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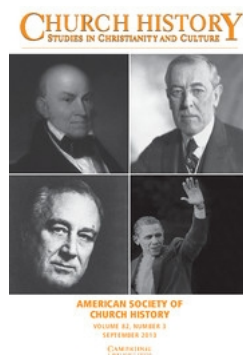
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The Lady Vanishes: Dilemmas of a Feminist Historian after the "Linguistic Turn"

ELIZABETH A. CLARK

I: HISTORY AND THEORY

History, Hayden White remarks, has no distinctively historical method, but borrows its models and methods from a variety of other disciplines.¹ These disciplines, however, have varied over time. Late-nineteenth-century German historiography looked to the rigorous procedures of the natural sciences to reconstruct the past "as it actually happened";² mid-twentieth-century historians turned to the social sciences, especially to anthropology and sociology, for *their* models and methods. More recently, historians' appropriation of (and experimentation with) concepts derived from literary and critical theory has occasioned much heated discussion within the field.

The "heat" has been generated in part because literary theory now covers far more than what earlier generations of scholars would have imagined. The newer theoretical approaches either implicitly or explicitly harbor positions on epistemology and the social processes of knowledge production, ontology, psychology, and ethics, and thus range much further intellectually than traditional literary criticism. Since literary theorists appear to some scholars to be cannibalizing the intellectual specializations of others, their practice understandably leads to conflict within academe.

"Turf wars," however, constitute only one and certainly not the central intellectual problem that theory poses for historians. Historians worry that theorists dissolve the external world into a text, thus exemplifying (to historians) how hubris can overtake the practitioners

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1. Hayden White, "New Historicism: A Comment," in *The New Historicism*, ed. H. Aram Veesser (New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 29.

2. The famous phrase of German historian Leopold von Ranke.

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of an entire discipline.³ Feminist historians—the proper subject of my inquiry—who wish to lay claim to ethics, politics, agency, and subjectivity for women fear that post-structuralists are apolitical (or worse), that they vastly overrate the place of language in the constitution of the world, are insensitive to issues of gender, and by decentering subjectivity, authorship, and agency, leave no ground on which a feminist politics can be built.

Rather than merely repeat such accusations, I pose a series of questions for consideration: What issues broached by post-structuralist critique have impacted—or might impact—on the work of historians? How might historians read their texts differently if they kept these considerations in mind? Since there *is* no presuppositionless writing of history, what kinds of epistemological claims and literary devices underlie various historiographical constructions? In particular, what issues do theoretically-informed feminist historians raise that deserve the attention of those who count themselves as church historians? What opportunities and pitfalls confront the feminist historian who wishes to engage the postmodern intellectual scene? After reflecting on these questions, I will ask how such considerations might prompt us to read differently texts pertaining to early Christian ascetic women, particularly those that represent Macrina, the sister of Gregory of Nyssa and Basil of Caesarea.

II: FEMINIST HISTORIOGRAPHY AND POST-STRUCTURALISM

First to be stressed is that the agenda of feminist historiography overlaps with that of post-structuralism at several points. In fact, a common complaint now among feminist scholars is that feminists first had the insights to which theoreticians now lay claim.⁴ Among such shared concepts are (and here I cite Judith Newton) “a critique of ‘objectivity’; an assertion of the political nature of ideas, theory, and representation; an investigation of the cultural construction of subjectivity. . . .”⁵ Similarly, both feminists and deconstructionists can profit-

3. An example is provided by John E. Toews, “Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn: The Autonomy of Meaning and the Irreducibility of Experience,” *American Historical Review* 92 (1987): 906: “. . . a new form of intellectual hubris has emerged, the hubris of wordmakers who claim to be makers of reality.”

4. See, for example, Judith Newton, “History as Usual? Feminism and the ‘New Historicism,’” *Cultural Critique* 9 (1988): 94–100; Amy Richlin, “Zeus Meets Metis: Foucault, Feminism, Classics,” *Helios* 18 (1991): 162–77, with numerous examples; Kathleen Canning, “Introduction to Dialogue: Gender History/Women’s History: Is Feminist Scholarship Losing Its Critical Edge?” *Journal of Women’s History* 5 (1993): 105; Jane Caplan, “Postmodernism, Poststructuralism, and Deconstruction: Notes for Historians,” *Central European History* 22 (1989): 261.

5. Newton, “History as Usual?” 94; cf. 99.

ably focus on demystification; in Mary Poovey's words, "Because deconstruction reveals the figurative nature of all ideology, it can expose the artifice inherent in such categories as 'nature' and gender."⁶ Early in the discussion, post-structuralism's "decentering of the Western white male subject" was thought useful to open up an "emancipatory space in which feminist historians could constitute female subjects while exposing and rectifying the historical exclusion of women and the identification of human with male."⁷ Moreover, various stripes of theory, from Althusser's account of interpellation to Lacan's notion of the division of the subject through the acquisition of language,⁸ have provided ways to talk of the multiple subject positions a person may inhabit, a theme to which many feminists warm. In these ways, post-structuralism and feminist theory appear to have much in common.

And yet . . . some forms of post-structuralism, especially deconstruction, simply "went too far" for most feminist historians, who complained that the post-structuralist version of the critique of objectivity seemed to nullify historians' weighing of evidence according to agreed-on disciplinary standards; representation was deemed so problematic that any connection between people of the past and the description of them by historians was abrogated; categories were so fractured that historians could not even speak of "women" anymore; the decentering of the male subject eventually annihilated the female subject as well. As many feminists have queried, why were we told to abandon "subjectivity" just at the historical moment when women had begun to claim it? Why, Nancy Miller asks, was the "end of woman" authorized without consulting her?⁹ Had "the lady" of both past and present vanished?

For although feminist historians were willing, indeed eager, to question the objectivity of knowledge (at least of "male knowledge") and endorse what Christine Pierce has called a "moderate" level of

6. Mary Poovey, "Feminism and Deconstruction," *Feminist Studies* 14 (1988): 58.

7. Kathleen Canning, "Feminist History after the Linguistic Turn: Historicizing Discourse and Experience," *Signs* 19 (1994): 371; cf. Isabel V. Hull, "Feminist and Gender History Through the Literary Looking Glass: German Historiography in Postmodern Times," *Central European History* 22 (1989): 279.

8. Paul Smith in *Discerning the Subject* (Theory and History of Literature 55 [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988]) shows how there are still ways to think about "agency" even if we abandon traditional notions of the "subject." For a summary of Smith's argument on these points, see John Mowitt's foreword to the book, pp. xiii-xv.

9. Nancy K. Miller, "The Text's Heroine: A Feminist Critic and Her Fictions," in *Conflicts in Feminism*, ed. Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 118, discussing Foucault's essay, "What Is An Author?"

epistemological skepticism,¹⁰ the radical antifoundationalism implied by some forms of post-structuralism was unwelcome. Such historians might agree with Lynn Hunt's claim that history is an ethical and political practice, not an epistemological one.¹¹ Taking the offensive, historians charged that deconstruction was at fault for failing to turn its own historicizing tendency upon itself.¹² Moreover, although deconstruction had loudly proclaimed "the death of the subject," historians could note that Jacques Derrida himself, the prime agent of deconstructive practice, "acts, has effects, produces texts, and so on. . . ."¹³ To such charges, theoreticians rejoined that most American feminists were philosophically inept; content to do battle with discrimination, they had left undisturbed the intellectual underpinnings (patriarchal, phallogocentric, and capitalist) of the old order.¹⁴

To be sure, some might argue that these debates are inconsequential, since post-structuralism's questioning of all foundations, with the resulting elimination of epistemological certainty, has no consequences for historical practice. Indeed, if we take pragmatism as the quintessentially American philosophy, we might endorse the view of some neopragmatists that there is "no logical link between a textual practice and its political consequences."¹⁵ Those historians who accept the textualism of history, it could be argued, do not thereby engage in their historical practice any differently; the two realms—theory and practice—have no necessary correlation.¹⁶ Do not disciplinary commu-

10. Christine Pierce, "Postmodernism and Other Skepticisms," in *Feminist Ethics*, ed. Claudia Card (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991), p. 61.
11. Lynn Hunt, "History as Gesture," cited in Keith Moxey, *The Practice of Theory: Poststructuralism, Cultural Politics, and Art History* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 65. Cf. Michel de Certeau, "History: Science and Fiction," in *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, trans. Brian Massumi, *Theory and History of Literature* 17 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), pp. 219–20.
12. Poovey, "Feminism," p. 61.
13. Smith, *Discerning the Subject*, p. 50. Although Derrida has argued that "deconstruction is not a discursive or theoretical matter, but practico-political" ("Du Tout," in *La Carte Postale: de Socrate à Freud et au-delà* [Paris: Flammarion, 1980], p. 536), his reluctance to deal with institutions as different from texts renders his claim dubious: see discussion in Peter Dews, *Logics of Disintegration: Post-structuralist Thought and the Claims of Critical Theory* (London: Verso, 1987), pp. 34–36.
14. E. A. Grosz, "The In(ter)vention of Feminist Knowledges," in *Crossing Boundaries: Feminism and the Critique of Knowledges*, ed. Barbara Caine, E. A. Grosz, and Marie de Lepervande (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1988), p. 95.
15. Gerald Graff, "Co-optation," in *The New Historicism*, p. 179. The position here described is associated with Stanley Fish; see *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982); idem, "Consequences," in *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1989), pp. 315–41.
16. Stanley Fish, "Commentary: The Young and the Restless," in *The New Historicism*, pp. 307, 309. For a historian's adaptation of this position, see Joan Wallach Scott, "History in Crisis? The Others' Side of the Story," *American Historical Review* 94 (1989): 690.

nities, history included, simply set and then operate by their own rules?¹⁷ On this line of argument, it would not matter if a radical antifoundationalism prevailed in a historian's theorizing of her discipline: her practice could continue, "business as usual."

Such an approach, however, has not found favor with many American feminist historians. Although Judith Butler and other theorists may celebrate the construction of a politics removed from any foundational position,¹⁸ historians remain more dubious. Many of them believe that if we abandon "subjects," we have no ground for critique.¹⁹ If "agency" is discarded, the historian's interest in change and causality is undercut.²⁰ Given these impasses, many feminist historians have rejected post-structuralist theory, but have not wished to retreat to the views of representation and "reality" that prevailed a century ago. What other concepts might be exploited to circumvent these equally unpalatable options?

III: WAYS OUT?

Given these conceptual dilemmas, feminist historians could ask if various appeals to "women's experience," to the materiality of female bodies, or (as a last resort) to "strategic essentialism" do not furnish foundational concepts that might counter the epistemological groundlessness of post-structuralist theory. Here I shall note the possible attractions of such appeals, yet conclude with historian Joan Scott that such appeals do not hold up to rigorous scrutiny.

Could not, for example, a feminist historian appeal to "women's experience" as evidence? Does not the appeal to "experience" provide a refuge from the seemingly nihilistic conclusions that allegedly attend post-structuralist theory? Is not "experience" empowering, is it not more personally verifiable and hence trustworthy? Just as theology from before the time of Schleiermacher to that of Barth reconstrued

17. A view also associated particularly with Stanley Fish; see discussion in David D. Roberts, *Nothing But History: Reconstruction and Extremity after Metaphysics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 301–02. As Wittgenstein argued some decades ago, independently of Pragmatism, knocking out the transcendental grounding for knowledge leaves everything just as it is.
18. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 14–15.
19. Carol Thomas Neely, "Constructing the Subject: Feminist Practice and the New Renaissance Discourses," *English Literary Renaissance* 18 (1988): 13.
20. Myra Jehlen in Judith Walkowitz, Myra Jehlen, and Bell Chevigny, "Patrolling the Borders: Feminist Historiography and the New Historicism," *Radical History Review* 43 (1989): 35, cf. 39. Paul Smith in *Discerning the Subject* (pp. xxxv, 152, 157) argues that we keep the notion of "agency" in some form so that we can have "resistance" (leftist politics needs at least a "trace" of an "actor"). With her interest in "performativity," Judith Butler links "agency" to "repetition"; see *Gender Trouble*, pp. 145–46.

Christian notions of revelation as "experience," so could not feminist historians here find a new basis for their work?²¹ Although the concept seemed promising and was immediately appropriated by feminist scholars from various disciplines, the problems occasioned by the appeal to "experience" soon became clear.

Some post-structuralists quickly denounced the appeal to "experience" as just "another deluded humanism."²² But even for those eager to locate some epistemological grounding, difficulties attending the concept of experience were early registered, most importantly by women of color: was not the experience being summoned up that of white, middle-class women? Representing the experience of *some* women as if it were that of *all* women involved essentializing the notion of "women."²³ Chandra Talpade Mohanty called this appeal feminism "by osmosis": the mere experience of being female somehow mysteriously transformed all women into feminists.²⁴ Moreover, it was argued, the appeal to "experience" separated the personal from the political in a way that simply privatized women. (As one feminist writer put it, at worst the appeal to "experience" degenerates to "the politics of feeling good.")²⁵ And in any event, women's "experience" did not emanate from the *fact* of being a woman, from some "embryonic consciousness," but existed as "traces of domination":²⁶ the political and social order had shaped "women's experience" as the experience of oppression, leaving small room for celebration. All these claims might be considered a political critique of the notion of experience.

But there were other critiques of "experience" that emanated from a more identifiably philosophical camp—for example, that one person's experience is never immediately knowable to anybody else in a sure

21. For a good discussion of "women's experience" from a theological perspective, see Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Changing the Subject: Women's Discourses and Feminist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), pp. 50–58.

22. Poovey, "Feminism," 53, speaking of deconstruction in particular.

23. See, for example, Sheila Greeve Davaney, "The Limits of the Appeal to Women's Experience," in *Shaping New Vision: Gender and Values in American Culture*, ed. Clarissa W. Atkinson, Constance H. Buchanan, and Margaret R. Miles (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1987), p. 32; Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 113.

24. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Feminist Encounters: Locating the Politics of Experience," in *Destabilizing Theory: Contemporary Debates*, ed. Michèle Barrett and Anne Phillips (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), p. 77.

25. Elizabeth Weed, "Introduction: Terms of Reference," in *Coming to Terms: Feminism, Theory, Politics*, ed. Elizabeth Weed (New York: Routledge, 1989), pp. xxii–xxiii, citing a phrase from Ellen Rooney.

26. Denise Riley, *"Am I That Name?" Feminism and the Category of "Women" in History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), pp. 99–100.

and unmediated way.²⁷ Moreover, feminists themselves disagreed on whether female "experience" gave women any privileged access to "truth." Although standpoint theoreticians, adapting an originally Marxist claim for the epistemic privilege of the proletariat, argued that women also enjoyed such privilege,²⁸ feminists of a different theoretical stripe argue that women have no surer access to reality than do men, that female and male visions share the same ontological status. Women's knowledge, like men's, is a social product that can be judged only on pragmatic and moral grounds, by what mode of life its visions allow or discourage.²⁹ On this view, sheer "distance from the center" does not lend any privileged access to "reality."³⁰

Here, the critique of historian Joan Wallach Scott has been especially important. For Scott, the notion of experience derives from processes of signification and is not foundational.³¹ Scott cites two examples of scholars who appeal to "experience" in ways she finds problematic. Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice*, Scott argues, essentializes and universalizes women's experience as "relational," yet Gilligan's much-cited study, Scott notes, was based on a very small sample of late-twentieth-century American schoolchildren.³² Likewise, Scott faults historian E. P. Thompson (author of *The Making of the English Working Class*) for overlooking gender diversity in his appeal to working class "experience." Scott claims that Thompson has not addressed the pressing question of why some experiences (those of men) become more salient for historians than do those of others.³³

27. Laura Lee Downs, "If 'Woman' Is Just an Empty Category, Then Why Am I Afraid to Walk Alone at Night? Identity Politics Meets the Postmodern Subject," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 35 (1993): 416. See also Laura E. Donaldson, *Decolonizing Feminisms: Race, Gender, and Empire-Building* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), pp. 137–38, for a discussion of the mediated and constructed nature of "experience."
28. See, for example, Nancy Hartsock, "The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism," in *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology and the Philosophy of Science* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1983); Sandra Harding, "Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What Is 'Strong Objectivity?'" in *Feminist Epistemologies*, ed. Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 49–82.
29. Sheila Greeve Davaney, "Problems with Feminist Theory: Historicity and the Search for Sure Foundations," in *Embodied Love: Sensuality and Relationship as Feminist Values*, ed. Paula M. Coe, Sharon A. Farmer, and Mary Ellen Ross (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), p. 93; idem, "The Limit of the Appeal," pp. 43, 45–46.
30. Bat-Ami Bar On, "Marginality and Epistemic Privilege," in *Feminist Epistemologies*, pp. 86–97, argues that women cannot even substitute for Marx's proletariat, who had social marginality but economic centrality—women have no such centrality.
31. Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review* 91 (1986): 1063.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 1065.
33. Joan W. Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17 (1991): 784–86. Scott's critics complain that her attack on Thompson is unfair—after all, *The Making of the*

Scott also warns historians against an uncritical appeal to "experience" that "naturalizes difference"; such an appeal takes as self-evident the identities of the experiencers, thus reproducing the ideological system rather than contesting it.³⁴ Moreover, since "women's experience" has been constructed by a process of female exclusion from "male universality," with the resulting subjection of women,³⁵ feminist historians should be wary to embrace the notion. And lurking behind the appeal to "experience," Scott adds, stands "the body as a pre-discursive given."³⁶

Can the concept of experience receive a nonfoundationalist treatment? Scott asks. She answers "perhaps"—but that inquiry will demand an analysis of the production of knowledge.³⁷ It will further require feminists to construct a notion of equality based on differences, not on some innate similarity, between and among women.³⁸ In any event, we should not follow even sophisticated theorists (such as Teresa DeLauretis) who, in Scott's eyes, place "experience" prior to the creation of subjectivity. Such an approach, Scott argues, bypasses the question of how female subjectivity is produced, how agency is made possible.³⁹

Moreover, the appeal to "women's experience," Scott notes, has often been linked to a second refuge of feminist historians, namely, an appeal to the body as the common factor in "women's experience." Is not the body the "bedrock" that no deconstruction can touch? Even more doubts, however, were raised by this appeal, for throughout history, women's identification with the body has served precisely to keep them in their subjugated positions. Feminists whose prime goal has been the achievement of equality for women are disinclined to rest their case on maternity, on women's "corporeality and sexuality,"⁴⁰ and many American liberal feminists in particular express unease at

English Working Class was written in 1963, before there was any "gender history." See Mariana Valverde, "Poststructuralist Gender Historians: Are We Those Names?" *Labour/Le Travail* 25 (1990): 228.

34. Scott, "Evidence," 777–78.

35. Joan W. Scott, "History and Difference," *Daedalus* 116 (1987): 113.

36. Scott, "Evidence," 786–87 n. 26.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 797. Scott has now attempted to write a feminist history via deconstructive readings: see *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

38. Scott, "Deconstructing Equality-Versus-Difference: Or, the Uses of Poststructuralist Theory for Feminism," *Feminist Studies* 14 (1988): 48.

39. Scott, "Evidence," p. 782 (cf. p. 787), citing de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 159; cf. p. 182: experience as "an ongoing process by which subjectivity is constructed semiotically and historically."

40. Elizabeth Grosz, "Conclusion: A Note on Essentialism and Difference," in *Feminist Knowledge: Critique and Construct*, ed. Sneja Gunew (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 338.

the celebration of female bodiliness by French feminists such as Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, a celebration in which "woman" often seems to stand as a function of the female body.⁴¹

To be sure, there has been much scholarly work that considers the body to be inscribed or constructed by culture, so that the body is seen as a "result or effect," not "an originating point nor yet a terminus."⁴² According to this more nuanced understanding, there is no body except that which is marked and constructed by the social process. Yet this view of the "inscriptive body,"⁴³ standing neither "above" nor "below" history,⁴⁴ does not (it appears) appeal to the same "body" as do cultural feminists such as Mary Daly, who employ the body as a foundational concept that no deconstruction can challenge.

Joan Scott's rejoinder to those who appeal to the body as grounds for feminist historiography calls for a repositioning of the discussion. Instead of focusing on the physical difference between men and women, which for Scott has no consistent or inherent meaning,⁴⁵ Scott urges historians to explore how *categories* such as gender, class, race, and agency received their foundational status.⁴⁶ For Scott, historians must start with the processes of signification that stand prior to "meaning" and "experience."⁴⁷

Given such theoretical and historical dilemmas, many feminists have appealed to the notion of "strategic essentialism" made popular by Gayatri Spivak,⁴⁸ a concept that some might see as a third "refuge." Here, the antifoundational claims of post-structuralism are acknowl-

41. A good brief discussion can be found in Smith, *Discerning the Subject*, pp. 142–47. For some nuanced discussions that reject the charge that these French feminists can be labelled "essentialists," see Naomi Schor, "This Essentialism Which Is Not One: Coming to Grips with Irigaray," *differences* 1 (1989): 38–58; and E. Jane Burns, *Bodytalk: When Women Speak in Old French Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), pp. 7–9. For a discussion influenced by French feminism that also takes account of "social construction" arguments, see Naomi Schor, "Dreaming Dissymetry: Barthes, Foucault, and Sexual Difference," in *Coming to Terms*, pp. 47–58, esp. pp. 57–58.
42. Riley, "Am I That Name?," p. 102; cf. Moira Gatens, "Towards a Feminist Philosophy of the Body," in *Crossing Boundaries*, p. 62.
43. The term is from Elizabeth Grosz, "Bodies and Knowledges," in *Feminist Epistemologies*, pp. 196–99, referring to views of the body associated with the names of Nietzsche, Kafka, and Foucault. For a pointed critique of theorists' appeal to this "non-biological" body, see Vicki Kirby, "Corpus delicti: the Body at the Scene of Writing," in *Cartographies: Poststructuralism and the Mapping of Bodies and Spaces*, ed. Rosalyn Diprose and Robyn Ferrell (North Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1991), p. 91.
44. Riley, "Am I That Name?" p. 104.
45. Scott, "Gender," 1059; "Evidence," 786–87; "Deconstructing Equality," p. 44.
46. Scott, "Evidence," 796.
47. Scott, "Gender," 1063.
48. See Gayatri C. Spivak, "Criticism, Feminism and the Institution," *Thesis Eleven* 10/11 (1984): 184; idem, "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography," in Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Methuen, 1987), pp. 197–221.

edged in theory, viz., “women” don’t exist—but politics are nonetheless conducted as if they did.⁴⁹ Here, humanistic notions of female agency can be deployed as a provisional gesture to uplift a dominated population, but with the explicit recognition that such categories have no permanent validity.⁵⁰ “Strategic essentialism,” in effect, requires a double gesture: that even as conceptual systems supporting the notion of the feminine crumble, feminists continue to “press its claims,”⁵¹ “to theorize essentialist spaces from which to speak,” while they simultaneously “deconstruct these spaces to keep them from solidifying.”⁵² To be sure, this is not a pure position—but as Elizabeth Grosz reminds us, in an appreciative assessment of “strategic essentialism,” no feminist position is pure when “all options are in their various ways bound by the constraints of patriarchal power.”⁵³ Scott’s assessment is less positive: she reminds her readers “whether it’s strategic or not,” essentialism remains essentialism, assuming “that there are fixed entities, visible to us as social or natural facts.” In Scott’s view, historians should refuse such refuges; they should instead explore the multiple rather than the so-called “unitary subject” and interrogate how such subjects are produced.⁵⁴

These refuges, I have here suggested—the appeals to “experience,” to the body, and to “strategic essentialism”—all have their limitations. They do not, I posit, provide any sure escape from the questions raised by post-structuralist criticism.

IV: BEYOND DECONSTRUCTION

What, then, might historians learn from these conceptual dilemmas? Despite these impasses, might historians and theorists still find some common ground? What might historians reject, or claim, of theory? For most historians, examining the “how” of a text is not enough: they also pose questions of “why?”, of “what meaning?”, and, yes, even of “who?”⁵⁵ Ending one’s investigation with an appeal to the “undecidability,” the “non-closure,” of texts—as might deconstructionists—is

49. Riley, “Am I That Name?” p. 112; cf. discussion in Valverde, “Poststructuralist Gender Historians,” 236.

50. See Fuss’s discussion of Spivak’s position, *Essentially Speaking*, pp. 31–32.

51. Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail*, p. 97, cited in Weed, “Introduction,” *Coming to Terms*, p. xvii.

52. Fuss, *Essentially Speaking*, p. 118.

53. Grosz, “Conclusion,” p. 342. See also Jane Flax, “The End of Innocence,” in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 445–63.

54. Scott, “Evidence,” 791.

55. Hull, “Feminist and Gender History,” 291.

either seen as insufficient for the historians' enterprise,⁵⁶ or, worse, as positively inimical to it.⁵⁷

Historians insist that their work must explicitly attend to the social in a way that some forms of post-structuralism do not. This critique, however, is not new: earlier in the twentieth century, language theorists in Bakhtin's circle criticized Saussure and his disciples for their failure (or disinterest) in positioning "the sign" in the arena of class conflict and social groups.⁵⁸ Likewise, theoretically oriented historians today insist that their colleagues look beyond the instability of textual meaning to locate "the possible sources of those instabilities" in the "sociolinguistic interactions" of humans.⁵⁹ This is doubtless one reason why historians find Foucault's studies, with their analysis of the operations of power, more immediately useful for their own projects. In addition, Foucault's elaboration of the notion of discourse centers on institutions and the social order in a way that Derrida's concentration on writing does not⁶⁰—even though Foucault is easy to fault for his near erasure of women.⁶¹

As early as 1981, Gayatri Spivak urged theorists to move beyond the "reversal/displacement" theme of deconstruction to consider techniques (and the possible benefits of their use) for understanding power and the social. In her essay "French Feminism in an International Frame," Spivak—so centrally associated with deconstruction by virtue of her translation of and lengthy introduction to Derrida's *Of Grammatology*—notes aspects of linguistic theory that move readers "beyond the text." For example, she exhorts her audience to engage in "symptomatic readings" that explore the gaps and absences in a text, its "unnaturalness," that they see "another logic haunting its surface."⁶² Yet for Spivak, this project is not conceived as a purely literary exercise: what is absent as well as what seems contradictory or

56. Ibid.

57. Caplan, "Postmodernism," 272.

58. See discussion in Bryan D. Palmer, *Descent Into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), pp. 11–12.

59. William H. Sewell Jr., review of Scott's *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), in *History and Theory* 29 (1990): 81–82.

60. Caplan, "Postmodernism," pp. 266, 272.

61. Miller, "The Text's Heroine," pp. 117–18; Elizabeth A. Clark, "Foucault, the Fathers, and Sex," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 56 (1989): 634–36; Richlin, "Zeus Meets Metis," 165–70; and several essays in *Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance*, ed. Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988).

62. The phrase "symptomatic reading" is associated especially with Louis Althusser. For a helpful discussion of the term for feminists, see Rosemary Hennessy, *Materialist Feminism and the Politics of Discourse* (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. xvii, 93; and see Elizabeth A. Clark, "Ideology, History, and the Construction of 'Woman' in Late Ancient Christianity," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 2 (1994): 165.

"unnatural" relates to the social order of power in which the text participates, that is, to ideology. The "marginal moments" of a text, Spivak suggests, can be isolated to explore its ethical and political agendas.⁶³

These suggestions prompt the exploration of stripes of theory other than deconstruction. Thus the philosopher Nancy Fraser argues that the approach to linguistic theory most productive for feminists is that associated with the names of Bakhtin, Foucault, and Bourdieu (rather than that of Saussure, Derrida, and Lacan). The former group of theorists, Fraser claims, allow for "the social practice and social context of communication" in a way that the latter do not, or not very explicitly. Moreover, according to Fraser, through their attention to the diachronic, Bakhtin, Foucault, and Bourdieu prove more helpful to historians who are concerned for chronological change.⁶⁴ These three theorists, Fraser argues, provide ways to think of "social identities as complex, changing, and discursively constructed," and in doing so, help feminist scholars to avoid both essentialist notions of gender, on the one hand, but also a complete "dispersal of identity," on the other.⁶⁵

How might attention both to theory and to more traditional social concerns play out in the work of a contemporary historian? One instructive example, in my view, can be found in an essay by Gabrielle Spiegel, in which she searches for a variety of theoretical tools to assist her historical work. Spiegel's essay, "History, Historicism, and the Social Logic of the Text in the Middle Ages,"⁶⁶ trenchantly critiques some forms of New Historical writing among literary critics, not post-structuralism per se. Bringing various stripes of theory to bear upon the texts she analyzes, Spiegel seeks to persuade readers, especially historians, of the utility of various theoretical insights. Borrowing themes derived from Raymond Williams, sociolinguistics, and Bakhtin,⁶⁷ she incorporates an explicitly social view of language. Spiegel thus balances the post-structuralist notion that "language constitutes the social world of meaning" with the claim that "social

63. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "French Feminism in an International Frame," *Yale French Studies* 62 (1981): 177–78.

64. Nancy Fraser, "The Uses and Abuses of French Discourse Theories," in *Revaluing French Feminism: Critical Essays on Difference, Agency, and Culture*, ed. Nancy Fraser and Sandra Lee Bartky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), pp. 180–81.

65. *Ibid.*, p. 191.

66. *Speculum* 65 (1990): 59–86.

67. Spiegel, "History," 72, 82, 83. Isabel Hull ("Feminist and Gender History," 286) also notes how "mid-level theory" often proves most helpful for the historian.

differences structure language": pressures creating the text are not only inter- and intra-, but also extratextual.⁶⁸

The phrase that Spiegel devises to register both social and formal concerns is the text's "social logic," which she defines as the text's "site of articulation and its discursive character as articulated 'logos.'" ⁶⁹ She insists that "context"—which for Spiegel is not the same as "text"⁷⁰—must be scrutinized, a point with which most historians would concur. Yet, with literary theorists, she insists that "texts often perform elaborate, ideological mystifications of which it is proper to be suspicious and which the text itself inevitably will betray through its ultimate fracturing of meaning."⁷¹

Focusing on two pieces of genealogical history (which appeared as a literary genre for the first time in the eleventh and twelfth centuries),⁷² Spiegel looks for interpretive assistance outside the text, to changing dynastic patterns among Franco-Flemish aristocrats as they struggled against the growing power of the monarchy.⁷³ These genealogical histories, she argues, can be treated both as consequence of this extratextual development, but also as a cause, insofar as they helped first "to create a consciousness" of lineage and then "to impose it on the members of the lineage group."⁷⁴ Moreover, by commissioning the composition of one text (the *Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle*) in vernacular prose rather than in Latin or as epic, the Franco-Flemish lords who were patrons of this enterprise waged their contest against "the growth of royal authority" through the creation of a new literary mode.⁷⁵ Spiegel argues that the *Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle* had no stable inherent meaning, but acquired new signification as the legend passed from its earlier, clerically rendered Latin prototype to the new "local environment" of the French nobility.⁷⁶ Even though the political struggle is absent from the text itself, she argues, the "political unconscious" of the text places the work within the "historiography of resistance."⁷⁷ Although Spiegel sharply criticizes some themes of New Historicism,

68. Spiegel, "History," 84, citing Carroll Smith-Rosenberg.

69. *Ibid.*, 77–78; cf. 78 on the "social environment of the text."

70. *Ibid.*, 85.

71. *Ibid.*

72. *Ibid.*, 78, 79–83. The two texts Spiegel discusses are the Anonymous of Bethune's *Historie des ducs de Normandie et des rois d'Angleterre* and the vernacular *Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle*.

73. *Ibid.*, 78–81.

74. *Ibid.*, 78–79.

75. *Ibid.*, 80, 82.

76. *Ibid.*, 83.

77. *Ibid.* The allusion is to Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981).

such as the absorption of history by textuality,⁷⁸ she nonetheless responds to the "semiotic challenge"⁷⁹ by looking to the text's mode of production and to the "surplus of signification" that readers have found and will find in it.⁸⁰ She argues that historians must abandon any lingering view that historical literature reflects the world; rather, they should join with literary critics in a common project, the exploration of "the social dimensions of textual production in past times."⁸¹

Perhaps one reason why Spiegel succeeds (some might argue) in exploiting theoretical critique for the historian's enterprise is that the texts on which she works are more "like" literature than the economic and other documents with which many social historians deal. Spiegel, in fact, herself criticizes New Historicists' equation of literature and documents, and their claim that "both participate equally in the uncontrolled play and intertextuality of language itself."⁸² Spiegel's argument would be seconded by many other, if not all, historians, for whom the differing social contexts that surround (for example) tax rolls and diaries give clues for their respective readings.⁸³

Appropriating themes from various types of literary theory, Spiegel thus offers a less theoretically pure approach than do those that rely more exclusively on deconstruction.⁸⁴ Spiegel's "messier" theoretical equipment, however, is probably more readily appropriable by historians who wish not to dissolve the social and economic order into texts, and who wish to see their historical subjects—however decentered—as possessing will and agency. How might such considerations—especially the notion of the "social logic" of a text—assist the reading of early Christian works?

V: EARLY CHRISTIAN WOMEN

I now turn to narratives of fourth- and fifth-century women ascetics in order to explore the possible profit of such theoretical consider-

78. Spiegel, "History," 77.

79. *Ibid.*, 60.

80. *Ibid.*, 62.

81. *Ibid.*, 77.

82. *Ibid.*, 64. For a different view see Dominic LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1983), pp. 30–34; discussed in Toews, "Intellectual History," 885–86.

83. Hull, "Feminist and Gender History," 293. Joan Scott, however, in "A Statistical Representation of Work: *La Statistique de l'industrie à Paris, 1847–1848*" (in *Gender and the Politics of History*, pp. 113–38), argues against separating statistical reports from other kinds of historical texts; imagining that "numbers are purer" "denies the inherently political aspects of representation . . ." (pp. 114–15).

84. See the critique of Scott by Valverde, "Poststructuralist Gender Historians," 233; *idem*, "As If Subjects Existed: Analyzing Social Discourses," *The Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 28 (1991): 177.

ations for church historians. Some of these narratives are full-blown *Vitae* (*Lives*), such as those of Melania the Younger, of Olympias, of Macrina, and of Syncletica; others are shorter accounts, such as Palladius's description of Melania the Elder in his *Lausiaca History*, and Jerome's depiction of his friends (and patrons) Paula in *Epistle* 108 and Marcella in *Epistle* 127. All of these accounts, it may be noted, are literary constructions, some of a high rhetorical order.

Whereas the male subjects of asceticizing hagiography "leave culture for nature,"⁸⁵ women ascetics are more often represented as adopting forms of "house asceticism" in which they conduct their renunciations in their familial households (thus Macrina in Cappadocia and Marcella in Rome), or they form monasteries for women, often in cities (thus Olympias in Constantinople, the two Melanias in Jerusalem, Paula in Bethlehem).⁸⁶ Hence the women's *Vitae* contain fewer exotic features than do those of male ascetics: no hippocentaurs, no friendly lions to dig their graves.⁸⁷ The women's *Lives* represent their subjects as gradually intensifying their renunciations, not as breaking totally with civilization, a motif that Caroline Walker Bynum also notes in her study of medieval women saints.⁸⁸

How is our historical quest impeded or illuminated by bringing some of the literary and critical issues raised above to the interpretation of these accounts? The desire of many feminists to uncover "real women," to hear "real female voices," is often thwarted when these texts are subjected to theoretical critique: in this regard, the theorists have scored their point. Yet, as in Gabrielle Spiegel's notion of the "social logic" of a text, critical analysis raises some interesting themes that prompt different explorations of these texts in their cultural milieu and relate them to other texts of the period. For the texts with which I here deal are nothing if not literary productions, and hence are (some might argue) more readily liable to literary analysis than the charters, church rolls, and factory records that constitute the evidence for historians who study later periods.

85. Evelyne Patlagean, "Ancienne hagiographie byzantine et histoire sociale," *Annales: e, s.*, c 23 (1968): 114, borrowing from Lévi-Strauss.

86. See Elizabeth A. Clark, "Ascetic Renunciation and Feminine Advancement: A Paradox of Late Ancient Christianity," *Anglican Theological Review* 63 (1981): 240–57, reprinted in Clark, *Ascetic Piety and Women's Faith: Essays on Late Ancient Christianity* (Lewiston, Maine: Edwin Mellen Press, 1986), pp. 175–208, esp. pp. 182–85; also Susanna Elm, "Virgins of God": *The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), esp. chap. 1.

87. As in Jerome's *Vita Pauli* 7; 16 (PL 23, 22–23, 28).

88. Caroline Walker Bynum, "Women's Stories, Women's Symbols: A Critique of Victor Turner's Theory of Liminality," in *Anthropology and the Study of Religion*, ed. Frank Reynolds and Robert Moore (Chicago: Center for the Scientific Study of Religion, 1984), pp. 105–25.

We may first note that the *Vitae* of early Christian women saints share many features with the relatively new genre of novels or romances popular in this period rather than with classical biography that focused on the public activities of statesmen and generals: women did not operate in a public political sphere. (That the lives of these famous Christian women might resonate to some extent with the lives of philosophers and wise men will be considered below.) Composed largely between the first century B.C.E. and the fourth century C.E.,⁸⁹ novels such as *Clitophon and Leucippe* and *Chareas and Callirhoe* portray beautiful and aristocratic adolescent heroines who battle their kinfolk to be united with their true loves; they flee barbarians, wander, and are rescued from danger, while struggling to preserve their chastity against seemingly insuperable odds. At the end of many ordeals and adventures, the young couple is reunited, and marital bliss awaits.

Even before the period in which the *Vitae* of women saints were composed, the authors of the Apocryphal Acts and the Pseudo-Clementine literature appropriated such themes for their own Christian purposes.⁹⁰ Take, for example, Thecla, in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*:⁹¹ she is of a noble family ("the first of the Iconians"), destined for an aristocratic marriage. Upon hearing the message of stringent asceticism that Paul preaches, Thecla abandons her plans for marriage, to the distress and anger of her mother, her fiancé, and the civic authorities. She aims to follow Paul in a life of wandering and preaching, but great dangers and threats attend her pursuit of this desire. Although Thecla's story contains many themes similar to the adventures portrayed in the Hellenistic novels, there are, in contrast, no wedding bells at the end: she is dedicated to Christ her Bridegroom. The *Acts of Paul and Thecla* serves, arguably, as an excellent example of a text being both consequence and cause, for the book both develops the "liberal" strand of Paul's message regarding women and serves (we are told) as inspiration for later Christian women.⁹² Indeed, the

89. Ben Edwin Perry, *The Ancient Romances: A Literary-Historical Account of Their Origins*, Sather Classical Lectures 37 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), pp. 5–6, 96, 153; Otto Weinreich, "Nachwort," in Heliodorus, *Aithiopika. Die Abenteuer der schönen Charikleä. Ein griechischer Liebesroman*, ed. Rudolf Reymer (Zürich: Artemis-Verlag, 1950), pp. 327–36.

90. Most important, Rosa Söder, *Die apokryphen Apostelgeschichten und die romanhafte Literatur der Antike*, Würzburger Studien zur Altertumswissenschaft 3 (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1932).

91. Text in *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha*, ed. R. A. Lipsius and M. Bonnet (Leipzig: Hermann Mendelssohn, 1891–1903) I: 235–72; English translation in *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. Edgar Hennecke and Wilhelm Schneemelcher; English trans. R. McL. Wilson (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1965), II: 353–64.

92. For the "liberal" and "conservative" trajectories that were elaborated from Paul's teaching on women, see Dennis R. MacDonald, *The Legend and the Apostle: The Battle for*

refusal of sexual relation is the most striking difference between the heroines of the Apocryphal Acts and those of the "secular" novels.

Likewise the themes of the female saints' *Vitae*: aristocratic young women struggle against relatives and civic authorities to realize their desire (here, ascetic renunciation); their adventures involve the difficulties of disposing of their vast property and wealth in many parts of the Roman Empire. In some of the fuller *Vitae*, such as that of Melania the Younger, themes of travel, barbarians, and ransoming captives all play a role, as they do in the Hellenistic novels. In these ascetic tales, however, marriage is either avoided altogether, or is joyously renounced when husbands die or consent to take vows of chastity. After lives of inspiring virtue, the women die secure in the knowledge that the heavenly halls await them.

Since several of these novelistic *Vitae* claim to be written by eyewitnesses,⁹³ some commentators have thought that this claim moved the accounts back into the realm of history and lent weight to the authenticity of the *Lives*.⁹⁴ Thus the author of Melania the Younger's *Vita* (presumably her monastic disciple, Gerontius) prefaces his tale with the disclaimer that he has so much material at his disposal that he will not recount every detail of Melania's life or the narrative would be "interminable." Rather, casting himself "into the boundless sea of recitation," he shall, like a fisherman, pull up a sufficient number of fish, but not all.⁹⁵ Likewise, Gregory of Nyssa, writing the *Vita* of his sister Macrina, tells the correspondent who requested the account that he has not the time or space to report everything that Macrina said or did; his treatise is becoming too long already.⁹⁶ These moves, common

Paul in Story and Canon (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983). For later appeals to Thecla, see, for example, Tertullian, *De baptismo* 17; Jerome, *ep.* 22.41.

93. Often itself a literary fiction: see Hippolyte Delehaye, *The Legends of the Saints: An Introduction to Hagiography*, trans. V. M. Crawford (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1961; French and original English publication, 1907), p. 71. For more traditional scholars, a sign of the work's authenticity; see Georg Luck, "Notes on the *Vita Macrinae* of Gregory of Nyssa," in *The Biographical Works of Gregory of Nyssa*, ed. Andreas Spira, Patristic Monograph Series 12 (Cambridge, Mass.: The Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, 1984), pp. 21–22.
94. So Ruth Albrecht, *Das Leben der heiligen Makrina auf dem Hintergrund der Thekla-Traditionen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1986), pp. 42–43 (the *Vita Macrinae* is "ein sehr authentisches Bild"). Elizabeth A. Castelli, on the other hand, notes that since the name "Syncretica" is a pun, some have thought that the *Vita Syncreticae* did not refer "to an actual woman," but was a fictitious invention. See Castelli, "Translation" (of the *Vita Syncreticae*) in *Ascetic Behavior in Greco-Roman Antiquity: A Sourcebook*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), p. 267 n. 7.
95. [Gerontius], *Vie de Sainte Mélanie, prologus* (SC 90, 124, 126); Latin text in *Santa Melania Giuniore, senatrice romana: documenti contemporanei e note*, ed. Mariano del Tindaro Rampolla (Roma: Tipografia Vaticana, 1905).
96. Gregory of Nyssa, *Vita Macrinae* 18 (SC 178, 200); composed ca. 380 C.E. (pp. 57ff.).

in literary rhetoric, signal that we are dealing with self-consciously literary narratives of a strongly panegyric flavor. They are literature, not simply documents, and hence are readily subject to literary analysis and critique.

Twentieth-century scholars who study saints' *Vitae* have distanced themselves from the pious enthusiasts of yesteryear who claimed these *Vitae* as history.⁹⁷ Scholars such as Hippolyte Delehaye, however, argue that even after we remove these tales from the category of history, there is still much we can derive from them concerning the development of the saint's cult, liturgical practices, and so forth.⁹⁸ In Spiegel's phrase, we might find much by which to construct the text's "social logic."

Moreover, historians of late antiquity see these tales as rich mines for the construction of social history, even when they turn a skeptical eye on the reports of miracles and demons. From the *Life of Melania the Younger*, for example, we learn that senatorial families might have property in more than six provinces of the Roman Empire;⁹⁹ that their yearly incomes, quite apart from their land, might be 120,000 gold *solidi*—loosely translated, \$123 million (or, in an alternative calculation, enough to provide subsistence living for about twenty-four thousand families a year);¹⁰⁰ that it took about forty days to make the overland journey between Constantinople and Jerusalem, even when there was a ready supply of pack animals provided at government expense.¹⁰¹ From the *Vita* of Olympias, the companion and benefactor of Bishop John Chrysostom of Constantinople, we discern that even a relatively "nouvelle" aristocrat such as she had real estate in four provinces, besides her possessions in Constantinople, including three houses, baths, a mill, and various suburban properties, that she donated, along with the equivalent of \$900 million, to the Church.¹⁰²

Details do not always, however, concern money. The *Life of Syncletica* narrates at length a different feature of the saint's life, namely, her

97. See, for example, René Aigran, *L'Hagiographie: ses sources, ses méthodes, son histoire* (Paris: Bloud and Gay, 1953), part 2.

98. Hippolyte Delehaye, *Cinq leçons sur la méthode hagiographique*, SubsHag 21 (Bruxelles: Société des Bollandistes, 1934), p. 27; also Baudouin de Gaiffier, *Recueil d'hagiographie* (Bruxelles: Société des Bollandistes, 1977), pp. 140–41.

99. *Vita Melaniae Junioris* 11 (SC 90, 146); Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* 61 adds Aquitania, Taraconia, and Gaul, as well.

100. *Vita Melaniae Junioris* 15 (SC 90, 156); in the Greek version, the income is attributed to Melania's husband Pinian; in the Latin version, to Melania herself. I thank Keith Hopkins for assistance with these calculations.

101. The trip to Constantinople is described in *Vita Melaniae Junioris* 51–56 (SC 90, 224–40); the Latin version adds the precise figure of "40 days." She leaves Constantinople at the end of February and arrives home just before Holy Week (*Vita* 56–57).

102. *Vita Olympiadis* 5 (SC 13bis, 416, 418).

illnesses. We hear grimly elaborated the progress of a gum disease that decayed Syncletica's facial bones, left black holes in her mouth, and rendered her so odiferous that her fellow nuns could not bear to come near her.¹⁰³ Other accounts give different kinds of details, for example, about the women's reading habits: Melania the Younger read the *Lives* of the Fathers "as if they were dessert,"¹⁰⁴ and her grandmother, Melania the Elder, read through the works of such theologians as Origen, Gregory Nazianzen, and Basil of Caesarea "seven or eight times," according to Palladius.¹⁰⁵ We find a vivid account concerning the organization of a women's monastery in Jerome's narration of the life of Paula.¹⁰⁶ Occasionally we are told the direct speech of the women: thus Marcella's retort to her mother who was urging her to wed a wealthy elderly senator, "If I wished to marry, I would look for a husband, not an inheritance";¹⁰⁷ or Paula's warning to the nuns in her Bethlehem monastery, "A clean body and a clean dress mean an unclean soul."¹⁰⁸ Do not such texts lure us to feel that we hear the women's very voices?

Such events are narrated in the midst of much that seems to our contemporaries "unreal"—the battles with demons, the miracles—yet it is these seemingly reliable details that seem to pin down the *Vitae* into the world of history. Can historians not retrieve the social-historical facts while discarding the miraculous and the phantastic? Nonetheless—and here we move to some theoretical rejoinders—such details are precisely what literary theorist Roland Barthes has named "the effect of the real" (or "the reality effect"), which he claims was a strong marker of the French realist novel as it developed in the nineteenth century. In these novels, an impulse toward "narrative luxury" piled up details not necessary for the development of the plot or the depiction of character.¹⁰⁹ What was the function of such detail? Barthes puzzled. What was "the significance of the insignificance"? And he answered: to make the reader believe the truth of the illusion that was being constructed. The technique, he claims, was borrowed

103. Pseudo-Athanasius, *Vita Syncleticae* 111 (PG 28, 1556).

104. *Vita Melaniae Junioris* 23 (SC 90, 174). Which *Lives* would then have been available? Perhaps those of Antony and Martin, and Jerome's three monastic *Vitae*? See discussion in Jacques Fontaine, "Introduction," *Sulpice Sévère, Vie de Saint Martin* (SC 133, I: 77n.1).

105. Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* 55 (Butler, 149); this section of the *Lausiaca History* is now thought to report on Melania the Elder, not on Sylvania.

106. Jerome, *ep.* 108.20 (CSEL 55, 306–51).

107. Jerome, *ep.* 127.2 (CSEL 56, 145–56).

108. Jerome, *ep.* 108.20 (CSEL 55, 336).

109. Roland Barthes, "The Reality Effect," in Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986; French original 1984), pp. 141–42.

by novelists from earlier history writing,¹¹⁰ and perhaps before that, from the ancient narrative practice of *ekphrasis*, description for description's sake.¹¹¹ Barthes further asks, how does the historical form of narration differ from that which we find in "imaginary accounts" such as novels and dramas? Not at all, he answers.¹¹² Narration, whether used in an historical essay or in a novel, serves as "the privileged signifier of the real"; narrative structure becomes both "the sign and the proof of reality."¹¹³ To put the matter more bluntly: the very details that social historians claim give veracity to a text are here repositioned as a creative artist's attempt to create an illusory reality in the minds of readers. That the texts with which I here deal pertain to women does nothing to mitigate the force of Barthes's critique.

A second problematic issue to which literary theorists and "metahistorians" point also concerns the narrative structure of traditional history writing—in the case at hand, narratives such as the *Life of Melania the Younger* and the *Life of Olympias*. Since narrative "predominates in both mythical and fictional discourse," Hayden White warns, historians should be wary of it as a suspect style for "speaking about 'real' events."¹¹⁴ The function of narrative is to produce notions of "continuity, wholeness, closure, and individuality that every 'civilized' society wishes to see itself as incarnating . . .";¹¹⁵ it is, in the eyes of several theorists, especially disposed to serve as the carrier of ideology.¹¹⁶ Historian Sande Cohen argues a similar point: "by impos-

110. Ibid., pp. 143, 146–148.

111. See discussion in F. R. Ankersmit, *History and Tropology: The Rise and Fall of Metaphor* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 140–41. It seems characteristic of writers of early Christian texts that even when *ekphrasis* abounds, as it does in the *Vita Macrinae*, the descriptions can be taken as conveying "a personal note": so Eugenio Marotta, "Similitudini ed *ekphrasis* nella *Vita s. Macrinae* di Gregorio di Nissa," *Vetera Christianorum* 7 (1970): 283.

112. Roland Barthes, "The Discourse of History," trans. Stephen Bann, in *Comparative Criticism: A Yearbook*, vol. 3, ed. E. S. Shaffer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 7. For a similar point, see Hayden White, "Figuring the nature of the times deceased": Literary Theory and Historical Writing," in *The Future of Literary Theory*, ed. Ralph Cohen (New York: Routledge, 1989), pp. 23–24.

113. Barthes, "The Discourse of History," p. 18.

114. Hayden White, "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory," *History and Theory* 23, 1 (1984); reprinted in White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 57; also see White's essay, "The Discourse of History," *Humanities in Society* 2 (1979): 1–15, for an illuminating discussion of the "history of historiography."

115. Hayden White, "Droysen's *Historik*: Historical Writing as a Bourgeois Science," *History and Theory* 19 (1980), reprinted in White, *The Content of the Form*, p. 87. Peter De Bolla notes White's emphasis on the moralizing character of narrative ("Disfiguring History," *Diacritics* 16 [1986]: 50).

116. Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva in particular attack narrativity as an "ideological instrument"; see discussion in White, "The Politics of Historical Interpretation: Disci-

ing the form of a story," historical narrative "reproduces a culture of common language, common society, or common reality in the face of uncommon language (codes), class society, and uncommon realities (chasms between cultural worlds)." Cohen posits that by writing history as story, our ability to think about the nonrepeatable and the specific is blunted.¹¹⁷

Moreover, via narrative construction, White argues, contemporary historians work over the traces of past events—to the events themselves we have no access—and endow them with "'symbolic' significance."¹¹⁸ In creating narrative history, the historian employs the same techniques that Freud identified as the dreamwork—"condensation, displacement, considerations of representability, and secondary elaboration. . . ."¹¹⁹ Thus the very style of the texts under consideration, their narrative structure, raise questions about the historicity of what is contained therein. They are, perhaps, little different from novels.

Many historians, needless to say, denounce such theoretical incursions onto their intellectual turf. Thus distinguished ancient historian Arnaldo Momigliano: "History is no epic, history is no novel, history is not propaganda"—and why not? Because historians subject themselves to "the control of evidence" in a way that the authors of epics and novels do not.¹²⁰ But this is precisely the point that Roland Barthes would dispute: the writer of a historical account creates a sense of his or her subject's veracity in the same way that the novelist does. Is not the same literary phenomenon at work in the early Christian *Vitae* I have mentioned? Readers are thus led to ascribe considerable truth to the account because so many "effects of the real" have been summoned up.

A further literary/critical issue, and one more focused on the topic of gender, is raised by another feature of these *Vitae*: their tendency to present their heroines as teachers of wisdom. Earlier twentieth-century scholarship debated whether productions such as the *Life of Anthony* were based on the model of *Lives* of philosophers; Richard Reitzenstein, for example, argued that behind the *Life of Anthony* lay a

pline and Desublimation," *Critical Inquiry* 8 (1982), reprinted in White, *The Content of the Form*, p. 81.

117. Sande Cohen, *Historical Culture: On the Recoding of an Academic Discipline* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p. 16.

118. White, "Droysen's *Historik*," p. 102.

119. Hayden White, "Historicism, History, and the Figurative Imagination," *History and Theory* 14 (1975): 60.

120. Arnaldo Momigliano, "The Rhetoric of History and the History of Rhetoric: On Hayden White's Tropes," in *Comparative Criticism*, p. 261.

Life of Pythagoras.¹²¹ Athanasius—the presumed author of the *Life of Anthony*¹²²—thus seemed less the creator of a new literary genre than a latecomer.¹²³ Not only is the ascetic hero Anthony modeled as a paragon of self-restraint (highly important for a Hellenistic philosopher), he also confounds secular philosophers with his wisdom, despite his relative lack of education.¹²⁴ The message is clear: Anthony's philosophical wisdom is God-given, not laboriously learned in the schools of Athens. A second message is also clear: the ascetic as philosopher is a literary topos.

It is one thing, however, for *male* ascetics to be represented in the tradition of philosophers—and another thing, for women. Given the general patristic denigration of women's mental capabilities, it is surprising to note that all the women ascetics mentioned above are represented as the purveyors of wisdom and are cast as teachers—whether they teach only within their own monasteries (as do Syncletica and Paula) or are represented as carrying the message of asceticism and orthodoxy to a wider audience (as do Melania the Elder, who sounds apocalyptic warnings to male and female Roman aristocrats;¹²⁵ Melania the Younger, who gives anti-Nestorian lectures to the Constantinopolitan aristocracy;¹²⁶ and Jerome's Roman friend Marcella, who is represented as entering the public arena to argue against the doctrines of Origen¹²⁷). Of the *Life of Syncletica's* 113 chapters, 83 are devoted to a presentation of her teaching, a modified Origenism now familiar from the ascetic instruction of Evagrius Ponticus.¹²⁸ Thus Syncletica is depicted as giving advice on the examination of one's "thoughts" (*logismoi*, here as in Evagrius, demonic temptations);¹²⁹ she counsels "pure prayer" techniques¹³⁰ and how to avoid

121. Richard Reitzenstein, "Des Athanasius Werk über das Leben des Antonius," *Sitzungsberichte*, Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-Historische Klasse, 5 (1914): 30–32.

122. Timothy Barnes, "Angel of Light or Mystic Initiate? The Problem of the *Life of Antony*," *Journal of Theological Studies* n.s. 37 (1986): 353–68, casts doubt on the Athanasian authorship of the *Vita Antonii*.

123. So Karl Holl, "Die Schriftstellerische Form des griechischen Heiligenlebens," *Neue Jahrbücher für das Klassische Altertum* 29 (1912): 426.

124. Athanasius, *Vita Antonii* 72–73 (PG 26, 944–45). This topos is also well exploited in the case of the women here to be considered.

125. Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* 54 (Butler, 147).

126. Gerontius, *Vita Melaniae Junioris* 54 (SC 90, 232, 234).

127. Jerome, *ep.* 127.9 (CSEL 56, 152).

128. For a survey of these, see Elizabeth A. Clark, *The Origenist Controversy: The Cultural Construction of an Early Christian Debate* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 60–84.

129. Pseudo-Athanasius, *Vita Syncleticae* 26; 88 (PG 28, 1502, 1504, 1541).

130. *Ibid.* 29 (PG 28, 1504–05).

the various sins that tempt ascetics (gluttony, lust, sadness);¹³¹ she warns that crafty demons may appear even more ascetic than ascetics themselves;¹³² she wars against the teachings of astrology and fatalism.¹³³ Her advice to ascetic practitioners is as detailed as that which we find in the accounts of male ascetic teachers of a philosophic stripe, and resonates with the themes of late-fourth-century Origenism. The "social logic" of the text emerges when we view it from this theological perspective.

The most spectacular representation of a woman saint as philosopher, however, doubtless comes from Gregory of Nyssa's two treatises that focus on his sister Macrina: her *Vita*, and *On the Soul and the Resurrection*. Here, Macrina stands as Gregory's teacher of wisdom (and hence as teacher to other men); in fact, she is repeatedly called by Gregory "my teacher." Gregory makes clear that Macrina had not received a philosophic or even a literary education as had he and his brother Basil of Caesarea, pagan literature, in Gregory's view, containing too many "undignified" tales about women. Thus her education consisted almost solely of the study of Scripture¹³⁴—yet, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, she discourses at great length on theodicy, the human condition, the future life, and the soul.¹³⁵ (The topos of the uneducated woman as "philosopher" thus shares much with the representation of Antony.) In her *Vita*, Gregory only briefly mentions these as themes on which she spoke; but in *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, he provides Macrina with a longer format—indeed, Macrina talks for nearly seventy pages! Here she instructs her brother on the Epicurean denial of providence and espousal of atomistic theory;¹³⁶ on humans as the microcosm of the universe;¹³⁷ on the relation of the soul and body in the afterlife.¹³⁸ She speaks of the love that draws us to the Good.¹³⁹ She evinces knowledge of Aristotelian logic,¹⁴⁰ and borrows analogies from contemporary astronomy and physics to score

131. Ibid. 29; 40; 49 (PG 28, 1505, 1512, 1516–17).

132. Ibid. 53 (PG 58, 1520).

133. Ibid. 81; 88 (PG 58, 1536, 1541).

134. Gregory of Nyssa, *Vita Macrinae* 3 (SC 178, 148, 150). Georg Luck observes that there is not a single certain quotation from a pagan author in the entire *Vita* ("Notes," p. 29). Anthony Meredith comments that the whole notion of the "philosophic life" is here transformed into "the life of virtue" ("A Comparison Between the *Vita S. Macrinae* of Gregory of Nyssa, the *Vita Plotini* of Porphyry and the *De Vita Pythagorica* of Iamblichus," in *The Biographical Works of Gregory of Nyssa*, ed. Spira, pp. 191–92).

135. Gregory of Nyssa, *Vita Macrinae* 17 (SC 178, 198).

136. Gregory of Nyssa, *De anima et resurrectione* (PG 46, 24).

137. Ibid. (PG 46, 28).

138. Ibid. (PG 46, 76–79).

139. Ibid. (PG 46, 93, 96–97).

140. Ibid. (PG 46, 53).

her points.¹⁴¹ Do not such accounts encourage us to believe that fourth-century Christian women could expound theological and philosophical wisdom as well as their male counterparts? Are these women not heroines who can be added to the pages of "her-story"? Not too readily, I would suggest: the "social logic" of the text has less to do with "real women" than with an elaboration of theological points that troubled their authors.

First, Gregory's presentation of Macrina is not original, but borrows from an obvious philosophical precedent. Macrina is modeled on Socrates' muse Diotima of the *Symposium*, while her words in the dialogue *On the Soul and the Resurrection* owe much to Plato's *Phaedo*. Socrates reports Diotima's teaching on the nature of true love to his male companions at the dinner party that is the setting of Plato's *Symposium*. Having reached the summit of wisdom, Diotima shares her riches with worthy philosophers such as Socrates.

Moreover, we might also note that ancient Hebrew and early Christian literature represents Wisdom as a woman, a feat no doubt assisted by the feminine gender of the words for Wisdom in both Hebrew and Greek (*hochmah* and *sophia*). In such books as Proverbs, the Wisdom of Solomon, and chapter 28 of the Wisdom of Ben Sirach, Wisdom is personified as a female. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has further argued that the Sophia-traditions constitute a very early strata of Jesus' teaching, such as the Q saying, "Wisdom is vindicated by her children" (Luke 7:35/Matt. 11:19), in which Jesus is a "child" of "Sophia."¹⁴² Thus Schüssler Fiorenza claims that "the earliest Christian theology is sophiology."¹⁴³ And the theme of the female Sophia was exploited by Gnostic writers, as has been explored by Deirdre Good and other scholars.¹⁴⁴ Is there not then biblical as well as philosophical precedent for casting women as the embodiments of wisdom?

Such arguments have found a sympathetic reception with many contemporary Christian women, in part because they are easy to appropriate for present political purposes, providing a bastion for the partisans of "identity politics." Thus according to Schüssler Fiorenza, that the earliest Christian message was grounded in Sophia-as-female "made possible the invitation of women to the discipleship of equals",¹⁴⁵

141. Ibid. (PG 46, 32–33, 36–37).

142. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), pp. 132, 134.

143. Ibid., p. 134.

144. Deirdre J. Good, *Reconstructing the Tradition of Sophia in Gnostic Literature*, SBL Monograph Series 32 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), esp. pp. xix–xx.

145. Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, p. 140.

women today, she implies, can find inspiration in this ostensibly feminist vision of the early Christian community. Likewise, Elaine Pagels, in some of her early work on women and Gnosticism, suggested that the presence of female figures such as Sophia in Gnostic myths empowered women Gnostics to take active leadership roles in their sects,¹⁴⁶ in contrast to the views and practice of Catholic Christianity. Wisdom-as-Woman thus seems a "woman-friendly" motif for the Christian tradition.

Feminist historians of Christianity have similarly looked at the portraits of Macrina and other women teachers as providing a helpful counterweight to the slurs on women found so frequently in patristic literature. Images of Marcella standing down Origenist "heretics," of Melania the Younger denouncing the errors of Nestorius, of Macrina lecturing her brother on the relation of soul and body in the afterlife, can strengthen contemporary feminist visions. Yet, we must ask, can these depictions of philosophical women be unambiguously appropriated for feminist politics?

Start, for example, with the model of Diotima. Here, David Halperin's essay "Why Is Diotima a Woman?" provides sobering food for thought.¹⁴⁷ Halperin first notes the oddness of having a woman serve as the instructor in love for a group of male pederasts, such as are gathered at Plato's *Symposium*. Critiquing previous scholars' answers to "why Diotima is a woman," Halperin elaborates two themes that ancient Greek men associated with women in the consideration of erotic issues: mutuality / reciprocity, on the one hand, and procreativity / productiveness, on the other.¹⁴⁸ The values of reciprocity and creativity were needed for a male philosophical culture, Halperin argues, but were not available in the Greek cultural construction of male-male sex relation.¹⁴⁹ These allegedly female traits are rather used to legitimize the male philosophic enterprise: woman provides a tool with which men can "think" the values of their culture.¹⁵⁰ But then femininity is not referential—Diotima is not a woman—but figural, a "woman."¹⁵¹ She stands for something else—namely, as a trope for Socrates himself,

146. Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979), chap. 3.

147. David M. Halperin, "Why is Diotima a Woman?" in Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other Essays on Greek Love* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 113–151.

148. *Ibid.*, p. 137, 138–139, 144. See also Luce Irigaray's emphasis on the fecundity of love in Diotima's speech: "Sorcerer Love: A Reading of Plato's *Symposium*, Diotima's Speech," in *Revaluing French Feminism*, ed. Fraser and Bartky, pp. 64–76, esp. pp. 69–70.

149. Halperin, "Why Is Diotima a Woman?" 150, 137.

150. *Ibid.*, pp. 144, 145 citing Helene Foley.

151. *Ibid.*, pp. 151, 149.

the quintessential philosopher.¹⁵² She is, Halperin argues, an “inversed *alter ego*” of the male protagonist. She is not a true female “Other” to the male philosopher, but “a masked version of the same,” what Julia Kristeva calls a “pseudo-Other.”¹⁵³ It is not Diotima’s presence as a woman that is here valued; she is rather “a necessary female absence,”¹⁵⁴ “an alternate male identity whose constant accessibility to men lends men fullness and totality that enables them to dispense (supposedly) with otherness altogether.”¹⁵⁵

Likewise, does not the Hebrew and early Christian Wisdom tradition provide a positive statement about women insofar as God speaks in the guise of a female figure, “Lady Wisdom”? Here Howard Eilberg-Schwartz’s essay, “The Nakedness of a Woman’s Voice, the Pleasure in a Man’s Mouth: An Oral History of Ancient Judaism,” disturbs such a positive assessment.¹⁵⁶ Eilberg-Schwartz notes that although God’s relation to Israel as a collective entity is depicted in imagery of male and female, this marital and sexual imagery is abandoned when God is depicted as relating to *individual* male Israelites.¹⁵⁷ And here, enter Lady Wisdom: since God’s relation to a particular Hebrew male cannot be represented in terms of homoerotic relation (masculinity being firmly associated with “heterosexual desire and procreation” in the ancient Hebrew tradition), female Wisdom serves as mediator between a male God and a male Israelite,¹⁵⁸ keeping the masculine deity at safe distance—even metaphorically—from homoerotic association with Israelite men. On this reading, the identification of Wisdom as female appears less as a positive feature in and for itself, less an exaltation of “real” women’s rationality and good counsel, than as a cover and veil for what otherwise would be unspeakable.

I would suggest that a similar analysis might apply to Gregory of Nyssa’s portrayal of Macrina in his two treatises concerning her. On

152. *Ibid.*, p. 150.

153. *Ibid.*, p. 145.

154. *Ibid.*, p. 149.

155. *Ibid.*, p. 151. Virginia Burrus has astutely noted in a recent paper that the speeches given by the male symposiasts in Plato’s dialogue are also “made up”; the male figures are no more “solid” and have no more claim to a male subjectivity than does the representation of Diotima (“Is There a Woman in the Text? Reflections on Doing ‘Women’s History’ in the Field of Late Antiquity,” conference on “Religion and Gender in the Ancient Mediterranean,” Ohio State University, May 22, 1997, typescript, pp. 4–5).

156. In *Off With Her Head! The Denial of Women’s Identity in Myth, Religion, and Culture*, ed. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz and Wendy Doniger (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 165–184; discussion at p. 180, citing Claudia Camp and Raphael Patai. Gregory of Nyssa, on the other hand, in commenting on Proverbs 4:6–8 does not flinch from stating that both men and women can be married to Wisdom, citing Galatians 3:28 for support: *De virginitate* 20 (SC 199, 500, 502).

157. *Ibid.*, pp. 173–74, 177.

158. *Ibid.*, p. 180.

this analysis, Macrina is not herself a teacher of wisdom, but a trope for Gregory: he is, in contemporary parlance, "writing like a woman." Gregory has appropriated woman's voice.¹⁵⁹ Although we do not have here the "real" Macrina, we can nonetheless inquire about the "social logic" of the text. And when we do, several functions that the trope of Macrina serves for Gregory can be identified.

First, Macrina serves as a tool with which Gregory can think through various troubling intellectual and theological problems that confronted male theologians of his day; in a special way, she exemplifies the claim that Christian males, as well as other ancient men, used women to "think with."¹⁶⁰ As I have already noted, the details of Macrina's teaching would not have been available to a woman educated only in scriptural reading, not in philosophical schools. Rather, in *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, Gregory through Macrina ponders the acceptability of a modified Origenism that skirts "dangerous" theological points. Although Gregory represents Macrina as claiming that she will pose her own arguments, not borrow them from others,¹⁶¹ she is clearly made to voice Gregory's own attempt to tame Origen into Christian respectability.¹⁶² Thus while Macrina outrightly rejects the notion of the soul's "fall" into the body,¹⁶³ she subtly preaches a nonphysical conception of hell¹⁶⁴ and changes Origen's equation of the body with the "coats of skins" that Adam and Eve received after the first sin (Gen. 3:21) into the "skins of irrationality" that beset human life—sex, birth, old age, and so on.¹⁶⁵ Thus a first "Macrina-function" is to serve as a spokesperson for Gregory's revised Origenist theology.

The themes on which Macrina discourses can be paralleled in the writings of Gregory in which he speaks in his own voice. Thus, for

159. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Displacement and the Discourse of Women," in *Displacement: Derrida and After*, ed. Mark Krupnick (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), p. 190, for a critique of Derrida on this point, after a sympathetic (and useful) review of Derrida's advancement of feminine figurations. Arnaldo Momigliano accepts the role of Macrina in the *Vita* and *De anima et resurrectione* at face value: "Macrina is here Socrates to her brother Gregory" ("The Life of St. Macrina by Gregory of Nyssa," in Momigliano, *On Pagans, Jews, and Christians* [Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1987], p. 208; the essay was originally printed in *The Craft of the Ancient Historian: Essays in Honor of Chester G. Starr* [New York, 1985], pp. 443–58).

160. Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 153, borrowing a phrase from Claude Lévi-Strauss.

161. Gregory of Nyssa, *De anima et de resurrectione* (PG 46, 25).

162. Lawrence R. Hennessey notes that Gregory had "tamed" his Origenism before he wrote *De opificio hominis* and *De anima et resurrectione* ("Gregory of Nyssa's Doctrine of the Resurrected Body," *Studia Patristica* 22 [Leuven: Peeters Press, 1989], pp. 31–32).

163. Gregory of Nyssa, *De anima et de resurrectione* (PG 46, 112–13).

164. *Ibid.* (PG 46, 85).

165. *Ibid.* (PG 46, 148–49).

example, Gregory offers the same teachings as "Macrina" on the constitution of the world,¹⁶⁶ and the relation of the soul to the body (especially the denial of a pre-existent "fall").¹⁶⁷ He explores the notion that humans are a microcosm of the universe¹⁶⁸ and opts for a nonliteral understanding of the "coats of skins" that, while avoiding Origen's identification of the "coats" with "bodies," nonetheless associates them with "fleshliness" and "the capacity for death."¹⁶⁹ Gregory, like "Macrina," rejects fatalistic teaching¹⁷⁰ and understands future punishment not as eternal hellfire but as a remedial correction designed to return humans to their original condition.¹⁷¹ Gregory also stresses in works written in his own voice, as he does in his role as pupil of Macrina in *De anima et resurrectione*, that a teacher is necessary for the Christian seeking to find "philosophy."¹⁷² The teaching assigned to Macrina in *De anima*, in other words, turns out to be Gregory's.

What then is Macrina's function in *On the Soul and the Resurrection*? In addition to the obvious point that Gregory wishes to laud his esteemed (and now dead) sister, there are, I think, additional "Macrina-functions." The first is theological: Macrina herself provides a living example of Gregory's teaching that in God's first creation of humans "in the image of God" (Gen. 1:26–27), there was no sexual division. Since humans are created in the image of the Prototype, the Son of God, in whom "there is no male and female" (Gal. 3:28), maleness and femaleness cannot be assigned to the original creation but emerge only at a second stage, when God, foreseeing the "Fall" with its resultant penalty of death, provides for sexual reproduction by differentiating males and females.¹⁷³ The "image," in other words, represents the universal nature of humanity, not the differentiated "Adam," a thing of the earth.¹⁷⁴

166. Gregory of Nyssa, *De opificio hominis* 1 (PG 44, 128, 129, 131).

167. *Ibid.*, 28 (PG 44, 229, 232–33).

168. *Ibid.*, 16 (PG 44, 177, 180); Gregory faults the notion as too "lowly" for the Christian affirmation of human creation.

169. Gregory of Nyssa, *Oratio catechetica magna* 8 (Jaeger 3.4, 30); *De virginitate* 13 (SC 119, 422).

170. Gregory of Nyssa, *Oratio catechetica magna* 31 (Jaeger 3.4, 76–77); *De opificio hominis* 16 (PG 44, 185); cf. the arguments of Gregory's *Contra fatum* (PG 34, 145–74). Gregory's critique of determinism is explored in David Amand (de Mendieta), *Fatalisme et liberté dans l'antiquité grecque* (Louvain: Bibliothèque de l'Université, 1945), Book II, chap. 9.

171. Gregory of Nyssa, *Oratio catechetica magna* 8 (Jaeger 3.4, 32).

172. Gregory of Nyssa, *De virginitate* 23 (SC 119, 524–28); *De perfectione* (Jaeger 8.1, 195–96).

173. Gregory of Nyssa, *De opificio hominis* 16 (PG 44, 181, 185). Note Verna Harrison's summation: "Gregory argues that there is no gender in the eternal Godhead since even within the human condition gender is something temporary" ("Male and Female in Cappadocian Theology," *Journal of Theological Studies* 41 [1990]: 441).

174. *Ibid.*, 22 (PG 44, 204).

Most important, this first “image” pertains to our rational capacities, not to the bodies that differentiate the sexes.¹⁷⁵ As a virgin who rejects marriage, Macrina has already taken a major step to regain that primal pre-sexual condition in which the rational “image” remained pure¹⁷⁶—if in fact she lost it at all (Gregory believes that some righteous people, such as Moses, retained the pure “image of God” in themselves and thus were able to exemplify it to others¹⁷⁷). According to Gregory’s *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, the heroine of that book represents the woman who (as in Ps. 45:10–11) leaves her people and her father’s house to look to the true Father in Heaven; she is “adopted” into the divine family, becoming a “sister” to the Lord.¹⁷⁸ Perhaps Gregory pictured Macrina as such—although, to be sure, she did not wander far “from her father’s house” to found her monastery. Likewise, Macrina may well have been for Gregory a model of those who “keep their fountain sealed” (Song of Songs 4:12), that is, in Gregory’s interpretation, those whose intellectual properties remain untouched and “whole,” not wasted on thoughts of external and bodily things.¹⁷⁹ Since as virgin and as Christian philosopher Macrina has rejected sexual desire and lived so as to exhibit the rationality of the “integral” mind, it is no wonder that Gregory writes at the beginning of the *Vita Macrinae* that he does not know whether it is correct even to call her a “woman,” since she seemed to surpass that category.¹⁸⁰ This topos of ascetic literature regarding women renunciants acquires a precise designation in Gregory’s theology: Macrina exemplifies the primal rational human who is “without sex.”¹⁸¹

Yet another way in which Gregory uses “Macrina” is as a shaming device for Christian men: “even weak women reach this summit of wisdom and rationality . . . and look at you!” Here, men are urged to strive for Gregory’s (a.k.a. “Macrina’s”) level of philosophical reflec-

175. *Ibid.*, 16 (PG 44, 185).

176. As do virgins, according to Gregory of Nyssa, *De virginitate* 13 (SC 119, 422–26); cf. *Hom. in Canticum Canticorum* 15 (Jaeger 6, 439–40), on Song of Songs 6:2; according to Gregory’s teaching here, we recover the image when we model ourselves on Christ. See Patricia Cox Miller, “Dreaming the Body: An Aesthetics of Asceticism,” in *Asceticism*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 288 (writing of Gregory of Nyssa’s dream of Macrina’s glowing bones in *Vita Macrinae* 15) that “[t]he glowing body of his virginal sister was so important to Gregory because it was a sign that a momentous shift in the constitution of the human person with respect to time was possible.”

177. Gregory of Nyssa, *De opificio hominis* 18 (PG 44, 196).

178. Gregory of Nyssa, *Hom. in Canticum Canticorum* 4 (Jaeger 6, 115).

179. *Ibid.*, 9 (Jaeger 6, 275–76).

180. Gregory of Nyssa, *Vita Macrinae* 1 (SC 178, 140).

181. Verna E. F. Harrison notes how Gregory also can allow “Wisdom” to change genders in his *First Homily on the Song of Songs* (“Gender Reversal in Gregory of Nyssa’s *First Homily on the Song of Songs*,” *Studia Patristica* 27 [Leuven: Peeters, 1993], pp. 35–36).

tion. Just as the young Macrina worked a cure for her brother Basil's vanity at his oratorical skill,¹⁸² so the description of her abundant virtues serves to prod less dedicated Christians to lives of more strenuous renunciation. If Gregory neglects to record the details of her life, he fears that her story will remain "useless" (*anōphētes*)¹⁸³—"useless," that is, for the instruction and chastisement of others. Although Gregory does not here deploy an explicit rhetoric of shame, as do some of his monastic and ecclesiastical colleagues,¹⁸⁴ his picture of Macrina and her "philosophy" nonetheless stands as an implicit critique of "weaker" Christians, including Christian men.

Thus we should be cautious in assuming that wisdom-cast-as-woman provides an unproblematic positive evaluation of "real women." Just as scholars of Gnosticism soon backed away from linking the exaltation of Sophia to the empowerment of "real women"—after all, she is depicted as responsible for the disruption of the pleroma and the entrance of woe to the universe¹⁸⁵—so too our pleasure at finding women depicted as embodiments of Wisdom may be chastened. The attribution may have nothing to do with the empowerment of "real" women or with an exaltation of the feminine. To be sure, it is a more positive step to have women depicted as wise and beneficial than as ignorant and malevolent, as they all too often are in ancient texts. Nonetheless, historians should take care not to overlook the obvious: that we deal, always, with representation.

VI: VANISHING AND AFTERLIFE

How might this understanding of theoretical issues apply more broadly to the analysis of women and gender in early Christian texts? I think that scholars must move beyond the stage of feminist historiography in which we retrieve another forgotten woman and throw her into the historical mix. I do not mean to belittle the enterprise of recovery—after all, I myself have engaged in it, and would like to believe that these labors have served useful functions. That moment of recovery was, of course, politically charged, as part of a project to emphasize women's roles throughout Christian history; it constituted

182. Gregory of Nyssa, *Vita Macrinae* 6 (SC 178, 162).

183. *Ibid.*, 1 (SC 178, 140, 142).

184. See Elizabeth A. Clark, "Sex, Shame, and Rhetoric: Engendering Early Christian Ethics," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 59 (1992): 221–45, esp. 230–35, for examples.

185. See various essays in *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism*, ed. Karen L. King (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), especially Anne Pasquier's "Prouneikos: A Colorful Expression to Designate Wisdom in Gnostic Texts," pp. 47–66.

a celebratory move that gave courage to contemporary women by lauding our foremothers.

The current moment, more attentive to linguistic and social theory, is considerably less celebratory in its conclusions: we cannot with certainty claim to hear the voices of "real" women in early Christian texts, so appropriated have they been by male authors. Yet the direction in which I think interesting work is to be done examines how women and gender are constructed in these texts. This approach, I would argue, should move beyond the purely linguistic to explore the social forces at work in these constructions.¹⁸⁶ Thus, for example, Virginia Burrus notes in a recent paper that the very exclusion of women ("the excluded other") may point to "actual subject positions and social relations available to women historically 'as women'": here, "absence" itself can be seen as providing social data.¹⁸⁷

Likewise, we might expand Spiegel's notion of the "social logic" of the text to include (as I have above hinted) the "theological logic" as well. Here, the *Vita Macrinae* furnishes a particularly instructive example. Even though we retreat from the project of locating the "real Macrina" in this and other treatises by Gregory of Nyssa, a reading that attends to the social and theological context of these works reveals that the character of "Macrina" here plays a role in a contemporary controversy that tried to secure the place of a modified Origenism for "orthodoxy." On this view, texts are seen as engaged in contests, contests constituted in and through language, but also by events and interests within the broader discursive and social field. Although the "winners" appear to dominate our literary remains, opposition voices occasionally surface—even from 1500 years ago—to challenge the paradigm that was in the process of being made dominant.

Has, then, "the lady vanished"? If this question means, Can we recover her pure and simple from texts? my answer is no. But that is not the last word: she leaves her traces, through whose exploration, as they are imbedded in a larger social-linguistic framework, she lives on. "Afterlife" comes in different forms—or so we should know from the study of Christian history and theology.

186. See note 65 above.

187. Burrus, "Is There a Woman in the Text?" typescript, p. 7. For a different construal of the problem, see Bernadette Brooten, "Early Christian Women and Their Cultural Context: Issues of Method in Historical Reflection," in *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship*, ed. Adela Yarbro Collins (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1985), p. 66: "The lack of sources on women is part of the history of women."