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WORKING MIRACLES: SEEING ACTIVE SUPPLICANTS IN MARIAN MIRACLE STORIES

Gina Brandolino*

Abstract: This article expands on recent scholarship which treats miracle stories as not just facile devotional tales but complicated texts worthy of analysis. Specifically, it builds on the claims of scholars who have demonstrated that Mary is characterized in sophisticated ways in miracle stories. Focusing on one text in particular, a Marian miracle most commonly referred to as “The Widow’s Candle,” it makes the case that supplicants, too, are depicted as complex characters, and often in ways that provocatively parallel depictions of Mary.

Keywords: England, Middle Ages, lay piety, miracles, Mary, Feast of the Purification, The Widow’s Candle.

I often ask myself what makes a story work, and what makes it hold up as a story, and I have decided that it is probably some action, some gesture of a character that is unlike any other in the story, one which indicates where the real heart of the story lies. This would have to be an action or a gesture that was both totally right and totally unexpected; it would have to be one that was both in character and beyond character; it would have to suggest both the world and eternity.

-Flannery O’Connor¹

A curious miracle story related to the Marian feast of the Purification (more commonly known as Candlemas) circulated in late medieval England. A woman greatly devoted to Mary, unable to attend mass on this feast day, falls into a swoon during which she participates in a divine mass attended by angels, saints, and Mary herself, and presided over by Christ. An acolyte provides the woman with a candle to offer in procession at the altar with the rest of the congregation, as is the custom on this feast day, but she refuses to make the offering, wanting to keep the candle for herself. Offended, Mary sends a messenger to urge her to offer her candle; the woman still refuses. Mary orders the messenger to make the demand of the woman again and then, if necessary, take the candle from the woman by force. Force does prove necessary, and also unsuccessful; the woman struggles vigorously against Mary’s messenger to keep the candle, it breaks in the scuffle, and she awakens from her swoon holding half of it, which she cherishes as a relic. This miracle story survives in a number of fifteenth-century Middle English texts, some of which circulated widely: Caxton’s *Golden Legend*, the *Gilte Legende*, the *Northern Homily Collection*, Mirk’s *Festial*, the *Stanzaic Life of Christ*, and the *Speculum Sacerdotale*.² Each text tells the

*Department of English and Sweetland Center for Writing, University of Michigan, 1321 North Quad, 105 South State St., Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1285, gbrandol@umich.edu. Thanks to Ellen Muehlberger and the anonymous readers for *Viator*, whose generous and helpful comments greatly improved this article.

¹ Flannery O’Connor, “On Her Own Work,” in *Mystery and Manners* (New York 1969) 111.

² For information about manuscripts extant for each of these texts, see Thomas D. Cooke, “Tales,” in *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English 1050–1500* (New Haven, CT 1993) 9:3549–3550. In addition to the six versions of the miracle I consider here, Cooke lists one more I was not able to consult: Bodleian Library 4124 (MS Hatton 96), which Peter Whiteford describes as “a collection of homiletic material,” much of which is “taken from Mirk’s *Festial*.” See *The Myacles of Oure Lady Edited from Wynkyn de Worde’s Edition*, ed. Peter Whiteford (Heidelberg 1990) 126. Adrienne Williams Boyarin includes the

story in its own way but is the same in the most intriguing details—the woman’s willingness to disrupt the divine mass by ignoring the customs of the feast day, her repeated refusals to comply with Mary’s requests despite her great devotion to the Virgin, and her physical struggle to retain the candle.

This miracle is exceptional for several reasons, most obviously the supplicant’s pluck, though, ironically, it is precisely this feature of the story that catalogers of miracle stories have balked at describing. In his catalogue of Middle English miracles of the Virgin, Peter Whiteford refers to this miracle as “The feast of our Lady’s Purification,” a title that is not inaccurate but does nothing to highlight the remarkable action of the tale, especially compared to the highly descriptive titles Whiteford uses for other miracles—for instance, “How our Lady’s milk healed a monk’s throat,” “The Jew who insulted our Lady’s image,” and “How the devil impersonated the Virgin.”³ H.L.D. Ward provides this summary for the miracle, which he titles “Taper left behind by an Angel”: “How a widow heard Mass performed in an empty church, on Candlemas Day, by Christ and a choir of Angels; how, at the Virgin’s command, she received a taper like the rest; how she refused to give it back again to one of the Angels; and how she awoke with a fragment of the taper in her hand.”⁴ The title and the summary both suggest that the woman has the candle at the end of the tale because of the generosity of the messenger rather than because of her own agency. Similarly, Cooke, who titles this miracle “The Widow’s Candle” (the title that, because it does the least to conceal the action of the tale, I will use hereafter) provides a summary that downplays the supplicant’s extraordinary behavior: “On Candlemas a woman falls asleep and dreams of Christ celebrating Mass and the Virgin leading the congregation in offering candles. The woman refuses to relinquish her candle, and it has to be taken away from her by force. The candle snaps, and the woman awakens, still holding part of the candle.”⁵ But not all of the candle is taken from the woman by force; Cooke’s language obscures that it is the woman’s tenacity that wins her the half of the candle she retains at the end. Each of these catalogue treatments fails to represent to readers the most startling part of the story: the very active role the supplicant plays.

To be fair, catalogue titles for miracle stories are notoriously misleading; they often originated in nineteenth-century efforts to categorize these narratives using folkloric principles that rarely accommodated their variety and often flattened their quirkiness. This reliance on categories from folklore to organize miracle stories might also help explain why catalogue descriptions are so often stripped of the tales’ most striking elements, as is the case with “The Widow’s Candle.” But even so, it is probably easier to fumble an account of “The Widow’s Candle” than to write an accurate one; while

version of this miracle story from Mirk’s *Festial* in her recent anthology *Miracles of the Virgin in Middle English* (Peterborough, Ontario 2015) 101–102.

³ The Myracles of Oure Lady (n. 2 above) 105, 117, 122.

⁴ H.L.D. Ward, *Catalogue of Romances in the Department of Manuscripts in the British Museum* (London 1893) 2:658.

⁵ Cooke, “Tales,” in *Writings in Middle English* (n. 2 above) 9:3256. Especially because this is the title I use to refer to this miracle story, it is worth noting that most Middle English versions of this tale do not identify this woman as a widow; only the *Northern Homily Collection* does, and even then, it only once calls her a “widou,” most other times referring to her as a “leuedy” and once as a “wife.” *Northern Homily Collection*, in *English Metrical Homilies from Manuscripts of the Fourteenth Century*, ed. John Small (Edinburgh 1862) 160–163.

the scholars who know these narratives best understand that they unfold in a variety of ways, most readers have a very narrow, traditional view of the genre, expecting a saint at the center of the tale to provide a solution for a passive supplicant. The active supplicant in “The Widow’s Candle” defies such conservative expectations. For this reason, this tale is best approached—and here I will approach it—less as a miracle and more as a story, that is, with less expectation of predictable patterns and figures and more willingness to acknowledge and explore the complexity of the narrative. In this, I follow the lead of recent scholarship on medieval miracles, especially those of the Virgin. Adrienne Williams Boyarin begins her book-length study of Marian miracles with “the basic and enabling assumption that they need to be considered and interpreted *as texts*,” not “dismissed from the realm of serious study as ‘popular rather than learned,’ as ‘the stuff of popular homiletics,’ or as a kind of ‘vulgarization’ of hagiographical literature only representative of the ‘universal’ medieval notion of Mary’s power and mercy.”⁶ Rachel Koopmans, in turn, argues that Marian miracles in particular are far from simple and “provided ideal subject matter for sophisticated writers to display their rhetorical abilities.”⁷ That these narratives not only deserve, but require, scrutiny is also borne out in scholarship exploring the surprising behavior of Mary in specific miracle stories.⁸ I will briefly explore such miracles in the first section of this article, identifying several patterns in how depictions of Mary defy norms and expectations of the genre. Then, I will turn in the second section to focus on the surprising behavior of, not Mary, but a supplicant—the plucky woman vying for the candle—who engages in the same kind of convention-defying behavior we often see in Mary. I argue that this behavior empowers the woman, allowing her essentially to usurp Mary’s role, to the point of working her own miracle. Finally, in the third section, I will set “The Widow’s Candle” in a field of miracle stories with similarly active (even aggressive) supplicants to show that, while the woman’s story does not conform to traditional expectations for a miracle story, it is not *sui generis*. Together with “The Widow’s Candle,” these other narratives challenge us to read all miracle stories better by expecting their characters—not just the saints on whose behalf these tales get told, but also the supplicants—to be not flat and stock, but rich, complex, and even surprising.

I

Most Marian miracle stories are predicated on the Virgin, as Christ’s mother, being in a position to intercede in ways exceptional even for a saint on behalf of those who pray to her for help. The fourteenth-century Franciscan preachers’ manual *Fasciculus*

⁶ Adrienne Williams Boyarin, *Miracles of the Virgin in Medieval England: Law and Jewishness in Marian Legends* (Rochester, NY 2010) 7.

⁷ Rachel Koopmans, *Wonderful to Relate: Miracle Stories and Miracle Collecting in High Medieval England* (Philadelphia 2011) 204.

⁸ See, for example, David A. Flory, *Marian Representations in the Miracle Tales of Thirteenth-Century Spain and France* (Washington, D.C. 2000); Ruth Mazo Karras, “The Virgin and the Pregnant Abbess: Miracles and Gender in the Middle Ages,” *Medieval Perspectives* 3 (1991) 112–132; Kate Koppelman, “Devotional Ambivalence: The Virgin Mary as ‘Empresse of Helle,’” *Essays in Medieval Studies* 18 (2001) 67–82; and Kate Koppelman, “Becoming Her Man: Transcoding in Medieval Marian Literature,” *Exemplaria* 22 (2010) 200–222.

Morum encourages audiences to think of Mary as “the queen” who can “pray and intercede with the king” for them (*reginam . . . regem pro eo roget et deprecetur*):⁹

First let us go to the Mother of Mercy, the Queen of Heaven and Earth, and send her as a gift something special, such as waking, fasting, prayer, or almsgiving. At this she will certainly, like a loving mother, hasten to come between you and Christ your father who wants to chastise you for your failing, and she will stretch out her mantle between you and his rod. And he will surely relinquish all punishment or at least soften it to a large extent, so that we will go free without grief.

*Primo matrem misericordie, celi et terre reginam, adeamus aliquas specialitates orando loco exennii sibi premitentes, scilicet vigilando, ieiunando, orando, et elemosinas largiendo. Quo facto certe ipsa ad modum pie matrone occurret inter te et patrem Christum volentem te verberare pro delicto tuo, et pallium inter te et vergam proiciet. Et revera omnem penam tollet vel saltem pro maxima parte compescet, ita ut liberi sine gravamine recedere poterimus.*¹⁰

Mary fulfills this expectation and intervenes with Christ on behalf of supplicants in numerous miracles. One particularly compelling example is “A Drop of Blood in the Scales of Justice,” a variant of the *psychostasis*, or weighing of souls, miracle (of which there are many versions), in which a man not particularly morally upright but singularly devoted to the Virgin faces final judgment.¹¹ Books recording his sins are placed on one side of a set of scales by devils, while Mary places records of the man’s many prayers to her on the other. The sins weigh more, leading Mary to appeal to Christ to donate one drop of his blood to the scale. Christ replies: “It is impossible to deny thee anything. Yet know one drop of my blood weighs heavier than all the sins of the whole world. Receive therefore thy request.”¹² In this story, Mary’s intercession accomplishes what the *Fasciculus Morum* predicted, effectively rewriting Christ’s judgment; her wishes replace his will.

Mary’s frequent and successful efforts in medieval miracle stories to interfere with Christ’s pronouncements, while excellent news for her supplicants, created an embarrassing theological complication. According to medieval theology, strictly speaking, saints cannot perform miracles; their role is to intercede and request that God perform one. Though, as Phillipa Hardman explains, “theologians carefully defined this doctrine in relation to Christ’s redemptive mediation, it was all too easily interpreted in popular devotion as attributing miraculous saving power directly to the Virgin.”¹³ Mary’s special tie to Christ thus at least gives rise to confusion about the power dynamics behind miracles, and often rewrites them. Indeed, in numerous other depictions of *psychostasis*, both textual and visual, Christ supplies no drop of blood

⁹ *Fasciculus Morum: A Fourteenth-Century Preacher’s Handbook*, ed. and trans. Siegfried Wenzel (University Park 1989) 72–73.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ For all miracle stories, I will use the titles supplied by Cooke. For his summary of this miracle and manuscript information, see Cooke, “Tales,” in *Writings in Middle English* (n. 2 above) 9:3213 and 3522.

¹² Johannes Herolt, *Miracles of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, trans. C.C. Swinton Bland (London 1928) 77.

¹³ Phillipa Hardman, “The *Sege of Melayne*: a Fifteenth-Century Reading,” in *Tradition and Translation in Medieval Romance*, ed. Rosalind Field (Rochester, NY 1999) 81.

for the scales; in fact, he is not depicted at all.¹⁴ Instead, Mary lays her rosary or her hand on the scale-beam, tipping the scales in the sinner's favor.

A characteristic of many Marian miracles that is as interesting and problematic as the minimization of Christ's role is the Virgin's disregard for conventional moral standards; as Williams Boyarin has put it, Mary often "shows a seemingly arbitrary, even perverse, affection for the most horrendous of sinners."¹⁵ She will intercede for the most despicable characters and will bend the rules as far as she needs to, or break them, in order to do so. In "A Drop of Blood on the Scales of Justice," Mary interferes with the fair assessment of whether the soul in question deserved heaven or hell, essentially cheating the soul into heaven. In another miracle, "Beatrice the Sacristan," she assumes the likeness and duties of the nun Beatrice, who leaves her convent to live with a lascivious man who later deserts her, forcing her into prostitution to support herself. After fifteen years, Beatrice returns to her convent in shame hoping to be readmitted to discover that Mary had assumed her identity and has been covering for her so convincingly that nobody in her community even realized that she had been gone. In the *Speculum Sacerdotale* version of this miracle, upon returning, the wayward nun prostrates herself before a statue of Mary in the chapel and she appears and addresses her: "Aryse, wricche, aryse and do clothe the with þyn habytte, the whiche I haue borne for the þis xv. yere while that thou was mys-lad with the deuel. And þefore do penaunce and do schryue the, and be nozt in wille more to synne."¹⁶ Her words are harsh in tone, but not in message; she urges the nun to repent but otherwise issues no punishment. And just like that, after fifteen years of sin, Beatrice is free to resume her former life.

But the most famous example of Mary flouting moral standards to assist a sinner is the miracle story "Theophilus," which is about a clerk of that name who, in exchange for wealth, writes a charter in his own blood renouncing Christ and Mary and gives it to the devil, who locks it up in hell.¹⁷ Theophilus later regrets having done this and prays to Mary for help. The eight extant Middle English renderings of Theophilus's story depict him going to various great lengths to convince Mary to undo his inexcusable act, and ultimately, she does. In the *Gilte Legende* version of this tale, for example, she appears to him, furious, and "reproued hym of his feloni and comaunded hym that he shulde renounce the fende and knowlage Iesu Crist the sone of God and alle the verrey ordre of christen faithe."¹⁸ But here again, as in "Beatrice the Sacristan," Mary's quick anger melts away and, "in tokene that he was verily foryeue, oure Lady toke hym ayen the charter that he hadde wrete to the fende and leide it upon

¹⁴ Cooke titles miracle stories in which Mary intervenes for a sinner whose soul is being weighed without the assistance of Christ "A Hand on the Scales of Justice." See Cooke, "Tales," in *Writings in Middle English* (n. 2 above) 9:3219–3220 and 3527. For a discussion of images depicting Mary intervening in the weighing of souls, see Catherine Oakes, *Ora Pro Nobis: The Virgin as Intercessor in Medieval Art and Devotion* (Turnhout 2008) 129–166.

¹⁵ Williams Boyarin, *Miracles of the Virgin in Medieval England* (n. 6 above) 24.

¹⁶ *Speculum Sacerdotale*, ed. Edward H. Weatherly, EETS.OS 200 (London 1936; repr. 2000) 203. This miracle is extant in several Middle English texts; see Cooke, "Tales," in *Writings in Middle English* (n. 2 above) 9:3200 and 3512–3513.

¹⁷ Cooke, "Tales," in *Writings in Middle English* (n. 2 above) 9:3247–3248 and 2544–2545.

¹⁸ *Gilte Legende*, ed. Richard Hamer, EETS.OS 328 (Oxford 2007) 2:652.

his breſte, ſo that he ſhulde neuer drede for to be ſeruaunt more to the fende.”¹⁹ By returning the charter to Theophilus, Mary iſſues him a reprieve; having poſſeſſion of it relieves him of any reſponſibility for the very bad deciſion he made ſigning it. In this ſtory, even making a deal with the devil is not a ſin too great for Mary to look paſt.

Mary’s behavior in miracle ſtories like theſe complicates our interpretations of her penchant for helping ſinners and willingness to ignore the rules in order to do ſo. In the paſt, ſome ſcholars have identified theſe attributes as functions of her maternity. For inſtance, Marina Warner claims that Mary’s “gentleneſſ, loving kindneſſ, indulgence, [and] forgiveness” are “motherly” qualities.²⁰ On the baſis of theſe qualities, Carol M. Meale explained that “ſhe acts as indulgent mother to all mankind, her partiality towards her followers overriding notions of juſtice, as represented by her Son.”²¹ But as we have ſeen, Mary is not always depicted as a gentle, forgiving mother to humanity. In his ſeminal book *The Making of the Middle Ages*, R.W. Southern claimed that late mediæval depictions of Mary were characterized by “caprice,” a deſcription ſo apt that it has echoed in the ſcholarſhip on Marian literature.²² Miri Rubin obſerves that the “world of the miracle tale was a capricious one, in which Mary might chooſe to forgive ſins even for the ſake of a ſingle good habit or deed.”²³ Williams Boyarin notes that in the texts her monograph focuses on, Mary is “above all powerful and capricious.”²⁴ More ſpecifically, Kate Koppelman points to ſeveral inſtances in Marian miracles when Mary’s behavior is ambivalent and her feelings towards her devotees waver; in the miracle of Theophilus, for example, ſhe is “at once merciful and reproachful” towards the ſinner, and her act of reclaiming Theophilus’s deed from hell is not meek and mild but “aggreſſive and physically bold.”²⁵ Her behavior in this miracle and others like it, Koppelman argues, ſuggeſts that audiences had as much reaſon to fear “Mary’s capacity for retribution and judgment” as they had to rely on her mercy.²⁶ Ruth Mazo Karras ſimilarly recognizes that Mary’s ways of interacting with her ſupplicants is often complex, noticing in ſeveral miracles the preſence of negative ſtereotypes of women, moſt notably what mediæval audiences would have recognized as the “feminine tendency to reward adoration rather than moral worth” that is apparent, for example, when ſhe bails out ſupplicants whoſe only virtue is their devotion to her.²⁷

In ſummary, ſcholars have long obſerved that Mary’s miracles preſent plenty of evidence that, while ſhe is unfailingly helpful to her ſupplicants, ſhe is not always a benign, munificent devotional figure. Her representation in miracle ſtories, as Koppelman aptly characterizes it, is “unſtable and mutable”; ſhe is “active, aggreſſive,

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York 1983) 286.

²¹ Carol M. Meale, “The Miracles of Our Lady: Context and Interpretation,” in *Studies in the Vernon Manuscript*, ed. Derek Pearsall (Rochester, NY 1990) 143.

²² R.W. Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages* (New Haven, CT 1953) 248.

²³ Miri Rubin, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* (New Haven, CT 2009) 233.

²⁴ Williams Boyarin, *Miracles of the Virgin in Medieval England* (n. 6 above) 10.

²⁵ Koppelman, “Devotional Ambivalence” (n. 8 above) 68–69, 71.

²⁶ Ibid. 73.

²⁷ Karras, “The Virgin and the Pregnant Abbess” (n. 8 above) 117, 125.

[and] capable of outbursts of anger and of forgiveness. She is a signifier of divine benevolence *and* divine admonishment. Mary is called, in one miracle in particular, the Queen of Vengeance, and in others, the Empress of Hell.”²⁸ Mary’s volatile behavior is significant and useful to observe in and of itself, but it should also equip us to anticipate variations in other characters in the genre as well. Indeed, as “The Widow’s Candle” demonstrates, the saint is not the only character in a miracle story capable of complexity.

II

The source for all surviving Middle English versions of “The Widow’s Candle” is Jacobus de Voragine’s *Legenda Aurea*, completed in the 1260s.²⁹ The *Legenda Aurea* was very popular; it survives in approximately a thousand manuscripts.³⁰ It appears to contain the earliest occurrence of “The Widow’s Candle,” but it is difficult to tell if Jacobus is responsible for originating the story.³¹ On the one hand, he worked from a great many sources, not all of which are extant, so it is possible that he copied the miracle present in the *Legenda Aurea* from a source text that has not survived.³² On the other hand, scholars have long debated whether Jacobus merely compiled the narratives in *Legenda Aurea* or adapted and shaped them, essentially creating new narratives based on his source texts.³³ I have been able to locate only one text earlier than the *Legenda Aurea* which contains any narrative similar enough to “The Widow’s Candle” to be a potential source text: Caesarius of Heisterbach’s *Dialogus Miraculorum*. Completed between 1216 and 1223, the *Dialogus Miraculorum* contains over seven hundred stories and was one of the great medieval storehouses of exempla; it was also one of Jacobus’s sources for the *Legenda Aurea*.³⁴ Caesarius’s story is similar in most plot points to the story found in the *Legenda Aurea* (and the versions preserved in Middle English texts), but the supplicant is decidedly different. She is not

²⁸ Koppelman, “Becoming Her Man” (n. 8 above) 201–202.

²⁹ Sherry L. Reames, *The Legenda Aurea: A Reexamination of Its Paradoxical History* (Madison 1985) 193. Caxton explains in his prologue that he worked from the *Legenda Aurea* and English and French translations of the text while making his edition; see Caxton, *The Golden Legende* (STC # 24873). As an English translation of a French translation of the *Legenda Aurea*, the *Gilte Legende* obviously is related to the Latin text; see *Gilte Legende*, ed. Richard Hamer, EETS.OS 327 (Oxford 2007) 1:xi. Thomas J. Heffernan and Patrick J. Horner identify the *Legenda Aurea* as a prime source for the exempla in the *Northern Homily Collection*; see Heffernan and Horner, “Sermons and Homilies,” in *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English 1050–1500* (New Haven, CT 2005) 11:4026. Mirk explains in his prologue that his source is the “*Legenda Aurea* with more addyng-to”; see See John Mirk, *John Mirk’s Festial*, ed. Susan Powell, EETS.OS 334 (Oxford 2011) 1:3. Laurence Muir calls the *Legenda Aurea* “the prime source” for the *Stanzaic Life of Christ*; see Muir, “Bible Translations and Paraphrases,” in *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English 1050–1500* (New Haven, CT 1970) 2:392. Finally, the editor of the *Speculum Sacerdotale* gives the *Legenda Aurea* as the source of a great deal of the text, including the chapter in which “The Widow’s Candle” occurs; see Weatherly, introduction to the *Speculum Sacerdotal* (n. 16 above) xxvii.

³⁰ Barbara Fleith, “The Patristic Sources of the *Legenda Aurea*: A Research Report,” in *The Reception of the Church Fathers in the West*, ed. Irena Backus (New York 1997) 1:233.

³¹ Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda Aurea Vulgo Historia Lombardica Dicta*, ed. Theodor Graesse, 3rd ed. (Bratislava 1890) 165–166.

³² Fleith, “The Patristic Sources of the *Legenda Aurea*” (n. 30 above) 1:238.

³³ *Ibid.* 1:237.

³⁴ Joseph Albert Mosher, *The Exemplum in the Early Religious and Didactic Literature of England* (New York 1911) 3; Renata E. Woolf, “Selected Marian Stories from *The Dialogue of Miracles* of Caesarius of Heisterbach,” *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 33 (1998) 191.

a widow, but a virgin, and she is *paralytica*, paralyzed, on which account her father has hired a priest to be on hand to celebrate mass for her privately.³⁵ The priest is away for the feast of Candlemas, which is why the supplicant is without an earthly mass to attend and why she is mystically transported to the divine mass. But she does not wrestle her half of the taper from Mary's messenger (figured in this version of the miracle as an angel); instead, it is given to her:

[She was] reluctant to offer her candle, even though the angel signed her to do so, because she desired to take it back with her to earth. Whereupon the angel, considering and approving of this desire of hers, broke the candle into two pieces in her hand, taking away the upper piece, and leaving the rest to her.

. . . *candelam suam offerre noluit, etiam angelo suo praecipiente, volens illam secum ad terras deportare. Quod angelus considerans, candelam in manu eius fregit, superiorem partem auferens, et inferiorem illi reliquens.*³⁶

This docile supplicant is a far cry from her stubborn, even aggressive counterpart in "The Widow's Candle"; what she obtains by wishing for, the woman in "The Widow's Candle" fights to get. Caesarius's version of this story goes to great lengths to preserve its supplicant's passivity, while the woman in "The Widow's Candle" is unrepentantly active. Whether Jacobus took it upon himself to adjust the characterization of this supplicant or merely passed these adjustments along, thanks to the popularity of the *Legenda Aurea* as a source text, it is the story of this woman—the less stereotypical supplicant—that gets told and retold in Middle English texts.

The details of "The Widow's Candle" are, as I said earlier, the same in all surviving Middle English versions, but the writer of the *Speculum Sacerdotale* revels in those details; it is the version with the most narrative flourishes. My analysis in this section will focus on the version of "The Widow's Candle" present in the *Speculum Sacerdotale*, but I will note significant comparative points in other tellings of this tale.³⁷ The *Speculum Sacerdotale* is extant in only one manuscript copy, British Museum Additional 36791, though errors in this manuscript make it clear that it is a copy, not the original.³⁸ The manuscript is dated to the fifteenth century, and the language and dialect of the text are largely that of fifteenth-century London. Unfortunately, history has not preserved for us the name of the writer of the *Speculum Sacerdotale*. Presumably, the writer was a priest, as the text is a priestly aide, a collection of sermons offering explanations of church rituals and feast days as well as accompanying exempla and miracle stories; it also includes instructions for the laity and guidance for priests on the confession of sins and penance. Contents are arranged according to the liturgical calendar, and "The Widow's Candle" is included in the

³⁵ Caesarius of Heisterbach, *Dialogus Miraculorum*, ed. Joseph Strange (1851; repr. Ridgewood, NJ 1966) 2:25; trans. H. Von E. Scott and C. C. Swinton Bland, *The Dialogue on Miracles* (New York 1929) 1:481.

³⁶ Caesarius of Heisterbach, *Dialogus Miraculorum* (n. 35 above) 2:27; trans. Scott and Bland, *The Dialogue on Miracles* (n. 35 above) 1:483.

³⁷ All quotations from "The Widow's Candle" are taken from the *Speculum Sacerdotale* (n. 16 above) 27–29.

³⁸ Weatherly, introduction to the *Speculum Sacerdotale* (n. 16 above) xv.

sermon for the feast of the Purification of Mary. The *Speculum Sacerdotale* is written in colorful, talky prose that seems designed to engage both the priests consulting it and the lay Christians to whom they might read from it.

Mary is not the focus of “The Widow’s Candle”; she is strangely and undeniably removed from the action of this Marian miracle. First, Mary is physically distant in the story. The divine mass that is the setting for the majority of the narrative is celebrated in Mary’s honor, but the Virgin herself is only observed from afar because the story provides us with the woman’s perspective, describing what “sche be-helde”—we see what she sees, and as she sees it. To her, Mary is one among “a grete company of virgines” she observes as they enter the church; she watches as these women all “sette hem doun ychon be ordre” and as Mary is given “the gretyst taper” when candles are distributed to the congregation. These descriptions read like stolen glimpses of royalty or celebrity; the woman can see but is separated from Mary and the other saintly congregants, and Mary shows her no friendliness or familiarity. More, while all speech in the story is reported speech, Mary’s voice is at a further remove because she talks only through her messenger. The narrative seems to go out of its way to call special attention to this, highlighting her use of the messenger each of the three times she communicates with the woman. She first “sent hure worde by here messangere,” then “sent to hure an-other messangere,” and finally “had hure messenger go” and physically threaten the woman. In deed, speech, and even mere presence, Mary is an aloof and distant figure in this story.

Into the void Mary leaves steps the supplicant. The narrative exposition introducing the woman at the center of this tale is brief, comprising less than one-fifth of the total length of the story in the *Speculum Sacerdotale*, but it reveals two essential defining elements of her character. First, we learn plainly that she feels special reverence for Mary: “in oure lady Seynt Marie over all thyng sche had grete deuocion.” In this, she aligns with supplicants in other miracle stories whose special affection for Mary is their single saving grace. More obliquely, the narrative reveals the woman to be a woman of some wealth: not only was she “of noble birthe,” she also owns a private chapel and employs a chaplain so that she might “iche day . . . heere a masse of our lady.” We learn, too, that she is affluent enough that, every year, “for loue of the holy Virgine,” in honor of the feast of the Purification, the woman gives as charity “all that sche might haue to 3yue,” this year in particular giving “att the last” even “hure cloke.” This detail, which initially seems just a marker of the woman’s generosity, is key to the plot of this story: her chaplain, we learn, is away on “an errande in-to a ferre contre,” and without her cloak, she “might no3t go to the chirche, and so sche moste al-gatis be that day with-oute masse.” So, as this story opens, we learn very quickly that this woman, usually of some means, is temporarily bereft of means.³⁹

³⁹ *Mirk’s Festial* varies some of these details: the woman has no private chapel but does give all her clothes away, so that “on a Candelmas day heo wold haue gon to chyrche, but, for heo was an honest womon, heo durs not for schame, for heo hadde non honest cloþs as heo was wound for to haue.” See John Mirk, *John Mirk’s Festial* (n. 29 above) 1:58. Presumably, the one extant Middle English version of this miracle not available in a modern edition, Bodleian Library 4124 (MS Hatton 96), follows *Mirk’s Festial* in this. See n. 2 above. All other versions refer to her explicitly as a noble lady or imply her standing with mention of her private chapel.

The divine celebration of the feast of the Purification at which the woman finds herself ensures that, while she is without means, she will not be without mass. As we observe the other members of the congregation with her, a clear sense of hierarchy becomes apparent. The “company of virgines” that enters the church is headed by Mary, “fayrest of hem alle” and “crowned with a dyadyne.” The virgins and a similar group of male congregants are seated “ychon be ordre.” Jesus is the priest saying the mass, assisted by “a subdekyn and a dekyn” whom the woman identifies as angels and two alcolytes, saints Laurence and Vincent. In short, the context in which she finds herself has a particular and very visible order, and the woman does not rank as a significant part of it. She is not seated with the company of saints; remember, when Mary needs to communicate with her, she must send a messenger, implying the woman is seated at some distance. More, the woman receives her taper “at the last,” after all others present have received theirs. She shows no sign of being offended by this—when she is finally offered her taper, “gladliche sche receyued” it—but as the story goes on, she is also not particularly respectful of the order of this scene or the place she has been prescribed in it.

The woman’s refusal to offer her taper is a significant disruption to the order of the mass; it literally stalls “the preste”—Jesus—who cannot proceed with the celebration of the feast day, as he “was abydyng stille for the womman.” It is arguable that she has the nerve to break the rules in this way at least in part because of her usual earthly status and the privileges to which she is accustomed, but she is also, and more importantly, emboldened by devotion to Mary; she insists that she will “yeue hure candel to no man but kepe it for grete deuocion.”⁴⁰ However laudable this latter motivation might be, no one in the narrative steps in to reward her for it. The woman has no reason to doubt the Virgin’s displeasure at her actions; she has her messenger convey to the woman that “sche dide rudely and lewdly that sche come nost to offerynge,” and finally orders her messenger to “take [the taper] oute of hure handys violently.” The woman’s “grete deuocion” to Mary does not mitigate her anger as it does for supplicants in other miracle stories. Nor does this miracle story have in it an angel approving of and abetting the supplicant’s desires as Caesarius’s narrative does; as Mary’s agent, her messenger makes good on her threat of violence: “he busked hym to take [the taper] fro hure with a grete violence.”

It is tempting to imagine the physical struggle between the woman and the messenger as humor, even slapstick, but doing so means reading against the grain of the text, which is not funny, but earnest. The messenger attacks the woman “with grete violence,” and she meets his aggression with her own. The conflict that ensues is the most unique and striking I have encountered in a miracle story. Certainly, it has echoes of the biblical story of Jacob wrestling with an angel, but the messenger is *not* identified as an angel; the “dekyn and the subdekyn” assisting with mass are called “angels,” but the agent Mary sends is always called a “messangere.”⁴¹ The altercation

⁴⁰ Again, it is worth noting that while the woman is nobility in five of the six versions of this tale, in *Mirk’s Festial*, that does not appear to be the case. See n. 39 above.

⁴¹ Genesis 32:22–32. Indeed, no Middle English version of this miracle story identifies the messenger as an angel. The *Legenda Aurea* does not identify the messenger as an angel either, using in all cases a form of *nuntius* to refer to him. See Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda Aurea* (n. 31 above) 166.

between the woman and the messenger parlays the disorder the woman has already caused, making it not just situational, but conceptual; according to the narrative, she holds her taper “more strongly then he and manly defended hure-self so tyl they hadde longe stryuen.” She has put herself in a position in which she must defend herself against the agent of the saint to whom she is so dearly devoted. And she “manly” defends herself—an interesting adverb, one surely showing her prowess but also suggesting there is something about her efforts that does not suit a woman of noble birth and exceptional piety.⁴² The effect of the struggle confirms this; “throuz the grete wrystyng of the taper be-twene hem two, sodeynly sche was a-waked. . . .” It seems as though the force of the struggle—“the grete wrystyng”—is what removes her from the divine mass, though it is arguable that it is instead the effrontery of her behavior overall. She has managed to get away with a piece of her taper, though. When she returns to herself, the woman gives thanks for the miracle she has experienced.

But what *is* the miracle, and who works it? The story provides two different sets of answers to these questions, one more official, but the other more abiding. Officially, the miracle is that the woman was able to attend mass—and a divine mass. For this, she thanks divine agents as supplicants usually do in miracle stories: “gretely sche thonkyd God and his moder Marie for that they let hure no3t in that day be with-oute masse.” But the woman’s custody of the taper remnant, which she prizes as “a grete iewel, tresoure, and a relyk,” is also miraculous. It is a souvenir from a divine mass, and more, proves to have healing properties: “alle the seke whome-euer it touchid afterward were there-throuz hole delyuerd.”⁴³ Indeed, the woman’s taper upstages the divine mass in this story. She does not thank Mary or God for the taper, and rightly so; getting it was work she accomplished, even against Mary’s wishes. Notably, as hard as the miracle catalogues work to deemphasize the woman’s disorderly behavior in their summaries of this tale, none suggest the focus of this story is the mass; all hone in on the taper remnant. It is the miracle at the center of this story, and the woman is responsible for it.

As surprising as the woman’s behavior is, it is remarkably parallel to the depictions of Mary in miracles like those I discussed earlier. As we saw, often in miracle stories, Mary does not restrict herself to the doctrinally correct role of a saint—to petition God for a miracle—and instead works the miracle herself. Similarly, the woman does not passively petition and hope for a miracle when she wants to keep the taper; she does the work to accomplish that. Also as Mary does time and again in miracle stories, the woman overlooks rules when it suits her to do so, willingly ignoring the order of the

⁴² *Speculum Sacerdotale* is unique in its use of the adverb “manly.” The *Gilte Legende* is closest to it: “she defended myghtely,” and the *Stanzaic Life of Christ* describes the tussle between the woman and the messenger as a “grete beker” to determine who “schuld haue the more maistri.” The other texts use no remarkable language here but emphasize the woman’s persistent refusal to comply with Mary’s repeated requests and continue with the breaking of the candle between the messenger and the woman and her removal from the divine mass. See *Gilte Legende*, ed. Richard Hamer (n. 29 above) 1:171 and *Stanzaic Life of Christ*, ed. Frances A. Foster, EETS.OS 166 (London 1926) 106.

⁴³ Again, only *Mirks’ Festial* differs from the other extant versions of this miracle; it alone does not describe the candle as having curative powers. The candle is described as “a relyk” that the woman treasured “whyl heo lyuod,” but no healing properties are ascribed to it. See *John Mirk’s Festial* (n. 29 above) 1:59. It is likely that the one extant Middle English version of this miracle not available in a modern edition, Bodleian Library 4124 (MS Hatton 96), follows *Mirk’s Festial* in this. See n. 2 above.

mass and even repeated requests from Mary so that she might retain the taper. Like Mary, who is often enraged at supplicants one moment and snatching them away from certain damnation the next, the woman is volatile, awestruck and grateful to be at the mass but mulishly disrespectful when its rites interfere with her desires. On the surface, the woman seems obviously irreverent, but it is more correct to say she is overzealous in her reverence. Her behavior is a topsy-turvy homage to Mary; she disrupts the mass and disregards Mary's increasingly insistent messages not because she thinks so little of Mary, but because she thinks so much of her. In this, devotion so intense it becomes a threat to the saint, the woman is not alone.

III

"The Widow's Candle" is unique among miracle stories for its portrayal of a supplicant who physically struggles with a sentient agent of a saint, but other miracle stories feature supplicants who resort to animosity, threats, and violence to objects or images representing a saint to induce a miracle. Most often, and unlike the woman in "The Widow's Candle," the supplicants in these tales are in dire straits and act aggressively towards a saint out of desperation.⁴⁴ In a number of miracles, supplicants complain to Mary for not protecting those devoted to her. Consider, for example, the miracle story "A Scribe's Hand Restored" in which John of Damascus, whose hand is cut off as punishment when he is falsely accused of treason, addresses Mary in this way: "What rewardis is of vs þi servandis? Behold our reward! Lady, þow has willid me, a sinner, þi servand, for my reward to suffre suche a turmentrie, þat þou sufferd þe instrument of þine offes for to be þus cut off. For þis hand þat is cut off wrate oft sythis sangis of þi loving, & oft sithes sacred, & offerd þe flesh & þe blude of þi son."⁴⁵ John's character uses sarcasm to blame Mary for the violence done to him: is this her reward for his hard work? Though couched in temperate language—he calls himself a "sinner" and her "servand"—it is a bold complaint, and it works: as the title suggests, his hand is restored. Other supplicants are still bolder; in "The Woman who Stole Our Lady's Child," a woman appeals to Mary for help when her son is abducted and imprisoned. When the mother's prayers fail to yield results, she goes to her church

⁴⁴ Similar behavior can be found in supplicants in texts of other genres. Hardman identifies two such examples in romances: Bishop Turpin's rebuke of Mary in the *Sege of Melayne* and the friar Capistranus's similar berating of Mary in *Capystranus*. See Hardman, "The *Sege of Melayne*" (n. 13 above) 78–81. Scholarship suggests such behavior was also found in historical supplicants: Sister Mary Vincentine Gripkey cites a twelfth-century letter describing supplicants who try to extort ["extroquere"] miracles from Mary by scolding her as if she were "a servant or a handmaid" ["ac si quis servum vel ancillam"]. See Gripkey, "The Blessed Virgin Mary as Mediatrix in the Latin and Old French Legend Prior to the Fourteenth Century," (PhD diss., The Catholic University of America, 1938) 91, 97–98. The complete letter is available in "Lettre de l'Abbé Haimon sur la construction de l'Église de Saint-Pierre-sur-Dive, en 145," *Bibl. de l'École des Chartes* XXIX (1859). Patrick Geary explains how monastic communities used the ritual of the clamor and the humiliation of saints' relics and images to exert pressure on saints and, by extension, the laity. See Geary, "Humiliation of Saints," in *Saints and Their Cults: Studies in Religious Sociology, Folklore, and History*, ed. Stephen Wilson (Cambridge 1983) 123–140.

⁴⁵ *An Alphabet of Tales*, ed. Mary MacLeod Banks, EETS.OS 127 (London 1905) 263. For more information on extant Middle English versions of this miracle story, see Cooke, "Tales," in *Writings in Middle English* (n. 2 above) 9:3244–3245 and 3452–3443. Hardman notes several other miracles featuring supplicants making complaints to Mary; see Hardman, "The *Sege of Melayne*" (n. 13 above) 81, especially n. 30.

and tears the infant Christ statue out of the arms of the Mary statue on display there, saying, “Blessud maydon, ofte I haue preyed to þe for delyuerans of my sone and noht helputh. Wherefore so as 3e wil not help me to haue my sone, I wyll take 3oure Sone in stede of myne tyl 3e send myn hom.”⁴⁶ Her strategy works; Mary promptly appears to the imprisoned son, releases him from his prison, and instructs him to return to his mother and tell her to return her son. Marian miracles are not even the only miracle stories featuring such supplicants; second only to “The Widow’s Candle” for the boldness of its supplicant is a miracle of Nicholas of Myra in which a shopkeeper who is not Christian but who has heard of Nicholas’s many miracles leaves an image of Nicholas to watch over his shop while he is away. When thieves steal everything in the shop, the shopkeeper blames Nicholas. He reproves the image, vigorously beats it “as faste as he myzte til he was wery,” and threatens to burn it.⁴⁷ In response to this abuse, “hauynge compassion of his figure that it schulde so be bete and turmentyd,” Nicholas visits the thieves and demands that they return the stolen goods; the shopkeeper effectively uses violence to compel Nicholas to do his bidding.⁴⁸ In all these stories, not passive petitions but active tactics of one form or another help supplicants get their miracles.

Like “The Widow’s Candle,” these are not garden-variety miracles; the most conservative generic conventions do not prepare us to expect supplicants like these. But the actions of each of them are predicated on the fervent belief in a saint’s ability to ameliorate their situations; they complain, steal, and assault not because they think the saint is *powerless*, but because they know that she or he is so very *powerful*—powerful enough to risk offending if it will ultimately help the supplicant’s cause. Recent scholarship has shown us that not all miracle stories—and particularly not all Marian miracle stories—depict saints as thoroughly benevolent, helpful, obliging figures; it has primed us to see the diverse characterizations of saints in the genre. Together with “The Widow’s Candle,” stories like the ones discussed in this section entreat us to do the same for supplicants, to anticipate that not all of them will be the passive, long-suffering type. The behavior of the supplicants in these stories is, to use the words of Flannery O’Connor in the epigraph that opens this article, both “totally unexpected” generically and yet also “totally right” given their fervent, sometimes desperate, devotion. What they do is “beyond character” if we read with the most narrow of expectations, but unfettered by these expectations, completely “in character.” These stories show that supplicants can be developed characters with complicated motives—agents ready to receive a miracle, but also to do their part in working one.

⁴⁶ John Mirk, *John Mirk’s Festial*, ed. Susan Powell, EETS.OS 335 (Oxford 2011) 2:224. For more information on extant Middle English versions of this miracle story, see Cooke, “Tales,” in *Writings in Middle English* (n. 2 above) 9:3258 and 3551.

⁴⁷ *Speculum Sacerdotale* (n. 16 above) 249. This miracle story is preserved in many versions of the life of Nicholas; for a list of Middle English texts containing Nicholas’s vita, see Charlotte D’Evelyn, “Saints’ Legends,” in *Writings in Middle English* (n. 29 above) 2:614–615.

⁴⁸ *Speculum Sacerdotale* (n. 16 above) 249.