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March 2012

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### Recommended Citation

Bledsoe, Jenny (2012) "Hagiographic and Hymnic Representations of Women, Dress, and Identity in the Early Christian East," *Pursuit - The Journal of Undergraduate Research at The University of Tennessee*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 2 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/pursuit/vol3/iss2/7>

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## Hagiographic and Hymnic Representations of Women, Dress, and Identity in the Early Christian East

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*In the early Christian East, as now, dress indicated conformity or nonconformity to social norms, projecting and sometimes concealing the individual's gender and religious identities in a social context and indicating their position in the Church hierarchy. In the vitae of female saints Pelagia of Antioch, Anastasia, and Mary of Egypt and the hymns of Ephrem the Syrian, dress also functioned as a textual device to illustrate fundamental changes in the life of the individual Christian and, especially in the case of Ephrem, to convey theological truths about virginity and the relationship between Christ and humanity to an audience of believers. Texts such as the hagiographies and hymns explored in this article were not merely enjoyable for readers or listeners. Rather, such texts were used in liturgy or at least closely associated with ecclesiastical life, and thus they were instructive of the proper ways in which the authors thought ordinary Christians ought to live.*

### Introduction

In the early Christian East, as now, dress indicated conformity or nonconformity to social norms, projecting and sometimes concealing the individual's gender and religious identities in a social context and indicating their position in the Church hierarchy. In the *vitae* of female saints Pelagia of Antioch, Anastasia, and Mary of Egypt and the hymns of Ephrem the Syrian, dress also functioned as a textual device to illustrate fundamental changes in the life of the individual Christian and, especially in the case of Ephrem, to convey theological truths about virginity and the relationship between Christ and humanity to an audience of believers. Keeping several theoretical approaches – the sociology of the body as defined by Bryan Turner and the study of the “social aspects of dress,” as Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins and Joanne Bubolz Eicher termed it – in mind will be useful to an overall understanding of the ways in which dress and the body itself functioned in early Christian communities

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in the East and in texts produced in these communities. Texts such as the hagiographies and hymns explored below were not merely enjoyable for readers or listeners. Rather, such texts were used in liturgy or at least closely associated with ecclesiastical life, and thus they were instructive of the proper ways in which the authors thought ordinary Christians ought to live.

## Theoretical Background

### Sociology of the Body

The sociology of the body is a relatively new focus in the discipline of sociology at large. In his formative 1984 study, Bryan Turner defines the sociology of the body as follows:

[A] sociology of the body is a study of the problem of social order and it can be organized around four issues. These are the reproduction and regulation of populations in time and space, and the restraint and representation of the body as a vehicle of self. ... The sociology of the body is consequently an analysis of how certain cultural polarities are politically enforced th[r]ough the institutions of sex, family and patriarchy.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, Turner is concerned with the ways in which institutional hierarchies manipulate the body in order to restrain group and individual identity, among other ways in which the body is controlled. Turner's sociological approach to the body engages with the physical body as a locus of power: "In modern societies, power has a specific focus, namely the body which is the product of political/power relationships. The body as an object of power is produced in order to be controlled, identified and reproduced."<sup>2</sup> Further, Turner sees the interplay between political power and the body as fundamentally a struggle for control over the sexualized female body: "The sociology of the body turns out to be crucially a sociological study of the control of sexuality, specifically female sexuality by men exercising patriarchal power."<sup>3</sup> Turner's postulations are key to this paper's approach to the body and the role of dress in defining identity and enforcing or subverting orthodox standards for the social presentation of the body.

### Dress and Identity

Although I will use terms such as "clothing," "garments," and "adornments" throughout the paper, a single general term – dress – encompasses all of these outward signifiers of social, religious, and gender identities. As defined by Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins and Joanne B. Eicher,

dress of an individual is an assemblage of modifications of the body and/or supplements to the body. Dress, so defined, includes a long list of possible direct modification of the body such as coiffed hair, colored skin, pierced ears, and scented breath, as well as an equally long list of garments, jewelry, accessories, and other categories of items added to the body as supplements.<sup>4</sup>

This broad definition of dress encompasses all potential outward signifiers of inward identity, whether biologically consistent or not, for the female saints we will examine below. For example, as we will see with Mary of Egypt, darkened, weathered skin is for her a form of dress and a signification of her ascetic identity. Terms such as "garment" and "clothing"

are not all-encompassing enough for some of the forms of dress exhibited by these early Christian women.

Dress is not merely a signification of inward identity for the individual herself; it is also a projection of the identities that these women hope to present to those with whom they interact socially. In fact, individual identities are defined through social interactions with other people:

From the perspective of symbolic interaction theory, individuals acquire identities through social interaction in various social, physical, and biological settings. So conceptualized, identities are communicated by dress as it announces social positions of wearer to both wearer and observers within a particular interaction situation.<sup>5</sup>

Dress also indicates the position of the wearer within social hierarchies,<sup>6</sup> which for the purpose of this study are primarily Church or religious hierarchies. In many cases, the communication of identity begins with dress rather than speech: “dress has a certain priority over verbal discourse in communicating identity since it ordinarily sets the stage for subsequent verbal communication.”<sup>7</sup> Thus dress serves a primary role in the presentation and formation of individual identity within a social context.

In order to adhere to the expectations of the early Church hierarchy, female virgins had to meet expectations for “proper,” or orthodox, dress. Dress was much more than an individual choice: “All of the virgin’s behaviors and the appearance of her body itself become . . . emblematic of her social status and her allegiances, rather than the simple results of individual whim or undisciplined self-styling.”<sup>8</sup> The saints examined below all cross-dressed for different lengths of time and for different reasons. Their choices to don male dress constitute a gender transgression in a conservative society. It is important to remember the fluctuation of social norms throughout history and the difficulty to separate oneself from the expectations of one’s culture. Remaining cognizant of the cultural specificity of dress and the presentation of the body, one can hope to gain insights into the ideology and social norms of a foreign culture. In the case of these early Christian women, it is also possible to consider the ways in which they conformed to or transgressed standards of dress within their society:

For if a body can be reshaped to accommodate a particular society, it can also be partially wrested from that society’s control by an individual who has achieved enough power to redesign it according to her or his desires. In order to conceptualize how societies and individuals seize (or relinquish) the power necessary to reconstruct the human form, it is useful to employ the view that the body may be compared to a literary or ethnographic text which may be read closely for the ideological assumptions of its culture.<sup>9</sup>

What may seem to be the one of the most basic aspects of bodily identity – biological sex – may also be considered a social construction and thus another identity that the individual may choose to project or disguise:

Around the external reproductive apparatus (female or male), a material and symbolic structure is elaborated, destined first to express, then to emphasize, and finally to separate the sexes. This construction duplicates a material social relationship that is not at all symbolic—the sociosexual division of labor and the social

distribution of power. Such a construction makes men and women appear to be heterogeneous, that is, essentially different. This material and symbolic structure implies a constant intervention by social institutions throughout the life of the individual, beginning at birth and even before birth, ever since it has been possible to know the sex of an infant in the womb. The intervening social construction is inscribed in the body itself. The body is constructed as a sexed body.<sup>10</sup>

Key to our discussion of the interplay between dress and the performance of gender, it will be important to consider the potential ambiguities in seemingly basic characteristics of physical identity, such as biological sex.

### **Dress as Symbol of Social Status**

As discussed above, dress communicates individual identity in a social context. This certainly holds true in religious communities, just as it does in almost any social environment. In terms of power dynamics, dress often functions to signify differing levels of power among members of a community.<sup>11</sup> Bishops, priests, and monks wear different clothing to exhibit their individual placements within the Church hierarchy. All of the female saints examined below were ascetics living independently of religious communities, but two of them (Pelagia and Anastasia) wore uniforms to show their role in the social hierarchy of the Church. Writing about monk's clothing specifically, Rebecca Krawiec describes the seemingly straightforward nature of monastic dress:

[A]t first glance, monastic dress would seem to be a stable marker of unambiguous monastic identity. There is a shared generic portrayal of the properly attired monk – a person, male or female, who has changed into an identifiable garment, usually drab or dark, that becomes tattered and worn over time as evidence of the success of the monk's ascetic practices.<sup>12</sup>

As will be apparent in the saints' lives below, monastic dress is sometimes deceptive and subversive of the underlying gender and religious identities of the wearer.

## **Female Saints, Dress, and Identity**

### **The Saints**

Pelagia of Antioch, Anastasia, and Mary of Egypt, all saints in Eastern Christian traditions, lived as ascetics independent of monastic communities. Their *vitae* highlight key identity-defining moments in these women's lives with the exchange, putting on, or taking off of clothing. Pelagia changes clothing multiple times: first, she exchanges her dress as a prostitute for the garments of a recently baptized Christian; second, she takes off her baptismal garments and puts on male clothing in order to live as an anchorite; finally, religious leaders remove her male clothing and expose her underlying biological sex, although her exemplary religious identity remains the same.<sup>13</sup> In order to avoid being added to the emperor Justinian's royal court and to commit herself to an independent ascetic life, Anastasia, whose story takes place in Egypt but was popular in Syria, puts on male clothing and becomes a desert ascetic.<sup>14</sup> Mary of Egypt wore away her clothing and weathered her skin through ascetic practice in the desert. Although Mary converted to Christianity long before her encounter with Zosimas, Zosimas both gives her his own cloak and makes her ascent to heaven possible by administering the Eucharistic sacrament just before her death.

Thus, clothing functions as an indicator of gender and religious identities in the hagiographies of these female saints of early Eastern Christian traditions.

### **Dress as Expression of Gender and Religious Identities**

Clothing imagery appears frequently in the hagiographies of Pelagia, Anastasia, and Mary. Beginning with Pelagia and Mary, the so-called holy harlots, clothing and adornment of their female bodies affect the presentation of their gender and religious identities. Pelagia and Mary use clothing and adornment as markers of identity for the outside world. As “sinful,” sexual women Pelagia and Mary present themselves as such through their outward appearance, later modifying their appearance to adapt to newly adopted gender and religious identities.

Pelagia, “decked out with gold ornaments, pearls, and all sorts of precious stones, resplendent in luxurious and expensive clothes,” clearly represents the whore of Babylon.<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, Pelagia’s shamelessness is described as manly. Although she displays the supposed sexual weakness of a female body, even at the beginning of her tale the author configures Pelagia as manly because of her shameless presentation of her body. As bishop Nonnos laments Pelagia’s sinfulness and his own, he reflects on the necessity of Christian adornment. Although these are not physical adornments, Nonnos advocates that Christians’ souls be “adorn[ed] with good habits so that Christ may desire to dwell in us.”<sup>16</sup> When begging Nonnos to baptize her, Pelagia seeks to cleanse her religious identity, asking for “pure garments, the beautiful dress for the novel banquet to which I have come.”<sup>17</sup> She casts off her “dirty clothing of prostitution” in favor of Christian garb, both physical and spiritual.<sup>18</sup> Finally, Pelagia requests Nonnos’s own clothing in order to present her new identity as a Christian and a woman who has rejected her “weak” feminine sexuality and disguised her biological sex.<sup>19</sup>

Mary’s hagiography is less focused on clothing than Pelagia’s but still contains several interesting moments in which her identity is defined by the clothing or lack of clothing she wears. As Zosimias sees Mary for the first time, the author describes her body in the following way: “It was naked, the skin dark as if burned up by the heat of the sun.”<sup>20</sup> Although her body is naked, her sex is unclear, as the author refers to her as “it.” Her dark, burned up skin is a type of dress. Her skin shows her religious commitment and identity as an ascetic Christian. In order to protect her body from Zosimias’s gaze, Mary exhibits a “feminine” sense of shame for her sexualized body. Thus, she asks the priest to give her his cloak.<sup>21</sup> Before Mary’s conversion, she was poor and did not seem overly concerned with her clothing, unlike Pelagia.<sup>22</sup> Mary continues to wear Zosimias’s cloak until her death. Zosimias buries Mary, whose body is “uncovered by anything but the tattered cloak.”<sup>23</sup> Although Mary did not seek to disguise her sex with clothing, she is ultimately buried in a man’s cloak. This perhaps indicates that she has overcome her femaleness in death, as the label “holy woman” was a contradiction in her culture. Thus, dress serves as a means to perform gender and religious identities in the *vitae* of Pelagia and Mary, although these identities are not always clearly defined for the woman or her observers.

The usage of pronouns in the *vitae* of these female saints also proves interesting. When Zosimas first sees Mary, the author describes her as an “it” because of the ambiguous sex of her naked body.<sup>24</sup> In Pelagia’s Life, the narrator refers to her with feminine pronouns after he discovers her underlying biological sex. This use of feminine pronouns seems to suggest the immutability of sex and gender, at least for this narrator. In the Life of Anastasia, however, Daniel of Skete describes Anastasia with male pronouns even though he has always known that she was biologically a woman. The writer of Anastasia’s

*vita* seems to have a different viewpoint than the author of Pelagia's. Through her ascetic practice and the wearing of male clothing, Anastasia becomes at least spiritually male in Daniel's eyes. The complicated gender identities in these *vitae* might have proved confusing for audiences. While hagiographies establish behavioral models for the audience, these models are not necessarily consistent with the actual actions of the saints but rather with the spirit of the saint's Life. Writing of the role of monastic clothing in constituting the identity of monks in the early Christian East, Rebecca Krawiec explains the variations in authors' presentation and judgment of monastic clothing:

Rather than a set marker, these narratives reveal a range of attitudes and ideas toward both monastic clothing and monastic identity. Within these accounts, different opinions over what constituted appropriate dress for monks indicate tensions between emerging notions of ascetic values. Contradictions about monastic clothing – its appearance and its symbolic meaning – reveal ancient authors' anxiety about possible transgressions of boundaries this new 'social rank' could create. Moreover, because the meaning of the clothing lies in how it was decoded, misunderstandings could lead to a mistaken identity – something the writers needed to guard against.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, the authors of these hagiographies were not necessarily advocating the cross-dressing of their Christian followers, as this was a complicated question of gender identity, but rather they were illustrating the radical changes possible for those who chose to convert to Christianity.

The scenes in which Pelagia and Anastasia change clothing are conversion moments in the texts. Writing of holy women donning men's clothing, Delcourt explains that in many Lives of female saints "transvestism denotes breaking with a former existence."<sup>26</sup> At baptism, Pelagia exchanges her dress as a prostitute for the dress of a recently baptized Christian.<sup>27</sup> When she decides to commit herself to an ascetic life, she changes from her baptismal garments into bishop Nonnos's own clothing in order to present her new identity as a seemingly male anchorite.<sup>28</sup> Anastasia's change of clothing also symbolizes a change of identity. As she puts on male clothing, she begins her life as an ascetic – also seemingly male – who lives in a cave in the desert.<sup>29</sup> Mary's putting on of Zosimas's cloak is not necessarily a conversion moment, but it does lead to her receiving the Eucharist and thus being able to enter heaven at her death, which makes her initial meeting with Zosimas a key turning point for her identity as a Christian.

### **Dress and Male Authority**

In the *vitae* of Sts Pelagia of Antioch, Mary of Egypt, and Anastasia, these holy women obtain male clothing from male Christian leaders with whom they are acquainted. They do not merely find or make male clothing for themselves. Pelagia of Antioch asks for pieces of bishop Nonnos's clothing, and he willingly gives them to her.<sup>30</sup> Mary of Egypt asks Zosimas for his cloak in order to "cover at least a part of her body."<sup>31</sup> Daniel of Skete notes in Anastasia's life that he gave her a cave in which to live and that he was aware of her cross-dressing.<sup>32</sup> It is not clear whether Daniel actually gave Anastasia clothing from his own wardrobe, but he certainly does consent to her wearing men's clothing, as do the other male figures in these narratives. Thus, the primary male characters in the *vitae* consent to and even facilitate the cross-dressing of these female saints. In this way, the male authority figures allow these women to alter their outward appearance in order to conceal their biological sex, thus legitimizing their disguises.

The religious authority granted by male monastic clothing becomes particularly important when these holy women die. Pelagia's female body is only discovered as female when Christian leaders prepare her body for burial.<sup>33</sup> Her Life does not explicitly describe her burial clothing, but it is only at the moment of death that her true religious and gender identities are revealed. At her death, Mary appears "naked and uncovered by anything but the tattered cloak which had been given to her by Zosimas."<sup>34</sup> Only through Zosimas is Mary able to receive the Eucharistic sacrament necessary for her salvation. Additionally, Zosimas's cloak also serves as a marker of male approval of Mary's chosen mode of ascetic practice. Interestingly, Anastasia is buried in two layers of clothing, both male. First, she wears the male monastic garb she donned upon her transition to life as a desert ascetic. Daniel places his own garment on top of Anastasia's original garment as a second layer of clothing and also as additional support for her holy character.<sup>35</sup> Anastasia's own clothing and ascetic practice exhibit her holiness, but Daniel's garment adds another layer of legitimacy – truly male legitimacy – to Anastasia's body.

While each female saint used clothing in different ways, dress functioned in all of these stories to signify gender and religious identity, as well as placement within a social hierarchy. Cross-dressing not only concealed the biological sex of these early Christian women, but also complicated the audience's understanding of what it means to be male and female. Functioning within the Church hierarchy, though somewhat outside it because of their status as independent ascetics, dress served as an indicator of social and political power for these women. Pelagia's and Anastasia's changes of clothing marked transformative moments in the texts of their Lives, and male clothing functioned in all three lives as a marker of spiritual authority.

### **Ephrem the Syrian's Clothing Imagery**

A deacon in the Syriac Christian tradition, Ephrem the Syrian (ca. 306-373 C.E.) is the best-known writer of this Eastern branch of Christianity. Ephrem was born and lived in Nisibis most of his life but moved to Edessa when the Roman Empire lost Nisibis to the Persian Empire in 363 C.E. In his influential writings, he expressed his theological perspective in both metered sermons (*memre*) and hymns (*madrashe*). Kathleen McVey explains the significance of Ephrem's writings to Syriac-speaking Christianity: "His hymns, incorporated early into the liturgy, have remained central in both the East and West Syrian liturgical traditions. From this paramount position they have exerted a formative influence on all aspect of ecclesiastical life."<sup>36</sup> Many themes repeat throughout his writing, including mirror imagery, a theology of divine names, and, notably for this study, clothing imagery. Ephrem used clothing imagery both to explain theological truths to his community and to influence the behavior of his followers.

Throughout his hymns, Ephrem the Syrian typically uses clothing metaphors to narrate the salvation story. Ephrem and other Syriac authors depict four main biblical scenes with clothing imagery to illustrate the exchanges God and humankind make to cleanse humanity of its sinfulness. First, prior to the Fall, Adam and Eve wear "robes of glory/light" in Paradise. Second, as a result of the Fall, Adam and Eve are stripped of these robes of glory/light. Brock explains that Syriac tradition "is primarily concerned with what they took off [not what they put on] at this point." Thus the focus remains on heavenly garments rather than earthly, sinful ones. Third, God places Christ in a body in order to "re clothe mankind in the robe of glory." This event takes place when God descends into the Jordan, "for it is then that Christ deposits the 'robe of glory/light' in the water, thus making it



available once again for mankind to put on in baptism.” Fourth and finally, Ephrem and other Syriac authors write of the believer’s baptism as the moment at which she puts on the garment which Christ left for her: “[W]hen he or she is baptized, the Christian is himself going down into the Jordan waters and from them he picks up and puts on the ‘robe of glory’ which Christ left there.”<sup>37</sup>

Although the soteriological imagery described above is Ephrem’s most common usage of clothing metaphors, he also uses clothing and adornment imagery when writing of female virginity. I will use Ephrem’s first three *Hymns on Virginity*,<sup>38</sup> which illustrate generally the metaphorical putting on and taking off of clothing connected to virginity and/or chastity, and hymns 14, 16, and 28 of his *Hymns on the Nativity*,<sup>39</sup> which talk specifically about garments and the virginity of Mary the mother of Jesus. These six hymns situate the female virgin in relationship to Christ and illustrate her proper role in the Church community at large.

### **Ephrem’s First Three *Hymns on Virginity***

As with the discussion of dress in the context of the three *vitae* above, Ephrem also presented his clothing imagery as a communal, rather than an individual, projection of religious identity, as Kathleen McVey explains in her introduction to Ephrem’s *Hymns on Virginity*:

Ephrem’s poetry is based upon a vision of the world as a vast system of symbols or mysteries. No person, thing or event in the world exists without a mysterious relation to the whole. History and nature constitute the warp and woof of reality. To divorce an individual from its context in either direction would destroy the handiwork of God in time and space. Each moment of life is governed by the Lord of life and is an opportunity to see oneself and the community in relation to that Lord. . . . In creating the world God deliberately presented us not only with examples of beauty and order but also with symbols that allude more richly to the identity of their creator.<sup>40</sup>

While the virgin is inextricably a component of the whole body of believers, she also has a special relationship to Christ, which Ephrem describes in terms of clothing imagery. McVey writes of the female virgin’s situation within the biblical framework of salvation Ephrem expresses through clothing metaphors:

Likewise it is the virgin who has most fully stripped off the old Adam to put on the new at baptism. Her body is clothed in a new garment; it is the temple of God and his royal palace. However strongly Ephrem admonishes the virgin to preserve her sexual innocence, it is clear that this is not an end in itself, but rather it is symbolic of the full dedication of self to God, which is the goal of every Christian life.<sup>41</sup>

Thus, in his *Hymns on Virginity*, Ephrem situates the virgin in a favored, yet precarious, relationship to Christ. Her relationship to Christ is precarious because of the fleeting nature of physical virginity.

Ephrem writes several times of the biblical story in which Amnon deceives and rapes Tamar. Ephrem describes Tamar’s grief over her lost virginity in terms of dress: “Tamar tore her garments when she saw her pearl had perished. / Instead of her tunic she could acquire another, / but her virginity did not have a successor, / because it is not able, if stolen to be sought out again.”<sup>42</sup> Tamar’s outward appearance expresses her inward discontent. Although she remains silent after her rape, her torn clothing expresses the emotions that she cannot: “Tamar feared to be silent, but she was also ashamed to

speak. / Since she was able neither to be silent nor to speak, / she tore her garments so the visible shreds / would cry out in silence that her hidden sign of virginity were stolen.”<sup>43</sup> Ephrem also compares insignificant outward adornments to the most important, inward adornment Tamar has lost: “The multitude of pearls on her did not console her / about that one greatest [pearl].”<sup>44</sup> Ephrem frequently describes virginity as a pearl, which alludes to the importance of inward or metaphorical adornment, i.e. chastity, for the Christian virgin. Indeed, Ephrem writes that “the adornments of the spirit are hidden in the soul.”<sup>45</sup> So, while Ephrem argues that inward chastity is most important to Christ, outward virginity is also vital and very easy to lose.

Especially in the *Hymns on the Nativity* in which he writes about the virginity of Mary the mother of Jesus, Ephrem is concerned with outward proof of virginity, as we will see. In his third *Hymn on Virginity*, Ephrem tells virgins that although on earth they are accountable to their families to prove their virginity, they must ultimately be able to prove their virginity to Christ with bodily evidence:

It is written that if a husband renounces his wife, her father should bring out her proof of virginity, / but since your Betrothed is the High One Who sees in secret, / show the hidden proof of virginity in secret to your hidden Lord— / not on your cloth but on your body. / Rejected women show proof of virginity on a cloth; let you show your proof of virginity to your Betrothed.<sup>46</sup>

Here, Ephrem indicates that while clothing may prove virginity to those on earth, the body must provide evidence of virginity to Christ. In this way, the body itself is more important than the outward social presentation of it, at least in terms of female virginity.

Additionally, Ephrem’s first *Hymn on Virginity* uses clothing imagery to illustrate the Christian conversion process. Encouraging his listeners to discard old habits in favor of Christian behaviors, Ephrem describes Satan as if attached to the virgin’s skin. The virgin must remove Satan from her body in order to keep her new Christian garment clean. Otherwise, his presence underneath her clothing – in or on her body – will ruin the outward projection of her Christian identity:

O body, strip off the utterly hateful old man, / lest he wear out again the new [garment] you put on when you were baptized. / For it would be the inverse of paying his due / that he, if renewed, should wear you out again. / O body, obey my advice; strip him off by [your] way of life, / lest he put you on by [his] habits.<sup>47</sup>

While the converted virgin puts on Christ, Christ also puts on her body as a temple to Him: “He, the Carpenter of life, Who by His blood formed and built a temple for His dwelling. / Do not allow that old man / to dwell in the renewed temple. / O body, if you have God live in your Temple, / you will also become His royal palace.”<sup>48</sup> If the virgin keeps her Christian dress unsoiled by sin and protects the pearl of her virginity, she will gain a heavenly adornment as a reward: “Your way of life made light of youth in the contest, / so that the crown might adorn your old age.”<sup>49</sup> In this way, dress functions as a marker of Christian identity throughout the physical and spiritual life of the female virgin.

### **Three of Ephrem’s *Hymns on the Nativity***

The selected *Hymns on the Nativity* – 14, 16, and 28 – primarily discuss the virginity of Mary the mother of Jesus. McVey explains Ephrem’s strategic presentation of Mary in these hymns: “Ephrem’s choice of types for Mary and his argument on her behalf are motivated in part by a desire to defend the virgin birth from criticism or ridicule.”<sup>50</sup> Ephrem

writes that the earthly proof of virginity was established specifically to prove the virginity of Mary. Ephrem shows sympathy for women falsely accused of improperly losing their virginity. He particularly chastises the Jews for their “slander” of Mary and their apparent refusal to believe in the truth of her virginity:

God saw how much the unclean people [the Jewish people in the Old Testament], / whoring and envious, / were slanderous, but He had pity / upon women. For our sake / He increased His stratagems among the slanderers. / If her spouse should hate her, / he was to write to dismiss her, and if he were jealous, / they tested her [with] water, and if he slandered her / [her father] presented the cloth. All slander / was frustrated in the presence of Mary, who was sealed. / Moses had already exposed / how slanderous they were, for although cloths / of virgins are possessed by their families, / they have accused them and killed them. / How much more they slandered the mother of the Son! / By water ordeals and by cloths / He taught them, so that when the Lord of conceptions / came to them, and they slandered that womb / in which he dwelt, pure evidence of virginity / concerning her conception would convince us about it.<sup>51</sup>

Thus, Ephrem presents Mary’s virginity as miraculous yet empirically evident to followers of Christ. Ephrem repeatedly writes of tests of virginity seemingly to show the imperviousness of Mary to the slander of unbelievers.

While Ephrem was concerned with decrying the Jews’ lack of belief in Mary’s virginity, he was also interested to explore theological issues such as the relationship between Mary and Jesus, which he illustrates with clothing imagery. In the sixteenth *Hymn on the Nativity*, Ephrem writes as if Mary is conversing with Christ and questioning her relationship to Him:

What can I call You, a stranger to us, / Who was from us? Shall I call You Son? / Shall I call You Brother? Shall I call You Bridegroom? / Shall I call you Lord, O [You] Who brought forth His mother / [in] another birth out of the water? / For I am [Your] sister from the House of David, / who is a second father. Again, I am mother / because of Your conception, and bride am I / because of your chastity. Handmaiden and daughter / of blood and water [am I] whom You redeemed and baptized. / Son of the Most High Who came and dwelt in me, / [in] another birth, He bore me also / [in] a second birth. I put on the glory of Him / Who put on the body, the garment of His mother. / Amnon disgraced Tamar who was / from the House of David, and virginity / fell and perished from the house of both of them. / My pearl, placed in Your treasury, / has not perished, for You have put it on.<sup>52</sup>

While Mary gave birth to Jesus, Christ also gave birth to her in baptism. While Jesus put on Mary’s body as a garment during her pregnancy, Mary also put on Christ in baptism. Also, Mary transferred her pearl, her virginity, to Christ, who now wears her pearl as an adornment on his own person. Kathleen McVey elaborates on the complicated theological significance of the clothing imagery Ephrem uses to describe Mary’s relationship to Jesus/Christ:

[L]ike all Christians, in baptism Mary put on the “glory” of Christ, the glorious body that had been lost at the Fall. Conversely, in the incarnation, Christ put on

the garment of the body made for him by his mother. Through the paradox that the mother of Jesus is also his daughter, Ephrem has led us back once more to the mysteries of the incarnation and the virginity of Mary.<sup>53</sup>

Ephrem reiterates the reciprocal ways in which Mary clothed Jesus and Christ clothed her: "Although He was begotten, indeed He was in you / so that entirely gazing out from your members / was His brightness, and upon your beauty was spread / His love, and upon all of you He was stretched out. / You wove a garment for Him, but His glory extended / over all your senses."<sup>54</sup> Although this clothing imagery is complicated by the role of Mary as the mother of Jesus, in Ephrem's view all Christian believers put on Christ in baptism, and metaphorically the believers had also given the physical human body as a garment for Christ in the Incarnation.

As mentioned above, the Christian virgin has a special relationship with Christ: "For Ephrem, the virgin exemplifies most perfectly the concentration on the inner presence of Christ that leads to the full restoration of the *imago dei*."<sup>55</sup> Just as Mary served as a garment for Christ during her pregnancy, female virgins also serve a special metaphorical purpose in the attire of Christ: "May all evidences of virginity of Your brides / be preserved by You. They are the purple [robes] / and no one may touch them / except our King. For virginity / is like a vestment for You, the High Priest."<sup>56</sup> Christ, the High Priest, thus wears the bodies of virgins as a metaphorical liturgical garment. Thus, female virgins play an important role in the Church itself by virtue of their outstanding commitment to the preservation of their virginity and their resulting reward in heaven.

In these selected hymns from Ephrem's larger collections, Ephrem illustrates the roles of individual Christian believers in the Church. By using clothing imagery, Ephrem highlights the favored position of the female virgin and also argues for the true virginity of Mary the mother of Jesus. Ephrem's hymns thus function as a guide for female virgins and for his congregation as a whole. In his writings on the virginity of Mary, Ephrem teaches his audience orthodox theological ways of understanding Mary's virginity and her relationship to Christ. Ephrem's hymns express the theological truths of the Incarnation of Christ and the soteriological course of the Christian life by using clothing imagery to describe the role of the female virgin in the Church.

## Conclusion

Both Ephrem's hymns and the *vitae* of female saints construct the proper roles for female virgins and other members of the Church community by means of clothing imagery. Dress functions as an indicator of gender, religious, and other identities of the individual in the social context of the Church, while also placing the individual within the hierarchy of ecclesiastical power. For Ephrem, clothing imagery establishes the favored but precarious role of the female virgin and elaborates on theological truths concerning Christ's relationship to humanity. In the Lives of Pelagia of Antioch, Anastasia, and Mary of Egypt, changes of clothing function as a textual device that marks major transformative moments in the narratives. These early Christian women used dress to project their identities to their communities and sometimes to conceal their biological sex. While authors frequently wrote of the cross-dressing of female saints, their goal for the audience was not to encourage the concealment of sex but rather to show the transformative power of Christian conversion.

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## Endnotes

- 1 Bryan S. Turner, *The Body and Society: Exploration in Social Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), 41.
- 2 Turner, 34.
- 3 Turner, 115.
- 4 Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins and Joanne B. Eicher, "Dress and Identity," *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* 10.4 (Summer 1992): 1.
- 5 Roach-Higgins and Eicher, 5.
- 6 Roach-Higgins and Eicher, 5-6.
- 7 Roach-Higgins and Eicher, 7.
- 8 Teresa Shaw, "Askesis and the Appearance of Holiness," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6.3 (Fall 1998): 487.
- 9 Catherine B. Burroughs and Jeffrey David Ehrenreich, "Introduction: Reading the Social Body," In *Reading the Social Body*, Eds. Catherine B. Burroughs and Jeffrey David Ehrenreich (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 1993), 4.

10 Colette Guillaumin, "The Constructed Body," In *Reading the Social Body*, Trans. Diane Griffin Crowder, Eds. Catherine B. Burroughs and Jeffrey David Ehrenreich (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 1993), 40.

11 Mary Ellen Roach and Joanne Bubolz Eicher, "The Language of Personal Adornment." In *The Fabrics of Culture: The Anthropology of Clothing and Adornment*, Eds. Justine M. Cordwell and Ronald A. Schwarz (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1979), 17.

12 Rebecca Krawiec, "'Garments of Salvation': Representations of Monastic Clothing in Late Antiquity." *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 17.1 (Spring 2009): 126-27.

13 Sebastian Brock and Susan Ashbrook Harvey, eds., "Pelagia," In *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), Ch. 23, 41, and 49. Brock describes the widespread popularity of Pelagia's Life: "The Syriac Life is a translation from Greek, and it happens to be the earliest extant witness to the text. The Life of Pelagia was a great literary success – and deservedly so. It also served as the starting point for a number of later hagiographical texts of purely fictitious character. Translation into many different languages exist, and the work proved especially popular in the West during the Middle Ages" (Brock, "Pelagia," 41).

14 Sebastian Brock and Susan Ashbrook Harvey, eds., "Anastasia," In *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), Ch. 8. Writing of the close link between monastic circles in Egypt and Syria, Brock explains the context of Anastasia's *vita*: "Although this Life is set in Egypt, rather than Syria, it belongs to a cycle that proved both popular and influential in the Syriac milieu" (Brock, "Anastasia," 142).

15 "Pelagia," Ch. 4-6.

16 "Pelagia," Ch. 10.

17 "Pelagia," Ch. 23.

18 "Pelagia," Ch. 23.

19 "Pelagia," Ch. 41.

20 "The Life of our Holy Mother Mary of Egypt," In *Internet Medieval Source Book*, available at <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/maryegypt.html>, accessed 14 October 2010, 3.

21 "Mary of Egypt," 3.

22 "Mary of Egypt," 5-6.

23 "Mary of Egypt," 12.

24 "Mary of Egypt," 3.

25 Krawiec, 128.

26 Marie Delcourt, "Female Saints in Masculine Clothing," In *Hermaphrodite: Myths and Rites of the Bisexual Figure in Classical Antiquity* (London: Studio Books, 1961), 90.

27 "Pelagia," Ch. 23.

28 "Pelagia," Ch. 41.

29 "Anastasia," Ch. 8.

30 "Pelagia," Ch. 41.

31 "Mary of Egypt," 3.

32 "Anastasia," Ch. 8.

33 "Pelagia," Ch. 49.

34 "Mary of Egypt," 12.

35 "Anastasia," Ch. 7.

36 Kathleen E. McVey, trans., *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 3.

37 Sebastian Brock, "Clothing Metaphors as a Means of Theological Expression in Syriac Tradition," In *Typus, Symbol, Allegorie bei den Östlichen Vätern und ihren Parallele im Mittelalter* (1982): 12.

38 All quotations from Ephrem's *Hymns on Virginity* are from Kathleen E. McVey, trans., *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989). In footnotes, the *Hymns on Virginity* are henceforth referred to as *HVirg*.

39 All quotations from Ephrem's *Hymns on the Nativity* are from Kathleen E. McVey, trans., *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989). In footnotes, the *Hymns on the Nativity* are henceforth referred to as *HNat*.

- 40 McVey, 41.
- 41 McVey, 45-46.
- 42 *HVirg*. 2.4.
- 43 *HVirg*. 2.5.
- 44 *HVirg*. 2.5.
- 45 *HVirg*. 2.14.
- 46 *HVirg*. 3.13.
- 47 *HVirg*. 1.1.
- 48 *HVirg*. 1.2.
- 49 *HVirg*. 2.13.
- 50 McVey, 33.
- 51 *HNat*. 14.11-14.
- 52 *HNat*. 16.9-12.
- 53 McVey, 141.
- 54 *HNat*. 28.7.
- 55 McVey, 45.
- 56 *HNat*. 16.13.

### About the Author

**Jenny Bledsoe** graduated from the University of Tennessee in the spring of 2011 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in honors religious studies and honors English literature with minors in Latin and history. As an undergraduate at UT, she was the editor-in-chief of *Pursuit* and the *Daily Beacon* and was honored as a Torchbearer, UT's highest student honor. Jenny is currently a first-year Master of Theological Studies candidate at Harvard Divinity School, with a focus on religion, literature, and culture. Her research interests lie particularly in literature, religion, and gender in late medieval Western Europe. Jenny loves to delve into the mysteries of a centuries-old culture and has received several rewards for her work, including two UT Chancellor's Citations for Undergraduate Research in the Humanities. Jenny has presented her research at eight academic conferences and had her article, "Feminine Images of Jesus: Later Medieval Christology and the Devaluation of the Feminine," published in the *Intermountain West Journal of Religious Studies*. In May 2011, Jenny completed a senior honors thesis, "Imagining Devotion in Late Medieval England: Narratives of the Life of St Margaret of Antioch," in which she explored the cult of St Margaret at Tarrant Crawford and its particular resonance for a community of religious women as well as Jacobus de Voragine's sermons and saint's life on St Margaret, which proved to exhibit markedly different, historically-specific techniques for promoting Christian virtue and action. Jenny won the UT Department of English Ann Hight Gore Prize for Best Honors Thesis. After finishing her two-year master's degree program at Harvard, she hopes to earn a PhD and pursue a career in academia.

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