What Not to Wear: Hagiographic Representations of Cross-Dressing Saints

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Contest

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Many of Late Antiquity's hagiographies describe stories of women casting off their feminine accoutrement and adopting the clothing and identity of a man. The existence of these accounts present readers with an opportunity to consider early Christian conceptions of sex, gender, and the human body, and perhaps enhance scholars' understanding of the social climate in which these individuals lived. It is difficult to know for certain how fluid or static notions of sex and gender were during this period however the existence of hagiographies describing transvestitism suggests the possibility of the transgression of fixed roles. Viewing female transvestitism as an escape tactic from traditional obligations of womanhood or as an example of a monastic corpus wrestling with the problem of female sexuality are pragmatic approaches that deny the presence of someone who identifies as neither male nor female. It is impossible to draw definite conclusions about the mindset behind the hagiographic saint's engagement in transvestitism or complex inner conceptions of identity, and similarly so for the author who describes a cross-dressing saint's sanctity. An examination that moves beyond the reification of sex and gender binaries of male and female facilitates analysis of the motives of these authors. Bearing this in mind, the hagiographies of cross-dressing saints Mary and Pelagia present an ancient preoccupation with gender and the body in relation to divinity and, perhaps, depict its transcendence.

It is important to establish the meanings behind words that carry the heft that "sex" and "gender" do. For the purposes of this paper, sex will be used to denote the biological category the subject falls into by virtue of their anatomical reproductive organs. In contrast, gender is employed to denote the subject's performance of or engagement in actions that are commonly thought to reflect biological sex. Candace West and Don Zimmerman emphasize the difference

between sex and gender, arguing that gender involves "a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine 'natures'" (126). This explanation reflects how slippery gender can be: where a particular behaviour may appear to manifest itself as the product of one's sex, or nature, it is actually a response conditioned by societal expectations which ascribe how males and females are "supposed" to behave. Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub state that differences between male and female bodies are articulated by cultural politics onto a supposedly clear biological foundation, making systems of *both* sex and gender unstable (2). Here there is an unsettling of both sex and gender as fixed entities, where the authors question how truly immutable biological sex actually is and argue that it is a social construct as much as gender is. This destabilizes the notion that there are two distinct categories of either male or female. Furthermore, Epstein and Straub imagine both sex and gender systems as historically and culturally specific appropriations of the human body which establish and justify dominant ideologies (3). Thus Mary and Pelagia are examples of figures confronting and conforming to artificial constructs of sex and gender ascribed to them by powerful ideologies of numerous entities in Late Antiquity.

Cross-dressing is a way of pressing up against categories of sex and gender and breaching their boundaries via one's attire. However, if the sex and gender categories of male and female are socially constructed on imagined biological certainty, then the process of crossing their boundaries would also be a social construction. Furthermore, a cross-dresser's attire is often intentionally or unintentionally fashioned to reflect especially gendered stereotypes of dress for a variety of reasons. Certainly, when Mary and Pelagia each adopt the

clothing of a monk, they conform to a dress code that is distinctly masculine. Cross-dressing

enables the assumption of a "cross-gender identity" in which an individual maintains gendered

subordinate and dominant identities (Vedeler 463). It would therefore seem that in the cases

of Mary and Pelagia, a male identity is adopted as dominant while the subordinate becomes the

female identity. Significantly, "cross-gender identity" is reliant upon Western cultural ideas

about gender roles (Vedler 463). Taking this into consideration, as well as the assertion that

such roles are ideologically ascribed social constructions, Mary and Pelagia are not necessarily

assuming identities that are either male or female but that are unique iterations that do not fit

into these restrictive categories. Contemporary scholars' interest in the implications of Late

Antiquity's Christian women dressing as monks reveals less about the women themselves and

more about contemporary anxieties over apparent resistance to ascribed gender roles. Thus

imagining cross-dressing simply as a means of intentionally resisting sex and gender systems is

a narrow approach that does not work to determine the subject's – or the subject's author's –

motivations, or the practice's implications.

Christian hagiographies are a literary genre consisting of the written lives of saints,

ascetics, and holy people. Scholar Mary-Ann Stouck describes these works as an introduction to

Christian civilization in early Europe and expounds on their potential to offer readers a

perspective of the sensibilities and points of anxiety of diverse populations during this period

(xvii). Repetitive themes and narratives allude to contentious issues and societal concerns from

which scholars may extract a commentary on daily life in Late Antiquity. Standardization of

hagiographies facilitated recognition amongst the authors' audience, while simultaneously

lending credence to the stories. Importantly, hagiographies encouraged readers to draw

connections between the material and the spiritual, thereby provoking thoughts of spiritual

transformation (Miller 12). The stories of Mary and Pelagia help readers to imagine

transcendence of the corporeal in order to connect with divinity. The physical body becomes a

site of religious transformation as early Christians construct it as a tangible frame of selfhood,

inviting readers of hagiographies to see holiness articulated on the bodies of saints (Miller 18).

Thus the authors of the hagiographies of Mary and Pelagia manipulate and reinterpret

gendered bodies to address the issue of the body in relation to divinity.

Mary's hagiography is one which epitomizes a quietly determined faith. The account

begins when Mary follows her father into a monastery, shaving her head and adopting the

clothing of a man in order to take on the appearance of a monk. Rather than attempting to

dissuade her, Mary's father instructs his daughter on appropriate behaviour in a space

populated only by men (Stouck 129). Although by all outward appearances, Mary "becomes" a

man by cutting her hair, donning male clothing, and assuming the name Marina, her father

treats her like a woman when he warns her to guard her chastity. This reflects only a partial

transformation of Mary's identity and emphasizes the potential threat her female sexuality

poses, an authorial preoccupation with the problem of both male and female bodies. Notably,

the author continues use feminine pronouns when referring to Marina, until the saint is

wrongfully accused of impregnating an innkeeper's daughter and bears the punishment of

eviction from the monastery (Stouck 131). The distinctly gendered charge of falling victim to

temptations of the flesh and Marina's willingness to endure punishment corresponds to the

author's sudden use of masculine pronouns, indicating a definite textual shift from a female

identity to a male one. Accusation and punishment serve as an initiation process by which

Mary is rendered Marina. Although Marina could conceivably deny the false accusation and

dramatically reveal her true sex, her endurance of the punishment seems a testament to her

desire for the life of a monk, one which is realized through the transformation of her identity.

The author's use of masculine pronouns shifts once more when Marina's death results in the

discovery of her true sex, a revelation that is met with confused tears and which is eventually

characterized as an example of her admirable asceticism (Stouck 133). These transformations

from female to male and back again represent moments of transcendence of the human body.

Hagiographical encounters with god are achieved in moments of life and death, as well as in

acts of convertibility and metamorphosis (Burrus 16). To a monastic audience, the author thus

offers an interpretation of the soul's mastery of the body through ascetic devotion, using

designations such as gendered pronouns to indicate moments of transformation.

In contrast to Mary's, Pelagia's hagiography is a message of inclusion and acceptance

despite past corruptions of the flesh, making hers a powerful story of the transformation of

both body and soul. Pelagia is a prostitute before she hears the Sunday sermon that inspires

her to renounce life as a working girl in favour of Christianity. When confronted with the

obligation to remove her baptismal robes the Sunday following her baptism, Pelagia insists that

her bishop give her some of his clothing and, dressed as a man, she secretly leaves the city of

Antioch and eventually takes up residence on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem (Brock and

Harvey 58-59). At this point, the author begins to alternate between referring to the saint as

Pelagia and Pelagios, as well as between masculine and feminine pronouns. Describing his

attempt to locate her cell on the Mount of Olives, the author actually switches pronouns

midsentence: "He was very well-known in the area and held in high honour. As I approached

his cell, I saw it had no door to it . . . I knocked, and Pelagia, the handmaid of God, opened it. She was dressed in the habit of a venerable man" (Brock and Harvey 59). Describing himself speaking to local residents in his attempt to locate Pelagios, the author uses the masculine pronoun and changes to the feminine when he finds the saint, regardless of the fact that at the time of the encounter the author did not realize it was Pelagia he was speaking to. This is perhaps partly to do with the fact that the story is written with the benefit of hindsight and an audience who has been told that Pelagios is Pelagia. In the author's description of the monk's physical appearance, feminine pronouns are used and the emphasis is on what the author later realized were the changes to what was once an especially womanly body:

> Her astounding beauty had all faded away, her laughing and bright face . . . had become ugly, her pretty eyes had become hollow and cavernous as the result of much fasting and the keeping of vigils. The joints of her holy bones, all fleshless, were visible beneath her skin through emaciation brought on by ascetic practices. (Brock and Harvey 60)

The author describes the shift from a body of remarkable feminine beauty to one of stark asceticism, rendering the saint a sort of eunuch who appears to have transcended the gendered body. That Pelagios was well-respected in Jerusalem, a city of great religious significance, and physically bears considerable traces of an ascetic life in his physical appearance signals that he is a monk of the highest order, an achievement facilitated by physical transformation. Where Mary's is a complete embodiment of Marina as male, Pelagia's embodiment of Pelagios occurs via a total denial of a body that is gendered either male or female.

Conceptions of the body are influenced by how the medical field describes and categorizes differences between male and female bodies. *On Regimen,* from the Hippocratic Corpus, is an example of a body of work which would have significantly shaped popular conceptions of the body in Late Antiquity. In a description of fetal development and the determinants of a baby's sex, *On Regimen* concludes that there is the potential that "three kinds of men" may be born, called "men-women" or "hermaphrodites" (XXVIII). This suggests the existence of individuals who do not conform to the binary sex categories of male or female. *On Regimen* goes on to describe a capacity for bodily transcendence: "Male and female have the power to fuse into one solid, both because both are nourished in both and also because soul is the same thing in all living creatures" (XXVIII). Although only two sexes are referenced, this suggests that by virtue of their identical souls, males and females are able to fuse into one – in a transcendence of the body that negates sex differences. There is a conception of sex and gender as mutable and the possibility of bodily subjugation under the influence of the soul.

Thus, ancient medicine did not divorce matters of the soul from matters of the body. Michel Foucault describes the commonly held belief in Late Antiquity that "one had best correct the soul if one does not want the body to get the better of it, and rectify the body if one wants it to remain completely in control of itself" (56). This is based upon the belief that physical suffering is not a true illness while illness of the soul is, emphasizing care of the soul in order to regulate the body. Foucault cites ascetics' obligatory withdrawal from society, "disqualifying the values of one's private life" in order to focus on the relation of oneself to oneself (43). Joining a monastery, monks retreated from societal expectations of sex and gender – or values of private life – and pursued knowledge of their souls through devotion to

god. Denial of the body through prioritization of care for the soul was rooted in a medicalized concern that the body interfered with the soul's health. This is attributed to Hellenistic and Roman thought which encouraged the recognition of "oneself as the subject of one's own actions, not through a system of signs denoting power over others, but through a relation that depends as little as possible on status . . . for this relation is fulfilled in the sovereignty one exercises over oneself" (Foucault 85-86). Ascetic movements encouraged adherents to resist values of private life – and its attendant sex and gender systems – and recognize one's individual power over oneself. The hagiographies of Mary and Pelagia represent the very act Foucault describes: the saints become the sovereign subjects of their own actions when they remove themselves from a society that positions individuals in a hierarchy of power and status, so that they may seek a relationship with oneself. Although Christianity evolved to include ideals of heterosexual Christian marriage and the associated sex and gender roles, ancient Christian asceticism promoted subversive anti-familial ideals (Burrus 3). Prioritization of the nurturing of one's soul is characteristic of early Christian ascetic movements' traditions and practices, whose tenets Mary and Pelagia embraced and adhered to.

It is important to note that representations of cross-dressing saints are almost always of women assuming male identities and not vice versa. Practical explanations for these representations include the assertion that Late Antique society offered few options for women and the adoption of male dress may have presented the opportunity of education, travel, and, occasionally, positions of power. This relies on the assumption that women's lives were exclusively unfulfilling while men's were something to aspire to, a superficial conclusion for a drastic and life-changing decision. The authors of hagiographies wrote with intention – scholar

John Anson argues that these are stories by monks for monks and reveal more about the convictions of the author than that of their protagonists (5). It seems unlikely that a monastic author would be concerned with presenting the option of cross-dressing as a means by which a discontented woman might find emancipation, but rather, the representation of a woman becoming a monk may provide an account of bodily and spiritual transformation. Patricia Cox Miller wonders whether scholarly assessments imagining these women as either symbols of repentance and human salvation or as courtesan figures intended to remind monks of their capacity for sin are accurate, and instead suggests that they represent a monastic attempt at conceptualizing female holiness (422-423). According to Miller, both possibilities involve a disregard for the cross-dressing monk as specifically female and imagine her only in terms of her relationship to monks who are not cross-dressers, so that there is little representation of a holy woman. Meanwhile, Stephen Davis considers ancient monasticism's struggle with female sexuality as an obstacle to salvation and argues that through depictions of women adopting male identities, monks offered an example of female sanctity which negated one's femaleness (5). According to Davis and in opposition to Miller, the depiction of Mary and Pelagia discarding their feminine identities and taking up the lives of male monks represents a monastic conception of a transformation that addresses female sexuality. Miller's charge that they do not represent a holy woman is irrelevant since the texts were likely never written with this intention nor were they directed at an audience seeking such a representation. Ultimately, these hagiographies represent monastic efforts at imagining unity with divinity through the transcendence of the human body and male and female sexuality.

The accusation that Marina impregnated an innkeeper's daughter reveals tensions concerning male sexuality and the challenging vow of celibacy monks grapple with. Gillian Clark notes that Christian monks perceived male sexual desire to be unruly and persistent, manifesting in involuntary erections and excretions of seminal fluid, frequent reminders of the body's fallen state (38). Meanwhile, Pelagia's overt sexuality and career as a prostitute represent the usual unease monastic thinkers express over female sexuality. Davis argues that the authors of these hagiographies wrote to defeminize and fragmentize the bodies of their cross-dressing protagonists in order to create a representation of a sort of "female-man" (16). Certainly this is visible in the author's description of Pelagios in his cell: the once captivating and beautiful woman is genderless, gaunt and emaciated, while the author's simultaneous use of masculine and feminine pronouns represents a fragmentation of the saint's gendered identity. Characters in these hagiographies are often denied their identity as women through descriptions that erase it from memory, an intertextual fragmentation in which gendered identity is displaced and dislocated (Anson 17). For instance, when Marina faces the accusation of engaging in improprieties with a woman, no reference is made to the monk's female anatomy and the author doles out punishment as if there is every possibility Marina could have impregnated someone. Marina's willingness to accept the punishment issued is a turning point, wherein Mary embraces the identity of Marina and his male body, complete with male weaknesses and sexual desire for innkeepers' daughters. Davis argues that Mary destabilizes conventional gender categories with a "double-voiced" confession to the sin of impregnating the innkeeper's daughter, since the monk is a woman falsely confessing to a man's sin (18). However in accepting accusation and punishment, Marina conforms rather stringently to the

gendered ideals of a man who must take responsibility for his actions and does little to destabilize gender roles. Contrary to Davis' conclusion, it seems less likely that the author was interested in destabilizing gender roles and more likely that he wished to present Mary's total embodiment of her identity as Marina the monk, in order to reinforce the occurrence of transformation.

Finally, Miller's insistence at locating a holy woman in these hagiographies has the effect of denying Mary and Pelagia the power they realize in their blurred gender identities of Marina and Pelagios. Marjorie Garber describes this as "looking through" the cross-dresser in an attempt to subsume the figure within one of two sexes or genders (9). It is important to bear in mind that while the other characters of the hagiography may not realize the monk is a cross-dressing female, the reader does. While their peers are fooled by the roles Mary and Pelagia play as Marina and Pelagios, the reader recognizes theirs as stories of transformation and transcendence gained as a result of blurred gender identity. Marina and Pelagia occupy a unique space within the monastic consciousness: discarding their feminine identities, they deny their female-ness and no longer possess the troublesome problem of feminine sexuality. Although Mary and Pelagia project the outward embodiment of an ascetic monk, they are not entirely male, and therefore their piety and faith are not hampered by aspects of male sexuality, such as involuntary erections and excretions. The saints then overcome both the problem of female sexuality as well as male sexuality and the body's fallen state. Marina and Pelagios become ambiguous figures whose efforts at nurturing the soul are not troubled by bodily desires and therefore offer a representation of the transcendence of one's body.

These hagiographical authors address the problem of the human body in its devotion to the divine, offering a representation of ascetics overcoming the body by manipulating and resisting prescribed roles. This is possible because of long-held perceptions of sex and gender as negotiable and flexible, influenced by Late Antiquity's medical ideologies. Additionally, medicalization of connections between the body and soul led to religious conceptions which prioritized care of the soul in order to regulate the body, granting individuals the opportunity to deny values of private life as Foucault describes. Adopting the male identity of a monk, Mary and Pelagia refuse their feminine identity and sexuality and, because the saints are not physically men, occupy an ambiguous space in which they have also overcome male bodies. Cross-dressing saints therefore serve as monastic ideals or representations of the transcendence of the human body.

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