

The Lady Appears: Materializations of “Woman” in Early Monastic Literature

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According to a famous monastic saying, the Egyptian desert in Late Antiquity was the place where, as in some recent theory about gender in history, “there are no women.”¹ To be sure, the desert was filled with thoughts of women, memories of abandoned wives and mothers, and demonic specters of women, but monks claimed that there were few, if any, flesh-and-blood women in their desert. Likewise, Elizabeth Clark has invited historians of Christianity to consider the prospect that our sources present us not with real women from the past, but with male authors’ fantasies about or rhetorical uses of women, no more than the gendered literary “traces” of elusive “real women.”² Imagine, then, the surprise of a group of lay tourists—and perhaps our surprise as well—when their representative monk turned out to be really a woman:

Some worldly people visited a certain anchorite, and when he saw them he received them with joy, saying, “The Lord sent you so that you would bury me. For my call is at hand, but for the benefit of you and of those who hear (your report), I shall tell you about my life. As for me, brothers, I am a virgin in my body, but in my soul up to now I have been inhumanly under attack by fornication. Look, I am speaking to you, and I behold the angels waiting to take my soul, and Satan meanwhile standing by and suggesting thoughts of fornication to me.” Having said these things, he stretched himself out and died. While dressing him the worldly people found that he truly was a virgin.³

The radical confirmation of the monk’s claim about himself—“a virgin in my body”—made possible by the appearance of a female body only underscores what the monk presumably left unsaid about him/herself. Whatever

truths the monk may have told his admiring visitors “about my life,” perhaps only summarized here, his body, once he stopped talking, told a different truth: he was a woman. At the end of the male monk’s discourse, the lady appears. So the story, presumably told by the visitors, says. This surprise was too good to tell only once: a longer and more complicated *apophthegma* about Abba Bessarion likewise climaxes with a monk revealed to be a woman at his death (*Apoph. patr.*, Bessarion 4). The heroine of the later *Life of St. Pelagia the Harlot* lives for three or four years disguised as a male monk in Jerusalem, until her death reveals her ruse.⁴ From here the motif of the transvestite ascetic multiplied in early and medieval Christian literature; the abundant detail of these later narratives provides fertile ground for complex scholarly readings on several levels.⁵

In contrast to later medieval tales, the two *apophthegmata* in which dead monks are revealed to be women are spare. For example, the *Life of Pelagia* explains why its heroine chose to disguise herself as a man: a reformed actress and “prostitute,” she sought to escape her wealth and notoriety in Antioch for a life of ascetic anonymity. “She held her fortune to be worse than blood and fouler than the smelly mud of the streets”; wearing clothes given her by Bishop Nonnus, she fled to Jerusalem to live as a monk.⁶ In contrast, the *apophthegmata* narrate only the postmortem discovery of the monks’ cross-dressing, leaving it to scholars to offer plausible reasons for an ascetically inclined woman in fourth- or fifth-century Egypt to have impersonated a male monk. First, solitary women in the desert faced the risks of robbery and sexual assault: passing as a man provided some (but not complete) protection from such dangers.⁷ Second, sayings about and attributed to Amma Sarah, one of the very few named female anchorites in the *apophthegmata*, indicate that some male monks did not accept female colleagues and were even openly hostile to them.⁸ There were, then, good practical reasons for women who wished to pursue the eremitical life in the desert to disguise their sex. If so, then why are such stories so few? And why are they only of these women being discovered at their deaths? The compilers of the sayings appear to have been interested only in successful cross-dressers, or rather, *almost* successful—they made it through their lives without being discovered, but at their deaths the masquerade ended.

This essay, then, analyzes these two *apophthegmata*, along with certain kindred monastic sayings and anecdotes about “real women.” I ask about these women, “What were or are they doing there?”—not in a positivist quest for the actual motivations of real cross-dressing monks, but to explore the relationships between the literary and the social, the rhetorical

and the real. On the one hand, I explore the rhetorical effects, in literature produced by and for men, of stories about such unexpected women. What purposes do these women serve? How do these stories construct “woman”?⁹ On the other hand, I draw on the metaphor of “performance,” recently influential in studies both of asceticism and of gender, to argue that monastic discourse about real women was not “merely” literary, but materialized “woman” as embodying “the world” of sexuality, embodiment, and discourse, that which for the male ascetic was the “strictly foreclosed, . . . the nonnarrativizable.”¹⁰ Such materializations had concrete effects for real women.¹¹

On one level our short anonymous *apophthegma* plays on the gender ambiguity of the Greek word *parthenos* (“virgin”) and on the definition of true virginity. Unlike the male body, the female body could provide evidence of whether a person “truly was a virgin,” and in the fourth and fifth centuries Christian authors increasingly identified female virginity with physical intactness, as the debate over Mary’s virginity illustrates. The case of men was more difficult: John Cassian quotes Basil of Caesarea as saying, “I do not know woman, but I am not a virgin,” and comments, “Well indeed did he understand that the incorruption of the flesh consists not so much in abstaining from woman as it does in integrity of heart, which ever and truly preserves the incorrupt holiness of the body by both the fear of God and the love of chastity.”¹² Our anonymous monk echoes Basil by claiming that his body is virginal, but his soul has been vulnerable to temptation; yet the anecdote seems to take the dead monk’s integrity of body as evidence of the virginity of his soul, caught between the angels and Satan even at death. Only a female body could provide proof of the monk’s virginity “truly.”

Or, drawing on antiquity’s equation of virtue with manliness, we could say that only a female body could provide proof of the monk’s manliness. Through her ascetic discipline, especially through her battle against the “inhuman” temptation of fornication, our anonymous virgin proved herself to be manly; she achieved the masculine virtue of self-control. A variety of early Christian writings portrayed virtuous women as being “made male” or becoming “men.”¹³ In monastic works, the metaphor of the ascetic life as warfare with demonic forces of temptation portrayed the monk as a combatant, an *agônistês*, a masculine figure (e.g., *Apoph. patr.* 7.58). The monks inherited this metaphor from the literature of martyrdom, which understood the captive Christian’s struggle with beasts or gladiators in the arena to be combat with Satan. A female martyr such as Perpetua displayed masculine courage in her triumphant defiance of the demonic forces: “I became a man,” she says. The anchoritic life in the desert succeeded martyrdom

as the arena in which a woman could prove herself to be a female man of God.¹⁴

Like our anonymous monk, Amma Sarah epitomized this masculine ideal, waging warfare against the demon of fornication for thirteen years without asking God for relief. At last, “the spirit of fornication appeared corporally (*sômatikôs*) to her and said, ‘Sarah, you have conquered me.’ But she said, ‘It is not I who have conquered you, but my master, Christ’” (*Apoph. patr.*, Sarah 1–2). Rightly then Sarah was able to say to two male anchorites who sought to “humiliate” her, “According to nature (*phusis*) I am a woman, but not according to my thoughts” (4). To another set of brothers she stated, “It is I who am a man, you who are women” (9). Sarah’s assertion that she is a woman “according to nature” parallels our anonymous *apophthegma*’s identification of the anonymous monk as a (female) virgin “truly” based on her body. Bessarion and his disciple Doulas, as we shall see, discover that their anonymous monk “was a woman by nature (*phusis*)” (*Apoph. patr.*, Bessarion 4). Thus the sayings present an ancient version of the modern assignment of sex (man or woman) to the body or to nature, and of gender (masculine or feminine) to practices or to culture. Naturally or truly Sarah and the anonymous monk are women, but in their thoughts, by their practices, due to their virtue, they are masculine, men. Successful cross-dressing shows that they exemplify the power of the monastic regime to lift the human being above human nature and the sinful body, both associated with femininity.

In recent years modern scholars have developed their own vocabulary of the “performative” for the transformations, gendered and otherwise, that ascetic and other practices produce. Drawing on theories of performance, Patricia Cox Miller has called ascetics “performance artists, enacting the spiritual body in the here-and-now,” and Richard Valantasis has developed a nuanced and highly persuasive theory of asceticism as “performances within a dominant social environment intended to inaugurate a new subjectivity, different social relations, and an alternative symbolic universe.”¹⁵ Here scholarship on ancient asceticism dovetails with recent theory on gender. Contesting the assignment of sex to the body and gender to culture, Judith Butler famously argued that gender is performative, “a stylized repetition of acts . . . in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.”¹⁶ Amma Sarah and our anonymous monks appear to embody these theoretical positions: they became “male” by performing ascetic acts. Yet the concept of performativity questions the *apophthegmata*’s insistence upon the persistence of a “natural” and

“true” gendered identity, female, grounded in a body impervious to the transforming power of performance.¹⁷ It pushes us to ask how this seemingly “natural” and “true” female body may actually have been rendered “real” or “materialized” through monastic performance. A fuller analysis of the rhetorical context of the appearing women will lead us to perhaps the most powerfully transformative of monastic ideologies, Origenism.

The version of the monk-as-woman anecdote preserved under the name of Bessarion amplifies the figural dimension of its presentation and thus its rhetorical utility:

On another day, when I (Doulas) came to his cell I found him (Bessarion) standing at prayer with his hands raised toward heaven. For fourteen days he remained thus. Then he called me and said to me, “Follow me.” We went into the desert. Being thirsty, I said to him, “Father, I am thirsty.” Then, taking my sheepskin, the old man went about a stone’s throw away and when he had prayed, he brought it back, full of water. Then we walked on and came to a cave, where on entering we found a brother seated, engaged in plaiting a rope. He did not raise his eyes to us, nor greet us, since he did not want to enter into conversation with us. So the old man said to me, “Let us go; no doubt the old man is not sure if he ought to speak with us.” We continued our journey toward Lycopolis, till we reached Abba John’s cell. After greeting him, we prayed, then he (John) sat down to speak of the vision that he had had. Abba Bessarion said that a decree had gone forth that the temples would be overthrown. That is what happened: they were overthrown. On our return, we came again to the cave where we had seen the brother. The old man said to me, “Let us go in and see him; perhaps God has told him to speak to us.” When we had entered, we found him dead. The old man said to me, “Come, brother, let us take the body; it is for this reason that God has sent us here.” When we took the body to bury it, we discovered that it was a woman by nature. The old man marveled and said, “See how women triumph over Satan, and we behave shamefully in the cities.” Having given thanks to God, who protects those who love him, we went away.¹⁸

This version makes explicit that the story is told by and for men. The speaker is Abba Doulas, the disciple of Abba Bessarion. Bessarion gives the

discovery of the woman its moral: "See how women triumph over Satan, and we behave shamefully in the cities." As soon as she is stripped of her male monastic garb and revealed to be a woman, this "brother" is expelled from the (male) monastic community, as Bessarion speaks of "we" monks in contrast to "women." The function of this woman is to shame male monks.

Shaming men, Clark has taught us, is one of the most ubiquitous functions of the "woman" that ancient Christian authors constructed.¹⁹ They inherited the tactic from the gospel writers (e.g., Luke 24:22–25),²⁰ as well as from pagan moral philosophers, whose talk of virtuous ("manly") women scholars are now inclined to see less as indicative of a belief in the equality of the sexes in achieving virtue and more as a "rhetorical strategy designed to provoke the male moral subject."²¹ Bessarion only makes explicit the implicit function of our sparer anonymous *apophthegma*, in which the monk's identity as a woman provides physical confirmation of his claim to be "a virgin in my body." The possibly less pure male monastic reader should feel shamed by this woman, as he should by Sarah's statement, "It is I who am a man, you who are women." The *Life of Pelagia* carries this motif to a higher level. As a group of bishops sits outside a church in Antioch waiting for a meeting, the actress Pelagia passes by in the late ancient version of a promotional photography spread, seated on a donkey, accompanied by a throng of boys and girls, clothed in expensive jewels. Exclaiming on the great attention that Pelagia has lavished on her body in order to please her potential lovers, Bishop Nonnus chides his dumbstruck colleagues, "We have paid no attention to our souls in the attempt to adorn them with good habits so that Christ may desire to dwell in us. . . . And maybe we should even go and become the pupils of this lascivious woman" (*Vita Pel.* 4–11). When the dead monk Pelagius is discovered to be a woman, the monks "wanted to hide this astonishing fact from the people but were unable to do so. This was to fulfill what is written in the holy Gospel: 'There is nothing hidden which shall not be revealed, and nothing concealed which shall not be made known' (cf. Matt. 10:26)" (*Vita Pel.* 50). As actress and as monk, Pelagia serves to broadcast a moral to men: if a woman exhibits such care and devotion, how much more should a man?

In monastic literature the real women that instruct male monks by shaming them with their virtue inhabit the same world as the real women who tempt male monks by seducing them with their sexuality, often as the instruments of demons (e.g. *Apoph. patr.* N175–77, N189–90). As Arsenius famously put it, "It is through women that the enemy wars against the saints" (*Apoph. patr.*, Arsenius 28). In some stories these two identities com-

bine: a tempting woman prevents the wavering monk from succumbing to his sexual urges.²² For example, a washerwoman dissuades a monk who wishes to sleep with her by warning him of the guilt he will suffer afterwards: the rescued monk and his abbot marvel at this blessing (*Apoph. patr.* N49). A young widow finds it not so easy to cool down her ardent monastic suitor: finally, she says, “I am in my menses, and no one can come near me or smell me because of the foul odor” (N52). In both of these stories the monks are on errands, temporarily in the secular world, and they thank God for the “wisdom” that appears in these women, a theme seen as well in more developed literature about holy women who instruct men, such as Macrina.²³ In a story about a monk named Simeon, the wise woman of the world who instructs the monk becomes nearly abba-like. When Simeon, still a layman, wishes to marry the widow of his deceased wealthy friend and business partner, the unnamed woman puts Simeon through an elaborate parabolic spiritual exercise worthy of any esteemed elder training his disciple. The story uncharacteristically refers to the woman’s attraction to Simeon’s “youth and beauty,” thus further conforming her to a (male) monastic identity by portraying her as tempted by a beautiful body.²⁴ Displaying her “intelligence and temperance,” the widow persuades Simeon to become a monk and declares herself “to have renounced my husband” (*Apoph. patr.* N84). A variety of monastic literature’s female roles coalesce in this real woman—temptress, woman of the world, shamingly virtuous monk—and amplify into the role of a female abba, a miniature version of a Macrina. These wise, instructing “real women” retain the monastic association of women with “the world” by their location: the monk meets the woman in the world while on an errand or in his premonastic life, and she sends him (back) to the desert.

Our monks who are really women are located in the desert, but the problem of the world sticks to them as women and follows them into their stories. In the anonymous anecdote, “worldly people” (*kosmikoi*) form the audience who witness the revelation of the monk as a woman: monastic life itself seems to suffer an embarrassing exposure of its truth to the secular admirers upon whom monastic prestige depends. It does not describe the reaction of the “worldly people” to the revelation of a woman’s virginal body, but its concluding announcement that “he was truly a virgin” both confirms and draws a question mark over the story of his life that the monk had told his visitors. The monks who discover that Pelagius is actually Pelagia try to hide this fact, but the gathered crowds do not permit it. These moments open out the shaming function of the revealed women: they sug-

gest not only that male monks are failing to live up to their monastic calling, but also that the reality of monastic life fails to live up to its narrated form. The female body's appearance makes evident a gap between reality and representation, not only in how monks see themselves but also in how their lay admirers see them. In the *Life of Pelagia*, this awkward, even dangerous moment of potential monastic inauthenticity is quickly resolved with the quotation of Matthew ("There is nothing hidden which shall not be revealed . . .") and with the glorious funeral procession for Pelagia "as for a righteous woman" (*Vita Pel.* 50). The gap between reality and representation opened up by the appearance of the woman holds in it not only shame and embarrassment, but also pleasure and productivity—a new good story about the desert for the worldly audience. It is a lesson perhaps both for the ancient monks who feared exposure and for the (post-) modern historian who may lament the loss of positivist certainty.

The Bessarion story presents a more indirect and complicated engagement of the revealed women with the world and thus with the problem of representation. At the center of the anecdote lies Bessarion's meeting with John of Lycopolis, in which he interprets the famous monk's vision to mean that "the temples would be overthrown." The narrator Doulas informs us that this is indeed what happened. Framing the encounter with John are the two meetings with the unnamed brother. In the first, the brother refuses to speak with or otherwise acknowledge Bessarion and Doulas; in the second, the brother is dead. At its extremities, the story begins with Bessarion standing in prayer for fourteen days and miraculously producing water, and it ends with the revelation of the woman's body and Bessarion's moral, "See how women triumph over Satan, while we behave shamefully in the cities." What are "we" monks doing "in the cities" that they should feel shamed by the cross-dressing monk? Unlike the anonymous anecdote and the sayings of Sarah, there is no reference here to the monk's struggle with fornication. The clue seems to be John's vision of the temples being overthrown and its fulfillment: Bishop Theophilus of Alexandria led the violent attack on the Serapeum in 391 and, it seems, enlisted monks in his campaign of destroying pagan images and worship sites. It is this monastic involvement in anti-pagan violence that Bessarion condemns.²⁵ The female monk's resolute withdrawal, exemplified by her refusal even to acknowledge the presence of other monastic visitors, contrasts favorably with the male monks' abandonment of desert withdrawal for violent action in the cities.

The presence of John of Lycopolis and the allusion to Theophilus and his campaign against images provide the context for the opening scene

of prayer in our *apophthegma*—the Origenist controversy. Elizabeth Clark has dubbed the 390s “the decade of the image” in Egypt: the antipagan iconoclasm of its early years developed into the anti-images Origenism at the end of the decade.²⁶ Theophilus, of course, played a notorious role in this drama. At first he followed the decade’s iconoclastic path by opposing first pagan images and then the mental images for prayer entertained by the so-called anthropomorphite monks. In 399, however, he did an about-face, supporting the anthropomorphites and attacking the anti-images “Origenist” monks, who followed the teachings on “pure prayer” of Evagrius Ponticus. His actions belie the continuity that Clark persuasively describes:

Evagrius is, then, the quintessential iconoclast, radicalizing and internalizing the historical anti-idolatry campaign waged by Theophilus in the last decade of the fourth century. Before 399, Theophilus’s iconoclastic moves against Egyptian paganism found a seamless whole with a theology that set itself against “imaging” God.²⁷

Our saying mimics the slipperiness of Theophilus: on the one hand, it condemns the monks’ violent participation in the campaign against pagan images; on the other hand, it endorses imageless prayer in its praise of John of Lycopolis and its opening vignette of Bessarion at prayer. In both these moves, however, it condemns the unnamed Theophilus, who led monks into their shameless behavior in the cities and later persecuted the Origenists exemplified by John.²⁸

Although the “Origenism” that Evagrius taught addressed a variety of issues in the ascetic life, at its heart was the practice of pure, imageless prayer, an aspect of Evagrius’s teaching with which John of Lycopolis is particularly associated (elimination of the passions is another).²⁹ Evagrius himself reports that he and Ammonius consulted John on the origin of the “light” that one sees during pure prayer.³⁰ In the *Historia monachorum*, John exhorts his visitors to preserve “the purity of your understanding” in prayer and warns them against “distractions,” including “recollection of indecent images” and “opposing thoughts.”³¹ Monks “should cultivate stillness and ceaselessly train yourselves for contemplation, that when you pray to God you may do so with a pure mind” (*Hist. mon.* 1.62). When he translated the *Historia* into Latin and revised it, Rufinus made the pro-Origenist John more prominent and gave him a new sermon that even more explicitly calls for “pure prayer” and considers the problem of the monk giving God “some

kind of appearance or image in his heart in some corporeal likeness" (*Hist. mon.* 1.22–28). The miraculous production of water for the thirsty Doulas suggests that Bessarion's fourteen days of prayer achieved the purity that John was known to have commended. This saying, then, engages in an acute conflict over representation, the problem of images in thinking about and praying to the divine, while leaving the particulars of that conflict implicit, unsaid.

The complicated allusions that run through this brief narrative render the unexpected revelation of a woman even more puzzling: What is she doing here? In her exhaustive study of cross-dressing in (mostly recent) Western culture, Marjorie Garber argues that

the apparently spontaneous or unexpected or supplementary presence of a transvestite figure in a text (whether fiction or history, verbal or visual, imagistic or "real") that does not seem, thematically, to be primarily concerned with gender difference or blurred gender indicates a *category crisis elsewhere*, an irresolvable conflict or epistemological crux that destabilizes comfortable binarity, and displaces the resulting discomfort onto a figure that already inhabits, indeed incarnates, the margin.³²

In our anecdotes, as I have suggested earlier, the discomfort occasioned by the female brother is partly rooted in the deception of the monk's cross-dressing: he has misled those who meet him and the readers of the story. In general, the unmasking of this deception calls into question the truth of monastic discourse, especially as it is narrated to outsiders. More specifically in the Bessarion *apophthegma*, the deceptive brother makes explicit and thereby draws to himself the duplicities to which the story alludes, most immediately that of the unmentioned Theophilus, who drew monks into his campaign against images and supported those monks who argued against anthropomorphic images of God, but then who (in the view of our pro-Origenist anecdote) traitorously turned against the Origenist monks. In turn, the female brother incarnates the duplicity of the story itself, which covertly scores political points against Theophilus in a story that ostensibly simply commends complete withdrawal and monastic avoidance of "the cities."

The Origenist subtext speaks further in the female brother's silence: it is his reluctance to enter into conversation without a signal from God that Bessarion commends. The brother's refusal to enter discourse, followed by

the undermining of discourse that his female body occasions, indicates the danger of talk, which may produce the representations (*noêmata*) that can obscure pure prayer. “Prayer,” Evagrius wrote, “is a state of mind destructive of every earthly representation.”³³ The monk who would reach such a state must “deprive himself of all representations” (*Skemm.* 2). Hearing speech—“through the ears”—is one way “by which the mind grasps representations” (17). In Evagrius’s view, hearing was an ambiguous and therefore particularly dangerous mode of sense perception. On the one hand, unlike the representations that are grasped through vision, those that come through hearing do not always “imprint a form” and obstruct pure prayer “because a word (can) signify both sensory objects [bad] and contemplative objects [good]” (17). On the other hand, the “most dangerous” thoughts “come by hearing, since it is true, as the proverb says: ‘a sad word disturbs the heart of man’ (Prov. 12:25)” (19). The silent brother’s renunciation of discourse embodies a condition necessary for the pure prayer that Bessarion achieves. It is appropriate that the silent brother be a woman, for like other ascetic authors, Evagrius considered women especially prone to “empty talk” and stressed in his directives to female virgins the virtue of silence, even while praying in church.³⁴ This woman provides, then, a particularly pointed example of silence triumphing over speech.

Ironically, however, the female brother makes this point through a dramatic visual image, the discovery of his female body, and thus generates a particularly striking representation. As a woman, the brother accomplishes his embodiment of silence literally as a body, female “by nature,” and so introduces that which troubles Evagrian Origenism, its “category crisis,” the body and its nature. Like Origen, Evagrius criticizes those who would “speak in an evil way of our soul’s body”; God’s assignment of human intellects to bodies, in which they could learn virtue, is an instance of God’s “grace.”³⁵ To have a body is nothing more than to be in “the world” (*Keph. Gnost.* 6.81). Some monastic ideologies inspired by Origen confidently envision transforming the body itself.³⁶ On the other hand, Evagrius calls monastic withdrawal (*anachôrêsis*) a “flight from the body”; the goal is liberation from the body, which obstructs true knowledge (*gnôsis*) of God.³⁷ For those intellects that have achieved contemplation, “the entire nature of bodies shall be removed” (*Keph. Gnost.* 2.62). Unlike the monks who behave shamelessly in the world, the anonymous brother has transformed himself and has left behind a corpse, the body, “a woman by nature.”

The real “woman” that these stories construct is the detritus of monastic performance, the material body of sexuality, discourse, and the

world that the monastic regime rejects and thereby creates as its opposite. The gendered body is not simply there for the monk to transcend; rather, it is an instance of “matter, not as site or surface, but as *a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter.*”³⁸ The monastic “man” and “woman,” “soul” and “body,” are real, but as instances of “the power of discourse to materialize its effects.”³⁹ The appearance of the real woman disturbs because it unmasks the chain of performances that produces the monk as male, beyond sexuality, discourse, the world, as performances.

To think of “sex” as an imperative in this way means that a subject is addressed and produced by such a norm, and that this norm — and the regulatory power of which it is a token — materializes bodies as an effect of that injunction. And yet, this “materialization,” while far from artificial, is not fully stable. For the imperative to be or get “sexed” requires a differentiated production and regulation of masculine and feminine identification that does not fully hold and cannot be fully exhaustive. And further, this imperative, this injunction, requires and institutes a “constitutive outside” — the unspeakable, the unviable, the nonnarrativizable that secures and, hence, fails to secure the very borders of materiality.⁴⁰

As the “nonnarrativizable,” the appearing woman interrupts both the late ancient monastic myth of the desert as male space, without women and apart from “the world,” and any late modern scholarly myth of gender as merely rhetorical, unrelated to women and apart from social and material concerns. Even the most radically transformative of monastic ideologies, Origenism, in order to gain traction on the materiality it sought to transcend, made use of gender stability and gender-based practices of renunciation and separation that situated women as that left behind, even when women were themselves performing that ideology.⁴¹

One strategic value of performativity as an interpretive concept is its recognition of “the power of discourse to materialize its effects.”⁴² Real women were indeed left behind by husbands and fathers and sons, renounced as temptations and representatives of the world, segregated into their own ascetic communities, legislated to by men. The story of one such eerily real woman displays the power of monastic performance as its most extreme.

We visited another priest in the district of Achoris called Apelles, a just man who in his former life had been a blacksmith and had

abandoned his trade to turn to discipline (*askêsis*). One day when he happened to be forging utensils for the monks, the devil came to him in the form of a woman. In his zeal he snatched up a red-hot piece of iron from the fire with his hand, and badly seared her face and whole body. The brothers heard her screaming in the cell. From that time the man was always able to hold red-hot iron in his hand without being burned. He received us courteously, and told us about the men worthy of God who had been with him and were still living there. (*Hist. mon.* 13.1–2)⁴³

Here, too, a real woman unexpectedly appears (as the empirically minded historian might insist). In a striking transfer of corporeality, the body of the male monk loses its reality as a human body, becoming impervious to searing heat, while the thin, attenuated body of the demon acquires feminine corporeal solidity, enough to be seared and to produce audible screaming. This anecdote incorporates and transcends the story of the dead monk revealed to be a woman. If the “natural” woman who dresses as a male monk seems to vanish into the rhetorical, here the supernatural demon/woman incarnates into the real. Apelles renounces woman/body and, even before his death, achieves a state of passionlessness that defies corporeality. He then begins to talk, to spin the monastic narrative for his admiring visitors. We see here in chilling fashion the power of monastic discourse to materialize the “woman” it constructed.



Notes

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- 1 *Apophthegmata patrum*, Sisoës 3, in Benedicta Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection*, rev. ed. (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1984), 213. For the evidence that Sisoës’ saying “represents more an ideal than an accurate description of reality,” see Susanna Elm, “*Virgins of God*”: *The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 253–82. The Greek *Apophthegmata patrum* that I cite are found in roughly three collections: (1) the alphabetical collection, denoted by the name of the monk and a saying number (text in *Patrologia Graeca* 65:71–440; translation in Ward, *Sayings*); (2) a series of anonymous sayings that follows the alphabetical collection in some manuscripts, denoted by N (text of the first 400 edited by François Nau in *Revue de l’orient chrétien* 12–18 [1907–13]; partial translations in Columba Stewart, *The World of the Desert Fathers* [Kalamazoo,

- Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1986] and Benedicta Ward, *The Wisdom of the Desert Fathers*, new ed. [Oxford: SLG, 1986]; and (3) the systematic collection, denoted by chapter and saying numbers (text in Jean-Claude Guy, *Les Apophtegmes des Pères: collection systématique, chapitres I–IX*, Sources chrétiennes 387 [Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1993], no translation). Hereafter I will cite the *Apoph. patr.* parenthetically in the text, giving the Greek original only for the sayings that I discuss in detail.
- 2 Elizabeth A. Clark, “The Lady Vanishes: Dilemmas of a Feminist Historian after the ‘Linguistic Turn,’” *Church History* 67 (1998): 1–31; and Clark, “Women, Gender, and the Study of Christian History,” *Church History* 70 (2001): 395–426.
 - 3 *Apoph. patr.* N63, *Revue de l’orient chrétien* 12 (1907): 393. The translation by Stewart, *World of the Desert Fathers*, 30–31, is inaccurate.
 - 4 The Pelagia literature is vast and complicated. See Séminaire d’histoire des textes de l’École normale supérieure, *Pélagie la Pénitente: Métamorphoses d’une légende*, vol. 1, *Les textes et leur histoire* (Paris: Études augustiniennes, 1981). See also the treatment of the account by Patricia Cox Miller in this volume, “Is There a Harlot in This Text? Hagiography and the Grotesque,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 33 (2003): 419–35.
 - 5 See John Anson, “The Female Transvestite in Early Monasticism: The Origin and Development of a Motif,” *Viator* 5 (1974): 1–32; and many other studies, most recently Stephen J. Davis, “Crossed Texts, Crossed Sex: Intertextuality and Gender in Early Christian Legends of Holy Women Disguised as Men,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 10 (2002): 1–36.
 - 6 *Vita Pelagiae* (Syriac) 40–41, in Sebastian Brock and Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.
 - 7 Gillian Cloke, “*This Female Man of God*: Women and Spiritual Power in the Patristic Age, A.D. 350–450 (London: Routledge, 1995), 196.
 - 8 *Ibid.*, 196–97. It is not certain that Sarah was in fact a desert anchorite. See the discussion of her in William Harmless, S.J., *Desert Christians: An Introduction to Early Monastic Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).
 - 9 Cf. Clark, “Women, Gender, and the Study of Christian History,” 424.
 - 10 Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 188.
 - 11 Thus, the essay works in the spirit of Elizabeth Clark’s desire to pursue both “women’s studies” and “gender studies” in the history of Christianity, yet recognizes with her that the evidence for the ancient period may be more congenial to the latter (“Women, Gender, and the Study of Christian History,” esp. 419).
 - 12 John Cassian, *Institutes* 6.19, trans. Boniface Ramsey, *John Cassian: The Institutes* (New York: Newman, 2000), 161. Of course, Cassian did find a means of measuring integrity of heart through the male body—nocturnal emissions. See David Brakke, “The Problematization of Nocturnal Emissions in Early Christian Syria, Egypt, and Gaul,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 3 (1995): 419–60.
 - 13 Elizabeth Castelli, “‘I Will Make Mary Male’: Pieties of the Body and Gender Transformation of Christian Women in Late Antiquity,” in *Bodyguards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, ed. Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub (New York: Routledge,

- 1991), 29–49. See, e.g., *Gospel of Thomas* 114 and *Acts of Paul and Thecla* 25, 40 (where Thecla cuts her hair short and dresses as a man).
- 14 *Martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas* 10.7, in Ross S. Kraemer, *Maenads, Martyrs, Matrons, Monastics: A Sourcebook on Women's Religions in the Greco-Roman World* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 96–107. See the summary of Elm, “*Virgins of God*,” 267–69; also Cloke, “*This Female Man of God*.”
 - 15 Patricia Cox Miller, “Desert Asceticism and ‘The Body from Nowhere,’” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 2 (1994): 137–53; Richard Valantasis, “Constructions of Power in Asceticism,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 63 (1995): 775–821, at 797.
 - 16 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 140.
 - 17 Cf. Virginia Burrus, “*Begotten, Not Made*”: *Conceiving Manhood in Late Antiquity* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000), 69.
 - 18 *Apoph. patr.*, Bessarion 4, *Patrologia Graeca*, 65:140–41. I have used but altered the translation of Ward, *Sayings*, 41.
 - 19 Clark, “Lady Vanishes,” 29.
 - 20 Lynda L. Coon, *Sacred Fictions: Holy Women and Hagiography in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 82.
 - 21 Simon Goldhill, *Foucault's Virginity: Ancient Erotic Fiction and the History of Sexuality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 136–43, discussing esp. Musonius Rufus.
 - 22 The three examples that follow are found in Stewart, *World of the Desert Fathers*, 13–16.
 - 23 Clark, “Lady Vanishes,” 22–26.
 - 24 Although Sarah and our anonymous cross-dressing monk refer to their long struggles against fornication, “no text presents Satan disguised as a handsome boy in order to provoke a girl who has devoted herself to God” (Elena Giannarelli, “Women and Satan in Christian Biography and Monastic Literature [IVth–Vth centuries],” *Studia Patristica* 30 [1997]: 196–201, at 201).
 - 25 On the attack on the Serapeum and monastic involvement in it, see Elizabeth A. Clark, *The Origenist Controversy: The Cultural Construction of an Early Christian Debate* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), 53–57, citing our saying as well as *Apoph. patr.*, Theophilus 3. Cf. Ward, *Sayings*, 40.
 - 26 Clark, *Origenist Controversy*, 55, and passim 43–84.
 - 27 *Ibid.*, 84.
 - 28 As Ward puts it, “the ambiguity of his (Theophilus’s) relationship with the monks is mirrored” in the sayings transmitted under his name (*Sayings*, 80), esp. *Apoph. patr.*, Theophilus 2–3.
 - 29 On pure prayer, see Columba Stewart, “Imageless Prayer and the Theological Vision of Evagrius Ponticus,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 9 (2001): 173–204; Clark, *Origenist Controversy*, 67–71.
 - 30 Evagrius Ponticus, *Antirrheticus* 6.16, in W. Frankenburg, *Euagrius Ponticus* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1912), 524; Clark, *Origenist Controversy*, 70; Stewart, “Imageless Prayer,” 194.
 - 31 *Historia monachorum* 1.23, 25, in Norman Russell, *The Lives of the Desert Fathers*

- (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1980), hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.
- 32 Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 17, emphasis original.
 - 33 Evagrius Ponticus, *Skemmata* 26, trans. William Harmless, S.J., and Raymond R. Fitzgerald, S.J., “The Sapphire Light of the Mind: The *Skemmata* of Evagrius Ponticus,” *Theological Studies* 62 (2001): 498–529, hereafter cited parenthetically in the text; cf. Evagrius, *On Prayer* 71, in “Sapphire Light of the Mind.” For a clear discussion, see Stewart, “Imageless Prayer,” 186–91, esp. the references gathered at 190 n. 81.
 - 34 Evagrius Ponticus, *Ad virginem* 13, 15, 25, 33, in Hugo Gressmann, *Nonnenspiegel und Monachsspiegel des Evagrius Pontikos* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1913), 152–65. Cf. Athanasius’s directions to virgins, described in David Brakke, *Athanasius and Asceticism* (1995; repr. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 72.
 - 35 Evagrius Ponticus, *Kephalaia Gnostica* 4.60, in Antoine Guillaumont, *Les six centuries des “Kephalaia Gnostica” d’Évagre le Pontique* (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1958), hereafter cited parenthetically in the text; Evagrius, *Praktikos* 53, in Antoine Guillaumont and Claire Guillaumont, *Évagre le Pontique: Traité pratique, ou, Le moine*, Sources chrétiennes 171 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1971).
 - 36 For example, see the *Letters* of Antony, discussed briefly in Brakke, “Problematization of Nocturnal Emissions,” 436–38.
 - 37 Evagrius Ponticus, *Praktikos* 52 (flight); *Keph. Gnost.* 1.58; 2.6; 4.70, 74 (liberation); and *Gnostikos* 23 (obstruction).
 - 38 Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 9, emphasis original.
 - 39 *Ibid.*, 187.
 - 40 *Ibid.*, 187–88.
 - 41 Compare Rebecca Krawiec’s analysis of Shenoute’s “universal monasticism” as one that “existed for all monks ‘whether male or female,’ thus retaining gender, and was not a monasticism that recognized ‘neither male nor female,’ suggesting repression of sexual difference” (*Shenoute and the Women of the White Monastery: Egyptian Monasticism in Late Antiquity* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2002], 132).
 - 42 Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 187.
 - 43 I have used but altered the translation of Russell, *Lives of the Desert Fathers*, 93.