

Transvestite Women Saints: Performing Asceticism in Late Antiquity

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Abstract

During Late Antiquity, the secondary importance of women compared to men was manifest through attitudes to their spiritual prowess; it was assumed that a characteristic of the female was an absence of potential asceticism except in exceptional circumstances. Monastic asceticism at the period was dominated by male participants; there were cultural anxieties about 'womanish men', meaning that iconic representations of gender and spirituality are complex and informed by both secular and religious practices. In order to perform asceticism, some women dressed as men. This transvesticism did not simply guarantee acceptance, and some interpretations of church teachings asserted that true holiness predated a division between gender. Virginitly was greatly valued. The metaphorical adorning of the soul rather than the body became a means to performing asceticism.

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Asceticism and gender

[1] The Late Antique period has left a number of accounts of women, deemed to be saints, who dressed up as men in order to perform asceticism. This raises many intriguing issues to do with gender roles, the nature of asceticism and what it meant to be made "in the image" of a male God.¹ Differing expectations of

¹ The matter was addressed from various points of view in Sergio Zincone, "Il tema dell'uomo/donna immagine di Dio nei commenti paolini et a Gn di area antiochena (Diodoro, Crisostomo, Teodoro, Teodoreto)", in: *Annali di storia dell'esegesi* 2 (1985), 103-

men and women within Roman secular and religious societies, and beliefs about human physiology also play a role in depicting and understanding the practice of transvestite asceticism at this period. Contemporary sources about the place of asceticism in Late Antiquity are dominated by the Desert Fathers (with guest appearances from a small number of "Mothers") and later Patristic writings, both in Latin and Greek, some of which reduced women to no more than a continuation of the dangerous work of Eve. The Fathers of the Church were essentially hostile to women as personifications of risk to the chastity of the righteous male, and, for the most part, frankly incredulous that women could perform ascetic roles, aside from the enacted "yes" of Mary, the Mother of God.

[2] In recent years scholarship across the disciplines has unveiled a more nuanced and positive understanding of the role of women within asceticism. Furthermore, the evolving awareness that gender issues focus on men as well as women has led to new understandings of the construction of gender in relation to Late Antique asceticism.² This, in turn, leads us to re-evaluate the phenomenon, recorded in legends and stories, of women cross-dressing, and, in some cases, apparently succeeding in concealing their sex until their corpse was prepared for burial.³ Whilst at one level this practice appeared to give an outlet to women who wished to explore identities other than the domestic and procreative, it also calls into question the gendering of asceticism and, in turn, Late Antique Christian conceptions of the human soul and its place within a holistic view of the human as an ensouled body made in the image of Christ. If "asceticism was the remaking of the human person in the image of its maker",⁴ then it is important to question how women might be made in the "image and likeness" of a male God, and how (given the cultural, religious and social inhibitions women experienced)

113; Nonna Verna Harrison, "Male and Female in Cappadocian Theology", in: *Journal of Theological Studies* 41 (1990), 441-471, and "Women, Human Identity, and the Image of God: Antiochene Interpretations", in: *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 9 (2001), no. 2, 203-249; David G. Hunter, "The Paradise of Patriarchy: Ambrosiaster on Woman as (Not) God's Image", in: *Journal of Theological Studies* 43 (1992), 447-469; Susan Ashbrook Harvey, "Feminine Imagery for the Divine. The Holy Spirit, the Odes of Solomon, and Early Syriac Tradition", in: *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 37 (2004), 1-2; Frederick G. McLeod, *The Image of God in the Antiochene Tradition*, Washington, D.C. 1999, 191-231 (ch. 6, "Are Women Images of God?").

² For example, Joyce Salisbury, *Church Fathers, Independent Virgins*, New York 1991; Gillian Cloke, *This Female Man of God': Women and Spiritual Power AD 350-450*, London 1995; Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 2 vols, London 1986; Aline Rouselle, *Porneia: On Desire and the Body in Antiquity*, trans. Felicia Pheasant, Oxford 1988.

³ Bibliography on transvestite saints has grown exponentially since the publication of Evelyne Patlagean's study, "L'histoire de la femme déguisée en moine et l'évolution de la sainteté féminine à Byzance", in: *Studi Medievali* 17 (1976), 597-623, stimulated also by Queer theory. The most important titles are addressed within the body of the text.

⁴ Susan Ashbrook Harvey, "Asceticism", in: *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World*, eds. Glen W. Bowersock, Peter Brown and Oleg Grabar, Cambridge, Mass. 1999, 317-318.

females might share with males in devoting their lives to God through ascetic choices.

[3] In recent years, homo-erotic and Queer readings of cultures and societies have offered a new lens through which to view such phenomena; this, however, lies rather beyond our remit. Here we are mostly concerned with Late Antique records of perceptions of the outward manifestations of signifiers of gender. These took the form of clothing and those alterations to personal appearance (such as cutting of women's hair) which conventionally indicated the gender of persons according to the expectations of the day.

Being made "in the image"

[4] Christian ascetic practice developed as part of a process of reconsidering the body's role in personal salvation. The iconic view of humanity following the account in Genesis 1:26 where Adam was said to be created in the "image and likeness" of God, was grafted during the early centuries CE on the common belief in the correspondence between one's character and the body. As put by Cicero, "Every motion of the soul has its natural appearance, voice, and gesture; and the entire body of man, all his facial and vocal expressions, like the strings of a harp, sound just as the soul's motion strikes them."⁵ In this context, some held the body to be the image of God in humanity, an interpretation most Church Fathers refuted.⁶ Assimilation of the divine image with the soul and reasoning mind in the work of these Fathers, often stressed in modern scholarship, did not nonetheless deny the participation of the body in the iconic function. Indeed, a closer look shows that with little exception, belief in the body's mirroring of the state of the soul had the body partake in the "image" once the "likeness" was achieved. The iconic function transgressed gender and social differences, striving to their annulling according to Paul's Gal. 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek: there is neither bond nor free: there is neither male nor female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus."⁷ In this context, Christianity offered those categories that had been marginalised in Roman society an incentive, with women occupying prominent positions in the cult as patrons of communities, sponsors of cultic buildings, and even ritual functions.⁸ This is illustrated in an image from a Late Antique lead

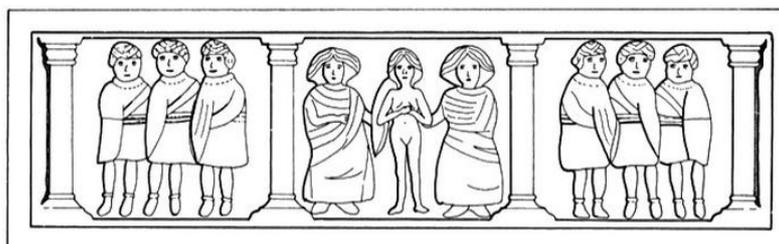
⁵ Cicero, *De or.* 3.216 (ed. Friedrich Theodor Ellendt, *M. Tullii Ciceronis De oratore libri tres*, Königsberg 1840, 571; English translation quoted according to Fritz Graf, "Gestures and Conventions: The Gestures of Roman Actors and Orators", in: *A Cultural History of Gesture*, eds. Jan Bremmer and Herman Roodenburg, Ithaca, NY 1992, 36-58: 40).

⁶ See Walter J. Burghardt, *The Image of God in Man According to Cyril of Alexandria*, Washington, D.C. 1957 (= *Catholic University of America Studies in Christian Antiquity*, 14), esp. 12-24 (ch. 2, "Body or Soul?").

⁷ For being made in the image of God as the essential quality of humanity, see Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Creation of Humanity* 16 (ed. PG 44.125-256).

⁸ On the role of women in the early Church, see the studies of sociologist Rodney Stark, esp. his "Reconstructing the Rise of Christianity: The Role of Women", in: *Sociology of Religion* 56 (1995), 229-244. On ritual functions, see Ivan Foletti, "Des femmes à l'autel?"

tank, where deaconesses are portrayed facilitating the baptism of a woman (Fig. 1).



1 Baptism scene from fragment of lead tank showing women deaconesses assisting in the baptism of a woman, fourth or fifth century, from Walesby (UK), currently in [The Collection: Art and Archaeology in Lincolnshire](#), Lincoln (Drawing by Charles Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain to AD 500*, Berkeley/Los Angeles 1981, fig. 41, p. 222)

[5] Christianity's overlapping with Roman society after 313 CE led to the reworking of differences of class, gender, and health into the Church. Society and Church now followed a hierarchical model shaped on that of the imperial state, in which the iconic function was focused on the emperor and bishop, both surrounded by male entourages.⁹ Women were set aside, with particular categories created for them. As widows and virgins, they could transcend their condition and work towards a status of temple of God's presence, achieved in the same way as that of the Virgin through obedience and denial of the reproductive function. The iconic embodying of God and angelic beings, nonetheless, was outside their reach as it was arrested by the male clergy and the imperial house.

[6] In the desert a contrasting model of iconic humanity was coagulating as individuals trained their bodies to subdue their urges and thus live a contemplative life. The marks the struggle signed on their bodies rendered them iconic, with a complex and fascinating process of imaginative exercise set in place by contemporary Christians in order to habituate the brethren to interpret the tortured bodies as angelic.¹⁰ There too, the presence of women was debated, leading to the phenomenon of the transvestite female monks. With repressing sexuality as one of the main concerns, the presence of women was disconcerting in an almost completely male phenomenon. Together with the philosophical

Jamais! Les diaconesses (veuves et prêtresses) et l'iconographie de la Theotokos", in: *Féminité et masculinité altérées: transgression et inversion des genres au Moyen Âge*, eds. Eva Pibiri and Fanny Abbott, Florence 2017, 51-92.

⁹ Ps.-Dionysius the Areopagite, *Cael. Hier.* 3.2 indicates the purpose of the (male) clerical hierarchy as theophanic. See Vladimir Ivanovici, *Chosen Vessels: Embodying the Divine in Late Antiquity*, Brno/Rome forthcoming.

¹⁰ Georgia Frank, *The Memory of the Eyes: Pilgrims to Living Saints in Christian Late Antiquity*, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London 2000 (= *Transformations of Classical Heritage*, 30); Patricia Cox Miller, "Desert Asceticism and 'The Body from Nowhere'", in: *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 2 (1994), 137-153; id., *The Corporeal Imagination. Signifying the Holy in Late Ancient Christianity*, Philadelphia 2009.

inquiries of the highly educated bishops of the fourth century, who pondered the relationship between gender and humanity's iconic function, asceticism stimulated the development of attitudes and concepts regarding gender and its relationship to the image of God in humanity.¹¹ The desert created a context in which the female body reflected what the Church Fathers presumed to happen to their spiritual nature. It was assumed that perfection entailed maleness of body and spirit.

[7] Much Patristic thought incorporated the ideas of Plato (ca. 427–347 BCE) which in modern research had often been perceived reductively as promoting a sense of dichotomic dualism between body and soul, a notion condensed in the famous *soma-sema* analogy, in which the body is considered to be a tomb for the soul.¹² However, Plato's teaching regarding the body is diverse and repays close reading to obtain a nuanced view of humanity's corporality, especially as it pertains to the female of the species: in the *Symposium*, Socrates is instructed by a female sage, Diotima, "whose sexual indeterminacy qua spiritual guide is here signalled by her repeated designation as *he didaskalos*—female article with male noun".¹³ It is notable that when Gregory of Nyssa (335–394) writes of his inspirational sister Macrina, he, too, adopts this hybridity of language in order to reflect the (surprising) merits of a female ascetic, whose life choices transcended the confines of her gender.¹⁴ Absorbed directly or through the work of philosopher Plotinus (204–270 CE), Plato's thought was instrumental in Patristic anthropology, with the Fathers often familiar with the nuances of his theories of embodiment. Thus, building on Paul's distinction between living *kata sarka* and *kata soma*, that is an opposition between living according to the 'demands' of the *flesh* and being embodied,¹⁵ early Christian thinkers proposed a variety of solutions in dealing with the body. Origen (185–254) saw it as an act of divine mercy that the soul could be enfleshed, as humans were born into a state of filth,

¹¹ Harrison, "Women, Human Identity, and the Image of God", explored differences existing between the Cappadocian and Antiochean schools, with the former ascribing the iconic function to the whole of humanity, and the latter to men alone, following Paul's 1 Cor. 11:7. To these I add the tradition present in Syriac poets who adopted the term "clothed in the body" as a translation for the creedal statement "he became incarnate" which rendered the body positive in it being central to salvation. See my *Clothed in the Body: Asceticism, the Body and the Spiritual in the Late Antique Era*, Farnham 2012.

¹² The key example from Plato may be found in *Gorgias*, 493a (ed. W. R. M. Lamb: Plato, *Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias*, Cambridge, Mass. 1925, 414-415).

¹³ Rowan Williams, "Macrina's Deathbed Revisited: Gregory of Nyssa on Mind and Passion", in: *Christian Faith and Greek Philosophy in Late Antiquity*, eds. Lionel R. Wickham and Caroline P. Hammond Bammel, Leiden 1993, 227-246: 244.

¹⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Macrina* (ed. PG 46.960-1000).

¹⁵ See the classic study by Robert H. Gundry, *Soma in Biblical Theology: with Emphasis on Pauline Anthropology*, Cambridge 1976 (= Society for New Testament Studies monograph series, 29).

from which belief in Christ alone could save them.¹⁶ Diversely, the fourth-century Fathers, influenced by Neo-Platonic thought, found gender to be a result of humanity's fall from perfection. Gregory of Nyssa, writing on the creation of mankind, stresses a unity between the genders in the human soul, arguing, as noted by Graham Gould, that "the first creation of man is logically prior to the division of humanity into two sexes. Sexual differentiation is alien to the divine nature and therefore, in the first instance, to any being created in the divine image."¹⁷ Drawing on and writing for ascetic experiences, Evagrius Ponticus (345–399) sees an inter-connectedness between body and soul,¹⁸ and the refining, rather than extirpation, of carnal instincts becomes the dominant ascetic aim; if the human person is made in God's image, and if Jesus was fully human as well as divine, it could not be possible, in Christian teaching, to totally reject the body in itself. Notwithstanding these insights, the dominant impression from early Christianity is one of negativity towards bodies, and especially female bodies or behaviours. The apocryphal third-century *Gospel of Thomas* is a case in point: "Wretched is the body that is dependent upon a body, and wretched is the soul that is dependent on these two."¹⁹

Women and effeminacy

[8] It will become apparent that 'womanish' *behaviour* was seen as being as much (maybe even more) problematic to spiritual development than the actual sexual identity at birth of the individual person. In other words, behaviour conventionally gendered as female is considered a hindrance (whether performed by men or women) and the desirable option is manly behaviour, as this was perceived as the superior position to follow. Female physiology was problematised because of being seen as unstable; its hormonal cycles were seen as antithetical to the stability and firm shape of the ideal form. For this reason, both the Gnostics, an influential and pervasive group of spiritual thinkers who denigrated the physical world and its corporeal inhabitants, and Plutarch of Chaeronea (46–ca. 122 CE), a seminal pagan philosopher who also promulgated Platonic dualism, saw female "shapelessness" as too proximate to chaos.²⁰ The male was seen as complete and perfect, the female as an incomplete and imperfect male; this assumption is promulgated in the teaching of Philo of

¹⁶ Origen, *Hom. Lev.* 8.3 (ed. PG 12.494-496).

¹⁷ For a discussion of this aspect of *De Opificio*, see Graham Gould, "Women in the Writings of the Church Fathers: Language, Belief and Reality", in: *Women in the Church*, eds. William J. Sheils and Diana Wood, Oxford 1990, 1-13: 6.

¹⁸ Evagrius Ponticus, *Chapters on Prayer* 129 (eds. Claire and Antoine Guillaumont, *Évagre le Pontique. Traité pratique, ou, Le moine. Cent chapitres sur la vie spirituelle*, Paris 1971 [= *Sources chrétiennes*, 170-171]).

¹⁹ *Gospel of Thomas*, Saying 87 (trans. Hugh McGregor Ross, *The Gospel of Thomas*, Longmead 1991, 56).

²⁰ On this see Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, New York 1988, 12.

Alexandria (ca. 20 BCE–50 CE), who presented "bad" bodies as behaving in a womanly way, regardless of their sexual form.²¹ However, ironically, the very fact that women's physical state changes through puberty to sexual maturity, and then on to the supposed sexless status of the post-menopausal, meant they inevitably moved towards the desired state of being sexless: once their core role as procreators had been fulfilled (or avoided, in the case of elected virgins), they no longer posed such a threat to men and society. Their inherent libidinousness was presumed to come to an end.

[9] Maleness, on the other hand, was presumed to be characterised as more inherently "stable" in terms of constitution and behaviour; men, therefore, continued throughout their lives to be at risk from erotic urges. Concerns about this are expressed in exclusively male terms; both ascetic and medical treatises expressed caution about the dangers in different circumstances of seminal emissions. On the one hand, the Desert Fathers discussed the fact that even when asleep, men's lust could lead to seminal emissions. If involuntary (as would be likely when asleep) this was seen as forgivable but best avoided if possible, because it indicated lust and an attachment to things of the world. Fasting was seen as a good way of preventing the production of too much semen.²² On the other hand, medical opinion, as recorded by Galen (130–210 CE)—a famous doctor and our main source for Roman medical theories on the body—, saw excessive loss of semen as damaging to the maintenance of heat and virility, qualities associated with being manly.²³ Wasting your seed, for example in masturbation, not only avoided what Roman secular culture saw as the proper responsibilities of procreating but also risked weakening your masculinity. The perceived 'danger' was that a man might become effeminate.

Virginité

[10] Alongside masculinity and its converse as defining constructs, a third category of sexual identity existed in Late Antiquity: virginité. Both men and women could adopt this route to perfection. Virginité was seen as a way of life which had its source in heaven, according to Ambrose of Milan (ca. 340–397), the author of a treatise on the topic.²⁴ Women who dressed as men in order to lead ascetic lives effectively acquired the status not so much of honorary men but of virgins, regardless of their physical intactness. The word "virgin" implies, indeed contains, the word "vir" (man); female virgins were thus effectively men, argued

²¹ Colleen M. Conway, *Behold the Man: Jesus and Graeco-Roman Masculinity*, Oxford 2008, 16–18.

²² *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto*: Dioscorus, 20 (ed. and trans. André-Jean Festugière O.P., Brussels 1961 [= *Subsidia Hagiographica*, 34]).

²³ This is placed in context in Brown, *The Body and Society*, 11 and 238.

²⁴ Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.11 (ed. PL 16.281–283); see Susanna Elm, *Virgins of God: The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity*, Oxford 1994, and the contribution by Vladimir Ivanovici and Sissel Undheim in this special issue.

Jerome (347–420), a promoter of female asceticism.²⁵ The continence presumed to be required in order to sustain chastity was supposed to be a characteristic of masculinity. Because virginity entails being "virile in ascetic prowess and virtue", there is an unavoidable tension in the early Church's writings about virginity: women were exhorted to acquire a status which was effectively full of 'manly qualities' such as virtue and continence.²⁶ Virginity was understood to be a concept or frame of mind as much as a physical state. It was seen as not merely an absence of sexual activity or desire, but as the presence of chastity, a chastity of mind and body, denoted by asexual behaviour. Gregory of Nyssa attributes virginity explicitly to non-corporeal states; he argues it is "not confined to the body; it pertains to all things and extends even to thought which is considered one of the achievements of the soul".²⁷ Ambrose, however, focuses on how female chastity demonstrates rare spirituality, as this entailed going beyond female nature, a topic to which we will return.²⁸ Ambrose writes about a virgin being forced to enter a brothel so that her "masculine *virtus*" might be dissolved into "feminine wantonness", as if there were no option but binary opposition.²⁹

[11] In terms of the hierarchy of spiritual perfection, the state of virginity came at the top, followed by married women who had renounced the demands of family ties and domesticity; next came those who lived as married "but with shame" (and presumably were open to the possibility of legitimate procreation), and below them in merit came those who willingly have sex or who re-marry, and lastly prostitutes. This taxonomy is found in the legends of Thecla—one of the most important female saints of the period—but can be taken as a general benchmark for female conduct.³⁰ Virginity was a conscious choice of celibacy. Because virginity was a mental as well as a physical condition, it could be re-acquired (through appropriate penitence and tears) even after marriage, or by people who had been sexually active in less approved ways, such as sex workers. Indeed, transitioning consciously from a state of being sexually active to being celibate was seen as a sign of strength: a male characteristic.

[12] The *topos* of virginity provides the context for the Desert Fathers' interest in cross-dressing according to Benedicta Ward, who suggests that monastic

²⁵ See Mathew Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch: Masculinity, Gender Ambiguity and Christian Ideology in Late Antiquity*, Chicago 2001, 231.

²⁶ Teresa M. Shaw, *The Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity*, Minneapolis 1998, 248.

²⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity* 15 (ed. Michel Aubineau, *Grégoire de Nysse. Traité de la Virginité*, Paris 1966 [= Sources Chrétiennes, 119]; trans. Virginia Woods Callahan, *Saint Gregory of Nyssa: Ascetical Works*, Washington, D.C. 1967 [= *The Fathers of the Church*, 58], 51).

²⁸ Ambrose, *De Virg.* 1.2.5 (ed. PL 16.267).

²⁹ Ambrose, *De Virg.* 2.4, 27 and 28 (ed. PL 16).

³⁰ See Gilbert Dagron, *Vie et miracles de Sainte Thècle: Texte grec, traduction et commentaire*, Brussels 1978, 131.

enthusiasm for stories about women dressing as men was neither "a sign of unhealthy repression leading to sexual fantasy and a prurient desire for stories about forbidden fruit, nor [...] part of the rejection of sexuality which at times marks the writings of the early Church". Ward argues that such stories were important to monks (who were devoting their lives to ascetic endeavour) for two reasons. These legends articulated "a clear recognition of the reality and force of sexual desire in human experience" and also showed that desire, in itself, is not necessarily bad. It has a "true and central role in human life" as yearning for God. Human desire can be expressed through either marriage or monastic life, both of which are sacraments blessed by the Church.³¹ Another perspective on the trope of the female transvestite saint was that it constituted the "literary product" of tension between "monastic hostility towards women as the source of their sexual desire [...] and monks' suppressed longing for female presence".³² The Desert Fathers have been implicated as key sources for accounts of transvestite female saints, and this needs now to be explored in more detail.

Cross-dressing narratives

[13] Modern scholarship on the topic of cross-dressing female ascetics was prompted some forty years ago by Evelyne Patlagean's study, "L'histoire de la femme déguisée en moine et l'évolution de la sainteté féminine à Byzance".³³ Since then, the emergence of Queer theory, and developments in feminist readings of writing about gender have introduced many new angles of interpretation about cross-dressing, which it will not be possible to cover in full here.³⁴ Legends and other records of transvestite women saints proliferated in desert and para-desert contexts in Late Antiquity. Deserts included remote and geographically hostile areas within Egypt, Syria and Palestine, and later various locations in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). The proportion of female to male ascetics was tiny; the surviving writings of the "Desert Fathers" include only three named "Ammas" or Mothers. Some recent scholarship has re-evaluated the nature of women asceticism in early Christian Egypt, and has concluded that it was more extensive in scope and diverse in its terms of engagement than previously understood; however, it remains the case that the majority of ascetics recorded in the Christian desert were men.³⁵

³¹ Benedicta Ward, *Harlots of the Desert*, Kalamazoo 1987, 102-103.

³² Stephen J. Davis, "Crossed Texts, Crossed Sex: Intertextuality and Gender in Early Christian Legends of Holy Women Disguised as Men", in: *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 10 (2002), 1-36: 7-8.

³³ See n. 3.

³⁴ A useful survey of twentieth-century developments in the scholarship of this area of asceticism may be found in Lawrence M. Wills's brief study, "Ascetic Theology before Asceticism? Jewish Narratives and the Decentering of the Self", in: *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74 (2006), no. 4, 902-925.

³⁵ Caroline T. Schroeder, "Women in Anchoritic and Semi-Anchoritic Monasticism in Egypt: Re-thinking the Landscape", in *Church History* 83 (2014), no. 1, 1-17. Schroeder widens

[14] Stories about women who adopted asceticism while dressed as men were very popular. The late fifth to early seventh centuries saw the publication of at least eleven *vitae* of transvestite female saints.³⁶ They included nuns disguised as monks living in coenobitic or urban contexts and female solitaries, of whom Mary of Egypt (ca. 344–ca. 421) was the most notorious.³⁷ The nature and credibility of these sources needs to be borne in mind. Hagiographical representations aside, these are normally deemed to be legends, stories which were popular for a range of reasons including entertainment as well as edification. As noted above, Ward presents them as being popular among monks. A pattern emerges in the legends, as would be expected in a literary construction. Frequently a young woman decides she wishes to escape the confines of domestic and procreative expectations, or there may be other practical reasons why her position within the family has changed. Unmarried (or widowed) women could be a financial and social burden to families. In one story, when Mary's mother dies, her father colludes with her decision to enter a monastery disguised as a monk.³⁸ Another formula is the impious woman, often a sex worker, who repents of her sins (especially of having earned her living through selling her body), and then removes to the desert in order to pursue a life of penitence and prayer; numerous examples of this can be found in Benedicta Ward's *Harlots of the Desert*, the title of which reflects the reception of their origins. Again, this flight from the lure of the world is sometimes supported by the men who know or know of the woman in question: when Pelagia, an actress in Antioch, finds salvation, and wishes to flee from her old life, the devil puts up a fight for her soul, but after eight days he is vanquished and she disappears "wearing a tunic and breeches belonging to the holy bishop Nonnus".³⁹ Mary of Egypt is given half the cloak of Zosimas, a fellow hermit in the Jordanian desert, in order to help cover her nudity.

[15] The credibility of their adopted gender is only sometimes tested: it is rare to find comments that anyone noticed that a 'monk' developed no facial hair, and never gained a broken voice (presumably it was accepted that such 'men' were natural eunuchs, whose adolescent hormones had not activated because of undescended testicles). The adopted gender becomes a *topos* that is not challenged, and the legends frequently contain instances where the true sex of the saint remained undetected until the corpse was undressed in preparation for burial. This ignorance of the true sex of the saint may pertain partly to the

the sources examined to include evidence from papyri of letters between women seeking spiritual counsel, as well as tax receipts, indicating women were economically more active than often perceived.

³⁶ Davis, "Crossed Texts, Crossed Sex", 2-3.

³⁷ Alice-Mary Talbot, ed., *Holy Women of Byzantium. Ten Saints' Lives in English Translation*, Washington 1996.

³⁸ Talbot, *Holy Women of Byzantium. Ten Saints' Lives: Life of St. Mary/Marinos* 1-3, 7.

³⁹ *Life of St. Pelagia* 12 (ed. PL 73.669; trans. Ward, *Harlots of the Desert*, 72).

discretion required of male ascetics; they were not permitted to eat or socialise with women and there are acerbic comments from one or two of the Desert Mothers that a perfect monk would not have looked at a woman long enough to realise she was a woman. Custody of the eyes was expected of both genders. As Amma Sarah said, "According to my nature I am a woman, but not according to my thoughts. It is I that am a man and you that are women."⁴⁰ On the other hand, it is recorded that Matrona of Perge's pierced ears were noticed, raising some questions about her gender.⁴¹ One good way of re-enforcing the transvestite disguise was to allow yourself to be accused of raping and impregnating woman: Mary/Marinos is a case in point. In her narrative, she even raised the child she was accused of having fathered for three years before being allowed back into the monastery.⁴²

[16] One quality that was shared by all these women was that they consciously relinquished all manifestations and markers of femininity (and thereby often also disguised their social class). They might cut their hair, an ambiguous act since while decent women would have long hair, it was always covered (perhaps referred to in 1 Cor. 11:2-16); a mark of a prostitute was that her hair was worn loose in order to entice clients (hence the assumption that the woman who bathes Jesus' feet with her tears and wipes them with her hair was a woman of the street, according to Luke 7:35-45).⁴³ A woman's decision to cut her hair thus denoted loss of femininity and social and even moral status.⁴⁴ Female allure was believed to be fostered by a number of elements, including attire, jewellery, makeup, adornment, perfume and so on. Giving these away was a conscious means of averting sexual desire, and a step towards cross-dressing which could be undertaken in the privacy of an upper-class home.⁴⁵ Thekla, for example, gave away her bracelets as a symbolic gesture of renouncing her femininity.⁴⁶ The process is mirrored in the representation of women saints whose hair is increasingly covered beginning with the sixth century. *The* symbol of femininity, as indicated by it being always the focus in the famous compositions of the time showing the (rich) woman's toilette, hair was increasingly tucked away in Late Antique and Early Medieval representations of women, after the model provided by the Virgin Mary; a progression that can be seen in figures 2 and 3.⁴⁷

⁴⁰ *Apophthegmata Patrum*: Sarah 9 (ed. PG 65.420; trans. Benedicta Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection*, Michigan 1975, 230).

⁴¹ Talbot, *Holy Women of Byzantium. Ten Saints' Lives*, 23.

⁴² Talbot, *Holy Women of Byzantium. Ten Saints' Lives*, 9-10.

⁴³ This is discussed extensively in Charles H. Cosgrove, "A Woman's Unbound Hair in the Greco-Roman World, with Special Reference to the Story of the 'Sinful Woman' in Luke 7:36-50", in: *Journal of Biblical Literature* 124 (2005), no. 4, 675-692.

⁴⁴ Carolyn L. Connor, *Women of Byzantium*, New Haven 2004, 81.

⁴⁵ Wills, "Ascetic Theology before Asceticism?", 909.

⁴⁶ Connor, *Women of Byzantium*, 9.



2 Terracotta statuette of a woman looking into a box mirror, h. 28.6 cm, 3rd-2nd century BCE, from Greece. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, acc. no. 12.229.19 (photo © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)



3 Mosaic portraits of Episcopa Theodora, St. Pudenziana, the Virgin Mary, and St. Prassede. Chapel of St. Zeno, Church of Santa Prassede, Rome, ca. 822. While the look of the local saints is influenced by the local tradition of the Roman *domina*, with hairdos that show their hair, Theodora (mother of Pope Paschal I, the commissioner of the chapel, still alive as the mosaic was made) is shown with her hair covered after the model of the Virgin (photo: Vladimir Ivanovici)

[17] The hieratic posture and the reduction of corporeality in these representations indicate a spiritualisation of the body, with immobility as mark of sanctity. Denoting one's neglecting of the corporeal in favour of a contemplative life, immobility and its depiction were not inherently male.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, the reduction of movement and of skin and hair display which had characterised representations of women, amounted to a reduction of their femininity, as

⁴⁷ In Rome and Ravenna the representation of women saints with hair continued in parallel under the influence of local traditions of depicting sanctity and female power.

⁴⁸ On immobility, see Miller, *The Corporeal Imagination*, 139-142.

exemplified in the mosaic panel showing empress Theodora and her entourage (Fig. 4).



4 Mosaic showing empress Theodora (ca. 500–548) with her entourage. Church of San Vitale in Ravenna, ca. 548. The women's hair is hidden and the femininity of their bodies annulled under heavy textiles and rendered in hieratic manner (photo: www.zeno.org)

[18] Leaving the safe, controlled confines of the home environment was also a way for women to demonstrate a shift in the gendering of their behaviour; at both a symbolic and actual level, women in Graeco-Roman society were associated with the private domain of the house, and public life was seen as a domain restricted to the male.⁴⁹ This brings us to consider what attributes and behaviours were seen as "male" and how women who transgressed the boundaries between male/female behaviour threatened not only their femininity but also the masculinity of their patriarchal guardians.

⁴⁹ Margaret MacDonald, *Early Christian Women and Pagan Opinion: The Power of the Hysterical Woman*, New York 1996, 28-29.

The problem of 'womanish' men

[19] According to Roman law, babies at birth were classified as male or female. There was, however, no guarantee that a boy would, existentially, become a man as masculinity was seen then (as now) as a constructed idea. It was not so much a birthright as something that had to be acquired and retained, through performing certain behaviours and conforming to cultural norms.⁵⁰ And according to some of the ancient medical teachings, whether you came out of the womb manly or womanly depended on happenstance: it was believed that if male seed entered the left part of the uterus, a feminine man was produced; if female seed entered the right side of the uterus, a manly woman was produced.⁵¹ It was presumed to be infinitely preferable to be male than female; maleness therefore needed to be practiced and 'performed': as both Michel Foucault and Judith Butler argue, gender is "always an already-scripted role that one plays".⁵²

[20] Within the context of the Christian Church during the Late Antique Era, there may have been religious as well as moral reasons for clear distinctions between the masculine and feminine. The Fathers of the Church expressed great anxiety about men not being manly enough. Lactantius (240–320), commenting on public displays by male performers, criticised their "enervated bodies, softened to womanish step and effeminate apparel", while Ambrose banned womanish men from heaven.⁵³

[21] The disparaging term 'womanishness' was used to denote irrational and uncontrolled behaviour; and men were urged to ensure they avoided behaving in this way, whether with their male social equals or even with their slaves.⁵⁴ Manliness entailed being the active partner in any sexual congress (hence being a catamite was far less acceptable than being a sodomite, since being penetrated was the role of a woman not a man according to social norms; this is perhaps what is suggested as an "abomination" in Leviticus 18.22 and 20.13). One of the reasons masturbation was so disapproved of officially was that it was regarded as the passive acceptance of pleasure rather than the active taking of it, according to Isidore of Seville (560–636).⁵⁵ Men who were effeminate failed to be superior to women, because they subverted what was seen as the natural

⁵⁰ Virginia Burrus, *Begotten, Not Made. Conceiving Manhood in Late Antiquity*, Stanford 2000, 18; Maud W. Gleason, *Making Men: Sophists and Self-Presentation in Ancient Rome*, Princeton 1995.

⁵¹ Oliver Nicholson, "Doing What Comes Naturally: Lactantius on Libido", in: *Studia Patristica* 31 (1997), 314-321.

⁵² Conway, *Behold the Man*, 21. Judith Butler has written extensively on this, most recently in *Notes towards a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Cambridge, Mass. 2015.

⁵³ Lactantius, *Div. inst.* 6.20.29 (ed. *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* [CSEL] 19.560-561; trans. Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch*, 211); Ambrose, *Commentary on Luke* 5:108 (ed. PL 15.1665-1666). On this, see Kuefler, *Manly Eunuch*, 209-211.

⁵⁴ Gould, "Women in the Writings of the Church Fathers", 2.

⁵⁵ Salisbury, *Church Fathers, Independent Virgins*, 22.

order, as we can see from Clement of Alexandria's (d. ca. 215) comment that "Women must seek wisdom, like men, even if men are superior and have first place in every field, at least if they are not effeminate."⁵⁶ The anxiety about womanish men extended to fear of 'manly' women (in spiritual terms): when it came to the ascetic life, female success was seen as potentially undermining male success. Enacting chastity allowed women to overcome the 'female' quality of shame (which is opposed to the male construct of honour); this was interpreted as women effectively threatening masculine identity.⁵⁷ So did women dressing up as men constitute a shift in gender perception? The contemporary accounts (almost entirely from men) focus on the 'manly' spiritual qualities of women who enacted ascetic life. They might become 'honorary' males. Was this sufficient for them to be seen as fully ascetic creatures who regained the image of God in which Adam had been made?

Becoming male

[22] Male authors of letters and other texts about 'manly' women suggest that transcending the limitations of female gender, with all its negative connotations, is the way to achieve purity and ascetic prowess.⁵⁸ The comments refer to gendered behaviour and attitudes and to the 'manliness' or otherwise of the soul, suggesting that in this aspect of human life, as in so much else, the male was seen as the (desirable) norm and the female version as 'other', aberrant and second rate. Because of this, referring to a woman as having a manly soul was high praise. As we have already seen, this desirability lay partly in its differentiation from the 'womanish' option rather than being an ontological difference. Gregory of Nyssa consistently referred to his sister Macrina in terms of her manly virtue and having transcended her gender. "We spoke of a woman, if one may refer to her as that, for I do not know if it is right to use that natural designation for one who went beyond the nature of a woman." He continues that as she had "raised herself to the highest peak of human virtue through philosophy", Macrina should "not be passed over in silence and her life rendered ineffectual".⁵⁹ The implication is that her manly asceticism merits a sustained reputation for spiritual insight that would not have existed had she remained womanly. The adoption of male gendered behaviour extended in her case beyond her piety to more practical behaviour: on the death of their sibling Naucratus, which caused her widowed mother to collapse in grief, Macrina effectively 'fathered' her siblings who acknowledged that she "trained her mother's soul to

⁵⁶ Clement, *Strom.* 4.8 (PG 8.1276; trans. Cloke, *'This Female Man of God': Women and Spiritual Power AD 350-450*, 32).

⁵⁷ MacDonald, *Early Christian Women and Pagan Opinion*, 28-29.

⁵⁸ Other religious overachievers were expected to transgress born sexuality in the period usually through voluntary castration as the priests of the goddess Cybele, or castration and the adoption of feminine garb as those of Atargatis.

⁵⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Macrina* (ed. PG 46.960AB; trans. Virginia Woods Callahan, *Saint Gregory of Nyssa: Ascetical Works*, Washington 1967, 163).

be courageous" (again, the word containing the sense of 'virtue' with its manly associations).⁶⁰ She became a *gyne andreia*, a manly woman. Macrina's brother, who was to become Basil the Great (330–379), writes of ascetic warriors as being of both genders, "for women too are fighting for Christ, being enrolled for the campaign because of the courage [*andreia*] of their souls, not rejected because of the weakness of their bodies."⁶¹ In listing the various roles Macrina performed within the family, Gregory of Nyssa uses almost entirely male nouns.⁶²

[23] Porphyry (d. ca. 305), a pupil of Plotinus and himself a philosopher in the Platonic tradition, in his *Letter to Marcella* urges her to envision herself as a man—and a manly man at that: "Neither trouble yourself much whether you are male or female in body, nor look on yourself as a woman, for I did not approach you as such. Flee all that is womanish in the soul, as though you had a man's body."⁶³ Gregory of Nazianzus records that his sister, Gorgonia, was blest with a manly soul, more manly than that of weak-willed men, "demonstrating that the distinction between male and female is one of body not of soul".⁶⁴ Paulinus (354–431), bishop of Nola, expressed a typical view of the ascetic woman when referring to Melania the Elder (325–410), the founder of two ascetic communities in Palestine, as "What a woman she is, if one can call so virile a Christian a woman!"⁶⁵ Noblewoman Perpetua in turn, martyred in 235 in Carthage, learns in a dream that she has to become man(ly) in order to win the contest in the arena. Transformed in a man in her dream, she then enacts the state by behaving manly in the arena.⁶⁶ Drawing on the story of Perpetua, a modern scholar points out that although "Logically, the complete transcendence of the carnal would

⁶⁰ Elm, *Virgins of God*, 83.

⁶¹ Basil of Caesarea, *Outline of the Ascetic Life* 3 (ed. PG 31.624C-625A; trans. Gould, "Women in the Writings of the Church Fathers", 3).

⁶² Philip Rousseau, "The Pious Householder and the Virgin Chorus: Reflections on Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Macrina*", in: *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 13 (2005), no. 2, 165-186: 176.

⁶³ Porphyry, *Letter to Marcella* 33 (ed. and German trans. Walter Pötscher, *Porphyrios. Pròs Markéllan*, Leiden 1969; English trans. Alice Zimmern, *Porphyry the Philosopher to His Wife Marcella*, London 1896, 77, amended). For the full context of this text, see Cloke, 'This Female Man of God', 212. Porphyry was a Neo-Platonic philosopher, whose *Enneads*, widely read in Late Antique Christendom, were the only surviving record of the teachings of his mentor Plotinus.

⁶⁴ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 8.14 (ed. PG 35.805; trans. Charles Gordon Browne and James Edward Swallow, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers. Second Series*, vol. 7, Buffalo, NY 1894, 242).

⁶⁵ Paulinus of Nola, *Ep.* 29.6 (ed. CSEL 29.251; trans. Patrick G. Walsh, *Letters of Paulinus of Nola*, Westminster, MD 1966, vol. 1, 105-106).

⁶⁶ For discussion of this and other related issues, see Elizabeth Castelli, "'I will make Mary male': Pieties of the Body and Gender Transformation of Christian Women in Late Antiquity", in: *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, eds. Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub, New York 1991, 29-49.

have converted sexual women into spiritual men", the patriarchal Christian Church, and especially its Fathers, whose teachings dominated Christian understandings of the religious life, were "as unwilling to support such a radical transformation as they were to support women transcending even the social expectations which bound them".⁶⁷ Whilst men might praise women who behaved in a 'manly' way, they also feared being shown up by them. Women becoming 'manly' threatened moving into, even occupying, male territory and thereby diminishing men's status, security and masculinity.

[24] The question remains why it was essential to have a manly soul. One answer is from the apocryphal *Gospel of Thomas* (and the embedded misogyny is not necessarily what prevented the gospel becoming canonical), which ends with Simon Peter addressing the apostles:

*Let Mary go out from amongst us, because women are not worthy of the Life. Jesus said: Behold, I will guide her Being, in order that I make her male that she like you become a living spirit, like you males. For every person who transcends being woman or man shall enter the Kingdom of the heavens.*⁶⁸

The implication here is that unless she were male, she could not have a living spirit, and without a living spirit would not be capable of salvation. Although this is not explicitly spelled out in the Patristic tradition, this sort of conception of the female as incomplete or imperfect male is implicit in much of the misogyny cited above. Quite how this sits with Galatians 3.28 is rarely discussed: it was a heresy that was not addressed by the Fathers of the Church. The logion from the *Gospel of Thomas* does, however, also imply that salvation is determined by transcending gender altogether. Macrina has been presented as having not so much "transcended the limitations of being female" as having "transcended the limitations of human nature as such and lived a life which is angelic in its detachment from earthly and bodily concerns".⁶⁹ Is this what is implied by Matt. 19.12:

*For there are eunuchs, who were born so from their mother's womb: and there are eunuchs, who were made so by men: and there are eunuchs, who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven. He that can take, let him take it.*⁷⁰

Transcending gender: becoming asexual eunuchs for Christ

[25] Since for both men and women the issue was how one behaved, not birth sexual identity or what one looked like, the ideal state therefore appears to be asexual, achievable by virgins, for example. Dressing up as men allowed women to distract attention from the trappings of gender; it enabled them to disguise

⁶⁷ Salisbury, *Church Fathers, Independent Virgins*, 97.

⁶⁸ Gospel of Thomas, Saying 114 (trans. Ross, *The Gospel of Thomas*, 88).

⁶⁹ Gould, "Women in the Writings of the Church Fathers", 6-7.

⁷⁰ I quote the revised Douay-Rheims edition of the Bible.

their birth gender so they could perform an ascetic life. Fallen humanity in its transcended state in the desert led an angelic life in nature as Adam and Eve, before sexuality. At a very basic level asceticism enabled women to leave the domestic environment which was the expected domain. But because both body and soul are capable of purity, arguably the perfect way to be an ascetic was beyond the confines of gender expectations. 'Manly' men and women were both acceptable, and if we strip out the misogyny inherent in such a concept, we are able to see that cross-dressing as a man enabled a woman to become asexual. Transvesticism articulated a desire to be seen as the more acceptable 'norm' rather than the female 'other'; culturally, it also enabled a degree of transcendence of gender altogether. Pelagia, by dressing as a man, "not only transcended her own gender, she transcended both genders. She was an asexual eunuch for Christ."⁷¹ Eunuchs are not androgynous but asexual.⁷² In the desert, perception of the body was nonetheless toned down by both, its direct implication in personal salvation and by the influence of the Syriac tradition. This latter employed the soft imagery of clothing to denote both the Incarnation and embodied life, with being "clothed in the body" allowing more easily the passing from the "robe of flesh" to a luminous "robe of glory" even in this existence.⁷³

Conclusion

[26] Late Antiquity predominantly struggled to accept women as sharing the ascetic potential of men. Biblical narratives, Patristic teaching and Platonic and Neo-Platonic thought combined to sustain an environment inherently hostile to the appreciation of women as more than contaminating bodies. The male-dominated monastic world further reinforced this convention by performing asceticism in a manner which sometimes denied the possibilities of physical grace and value. However, the ascetic merits of individual women broke through this hegemony. In a society where visual signifiers of status and gender were so dominant, the choice of women to shed the paraphernalia of femininity in favour of masculine attire was a bold and even dangerous step. Cross-dressing as men enabled some women not only to escape the practical and lethal demands of home-making and procreation in favour of nourishing their souls, but ultimately to transcend even the concept of gender. Like men who also sought alternatives to male gendering, cross-dressing women were empowered to become metaphorical "eunuchs for Christ".

About the Author

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⁷¹ Salisbury, *Church Fathers, Independent Virgins*, 101-101.

⁷² On this, see my *Clothed in the Body*, ch. 7-10.

⁷³ See the contribution by Bogdan G. Bucur and Vladimir Ivanovici in this special issue.

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