A Second Skin: Ascetics as Body-Places in Late Antique Christianity

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DEDICATION

To my parents, for their unending love and support.
And to Robert Rennie, the love of my life.
For all of the things.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation reconceptualizes the boundedness of the late antique and early medieval Christian ascetic body. Many ascetics spent the majority of their lives out of sight, residing primarily in either tiny cells or caves deep within mountains. Because their flesh was inaccessible to the pilgrim, I argue that their location became a second skin, as flesh melded with physical materiality. I use various sources, from letters and treatises, to hagiographies and collected sayings – from the regions of Gaul and Rome to Egypt, Syria and Palestine – in order to explore this entanglement. Christian authorities attempted to solidify these men and women into a single physical form, casting them as impenetrable bridal chambers, or even literal walls that shielded Christian towns from the onslaught of demons and Huns alike. Bishops rhetorically transformed ascetics' bodies in their bishoprics to stone, portraying them not only as the limits of their political power, but as the fortified boundaries of the Christendom itself. Even when ascetics completely hid their bodies, their abodes were depicted as their face to the world, allowing pilgrims to access their holiness through a medium other than skin. Moreover, the second half of investigates how this negotiation of bodies and space took place in the late antique world when salvation was at stake. I contend that bishops and other episcopal authorities tried to exert control over their surroundings and thus themselves, though that materiality often pushed back in unexpected ways. Their anxiety over self-categorization is often palpable throughout their letters and saints' lives, letting us peek behind the curtain of their overt assuredness. This project ultimately examines how late ancient and early medieval Christians negotiated their own sense of self in spaces and with bodies that distort traditional categorizations of gender, materiality, and mortality, revealing that an author does not have sole agency over the shape of his story.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION ……. 1

CHAPTER ONE: Flesh under Siege: The Construction of Ascetic Bodies as Defensive Fortifications…..……... 28

CHAPTER TWO: The Physiognomy of the Landscape: Reading Place as Face……..…….... 77

CHAPTER THREE: ‘Death has Climbed up Through the Window’: Transpatial Ascetics and the Danger of Misplaced Bodies……..…….……... 124

CHAPTER FOUR: The Flesh that Wasn’t: Ascetic Assemblages and the Disruption of Dualism……... 170

CHAPTER FIVE: Female Performance and the Pursuit of Ascetic Perfection……..... 224

CONCLUSION……...… 269

LIST OF REFERENCES…… 282

VITA……...… 301

ABBREVIATIONS

AB	*Assyriologische Bibliothek,* Leipzig 1,1881–26,1927; NS 1–2,1933.
ActaSS	*Acta sanctorum*, ed. J. Bolland & G. Henschen, Antwerp etc. 1,1643ff. (70,1944); Venice, 2nd ed. 1,1734–43,1770; Paris etc., 3rd ed. 1,1863–60,1870
Ambr. *Virg.*	Ambrose, *De Virginibus*
Apophth. Patr.	*Apophthegmata Patrum*
Aug. *Ep.*	Augustine, *Epistulae*
ChHist	*Church History*
Chrys. *Virg.*	John Chrysostom, *De Virginibus*
CSCO	*Corpus scriptorum Christianorum orientalium, Rome etc. 1,1903ff.*
CSEL	*Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum Latinorum, Vienna 1,1866ff.*
Greg. Nyss. *Vit. Mac.*	Gregory of Nyssa, *Vita Macrinae*
Hier. *Ep.*	Jerome, *Epistulae*
Hier. *Vit. Paul.*	Jerome, *Vita Pauli heremitae*
Hom.	*Homilies*
HL	Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca*
Hist. mon.	*Historia Monachorum in Aegypto*
Iren. *Haer.*	Iranaeus, *Adversus haereses*
JECS	*Journal of Early Christian Studies*
Or.	*Oration*
PG	*Patrologia Graeca,* (1857-1886)
PL	*Patrologia Latina,* (1841-1855)
PO	*Patrologia Orientalis* (1904 -)
SC	*Sources chrétiennes,* Paris 1,1941ff.
Thdt. *Hist. rel.*	Theodoret, *Historia religiosa*
Vit. Ant.	Athanasius, *Vita Antonii*
Vitr. *De arch.*	Vitruvius, *De architectura*

INTRODUCTION

The bounds of the body do not stop at the skin. We ooze; we defecate; we bleed; we weep. Polluted air infiltrates our lungs, while earth seeps into our pores. Although we like to think of ourselves as self-contained, our flesh acts as more check-point, as cultural signifier, than impenetrable wall. Just as scientists have collapsed the distinction between the body and the world, so too have those in the humanities began to recognize the social-historical construction of skin as barrier.[1] Recent historical and cultural scholarship has begun to question the boundedness of the late ancient body and even the necessity of human flesh to serve as a person's physical container. Studies of late antiquity, drawing upon phenomenology, gender theory, trans-humanism, and thing theory, urge us to look for multiple substantiations or even transubstantiations of humanness.[2] As C. M. Chin has recognized, "The late ancient body… is not necessarily aligned with the late ancient person, and late ancient objects exist as potential manifestations of animate personhood."[3]

Though such a phenomenon can be found across the late-antique world, it frequently appears in early Christian asceticism, wherein various practitioners spent anywhere from days to decades of their lives hidden within a physical abode instead of interacting bodily with the world. John of Ephesus, a sixth-century Syriac preacher and historian**,** for example, described how the

[1] For more on skin as cultural signifier rather than physical barrier, see Claudia Benthien, *Skin: On the Cultural Border between Self and the World*, trans. Thomas Dunlap (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002). For an excellent historical look at how human identity exceeds the limits of the flesh, see Jeffrey J. Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).
[2] For thing-theory, see Patricia Cox Miller, *The Corporeal Imagination: Signifying the Holy in Late Ancient Christianity* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009). Cox Miller also uses phenomenology (in the form of Julia Kristeva) and gender theory to expound upon disruption of gender categories in "Is there a Harlot in this Text?: Hagiography and the Grotesque," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 33.3 (2003): 419-435. C.M. Chin proposes that a person could not only be contained simultaneously by other living and dead bodies, but by buildings as well in C. M. Chin, "The Bishop's Two Bodies: Ambrose and the Basilicas of Milan," *Church History* 79.3 (September 2010), 531-555.
[3] Chin, "The Bishop's Two Bodies," 545.

ascetic Maro encased himself within the trunk of a tree;[4] while Theodoret, a fifth-century Bishop of Cyrrhus, told of how Domnina hid within a tiny hut constructed out of the stalks of millet in the midst of her mother's otherwise lush garden;[5] and, perhaps most famously, Antony, according to his fourth-century biographer Athanasius, spent decades locked inside an abandoned barrack, refusing anyone entrance as he practiced dying to the world.[6] While the temptation has always been to try to peer around these barriers or tear them down, even for the briefest glimpse of the flesh, I contend that, far from "architectural obstacles," these abodes represent an ascetic's second skin – as an abode signifying the flesh within.[7]

This dissertation explores how and why early Christian hagiographers constructed ascetics as a combination of bodies and places, and how, on occasion, that very materiality pushed back, often with disquieting results. Through a close examination of early Christian ascetic treatises, *vitae,* and letters, I examine the multiplicity of ways in which early Christians encountered ascetics, both physically and rhetorically, as well as how their identities were necessarily altered in such interactions. As a system, ascetics-turned-body-place refused strict categorization and existed within a space of uncertainty, blurring the binaries of person/object, living/dead, and male/female. I argue, therefore, that by examining ascetics as body-places, we can not only see how ascetics attempted to discard the restrictive norms placed upon their flesh, but also how their hagiographers used the same construction in an effort to bring the ascetic under their control and harness their unique power for themelves and the church.

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[4] John of Ephesus, "Abraham and Maro," *Lives of the Eastern Saints*, ed. and trans. W. E. Brooks, *PO*. (1903), 4, cols. 56-84.
[5] Thdt. *Hist. rel.* 30.2.
[6] Athansius, *Vit. Ant.* 12.3. For an English translation, see: Athanasius, *Life of Antony* in *The Life of Antony: The Coptic Life and the Greek Life,* trans. Tim Vivian and Apostolos N. Athanassakis (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 2003).
[7] Georgia Frank describes ascetic abodes this way in *Memory of the Eyes: Pilgrims to Living Saints in Christian Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 142.

I argue that this conceptualization of ascetics, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, did not take hold only during a specific historical moment, nor even on only one side of the many doctrinal debates that punctuated late antiquity. In order to incorporate the breadth of the discussion on ascetic body-places, I will focus on the fourth through the sixth centuries CE, and draw on hagiographical sources from across the Mediterranean, from Gaul to Syria. Despite the distance between and wildly varying geography among these regions, hagiographers nevertheless described ascetics as body-places, melding them with their physical environment.

Throughout late antiquity, asceticism flourished, spreading rapidly across the Roman Empire and beyond. As men and women began to renounce the world and to enclose themselves within their familial homes or retreat into the desert, tension sprung up with the wider and varied group of Christians as to the nature of authority. Bishops, often ascetics in their own right – although they often took their practices to less extremes so that they could tend to their office – typically held both spiritual and pragmatic authority.[8] They not only preached and participated in important ecumenical decisions, but controlled financial resources that enabled them to negotiate for tax remission, provide food in times of famine, and, eventually, help lead the cities themselves.[9] In contrast, the most famous ascetics primarily held charismatic authority as their great feats of bodily discipline and denial inspired both awe and imitation.[10] It was this type of authority, this type of power, which bishops and other church leaders attempted to harness for themselves and cultivate in their congregants.

Because so many of these ascetics lived in the deserts of what would become Egypt, Syria, and Palestine, or remained sequestered within their homes, many Christians would have

[8] Claudia Rapp, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity: The Nature of Christian Leadership in an Age of Transformation*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 155-173.
[9] Rapp, *Holy Bishops*, 156.
[10] Rapp, *Holy Bishops*, 17-18.

only come into contact with them through their *vitae*.[11] As both symbolic and pedagogic literature, hagiography narrated an encounter between human and divine, providing a path to redemption for the audience by encouraging imitation.[12] While the male authors purported to tell accurately the lives of their subjects, a great deal of debate has arisen as to whether we can access the lives of holy women in particular. Elizabeth Clark first posed this problem in 1988, noting that Jerome's accounts of women were, at best, "literary constructs, some of a highly rhetorical order."[13] In a counter-narrative, David Brakke posited that historical women *could* be found in these highly constructed sources because the presence of their physical bodies profoundly affected the men with whom they came into contact.[14] While we must, therefore, always approach hagiography with a critical eye, Felice Lifshitz also reminds us that we should not get too caught up in the criticism of this genre being "untrue" because this stigmatization can blind us to its "function as historical *writing*."[15]

Throughout this dissertation, I build upon these trends to examine hagiography, and particularly the gender dynamics therein, as historically constructed by the author and/or ascetic themself.[16] As I will discuss, I suggest that the addition of landscape can help us to navigate the

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[11] For a more thorough investigation into these "armchair travelers," see Georgia Frank, *Memory of the Eyes,* 4.
[12] Susan Ashbrook Harvey, "Women in Early Byzantine Hagiography: Reversing the Story," in *That Gentle Strength: Historical Perspectives on Women in Christianity* ed. Lynda Coon, Katherine J. Haldane and Elisabeth W. Sommer (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990), 36. For more on women and the hagiographic tradition in particular, see Linda Coon, *Sacred Fictions: Holy Women and Hagiography in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), esp. xiii-xxiii.
[13] Elizabeth Clark, "The Lady Vanishes: Dilemmas of a Feminist Historian after the 'Linguistic Turn'." *Church History* 67.1 (1998), 15. Andrew Cain even casts Marcella as Jerome's "alter-ego" rather than as a fully realized person. Andrew Cain, *The Letters of Jerome: Asceticism, Biblical Exegesis, and Construction of Christian Authority in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 85.
[14] David Brakke, "The Lady Appears: Materializations of 'Woman' in Early Monastic Literature," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 33 (2003): 387-402.
[15] Felice Lifshitz, "Beyond Positivism and Genre: 'Hagiographical' Texts as Historical Narrative," *Viator* 25 (1994), 95-114.
[16] Throughout this dissertation, I will use the pronouns "they," "them," and "their" to refer to a single person of an undetermined, or fluctuating, gender. I will also employ the singular reflexive pronoun ("themself" instead of "themselves") when discussing a single person. The use of the use of "they" to refer to an individual has been defended within linguistics by Anne Curzan in, "Says Who? Teaching and Questioning the Rules of Grammar," *Publications of the Modern Language Association for America* 124.3 (2009), 870-879.

agency within these tales and release it from purely human actors. But in order to understand the importance of place as an aspect of the ascetic, we must first turn to the contentious nature of asceticism itself.

In a series of meetings throughout the 1980s, the Society of Biblical Literature Group on the Behavior of Greco-Roman Antiquity failed to reach a consensus on the definition of asceticism, and today, more than 30 years later, scholars still disagree.[17] Dale Martin provides one of the best descriptions of asceticism as, "those human impulses and practices of self-control, training, and discipline that reject or avoid, for the purpose of attaining a 'higher good,' the enjoyment of 'goods' normally thought appropriate for human use in the society in question."[18] Others, like Richard Valantasis, offer a less cynical view of asceticism that emphasizes self-improvement instead of denial.[19] Crucial to all of these definitions are two factors. First, that asceticism hinges upon bodily practice, central to which are sexual renunciation, fasting, giving up physical comforts, and limiting contact with the opposite sex. Second, that asceticism can be practiced to varying degrees. While many Christians could have engaged in minor acts of asceticism in their daily lives, through intermittent fasting or works of charity, this dissertation will focus upon those men and women who took this lifestyle to the extreme.

Before the 1980s, scholars focused primarily on the larger social dynamics of asceticism, expounding on the relationship between holy men and the church.[20] Recently, however, with the

[17] Clark, *Reading Renunciation*, 14.
[18] Dale B. Martin, "Introduction," in Dale B. Martin and Patricia Cox Miller (eds.), *The Cultural Turn in Late 85 Ancient Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 1-21, 15.
[19] Richard Valantasis, "Is The Gospel of Thomas Ascetical?" *JECS* 7:1 (1999), 55-81. For a broader view of the various definitions of asceticism, see Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis, "Introduction," *Asceticism* ed. Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), xix-xxxiii.
[20] See, for example, Phillip Rousseau, *Ascetics, Authority and the Church in the Age of Jerome and Cassian* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978), 1-8.

revolutionary work of Michel Foucault, Peter Brown, and Elizabeth Clark, asceticism came to focus squarely upon the body as both means of understanding and as a microcosm of the universe.[21] Here, the body was finally taken seriously as a mode of analysis and means of engaging with the world. This is where our current definition of practice resides, as agency lies with the person themself.

For the last 30 years, scholars have written abundantly on the body, exploring topics ranging from the body in pain as a means of building and spreading Christian community, to early Christians' complex relationship with food, to the various forms of sexual and gendered expressions in ascetic and monastic communities.[22] This remarkable scholarship has proven time and again that bodies mattered to early Christians; yet, in our enthusiasm to embrace this crucial aspect of asceticism, we have once against settled to a place of familiarity about which Peter Brown warned. In order to rediscover some of the "disturbing strangeness" of early Christian asceticism and to render ourselves once again uncomfortable in our work, I argue that we must expand our definition of asceticism outside the bounds of the body.[23] The late ancient body was not constrained by the skin in the same way as the modern, as ancient hagiographers in particular understood place as a crucial aspect of their subjects. With body-centered asceticism, place and landscape tend to function in several ways: as another means of disciplining the body; a place of

[21] For examples of their early influential work, see Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity,* twentieth-anniversary ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); Elizabeth Clark, *Women in the Early Church* (Wilmington: The Liturgical Press, 1983).
[22] See, for example, Judith Perkins, *The Suffering Self: Pain and narrative representations in the early Christian era* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast, Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988); Dale Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); Jennifer Knust, *Abandoned to Lust: Sexual Slander and Ancient Christianity.* (New York City: Columbia University Press, 2006); Virginia Burrus, *Saving Shame: Martyrs, Saints and Other Abject Subjects* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); Patricia Cox Miller, *The Corporeal Imagination: Signifying the holy in late ancient Christianity* (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).
[23] Peter Brown, *The Body and Society,* xv, xxi-xxiv.

spiritual growth; a place of transition and preparation; or a means through which to connect to the biblical past.[24] While all of these are certainly an aspect of the landscape, they do not take seriously the location as a physical part of the ascetic themself. I propose that when ancient authors like Jerome instruct their ascetics to close the doors of their heart as they do the doors to their bridal chambers, we should take them at their word.[25] Such a move de-centers the flesh because suddenly body and enclosure mirror one another and become an inextricable entity. As Jerome will go on to note, if someone penetrates the bridal chamber, so too will they penetrate the bride. This shift moves the agency away from the body and allows us to see the fluidity of different types of power, as it circulates between people (the ascetic, hagiographer, and pilgrim) and space. This inclusion of landscape as part of asceticism and the ascetic reveals how authors and pilgrims engaged in this type of construction for their own advantage, how both groups disrupted ascetics with their presence, and how ascetics incorporated space to push back against authorial control.

Hagiography, then, defines the bounds of my project and also enables the construction of ascetics to cross doctrinal and spatial boundaries. In the fourth and fifth centuries in particular, various Christian communities contested the physicality and materiality of the body, particularly as it related to the incarnation of Jesus. At the first Council of Nicaea, called by Emperor Constantine I in 325 CE, debate raged over the nature of God the Father and the Son. While the presbyter Arius and his followers argued that the Son was created by the Father and was therefore neither co-eternal nor consubstantial, Alexander of Alexandria and Athanasius cried heresy, and condemned this point of view. In contrast, they contended that God the Father and

[24] Claudia Rapp, "Desert, City, and Countryside in the Early Christian Imagination," *Church History and Religious Culture* 86.1 (2006), 93-112.
[25] Hier. *Ep. 22* in *Hieronymus: Epistularum Pars I, Epistula I-LXX, Vol. LIV*. ed. Isidorus Hilberg (Vienna, Österreichischen Akademie Der Wissenschaften, 1996).

the Son were both co-eternal and *homoousios* (or consubstantial); this side eventually won out and was instituted in the Nicene creed.[26]

Despite the wide-spread adoption of this creed, Christians continued to dispute the nature of Christ, and the conflict once again came to a head at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. Though a consensus was never reached, the council eventually formulated the "Chalcedonian definition," which established that "one and the same Son, our lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and the same perfect in humanity; truly God and truly man … *homoousian* (consubtantial), with the Father in regards to the Godhead, and consubstantial with us in regards to his humanness… to be acknowledged in two natures without confusion, unchangeably, indivisibly, and inseparably."[27] Thus, in this single statement, the council refuted Appollinarus, Arius, Eutychius, and Nestorius. While this conception of the Trinity came to define western and eastern orthodoxy, many Christians, especially in Syria and Egypt, rejected the Council's decision and broke with the imperial church. These so-called Miaphysites insisted that the Son had only one nature (instead of two) which is both divine and human, but without mixture, separation, or

[26] For more on the Council of Nicaea, see Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[27] The translation is my own. The entire "definition" reads: "Ἑπόμενοι τοίνυν τοῖς ἁγίοις πατράσιν ἕνα καὶ τὸν αὐτὸν ὁμολογεῖν υἱὸν τὸν κύριον ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν συμφώνως ἅπαντες ἐκδιδάσκομεν, τέλειον τὸν αὐτὸν ἐν θεότητι καὶ τέλειον τὸν αὐτὸν ἐν ἀνθρωπότητι, θεὸν ἀληθῶς καὶ ἄνθρωπον ἀληθῶς τὸν αὐτὸν, ἐκ ψυχῆς λογικῆς καὶ σώματος, ὁμοούσιον τῷ πατρὶ κατὰ τὴν θεότητα, καὶ ὁμοούσιον τὸν αὐτὸν ἡμῖν κατὰ τὴν ἀνθρωπότητα, κατὰ πάντα ὅμοιον ἡμῖν χωρὶς ἁμαρτίας· πρὸ αἰώνων μὲν ἐκ τοῦ πατρὸς γεννηθέντα κατὰ τὴν θεότητα, ἐπ᾽ ἐσχάτων δὲ τῶν ἡμερῶν τὸν αὐτὸν δι᾽ ἡμᾶς καὶ διὰ τὴν ἡμετέραν σωτηρίαν ἐκ Μαρίας τῆς παρθένου τῆς θεοτόκου κατὰ τὴν ἀνθρωπότητα ,ἕνα καὶ τὸν αὐτὸν Χριστόν, υἱόν, κύριον, μονογενῆ, ἐκ δύο φύσεων [ἐν δύο φύσεσιν], ἀσυγχύτως, ἀτρέπτως, ἀδιαιρέτως, ἀχωρίστως, γνωριζόμενον· οὐδαμοῦ τῆς τῶν φύσεων διαφορᾶς ἀνηρημένης διὰ τὴν ἕνωσιν, σωζομένης δὲ μᾶλλον τῆς ἰδιότητος ἑκατέρας φύσεως καὶ εἰς ἓν πρόσωπον καὶ μίαν ὑπὸστασιν συντρεχούσης, οὐκ εἰς δύο πρόσωπα μεριζόμενον ἢ διαιρούμενον, ἀλλ᾽ ἕνα καὶ τὸν αὐτὸν υἱὸν καὶ μονογενῆ, θεὸν λόγον, κύριον Ἰησοῦν Χριστόν· καθάπερ ἄνωθεν οἱ προφῆται περὶ αὐτοῦ καὶ αὐτὸς ἡμᾶς ὁ κύριος Ιησοῦς Χριστὸς ἐξεπαίδευσε καὶ τὸ τῶν πατέρων ἡμῖν καραδέδωκε σύμβολον." For a translation of all the acts of the Council of Chalcedon and its effects, see *The Acts of the Council of Chalcedon* trans. Richard Price and Michael Gaddis (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007).

confusion.[28] The disputation between these groups can be seen throughout ascetic literature, as monks, bishops, and hagiographers attempted to work out theology in their daily lives.

Yet, in spite of sharp divisions over doctrine, hagiographers nevertheless repeatedly describe asceticism as a system of both bodies and their location. The pliability of this imagery and, I contend, its centrality to asceticism itself allowed hagiographers from Gaul to Palestine to use it for their own benefit. Such a construction not only helped them to control the image and function of the ascetics about whom they wrote, but also enabled the ascetic to employ alternate materiality to push back against the restrictive norms forced onto them from the outside world. Ultimately, then, my dissertation shows how early Christians negotiated their own sense of self in spaces and with bodies that distorted traditional categorization, revealing that the male author did not have sole agency over the ascetic's narrative.[29]

While late antique conceptions of gender and landscape cannot be separated, their scholarly trajectories have only recently begun to overlap. Therefore, it is vital to understand their respective histories and to define the terms within for this dissertation.

Gender and Landscape Studies

Strictly speaking, gender encompasses the behaviors, attitudes, and expectations that a culture places upon an individual's biological sex. When a person's gender identity matches their biological sex, we call this person cis-gender, while those whose gender does not match their biological sex often identify as gender-queer, gender-fluid, agender, or trans.[30] While gender has

[28] For more on the effects of the Council, see David M. Gwynn, "The Council of Chalcedon and the Definition of Christian Tradition," in *Chalcedon in Context: Church Councils 400 to 700* ed. Richard Price and Mary Whitby (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2009), 7-26.
[29] Throughout the dissertation I will use male pronouns for ancient authors unless the author is clearly a woman.
[30] "Gender queer" refers to an individual who does not subscribe to traditional gender categories but can combine aspects of "typical" masculine/feminine gender roles or reject them altogether. "Gender-Fluid" refers to an individual whose gender moves in an out of "traditional" gender traits, and they may identify as more masculine one

often been described as a "spectrum," with masculinity at one end and femininity at another, this type of system is outdated and does not account for the variety of gender identities that perform as simultaneously male and female (or even reject the system altogether), nor the historical construction of gender. Rather, we must look at how gender fluctuates from moment to moment, instead of understanding performance as having a set endpoint.

Importantly, while sex and gender are often conflated in modern debates, gender is not dependent on one's biological sex. Even in the ancient world, gender was an achieved state, one, as Maud Gleason has noted, which was "radically underdetermined by anatomical sex."[31] As such, we should understand gender as a life-long series of performances and negotiations that is determined, among other factors, by one's ever-changing culture.[32] It is crucial here to recognize that even though categories of "male" and "female" or "masculine" and "feminine" may seem stable to the point that we conceive of them as "natural," they shift with the societies in which they were embedded. Ancient Christianity, particularly at its birth, ushered in anxiety over changing gender roles. Instead of marrying and having children to carry on their husband's lineage, affluent Christian women increasingly began to reject marriage in favor of perpetual virginity.[33] Several scholars, including Elizabeth Clark and Susanna Elm, have suggested that early Church fathers addressed the apprehension that surrounded this choice, one that flagrantly

day and feminine the next. "Agender" refers to an individual who identifies with no gender or as gender-neutral. "Trans" can either serve as an umbrella term for all gender non-conforming identities or simply to a person whose gender or sex identity differs from the one they were assigned at birth.

[31] Maud Gleason, *Making Men*, 95.

[32] Coon describes gender as a "lifelong negotiation," *Dark Age Bodies: Gender and Monastic Practice in the Early Medieval West* (Philadelphia and Oxford: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 9.

[33] This movement towards asceticism was slower in Rome. While Jerome claims that Marcella, who lived in the fourth century CE, was the first noble woman to practice asceticism, this was probably not the case. Several other women, including Saint Agnus, has already begun to practice asceticism, though Marcella was certainly one of its earliest and most influential adopters. Cain, "Rethinking Jerome's Portraits of Holy Women," 95.

violated the expectations of wealthy women, by framing their dedication to God as a marriage.[34] Such a re-framing brought these women's choices back within a socially acceptable framework and lessened their gender "deviancy." Nevertheless, the idea of what it meant to "be" a woman expanded under the influence of Christianity.

Likewise, and again tied to their sexual performance (or lack there-of), men who took vows of chastity thwarted expectations of their gender.[35] Not only did they reject their role as father and provider, often abandoning their families in favor of a solitary life or, later, a single-sex monastery, but they redefined manhood itself. In ancient Rome, as is still frequently the case today, masculinity was tied to virility. The ability to sire male children, as well as a man's sexual (though not excessive) appetite, are part of what rendered a man male.[36] When men chose chastity and struggled with their own sexual desire, they also struggled with what it meant to be a man.[37] To once again bring this "deviant" gender performance under the comprehensible categories of the time, ascetic theorists, building upon prevailing philosophies of the day, "based their vision of virility on the degree to which a man had transcended the desires of his body."[38]

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[34] Elizabeth Clark, "The Celibate Bridegroom and his Virginal Brides: Metaphor and the Marriage of Jesus in Early Christian Ascetic Exegesis 1" *Church History* 77 (2008): 1-25. Susanna Elm, *Virgins of God: The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Claredon Press, 1994), 374-5.

[35] For more on Roman masculinity, see Maud Gleason *Making Men: Sophists and Self-Presentation in Ancient Rome* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995). .For more on how Christianity both disrupted and re-affirmed these tropes, see: Gillian Clark, "The Old Adam: the Fathers and the unmaking of masculinity," in *Thinking Men: Masculinity and its self-Representation in the classical Tradition* ed. Lin Foxhall and John Salmon (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 170-182; Maud W. Gleason, "By Whose Gender Standards (If Anybody's) was Jesus a Real Man?" in *New Testament Masculinities* ed. Stephen D. Moore and Janice Capel Anderson. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2004, especially pp. 325-6.

[36] This expectation would again change under Augustus, who wanted men to focus their sexual energy on their home. He attempted to curtail prostitution and encouraged men to be faithful to their wives. While the success of his campaign is dubious, it nevertheless reveals, yet again, the constantly changing conceptualizations of gender.

[37] Nearly every ascetic treatise deals in some way with men's battle with their own sexual desires.

[38] Lynda Coon, *Dark Age Bodies: Gender and Monastic Practice in the Early Medieval West* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 9. The Christian gendering of masculinity to incorporate men whoforwent sex is not without precedence, and is, in fact, based on the practice of many ancient philosophers. For more on the Greek philosophical underpinnings, see Kathy Gaca, *The Making of Fornication: Eros, ethics, and political reform in Greek Philosophy and Early Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), esp. 23 – 118.

Thus, paradoxically, the more a man *overcame* his sexual inclinations, the more virile he was understood to be. As with the conceptualization of femininity, masculinity shifted, if subtly, in the ancient world.

Yet early Christian ascetics did not merely blur gender distinctions within their own cis-normative context, but began to gender-bend as well. Women in particular were understood, especially when performing great feats of asceticism or miraculously withstanding the grueling tortures of martyrdom, to be behaving in a masculine way. Some of these women were seen as "female men of God," while others, modern scholars have argued, were constructed as thought experiments for men to think through the complicated factors of female holiness.[39] Patricia Cox Miller even contends that the concept of female holiness was so distressing to late ancient male authors that they construed the "Holy Harlots" (ascetic women who used to work as prostitutes) as "grotesqueries," or creatures that defied boundaries and even the very laws of nature.[40]

While modern scholars increasingly accept that female-bodied people could move back and forth between masculinity and femininity, only recently have they begun to explore the possibility of men doing so as well.[41] This delayed response is due in large part to the immense interest in regaining women's lives in late antiquity, which naturally resulted in an increased attention to women's gender performance in the story. Yet, it is also a result of the fact that late

[39] See, for example, Gillian Cloke, *'This Female Man of God: Women and Spiritual Power in the Patristic Age, AD 350-450* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995); Margaret Miles, "'Becoming Male': Women Martyrs and Ascetics," in *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1989), 53-69.
[40] Patricia Cox Miller, "Is There a Harlot in This Text? Hagiography and the Grotesque," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 33.3 (2003), 419-435.
[41] For examples of queering masculinity, though not quite moving into femininity, see Dale Martin "Contradictions of Masculinity: Ascetic Inseminators and Menstruating Men in Greco-Roman Culture," in *Generation and Degeneration: Tropes of Reproduction in Literature and History from Antiquity through Early Modern Europe*, ed. Valeria Finucci and Kevin Brownlee (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001); Gillian Clark, "Adam's Womb (Aug., *Confessions* 13.28) and the Salty Sea," in *Body and Gender, Soul and Reason in Late Antiquity* (Ashgate: Variorum, 2011), 89-105.

antique hagiographers do not describe their male subjects becoming female in the same way as their female subjects becoming male. Scholars therefore had to return to clues about each individual's gender performance, instead of their literally stated gender identity, within the story, as well as their bodily description and allegory, to see the ways in which they behaved as female or gender queer.[42] This new insight has added nuance to our understanding of gender and has helped me to disentangle the author's statements as to his conceptualization of gender identity from the ascetic performance thereof.

Even as these few examples have shown, however, gender itself cannot and does not exist on its own. Instead, it is influenced by a multiplicity of elements including class, religious practice, country of origin, and even the people whom one encounters. Though not typically addressed as such within the historical discipline, these types of over-laying identities now fall under the umbrella of intersectionality. In 1989, Kimberlé Crenshaw coined this term to illustrate how black women were marginalized by both feminist and anti-racist groups, because they did not fit completely within either one.[43] Feminist groups often ignored the fact that women *of color* faced different forms of oppression than white women, while anti-racist groups downplayed black *women's* struggle. In the ancient world, this theory allows us to see how gender identity changes with every situation. Of particular importance to ancient Christians were one's religious practice (whether they were dedicated virgins, the degree of their asceticism, etc.), their social class, their education level, and their location within the Empire.

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[42] For an example of non-binary masculinity and femininity see Michael Nausner, "Toward Community Beyond Gender Binaries: Gregory of Nyssa's Transgendering as Part of his Transformative Eschatology," *Theology & Sexuality* 16 (2002), 55-65. For fantastic insight into how many ascetics are characterized *as* women see, Ellen Muehlberger, "Simeon and Other Women in Theodoret's Religious History: Gender in the Representation of Late Ancient Christian Asceticism," *JECS* 23.4 (2015), 583-606.

[43] Kimberlé William Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1.8 (1989), 139-167. Intersectionality has recently expanded beyond race and gender to encompass class, sexual orientation, ability, region, age, etc.

Crucially, historians and religious scholars have added place to these series of intersections. In his seminal book *Christians and their Many Identities,* Éric Rebillard contended that early Christians selected from among their identities depending on the situation in which they found themselves; that is, they did not prioritize their Christianness at all times.[44] He deftly demonstrated that many Christians, particularly those not of the aristocracy**,** frequented gladiatorial games despite the warnings from the leaders of their church that such practices were not Christian. While this work advanced the field by determining that Christianness did not dominate people's identity in every situation, their decision making was not quite so conscious as Rebillard might suggest. Instead, I submit that location *itself* acts as another factor in people's ever-changing identity performance. Whether aware of it or not, stepping into a space produces a change in behavior. Within a church, one was supposed to be deferential, quiet, and obedient. Their thoughts were supposed to be on the sermon, readings, or even imagery within the church, and their movements restrained and demurred. The church space itself required this type of behavior. In contrast, the space of the arena encouraged booming voices, drinking, and gambling. The space *itself* pushed the audience to enjoy the violence and spectacle of the arena, and to drop the typical behaviors associated with a Christian at church.[45] This does not mean that these identities were contradictory to one another, but simply that they changed depending on the various intersecting factors, including the space in which they were performed.

Lynda Coon brilliantly demonstrates how the physical building of an all-male monastery as well as the construction of a monastic rule influenced the daily negotiation of gender. Not only did the Benedictine Rule gender the monastic inhabitants in terms of power, with the most

[44] Éric Rebillard, *Christians and their Many Identities in Late Antiquity, North Africa, 200- 450 CE* (Ithica; London: Cornell University Press, 2012), 8.
[45] For more on the power of the arena and crowd behavior, see Garrett Fagan, *The Lure of the Arena: Social Psychology and the Crowd at the Roman Games* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

able-bodied as men and the physically weakest as women, but it also created different spaces within the monastery as markers of status.[46] Those sick men who lay in the infirmary were gendered female not only because of the fragility of their flesh, but because of their location within the monastery itself; likewise, younger, fit monks who walked easily up a steep ramp would be reminded of their vigor and masculinity, while older, more infirm monks who negotiated the same space would be rendered female due to their labored breathing and struggle to ascend to the next room.[47] Coon's book is crucial not only because it demonstrates how space affects gender, but because it reveals that the process is not simply a negotiation of rhetoric that attempts to encompass practice under its ideology, but a daily, and even a moment-to-moment, negotiation of bodies in space. It is upon this notion which my dissertation finds its firmest foundation.

Yet before I turn to how my dissertation will contribute to this conversation, I want to return to how other theorists have negotiated the intersection of bodies and space. One of the most important spatial theorists, Henri Lefebvre, theorized that space and bodies cannot be separated from one another; that "each living body *is* space and *has* space: it produces itself in space and it also produces that space."[48] Bodies, therefore, are not unaffected by space, nor space by bodies. Each constructs the limits of the other, and those boundaries and borders change as people enter and leave different locations.

Such, then, is the case with ascetic space, as the desert in particular was imbued with a great deal of symbolic value. Across the Roman Empire, the desert was understood as the

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[46] Coon, *Dark Age Bodies*, 69-86.
[47] Coon, *Dark Age Bodies*, esp. 113-133.
[48] Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life, Volume 2: Foundations for a Sociology of the Everyday* trans. John Moore (London; New York: Verso, 2002), 170. Darlene Brooks Hedstrom uses Lefebvre's theories to great affects in *The Monastic Landscape of Late Antique Egypt: An Archaeological Reconstruction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); and "The Geography of the Monastic Cell in Early Egyptian Monastic Literature," *Church History* 78.4 (2009), 756-791.

dwelling-place of demons and it marked the separation of society from the world.[49] It not only symbolized death,[50] but also, increasingly, spiritual rebirth.[51] For these reason, among many others, ascetics were often understood as inhabiting this liminal space between this world and the next, some hagiographers even referring to them as angels, given their ability to inhabit the inhabitable and surpass the needs of the body.[52]

Not all ascetics, however, resided in the desert, and so their abodes came to symbolize their holiness and ascetic struggle. A Roman virgin's home, then, often became a physical stand-in for the protection of her virtue.[53] Her home physically shaped her practice, forcing her to leave her apartment only rarely and to guard herself constantly from the assaults of the wider world. When placed in conversation with Lefebvre, historians have also noted how a virgin's home was changed by her presence and practice. Before the spread of Christianity, the *cubiculum*, or inner-most chamber of the house, was often associated with secrecy and illicit actions. Though it could be filled with a divine presence, because it was removed from the public's discerning gaze, it

[49] For more on the desert and ancient society see, Patricia Cox Miller, "Desert Asceticism and the 'Body from Nowhere,'" *JECS* 2.2 (1994): 137-153; William Harmless, *Desert Christians*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); R. S. Sugirtharajah ed., *Wilderness: Essays in Honour of Frances Young* (London: T & T Clark International, 2005).

[50] James Goehring, *Ascetics, Society and the Desert*: *Studies in Early Egyptian Monasticism* (Harrrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1999); James Goehring, "The Dark Side of Landscape: Ideology and Power in the Christian Myth of the Desert," in *The Journal for Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 33.3 (2003), 136-159.

[51] See, for example, Veronica della Dora, *Mountain* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 2016), 56 – 64. For more on desert as a spiritual landscape see Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Goehring, "Monastic Diversity and Ideological Boundaries in Fourth-Century Christian Egypt," *JECS* 5 (1997): 61-84; William Harmless, S.J., *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (Oxford, 2004); Jean Leclerq, "'Eremus' et 'Ermetia': Pour l'histoire du vocabulaire de la vie solitaire," *Collecteana Cisterciensia* 25 (1963): 8-30.

[52] Ellen Muehlberger cautions against the reading of ascetics envisioning themselves as angels. Instead, she suggests that this trope was placed upon them by their hagiographers. Ellen Muehlberger, *Angels in Late Ancient Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), esp. 148-174; For more on ties of the desert to ascetics, see Veronica della Dora, *Landscape, Nature, and the Sacred in Byzantium* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 118-143.

[53] Kim Bowes notes that homes were understood as "guardians of virtue" as they protected dedicated virgins from the filth of the public realm. Kim Bowes, *Private Worship, Public Values, and Religious Change in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 203.

could also potentially house magic and other deviant acts.[54] Yet as Christian virgins began to use this room, as Lefebvre would recognize, they changed the space with their presence and continued practice. Now, the space became associated with intimacy with God, while its privacy and defense against external penetration became synonymous with virginity itself. Indeed, this space became, for some, the best place for virgins to practice their asceticism.[55]

In later medieval and early modern Italy, architecture itself began to reflect the virginal bodies within. Because the public could not enter female convents, the architects made the virgins visible through the very stone carved into the shape of sensuous drapes and veils.[56] This stylization revealed that women's bodies resided inside, while simultaneously concealing their flesh with its sensual folds. While such structures were not specially made to reflect the bodies of their inhabitants in late antiquity, I contend that ascetics and their hagiographers rendered them rhetorically so. As I will discuss further, through the practice of physiognomy, or face-reading, pilgrims learned how to read character into the ascetic abodes they encountered, seeing the smallness of the space and the parched earth as symbolic of the cramped and desicated body within. Hagiographers also tied in biblical tropes to the monastic communities that sprung up across the desert, insisting, as per the Gospel of John, that these men were re-born as their tents and so lived on this earth, not merely as flesh, but as tabernacles of Christ.

Yet, the constant construction and reconstruction of bodies and space did not simply lend itself to stability and the "proper" placement of gendered bodies, as much as bishops and other early Christians may have wished it so. Nimal Puwar, a modern theorist, furthers Lefebvre's

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[54] Kristina Sessa, "Christianity and the *Cubiculum*: Spiritual Politics and Domestic Space in Late Antique Rome," *JECS* 15.2 (2007), 176-80.
[55] Sessa, "Christianity and the *Cubiculum*," 181-82.
[56] For more on Italian convents as metaphors for the body, see Helen Hills, "Architecture as Metaphor for the Body: The Case of Female Convents in Early Modern Italy," in *Gender and Architecture* ed. Louise Durning and Richard Wringley (Chichester and New York: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2000), 67-99; and "The Veiled Body: Within the Folds of Early Modern Neapolitan Convent Architecture," *Oxford Art Journal* 27.3 (2004): 271-290.

discussion of the production of space by examining how women and racial minorities destabilize governmental space as they defy conventions and boundaries, creating an "organizational terror" in the here-to-for invisible system of white male bodies in government.[57] The disruption of space by outsiders is crucial for my understanding of ascetics as assemblages, or a system that combines an ascetic, their abode, the protagonist of the story, and any other people that may show up as well. All too often, and as will be discussed in the first three chapters of this dissertation, bishops and other hagiographers were completely unaware of the effects that their bodies had on the space they entered and the people with whom they came into contact. Puwar's work proves that, despite their ignorance, men's bodies nevertheless transform the space they enter. In the case of the ascetics, as I will argue, this results not only in a disruption in the ascetic's attempt to remove themselves from the human constructs of gendered bodily material, but also occasionally forces the author and male reader to recognize that their bodies are suddenly no longer the somatic norm within this new space. They then not only disrupt the space with their presence, but the space itself pushes back and forces them to recognize the materiality of their own bodies.

Less work, however, has been done in the field of late antiquity on how space affects the gender of its inhabitants. While bishops and other hagiographers often have a vested interested in the two re-enforcing each other, such is not always the case. A modern study on the intersection of regionalism, gender, and sexuality provides insight into why. In her 2012 article "Midwest or Lesbian?," Emily Kazyak highlights the importance of taking regionality into consideration when discussing identity performance.[58] When scholars typically speak about the transgression

[57] Nirmal Puwar, *Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies Out of Place* (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2004), esp. 1-30. He discusses Lefebvre specifically on pages 32-5.
[58] Emily Kazyak, "Midwest or Lesbian? Gender, Rurality, and Sexuality," *Gender and Society* 22.6 (2012), 825-848.

of female gender norms, such as wearing plaid and other work clothes, cutting their hair short, and applying no makeup, they examine how this "deviant" performance is usually undertaken by butch lesbians, or lesbians who present in a more masculine manner. In these studies, "deviant" sexual identity is thought to have led to "deviant" gender identity, and thus the visibility of both. Kazyak, however, reveals the over-generalization of this assumption. In many Midwestern rural communities, more masculine performance is undertaken by people of all gender and sexual identities because of a combination of femmephobia and, more importantly, the manual labor necessary in these communities.[59] Because these rural towns are defined by farm work that necessitates a more rough-and-tumble appearance, masculine presentation is normalized and not associated with deviancy. This decoupling of sexual and gender identity, Kazyak argues, is unique to the rural Midwest and does not follow patterns found in urban areas.

This study has proved crucial to my understanding of the intersection of location and gender because it disentangles factors which, without the addition of place, would have remained either muddled or invisible. While I do not deal with sexual orientation, I do think that space has the possibility of extricating gender from the body. As I discussed above, gender typically is based upon behavior performed by, or assumptions placed upon, the body. Yet, in many ascetic treatises, the body remains out of sight for the majority of the story. The reader does not gaze upon the flesh, and the ascetic purposefully removes themself from scrutinizing eyes. While the hagiographer often fuses ascetics with their habitation, thus solidifying their gender as well, if we shift our perspective away from the desires of the author and onto the materiality he and his readers encounter, we can see a different sense of agency and performance emerge. By shifting

[59] Femmephobia refers to the hatred or fear of all things that are associated with femininity, as opposed to misogyny which refers to the hatred or fear of women.

outside of the authorial perspective, we can decouple his own deeply entrenched sense of gendered flesh.

Understanding space as part of the ascetic, and not just simply as a location in which they exist or a piece of their practice, then, becomes imperative because it resists reductionism and the seemingly inevitable linking of sex and gender. If the audience cannot see the body and its sex markers, they cannot then immediately prescribe it a gender.[60] While they can read asceticism into the abodes, gender markers remain more elusive. This disassociation allows the ascetic to resist the gendered expectations of society and to exist in a more fluid state, where they move either between, or even outside of, these categorizations. It is only when the bishop or pilgrim enters their abode, and the assemblage of materiality and onlookers inevitably shifts, that the ascetic once again collapses down to their bodily gendered/sexed state.

Additionally, understanding ascetics as a body-space, as a system that encompasses earthen materiality as well as the influence of onlookers, helps us to push back against both the linguistic and strictly material turn. As I have already discussed, accessing ascetic men and women through their hagiographies proves exceedingly difficult, as few, if any, of their own words survive. The danger in over-correcting for the linguistic turn, which insists that women in particular are often little more than constructions with which men think through the most pressing concerns of their day, is that this collapses women down to their gender-essentialized bodies. In these readings, a woman is either discourse or sexualized flesh, with little of herself showing through. As David Brakke observes,

[60] Many scholars have argued that it is impossible to distinguish sex and gender because linguistically one inherently references the other. This theory was originally proposed by Judith Butler in "Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's Second Sex," *Yale French Studies*, 72 (1986) 35-49. Sissel Undheim argues that sex and gender were the same thing in the ancient Greek world, so it makes little sense to differentiate them. Sissel Undheim, *Borderline Virginities: Sacred and Secular Virgins in Late Antiquity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 105.

> The real 'woman' these stories' construct is the detritus of monastic performance, the material body of sexuality, discourse, and the world that the monastic regime rejects and thereby creates as its opposite. The gendered body is not simply there for the monk to transcend; rather, it is an instance of 'matter, not as site or surface, but as *a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter*'. The appearance of the real woman disturbs because it unmasks the chain of performances that produces the monk as male, beyond sexuality, discourse, the world, as performances.[61]

In other words, the woman, over the course of her life, becomes stabilized in her material form and, in so doing, re-materializes men as well. For hagiographers, as I will discuss in my first three chapters, this course of events often proved true, as they sought to stabilize the bodies of men and women, if not as bodies then as buildings or landscape, so that they could gain greater control over them. Yet, if we shift our focus to look at the larger system of asceticism and attempt to remove ourselves from the author's point of view by looking instead at the instability of the ascetic and their materiality, we can see that, in opposition to Judith Butler's assertion that material stabilizes over time, the ascetics work progressively towards destabilization.[62] By hiding their bodies away, by refusing the boundary of the flesh, they do not solidify into a single form. Instead, projecting their abode as a second skin, the ascetics destabilize various categories, from gender, to physical materiality, to even their own mortality. By reducing ascetics down to their bodies alone, we ignore the fact that they are part of an inherently unstable process, or assemblage, that changes from moment to moment. Though it might be tempting, as do the hagiographers of the so-called "transvestite" or "cross-dressing" saints, to reveal the flesh and exclaim that these were women all along, such a proclamation ignores the movement throughout the rest of the story. If we take into account the constant fluctuation of materialities, it also

[61] Brakke, "The Lady Appears," 397-8.
[62] Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1993), 187-88. This is the quote Brakke sites above.

reveals that, despite his best efforts, the author does not have complete control over the stories he tells. Instead, it shifts between him, the ascetic, and the space in which they reside.

Outline of Chapters

This dissertation is divided into five thematic chapters which move from the hagiographer's construction of the ascetic as a body place to de-centering the agency of the authors by examining how they affect and are affected by the stories they tell. Chapter One, "Flesh Under Siege: The Construction of Bodies as Defensive Fortifications," explores how hagiographers rhetorically transformed ascetics into bastions for Christianity by describing the practice of asceticism as one which reconstructed the permeable, fleshly body into a series of gates, walls, and heavy doors. While asceticism is frequently characterized by training like a soldier, often hagiographers illustrated how ascetics, through fasting, sexual abstinence, and the general guarding of what entered and exited their bodies, became physical strongholds.

Not all raw material, as the flesh had now become, however, was well-suited for every location. Because women's bodies were understood to be more porous and easily penetrable, women were encouraged to stay within locations that provided additional fortification. Hagiographers therefore stationed virgins within their homes, encouraging them to take on the characteristics of their bridal chambers. In contrast, because men's bodies were composed of sturdier material, they could wander outside the home into the desert itself, establishing themselves as fortresses on the boundaries of Christianity. Once ascetics had transformed themselves physically, their hagiographers insisted that these ascetics turned body-place could extend the protection they perfected surrounding their bodies out to defend cities, entire towns, or even Christendom itself. By portraying ascetics as not just bodies but fortresses, the authors of

these works, often bishops or other church authorities, more easily controlled their subjects and gained a different type of power for themselves, claiming households and territories in ways that would have proved impossible had they simply claimed authority over ascetics as people alone.

Yet the construction of ascetics as body-places did not only benefit hagiographers, but pilgrims as well. My second chapter, "The Physiognomy of the Landscape: Reading Place as Face," asks how pilgrims could gain benefit with their eyes, as so many hagiographers encouraged them to do, if ascetics spent most of their lives inside caves, behind the walls of their abodes, or even high atop pillars. Far from seeing these abodes as "architectural obstacles,"[63] I suggest that hagiographers taught their audiences how to read asceticism and holiness into the landscape itself. The first part of this chapter builds upon the conception of physiognomy, or the ability to read character into a person's face and appearance, which, I contend, ancient Christians transposed onto the material world when the flesh was not visible.[64] When pilgrims applied this approach, they were able to see how ascetics' habitations began to physically resemble the body within – how, moreover, these abodes became a second skin. Yet, this metamorphosis did not simply occur through the donning of landscape as though it were clothing; instead, early Christian authors, often building upon the language found in the Gospel of John, described how ascetics were re-born as biblical tabernacles and were remembered as pieces of the landscape when they eventually passed away. Remarkably, this conception of ascetics spanned not only geographical divides, but crossed doctrinal disputes as well. Writers on both sides of the Arian Controversy and even the Council of Chalcedon described ascetics as physically becoming their abodes and dwelling as tents on earth, as Jesus had done before them. By casting ascetic abodes

[63] Frank, *Memory of the Eyes*, 142.
[64] Frank, *Memory of the Eyes*, 134-170.

as a second skin for those within, early Christian writers invited literal and literary pilgrims alike to evoke a biblical past by reading events like the incarnation of Christ onto the ascetic abodes.

While this fusion of an ascetic body with its abode constituted a powerful force that could be harnessed for the good of all Christians, occasionally, an ascetic attempted to meld with a place not suitable for their body. Chapter Three, "'Death has Climbed up Through the Window': Transpatial Ascetics and the Danger of Misplaced Bodies," examines the negative repercussions of ascetics residing in spaces inconsistent with their gender. In the majority of these stories, a female ascetic enters a male space, which forces her to perform in a way contradictory to her gender. As a result, not only because her body is incongruous with the male space but also because the space forces her to perform as a man, the monastic space expels her from its midst and she suffers serious repercussions. Most frequently, she is raped, accused of rape, or ostracized from her community. Though these women are often categorized as transvestite or cross-dressing saints, I find the term "transpatial" [65] more useful, not only because it encompasses a wider variety of stories, but because the women's presence in a male space, not their donning of male clothing, holds the largest potential threat for the entire community. Because of the massive anxiety that female bodies hold, not just for the men in the story, but for the audience as well, the conflict between gendered bodies and space almost always resolves itself by the end of the tale. While they served as a warning for audience to be always aware of their own physical placement and the consequences it could have for both themselves and others, they ultimately bring the world back into accord. Even though none of the ascetics who have spatially transgressed can ever hold the power described in the first two chapters, they

[65] By this term, I simply mean a person who resides in a space primarily associated with the opposite sex.

nevertheless are able to, for the most part, repair the damage and bring their bodies and space back into systematic harmony.

Such a neat systematization, however, is only possible when we understand the hagiographer to be in full control of the story. While the first three chapters examine ascetics as body-places through the lens of the male author, the next two chapters shift their view to explore how hagiographers and the audiences affected and were affected by the stories into which they entered. Space, as even the hagiographers themselves recognized, exerted its own type of power. While authors attempted to harness it for themselves, often space pushed back in unexpected, or even unacknowledged, ways.

Chapter Four, "The Flesh that Wasn't: Ascetic Assemblages and the Disruption of Dualism," builds most explicitly upon new materialism to conceptualize of the ascetic assemblage, not just as a combination of ascetic and their abode, as the hagiographer imagines it, but as inclusive of the tale's protagonist and other interlopers as well.[66] This new way of seeing, combined with us taking seriously the movement within the stories themselves instead of simply their end results, reveals the crisis of categorization inherent within these tales. Within the confines of their *vitae*, ascetics move in and out of varied states of gender, materiality, and even mortality. In some instances, the landscape itself helps them to shift between these states of being, acting as protection or barrier for the ascetic to perform free from prying eyes. In the same vein as the Schrodinger's Cat experiment, which I will detail at greater length in my chapter, the heat of the desert allows ascetics to shift in and out of their human form, whereas an enclosed barracks prohibits those on the outside from assessing whether or not the ascetic is still alive.

[66] I will go into further detail about the history and theoretical underpinnings of new materialism in Chapter Four.

When the protagonist of the story either enters an ascetic abode or happens upon one in the middle of the desert, however, he disrupts the ability of the ascetic to move between these various states of being. In this instance, the multi-dimensional performance of the ascetic that changes from moment to moment collapses under the cultural baggage of the interloper's gaze that primarily functions within the framework from which the ascetic attempts to escape. While the man who reports the story purpots to be telling the truth of what he sees, he only relates what is occurring in that single moment. The act of looking, then, only substantiates one form of the ascetic assemblage, and does not render it "real" for anytime longer than that single moment; for when the protagonist leaves, the assemblage once again shifts without their presence. If we conceptualize asceticism in this way and zoom out from our focus on just the body, then we can see how this system both breaks and reconstructs human-centric dualities, revealing a more malleable concept of asceticism writ-large.

The protagonist and hagiographer, then, whether they realized it or not, affected the outcome of these stories. Yet, in many ways, the authors and their male avatars remain nearly invisible throughout most ascetic discourse; they seem to float in and out of *vitae*, reporting on what they saw while remaining utterly unaltered themselves. In my fifth chapter, "Female Performance and the Pursuit of Ascetic Perfection," I turn the lens around to gaze alternatively upon the author and, through him, the male audience. When we examine the *vitae* of ascetic women in particular, the male body comes into view, as it contrasts sharply, in the author's mind, with his own sense of self. Yet within these stories, because these men enter female space, they cease to be the somatic norm, and so are forced, by the space and the presence of women, to perform like the women they encounter. In order to encourage their audience to drop into[67]

[67] While not a technical term, the phrase "dropping in" describes how the audience buys into and loses themselves within the storyline.

stories of women, they show their audience how to let go of their assumptions about the inferiority of women and show them how to learn from them instead. I then examine the stories of Macrina, Mary of Egypt and Pelagia of Antioch to explore, first, how Basil and Peter learned female asceticism from their sister and then how the men themselves within the lives of the Holy Harlots had to practice becoming prostitutes for God. Through the imitation of such female behavior within feminized space, authors and their male audiences realize that ascetic perfection is not exclusively male, but the embodiment of both genders.

By reconceptualizing the boundedness of the ascetic body to include abodes as a second skin, my dissertation makes several new contributions to the understanding of asceticism and the conceptualization of gender in Late Antiquity. I employ a combination of queer theory, new materialism, and place studies to ask what happens to the systems of meaning attached to a Christian ascetic bodies if the majority of that person's life was spent behind closed doors. Ultimately, I contend that though ascetics as body-places could perform as systems of gender reification and power when deployed within hagiographies written by men, they also had agency of their own, and pushed back against the repressive system of worldly categorization.

CHAPTER ONE:
Flesh under Siege: The Construction of Ascetic Bodies as Defensive Fortifications

"Once did She hold the gorgeous East in fee;
And was the safeguard of the west: the worth
Of Venice did not fall below her birth,
Venice, the eldest Child of Liberty.
She was a maiden City, bright and free;
No guile seduced, no force could violate;
And, when she took unto herself a Mate,
She must espouse the everlasting Sea."

- William Wordsworth, "On the Extinction of the Venetian Republic"

The metaphor of city as body is no stranger to modern readers. While scholars have moved away from gendering locations, the physicality nevertheless remains, as we speak about a city's "heart" or of an "urban nervous system." This system finds its most recognizable roots in the work of Vitruvious, a first-century BCE architectural theorist.[68] According to Vitruvius, the perfect male body served as the ideal mathematical measurements for architecture, as pieces of the body (like the foot and head) as well as the height and armspan served as points of measurement.[69] The building, in this case, substantiates the idealized, contained body. He goes on to detail how buildings must not only be constructed according to the bodily measurements but must be placed in specific locations to fulfill their potential. A city wall, for example, should be built on a "healthy" site, devoid of mist, frost, or marshy terrain in order to fulfill its purpose.[70] If walls are not built in such a way, they, like the body, will be damaged by the elements. If moisture seeps into the pores of walls or bodies, it will compromise their

[68] For a brief history of this image, see Robert Tavenor's introduction to Vitruvius' *On Architecture,* trans. Richard Schofield (New York: Random House Books, 2009).
[69] Vitr. *De arch.* 3.1.1-2.
[70] Vitr. *De arch.* 1.4.1.

equilibrium, dissolving their very elements, until the normal characteristics of their composition are destroyed.[71]

Though few cities were actually built according to these Vitruvian ideals, people across the Roman Empire nevertheless adopted his vocabulary to describe not just feats of engineering, but human bodies. Violated virgins, in particular, were prone to description as a city sacked to symbolize the penetration and violence enacted upon their flesh, and the defilement of Priam's daughters was repeatedly compared to the breaching of the walls at Troy.[72] In this chapter I will discuss how Early Christians beginning in the late third to early fourth centuries C.E. applied this rhetoric to ascetic bodies. Like cities, ascetics were understood as being in great danger of attack, though mostly from *daimones* and the passions; moreover, like the walls which often encircled them, ascetics had the potential to thwart marauding forces. By rhetorically constructing their ascetics as body-places, hagiographers transformed ascetics into ramparts for Christianity, protecting citizens from Huns and *daimones* alike.

Hagiographers argued, however, that an ascetic could not simply be placed anywhere and be expected to withstand every attack against them. The second part of my chapter will turn to how, like any raw material, ancient authors insisted that ascetics first had to be hewed and hardened before they could become a defensive fortification – their soft edges had to be worn away, and any openings sealed against external penetration. Yet all building materials, as Virtruvious would argue, were not equally well-suited for every location or physical demand. Because the raw material of the female flesh was understood to be softer and more porous by its very nature, as well as naturally inclined to domesticity, female body-places were seen as most

[71] Vitr. *De arch.* 1.4.6.
[72] Anne Ellis Hanson, "The Medical Writers' Woman," in *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World*, ed. Froma I. Zeitlin, John J. Winkler, and David M. Halperin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 327.

efficacious if placed within the home or, in rare circumstances, the city walls.[73] Men, on the other hand, because they had been trained from birth to withstand assaults on their flesh, were "properly" placed as city walls or even ramparts further afield.[74]

As a result, bishops and other church leaders could use this language to keep female ascetics in their "proper" place, showing them that the physical material of their bodies was best used defensively if it was deployed within their home or city. I contend that such a construction also helped hagiographers to rhetorically claim the territory on which male ascetics established their bodies-turned-fortresses, thus, rhetorically at least, widening their own episcopal authority and range. As body-places, then, these ascetics, no matter their gender, became bulwarks of Christianity.

This chapter will trace the construction of ascetics as body-places from their origin as raw matter to their various stages of proper deployment. Even though both male and female ascetics had to transform their bodies into fortresses by sealing up the various openings to their flesh with

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[73] While many male ascetics, and a handful of female ascetics, practiced in their desert abodes, many holy women, particularly in the west, undertook domestic, or "house" asceticism. These monasteries have often been portrayed as the "natural" setting for women to reside, as the house, as Kim Bowes has recognized, was the embodiment of female virtue. Kim Bowes, *Private Worship, Public Values, and Religious Change in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). For more on the movement of virgins throughout the late ancient city, see Sissel Undheim, "Veiled Visibility: Morality, Movement, and Sacred Virginity in Late Antiquity," in *The Moving City: Processions, Passages and Promenades in Ancient Rome*, ed. Jonas Bjørnebye, Simon Malmberg, and Ida Östenberg (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 59-71.

[74] While public exposure could also prove problematic for men, their bodies were viewed as far less porous than women's. As such, their greatest battle was often against the penetrative force of the gaze. Because, unlike women who were supposed to spend most of their time behind the protection of walls, men existed constantly in public, they were far more likely to fall victim to the violence of the eyes. Because the gaze constituted a physical force and thus was frequently equated with sexual penetration, it became increasingly important to guard against. While penetration was shaming in and of itself, this shame could be brought about simply by staring at a person's sex organs. While the genitals were only considered shameful parts of the body if they were exposed, these parts of the body could easily be undressed with the eyes.[74] Yet despite this danger, "Being, for a Roman, was being seen."[74] By calling up others to witness their actions, these elite men proclaimed that they had nothing to hide and would stand up to even intense scrutiny. Subsequently, by saying that they had nothing to hide and by ostensibly proving this to the world, these men and women rendered scrutinization unnecessary. Thus, demonstrating one's willingness to be penetrated rendered that person impenetrable. For more information, see David Fredrick, "Introduction: Invisible Rome" in *The Roman Gaze; Vision, Power, and the Body* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002); and Carlin Barton, "Being in the Eyes: Shame and Sight in Ancient Rome" in *The Roman Gaze; Vision, Power, and the Body* ed. David Fredrick (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

newly constructed bolted gates and doors, when women fused with their bridal chambers or their city walls, they used their virginal bodies to defend all those who resided within, while men established themselves as fortesses further afield, entrenching themselves on the *limes* of Empire and Christianity. Ultimately, I argue that such an evolution will reveal how, for hagiographers, the establishment of ascetics as body-places often functioned for their own benefit, granting them types of power unavailable to them if the ascetics remained simply flesh-and-blood human beings.

Constructing the Ascetic Form

The flesh is often seen as the first defense against the assaults of the world – a distinctly human boundary that distinguishes the self from all other objects. Due in large part to psychoanalytical theory developed by Sigmund Freud, and later Didier Anzieu, we have often fallen into the fallacy of assuming this belief to be held universally, a natural and therefore timeless distinction between people and the rest of the world.[75] If we recognize the skin itself, however, to be historically constructed and contingent, we must look beyond the boundaries of our modern conception of humanness to see a blurring of materialities. Such a shift allows us to undertake a study of flesh becoming less human and more like that which surrounds it. The ascetic practices of fasting, sexual abstinence, and ceaseless praying, therefore, do not simply work to subdue the desires of the flesh, but to transform it into walls, gates, barricades and even a city unto itself. When early Christian hagiographers discussed these types of practices that rendered ascetic bodies into walls and citadels, I contend they did not simply speak in metaphor.

[75] Claudia Benthien is particularly concerned with dismantling their theories on the "skin ego" which, according to Anzieu, constituted a "containing, unifying envelope for the Self; as a protective barrier for the psyche; as a filter of exchanges and a surface of inscription for the first traces…". *Skin: On the Cultural Border between Self and the World,* trans. Thomas Dunlap (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 8.

Instead, I suggest that they constructed an alternative mode of conceptualizing the ascetic. Ascetics, through dedicated practice, through the shoring up of the bulwarks of their body, took on the defensive structures of the room or home in which they resided, and in turn, could reflect that security back upon their home. Ascetic and abode not only became metonyms, but fused with one other, each offering the other strength and fortification if, and only if, they ceaselessly guarded their entrances from external penetration.

In his fourth-century treatise on virginity, John Chrysostom, an eloquent Antiochene preacher and public speaker, insisted that he understood the violence rent upon this state of being. Placing himself alongside the women to whom he spoke, he informed them that in order to withstand the assaulting forces, "We will an need thoughts of steel, eyes never sleeping, much patience, strong walls, external walls and bars, watchful and brave guards, and in addition to all of these, help from above."[76] Chrysostom spoke here, not of building a barricade for every virgin, but of turning the virgins themselves into barricades. Their very bodies must serve as external walls and barriers, guarding the soul within. This transformation, he insisted, could be accomplished through the strains of asceticism, including fasting, sleeplessness, keeping watch over one's thoughts, and not becoming overconfident in one's abilities. For virgins, their first battle would be against "natural compulsions" and evil spirits.[77] Their bodies had to become battlegrounds before they could be hardened into rock and other earthen materials.

Theodoret, also a native of Antioch, though born a few years before Chrysostom's death, describes just such a battle: "Repressing the body and subduing it, to use the apostolic phrase,

[76] "Δεῖ τοίνυν ἡμῖν ἀδαμαντίνης διανοίας, μηδέποτε καθεύδοντος ὀφθαλμοῦ, καρτερίας πολλῆς, τειχῶν ἰσχυρῶν, θριγκῶν ἔξωθεν καὶ μοχλῶν, φυλάκων ἐγρηγορότων καὶ γενναίων, καὶ πρὸ τούτων ἁπάντων τῆς ἄνωθεν ροπῆς." Chrys. *Virg.* 27.1.

[77] While Chrysostom addresses female virgins in his treatise, his inclusion of his own struggle with virginity suggests that the battles these ascetics must fight are not strictly limited to women.

they [ascetics] soothed the fiery heat of the angry part and forced the madness of desires to quiet down. And so by fasting and lying on the hard ground, they lulled the passions to sleep and put an end to their jumpiness; they forced the body to make a peace offering to the soul and eradicate their innate war."[78] In order to become a fortified body-place, he explained, the individual first had to wage war against themself. As the passions of the body revolted against the soul, the ascetic had to turn their resolve to God, "repressing and subduing the thronging mob of bodily desire."[79] This step in the process of becoming place proved crucial for the ascetic and for ascetic communities at large.[80] If the body and soul did not make peace between themselves, devilish thoughts could betray the soul, or the body could refuse to cooperate with the mind's higher operations. The devil himself would exploit these weaknesses, using the ascetic against themself, until body and soul crumbled together through their disunity.[81] By sleeping on the hard earth, denying themselves the luxuries of food and water, and abandoning contact with the world, these individuals "forced the body to make a peace offering to the soul and eradicate their innate war," therefore denying the devil any point of entry.[82]

Only now, once the ascetic had subdued the desires of the flesh could the body itself be transformed. Instead of envisioning the body and soul as two armies engaged in a civil war, the

[78] "τὰ σῶμα πιέσαντες καὶ δουλαγωγήσαντες, τὰς μὲν τοῦ θυμοῦ φλεγμονὰς κατεπράϋναν, τῶν ἐπιθυμιῶν δὲ τὸ λυσσῶδες ἡσυχίαν ἄγειν ἠνάγκασαν. Ἀπαστιᾳ δὲ καὶ χαμευνίᾳ οὕτω τὰ πὰθη κοιμήσαντες καὶ τὰ τούτων σκιρτήματα καταπαύσαντες, σπείσασθαι τὸ σῶμα τρὸς τὴν ψυχὴν κατηνάγκασαν, καὶ τὸν ἔμφυτον τούων κατέλυσαν πόλεμον. Thdt. *Hist. rel.* pr. 5. Unlike the previous examples, Theodoret speaks about both male and female ascetics. The connection between the bodies of male ascetics and their abodes will be discussed at greater length later in the chapter.

[79] The larger quote reads: "τὸ σῶμα πιέσαντες καὶ δουλαγωγήσαντες, τὰς μὲν τοῦ θυμοῦ φλεγμονὰς κατεπραϋναν, τῶν ἐπιθυμιῶν δὲ τὸ λυσσῶδες ἡσυχίαν ἄγειν ἠνάγκασαν." Thdt. *Hist. rel.* pr. 5.

[80] For more information on Theodoret's wider clerical community as well as the theology's effect on these networks, see Adam Schor, *Theodoret's People: Social Networks and Religious Conflict in Late Roman Syria. Transformation of the classical heritage, 48,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

[81] For Theodoret, the devil (ὁ διάβολος) appears to affect, not "pagans," but those communities he deems to be "incorrectly" Christian, such as the Marcionites. See, for example, the story of James of Cyrrhestica. Thdt. *Hist. rel.,* 21.23-28.

[82] Thdt. *Hist. rel.,* pr. 5.

body turned to stone. No longer were the eyes enticed, the hearing bewitched, the touch tantalized, nor the mind enraptured by evil thoughts and spirits; instead, those plotting harm broke upon the body like water upon rock.[83] Yet the body did not simply become a wall, but rather a city upon a hill (πόλιν ἐφ᾽ ὕψους), surrounded with a strong barricade and a moat on all sides.[84] The ascetic thus emerged as a fortress and his/her soul those who "man" it. No *daimones*, no devilish tricks could worm their way in, so long as the soldiers remained vigilant. After all, if the stones fell into disrepair, the stones themselves were not to blame, but the soldiers who failed to maintain them.

Unlike Matthew 18:8-9 which suggests that if the hand sins it should be cut off and if the eyes sin they should be plucked out, Theodoret argues that the sinful action does not originate from within the body, but from either the soul or mind. Only by some "compliance of thought" (τινος λογισμοῦ ῥᾳστώνη) can the adversaries enter the new body-fortress once the body has been subdued and turned to stone.[85] Price, an modern editor of Theodoret's corpus, remarks that unlike similar ascetic works, Theodoret's *Historia Religiosa* seems unconcerned with the "problems and temptations" that an ascetic might encounter, choosing instead to present them as "fully formed and faultless."[86] One they have put an end to the fight between body and mind, they seem to fuse as a single, impenetrable being, not tempted by the world as long as they maintain their vigilance and exceedingly disciplined practice.

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[83] *Hist. rel.*, prol. 5.
[84] "καὶ περιβόλοις ὀχυροῖς τεριτετειχισμένην καὶ φάραγξι βαθείαις πάντοθεν κυκλουμένην." *Hist. rel.* prol. 6. Referencing Matthew 5:13. In the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, Abba John the Dwarf compare the ascetic body to a city under siege: "If a king wanted to take possession of his enemy's city, he would begin by cutting off the water and the food and so his enemies, dying of hunger, would submit to him. It is the same with the passions of the flesh: if a man goes about fasting and hungry the enemies of his soul grow weak," 3.
[85] Theodoret, *Hist. rel.*, Prol. 6.
[86] R. M. Price, *History of the Monks of Syria* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1985), xxix-xxxii.

The establishment of the body as a fortress, however, still required additional security measures to be taken to ensure that the structure stood strong. Ascetics, Theodoret advised, should heed the prophet's warning that, "death has come up through the windows" (Jer. 9:21), and so ascetics must work to secure their senses with God's laws, "as if with bolts and bars" and entrusted their keys to the mind.[87] The weak points of the citadel, then, were those which allowed access from the outside in: the eyes, ears, tongs, lips, genitals, and, by extension, the stomach. These entrances all had to be set with an immovable guard, admitting only beneficial aspects, while rejecting all senseless ones. Such an undertaking required constant maintenance and vigilance via ascetic works. The "doors" to the fortress presented the largest threat and the easiest access: the mouth and the genitals, connected by way of the stomach. According to early Greek and Roman medical writers, not only was the womb a "mouth" and labia, "lips," but the cervix was identified as the "lower neck."[88] While Aristotle noted that a woman's womb became wet during intercourse in the same way the mouth was moistened while eating, Sonarus detailed how a woman should have sex only when she had the appetite for it, just as one would eat when she was hungry.[89] The Greek terms for stomach and womb, as Teresa Shaw recognizes, also overlap, as the word γαστήρ can refer to either the "belly" or the "womb," sharing not only similar names, but functions.[90]

While women in general were thought to be physically cooler than men, young women were understood to possess more bodily heat, which "naturally" inflamed both their stomach and

[87] "'ἀνέβη θάνατος διὰ τῶν θυρίδων', οἷόν τισι μοχλοῖς καί κλείθροις, τοῖς θείοις νόμοις τὰ αἰσθητήρια κλείσαντες, τῷ νῷ τὰς τούτων ἐνεχείρισαν κλεῖς." Thdt. *Hist. rel.,* Prol. 6.
[88] Hanson also notes that Greek and Roman literature frequently played on "upper neck" and "lower neck" to describe the violation of virgins, the penetration of city walls, and the virgin's ultimate slaughter. Hanson, "The Medical Writers' Woman," 327.
[89] As cited in Dale Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), 237.
[90] Teresa Shaw, *The Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998),75. For more on the connection between stomach and womb, see Aline Rousselle, *Porneia: on Desire and the Body in Late Antiquity* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1988), 25-29, 67-71.

their loins.[91] A diet of either warm or cold foods could mitigate this heat and bodily desire, and so late antique Christians often encouraged a cooler diet for those wishing to practice virginity or chastity. Even eating in the presence of another could prove to be particularly dangerous, for as the mouth opened, so did the loins. Abba John the Dwarf, according to the anonymous fifth-century *Apophthegmata Patrum*, explicitly warned that, "he who satiates himself and talks with a boy has already fornicated with him in his thoughts."[92] By letting down his guard and inflaming his stomach, the monk had likewise inflamed his lust.[93] It is important to note, however, that the boy in this tale was not to blame, nor had he committed any sinful acts—for food was understood to affect the body differently depending on age.

Jerome, a biblical exegete and Christian teacher in late fourth to early fifth-century Italy, for instance, described how a pre-pubescent child was allowed to eat meat because the blood would not arouse sexual desire, while adult Christians should avoid meat for the blood's warming properties.[94] As Christians aged, however, and their bodies cooled, meat was once

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[91] Jerome also plays on this medical knowledge, and so emphasizes the importance of fasting for the maintenance of virginity. See Shaw, *The Burden of the Flesh*, 79-128.

[92] "Εἶπε πάλιν, ὅτι ὁ χορταζόμενος καὶ λαλῶν μετὰ μαιδίου, ἤδη ἐπόρνευσε τῷ λογισμῷ μετ᾽ αὐτοῦ." In "Abba John the Dwarf," *Apophth. Patr.* 4. What has come to be known as the *Apophthegmata Patrum,* or the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, is a 5th century collection of stories and sayings attributed to the male and female ascetics of the Egyptian desert. For a note on the language, as well as further background on the text itself, see Benedicta Ward, trans. and ed. *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection* (Kalamazoo and Oxford: Cistercian Publications, 1984).

[93] Chrysostom likewise speaks of the danger of letting one's guard down, even if the body itself has been turned to stone: Εἰ γὰρ καὶ τὸ σῶμα αὐτῆς ἀκέραιον μένοι, ἀλλ᾽ ὅμως τὸ κρεῖττον διέφθαρται τῆς ψυχῆς τὰ νοήματα. Τί οὖν ὄφελος ἀφανισθέντος τοῦ ναοῦ τοὺς περιβόλους ἑστάναι;" "For even if her body should remain intact the better part of her soul has been ruined: her thoughts. What benefit is there in the walls having stood firm when the temple has been destroyed?" Chrys. *Virg.* 6.1. For more on Chrysostom, see *On Virginity, Against Remarriage* trans. and ed. Sally Rieger Shore, (Lampeter, Dyfed, Wales: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1983).

[94] Hier., *Ep*. 79.9. While the advancement of age helped in asceticism, the reverse is often not true. Children were often not allowed in monasteries because they served as a distraction, and could not undertake the rigors of an ascetic life. John of Ephesus tells a story of Anastasia, a young girl who ran away from her home because her parents would not let her undertake a virginal life. When she attempted to join a group of holy women, they refused her entrance because of her age. After days outside of their gates, sobbing, praying, and fasting, the women finally admitted her entrance. Yet for nearly the entirety of her stay, the other women scorned her, even though this young woman proved to be the most accomplished ascetic of them all John of Ephesus, *Lives of the Eastern Saints,* in *Holy women of the Syrian Orient,* ed., Sebastian P. Brock and Susan Ashbrook Harvey (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), especially pages 122-123.

again allowed into their diet, as they were understood to have transitioned out of the sexual climax of their lives. For women, this process of aging corresponded most directly with the presence and absence of menstrual fluid, signaling their sexual (in)viability, and thus (in)vulnerability to sexual penetration.[95]

Age for ascetic women also rendered their bodies less porous for social, rather than strictly medical, reasons. While young female virgins were thought to be sexually enticing and therefore a danger to both themselves and to whomever they came into contact, older, even elderly, virgins seem to pose much less of a threat.[96] Because youth was prized and desired not only for its embodiment of socially constructed beauty, but also for the ability of the female body to produce healthy offspring, the end of menstruation and the physical signs of aging rendered women less porous, and therefore physically and socially less desirable. Thus, as women aged and their bodies became less penetrable, their physical defenses and elision with physical structures strengthened.[97] The lack of menstruation and subsequent inability to bear children "permanently" sealed the most dangerous portal to their body-places, rendering them nearly impervious.

While ascetic authors do not discuss the transformation of women's bodies in such explicit terms, such changes become evident through their descriptions of when in the ascetic process women's bodies can take on the characteristics of walls and ramparts. Before these women enter monasteries, lock themselves within their rooms or flee to the desert, their bodies are soft and luscious.[98] It is this characteristic that makes them not only beautiful and sexually

[95] Shaw, *Burden of the Flesh*, 72.
[96] A similar sentiment can be seen in modern society, which insists that women "of a certain age" are no longer sexually viable (despite their bodies' continued ability to engage in intercourse). See, for example, William Safire, "In Language; A Woman of a Certain Age," *The New York Times* July 2, 1995.
[97] This phenomenon will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter.
[98] For example, Gregory describes Macrina as a flower in bloom before she undertakes an ascetic life, then ceases to describe her bodily thereafter. Greg. Nyss., *Vita S. Macrinae* in *Gregoire de Nysse: Vie de Sainte Macrine*. Ed. and

desirable, but also far more easily penetrable, as indicated by the language of the bodily descriptors themselves. But when these women undertook asceticism, their bodies became skin and bones; they were hardened from the sun and lost the luster of youth.[99] Georgia Frank even remarks that "sunken eyes, emaciated cheeks, and thinning hair were badges of honor."[100] Though the vagina is not mentioned, by extension it has dried up with the rest of the body, adding another physical defense against penetration.

Without shaping the raw material of their bodies into sturdy physical materials, these ascetics could not be properly utilized to defend Christians and Christianity itself from the assaults of the wider world. For women, a greater transformation was required, as their flesh was understood to be naturally more porous and their bodies more vulnerable. Male ascetics, on the other hand, possessed sturdier physical materials, and were in far less danger in public places. Both groups of ascetics, however, had to first quell the riotous armies within themselves before transforming themselves outwardly into fortresses which could, when properly utilized, withstand the onslaught on external forces from demons to marauding armies.

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trans., M. Maraval, *Source chretiennes* 178 (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1971), 4. For more on the markings of the feminine as soft and penetrable, see Kathryn M. Ringrose, "Living in the Shadows: Eunuchs and Genderi n Byzantium," in *Third Sex, Third Gender: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History* ed. Gilberg Herdt (New York: Zone Books, 1994) 94-5.

[99] The loss of beauty is a common trope in female ascetic stories. For a few examples see *Life of Hilaria* in *Three Copic Legends: Hilaria, Archellites, the Seven Sleepers* ed with trans and commentary by James Drescher (Le Caire; Imprimerie de L'Insitut Francais; D'archeologie Orientale, 1947), 71-82; *The Life of Euphrosyne* in *Select Narratives of Holy Women: from the Syro-Antiochene or Sinai palimpsest: as written above the old Syriac Gospels by John the Stylite, of Beht-Mari-Qanun in A.D. 778* ed. and trans. Agnes Smith Lewis (London: C. J. Clay and Sons, 1990), f, 83 a.

[100] Georgia Frank, *The Memory of the Eyes: Pilgrims to Living Saints in Christian Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 143.

Defending the Home

Not all building materials, however, are equally suited to every environment. As Vitruvius notes, the delicate nature of granaries forces them to reside in a place where they will not be damaged by the sun, while city walls must be rounded face to the North or East so as to best ward-off enemies.[101] Similar consideration was taken with the employment of ascetic body-places. Women, due to conceptualization of the porosity of their flesh and their subsequent vulnerability to penetration, were understood to be "naturally" suited for the household.[102] Its walls sheltered the women within from the penetrating force of the public's gaze, while simultaneously protecting men from the siren's call of the woman's body.[103] Hagiographers, often reflecting wider social anxieties though some, like Jerome, anxious to keep these women's power and influence for themselves, played up the dangers of a man's lust (as symbolized by the outside world), and so encouraged female ascetics and virgins to remain within.[104] Yet the

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[101] Vitruvius, *On Architecture*, 1.4.1, 1.5.2.

[102] Kim Bowes, *Private Worship, Public Values, and Religious Change in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 202 – 3. Early Christian writers often shared not only this anxiety over the porosity and vulnerability of the female body, but also its metaphors and, occasionally, means of defense: the veil. This piece of clothing embodies the virgin and city metaphor, and indeed more closely elides the two, as the Greek word "*kredemnon*" could mean a woman's "headbinder," the "battlements of the city," and the "stopper of a bottle." The veil, then, serves as the virgin's first line of physical fortification as she prepares her body for battle. Importantly, this structure works to seal the openings of her body through which liquid can pass, and through which accesses can be gained to the curved structures within. "For ancient Greeks, then," as Dale Martin argues, "the veil (*kredemnon*) not only symbolized but actually effected a protective barrier guarding the woman's head and, by metonymic transfer, her genitals." For more on the three-fold usage, see Carson, "Putting Her in Her Place," in *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World,* ed. David M. Halperin, John J. Winkler, and Froma I. Zeitlin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 160. Dale Martin, *The Corinthian Body*, 234. Martin's chapter entitled "Prophylactic Veils" explores veils' use as a form of physical defense in greater depth. Intriguingly, he argues that veils did not only protect virgins from the polluting world, but others from the sexuality and de-civilizing force of the virgin's body.

[103] Bowes, *Public Worship*, 203-207; While the *cubiculum* often became a space for female ascetics, it was also used as a more "private" place for Christian worship in general. See Kristina Sessa, "Christianity and the cubiculum: Spiritual Politics and Domestic Space in Late Antique Rome," *Holy Households: Space, Property and Power* special issue, *JECS* 15.2 (2007): 176-85.

[104] For more on Jerome's desire to create a large network of wealthy ascetic women from whom he could benefit, see J.N.D. Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies,* (London, Duckworth, 1975), 109-114, 126-127; Andrew Cain, *The Letters of Jerome: Asceticism, Biblical Exegesis, and Construction of Christian Authority in Late Antiquity,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 110-114; Barbara Feichtinger, "Konsolationstopik und Sitz im Leben: Hieronymus' ep. 39 ad Paulam de obitu Belsillae im Spannungsfeld zwischen Christlicher Genusadaption und Lesermanipulation," *JbAC*, 38, 1995, 75-90.

household was not seen as simply gendered female because of the presence of women; their very movement shaped the conception of their space, such as traditionally "domestic" activities from sewing to household management. Such movement of ascetic female bodies within houses, some of which would eventually become monasteries, transformed both the household and the ascetic within.[105] Instead of envisioning the women residing inside as maintain the weakness of their flesh, hagiographers fused the women with their households, melding her with its walls, doors, and windows to protect not only herself, but all those within its walls.

Guarding the Bridal Chamber

As has been widely recognized, the practice of asceticism, particularly by wealthy young women, caused a great deal of anxiety in Roman society.[106] In some instances, this unease sprang from financial concern over the virgin's upkeep as well as her family's legacy and inheritance.[107] Other apprehension arose over the woman's lack of male protection and thus her vulnerability to violence.[108] Elizabeth Clark argues that the construction of virgins as bridegrooms for Christ may have soothed some of these anxieties.[109] This new construction allowed older modes of social categorization as well as legal recourse to extend to the ascetic, rendering her both comprehensible as well as protected by society writ large. Yet, in many

[105] Because very few individuals, with the exception of bishops, could enter these female abodes, the world came to see monasteries as representative of the female flesh within Macrina, for example, established what has been widely recognized as the first female monasteries. While a few select men were allowed inside so that they might benefit from her holy presence, only her brothers could come and go as they pleased. Greg. Nyss. *Vit. Mac. SC*, 178.
[106] Susanna Elm, *Virgins of God*: *The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 16, 28.
[107] Judith Evans Grubbs, "Virgins and Widows, Show-Girls and Whores: Late Roman Legislations on Women and Christianity" in *Law, Society and Authority in Late Antiquity* ed. Ralph Mathisen, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 227.
[108] Grubbs, "Virgins and Widows," 234.
[109] Elizabeth Clark, "The Celibate Bridegroom and his Virginal Brides: Metaphor and the Marriage of Jesus in Early Christian Exegesis," *Church History* 77.1 (2008), pp. 1-25.

instances, virgins and ascetics alike became not just brides awaiting their groom upon departure from this earth, but the bridal chamber itself, to be occupied presently by the loving couple. In order for this bridal chamber to remain not only unsullied, but completely intact, the female virgin had to elide with the structure itself, erecting sturdy walls and guarding not only its doors and windows, but her own.

For Ambrose, the virgin as bridal chamber transformed her flesh into an entity which could protect her from "every defilement of the flesh" should she remain present and vigilant.[110] Jerome, for the most part, agreed. In his advice to several of the dedicated virgins whom he oversaw, Jerome warned them that only "*virgines stultae*," "foolish or fatuous virgins," wandered about outside.[111] Wise virgins, on the other hand, should be "indoors with your Bridegroom, because if you shut your door and, according to the precept of the Gospel, pray to your Father in secret, he will come and knock and say, *Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone will open it to me, I will enter and dine with him and he with me*."[112] This image, as conjured by Jerome, resonates on several levels. Not only should the virgin remain inside her home, but inside the chamber of her flesh, contemplating the word of God in her bodily cloister. Jerome instructed her to quite literally close the "inner room in your breast," guarding against the assaults on her soul.[113] As such the body of this woman also had to shut *its* doors to the world through her maintenance of virginity and practice of fasting. The only outside force allowed within was not of this world at all, but her bridegroom who will penetrate her threshold at some

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[110] Ambr. *Virg.* 3.4.19 "*ab omni inquinamento carnis*." For more on Ambrose, see Kim Bowes, *Private Worship, Public Values, and Religious Change in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 203. Dale Martin emphasizes the importance of the virgin's active agency in providing her own defense. See *The Corinthian Body*, 245.
[111] Hier. *Ep.* 22.26
[112] Hier. *Ep.* 22.26. Quoting Revelation 3:20. "*foris uagentur uirgines stultae, tu intrinsecus esto cum sponso, quia, si ostium cluseris et secundum euangelii praeceptum in occult oraueris patrem tuum, ueniet et pulsabit et dicet:* ecce ego sto ante ianuam et pulso. Si quis mihi aperuerit, intrabo et cenabo cum eo et ipse mecum…".
[113] Hier. *Ep.* 130.9, "*…ut claudas cubiculum pectoris*…".

future time.[114] As Kim Bowes has noted, Jerome here uses language from the Song of Songs, transforming the virgin's home (and, I suggest, her body), into a military bastion, "both protecting the ascetic and marking an easily definable, physical *limes* between her virtue and the sin of the *saeculum*…".[115]

A little less than a century later, Pseudo-Athanasius, an unknown author who wrote several cannons on virginity in Syriac, drew upon the same imagery when eliding virgin and her bridal chamber.[116] To further clarify that the room which the bridegroom would penetrate was not just the virgin's literal door, Pseudo-Athanasius revealed that "Christ is the bridegroom, and the soul is the bride."[117] In this transformation of space into flesh, the door on which Christ knocked was the corporeal body of his beloved. She had to first let down her defenses and open her body to allow him entry. It was only once he had passed through the doors of her flesh that Jesus and his bride could be unified in her soul.

Yet the doors of her body-chamber were not the only ports of entry. The windows, those of her eyes, nose, and ears, remained vulnerable to attack. Because, however, she had to keep her ears pricked for the sound of the knock and her eyes open to assure that her ears were not deceived, she cannot simply shutter all of her windows. Instead, Jerome urged her to open her windows "only on the side where the light may enter and from which you may see the city of God. Do not open those other windows, from which it is said, *Death has entered through our*

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[114] The sexual connection between the virgin and her bridegroom here is also evident, drawing the explicit parallel between a virgin's "door" and her vagina, through which the bridegroom would enter. For more on the explicit sexuality found throughout Jerome's letter to Eustochium, see Patricia Cox Miller, "The Blazing Body: Ascetic Desire in Jerome's Letter to Eustochium," *JECS* 1.1 (1993), 21-45.
[115] Bowes, *Private Worship*, 203
[116] Because the author's dates are unknown, we must rely on the manuscripts themselves to place Pseudo-Athanasius. My dating is therefore based on Elizabeth Castelli's arguments in "Pseudo-Athanasius: The Life and Activity of the Holy and Blessed Teacher Syncletica" in *Ascetic Behavior in Greco-Roman Antiquity: A Sourcebook*, ed. Vincent Wimbush (Minneapolis: Fortress press, 1990), 265. For Pseudo-Athanasius's treatise on virginity, see "Pseudo-Athanasius on Virginity," ed. David Brakke, *CSCO* (2002).
[117] Pseudo-Athanasius, *On Virginity*, 31. Trans. Brakke.

windows."[118] Jerome did not tell Eustochium to look at for her bridegroom *as though* through open windows, but instead commanded her to "keep your windows open" (*tu habeto fenestras apertas*), more closely eliding the physical body and place. Eustochium was to envision herself as opening up windows and doors in her physical body, not merely in her residence. Because the windows of the flesh were still permeable, but in far less danger than the significantly larger doors, it was safer for the virgin to keep them at least slightly open, it order to look out for her approaching bridegroom. She, then, did not simply mirror, or exist in, a space that was constructed for her protection: she *became* it.

The transformation of a virgin into a bridal chamber occurred not only for her own protection, but for the benefit of the episcopal authority who constructed her story. As a woman, her flesh proved far too vulnerable, and her feminine wiles more difficult to control. She could come and go on a whim, not only exposing herself to harm, but disobeying her teacher as well. As a body-chamber, however, she became more immobile, and, ideally for Jerome, could quite literally never leave her home.[119] In Jerome's instance, this construction lessened the likelihood that she would be reduced away by other teachers and thus that he would lose her patronage and stream of revenue.[120] While we know that many of these women frequently went against Jerome's wishes, his imagery proved rhetorically powerful nonetheless and reflected a wider desire to conflate virginal women with the places in which they resided.

[118] Hier. *Ep.* 22. "...et tu habeto fenestras apertas, sed unde lumen introeat, under uideas ciuitatem dei. Ne aperias illas fenestras, de quibus dicitur*: mors intrauit persfenestras uestras*."
[119] Hier. *Ep.* 22.
[120] This concern is reflected in Hier. *Ep. 127.*

Thwarting Home Invasion

In many instances, ascetic women could not only rendering themselves impenetrable by tightly closing and closely guarding any openings to their bodies, but could also extend that learned protection to encompass the entirety of their household. As they practiced sealing off their bodily openings, so too were all entrances of their homes barred against their foes. The story of Patermuthius, an Egyptian ascetic described only in the late fifth-century *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto,* illustrates just such a phenomenon.[121] Before he established a hermitage in Egypt, Patermuthius, or so Copres related, lived as a thief and tomb robber. One night, he attacked the home of an ascetic woman, intending to rob it. One way or another, he found himself on her roof, but could devise no way into her "inner chamber" or "treasure room" (τὸ ταμιεῖον). At this point in the story, he discovered that he was stranded, unable either to force his way inside or climb back down. While the story goes on to describe Patermuthius' conversion and subsequent devotion to the ascetic life, this scene, even in passing, reveals the strength of the virgin's defenses.

The imagery within the story works on several levels. First, Patermuthius was unable to break into this woman's house to raid what precious goods she might have had. Because the audience knew that the woman whose home Patermuthius tried to invade was a virgin, however, they would have recognized that her most costly possession was her virginity. Therefore, the story also was embedded with strong sexual overtones, to illustrate that, like a house, the female

[121] Unlike many of the ascetics within the pages of the *Historia Monachorum,* Patermuthius appears only within the text. Normal Russell notes that he appears to be regarded as a founder of a monastic group, although his legend appears to have been exaggerated by Copres, who tells his story within this text. Norman Russell, *The Lives of the Desert Fathers,* 132. The text itself was composed by an anonymous monk who resided in a monastery on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem, and who traveled with his companions to Egypt in the late fourth century. For more on the history of the text, see Andrew Cain, *The Greek Historia Monachorum in Aegypto: Monastic Hagiography in the Late Fourth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). For this dissertation, I will be relying on the Greek *Historian Monachorum* in *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* ed. A.J. Festugiére (Bruxellles: Société des Bollandistes, 1961).

ascetic has sealed her own "door" against external penetration. In so acting, she prevented the destruction of her own "treasure chamber" – or that aspect of herself which has been deemed socially and religiously valuable by many early Christian leaders.[122] Finally, the description of her impenetrable inner chamber also works on a biblical level, for this was no ordinary person he attempted to invade, but specifically a powerful ascetic woman who has already shored up her defenses. Her "treasure room," was, as Norman Russell recognizes, the "closet" into which Matthew 6:6 tells people to retreat to pray.[123] Yet this sacred inner chamber also constitutes, as Chrysostom recognized, the soul, which must be guarded at all costs.[124] Thus, on all three levels, the ascetic woman has transformed herself into a defensive structure, and in turn imbued her house, her second skin, with the strength of her body against the world. She was not only a wall or a doorway, but an entire structure built to withstand even the most notorious brigand and thief.

The home as bastion was taken to an even greater extreme in the story of Marana and Cyra. The abode of these two fifth-century ascetics, who make an appearance in Theodoret's *Hisotoria Religiosa,* not only had no *cubiculum* (since it was a single room), but no doorway as well.[125] In its stead, they placed a small window through which they could take food and speak

[122] The place of virgins and virginity within a Christian hierarchy was hotly debated. For a lengthy discussion of the actors within the debate, see Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 259 – 79.
[123] Norman Russell ed. and trans., *The Lives of the Desert Fathers: The Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* (London and Oxford: Mowbray, 1980), 132.
[124] Chrys. *Virg.* 6.1. He, however, places the story in the negative, asking "For even if [a virgin's] body should remain unviolated, her soul, which is the superior part, that is her intelligence, nevertheless has been ruined. What is the purpose in the wall having stood firm when the temple is destroyed?" "Nam etsi ei corpus salvus est, animi tamen, quae pars est potior, sunt corrupta consilia. Quid autem refert disjecto templo septa restare?"
[125] Thdt. *Hist. rel.,* 29.2. In so doing, Marana and Cyra solve Chrysostom and Jerome's concerns over vulnerability of windows and doors. While they seal their abodes on all sides, they while simultaneously leaving a "window" open for God by leaving off the roof. Intriguingly, Vitruvius notes that roofless structures were common practices for temples dedicated to Jupiter and Caelus, who made themselves known through the sky itself. Vitruvius, *De Architectura*, 1.2.5. "Statione, cum Iovi Fulguri et Caelo et Soli et Lunae aedificia sub divo hypaethraque constituentur; horum enim deorum et species et effectus in aperto mundo atque lucenti praesentes vidimus."

with the women who wish to see them.[126] Even Theodoret, when he wished entry, had to dig through the mud and create a door for himself.[127] By sealing themselves off so entirely, Marana and Cyra not only had one less point of entry for which they had to stand guard, they essentially remove their wombs from their bodies. As discussed above, the door itself frequently represented a woman's vagina. By removing doors from their abodes, and, by extension, their bodies, they essentially removed the main openings to themselves as well. The mouth, then, having nothing with which to connect, became a far less dangerous opening, allowing the women to take in a meager amount of food with very little danger. The materiality of the cell itself, as it was constructed from clay and mud, however, resembles the "softer" flesh of the female body. Thus, while they could seal off their openings, the very elements of their bodies were still more vulnerable than that of their male counterparts. Nevertheless, such an example further illustrates the extent to which a body could mirror the state of its physical structure.[128]

In households in both Syria and Egypt where more than one person resided, however, virgins became so crucial as a defensive structure that Pseudo-Athanasius and Eusebius of Emesa insisted that, "every good household needs a good virgin."[129] A virgin who undertook the ascetic practice of melding herself with her abode until, as the passage suggests, she became as

[126] Only Marana is said to have talked with visitors. Cyra remains completely silent, thus closing down all potential points of bodily entry.
[127] Theodoret insists that this act is out of respect for his episcopal office, but the act itself raises many issues that I will discuss at length in Chapter 5.
[128] The lack of openings in a created structure is also not without precedence. When Macarius of Alexandria builds his cell, he constructs a door, but no windows. Due to the severity of his structure in addition to his ascetic undertaking, his fellow monks complained to Pachomius, "Where did you find this bodiless man?" Palladius of Hellenopolis of Aspuna, *HL*, ed. Cuthbert Butler in *The Lausiac History of Palladius*, 2. Vols. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1904), 18.15. For an English translation, see *The Lausiac History*, trans. Robert T. Meyer (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1965)
[129] Pseudo-Athanasius, *Pseudo-Athanasian Canons* in *The Canons of Athanasius of Alexandria* eds. Crum, W. E., and W. Riedel, (London and Oxford: Text and Translation Society 9, 1904,1973). Eusebius of Emesa insisted that "It is a safeguard for a house to have a good virgin…." Eusebius of Emesa, *Hom.* 7.24 in *Eusèbe d'Émèse*. Discours conservés *en Latin. Vol. 1. La collection de Troyes*, ed. E. M. Buytaert (Louvain: Spicilegium Sacrum Lovaniense, 1953), 1.191-2. "Tutela in domo est virgo bona…."

crucial as a sound foundation or sturdy walls. For, like the wall of a home, a virgin was expected not only to protect her household, but to help shape it.[130] Eusebius, the bishop of Emesa who wrote in Syriac in the early to mid-fourth century, indeed emphasizes that it was the "safeguard" of a household against evil to have a good virgin within.[131] In so doing, the virgin/household defended the "temple of God" within herself and her family against the wickedness without.[132] So important was this virgin to the safety of her household in late antique Egypt, that if a daughter did not undertake virginity, a slave was ordered to take these vows instead.[133]

While the practice of having a virgin within a household has been cast as a measure of "good housekeeping" and indubitably offered the household a form of protection, I argue that the presence of these individuals was more than simply insurance against disaster.[134] While an uncluttered house that employs the use of up-to-date fire alarms, for example, may help prevent the complete destruction of the house, it does not prevent a fire from occurring. In contrast, the presence of a virgin actively prevented evil from entering the household. Pseudo-Athanasius, for instance, notes that, "when wrath comes upon the whole city, it shall not come upon the household where a virgin is."[135] Although I agree with Bowes' insightful assertion that, in this instance, the asceticism and saintliness practiced by the woman would rebound onto the

[130] For more on how a wall could shape the identity of those within its bounds, see Hendrik W. Dey, *The Aurelian Wall and the Refashioning of Imperial Rome, AD 271-855* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) especially chapters three and four.
[131] This vague force refers perhaps to a similar type of "wrath" that swept through Egypt, killing the first-born son of all those whose homes were not protected with the blood of the lamb (Exodus 11:5-12:15). It does not appear to imply protection against physical invaders, as will be discussed later in the chapter. For a lengthier discussion of the passage, see Bowes, *Private Worship,* 206.
[132] Eusebius of Emesa, *Hom.* 7.24
[133] *Pseudo-Athanasian Canons* 103-4 in *The Canons of Athanasius of Alexandria: The Arabic and Coptic Versions*, ed., and trans., Wilhelm Riedel and W. E. Crum (London and Oxford: Text and Translation Society, 1904), p.66-7.
[134] Bowes, *Private Worship*, 205.
[135] Adapted from Pseudo-Athanasius, *The Canons of Athanasius of Alexandria*, 98. Riedel and Crum speculate that Pseudo-Athanasius must be an Alexandrian. *The Canons of Athanasius*., XIII.

household itself to act as a form of protection, I contend that the image painted by Pseudo-Athanasius pushes the relationship between virgin and household further.

As we have seen in previous Christian authors, when a man penetrated a doorway of a virgin's home he, by extension, penetrated her physical body. Likewise, though now in the inverse, the physical defense of a woman's body led to the physical defense of her household. Thus, instead of her body simply taking on the qualities of her place, her place began to take on the physical qualities of her body. All of the ascetic practices undertaken by these women, from the control of the sights and smells to even the food that enters through the portals of her body, served to shore-up the weak places of entry and physically guard against the inundations of the world. It was therefore not just her asceticism that seeped into the walls, but the physical protection of her body, as the walls became ascetic flesh, guarded against the destructive wrath of external violence.

Fortifying the City

The fortification of a single house, however, would prove of little use should armies infiltrate the walls of city. As such, ascetics as body-place were frequently employed to merge, not only with their homes, but with the fortifications of their entire town. In this instance, both male and female ascetics could undertake the task, though in strikingly different ways. A woman, because she was "properly" placed when inside a structure, became a wall from within the city. Male ascetics, on the other hand, function most effectively outside, establishing themselves as a more active deterrent either from within the walls, or in a protective halo just outside. While gender determined the placement of materials, the purpose was the same: to act as a physical barrier against those who sought harm against a Christian city.

Woman as Wall

In many Greek and Roman tragedies and epics, female bodies were often elided with city walls to emphasize their vulnerability.[136] Just as invading forces penetrated city gates, so too was the woman, the symbol of the city, easily raped by a marauding force. Yet with the growth of Christianity, and particularly following multiple invasions of the Roman Empire, the connotation of a woman as city changed drastically from a permeable portal to a sturdy wall.

In some select instances, a virgin's bodily defenses became so strong that she could extend her bodily fortifications out from her flesh, and even her household, to encompass an entire city. Composed nearly twenty years after her death in 502, the Life of Genovefa, the virgin of Paris in Gaul, told the tale of a young girl called to virginity by the Bishop (and later Saint) Germanus.[137] When she has made her decision to dedicate herself to God, Germanus tested her to ensure her firm resolve, asking whether she wanted to preserve her body "immaculate and intact" (*immaculatum et intactum*) for God.[138] She responded that this was her only wish. Once she gladly accepted her new life as the bride of Christ, Germanus informed her that the "Lord will give her strength and fortitude for her beauty."[139] Here, the author begins to fuse Genovefa's flesh with defensive structures, equating her feminine body, which was typically

[136] Ann Ellis Hanson, "The Medical Writers' Woman" 326. Helen Hills also discusses the longevity of virginity's conception in spatial terms, and indeed traces it through early modern Italian convents in "Architecture as Metaphor for the Body: The Case of Female Convents in Early Modern Italy" in *Gender and Architecture* ed. Louise Durning and Richard Wringley (Chichester and New York: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2000). Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the propensity for even modern individuals to discuss the destruction of a city as violence against the female body (e.g. the rape of Nanking), the metaphor originates finds its roots in literature far older than Christianity.
[137] My translation is drawn from "S. Genouefa, Virgo Parisiis in Gallia" *ActaSS*, January 3, 137-53, which has been designated as the older version by C. Kohler, in *Etude critique sur le texte de la vie latine de Ste. Geneviéve.* Paris, 1881. For an English translation, see "The Life of Genovefa, a Virgin of Paris in Gaul" in *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages* ed. and trans. Jo Ann MacNamara and Jon E. Halborg with E. Gordon Whatley (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1992). For a broader discussion of the composition of her *vita*, see Martin. Heinzelmann and Joseph-Claude Poulin, *Les vies anciennes de Sainte Geneviève de Paris* (Paris: Champion – Slatkine, 1986); and Lisa Bitel, *Landscape of Two Saints*: *How Genovefa of Paris and Brigit of Kildare Built Christianity in Barbarian Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 8-15.
[138] "S. Genouefa," 1.3.
[139] "Dabit enim Dominus virtutem & fortitudinem decori tuo." "S. Genouefa," 1.3.

synonymous with delicacy, with rigidity. She furthers this transformation of her flesh during the ceremony when she declares "I long to keep the chastity of my mind and the soundness of my body… until the end."[140] It was this contrast between expectations of the female flesh and the transformation of that body through the discipline of asceticism and the gifts on which the author continuously played. Like the descriptions in Theodoret, Genovefa could only transform into a fortified structure once she began her practice of asceticism.

Over and over again, people from the town, and even her own family, doubted Genovefa's dedication and demanded to be shown proof of her asceticism. It is important to note that asceticism had come to Paris only a little over 50 years ago, with the arrival of Martin of Tours (d. 397).[141] As such, the author of Genovefa's *vita* seemed to deliberately contrast the pre-ascetic understanding of women with the new ascetic model of which he was clearly in favor. Intriguingly, instead of revealing the harsh angles of Genovefa's body made evident through her asceticism, Germanus instead invited her retractors to gaze upon her cell. They became convinced of her piety, not just by the austerity of her single room, but of the floor of her cell, which had turned to mud from the flow of her copious tears.[142] This image revealed to all who looked that holiness and dedication to asceticism had been achieved and subsequently revealed through the fusion of an ascetic and her chamber. The abode alone did not reveal Genovefa's holiness, nor did her body; instead the combination of her tears and the floor on which they fell proved beyond a shadow of a doubt the true nature of this young woman.

After the fusion of body and abode had been definitively shown and defended against a trivial foe, the author escalated the difficulty of her adversary. The Huns, Genovefa discovered,

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[140] The whole line reads: "*quia castitatem mentis & corporis integerrimam, Deo me iuuante, vsque in finem seruare desidero*," "S. Genouefa," 1.4.
[141] See "Introduction" by Jo Ann MacNamara and Jon E. Halborg in *Sainted Women*, 18.
[142] "S. Genouefa," 2.9.

were laying waste to the province of Gaul.[143] While the townspeople panicked and contemplated fleeing to other presumably safer cities, Genovefa recruited all the matrons (*matrona*) of the cities to help her in her task of defending Paris.[144] In this instance, the anonymous author made the curious decision to build on older traditions of females as both walls and defenders, instead of more contemporary Christian examples. As we have seen above, the bodies of women in Greek and Roman epic were frequently elided with the walls of their cities as the invading forces penetrated the undefended gates.

Yet the most powerful virgins in the ancient world were not the women of epic, but the vestal virgins of Rome. "In a ritual sense," as Ariande Staples argues, "the Vestals *were* Rome."[145] We can see no clearer instance of this than when the city itself was in danger. Under normal circumstances, the Vestals represented life and sustainability for Rome; as long as their bodies remained whole and in tact, so too did the city. But in times of great political turmoil – circumstances so severe that they occurred only twice on record, once between the first and second Punic wars in 216 BCE and once at the end of the Republic in 114 BCE – a Vestal's virginity was called into question and she was interred underground, but within the Aurelian walls.[146] As Staples observes, just as a Vestal's virginity was indispensable for the wellbeing of Rome, so too was its loss.[147] The sex act was seen as a threat to Rome's stability, and so in order to return it to the status quo, the Vestal served as a sacrifice.

Like the Vestals, Geovefa and her virginity come to represented Paris itself. Indeed, this construction of Genovefa would have already been obvious to a late antique audience who

[143] "S. Genouefa," 3.10.
[144] "S. Genouefa," 3.10.
[145] Ariadne Staples, *From Good Goddess to Vestal Virgins: Sex and Category in Roman Religion* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 129.
[146] Staples, *From Good Goddesses to Vestal Virgins*, 133-137.
[147] Staples, *From Good Goddesses to Vestal Virgins*, 135.

recognized this woman as their city's patron saint. Yet in order to establish her as such, the anonymous author of her *vita* plays with the tropes of the Vestals, but inverts them slightly to reveal the power of Christianity. Just as in Rome, when times were good, Genovefa came to no harm and no one doubted her virginal, holy state. Yet in 451, rumors spread of Atilla the Hun laying waste to the Gallic countryside on his march to Paris. It is here that the tale shifts.

Genovefa, the author and later Germanus's protégé Lupus make clear, was the best person to defend the city because she has made a life-long practice of protecting her own body against the onslaughts of men and was given additional strength and fortitude by God.[148] Not able to defend the city alone, however, she called upon the Christian matrons to help her. Here, the author clearly makes a deliberate choice to snub the non-Christian virgins who would have been present. As McNamara and Halburg note, ascetic Christians would have made up only a tiny population of the aristocrats in the fifth century.[149] This eschewing of virgins in favor of Christian matrons signifies that even imperfect Christian bodies were stronger and more powerful than their counterparts, and even calls into question the veracity of virginity among non-Christian virgins.[150] Nevertheless, calling upon the precedence of Esther and Judith who defend their people by taking matters into their own hands, Genovefa took up spiritual arms and used the strength of the woman to amplify her own bodily fortitude to surround the city with it.[151]

After ensconcing themselves in a baptistery, Genovefa and the Christian matrons of Paris labored for days, fasting, praying, and keeping watch. Through this undertaking, Genovefa

[148] "S. Genouefa," 1.3-4.
[149] McNamara and Halburg, *Sainted Women*, 18.
[150] John Chrysostom, for example, talks about "false virgins" who may look the part but secretly harbor heretical ideas. *De virg.*, 6 (SC 125.108-10).
[151] "S. Genouefa," 3.10-12.

defended the city against the Huns, a task previously only possible through male Christian intercession. What is remarkable about this scene, however, is the manner in which Genovefa defends the city. Unlike other ascetic writers, particularly in the east, the author of this *vita* allowed other women to help the virgin in her protection of the city. Because of the size of Paris, Genovefa could not carry out the task on her own, and so established reinforcements. The ascetic tasks undertaken by these women revolved around the discipline of the body and the defense of it as though it was a physical fortification.

The first task, fasting, took on particular significance in this instance when viewed through the lens of defensive fortification. While all of these women, particularly Genovefa, most assuredly fasted as part of their regular practice, their redoubled practice was taken on in this instance for several days. In anticipation of the attack from the Huns, Genovefa and her fellow women let no food pass the doors of their lips, thus sealing off a primary port of entry. Because of the frequent connection between the mouth and womb, fasting would also seal off these women's vaginas, lessening their sexual desire and ability to orgasm.[152] This act of bodily discipline in which the women block entry and exit of fluids from their bodies mirrored the ways in which a city gate would have been barred pending attack. Moreover, in continuation with this imagery, fasting was understood to dry out and harden the body, thus shoring up its defenses against penetration and evacuation**.** As Teresa Shaw argues, many early Christians, echoing Galen, believed that "Through control of her diet, the virgin should be able to dry and cool the body, thus countering the heat and moisture…".[153] No longer did her body, in the manner typical of women, excrete fluids through the porosity of its very nature. Instead, her body became more masculine -- drier, cooler, harder and, in turn, less vulnerable to external attacks.

[152] Shaw, *The Burden of the Flesh*, 236.
[153] Shaw, *The Burden of the Flesh*, 236.

The bodies of these women, like that of Genovefa, with thus shored-up with additional fortification. This transformation redoubled the gifts of strength and fortitude God had placed upon Genovefa, extending the protecting of their bodies well beyond the walls of the city. At the moment, Genovefa *becomes* Paris. As her own bodily defenses were strengthened, so too did she strengthen the battlements of the city itself.

The final act these women undertook was keeping watch, though they themselves were closed in a solid structure.[154] This image reinforced their bodies' fusion with the walls, as the virgin and matrons worked internally to affect external events, not only within their own bodies, but within buildings inside the city itself. Such an image, then, implied that they could be on the lookout for the approaching Huns as though they were standing on, or directly behind, the walls of the city. Indeed, Genovefa became this defensive structure as she spread out the defense of her physical body to encompass the entire city, and the women she recruited became the soldiers who "man" it. Together, these women, as they extended their bodily fortifications around Paris, held back Attila and his hordes.

Just as the people of Rome turned against the Vestals in times of great turmoil, so too did the citizens of Paris rise against Genovefa. Accusing her of being a "false prophetess" (*pseudoprophetissam*), they called into question the state of her body, as her virginity indicated her holy status.[155] As she and the other Christian women of the city sought to defend it against their enemies, the other people of Paris selfishly worried about their good stored within the walls, and conspired to kill Genovefa either by stoning or drowning.[156] More than simply forgetting the feats she had undertaken only days prior, the townspeople also appeared to revert

[154] The act of "keeping watch" also mirrors the act of the bride in Revelation 3:3, who must constantly be on guard for anyone who may approach.
[155] "S. Genoufa," 3.11.
[156] "S. Genoufa," 3.12.

back to their old, misguided, and, the author seems to argue, non-Christian understanding of virginal women. If they still operated under the mindset that women were weaker than men, more porous and therefore more vulnerable to attack, then they would understandably desire to move their goods to another city. It seems to be on these grounds that they seek to attack Genovefa.

Once again, however, Germanus returned to the city to steer the population back on course and remind them of the great ascetic nature of Genovefa. Building upon the imagery he established in the previous scene as the women sought to harden their bodies through fasting and simultaneously become more like men and stone, Germanus drew parallels between Genovefa and both Bishops Martin and Anianus. Both men, he claimed, went into battle without any weapons, and "stopped the violence of the opposing army" (*utriusque exercitus saeuitia sedata*) from sacking the city of Orléans.[157] He then asked, rhetorically, if the same honors were not due to Genovefa, who drove away the same army. Just as these sainted men, he argued, were able to drive away the men from the city, so was Genovefa. The only difference in these instances lay in their means: the men through prayers and negotiation, and Genovefa through her prayers her physical embodiment of Paris itself.

Very few instances of virgins or women defending entire cities exist in late ancient hagiography. The only other example appears to come from Palladius' *Lausiac History*, in which he tells the story of Piamon, an Egyptian ascetic, who halts attackers three miles outside of her city through intercessory prayer.[158] Julia Smith argues that many of the "implausible" episodes in Genovefa's *vita* "can best be explained by the absence of any Latin hagiographical tradition,

[157] "S. Genouefa," 3.12.
[158] Palladius, *HL*, 31.

other than a male one, episcopal or monastic."[159] While Latin female *vitae* may have been in short supply in late antique Gaul, the way in which Genovefa defended the city of Paris nevertheless reflects an understanding of how female protection works. Unlike Marin or Anianus, to whom the author compares her, Genovefa did not go into battle to route the enemy. Instead, she locked herself inside a baptistry in the city and greatly increased her asceticism, which, as Theodoret demonstrates, would have increased the fortification of her body-city and helped her to keep even tighter guard. As is shown by the desire of houses to have virgins within them for their protection, this is how *women* were able to perform as defensive structures. While the author of Genovefa's *vita* may not have had other ascetic *vita* as precedence for such a grand use of a virgin, they certainly were, at the very least, steeped in the cultural environment where this type of imagery would have resonated with the audience.

Within this story, very little of Genovefa's own construction of her life and actions shine through. Instead, her hagiographer used her *vita*, and particularly her construction as a body-place, as a tool to "think with."[160] The characterization of Genovefa in such a way allowed the author to construct a Christian history of Paris, while simultaneously tying his story to other saints' lives dating back to the fourth century. One of the crucial aspects of "Christianization," as scholars have begun to recognize, was not only the presence of Christians, but of Christian spaces.[161] Genovefa as a body-place did both. She not only inspired others to become Christian

[159] Julia Smith, "The Problem of Female Sanctity in Carolingian Europe c. 780-920," *Past and Present* 146.1 (Feb. 1995): 5. The "authenticity" of Genovefa's *vita* has been disputed, but eventually claimed as a 6th century original. For more on the debate and the foundation on which Smith draws her conclusions, see Ian Wood, 'Forgery in Merovingian Haiography," in *Falschungen im Mittelalter: intemationaler Kongress der Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, 6 Vols. (Hanover: Monumenta Germaniae Historica, 1988-90), 369-84. The date of the first copy of Genovefa's *vita* is in Martin Heinzelmann and Joseph-Claude Poulin, *Les vies anciennes de Sainte Genevieve de Paris: etudes critiques* (Paris: Bibliotheque de l'Ecole des Hautes Eludes, 1986).

[160] This characterization of a woman comes from Elizabeth Clark's article, "The Lady Vanishes: Dilemmas of a Feminist Historian after the 'Linguistic Turn,'" *Church History,* 67.1 (1998), 27.

[161] Jacob Latham, "Ritual and the Christianization of Urban Space," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Ritual* ed. Risto Uro, Juliette Day, Richard Rikard Roitto (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

through her deeds, but her physical presence kept the city from falling to "pagans."[162] Her story also helped to de-legitimize the pagan past of the city by shaming those who still fall prey to its old ways. Shunned through silence, Genovefa chose the matrons of the city to help her defend its walls, instead of the previously pagan virgins, who surely would have been present. Christian bodies, even if those bodies have been "tainted" with sex and child-birth, contained far greater power than the uncorrupted bodies of the un-converted. Even those who had been converted, but still did not fully embrace Christ nor acknowledge the ability of the women who follow him, were frequently reprimanded, like the apostles in the Gospel of Mark, for their disbelief. The repeated emphasis on the power of her body-places, from her tear-soaked floor, to her embodied protection of the city walls, clearly demonstrated to all those looking on that Christianity, and particularly ascetic Christianity, constituted the omnipotent, and therefore only, true religion.

Men as Walls

Unlike their female counterparts whose porous bodies restricted them to their households or, at most, the city limits, male ascetics frequently ventured outside the traditional societal bounds.[163] Still desperate for the power their bodies held, however, their hagiographers continued to cast them as city fortifications. Because their bodies were understood to be "naturally" less porous than those of women, male ascetics-turned-wall did not have to undertake any additional ascetic feats to best defend their cities. As such, the fortifications of these male

[162] "Pagan" has been definitely proved to be a group of people created by the Christians to act as a convenient "Other." Because the author of Genovefa's *vita*, however, uses "pagan" in just such a way, I will use the moniker for the sake of clarity.

[163] There are, of course, noted exceptions. The "harlots of the desert" (Mary of Egypt, Pelagia of Antioch), all live well outside the city limits. Men also often resided within the borders of the wall, practicing in houses or what would come to be called, monasteries. See "Saint Mary of Egypt" in *Harlots of the Desert: A Study of Repentance in Early Monastic Sources* ed. and trans. Benedicta Ward. (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications Inc., 1987); "Pelagia of Antioch" in *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient*, ed. and trans. Susan Ashbrook Harvey and Sebastian Brock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

ascetics could also be deployed immediately and did not require time to build them in advance. Indeed, when a city required the bodily defenses of James of Nisibis, an ascetic whom Theodoret described as residing on the frontier of the Roman and Persian empires, he did not establish himself as a bulwark until part of the physical wall had already been destroyed.[164] Despite the destruction of part of their wall, the city, Theodoret reports, was not worried because their enemies "knew nothing of the great wall of the inhabitants."[165] They begged James to come and establish himself on their hastily re-built wall, not by acting within a church and projecting herself outward as did Genovefa, but by standing upon, and reinforcing the wall itself.[166] As a man, James' body offered protection from the penetration of external forces even as they were occurring. As a strong barricade, he could deflect any active attacks against himself and the city, and ultimately aid them in victory.

One of the crucial differences between male and female walls, was their interaction with foes as dictated by the ascetic's own fleshly material. While female ascetics could prevent and withhold attacks upon their flesh, they never resisted them actively. Indeed, Genovefa stopped the Huns before the ever reached Paris; they never attempted to penetrate her defenses with arrows or other assaults, but were simply stopped outside the city as though she had encircled the city within he own bodily protection.[167] Piamon, an Egyptian ascetic, similarly halted attackers three miles outside of her city, without a dart thrown or a sword drawn.[168] Some male ascetics like James, however, were physically assaulted because the material of their body-places enables them to withstand it.

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[164] Thdt., *Hist. rel.* 1.11.
[165] "Τὸ δὲ οὐκ ἤνεγκε τὴν τοῦ ὕδατος ἐμβολὴν, ἀλλὰ τῇ ῥύμῃ κατασεισθὲν ἄρδην ἅπαν τὸ κατ᾽ ἐκεῖνο τὸ μέρος κατέπεσεν. Οἱ δὲ μέγα ἐβόησαν, ὡς εὐαλώτου γενομένου τοῦ ἄσεως· τὸ τὰρ μὲγα τεῖχος τῶν ενοικούντων ἠγνόουν." Thdt. *Hist. Rel.*, 1.11.
[166] Thdt. *Hist. Rel.*, 1.11-12.
[167] "S. Genouefa," 3.11.
[168] Palladius, *HL*, 31.

In other cases, however, where the city was in less immediate danger from assailing armies**,** male ascetics provided a spiritual deterrent. While other Christian cities such as Rome were able to gain an additional defensive structure through the cult of the saints that sprouted just outside its walls, other cities, like Thebaid in North Africa, benefited, instead, from a halo of ascetics.[169] The anonymous author of the *Historia monachorum in Aegypto,* in his description of the life of Oxyrhynchus, notes that, it was impossible to do justice to the marvels they saw in Thebaid because "the city was so full of monasteries that the walls themselves reverberated with monks. Other monasteries encompass it outside, so that the outer city forms another town alongside."[170] These ascetics, like the bones of saints, acted as a holy protection for the city within, a bastion against the marauding *daimones* and forces of evil. As the walls of a city, ascetics could mitigate assaults, and protect the Christian bodies within.

Beyond the Wall

While some, particularly female, ascetics stayed within the city to undertake their ascetic practice, many left behind the world for the struggles of the desert. For female ascetics, this move proved problematic, as they teetered on the edge of improper placement.[171] In order to bring them back under the jurisdiction of Christian authorities, their flesh was cast as and transformed into mobile defensive structures, powerful enough to protect only themselves. Male ascetics, however, were transformed into bastioned and fortresses of and for Christianity. As physical defensive structures, they not only ousted *daimones* from mountaintops, but

[169] For more as relics as a holy wall, see Hendrik Dey, *The Aurelian Wall and the Refashioning of Imperial Rome, AD 271-85*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 217-229.
[170] "γέμει γὰρ οὕτως ἔνδοθεν μοναστηρίων, ὡς τὰ τείχη ἐξηχεῖσθαι ὑπ᾽ αὐτῶν τῶν μοναχῶν, περιέχεται δὲ ἔξωθεν μοναστηρίοις ἑτέροις, ὡς ἄλλην εἶναι παρ᾽ αὐτὴν τὴν ἔξω πόλιν." *Historia Monachorum*, 5.1.
[171] The concept of "improper placement" will be explored further in Chapter 3.

transformed the landscape between the city they fled and the area they now secured into a Christian space. As outposts of Christianity, hagiographers and episcopal authority constructed ascetics as the most powerful body-places the world had yet seen.

Defenses on the Move

Even though "good" Christian women were urged to stay within their homes, and certainly their cities, for their own protections, many frequently left at very least to attend services and minister to the needs of those in their communities. Other women ventured further afield in order to visit holy sites or make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem itself. For these endeavors, only the strongest of virgins, those who had taken the most qualities of their dwellings, could (more) safely leave their homes and venture outside without falling immediately to the penetrative forces of the world.[172] By stressing the limits of their own materiality through exceeding the traditional boundaries for women, however, they lost the ability to extend their protection beyond the limits of their flesh. Indeed, so great was the strain on their resources that they had to undertake additional ascetic practices to ensure that their bodily portals, their physical doors and windows, were sealed off completely. They had to become portable defensive structures, impenetrable to even the most innocuous threat.

[172] There are, of course, obvious examples of women who do not fit this ideal and instead use their massive wealth as a safeguard against the marauding forces of the world. Both Egeria and Melania the Elder, for example, travel through Egypt, as well as to many holy sites in Jerusalem. These women are never described as body-places, nor, however, are they ever cast in any physical danger. See *Egérie, journal de voyage* ed. and trans. Pierre Maraval and Manuel C Díaz (Paris: *Editions du cerf*, 2002); Caroline Schroeder, "Exemplary Women," in *Melania: Early Christianity through the Life of One Family* ed. C. M. Chin and Caroline Schroeder (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 50-65. Melania the younger especially becomes a problematic figure for Augustine, who does not know quite what to do with such a public woman. His dislike of this type of female religious practice is made evident in his letter to Ecdecia (*Ep*. 262) in Elizabeth Clark, *Saint Augustine on Marriage and Sexuality*. (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996), 24.

The first layer of defense was clothing. Veils, in particular, shielded the woman from the world, and the world from the woman.[173] This piece of clothing embodies the image of virgin as city, and indeed more closely elides the two, as the Greek word κρήδεμνον could refer to a woman's "headbinder," the "battlements of the city," and the "stopper of a bottle" simultaneously[174] The veil, then, serves as the virgin's first line of physical fortification as she prepares her body for battle. Importantly, this structure also works to seal the openings of her body through which liquid can pass, and through which accesses can be gained to the curved structures within. "For ancient Greeks," Dale Martin argues, "the veil (*kredemnon*) not only symbolized but actually effected a protective barrier guarding the woman's head and, by metanymic transfer, her genitals."[175]

In some instances, virgins who ministered to men wished to cover not just their head, but their face as well, and so donned heavy cloaks. Domnina, for example, a sixth-century Syriac saint, wears only a hair-shirt when enclosed in her small hut, but dons a heavy cloak and bends entirely in half when she ventures outside, neither seeing a face nor showing her face to another.[176] In the same work, Theodoret describes Marana and Cyra, who similarly wear heavy cloaks, though these garments extend not only over their heads, but all the way down past their feet so that they drag on the floor, leaving no inch of skin exposed. These garments, then, protect the women from visual penetration, while simultaneously hardening the flesh against its own intrinsic weakness. When covered completely, no cool breeze could kiss the skin, relieving

[173] Martin, *The Corinthian Body*, 346.
[174] Anne Carson, "Putting Her in Her Place," in *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World*, ed. David M. Halperin, John J. Winkler, and Froma I. Zeitlin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 160.
[175] Martin, *The Corinthian Body*, 234.
[176] Thdt. *Hist. rel.*, 30.2.

it of its plight, if even for a moment. Instead, the cloak helps to strengthen the flesh underneath, sealing it off against the lure of life in the open.

Yet, like building in which the virgin previously resided, cloaks naturally have openings and therefore were not impregnable. While they helped virgins to seal off their windows (for their eyes were shuttered against the world), cloaks did little to guard the more dangerous apertures of the mouth and vagina. Because these openings were more exposed as the woman moved outside of her home and across, potentially, hundreds of miles, she almost always fasted more severely. When Marana and Cyra, for example, have lived for forty-two years in their tiny cell, they had a great desire to see the great places where Christ had suffered, and so hastened to Jerusalem.[177] Along the way, emulating the fast of Moses, they took no nourishment, receiving food and water only when they had reached the city and accomplished their worship. Likewise, they completed the return journey without food; a journey in which, Theodoret reminded his readers, "there are not less than twenty stages."[178] While fasting, as noted above, helps to seal off both orifices and weaken the connection between womb and mouth, an attenuated connection was not enough. During these journeys, these women were not on the lookout for the bridegroom; the guards at the doors of their mouths were not under instruction to let in friend while guarding against foe, but were under strict orders to bar entrance to all. Even food and drink, which could sustain the body, proved too great a danger, as its passage through the mouth exposed the virgin, even if only for the briefest of seconds, to potential danger. She was a lone fortress in this wider world, no longer surrounded by house and city wall, and therefore could take no chances on letting the enemy slip past her defenses. While Theodoret does not bring back the fortress or city language he uses in his prologue, both women undertake more extreme

[177] Thdt. *Hist. rel*., 29.7
[178] Thdt. *Hist. rel*., 29.7.

asceticism during this time, a process which Theodoret insists shores up the defenses of their body-cities.[179]

John of Ephesus, the leader of a Syriac church in the sixth century, told a similar tale of a sixth-century virgin named Mary, who traveled every year to Jerusalem, eating something small only every two days.[180] While more food was permitted in this instance, John suggested that Mary was both allowed and in less danger of doing so because of her advanced years.[181] While Marana and Cyra were in their fifties or sixties by the time they begin their journey to Jerusalem, Mary was said to be in her eighties. Age, while not a tool immediately available to all virgins, played a crucial factor in the construction of virginal bodies as defensive structures. Like a fortress that has stood the test of time, the bodies of these women had proven themselves not only reliable, but impenetrable by outside forces.

Mary, John wrote, was a "pure virgin," dedicated to her calling since childhood.[182] After many decades of ascetic undertaking, she bent her mind on going to Jerusalem so that she might worship, and then return to her previous way of life. When she finally reached the site of Golgotha, she was, John reports, "lifted up in ecstasy," and remained immobile for three days.[183] For many other virgins, this act would have spelled certain death, as Mary's body remained exposed to all for a great length of time. John, indeed, playing on the apprehensions his audience would likely have held, immediately followed his description of her in ecstasy with what would seem like terrible foreshadowing: "Meanwhile, men came to see her, and the guards wished to drive her off."[184] This scenario exemplifies precisely why women, especially virgins, were not to

[179] Thdt. *Hist. Rel.* prol. 6-7.
[180] John of Ephesus, *Lives of the Eastern Saints*, in *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient,* 124.
[181] Age affected men in similar ways. Elias, for example, ate three ounces of bread every evening on account of his age, whereas he ate only once a week in his youth. *Historia Monachorum* 7.2
[182] John of Ephesus, *Lives,* 124.
[183] John of Ephesus, *Lives*, 124.
[184] John of Ephesus, *Lives*, 124.

go outside alone and unguarded.[185] Men posed too great a threat, and without the additional protection of walls, a virgin's body could only withstand so much. Yet Mary's body was not the body of an ordinary virgin, but one that took on the defenses of her previous chamber and endlessly tested against the forces of evil. Her final and most potent defense in this case, was her age. "[W]hen they [the men] saw that she was an old and feeble woman," John writes, "and, moreover, standing in prayer, they left her alone."[186] These onlookers saw, not with spiritual eyes, but fleshly ones. Where they saw weakness, there existed strength. The apparent feebleness of her body in fact acted as an additional barrier, rendering her undesirable and thus less vulnerable to penetration. Mary's age, and God's defense of her body, then, thwarted her attackers and defended her body as no other ascetic undertaking could. To these men, Mary was sexually undesirable. Her flesh was shrunken, and her womb dried out. Her body, because it no longer produced life-giving fluid, was no longer sexually appealing, and therefore in far less danger of penetration. Her age had, at least socially, closed one of her "doors" permanently, and transformed the other into a more harmless "window." The bodies of a select few ascetic women, then, transformed themselves into movable fortresses of Christianity, too vulnerable to encompass the masses, but strong enough to thwart any physical assault.

The Outposts of Men

Ascetic men beyond the wall of the city, on the other hand, could not only become fortresses, but, once they had established themselves as such, could claim the piece of land on

[185] Jerome in particular insists that "good" virgins should never leave the house. Hier. *Ep.* 22.26. For more on Jerome's letter to Eustochium, see *Handmaids of the Lord: Contemporary Descriptions of Feminine Asceticism in the First Six Centuries*, ed. and trans. Joan M. Petersen. [Cistercian Studies Series: 143] (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, Inc. 1996).
[186] John of Ephesus, *Lives*, 124.

which they established their body-place for Christianity writ-large. It is important to note that the authors of these hagiographies often claimed this land rhetorically, instead of physically. Indeed, as I will discuss, the ownership of the land itself was often contested by several groups who desired to lay claim to its power. In some cases, as in Athanasius the bishop of Alexandria's fourth-century *Life of Antony*, male ascetics resided in a physical encampment, easing their physical and visual transition into a fortress for Christianity. Athanasius described how Antony, having chosen an abandoned barracks (παρεμβολή) for his fight against evil, must first drive off the hordes of snakes and reptiles that have taken up residence within.[187] Here he remained for many years, rebuffing all forces, no matter their intent, that attempt to thwart him. Even pilgrims who wished to learn from him, were rebuffed at the door. Yet *daimones*, Athanasius warned, could slip through the cracks of even the most well-fortified defensive, and so strove to oppose Antony's undertaking. One night, the *daimones* became so infuriated with Antony that they shook his monastic dwelling, threatening to bring down his very walls. While neither the barracks nor his flesh alone could have repelled the attacks of the enemy, since before Antony's arrival all sorts of creatures found a home within, together, as a single entity, they waited as the *daimones* broke upon their walls. For twenty years, his body-place withstood the assaults of time, people and the forces of evil, and, like a fortress constantly maintained by those within, he remained physically unaltered in the eyes of the viewer.[188]

While Antony willingly embraced his elision with his fortified surroundings, other ascetics were at first driven mad by their enclosures before they grasped their defensive purpose.

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[187] Vivian, Athanassakis and Greer note that, "It is not clear exactly what *parembole*, 'barracks', indicates. LSJ 1335B, IIb2, gives 'encampment' (Ex 14:19 [LXX]), generally 'soldiers' quarters, barracks', and cites a papyrus from Oxyrhynchus (third century)." Athan. *Vit. Ant.* 53.

[188] Antony is one of the few ascetics whose flesh remains unaltered by the elements during his life. As Georgia Frank details, one of the signs of holiness was the way in which asceticism physically transformed the body. Frank, *Memory of the Eyes*, 142. Antony's uncorrupted flesh rebukes this model, and is reflected in his dwelling place. This phenomenon of the abode of an ascetic reflecting his or her face will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2.

Abba Moses, an ascetic whose story was collected within the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, was said to have struggled greatly with the temptation of fornication as he sat alone in his cell.[189] So maddening did the walls surrounding him become that, despite his orders, he ran to Abba Isidore and begged him not to force him to return to his cell. Abba Isidore, or so the story goes, took pity upon this ascetic, and so showed him the sky where angels warred with the enemies of Christianity for control of the world. It was this battle, he explained, in which ascetics engaged. After imbibing this message, Abba Moses was able to pass it onto younger generations of ascetics, urging them to return to their cells, for "your cell will teach you everything."[190] In their cells, ascetics learned to become like the walls which surrounded them—they would harden their flesh, close their doors to food, their loins to lust, and the windows of their eyes and ears to the pleasures of the world. As these ascetics transformed their bodies, they would come to realize that they were their own huts, fortresses on this brink of Good and Evil, poised to defend Christianity within their very breast.

The positioning of these ascetic body-fortresses was, however, not described as a matter of happenstance. As when establishing the frontier of an empire, natural barriers such as mountains provided clear, though often contested, borderlines.[191] Such boundaries, however, often proved difficult to hold, given that a legion could easily occupy part of a mountain, though rarely an entire mountain range. The establishment of such strongholds, then served primarily a political purpose, justifying the "exercise of power in a territory [which the empire did] not yet occupy."[192] The body-places of ascetics served just such a purpose.

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[189] *Apophth. Patr.* 6.
[190] *Apophth. Patr.* 6.
[191] C. R. Whittaker, *Frontiers of the Roman Empire: A Social and Economic Study* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 19.
[192] Whittaker, *Frontiers,* 27.

The *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto*, the anonymous late fourth-century tales of monks in Egypt, for instances, tells of the ascetic Elias who was famous for spending seventy years in the particularly uninhabitable mountain range in the desert.[193] According to his hagiographer, Elias established himself in such a way that the peaks became part of his flesh. When pilgrims first came upon him, they saw not his body, which was hidden within a cave, but rough crags that towered on either side (*λίθου ἀγρίων παρακειμένων*).[194] His body-fortress, then, encompassed not only flesh, but rock and earth, rendering it nearly impenetrable and extremely treacherous to even attempt to encounter.[195] Similarly, Pityrion inhabited a high mountain overlooking a river. To the anonymous author and his travel companions, the crags and the caves of the mountain melded with Pityrion, rendering his indistinguishable from his surroundings. As with all ancient *limes,* the connection between these outposts was never linear, but instead worked as zones of established power and identity.[196] These zones would have extended, not just from one ascetic to another, but from the ascetic to the city over which he presided.

While many of the male ascetics describe in Theodoret's *Historia Religiosa* also resided as body-fortresses within mountain ranges, Theodoret purposefully cast this boundary as different type of border line: one which transformed the identity of those within.[197] While walls

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[193] *Hist Mon.* 7.1.

[194] "... ὡς μόγις ἐπιβαίνειν τοῖς ἴχνεσι τοὺς ἐπειγομένους ἔνθεν κἀκεῖθεν λίθου ἀγρίων παρακειμένων." *Hist. Mon.* 7.2. Theodoret told a similar tale of James of Cyrrhestica. Sitting upon the mountain, James practiced living life in a body without a body (*Hist. rel.*, 21.3). As would happen in death, his body became the earth, and the earth his body. When pilgrims from miles around journeyed to see James, they did not try to snatch up the hairs from his head, nor grab the rags from his clothes. Instead, they absconded with the soil from the mountain with which he resided. Eventually, so many people came to this holy body-place, that the mountain, like the flesh from its ascetic feats, became nearly exhausted from all those coming to carry it off for their benefit (*Hist. rel.*, 21.4). When these men and women returned to their homes, they did not have a fleshly token with which to remember James, but soil, that little piece of place that embodies, not just the power of the ascetic, but the ascetic himself.

[195] The hagiographer notes that the path to Elias' cave was extremely narrow and flanked by sharp rocks on each side. *Hist. Mon.* 7.1-2.

[196] Whittaker, *Frontiers of the Roman Empire*, 71.

[197] See Daniel Boyarin's discussion of how border lines drawn between groups work to shape the identity of both in, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004). Women also worked as walls to shape the identity of those without their boundaries. Unlike men, however, they did

and army outposts often served as a deterrent to enemies, one of their primary roles was to help to contain and define the people who lived inside its boundaries.[198] It is crucial to note here that that walls themselves exerted influence on those within their bounds. As often occurred within disputed territories, the border crossed people instead of people the border, resulting in a new identity despite the fact that no journey was made. Such then was the case for the townspeople who now find themselves within Theodoret's jurisdiction. In these instances, the ascetic would not only act as a military deterrent to any *daimones* who wished to wage war on Theodoret and his see, but would also define the newly converted Christians against their non-Christian neighbors; a process which, in Theodoret's re-telling, they seemed to welcome whole-heartedly.[199] These ascetics, these fortresses, thus became the first line of defense against an onslaught of wickedness and corruption. Far from acting as mere boundary claims, their physical presence as part of the landscape proved necessary for Theodoret to rhetorically establish Christianity itself.

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not establish military fortresses or expel *daimones* from territory. Instead, they worked as the walls of a home, as with the case of Eusebius of Emessa, to transform the lives of their families. Not only is it a safeguard for virgins to live within a household, but she will, *by her very presence* transform the activity of her family. "her sister will be instructed, the slave will be corrected, her father will become more chaste, her brother will be persuaded to live a life of continence…." Eusebius of Emesa, *Hom.* 7.24: "*Si enim fuerit virgo in domo, honestatem et mater colebit … et soror erudietur et servus corrigetur et pater castior erit et frater suadebitur…."* Within their borders of the now Christian home, the activity necessarily changed. Additionally, as a city wall, Genovefa did not free Paris' inhabitants from "paganism," but did prevent it from becoming so. The protect and shape she gave to the boundaries of Christianity helped, according to her hagiographer, to preserve the Christian identity of those within. "S. Genouefa."

[198] Hendrik Dey in particular discusses how walls can serve both defensive and constructive means. In particular, when examining the Aurelian Wall, he argues that its pragmatic aspect does not serve as the final word in its history. Instead, we must consider not only wall as object, but as subject, an historical actor that exerts control over those within its boundaries. Such is the case in particular when the wall 'Christianizes' Romans within the city. See Chapter three, 'Motives, Meaning and Context: the Aurelian Wall of the Late Roman State' in Dey, *The Aurelian Wall*, 110-159.

[199] For more on the construction of ascetics as outposts in Theodoret's *Historia Religiosa,* see Kathryn Kleinkopf, "A Landscape of Bodies: Exploring the Role of Ascetics in Theodoret's Historia Religiosa," *Studia Patristica* 22 (2015), 283-292.

Theodoret described one such soldier, Eusebius, who established himself as a fortress on a dale just above the city called Teleda.[200] To the north of the town stood the highest mountain which the locals called κορυφή, or Summit. On the top of that mountain, according to Theodoret, lived a precinct of *daimones*, greatly admired by those in the vicinity. In order to thwart these *daimones'* "malicious designs," as well as seek solitude for himself, the ascetic established himself within his hut and acted like a garrison between the town and mountain, providing a powerful barrier between the two.

As word of this ascetic's stronghold spread, Theodoret insisted, grateful townspeople began to flock to him. Curious about the fortress of his body and the tactics with which he thwarted the enemy, one old man asked why Eusebius bent himself in half, refusing to look at the sky or admire the beauty of the plane. The ascetic replied that he did so in order to prevent the *daimon* from making war (πολεμῇ) on him in things of importance, he transferred the war to unimportant things. In so doing, if the *daimon* won, the ascetic and the town he protected suffered no great loss, while if it lost, the *daimon* looked all the more ridiculous. In this way the *daimon* could neither smite nor kill, for his weapons were not mortal and lack points of iron.[201] As a fortress manned with a disciplined army, the ascetic could route his enemies and force them on the defensive. In so doing, the attacks lost their power and danger, allowing the ascetic fortress to withstand the attacks. The old man, purportedly in great awe of Eusebius's courage and experience in war, departed, spreading word about the protection of their town.

[200] Thdt. *Hist. rel.*, 4.3. The monastery of Teleda became the greatest monastery of the Antiochene region. The monastery itself has left notable ruins which date to the late fifth or early sixth century. Price, *History*, 57.
[201] Thdt. *Hist. rel.*, 4.6-7.

It is crucial to note, however, the power of rhetoric both to change how a place is perceived as well as the politics and identities of those associated with it.[202] While Theodoret desired to cast the ousting of *daimones* as a victory for Christianity over evil, the entities he described would have served a little more than local deities to population. Yet by constructing ascetics as body-places in those territories which were hotly contested by both "pagans" and Christians, Theodoret established rhetorical power not only over the people who resided there, but also over the land itself. Instead of the ascetics forming merely outposts, they became connection points to Christianize all the land in between. Yet more than connection zones and physical structures, practices and activities held within them were needed to reconstruct the desert landscape.[203] In order to make a place Christian, it first had to be filled with Christian sights, sounds and activities.[204] Such a process began with the simple act of walking.[205] As men and women made their way from city-center to the ascetics beyond the border, their bodies and footsteps physically altered the landscape by taking up space and claiming it for their own.[206] Like buildings, their physical forms altered the material conditions and therefore the meaning of public spaces.[207] By traversing from city to ascetic, therefore, the pilgrims worked to alter the Syriac landscape, marking it as a powerful Christian space.

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[202] Christine Shepardson, *Controlling Contested Places: Late Antique Antioch and the Spatial Politics of Religious Controversy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 10.
[203] Nathanael Andrade, "The Processions of John Chrysostom and the Contested Spaces of Constantinople," in *JECS* 18:2 (2010), 161-189.
[204] Andrade, "The Processions of John Chrysostom," 176.
[205] Leslie Brubaker, "Topography and the creation of public space in early medieval Constantinople," in *Topographies of Power in the Early Middle Ages* ed. Mayke de Jong, Frans Theuws and Carine van Rhijn (Leidon, Boston, Koln: 2001).
[206] Numerous scholars have written on the ability of pilgrims to 'Christianize' landscape. Shepardson, *Controlling Contested Places*; David Frankfurter, ed., *Pilgrimage and Holy Space in Late Antique Egypt* (Boston: Brill, 1998); Georgia Frank, *The Memory of the Eyes;* Pierre Maraval *Lieux saints et pèlerinages d'Orient: Histoire et* géographie des origins à la conquête arabe (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 2004).
[207] Nathanael Andrade, "The Processions of John Chrysostom," 165.

Theodoret's tale of Thalelaus, an ascetic who lived about two miles outside of Gabala (about sixty miles south of Antioch), illustrated his rhetorical program.[208] Here, Thalelaeus established his fortress on a hill on which a great precinct of *daimones* stood, honored with many sacrifices by the "impious of old."[209] Many of the men in the surrounding city, or so Theodoret wished his audience to believe, served these *daimones* in fear that they would harm their donkeys and mules, oxen and sheep, thus keeping them from their livelihood. This zone, then, marked one of great contestation, one which was to be claimed for Christianity.

Angry at the ascetic's arrival and desirous to frighten him away and maintain the land for themselves, the *daimones* suddenly uprooted hundreds of flourishing fig and olive trees from the hill on which he resided. Yet the buttress of Christianity could not be moved, staking claim to the land and its inhabitants. Embittered, the "wicked" *daimones* tried again, wailing and displaying torches at night, trying to terrify him and confuse his thought. Yet the ascetic laughed, thwarting the *daimones* who sought his destruction. Consequently, the ascetic caused the *daimones* to flee, establishing both himself as an outpost of Christianity, and ridding the town of its tormentors.

While the "impious of old" were never explicitly named, it is clear from the story that these men and women were not Christians.[210] Moreover, Theodoret attempted to convince his audience that these people were not willing participants in their paganism, but were instead forced into compliance for the sake of their lives. The fight, then, as he set out the terms, took place both for the land and the souls of those who lay within its borders. As previously mentioned, the establishment of a fort along the *limes* of an empire would grant that place power

[208] Price, *History*, 182.
[209] Thdt. *Hist. rel.*, 28.1.
[210] Thdt. *Hist. rel.*, 28.1.

over a territory which it did not yet control, either actually or rhetorically. Yet in so placing an outpost, the controlling entity would be able to claim all which lay in its frontier zone as under its jurisdiction. While Theodoret used martial Christian imagery to describe the event, it greatly resembled the way in which an empire would justify 'liberating' a town or province from the control of another. The inhabitants of this newly reclaimed city would be 'free' to worship the Christian God, purportedly thankful that they were no longer threatened by a wicked and corrupting force.

As Christine Shepardson notes, however, accounts such as these reflect the perspective of the author, and undoubtedly exaggerate the version of events.[211] Indeed, while Libanius, the fourth-century Greek teacher of rhetoric, also discussed the relocation of ascetics to the Antiochene region, the stories he told were not of the peaceful establishment of Christian fortresses upon a hill, but of the violent ousting of "pagan" gods which would ultimately lead to the destruction of inhabitants and the entire region.[212] Ascetics, Libanius claimed, gorged themselves on local food and drink, and then ran about tearing down temple walls, burning statues, and overthrowing alters.[213] Thus, not only did these individuals, according to Libanius, eschew the central tenants of their religious practices, but also did not convert any of the townspeople they claimed to have one over. Their apparent converts, he insisted, while apparent through their practices were not, in fact, real.[214]

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[211] Shepardson, *Controlling Contested Places,* 193.

[212] See, for example, *Or*. 30.4. For further analysis of Libanius and his discussion of ascetic actions in the regions surrounding Antioch, see Shepardson, *Controlling Contested Places,* 193-196.

[213] Libanius, *Or*. 30.8. "σὺ μὲν οὖν οὔθ᾽ ἱερὰ κεκλεῖσθαι <ἐκέλευσας> οὔτε μηδένα προσιέναι οὔτε πῦρ οὔτε λιβανωτὸν οὔτε τὰς ἀπὸ τῶν ἄλλων θυμιαμάτων τιμὰς ἐξήλασας τῶν νεῶν οὐδὲ τῶν βωμῶν, οἱ δὲ μελανειμονοῦντες οὗτοι καὶ πλείω μὲν τῶν ἐλεφάντων ἐσθίοντες, πόνον δὲ παρέχοντες τῷ πλήθει τῶν ἐκπωμάτων | τοῖς δι᾽ ἀσμάτων αὐτοῖς παραπέμπουσι τὸ ποτόν, συγκρύπτοντες δὲ ταῦτα ὠχρότητι τῇ διὰ τέχνης αὐτοῖς πεπορισμένῃ μένοντος, ᾧ βασιλεῦ, καὶ κρατοῦντος τοῦ νόμου θέουσιν ἐφ᾽ ἱερὰ ξύλα φέροντες καὶ | λίθους καὶ σίδηρον, οἱ δὲ καὶ ἄνευ τούτων χεῖρας καὶ πόδας." *Loeb Classical Library.*

[214] Libanius, *Or*. 30.28 "Εἰ δέ σοι φήσουσί τινας ἑτέρους ὑπὸ τούτων γεγενῆσθαι τῶν ἔργων καὶ μετ᾽ αὐτῶν εἶναι τῇ περὶ τοῦ θείου δόξῃ, μή σε λανθανέτωσαν δοκοῦντας οὐ γεγενημένους λέγοντες."

One of the goals of this oration, as Shepardson persuasively argues, "seems to have been to facilitate the continuation of traditional cult, and to stop Christian ascetics from redefining the local landscape to their advantage."[215] His rhetoric, in fact, explicitly denied any connection or authority that the ascetics or other Christians had claimed over place. Unlike the ascetics of Theodoret's treatise**,** these individuals clearly had not waged a war against their bodily appetites, and so could not become a hardened body-place. Moreover, they could not even perform the functions of a city wall or frontier fortification, since the land on which they sat had been falsely claimed and the inhabitants only nominally converted. No townspeople were here grateful for the protection of Christianity against the *daimones*, but instead resented and even feared their presence. Such clashing tales, then, reveal the power of place and those who claimed it. While some Christian authors attempted to create ascetics as body-places to assert definitive control over a region, we must remember that the spaces were themselves contested**.**[216]

Conclusion: A Landscape of Bodies

The construction of ascetics as fortresses which could defend against *daimon* and Hun alike thus represents an idealized deployment and employment of the flesh as body. While they did not necessarily acknowledge the contested nature of the space itself, ascetics as body-place provided bishops and other episcopal authorities with the ability to claim power and territories for Christianity which otherwise may have been out of their range. Similarly, as fortresses, ascetics protected themselves from external penetration, and their fellows from the onslaught of non-Christian forces. In the eyes of their hagiographers, these ascetics ultimately transformed

[215] Shepardson, *Controlling Contested Places*, 195.
[216] As Shepardson convincingly demonstrates throughout *Controlling Contested Places.*

both territory and people within their jurisdiction into Christians, thus shaping both the physical and rhetorical landscape of late-antique Christianity.

The process of transformation into a body-place, however, was life-long and arduous. As Jerome, Chrysostom, and Theodoret all noted, the process began with the ascetic themself waging a war, soul against flesh. Once the desires had been subdued, the body became a wall, or even a city upon a hill, while the soul emerged as those who guarded it. While this process was nearly universally acknowledged among these writers, the deployment and use of the ascetic as fortress began to differ geographically. Jerome, writing primarily to wealthy virgins in Rome, envisioned his ascetics as bridal chambers, sealing off the portals of their bodies from penetrative forces which sought to corrupt them. Further east in Egypt and Syria, Eusebius of Emesa and Pseudo-Athanasius described the ability of virginal ascetic women to extend their defenses and merge with their homes, protecting all those within their walls. Perhaps both most anomalous and striking of all, the anonymous Gallic hagiographer described Genovefa and a group of Christian matrons encompassing the walls of Paris within their bounds to stop the invading Huns in their tracks. Despite their disparate locations and ability to extend the protective fortress of their flesh, however, these female ascetics were ultimately still bound by the inherently "soft" nature of their bodies, and so remained bound to the city.

So permeable was a woman's flesh, even as an ascetic, thought to be, that those who did step beyond these gates utterly lost their ability to protect others. As mobile defensive structures, female ascetics could travel abroad to the Holy Land, but could claim no territory along the way. These women represented self-contained entities, so completely sealed off that they could not even establish roots on a mountain. Male ascetics who traveled further abroad, in contrast, faced far less danger due to their "naturally" more impervious bodies. As fortresses, they could drive

off local gods as well as repel any devilish creatures which had settled on the land. In so doing, their body-fortresses melded with their earthen structures to form a *limes* separating Christianity from the space beyond.

As with legionary forces established by an empire, ascetic frontiers often took root in mountain ranges. As the male ascetics became synonymous with the crags of the peaks, their hagiographers used their location to their own advantage, rhetorically laying claim to the space. Even if the hagiographers themselves had never journeyed to a town over which an ascetic resided, they, like an emperor, drew upon the influence of their legions to claim that town for themselves. As Jacob Latham and Nathaniel Andrade have shown, the procession of Christians back and forth across a specific space, in addition to the smells and sounds they brought with them, would help to reinforce the territory between town and mountain as Christian.[217]

Libanius' rebuttal, however, effectively demonstrated the idyllic construction of these ascetics by Christian authorities. Contrary to Theodoret's claim that his ascetics had both peacefully and successfully wrested the land for Christianity as they sat quietly atop their hills, Libanius argued that these individuals were instead drunkards and gluttons. They violently lay waste, he claimed, to temples, as they ate their way through town. Moreover, he continued, the inhabitants, whom Christians claimed to have converted, were Christian in name only. While they may have appeared to practice Christianity, their actions were deceiving. Instead, Libanius insisted, this land outside Antioch belong to the local gods and ought to be defended as such.

Libanius' critique reveals the flaw in the Christian narrative of properly-placed ascetics. As much as Christian leaders attempted to depict ascetics as body-fortresses, such was not

[217] Jacob Latham, "From Literal to Spiritual Soldiers of Christ: Disputed Episcopal Elections and the Advent of Procession in Late Antique Rome," *Church History* 81.2 (2012): 298-327; Andrade, "The Processions of John Chrysostom and the Contested Spaces of Constantinople," 161-189.

always the case. Yet many of these same Christian authors established a contingency plan: ascetics who committed acts outside of their "appropriate" behavior were often simply placed improperly. They either ventured too far afield, or resided in, and therefore as, an improperly gendered place. These authorities would thus occasionally use tales of misplaced ascetics as both a defense against accusations of debauchery, as well as a warning to their own congregants of what should happen should they not remain "properly" placed. Such an investigation will be the topic of the following chapter.

CHAPTER TWO:
The Physiognomy of the Landscape: Reading Place as Face

"καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν"
"And the word was made flesh and *tented* among us."
- John 1:14

In his prologue to his history of the monks of Syria, Theodoret, the fifth-century Bishop of Cyrrhus, writes, "How auspicious it is to behold the contests of valorous men, the athletes of virtue, and to draw benefit with the eyes."[218] Theodoret invites his reader to look upon, throughought his story, the actions of the ascetics and ultimately gain benefit from them through their own desire to imitate (even in a small way) such extraordinary feats.[219] Yet, what is remarkable about both Theodoret's hagiography, as well as tales of monks and ascetics from across the late antique Christian world, is how often the body remains hidden from sight. Because we ourselves are so often focused on the flesh as the locus of meaning-making, we tend to glance over the fact, for example, that monks like Antony the Great spent over twenty years hidden inside an abandoned barracks, out of sight of everyone who visited.[220] Instead, we tend to focus on the moment of his miraculous reveal, when he steps out of his abode apparently unchanged, despite demonic attacks and his numerically old age.[221]

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[218] "Τῶν ἀρίστων ἀνδρῶν καὶ ἀρετῆς ἀθλητῶν καλὸν μὲν ἰδεῖν τοὺς ἀγῶνας καὶ τοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς τὴν ὠφέλειαν ἀρύσασθαι." Thodoret of Cyrrhus, *Historia Religiosa* (Hereafter *Hist. rel.*) in *Théodoret de Cyr: Historie des moines de Syrie*, vol. 1 ed. Pierre Canivet and Alice Leroy-Molinghen (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1977) Prologue, 1. Translation is my own. For a complete English translation and introduction, see R. M. Price, *History of the Monks of Syria* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1985).

[219] Georgia Frank, her in remarkable work *The Memory of the Eyes: Pilgrims to Living Saints in Christian Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), describes this process in detail for ascetics throughout the late antique world.

[220] Athanase D'Alexandrie, *Vie D'Antoine* in *Athanase D'Alexandrie: Vie D'Antoine: Introduction, Texte Critique, Traduction, Notes et Index* (Paris: Les Éditions Du Cerf, 2004) 12.3. For an English translation, see: Athanasius, *Life of Antony* in *The Life of Antony: The Coptic Life and the Greek Life,* trans. Tim Vivian and Apostolos N. Athanassakis (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 2003).

[221] This phenomenon is widespread throughout scholarship of Athanasius' *Life of Antony*. See, for example, David Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk: Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2006), 183.

As I discussed in the previous chapter, similar phenomena occur in other ascetic treatises, as ascetics spend the majority of their lives inside of huts, caves, forests, or even small chests. Pilgrims, it seems, would try anything to see the bodies within. They attempted to peer through the tiny windows, the cracks in walls and doors. Some even tunneled underneath the enclosure when every other entrance was barred.[222] This lack of bodily access and disruption appears to perplex some modern scholars as much as it did ancient Christians. R. M. Price, the modern editor of Theodoret's *Historia Religiosa,* for example, groups many of the ascetics by their type of dwelling not only because their lives seemed frustratingly interchangeable, but because they represent an "external of asceticism."[223] Georgia Frank even remarks that impenetrable cells with little more than windows presented "architectural obstacles" to the pilgrim's access of the holy flesh.[224] As a result, we tend to gloss over these moments for those few in which the body becomes visible. Yet, if we take Theodoret and the many other hagiographers at their word, we have to ask ourselves, at what are we supposed to be looking? Can we truly only gain benefit with our eyes when the skin is in sight, or are they entreating us to see in an entirely different way? If only the physical body produced benefits, it would negate a great deal of the looking taking place. Especially because hagiographers chose and controled onto what their readers' gaze landed, I contend that benefit must not lie solely within the flesh, and that these men didn't cast ascetics as body-places solely for their own benefit. Instead, I argue that ancient Christian writers cast ascetic abodes as a second skin for those within, inviting literal and literary pilgrims alike to evoke a biblical past and scriptures through their reading of landscape as body.

[222] Theodoret, for example, must dig through the mud wall of Marana and Cyra's enclosure in order to see them. Thdt. *Hist. rel.,* 29.4.
[223] Price, *A History of the Monks of Syria,* xxxi-xxxiii.
[224] Frank, *The Memory of the Eyes*, 142.

In order to explore how this process occurred, we must begin with the ancient act of physiognomy. In this section, I expand upon Michael Taussig's, Maud Gleason's, and Georgia Frank's studies on the use of physiognomy to read character, a biblical past, and scripture into the bodies of ascetics. Building on modern landscape studies and ancient sources, I push this theory further to suggest that ancient Christians would have transposed this ability onto landscape when the body of the ascetic was not visible. Reading character into landscape or even architecture would not have been a foreign phenomenon to early Christians, and hagiographers eased this transition with their elision of flesh and abode. They became physiognomers themselves, as they focused their readers' gaze on poorly constructed huts, craggy caves, or clear streams running from an ascetic's mountain abode to the town below. Reading place as face allayed many readers' fears about the potential of malpractice or even deviance within private spaces. Instead of the inside of a hut representing a room in which nefarious deeds could occur, it became, through the manipulation of hagiographers, the dwelling-place of the ascetic soul.

The next section of this chapter deciphers how landscape and architecture began to physically resemble the body within. Hagiographers described the unornamented stone of ascetic caves as though they reflected ascetic's unadorned bodies, and even the acts of asceticism themselves became evident through the earth. Hagiographers taught their audience, through descriptions which invited the gaze to linger on the cramped space, sunbaked mud, or streams of icy water pouring beneath stones of an ascetic's hut, how to read fasting, abstinence, and even frozen skin into alternate materiality.

The final section of this chapter employs several case studies to explore how, when men and women renounced the world to become desert ascetics, they were often re-born, or re-made, into

architecture and landscape. As debates over the incarnation of Christ raged across early Christian communities, hagiographers drew on the language of incarnation, particularly from the Gospel of John, not only to describe the process of asceticism, but to reassert "proper" theology.[225] Language of "becoming," "dwelling," and the construction of blessed "tents" litters the descriptions of the formation of ascetic communities, as their own birth reflects that of the substantiation of Christ in the world. Early Christians thus were able to gain benefit with their eyes by learning how to read a bibilical past onto abodes turned second skin for the ascetic within.

Physiognomy

The act of physiognomy, or face-reading, did not begin with the early Christians.[226] Ancient Greeks and Romans constructed manuals about how to "read" character into the body, and especially the face. By focusing intentionally on certain characteristics, such as the eyes, wizened hair, etc., they attempted to detect if a merchant was squandering them out of money or if the person they encountered was a criminal.[227] Handbooks were created as a "field guide" to interpretation, informing readers on which aspects of a body their gaze should linger for the most fruitful insights.[228] Physiognomy was not about taking in this countenance of a person as a whole, or even reading their actions to determine their character (for actions could be deceiving) but about interpreting certain aspects correctly. The face thus became less about individual

[225] The "correct" theology, of course, depended on the group in question. This chapter will explore only those group who would later be called "Orthodox." For more on the historical context of the Christological debates, see the introduction to my dissertation.
[226] Frank, *The Memory of the Eyes*, 32, 168. Tamsyn Barton suggests that it originated with the ancient Mesopotamians in the first half of the second millennium BCE. Barton *Power and Knowledge: Astronomy, Physiogomics, and Medicine under the Roman Empire* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994),100.
[227] Frank, *Memory of the Eyes,* 143, 168.
[228] Frank, *Memory of the Eyes*, 168; Barton, *Power and Knowledge*, 101-107.

features, and more about visual shorthand for the character that lay beneath.[229] In other words, "one gazed at external features in order to gaze through them."[230]

While many early Christians often employed physiognomy to discover "false" Christians and ascetics, it also provided them to the tools to discover the holy and links to a biblical past, one which was evoked in scripture.[231] As such, they had no need for field guides when they visited ascetic places. Instead, their sight would have been informed by various hagiographical sources they either would have read or heard. Indeed, these ancient authors illustrated scenes in such a way as to prompt a physiognomic reading, as they included only the pieces that mattered, informing the pilgrim within the text and later in their potential journey exactly where their eyes should fall and what such features symbolized.[232] Moreover, this type of re-description was necessary because desert ascetics were not normal people, and so the traditional rules did not apply.[233] Instead of merely looking for signs of deceit or aptitude, pilgrims were taught to look for holiness, to see glimpses of angels and links to the biblical past.[234] Though such construction, they could access sanctity, the Bible, and engage with the quasi-divine on a more intimate level.

The second level of interpretation for physiognomers often resided with their subject's clothing. In nearly every treatise on asceticism, some sort of ascetic vestment is described. While there was no overall consensus about proper ascetic attire, Benedict, in his sixth-century

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[229] Maud Gleason and Tamsyn Barton also discuss the use of topoi in physiognomy and suggest that this act of face-reading was not interested in individuals, but in larger trends and meaning. Gleason, *Making Men: Sophists and Self-Presentation in Ancient Rome* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 29; Barton, *Power and Knowledge*, 98-116.
[230] Frank, *Memory of the Eyes*, 169
[231] Frank, *Memory of the Eyes*, 162, 168.
[232] Pausanius similarly taught his readers how to read features in a certain way. See Jas Elsner, "Between Mimesis and Divine Power: Visuality in the Graeco-Roman World" in *Visuality Before and Beyond the Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 45-69.
[233] Frank, *Memory of the Eyes*, 136.
[234] Frank, *Memory of the Eyes*, 162.

Rule, advises that garb should remain simple, yet should take the climate into consideration.[235] Desirous to make their internal ascetic life externally visible, some ascetics donned rough animal skins, while others wore simple, plain clothing.[236] Christian leaders also pushed their ascetic protégés to dress in particular ways, instructing women in particular to forego makeup, jewels, and elaborate clothing[237]. Evagrius of Pontus, for example, a fourth-century ascetic who spent most of his life in Palestine and Egypt, wrote, in his exhortation on virginity, that "she who adorns her clothing will also be wanting in chastity."[238] Here, Evagrius essentially informs both virgins and other readers alike that the state of their flesh could be read into their clothing. Far from hiding their misdeeds with gold and fine jewels, this ornamentation actually revealed the truth about a woman's body as well as the nature of her character.

Despite the desire of many early Christians to urge their constituents to dress in certain ways which accurately portrayed their lifestyle, debate swirled around proper ascetic attire.[239] In some cases, women insisted that their new position as ascetics changed their material or even their gender status, allowing them to wear either clothes of mourning, or, scandalously in the eyes of many, chop off their hair and dress like men.[240] Moreover, even more-or-less standard

[235] Benedict, *Rule*, 55 in *RB 1980: The Rule of Benedict in Latin and English with Notes,* ed. Timothy Fry (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1981).
[236] For ascetics who wore animal skins, see, for example, Theodoret, *Hist. rel.*, 18; *The Life of the Jura Fathers*, 2.62.
[237] For more on prescripts against certain types of women's clothing, see Upson-Saia, "Scripting Christians' Clothing and Grooming," in *Early Christian Dress*, esp. 51-53.
[238] Evagrius of Pontus "Exhortation on Virginity," in *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus* trans. Robert E. Sinkewicz, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 133.
[239] For more on this debate, see Kristi Upson-Saia, *Early Christian Dress: Gender, Virtue and Authority* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 59-85.
[240] Augustine, for example, chastises Ecdecia for "flaunting herself like a widow" (*viduam iactares*) instead of wearing the dress of a matron (*habitus matronalis*) even though her husband is still alive. Aug., *Ep. 262*, in FOTC 32.261-269 *St. Augustine, Letters, 5 (Letters 204-70*) (1956). Upson-Saia notes that widows often wore dark mantles, "expressing her commitment to her humble lifestyle, as well as her renunciation of sexual intercourse and her turn from womanly sexual enticement." Upson-Saia, *Early Christian Dress,* 29-31. Jerome likewise criticizes women who forgo the gendered expectations of their appearance by cutting off their hair and "shamelessly flaunting" the appearance of eunuchs. Hier. *Ep.* 22.27 (CSEL 54.184).

male ascetic appearance simple clothes and long, grey beards could hide un-ascetic action. Indeed, many Christian leaders engaged in heated debates over the presence of "false" ascetics, who would parade into town begging for food and deceitfully claiming authority.[241] Onlookers, then, could not read clothing the same way in which they could read bodies. Clothing could lie; it could be treacherous and conceal the "true" nature of the body beneath. While it could evoke biblical stories, it could also trick the onlooker into falsely believing in a person's authenticity. In order to ascertain the soul and character of an ascetic, then, it would seem that the pilgrim had to return their gaze to the flesh.

Yet, troublingly, the face of an ascetic was not always visible, even within stories where the author had every opportunity to provide description. In some cases, no bodily detail occurs at all, while other times the ascetic purposefully hides their body or obscures their face. In many instances, they are entirely concealed by the abodes in which they spend the majority of their time. If the reader is supposed to look and gain benefit from the flesh alone, this deliberate obfuscation wavers between tantalizing and down-right cruel. I suggest, however, that the authors do not simply wish to trick their readers, but instead are inviting them to shift their gaze and look upon something else: the landscape. The essence of being an ascetic, of being a monk, was to live a solitary life within a cell or some other desolate place. The English word "monk," *μοναχός* in Greek, originally refers to a solitary dweller.[242] It therefore would not have been a stretch, I contend, for ancient Christian to gaze upon ascetic habitation as though it had become a

[241] For more the debate surrounding ascetic dress and the debate surrounding those who were accused of improperly dressing as such, see Stefan Hodges-Kluck, "Philosophical Self-Presentation in Late Antique Cappadocia" (PhD dissertation, University of Tennessee, 2017), especially pages 32, 37, 108-109, 126-129. See also Theresa M. Shaw, "Wolves in Sheep's Clothing: The Appearance of True and False Piety," *SP* 29 (1996): 127-132; eadem, "*Askesis* and the Appearance of Holiness," *JECS* 6:3 (1998): 485-99; Stefan Urbano, "Dressing a Christian: The Philosopher's Mantle as Signifier of Pedagogical and Moral Authority," *Studia Patristica* 62 (2013), 213-20; Urbano, "Sizing up the Philosopher's Cloak: Christian Verban and Visual Representations of the Tribon," in *Dressing Judaens and Christians in Antiquity* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014), 175-94.
[242] Vivian and Athanassakis, "Introduction" in *The Life of Antony*, 53.

second skin for the ascetic within. This materiality, then, did not act like clothing, which could conceal the nature of the soul, but acted more like the body, which would reflect it.

As recently as the twentieth century, scholars have begun discussing the physiognomy of landscape and architecture.[243] Instead of examining a body, one interprets buildings in terms of their surfaces, "facades in terms of faces, and faces in terms of character – *persona* the 'sounding through' of a presence behind, and traveling across the physical boundaries of the mask."[244] In other words, the onlookers read the façade of a building as though it were a face. From here, they can read the character into it as well. Like studying a face "arrested in motion," the landscape or architecture is frozen in a single moment, rendering it readable. It allows the gaze once again to linger on select moments.[245] Frank recognizes a similar, though inverse phenomenon in ancient physiognomy. "The face, like the monument," Frank writes, "could evoke both what is and what was, in large part because physiognomic perception froze and stabilized the face. Just as monuments provided a way to order and control the evidence of the senses, so physiognomic description ordered the visual experience of meeting holy people."[246] This induction of character, then, could go both ways: not only could a face be read like a monument, but a monument could be read as a face.

Such a reading would not have been entirely foreign to ancient audiences. As with houses in the cities, an ascetic's abode worked to reinforce the "identity of the occupants of the house and their relationship with the world around them."[247] The façade of a typical Roman house, for example, proclaimed the elite status of the family who lived within. Without even

[243] See, Stefan Koller, "Visual Vertigo, Phantasmagoric Physiognomies: Joseph Roth and Walter Benjamin on the Visual Experience of Architecture" *Footprint: Delft Architecture Theory Journal* 18 (Spring/Summer 2016), 11.
[244] Quoting Joseph Roth in Stefan Koller, "Visual Vertigo, Phantasmagoric Physiognomies," 13.
[245] Koller, "Visual Vertigo, Phantasmagoric Physiognomies," 14.
[246] Frank, *Memory of the Eyes*, 165.
[247] Lisa Nevett, "Perceptions of Domestic Space in Roman Italy" in *The Roman Family in Italy: Status, Sentiment and Space* ed. Beryl Rawson and Paul Weaver (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 183.

stepping inside, one could expect there to be multiple rooms whose function fluctuated from business to domestic work depending on the time of day.[248] The rooms in use could also differ depending on the time of year and type of weather, as some spaces would catch a cool breeze, while others were insulated from the cold and rain.[249] While curtains often blocked the doors, it was expected that, if the inhabitants of the house behaved morally, one could walk into a room at any time and find the inhabitant performing in the expected way.[250]

Ascetic cells and habitations worked much in the same way. From the outside, one could deduce the actions that took place within. The cramped room allowed for little action other than prayer, while its exposure to the elements rendered both sets of "skin" weathered and brittle. Yet ascetic devotion alone did not come through the material covering. Habitations as bodies also reified the biblical past in a way not possible by either fleshly body or earthen landscape alone. Instead of simply tying them back to biblical figures, they could become a desert oasis of even the tree of life. As I will discuss further in the chapter, the ascetic and abode combined flesh and landscape to ensoul materiality and reincarnate ascetics as tabernacles of God.

The State of the Flesh

The first step in the pilgrim's ability to read place as face was to transform it rhetorically to resemble the physical body within. In this way, pilgrims and hagiographers did not simply describe a sacred landscape or monument, but place *made* sacred through its reflection and presence of the ascetic. In many ways, the habitation encased the soul of the ascetic, displaying

[248] Nevett, "Perceptions of Domestic Space," 190.
[249] Nevett, "Perceptions of Domestic Space," 189.
[250] This especially held true for women, for whom honor equated being seen. As such, when a man entered a room, he was supposed to be able to see how she truly lived. Carlin Barton, "Being in the Eyes: Shame and Sight in Ancient Rome" in *The Roman Gaze: Vision, Power, and the Body*" ed. David Fredrick. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 220.

both its discipline and its sanctity. The abode, then, was not simply a house or dwelling-place, but a second skin.

Theodoret, in his *Religious History*, narrates the life of Maris, who built a small hut for himself in which he continued to live.[251] It received much rain from the neighboring mountain, and, during the winter, it poured streams of water.[252] Though pilgrims never saw Maris' body, they nevertheless, through the observation of his abode, knew what harm this would cause bodies and the diseases which it could produce. Yet not even these hardships, Theodoret continues, induced Maris to change his cell. His cell, in this way, became a physical representation of his skin. As snow beat against the walls, and water poured from its floor, eroding the ground beneath, it represented the destruction of the ascetic's body within. Pilgrims did not have to gaze upon the body to see exactly how it was being treated. Moreover, they understood from the cell the extent of Maris' asceticism and his dedication God. Though his eyes were not visible to reveal the character within, it nevertheless penetrated the walls to reveal itself to the pilgrims.

Even the souls of ascetics, however, can stray from the right path. As I will discuss in Chapter Three, men and women who performed their asceticism in a place incongruous with their gender were always expelled from their communities. It was as though the land rejected a piece of itself that did not belong, like a body rejecting a transplanted organ. Before it reached such a level, however, early Christians assured their audiences that even fallen states of flesh could be read into the landscape. Theodoret describes how Julian Saba and his community, for example, built small huts for those who wished to practice asceticism.[253] While originally food was kept in a damp cave, it began to spoil, so Julian allowed his fellow cenobites to build a

[251] Thdt. *Hist. rel.,* 20.1.
[252] "ἐν ὥρᾳ δὲ χειμῶνος καὶ λιβάδας τινὰς ὑδάτων ἀνέβλυζεν" Thdt. *Hist. rel.,* 20.1.
[253] Thdt. *Hist. rel.* 2.2-3.

storeroom. These men, however, far exceeded proportions allowed for such an enclosure. Like their own stomachs, swollen with excess food, so too did the storeroom swell from its gluttony. Julian quickly reprimanded his followers, saying, "I fear … that by enlarging our habitations on earth we may reduce those in heaven."[254] Once again, this passage reflects the metonymy between the bodies and dwellings in the New Testament. In 2 Cor. 5:1, Paul reminds his community that they know "if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, and eternal house in heaven…". Theodoret has thus played on this image to further suggest that abodes act as a second skin, reflecting the state of the dweller within. If the soul is gluttonous, the skin (or earthen enclosure) will reveal its transgressions and will ultimately be destroyed, but if it is abstinent, and therefore physically smaller, it will be rewarded in heaven.

Similarly, Palladius, in his early fifth-century treatise of Egyptian asceticism, discusses how gluttony manifests in architectural forms. Here, instead of huts, the "souls of the sinful resemble different springs."[255] As the story goes, the gluttonous and perpetually inebriated are like fountains with frogs; the envious and arrogant are springs inhabited by serpents. Palladius walks his reader through how to read character into landscape. Not only do frogs and serpents embody the foul, and even demonic, creatures that destroy the purity of water (and thus the soul), but they prevent the waters themselves from flowing properly. In these instances, "reason stagnates, for no one continuously draws benefit them on account of the bitterness of their character."[256]

[254] "Δέδοικα, ἔφη, ὦ ἄνδρες, μὲ τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς εὐρύνοντες καταγώγια σμικρύνωμεν τὰ οὐράνια." Thdt., *Hist. rel.*, 2.4

[255] "Εοίκασι γὰρ ἀληθῶς αἱ τῶν ἐμπαθῶν ψυχαὶ διαφόροις πηγαῖς." Palladius, *HL*, 47.10.

[256] "…αἷς ἀεὶ μὲν ἐνλιμνάζει ὁ λόγος, μηδένα δὲ ἡδέως ἀρύεσθαι τούτων διὰ τὴν πικρίαν τοῦ ἤθους. Palladius, *HL*, 47.10.

If this type of description was not enough to convince their readers, most hagiographers also stepped inside the hut, ruining the ability of the audience to read the landscape, but essentially bringing to light the movements of the soul. This is where the glimpses of the flesh most often occur, as hagiographers describe ascetic bodies bent over with heavy chains or emaciated because of the lack of food.[257] Yet, even here, the gaze continues to linger on more than the body. Unlike other homes which would have been furnished with curtains, beds, and tables, ascetic huts contained no such amenities. Indeed, the viewer would have been struck with the emptiness and starkness of their surroundings. They would stare at the hard earth upon which a rough mat may have laid, and absorbed the lack of adornment of any sort. Just as the outside of the hut reflects the body, the inside seems to reflect the soul. Free of all enticements, the soul has emptied itself out to dwell on God alone.

Immediately after the experience of stepping within, however, the pilgrim and reader once again leave the hut and observe the landscape once more. Now, recognizing the state of the soul within, they could similarly reflect upon the lack of ornamentation without. In one such story, Theodoret tells of the monk named Juliana Saba, who forwent his former life and fled to live as a hermit in the desert. Eventually he happened upon a cave "not made by hand, nor well and beautifully dug, but able to provide little shelter for those seeking refuge."[258] As though to counter his readers' protestations over the appalling idea of living in such a place, Theodoret reports that John was, "glad to settle in the place, thinking it more luxurious than palaces shining with gold and silver."[259] Thus, the abode which Julian finds is God-created, not like a house, but

[257] Thdt., *Hist. rel.,* 24.4.
[258] "ὁ Θεῖος οὗτος ἀνὴρ καὶ ἄντρον εὑρὼν οὐ χειροποίητον, οὐδὲ εὖ καὶ καλῶς ἰρωρυγμένον, ἀλλὰ Βραχεῖάν τινα σκέπην παρέχειν δυνάμενον τοῖς καταφεύγειν ἐθέλουσιν," Thdt., *Hist. rel.,* 2.2.
[259] "τῶν χρυσῷ καὶ ἀργύρῳ καταλαμπομένων Βασιλείων νομιζων πολυτελέστερον." Thdt., *Hist. rel.,* 2.2

like a body. Its rough-hewn nature act like bones straining against the skin, revealing the ascetic's discipline and dedication to God.

The lack of adornment also reflects the ascetic undertaking and once again plays into the physiognomic reading of place as face. As Kristi Upson-Saia notes, some early Christian leaders argued that "ascetics ought to exhibit their progress in piety by renouncing physical markers of feminine vice (e.g., cosmetics, jewelry, and ornamentation that communicated feminine vanity, decadence, and hyper sexuality)…."[260] The unadorned hut or cave of monks like Julian Saba thus not only signaled the difference between opulent city house and austere desert abode, but between the adornment of the body and the hut. Though their bodies were hidden away, the second-skin of the ascetics in their form of their surroundings displayed the ascetic's movement toward piety. They rejected the gold and silver of the man-made world and opted instead for the natural beauty of God.

When reading the ascetic body physiognomically**,** pilgrims could look to the emaciated flesh for signs of limited food intake, or even, as described in the first chapter, the lack of sexual intercourse, as a result of the drying-out of the flesh. Similarly, abodes had the ability to reflect ascetic practice. Julian's comment about the importance of the small huts, for example, reveals not just his desire for a heavenly reward of a large open space, but the inability of the body to move freely. While the size of ascetics' huts remains unclear from archaeological evidence, as none survive, we can surmise their approximate size from the texts. It is important to note, however, that ancient hagiographers were taking their audience on a literary pilgrimage, and that they constructed space in a way to visually symbolize the bodies within. The act of physiognomy, after all, is visual shorthand. The lived space may therefore have looked nothing

[260] Upson-Saia, *Early Christian Dress*, 14.

like the literary reality. Despite this, given the lack of resources and the desire to avoid ostentation, it is reasonable to assume that these huts would have contained room for little more than a place to lie down.

Even from the outside, such limitation would have been immediately obvious. These were small spaces, with barely enough room in which to sleep.[261] In other cases, the restricted movement of the body within became even more evident. Often at the end of the day, Gerontius informs his audience, Melania would enclose herself in a chest which was so small that when she was lying in it she could turn neither left nor right, nor stretch out fully.[262] Though her body could not be seen, its movements, or lack-there-of, were exposed by the structure in which she reposed. Moreover, the smallness of this chest revealed, not only that she possessed "great virtue" **(**ἀρετάς) but that she was never "puffed up" (ἐφυσιώθη) by her own righteousness.[263] As her chest would have swelled with pride, so too would this chest have failed to fit such a body. Yet, its straight, rigid wooden confines mirrored the perfectly controlled ascetic inside.

In a similar fashion Sergius, the recluse in John of Ephesus' sixth century *Lives of the Eastern Saints* eventually shut himself in a structure that was too small for his stature.[264] His body could make none of the movements which so concerned bishops and other Christian authorities. As I will discuss in my next chapter, one of the greatest dangers posed to an ascetic was demons or women joining them in their cell and causing them to engage in sex either

[261] *Hist. Mon.*, 6.
[262] Gerontius, "The Life of the Holy Melania" in *Handmaids of the Lord: Contemporary Descriptions of Feminine Asceticism in the First Six Centuries* ed. and trans. Joan M. Peterson (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, Inc., 1996), 331. While both Latin and Greek texts of this story survive, neither are the (probable) Greek original. For more on the provenance of this text, see Joan Peterson, *Handmaids of the Lord*, 287-289. For the Greek edition of this text, I have used Denys Groce, *Vie de sainte Mélanie* SC 90 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1962); for the Latin edition, I have used Patrick Laurence, *La Vie Latine De Sainte Mélanie* (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 2002).
[263] Groce, *Vie de sainte Mélanie,* 32.
[264] John of Ephesus, *Lives of the Eastern Saints,* ed. and trans. W. E. Brooks, accessed through the *PO*.(1903), 5.

mentally or physically. A chest or box which measures smaller than a human body would thus not have allowed entrance to any other external creature. Also evident from outside would have been its exposure to the elements. While the wealthy could have switched rooms if they grew too hot or cold, the abodes of the ascetics revealed that their inhabitants purposefully exposed themselves to the elements. They could not switch rooms if the rain tormented them, and some even forewent ceilings and mortar so they would not be spared the harsh weather.[265]

Far from "architectural obstacles," then, ascetic abodes could be read as a second skin, as physical representations of the bodies within. They mirrored the movements of the flesh, from fasting to feasting, and thus could be used to access the ascetic when he or she remained hidden from sight. Pilgrims, then, whether literary or actual, could employ physiognomy to garner the ascetics' character and gain benefit with their eyes, not from the flesh, but from the earth which enclosed it.

The Biblical Past Made Present

When gazing upon an ascetic landscape, one could not look only with a scrutinizing glance, determined to see bodily actions manifest in mud, but with the *oculis fidei*, or the "eye of faith." The "eye of faith," as described by Jerome, allows a scene to occur in two times: the biblical past and the pilgrim's present.[266] Just as Georgia Frank notes the importance for pilgrims to see beyond physical appearance in order to "gain a fuller perception of biblical events or figures," I contend that reading ascetic landscape in a similar fashion would have offered additional layers of discernment. In particular, the biblical past that is often evoked through the

[265] See, for example, Eusebius of Asikha, in Thdt., *Hist. rel.*, 28.
[266] Paraphrasing Hier. *Ep* 108.10 from Georgia Frank's *The Memory of the Eyes*. For more description of the use of "the eye of faith" in reading ascetic bodies, see Frank, *The Memory of the Eyes*, 102-134, 165-170.

second skin of the hut frequently binds together bodies and dwellings so tightly that they become inextricable from one another. They weave together not only time, but materiality. As ascetics are reborn as biblical tabernacles, so too are they remembered as pieces of the landscape when they finally pass away.

Birth, Becoming, and Indwelling

Athanasius' *Life of Antony* is still seen as one of the foundational works in Christian asceticism, and was, indeed, frequently cited and copied in the ancient world.[267] Composed in Greek around 360 CE, *The Life of Antony* tells the tale of an Egyptian man who converted to Christianity and subsequently sold all of his belongings, donated the funds to the poor, and fled to the desert to live life as an ascetic. While not the first person to live as a solitary, or monk, his life as told by Athanasius nevertheless held great influence over many Christians who desired to imitate him, just as he had imitated Jesus.[268] One of these admirers was undoubtedly the anonymous author of *The Life of the Jura Fathers*.[269] Composed sometime in the fifth or sixth century in Gaul, this work narrates the birth of the Jura monastery through the lives of its three most influential fathers: Romanus, Lupicinus, and Eugendus.[270] Like Antony, Romanus wandered into the wilderness (though his was composed of trees instead of sand), and lived away

[267] Ath. *Vit. Ant.*
[268] For more on the *Life of Antony's* influence on Egyptian monasticism and asceticism, see Peter H. Görg, *Die Wüsten Väter: Antonius und die Anfänge des Mönchtums* (Augsburg: Sankt Ulricht Verlag GmbH, 2008).
[269] The anonymous author notes that Romanus was "the imitator of the aged Antony" (prisci imitator Antonii) in *Vie Des Pères du Jura: Introduction, Texte Critique, Lexique, Traduction et Notes* ed. and trans., François Martine (Paris: Les Éditions Du Cerf, 2004) 1.12. For an English translation, see *The Life of the Jura Fathers: The Life and Rule of the Holy Fathers Romanus, Lupicinus, and Eugendus, Abbots of the Monasteries in the Jura Mountains* ed. and trans. Tim Vivian, Kim Vivian, Jeffrey Burton Russell, and Charles Cummings (Kalamazoo and Spencer: Cistercian Publications, 1999). Hereafter *Lives of the Jura Fathers.*
[270] For the sake of this chapter, I am interested primarily in Romanus, as, like Antony he lived life as a solitary ascetic before a monastery grew up around him.

from all human influence until his fame spread and a monastic community grew up around him and Lupicinus.[271]

It is, in fact, this moment of conception, of indwelling, that interests me most. In both stories, as we shall see, Christian solitaries and ascetics are born, not just figuratively, but literally. They are made, given form and given shape. And this space, I argue, is not just the flesh of their human bodies, but the dirt and plants of the earth, the stone, wood, and mortar of their cells. When they are made into ascetics, earth and flesh elide into a single godly substance that houses an immortal being.

Athanasius draws explicitly upon biblical creation stories when he describes the birth of an ascetic community. After decades of hardship living everywhere from tombs to abandoned barracks, Antony begins to inspire others to undertake the solitary life. Following the model of Jesus (made explicit by Athanasius) Antony comforted those who mourned and healed those who were sick.[272] As his fame grew, those who wish to learn from him began to flood into the desert. "And so," Athanasius writes, "monastic dwellings came into being [γέγονε] in the mountains and the desert was made into a city by the monks." [273] While scholars have focused a great deal of attention on the way in which Athanasius transformed the desert into the city, particularly a city of heaven, I argue that the equally important word here is γέγονε.[274] For Athanasius and, indeed, the audience of his work, γέγονε, particularly when paired with stories of creation, would have immediately signaled John 1:3, "πάντα δι᾽ αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, καὶ χωρὶς αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο οὐδὲ ἕν ὃ γέγονεν" or "All things came into being through Him, and apart from

[271] The *Lives of the Jura Fathers* also consciously modeled on Jerome's *Life of Antony*. For further discussion, see Vivian, Vivian, Russel and Cumming's introduction to *The Life of the Jura Fathers*, 61-2.
[272] Tin Vivian and Apostolos Athanassakis write, "The *Life of Antony* is obviously about Antony. But what it is really is the story of Christ, the Word, and the story of words and their power…." in *The Life of Antony*, xxiii.
[273] "καὶ οὕτω λοιπὸν γέγονε καὶ ἐν τοῖς ὄρεσι μοναστήρια…." Ath. *Vit. Ant.*, 14.7.
[274] The description of the desert as a city mirrors Luke 18:28, Phil. 3:20-1, Heb. 12.23.

Him nothing came into being that has come into being." The use of γέγονε to signify the construction a new community was not an accident, as one paragraph later, he repeats the phrase when Antony attracts more followers: "Quickly his speech attracted multitudes and many monastic dwellings came into being [πλεῖστα γέγονε μοναστήρια], and he guided all the monks like a father."[275] While no modern editors have cited the influence of the Gospel of John on this passage, Athanasius himself quotes John 1:3 slightly later in his refutation of the Aryans: "Have faith, therefore, that all creation is angry at them because they count Christ the Lord, *through whom all things came into being* [*γέγονεν*], among those that came into being."[276] Even though this passage has received little scholarly attention, I argue that Athanasius uses γέγονε only in specific passages that refer specifically to the (re)incarnation of ascetics and their communities on earth.

This use, then, has several notable consequences. First, the biblical past is reified in front of the pilgrims' very eyes. Through his evocative use of γιγνομαι, Athanasius has transformed ascetics huts into the very story of creation. It is crucial, however, to note that in both Athanasius and John, γιγνομαι does not simply refer to the creation of earth, but of bodies. They become one-and-the-same as Jesus himself, as described in John 1:14, "became flesh and tented among us" [καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν]. Remarkably, human flesh was constructed the same way as the material earth. The mirrored use of words thus implies that both are created from the same material and differ only in form. People are earth and earth, people. The important aspect here is that this remains the case even when people are alive. In other

[275] Athanasius, *Vita Antonii* (henceforth *Vit. Ant.*), 15.3
[276] "Πιστεύετε δέ, ὅτι καὶ αὐτὲ ἡ κτίσις πᾶσα ἀγανακτεῖ κατ᾽ αὐτῶν, ὅτι τὸν κρίστην καὶ Κύριον τοῦ παντός, ἐν ᾧ τὰ πάντα γέγονεν, τοῦτον τοῖς γενητοῖς συναριθμοῦσιν." Athanasius, *Vit. Ant.* 69.6. Emphasis is my own.

words, ascetics do not have to die and once again become dust for the matter of their body to return to its original state.

Moreover, to return the second half of the passage from John, the Word not only "becomes flesh," but it "tents among us." In this instance, flesh and abode elide. The English here does not quite do the Greek justice, as "ἐσκήνωσεν" does not just mean "to live inside a tent" (or σκηνή) but to literally "pitch a tent." In the passage from John, then the body of Christ is like a tent for the soul.[277] By evoking this same language to describe the creation of ascetic huts in the desert, Athanasius similarly implies that ascetics were re-born into their abodes as they became the souls.[278] By reading these new skins with the "eyes of faith," the creation story comes to life.

Athanasius describes how ascetics have been created or "birthed" (an additional meaning of γιγνομαι) into communities of heaven. They are, quite literally, a reflection of God's creation: They are his tabernacle, his tent, on earth. It is this image, this birth/creation/becoming of both flesh and place that is at the basis of asceticism and is crucial to a pilgrim's or reader's ability access the holiness of the ascetic. Indeed, Athanasius insists that visitors would recognize the construction of people as tabernacle: "someone who had come back and saw the monastic dwellings and such an arrangement of them, called out and said: beautiful are your dwellings, oh

[277] As noted in the introduction, various Christian groups during this period debated the exact wording and meaning of the incarnation of Jesus. Philoxenos, for example, dedicated an entire book to the Gospel of John. He then expanded upon this Christology and applied it to the monks in his *Letter to the Monks of Senun*. For more on Philoxenos and his Christological beliefs, see David Michelson, *The Practical Christology of Philoxenos of Mabbug* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014), 18-27.

[278] Intriguingly, Jerome, in his *Life of Paul* (the hermit, not the author of Corinthians), repeatedly uses the verb "habitare" to describe the way in which Antony lived in the desert. Though he does not mention that Antony established great communities around him, as Jerome was trying to cast Paul as the founder of asceticism, "habitare" carries similar connotations to ἐσκήνωσεν. In Jerome's translation of John 1:14 from the Greek, he writes, "et Verbum caro factum est et habitavit in nobis" (And the Word became flesh and habitated among us). Just as the root of ἐσκήνωσεν implies that the individual resides in a tent, or σκηνή, habitare suggests the dwelling or habitat in a "habitatio." See Hier. *Vit. Paul.* in *Trois Vies de Moines*.

Jacob, and your tents, oh Israel. Like shady groves and like bountiful gardens [παράδεισος] beside a river, and like tents that the Lord pitched, like cedars beside the water'!"[279] Here, as the reader would recognize, the speaker is not praising the tents directly, but that which they symbolize: a holy community and their covenant with God. The interpretation of buildings, and even, as this passage articulates, the trees and rivers of earth, as the bodies of a holy person or community would not have been foreign to early Christians. In fact, I argue that Athanasius actively encouraged his community to perform such a feat. Just as the practice of physiognomy allowed viewers to evoke biblical stories through the flesh, so too did Athanasius encourage his audience to read monastic huts and landscape.

Here again, I think that γιγνομαι comes into play. In all instances of the construction of ascetics as huts and communities, exactly who created the structures remains linguistically uncertain. While, on one level, Athanasius' use of γέγονε would have implied that Antony and the other monks built their own huts, he again encourages his readers to gaze upon the scene with the "eye of faith." Since nothing has "come into being" that was not made by God, these structures, like ascetic bodies, are also God-made.[280] However, because they have been created or "birthed" (an additional meaning of γιγνομαι) into communities of heaven, their integrity cannot be doubted. They are, quite literally, a reflection of God's creation: they are his tabernacle on earth. It is this image, this birth/creation/becoming of both flesh and place that is at the basis of asceticism and is crucial to a pilgrim's or reader's ability access the holiness of the ascetic.

[279] Ὥστε ἰδόντα τινὰ πάλιν τὰ μοναστήρια καὶ τήν τοιαύτην τῶν τάξιν, ἀναφωνῆσαι καὶ εἰπεῖν. ' Ὡς καλοί σου οἱ οἶκοι, Ἰακώβ, αἱ σκηναί σου, Ἰσραήλ. Ὡσεὶ νάπαι σκιάζουσαι καὶ ὡσεὶ παράδεισος ἐπὶ ποταμόν, καὶ ὡσεὶ σκηναί, ἃς ἔπηξεν ὁ Κύριος, ὡσεὶ κέδροι παρ᾽ ὕδασιν.'"Ath. *Vit. Ant.*, 44.4.
[280] John 1:3 "All things came into being through him, and without him nothing came into being."

The language of the substantiation of ascetics as abodes, particularly as it coincides with γιγνομαι, reflects Athanasius' entrenchment in the Christological debates of the fourth century. In particular, Athanasius became well-known for his refutation of Arius, who believed that Jesus the Son was created from God the Father, and that he was therefore neither co-eternal nor consubstantial.[281] The first Council of Nicaea in 325 C.E., at which Athanasius, though only a deacon at the time, was present, concluded that God and Jesus were both co-eternal and *homousios,* or consubstantial.[282] Athanasius eventually became a champion of the Nicene Creed in the 350s, when he declared it the only true defense against "Arian heresy."[283] Moreover, his *Life of Antony*, written during his "third exile" (356-362 C.E.) is distinctly anti-Arian, as Athanasius depicts Antony himself as condemning a group of Arians and preaching about the "true" nature of Christ.[284]

Despite the adoption of this creed by many early Christians, debate over the nature and substance of Christ raged for several generations. The next great schism occurred at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. Here, the "Caledonian Definition" disavowed the notion of a single nature in Jesus Christ and declared instead that he had two natures in one person and hypostasis.[285] Moreover, these two natures, that of Godhead and manhood were seen as both complete. While this conception of the trinity came to define imperial orthodoxy, many eastern Christians, especially those in Syria and Egypt, rejected the Council's decision and began forming their own

[281] For more on Athanasius' refutation of Arianism, see David M. Gwynn, *Athanasius of Alexandria: Bishop, Theologian, Ascetic, Father* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 4-5, 55-6, 50-95; David Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 57-79, 129-141.
[282] For more on the Council of Nicaea, see Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005);
[283] Gwynn, *Athanasius of Alexandria,* 5.
[284] Ath., *Vit. Ant.,* 69.
[285] For more on the Council of Chalcedon and its effects, see David M. Gwynn, "The Council of Chalcedon and the Definition of Christian Tradition," in *Chalcedon in Context: Church Councils 400 to 700* ed. Richard Price and Mary Whitby (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2009), 7-26.

churches. These Miaphysites insisted that Jesus had only one nature which is both divine and human, but without mixture, separation, and confusion. The conflict between these groups can be seen throughout early ascetic literature, as monks, as well as their bishops, attempt to work out the theology in their daily lives.

Despite these stark differences in doctrine, ascetic hagiographers employ surprisingly similar imagery when describing the incarnation of monks as or in their abodes or landscape. As I will discuss further, these authors frequently used variations of γιγνομαι, depending on the language in which they wrote, in reference to ascetic places-as-bodies. This image, it seems, of tabernacle as a stand-in for the flesh, transgressed traditional doctrinal boundaries, providing a unifying theme for many desert ascetics of the early Christian world.

While the fifth or sixth century Gallic *Life of the Jura Fathers*, for example, does not reflect the biblical imagery of Athanasius, it nevertheless embodies an ascetic/monastic creation story and the fusion of body and abode. The narrative opens with the life of the holy Romanus, a figure so tied to the environment that the modern editors of his *vita* refer to him as an "earth-figure," a title, they admit, he probably would have found abhorrently pagan.[286] Nevertheless, the anonymous author spends the first nine paragraphs, over sixteen percent of the entire *vita*, eliding Romanus with earth around him. In place of bodily descriptions, of which there are none, the author describes a beautiful forest, rockbound valleys and mountain ridges that settled into a small plane.[287] Eventually Romanus found the perfect place to reside at the foot of a rocky mountain beneath the wide branches of a dense fir tree, as had Paul the Hermit.[288] From this spot ran an icy cold stream, eventually channeled by wood pipes into a distant monastery. On and on

[286] Vivian, Russell and Cummings, *The Life of the Jura Fathers*, 61.
[287] *Vie Des Pères du Jura,* trans. François Martine (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 2004), 6.
[288] *Vie Des Pères du Jura,* 7.

the description goes, detailing the spot's ease of cultivation and yet its remoteness from civilization. As part of this wilderness, Romanus "enjoyed the sight of nothing except wild animals."[289]

The author's purpose in this description becomes clear when compared to the beginning of the Life of Lupicinus, the second founder of the monastic community of Jura and the next story in the larger *vita*. Once again, the author never explicitly describes the body, yet its characteristics become immediately obvious. About nine paragraphs are again spent describing this father, but this time the focus lies on his animal nature. His mean and meager clothing are made out of the "shaggy and hideous" skins of animals, he spends the majority of his day exposed to the extreme elements and only constructs a protective cocoon for himself under the direst of circumstances.[290] This description so radically contrasts that of Romanus that the reader is automatically struck, not just with the alternate materialities, but the opposing natures of these two founders. As becomes clear from Lupicinus' description, even before the author adds details about his nature, that he is harsher than Romanus, more bestial. They know from the detailing of ugly clothes and harsh wooden shoes that he only wears outdoors, that his body has become tough and lean. Lupinicus' description as indifferent to the bitter cold and rejection of human luxuries like a bed reveal his discipline and, indeed, his holiness without his flesh ever having to be described.

Romanus' description as landscape works much in the same way. Unlike Lupicinus, however, Romanus is life-giving. His body, in the form of crops and fields, provides sustenance while the waters of his stream give life. The wide branches of his trees provided protection from

[289] "…ac raro venantium frueretur adspectu…" *Vie Des Pères du Jura,* 12.
[290] *Vie Des Pères du Jura,* 62-65. This cocoon is rather remarkable. He stripped back from on old oak, and then closed off each end by sewing pieces together from the same bark. He can then warm up one end or the other in from of a fire, or simply swaddle himself in the protective bark.

the elements, and symbolize the hermit life, just as the desert caves and springs do for eastern ascetics.[291] Eventually, however, these two men would come together in a "little nest, that had been hidden by the wilderness, like 'a pair of turtle doves or two young doves'" and they could birth spiritual offspring who would spread to the monasteries and churches of God.[292] Again marrying animal and earthen imagery, like a nest, the valley in which they settled became "a birthplace of the holy ones" (*natale sanctorum*), and they, the parents. In this way, ascetics and monks within the community are reborn into distinctly less human forms. With parents of nature and animal, they assume the characteristics of both, shedding their delicate human skin for bark and fur. Again, as with Antony's communities, Romanus and Lupicinus built small dwellings out of wood with the utmost care, preparing for the lives that would soon fill them.[293]

To be an ascetic, then, was not to be entirely human, or, at least, not a human existing only in the flesh. In fact, only thrice in the life of Romanus and Lupicius are they described as men or described in any bodily fashion. The first is a description of Romanus' early life, in which he did not behave as a child with childish foolishness, nor as a young man with human desires.[294] As soon as he becomes an ascetic, however, all descriptions of him as a human or a man cease. Instead, he is called a *pater*, a *frater*, or *abrenuntiatione* (monk, lit. renouncing one).[295] The description of Romanus as a man and body occurs only upon his death, as his "poor body was carried to the basilica."[296] Similarly, Lupicinus's flesh receives description only as his body ails, legs and arms grow weak, and his tongue struggles to stir a bit of water around his

[291] *Vie Des Pères du Jura,* 62.
[292] "…ut in nidulo illo, hoc est secreto heremi, tamquam *par turturum vel duo pulli* columbarum,…" Vie *Des Pères du Jura,* 12. Martine notes that the italicized passage is reminiscent of Luke 2:24 "a pair of doves or two young pigeons."
[293] *Vie Des Pères du Jura,* 13.
[294]*Vie Des Pères du Jura,* 5.
[295] *Vie Des Pères du Jura,* 21.
[296] *Vie Des Pères du Jura,* 61.

mouth.[297] Death, it seems, transforms the body once again, stripping off the hard flesh of bark, to return it once again to flesh, before it meets its ultimate demise as dust once more.

Huts and Tabernacles

Following in the tradition begun by Athanasius' *Life of Antony*, many hagiographies emphasized the physical substantiation of desert ascetics as the tabernacles in which they dwelled.[298] These stories not only birth monks into their second skin but describe the process of living and dying as *κελλία*, or monastic cells. Their deep biblical imagery ties the monks physically with land and abode, laying bare a deep sacred past made present for the edification of all those who look on.

While Paphnutius, a monk writing in the late fourth century about the monks of Upper Egypt, does not describe the process in which monks became their tabernacles, he does open with a benediction to them. In a passage remarkably similar to that in *The Life of Antony*, the *Histories of the Monks of Upper Egypt* begins with a monk exclaiming:

> Blessed are we! our land [has] become worthy of your holy footsteps. The psalmist David rightly said: *Beloved are [your] habitations*, and again *Beloved are they on account of their fathers*. It is the Lord who [speaks], for […] with great [fear?] and gladness. I remember what the Lord said in the Gospel: *In the house which you enter, first of all say, 'Peace by with this house.' If there are children of peace there, let your peace rest upon it. If not, let your peace [return] to you.*[299]

Paphnutius, then, addresses his opening not to people directly, but to people being accessed through the medium of their abodes. From the very beginning, then, people and their habitations

[297] *Vie Des Pères du Jura*, 115-116.
[298] While hagiographers have not necessarily read Athanasius's *Life*, though many clearly have, I contend that his description of ascetics becoming huts deeply influenced ascetic discourse and the ways in which pilgrims engaged with ascetics.
[299] Paphnutius, *Histories of the Monks of Upper Egypt* in *Histories of the Monks of Upper Egypt and The Life of Onnophrius by Papnutius* ed. and trans. Tim Vivian (Kalamazoo: Cistercian publications, 1993), 1. The first line of this work is partially missing. The paragraph breaks were added by Vivian. The italics reflect biblical passages.

are physically connected. Each makes the other holy and worthy of blessing, and neither can exist in the blessed state without the other. In order for the pilgrim to gain benefit with their eyes, then, they must understand body and abode to be deeply interconnected.

The importance of a cell for the existence of a monk as such is exemplified by a short work by Paul of Tamma, a mid-fourth century monk from upper Egypt.[300] His treatise *On the Cell* describes the importance of the cell for the monk in teaching and learning wisdom.[301] Above all else, it emphasizes solitude, insisting that an ascetic never leave his cell, no matter how uncomfortable he or she may become. "You shall be a wise man in your cell," Paul writes, "building up your soul as you sit in your cell."[302] As the monk inhabits this cell, he should look toward no man, nor let any man look toward him.[303] Indeed, as he dwells in this state, his nature will change as he becomes more like the divine. "The measure of a wise man sitting in his cell is the Lord," Paul continues, "For he is like God because he is invisible. The wise man in his cell will be hidden from the coming evils."[304] The wise man, then, cannot be seen – at least not with eyes fixed upon the mundane. The pilgrim, Paul teaches, should not gaze upon the ascetic flesh for instruction, but should instead turn to the abode. In this way, then, the cell becomes the physical manifestation of the monk or ascetic on earth. Never leaving his cell and turning his mind always to God, the monk remains hidden from the sight of others.

[300] For more background on Paul's work as well as a complete translation of *On the Cell,* see Tim Vivian, *Words to Live By: Journeys in Ancient and Modern Egyptian Monasticism* 141-164. Because the text survives only partially in Sahidic and completely in Arabic, I will be working from Vivian's translation. For more on the hagiographical sources of Paul of Tamma, see Alin Suciu; "Sitting in the Cell: The Literary Development of an Ascetic Praxis in Paul of Tamma's Writings. With an Edition of Some Hitherto Unknown Fragments of *De Cella*," *The Journal of Theological Studies*, 68.1 (April 2017), 141–171.
[301] Paul of Tamma, *On the Cell,* in *Words to Live By,* ed. Vivian.
[302] Paul of Tamma, *On the Cell,* 77.
[303] Paul of Tamma, *On the Cell,* 78-9.
[304] Paul of Tamma, *On the Cell,* 47-49.

When ascetics did leave their cells to gather food or even wash their clothes, their hagiographers often warned their audience about looking upon these individuals without the intercession of the habitation. Theodoret narrates two such cautionary tales. In the first, he describes Acepsimas who remained immured in his cell for sixty years, leaving only night to draw water from the stream. So ardently did Acepsimas wish to avoid being seen by the prying eye, that even his food could not be delivered through window or door. Instead, a hole was dug obliquely through the wall in the shape of a curve, so that not even a stray glance could land upon his flesh.[305] One night, however, when he went out to the spring, an onlooker, wishing out of "malign curiosity" to discover what Acepsimas did with this time, climbed a tree that grew alongside his enclosure. Immediately, however, he was paralyzed from the crown of his head to the soles of his feet. Wishing to atone for his sin, this man listened to the prediction that his health would be restored if the tree was cut down to prevent another from committing the same deed and suffering the same penalty, and so had the tree cut down. Upon so doing, his sight was restored.

Similarly, several young women gazed brazenly upon James of Nisibus as he left his cave to wash his clothes in the river. The first time, he turned the onlookers into trees so that they would be unable to gaze improperly again. The second time, as he makes his way to Persia to help a friend, he happens upon several other women who gaze upon him "with brazen looks and eyes dead to shame."[306] Moreover, these young women did not cover their heads nor even let down their clothes, which they had tucked up in order to stand in the river. Angry at this, James decided, according to Theodoret, to display God's power and curse both the spring and the girls. The once gushing spring promptly vanished, while the girls' hair went from deep black to

[305] Thdt. *Hist. rel.,* 15.1.
[306] Thdt. *Hist. rel.,* 1.13.

prematurely gray. While he eventually restored the spring at the behest of the town, the girls remained permanently cursed as a reminder of the dangers of looking.[307]

From these cautionary tales, it becomes evident that Theodoret is warning his audience about the perils of gazing upon the flesh of an ascetic. If they decide to look upon these men without compunction, without the eyes of faith, they themselves will be physically punished. Remarkably, even within these tales, the eyes of the literary pilgrims do not fall upon the body of the ascetic, but upon the landscape and especially upon those who do the looking within the story. The young women who stare at James and the man who spies on Acepsimas receive detailed bodily description, while the ascetic protagonists receive none. Instead, Theodoret emphasizes their connection with the earth and their ability to control streams and trees, an important quality which I will discuss at greater length later in the chapter.

Yet not only ascetic men were in danger of the unprotected gaze, nor the only ones able to retaliate which such an attack occurred. Several centuries later, Gregory of Tours wrote the life of Monegund, a widow and recluse of Tours in Gaul.[308] When Monegund was first widowed, she forsook her old life to live in a small cell, outside of which she planted a small garden. One day when she was inspecting the herbs that grew there, a woman who was putting wheat on her roof, "her attention full of mundane things, spied rudely [on Monegund]."[309] Before she could get a good look at Monegund, however, she was struck blind.[310] Gregory of Tours thus implies

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[307] For more on the ascetic repercussions of this story, see Chris L. de Wet, "Asceticism, Religious Violence, and Monastic Curses in Theodoret's *Historia Religiosa*" (presentation, Religious Violence in Antiquity: A Religious Studies Approach across the *longue durée*, Montréal, Quebec, September 28), 1-40.

[308] Gregory of Tours, "De Sancta Monegunde Vidua Reclusa," *De Vita Patrum*, in *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages* ed. and trans. Jo Ann MacNamara and John E. Halborg with E. Gordon Whatley (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1992), 51-59.

[309] "… curis oppleta mundanis, importune prosexit," Gregory of Tours, "De Sancta Monegunde Vidua Reclusa," *De Vita Patrum*, c.19, *ActSS.* July 2, 4.

[310] The symbolism of blindness, and particularly, in this instance, of eyes "losing the light" have deep biblical resonances wherein God represents the light, or those who can truly "see," while those who are blind are lost in the metaphorical darkness. See, for example, John 9:39-41; 2 Cor 4:4; Luke 4:18.

that no one should try and glimpse ascetic flesh, particularly when their minds are not focused on holy things. Instead, he invites his audience's gaze to alight upon Monegund's small cell with a tiny window and the beautiful garden just outside of it.[311] Upon these manifestations of the ascetic can the pilgrim look and gain benefit without putting either themselves or the ascetic in danger by gazing directly upon the flesh.

Caves

As has been widely discussed, many ascetics do not reside in cells or huts, but instead choose to enclose themselves in the caves of mountains or the desert. Dense with biblical imagery, caves represent death and rebirth, and hagiographers tye bodies not only into the dust and earth that surrounds them, but into Jesus' burial and resurrection. Highly symbolic, the body's fusion with the cave presented audiences with a way of accessing sanctity and asceticism that would not have been possible had they gazed solely upon only one materiality or the other.

In his *Lives of the Eastern Saints,* John of Ephesus narrates the story of Susan, a girl who desperately desires to join a convent of women in order to devote her life completely to God.[312] Despite her long journey and spoken dedication**,** the holy women insist that Susan is too young to undertake serious ascetic discipline and therefore cannot live in their community. Heartbroken though undeterred, Susan stays outside the gates of the convent, weeping ceaselessly until she is finally admitted. Almost immediately, she begins to surpass her sisters in devotion, infuriating them to the point that they physically harm her to slow her down. Yet not even these hardships

[311] Gregory notes: "Habebat autem contiguum cellulae parvulum viridarium…" "She had a small tree garden next to her cell." *Vit. Mon*. 4.
[312] John of Ephesus, "Susan," *Lives of the Eastern Saints* in *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient* ed. and trans. Sebastian P. Brock and Susan Ashbrook Harvey (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

can deter Susan, as she stands continuously in a corner, never showing her face to anyone nor looking anyone in the eye, but keeping her mind always bent on God.

Then, after nearly ten years in the convent, John of Ephesus reports that "persecution fell upon the convent," and the women either had to convert to Chalcedonian Christianity or leave.[313] The community, John declares, was divided over the issue. Yet when it became clear that Susan was going to leave the community and head for the desert, five women chose to follow her, despite her attempted dissuasion. So, the women took a ship from Palestine to Alexandria in search of a new home. Once they arrived, they took up residence in an abandoned tower just outside of the monastery of Mar Menas. There, life began to progress normally, as Susan helped to lead the community in its new life.

Up until this point, it is important to notice several crucial features of this story. For one, John never describes Susan's body. Though we are told that she came from an aristocratic family, we never hear of her great beauty or her shining eyes. More importantly, John informs his audience that Susan purposefully hid her face. She did not even want the other holy women of her community to gaze upon her, nor did she desire to look them in the eye. As is evident from these actions, as well as her desire to huddle alone in a corner, Susan clearly wished to disappear from sight completely. Thus, though John speaks about Susan with great reverence and esteem, his descriptions, or lack-there-of, conflict with the necessity of looking upon holy flesh. In fact, it is as though the audience cannot quite access Susan yet – as though she is still trying to become an full ascetic.

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[313] John of Ephesus, "Susan," *Lives of the Eastern Saints*. The Council of Chalcedon in 451 further divided the Antiochene Christians after the Council of Ephesus in 431. John himself was anti-Chalcedonian Christian, or a Miaphysite. For more on John and Syriac Miaphysite communities following the Council of Chalcedon, see Peter N. Bell, *Social Conflict in the Age of Justinian: Its Nature, Management, and Mediation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); 160-213; For more on John of Ephesus' community construction through his hagiographical writing, see Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Asceticism and Society in Crisis: John of Ephesus and the Lives of the Eastern Saints* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

To return, then, to Susan's story, a short distance away from the tower in which the women dwelled was an underground cave where a holy man had once lived. On one of her many walks, Susan stumbled upon this cave and immediately jumped inside. She had no food with her, nor was anyone else aware of where she had gone. After she was absent a few days, the sisters began to panic, and wonder where the woman they had trusted so deeply had gone.[314] Within ten days, the villagers also heard about Susan's absence, and so all set out in search for her. Eventually they peered down into the cave, and saw her face-down, groaning, weeping, and praying. After convincing her that they were not demons (for some had tormented her during the night), she insisted that God had prepared this place for her, and here she would dwell. After much pleading, she conceded that the sisters could bring her water and lentils once a week to check and see if she was dead or alive.

This scene marks the turning-point of Susan's story. For the first time in her narrative, John evokes scripture as soon as she descends into the cave. "Just as is written about Ishmael the Son of Abraham," John writes, "'he sat in the desert of Paran and was instructed in the bow."[315] John continues, "So also it is fitting to say about her that she was sitting in a desert cave, being instructed in struggle and manliness against hideous demons that especially show the fervor of their wickedness in the desert."[316] It is crucial to note that John did not evoke biblical passages of her face shining like that of Moses, as would have been more traditional in the physiognomic reading of saints, but in that moment when she is subsumed by the earth. The habitation of space thus rendered both body and earth sacred and brought forward the biblical past for all to see.

[314] John of Ephesus, "Susan," *Lives of the Eastern Saints*, 136.
[315] John of Ephesus, "Susan," *The Lives of the Eastern Saints*, 137. Paraphrasing Genesis 21:20-21.
[316] John of Ephesus, "Susan," *The Lives of the Eastern Saints*, 137.

The way in which John negotiations the sight of the sisters and the readers also reveals the important of place in this section. Foolishly, it seems, the women try to look upon Susan's body for further instruction. Crucially, the cave is dark. They can barely make out the image of Susan within. Yet not only has their sight been limited, but they only see Susan's back as she lies pronate. Indeed, the only signs that she remains alive are her guttural groans and tears. Otherwise, the scene upon which we gaze is that of a tomb: Susan's body is only waiting for time for it to fully reunite her with the earth through which she must now be interpreted. Face down, she leaves much of her humanity behind. These onlookers, then, are looking with the wrong type of sight.

Instead, the near totalizing darkness of the cave cues the audience that they must discard their earthly gaze in favor of other senses and knowledge. Caves represent, in the early Christian mind, what Veronica della Dora has called the "anti-landscape."[317] These spaces are defined, not by what they contain, but what they lack: matter, light, and comfort.[318] They were highly metaphorical spaces, suggestive not only of the human soul, but an encounter with God.[319] As in the story of Susan, these early Christians interpretations of caves force the sojourner to let go of their physical sight to see instead with their "spiritual sight" as well their other senses.[320] Indeed, Dionysius the Areopagite (early 6th century CE) refers to this type of space as "divine darkness," and urges his audience to "Leave behind the senses and the operation of the intellect, and all things sensible and intellectual…. For by unceasing and absolute renunciation of thyself and all things thou mayest be borne on high, through pure and entire self-negation into the

[317] Veronica della Dora, "Anti-landscapes: Caves and Apophasis in the Christian East," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 29 (2011), 761.
[318] della Dora, "Anti-landscapes," 761.
[319] della Dora, "Anti-landscapes," 761.
[320] della Dora, "Anti-landscapes," 762.

superessential radiance of the divine darkness."[321] Not only, then, did Susan seek to empty out her soul through complete self-denial, but the space in which she resided reflected her efforts to do so. Her face, it seems, was no longer adequate for the task, as it could not reveal chasm within. Susan, like this space, but become known for what she is not, rather than is.

These caves, however, also represented more than an emptying-out of the self in anticipation of being filled by divine grace. They, like John of Ephesus' description of them, also would have evoked biblical parallels for the pilgrim.[322] Once again evoking the resurrection metaphor evident in *The Life of Antony* and *The Life of the Jura Fathers*, the cave in John's story of Susan first and foremost would have been associated with Jesus' resurrection.[323] Instead of employing the language of "becoming" here, John uses landscape to depict the transformation of Susan's flesh. In her cave, she dies to her old life and is resurrected as another being entirely. Indeed, it is only after Susan has entombed herself that John begins to refer to her "perfection."[324] And it was news of this perfection, after several years, that reached monastic communities across Egypt, and caught the ear of John himself.

As is common in stories of hagiographers visiting their subject, Susan agrees to meet with John of Ephesus and two of his traveling companions. Unlike the stories of ascetics found within Theodoret's *Historia Religiosa*, however, Susan does not reveal her face to John. Indeed, the most of her even these privileged men can see is the very tip of her nose.[325] When the monks finally leave, one of them turns to John to ask, seemingly mirroring the question of John's

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[321] Dionysius of Areopagite, trans. della Dora. *The Mystical Theology and the Celestial Hierarchies Vol. 1* 175,1:9
[322] For an extensive discussion of the biblical parallels to caves, see della Dora, "Anti-landscape, 768-776. For more on the biblical connotations of mountains in which caves so often reside, see her monograph, *Mountain* (London: Reaktion Books, 2016).
[323] Jerome in his *Life of Paul* notes that Paul and his journey become almost synonymous with the cave. Jerome even describes how Paul must roll aside the stone blocking the entrance, drawing even further parallels to the death and resurrection of Jesus. Hier. *Vit. Paul,* 5.
[324] John of Ephesus, "Susan," *Lives of the Eastern Saints,* 139.
[325] John of Ephesus, "Susan," *Lives of the Eastern Saints,* 140.

literary audience, why they could not see the face of this woman. He responds that he had asked Susan this very question, demanding that she tell him the truth. "Are you afraid that you will suffer at the sight of a man," he inquired, "or that he would at the sight of you?" She answered, "Because of both these things." At the end of the story, then, it becomes clear that the cave as a second skin acts not only a biblical invocation but as a prophylactic against sin. Though both skin and cave are composed of godly matter, womanly flesh still has the ability to enflame lust in the way that dirt and stone do not. The cave can thus reflect her body and make present a deep biblical past, while also as a protective layer against the potential transgression of bodies themselves.

In other instances, caves become a stand-in for ascetic bodies, even when the ascetics themselves have gone elsewhere. Palladius, for example, tells the story of Macarius of Egypt, who spent a great deal of his time helping people through the medium of his cell in the desert.[326] As often happens with desert ascetics, however, his cell became overly popular and he could no longer stand the noise. Though he closed the door to his cell as one could close his ears, the cell itself could not fully drown-out the din. Over a period of years, then, or so Palladius reports, Marcarius made a tunnel of about half a mile, ending in a cave. Whenever too many people crowded around his cell, he would secretly leave and go to the cave, where no one could find him. While Palladius' story itself focuses on Marcarius' movements, to the pilgrims outside of his hut, his presence within makes little difference. They continue to entreat the hut for healing and with prayers as though it substantiated Marcarius himself. It is as though Marcarius was able to shed this skin and leave it behind as a way for pilgrims to interact with him while he, or, perhaps, metaphorically his soul, was elsewhere, in a cave of divine contemplation.

[326] Palladius, *HL* 17.

Trees and Water

Jerome's late fourth-century *Life of Paul* contains not just cavern imagery of the hard earth, but nature depictions of trees and water as well. Instead of the descent into his cave being enveloped darkness and emptiness, it ends in a hall which is open to the sky though shaded by the "wide-spreading boughs of an ancient palm."[327] In a way, this scene marks the inverse of Plato's allegory of the cave; instead of obscuring the mind in darkness, it opens it up to light and understanding. Here is a place, once used by the Egyptians as a mint (according to Jerome), but now marked by God as an ideal foundation for Christian asceticism. Moreover, the tree itself marks this union of dwelling and dweller, as the palm tree stands for the ascetic himself. Much of the imagery of God's chosen people as palm trees stems from Psalm 92, which reads, "The righteous will flourish like a palm tree/ they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon;/ planted in the house of the lord,/ they will flourish in the courts of our God./ They will still bear fruit in old age,/ they will stay fresh and green,/ proclaiming, "The Lord is upright;/ he is my rock, and there is no wickedness in him" (Ps. 92.12-16). Jerome's description of Paul and his relationship with the abode, then, almost directly mirrors this passage. The palm tree here not only marks where Paul will flourish in his asceticism, as this is the place he chooses to live out much of his life, but both he and the tree physically plant themselves in a court to God. This mint-turned-temple opens onto the sky, inviting the gaze, not downward toward earth, nor around the cave itself, but upward, toward heaven. When Paul puts down roots here, he, like the tree, bears fruit of Christianity, as he, according to Jerome, literally becomes the progenitor of asceticism. The fruits of his labor and the life-giving seeds they contain spread themselves across the Egyptian

[327] "patulis diffusa ramis uetus palma." Hier. *Vit. Paul,* 5.1. The presence of a tree also transforms the cave from a vast, vacuous space into a physical place. It helps to compose the landscape and fill the void with a distinct marker. For more on trees ability to transform places into spaces, see Owain Jones, "Arnos Vale Cemetery and the Lively Materialities of Trees in Place," *Garden History* 35 (2007), 150.

desert and beyond.[328] In the final two lines of the opening passage, the foundation from which this tree grows and to which it clings is the cave itself, the rock that is God. This imagery of tree, fruit, and rock, then, consume both Paul and the audience. As armchair pilgrims, the audience walks both through the literary and biblical landscape as the two collapse into one another.

While not all stories of ascetic beginnings mirror the Psalms quite so literally, many of them do contain stories about ascetics either coming across a spot marked with tree and stream, or plant a tree when they establish their dwelling-place.[329] For the sojourning pilgrim, though the body of pilgrim is not described in this moment, the presence of a tree, of an oasis, would make it readable. On a very basic level, the manifestation of a tree, whether palms in the deserts of Egypt and Palestine, or firs in the forests of Gaul, represent the ascetic life.[330] Like with physiognomy of the face, for the viewers, it was less about individuation between these places, and more about visually cueing them into larger motifs of representation. As stand-ins for the ascetic flesh, these trees signify people's uprightness, elasticity, and longevity. As the tree in Paul's cave suggests, trees as ascetics stand straight up, reaching toward heaven. They do not bend over toward the ground, preoccupied with earthly concerns, but instead strive always upwards. Yet in their pursuit of heaven, they are not so rigid that they snap under pressure, nor so pliant that they bend at the slightest suggestion. Palm and fir trees in particular can withstand

[328] In a somewhat surprising categorization, ancient Greeks often attributed more negative connotations to male plants, than to female ones. Softer word was more useful than hard, gnarled bark, while fruitful trees and plants provided greater value for the community. For more on the gendering of plants in ancient Greece, see Lin Foxhall, "Natural sex: The Attribution of Sex and Gender to Plants in Ancient Greece," *Thinking Men: Masculinity and its Self-Representation in the Classical Tradition* ed. Lin Foxhall and John Salmon (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 57-70.

[329] For those who find trees, see "Marcarius" in *Hist. Mon.* 75.8; Hier. *Vit. Paul.*; Palladius, "Marcarius of Alexandria" in *HL* 18.5. For planted trees in ascetic cells or monastic communities, see John of Ephesus, "John the Perfect Nazarite" in *The Lives of the Eastern Saints*; "Romanus" in *Vie de Peres de Jura,* 61.

[330] Vivian, Russel and Cumming suggest that fir trees and rivers beside them are "emblems of the hermit life" in Gaul, just as caves and springs were in the Judean desert. *Life of the Jura Fathers,* 62. For more on the imagery of caves and springs during the early byzantine period, see Yizhar Hirschfeld, *The Judean Desert Monasteries in the Byzantine Period* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

ferocious wind and storms without breaking while maintaining their upright stance when the weather calms down. So too are ascetics supposed to endure onslaughts from demons, pilgrims, or even their own thoughts without foregoing their practice, yet must remain steadfast even when their routines become mundane.[331] Finally, the ascetic himself mirrors the tree in lifespan. Just as a palm tree typically lives for about 90 years, Jerome reports that Paul was over 100 years old when he finally passed away.[332]

Trees, however, did not simply signify the ascetic body with which they resided, but combined with its presence to evoke a biblical past. As with caves, trees had the ability to conjure images of death and rebirth, particularly as it pertained to Jesus' incarnation and crucifixion.[333] As Sara Ritchey recognizes, "The importance of trees is not difficult to explain. A tree lay at the heart of God's original act of making, and of creation's slipping away from its ideal original image. It was the foundation of the world's great unmaking, first in the gospel narrative of Christ's crucifixion on a wooden cross, then in Revelations, where a tree of continuing life gave hope that creation might transcend into God."[334] In other words, trees embodied salvation history and collapsed multiple biblical events into a single symbol. This imagery can be round repeatedly throughout the New Testament, as Paul in particular notes that "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree'" (Gal. 3:13).[335]

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[331] Indeed, this boredom, or *akedia*, is often more difficult for the ascetic to endure than battles with devils and demons. See, for example, Susanna Elm, *'Virgins of God': The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 264.
[332] Hier. *Vit. Paul*, 7. Jerome reports that Paul lived to be 113 years old. Old age is also a common trope for ascetics, although, when compared to trees instead of humans, their life-span seems more congruous.
[333] For more on how trees become "holy matter" and signify Jesus' incarnation and crucifixion, see, Sara Ritchey, *Holy Matter: Changing Perceptions of the Material World in Late Medieval Christianity* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2014), 3.
[334] Ritchey, *Holy Matter*, 18-19.
[335] Paul here is referring to Deut. 2:22-23. Similar substantiations of Jesus as tree can be found in Acts 5:30, 10:39, 13:20.

The discourse surrounding trees, however, was not confined to the monastic sphere, but found a wider audience within the Christological debates. By the second century CE, for example, Irenaeus of Lyon had connected the tree of Eden with that of the crucifixion, explaining that, by means of a tree Christian were made debtors to God, and also by means of a tree they obtained remission of that debt.[336] He goes on to connect this reading to a story about the prophet Elisha. When his fellow prophets were chopping wood for the construction of a tabernacle, the iron head came look from the axe and fell into the river, Jordan. Unable to find the axe head, they asked Elisha for help. Upon reaching the river, he threw some wood into the water. As soon as he did this, the axe head floated up to the surface, and they were able to resume their work.[337] Irenaeus explains that though people negligently lost the word of God (the axe head) by means of a tree (the handle of that axe) and struggled to find it again, God offered them exoneration through a tree as well (the wood thrown into the river, and subsequently the cross on which Jesus died).[338]

A little over 200 years later, in the mid-fourth century CE, Ambrose of Milan connected wood and trees more explicitly to the body of Jesus: "By wood we began to hunger until [wood] took his own flesh for nourishment. The same lord joined flesh and wood in Christ so that the old hunger might cease and the grace of life might be restored."[339] This wood is identified as the cross made from the Tree of Life, onto which Jesus was put in order to satiate the appetites whetted by the Tree of Knowledge.[340]

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[336] Iren. *Haer.* 5.17.3.
[337] This story comes from 2 Kings 6:6.
[338] Iren. *Haer.* 5.17.14.
[339] "per lignum coepimus esurire, quoad caro suum accepit alimentum. Ideo dominus in Christo camei iunxit et lignum, ut fames antiqua cessaret, vitae gratia redderetur." Ambrose of Milan, *Explanatoi Psalmi* 35, *PL* 14.
[340] For more on tree imagery in this passage, see Victor Y. Haines, "The Iconography of the *Felix Culpa*," *Florilegium* 1 (1979), 155-6.

It is crucial to note in all of these instances, however, from the Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit, to Jesus' crucifixion upon a wooden cross, that trees act as a synecdoche. What they substantiate is not the natural world, but the state of the flesh. They simultaneously encompass both the fallen and the resurrected; humankind at its lowest and highest point. Without people in this equation, as they nearly become part of the tree itself, (or, in the case of the Edenic tree, the fruit becomes part of their legacy), the tree would have less symbolic resonance. The evocation of the biblical image for the literary pilgrim therefore requires elision of body and bark.

This amalgamation plays out most explicitly in John of Ephesus' story of Abraham and Maro. These two ascetics, great in their asceticism, began to attract people from miles around who sought not only their teaching but to be healed.[341] Both monks, however, desired to distance themselves from the masses, and so Abraham ascended a tall column while Maro locked himself in a small room and then enclosed himself within the hollow of a tree. John of Ephesus informs his readers that Maro had taken a giant segment from a hollow tree and placed it in a corner. Because the tree was too narrow to lie in, he stood ceaselessly, refusing to see anyone while enclosed. In order to ease his own access in and out of this tree, however, Maro constructed a tiny door through which he would stoop and come out only when he wanted. When he did leave, he would stand outside and expose himself to the elements, as though his flesh itself has transformed into the bark of a tree.

Abraham, however, was not happy with Maro's decision to stand outside and expose himself to the freezing snow that often covered their monastery in the mountains.[342] "Why are you killing yourself? What good is this to you?" he asked. Maro, weeping profusely, replied

[341] John of Ephesus, "Abraham and Maro," *Lives of the Eastern Saints*, 4.
[342] John of Ephesus, "Abraham and Maro," *Lives of the Eastern Saints*, 4.

that he must be tormented here, because this suffering would eventually end. While Abraham heard Maro "in his soul," he nevertheless convinced Maro to come inside and reside in his tree-segment because his "colour was changing nature from the intensity of the snow." Weeping bitterly, Maro eventually relented and lived primarily in his tree-segment for the next thirteen years.

To pull back for a moment, we must begin by analyzing John of Ephesus' intent when he included this story. While we will never be able to comprehend his motive fully, two primary possibilities exist. One, that Abraham and Maro actually lived such a life, and so John reported what he saw and included what he thought was most important. Two, that John took great liberties with this story and brought his readers along on a literary pilgrimage of primarily his own creation. I contend that, in this instance, we do not have to choose between one or the other because the conclusions that we can draw between the presence or absence of material remains largely the same.

First, because John invites his readers on a journey to the top of a remote mountain in order to benefit from the lives of these holy men, he includes details which he thinks would be salient to his readers. Repeatedly, he returns to the curious image of Maro living within a large segment of a tree. He is so insistent that this piece of the natural world be associated with Maro, that he uses Abraham as a mouthpiece, urging Maro to assume this materiality once again and to survive like the tree. The tree clearly symbolizes Maro and, as I will discuss, invokes scripture in such a way that its inclusion and emphasis become a crucial feature on which his audience's gaze had to repeatedly alight. Second, what is *not* featured would have also immediately captured the reader's eye, for a landscape, like a face, is constructed as much by its absences as its manifestations. Though John of Ephesus spends a great deal of time describing features of the

monastery and the mountain on which it resides, he does not, at the beginning of the story where this tale takes place, describe either Abraham or Maro physically. The pilgrim is not privy to details of their eyes, hair, or even state of the flesh. The closest description the audience receives is Abraham's note that Maro's "nature" changes when he stands outside in the snow for too long.[343] Instead, John invites his readers to look over and over again at the tree as a substantiation for Maro's body.

This repetition also evokes more than simply the state of the body, as it deeply connects it, not only with nature in general, but with a tree. Like the cave which evoked the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the tree similarly substantiates the fall and redemption of humanity. Indeed, Maro's physical connection with the tree plays this out. In one sense, his desire to stand outside like a fir tree, subjected to all of the elements, reflects the tree of knowledge. In this state, he laments constantly over the fallen state of humanity, bitterly weeping over the torments people must suffer in this life in order to not experience them eternally in the next. At the same time, however, particularly when he is encased in the tree-segment, pilgrims would have seen the redemptive nature of the tree, as this practice, this imitation of Jesus, will eventually save Maro. Thus, even though the body is not visible, John of Ephesus displays the dual natures of the flesh, in both its fallen and saved state.

Next to all of these trees, the hagiographers inform their audiences, lies a stream. While rivers and running water hold a plethora of meaning in early Christianity, their evocation in ascetic texts, particularly as they substantiate bodies, seem to be limited. Somewhat surprisingly, given the resonances of death and rebirth found in caves and trees, rivers in the majority of these

[343] John of Ephesus, "Abraham and Maro," *Lives of the Eastern Saints*.

stories do not symbolize the river Jordan or the act of baptism.[344] Indeed, in some texts, monks are shamed for placing their bodies in the river at all. Palladius, for example, tells of how, after a long, hot, and dusty journey, Jovinius stopped by a stream to wash his hands and feet in water before going to lie down. In this middle of this act, Melania suddenly appears, saying, "How can a courageous, hot-blooded young man like you dare to beautify your flesh that way? Do you not perceive that this is engenders great harm? Have courage, I am sixty years old and neither my head nor my feet, nor any of my members, except for the tips of my fingers, has touched water."[345] The river, here, is not meant to cleanse, nor touch the body in any way, for it symbolizes the weakness of the flesh which should be resilient like the earth.

In many instances, however, when an ascetic comes upon a perfect spot in which to dwell, a river is almost always close by. Romanus, for example, settles on a mountain from which a stream pours forth, while Antony lives in a barracks next to a river.[346] Moreover, whenever they happen upon a tree that marks their spot, a river almost always gushes forth next to it.[347] In this sense, the ascetics remain like the tree, depending on the water for their sustenance.[348] It is there to sustain their bodies, but nothing more. In some sense, this is the primary function of water within these tales. In order to remain alive, particularly in the

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[344] For more on the ritualization of water in late antiquity, see Anders Klostergaard Peterson, "Rituals of Purification, Rituals of Initiation: Phenomenological, Taxonomical and Culturally Evolutionary Reflections, in *Ablution, Initiation, and Baptism: Late Antiquity, Early Judaism, and Early Christianity* (Berlin: Gruyter, 2001) 11-15. For more on rivers and baptism in early Christianity, see Andreas Lindemann, "Zur früchristlichen Taufpraxis: Die Taufe in der Didache, bei Justin und in der Didaskalia" in *Ablution, Initiation, and Baptism,* 767-816. For more on baptism and water's connection to the cycle of life and death, see Frederick S. Paxton, "Communities of the Living and the Dead in Late Antiquity and the Early Medieval West," in *The Making of Christian Communities in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages* ed. Mark F. Williams (London: Anthem Press, 2005), 49-62.

[345] "Πῶς θαρρεῖς ταύτην ἄγων τὴν ἡλικίαν ἔτι ζέοντος τοῦ αἵματός σου οὕτω φιλοκαλεῖν τὸ σαρκίον, μὴ αἰσθανόμενος τῶν ἐξ αὐτοῦ τικτομένων βλαβερῶν; Θάρσει, θάρσει ὅτι ἑξηκοστὸν ἄγω ἔτος τῆς ἡλικίας, ἐκτὸς τῶν ἄκρων τῶν χειρῶν οὐ ποῦς μου ἥψατο ὕδατος οὐκ ὄψις οὐδὲ ἓν τῶν μελῶν…." Palladius, *HL* 55.2

[346] *Life of the Jura Fathers*, Athanasius, *Life of Antony.*

[347] See, for example, Hier. *Vit. Paul*, 5; *Life of the Jura Fathers*, 7;

[348] Evagrius Ponticus in *Ad Monachos* remarks that "Without knowledge, the heart will not be placed on high;/ a tree will not flourish without a drink." in *Evagrius Ponticus: Ad Monachos* ed. and trans Jeremy Driscoll, OSB (New York and Mahwah: The Newman Press, 2003), 117.

"wilderness," a near-by stream and a fruit-bearing tree would constitute basic necessities.[349] Yet, often, hagiographers tie water more intimately with the body than basic nourishment.

Theodoret, for example, tells the tale of Julian Saba who made a journey with a young man who wished to become an ascetic.[350] As he and his companions travelled many days in the desert, a young man was overcome with thirst. Taking pity, Julian Saba knelt down and began to cry and pray. Through his entreaty, tears began to stream down, and as they touched the dust of the earth, they transformed a spring of water. In case his audience, as they journeyed through their literary pilgrimage, missed the connotation, Theodoret reminded them that, just as Moses struck a rock that caused floor of river-water in order to quench the thirst of thousands, "so this man of God, by watering the dry sand with his tears, drew out streams of spring-water, not to cure the thirst of the many many but of a single adolescent."[351] In some ways, then, these men are both tree and river. Their bodies become an oasis in the desert, transforming from the materiality of the flesh into life-sustaining fruit and water, while their words also nourish the mind and soul.

In such a way, these hagiographers are portraying their subjects as fulfilling the Old Testament, and especially Isaiah's, prophecies about the desert being transformed by God:

> I will open rivers on the bare heights,
> and fountains in the midst of the valleys;
> I will make the wilderness a poll of water,

[349] For more on the "wilderness" trope in stories of asceticism, see, for example, J.E. Goehring, *Ascetics, Society and the Desert: Studies in Early Christian Monasticism,* (Harrisburg: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 1999), 73-88; William Harmless, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Claudia Rapp, "Desert, City, and Countryside in the Early Christian Imagination," *Church History and Religious Culture* 86.1/4 Special Issue: The Encroaching Desert: Egyptian Hagiography and the Medieval West (2006), pp. 93-112; James E. Goehring, "The Dark Side of Landscape: Ideology and Power in the Christian Myth of the Desert," in *The Cultural Turn in Late Antique Studies: Gender, Asceticism, and Historiography* ed. Dale Martin and Patricia Cox Miller (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 136-149.
[350] Thdt. *Hist. rel.,* 2.7.
[351] "…ὕυτως οὗτος ὁ Θεῖος ἀνήρ, τὴν ξηροτάτην ἐκείνην ψάμμον καταρδεύσας τοῖς δάκρυσι, πηγαίων ναμάτων εἵλκυσε ῥεύματα, οὐχ ἵνα πολλῶν μυριάδων, ἀλλ᾽ ἵνα ἑνὸς μειρακίου Θεραπεύση τὸ δίψος." Thdt. *Hist. rel.,* 2.8.

and the dry land springs of water.
I will put in the wilderness the cedar,
the acacia, the myrtle, and the olive;
I will set in the desert the cypress,
the plane and the pine together.[352]

The monks and ascetics of the desert and the forests thus embodied this prophecy. Their bodies bore fruits of asceticism and their tears sustained life. As Palladius writes, God had the ability to "prepare a banquet in the desert… For those who have faith in God even the desert can bloom."[353]

Crucially, however, this landscape does not exist by itself, and indeed cannot exist without human bodies. The two become inextricable both in life and in memory. Theodoret, for example, told the tale of James of Cyrrhestica. Sitting upon the mountain, James practiced living life in a body without a body.[354] As would happen in death, his flesh became the earth, and the earth his flesh. He embodied, quite literally, the story of creation, where *Adamah* (earth) and *Adam* (man) were the same material given different form. To be a man, Theodoret reminded his audience, was to be dust and soil. When pilgrims from miles around journeyed to see James, they did not try to snatch up the hairs from his head, nor grab the rags from his clothes. Instead, they absconded with the soil from the mountain with which he resided. Eventually, so many people came to this holy body-place, that the mountain, like the flesh from its ascetic feats, became nearly exhausted from all those coming to carry it off for their benefit.[355] When these men and women returned to their homes, they did not have a fleshly token with which to remember

[352] Isa. 41:18-19; see also Isa. 51:3; Isa. 35:1-2.
[353] Palladius, trans. Soterios Mpalatsoukas, in *Οἱ ἅγιοι καὶ τὸ φυσικὸ περιβάλλον*. *(The Saints and the natural environment)* (Thessaloniki: Editions Mygdonia, 1996), 153.
[354] Thdt., *Hist. rel.*, 21.3.
[355] Thdt., *Hist. rel.*, 21.4

James, but soil, that little piece of place that embodies, not just the power of the ascetic, but the ascetic himself.

Not only, then, does Theodoret describe how literal pilgrims would have remembered James through the medium of the earth, but such a telling encourages his literary audience to do so as well. In both life and death, James is not seen as bones, skin, and hair, but rocks, soil, and mud. In the same way, the author of the *Life of the Jura Fathers* encourages his audience, not to remember Romanus by his flesh, but through the earth. Returning to the opening story of this chapter, Romanus established his community on a mountain from which flowed a spring of icy water. "Even today," the author writes, "its waters, channeled with wooden pipes to the distant monastery, are placed at the disposal of Romanus' heirs as a pledge of the inheritance that was to come."[356] Romanus is thus remembered, not as man, but as stream, that life-giving force that sustains his heirs. Even though his fleshly body no longer exists, a part of Romanus lives on both in the wilderness as well the monks whom he created.

Theodoret and John of Ephesus similarly conclude the lives of Julian Saba and Z'ura, two desert ascetics, respectively.[357] Though both men performed great deeds throughout his life, their physical memory will be carried out through the spring which his tears created. Both authors note that these springs last "even till now" and stand as a witness to God's glory. The spring created by Z'ura (though not by his tears) was even, according to John of Ephesus, called "Mar Z'ura's spring" until present time. For both of these men, the creation of the spring from their own bodies represented one of their first acts of power, and at the end, when their bodies have turned back to dust, it is how they will be remembered. As a spring, they will sustain both

[356] *Life of the Jura Fathers*, 7.
[357] Thdt., *Hist. rel.*, 2.1-8; John of Ephesus, "Z'ura" in *Lives of the Eastern Saints*, 2.

physical and spiritual life, helping future communities to live in the "wilderness" and become the wellspring of future generations.

Yet, to bring this chapter full-circle, often, what monks, or even those who built their abodes, wanted to be remembered as and for, was not nature, but the abodes themselves. Cyril of Scythopolis, a sixth-century Palestinian monk, describes one story in which Eudocia, a local ascetic woman, established a large number of monasteries and churches to Christ.[358] Vising one of the monasteries which housed the great Euthymius, she cried out "Good are your dwellings, oh Jacob, and your tents, oh Israel!" Unlike in Athanasius description of the birth of Antony's community, Cyril ties this passage to the death of Eudocia. At this very monastery, Euthymius, the monk whom Eudocia set out to visit, foretold her death in the near future. In an attempt to console her, he assured her that she would be remembered in both "word and letter." According to Cyril, however, this type of memory was not suitable for Eudocia. Instead, she was determined to bequeath him part of her massive fortune through her will. Yet unsatisfied with money alone, Eudocia feverishly builds and consecrates even more monasteries in her last days on earth so that she will live on through the monastic habitations. Abodes, then, can reflect not just the bodies of those whom they enclose, but those who build, preserving memory in the matter from when it originally came. Born out and decomposing into dust, they nevertheless live on through manifestations of the earth itself.

Conclusion

At the end of his *Life of Paul,* Jerome turns to his audience and says:

> Let it be permissible at the end of this little work to ask those who are ignorant of their inheritance, who drape their homes in marble, who sew

[358] Cyril of Scythopolis, *Lives of the Monks of Palestine*, trans. R. M. Price, into and notes John Binns (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1991), 35.

> together villas with a rope: what did this naked old man ever lack? Your cups are bejeweled, he was satisfied with his naturally cupped hand. You are woven in gold tunics, he did not possess the clothing of your cheapest slave…. He, though he preferred to be nude, kept the clothing of Christ: you clothed your silks, have lost the robes of Christ. Paul lies covered with worthless dust, but will be resurrected in glory; You are oppressed by elaborate rocks with all of your wealth burning. Why are even your grave clothes of your dead completely covered with gold? Why does your ambition not cease amid grief and tears? Can the cadavers of the rich not know how to decay except in silk?[359]

Even in death, then, abodes can display the character of the body within. Just as Paul was naked throughout his life (a fact never mentioned until his death), his cave tomb remained unadorned. Just as he told Antony that he was looking upon a man who would soon again be dust, he evokes the substances from which he was born and into which his corpse will soon turn. Seeing man as dust and dust as man reveals the connection of this body-place to a biblical past and allows Jerome's readers to access a hidden flesh. Even though the body is gone, his tomb evokes what once was: poor, thin, and dirty, but heavenly and angelic at the same time. Yet, unlike many of his counterparts, Jerome takes the tale further to shame his own audience. Applying the trope of abode as second skin to his own readers, he asks them what their own graves will reveal about their bodies, and thus the true nature of their souls. Just as the absence of gold revealed the presence of Christ in Paul, so too does the presence of jewels and vaulted ceilings reveal Christ's absence in those buried in such places. Jerome, then, asks his audience to view their own lives as pilgrims, to read place as their own face, and condemningly asks if they like what they see.

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[359] "Libet in fine opusculi interrogare eos qui patrimonia sua ignorant, qui domos marmaoribus uestiunt, qui uno lino uillarum insuunt pretia: huic seni nudo quid umquam defuerit? Vos gemma bibitis, ille concauis manibus naturae satisfecit. Vos in tunicis aurum texitis, ille ne vilissimi quidem mancipi uestri indumentum habuit…. Ille Christi uestem, nudu licet, seruauit: uos uestiti sericis indumentum Christi perdidistis. Paulus uilissimo puluere opertus iacet resurrecturus in gloria; vos operose saxis sepulcra premunt cum uestris opibus arsuros…. Cur et mortuos uestros auratis obuoluitis uestibus? Cur ambitio inter luctus lacrimasque non cessat? An cadauera diuitum nisi in serico putrescere nesciunt?" Hier. *Vit. Paul*, 17.

CHAPTER THREE:
'Death has Climbed Up thorugh the Window': Transpatial Ascetics and the Danger of Misplaced Bodies

"Death has climbed up through the window
it has entered our palaces,
to cut off the children from the streets
and the young men from the squares.
Speak! So says the Lord:
'Human corpses will fall
like dung upon the open field,
like sheaves behind the reaper,
and no one shall gather them.'"

- Jeremiah 9:21-23

In the previous two chapters, I have discussed the importance of early Christians being able to read ascetic abodes as though they were bodies as well as the power embedded in the proper placement of those ascetics. If placed correctly, such a construction had the potential to benefit hagiographers, pilgrims, and ascetics. Not only could onlookers invoke a biblical past in order to learn how to incorporate humility and moderation into their own lives, but the ascetics themselves could, at their most powerful, meld with their surroundings to protect a house, city, or even large swaths of Christendom from the onslaught of assaulting enemies. The fusion of an ascetic body with its abode was a potent force that could be harnessed for the good of all Christians.

Yet, not all ascetics obtained this ability to meld with their surroundings, as they resided inside an abode not meant for their bodies. Most frequently, female ascetics, fleeing abusive marriages or controlling fathers, ran to monasteries and dressed like men in order to gain entrance and, as a result, physical concealment. Because this location did not correspond to her gender, however, the place itself worked actively to expel the woman from its midst. Most frequently, she was raped, accused of rape, or ostracized from her current community. In all

instances, she was physically separated from this male space, at least for a time. It is at this point that her space and gender performance must, in some way, be either rectified or realigned in order for the woman's punishment to cease and for her to gain re-entry into paradise.

This chapter will examine how these stories, both within their own framework and for a larger audience, served as a warning about the dangers of misplaced bodies, as well as instruction for how body and space could realign to restore balance in this volatile system. The first part will conduct a close reading of "Mary the Niece of Abraham," a sixth century Syriac text.[360] While by no means an urtext, this *Life* not only details Mary's spatial transgressions explicitly and at great length, but also contains some of the most elaborate tropes and overtones that can be found in nearly every other story I will discuss. This deep-dive will demonstrate both the role space played in Mary's fall and redemption as well as the necessity of recognizing space as actor both in *vitae* and, subsequently, the lives of readers. From there, I will compare the three crucial plot points within a larger body of texts concerning misplaced ascetics (spatial transgression, consequences, spatial re-gendering), to explore how these stories were constructed specifically to cause character and audience to be hyper-cognizant of the relationship between their gendered body and the spaces they entered.

With the exception of "Mary the Niece of Abraham," the five stories with which I will be working fall under the category of "transvestite" or "cross-dressing" saints.[361] They include the

[360] *Mary, the Niece of Abraham of Qidun* in *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient* ed. and trans. Sebastian P. Brock and Susan Ashbrook Harvey (Berkeley, L.A., and London: University of California Press, 1998).
[361] Nicholas Constas notes that the stories of "transvestite nuns" were extremely popular in Byzantine hagiography between the fifth and ninth centuries. *Holy Women of Byzantium: Ten Saints' Lives in English Translation* ed. Alive-Mary Talbot (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library Collection, 1996), 1. Evelyne Patlagean identifies 12 saints in total, while Stephen Davis identifies 11. Evelyne Patlagean, "L'histoire de la femme déguisée en moine et l'évolution de la sainteté feminine à Byzance," in *Structure sociale, famille, chrétienté à Byzance, IV-XI siècle* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1981) 600-602. Stephen Davis, "Crossed Text, Crossed Sex: Intertextuality and Gender in Early Christian Legends of Holy Women Disguised as Men" *JECS* 10 no. 1 (2002), 4, 8. While Pelagia is usually included in this group, I will discuss her *vita* at great length in Chapter Four.

3rd-century *Life of Eugenia,* the fifth-century *Life of Euphrosyne,* the late fifth-and early sixth-century *Life of St. Matrona of Perge,* the sixth-century *Life of Hilaria,* and the sixth-or seventh-century *Life of St. Mary/Marinos*.[362] Scholars have explored how the gendered constructions within these tales become blurred, as the title characters leave behind their female identities to dress as men. As Kristi Upson-Saia, Stephen Davis, and Patricia Cox Miller among others have recognized, hagiographers played easily with these tropes, examening these saints as rhetorical devices, means by which to explore female holiness, and as symbols of correct spiritual practice.[363] While I agree that the cross-dressing aspect of these stories remains crucial to their overall purpose, I suggest that these *vitae* should fall under the larger umbrella of transpatiality. By this term, I simply mean a person who resides in a space primarily associated with the opposite sex. I contend that this new categorization is beneficial for several reasons. First, it recognizes that performing as male constituted a means of passing only in order to gain entrance into a certain space, instead of an end in-and-of itself.[364] None of these women announce that

[362] Because most of these stories were originally written in Syriac, I will rely first upon the English translation of the Syriac and will then compare it to slightly later translations of either the Greek or Latin.

[363] For more on cross-dressing and transvestite saints, see Kristi Upson-Saia, *Early Christian Dress: Gender, Virtue, and Authority. Routledge Studies in Ancient History* (New York, London: Routledge, 2011), 84-103; Lynda Coon, *Sacred Fictions: Holy Women and Hagiography in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 52-70; Stephen Davis, "Crossed Texts, Crossed Sex," 1-36; Stavroula Constantinou, *Female Corporeal Performances: Reading the Body in Byzantine Passions and Lives of Holy Women* (Stockholm, Uppsala, 2005); Laila Abdalla, "Theology and Culture: Masculinizing the Woman," in *Varieties of Devotion in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Arizona Studies in the Middle Ages and Renaissance,* 7 ed. Susan C. Karant-Nunn (Turnhout: Brepolis, 2003),17-37; Patricia Cox Miller, "Is There a Harlot in This Text? Hagiography and the Grotesque" *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 33 no. 3 (Fall 2003), 420-435.

[364] Simply defined, passing is "a practice by which a social identity is deemed socially abnormal and is 'nicely invisible and known only to the person who possesses it.'" Goffman, as quoted in Z. Nicolazzo, "It's a Hard Line to Walk': black non-binary trans* collegians perspectives on passing, realness, and trans*-normativity," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 29 no. 9 (June 2016), 1173-1188. For late antique ascetics, the socially abnormal identity would be "woman" in the context of a male monastery, and so was known primarily to the person who possessed that identity. Though there are many different reasons for passing, typically those attempting to conform to social expectations are doing so for their own safety. This is evident within the lives of transpatial saints as Matrona escapes her abusive husband while Eugenia flees her controlling father and an arranged marriage. *Saint Matrona of Perge,* 10; "Life of Eugenia" in *Select Narratives of Holy Women: from the Syro-Antiochene or Sinai palimpsest: as written above the old Syriac Gospels by John the Stylite, of Beht-Mari-Qanun in A.D. 778* ed. and trans. Agnes Smith Lewis (London: C. J. Clay and Sons, 1990), 5-10. For more on modern discussions of the dangers of passing, see, Stephanie Begun and Shanna K. Kattari, "Conforming for Survival: Associations between

they wish to "be" men, and, in fact, some seek out alternatives to monastic communities before relenting.[365] Moreover, these women never stop identifying as women to themselves. Matrona, for example, worries constantly that someone will discover that she is actually a woman.[366] The only people who gender these women male are the monks and occasional side characters in the story who come into contact with her. Not only do these circumstances epitomize the phenomenon of passing, but they exemplify relatively new language within the field of gender studies which differentiates between gender expression (clothing, voice, name, bodily movements, etc.) and gender identity (if one considers oneself to be a man/woman/trans etc.). When these ascetics who self-identify (or whose hagiographer repeatedly identifies them) as women enter a monastery or other masculinized space, their gender expression and the space match, but their gender *identity* does not. It is for this reason that they are *transpatial* and not just transvestites. Here, I do not wish to downplay the importance of works on these women as transvestites or cross-dressing saints. The fact that they dressed up as men and troubled gendered binaries is still crucial to understanding their stories. I simply suggest that we also must look at the role space plays within their performance. Their desire to enter a male space occasionally required the donning of male clothing and not the other way around. As such, transpatiality recognizes that gender expression does not stop at clothing, but includes performance within space as well, which allows other ascetics, like Mary the Niece of Abraham, to be brought into a conversation from which they would have otherwise been excluded.

Transgender Visual Conformity/Passing and Homelessness Experiences," *Journal for Gay and Lesbian Social Service* 28.1 (January, 2016), 55.

[365] Matrona of Perge, for example, asks God for help in her plan to become a nun to escape the notice of her husband. *Matrona of Perge*, 4.

[366] *Life of St. Matrona of Perge* trans. Jeffrey Featherstone with intro. and notes by Cyril Magno, in *Holy Women of Byzantium: Ten Saints' Lives in English Translation* ed. Alice-Mary Tablot (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library Collection 1996), 4-6.

Finally, and most importantly, examining these ascetics as transpatial emphasizes that the transgression of space had far greater and potentially more dire consequences on the entire community, and not just the woman. In late antique Christianity, women residing or even approaching male spaces caused massive anxiety and disastrous consequences if not immediately rectified. As such, many men went to great lengths to avoid seeing, or even being in the presence of, women, from sitting high atop a pillar in the middle of the desert, to visiting them only in a dream so that their flesh would not be tempted.[367] Moreover, nearly every story of male ascetics contains some warning about the weakness of the flesh and the ability of the female form to cause a man to fall in a single instance.[368] Women, more than even demons themselves, were thought to be the ultimate downfall of male ascetics.[369]

All of the stories I will discuss in this chapter reflect this spatial anxiety. The authors do not express concern here for the women dressing like men, but for them entering male space, for their bodies have the ability not only to corrupt the individual, but every person around them. Even though these women rarely enter *qua* women, they *never* exist in male space the same way as their male counterparts. The space in some way knows that their bodies do not belong, as the passage from Matrona hints at, and tries to push them out. Thus, examining these stories through

[367] "On John of Lycopolis," in *Lives of the Desert Fatheres: The Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* trans. Norman Russell, Intro. Benedicta Ward (Mowbray, London, and Oxford: Cistercian Publications, 1981), 1.5-6

[368] Palladius, for example, tells the story of Elias who was "spiritually castrated" so that he would not be filled with lust when he lived with women in the desert. Palladius of Aspuna, *Lausiac History*, 29 ed. and trans., John Wortley (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2015). Jerome also describes in detail his battle with lust when he attempted to live like an ascetic in the desert. Hier. *Ep.* 22 in *Hieronymus: Epistularum Pars I, Epistula I-LXX, Vol. LIV.,* ed. Isidorus Hilberg (Vienna, Österreichischen Akademie Der Wissenschaften, 1996). For more on Jerome's letter to Eustochium, see *Handmaids of the Lord: Contemporary Descriptions of Feminine Asceticism in the First Six Centuries,* ed. and trans. Joan M. Petersen. [Cistercian Studies Series: 143] (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, Inc. 1996). While Pelagia also fits into this category, she will be discussed at greater length in chapter 4.

[369] Even when demons do show up to torment ascetics, they frequently appear in the guise of women. See, for example, "John of Lycopolis," in *The Lives of the Desert Fathers: The Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* Trans. Norman Russel, intro. Benedicta Ward (Mowbray: London and Oxford Cistercian Publications, 1981), 1.32-35.

the lens of transpatiality will not only help us to expand our story base, but to see another danger of misplaced, and not just misgendered, bodies.

Mary the Niece of Abraham

The story which modern scholars now call "Mary the Niece of Abraham" is actually an extract from a much larger *Life of Abraham*. While the life itself is anonymous, because our earliest manuscripts are in Syriac from the fifth or sixth century, it became falsely attributed to Ephrem, who died in 373 CE. Scholars, however, believe that this life actually belongs in the fifth century because it draws explicitly on Theodoret's *Historia Religiosa*, Palladius' *Lausiac History*, and Athanasius' *Life of Antony*. Though our first copies of this Life are in Syriac, it was quickly translated into both Latin and Greek.[370]

Not only was this story specifically influenced by tropes within these hagiographies, but it also drew upon ascetic discourse surrounding Jeremiah 9:20-22:

> Hear, O women the word of the Lord, and let your ears receive the word of his mouth; teach your daughters a dirge, and each to her neighbor a lament. 'Death has come up into our windows, it has entered our palaces, to cut off the children from the streets and the young men from the squares.' Speak! Thus says the Lord: 'Human corpses shall fall like dung upon the open field, like sheaves behind the reaper, and no one shall gather them.'

This passage, or at least portion of it, frequently shows up in the writings of late antique hagiographers and of early Christian leaders who correspond regularly with virgins or other ascetics. Jerome, for example, wrote a letter to Eustochium, a Roman virgin who eventually erected a monastery for women in Bethlehem. In this letter, Jerome exhorted Eustochium to

[370] Sebastian P. Brock and Susan Ashbrook Harvey, "Mary the Niece of Abraham" in *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient: Introduced and Translated by Sebastian P. Brock and Susan Ashbrook Harvey. Updated Edition with a New Preface* (Berkeley, L.A., and London: University of California Press, 1998), 27. The Greek exists only in manuscript form, and so was not consulted for this project. For a list of the manuscripts, see *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Orientalis* 3rd edn., ed., F. Halkin, Subsidia Hagiographica, 5-8, e vols. (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1957).

never go outside, but instead to shut her doors and wait for Jesus, her bridegroom, to knock upon them. He goes on to instruct Eustochium to:

> Let [the doors of your heart] be open to Christ, but let them be closed to the devil, according to that [saying] *If the spirit who has power rises up against you, do not leave your place*.[371] Daniel, in his upper room -- because he could no longer remain in the lower one -- had its windows open towards Jerusalem.[372] Also keep your windows open, but only from where light may enter and from which you may see the city of God. Do not open those other windows, of which the it is said, *Death has entered through our windows*.[373]

Here we can begin to see elisions between the physical household of the virgin and the protection of her flesh. On one hand, Jerome literally wants Eustochium to close the doors of her home and to never venture outside. On the other hand, Jerome encourages Eustochium to open the doors of her heart to Jesus but close them to the Devil. In this passage, then, Jerome parallels the boarding up of the virgin's house with that of her body.

Theodoret the Bishop of Cyrrhus, who wrote the *Historia Religosa*, spoke similarly of the ascetics under his care: "Hearing God saying through the prophet that *death has come up through the windows*, they [the ascetics] bolted shut the senses with their Father's [God's] laws as if with bolts and bars and entrusted their keys to the mind."[374] He proceeded to inform his readers that the ascetic's tongue did not move except at the command of the mind, nor did the eyes open nor ears listen without permission. His ascetics, in other words, learned how to board

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[371] Ecclesiastes 10:4

[372] In reference to Daniel 6:10, "Although Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he continued to go to his house, which had windows in its upper room open toward Jerusalem, and to get down on his knees three times a day to pray to his God and praise him, just as he had done previously."

[373] "*aperiantur Christo, claudantur diablo secundum illud: 'si spiritus potestem habentis ascenderit super te, locum ne dederi ei'. Danihel in cenaculo suo – neque enim manere poterat in humili – fenestras ad Hierusalem apertas habuit: et tu habeto fenestras apertas, sed unde lumen introeat, unde uideas ciuitatem Dei. Ne aperias illas fenestras, de quibus dicitur: 'mors intrauit per fenestras uestras'.*" Hier. *Ep.* 22.28

[374] "…και ἀκούσαντες τοῦ Θεοῦ διὰ τοῦ προφήτου λέγοντος ὡς 'ἀνέβη θάνατος διὰ τῶν θυρίων,' οἷόν τισι μοχλοῖς καὶ κλείθροις, τοῖς θείοις ϝόμοις τὰ αἰσθητήρια κλείσαντες, τῷ νῷ τὰς τούτων ε_νεχείρισαν κλεῖς." Thdt. *Hist. rel.* Prol. 6.

up all of the openings on their bodies to become immovable body-spaces or fortresses, as discussed in the previous chapter.

Yet, hidden within these words resides not only praise for miraculous ascetics, but fear as to what will happen if they do not take this path. Both Jerome and Theodoret warn about death climbing in through the window, about it sneaking up on the ascetic if he or she is not careful. It is exactly this fear that stories of transpatial ascetics exude and that particularly comes to the fore in the story of Mary the Niece of Abraham.

As the story goes, at the tender age of seven, Mary was sent to live with her uncle, Abraham, following the death of her parents.[375] Abraham, though he was an ascetic, immediately takes her in as his protégé, and they live happily together, with him in inner room and her in the outer, for many years in their joint pursuit of holy perfection. One day, however, when Mary is about twenty-seven, a man, who the author notes was a "monk by declaration only" (*quidam professione tantummodo monachus*) arrives to talk with Abraham. While within, he observed (*contemplando*) Mary in the next room, and immediately fell into lust.[376] He then spends the next year seducing her with honeyed words until she opens her window to him, then eventually opens her door and is sexually assaulted. Out of great shame, Mary flees her home and establishes herself as a prostitute in a nearby city. Her uncle, fearful and anxious for his niece, devises a plan to rescue her. Dressing up as a soldier, he enters the tavern, and hires Mary for the evening. She eventually recognizes him, and they escape back to their original abode, where Mary is immured further within, strengthening both her and Abraham's ascetic devotion.

[375] *Vita Sanctae Mariae Meretricis*. PL 73, cols. 651-660. For the Latin text, I will use "*Vita Sanctae Mariae Meretricis*," while for the Syriac, I will refer to it as "Mary the Niece of Abraham."
[376] It is unclear how the false monk gets inside the house. While Mary resided in the exterior room, and so presumably he would have had to enter through it in order to see Abraham, the text says that he does not notice her until he is in Abraham's room.

While this story has primarily been read as one of simple redemption, with Abraham as the Christ figure who saves Mary (as possibly humankind) from the fall, I think that more is at stake here. If we back up to the beginning of the story, we can notice something peculiar about the placement of these two people from the outset. When Abraham takes Mary in, he places himself in the inner-most room and situates Mary further outside. The two never enter the other's room, but instead communicate by means of a window between the two. As scholars such as Virginia Burrus have recognized, Mary and Abraham have swapped places within the hermitage which are typically deemed appropriate for their gender.[377] The innermost room, the one most suitable for women, is occupied by a man, and vice-versa. What is curious, however, is how little attention has been paid to the ramifications of such inversions. On one hand, it is almost as though Mary tries to fight the affect the physical space has on her body. Though she occupies what Burrus called a "liminal zone marking the space of interface between private and public domains," she nevertheless turns resolutely inward towards the window she shares with Abraham.[378] She attempts to ignore the door and window that face outward. Yet such a practice does not work forever, and after this mention of space, it is almost as though we forget that it is an actor in the larger story. Indeed, it is as though our focus on the gendered names and pronouns within the story blind us to the bodily performance induced by the space in which these bodies reside. In other words, because we are focused on Mary being a woman and Abraham being a man, we are ignoring their bodily performance which is being influenced by the gendered requirements of the space in which they reside. The anonymous hagiographer, however, makes

[377] Burrus remarks that this story inverts the "conventional architectural topography of gender." Virginia Burrus, *The Sex Lives of Saints: An Erotics of Ancient Historiography* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 132.
[378] Burrus, *The Sex Lives of Saints*, 132.

it quite clear that the Devil has not overlooked such a blunder, and so sends a "serpent" in the form a "monk" to capitalize on both of their physical incongruities.[379]

It is at this point that the story begins to mimic a gender-inverted Adam and Eve. The Devil, the author tells us, wishes to "strike out," (*posset incutere*) at this holy people, and so began by vising Abraham under the "guise of seeking edification" (*sub obtentu aedificationis*).[380] The first penetration, the first seduction, is thus not of Mary, nor even of Abraham per se, but the abode. Abraham first opens his "door" to this "man," allowing a serpent inside their home. Ignorant of the serpent's true purpose, Abraham unknowingly aids this creature in its seduction of Mary as well. In this story, then, Abraham plays the Eve to Mary's Adam. The author once again builds upon the bodily and spatial metaphors, noting that the false monk happened to see Mary through the window between her and Abraham's room, and his mad desire began to burn like a flame in his heart. For a whole year, he treacherously lay in wait for her, softening her resolve, until eventually she opened her window to him.

Here, the author does an excellent job drawing the reader's attention back to the passage from Jeremiah, without having to explicitly state it. Death is literally at Mary's window, and it happened, just as Theodoret and Jerome warned, because she and Abraham did not seal them up against the devil and because their bodies were not in alignment with their space. Eventually Mary's resolved is so softened that she exits her house to greet this serpent. While this small moment may not seem consequential or gendered, when we think about architecture and the body, men typically exit the home while women typically welcome others in.[381] Thus going out

[379] The author states that "The devil became enraged against her and he laid out his usual snares to catch her in his nets, so that in some way he might strike out also at the goodness and care of the blessed old man and in some small way take his attention away from the Lord." In "Mary the Niece of Abraham," *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient*, 17.
[380] "Mary the Niece of Abraham," 17.
[381] As discussed in the introduction, Mary's hagiographer is playing on idealized versions of wealthy women here. While, as demonstrated by figures like Melania the Elder and Younger, women often broke with the romanticized

of her house instead of inviting the man inside (as Abraham does, acting as the woman from his inner/female room) she penetrates the public space as a man.[382] This act, however, as a result of the incongruency between her body and its space, causes her downfall. She is immediately raped, or "defiled and stained … with the wickedness of immorality and wantonness."[383] This horrific act, however, "re-genders" Mary as a woman, forcing her to recognize that she is *not* Adam but Eve, and that she has now fallen as a woman. Moreover, she finally recognizes her body's incongruity with her ascetic space, though this time because of her sexual act instead of her gender performance. We will see this moment of downfall and recognition in other stories of transpatial saints, as recognition of bodily/spatial incongruity is deemed necessary for repentance and proper re-placement.

At this moment, Mary begins to wail and moan that she did not preserve her virginity as spotless for "the immortal Bridegroom." The imagery here is important, because, again relating to Jerome's exhortation to Eustochium that she, as a bride, must await her bridegroom in her unpenetrated bridal chamber, Mary has failed to secure both her bodily self and her physical space. The author builds upon this metaphor, as well as the story's connection to the passage from Jeremiah, when she said "For I dare not go near that window [the one she shares with Abraham]. For how can I, a sinner full of the squalor of lust, speak again with my holy uncle? And even if I dared to do so, would not flames leap from the window, which would immediately

version of their gender in which they never went out doors, but stayed always within, waiting patiently for their husbands to return. Because the Life of Mary, however, attempts to scare people into an idealized pattern of behavior, however, the black and white tropes of gender work well to further the narrator's agenda.

[382] Burrus notes that the angle of vision/attack of the snake/"monk" is of interest here. "…the monk, closeted with Abraham, is peeping not *in* but *out*, for Mary, by her uncle's design, is already in the 'outer part' of the house." *The Sex Lives of Saints*, 133.

[383] "*qui eam protinus scelere iniquitatis atque libidinis contaminavit ac polluit*." *Vita Sanctae Mariae Meretricis*, 3. Brock and Harvey, working from the Syriac, translate this phrase: "assaulted with blandishments and bespattered with the mud of the monk's lust," "Mary the Niece of Abraham," 19.

consume me?"[384] Mary has now become death herself, and as a fallen woman her now sexualized body would contain the possibility of further seducing Abraham. Moreover, the window, which once let in the light of God, now issues forth the fires of hell to consume her whole. The allusion is sealed when she announces that, "it is better for me to depart to some other country, where no one can recognize me, namely because I would be dead once and for all, and there would no longer be hope of salvation left for me."[385] Death has literally climbed through Mary's window. She is singing the dirge and her rotting corpse will soon fall upon the fields. Mary thus flees to live in a brothel.

Even in this moment of utter despair, Mary's story reflects that of Genesis 3. Though Mary was, in her virginal ascetic state, innocent, just as were Adam and Eve, she has now tasted the "fruit" from the tree of knowledge and now "knows" Good and Evil. While her punishment will not result in the pangs of childbirth (that we know of), the consequence of her transgression, like that of Adam and Eve, is not only her expulsion *from* paradise but her exile *into* civilization. Yet, while Mary's gendered body and space have been reconciled in her mind, they still have not in the larger view of the story, as Abraham still envisions her in the role of Adam and himself as Eve. As such, Mary's punishment combines both gender roles, until Abraham's presence can rectify both of their bodily placement and gendered performance. Like Adam, Mary is forced to work every day of her life, though, like Eve, she toils sexually so that she does not completely fall into the role of man once more.

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[384] "Jam enim ad fenestram illam propinquare non audebo. Quomodo ego peccatrix et plena immunditae sordibus rursum cum sancto patruo meo loqui tentabo? Quod et si ausa fuero, nonne ignis exfenestra exsiliet, qui me confestim exuret?" *Vita Sanctae Mariae Meretricis,* 3.

[385] "Melius est ergo mihi abire in aliam patriam, ubi nullus est qui me possit agnoscere, eo quod semel jam mortua sim, nec ultra mihi spes salutis relicta sit." *Vita Sanctae Mariae Meretricis,* 3.

That night, Abraham had a terrible dream, in which he saw a huge snake hiss and slither towards Mary's cell. There, he watched it snatch a dove and swallow it, crushing it in his jaws. Weeping bitterly, though not quite understanding its message, Abraham prayed, asking God for clarification. Two days later, he saw the snake come into his own cell, and place its head under his feet and die. Immediately he realized that the dove it had devoured was alive in his stomach, and Abraham reached out and took her out. Suddenly, understanding this dove to represent Mary, he called out to her in an attempt to warn her of the danger to come. Instead, finding her gone, he headed into town in search for now.

On the surface, this moment seems utterly inconsequential, but in other stories of male monks who have tried to achieve asceticism too quickly, their only punishment is being forced to leave their ascetic hut and live in a less exacting place. In his *Lausiac History*, for example, Palladius tells the story of a monk named Abramius who lived an extremely harsh live in the Egyptian desert. Eventually be was so overcome with his own self-conceit, that the other ascetics "took him away from the desert and carried him to fuller and less exacting way of life."[386] Abraham's movement seems to mirror this slight fall, as he too is forced to abandon his ascetic life and return to the city. Though not as obvious as Mary, his body, too, is incongruous with its ascetic surroundings, and he must be re-gendered.[387]

Thus, in a re-unification of a "properly" gendered body in its "properly" sexed place, Abraham dresses up as a soldier and enters the brother where Mary is employed. This scene is often interpreted as either Abraham playing the part of a holy fool, wherein he hides his holiness

[386]" Ὃν οἱ πατέρες διαχωρίσαντες τῆς ἐρήμου, καὶ ἐπὶ τὸν παχύτερον καὶ αδιαφορώτερον ἀγαγόντες βίον." Palladius, *HL* 53. In another story, Nathaniel is tricked by demons into moving closer to the city. Once he realizes his error, however, he simply moves further out into the desert with no repercussions. *HL*, 16.

[387] It must also be noted, however, that neither of these men seem to be in danger of eternal consequences for their actions. Once he was moved, Abramius acknowledged his own weakness and was cured of his arrogance. His story is not so much one of redemption, then, but one of a series of missteps that required relocation and recognition of bodily and physical limits.

in order to save the fallen Mary.[388] While this interpretation is absolutely at play, I would also argue that this scene forces Abraham into a sexualized male position where he is almost as forcefully re-gendered as Mary was. He not only has to dress up as a soldier and play a hyper-sexualized man, but he must sleep next to Mary, drink wine with her, and even stroke her arm and kisses her neck. This hyper-sexualized place, then, forces the bodies to be "properly" realigned with their gender. Mary acts as a stereotypical woman, and Abraham as a man. It is only once their genders, bodies are once again congruous with the place in which they reside, can the two recognize each other and return to their cell.

The author notes that "When he came to the proper place (*proprium locum*), that one where he himself had been, he opened up the inner cell, but he himself remained in the exterior cell."[389] Having thus rejoined their materiality and now living in gender appropriate places, the re-masculinized Abraham resides in the outside room, and the re-femininized Mary on the inside. And so, the two became devout ascetics, living out the rest of their day without incidence.

Mary's story proved so moving and influential to early Syriac Christians in particular, that a lament was composed in her name and her voice.[390] This lament in many ways mirrors the one within the hagiography itself, as Mary cries out to God about the evil she has committed. Indeed, the lament begins *in media res*: "I will sit down and lament over my life;/ alas for me, for what has happened to me,/ how I have fallen!"[391] The audience clearly knows what has befallen Mary before her lament begins, though she goes on to vaguely explain what happened, though, at first, in spatial terms. "(response): He removed from my countenance (Call): the honorable veil –

[388] Burrus, *The Sex Lives of Saints,* 135-6; Brock and Harvey, *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient*, 28.
[389] "Cumque venisset ad proprium locum, illam quidem ubi ipse fuerat, interior cellula reclusit, ipse vero in cella exterior permansit." *Vitae Sanctae Mariae Meretricis,* 10.
[390] "Lament of Mary, the Niece of Abraham of Qidun," in *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient,* trans. Brock and Harvey, 37-39.
[391] Brock and Harvey note that "The Lament is in the form of an alphabetic acrostic…; like Hebrew, the Syriac alphabet has twenty-two letters." *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient*, 37, note 18.

alas is me!/ He made me live, shamefaced, in a tavern." Not until fourteen lines later does Mary identify herself as a prostitute; instead, we are supposed to understand her fallen position by the fact that she lost her veil and lives in a tavern.[392] As discussed in the first chapter, a veil not only symbolized virginity, but acted as a prophylactic against visual assault. It literally acted as gate, closing off the body of the woman wearing it. Once this portal is penetrated, then, Mary's body had to be forcefully moved to a place where the veil was no longer necessary: the tavern. The place in this instance provides synecdoche for a prostitute's body. It is a public venue through which men protrude in and out. She has become, in some senses, a public space.

This imagery of previously unpenetrated and currently penetrated spaces appears twenty-one lines later, when Mary wails: "The great blessing would have been mine/ had I died while still a virgin, when the seal of virginity was preserved still sealed." Then again only a few lines later, she announces that the crown of virginity was snatched from her "because I, of my own will, opened the door to him [the Evil One]."[393] Again, her body and abode become synonymous, as previously her vagina was sealed via the hymen and her religious vows in virginity, yet that threshold, that doorway was punctured when she opened herself up to the fake monk. This image, moreover, also speaks to the invasion of her actual household, as she has to physically open the door of the hermitage in order to fall to this man. It is crucial, however, to note that this song preserves the gender of all participants. Mary never appears as Adam in this story, as she opens her door to the "Evil One" suggesting penetration of her body, instead of her original penetration of the public space.

[392] Mary's *vita* never explicitly mentions her veil, only that she removes her *schema*, or her traditional monastic garb, when she leaves. Brock and Harvey briefly discuss this difficulty in translation in footnote 13 in "Mary the Niece of Abraham," *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient*, 19.
[393] "Lament of Mary," *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient*, 38.

There is hope, this lament confirms, not that she can become unviolated, which this story renders impossible, but at least that she can protect herself against all further assaults and find redemption from her fall. In this move, however, the lament shifts from material conceptions of place to spiritual ones. As the tone of the piece shifts from one of lament to one of hope, Mary begins to assert that the Lord's "door is open for all penitents" and that he pours grace "over sinners/who take refuge in you, who come to your great and holy gate in penitence." The gates of God, then, are Mary's salvation. She has thrown herself before them and promises to shore them up with her own strength once inside.[394] Unlike the end of her hagiography, then, when she achieves salvation when she is physically situated in her proper physical place, her body and space are resolved in the Lament when she enters into the city of God.

Transgression, Consequences, and Spatial Re-gendering

As in the story of Mary the Niece of Abraham, the placement of ascetic bodies was always supposed to happen under the supervision of men, God, or both. Though such an idealization rarely happened outside of stories, sermons, and letters (much to Jerome's chagrin), it became an important trope for many hagiographers as it reinforced both spatial and social gender norms. As discussed in the first chapter, because men's bodies were often seen as a stabilizing and even rehabilitating force, they could transform a space from an improper (i.e. "pagan") to a proper (i.e. Christian) place, whereas women could only strengthen the force of an already Christian place. As such, in tales of desert ascetics, men's bodies are rarely depicted as misplaced, and if they are, it is always by their own hand.

[394] "…may the Evil One be put to shame when he sees my firmness, may he collapse in confusion, destroyed forever in the pit." "Lament of Mary," in *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient*, 38.

Intriguingly, Abraham's misgendered performance as a woman remains one of the few examples of a man misplaced in a woman's space. Most frequently the inverse occurs. Yet if we take into consideration late antique understandings of gendered bodies, it is not Abraham's, but Mary's that disrupted the system. Had Abraham been living by himself, his placement in the inner room would not have been a problem, as his entire abode would have been a male space, since only a man lived inside. Mary's presence, then, even though Abraham helped place both their bodies, ultimately led to both of their downfalls. Women, even ascetic women, were viewed as a physically disruptive force to space and body alike.

In the *Historia Monachorum*, the author includes multiple stories of women, whether actual or demonic, disrupting male practice. Their mere presence causes monks to fall immediately into lust or even to have disruptive memories of these women when their bodies cease to be present.[395] After telling just such a story, one monk remarks that "we should not put together dwellings near inhabited places nor associate with women."[396] For the two were often one and the same, as the city became associated with the feminine, and thus sexual vice, while the desert was supposed to be a place of complete isolation, a world, according to Susanna Elm, that "had been created in part for the exact purpose of escaping women and all that they represented."[397]

So dangerous, indeed, was the physical presence of a woman, that she was even thought to infect space itself. Abba Theodore of Pherme, in the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, for example, warns his brethren to "not sleep in a place where there is a woman."[398] Over a century

[395] *Hist. Mon.* 1.4, 1.32-37.
[396] "οὐ συμβάλλεται ἡμῖν ἡ πλησίον τῶν χωρῶν οἴκησις, οὐδ΄ ἡ τῶν γυναικῶν συντυχία...." *Hist. Mon*. 1.37.
[397] Susanna Elm, *Virgins of God*: *The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 257.
[398] Benedicta Ward, trans. and ed. *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection* (Kalamazoo and Oxford: Cistercian Publications, 1984), 17. Elm, *'Virgins of God,'* 257.

later, laws began to reflect this sentiment. Beginning in the mid-fifth century both civil and canon laws were written in an attempt to segregate monastic space, rendering it off-limits to women and vice-versa. Novel 133 of Justinian in 539 CE, for example, "forbade entrance to a monastery by members of the opposite sex, even of corpses for burial."[399] The mixture of bodies in gendered space became recognizably dangerous, as early Christians attempted to determine where and in what space gendered bodies could and could not exist.[400]

Nearly all stories of transpatial ascetics reflect this spatial anxiety. For example, after Mary/Marinos decides to follow her father into a monastery, he says to her, "Child, take heed of how you conduct yourself, for you about to enter into the midst of fire, for a woman in no way enters a <male> monastery."[401] Similarly, Matrona of Perge quotes her teacher Eugenia, who said "'It is a difficult thing… and indeed impossible for women to be assigned to a male monastery or, once assigned, to escape notice."[402] While the focus here has typically been upon Mary and Matrona's gender and subsequent transformation through male garb, the anxiety within these passages focuses on misplacement. The authors do not express concern here for women dressing as men, nor do they ever quote or even paraphrase Deuteronomy 22:5.[403]

While the quotes from the transpatial literature hint at the fact that these women will not enter the monasteries "as" women, their concern here is not the cross-dressing, but the breaching of gendered space. Women's bodies, *whether visible or not,* threatened male sanctity. Their

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[399] Alice-Mary Talbot, "Women's Space in Byzantine Monasteries," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 52 (1998), 114.
[400] For more on the decline of this system of asceticism, see Susanna Elm, "Symbiosis of Male and Female Ascetics and the Demise of the Homoiousian Model," in '*Virgins of God,*' 185-223.
[401] *Life of St. Mary/Marinos* trans. Nicholas Constas in *Holy Women of Byzantium*, 3. This line does not exist in the Latin *Vie de Sainte Marine, ActSS* 360.
[402] *St. Matrona of Perge,* 5. Δυσχερὲς γὰρ πρᾶγμα, ἔλεγεν ἐκείνη, καὶ ἀδύνατον, γυναῖκα ἐν ἀνδρικῷ μοναστηρίῳ ἀποτάξασθαι ἢ ἀποταξαμένην λαθεῖν"
[403] "A woman shall not wear a man's apparel, nor shall a man put on a woman's garment; for whoever does such things is abhorrent to the Lord your God." For more on this passage in the literature of "cross-dressing" saints, see Constas, *Life of St. Mary/Marinos* 2-3.

entrance into male space when they and at least one other man knew that the were not "bodily" women had the potential to bring down the entire gendered system.

Because the possibility of disruption was so potentially life-threatening, hagiographers seem to have tamped down on the threat in their stories both for the sake of their audiences as voyeurs as well as for the men within them by two means. First, all of these stories, from the very beginning, concern women who have died. And, in many cases, not just those who have been pronounced dead, but those whose corpse has been verified by multiple people. Here, I want to underscore the function of hagiography itself. Everyone about whom *vitae* are written has died. The audience would know this going in, and so a modicum of safety surrounds them as they either hear or read the tale. Like modern audiences of horror films, while they experience terror when caught up in the story, they are not themselves in any immediate danger, and so experience pleasure at the same time. Death in the hagiographies works much in the same way. The audience is in no *actual* danger from the woman's transgressive actions because she is not physically in their presence, which allows her into spaces from which they otherwise would have been barred.

The best example of death allowing women into male spaces comes not from the hagiography of a female saint, but from an anonymous story of a monk living within an ascetic community at Scetis. The author informs his audience that here resided a monk who was tortured constantly by the memory of a beautiful woman he had once seen. One day, a different monk came down from Egypt and, over the course of their conversation, told him that the wife of some man had died. This, it turns out, was the woman who had troubled him so. As such, in the dead of night, the monk took his cloak and left to find the place where she was buried. Once there, he opened the tomb, gathered the liquids flowing from her corpse in his coat, and brought it back to

his cell. The stench, the author relates, was unbearable, but the monk stared at this "infection" and told himself too look at what he desired, stare at it, and sit back down again. He then subjected himself to the stench until he defeated his inner torment.[404]

As a living woman, the liquids of her body caused the monk great pain and, had she physically entered the ascetic community, would have, it is strongly suggested, caused the monk to sleep with her. Alive, she represented temptation, but dead, she becomes his teacher. Now, her body (or at least the symbolic aspect of it) can cross the threshold of the community, and the monk can remember that a woman's sexuality (i.e. the liquids he collected), means not life, but death. A woman's presence is literally a rotting corpse, something that all men should abhor instead of lust after. While this scene metonymically applies to all living women, it is important that her transgression was only physically allowed when she was really and truly dead. Living women and female bodies were far more unpredictable and difficult to control (both physically and intellectually), so their deaths provided both safety and instruction for others.

So, then, did the death of the transpatial ascetics allow for their bodies within their stories to cross forbidden boundaries with fewer consequences, while simultaneously titillating audiences enough to learn about pious devotions and the necessity of properly placed bodies. But what is truly fascinating about these stories is that, despite this allowance, the space itself resists a woman's presence. While it forces her to assume an alternate masculine gender expression in order to breach its walls, it remains constantly at odds with her gender identity.

Secondly, because nearly all of the transpatial ascetics were misplaced by men instead of by their own volition (thus tacitly bowing to patriarchal power dynamics), their ability to cause male destruction seems to be lessened, affecting them more than the monks and quite literally

[404] Frédéric Nau "Histoires de solitaires égyptiens," *Revue de l'Orient Chretien* (1908), 172.

inverting typical stories of female spatial incursion. Like Mary the niece of Abraham, the choice to inhabit a masculinized location is not all their own.

While some ascetics entered a monastery to stay with their families, others, like Matrona, a fifth/sixth-century ascetic, entered while fleeing an abusive marriage or, like Euphrosyne, a fifth-century ascetic, who joined in order to escape an arranged marriage. In both these instances, either God or a male monk helped in their transition. Both of these women decided to reside in male monasteries, not in order to become male because they were less likely to be found in a masculinized space.[405]

In other cases, the first spatial transgression and spatial renunciation begins when wealthy women leave their homes in order to undertake the ascetic life. Eugenia, for example, the wealthy daughter of a governor of Egypt, converts to Christianity, and leaves her home with a large party of people to venture into the desert and contemplate her future.[406] While physically separating herself from her home marks her first step in renunciation, while on her journey, she and her servants hear Christians singing, and she realizes that she must also give up the luxury in which she currently resides. In order to do so, however, she had to leave her litter, a space simultaneously symbolic of both luxury and femininity.

Here, it is important to note that, in the ancient and late-ancient world, luxury and excessive wealth were often gendered female.[407] Material goods, because they often were associated with softer materials and excessive eating and drinking, were said to make one

[405] This logic proved particularly true for Matrona, whose abusive husband searched for her high and low. When he finally heard of a woman who had been living in a male monastery, he, according to Matrona's hagiographer, shrieked violently, shouted loudly, and began beating on the monastery doors with stones. "St. Matrona of Perge," 10.
[406] *Vita* Sanctae *Eugeniae, PL* 73 col. 611.
[407] The feminization of wealth is also portrayed in the Life of Hilaria. "Life of Hilaria," 72.

physically weaker, more prone to languishing, and softer of body, like a woman.[408] This trope is also found within the story of Hilaria, who, when she decides to run away and become a monk, she dresses up as a wealthy knight girded in priceless armor.[409] The doorkeeper at the monastery sees "his" armor and quickly dismisses this knight as soft, as effeminate, and unable to endure the hardship required of a monk. Though her words of endurance eventually convince him otherwise, this encounter nevertheless nicely displays the intersection of wealth and femininity: though the gatekeeper does not know that Hilaria is a woman, he nevertheless voices men's concern over female ascetics – that their bodies and constitutions were too weak to endure monasticism. Only, instead of speaking directly to her gender, he does so sidewise, by hinting at her wealth.

As, then, with the story of Eugenia, the rejection of wealth is in some ways a rejection of the feminine. But, as does the story, we must distinguish between gender performance and stereotypes and gender identity. Just because someone does not perform in a way typically associated with a certain gender does not mean that they do not still identify with that gender. Instead, Euphemia wanted to rid herself of luxury, which also removed a layer of femininity. Additionally, this removal of luxury paralleled her desire to enter a different space. Since Eugenia no longer wanted to have luxury of any kind, she could no longer reside in the palace or ride in her litter. The only other option for her was to walk outside with her eunuchs.[410]

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[408] For more on the connection between ostentatious wealth and femininity, see Kristi Upson-Saia, *Early Christian Dress*, 14-32.

[409] *Life of Hilaria* in *Three Copic Legends: Hilaria, Archellites, the Seven Sleepers* ed with trans and commentary by James Drescher (Le Caire; Imprimerie de L'Insitut Francais; D'archeologie Orientale, 1947),

[410] This desire to switch places necessitated that Euphemia perform, or pass, as a man. While there certainly was not a strict dichotomy between women being allowed only in private while only men could walk freely in private, this story, as with many other transpatial saints, plays on this stereotype. Stravroula Constantinou notes that Euphrosyne the Younger, another transpatial saint, "adopts male attire so that she can move freely and more safely in remote places considered dangerous for women travelling alone." *Female Corporeal Performances: Reading the Body in Byzantine Passions and Lives of Holy Women* (Stockholm Uppsala, 2005), 107. Eugenia also required this additional level of disguise in order to hide from the rest of her large party which was not privy to her plan. The loss of her

It is crucial, however, to note that in all of these stories, including that of Mary the Niece of Abraham, that women only enter male spaces under the direct permission, and often the supervision, of men, or even God himself. None of the men seem to be aware of the consequences that will befall these women, but if we pull back to look at the audience for a moment, this type of direction mattered. The spatial infringement of the female ascetics would have been even more dangerous had no men had been in the know, since the women would then be socially transgressive as well. Adding this layer of permission thus reminds the audience that even though these women are entering "forbidden" space, they are doing so with (some) male blessing. This consent not only adds a modicum of safety and social explanation for the audience, but reveals that space, not just people, is at odds with female bodies and that they can still suffer consequences even if they are in the wrong place for the "right" reasons.

Once they successfully entered masculine space, a strange dance between the space itself concealing and revealing the gender of these women began to occur. On one hand, the masculinization of the space itself helps them to pass in the eyes of their colleagues. As bell hooks has noted, and as we have seen above with the example of wealth, gender is not the sole factor in constructing maleness or femaleness.[411] When they first arrive at the monasteries, because nearly all of them travel freely across the landscape with a male companion (a taboo for women even if it was not strictly adhered to), their gender is not questioned upon their arrival.

Additionally, once inside the monastery, their gender would be assumed. Euphrosyne notes, for example, that, "If it be that I am to go to a convent of women, my father will never

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hair and jewels, and the assumption of male garb, then, reflects a desire to enter space of poverty, a space that required Mary to pass as male in order to inhabit it safely. For this reason, these saints are not just transvestites, but are also transpatial. Male dress gets them through the literal door, but the space remains their ultimate goal.

[411] bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 63. hooks is referring to the intersectional factors of race and class, but I would contend that space genders as well, as it forces the body to be seen and behave in different ways.

cease until he has found me, and he will snatch me away by force from the convent on account of my betrothed. But I will put myself into a domicile of men, in a place where no one will suspect me."[412] The very fact that she was allowed in the doors and then lived in a monastery helped to add an additional layer of masculinity to her performance. No one was looking for a woman in their midst and would have naturally assumed that, because they lived inside a closed, or at least strictly controlled, environment, every person they encountered would be biologically male.

In the Life of Mary/Marinos, for example, while her father is living, no problems arise. She becomes famous not only for her ascetic devotion, but for her ability to heal, particularly those who are inflicted with demons. Once her father dies, however, and her presence is no longer explicable through familial ties, the trouble starts. One afternoon, the Superior calls Mary to him. He reminds Mary (and consequently the audience) that once a month, four brothers are sent out to minister to the needs of other monks and solitaries who live outside the community. Midway through their long journey, the monks stop at an inn to sleep, eat, and regain their strength. The superior makes it clear to Mary that she must go this time because her fellow monks are annoyed that she has not had to go out to do service yet. The monastic space she has previously inhabited when she lived as a daughter in disguise and when she lived as a single monk play out in dynamic and seemingly contradictory ways.

On one hand, the men within the monastery still read her as more-or-less male. As noted above, within the confines of the monastery, the monastic space itself can help disguise her as male. On the other hand, even within these walls, Mary's disguise wears thin. Until now, Mary

[412] "Euphrosyne," *Select Narratives of Holy Women,* f. 80 a-b. The Latin is similar, "Si ambulavero in monasterio muellarum, pater meus requirens inveniet me, et violenter trahet me inde propter sponsum meum. Proinde pergam ad monasterium vioram, ubi nullus suspiciet me esse." "If I walk into a female monastery, my father, seeking, will find me will violently drag me from there on account of my engagement. Therefore, I will go into a male monastery where no one will suspect me." "Euphrosyne," *PL* 73 col. 646.

has inhabited nearly the most feminine space possible within the monastery. As Lynda Coon, and several others, recognize, within male spaces, gender hierarchies were redrawn, with young, healthy, masculine bodies at the top, and weak, infirm, or less masculine bodies at the bottom.[413] Repeatedly throughout the story, other monks call Mary a eunuch, a person who would have inhabited this feminized position. Instead of reading a eunuch just as a "third gender" or as a woman trying to be a man, I suggest that passing as a eunuch and not "fully" male would have been a spatial choice and not just a gendered one.[414] It would allow Mary to move her body in the most feminized way possible, thus spatially inhabiting the lowest of rungs, while still passing as male. Such an action would, and did, keep Mary safe within the monastic space – at least for a time.

Moreover, even though the monastery is technically a male space because it is inhabited (or is *supposed* to be inhabited) by male bodies, Mary performs, in part, as a woman: she does not venture outside; she does not subject herself to the gaze of sexualized male eyes, and, until recently, she was constantly reminded of her role as daughter. Though Mary/Marinos resides within a male space and wears male clothing, she nevertheless spatially performs as a female, therefore, in some ways, resolving the tension of her misgendered body and space. As much as possible, Mary has imposed female space and spatial relations upon herself.

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[413] Lynda Coon, *Dark Age Bodies: Gender and Monastic Practice in the Early Medieval West* (Philadelphia, Oxford: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 1-13; 165-205.

[414] I recognize that Mary would not have been able to grow a beard, but she could have deepened her voice, spoken more forcefully, or other ways in which men performed as male. For more on the performance of masculinity, see Maud Gleason, *Making Men*, particularly her chapter on eunuchs. *Making Men: Sophists and Self-Presentation in Ancient Rome* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 131-158. For more on female "transvestites" attempting to become a "third gender," see Davis, "Crossed Texts, Crossed Sex," 22-24. For more on eunuchs specifically as a different gender, see Kathryn M. Ringrose, "Living in the Shadows: Eunuchs and Gender in Byzantium," in *Third Sex, Third Gender: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History* ed. Gilberg Herdt (New York: Zone Books, 1994), 85-109.

This feminine spatial imposition occurs within many other stories of transpatial monks. Just as Mary the Niece of Abraham turned her back to the door in an attempt to feminize her movements within her masculine space as much as possible, other transpatial saints similarly attempt to keep performing as feminine within a masculinized space. These stories make it clear that, on some level, these women *know* that they are not supposed to be in this male space. Their hagiographers insist that they tried to delay their inevitable fall for as long as possible by behaving spatially as women, but the gender expectation and exertion of the space itself ultimately won out. For their hagiographers, this conflicted duality of these women's performances not only shows their audience that these women were not *willfully* transgressive (thus reasserting the femininity and "proper" hierarchical placement of their subjects) but also that there is a strict spatial order that will triumph no matter its inhabitant's intent.

Eugenia, for example, quickly progressed like all of the other transpatial ascetics within the monastery. So impressive were her feats, however, that eventually she was appointed abbot of the monastery. Immediately, Eugenia declines this offer, and the hagiographer goes to great length to remind his audience that it is inappropriate for Eugenia to lord over men: "Then the blessed Eugenia, fearing that it was against the Law to place herself as a woman over men; moreover, fearing lest she shun those unanimously entreating her, she said to them: I beseech you all that you turn to the Gospel at this time. But when this had been conveyed, she said: some other Christian should be chosen, I will listen to Christ before all."[415]

[415] The Latin reads: "Tunc beata Eugenia metuens se feminam contra regulam viris praeponi; item timens ne omnes unanimiter deprecantes sperneret, ait ad eos: Obsecro vos ut Evangelium in praesenti adhibeatis. Quod cum fuisset allatum, dixit: Quotescumque Christianis aliquid eligendum est, Christus est ante omnia auscultandus." *PL* 73 col. 611. The Syriac is slightly more forceful: "But the blessed Eugenia declined this, for her conscience admonished her that she was a woman, and it was not fitting that she should be commander [and] governor to the men of God. And moreover she was afraid lest she might cause the minds of the brethren to stumble who were advising and persuading her to do this; for she clearly saw that the minds of all of them were consenting to that idea." In "Eugenia," *Select Narratives of Holy Women*, F 32 a – b. I will be consulting the translated Syriac first, since it is the oldest edition of the text, and the slightly later Latin version second.

This aside, however, seems to be more for the instruction of the *vita*'s audience than those within the story, as the monks persist, forcing Eugenia to resort to bibliomancy for guidance from God. When she does so, she opens a passage that says "whosoever among you wishes to be the chief, let him be the servant and minister of every man."[416] So, bowing to their wishes, Eugenia undertakes the position of abbot. Yet, still weary of her physical position as female, she refuses to assume the typical room. If she is unable to protect the men from guiding them spiritually, she can at least protect them from herself physically. As such, she constructs a tiny cell for herself by the door of the monastery. Her hagiographer notes that she desired to stay constantly within this cell so that she both would not be a burden to the brothers and herself be better off as well.[417] The author makes sure that the audience knows that Mary is doing everything she can to continue to behave as a woman within the space, consequently putting off her inevitable fall for as long as possible.

This imposition of female space upon female bodies within a male monastery, I contend, is purposeful, if not by the woman herself, then at least by the authors of her *vita*. It is in these moments that the audience can feel the author's anxiety over female agency and his subsequent desire to subsume it once again under the heading of male authority. Despite the fact that these women transgress into male space, they still seem to remember their place within the wider male social order. They seem to recognize that, though they are female, their bodies are "inherently" sinful, and so attempt to sequester themselves as much as possible. Moreover, because they recognize that public space requires a much more rigorous performance of masculinity, and thus a space where their disguise can be more easily undone, none willingly seek to leave the confines

[416] "Eugenia" in *Select Narratives of Holy Women*, 33a. The Latin version quotes Matt. 20:26 (But whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant) and Luke 22:26 (the greatest among you should become like the youngest, and the leader like the one who serves). *PL* 73 col. 611.
[417] "Eugenia" in *Select Narratives of Holy Women*, 33b.

of their monastery to venture again into the wider world. In nearly every spatial sense, the authors of the transpatial women code them as adhering to the height of female placement.

Yet despite all of their good intentions and even the advice of the men in their lives, the "natural" order of gender-segregated space seems to push back. Eventually, all of these women either forget their feminine performance or are forced to behave in a hyper-masculinized, and particularly sexualized, way, and are forced out of their communities as a result. In the story of Mary the Niece of Abraham, this moment occurs when Mary plays the role of Adam instead of Eve and proceeds *out* of her home to penetrate an even more masculinized and public space. Here, her body cannot live up to the male performance, and so is raped and forced to re-remember its female positioning. While this same moment of spatial expulsion happens in all other transpatial stories, in most it does not happen quite so violently.

In the least problematic of instances, the woman simply cannot reside with her fellow monks and is so ostracized from her community itself. In the story of Euphrosyne, for example, this young woman runs away from her father and her arranged marriage for the sake of her virginity and her soul. Directly following her entrance into the monastery, however, a monk named Agapius was ordered to take Euphrosyne (now Esmeraldus) away to his cell because "your beautiful appearance, son, is making the brothers sick; therefore I wish that you remain alone in your cell, and there you sing the songs, and there you eat, nevertheless you will not go from there to anywhere else."[418] Not even this spatial segregation, however, was sufficient to counter the effects of Euphrosyne's body in this space. Almost immediately, the abbot called her to him and informed her that the beauty of her face has caused many who were not "well-

[418] "Pulchra est facies, fili, infirmis fratribus; volo autem ut sedeas solus in cella tua, et ibi psallas, et ibi manduces, non tamen egressurum te inde alicubi." "Euphrosyne," *PL* 73 col. 647. The Syriac mentions only that he was taken away because "his face was covered with beauty like an emerald." "Euphrosyne," *Select Narratives of Holy Women*, 53.

established" to fall. As a result, he forced her to dwell in a hut far from the monastery and instructed her to *never* let herself be seen by her brethren.[419]

From the moment of her entrance into the male monastic space, Euphrosyne's body was incongruous. While she passed as male and her fellow monks assumed her to be such, she was nevertheless segregated in a way different from all of the men within the monastery. Her segregation, then, cannot be blamed on the monks alone, for they are convinced by her masculine performance. It is the space itself that seems to push back, as she is almost immediately banished from its midst. The hagiographers construct the gender dichotomy between masculine space and sexed female bodies in such a way that the two remain incongruous as long as the woman remains alive.

Lust for women disguised as men, however, was not limited to the monks themselves and frequently extended to other people outside the monasteries, resulting in a far greater fall. Eugenia's hagiographer, for example, tells of how she quickly became famous for her ability to heal and exercise demons. One day, a woman named Melania, who was possessed by an evil spirit, came to the monastery to be cured. Once she regains her strength, she continues to return to Eugenius for guidance and council, listening to "his" sacred words and, eventually, falling deeply in love with "him."

The incursion of Melania into a monastery sets up a nice scenario for the author to discuss the problem of *any* female bodies in a male space. This male space mis-genders Melania as well, who begins to take on the masculine role in her pursuit of Eugenia. Indeed, she falls so far into love that she proposes marriage to Eugenia, insuring "him" that such an arrangement is not a sin before God, and that he will enjoy many years of good things.[420] The author here seems

[419] "Euphrosyne," *Select Narratives of Holy Women,* 53.
[420] "Eugenia," *Select Narratives of Holy Women,* 17.

to be trying to give Eugenia an out, to remind her that she is a *woman* and not a male monk, and that her body therefore does not belong is such a space. As noted above, in order for a woman to be properly re-placed, she must first publicly recognize her female body. Yet Eugenia, in this instance, does not seize this opportunity.

And so the tension between space and gender crescendos until Melania invites Eugenia to her room in order to be "healed" once more. In this highly eroticized space, a space which traditionally dictates the presence of a man and women, two women enter: Melania playing the role of the female seductress and Eugenia, by mandate of the space and her previous performance, the sexualized man. While Melania lives up to her gendered expectation, Eugenia not only *does* not but *cannot*. While she can pass as a male monk and has, indeed, sunk into that role, she is physically incapable, as the space reminds her, of being a sexually active man. This space and its gendered expectations thus push Eugenia's performance to its breaking point. As a result of Eugenia's continued refusal of her, Melania subsequently accuses "him" of attended seduction and rape, and Eugenia is henceforth condemned to death.

Intriguingly, this story of falsely accused monks does not only occur in instances of transpatial ascetics but, instead, seems to be a fairly common trop in ascetic *vitae*. Palladius's *Lausiac History* and the anonymous *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* contain stories of fallen women with only slight variations.[421] Like Eugenia and Mary, these women began their Christian lives as dedicated virgins, but were seduced out of their enclosures by deceitful men pretending to be monks or priests of some sort. Unlike Eugenia and Mary, however, these women do not recognize their sinfulness, nor that their expulsion belies the incongruence of their

[421] For other examples of false charges of paternity in hagiographies, see Paul Canart, "Le nouveau-né qui dénonce son père. Les avatars d'un conte populaire dans la littérature hagiographique," *AB* 84 (1966): 309-33.

bodies and their space. Instead, the stories depict them as living in a liminal space, not quite certain where their bodies belong. When they become pregnant, their seducers convince these women to blame it on a local clergyman or monk. Clearly, then, these women are not living with these men. Yet nor, the stories make it clear, are they living in their monasteries or other holy enclosures in the same way they did before, as they are fallen women. In Palladius' *Lausiac History*, there is the vague suggestion that perhaps the unnamed woman has gone back to live with her father, though her father, according to Palladius, is the priest at Caesarea, so where exactly she would reside is uncertain. This uncertainty, I argue, reflects the ambiguity of her body.

Moreover, it is precisely this dilemma around which the story focuses. Who impregnated this young woman and where, as a result, should she live? In all three stories, though the male protagonists insist upon their innocence, the monk or lector is blamed for woman's condition. Concerned to defend their own bodily integrity, however, and to not let death in through their own windows, as it were, most of these men send these women to live at a different monastery, at least until they give birth. In this way, the author foreshadows the events to come, as this was clearly no permanent solution.

When the babies were about to be born, therefore, a curious thing happens. As Palladius most colorful notes, "When the critical time was at hand, there was groaning, pangs, hard work, and visions of the lower regions; and yet the baby did not come. The first day came, then the second, the third, and the seventh, and the woman was going through insatiable torment because of the pain; neither did she drink, nor walk, nor get any rest."[422] While she cries out that such a

[422] "παρέστη ἡ κρισίμη ὥρα, στεναγμοί, ὠδῖνες, πόνοι, καταχθονίων ὁράσεις · καὶ τὸ βρέφος οὐκ ἐξήρχετο. Παρῆλθεν ἡ πρώτη ἡ μέρα, ἡ δευτέρα, ἡ τρίτη, ἡ ἑβδόμη· ἡ γυνὴ ἀπὸ τῆς ὀδύνης τῷ ᾅδῃ προσομιλοῦσα οὐκ ἔφαγεν, οὐκ ἔπιεν, οὐκ ἐκαθεύδησεν..." "Palladius, *HL* 70.3.

state is because she falsely accused the monk, thus admitting her own wrongdoing, her body is loosened and she is able to give birth. Scholars thus have often interpreted this scene as mirroring Matthew 18:18, which reads "Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." In this context, it means that only the monk bound this woman could loosen her again. While that is certainly the case, as the woman can only give birth when the monk forgives her for her slander, what seems more pertinent here is the type of punishment she was forced to endure. While not giving birth certainly would have been a fitting punishment in its pain, it is also perfect for one who was not supposed to give birth in the first place. Moreover, the punishment perfectly fits her original crime: not of falsely accusing the monk, but of sleeping with a man instead of maintaining her vow of virginity. Because she did not treat her body as a bridal chamber by closing her windows against the seductive whisperings of her suitor, nor, later, did she bar her doors against his penetration, the openings on her body were now sealed as they originally should have been. Her punishment, then, was for her body to become the monastery in which she now resided, and which she should have mirrored all along.

In sharp contrast to their female monastic counterparts, because male space has no reason to cast out male bodies, it never does. In these stories, no man is sent to his death, nor even forced from his monastery. Instead, the punishment for spatial transgression once again falls squarely on the shoulders of women.

Such remains the case in the story of Mary/Marinos. No longer able to maintain her female role of dutiful daughter within the monastery following the death of her father, Mary's performance becomes much more masculinized, and so the monastic space forces her out into the world. On their journey to the other monastery to do service, Mary and her fellow monks

stop off at an inn to spend the night. Even for regular monks, this new space proves physically and spiritually trying. An inn would have constituted an entirely different type of space and thus elicited a different type of performance. For these spaces were filled with literal temptations, from food and wine, to, quite probably, prostitutes and, assuredly, women. If nothing else, male monks would have had to be on their guard far more, and, as Theodoret mentions above, would have had to seal up the portals to their body even more tightly to ensure that death did not climb in through their windows. Nevertheless, Mary is forced out of the monastery and proceeds with her fellow monks into town.

When Mary/Marinos leaves her monastery and spends the night at the inn, the innkeeper's daughter sleeps with a soldier the same night. As it later becomes clear that the young woman has been made pregnant, the soldier convinces her to blame the "young monk" who had been staying in the inn at the time. In order to protect her suitor from the wrath of her father, she informs him that the "young attractive [monk] called Marinos" had seduced and raped her.[423] Furious, the innkeeper, so Mary's hagiographer tells us, makes his way to the monastery and demands to see the Superior. When he comes to the door, the innkeeper accuses Marinos of impregnating his daughter and demands that he be kicked out.

After the Superior sends the angry man back to his inn, he calls Marinos to him and demands to know what had happened. Instead of offering an excuse, Mary replies "ὅτι ὡς ἄνθρωπος ἐπλανήθην."[424] Nicholas Constas and Kristi Upson-Saia translate this sentence as "I have sinned as a man" while Stavroula Constantinou prefers "I have sinned as a person."[425] I

[423] *Life of Mary/Marinos,* 9.
[424] *Vita Maria/Marinos,* 11.
[425] Constas, *Life of St. Mary/Marinos,* 11; Upson-Saia, *Early Christian Dress,* 94; Constantinou, *Female Corporeal Performances,* 103. Because Constantinou consciously uncovers these characters as women, she is more sensitive to not gender them male when the language does not explicitly do so.

would argue, however, that this phrase is not so much an acceptance of sin, as a mirror of Mary's spatial transgression. In the mind of her superior, this line reads as previous scholars have translated it: as a confession of guilt. If she has sinned "as a man" and has been accused of impregnating a young woman, then she is admitting to having sex. This is a plausible reading on many levels. Other monks who were accused of fathering children also, within their hagiography, confessed to the crime they had not committed. Because their own bodies (unlike Mary's) were unable to prove their innocence, it was meted out on the bodies of their accusers.[426] This scene, then, is one of Mary taking her lumps like her fellow monks and accepting punishment for a crime she did not commit.

Yet the Greek here is curious. The usual verb for "I sin" is ἁμαρτάνω.[427] But here, the author chooses ἐπλανήθην, to "cause to wander" or "to lead astray." While the sentiment is certainly similar, the voice of the verb does not function in the same way.[428] Unlike the active English translation "I sinned," ἐπλανήθην is a passive verb. Thus, Mary says to her superior, "I have been caused to wander." While this could be read as the woman leading her astray in context, in the context of spatial transgressions, it seems to be more pointed toward her superior than toward the innkeeper's daughter.[429]

The translation of this phrase as "sinned as a man," also breaks down when we look at ἄνθρωπος. While certainly it can be translated as "man," its meaning is much closer to the

[426] Palladius, for example, tells the story of a monk who was falsely accused of fathering a child. As punishment, the woman who was impregnated by a soldier is incapable of giving birth because her body has sealed itself up. It only opens when she admits that the monk is innocent. Palladius of Aspuna, *Lausiac History*, 48.1-4. ed. and trans., John Wortley (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2015), 70.
[427] This verb can be found repeatedly throughout the Koine version of the New Testament.
[428] Later Latin versions of this story use "peccavi" to denote Mary's transgression. The Latin Life was edited by L. Clugnet, *Revue de l'Orient Chrétien* 6 (1901), 357-78.
[429] I am also hesitant to translate this world only as "sin" because, as noted earlier, the author does not use the biblical ἁμαρτάνω. It is striking not only because there are fewer biblical overlays in this piece in general, but because the author uses ἁμαρτία later when Mary laments that the child should suffer for her ἁμαρτία (sins).

universal sense of "mankind" or a "human person" than an individual male person.[430] This brilliant turn of phrase, then, both hides and reveals Mary's gendered and spatial status. The word ἄνθρωπος allows her superior to hear that she is a man, while allowing her female body to hide behind the erasure of the feminine within a masculinized category of human. As in her story, she is male by assumption only. Moreover, ἐπλανήθην shifts the blame for what happened away from her and onto her superior and the space into which she was forced. Mary did not want to leave the monastery, but she submitted to her superior's demand to enter a hyper-masculine space, a space in which, even more than her monastery, her body did not belong. As with Mary the niece of Abraham, Mary/Marinos went *out* from her space and was forced to penetrate a public one. She also did not follow within the behavior guidelines Jerome thought appropriate for young Christian women, as she did not stay inside and seal up her body. Thus, though she was a female virgin, her penetration masculinized her further and this space caused her fall. As Mary herself slyly points out in this phrase, had she not been forced to go out into a masculine space, none of this would have happened.

Despite their best efforts, all of these transpatial women eventually fall and are separated from their monasteries, even if only for a short time. While their hagiographers make it clear that these misfortunes are not entirely their fault, they are punished nevertheless. This series of events, for the audiences, demonstrates that they, and especially the women among them, must be constantly cognizant of the placement of their bodies, for if they are not, their story could end in ruin.

And for some early Christian ascetics, it does. A few stories exist of women exiled from their ascetic abode, from their garden of Eden, to never return. While we more typically focus on

[430] ἁνδρας or ἀνήρ are more likely to be used to denote a physically male person.

the stories of women like Mary, Marinos, and Eugenia not only because of their rich detail but because of their happy ending, several shorter vignettes exist about transpatial women who were not quite so lucky. Palladius, for example, tells a story of a "Fallen Virgin." He begins his story, "I knew a virgin in Jerusalem who wore sackcloth for six years and enclosed herself, receiving nothing of pleasure in her ascetic striving."[431] So far, she sounds exactly like the women within these stories, particularly Mary the Niece of Abraham. Though this unnamed woman did not walk into male space, she did, according to Palladius, succumb to the sin of pride and begin to behave more like a man than virginal woman. Here again, we can see the tropes in Jerome discussed at the beginning of the chapter. In order to perform as a woman and, more importantly, a good virgin, a young woman was supposed to stay inside and seal up her building just as with the apertures of her body. Pride, however, breaks this seal. An excessive emotion, pride spills out from the boundaries that attempt to hold it, rupturing doors and windows alike. As with Jerome's "bad" virgins, this young woman opens her door and is raped. Yet unlike the other transpatial women, she is offered no reconciliation. Her story ends here, and the world never hears of her again.

Hagiographers of most transpatial ascetics, however, did not end their stories with the permanent exile or death sentence to their subjects. The goal of these stories, after all, was just to scare their audience into being more aware of the interaction between space and their bodies, but to reinforce their trust in a system of proper placement. As such, these women were offered the possibility of redemption. This reclamation, however, did not simply rest upon God's forgiveness, but required that every ascetic recognize her femaleness in, or what would become,

[431] "Παρθένον πάλιν ἔγνων ἐν Ἱεροσολύμοις σακκοφοροῦ σαν ἐπὶ ἐξαετίαν καὶ ἐγκεκλεισμένην, μηδενὸς τῶν εἰς ἡδονὴν συντεινόντων λαμβάνουσαν." Palladius, *HL*, 28.

a gender-congruent place. In other words, redemption required a spatial re-gendering, or recognition and action that realigned the woman with her "proper" place.

Unlike the stories of both Marys, that of Eugenia culminates with her standing, still disguised as Eugenius, in the middle of the arena, waiting to be devoured by wild beasts. Like both of these stories however, this place is where her moment of reckoning, and of spatial re-gendering comes. As she stands, defiantly facing the audience and awaiting what she presumes will be her death, she says, "I declare this my mind publicly and in the midst of and in the sight of all men. For by nature I am a woman."[432] She goes on to assert that she had to disguise herself as a man for a short time in order to save her soul, and that she did so in imitation of her teacher, Thecla. Now, while this passage has been read repeatedly for its insight into cross-dressing and women "becoming male" for God, I suggest that her re-gendered spatial orientation is equally important.

Now, in discussing the arena, and a martyr's death in particular, this public space is typically coded extremely masculine. Here, men are supposed to fight animals (or each other) to the death before the very public eyes of the watching crowd. This arena also allows for displays the masculine virtues of bravery, physical skill, and endurance of pain. Indeed, as Stephanie Cobb, discusses, the arena allows for female martyrs, like Perpetua, to behave acceptably in masculine ways before and during their deaths.[433] While I agree that, in some ways, female martyrs code more masculine upon their very public deaths, I also think that we must remember

[432] "Eugenia," *Select Narratives of Holy Women,* 21. The Latin adds only "et apparuit femina." *PL* 73.614.
[433] Stephanie Cobb, *Dying to be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr Texts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 92-123.

Patricia Cox Miller's assertion that these moments of transgression *affirm* these women's femaleness instead of denying it.[434]

Indeed, as Eugenia stands before the audience, she does not simply verbally declare that she is a woman, but *shows* that she is. After she finishes her speech, Eugenia tears her top to reveal her "chaste breasts which were upon the bosom of a pure virgin."[435] This type of reveal is unusual neither in female martyrologies nor in stories of transpatial saints. As Eugenia herself recognizes, she follows in the footsteps of Thecla, who was also physically exposed in front of wild beasts, though by no will of her own.[436] Additionally, Perpetua and Felicity are stripped naked and forced into the arena and the narrator specifically draws his audience's eyes to Felicity's breasts, which were dripping milk.[437] The arena, then, constituted not simply a place for men to be men, but for women to be exposed *as* women. The space itself, in concert with the scrutinizing eye of the crowd, essentialized both genders down to their sexed bodies.

Moreover, for Eugenia, the space forced her to declare herself physically female. No longer did the monastic setting help to hide her body. Her expulsion from it and her entrapment within this new space compelled her to remember that she was a woman. In the moment that she exposes her breasts, she embodies both the pre- and post-fall states of female flesh. At first, Eugenia is brazenly proud of her female form. Though she is aware of her exposure, it does not carry the connotation of shame. Yet, after the author notes that she has convinced everyone of

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[434] Patricia Cox Miller, "Is There a Harlot in This Text? Hagiography and the Grotesque," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 33:3 (Fall, 2003), 425.
[435] "Eugenia," *Select Narratives of Holy Women*, 21. The Latin version is less graphic: "et haec dicens, scidit a capite tunicam, qua erat induta, et apparuit femina." "And saying this, she tore the shirt from her head, which she had put on, and appeared female." *PL* 73 col. 614.
[436] For more on the cult of Thecla, see Stephen J. Davis, *The Cult of St. Thecla: A Tradition of Women's Piety in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: oxford University Press, 2001).
[437] For more commentary on this scene, see Thomas J. Heffernan, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 339-40.

her femaleness (for they do *not* exist in a pre-fallen state), she remembers that she still inhabits a fallen body, and so immediately covers her breasts.[438]

Within this space, however, Eugenia's status as female is further solidified when she announces to the governor "You are certainly my father, Claudia is my mother, and my brothers are these two who are siting with you, Avitus and Sergius. Therefore I am your daughter Eugenia…"[439] Like Hilaria who discloses her female status as daughter to her father when he accuses her of seducing her sister under the guise of Hilarion, the reaffirmation of female bodily status, particularly one that resides under a patriarchal household, helps to re-align Eugenia and Hilaria with both their bodies and space.[440] In this moment, the arena itself transforms, from a place for the punishment of a transgressive man, to the place of miracles from a transpatial woman.

Like the story of Mary the Niece of Abraham, who returns with her uncle to live in the correct inner female space while he inhabits the outer male one, Eugenia likewise resides in holy space coded for women's bodies. The author of this *vita* ensures that the audience knows that this spatial re-gendering and proper re-placement benefited both the system as a whole, as well as Eugenia herself. For many years, the audience reads, Eugenia lived as an exalted woman and was visited by many people, a fate not possible had she not been kicked out of her monastery and

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[438] This scene is also very reminiscent of the scene in the *Passion of Perpetua*, where a mad cow rips Perpetua's dress and tousles her hair. The author highlights how she was oblivious to the pain instead immediately tried to pull down her dress and pin her hair up to preserve her sense of *pudor*. "The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity," in *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* ed. and trans. Thomas Heffernan, 20.

[439] "Tu mihi quidem secundum carnem pater, Claudia mater est, et fratres hi duo qui tecum sedent, Avitus et Sergius. Ego autem Eugenia filia tua…" in "Eugenia," *PL* 73 col. 614. The Syriac is almost identical in "Eugenia," *Select Narratives of Holy Women*, 21.

[440] In the story of Hilaria, her sister grows gravely ill and is sent to the monastery where Hilaria resides. Because the other monks are afraid that having a young woman in the room with them will cause them to fall, Hilaria reluctantly agrees to take her in. Though her sister does not recognize her, Hilaria recognizes her sister, and so kisses her and even sleeps in the same bed with her. When her sister is healed, she returns to her father to tell him about her stay at the monastery. She discloses the odd behavior of the "monk" who healed her, and her father, curious and angry, calls Hilarion to his court. It is there that Hilaria reveals herself as his daughter and begs him to allow her to return to the monastery. *Life of Hilaria*, 77-79.

forcibly re-gendered by the arena itself. Though she ends her life a martyr, she also ends it as a woman who, when properly placed, furthered Christianity and converted thousands of people by both deed and action.[441]

As mentioned earlier, death makes physical transgression safe. The body has solidified into a single state of being, and its movements, effects, and memory are easier to control. In the stories of female transpatial ascetics who do not end up residing in female gendered space, their death, and particularly the very public display of their bodies (whether linguistically or physically) seems to negate their spatial transgression and untangle their stories until they reside in a state of spatially gendered innocence.

The story of Mary/Marinos works much in the same way, though her gendered re-spatialization occurs slightly earlier in her *vita*. Exiled for a crime she did not commit and still desirous to, somehow, return to the monastery, Mary sits just outside its gate where she endured cold and burning heat. After the child was born to the innkeeper's daughter, the innkeeper brought the infant to the monastery and threw it at Mary's feet. Distraught, Mary acknowledges that she has received the reward for her "sins" (ἁμαρτία) but does not wish for the baby to die with her.[442] Space and gender continue to work at odds here, just as Mary sits on the boundaries of the monastery, in essential no-man's-land between the secular and the sacred world, so too does her gender waver between male and female. She is not fully masculinized, both because she did not father the child and because she is not a monk. Yet she has not taken off her disguise and so is not fully a woman. Her body did not bear this child, nor is she able to provide it with

[441] The author notes that when she revealed her body to the crowd at the arena, everyone was converted. "Eugenia," *Select Narratives of Holy Women,* 22.
[442] *Vita Maria/Marinos,* 14-16.

sustenance. Instead, she is left, neither mother nor father, nun nor monk, ostracized from the paradise of the monastery, yet refusing to enter the world.

After watching Marinos endure three long years of hardship outside the gates, the monks convince their superior to forgive Marinos and let him back inside. The superior agrees on the condition that he be the "last and lowest of all" (ὕστερον πάντων).[443] Throughout this passage, the building of the monastery itself is not stressed, but its gates instead. The hagiographer continually references Mary's physical proximity either to the gates. Once she is welcomed back inside the monastery, she accepted her place as the lowest and, curiously, the duality of her new performance seemed to satisfy the space to as to allow her to pass and perform as a monk.

Curiously, unlike Mary the Niece of Abraham and many other transpatial saints, Mary/Marinos returns to a male monastery. On one hand, Mary is still spatially allowed to pass as a monk. She lives in the monastery, but performs the basest of duties, the closest to that of a woman within a male space. On the other hand, the story now emphatically emphasizes her new role of *female* caretaker. Though, externally, the child and the other monks read this act as fathering, for the audience of the *vita* itself, Mary behaves as a mother. In order to be allowed back in, the space seems to have required that she behave like as much of a woman as possible, and motherhood would have been her destiny outside the gates. Intriguingly, though so little biblical overlays find their way into this story, the end of Mary's life codes much closer to that of Eve's, and, indeed Mary the mother of Jesus, than does Mary the Niece of Abraham. Though the other Mary was forced to have sex though not give birth, Mary/Marinos had to take care of a child without having sex. Unlike the Virgin Mary, however, the author of this Life emphasizes

[443] *Vita Mary/Marinos,* 15-16. I believe that this is one of the few other biblical references within this work, as Matthew 20:16 reads "and so the last will be first and the first last." Just like Mary will be last in the monastery, she will be first into heaven.

the presence of this child as punishment. Only one paragraph is devoted to the remainder of Mary's life in the monastery, and all but one sentence concerns the burden of the child. Like Eve, Mary was expelled from the paradise of her monastery, though, like Mary the niece of Abraham, for a crime not entirely her own. More like Eve, however, the punishment for her expulsion was painful childbirth. Though, in this case, her body did not endure the physical pangs, the birth of the child brought her much anguish. Yet, nevertheless, in the end Mary's body saves instead of damns her, as it breaks all possibility of her fatherhood and allows her, upon her death, to enter heaven first as she was the lowest on earth.

Mary's death, then, solidifies her body in one state. As the monks prepare to wash Marinos before burial, they discover that "he" is a woman, and, like women themselves, "shriek" and begin to cry "Lord, have mercy!"[444] The superior runs in and asks them what has happened, and they reveal that "Brother Marinos" is, in fact, a woman. Once again, like Eugenia's in the arena, Mary's body remains on full display as the superior draws near in order to see for himself. When he does, he cries out for forgiveness from Mary herself, saying that he will die at her feet until he can be forgiven for all of the wrongs he has done to her. The brothers say that he is forgiven because he acted unknowingly, thus not only revealing the covert role space played in pushing Mary out, but also undoing the threads of her transgression to the moment she was expelled from the monastery.

Yet the spatial unraveling goes even further, when the monks not only go to tell the innkeeper but *take the body with them* and *show* him that Marinos was a woman. He too repents and asks for forgiveness, and it is once again granted because he did not know. Thus, Mary is returned to her state of daughter where she began the story. She, through her death and the

[444] *Vita Maria/Marinos*, 18.

physical revelation of her body, has returned to a pre-transgressive state, as a young girl who simply cared for her father and the state of her soul. Because she is now dead and her body no longer poses a threat to any of the monks in the vicinity (and because none of them came to actual harm), her spatial transgression is unwritten and the system returns to its state of stability once more.

Though Euphrosyne's body is never physically revealed to the monks with whom she resides, her death nevertheless also unravels her transgressions and properly re-places her as a young girl, hoisting the blame not only on the father, but upon space itself. Like both Mary/Marinos and Eugenia, one of Euphrosyne/Esmeraldus' primary characteristics at the beginning of her story was that of blessed daughter. Yet the space of her father's palace was extremely unwelcoming, forcing her into secular gender roles with which she did not agree. Her death seeks to right these wrongs and place her back within that female space, though with religious, instead of secular, gendered expectations. A few days before she died, Esmeraldus called "his" father to "his" room in order to reveal that she was not the monk he had come to know, but his missing daughter. Like all other transpatial saints, Euphrosyne is forced to reconnect with her female body and recognize that it does not belong in the space she currently exists while alive. As such, she wants her father to bury her so that the monks do not literally manhandle her body, a well-worn trope of femininity for late antiquity.[445] Additionally, like most transpatial ascetics, this also reaffirms her status as daughter and, upon her death, undoes all of her transgression. It explains to the monks why she was so beautiful and why they were so attracted to her, and so retroactively moves her body from exile into the monastery. Yet it

[445] For example, Macrina will not let a doctor in to see the ulcer on her side out of a sense of αίσχος, or "shame." For more on this trope see Virginia Burrus, "Macrina's Tattoo," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 33.3 (2003), 403-417.

rewinds her movement even further as her father realizes that if he had allowed her a space within his own palace to practice Christianity as a woman, that Euphrosyne never would have left in the first place.[446]

To zoom out, the authors of these Lives use the plot device of gendered spatial transgression to address several audiences. Not only are all people, and young women in particular, supposed to be hyper-vigilant (unlike the people in the stories) about where their bodies are being placed so that they do not fall and become cast-out of the garden, but be aware of how their own spaces affect that of others. Though none of the men in the stories are held accountable for their actions, since they were either unaware of the "real" gender of the protagonist or else were so caught up in the secular placement of their daughters that they forgot about the religious, the stories nevertheless act as warnings for men, and fathers in particular, to look after the gendered placement of their daughters.

Conclusion

Anxiety surrounding the placement of gendered bodies in gender incongruous spaces dominates the narratives of transpatial ascetics. In late antiquity, women's bodies were seen as inherently dangerous. They had the ability not only to corrupt a man if his eyes, or even his mind, happened to alight upon her, but their very presence could ooze through walls and under doors, infecting entire buildings with their siren call. As such, the presence of women in a male monastery had potentially disastrous consequences for the men involved. While every one of these stories acknowledge, and even forces the woman to reckon with, this danger up front (often for the sake of their audience), the hagiographer turns this trope on its head: because the

[446] "Euphrosyne," *Select Narratives of Holy Women*, f 83 a – f 85 a.

woman's presence in these monasteries is permitted either by man or God, the main danger, that of her misplacement, falls upon the woman herself. She, not her fellow monks, is in grave danger in this gender-incongruous place. Though she may be able to stave off the inevitable for a while by spatially segregating her female body, the space eventually pushes her out and she falls from grace.

The hagiographers of these *vitae* make it clear to their audience that space, not people, caused these women's expulsion because, not only does something like this *never* happen to male monks, but almost no one within the monastery knows that these individuals are women. Even in those few instances when male monks are falsely accused of paternity, they are allowed to remain within their monastery until the pregnant woman finally confesses to her lie. Some authors are even more explicit than this, as when Mary/Marinos's hagiographer has her tell her Superior that she was accused because she was forced to enter a hyper-masculine space against her will. Nevertheless, these stories make it clear that, no matter their intention, these women were in the wrong place for their gender, and so had to be punished accordingly.

Because these tales are not really about misplacement at all, however, they almost always close with spatial re-gendering. Following, or in the midst of, her punishment, the woman reveals herself as female and properly re-aligns her body with her space. If such an action does not occur within her life, then it happens upon her death bed, sometimes literally, as her body retraces its steps until it is once again properly aligned with a gender-congruous space. It is this return to order that ultimately settles the anxiety present within these stories. While they serve as a warning for audiences to always be aware of their surroundings and the consequences their placement can have on both themselves and other people, they ultimately bring the world back into accord. They assure their audiences that the system works; that if they either follow spatial

guidelines in the first place, or rectify them as soon as possible, that they will be welcomed back into paradise where they can achieve remarkable deeds.

As we will see in the next chapter, however, such a neat systemization is only possible when we understand the hagiographer to be in full control of the story. Space, we now know, exerted a great deal of (often unrecognized) force upon its inhabitants. Though hagiographers tried to distance themselves from their stories and control the narratives, if we approach their works from the view of New Materialism to understand the author as a part of the story he crafts, a different conception of his and his subjects' materiality comes into view; one which is far less stable, and far more uncertain, than he would have liked.

CHAPTER FOUR:
The Flesh that Wasn't: Ascetic Assemblages and the Disruption of Dualism

"It just so happens that your friend here is only MOSTLY dead. There's a big difference between mostly dead and all dead. Mostly dead is slightly alive."

- Miracle Max, *The Princess Bride* (1987)

As the previous three chapters have demonstrated, hagiographers often felt like they held nearly totalizing control over their retrospective construction of ascetics' lives. Not only could these authors deploy ascetic body-spaces in such a way as to enable them to defend towns or evoke biblical images of the creation and the incarnation of Christ into a sea of tents, but they could also use these stories to encourage "proper" placement of their audiences' gendered bodies as well. Because so few, if any, words of ascetics themselves remain, we are often frustrated in our attempts to break the author's hold over the story and glimpse any agency beyond his own. Yet, while we will never be able to recover an ascetic's voice, we may be able to access their agency another way: through their choice of abode. Pilgrims could have, at least in theory, visited the enclosures of the ascetics for themselves. Therefore, while hagiographers could lay their own analysis over these habitations, they did not fully control this starting point of the ascetic's narrative, nor this physical aspect of the ascetic themself.

Not only, however, did place push back against the totalizing narrative, but the presence of observers did as well. While the gaze of the protagonist often appears neutral, it carries with it the weight of immense cultural baggage, from gendered expectations of the body to the observation of the "humanness" of the creation upon whom they gaze. As I will discuss, the seemingly simple act of looking was not neutral at all, but utterly transformed the scene upon which the looker gazed. Ascetics, then, did not merely consist of their boedies, or even as body-spaces as the hagiographer and pilgrim would have imagined them, but as an ever-changing

combination of flesh, enclosure, and observer. As this system fluctuated over time – as people came and went and as the ascetic performed differently within their enclosure – not only did agency flow from one aspect to another, but the ascetic moved inside and out of the very human categorizations of gender, materiality, and mortality. By understanding this system to function in such a way, instead of simply reducing it down to the modulations of a body alone, we can uncover a more malleable concept of asceticism at large.

In order to describe the transformation of ascetic systems through the gain and loss of their various parts, I will begin with a brief background of the theoretical underpinnings of this chapter. While new materialism constitutes a relatively new theory to the fields of history and religious studies, I suggest that its ability to re-cast human action as only part of a larger system while simultaneously questioning the very boundaries between flesh and other materiality reflects the late ancient world. Theodoret, the bishop of Cyrrhus, for example, describes how an ascetic's tears became spring waters, while, in other instances, an ascetic's cell had the ability to deconstruct humanity altogether.[447] New materialism, I contend, simply provides us with the necessary vocabulary to discuss a phenomenon already present within late antiquity.

In the next section, I will examine the crisis of categorization induced by asceticism and how the incorporation of materiality and observers helps to explain why this ambiguity occurred. To many early Christians, ascetics appeared nearly monstrous; they often defied bodily limitations and almost appeared to be composed of something other than human flesh. While scholarship occasionally has collapsed ascetics down into their human form while explaining that ascetics only *seemed* like phantoms, I contend that new materialism allows us to understand how, for the audience, the ascetic actually transformed between alternate types of substantiation,

[447] Thdt. *Hist. Mon.* 2.7; Maureen Tilley, "The Ascetic Body and the (Un)Making of the World of the Martyr," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 59 no. 3 (1992): 467-479.

depending on the composition of the ascetic's materiality as well as the identity of those looking on. Such a conclusion refuses essentialization and reveals the fluid nature of identity. Moreover, for this chapter, because I am discussing people whose gender shifts repeatedly throughout their life, the use of a gendered pronoun often places them into categories into which they do not fit all of the time. As a result, I will use "they," "them," "their," and "themself" to reveal how they worked between and outside of the male/female duality to exist as genderqueer, or even agender, individuals.

Finally, I will undertake a thought experiment to probe the question of agency, as well as the effect of the observer on the ascetic undertaking. As has been thoroughly discussed in early Christian scholarship, granting agency to those whose writing we lack becomes extremely difficult. We simply cannot know whether they behaved or said the things reported by the author of their story, particularly if their gender does not match that of their hagiographer, or if the writer elaborated upon, or created details wholesale, for their own purposes.[448] In this section, I argue that an alternate way to examine agency exists. If we look at ascetics as a combination of body, place, and other observers, agency never lies continuously with one element, nor is each element ever free from the influence of the others. Instead, they affect each other alternately, resulting in either a transgression, or deconstruction, of social norms, depending on the component emphasized. As such, we have to recognize that when a bishop or other outsider entered an ascetic abode, they shifted the scene within. The force of their gaze, as I will discuss further, collapsed the ascetic down to their body, returning them to a state of being comprehensible to the observer, though not necessarily indicative of the ascetic system as a

[448] For an encapsulation of the agency debate, particularly the question as to whether historians can access authentic female voices, see Elizabeth Clark, "The Lady Vanishes: Dilemmas of a Feminist Historian after the 'Linguistic Turn'" *Church History* 67 (1988): 1-31, as well as David Brakke's response, The Lady Appears: Materializations of 'Woman' in Early Monastic Literature" *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 33 (2003): 387-402.

whole. In this way, the ability of space to keep interlopers at bay (at least for part of the time) aided the ascetic in breaking down the categories of gender, materiality, and mortality.

Ultimately, I contend that these ascetics cannot be reduced to their genders, because their actions are performed outside of the binary. They cannot be essentialized down to their bodies because their flesh has now melded with other physical material. And they cannot be understood by appearing in front of the viewer, because their composition changes from moment to moment. By employing new materialism to see how these ascetics moved, wraith-like, in and out of human categorization and if we can learn to be wary of the truth gained with the eyes, then we can see how early Christian ascetics created a crisis of categorization.

Ascetic Assemblages: New Materialism and Destruction of Dualism

When writing about the materiality of ascetics, scholars typically focus on the body of the individual (fasting, sexual renunciation, smell, sight, etc.), the effect of the place *on* the body (the desert sun blackening the skin or wizening the hair), or on the body *in* the place (the way in which the desert becomes the city through the presence of bodies, or monastic bodies moving through a monastery). Rarely, however, are the body and place studied as a single, inextricable, phenomenon.[449] While the material turn has encouraged scholars to explore the agency of "things" upon human thought and action, objects are still just that: objects – those materialities which are linguistically and thus perceptually recipients of action, but are never themselves actors.[450] They are de-centered from human flesh, a sharp boundary drawn between "us" and

[449] Helen Hills discusses architecture as body, but not body and architecture together as a single phenomenon. See, "Architecture as Metaphor for the Body: The Case of Female Convents in Early Modern Italy" in *Gender and Architecture* ed. Louise Durning and Richard Wringley (Chichester and New York: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2000), 67-112.
[450] For an excellent work on the material turn in late antiquity, see Patricia Cox Miller, *The Corporeal Imagination,* particularly pages 1-18.

"it." Yet when we look closely, that line begins to blur. Humans are not as isolated from the world around us as we often like to think. Even our bodies are not entirely our own, as millions of bacteria thrive inside our gut and mites chew on our eyelashes. While late antique Christians would not have envisioned themselves as composed of other microscopic creatures, they did conceive of some ascetics as blurring the lines of their body and fusing, as one, with the landscape in which they existed. Such a phenomenon, in the nomenclature of new materialism, is called an assemblage.

The best way to visualize an assemblage is through a system that functions logically for both antiquity and today: a sporting event. The three crucial components of these events are the athletes, the audience, and the arena. Importantly, all of these pieces of this assemblage do not become a homogeneous mass; instead, they influence one another, but do not subsume each other. Each component could be extracted and plugged into a different assemblage, or even studied individually, but the effect of each part would behave differently if such a study was undertaken. Thus, we could study the athlete's rigid training regimen to determine the effect on her body, the audience's demographic makeup, or the arena's place in the social imagination, but in so doing, we would miss the way in which they come together as a system. If we study them as a whole, however, we can explore how the athlete gives weight to an arena, and how a particularly good play can rally the audience. Yet agency does not lie solely with the athlete, as the arena can shape the way their body performs or add significance to their performance, while the audience can either inspire as a home crowd or intimidate the away team. Likewise, the arena can perform independently of the athlete and audience, as they can amplify voices to a deafening level, or add the weight of history to the events unfolding within. The outcomes of these various interactions shift from moment to moment as the actions of each piece change. The assemblage

is not stable and does not last forever, but has strict boundaries with observable effects. New materialists have used assemblages to discuss everything from environmental justice, to the prison industrial complex in the United States.[451]

"New Materialism" itself was coined in the late 1990's by Manuel DeLanda, a philosopher and architect, and Rosi Braidotti, a philosopher and feminist scholar.[452] While often seen within the humanities and social sciences as a response to the linguistic turn, this movement also encompasses the biological and environmental sciences.[453] Essentially, new materialism contends that scholars, writ large, have been too anthropocentric in their studies; because we ourselves are human, we tend to value human actors above almost all else. As such, linguistically and philosophically, we draw false distinctions between ourselves and other "things" inside, on, and around us. This type of thinking lends itself, particularly in Western thought, to dualities, from human-object, and human-animal, to the sexual and gender dimorphic male-female, man-woman. What new materialism proposes, in contrast, is that we work to de-center people to envision a more complex and dynamic phenomenon. As the oft-repeated catchphrase espouses: "matter matters."[454] This phenomenon, or an assemblage of humans with

[451] For a work on new materialism and environmental activism, see Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Nautres: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010); for work on the prison system, see Antony Ryan Hatch and Kym Bradley, "Prisons Matter: Psychotropics and the Trope of Silence in Technocorrections" in *Mattering: Feminism, Science, and Materialism* ed. Victoria Pitts-Taylor (New York and London: New York University Press, 2016).
[452] Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2012), 48.
[453] One of the most influential studies in new materialism is Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); For the science of new materialism, see Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010); For the usefulness of New Materialism in the study of religion, see Sonia Hazard, "The Material Turn in the Study of Religion," *Religion and Society* 4 (2013): 58-78; For an overview of New Materialism and its effect on gender studies, see Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, *New Materialism.*
[454] The phrase "how matter comes to matter" originates with Karen Barad's article, "Posthuman Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter, *Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28.3 (2003). This phrase can now be seen across new materialism works, as well as on the homepage for new materialism academic studies, http://newmaterialism.eu/.

other types of matter, recognizes the existence of human-created binaries, but moves fluidly, and constantly, between and even outside of them. An assemblage, according to Deleuze and Guattari, is a "hybrid formations that do not cleave to the subject/object divide."[455] Assemblages are both human and non-human, and therefore both subject and object. Crucially, in this relationship, neither component wins out over the other nor continuously controls the other. Instead, they form an "uneven topography."[456] Each member has certain agency over other members, but the assemblage's collective agency is more than just the sum of its parts.

Additionally, assemblages are neither stolid nor finite; they have a limited life-span, and frequently assume and lose members.[457] Such a construction, as Sonia Hazard recognizes, allows us to let go of the notion that only humans have the power to act and affect change, to explore instead how "human volition and action is only a small part of a larger picture."[458] This larger picture, too, is ever-changing, for stasis creates binaries, and captures only a single point in time. It is here that Simone de Beauvoir's theory of "becoming" come to the fore. In her now oft-quoted work, *The Second Sex,* de Beauvoir wrote, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman."[459] It is this period of becoming that interests new materialists. Often, we are taught to interpret this quote as an individual moving from one state (girlhood) to another (womanhood), thus creating a binary of being. Yet, within this passage, neither the presumed past nor the guaranteed future appears. This person instead exists as neither girl nor woman, but instead continuously moves between various states of gender. This process of becoming, though it may seem as such when we bring the binary and cultural conditioning into the mix, does not imply a

[455] Hazard, "The Material Turn in the Study of Religion," 65.
[456] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter,* 24.
[457] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter,* 24.
[458] Hazard, "The Material Turn in the Study of Religion," 65.
[459] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 301.

straight line from one state of being to the other, but instead suggests the process of sexual *differing* instead of *being*.[460] Thus, while one ungendered human has the possibility of *becoming* a woman, that individually also has the potential to *become* a man or even, though de Beauvoir would not have recognized such categories, trans or agender. Thus, as Dolphijn and van der Tuin argue, "a sexual differing can be made apparent that has an eye for the material ('sex') and the discursive ('gender') in their mutual entanglement, thus shifting identity politics and biological essentialism in favor of a performative ontology, as well as the dominate conceptualization of 'revolution in thought'."[461] In other words, "sex" and "gender" are not mutually exclusive, biologically determined phenomena, but instead shift depending on how an individual performs, or behaves, over the course of their life. While such a phenomenon has frequently been applied to gender, this aspect of new materialism suggests that we must examine a wider "event-space" to encompass action rather than trying to observe a phenomenon at a single point in time, or as a cohesive whole.[462] The action of the matter, not the present state of matter, create the assemblage, as ascetics move across and between several different axes in the process of becoming.

Often, for example, the lives and stories of early Christian ascetics seem to contain contradictions embedded within ascetics' very existence. Female ascetics, from "transvestite" saints to "manly" women, often appeared male based on clothing or virtuous performance, but were discovered to actually "be" women upon closer examination of their flesh.[463] Other ascetics

[460] Dolphijn and van der Tuin, *New Materialism*, 147.
[461] Dolphijn and van der Tuin, *New Materialism*, 11.
[462] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 23. Physics suggests a similar phenomenon in the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, wherein an object's position and velocity cannot be measured at the same time, even in theory.
[463] See, for example, Elizabeth Clark, "The Lady Vanishes: Dilemmas of a Feminist Historian after the 'Linguistic Turn'. *Church History* 67 (1988): 1-31; David Brakke, "The Lady Appears: Materializations of 'Woman' in Early Monastic Literature" *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 33 (2003): 387-402; Stephen Davis, "Crossed Texts: Crossed Sex: Intertextuality and Gender in Early Christian Legends of Holy Women Disguised as Men," in the *JECS* 10.1 (2002): 1-36.

of both genders seemed to straddle the flesh of the living and of the dead, as their "spirit" remained untouched by the hardship of their bodies.[464] Indeed, some of these ascetics were cast as both human and divine, as their corporeal form existed on earth while they maintained citizenship in heaven.[465] While these phenomena have largely been studied as exercises in contradiction, or even as "grotesqueries," new materialism, I argue, offers us a way to make sense of these apparent dichotomies.[466]

While the event-space for the study of ascetics as assemblages is, by necessity, determined by the confines of their story, we must expand our own understanding of the phenomena to encompass three members: the state of the flesh, the type of dwelling, and the presence of other beings (whether human or otherwise). First and foremost, this allows us to see "human" boundedness as a construction of our own anthropocentrism, instead of as "naturally" occurring.[467] In this picture, the flesh is no different than other organic materiality. Theodoret, for example, describes how an ascetic's tears became spring waters, while Gerontius details how worms gnawed upon Melania as she slept.[468] Second, it recognizes the "agency of objects," of non-human actors, which nevertheless exert influence over people. An ascetic's cell is perhaps the most obvious example, as, in the midst of the desert, these solitary places exacted torture and, occasionally, enlightenment, upon their inhabitants.[469] While some of these tortures manifest as

[464] The understanding of spirit/mind/soul differs by author. For a detailed discussion on the use of each in two early Christian authors, see, Kevin Corrigan, *Evagrius and Gregory: Mind, Soul and Body in the 4th Century* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2009).
[465] See, for example, Greg. Nyss. *Vit. Mac.*
[466] Patricia Cox Miller, "Is There a Harlot in This Text? Hagiography and the Grotesque," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 33.3 (2003): 419-435.
[467] For more on the skin as a culturally constructed boundary, see Claudia Benthien, *Skin: On the Cultural Border between Self and the World,* trans. Thomas Dunlap (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).
[468] Thdt., *Hist. rel.*, 2.7. Gerontius, "The Life of the Holy Melania" in *Handmaids of the Lord: Contemporary Descriptions of Feminine Asceticism in the First Six Centuries* ed. and trans. Joan M. Peterson (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, Inc., 1996), 311-362.
[469] For more on how the walls of single room become an instrument of torture in-and-of themselves, see Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985). For a tie in how this definition, along with Amnesty International's understanding of torture, can be

a demonic presence, others, as in the case, as in the case of Abba Moses, were far more psychological.[470] The enclosing walls of his cells which caused him to dwell ever-more on fornication, forced Moses to leave his cell and insist to his elder, despite his reprimands, that he could not return.[471] Finally, just as an ascetic cannot be understood without taking both flesh and materiality into consideration, likewise is the phenomenon incomplete without interloping observers. Human or otherwise, these beings both gender and corporealize the matter upon which they gaze, disrupting the grand experiment of becoming. Such an interference occurs not only in the more traditionally embodied presence of a woman, as in the case of Simeon the Stylite, but with *all* those who visit and look upon ascetics.[472] To be clear, I am not simply discussing the "male gaze" of film and feminist studies, which largely present the gaze as rendering women objects of male desire.[473] Instead, I argue that the gaze of bishops and other Christians reinstates the very binaries which ascetics attempt to transgress. Even "male" ascetics were subject to such an action, as without the presence of an Other, they could move more freely across the gender/materiality/mortality divide.[474] Thus, the addition and loss of alternating materiality and observers at various times throughout the story reveals how and why ascetic assemblages did not constantly embody the dualisms of gender, mortality, and materiality, but

seen upon the early ascetic body, see Maureen Tilley, "The Ascetic Body and the (Un)Making of the World of the Martyr," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 59.3 (1991): 467-479.

[470] In the case of Anthony, for example, demons shook his monastic dwelling in an attempt to shake his resolve. Athanasius, *Vit. Ant.* 39.5.

[471] *Apophthegmata Patrum*, "Abba Moses."

[472] Simeon allowed no women even to see him. Thdt. *Hist. rel.*, 26.21.

[473] The concept of the "male gaze" began with Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Visual and Other Pleasures e*d. Linda Williams (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989). This theory has since been nuanced to recognize that *anyone*, regardless of gender, can participate in this type of gaze. bell hooks pens one of the most thoughtful responses in her work, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators" in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 115-31.

[474] This phenomenon will be discussed in greater detail later in the chapter.

instead moved ceaselessly between and outside of them, taking on different qualities depending on the boundaries and composure of their assemblage.

The Categorization Crisis

To the curious pilgrim or inquisitive monk, dessert ascetics, in particular, often appeared quasi-monstrous, taking on forms from phantoms or demons to even that of living corpses. In many of these instances, authors of ascetic *vitae* as well as their audiences, attempted to distill ascetics into one form or another, or, indeed, rid them of their monstrous qualities altogether so that could be more easily categorized. If we take the ascetics as a piece of a larger assemblage, however, their nature and function shift throughout their story, refusing to settle in one place, forcing the audience, on occasion, to question their own rigid categorization. This section, then, looks primarily at how de-centering ascetic bodies helps us to see that the larger system into which they are incorporated moves fluidly in and out of humanness, and the gendered, material, and moral constructs such categorization implies.

The Monstrous

In his introduction to *Monster Theory*, Jeffrey Cohen posits that monsters are born at crossroads, that they are the embodiment of a certain moment of "time, a feeling, and a place."[475] Because they contain all of these elements, which are often at odds with one another, they constitute a "harbinger of category crisis."[476] Monsters refuse to participate in the order of things and resist any attempt to apply systematic structure to their form. They are, in fact, assemblages,

[475] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Preface: In a Time of Monsters," in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 4.
[476] Cohen, "Preface," 6.

"that which questions binary thinking" and introduce a dilemma.[477] Bettina Bildhauer and Robert Mills, in their introduction to *The Monstrous Middle Ages* further Cohen's conclusions, arguing that monsters produce contours of bodies that matter and don't, demarcate segments of space as well as divisions of time.[478]

Ascetics, likewise, were often conceptualized of as monstrous. Many were described as "phantoms," while others fell further into the category of quasi-demonic.[479] Yet while the narrators of ascetic hagiographies, and even other characters within the larger story, described ascetics in such a way, as scholars such as Cohen, Bildhauer, and Mills indicate, such a construction only reflects a specific moment in time. If, however, we pull back to view the ascetic as an assemblage, we can see how, through a combination of performance and various other elements, the ascetic as assemblage moves through and beyond both the monstrous and the human. They are never continuously monsters, nor are they ever fully human, but instead flow in and out of these states depending on the composition of the wider assemblage.

The clearest example of the continuous movement in and out of these categories lies within the story of Abba Amoes in the *Apophthegmata Patrum.* "In the beginning," the author wrote, "Abba Amoes said to Abba Isaiah, 'In what way do you see me?' He responded, 'as an angel, father.' And at a later time he said, 'Now in what way do you see me?' He said, 'As Satan. Whatever good things you mention to me in conversation, I understand as though they were a

[477] Cohen, "Preface," 6. While Cohen does not refer to ascetics as assemblages, his definition of "monster" and that of "assemblages" are identical in many respects.
[478] Bettina Bildhauer and Robert Mills Eds., *The Monstrous Middle Ages* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 2.
[479] Palladius notes that Abba Adolius was suspected of "being a monster/phantom" (φάσμα εἶναι) as was Mary of Egypt, while Abba Amoes, within the *Apopthegmata Patrum*, accused his superior of being Satan. Each example will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter. For an excellent article on the disturbing and distressing categorization of desert ascetics, see Patricia Cox Miller, "Is There a Harlot in this Text?: Hagiography and the Grotesque," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 33.3 (Fall, 2003): 419-36.

sword.'"[480] This passage clearly depicts a shift not a change in form (as Abba Amoes does not change), but in understanding of action. This shift, I suggest, occurs not only because of the bodily discipline undertaken, but because of Abba Isaiah's alternating function within the assemblage. He begins as an observer, then moves to a participant. Importantly, however, neither of his visions of Abba Amoes are incorrect. Instead, they represent two different, yet simultaneous, functions of the larger system. For the observer, they are positive, and for the participant, harsh. Yet the system itself has not changed; merely a shift in perspective has occurred. The assemblage, through the harsh desert conditions, physical isolation, and bodily discipline, still works towards *becoming* something other than human, though the interpretation of that beings' *performance* remains in flux.

Palladius tells a similar story about Abba Adolius who was accused of inhabiting a indeterminate state between human and monster. Because of his excessive self-control and all-night vigils, Abba Adolius is suspected by his fellow monks of "being a wraith" (φάσμα εἶναι), hovering between categories of both mortality and materiality.[481] Every night after prayer, he would stand on the Mount of Olives, singing psalms and praying ceaselessly. He rarely slept, ate only every other day, and seemed impervious to normal human weakness. Abba Adolius' most uncanny feat, that which marked him as more phantom than human, was his ability to stand on the mountain, whether it snowed rained or froze, unmoved.[482] This creature appeared gleefully

[480] *Apophthegmata Patrum,* 11.12. "ἔλεγεν ὁ ἀββᾶς Ἀμμώην τῷ ἀββᾷ Ἡσαΐα τῇ ἀρχῇ· Πῶς με Βλέπεις ἄρτι; Λέγει αὐτῷ· Ὡς ἀγγελον, Πάτερ΄ Καὶ εἰς τά ὕστερα ἔλεγεν· Ὡς τὸν Σατανᾶν· κᾶν λόγον μοι λαλαηήσεις ἀγαθὸν, ὡς ρομφαίαν αὐτον ἔχω." "Dixit abbas Ammoes abbati Isaiae initio: Quo pacto me vides modo? Respondit: Velut angelum, Pater. Et posterioribus temporibus ait: Nunc quo modo me vides? Et ille: Velut Satanam; quamvis bonum ad me protuleris sermonem, instar gladii illum habeo." *PG* 37.125. Muehlberger has demonstrated that this passage also reveals that the conceptualization of ascetics as angels came from external expectations rather than internal experiences. Muehlberger, *Angels in Late Ancient Christianity,* 175.

[481] The whole lines reads: "Δι' ὑπερβολὴν γὰρ ἐγκρατείας καὶ ἀγρυπνίας ὑπε νοήθη καὶ φάσμα εἶναι." Palladius, *HL* 43.1.

[482] Palladius, *HL,* 43.2.

to defy the laws of nature, the ways in which many humans experienced embodied life, and so became a strange aberration. At night, then, and in concert with the open air and rigid mountains, the assemblage took on a form of the fantastic, causing it to slip outside of human categorization.

At daybreak, however, Abba Adolius' system changed. He would wake his fellow ascetics for prayer, and so appeared nearly human. Yet he never quite fully embodied this categorization either, as his mind never turned to the physical world. Abba Andolius' obliviousness to his own flesh came to such a point that his brothers would wash and change his clothes without his noticing. This phenomenon, as a combination of body, place, and observer, defied the classification of those looking on and of those to whom the story was being told. Without the judgements of the observers, whose own tendency toward human binaries make them fearful of phenomena which do not behave within understood bounds, the performance of the assemblage would not be strange. Left to its own devices, it is free to behave as vaguely as it pleases without causing fear, as no one is there to judge it. The form of the assemblage thus transforms depending on how the landscape and body interact, as well as how the other monks interpret these actions**,** but its tendency toward becoming something else entirely does not.

In other instances, however, not only ascetic practice, but the unclassifiable nature of the flesh in concert with its desert surroundings help the assemblage to defy gender, mortality, and material classifications. Like Mary herself, the origins of the *Vita Mariae Aegyptae* are phantasmal.[483] While Mary presumably lived in either the fourth of fifth centuries, the tale itself probably dates to the seventh century. Though originally penned in Greek by Sophronius, the

[483] In line with Mary's life as a "holy harlot," Lynda Coon, Patricia Cox Miller, and other refer to the dating of the texts as "promiscuous." Patricia Cox Miller, "Is There a Harlot in This Text?" 420; Lynda L. Coon, *Sacred Fictions: Holy Women and Hagiography in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 77. For further analysis and an English translation of the *Life of Mary of Egypt*, see, Benedicta Ward, *Harlots of the Desert: A study of repentance in early monastic sources* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications Inc., 1987).

Patriarch of Jerusalem, the most popular version was translated into Latin by Paul, the deacon of Naples.[484] Sophronius begins his narrative after a brief exhortation to see and be cured from blindness, not by displaying the titular character, but by introducing them to Zosima, the monk through whose eyes Mary's story unfolds. To introduce the story briefly, Paul informs his audience that Zosima stumbled across a creature in the desert. Startlingly, he discovered this creature was a woman, but a woman unlike any other he had seen; her skin was black, her hair wizened, and her body little more than a skeleton. Eventually, Zosima persuaded the woman, Mary, to tell her story. In her youth, Mary reveled in lust, giving her body freely to all sorts of men. Eventually, she came across a group of attractive sailors heading for Jerusalem and begged them to take her with them, with her body as her price. When she reached the holy land, she saw a group of handsome men entering a church, and so tried to enter as well. Despite her efforts, she could not break the threshold. Almost immediately, Mary repented her sins and begged forgiveness from the Virgin Mary. In her desire to amend for her previous sins, Mary strove to live an ascetic life. The devil, however, desirous to return Mary to his ways, ceaselessly tormented her, forcing her to leave the city and flee to the desert. There she lived for several decades, seeing no one until Zosima's arrival. After Zosima drew wisdom from this remarkable woman, he left only to return a year later and find Mary ill. Upon her death, a lion appeared from the desert to bury the saintly body.

Along with Pelagia, another "holy harlot" whom I will discuss later in this chapter, Mary has been read as a transgressor, gleefully defying earthly attempts to categorize. Patricia Cox Miller even classifies these individuals as "grotesqueries" because they were holy *women*, a

[484] The Latin text of the *Vita Sanctae Mariae Aegypticae, Meretricis* (henceforth *Vita Mariae*), translated by Paul the Deacon from the Greek of Sophronius, is printed in the PL 73. cols 671-90. The Greek text is printed in PG 87 (3), cols. 3693-3726.

contradictory identity for the time.[485] While I agree with this concept, I want to push the disruption of categories even further and reject the distillation of Mary down to their sexed body.[486] As a member of a larger assemblage, Mary's gender and even humanness changes depending the audience and the physical location. Mary coming into clear view and Zosima discovering her "true" identity does *not* disclose their ontological status as a human female. These categories come into existence in that moment for Zosima and Mary, who was, because of the audience and physical location, forced to perform in a way expected of human woman. This single state of being, however, does not overrule all others. As I will show, the identity of the ascetic assemblage transforms multiple times throughout the narrative.

After departing into the desert on a quest to find monk from whom he can truly learn, Zosima comes across a create he struggles to categorize. After days in the desert, Zosima saw the shadow of a human form in the distance (ἀποσκίασμα φανὲν ὡς ἀνθρωπίνου σώματος/ veluti corporis humani simulacrum apparet).[487] Both the Latin and the Greek in this instance reflect the ambiguity of the human form and its gender. The landscape, potentially the heatwaves undulating across the sand, as well as Zosima's own exhaustion come together to form a hazy figure that is not quite human and seems to lack a gender altogether.[488] But even in a single moment, the scene shifts. As he drew closer to the creature, Zosima doubted his first instinct to classify it as human, terrified that was it instead a "demonic specter" (φάσμα διαμονικὸν/ diabolicum spectrum).[489] Even as he drew close enough to see the body, skin black and hair wizened by the sun, the gender of the creature remained ambiguous. Sophronius once again

[485] Patricia Cox Miller, "Is There a Harlot in This Text?" 423.
[486] I am using the singular "their" here to refer to Mary's body because I want to emphasize the ambiguity and fluid nature of the ascetic's gender.
[487] *Vita Mariae,* 1.9.
[488] Zosima notes that he had already been traveling for twenty days, and that he had sat down to eat and pray when the figure of Mary appeared in the distance. *Vita Mariae,* 1.9-10.
[489] *Vita Mariae,* 1.10.

neglected to put any identifying personal pronouns in his account. While the composition of the creature shifts, its ability to transcend categories remains. Because the creature existed in a desert, the categorization of human did not quite fit. Even when the flesh and bones of a humanoid creature appeared in front of Zosima, still, the creature did not take on full human form because it lacked a gender. Not only the location, but the performance of the creature itself was not in line with either man or woman, and so exists beyond this categorization entirely.

No longer afraid once he realizes that the sight was vaguely human, Zosima ran toward the apparition as quickly as he could. Yet still the creature attempted to allude him, running further away, striving to avoid his gaze and his presence at all costs.[490] Eventually, Zosima broke down in tears and convinced this phantom to speak to him. When the creature obeyed, it told Zosima that it could not turn around, declaring "*mulier enim sum*" (*γυνὴ γάρ εἰμι*).[491] This moment is particularly striking because the freedom to perform outside of social bounds found within the larger assemblage comes crashing down under the weight of social expectations. In the desert, Mary was not required to conform to any larger expectations, and the desert itself, as well as the lack of any prying eyes, aided them in their continuous transgression. When Mary came into contact with Zosima, however, suddenly her body became that of a woman and therefore contained great shame that she was responsible for covering, lest she infect those around her.

To pull back for a moment, many scholars contend that scenes like these are a false reveal because the audience of the tale already knows that this creature is a woman.[492] While I

[490] Zosima refers to the creature now as a *φεῦγον σῶμα / fugitivum corpus*. *Vita Mariae,* 2.12
[491] *Vita Mariae,* 2.12.
[492] Patricia Cox Miller, "Is There a Harlot in this Text?" 425; In the majority of literature, the figures of Mary and Pelagia are referred to as "holy harlots," emphasizing their femaleness instead of their transgression. For a discuss of these lives as conversion and repentance tales, see Lynda Coon, *Sacred Fictions: Holy Women and Hagiography in Late Antiquity,* Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 71-94. For an

do not disagree with this reading, I would argue that the story also works on another level. Even though the audience "knows" the outcome of Zosima's encounter, the language in the tale itself urges the audience to drop into Zosima's situation and experience the transformation of Mary from moment to moment. Sophronius could have easily used female pronouns to describe Mary from the beginning, as does James the Deacon, the author of Pelagia's narrative.[493] His language, however, encourages the wider audience to become a part of this larger assemblage, instead of merely viewing it from the outside. Such participation allows Mary to transgress far more boundaries of human categorization, and recognizes that moments like this are no more "real" than the other versions Zosima has experienced; it is simply one substantiation of an ever-moving assemblage.

Thus, despite Mary's assurances to her deeply human nature, her actions repeatedly defy human flesh, rendering Zosima intensely fearful. As Mary turned to the east to provide Zosima with the prayer he requested, he recounted that she spoke silently, with her lips motioning the words without sound. He, in turn, understood nothing, but stood trembling.[494] After offering his own supplication to God, he raised his eyes back to Mary and noticed that she had risen a cubit off the ground and was "standing praying in the air."[495] Zosima recounts that when he saw this, "even greater fear crept upon him, his expression anxious, not daring to say anything, but saying to himself having fallen to the found, 'Lord, have mercy!'"[496] As he lay on the ground, he was concerned that this creature might be an evil spirit and its prayer an illusion.

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examination of the dangerous game of seduction played by both "women," see Virginia Burrus, *The Sex Lives of Saints: An Erotics of Ancient Hagiography* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 137-159.

[493] I will discuss James' use of pronouns later in the chapter.

[494] *Vita Mariae,* 2.14.

[495] "ipsam orare in altum sublata," *Vita Mariae,* 2.15

[496] "majori correptus metu, vultumque anxius, et omnino nihil proloqui audens, solum intrase dicebat identidem, Domine, miserere." "Τοῦτο δὲ ὡς εἶδε, φόβῳ πλείονι συνεχόμενος καὶ σφόιρα ἀγωνιῶν καὶ μηδὲν φθέγξσθαι ὅλως πολμῶν, καθ᾽ ἑαυτὸν δὲ μόνον λὲγων ἐπιπολὺ τὸ, Κύρις ελέησον,..." *Vita Mariae,* 2.15.

Despite Mary's assurances, in these moments, Zosima experiences "her" as moving continually among multiple axis of gender and corporeality, never settling on one for long. At first, the ascetic's form remains elusive, as though a heat wave shimmering across the sand, or else a mirage caused by the landscape and his own mind. Even when he recognizes the form as human, the landscape has so transformed the body, that a sex was not determined. It utterly escapes categorization, even when it assures him that it is a "woman." The prayer "she" utters makes him more, instead of less, anxious, and he once again reverts to his fear over this monstrosity. Like the previous ascetics described, Mary's body defies the typical possibilities of human flesh, not only in its appearance, but in action. It not only exceeds the "normal" requirements of food and shelter, but defies the law of nature as it floats across the ground. Given that the desert was understood to be the home of demons and other monsters, it is no wonder that "human woman" was the last categorization Zosima considered when interacting with this ascetic assemblage.[497]

Curiously, the only person to continuously identify Mary as a human woman was Mary herself. After she frightened Zosima by floating several inches off the ground, Mary assured him that she was "just a woman, a sinner… I am not a spirit, but earth and ashes, entirely flesh, in no way calling spirits to mind."[498] In one way, these words serve in direct contrast to her previous life as a woman on display, not necessarily a prostitute, for no money was exchanged, but a woman who freely shared her sexuality.[499] In another way, it serves the purpose recognized by

[497] For more on the connections between demons and their environments, see, David Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk*: *Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2006), 6-22 in particular.

[498] "Certus esto, o homo, quia mulier peccatrix quidem sum… spiritus autem non sum, sed terra et cines, ac denique caro nihil spiritual cogitans." "πληροφορήθητι, ἄνθρωποε, ὀτι ἁμαρτωλόν εἰμι γύναιον, πλὴν τῷ βαπτίσματι τῷ ἁγίῳ τετείχισμαι· καί πνεῦμα οὐκ εἰμὶ, ἀλλὰ γῆ καὶ σποδὸς καὶ τὸ ὅλον σὰρξ, μεδεν πνευματικὸν ἐννοήσασα." *Vita Mariae*, 2.15

[499] Patricia Cox Miller explores the curious construct of Mary of Egypt and Pelagia of Antioch as a *meretrix*, a "woman who earns," further in her article, "Is There a Harlot in This Text?" 428-9.

Virginia Burrus and Lynda Coon, that these highly constructed women served as signs of God's redemptive love, or even, as Cox Miller suggests, paradoxes that speak to the allure of female holiness.[500] In all of these instances, however, the reality of Zosima and the male author of the text, is reified; we read the story as an upper-class, male, Christian leader, instead of pulling back from the categories he so hopes to actualize. By placing Mary's self-narrated story of her former life in the midst of the larger work, the author attempts to make the past a present reality, one with which Mary still struggles – thus rendering her both redemptive and a grotesquerie.[501]

Yet, if we return to de Beauvoir's sense of sexual *differing* rather than *being*, Mary's past performance as a woman has no bearing on her present state. Not even her body remains the same. Zosima claimed that he recognized the "shadow" of a human figure in the distance, yet he still approached the creature as though it was a phantom, for demons could take human form.[502] Moreover, neither he nor the narrator ever commented upon the femaleness, or lack-there-of, of Mary's body. Unlike Pelagia and Anastasia, two other late-antique Christian women who were mistaken for phantoms and men, no male hands explored Mary's form, revealing her "sex."[503] Nor did Zosima's gaze roam Mary's flesh. "Her" form thus *differs* and is not simply *different than* her previous manifestation as a sexually promiscuous woman.[504] She does not exist as either male or female. Instead, "she" is in the midst of *becoming,* of playing with categories into which "she" does not quite fit. Like a phantom, Mary moves in and out of sight, of understanding. They hover between and among gender, fleshiness, and aliveness. Depending on

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[500] Virginia Burrus, *The Sex Lives of Saints,* 137-159; Lynda Coon, *Sacred Fictions,* 71-94; Cox Miller, "Is There a Harlot in This Text?" 423, 430.
[501] The "grotesquerie" is in reference to Cox Miller's article, "Is There a Harlot in This Text?"
[502] The Latin reads that he saw a "*umbram quasi humani corporis*" *Vita Mariae,* 1.10.
[503] *Vita S. Pelagiae, Meretricis* PL 73.663-72; "Anastasia" in *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient* trans. Sebastian P. Brock and Susan Ashbrook Harvey (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1987), 143-150.
[504] Here, I want to stress continuous action (differs) a opposed to an adjective or static state of being (different than).

Mary's place within their wider assemblage, they constantly transcend human categorization, refusing to settle permanently in one place, despite outsiders' frequently attempts to portray them in such a way.

Dead while Alive

While some hagiographers characterized the transformation of the ascetic flesh in terms of the monstrous or the phantasmal to convey a sense of transcendent otherworldliness, others described flesh that rotted while alive, a symbol of the ascetic's departure into the reality beyond. Throughout this process, the flesh became less human and more earthen, a vessel which would eventually be discarded as it blended forever with the soil. It, like the monstrous body, disrupted boundaries and disturbed convictions. As an assemblage, the corpse-like ascetic's body turned to dust and was infested with vermin typically associated with the dead, often making it indistinguishable as a substance from the earthen location it inhabited. And yet, the flesh was uncannily animate; the assemblage was dead while alive, inverting the social order and exploding the dualities typically associated with humanity.

For some ascetic assemblages, the ability to move between the world of the living and dead, as well as the gendered binaries associated with both forms, manifest itself in the body's fusion with the physical landscape. Theodoret's female ascetics, for example, all reside within gardens, a space which, even more than the home, visually symbolized a woman.[505] The soft curves and blushing flowers represent the softness and vulnerability of the female form more generally, while words such as κῆπος (garden) were slang for female genitalia, and to be 'garden-mad' (μανιόκηπος) was to be crazy for sex.[506] Within the Christian tradition more

[505] Thdt. *Hist. rel.*, 29, 30.
[506] Katharine T. von Stackelberb, *The Roman Garden: Space, Sense, and Society* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

specifically, a tension often occurred between sexuality and virginity, and, for Jerome, the erotic desire for the enclosed female body. As Patricia Cox Miller recognizes, the description of a virgin's body as "a garden enclosed, and a fountain sealed," does not "end erotic desire. It intensifies it."[507] Such, then, is the way that Domnina especially, who lived in a hut within a beautiful garden within her mother's home, has been read. As a literal garden, this woman was sealed off from harshness of the world without.[508]

The portrayal of Domnina as a garden sealed is problematic, however, because it re-genders the actions of the inhabitant in a way which *was* congruent with their previous lifestyle as Christian women, but no longer reflects their current state of becoming an assemblage. It ignores the bodily process enabled by the enclosed state, as well as the ability of space to be re-gendered, or even un-gendered, by the actions of the individuals within.[509] Moreover, with Domnina, it disregards the self-styling of her abode. Unlike other ascetics, whose abodes were made of mud or wood, Domnina constructed her tiny hut in the middle of the garden with the stalks of millet. Now this image can, at first, meld with the concept of woman as garden if we picture an idealized (and indeed fantastical) cell that would be pristinely constructed out of plants. Yet if we look more closely at the building materials and remember that pilgrims could conceivably have visited this place, the illusion of woman as garden starts to fall away. The garden, we can now observe, sits on the periphery. Indeed, it is as though the garden represents the skin which Domnina first shed in her process of becoming. Visually, it also resides at that point which is physically furthest away from the ascetic, separating Domnina from the social and

[507] Patricia Cox Miller, "The Blazing Body: Ascetic Desire in Jerome's Letter to Eustochium," *JECS* 1:1 (1993), 28.
[508] Thdt., *Hist. rel.*, 30.
[509] As Jane Randell has recognized, space can become gendered in two ways: either through the "gender associated with the different types of activities which occur within," or the "images which have cultural associations with particular genders to invoke a comparison to the biological body." See, "Introduction: 'Gender, Space,'" in *Gender Space Architecture: An Interdisciplinary Introduction* ed. Jane Rendell, Barbara Penner, Iain Borden, (London: Routledge, 2000), 103.

bodily connotations that she no longer inhabits. The point which is closest, and represents the stand-in for her flesh, however, is the hut made of millet. She has chosen the dead stalks of a plant, those rejected by the farmer in their quest to create life-sustaining bread. Domnina thus literally portrays herself as dead to the world. Far from embodying the vision of a garden enclosed and a fountain sealed, she closes herself off the life-giving forces as she practices dying. Her hut, and thus her very flesh, rejects the gendered imagery of female bodies, and in so doing, does not become more masculine- for a dead plant is no more masculine than it is feminine. Instead, she portrays herself as dead to the world, and thus able to disconnect fully from its social expectations.

What is remarkable, then, if we view these ascetics as rejecting the gender binary, is that their process of becoming, of inhabiting a place that is gendered, agendered, and everything in between, is reflected in the place itself. In the imagination of the visitor, the place transforms from gendered female, to one that is rejecting that femaleness and indeed almost humanness, altogether. As these ascetics become part of a larger assemblage and thus transcend the dualities of gender, they also study death, working to transform the materiality of their bodies into something else entirely.

Domnina's very flesh reflects her movement toward death. Theodoret described her as "a skeletal body and mostly dead. For her skin is like a husk, and lies on her thin bones like a membrane, because her fat and flesh have been worn away by her asceticism [lit. hard work]."[510] This body, in one sense, has become far less female; for a skeleton, unlike a woman, cannot leak,

[510] "… σώματι κατεσκελετευμένῳ καὶ ἡμιθνῆτι…. Λεπτότατον γὰρ τὸ δέρμα καὶ ὑμενῶδες λεπτοῖς τοῖς ὀστέοις περίκειται καὶ πιμελῆς καὶ σαρκῶν ὑπὸ τῶν πόνων δαπανηθεισῶν." Thdt. *Hist. rel.,* 30.2

it cannot excrete blood, nor invert the inside and outside through childbirth and lactation.[511] Yet in the same vein, Domnina has also shifted to at least appear as something not of the living. Her body lost its humanness to engage with the world more as dead bone than living flesh. Thus, while her corpse-body has shed its gender-identifying markers, and ceased to perform as "woman," "her" skeletal flesh nevertheless threatened abjection.[512] As the bones become visible through the paper-thin skin, the inside threatened to break forth, upending categorization, defying all laws of humanity. In their performance as a member of an assemblage where the human distinction begins to break down, ascetics walk this line, between death and life, between materiality and transmateriality, between gendered and not. They move constantly between being and becoming, perpetually in danger of slipping entirely one way or the other.

Not just female ascetics, however, worked to undo their externally gendered body through the process of dying while still alive. For example, Ellen Muehlberger, in her article on ascetics in Theodoret's *Historia Religiosa*, argues that "Simeon and the other male ascetics … do not simply interact with women: many of them also *are* women.[513] For Theodoret, men and women did not differ in bodily nature from one another, but varied only in the strength in their bodies.[514] In particular, the porous and liquid nature of previously male bodies rendered them female, as they wept tears and pus alike.[515] Simeon, for example, began his transformation into

[511] Late Antique medical discourse assumed that women were "wetter" and men "dryer," for women were associated with menstruation and tears, while men's bodies were supposed to be much more self-contained. For more on how this medical discourse affected ascetic bodies, see Muehlberger, "Simeon and Other Women."
[512] The abject, for Julia Kristeva, is the place where meaning collapses. The line between subject/object and self/other cease to exist as previous distinctions fall in on themselves. Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 1-32.
[513] Ellen Muehlberger, "Simeon and Other Women in Theodoret's Religious History: Gender in the Representation of Late Ancient Christian Asceticism," *JECS* 23.4 (2015), 584.
[514] Muehlberger, "Simeon and Other Women," 586.
[515] While it will not be discussed at length here, Muehlberger draws on Julia Kristeva, as well as ancient medical understandings of the body, to demonstrate that female flesh was seen as wetter and more likely to leak than male bodies. Muehlberger, "Simeon and Other Women," 487-490.

the feminine by wrapping a coarse rope tightly around his waist. Theodoret commented that he tied it so tightly around himself that he lascerated his skin. "When he had continued in this manner for more than ten days and the now worsened wound was discharging drops of blood, someone who saw him asked about the blood. When he replied that there was nothing wrong with him, the other man inserted his hand and discovered the cause of the blood."[516] As Muehlberger notes, the gynecological overtones of this passage are impossible to ignore.[517] Women's, not men's bodies, were subject to this kind of forcible examination, as women, not men, bled from invisible (vaginal) "wounds." So threatened was Simeon's community by this type of female display, that he was immediately ousted. As part of a larger assemblage, Simeon's physical surroundings, as well as the audience, prohibited them from fully transcending dualistic human categorization.

In order to pursue this transgression more fully, Simeon left their community to practice asceticism while standing atop a tall pillar. They dedicated themself so vehemently to their performance that they developed an ulcer on their foot, which rotted and leaked puss.[518] One onlooker, doubtful that a person could endure such pain without moving, ascended the pillar to investigate for himself. In a close reading of the text, Muehlberger notes that this man once again felt the body of Simeon to ascertain his wound, referencing, not his ulcer, but his loins girded with rope.[519] Thus in multiple instances, Simeon's porous body, a body that excretes, like

[516] "Ὡς δὲ πλείους ἢ δέκα ἡμέρας τοῦτον διετέλεσε τὸν τρόπον καὶ τὸ ἕλκος χαλεπώτερον γιγνόμενος αἵματος ἠφίει σταγόνας, ἤρετό τις αὐτὸν θεασάμενος τίς ἡ αἰτία τοῦ αἵματος." Thdt. *Hist. rel.*, 26.5.
[517] Muehlberger, "Simeon and Other Women," 597.
[518] Thdt. *Hist. rel.*, 26.23.
[519] Muehlberger, "Simeon and Other Women," 599. In another story about James of Cyrrhestica within the same collection, Theodoret himself thrusts his hands under James' cloak in order to "rub his back." At this point, Theodoret discovers that James wears heavy irons around his flesh, and thus begs him to take them off. *Hist. rel.*, 21.8.

that of a woman, both puss and blood. Upon close examination, this individual is not "male" at all, but seems, disturbingly, to present as female.

What renders these bodies female, and thus closer to the abject as an assemblage of earth and flesh, however, is its vacillation between progenitor and corpse.[520] On one hand, as with earthly women, Simeon's blood gives life in the sense that it guarantees him access to the next. In this sense, "he" almost gives birth to himself, as the blood and pangs experienced in "his" earthly body will eventually produce "his" spiritual one. Such a transformation in form strongly disrupts earthly binaries of not only gender, but sex, as the flesh itself transforms in its process of becoming an assemblage. The progenitive nature of the body simultaneously, however, marks its death. Unlike human women whose blood has the possibility of bringing forth earthly bodies, Simeon's blood ultimately destroys "him" by causing "his" earthly death. In this sense, Simeon embodies the opposite of womanhood, and becomes, instead, a corpse. Though animate, it rots; it smells; it decays. Yet far from rendering Simeon more human through this process, it instead suggests the process of becoming something else entirely. Indeed, the same man mentioned earlier asks Simeon "are you man or bodiless being?"[521] Though eventually the man forces his hand under Simeon's cloak to feel his wound, such an action only speaks to the condition of Simeon's body at that moment.

Both external and internal forces, however, threatened to pull the ascetic assemblages toward a more permanent human, fleshly, state of being. Theodoret, for example, clearly prided himself on convincing ascetics to lessen their load, not out of malice for their undertaking, but out of genuine concern for their well-being. He, after all, grew up with these men and women from the time he was a small boy. They saved his mother's life and encouraged his ambition of

[520] Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror*, 57-80.
[521] Thdt. *Hist. rel.* 26.23.

being Bishop of Cyrrhus.[522] In turn, he offered to rub their backs when they fell ill and gave them water when they wilted under the hot sun. [523] Some of the ascetics, like Marana and Cyra and James of Caesarea, even removed their heavy chains upon Theodoret's request.[524] Not only, then, do these stories reveal his empathy for the physical welfare of those under his care, but they display his authority over the ascetics, as he "outwitted [their] endurance" (τήν καρτερίαν κατασοφισάμενος). [525]

In so forcing the ascetics to not only lessen their labors, but to eat and drink, however, Theodoret dragged them toward humanity and away from transcendence. Suddenly, Marana and Cyra's chains, which were so heavy that not even a well-built man could carry them, became signs of them attempting to overcome their "weaker" gender, instead of mere tools of their asceticism and aspect of their assemblage writ large.[526] Moreover, food and water rooted ascetics to the physical world. John the Nazarite, as narrated by John of Ephesus, lamented, "What profit have I from the fact that I feed this body the end of which was doomed to be loathsome and disgusting decay?... Food belongs to the belly and the belly to food; but God shall make end of both…."[527] Sustenance thus ruined the process of becoming angelic, as it firmly relocated these individuals within the human realm, with its specific categorization, instead of allowing it to roam between several axes of becoming angelic.

Perhaps the clearest instance of this warning comes from Palladius's story of Silvania. As often occurs in the shaming of men into correct action, a woman, in this instance, Melania,

[522] For more on Theodoret's background, see Theresa Urbainczyk, *Theodoret of Cyrrhus: The Bishop and the Holy Man* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2002).
[523] Thdt. *Hist. rel.,* 21.7.
[524] Thdt. *Hist. rel.,* 29.5; 21.8.
[525] Thdt. *Hist. rel.,* 21.7.
[526] Theodoret remarks that the chains were so heavy that even a well-built man could not carry them. *Hist. rel.* 29.5.
[527] John of Ephesus, "John the Perfect Nazarite," in *Lives of the Eastern Saints,* 3.

appears.[528] After a long, tiring journey, Jovinius washed his hands and feet in water, then went to lie down. As if an angel sent from heaven, Melania suddenly appeared, saying "How can a courageous, hot-blooded young man like you dare to beautify your flesh that way? Do you not perceive that this is engenders great harm? Have courage, I am sixty years old and neither my head nor my feet, nor any of my members, except for the tips of my fingers, has touched water, although I am afflicted with much sickness and my physicians urge me…" to rest.[529] While Palladius attributed this action to human weakness, Melania seemed most concerned about the *human* aspect. To coddle the flesh was to stay in the physical realm; to tie oneself to one state of being, instead of freeing oneself to transgress many. Even the wounds one sustains, Mary argued, should not be of concern, as the body belongs to this world and not the next.

Thus, many ascetics came to be associated with the untreated, rotting flesh; that which collapses distinction between the body and the world.[530] In a different story of Melania the younger, Gerontius, a fifth-century hagiographer, wrote that "after she received the wound of God's love on herself, she did not hold up the idea of remaining always in the state of life."[531] Living alternately in a tiny cell and a chest in which, lying down, could turn neither left nor right, she nurtured her wounded body by refusing it physical aid. So little care did she give to her flesh, that one of her maids reported that when she used to shake out the sack upon which

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[528] For more on how the invocation of women was used as a tool to shame men into action see, Virginia Burrus, *Saving Shame: Martyrs, Saints, and Other Abject Subjects* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).
[529] The whole line reads: "Πῶς θαρρεῖς ταύτην ἄγων τὴν ἡλικίαν ἔτι ζέοντος τοῦ αἵματός σου οὕτω φιλοκαλεῖν τὸ σαρκίον, μὴ αἰσθανόμενος τῶν ἐξ αὐτοῦ τικτομένων βλαβερῶν; Θάρσει, θάρσει ὅτι ἑξηκοστὸν ἄγω ἔτος τῆς ἡλικίας, ἐκτὸς τῶν ἄκρων τῶν χειρῶν οὐ ποῦς μου ἥψατο ὕδατος οὐκ ὄψις οὐδὲ ἓν τῶν μελῶν, καίπερ διαφόροις ληφθεῖσα ἀρρωστίαις, καὶ ὑπὸ τῶν ἰατρῶν ἀναγκαζομένη οὐκ ἠνεσχόμην ἀποδοῦναι τῇ σαρκὶ τὸ ἔθος, οὐκ ἐπὶ κλίνης ἀναπαεῖσα οὐ λεκτικίῳ ὥδευσά που". Palladius, *HL*, 55.2
[530] Athanasius' description of Antony's uncorrupted flesh provides a notable exception. This tale will be discussed at greater length later in the chapter.
[531] Καὶ ἐπειδὴ τῷ Θείῳ τρωθεῖσα ἔρωτι ἐν τῇ αὐτῇ ἀεὶ μένειν οὐκ ἠνείχετο πολιτειᾳ" Gerontius, *S. Melaniae Iunioris*, 32. For an English translation, see: "The Life of the Holy Melania," in *Handmaids of the Lord: Contemporary Descriptions of Feminine Asceticism in the First Six Centuries, ed. and trans.* Joan M. Petersen, Cistercian Studies Series (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1996), 340.

Melania slept, enormous maggots fell out. Melania's body, then, had transmuted from living to dead, though "she" existed somewhere in between. Worms gnawed at her flesh, just as John the Nazarite had warned would happen when he spoke against earthly indulgence. "'What profit," he wrote, "have I from the fact that I feed this body the end of which was doomed to be loathsome and disgusting decay? And wherefore do I have a quantity of food amass and lay up store in it for a multitude of creeping things and worms?"[532] For Melania and Mary, this state of utter abjection transformed the profane into the sacred. The rotting flesh became symbolic, not of death, but rebirth; the glory of God. While this flesh was not yet otherworldly, by shedding it through their "life" ascetics became assemblages which allowed them to transcend bodily limits before the freedom of death.

Interloping Others: Disruption and Experimentation

While often the sight of the flesh could indicate the changed nature of the ascetic assemblage, often, as discussed in the previous chapter, ascetic bodies were hidden from sight. When such a phenomenon occurs, the product of the assemblage shifts dramatically. Suddenly, an outside observer can no longer access the ontology of the creature within. As such, while enclosed, the entire assemblage takes on an air of ambiguity: the observer can no longer predict the status of the creature inside the enclosure, and so the boundaries often regulated by the gaze, begin to break down. The best way to understand this process is by reimagining an old thought-experiment.

In 1935, Austrian physicist Erwin Schrödinger devised a thought experiment to address the problems he saw within the Copenhagen Interpretation of quantum mechanics. In his

[532] John of Ephesus, *Lives of the Eastern Saints*, ed. and trans. W. E. Brooks, *PO.* (1903), 3.

experiment, a cat would be placed inside of a sealed steal box, along with a small amount of bottled radioactive material, a Geiger counter, a hammer, and a bottle of poison. Because the amount of radioactive material was so small, it only had a 50% chance of being detected within the hour limitations of the experiment. If the Geiger counter did detect radio activity, it would trip the hammer which would, in turn, smash the poison, killing the cat. Because the scientist would not know what was going on inside the box, and because the likelihood of either scenario occurring, the scientist had to consider the cat simultaneously alive and dead, or in a superposed state.[533] While Schrödinger himself used this experiment to show how ridiculous quantum mechanics was, as a cat cannot actually be both alive and dead, the thought experiment took on a life of its own and physicists began to realize that a similar scenario actually *does* occur on an atomic level.[534]

Now, while clearly an ascetic is neither cat nor electron, I suggest that such an experiment reveals the similar ability of an ascetic to exist in a superposed state when viewed as one member of a larger assemblage. In other words, and enclosed ascetic, free from the gaze of others, must be thought of as existing in multiple states simultaneously, in this instance, male/female, alive/dead, corporeal/incorporeal. It is only when the observer breaks down the door to peek inside does the assemblage collapse down to its subsequent parts, as its ability to exist outside human duality shatters under the gaze. While the previous section has focused on the combination of materialities and physical spaces, external observers will serve as the focal point of the assemblage of this section because presence of others, and particularly the force of

[533] A superposed state simply refers to the coming together of two quantum states that are usually distinct from one another. Outside of the box, the cat can be either dead or alive, but in a superposed state, it is both.
[534] In such a scenario, an electron usually only spins clockwise or counterclockwise, but physicists have discovered that there are some electrons who spin alternately in both directions. Only when the scientists stops the electron to take a measurement does the spinning of the electron collapse into one state or the other.

their gaze, is never neutral. With it comes the heavy baggage of cultural expectations, gender norms, and religious assumptions. As film theorists and physicists alike have definitively shown, the presence of an observer changes not only the outcome of an event, but the event itself. This phenomenon, I argue, is present in this world of late antique ascetics. As I have shown, an ascetic assemblage changes depending on the flesh and the landscape, but, as I will now discuss, that landscape is often populated with human materialities whose gaze can drastically transform the actions of the assemblage as a whole. In order to understand ascetics as an assemblage, we must look at continuous action, at its movement in space and time, instead of at a single moment. The gaze, however, reduces this complex phenomenon down to a single point in time, a finite instance which conveys neither current action, nor its past and present. Indeed, it reduces ascetics into beings, rather than processes of becoming. The presence of other forces, then, whether human or otherwise, disrupts the grand ascetic experiment of disrupting human categorization.

Disturbing Gender

One of the greatest fears of ascetic men, it seems, was the presence of women -- particularly beautiful women, though even skeletal female bodies threatened to enflame lustful feelings.[535] Women, it seems, endangered an ascetic assemblage by reducing a man to his basest aspect: lust. Lust not only ties these individuals deeply into the human form, but makes them incapable of existing in a super-posed state. Through sexual renunciation, ascetics fled this

[535] Mary of Egypt tells Zosima to look away from her shamefully naked body because of its debaucherously power. He gives her his cloak to cover her nakedness, but remarks that her beauty has been stripped away. Nevertheless, the body of a woman, no matter how beautiful, still posed a danger to the unguarded gaze. *Sancta Mariae* 2.12.

aspect of masculinity, seeking abstinence and a contemplation of God.[536] Yet as the popularity of ascetics grew, so too did the danger of women interrupting them. As such, many sought to avoid them at all costs, enclosing themselves much in the same way as the cat in Schrödinger's experiment.

For some, the danger was the sight of the women's face and, indeed, the possibility of the woman looking back.[537] John of Lycopolis, a desert ascetic described by both Palladius and the anonymous author of the *Historia Monachorum*, forbids women to see him for just such a reason.[538] Hidden away in his cell for over forty years, he never beheld a woman's face, no matter how important nor how high her status. Even Poimenia, an ascetic herself, could not gaze upon John, and had to content herself with answers whispered through the wall.[539]

The danger of women was so great to this experiment, it is later revealed, that devils would take on feminine forms to tempt the ascetic and distract John from his task. In the version of the story within the *Historia Monachorum*, John proceeds to tell a cautionary of an unnamed monk who grew cocky in his practice of asceticism.[540] Desirous to capitalize on this weakness, a demon appeared in the form of a beautiful woman who desperately sought shelter in the desert. Foolishly, or so the narration goes, the monk let her enter. So begins the cat and mouse of seduction. The demon-woman slowly reeled in the ascetic, touching him lightly on the hand and neck, ensnaring him in her trap until he became her prisoner. Ironically**,** to the audience of this story, the monk thought it was he who had seduced this beautiful woman, and so desired to have

[536] Brown, Peter. *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).
[537] For more on power of previously objectified figures looking back, see bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Females as Spectators," 115-131.
[538] *Hist. mon.* 1.1-65; Palladius, *HL* 35.1-15.
[539] *Hist. mon.* 1.35.
[540] *Hist. mon.* 1.32-35.

sex with her. But in his eagerness, just as he reached out, she gave a loud cry and vanished like a shadow.

In one sense, the presence of this "woman," firmly situates the monk in the body as a hyper-sexualized male at the expense of all else. All "women," it seems, are demonic, as uncontrollable objects of male desire. Yet framed in such a way, the male monk and his biographer are the center of the story, its subject; the demon-woman is little more than the object of his lust, or, at best, a sign of over-inflated ego. It is tempting, because the story is told from the monk's point of view, to provide him with sole agency, yet the composition of the entire assemblage shifts, causing a disruption in gender performance and expectation, not simply because he gave into lust, but because of the disruptive presence of one who should have remained outside. It is as though the cat has let the scientist inside, as, not the cat, but the act of looking, disrupts the experiment. If, however, we adjust our view to include the demon-woman as a part of this ascetic assemblage, the subject-object line blurs, as does the gender of the previously "male" ascetic. Instead of the person within being able to move between the axis of male and female, suddenly, they are forced into one, often unpredictable, form. Indeed, in this relationship, it is the demon, not the monk, who plays the masculine role. The signs of their sexed "bodies," as I will demonstrate below, become mere markers of material difference.

In the wider Greek and Roman world, the force of the gaze determined both gender and power relations. Because the gaze was thought to manifest physically and had the potential to materially penetrate the body of another, it became increasingly important to guard against such assault. While penetration was shaming in and of itself, this shame could be brought about simply by staring at a person's sex organs.[541] While the genitals were only considered shameful

[541] David Fredrick, "Introduction," in *The Roman Gaze* ed. David Fredrick (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 17.

parts of the body if they were exposed, these parts of the body could easily be undressed with the eyes.[542] For this reason, public exposure meant that a person became extremely vulnerable in the eyes of others. Yet despite this danger, as Carlin Barton recognizes, "Being, for a Roman, was being seen."[543] For men, this applied to his ability to perform in public and in politics; for a woman, it spoke to her actions within the home.[544] In both cases, shame and honor were at stake. According to Barton, "Roman honor was a willingness to be exposed and so… a readiness to be ashamed."[545] By calling up others to witness their actions, these elite proclaimed that they had nothing to hide and would stand up to even intense scrutiny. Subsequently, by saying that they had nothing to hide and by ostensibly proving this to the world, these men and women rendered scrutinization unnecessary.

Deeply concerned over the ability of the eyes to physically penetrate another, Christians during the latter half of the Roman Empire expanded upon the Roman conception of the gaze. Following the prescripts of Matthew, which notes that "everyone who looks upon a woman with lust has already committed adultery in his heart" (Mt. 5:28), Christians began to argue that the gaze brought shame and pollution to both parties involved. Augustine, in his "Rule of Monks," furthers this argument when he warns that, "it is sinful to desire [women], or to want to be desired by them. For it is not by touch or passionate feeling alone, but by one's *gaze*, that carnal desires for women arise and are arisen."[546] Combining this with the verse from Matthew

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[542] David Fredrick, "Introduction," 17.
[543] Carlin Barton, "Being in the Eyes," in in *The Roman Gaze,* 220.
[544] A good wife, as Barton states, would be the one caught performing correctly upon the sudden return of her husband or his comrades. A bad wife would misbehave when she thought no one was looking. Thus in a Foucauldian sense, the proper wife ought always to behave as though someone is looking at her. "Being in the Eyes," 221.
[545] Barton, "Being in the Eyes," 221.
[546] Aug., *Regula Sancti Augustini*, "*… feminas videre prohibemini, sed appetere, aut ab ipsis appeti velle, criminosum est. Nec solo tactu et affectu, sed aspectu quoque, appetitur et appetit concupiscentia feminarum.*" in Greorge Lawless, *Augustine of Hippo and His Monastic Rule* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).

suggests something uniquely Christian: that the gaze equally contaminates both parties. In this way, the gaze within Christianity, especially within ascetic Christianity, become partially tied to the vow of chastity. For Christians, because of the physicality of the gaze, simply looking at another with desire equated to penetration and shame.

Thus, for any ascetics, a woman's presence, and especially of her gaze, could prove fatal to the ascetic experiment, and thus often was avoided at all costs. Theodoret told of Simeon Stylites, for example, whose dedication to God manifest by standing on a great pillar. Indeed, Theodoret compared such a deed to the heroes of the Old Testament: Isiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, and Ezekiel, all of whom undertook a laborious task upon God's request.[547] While this man could bear bodily suffering to the point of oozing and rotting flesh, the presence of a single woman threatened to disrupt his practice.[548] Even though he was out of the reach of the onlookers, he nevertheless kept his body on display to all, and frequently talked to those who came to see him. The presence of a woman, it is thus suggested, would re-gender and re-corporealize Simeon. Without them there, his sexual drive, or so it is assumed by the author, would not have been aroused by the men, and so Simeon would have been in no danger of his gender being reified through sexual arousal. The presence of a woman, however, threatened such a bodily collapse into hyper-masculinity, thus destroying his ability to move more fluidly out of the gender spectrum.

In cases where men were manipulated and controlled by a woman, however, where the female gaze penetrated their body and their libido becomes the object, the gender and power relations shift.[549] To return to John's story of the monk and the demon-woman, as soon as John

[547] Thdt. *Hist. rel.,* 26.12.
[548] Thdt. *Hist. rel.,* 26.21.
[549] Sharon L. James discusses just such a scenario at a Roman dinner party in Plautus's *Asinaria* and Ovid's *Amores*. Here, the prostitute becomes masculinized, as she both examines and controls the men in the room. She has more

opened his door, the demon penetrated his threshold altering the function and composition of the larger assemblage which resulted ultimately in the inversion the traditional gender roles. While the bodily form of these creature may resemble a woman to the monk's eyes, they have swapped, genders; as the penetrated, John became the woman, and the demon the man. This relationship continued, as the demon reeled in its victim; the demon was bold, touching the monk, taking away "his" power to control "his" desire. "Her" eyes ranged over "his" body, and "her" hands took ownership. Thus, at the end of the tale, as the monk's passions raged and he inwardly announced his desire to unite with her like "a stallion desirous to mount a mare" (θηλυμανὴς ἵππος γενόμενος), his own perception of the situation is a delusion not only because this "woman" is incorporeal, but because, in this relationship, it is he who has been mounted.[550]

This story seems to suggest, at least for some ascetics, that "women" as human beings did not present the only problem to the function of their assemblages, but instead that female *form* posed the real danger. Thus, while the audience of John's tale knew that the "woman" with whom John interacted was no woman at all, from the monk's perspective, because he had been so debased as to live that moment entirely in the flesh, the *appearance* of "female" flesh was enough to complicate the gender relationship. Once in this form, the demon could operate and affect the monk though it was a flesh-and-blood person, and could manipulate the gender dynamics as well. Thus, unlike the Schrödinger's cat experiment, the observer, in this instance, could affect the outcome. The monk's encounter with the demon reveals the tenuous nature of

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freedom and control over sexuality than they do, as she can choose with whom she goes home, while simultaneously eliciting desire from all men. Like the monk in *Historia Monachorum*, they become her slaves. "A Courtesan's Choreography: Female Liberty and Male Anxiety at the Roman Dinner Party" in *Prostitutes and Courtesans in the Ancient World* ed. Christopher Faraone and Laura McClure (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2006).

[550] Andrew Cain notes that the comparison of the monk to "lusty stallion" (his translation of θηλυμανὴς ἵππος γενόμενος) is reminiscent of Proverbs 7.21 and Jeremiah 5.8, both of which condemn sexually wayward Jews. *The Greek Historia Monachorum in Aegypto: Monastic Hagiography in the Late Fourth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 80.

gender and its ability to move rapidly between multiple points on a spectrum depending not only on the person's own bodily performance, but on that of other creatures who become part of the larger assemblage.

Thus, the mere *presence* of women seems to infect and penetrate the landscape, transforming the construction of the ascetic assemblage. Suddenly, because a woman entered, the environment transforms from a harsh cave, whose natural environment world force its inhabitant into solitary discipline and deprivation, to a den of lust. While the setting itself does not change, the actions within recast the cave as an intimate bedchamber as the demon/woman strokes John's neck, while it later transforms into a prisoner, as the demon/woman becomes its warden.[551] The women present needed not even look upon the ascetic, nor the ascetic upon her, for her dangerous libidinousness to disrupt his entire physicality. As such, and in contrast to the same story of John as told by Palladius, John let no women, even ascetics, near his abode.[552] This danger, however, left John in a precarious situation, because he still desired to help these women, though he could not do so in the flesh. So instead, he went to her in a dream, listening to her concerns and providing answers. The mixtures of their bodies within the same area would have proved too risky. The only way to not alter his assemblage was to remove the physical world entirely.

Thus, even when comparing a few moments from two different saints' lives, it becomes clear that gender is unstable. While early Christian hagiographers often chooses to reify the ascetic's "masculine" gender through the use of pronouns, names, or comparison to other male figures, few of the actions undertaken by the ascetics themselves read in such a way. Indeed, especially in tales of ascetics where, as Gillian Clark has observed, masculinity is being

[551] *Hist. mon.* 1.34.
[552] *Hist. mon.* 1.35.

"unmade," the one feature that seems to re-gender ascetics is their sexuality.[553] Unlike their male counter-parts who have not undertaken such a life, ascetic "men" are not physically strong; as has been discussed above, their bodies weep and wither. Nor did these "men" hold physical power over a household or over their kin, as they renounced the world in their contemplation of the divine.[554] The only "male" characteristic that appears within these tales is their potentially insatiable libido in the presence of women. Without her presence, they exist within a quasi-agender territory, moving between genders and even escaping from the gradient entirely. What the instances of engendering demonstrates**,** however, is that we cannot understand these individuals to consistently *be* men, for they were not. The presence or absence of certain types of bodies transformed their very flesh as they vacillated between the super-posed states.

Corporealizing Masculinity and the Reinstatement of Physical Categorization

The disrupting presence of women is nothing new to discourse ancient or modern, yet within these studies, and indeed often within the lives of their subjects, men and masculinity are normalized to the point of invisibility. As Clark notes, "This makes it difficult to find out much about women, but also makes it difficult to find out about men: not about what they did, but about how they experienced the social construct of masculinity and the pressures exerted on men to conform. Male authors take masculinity for granted, except when they are attacking an enemy who lacks it."[555] The effect of a male's presence, then, often goes unnoticed, particularly when he is not playing the hyper-masculine aggressor. If his sexuality falls to the background, he

[553] Gillian Clark, "The Old Adam: The Fathers and the Unmaking of Masculinity," in *Thinking Men: Masculinity and Self-Representation in the Classical Tradition* ed. Lin Foxhall and John Salmon (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 170-182.
[554] Clark, "The Old Adam," 177-180.
[555] Clark, "The Old Adam," 170.

appears "neutral," despite his otherwise masculinizing physical strength, worldly power, and, in the case of many of those who wrote about ascetics, deeply entrenched worldly binaries. Even though most of the authors of ascetic *vitae* and tales practiced celibacy, they nonetheless benefited from the very binaries ascetics themselves sought to escape: the physical maleness of their bodies granted their social prestige and power, as did their ability to move less problematically through a variety of spaces in the material world. It is this entrenchment in and benefit from the binary that disrupts the experiment of the ascetic as assemblage, and thus its ability to exist outside of human dichotomies.

It is perhaps easiest, then, to begin by visualizing masculinity as it relates to women. When studying the remarkable feats of ascetic women, for example, scholars typically discuss how these women become men through their acts of bravery, self-restraint, and self-denial.[556] This masculinity is often worn as a badge of honor, signifying that these ascetics have overcome the feminine fragility of their bodies and have ascended to a higher level. From the perspective of the bishop both in or relating the ascetic's story, the qualifications of these actions are correct. In his *Life of Macrina*, for instance, Gregory of Nyssa describes how Macrina teachers her mother and the other women of her monastery to act more "manly" upon the death of her brother Naucratius.[557] Macrina, according to Gregory, was not carried away by her sorrow, nor did she display her suffering in "any base or womanish way." Instead, she took on the role of a man, rising above her "nature" to care for her mother and the other women of her monastery. In another moment, Macrina takes on the traditionally male role of debating philosophy with her

[556] See, for example, Elizabeth Castelli, "'I Will Make Mary Male': Pieties of the Body and Gender Transformation of Christian Women in Late Antiquity," in *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, ed. Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub (New York: Routledge, 1991); Gillian Cloke, *This Female Man of God: Women and Spiritual Power in the Patristic Age, AD 350-450* (London: Routledge, 1995); Stephanie Cobb, *Dying to be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr Texts*, (New York, Columbia University Press, 2008).
[557] Greg. Nyss. *Vit. Mac.* 178.

brother Basil, and in turn teaching the practice of virtue to her youngest brother, Peter. All of these actions have been read individually as indisputable signs that Macrina *is* a female man of God.[558]

Pinpointing specific actions to argue for the existence of these ascetics as either masculine or feminine, however, destroys the entire experiment of becoming. At the moment of looking, only one of those actions can occur. In order to understand the process of becoming an angel, I contend, we must look instead at the totality of actions. Macrina, for example, took on a maternal role of bringing up children and worrying for their well-being at the beginning of her ascetic life, and refused to be seen by a male doctor when she grew gravely ill out of a sense of shame for her body.[559] Likewise, Domnina, an ascetic described in Theodoret's *Historia Religiosa,* though she undertook, in the binary view, great "masculine" feats of endurance, by sleeping on the hard earth, eating nothing but lentils, and subjecting her body continuously to the punishing elements, she also cried nearly continuously to the point that her rough garments were drenched with tears.[560] If we focus, then, primarily upon women becoming men, we must necessarily ignore or downplay those instances which would, in the binary system, render them "women" once again.

These "female" ascetics, then, when enclosed in their abodes, were no longer forced to perform in such a way that conformed with gender norms, but could attempt instead to disengage from this system. I want to stress, however, that this performance did *not* make the ascetic androgynous, because androgyny assumes either a combination of masculine and feminine traits, or a place between these two categories. Instead, the process of becoming, of studying the ways

[558] This term originates with Cloke, *This Female Man of God* (1995).
[559] Greg. Nyss. *Vit. Mac.* 178.
[560] Thdt. *Hist. rel.,* 30.2-4.

of the angels, required the movement among and outside of the binary, between gendered and agender creatures. Pinpointing ascetic action at a specific point on only one access of either gender, materiality, or corporeality, destroys the experiment in becoming because it ignores action in favor of observation cast as truth. Though, for the observer, the person within exists within specific human constructs (alive/dead, man/woman, corporeal/incorporeal), such an observation is merely confirmation bias. Because the observer thinks within these categories, their gaze consequently imposes these dualities.

The presence of a bishop of male interloper, however, ruined this emancipation. As scholars have recognized, the ability to enter a female ascetic abode as a man typically transpired as a demonstration of power, both of his episcopal authority, as in the case when Theodoret brags that Marana and Cyra, two female ascetics who grace the pages just before Domnina's vignette, let him in "out of respect for the episcopal office" and of his ability to remain unfazed by their "female" presence.[561] In the case of Basil, whom Macrina won over to the "ideal of philosophy," and Gregory, who frequently visited Macrina, both men were Macrina's brothers, and therefore not tempted by her femininity.[562] Yet Theodoret's great office and own ascetic devotion seemed to protect him from being overcome with lust. In all of these stories, when the men entered the abodes of the ascetics, they were unsurprised to find women still. While, occasionally, the women may be portrayed as acting "manly," ultimately, as Patricia Cox Miller recognizes, they remain women because their gender is inextricably tied to their visually sexed bodies.[563]

The problem of this interpretation, however, remains, not with the subject, but with the observer. The ascetic encounter, in every instance, is narrated entirely by men, so that even the

[561] Thdt. *Hist. rel.,* 29.5.
[562] Greg. Nyss. *Vit. Mac.* 178.
[563] Patricia Cox Miller, "Is there a Harlot in this Text?" 419-435.

reader participates in the male gaze. Because this situation is so normalized, we tend to take this description for granted and do not fully challenge the categories within this constructed reality. We are willing to play with the words and images described, to see how the women have transformed throughout the account due to the masculinization of asceticism, but we still take the bishop's reality as, if not given, the only grounds with which we have to work.

What underlies the entire reality which Gregory and Theodoret have created, however, is their situatedness along the gender binary. his reality works for them. As upper-class, male, Christian ascetic leaders, their gender, and thus their place within the gender binary and hierarchy, serves their purpose of power. They therefore have little reason to question their place in it, or even the existence of it. Moreover, they place this same binary upon the ascetics whom they visit. By looking at the bodies of Macrina, Domnina, Marana and Cyra, Theodoret, Gregory, and the readers can now "tell" the gender of the women within. heir gaze, masculinized bodies, and status as social elites collapse the gender of these women down to their sexed bodies, as the social expectations for what women "should" act like comes rushing in through the open door and the eye of the observer.

While the gender of these "women" is never questioned throughout their tales, in other instances, the "woman" is not "discovered" to be such until the end of the tale. As the story typically goes, a holy woman desires to enter a monastery, but cannot do so because of her gender. In order to work around this obstacle, she dresses as a man, and enters a monastery anyway. This individual is typically recognized as particularly pious, praised for "her" "masculine" feats of endurance. Not until the end of "her" story is "her" secret discovered, and "her" true piety revealed. The problem with this typical reading, however, rests on the re-

inscription of the "*telos* of maleness for ascetic performance," where it "did not exist to start."[564] As Muehlberger has recognized, for some ancient Christians, ascetic performance could not be separated into strictly 'male' and 'female' categories.[565] Building upon this argument, I contend, these ascetics move among multiple axes, between gender and agender, and between humans, ascetics and angels. Indeed, if we look more closely, the only aspects of these stories that re-gender the subject are the male interlopers.

The story of Pelagia, a *meretrix* and actress of fourth or fifth-century Antioch, was composed sometime in the seventh century by an anonymous author and is narrated through the lens of the bishop Nonnus' protégé, James.[566] Pelagia began life as a beautiful harlot, covered in glittering gold and sweet-smelling perfumes. One day, when she was riding by the church where Nonnus was preaching, she was overcome by fear of God and desired to repent for her numerous sins. Sobbing, she threw herself as the feet of Nonnus, and eventually convinced him to baptize her. After several trials with the devil, Pelagia decided that her best course of action in pursuit of asceticism was to leave her previous life behind completely, don the rough clothes of male monks, and join a monastery as Pelagius.

When Nonnus first sent James to visit "Pelagius," the famous "monk" who resided just outside of Jerusalem, James, through his omniscient narration, informed the reader that at this point, he was unaware that the person to whom Nonnus referred was Pelagia. This interplay

[564] Ellen Muehlberger, "Simeon and Other Women," 606.
[565] Muehlberger, "Simeon and Other Women," 606.
[566] As Patricia Cox Miller and Virginia Burrus have recognized, the stories of women like Pelagia are themselves, "promiscuous," as they are difficult to date historically and locate geographically. Cox Miller suggests that the earliest versions of the texts were written sometime in the seventh century CE, though has a complicated literary and oral history, as they were translated into several languages and circulated widely. See Patricia Cox Miller, "Is There a Harlot in This Text?: Hagiography and the Grotesque," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 33.3 (2003): 420; Virginia Burrus, *The Sex Lives of Saints;* For the life of Pelagia, see *Vita S. Pelagiae, Meretricis* PL 73.663-72. English translation by Benedicta Ward, *Harlots of the Desert: A Study of Repentance in Early Monastic Sources*. Cistercian Studies Series 106 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1987).

between masculine and feminine descriptors, then, did not fool the audience. Just as Nonnus was in on Pelagius' "true" identity, and audience, with the help of James, could follow along. James then described his journey to Jerusalem to find Pelagius, using masculine pronouns to refer to this "eunuch monk." As soon as he saw Pelagius' body, however, he switched to female pronouns, despite the fact that he in the present did not recognize Pelagius "as" a woman.[567] Such a move is not at all unusual in tales of holy harlots. As Patricia Cox Miller has recognized, this type of language keeps the audience in the know, since the contradiction of this "holy *woman*" carries the moral weight of the story.[568]

There exists, however, a curious slippage in Pelagia's story when James returned to the hermitage several months later. When he arrived and knocked on the window of "her" cell, no one answered. He remained there for three days, knocking and calling out "her" name, growing increasingly concerned. It is only when James became convinced that Pelagius had died, however, does the pronoun switch. "I had better see if, by chance, *he* has died," (*considerem ne forte mortuus sit*) James murmured to himself.[569] The Greek is even less ambiguous, as James goes to see whether or not "the holy monk" has died.[570] While this gender shift potentially could be explained by its conjunction with the consideration of James in the present moment, as he had not learned of Pelagius' "true" identity, the masculine pronoun shows up several lines later, outside his present predicament. Concerned that Pelagius has died, James noted that he, "broke open the little window, looked in, and saw that *he* was dead" (*et aperui ostiolum fenestellulae, et*

[567] *Vita S. Pelagiae,* 14.
[568] Cox Miller, "Is there a Harlot in This Text?" 429-430.
[569] *Vita S. Pelagiae,* 15. My emphasis. The Syriac does not reflect this ambiguity, nor does it include this scene. Instead, it jumps to Pelagia's funeral. James refers to Pelagia constantly as "she" or "her," while simultaneously recognizing that the other townspeople knew Pelagia "as a righteous man" until her death. "Pelagia of Antioch," *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient,* 48-50.
[570] *Vita. S. Pelagiae*, 15. "ἀπέθανεν ὁ ἐνταῦθα ὢν ἅγιος μοναχός."

prospexi, et vidi eum moriuum…).[571] Unlike before, when James sees Pelagius' body, he does not revert to the female pronoun. Even when Pelagius was removed from the cell, James referred to "*his* sacred little body" (*delatum est foras sanotum corpusculum ejus*), being carried by the church fathers to be prepared for burial.[572]

The use of the male pronoun to describe the dead body may have surprised the readers, as it broke from tradition in other tales of holy women disguised as men. At this moment, James was no longer concerned about describing how Pelagia/us' beauty has faded into a less gendered frame but focused instead on the presence of a dead body, itself enough of a descriptor. Here, death outweighs physical depiction, and so James' gaze stopped analyzing and collapsed down to his experience of the assemblage. In this moment, in a tiny hut in the desert, Pelagius *was* male. There was no doubt about it. James and his fellow monks grieved for the man they lost, urging the audience to do the same by refusing to extract themselves from the situation as the omniscient narrator. Even though, on one level, the audience "knows" that the body "is" that of a woman, James encouraged them to experience it, at least for a little while, as a man. It is not until the monks anointed the body with myrrh and feels some sign of her femaleness beneath the sackcloth, does the female pronoun return.[573] Only the naked body reinstates femaleness when masculine gender is assumed.

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[571] *Vita S. Pelagiae*, 15. My emphasis. The Greek reads: "ἰδου ὁρῶ τὸν ἅγιον τεθνηκότα."

[572] *Vita S. Pelagiae*, 15. My emphasis. While '*ejus'* is ambiguously gendered, the antecedent is "*Pelagius Monachus*" while the closest previous personal pronoun is the "*eum*" mentioned above. The section reads: "*… et aperui ostiolum fenestellulae, et prospexi, et vidi eum moriuum, et clausi ostiolum; et de luto replens dilligenter, cursu veni Jerosolymam, et nuntiavi commanentibus, quod sanctus Pelagius monachus mirabilia faciens requievisset. Tunc sancti patres venerunt cum diversis monasteriis monachorum, et sic solutum est ostiolum cellulae; et delatum est foras sanctum corpusculum ejus, quod auro et lapidibus pretiosis condigne posuerunt.*" The Greek uses the gender neutral "τὸ ἅγιον."

[573] *Vita S. Pelagiae* 15. It is unclear whether the body is simply felt, and discovered to be lacking masculine genitalia, or seen in a state of undress. This story differs from that of Anastasia, where the Daniel's disciple dresses what the thought to be a eunuch's body for burial, only to discover two shriveled breasts under a strip of palm hair. Neither story, however, makes any mention of female genitalia, though surely it would have been discovered as well. For the story of Anastasia, see "Anastasia" in *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient*, 143-150.

The multiple layers to this tale reveal almost contradictory expectations of ascetic sex and gender. On one hand, James' varied use of pronouns, as well as his invitation to the audience to play with multiple ways of understanding and experiencing Pelagia/us, demonstrates that every time observers peeked inside the box (as it were), the subject's state of being changed. Pelagia/us never consistently embodied one state of gender, corporeality or humanity, but moved constantly between these various axes. The act of looking did not bring all of these actions together at once, but instead revealed different moments within the trajectory of becoming.

On the other hand, in stories such as these, as well as those of Macrina, Domnina, Marana and Cyra, their bodies, for their hagiographers, serve as their ultimate feminizing feature; their bodies, especially their dead bodies, retroactively *make* them women. At the end of the story, as Cox Miller articulates, these individuals are "truly female" because they are female-sexed.[574] Like "male" ascetics, who are rendered masculine should their lust be aroused, "female" ascetics regain their femininity through the perusal of their sex organs. While ascetic's like Pelagia and Mary of Egypt may appear masculinized, as their cheeks are no longer rosy and their eyes have lost their luster, their shriveled breasts ultimately give them away. While these "women's" hagiographers reduce them to their flesh, we should not leave this phenomenon unexamined. By essentializing ascetics to their flesh, their experiment in becoming is ruined. At this moment, they are only allowed to *be* one gender. This reductionist thinking, however, only substantiates the hagiographer's conception of reality, and not the ascetic's. While death ultimately reveals the "true" sex of the ascetic, at that very moment, the ascetic is no longer their body; they have transcended materiality to become something else entirely. As such, the announcement of these ascetic's femaleness, and thus bodiliness, has no bearing on their past performance. Indeed, such

[574] Cox Miller, "Is There a Harlot in This Text?," 429.

a statement ignores even simple transformation and retrojects *being* onto processes of *becoming*. The hagiographer commits a fallacy into which the readers buy and which directly contradicts the process of transformation of the ascetic upon the death of their flesh.

This process of becoming, I contend, inadvertently occurs in the stories of both Pelagia and Macrina. Like within Pelagia's *vita*, Macrina's death occurs when all others have left the room.[575] This lack of a human presence, which both engenders and enfleshes the body, at the moment of death signifies the ultimate moment of *becoming*, as the ascetic leaves behind the body to become an angel. This final act, as these "women" transition entirely out of the human binary, would not have been possible had Gregory or James witnessed their final breath. Therefore, the presence of two male interlopers, who live perpetually in the binary, disrupts the uncertainty of the ascetic space and disallows the experiment in becoming to continue. While, for the men, simple confirmation to the goings-on of their wards or teachers has occurred, to the outside observer, as well as to the ascetics within the enclosure, only partial knowledge of the ascetic experiment has been gained.

Leaving behind human categorization is only possible while still on earth, however, when the ascetic remains hidden from sight. Like Schrödinger's Cat, viewing the actions of these individuals from outside the walls of their cells or enclosures allows them to exist in a place of uncertainty. In order to conceptualize the experiment within, those external to the ascetic assemblage must allow for the presence of several possibilities, since they do not "know" what is happening within. As such the ascetic could move more freely between the axes of gender, materiality, and corporeality.

[575] Greg. Nyss. *Vit. Mac.* 178.

Even other Christians or ascetics of a similar socially imposed gender and materiality often pose a threat to this process. The author of the *Historia Monachorum*, for example, tells stories of two separate groups of monks who sought to never gaze upon one another. In one case, Abba Or built individual cells for over 1000 monks, taking great care to warn the other monks when a new member arrived so that they would not venture out of their cells and accidently lay eyes upon one another.[576] In another instance, Abba Amon describes his community where monks draw their hoods down over their faces and attempt to avoid seeing and being seen.[577] Even though the male gaze and body is often normalized in early Christian discourse, clearly both pose a great danger to even "male" ascetic performance.[578] Other people within the ascetic assemblage both corporealize and re-gender the other bodies in the vicinity.

John Cassian, a monk and theologian who wrote extensively on the external organization of desert ascetic communities in Egypt, provides a case-study of just such a scenario. [579] In *De institutis coenobiorum*, composed around 420 CE, Cassian provides greater detail about how the separation of bodies would help to dismantle earthly dualities. In one story, a father, Patermucius, entered a monastic community with his eight-year-old son.[580] In order to move beyond his previous standing as a wealthy, secular father, Patermucius separated himself within the community from his son. The presence of his son, Cassian explained, would tie Patermucius

[576] *Hist. mon.* 2.
[577] *Hist. mon*. 3.
[578] For a discussion of how the presence of male bodies can render other "male" bodies "female," see Coon, *Dark Age Bodies.* Additionally, "female" bodies also had the potential to disrupt the ascetic practice of other "women." Susan, as described in John of Ephesus' *Lives of the Eastern Saints*, for example, flees "her" convent to hide, face down, in a hole within a cave. "She" refuses all visitors, both male and female, as such a presence would gender and corporealize "her." See Sebastian P. Brock and Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient*, 133-141.
[579] Cassian, *De institutis coenobiorum* in *Des Institutis Coenobiorum: Ne incarnatione contra Nestorium* ed. and trans. Michael Petscheing and Gottfried Kreuz (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2004).
[580] Cassian, *De Institutis coenobiorum*, 27.

both to materiality through the constant reminder of his renounced possessions, as well as to masculinity through the presence of his son. In order become an ascetic assemblage and leave human categorization behind, Patermucius would need to rid himself objects like his son which would tie him to his previous virility and social standing. By removing this reminder of his former life, the fleshly pull to kin and thus world could fall away.

To return, however, to the comparison on ascetic assemblages to the experiment with Schrödinger's Cat, many of these ascetics were not seen at all during their lifetime, or, at the very least, for great expanses of time. Behind the walls, gender distinctions fell away and the distinctions between dead, alive, and dying blur. Anthony, as described by his fourth-century hagiographer Athanasius, in some ways encapsulates the epitome of stoic masculinity; he fights off demons, survives their physical assaults, and yet remains emotionally stable throughout his various ordeals.[581] Like with the "female" ascetics whose "true" nature was ultimately discovered, however, his gendered and corporeal identity is often retrojected onto an otherwise ungendered and indeterminately human form. Such, particularly, is the case when Antony spent decades locked inside a tomb and then later resided 20 years within an abandoned barracks.[582] As discussed in chapter one, Athanasius casts these enclosures as evidence of Antony's martial asceticism, but when we look only at the assemblage and remove the masculinized presence evoked in hindsight, a different picture emerges. Far from the masculine ascetic and Christ figure he was painted as, the moment Antony entered the enclosure and refused to see anyone, he violated the first rule of ancient masculinity: being seen.[583] Not only did "he" cease to perform in public, welcoming, though simultaneously thwarting, the eyes of all, but he did not even allow

[581] David Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk: Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2006). Athanasius, *Vit. Ant.*
[582] Athanasius, *Vit. Ant.* 8.2-10.2, 12.3-14.7.
[583] Carlin Barton, "Being in the Eyes," 220.

clients in as their patron. Instead, they were stymied at the door, as they cried and bellowed like wild animals.

Even though Athanasius praised such action as exceptionally pious, his words shroud a more disturbing phenomenon.[584] The man he described was no man. Antony indeed failed at masculinity, barring emotional control, in almost every way. Not only did he neglect to perform his public duty as citizen and patron, but he allowed physical harm to befall his body without resistance while moans and groans escaped his lips.[585] If we gender-swap Antony for a woman for a moment, all of these actions would be read as emphasizing the ascetic's feminine performance. Indeed as "she" hid herself away, "she" performed as the perfect woman awaiting "her" bride-groom. As discussed in the first chapter, Antony's sealed abode would transform into the bridal chamber, as "she" barred anyone entrance as "she" awaited her beloved. Closed off from the eyes of onlookers, her flesh could become one with her chamber: unpenetrated yet watchful, sealed yet open to God. As a "man" enclosed, Antony in some ways performed as a woman.

Yet, while such action may seem "womanish," betraying the weakness of the body, this categorization, too, is not quite correct. As Carlin Barton recognizes, a proper Roman woman was supposed to behave as though she were constantly supervised.[586] Upon the return of her husband and comrades, she would be performing correctly. A bad woman on the other hand, performed as though no one was looking, though she would inevitably be caught in the act. Thus, because no one was looking upon Antony as "he" performed his work, because no other body enters the room, Antony transcended the need to behave in a gendered fashion at all.

[584] Athanasius, *Vit. Ant.* 13.1-14.1.
[585] Athanasius, *Vit. Ant.* 9.8.
[586] Barton, "Being in the Eyes," 221.

To be completely cut off from the humanizing influence of other people was a dangerous enterprise, one looked on with great suspicion.[587] As discussed in the previous chapter, this fear prompted authors to unite ascetics with their enclosures, ridding the situation of suspicion by allowing holiness to be read externally. Yet, while this reading offers one possibility for the ascetic assemblage, concern persisted nevertheless. When Anthony appeared after he had been interred for twenty years, Athanasius wrote that people were amazed because Antony's body was physically unaltered. Often, scholars approach this passage as a prototype for the incorruptible flesh of the ascetic. When taken in concert with the ascetic as an assemblage that traverses various axes of gender, corporeality, and materiality, however, I contend that onlookers were equally amazed at its humanness. Out of their sight, the body became less than human, almost monstrous. Those who came Antony's hermitage with hopes of talking with the ascetic remarked that they heard a great ruckus within and pitiful voices crying out "Get away from our things! Why are you in this solitary place? You will not be able to endure our scheming!"[588] Antony had entered the place of demons, and by closing himself off from the world, became closer in aspect to them. When the visitors looked through the keyhole, they could see nothing, neither demons nor Antony. The forces did not physically contend with the body, though they fought him nonetheless, preventing Antony from being fully masculinized and humanized. He suffered greatly at the hands of the demons, yet offered no opposition, preventing his reification as the ideal masculine type. Nor, however, was he feminized, for the demons could not penetrate his mind and not demolish his fortifications provided by God.[589] Thus Antony was transformed: in

[587] Muehlberger, *Angels in Late Ancient Christianity*, 158.
[588] "Ἀπόστα τῶν ἡμετέρων. Τί σοὶ καὶ τῇ ἐρήμῳ; Οὐ φέρεις ἡμῶν ἐπιβουλήν." Athanasius, *Vit. Ant.* 13.2. Tim Vivian and Apostolos Athanassakis remark that the shouts of "Τί σοὶ καὶ τῇ ἐρήμῳ" echo Matthew 8:28 where a demon says to Jesus, "Τί εμοί καὶ σοὶ." in *The Life of Antony*, 89.
[589] Athanasius, *Vit. Ant.* 13.5. In this instance, Vivian and Athanassakis remark that the Greek and Coptic "retain the image of being protected by surrounding strong walls." *The Life of Antony*, 90.

the dwelling-place of demons, he was becoming an angel. "He" began to lose the dichotomous gender markers which the world placed upon the flesh, and the flesh itself started to lose its human distinction as it melded with the invisible walls of God.[590] Antony even began to transcend the very world, as visitors, though they came often, thought that they would eventually find him dead.[591] As they gazed upon his barracks, they understood this ascetic to be simultaneously dead, alive, and dying. In this place of seclusions, then, Antony undertook the ultimate form of becoming, leaving behind earthly dichotomies in pursuit of the indeterminate.

Conclusion

This investigation of early Christian asceticism has demonstrated that we must conceptualize of ascetics as assemblages in order to visualize the multiple dualities they transgressed. The only way we can understand this process, however, is if we look beyond the false boundary of the skin. If we cannot to do so, then the story of John the Dwarf, who failed to live as an angel on earth because he could not survive without food, becomes a cautionary tale instead of a manual.[592] If, however, we look beyond the body we can see that while John returned to his community after several hungry days in the desert, he realized that had to learn to traverse carefully the boundaries between this world and the next, without slipping too far in one direction or the other. By using the tools of new materialism, we can thus see that needs of the human flesh in a single moment, divorced from its surroundings, form only part of the equation, and that we must redraw the boundaries of an ascetic to look instead at its continuous movement and interaction with the wider event-space.

[590] Athanasius, *Vit. Ant.* 1.9. In reference to chapter one, where ascetics would bar themselves with invisible walls defended by God and prayer.
[591] Athanasius, *Vit. Ant.* 13.7.
[592] John the Dwarf," *Apophth. Patr.* 4.

Through such a lens, the inhuman transformation of the ascetic becomes clear. As assemblages conceptualized of as monsters of phantoms, the categories of human/other and male/female were deeply troubled. As ascetic bodies moved in and out of view in the desert or within their hermitages, their practices changed, as they were forced to contend alternately with social standards or the freedom from the same. For some, death appeared to give an indication as to their "true" identity, as "female" body parts were discovered on otherwise masculine figures. When taken in tandem with new materialism, however, which emphasizes process over ontology, such a moment only creates identity retroactively and entirely ruins the experiment of becoming. In fact, as for ascetics like Macrina and Mary of Egypt, death out of the sight of others allowed them to transgress between materiality, gender, and mortality in their final moments when they transitioned between this world and the next.

The absence of interference proved crucial to the ascetic undertaking of becoming an assemblage because the presence of others would immediate substantiate the ascetic in the moment. If a bishop of other male Christian leader visited an ascetic, his status, gender, and authority would automatically re-gender and re-corporealize the ascetic. Even more problematically, particularly for previously male ascetics, was the presence of women, or even creatures masquerading as women, which could reduce them to their masculinized, and deeply human, lust. The problematic presence of flesh that would stir bodily appetites, or forced food and water, made it dangerously difficult for ascetics to traverse the multiples axes needed to transcend human categorization. The safest way to exist constantly in a place of material, mortal, and gender uncertainty was therefore to lock oneself away, forcing those outside to conceptualize of the one within as performing multiple states simultaneously.

Thus, in this active process of becoming, ascetics could not be reduced to one position on the multiple intersecting axes of performance. To do so would be to miss the vibrancy of the ascetic assemblage, of its constant negotiation of categorical dualities. Ultimately, then, as assemblages, ascetics traversed human boundaries, working to remain in a state of constant instability until that moment when they could, according to Theodoret, "leave behind a memory not buried with the body but blooming, thriving, and persisting inextinguishable forever, sufficing to profit those who wish."[593]

[593] "κατέλιπε μνήμην οὐ συνταφεῖσαν τῷ σώματι ἀλλ᾽ ἀνθοῦσαν καὶ τεθηλυῖαν καὶ ἄσβεστον εἰς ἀεὶ διαμένουσαν καὶ εἰς ὄνησιν τοῖς βουλομένοις ἀρκοῦσαν." Thdt. *Hist. rel.*, 11.5

CHAPTER FIVE:
Female Performance and the Pursuit of Ascetic Perfection

"Ἰωάννη, ὡς πόρνη καλλωπίζουσα ἑαυτὴν οὕτως εἶ, ἥτις πληθύνει τοὺς ἐραστὰς αὐτῆς."
"John, you are like a prostitute who beautifies herself so that she can increase the number of her lovers."

- "John the Dwarf," *Apophthegmata Patrum,* 46.

In the anonymous *Apophthegmata Patrum*, an elderly monk tells John the Dwarf that he is "like a prostitute who beautifies herself so that she can increase the number of her lovers." Thrilled, John embraces the man saying, "You speak the truth!" Perturbed by John's response, the man asks, "Does this not trouble your mind?" But John replies, "Absolutely not! For I am the same on the outside as I am on the inside."[594] While we often think of stoic masculinity as the height of ascetic practice, as male commentaters often remark on the extraordinary ways female ascetics overcome the weakness of their female flesh in order to be more like their counterparts, such is not always the case. Stories, like that found in "John the Dwarf," challenged audience and monk alike to re-conceptualize holiness. In this tale, John so obviously performs as a woman that the other elders in his community comment upon it. Instead of backing down, John not only verbally acknowledges this perception, but physically embraces the questioner as well. Even though such an action would not have been at all unusual in early Christian communities, it stands out both in a collection of sayings that operates primarily through verbal interaction, as well as in its placement directly after the accusation of performing like a prostitute whose literal job it was to

[594] "Καὶ λέγει αὐτῷ τις τῶν γερόντων· Ἰωάννη, ὡς πόρνη καλλωπίζουσα ἑαυτὴν οὕτως εἶ, ἥτις πληθύνει τοὺς ἐραστὰς αὐτῆς. Καὶ περιπτυξάμενος ὁ ἀββᾶς Ἰωάννης λέγει· ἀλήθειαν λέγεις, πατερ. Καὶ μετὰ ταῦτα εἶπέ τις τῶν μαθητῶν αὐτου· ἆρα οὐ ταράσσῃ ἔνδον, ἀββᾶ; Καὶ λέγει· οὐχὶ, ἀλλ᾽ ὡς εἰμὶ ἔξωθεν οὕτως καὶ ἔσωθεν." *AP,* 46. The Greek for lines 41 – 47 of the "John the Dwarf" in the *AP* can only be found in Jean Claude Guy, *Recherches sur la tradition grecque des* Apothegmata Patrum (Bruxelles, Société des Bollandistes, 1962), 23-24.

physically embrace men.[595] In this tale, then, as the monks and audience quickly discover, in order to achieve ascetic perfection, men had to learn how to behave, both inside and out, like a woman.

More often than not, however, such advice was not as explicit as in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, and instead required more convincing to persuade the male audience to behave in such a way. I suggest that this type of transformative experience is embedded within stories ostensibly about ascetic women, though framed by the lives of men. In order to see how this learning process unfolds, we must turn our gaze around, to focus not on the story's subject, but on its author and, through him, the male audience. When we examine the *vitae* of ascetic women, I contend that the male body, both inside and outside the story, not only materializes, but performs like the women it encounters. Through such behavior, authors and their male audiences realize that ascetic perfection is not exclusively male, but the embodiment of both genders.

Scholars who study stories of ascetic women in particular debate about whether or not we can access the "real" or "historic" woman embedded within the text. Early feminist scholarship insisted that we could "find" early Christian mothers, laying claim to a lineage of strong women within the Christian tradition.[596] Elizabeth Clark, however, challenged this notion (while recognizing that she herself participated in this type of history early on) and insisted that women more often served as mouthpieces for men.[597] Some, like Kate Cooper, Catherine Roth and Andrew Cain have built on Clark's image of woman as rhetorical device with which men play in

[595] For more on the physical embrance and kissing between groups of Christians, see Michael Penn, *Kissing Christians: Ritual and Community in the Late Ancient Church* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).
[596] For more on this early history of feminist scholarship, see Elizabeth Clark, "Holy Women, Holy Words: Early Christian Women, Social History, and the 'Linguistic Turn'," *JECS* 6 (1998), 413-17; Morwenna Ludlow, *Gregory of Nyssa, Ancient and (Post)modern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 204-206.
[597] Clark, "Holy Women, Holy Words," 211-213; "The Lady Vanishes: Dilemmas of a Feminist Historian after the 'Linguistic Turn'," *Church History,* 67 (1988), 1-31; "Ideology, History and the Construction of 'Women' in Late Antique Christianity'," *JECS,* 2 (1994), 160-4.

order to convey a larger message;[598] while others, like Virginia Burrus and David Brakke, challenge this construction of ascetic women to uncover some historical reality while still recognizing the undeniable influence of the male author.[599] It becomes clear, however, that across all readings, the male author represents the voice and the woman the body – the physical manifestation of his words.[600]

In almost all stories of ascetic women, the male author either shows up in the prologue as a guide for his readers, or as a male protagonist who encounters the female subject of the tales. This man then slips into the background as the audiences' gaze lands upon the woman – the materiality of the story. The men then proceed to float in and out of various tales, seemingly through doors and windows and into private spaces where they would otherwise have never been allowed. Their presence seemingly makes no difference to those whom they encounter. As I have demonstrated in my previous chapter, however, and despite their vast ignorance to the contrary, these men undoubtedly affected any space they entered. The first goal of this chapter, then, is to prove that entering queer or female space affected men's gender performance – forcing their bodies into focus instead of just their words.

The male author of these tales, however, did not just write for himself, but for those who looked like him. Despite the female subject matter, we must assume a primarily male audience for the lives of female ascetics.[601] Some of these stories, like that of Pelagia of Antioch, first

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[598] Kate Cooper, "Insinuations of Womanly Influence: An Aspect of Christianization of the Roman Aristocracy," *The Journal of Roman Studies,* 82 (1992), 151-153; Catherine P. Roth, "Platonic and Pauline Elements in the Ascent of the Soul in Gregory of Nyssa's Dialogue on The Soul and Resurrection," *Vigilae Christianae*, 46 (2002), 20-1; Andrew Cain envisions Marcella as Jerome's "alter-ego," *The Letters of Jerome: Asceticism, Biblical Exegesis, and Construction of Christian Authority in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 85.
[599] Virginia Burrus, *'Begotten Not Made': Conceiving Manhood in Late Antiquity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 212; David Brakke, "The Lady Appears: Materialization of 'Woman' in Early Monastic Literature," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 33:3 (2003), 387-402.
[600] For a summary of the debate surrounding the construction of women in late antiquity, particularly as it pertains to Macrina, see Ludlow, "Macrina – in Life and Letters," in *Gregory of Nyssa*, 202-219.
[601] Clark, "Holy Women, Holy Words," 428-30.

circulated orally around fifth century ascetics in Syria and Palestine before it was written down.[602] Letters, by nature, were understood to be distributed and read widely, presumably by their primarily male recipients,[603] and the *vitae* of saints would have been recited by priests during services, read by literate audiences, and even performed during festivals.[604] In many causes the audience of the text is not explicit, but can be implied through the author's use of rhetorical devices and tropes. In some instances, women are used as shaming devices to goad presumably male audiences, given the use of gender performance within the story, into action.[605] In other instances, male authors, as noted above, used female subjects "to think with," a presumably useful exercise for not only themselves, but for their male audiences in similar dilemmas.[606]

Like the male author, this male audience tends to slip linguistically into the background as a more generalized "audience," as the masculinity of the group becomes invisible and thus minimized. While women certainly made up at least part of some of these audiences, the envisioned audience was primarily male. For the *vitae* written about women, the gender of the assumed audience matters for two primary reasons. First, the male author assuming a male audience changed the way in which he constructed the story. In the cases of female ascetics, he had to address the anxiety that men might harbor when reading stories about women. Second, once he addressed this anxiety, he showed men how to drop into these stories and not only learn

[602] Lynda Coon, *Sacred Fictions: Holy Women and Hagiography in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 77.
[603] Maureen Tilley, "No Friendly Letters: Augustine's Correspondence with Women," in *The Cultural Turn in Late Ancient Studies: Gender, Asceticism, and Historiography* ed. Dale Martin and Patricia Cox Miller (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), 40-41.
[604] Coon, *Sacred Fictions*, 1. For the reading of saints' lives at festivals, see David Frankfurter, *Christianizing Egypt: Syncratism and Local Worlds in Late Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), esp. 104- 110.
[605] See, for example, Cooper, "Insinuations of Womanly Influence," 151; Coon, *Sacred Fictions*, xx.
[606] While widely used by Elizabeth Clark, the phrase originated with Peter Brown, *Body and Society*: *Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 154.

from, but learn to behave *like,* women. This chapter, then, re-examines the stories of female ascetics from the point of view of the often (physically) invisible male protagonist to reveal that his own gender status was not as stable as he might have hoped or assumed. Ultimately, I contend that in order for both the male protagonist and thus the audience to reach ascetic perfection, at least within the story-scape, they had to learn how to perform, both physically and spatially, like a woman.

In order to demonstrate how this process occurred, I will begin by examining how hagiographers structured their stories in order to ease their male audiences into performing as women. The process of "dropping in," or visualizing themselves as different characters within the *vitae,* enabled men to practice taking on different gendered attributes within the safety of the story-space, before taking such ideas back into their own lives. As a case study, I then explore how Gregory of Nyssa walked his audience through the *Life of Macrina* to encourage them to learn from and behave like her, just as he and his brothers had. While it may have seemed easier for audiences to understand why they should emulate women like Macrina, who epitomized female perfection, hagiographers did not simply call upon men to behave like these idealized women. As such, I conclude with stories of the so-called "Holy Harlots." Just as the opening vignette of John the Dwarf suggests, within these tales, men were encouraged not only to behave like women, but to become prostitutes for God.

Dropping In

At the beginning of his *Lausiac History*, Palladius encouraged his audience to "seek a window shining on behalf of both saintly men and women so that through them, just as in a neatly written book, you would be able to see clearly your own heart, and, through juxtaposition,

be able to assay your own laziness and indifference."[607] Georgia Frank notes that in this passage, Palladius shows his readers how a physical journey can become a spiritual one, as well as re-creating for them the effect of movement.[608] These pilgrims approach the window to learn, to be literally enlightened, with what they see within. Yet what is remarkable about this passage, besides the voyeuristic aspects noted by Frank, is that Palladius does not distinguish between how his audience should learn from male as opposed to female ascetics. He does not tell them to be wary of female stories, or that somehow these tales are of less value because they are those of women. Nor does he insinuate that the male members of the audience should drop into the textual body of the male protagonist but be sure to only gaze upon that of the female. Instead, he encourages his audience to approach all of his stories the same way. In the prologues and chapter introduction within their ascetic treatises, I contend that Palladius, Theodoret, and John of Ephesus laid the groundwork for their male audience to lessen their hold on their strictly male body and learn how to perform *as* women.

In order to encourage their readers to do so, these ancient authors first had to show them how to read. Given the greater abundance of stories about male ascetics, it is logical to assume that male audiences would have had less resistance identifying with men in the stories. We can see this quite easily through the very fact that the male author is allowed to slip into the background, his body never a conscious issue. Ancient authors also evidently assumed that because man was a universal figure, and because ascetic women had to learn to behave like men

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[607]"Ὑπὲρ δὲ θυρίδα φωτεινὴν μεταδίωκε ἀνδρῶν τε καὶ γυναικῶν ὁσίας συντυχίας, ἵνα διὰ τούτων, καθάπερ λεπτόγραφον βιβλίον, δυνηθῇς σαφῶς ἰδεῖν καὶ τὴν σὴν καρδίαν, διὰ τῆς παραθέσεως τὴν ῥᾳθυμίαν ἢ τὴν ἀμέλειαν δυνάμενος τὴν σὴν δοκιμάζειν." Palladius, *HL*, Prol., 15.

[608] Georgia Frank, *Memory of the Eyes: Pilgrims to Living Saints in Christian Late Antiquity.* The Transformation of Classical Heritage 30 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000) 69. Frank goes on to note that these armchair pilgrims stop and look in the window, but never fully enter monastic space. I think, however, when taken in context with the numerous examples of ascetics being told to let light into their rooms, but only from one side (as I have demonstrated in several previous chapters), that these pilgrims themselves become the space that the ascetic stories inhabit – that their light enters the pilgrim him/herself.

in order to be perfected, women likewise would be easily able to fall into these stories. Dropping into the stories as a woman, however, may have seemed more precarious.[609] As I discussed in chapter two, women's bodies had the power to corrupt absolutely. Mary of Egypt asked for Zosima's cloak in order that her body not cause him to fall;[610] Simeon did not allow any women near his pillar in fear that he would be consumed by lust;[611] and John of Lycopolis would only visit women in his dreams.[612] Early Christian ascetic literature, then, was clear: men, particularly ascetic men, could not be in the presence of women, who corrupted even the space which they inhabit, without succumbing to carnal desire. Yet, if such sentiment were true across the board, then a female story-space would constitute a particularly dangerous place for any man to enter, however, briefly.

Ascetic literature, however, was constructed both for the safety of its readers as well as for their ability to relate across difference, or cross-identify with the opposite sex. As I discussed in chapter three, engaging with a story did not bring about the same amount of physical danger for the reader as actually experiencing it in person would have. However, just as in modern horror films, the reader (or viewer) could still drop into the story and experience its events *as though* they were happening, though with the knowledge of safety at the back of their minds, thus enabling them to enjoy the story while simultaneously being terrified.[613] In her 1995 article,

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[609] By "dropping in," I simply mean the ability of the reader/ listener to visualize themselves as the various characters in the story, essentially experiencing the story as though they were that character.
[610] *Vita Sanctae Mariae Aegypticae, Meretricis* (henceforth *Vita Mariae*), translated by Paul the Deacon from the Greek of Sophronius. Printed in the *PL.* 73. cols 671-90. For further analysis of the story and an English translation of the *Life of Mary of Egypt*, see, Benedicta Ward, *Harlots of the Desert: A study of repentance in early monastic sources* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications Inc., 1987).
[611] Thdt. *Hist. rel.* 26.21.
[612] "On John of Lycopolis," in *Hist. mon.* For an English translation, see: *Lives of the Desert Fathers: The Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* trans. Norman Russell, Intro. Benedicta Ward (Mowbray, London, and Oxford: Cistercian Publications, 1981).
[613] For more on fear as pleasure through the safety of a visual medium, see Katerina Bantinaki, "The Paradox of Horror: Fear as a Positive Emotion," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 70.4 (2012), 383-392.

"Spectatorship-As-Drag," Rhonda Berenstein posits that viewers of horror films in particular "allow fluid subject-positions and invite spectators to engage in roles similar to those appropriated by actors in the performance of drag."[614] In other words, horror and, I argue, ascetic literature, encourage the audience to inhabit an alternate identity while safe inside the story-space.

Berenstein posits that horror in particular facilitates this type of performance for several reasons. First, often characters appear in masks or other disguises, revealing and hiding their "true" identities while playing fluidly with categories of good/evil as well as social expectations of gender/sexuality. Second, monsters within the genre often blur categories of biological sex and gender. Finally, it allows for oscillation of identity throughout the story, as viewers move continuously between identifying with the female victim, male hero, and even the monster while still occasionally falling back to their embodied gender to performatively put their arm around their girlfriends or, if female, hide their eyes in fear.[615]

Ascetic literature in turn embodies all of these traits. Disguises frequently play a role, as women cross-dress as men, and men, like Apa Longinus, hide their true ascetic power to ensure that they do not become overwhelmed with pride.[616] Monsters, as I demonstrated in my previous chapter, also frequently appear within ascetic discourse as ascetics fight off demons or are themselves mistaken as such. Within both circumstances, the quasi-demonic figure moves in and out of materiality, sexuality, and gender, as do the monsters within modern horror films; and finally, in nearly all ascetic stories readers oscillate between the gendered characters within the

[614] Rhona Berenstein, "*Spectatorship-as-Drag: The Act of Viewing and Classic Horror Cinema," in Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film (New Brunswick and New Jersey: Rutgers University Press,1994),* 232.
[615] Berenstein, "Spectatorship-as-Drag,"235, 240, 244-245.
[616] "Life of Longinus," ed. Tom Vivian in *Words to Live By: Journeys in Ancient and Modern Egyptian Monasticism* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 2005).

tales themselves and their own gendered bodies. Like horror, then, the structure and themes of ascetic literature *encourage* cross-identification, but in a safe way, one which they can put on and take off like drag, while still managing to enjoy, and learn from, the experience.

Such a process, then, begins at the prologue. The introductions to ascetic treatises are fairly formulaic. They remind readers of the humbleness of the author, give thanks to God, and encourage the reader to gaze upon their subjects. But as with spectatorship in film, the viewing position of the reader is not only to participate simply as a voyeur, but for themselves to drop into the action and, as Palladius encourages, find the light of the ascetics about whom they are about to read within themselves.[617] This, then, is a voyage not only of self-discovery, but of "play," of performing in drag and taking a piece of that performance home with themselves, even when the costume is removed.

In order to encourage this type of behavior, ascetic authors had to address the anxiety ancient male readers may have harbored when they encountered stories of women. As has been repeatedly demonstrated, women's path to God was, because of their bodies, supposed to be more difficult and thus all that more revered when it occurred.[618] Ancient authors cast women's flesh in particular as soft, weak, and prone to corruption – essentially the opposite of everything a male body should exhibit.[619] Why, then, should men attempt to learn from it? Many scholars have answered this question by showing how male authors used female subjects to shame men

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[617] Palladius, *HL*, Prol., 15 in Palladio, *La Storia Lausiaca*, ed. and trans. Marino Barchiesi, (Fondazione Lorenzo Valla, 1974). For an English translation, see: *Lausiac History*, 29 ed. and trans., John Wortley (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2015). "Viewing Positions," refers to Linda Williams work *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), Prol. 15.

[618] See, for example, Stravroula Constantinou, *Female Corporeal Performances: Reading the Body in Byzantine Passions and Lives of Holy Women* (Stockholm: Uppsala, 2005), 90; Susan Ashbrook-Harvey, *Asceticism and Society in Crisis: John of Ephesus and the Lives of the Eastern Saints*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 40; Gillian Cloke, '*This Female Man of God': Women and Spiritual Power in the Patristic Age, AD 350-450* (London: Routledge, 1995), 33-56, 214-216; Lynda Coon, *Sacred Fictions: Holy Women and Hagiography in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 18.

[619] Gleason, *Making Men*, 64.

into proper behavior. Even Palladius encourages such a reading when he exhorted his audience to place themselves in contrast to the saints in order to see how they were failing.[620]

In the majority of these cases, the women in these stories shame the men in their masculinized bodies, and, in fact, often assertively re-masculinize them. In Palladius's *Lausiac History*, for example, Jovinius stops after a long, excruciatingly hot journey to wash his hands and feet in cold water, and then goes to lie down. Suddenly, as though she materialized out of thin air, a woman named Silvania appears in front of him. Like a reproachful mother, she mocks Jovinius for his softness and criticizes him for cherishing his young flesh. She reveals that she, despite her gender, old age, and ill health, has never touched water to any part of her body, except the tips of her fingers.[621] This woman, this supposedly delicate creature, proves more masculine than the supposedly "male" protagonist.

In this moment, the reader feels shame alongside the protagonist- at some point they have probably been hot and thirsty and have given into the temptation of cold, clear water. Everyone in the audience has failed to resist temptation in some way or another and has fallen prey to the desires of the flesh, thus acting contrary to the expectations of masculinity. This scene, then, not only forced the male audience members uncomfortably back into the pain and desire of their fleshly bodies, but into the shame of their failed masculinity as well. Silvania's reproach reminded them, as the trope of an old woman, that they were "real" men, and needed to act like it.

Male protagonists and readers did not, however, only learn from "women" in these stories by means of their shameful remasculinization. For, as Palladius instructs his readers, they

[620] Palladius, *HL*, Prol., 15.
[621] Palladius, *HL*, 55.1-2.

had to find the light of both male *and* female ascetics within their hearts.[622] I therefore posit that male audiences were not only supposed to learn *from* women, but actually to become *like* them. To be clear, I do not mean that ascetic perfection required men to slide on the gender scale towards femininity as they ceased to behave in a masculine manner. In fact, I do not think that understanding ascetic gender (or gender in general) as a spectrum captures the complexity of performance. Instead, as Palladius' quotation suggests, I argue that early Christian men had to learn how to perform both masculinized and feminized action, sometimes simultaneously and other times alternately, in order to achieve ascetic perfection.[623]

Later in the *Lausiac History*, for example, Palladius drops his reader into a monastery inhabited by a woman who pretended to be insane.[624] He invites his reader into the story, not at first as a man, but through 1 Cor. 3:18, "If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise."[625] So, then, is this woman. Instead of having his readers pull back to judge her actions from the outside, Palladius encourages them to see her from within and to learn through imitation. To further reinforce this point, Palladius introduces Piteroum, a holy monk. As he sat in his cell, he was visited by an angel who asked him why he had such a high opinion of himself living in such a place and, consequently, if he wanted to see a woman holier than he. The angel then told him to go to this woman's monastery to find the one

[622] Palladius, *HL*, 15.
[623] As I have shown in previous chapters, and as many other scholars have shown, women had to perform in the same way, though their masculinity is often over-emphasized.
[624] The notion of fools for Christ or God primarily comes from Paul, 1 Cor. 4:10; 1 Cor 3:18-19; and 1 Cor 1:21. For more on this trope in late antiquity, see Derek Krueger, "Holy Fools and Secret Saints," in *Symeon the Holy Fool: Leontius's Life and the Late Antique City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 57-71; Irina Goraïnoff, *Les Fols en Christ dan la tradition Orthodoxe* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1983), 29-42; John Saward, *Perfect Fools: Folly for Christ in Catholic and Orthodox Spirituality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 12-19. The tales of holy fools have been discussed most thoroughly by José Grosididier de Matons, "Les Thèmes d'édification dan la Vie d'André Salos," *Travaux et mémoires* 4 (1970), 277-329.
[625] Palladius, *HL*, 34.1.

wearing a "diadem" on her forehead. Before it leaves, the angel says "she is better than you" because she never separated her heart from God, while he wandered in cities in his mind.[626]

At first, this story reads like that of Jovinius, shaming Piteroum into action. Yet when he arrives at the monastery, he is not greeted by a masculine woman who out-gender-performs him, but by a woman being dragged away from her place of hiding; by a woman who, in fact, embodies the highly prized female ideals: she rarely talks to anyone, remains always inside, cares not about her looks and, presumably, is a virgin. Moreover, this unnamed woman does not shame Piteroum with her words, but instead falls on her knees when she sees him, and he to his. Recognizing their mutual holiness, Piteroum calls her "amma," and, of course, inverts the biblical narrative onto the other women of the monastery, calling them all "fools."[627] And yet if, as the angel suggested, Piteroum was supposed to learn something from this encounter, it must be from this original foolish woman's behavior within the monastery itself. He, and the reader, must learn to play the demure servant girl, content with whatever crumbs were left on the table, speaking little, and never complaining, despite their frequent bodily and verbal assaults.[628] To be more holy, then, he must have had to learn to behave like a foolish woman.

The gender in this story I think, matters, and not just for Piteroum to show women their own preposterous behavior. If that were the case, then there would be no reason for Palladius to explicitly state that Piteroum must learn from this woman as well. Moreover, this holy fool did not exist for the sake of shaming the male protagonist or the male audience into behaving more manly, for she herself does not exhibit masculine behavior. Instead, she seems to have burned off the extremes of femininity (which her sisters have yet to accomplish) – that is gossiping,

[626] "αὕτη σου ἀμείνων ἐστί." Palladius, *HL*, 34.3.
[627] Palladius, *HL*, 34.6.
[628] Palladius mentions that the other women in the monastery punched, insulted, cursed and loathed her. *HL*, 34.1.

pettiness, and feminine excess—and has settled instead into the epitome of feminine docile asceticism. It is this feminized behavior, this foolish behavior, that only a woman could teach.[629]

Preparing the Ground

Before I dive further into how late antique authors used stories of women to show men how to achieve ascetic perfection, I want to back up to look more closely at how they prepared the ground. As mentioned above, these hagiographers wanted to address male anxiety over the stories of women and, begin to help them slide away from their firmly entrenched masculinity. In so doing, they employ two main approaches. The first, used primarily by Palladius and John of Ephesus, insists that stories of men and women belong in the same collection and that the stories of women hold value because men and women walk the same narrow path to God. John prefers spatial metaphors, noting that "their [holy women's] course of life was not lower than the exalted path upon which every one of those holy men has journeyed," and that Susana, one of the several woman about whom he writes, has entered "the same narrow gate;" while Palladius maintains that God grants men and women equal prizes in the end.[630] The most commonly repeated trope, however, when showing men why the author has included stories about women and why the readers should participate in them is the repetition of Galatians 3:28: "… there is no longer male and female because you are all one in Christ."[631]

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[629] Verna E. F. Harrison notes that, "many of what become monastic virtues were identified as feminine in Graeco-Roman culture, e.g. chastity, silence, humility, receptivity, inwardness, obedience and enclosure'." "A gender reversal in Gregory of Nyssa's First Homily on the Song of Songs,' *Studia Patristica* 27 (1993), 208.
[630] John of Ephesus, *Mary and Euphemia*, and *Susana* in *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient*, ed. Sebastian Brock and Susan Ashbrook Harvey, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 12; Palladius, *HL*, 41.1.
[631] John of Ephesus opens both his only two stories on women with this quote from Galations. "Susan," and "Mary and Euphemia" *Lives of the Eastern Saints*, in *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient*, ed. Sebastian P. Brock and Susan Ashbrook Harvey (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 1; Theodoret also references Galations 3:28 in his introduction to *Historia Religiosa*, 30.5.

While all of these metaphors can and have been read to show that holy women must lessen their femininity and take on certain aspects of male performance in order to become holy, if we shift our gaze from the subject of the discourse to the author and audience, a different picture emerges. On one hand, comments like these reveal more about their audience than about the women in the stories because they address common prejudices of the day. Yet in so doing, they also immediately head off men's doubts about the usefulness or potential anxiety of the story. Right away, they acknowledge the stereotypical ways in which men understood women, particularly in terms of the weakness of female flesh. John of Ephesus even recognizes the importance of finding out how God works "not only in men who are powerful in appearance and mighty and forceful, but also in weak, feeble, frail women."[632] As these authors would have recognized, coming across the stories of women, even if their audience had been primed to approach them the same way in the prologue, would have snapped their readers out of the story-space and back into their sexed bodies and deeply entrenched gender expectations. So, the hagiographers met their male readers where they were, acknowledged their concerns, and then encouraged them to let them go.

On the other hand, discussion of men and women walking down the same path and becoming one in Christ also began the process of encouraging men to behave like women as well. Just as in the story of the holy fool where the other women had to let go of their excessive feminine pride and preening to be more like the ascetic woman, so too did these men have to forgo their hyper-masculinity that valued men over women and saw women only as inferiors. Becoming one in Christ did not just mean that women had to behave like men, but that men also

[632] John of Ephesus, "Susan," *Lives of the Eastern Saints*, 27.

had to perform like the women they encounter. Both types of gendered behavior were necessary together in order to achieve perfection.

Moreover, all of these introductions to the stories of women encourage men to take up physically the same space as women within the stories, their monasteries, and even within their bodies. John of Ephesus explicitly recognizes this phenomenon in his story of Susan when he insists that "she so astonished me … that she seemed to me not at all *out of place* in this series of stories about holy men."[633] As Berenstein mentions, while this cross-identification and dropping into a differently gendered space is safer, it does not mean that the person entering the story remains unaltered.[634] While, as discussed in chapter two, men have a greater capacity than women for "normalizing" (or, in this case, masculinizing) a space to fit their gendered bodies, they are distinctly out of place in stories about women and their bodies and physical performance are thus necessarily affected.

One of the first effects, then, that female, or gender-queer, spaces have on male bodies is to render them both visible and material. A male body in a male space cancels out the other, and so renders both "natural" or "normal." It is only the presence of a non-"normative" body, of, in this case, a woman's body, that reveals the space as masculine all along. A man, particularly in the late ancient world, was used to being able to enter almost any space and feel, if not at ease, then at least unconcerned about the impact of his body. No one would look twice at his presence in a forum, the streets, or even most rooms within his home. An upper-class man had the ability to ignore his body for most of his life. In other words, his body remained irrelevant to his position. He essentially constituted a blank person who carried out his duty without thought to his physical form. "The capacity to be unmarked by one's body," Nirmal Puwar notes, "in terms

[633] John of Ephesus, "Susan," *Lives of the Eastern Saints.*
[634] Benestein, "Spectatorship as Drag," 35.

of race, gender or for that matter any other social feature, is a key component of what makes a universal body. It is a 'privileged position' that is 'reserved' for those who are not bedraggled by the humble shackles of nature, emotion and, in effect, the body, allowing them to escape into the higher realms of rationality and mind."[635] It is in just such a state that male authors and protagonists "appear" in ascetic literature and how, as a result, male audience often experience the stories as well.

Nearly all of the ascetic *vitae* or treatises we have are written by men and often contain a male protagonist that leads the reader through the story.[636] Numerous scholars have commented upon how the author's fingerprints are all over the narrative, rendering female bodies hyper visible for the male eye. Thus, in most narratives, the male is intellectually visible and the female physically so. Yet when he enters a female space, one made specifically for female bodies, or the story-space of a woman, his materiality suddenly comes into view. For, as Puwar recognizes, "Bodies do not simply move through spaces, but constitute and are constituted by them."[637] In other words, men's bodies are affected by and affect the space they are in, whether or not the author actively recognizes the phenomenon. Just as we saw how male bodies can disrupt queer space in the last chapter, these same stories also show us how queer or female spaces can disrupt male bodies.

In these stories of women that occupy both physical and mental space, men cease to be the somatic norm because their bodies no longer monopolize the space numerically. While they become hyper-aware of their own masculinity (as evidence by the repeated invocation of the

[635] Nirmal Puwar, *Space Invaders*: *Race, Gender and Bodies Out of Place* (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2004), 57.
[636] The potential exception is the *Life of Febronia*. Though the author remains unknown, Sebastian Brock and Susan Ashbrook Harvey speculate that it was written by a woman. For further discussion, see "Febronia," *Holy Women*, 150-152.
[637] Nirmal Puwar, *Space Invaders*, 32.

weak female flesh) their gender is also disrupted and forced to oscillate in this new space. Here, men had to learn how to behave like women. One of the most subtle, though simultaneously drastic, ways in which this performance occurs in some, though not all, of these stories about female ascetics is a change in sexual desire.[638] Though an argument from silence is difficult to make, it becomes exceedingly clear when compared to women entering male stories that men entering female stories must learn how to behave (sexually) like the women they encounter. In other words, they must let go of their male desire to see the other women in the monasteries as the women would have seen each other.[639]

As mentioned above, women in stories about male monastics almost always posed a threat. Anything from a glimpse of their bodies, to the touch of their skin, to even their mere presence could reduce a man to his carnally masculine desire. In the third and fourth century, debates raged across the Roman Empire as to whether male and female ascetics should be able to live together. As the logic went, if men and women were supposed to be angels and there is neither male or female in Christ, then living together represented ascetic perfection.[640] Yet suspicion about men and women living together abounded. Canon 19 issued at Ancyra, for example, prohibited women from living together (*τὰς συνερχομένας*) with men as sisters.[641] In 325 CE, the council of Nicaea issued another cannon which forbid any bishop, presbyter, deacon or other cleric to live with another woman in his house who was not his mother, sister, or aunt.[642]

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[638] I say "desire" and not "orientation" because the concept did not just exist. This change in desire obviously does not occur in all male commentary of female ascetics. For the most blatant example, see Hier. *Ep.* 22 in *Hieronymus: Epistularum Pars I, Epistula I-LXX, Vol. LIV.*, ed. Isidorus Hilberg (Vienna, Österreichischen Akademie Der Wissenschaften, 1996); and Patricia Cox Miller's subsequent commentary, "Blazing Bodies: Ascetic Desire in Jerome's Letter to Eustochium, *JECS*, 1.1 (1993), 21-45.

[639] I recognize that this view does not account for same-sex desire, but the male authors of these *vitae* does not account for that potential desire at all.

[640] Susanna Elm, *'Virgins of God': The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Claredon Press, 1994), ix.

[641] *Sacrorum conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio,* ed. J. D Mansi, 31 vols. (Florence-Venice, 1757-98), ii, 520.

[642] Canon 3, Mansi, *Sacorum conciliorum*, ii., 669.

Concern over sexual relationships and exploitation of women resulted in repeated banning of this type of asceticism, resulting ultimately in men and women establishing separate houses of practice.[643]

Intriguingly, then, such anxiety does not occur within most of the ascetic treatise that teach their readers how to drop into the stories as women. Theodoret shows no sexual desire for Marana, Cyra, nor Domnina; John of Ephesus shows no trepidation as he relates the stories of Susan or Mary and Eupheia; Palladius does not hint at the dangers of inhabiting the same space of Juliana, Melania the elder and younger, Silvinia, Olympia, or any of the other numerous women within his tales; nor does Gregory of Nyssa ever encourage his audience to look upon Macrina with wary eyes. These stories, I suggest, contradict other ascetic literature that tells men to constantly be on guard against a woman's body. Moreover, it is not just the women's bodies that have changed, since even Mary of Egypt, whose feminine form has been reduced to that of a skeleton, hides body and then covers herself with a cloak before turning around to speak to Zosima.[644] Therefore, it is the men who must undergo a transformation in order to reside with these women without danger.

While Gregory of Nyssa's lack of concern over his sister's body can be explained through their familial relationship, kinship did not always prove a barrier to the sexuality inherent in a female body and the desire in a male. The anonymous *Sayings of the Elders* tells a story of a certain monk who conceded to go on a journey with his elderly mother. When they came to a river which the old woman could not ford, he wrapped his arms in a cloak before carrying her across, terrified to let his naked skin touch her own. When he set her down on the

[643] For more about the development of entreaties against male and female ascetics cohabiting, see Elm, *Virgins of God*, 47-51.
[644] *Vita Sanctae Mariae Aegypticae, Meretricis* (henceforth *Vita Mariae*), translated by Paul the Deacon from the Greek of Sophronius. Printed in the *PL.* 73. cols 671-90.

other side, his mother asked why he had wrapped his arms and he responded, "because the body of a woman is fire. And simply because I was touching you, the memory of another woman came into my soul."[645] Within this discourse, women's bodies, even those to whom the man was related, could prove disastrous.

The safety and ease with which Palladius, John of Ephesus, Gregory of Nyssa and Theodoret entered female spaces, then, cannot fully be explained away by familial connections. Nor can we simply assume that the men were so far along in their asceticism as to be unaffected by them, since many men who were recognized as the pinnacle of asceticism refused the presence of women entirely. Instead, I want to return to Susana Elm's notion of men and women living together, even if only for a short while, in order to explore further explore the pursuit of ascetic perfection.

After she explains the reasoning behind this type of arrangement based on Matt. 22:30 and Gal. 3:28, she deduces that, "[i]f through asceticism a woman achieves 'male' virtue (*aretē*) and is thereby transformed into a 'manly woman', then she has not only achieved true equality with her male counterparts, but has been transformed into an ideal, complete human being."[646] While undeniable, this transformation ignores the male half of the equation, for even if women have achieved perfection in their asceticism and have made themselves "male," their bodies could still cause harm to men with whom they came into contact.[647] It is therefore possible that men, too, must have had to make themselves *more like women* in order for this type of interaction to work. Only when men had overcome *their* nature, by subduing the lust in their

[645] "Quia corpus mulieris ignis est. Et ex eo ipso quo te contingebam, veniebat mihi commemoratio aliarum feminarum in animo." *Verba Seniorum* in *Vitae Patrum* V, *PL.* 73.572, 4.68.
[646] Elm, *Virgins of God*, ix. Matt. 22:30 "For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven." Gal. 3:28 "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."
[647] Palladius discusses how ascetics should not associate with women, even ascetic women. *Historia Monachorum*, 1.25.

bodies and learning to see women as would other women, could they interact with them unproblematically.

For example, when Theodoret visits Domnina, he was able to touch her, and she him, without fear. Often, Theodoret notes, when he approached Domnina she took his hands, placed it by her eyes, and released it "so soaked that tears dripped from his hand."[648] These tears, while a sign of her arduous love of God, also reveal Theodoret's transformation within this space. In order to enter her garden safely, he had to lessen his masculinity and learn to behave more like a woman. Had Theodoret remained fully male, Domnina's excretions would have constituted a massive breach of gendered protocol. Not only did she touch him, but her bodily fluids poured out upon him.[649] If a man brushing his mothers' arm was enough to send him into a frenzy, Theodoret wetting his hands with liquid from a woman's body would have proved beyond catastrophic. But instead, Theodoret recognizes this moment as one of holy perfection. Domnina's tears soaked Theodoret's hand to such an extent that his body appeared to be weeping just as had hers. The two cry together. They were, in this moment of shared liquid, one flesh, though, crucially, not through a sexual act, but one of immense piety.

This new way of interacting with women, of viewing them and shifting their own performance in response, is also passed onto the male reader. Within these stories, even if the reader inhabits a seemingly familiar male form, he is invited to look upon women in an entirely new light. He drops the male gaze that sexualizes and penetrates female bodies, and instead opts for a female one -- one that looks upon women not as objects of desire but as people relatable to

[648] "…διάβροχον γενομένην ἀφῆκεν ὡς αὐτὴν ἀποστάξαι τὴν χεῖρα τὸ δάκρουν." Theodoret, *Historia Religiosa*, 30.2.

[649] For more on the excretions of liquids signifying female identity, even within male bodies, see Ellen Muehlberger, "Simeon and Other Women in Theodoret's Religious History: Gender in the Representation of Late Ancient Christian Asceticism," *JECS* 23.4, esp. 595-599.

themself.[650] Through the male protagonists and authors learning to behave like women, male readers learned how to cross-identify and to perfect their asceticism as well.

The Nature of Woman

One of the most widely studied texts on a woman achieving ascetic perfection by overcoming her femaleness to reside in a state of semi-perfection is Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Macrina*.[651] As Elizabeth Clark recognized, this the language of women becoming male helped men to grant women as full of a humanity as they were able to do so in a male-centered society.[652] Yet, as Verna Harrison notes, "The language of women 'becoming male' is a way of transcending culturally entrenched misogyny, not a reaffirmation of it."[653] I propose that this language reveals yet another means of fighting against late antique misogyny: for Gregory of Nyssa, as with other men in society, full humanity, and the perfection of humanity, was not entirely male. In other words, transcending cultural misogyny occurred not just by allowing women to be like men, but by encouraging men to be like women. Ascetics had to undertake both types of gender performance in order to reach ascetic perfection. While, as I have shown, ascetic "women" excelled at this task, ascetic men, though their performance is less explicitly commented upon, also had to behave like their counterparts.

[650] I use the gender-neutral pronoun here because while the viewer would still identify as male, he is learning how to behave more like a woman, and so his gender performance is queered.
[651] Pierre Maraval, *Grégoire de Nysse: Vie de Sainte Macrine*, (Les Éditions Du Cerf, 29: Paris, 1971), note 2 pg. 140.
[652] Elizabeth Clark "Devil's Gateway and the Bride of Christ: Women in the Early Christian World, in Elizabeth Clark ed., *Ascetic Piety and Women's Faith* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellon Press, 1986), 43.
[653] Verna Harrison, "Male and Female in Cappadocian Theology," *Journal of Theological Studies*, 41.2 (1990), 447.

The gendered subject within Gregory of Nyssa's discourse on Macrina becomes particularly complicated in its relation to the experience of grief.[654] At the beginning of the *Life of Macrina*, following the death of her brother Naucratus, Macrina consoles her mother and begs her not to cry. Gregory reports that, in this instance, Macrina placed her reason above her passion, and did not vent her suffering in any "low-born or womanish way."[655] In contrast, following Macrina's death, Gregory and the other women within the monastery openly grieved, defying Macrina's staunch masculine teachings to the contrary. While some see this scene as Gregory's feminization of himself, others view it as a stoic justification for reasonable grief in a moment of hardship.[656]

The juxtaposition between the masculine and feminine aspects within the *Life of Macrina*, then, often lies in the philosophical debates between nature and reason. In many ways, Gregory transforms Macrina into the ideal teacher, and Derek Kreuger even notes that Gregory purposefully gave his sister a didactic identity.[657] Her portrait within this work so often resembles the idealized version of Gregory's education, or even a reimagining of Socrates, that feminist scholars, in particular, wonder if we can see Macrina at all.[658] In *De Anima Et Resurrectione,* for example, Gregory almost exclusively refers to Macrina as "the teacher," or "η

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[654] For more on Gregory's oscillation between male and female, see Nausner, "Toward Community Beyond Gender Binaries," 60-61 and Virginia Burrus, '*Begotten not Made': Conceiving Manhood in Late Antiquity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 200), 83.

[655] "δυσγενές τι καὶ γυναικεῖον" Gregory, *Life of Macrina*, 10.7-8. For a discussion of Macrina as a instructor for how to endure grief, see Derek Kreuger, "Writing and the Liturgy of Memory in Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Macrina*," *JECS* 8.4 (2000), 483-510. See also Georgia Frank, "Macrina's Scar: Homeric Allusion and Heroic Identity in Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Macrina*," where she calls the text a "primer of grief," 525. For more on the philosophical underpinnings of Gregory's discussion on grief in the companion text *De Anima Et Resurrectione*, see J. Warren Smith, "Macrina, Tamer of Horses and Healer of Souls: Grief and the Therapy of Hope in Gregory of Nyssa's 'De Anima Et Resurrectione," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 52.1 (2001), 37-60.

[656] For the contrast, see Nausner, "Toward Community Beyond Gender Binaries," 60-61 and J. Warren Smith, "A Just and Reasonable Grief: The Death and Function of a Holy Woman in Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Macrina*," *JECS* 12.1 (2004), 57-84.

[657] Krueger, "Writing and the Liturgy of Memory," 488.

[658] This debate began with Elizabeth Clark, "The Lady Vanishes: Dilemmas of a Feminist Historian after the 'Linguistic Turn,'" *Church History*, 67.1 (1998), 1-31.

διδάσκαλος," employing a feminine article with a masculine noun.[659] He also describes her as "διδάσκαλος" without an article in the *Life of Macrina*.[660] In many ways, as has been widely discussed, Macrina personifies the height of reason and has overcome its opposite- φύσις, or *nature*.[661] In one of the most frequently quoted lines, Gregory questions whether or not he can call Macrina a woman since she has risen above her nature, her φύσις.[662] Because of her transcended nature, it became acceptable for Macrina, now no longer female, to be a teacher of men. Gregory employs this version of Macrina to show other men how to overcome their own flesh since hers proved, by nature, all that more corruptible. Indeed, the majority of the time Gregory uses the words φύσις, it is to show his audience how Macrina transcended it, or stoically endured its attacks.

Yet such is not always the case. At this point in the narrative, Gregory describes their brother Peter's education. Unlike any other members of the family, Peter did not know his father, and so grew up exclusively under Macrina's tutelage.[663] Gregory notes that she was everything to Peter, from father and teacher, to guide and mother.[664] Yet what is intriguing here, and what often gets overlook, is *how* Peter became a great monastic and excelled in Christian learning. Here Gregory notes that Peter looked down on "profane" studies, and "holding nature (φύσιν) as a sufficient teacher of all good lessons, and always looking to his sister and making her the ideal of everything good, he made such great progress in his virtue."[665]

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[659] For more on this linguistic construction, see Nausner, "Toward Community beyond Gender Binaries," 59-61.
[660] Greg. Nyss. *Vit. Mac.* 12.3 and 26.9.
[661] Gregory notes that Macrina raised herself through philosophy to the highest limits of human virtue. *Life of Macrina*, 1.28-31.
[662] Greg. Nyss. *Vit. Mac.* 1.14-17.
[663] Greg. Nyss. *Vit. Mac.* 12.4-5.
[664] Greg. Nyss. Vit. *Mac.* 12.7. Many scholars note the opposing gender roles Macrina holds. For an overview and summary, see Ludlow, "Macrina," 214-16.
[665] "…ικανήν δὲ διδάσκαλον παντὸς ἀγαθοῦ μαθήματος τὴν φύσιν ἔχων ἀεί τε πρὸς τὴν ἀδελφὴν βλέπων καί σκοπόν ἀγαθοῦ ἐκείνην ποιούμενος εις τοσοῦτον ἐπέδωκεν ἀρετῆς…" Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Macrina* 12.23-26.

On one hand we can take Gregory's use of φύσις here to refer back to Athanasius's *Life of Antony*, who cast Antony as eschewing learning of any sort, preferring instead to be "God-taught."[666] Yet, as Fotis Vasileiou has observed, Gregory (through Macrina) wanted to substantiate a different type of asceticism, one free from both *agora* and desert, that is, one liberated from the masculinized expectations of both spaces.[667] Instead, her asceticism takes place squarely in secluded women's quarters, a distinctly female space. Moreover, Gregory never uses φύσις to mean this type of learning in the rest of the *Life*. Macrina herself rejects education typical of her class and opts instead for scripture alone.[668] Indeed here, she was concerned that "secular" literature would spoil *her nature*. Therefore, this passage seems to suggest that not just Macrina, but Macrina's nature (that is her φύσις, her female body) is the best teacher of all. In order to acquire all of the "good lessons" he could not gain from reason (or masculinity) alone, he had to learn from, and by performing as, a woman.

If we look at the similarities between Macrina's and Peter's education, we can essentially see that Peter was educated *as* a woman. To begin, Macrina taught both herself and her younger brother.[669] While Macrina has typically been portrayed as masculinized in this role, presumably since most ancient teachers were men and Gregory used the male article as her descriptor,[670] it is crucial to keep in mind that just because male bodies typically hold a certain space, does not mean that space itself is male. Macrina is, as Nirmal Puwar would describe her, a "space

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[666] Athanase D'Alexandrie, *Vie D'Antoine* in *Athanase D'Alexandrie: Vie D'Antoine: Introduction, Texte Critique, Traduction, Notes et Index* (Paris: Les Éditions Du Cerf, 2004) 1.1. For an English translation, see: Athanasius, *Life of Antony* in *The Life of Antony: The Coptic Life and the Greek Life*, trans. Tim Vivian and Apostolos N. Athanassakis (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 2003).
[667] Fortis Vasileiou, "At a 'Still Point of a Turning World': Privacy and Asceticism in Gregory of Nyssa's 'Life of Macrina'" *Byzantion* 82 (2012), 451.
[668] Greg. Nyss. *Vit. Mac.* 3.
[669] Greg. Nyss. *Vit. Mac.* 12.
[670] For more on Macrina as a male teacher, see Nausner, "Toward Community Beyond Gender Binaries," 61.

invader," or a dissonant body that takes up space not reserved for her.[671] Through her presence, it is revealed that the position of "teacher" is not a neutral one, but one constructed by the male body. In other words, a "teacher" was understood to be an un-gendered position until it was occupied by a female body, revealing that it was actually male all along. Thus, her presence, in her distinctly non-male body, both disorients and amplifies her defiance of spatial boundaries. Gregory's use of a female article and male noun (η διδάσκαλος) here thus makes sense: she is a woman inserting herself into a typically male job. The disorientation and anxiety, however, lies not just with Macrina's gender, but with her audience's discomfort *with* it. Suddenly, Gregory has to scramble to explain *why* her presence as a teacher is acceptable. Perhaps Gregory's, and the wider Graeco-Roman society's, discomfort with women assuming spatial positions of authority explains why Gregory goes to such lengths to masculinize Macrina.[672]

And yet, as a teacher of both herself and her younger brother, Macrina, though her gender frequently oscillated back and forth, often epitomized the height of female asceticism. According to Gregory, once she became an ascetic, Macrina never left her home. Indeed, her home itself, especially following the death of her father, became a deeply female space.[673] While it is clear that both men and women resided in Macrina's household and, perhaps, lived in separate quarters, Macrina was its head.[674] Just as Macrina eschewed the more "male" aspects of education, including secular stories deemed inappropriate for women, so too did her brother

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[671] Puwar, *Space Invaders*, 11.

[672] For more on Macrina as teacher, see Patricia Wilson-Kastner, "Macrina: Virgin and Teacher," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* scii (1979), 105-117; Elena Giannarelli, *La tipologia femminile nella biografia e nell'autobiografia cristiana del IVe secolo* (Rome, Palazzo Borromini: 1980), 29-47. For more on the injunction against female teachers, see Elizabeth Clark, *Ascetic Piety and Women's Faith,* 47.

[673] As I discuss in my previous chapter, this can also be seen as a gender-queer space since the "women" within perform as both male and female. For Gregory's sake, however, the space is, at first, female, as it is from the gendered position that he must learn.

[674] For more on Macrina's living quarters, see: Kim Bowes, *Private Worship, Public Values, and Religious Change in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 209; Philip Rousseau, "The Pious Household and the Virgin Chorus: Reflections on Gregory of Nyssa's Life of Macrina" *JECS* 13.2 (2005), 165-186.

Peter.[675] While he learned philosophy from his teacher, he was most drawn toward handicrafts, just had been Macrina. While Macrina became particularly skilled at wool-working, Peter too learned to work with his hands, and excelled especially, it seems, at cooking and organizing food for the masses.[676] Yet not just their education, but their bodies seem to mirror one another in Gregory's telling. Just as Macrina faced her own battles during her "bloom of youth," (νεότητος ἄνθος) so too was Peter "blossoming" (ἀνθοῦντα) in his education.[677] These two delicate flowers, Gregory seems to insinuate, learned to grow towards the light, beautiful in both body and soul.

From the beginning, then, Peter's gendered education was decidedly female. As Maud Gleason notes, education was not simply inscribed on the mind, but on the body as well. "It was the language that anatomical males were taught to speak with their bodies;" a process which, she argues, began at birth.[678] Peter was never taught to "act like a man" in the same ways which his brothers were. While Macrina was both "father and mother" to him, she still possessed a female body and did not move it, consistently at least, the way in which a "proper" Roman man would have. If the process of masculinization (and femininization) begins at birth, then Peter inhabited this queer space, this mixture of both male and female traits, from the start. And, according to Gregory, he became a great monastic far more quickly because of it.[679]

Peter's education based primarily on scripture and the sharp intuitions of Macrina herself contrasts most sharply with that of Basil. Basil, Gregory tells his audience, had recently returned

[675] Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Macrina*, 3.
[676] During a famine, Peter, allow with his sister and mother, was said to have, thanks to his "inventiveness" provided the starving people with an abundance of provisions. Gregory, *Life of Macrina*, 12.
[677] Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Macrina*, 4, 12.
[678] Maud Gleason, *Making Men: Sophists and Self-Presentation in Ancient Rome* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 70
[679] Gregory notes that Peter made such progress in his virtue that he was of no less repute early in his life than Basil was only later. *Life of Macrina*, 12.25-27

from school where he was trained in rhetoric.[680] When Macrina took him by hand into her home, she found him "grossly inflated by his skill in rhetoric, disdainful of every high reputation and exalted by his pretention above the notables of the province…."[681] The picture Gregory paints, then, is of a man puffed-up by his own self-assurance, and one which he learned through encoded masculinity. As Gleason notes, "One has to learn how to move like a gendered human body," and for wealthy men in the late-ancient world, this was often achieved through the study of rhetoric and philosophy.[682] When a young man learned how to speak well, he learned how to hold his body – how to tilt his pelvis, gesture his hands, and even move his eyes. In this way, men had to learn how to rid themselves as much as possible of the signs of effeminacy. As Basil showed, men had to learn how to walk like lions: powerfully and dominating.[683] Because orators spent so much time in the public's eye, they had to constantly be on their guard lest a single gesture cause their entire performance to slip.

Under Macrina's tutelage, however Basil's demeanor began to change. While Gregory concludes that Basil's transformation was due to Macrina's ability to win him over to the ideals of philosophy, in this very gendered mode of performance, Basil also had to un-learn masculinity.[684] In the wider world of Roman oratory, Basil marked the hight of male excellence; but in his new space of queered introspection, Basil's performance resounded too harshly. So, like a mother, Macrina led him inside by the hand. This very movement from outside in a masculine world, to inside a (to Basil at least) deeply feminine one marked his first transition. In

[680] Gregory, *Life of Macrina*, 6.
[681] "λαβοῦσα τοίνυν αὐτὸν ὑπερφυῶς ἐπηρμένον τῷ περὶ τοὺς λόγους φρονήματι…" Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Macrina*, 6.5-6.
[682] Gleason, *Making Men*, xxvi.
[683] Gleason, *Making Men*, 62.
[684] For more excellent work on the physical characteristics of early Christian philosophers, see Stefan Hodges-Kluck, *Philosophical Self-Presentation in Late Antique Cappadocia*, PhD diss., (University of Tennessee, 2017), 99-207.

this new space, his voice would have boomed too loudly, and his gestures consumed too much room.[685] Indeed, after he notes that Basil entered the monastery, Gregory never mentions Basil's voice again. In this way, his *new* education, one led by female movements instead of male, mirrors Peter's upbringing as well. Nowhere does Gregory remark upon Peter's voice nor mention him engaging in conversation. Instead Peter's wisdom manifests through his nature – his soft gestures and caring heart. In his telling, Gregory renders both Basil and Peter as silent as women were supposed to be. Gregory even declares that Basil began to feel contempt for the admiration of rhetoric and thus his old way of life.[686] Only, then, after spending time with Macrina, of learning from her, of learning to behave *like* her, did Basil truly become "great."[687]

To pull back for a moment, the only men who have to learn to behave like women in this *vita* are not Basil and Peter, but the audience as well. Gregory's construction of Macrina's *Life* in such a way has two primary effects on his audience. First, it allows them first to visualize themselves as physical males like Basil and Peter. There, the audience is able, through male characters, to experience a fluctuation in gender performance and identification. This example shows the audience how they too can and *should* learn from the women they encounter in the story-space. Thus, Gregory reveals to his audience a second way of interacting with the text. Once they were comfortable being shown by bodily men how to perform as women, they could, like Basil and Peter, learn how to cross-identify as Macrina herself. In this space, then, they embody both the height of her masculinity as a renowned philosopher, and her femininity, as a house ascetic learning to control her body.

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[685] While members of the patrician class would have controlled their voice and movements more than men of the lower class, their voices and movements still would have been louder and larger than those of the upper-class women with whom they came into contract.
[686] Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Macrina*, 10.10-13.
[687] Gregory insists that Basil only subsequently became famous across the globe for his virtue after learning from Macrina. *Life of Macrina*, 6.14-18.

So profoundly has Macrina's teaching embedded itself in her physical form that her last great lessons are taught by her flesh alone once her spirit has departed. Deeply grieving his loss, Gregory asks female attendants if there is anything in the cupboards or storage chests with which to adorn her bier. In response, one woman points simply at her body.[688] On it is displayed the wealth of the household: her cloak, her veil, and the sandals on her feet. She is both woman and cupboard laid bare. Her body, it seems, reveals the ultimate lesson: men must not only learn from, but learn to be *like* women: closed from the world, but open to God.

Prostitutes for God

It was not just highly reputable women with pristine backgrounds, however, whom early Christian men were called upon to imitate. As I have discussed in previous chapters, the stories of Mary of Egypt and Pelagia of Antioch, popular both in their own time and later in the Middle Ages, served as instruction for monks as well as for Christian congregations.[689] Frequently referred to as the "Holy Harlots," the stories of these women tell of a reformed prostitute who has fled her shameful life to become a Christian ascetic. "Discovered" by a male monk or his disciple, the details of her miraculous transformation from sinner to saint amaze and shame the audience. Reading these women as descriptions of transvestite saints, stories of redemptions, examples of female piety, or even the paradoxical 'holy woman,' scholars focus upon the construction of the female protagonists at the expense of the secondary figure.[690] The men

[688] Gregory, *Life of Macrina*, 30.
[689] Harvey and Brock *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient,* 40-41, Patricia Cox Miller, "Is there a Harlot in this Text?: Hagiography and the Grotesque." *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 33:3 (419-435). Pelagia is even believed to be the harlot mentioned in Chrysostom's Homily 67 according to Harvey and Brock. *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient,* 40. The text itself describes the story of a prostitute very much like Pelagia about whom both Chrysostom and his congregation are intimately familiar. John Chrysostom, "Homily 67," *PG*. 58, cols. 636-637.
[690] The texts referred to in order are: Harvey and Brock, *Holy Women,* 41; Benedicta Ward, *Harlots of the Desert: A Study of Repentance in Early Monastic Sources*. Translated and Edited by Benedicta Ward. (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications Inc., 1987) 26-34; Patricia Cox Miller, "Is there a Harlot in this Text? 21-45.

present in these texts tend to slip into the background, discussed only as the male instrument for both constructing and relaying the lives of Mary and Pelagia. We forget that they are ascetics on their own spiritual journey.

Indeed, the men, not women, frame the story and serve as its primary audience. While the texts themselves demonstrate that even the lowest of sinners can be saved and provoke the audience into thinking about their own shame, they serve as gendered instruction. Within the stories themselves, great ascetics and their disciples set out on a journey to explicitly learn how to achieve ascetic perfection. "Is there… a monk on earth," Zosima, the narrator of the *Life of Mary of Egypt*, askes, "who would be able to be of use to me, to teach me some new type of ascetic training, something which I have not yet learned and have not yet attempted with toil? Or will there be some philosophizer in the wastelands who will show me the way in either thought or deed?"[691] While, as both Patricia Cox Miller and Virginia Burrus remark, the reader appreciates the irony of this statement as the ascetic turns out to be a woman, these tales begin with a quest for male perfection. In order to obtain such a status, these men and their male audiences must learn to behave like women they encounter. Indeed, they must learn how to become prostitutes for God.

Up until this point, both Nonnos and Zosima have achieved the "male" aspects of asceticism by rendering their bodies impermeable to worldly penetration. By taking vows of chastity, donning rough and common clothing, performing constant vigils and eating little more than necessary, they have burned away any desires in the body while simultaneously averting the

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[691] "*Sic enim, yet dixit, secum ipse disserebat; putasne in terra est monachus, qui prodesse mihi possit, meque docere aliquod exercitationis genus novum, quod necdum novi et ipso opere non sum expertus? aut erit in eremo philosophantium quispiam, qui me vel cognitione vel actione praecedat?*" "*Αράγε ἔστιν ἐν τῇ γῇ μοναχὸς, ὁ δυνάμενος ζένον τι παραδοῦϝναί μοι, ἢ ωφελν'σαι με ισχύων, ὅπερ οὐχ οἶδα, οὐδὲ πέπραζα, εἶδος ἀσκήσεως; ἆ ρα εὑρίσκεται τῶν ἐν ἐρήμῳ φιλοσυφούντων ἀνὴρ ὃς κατὰ πρᾶξιν ἢ θεωρίαν πρωτεύει μου*;" *Vita sanctae Mariae Aegyptae* in *PL.*, 87 col. 3699, 2. For an English translation, see: "Saint Mary of Egypt; the Liturgical Icon of Repentance" in *Harlots of the Desert.*

gaze of the world. Yet as they both discover, in order to achieve ascetic perfection, performing as male is not enough. As Pelagia and Mary show, they must learn how to behave like the most lascivious of women: the prostitute. In these texts, the goal of a prostitute is to adorn herself in such a way as to entice men to penetrate her with their gaze. These ascetics must therefore learn how to attract God's attention just as these women attracted suitors.

Indeed, these women are experts in their field. When Jacob the deacon first introduces Pelagia, he forces the readers to gaze upon her. Conjuring a picture of a prostitute brazenly riding a donkey down the middle of the street, herself adorned with gold, pearls, precious stones and luxurious silks, Jacob describes this sinful woman as a feast for the senses. Drawing his readers' gaze first to her overall appearance, then to her decorated hands and feet, and finally to the pearls draped around her throat, Jacob describes how her beauty stunned all those who looked upon her.[692] Clearly offering herself to visual (and, later, physical) penetration, Pelagia boldly rode with her head uncovered and with a scarf thrown about her shoulders in a shameless fashion.[693] In the Syriac version of the text, the author adds: "indeed in her haughty impudence her garb was not very different from a man's…apart from her makeup, and the fact that her skin was dazzling as snow."[694]

[692] "Μετάνοια τῆς ὁσίας Πελαγίας," in H. Usener ed. and trans., *Legenden der heiligen Pelagia*, 3- 16. (Bonn, 1879), 2 (Henseforth *Vita S. Pelagiae*). For the Latin version of this text see, "Vita Sancta Pelagia, Meretricis," in *PL*. 73, cols. 663-71. For an English translation from the Syriac (the Syriac is translated from a different Greek original, to which it is the earliest witness) see "Pelagia," in Sebastian Brock and Susan Ashbrook Harvey, ed. and trans., *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 4. For an English translation of the Latin edition, see "Pelagia; Beauty Riding By," in Ward, *Harlots of the Desert*, 2 (note that the numbering in the Syriac and Latin traditions are not the same as the Greek). For this chapter, I will refer primarily to the Syriac text and its number system since it is the earliest copy of the text. However, I will also make comparisons to the only slightly later Greek and Latin versions as well.

[693] *Vita S. Pelagiae,* Greek, 2-3; Latin, 2.

[694] "Pelagia," *Holy Women*, 6. The Greek text notes that her head was uncovered and that only a scarf draped around her shoulders. *Vita S. Pelagiae*, 3. Greek, 2-3. The Latin version insists that she was completely naked except for those portions which were covered in jewels, 2.

While, as Patricia Cox Miller has recognized, Pelagia behaves in this scene like both man and woman,[695] it is from the womanly aspects that the male onlookers, and audience, must learn. Though dressed in the garb of a man (which turns out later to primarily consist of a sheer cloak vaguely wrapped around her shoulders), Pelagia's face is coated in makeup. For a "proper" Roman woman, such adornment would bring unwanted attention, calling notice, as Carlin Barton observes, "not [to] one's blushing modesty, but one's brazen shamelessness."[696] Yet a prostitute welcomed such attention, for it was her job. Pelagia not only embraced the penetrating gaze of those who stare openly at her breasts, but enjoyed it. She basked in the glow of the dozens of eyes, drawing even the attention of Bishop Nonnos and his disciple. Her beauty and luxury were such that they lured everyone who saw her to stare and her and at her appearance, and ultimately enticed anyone who even glanced at her to fall madly into lust.[697]

Mary, too, exposed her body for pure enjoyment, not even taking money from those who sought her services.[698] Brazenly mixing with a crowd of sailors, she flirted with them, offering her body as compensations for passage on their ship.[699] Seeing her readiness to be shamed, they took her with them to live a life of debauchery. While Mary did not adorn herself with jewels and gold, choosing instead to live a life of squalor, she nevertheless displayed her body openly before groups of men, thus freely inviting penetration of both the gaze and body.

Like a prostitute, a Roman man was also supposed to draw attention to himself while in public.[700] Yet their presence in the public eye thwarted penetration, instead of inviting it. Once a man had proved both his honor and masculinity through his willingness (and thus bravery) to

[695] Cox Miller, "Is There a Harlot in This Text?" 420.
[696] Carlin Barton, "Being in the Eyes: Shame and Sight in Ancient Rome" in *The Roman Gaze* ed. David Fredrick. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 222.
[697] *Vita S. Pelagiae,* 5.
[698] *Vita Mariae* , 8.
[699] *Vita Mariae* , 8.
[700] Carlin Barton, "Being in the Eyes," 20.

display himself in public, he relied upon others to not penetrate him with their eyes.[701] Within the upper classes, this action was considered sacred. "The gaze without compunction," Barton contends, "signaled the loss of trust, the end of the collusion between the seer and the seen, the breakdown of a common bond and the security and camaraderie created by the mutual inhibition of the eyes."[702] The elite were supposed to subject only the "others" of society to this kind of gaze: lower class men, women, children and slaves. Penetrating those of the lower class signified an elite male's prerogative, something he practiced freely.[703] In so doing, he both reaffirmed his manliness and shamefully gendered his inferior female, whether he/she was actually a woman or not.

While this type of gaze functioned well in wider Roman society, it prohibited the type of relationship that ascetics sought with God, for the relationship they desired looked far closer to that of the prostitute and her patron. Though she welcomed penetration (both visually and otherwise) from earthly suitors instead of heavenly, she knew not only how to attract it such attention, but how to keep it. She knew how to mark herself as open and willing, in ways that were foreign to the monks who beheld her. Nonnos agonizes over how well Pelagia has welcomed the gaze of her male suitors, describing in excruciating detail how long it must have taken her to ready herself for these men, doing her make-up, putting on perfumes, and looking at her face for hours in the mirror, making sure there was not a speck of dust on it.[704]

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[701] Carlin Barton describes the extreme fear that the gaze held for the general populace. This fear of the uninhibited gaze displays itself most terrifyingly in Roman dramas. In many instances, gazing upon another even equated to cannibalism, the most terrible of Roman crimes. See "Being in the Eyes," 224-225 for further discussion.
[702] Ibid. 225 Virginia Burrus suggests that, perhaps more than trust, shame itself prevents further shame. She writes, "an empathetic awareness of our capacity both to shame and to be shamed … serves as a guard against the violence of shaming, protecting privacy and dignity, cultivating not only tact but a positive sense of awe in the face …of what is at once most vulnerable and most sacred in human experience." Virginia Burrus, *Saving Shame: Martyrs, Saints and Other Abject Subjects*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 3.
[703] Burrus, *Saving Shame*, 220.
[704] *Vita S. Pelagiae*, 9.

Pelagia's ability to welcome penetration from everywhere forces Nonnos to think about the point in *his* life where he should behave in the same manner: when he prepares himself for his ultimate bridal chamber and fiancé.[705] This scene takes on distinctly sexual overtones, as he laments how he has failed in his duty to make himself ready for the Lord, for that felicitous night when they will meet again in the chamber.[706] Though never stated explicitly, it is clear that this openness, this penetration of both space and body (as described in my previous chapter), is the moment for which the bishop, and thus his male audience, yearns. But in order to gain it, in order to draw the attention of God and keep God's interest, Nonnos, and through him the male audience, must first learn to behave like the prostitute who had ridden before them.

To pull back for a moment, another crucial factor to notice in these opening scenes, particularly as it relates to the audience, is that shame functions in an entirely different manner from many other stories of asceticism. Instead of the male author using a woman as a trope for not behaving "manly" enough, the authors of Mary's and Pelagias *vitae* employs the women to reveal how the male subject does not perform "*womanly*" enough. In this moment, the audience would be once again re-masculinized, but not in a positive way, and not in a way which made them want to perform their given gender better; instead, they were encouraged to leave behind that performance, at least for a while, and learn to behave, first through the male protagonists and then on their own, as the women they encountered in the story. Within these stories, the "Holy Harlots" have shamed the men because of the tremendous effort they have poured into pleasing their masters. Nonnos stumbles because Pelagia has made him realize his arrogance and pride in his ascetic life. In the Syriac version of the story, Nonnos cries out in his prayer to God that "having failed to adorn myself as you would like, I stand before you who are mighty, despicably

[705] *Vita S. Pelagiae*, 10. Latin, 3. Greek, 3.
[706] *Vita S. Pelagiae*, 10. Latin, 3; Greek, 3.

unworthy."[707] Comparing himself directly, he gazes with amazement and wonderment at both Pelagia and then his soul, noting that he and his brethren should have been trying "to please our Lord in all things with even greater effort than she has expended on her embellishments and adornments." So great is her power, and so inferior has she proved the holy men, that Nonnos tells his fellow monks that they should go and be pupils of this lascivious woman.[708]

This angle has been partially explored by Patricia Cox Miller, who argues that ascetics did not want to rid themselves and these prostitutes of their passion, but instead simply wanted to redirect it towards God.[709] While I agree with this assessment, I think that this relationship with God must also be explored in a different way. Even though the ultimate goal of these prostitutes turned ascetics is the penetrating gaze of God, they must first work to attract the attention of their potential client. As earthly prostitutes, wearing golden clothes, silken scarves, and expensive makeup, these women garnered only the worldly gaze. They worked tirelessly to catch the eyes of men to tempt them into sampling their wares by allowing men to penetrate them with their eyes. Yet in such a state, this woman hides from God. Her golden bangles become dull, and her makeup obscures her true beauty. When they convert to Christianity, these harlot-ascetics must work equally hard to attract the attention for God.

Therefore, like the prostitute who has taken such care to adorn herself (albeit for the wrong master), a true Christian ascetic must work equally as hard to adorn his soul. In this metaphor, then, the ascetics must draw God's penetrating gaze by doing two things. First, through their asceticism, they must remove any filth and dirt from their souls.[710] Such a feat

[707] *Vita S. Pelagiae*, 13. Latin, 4; Greek 4.
[708] *Vita S. Pelagiae*, 10.
[709] Patricia Cox Miller, "Blazing Bodies: Ascetic Desire in Jerome's Letter to Eustochium" *JECS* 1:1 (1993) 21-45.
[710] This sentiment happens repeatedly in all three versions of the text. The Latin text, for example, asks "why do we not adorn ourselves and wipe away the dirt from our miserable souls?" The whole line reads: "*habentes repromissionem, faciem illam magnam et splendidam, et inaestimabilem sponsi vulvum viere, cui Cherubim*

requires that they do not look upon others in lust, nor do they attract the attention of others who would look upon them in such a way. Second, in so doing, they must perform remarkable ascetic undertakings to attract God's gaze. Through the adornment of their souls, these ascetics open themselves up to the penetration and possible shame of God's gaze. In so doing, they perform as both men and women. By sealing themselves off from worldly penetration and by performing ascetic acts which deny their desires, they remain firmly male; by opening themselves up to the penetrating gaze of God, however, they distinctively gender themselves female. Through their performance as both men and women, these monks thus achieve ascetic perfection.

Up until this point, however, even Nonnos himself has not achieved such a state. While he has learned how to control his own gaze so that he can contemplate people in his mind instead of penetrating them with his eyes, he has not yet opened himself up to penetration from God.[711] He has failed, in contrast to the prostitute, to make himself vulnerable and open to the possibility of shame. Yet seeing Pelagia causes Nonnos to further his own ascetic practices. Nonnos goes on to lament, "What that prostitute accomplished in a single day in beautifying herself surpassing everything I have ever achieved during all the years of my life. How can I have the face to look upon you, my God? I do not know what words to use in the attempt to justify myself in your presence, Lord."[712] Unlike a prostitute, Nonnos does not believe that he is worthy to be looked upon. In fact, he believes that he is not even worthy to be in the presence of God, so unadorned is his soul. Despite all his years of ascetic devotion, he has succeeded only in refining his body, not in embellishing his soul. In his shame, he hides his face from the lord while simultaneously

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respicere non audent, non ormanus neque detergimus sordes de miseris animabus nostris, sed dimittimus eas negligenter jacere." *PL*, 3.

[711] The author of the *Life of Pelagia* is careful to note that Nonnos does not gaze directly at Pelagia, but instead observes her in his mind. 7. In the Latin and Greek life, however, he gazes at her without compunction. Latin, 2. Greek, 3.

[712] *Vita S. Pelagiae*, 11.

laying bare his soul. Such an action is made manifest in the Latin text, when Nonnos cries out to God, "As I am naked in heaven so am I naked on earth, because I do not carry out your commandment [to please you]."[713] In such a confession, and by opening himself up to vulnerability and the beckoning gaze of God, Nonnos begins the first step in furthering his ascetic practice by learning to behave like a female prostitute.

It is this state of absolutely vulnerability and openness to shame that the readers of the tales must also work to inhabit. Such an undertaking will require them not only to behave like women, but, through the process, to un-learn their masculinity as well. For most of their lives, as Gleason and Barton note above, the audience has learned to move their bodies like other men. They, through mimicking others, figured out how to position themselves in such a way as to walk in public without fear of vulnerability or penetration. From a very young age, they essentially shielded themselves from the gaze, covering their bodies in a protective armor. The position of prostitute for God, however, requires that they undertake an entirely alternative way of understanding their bodies and the space they inhabit. They must learn to let down that protective shield and to invite scrutiny upon themselves for the first time. They must, in essence, physically comprehend how it feels to be a low-class woman (specifically, a woman for hire) in a public space, and embrace it.

At this point in the story, the transformation of prostitute and male ascetic mirror one another, as Mary and Pelagia must redirect their proclivity for showcasing their bodies, while Nonnos, Zosimus, and the entire male audience, must master the feminine ability to attract the attention of their suitors through the adornment of their souls. As Pelagia and Mary cast off their garments of worldly filth (though Pelagia's glitter like gold), they choose instead the rough garb

[713] "*Nudus sum tam in caelo quam in terra, non adimplens praecepta mandatorum tuorum.*" Latin, 4.

of the ascetic, even throwing dirt over their heads in recognition of their shamefulness.[714] In this moment, filth works on two levels, as the transform from the filth of sin, away from which Pelagia and Mary move, and into the lowliness of salvation. Already, though they have just begun to repent, these women know how to beautify themselves in the eyes of God. Even though ascetic clothes did not contain the luster of metallics nor the ease of silk, they nevertheless drew the eye of the observer. The author of both stories in fact parallels this, as they spend a great deal of time marking what the male protagonists wear: Zossima in his rough cloak and Nonnos in his hair-shirt. While such clothing may have seemed dull, its purpose was to garner favor of a different sort. Though prostitutes did not dress in a Christian manner, their clothing nevertheless served the explicit purpose of garnering the gaze of potential clients. Ascetics therefore had to learn to do the same when they dressed for God.

The clothing of an ascetic, unlike that of a prostitute, worked to draw attention *away* from the body, while simultaneously signaling the wearer's transition to a holier life.[715] Signifying simplicity and humility, an ascetic's clothing should not be embellished or embroidered, dyed or ornamented.[716] While these clothes would have stood out against elite non-Christian, who regularly dyed their clothes, wore jewels and bought rolls of fine clothes, an ascetic was not supposed to stand out against his or her fellows.[717] In the early fifth century, Augustine of Hippo, for example, reprimanded Ecdicia for dressing inappropriately for a Christian ascetic. Her choice of black clothing, he argued, caused this woman to flaunt herself as a widow instead of humbly accepting her role as Christian wife.[718] One of Ecdicia's (many) transgressions was

[714] Such an act only occurs in the Syriac version of *Vita S. Pelagiae*, 23.
[715] Kristi Upson-Saia, *Early Christian Dress: Gender, Virtue and Authority* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 2.
[716] *Early Christian Dress*, 2.
[717] Upson Saia, *Early Christian Dress*, 3.
[718] Aug. *Ep.* 62, *CSEL* 57.562. For an English translation, see "Epistle 262 to Ecdicia" in *St. Augustine on Marriage and Sexuality* ed. Elizabeth Clark, (Washington D.C., The Catholic University of America Press, 1996). For excellent analysis of this letter, see: Kate Cooper, "Insinuations of Womanly Influence," 158-60; Claudia Kock,

drawing attention to the extravagance of her lifestyle with her clothing. While early Christians still hotly debated the appropriate clothing for ascetics during the fifth century, ascetic women in particular were not to stand out from their fellows, at risk of becoming too prideful and thus falling into lust. Instead, they should direct the adornment of their soul, the true purpose of dressing in rough clothing, toward reading themselves for their heavenly bride-groom.[719]

The rhetorical use of clothing within these stories demonstrates how Mary and Pelagia simultaneously both succeeded and failed in their adornment as earthly prostitutes. They were wrong in that they used it to attract the attention of *worldly* suitors, but they were right in that their knowledge of how to beautify themselves would ultimately help them to attract their future bridegroom. The men in the story thus worked hard to not attract the eyes of their fellow humans, but failed to attract the eyes of God. The garments in these stories also take on important symbolic significance. Pelagia, for example, recognizing her guilt and desiring to cleanse her soul through baptism, beseeched Nonnos to "strip off from me the dirty clothing of prostitution; clothe me with pure garments, the beautiful dress for the novel banquet to which I have come."[720] The clothes of gold with which Pelagia previously dressed here become signs of sin and filth. In turn, the ragged, dirty clothes of asceticism transform into beautiful vestments displaying her purity and virtue. Indeed Mary, devoid of any earthly clothes, soon came to be covered by the "word of God" alone.[721]

Despite this comparison, however, the ascetic and the harlot once again do not represent opposites, but parallels. The clothes of the harlot, colored with Christian constructions of shame,

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"Augustine's Letter to Ecdicia: A New Reading," *AugSt* 31.2 (2000), 173-80; and Rebecca Krawiec, "'From the Womb of the Church': Monastic Families," *JECS*, 11.3 (2003), 292-295.

[719] Upson-Saia, *Early Christian Dress,* 3-5.

[720] *Vita S. Pelagiae*, 19.

[721] *Vita Mariae* , 19.

work to reveal herself to the masses and hide herself from God. Her clothing sought to draw the eyes of the onlookers, inviting them to penetrate her with their gaze. She did not conceal her shame from the crowd, yet attempted to obscure it from God. The clothes of the ascetic worked in a similar way. Here, the wearer attempted to hide his or her body from the eyes of the world. Not wanting them to penetrate his or her earthly body, thus causing them shame, the ascetic donned drab, unflattering clothes. In so doing, however, the ascetic assumes the clothing of light. While avoiding the gaze of the physical world, she opened herself up to the gaze of God. No longer did she hide behind clothes of God but invites the gaze and subsequent penetration of God. Simply put, the disguises which both women assume thus work in two ways: to hide the individual from the earthly gaze and reveal them to the eyes of God.

Having donned the clothing of God, the holy harlots continue the processes of adorning their bodies for the eyes of God and protecting themselves from earthly pollution by fleeing the city. In so doing, Mary and Pelagia literally seal themselves from bodily penetration from the eyes of the world. Pelagia, like many other cross-dressing (or trans-spatial) ascetics, fled to a monastery.[722] Unlike many of these other women, however, Pelagia chose to completely seal herself off from the world around her. Claiming to be a eunuch (an effort aided by her male disguise), Pelagia walled herself into a small cell within the monastery itself. When Jacob visits her in Jerusalem, he has to search carefully in order to find the small window which had been cut into one while of her cell. While such a design necessarily prohibits anyone from looking upon her, Pelagia (or Pelagios as she is now known) also shutters her window from within.[723]

[722] *Vita S. Pelagiae*, 58. Mary, Niece of Abraham of Quidun is also said to have locked herself in an inner room. See "Mary, Niece of Abraham of Quidun" in *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient.*
[723] Jacob reports that Pelagia opened the window when he knocked upon it. *Vita S. Pelagiae*, 59.

Similarly, Mary flees the gaze of the world. Again, like many ascetics before her, Mary escaped to the desert.[724] Within ascetic hagiography, the desert has come to symbolize the "eschatological paradise free from mundane hierarchies."[725] A place of redemption where holy men and women can finally achieve ascetic perfection, the desert acts symbolically as a training-ground for the harsh practices of *askesis*.[726] The desert, however, like the cell, also physically removes the practitioner from the world. Free from the sullying gaze of society, ascetics instead open them up to the gaze of God. As the crowded streets serve as the proper location for a prostitute to display her wares, so too do these secluded places allow the ascetic to display her holy goods. In public, the prostitute reveals herself to the masses while hiding in plain sight from God. In seclusion, the ascetic closes herself off from the world while revealing herself to God.

Yet these women clearly do not remain hidden forever. After they have remained in the desert for decades and have achieved ascetic perfection, monks or their disciples go in search of them. The sight that greets these men, however, is not what they expected. Both women have become shadows of their former selves. No hint of their beauty remains. Their luscious curves have disappeared, their breasts have shrunk, their rosy cheeks have become hollow, and their bright eyes have dimmed.[727] Indeed, both women are mistaken for men upon first glace.[728] Upon this scene, the reader is once again invited to look. This time, however, the eyes are not met with an object of desire. They are not attracted to the white hair and the blackened skin of Mary, nor the fleshless bones of Pelagia.[729] Except for her astonishing asceticism, the picture of these women, especially to the reader, is revolting. Having transformed their bodies, Mary and Pelagia

[724] See also John of Ephesus, "Anastasia" from *Lives of the Eastern Saints.* In *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient*; and "Life of St. Thais the Harlot" in *Harlots of the Desert.*
[725] Lynda Coon, *Sacred Fictions: Holy Women and Hagiography in Late Antiquity*, 72.
[726] Coon, *Sacred Fictions*, 72.
[727] *Vita Mariae* , 18; *Vita S. Pelagiae*, 46.
[728] *Vita Mariae* , 18; *Vita S. Pelagiae*, 46.
[729] *Vita S. Pelagiae*, 46.

have transformed them into something utterly impenetrable. If the breasts no longer exist, how can one desire them? If the organs of shame cease to function, how can they bring shame any longer?[730]

It is this state which both Zosimus, Nonnos and Jacob, and the wider audience, wish to achieve. It is this state which completes the transformation from prostitute to ascetic. Now, finally, the woman has achieved perfection by adorning her soul for God. A prostitute, in order to attract the penetrating gaze of admirers, dresses herself in jewels, silks, perfumes, and bells. Again, in so doing, she attracts the penetrating earthly gaze, while hiding from God. In both parallel and contrast, the holy harlots have adorned themselves with spiritual ornaments, repelling the human gaze but opening themselves up to the gaze up God. By adorning their bodies and soul in such a manner, these former prostitutes open themselves up to God's penetrating gaze, allowing him to look inside their soul and reveal their true worth. In hiding from the world, these perfect ascetics reveal themselves, both masculine and feminine, to God.

In comparison to the *Life of Macrina* and many of the other ascetic treatises and *vitae* on holy women, these stories show remarkably little anxiety over dropping the audience into the female protagonist. While each recognizes that Mary and Pelagia respectively have been "stumbling blocks," or have caused men, even those who were unwilling, to sin, the audience's gaze is brazen. Their bodies are laid bare, completely objectifying the woman and inviting the audience, in their male bodies, to objectify them. What would draw the discomfort of the men reading or listening to this story, then, is not the female protagonist, but the male. The man not the woman, instructs the audience that they too must behave like women and open themselves up to penetration. The man proves the most dangerous aspect of the story. Suddenly, the audience

[730] Sex organs (including breasts) were said to be the stores of shame. Barton, "Being in the Eyes," 219.

becomes deeply aware of their own sexualized masculinity, of the way in which the author has invited them to look upon the woman. Their eyes have roamed over her barely covered breasts, or, in the case of Mary, her nearly naked body.[731] They did not, as they had been instructed, gaze upon these women with compunction, but instead looked, through the author's guidance, at the shameful parts of the female form. While the audience becomes hyper-aware of their own masculinity at this point, it also serves to show them that, if they properly adorn their souls, this is almost exactly how God should look upon them.

The author thus flipped the anxiety expected by the male audience, as the discomfort lay with the expectations of the male protagonist instead of the female. Yet, at the same time, the male protagonist's status as the most holy of men invited the audience to trust him a way that they would not have trusted a woman alone. He encourages, through his lamentations, them to physically and spiritually transform themselves in order to behave like Mary and Pelagia. Intriguingly, and unlike Peter and Basil in the *Life of Macrina*, the male protagonist in these tales does not physically reveal to the audience how he has changed as a result of their tutelage. Instead, the readers themselves, once they have been given instructions by the monk or bishop, must learn from the woman herself. The authors of these tales do not hold the hands of their audience nearly as much as does Gregory. While the male protagonist *tells* him what he must do, the women actually *show* them how. Even the men in the audience must become prostitutes for God.

[731] *Vitae Maria Agyptae*, 2-3.

Conclusion

At the end of these hagiographies and ascetic treatises, no one's gender performance remains the same. Though at first, the male audience may have been wary about dropping into stories about women, particularly from whom they were supposed to learn, the authors addressed their anxieties. They slowly convinced the audience to let go many of their pre-conceived notions about the inferiority of women, ensuring them that these women were different. The male authors also subtlety reminded men that men and women walked the same narrow path and were ultimately one in Christ. This type of scriptural inclusion paved the way not only for the audience to understand how the female subjects of the story must change to please God, but how the audience and male protagonist of the story must do so as well.

Once inside the lives of holy women, it immediately becomes evident that the people who tell and experience the stories are not as disembodied as they had come accustomed to being. As soon as they entered a female or gender-queer space, they no longer constituted the somatic norm. Indeed, this new space forced them to become aware of their gender and sexuality in ways they may have otherwise rarely experienced. Moreover, these stories, particularly those of Macrina, Mary of Egypt, and Pelagia, do not employ the trope of femininity to shame men into proper masculine behavior. Instead, they invite the author, male protagonist, and readers to behave more like them: to perform as both male and female in their ascetic perfection.

Because men already knew how to act (for the most part) as the expectations on their masculinity demanded, they had to figure out how to move like women. in order to ease their audience into such a phenomenon, the authors showed them how their male protagonists would accomplish just such a feat. Basil had to learn to embody feminine silence over masculine rhetoric; Peter mirrored Macrina's "nature" in everything he did; and Zosimus, Nonnus, and

Peter all became prostitutes for God. On this first pass through, the audience inhabited the body of the male protagonist in order to understand how he underwent such changes. Once the author had shown his audience the ropes, however, he eased off his control and let them drop fully into the body of the woman, enabling them to experience her actions for themselves.

When we remember that the audience and framing agents of these ascetic tales are not women at all, male bodies come into view. Suddenly, we can see that they do not float above the narrative but are instead deeply embedded within it. Their bodies and their gender shift throughout the story as they learned from the sex women whom they encountered. At the end of these tales, the men learn to achieve ascetic perfection not by performing solely as men, but as women as well.

CONCLUSION

In the preceding analysis of early Christian asceticism, I have argued that landscape did not merely provide a backdrop for the story, nor did it simply constitute yet another way of intensifying ascetic practice in early Christianity. Instead, hagiographers, writing between the fourth and seventh centuries CE, ranging in location from Gaul to Palestine, elided space, both materially and linguistically, with the ascetics themselves. When Theodoret cast the ascetic Eusebius as a military outpost that thwarted demonic attack and converted vast amount of Christians within the new territory; when former dedicated virgins were unable to give birth because their bodies were sealed like their chambers should have been; and when ascetics used their surroundings to transcend boundaries of human categorization, these individuals and their hagiographers proved that the boundedness of the body did not stop at the skin – that earthen and fleshly materiality had to be taken together to comprehend the full breadth of the ascetic undertaking. Even hagiographers were not free from the effects of space, as their entrance into female abodes enabled them to behave as both men and women in order to achieve ascetic perfection. The omnipresent influence of ascetic space proves that we can no longer attempt to peer around or ignore habitation in favor of the body. Spatial materiality not only reveals a different form of power and gender dynamics, but also pushes back against the idea that the male author was in complete control of, and thus unaffected by, its presence. The construction of ascetics as body-places in late antiquity highlights the mailability of materiality (including the body) and the desire of both author and subject to exist beyond the confines of the physical form.

In order to portray ascetics as body-places, hagiographers first had to show their audiences how such a process occurred. Spatial transformation within these *vitae* became part of the ascetic themself, not just an additional element that helped them to subdue the temptations of

the flesh. Through images of abstinence, limited food intake, and other harsh practices, hagiographers showed how ascetics themselves transformed into fortresses. These individuals were said, and were instructed, to have followed biblical precepts by setting a guard at the entrances to their bodies: at the larger, door-like mouth and genitals, and at the smaller windows of their eyes, ears, and nose. As they continued their disciplined practice of restricting entrance and exit from their bodies, ascetics' very flesh began to take on the materiality of its surroundings. Women often morphed into their bridal chambers, while men transformed into, not just soldiers, but literal bastions for Christianity.

Because late-ancient Romans believed female flesh to be literally weaker than its male counterpart, hagiographers often insisted that human materiality had to be placed in a location suitable to its gendered characteristics in order to be most effective. For this reason, women as body-places were seen as most efficacious within a city or even within her own home. As a bridal chamber, she had to keep watch over her own breast to admit Christ alone, while thwarting all other potential intruders. Because many early episcopal authorities insisted that a woman's body, once breached, could not restore its seal, they argued that only dedicated virgins could meld with their surroundings and offer protection to those outside of themselves.[732] So crucial did some early Christians believe a virgin was for the protection of their households against the forces of darkness, that if a daughter did not dedicate herself, then a female slave could be forced to in her stead. Occasionally, a city's need was so great, and a virgin so divinely favored and powerful, that she could extend her bodily protection to encompass an entire city. As with her own doors and windows, no man was allowed entrance, and even enemies as fearsome as the Huns were thwarted outside the walls.

[732] While church authorities debated whether or not a woman could remain a virgin once she had been raped, no stories exist of raped virgins who were then able to provide protection for either their households or their cities.

In contrast, because men's flesh was seen as inherently less porous than women's and hagiographers concerned themselves less with the penetration of male bodies, virginity was not a requirement for their transformation and their sturdier materiality enabled them to dwell further outside the safety of the city. While rings of monks dwelt around several late-ancient cities, offering their bodily protection as another external wall, other male ascetics, particularly in Egypt and Syria, became outposts for Christianity. After transforming their bodies into garrisons, these men placed themselves atop mountains or on the outskirts of far-flung towns. Here, they established themselves as fortifications, thwarting *daimones* and invading forces who alike broke upon their bodies like water upon rock. As a result, the desert between their barricaded bodies and the larger cities from which they came, was converted to Christianity. The body-places of these male ascetics acted as a *limes*, a physical border defending and separating Christians from the "pagan" world without, while simultaneously acting as a missionary, extending the reach of the church and power of the bishop.

For hagiographers, then, the construction of ascetics as body-places often functioned for their own benefit. The establishment of women as bridal chambers not only re-inscribed gendered norms, but made the women, upon whom men like Jerome depended for their own livelihood, easier to control. In the East in particular, the use of ascetic men as outposts of Christianity enabled bishops to claim command over territories previously outside of their jurisdiction. Yet, hagiographers did not elide body and abode solely for their own benefit, but for that of their audience as well. Many early Christian ascetics spent most of their lives out of sight, hidden inside an abode, or even within a cave or tree. Because a pilgrim would have been far more likely to see an ascetic's hut than an actual ascetic, hagiographers had to show them how to transfer their ability to gain benefit with their eyes to an alternate materiality. In order to

continue to allow pilgrims to continue this practice, hagiographers encouraged them to visualize ascetics place as their face, and to read physiognomy into the landscape.

Early Christians, as Georgia Frank notes, would have been well-versed in the ancient practice of physiognomy.[733] Though pilgrims could not glimpse the flesh within, the rocks and mud revealed its state. The small confines of the huts insinuated the cramped body within; the lack of food revealed its emaciation; and the jutting rocks began to resemble bones themselves. Even the rain pouring from under the ascetic's enclosures or the sun beating mercilessly upon it helped the pilgrim to read flesh into landscape. In this way, hagiographers cast ascetic enclosures as their second skin.

When gazing upon the ascetic body-place, however, the pilgrim not only observed the flesh made manifest, but a biblical past made present. Hagiographers frequently tied ascetics so inextricably to their enclosures that they were both understood to be reborn as tabernacles and also remembered as trees or rivers after their death. As debates over the incarnation of Christ raged across early Christian communities, hagiographers drew on the language of incarnation, particularly from the Gospel of John, not only to describe the process of asceticism, but to reassert "proper" theology.[734] Language of "becoming," "dwelling," "*oikonomia*," and the construction of blessed "tents" litters the descriptions of the formation of ascetic communities, as their own birth at reflects that of the substantiation of Christ in the world. At first, this transformation is linguistic, and hagiographers employ similar verbs and imagery that tie what the pilgrims see to biblical passages and language. Then, the authors encourage their audiences to allow those shared concepts to transform the way they physically see and understand the

[733] Georgia Frank, *Memory of the Eyes*, 134-170.
[734] The "correct" theology, of course, depended on the group in question. See the introduction and chapter 2 for more on this debate.

abodes upon which they look. The combination of ascetic and their dwelling thus had to be seen together, to be read as evoking a biblical past through the elision of body and earth, in order for the pilgrims to gain benefit with their eyes.

Intriguingly, this phenomenon remained so both before and after the death of the ascetic. As monks hid themselves within caves, these structures represented not just death to their old life, but their resurrection as well, as the space enabled their bodies to transcend their fleshly limitations and allowed the pilgrims to comprehend these transformations. Additionally, natural imagery, like trees and running water, came to signify not only the living ascetic body, with their ability to weather even the most ferocious storms by striving always upward to heaven, but also continued to provide life to a community even after the original ascetic had died, the earthen part of his body now providing nourishment for the next community. If ascetics, then, dedicated themselves to their transformation into abode or landscape, their physical presence not only benefited the people they strove to protect, but generations to come. If, however, their bodies and places proved incongruous, disaster could occur.

The inversion of these stories of power proved ubiquitous in early Christianity, as hagiographers explored what would happen if ascetics did not meld with their enclosure. Most frequently, this bodily and spatial incongruity occurred because a female ascetic inhabited a male space. Because this location as not "meant" for her body (at least according to her hagiographers) the place itself actively worked to expel the incongruity from its midst. While sometimes this eviction occurred because of rape, the woman was also frequently accused of "fathering" a child, as she was disguised as a man within the walls of the monastery. Even though many of these women have been deemed "cross-dressing" or even" transvestite" saints, I contend that we must

also consider them transpatial because their transgression of spatial boundaries lead to far more dire consequences than just their male gender performance.[735]

In all of these tales, it becomes immediately apparent that place did not represent mere background in which the action occurred or even an "external of asceticism," but exerted force upon the actors themselves. Mary the Niece of Abraham, for example, was placed within the outer-most room of her uncle's abode, while he took the inner.[736] This misplacement forced Mary, against her own will to behave more like a man and let her guard down. Eventually, she opened her window to hear the whispers of a demon and finally was penetrated by him when she stepped outside her door. The author of this *vita* makes it abundantly clear that Mary did not *want* to behave in such a way, as she repeatedly attempted to turn her back on the death she knew would climb through her window; nevertheless, because she existed in the wrong place, she performed as the incorrect gender and was forced out.

This trope repeats itself in nearly all stories of female ascetics who dress as men in order to enter male monasteries. Many women did not want to be there at all, but knew that the male space would hide their female bodies from the world, at least for a time. In every case, the woman within attempted to continue to perform as a woman (despite their disguises), but were pushed, by the space itself, to behave otherwise. Some were forced to leave the monastery to take care of individuals in other owns, while others had to enter the rooms of lascivious women bent on seducing them. In all cases, the "men" were accused of rape, or attempted rape, and either were expelled from their communities or questioned about their actions.

The hagiographers of these *vitae* make it clear that space itself was responsible for expulsion of these transpatial saints, since few men were aware of their presence and no man was

[735] For a longer explanation on why I prefer the term "transpatial" to "transvestite" see chapter 3.
[736] For more on space as an externalization of asceticism, see Price, *A History of the Monks of Syria,* xxxi-xxxiii.

exiled in the same way.[737] Because these tales cannot end with the simple expulsion of the woman she since has been falsely accused, they almost always close with spatial re-gendering. It is this return to order that ultimately settles the anxiety about bodies in incongruous spaces. While they serve as a warning, they also reassure their audience that the system works; that if they follow spatial guidelines, or immediately rectify them, then they will be welcomed back into paradise where they can achieve remarkable deeds. Such tacit assurance only works, however, if the author is in complete control of the story, for, as these examples have already shown, space often pushed back in unexpected ways.

While the author often had nearly total command over the construction of an ascetic's life to suit his own personal and political ends, one of the few elements over which he occasionally had less say was the ascetic's abode. One could, theoretically at least, have actually visited some of the ascetics in question. This means that while the hagiographers could lay interpretation on top of the enclosures, the ascetic themself may have originally had agency over their place of habitation. Not only, then, did space have some say in the construction of ascetics, but so did observers as well. They would have brought with them not only the interpretations given to them by hagiographers, but the weight of their own physical presence and gaze. Ascetics, then, did not simply consist of their bodies, but as a combination of flesh, abode, and observer. As this system changed over time and agency flowed from one aspect to another, so too did it break and reconstruct categorization of gender, materiality, and mortality.

When we expand our understanding of ascetics to de-center the physical form, they suddenly invite in a crisis of categorization. It helps us to see that the larger system moves in and out of human binaries and pushes back against the idea that seeing is believing. In fact, in most

[737] Some monks were accused of parenting a child, but they were never expelled from their monasteries and always regained their proper standing when the real father of the child was outed. For more on these stories, see chapter 3.

stories of ascetic encounters, gazing upon the ascetic only tells part of the story. Often, these ascetics begin as little more than a mirage in the desert, then shift suddenly into phantoms or some other monstrous form. Only the noonday sun reveals, for a short while, any sort of humanness, before darkness comes and they once against lose their human, and gendered, bounds. Others, like Domnina and Melania, purposefully use their enclosures to play with these categories, as the rotting stalks of millet and flesh-eating maggots reveal that these creatures were dead, that their flesh was once again earth, even though they were still technically alive. Time makes a difference in these stories, and to focus solely on an instance that makes sense to us, where we see what we expect, is to lose the larger picture.

The incomplete evidence of a single moment for revealing the complexity of an ascetic assemblage reveals itself through our reliance upon the narrator for a description of "reality." When he enters an ascetic abode to declare that he can definitively see the male or female body within, he disrupts the entire assemblage, or ascetic system, with his presence. Far from depicting truth, he collapses the complex phenomenon down to his expectations, which depend both on his gender and his authority. Without him there, the ascetic could transcend society's expectations. Women were not only freed from the repression of their physical form, but men like Antony were as well. When no one was looking, they could simultaneously be alive/dead, male/female, and material/immaterial. Only when an observer steps in and fundamentally changes the system does one of the multiple possibilities appear before his eyes.

Problematically, this male interloper, either the author himself or some other protagonist, did not realize that he had any effect on the situation whatsoever. In fact, in most of the tales of early Christian ascetics, the male author floats in and out of the story, apparently disembodied, as he purports to tell of events without affecting the ascetics or them affecting him (physically, at

least). In the wider Roman world this effect of masculinity resulted from the normalization of male bodies and their ability to enter (almost) any space as the somatic norm, resulting in a lessened awareness of their effect on space – and its effect on them – since their bodies were made for the spaces they entered, and vice-versa. But just because they were unaware, as demonstrated through their presence in ascetic space, does not mean that their presence was without consequence. Indeed, in many stories about ascetic women the bodies of male interlopers are affected as much as the ascetics they encounter within space, as men learned to drop their masculinity and behave more like women.[738]

Even though scholars have repeatedly argued that masculinity represented the pinnacle of ascetic perfection, the stories of female ascetics suggest otherwise. When we turn the lens around to the male protagonist whose own journey for ascetic perfection bookends these narratives, we see that it is from the woman *as a woman* that he must learn. While she may exhibit masculine characteristics as well, her physical nature as a flesh-and-blood woman does not just shame men into behaving more "manly" but shows him how to behave like a woman, and thus embody both genders on his pursuit of perfection. The male authors help their male audiences to achieve this goal first by showing them how to drop into, or read themselves as, the other holy men who accomplished just such a task. Gregory of Nyssa's brother Peter learned from birth to behave as both man and woman from Macrina, who was his only teacher, while Basil became "great" after he unlearned the arrogance of masculinity through oration to adopt instead the silent contemplation of women.

[738] As discussed in chapter 5, this space is queer before the man enters the space, but his presence renders it female. This is a crucial step for the man to learn to behave like a woman. He does not, however, prevent the space from becoming queer once more upon his departure.

While it may have been easier to convince a male audience to behave like women who undeniably embodied the pinnacle of Christian asceticism, some of the greatest teachers did not begin life with such pious intentions. Normally studied for their construction of female holiness and repentance, the stories of the "holy harlots" are not actually about these women themselves, but about the men who encountered them. What so astounds Zosimus and Nonnos was not these women's dedication to God (in sharp contrast to Macrina), but their jobs as prostitutes. In wholly public spaces, these women adorned their flesh in such a way as to attract the penetrating gaze of anyone in the vicinity. Their ability and willingness to attract suitors (albeit the wrong kind until they are converted) shames the male protagonists into making *themselves* into prostitutes for God. Though men serve as the first means by which the men drop into the story, ultimately, the audience must learn to identify with and behave as the woman by themselves in order to further their own religious dedication. The space in which these women practiced and, more broadly, the story space itself, made it possible for these men to safely learn to behave as women, with mediated threat to their physical and sexual bodies.

The methodological approaches I have undertaken in this dissertation reveal a great deal, not just about the nature of asceticism, but larger constructs within late antiquity as well. In particular, spatial descriptions abound in treatise on and *vitae* of virgins. If we start taking seriously the description of virgins as place, then we can shift the conversation away from such a narrow focus on the nature of the flesh. As I have shown with the few examples in this dissertation, a virgin as bridal chamber constitutes an entirely different phenomenon than simply a virginal body. In the case of virginal rape, viewing women as buildings can help shift the conversation away from the problematic conception of "consent" and into a discussion of power. The agency of space behaves differently than a person, and likewise often space can be restored

and rebuilt in ways bodies and flesh cannot. If we examine hagiographers use of spatial imagery to describe virgins and when this analogy falls away, perhaps we can also gain insight into the ever-shifting conception of power and agency.

It is to this larger discussion of agency that my dissertation also speaks. Space did not play a role solely in the stories of ascetics, but in the daily lives of Romans across the Empire. If we widen our gaze to look for systems instead of simply at individuals, we can begin to move past the linguistic turn. Space enables us to wrest control from the author and to place it, at least potentially, back within the hands of his subject, or even outside all human actors. It reveals that neither the author's voice, nor the body of his subject, solely determines the narrative of the story. Expanding our perception to take in an event-space, or a system in which agency moves constantly and fluidly between various actors (including space and materiality), enables us to encompass a wider degree of action and power. While we may not be able to regain the voice of many ancient women, perhaps we can look to their space for more of a sense of how they wanted to portray themselves to the world.

Debates surrounding gender and space, however, are not limited to the distant past, but pervade our present. In 2013, female graffiti artists in Egypt began to draw women on walls as a form of resistance.[739] These artists began with a single garage, and after its success as agitator and conversation starter, eventually spread their work across the city in an effort to raise women's issues through graffiti. On these public streets where women's bodies often were not allowed, not only did female artists make their presence known, but the female form, sometimes with free-flowing hair, other times with sensuous features or standing in positions of power, began to dominate the streets. Even when their bodies were absent, women's presence began to

[739] "About WOW 2013," *Women on Walls*, http://womenonwalls.org/in-mansoura-join-us-or-if-you-cant-follow-our-daily-journal-and-flickr/ (accessed November 30, 2018).

dominate cities of Egypt. As this project grew, women began to depict their concerns about issues like female harassment by drawing large images of cats, a derogatory term man hurl at women.[740] This type of visualization made manifest the verbal misogyny and brought its consequence into sharp focus. Suddenly, as architecture, women changed the physicality of their cities. No longer were streets male dominated, as men became painfully aware of their masculinity and that the world was no longer built for their bodies. As with the ascetic who used space to push back against restrictive gender norms, so too did these modern Egyptian women. Walls substantiated their flesh and claimed power in ways their physical bodies alone would not have been capable of doing.

While my study offers suggestions for further theorization of gendered materiality and spatial politics, to these conclusions must be added sexuality and race. Modern American debates over trans people using certain bathrooms reveal not only fear of "deviant" genders and sexualities (the two often becoming conflated), but of the potential of space to hide the "true" identity of the person in the neighboring stall. The intersection of bodies and space causes, particularly the male "norm," to have to recognize suddenly that people not like them may share their same space, thus disrupting, intellectually at least since trans folx[741] have always used bathrooms that coincide with their gender performance, their notion that space was made specifically for them. This same discomfort with the de-normalization of presumed straight, white, cis-male space also reveals itself in politics. The fight for office is a literal fight for space, both in reality and the collective imagination. As President Obama revealed during his two terms, and Hilary Clinton throughout her campaign, the office of the President has always been

[740] "WOW Egypt," *Women on Walls*, http://womenonwalls.org/in-mansoura-join-us-or-if-you-cant-follow-our-daily-journal-and-flickr/ (accessed November 30, 2018).
[741] "Folx" is a gender neutral collective pronoun often preferred by members of the trans and LGBTQ+ community.

deeply racialized and gendered. By recognizing that space is not simply brick and mortar and that bodies have the power to physically disrupt the places they enter, we can see and thus deal with the overlapping complexities of gender, religion, and sexuality as well as the institutionalization of such phenomena. Even when individuals' bodies are not physically present, the public's conception of what a body that occupies such a place *should* look like indisputably affects who they are willing to place there.

The main contention of this dissertation is that the bounds of the body do not stop at the flesh. Early Christian ascetics spent much of their lives behind closed doors, entombed in caves, or out of sight in the desert. While religious leaders attempted to usurp ascetic stories for their own political ends, ultimately these creatures embodied a physical representation which refused strict categorization. This project, then, necessarily rediscovers the "disturbing strangeness" of ascetic bodies first described in Peter Brown's seminal work, *The Body and Society*.[742] To once again evoke scholars' unease and remove our subjects from the banality of the familiar, we must look beyond the flesh to its enclosure. We must forget what we think we know about a body's boundedness and physical makeup, to envision a space where encountering an ascetic meant coming face-to-abode. While, to the modern reader, mud, grass, stone, and wood seem like substances altogether different from the flesh, early Christians began to meld these materials with the human form, transforming a hut or cave into a second skin for the ascetic within.

[742] Peter Brown, *The Body and Society*, xv.

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