ABSTRACT

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The Christian women of Roman Alexandria are something of a mystery, but they were integral to the transformation of religion. They Christianized the space they occupied, their bodies becoming houses for sanctity. While it is difficult to verify the accuracy of male representations of female subjects, discourse exposes the underlying assumptions upon which gender was understood. Reformed prostitutes, women who traveled to the shrine at Menouthis, collectors of pilgrim flasks from Abu Menas who sat in front of the Virgin Mary fresco at Kom el-Dikka, and virgins who shut themselves away—none of these women may have thought of themselves as men suggested. Yet when men referenced the feminine, they introduced alterity, indicating resistance to a master discourse or even competition among rival discourses. This negotiation, combined with a daily expression of agency through the use of space, reveals how women must have asserted their rights to salvation.

PERFORMING CHRISTIAN FEMALE IDENTITY IN ROMAN ALEXANDRIA.

By

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Acknowledgements

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Thinking about Women in Early Christian Alexandria

The women of Early Christian and Late Antique Alexandria are something of a mystery. Little or nothing survives of their writing. Yet the city and surrounding environs were inhabited by female virgins, ascetics, pilgrims, and patrons whose activity was integral to the progress of Christianity. As women Christianized the space they occupied, their very bodies became houses for sanctity.[1] Alexandrian discourse suggests that merely the way a woman occupied space could signal her allegiance to orthodox or heretical Christianity. Even prostitutes and pagans helped demarcate Christian space, if only by defining its boundaries. Thus, the use of space provided an opportunity for the expression of agency, something which is especially important to modern scholars discouraged by the relative silence of female voices. Although it can be difficult to verify the accuracy of the discursive representation of Alexandrian women in the work of male writers, inconsistencies can be highly informative, exposing the underlying assumptions upon which gender was understood. The ambiguity of such evidence reveals the degree to which authority was contested in the battle over gender. A superficial read may imply a tendency towards misogyny; however, the presence of dissenting voices opens up room for negotiation. Undoubtedly, it was often this negotiation, rather than hard and fast conclusions, that most interested women seeking validation for their experiences as gendered beings.

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[1] For example, Syncletica, an Alexandrian ascetic, supposedly likened the body of a virgin to a house ruled by God. See "The Life and Activity of the Holy and Blessed Teacher Syncletica," in *Ascetic Behavior in Greco-Roman Antiquity: A Sourcebook,* trans. Elizabeth Castelli, ed. Vincent Wimbush (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 79.

<u>Introduction</u>

When Alexandria was founded 331 B.C.E, it replaced a small fishing village on the site by the name of Rhakotis. Ostensibly a Greek city, Alexandria's cosmopolitan flavor was enhanced by the presence of Egyptian natives and Jewish immigrants. The mixture of cultures was further complicated when the city formally passed into Roman rule in 80 B.C.E. Alexandria's role as a central conduit for Mediterranean trade continued to enrich the city even as it increased the Empire's interest in maintaining control. In this regard, the city's waterways were indispensable. The freshwater lake Mareotis lay to the south, canals linked the city to the Nile in the east, and a causeway connected Alexandria to Pharos, a small island lying in the Mediterranean Sea. This causeway, which was seven stadia long, created two harbors. On Pharos itself, a lofty lighthouse helped sailors navigate the dangerous reefs.[2]

In the transition from paganism to Christianity, Alexandria's physical appearance underwent drastic changes. In the 270s, civil unrest laid waste to the Bruchion, a Ptolemaic palace district in the northeast corner of the city. The nearby Museon— Ptolemaic library and center for learning—continued to attract students. A theater stood to the west, just south of the Caesarion, a large temple that was later transformed into a church. Further south, the Via Canopica ran across the city, from the Gate of the Moon to the Gate of the Sun. At a width of 30.5 meters, this thoroughfare was four times the width of the city's other streets and, as such, was frequently the site of public demonstrations. Real estate along the Via Canopica was greatly sought after by adherents of paganism, Judaism, and Christianity. Unfortunately, violence was a

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[2] Christopher Haas, *Alexandria in Late Antiquity: Topography and Social Conflict* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 24-25.

common tool in such disputes. The agora, which the Via Canopica bisected, continued to

be used well into Late Antiquity, but the nearby gymnasium fell into disuse in the third

century, an occurrence that cannot be blamed on Christianity, as it had yet to secure

dominance in the city.[3]

A large concentration of the city's pagan temples stood in the Delta and Gamma

quarters,[4] but it is unknown where these quarters were located.[5] Temples found outside

these quarters appear to have had a location that correlated to their function. For

instance, a temple to Poseidon was located near the harbor.[6] Although Alexandria was

sprinkled with temples, the Serapeum in the southwest outstripped them all in size.

Devoted to the civic deities, Serapis and Isis, the Serapeum became a base of operations

for pagans during the religious disputes of the fifth century. While such disputes had a

profound effect an Alexandria's appearance—rioters dismantling temples and

synagogues and churches[7]—less violent change had an impact as well. Kom el-Dikka, a

neighborhood in the center of the city, went from being a sea of villas in the early

imperial period to a collection of public buildings, only to be transformed again into

workshops and houses. After Alexandria fell to the Arabs, the neighborhood was turned

into a cemetery with some rural dwellings.[8] This high degree of fluctuation suggests

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[3] Ibid., 29-31.

[4] The city's quarters were identified by the first five letters of the Greek alphabet. See Haas, 141.

[5] Haas, 47.

[6] Ibid., 142.

[7] Pagan statuary may have reflected cultural tastes rather than religious values, but it cannot have been completely insignificant to the latter, otherwise Clement would not have criticized its presence in private homes and baths (Clem. Al. *Exhor. to the Gr.* 4.5, trans. G. W. Butterworth, [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960]).

[8] Haas, 50.

that—for Late Antique men and women with good memories—urban space could invoke a multitude of connotations, reflecting its succession of faces.

Estimations of the city's population in Late Antiquity vary widely, and no doubt war, natural disasters (like the fourth century tsunami), and seasonal factors caused large swings. A conservative estimate places the population at 200,000 people, give or take vacillations.[9] This would have made Alexandria one of the largest cities of the Empire. Significantly, the density of its population may have predisposed the city to Christianization earlier rather than later. Urban life afforded opportunities for making new social contacts which, situated within the context of a growing religion, could aid the recruiting process.[10]

Alexandria's flourishing population of Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans were drawn by the city's economic and cultural attractions. Despite its ethnic diversity, pronounced divisions existed. Egyptians were concentrated in the southwest quarter of the city,[11] from which they were expelled in the early third century C.E. The magnitude of this expulsion is unclear, as there were several loopholes. It is also unclear to what extent a "mixed civilization" was born out of the combination of Egyptian, Greek, and Roman cultures.[12] As unsavory as segregation may sound to modern ears, it facilitated the preservation of a distinct identity for native Egyptians. Brother-sister marriage, a traditional Egyptian practice, may have taken on new importance as a strategy for safe-

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[9] Ibid., 46.

[10] Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge, "Networks of Faith: Interpersonal Bonds and Recruitment to Cults and Sects," *The American Journal of Sociology* 85 (1980): 1382.

[11] Haas, 49.

[12] Francoise Dunand and Christiane Zivie-Coche, *Gods and Men in Egypt: 3000 B.C.E. to 395 C.E.* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 267.

guarding ethnic identity.[13] Restrictions were placed on marriage between Romans and

Egyptians. The children born of such unions were deemed Egyptian, [14] so intermarriage

did not necessarily provide opportunities for Egyptians seeking to improve their family's

chance for advancement.

Likewise segregated either by force or choice, a large Jewish population became

concentrated in the Delta quarter of the city, the location of which is still uncertain.

Jewish and non-Jewish cultural practices may have limited social interaction,[15] but there

is evidence of pagans, Jews, and Christians making use of the same civic institutions,

such as the theater. Interestingly, the Roman conquest of Egypt may have reawakened

conflicts in Jewish-Greek relations. [16] In addition, economic competition between Jews

and non-Jews appears to have encouraged some animosity. Nevertheless, interaction

would have encouraged the sort of familiarity that might have decreased tension. Indeed,

Rodney Stark argues that familiarity with Judaism paved the way for Christianity.[17]

Whatever the case, Alexandria's Jewish population faced many obstacles, not the least of

which was relocation outside the walls after the uprising of 115-17 C.E.[18] Jews must

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[13] Ethnic variations in women's experience could not help but be influenced by differences in age at marriage. Yet, it is still a matter of debate whether or not Egyptian marriages took place later in a woman's life compared to Greco-Roman marriages. If they did, this need not have precluded early opportunities for sexual experience, especially among brothers and sisters destined for marriage who took advantage of co-residence. See Dominic Montserrat, *Sex and Society in Graeco-Roman Egypt* (New York: Kegan Paul International, 1996), 89-91.

[14] Free men could not marry Egyptian women, but free women could marry Egyptian men. See Jane Rowlandson and Andrew Harker, "Roman Alexandria from the Perspective of the Papyri," *Alexandria, Real and Imagined,* ed. Anthony Hirst and Michael Silk (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2004), 83-84.

[15] Haas, 122.

[16] See Dunand, 257, 278.

[17] Stark has found a positive correlation between the presence of synagogues and the rapidity of a city's conversion. See Rodney Stark, "Christianizing the Urban Empire: An Analysis Based on 22 Greco-Roman Cities," *Sociological Analysis* 52 (1991): 82-83.

[18] Haas, 102.

have resettled in the city at some point, for they were again expelled after religious

violence in the early fifth century. In 415, a Jewish mob had tried to destroy the Church

of St. Michael, which had been converted from a temple of Kronos.[19] If the church was

located in or near Jewish settlement, proximity may have encouraged the outbreak of

violence.[20] A few decades later, Jewish leaders were reestablishing themselves within the

city, requesting permission to rebuild synagogues.[21] Unfortunately, it is unknown where

any of these synagogues were located.[22]

Violence between Christians too made its mark. Despite being the birthplace of

Arianism, Alexandria was not a center of benevolence between Arians and their

opponents, who would later be labeled orthodox. Hostility was rampant. The parish of

Arius (ca. 250/6-336), the founder of Arianism, was located in the Boukolion ("the

pasturage"), in a suburb east of Alexandria opposite the orthodox bishop's main church.

The sparsely populated Boukolion was thought to be dangerous, a haunt for herdsmen

and criminals. A Roman matron who tied up her boats on the canal near Nicopolis in the

region of the Boukolion was attacked by herdsman who threw a bishop in the canal. In

339, Arians who attacked one of the orthodox churches included shepherds and

herdsmen. Perhaps these attackers were from the Boukolion.[23] In any case, the

marginalization of Arians on the periphery of the city appears to have impeded their

response when the Arian bishop, George the Cappadocian (d. 361), was seized and

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[19] Sa'id ibn al-Batriq (Eutychius) *Annales* 433-35, *PG* 111, col. 1005; *Copto-Arabic Synaxarion* 12, "Michael the Archangel," in *CoptEncy* 5:1616-20; referenced in Haas, 209-10.

[20] Haas, 142.

[21] Ibid., 127.

[22] Ibid., 117.

[23] Athan. *Hist. Ar*. 10; referenced in Christopher Haas, "The Arians of Alexandria," *Vigiliae Christianae,* 47 (1993): 235-37.

paraded through the center of the city, an area that was controlled by the orthodox bishop.[24] Geography reflected divisions in ideology.

Greeks and Romans also clashed, and a dispute over the appointment of the emperor led to open rebellion in the late third century C.E. The city had a well-deserved reputation for rowdiness, with riots during the rule of the Ptolemies setting a precedent for the use of violence in debates over the use of Alexandrian space. As a planned city filled with civic monuments, Alexandria already bore the indelible mark of government. While Greco-Roman relations were a source of tension, Roman absorption of Greek culture encouraged identification. In this vein, Emperor Julian (331-363) complained when the bishop of Alexandria dared "to baptize Greek women of rank."[25] For Julian, conversion meant alienation from Greek culture and ethnicity. By embracing alienation from the dominant culture, however, Christian writers like Clement (150-211/6) used the negative experiences of ostracism—ridicule and persecution—to solidify the boundaries of a unique Christian identity.[26]

Once emperors began interfering with internal Christian disputes, bishops found themselves in a different position. When an imperial official summoned Theophilus (?-412), bishop of Alexandria at the time, to Constantinople so that he might be tried by John Chrysostom (ca. 347- ca. 407), Theophilus took his time in making the journey. Stopping here and there, Theophilus recruited the bishops whom John Chrysostom had alienated. By the time he arrived in Constantinople, Theophilus had sufficient backing—

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[24] Haas, *Alexandria* 289.

[25] Julian *Ep.* 111, *Epistulae, leges, poematia, fragmenta varia,* ed. I. Bidez and F. Cumont (Paris: Société d'édition Les Belle Lettres, 1922); quoted in Haas, *Alexandria* 224.

[26] For instance, Clement advises his reader: "So never set your sights on pleasing the crowd. We do not practice what delights them. Our knowledge is a long way from their disposition." Clem. Al. *Strom*. 1.41.6., trans. John Ferguson (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1991).

both episcopal and imperial—to secure the upper hand.[27] When violence against pagans

and Jews broke out in 413, Cyril (ca. 378-ca. 444), who was then bishop, may have

escaped serious penalties simply because the pagan prefect of the city lacked the

resources to check the Christian community, with its massive financial and political

support.[28] Events did not always work out so well for Alexandria's Christians. Imperial

censure led to the exile of another bishop, Athanasius (293-373) and imperial authorities

appointed the unpopular George the Cappadocian as bishop.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to judge the level of violence actually brought to bear

in incidents of conflict.[29] Accounts of violence were written to serve rhetorical purposes

above and beyond the objective description of history, reflecting the author's ideological

biases as to whether or not the violence was justified.[30] When viewed from the

perspective of the community setting, violence revealed boundaries of behavior,

retaliation occurring when boundaries were transgressed.[31] Although violence was a

group activity, individual tastes certainly varied. When men were the targets of violence,

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[27] Eric Fournier, "Exiled Bishops in the Christian Empire: Victims of Imperial Violence," in *Violence in Late Antiquity: Perceptions and Practices,* ed. H.A. Drake (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2006), 163-4.

[28] Ibid., 165.

[29] An emphasis on violence in one writer might reflect a particular interest rather than an objective increase in violent activity (Martin Zimmerman, "Violence in Late Antiquity Reconsidered," in *Violence in Late Antiquity: Perceptions and Practices,* ed. H.A. Drake [Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2006], 351-3). Large-scale rioting might not gain as much coverage as everyday insults or small-scale violence; yet the latter could have a significant impact on day-to-day activities (Carlos Galvao-Sobrinho, "Embodied Theologies: Christian Identity and Violence in Alexandria in the Early Arian Controversy," in *Violence in Late Antiquity: Perceptions and Practices,* ed. H.A. Drake [Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2006], 324).

[30] To ensure the greatest possible impact on readers, the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (1st cent. B.C.E.) recommended the use of spectacular beauty or grotesquerie (Zimmerman, 345).

[31] Zimmerman, 355. Notably, the *Theodosian Code* contained a law (423 C.E.) implicitly permitting violence against Jews and pagans, but only if they were behaving in an unlawful or disorderly way (Edward Watts, "The Murder of Hypatia: Acceptable or Unacceptable Violence?," in *Violence in Late Antiquity: Perceptions and Practices,* ed. H.A. Drake [Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2006], 335).

one wonders the extent to which female kin and associates felt threatened. When women

were the targets, tradition dictated that male kin and guardians become involved. It

would be useful to know how women felt about seeing others of their gender from

different faiths or cultures forced to suffer violence. The prevalence of acceptable forms

of violence—for example, in the arena—complicates efforts to assess the capacity for

empathy in Late Antique men and women.[32]

Oddly, religious violence often involved a degree of cooperation. Christopher

Haas argues that religious violence rarely left one side out, for aggressors frequently

represented an alliance of two different faiths. Consequently, Athanasius' followers

apparently fell victim to concerted attacks by pagans and Arians.[33] Such cooperation

transformed the violence into a community response.

Within an individual group, defensive or offensive behavior could serve as a

powerful unifier, ensuring cohesion. Inspired by cultural anthropologists studying ethnic

violence in modern Asia, Carlos Galvao-Sobrinho argues that the conflict over Arianism

incited controversy because the doctrine it challenged was intimately linked to the

orthodox construction of identity. By questioning the divinity of Christ, Arianism

threatened the sense of humanity enjoyed by orthodox Christians. Leaders on both sides

encouraged their followers to use violence or resistance to define themselves as members

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[32] In *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, pagan women who witnessed one of Thecla's ordeals in the arena were moved to convert, seemingly out of sympathy for her situation (*The Acts of Paul and Thecla,* in *Anthology of Ancient Greek Popular Literature,* trans. R. Wilson, ed. William Hansen [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998], 37). Mention of the arena reintroduces the issue of boundaries for acceptable levels of violence. Zimmerman argues that the violence of the arena symbolized the Empire's maintenance of order via the subjugation of criminal, slaves, and exotic animals (representative of the Empire's vast resources). Distancing himself from the spectacle of suffering on the part of the Other, the viewer could identify with the Roman state's imposition of order (Zimmerman, 347). Nevertheless, men unaffected by the carnage of the arena might still be overcome at the sight of a dead body outside that setting (Zimmerman, 351).

[33] Haas, "Arians" 240.

of their community.[34] An identification with one's religious leader was reinforced by

neighborhood socialization, rivalries developing as people became overly attached to the

presbyters appointed to their local parish.[35]

Ethnic and religious relations in the city were further complicated by the city's

relationship with the surrounding countryside. After 211, when Caracalla (186-217)

expanded Roman citizenship, Romans with ties to the *chora* may have begun neglecting

the city, since Alexandrian citizenship was no longer necessary to secure Roman

citizenship.[36] This could have had a significant impact on women's lives, since women

living in the city faced legal restrictions not faced by women living in the *chora*.[37]

Perhaps this was a side-effect of the Empire's relative disinterest in the activities of the

chora. As late as 572/3, though, women from Oxyrhynchus, which lay far to the south on

the Nile, were still coming to Alexandria to settle legal disputes.[38] Alexandria remained a

central point for economic, social, political, and legal activity, despite competition with

Oxyrhynchus and other towns.

A hinterland of about 60 kilometers supplied much of Alexandria's agricultural

goods. Directly east of Alexandria lay the Boukolion, a sparsely populated region

occupied by herdsmen and sheep. A canal connected Alexandria to Canopus, which lay

56 kilometers west of the city. Menouthis, which sat next to Canopus, was the site of a

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[34] Galvao-Sobrinho, 329.

[35] Haas, "Arians" 236.

[36] Mohammed Abd-el-Ghani, "Alexandria and Middle Egypt: Some Aspects of Social and Economic Contacts under Roman Rule," *Ancient Alexandria between Egypt and Greece*, ed. W. V. Harris and Giovanni Ruffini (Boston: Brill, 2004), 172. Over time, as more Romans and Greeks settled in the *chora*, the process of intercultural exchange must have grown increasingly complicated.

[37] Such as limitations on wills. See Rowlandson and Harker, 81.

[38] See *PSI* 1.76; quoted in Jane Rowlandson, ed., *Women and Society in Greek and Roman Egypt: A Sourcebook* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 205-6. See also Abd-el-Ghani, 161-78.

popular Isis shrine that was replaced by a Christian martyrium to which pilgrims

frequently traveled. Serving as a way station for visitors traveling to and from the Holy

Land, and/or the sacred sites of Egypt, Alexandria played a crucial role in facilitating

Christian travel.[39] South of Menouthis, between lake Mareotis and the Nile, fertile

agricultural lands were exploited by landowners who called Alexandria home. The lake

itself, which was three times larger in Late Antiquity then it is now, could take almost

two days to cross.[40] The semi-rural region west and south of the lake contained a large

urban center by the name of Marea, several villas, and a collection of villages that

supported a thriving viticulture industry. Pilgrims often traveled to Abu Menas, located

about forty-five kilometers southwest of Alexandria, at the intersection of caravan

routes.[41] Originally the site of a pagan shrine, Abu Menas was transformed into a

Christian landmark, with hostels, baths, and a massive baptistery.[42]

Lying still further south, the arid region of the Scetis similarly attracted pilgrims

interested in the monastic activity of the region's occupants.[43] As religious aspirants

sought the seclusion of under-populated districts, wilderness acquired gendered

connotations. One of the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, for example, tells of a disciple

who suggested to his spiritual advisor that they return to "the world." His advisor agreed

if they could go where there were no women. In response, the disciple asked "What is

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[39] Rowlandson and Harker, 205-6.

[40] Haas, *Alexandria* 36-37.

[41] Peter Grossman, "The Pilgrimage Center of Abu Mina," in *Pilgrimage and Holy Space in Late Antique Egypt*, ed. David Frankfurter (Boston: Brill, 1998), 281.

[42] Haas, *Alexandria* 38.

[43] The cross-dressing heroines, Apolinaria and Hilaria, traveled through Mareotis to Abu Menas before continuing on to a monastery in Scetis. See Steven Davis, "Pilgrimage and the Cult of Saint Thecla in Late Antique Egypt," in *Pilgrimage and Holy Space in Late Antique Egypt,* ed. David Frankfurter (Boston: Brill, 1998), 328.

the place in which there are no women, except the desert alone?' The elder replied to

him: "Therefore take me into the desert."[44] Withdrawal into the desert, though, was not

just flight from the opposite sex. A first century fable recounted how Truth (portrayed as

a woman) fled the falsehood of the city by fleeing to the desert. To this end, the city and

desert were antitheses. Distance from the city correlated to the accumulation of sanctity,

but ascetics could seclude themselves in the city or desert and achieve the same goals.[45]

For instance, Athanasius encouraged Christian women to emulate the Virgin Mary by

secluding themselves. According to Athanasius, the Virgin Mary had no "eagerness to

leave her house, nor was she at all acquainted with the streets . . . . And she did not

acquire an eagerness to look out the window . . . she did not come and go, but only as was

necessary for her to go to the temple."[46] In this way, the imaginary Virgin Mary, and the

women who imitated her, "performed" their faith by avoiding public civic space.

    Late antique scholarship has begun to show a great deal of interest in seeing how

women "performed" their social and religious identities within civic space. K. Holum,

for one, has explored how women occupied the "performance space"[47] of Caesarea

Maritima. He has found that women of this period "performed" their Christianity by

avoiding certain areas, like the theater, and assuming modest attire in public. Because the

same acts could be performed by non-Christians, spokesmen such as John Chrysostom

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[44] *The Wisdom of the Desert: Sayings from the Desert Fathers of the Fourth Century,* trans.
Thomas Merton (New York: New Direction Books, 1960), 70.

[45] James Goehring, *Ascetics, Society, and the Desert: Studies in Early Egyptian Monasticism*
(Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1999), 73, 75, 80.

[46] Athan. *On Vir.* 92-3, "Der dem Athanasius zugeschriebene Traktat PERI PARTHENIAS,"
Sitzungsberichte der Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften 33 (1935) 1029; quoted in Davis, 326-27,
n. 86.

[47] Paul Zanker applied this term when describing Pompeii's construction of an urban identity via
the use of space. See Paul Zanker, *Pompeii: Public and Private Life,* trans. Deborah Schneider
(Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 1995.

took steps to appropriate this behavior as specifically Christian.[48] Thus, John

Chrysostom and others of his ilk employed women to "think about"[49] the spread of

Christianity throughout the Empire.

Texts of this sort do much to reveal the symbolic mindset that went into situating

women within gendered space. Analysis along these lines is in keeping with the "cultural

turn," as evinced by writers such as Dale Martin, who have examined Late Antique

writers to uncover not only "the conscious or even unconscious intentions of the author,

but the larger matrix of symbol systems provided by the author's society from which he

must have drawn whatever resources he had to 'speak his mind.'"[50] In some sources,

Alexandria appears to have been simply a dramatic backdrop[51] but this use is especially

helpful for uncovering the city's place in the symbolic mindset of the period. As a stage

for the Alexandrians, both imaginary and real space was given over to the fulfillment of

social needs and the expression of civic identity.[52]

The excavation of Alexandria's imaginary space reveals layer after layer of

Christian, Jewish, pagan, Roman, Greek and Egyptian influence. When Athanasius

encouraged women to demonstrate their piety by remaining at home, he was attempting

to shape Alexandria's identity as a Christian city. His attempt could not help but engage

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[48] For instance, *sophrosyne*, or moderation, which had long been central to Greco-Roman ethical discourse, was appropriated by Christians to promote modesty. It would be easier for a rich woman to exhibit modesty by "dressing down" than a poor woman, whose poverty already limited her clothing choices. To this end, modesty was an elite virtue. See K. Holum, "Women of Caesarea: Gendering the Mediterranean City in Late Antiquity," (Workshop of Caesarea Maritima II, American Schools of Oriental Research, Annual Meeting 2006, Boston University, photocopied).

[49] A phrase borrowed from Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 153.

[50] Dale Martin, "Introduction," *The Cultural Turn in Late Ancient Studies: Gender, Asceticism, and Historiography*, ed. Dale Martin and Patricia Cox Martin (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 24.

[51] For instance, see below for Alexandria's role in the legend of Mary of Egypt.

[52] Zanker, 3.

with the work of others, for knowingly or not, he was borrowing from the Jewish philosopher Philo (20 B.C.E.-50 C.E.), who had recommended the same practice for Jewish women living in Alexandria three centuries earlier. Philo, in turn, was echoing the sentiments of earlier Roman thinkers living outside Alexandria such as Cato (234-149 B.C.E.), who criticized women who went about in public wearing elaborate attire.[53]

Tellingly, Athanasius' virgins—as brides of Christ—conformed to traditional Greco-Roman notions about the rightful role of a wife. According to the Greek thinker Plutarch (46-120 C.E.), a wife ought to entertain no friends other than her husband's, assume modest dress, leave home but rarely and then only in the company of her husband. Even then, she should take pains to hold her tongue in public.[54] Abstinence and chastity too bore the influence of Greco-Roman thought, with Stoic philosophers encouraging complete abstinence or permitting sexual activity solely for the sake of procreation.[55] These ideas can be traced as far back as sixth century B.C.E. Pythagoreanism and debates over the relationship between the soul and the body. Because similar trends occurred in both Christian and non-Christian Late Antique contexts, it is exceedingly difficult to determine if Christianity actually altered attitudes towards gender or merely offered new variations on old themes.[56] To answer this question fully would require a more detailed comparison of Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Jewish, pagan and Christian discourse and behavior than is possible here. Instead, this

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[53] Marilyn Skinner, *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture* (Malden, Blackwell Publishing: 2005), 201.

[54] Plut. *De mul. vir.* 2.298-343; *Moralia* trans. Frank Cole Babbitt (Cambridge, Harvard University Press: 1927-8); quoted in David Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 75-76.

[55] Skinner, 244.

[56] Ibid., 283-84.

discussion lays the groundwork for a debate of that sort by defining just what role women did play in Christianity.

Naturally, such a discussion cannot help but touch upon the discourse generated in the city's renowned schools of learning. In Ptolemaic times, Alexandria fostered the work of highly influential writers, such as Callimachus of Cyrene (290?-246? B.C.E.) and Theocritus (3rd cent. B.C.E.), whose poetry displayed a great interest in women's internal lives. This interest may have been inspired by literature disseminated under the name of female poets such as Erinna (4th cent. B.C.E.), whose *Distaff* evokes the particular difficulties faced by women on the brink of marriage.[57] A fascination with women's lives was further promoted by the patronage of queen Arsinoë (316-270 B.C.E.), whose leadership was such that she often overshadowed her husband, Ptolemy II (309-246 B.C.E.), as ruler of Egypt.[58]

By the imperial era, Alexandria had become a center of Middle Platonic thought, boasting such distinguished philosophers as Philo and Ammonius Saccus (3rd cent. C.E.). Ammonius and Plotinus, (205-270), who also studied in Alexandria, were responsible for laying the foundations for Neo-Platonism. Later, as paganism breathed its last, Hierocles (f. 430 C.E.) and his fellow thinkers nourished a brand of Neo-Platonism that retreated underground in the face of Christian intolerance. Christian-pagan violence had erupted in the city as early as the third century,[59] but did not disrupt academic life until the late fifth

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[57] Ibid., 185-86.

[58] Arsinoë left a lasting mark on Alexandria's landscape with her support for the worship of Aphrodite, to whom several shrines were constructed. After the queen's death, she continued to be honored in the form of Isis, the city's civic goddess, who had shrines and temples in every quarter of the city (Skinner, 181-82).

[59] Euseb. *Hist. eccl.* 7.11*, The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine,* trans. G. A. Williamson (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1965).

century. Before then, diverse faiths appear to have mingled in Alexandria's schools with relative ease.[60]

Thanks to this tolerance, early Christianity enjoyed the benefit of Hellenic and Jewish learning. Thus, Origen (ca. 185-ca. 254), a Christian thinker who spent time in Alexandria as a student and teacher, was steeped in Classical learning. His faith did little to discourage appreciation for the allegorical methodology of pagans such as Chaeremon the Stoic (1st cent. C.E.) and Cornutus (f. 60 C.E.). Their techniques were integral to Origen's interpretation of Scripture.[61] Similarly, Clement of Alexandria borrowed from Classical passages, which he thought were based on Jewish texts.[62] The Septuagint, produced by Jewish scholars in the Ptolemaic period, was indispensable to Christians seeking access to Old Testament texts.[63] The scholarship of Jewish writers, who used Classical literary models to criticize Hellenism in the light of the Septuagint,[64] had a tremendous influence on the development of Clement's analytical techniques.[65]

Although gender issues were not paramount to Alexandrian philosophical discourse, the latter was influential over the issue of gender as Christianity developed. In the Neo-Platonic teachings that monopolized Late Antique Alexandria thought, spiritual aspirations meant transcending the material world, making the body a possible object of denigration. As some writers equated women with the body and men with spirit, doubt

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[60] Heracles, for one, seems to have pursued studies under the Platonic, pagan teacher Ammonius despite pursuing Christian teachings under the rival instructor Origen. See Edward Watts, *City and School in Late Antique Athens and Alexandria* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 161.

[61] Euseb. *Hist. eccl.* 19.

[62] David Dawson, *Allegorical Readers and Cultural Revision in Ancient Alexandria* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 199-200.

[63] Haas, *Alexandria* 97.

[64] Dawson, 75.

[65] Haas, *Alexandria* 105.

was cast on women's ability to overcome the material world and gain access to the divine. Gender confusion resulted. In Christianity, this took the form of stories about cross-dressing monks and harlots with ambiguous sexual status. To understand how real women—virgins, married women, prostitutes, and widows—"performed" their gender in the city and *chora*, one must first understand the hermeneutical debates that shaped the symbolic mindset behind such tales.

The discussion thus far has merely outlined the geographical setting in which women would have "performed" their gender and their religion. In the religious conflicts of Early Christianity and Late Antiquity, the use of space was an important means for the expression of agency. Because behavior and discourse could overlap, Christians had to appropriate otherwise pagan or Jewish behavior and arguments as specifically Christian. The discussion that follows will explore the extent to which the negotiation of space and the competition to assert a hegemonic discourse opened up fissures wherein women could construct an identity to their liking.

Chapter 2: Hermeneutics of Late Antique Gender

By emphasizing negotiation, this discussion moves away from traditional scholarship on women in Early Christianity. A brief review of this scholarship reveals the pressing need to account for contradictions and ambiguities in the evidence. Instead of glossing over incongruities, perhaps scholars of this period should consider contention in its own right, as a meaningful tool of discourse. This forces one to reflect upon the impact of competition within Alexandria's schools. Rivalry, in and of itself, exposed areas where the discourse was particularly vulnerable to reinterpretation. Negotiation as a tool of hermeneutics is applicable to the subject of gender and the divine with regard to at least five areas: 1) notions about the relationship between gender and the material world, 2) attitudes towards the gender of the divine, 3) the classification of gender signs, 4) the submissive qualities attributed to the religious adherent, and 5) the definition of gender categories. An examination of these areas will help to illuminate just what Late Antique writers thought about women's ability to access the divine.

Previous work on Late Antique gender has done much to establish the limitations placed on women's agency in generating the system of symbols by which they were represented. Scholars have made great strides in revealing "the abhorrence of sexuality that the church focused on women,"[66] the degree to which "women were essentially

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[66] Susan Asbrook Harvey, "Women in Byzantine Hagiography: Reversing the Story," in *That Gentle Strength: Historical Perspectives on Women in Christianity,* ed. Lynda Coon, Katherine Haldane, and Elisabeth Sommer (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990), 46; quoted in Patricia Cox Miller, "Is There a Harlot in This Text? Hagiography and the Grotesque," in *The Cultural Turn in Late Ancient Studies: Gender, Asceticism, and Historiography*, ed. Dale Martin and Patricia Cox Miller (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 92. The misogynistic leanings of Early Christian texts followed the examples set by Greco-Roman writers such as Juvenal (late 1st-early 2nd cent.) and Martial (40-102 C.E.). No doubt such traditions were tempered, for better or worse, in Alexandria with its history of rule by such notable women as Arsinoë and Cleopatra (69-30 B.C.E.).

sinful because essentially sexual,"[67] and how "to the church fathers the very idea of a

holy woman was a contradiction in terms, which women could only get round by

pretending to be men."[68] Unfortunately, these findings do little to illuminate why Late

Antique writers, if they were so androcentric, ever bothered themselves about the so-

called contradiction of a holy woman, what Palladius of Galatia (363/4-420?)—bishop of

Helenopolis in Bithynia and a visitor to Alexandria—referred to as "*hê anthrôpos tou*

theou."[69]

The female man of God was a common motif. The Gnostic *Gospel of Thomas,* a

copy of which was discovered south of Alexandria at Nag Hammadi, claims that "any

woman who makes herself male shall enter the Kingdom of Heaven."[70] In Pelagius and

John's *Sayings of the Desert Fathers,*[71] Abbess Sara states that she is "a woman in sex,

but not in spirit."[72] Origen wrote of women ceasing to be differentiated from men,[73] but

also wrote that "a woman represents the flesh and the passions"[74] and "he is truly male

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[67] Gillian Cloke, *This Female Man of God' Women and Spiritual Power in the Patristic Age, A.D. 350-450* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 33.

[68] J. Herrin "In Search of Byzantine Women," in *Images of Women in Antiquity*, ed. A. Cameron and A. Kuhrt (London: Routledge, 1993), 179; quoted in Miller, 92.

[69] Palladius *Lausiac History* 9, ed. C. Butler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1898); quoted in Miller, 98.

[70] Nag Hammadi Codex 2.99.78-26 (Layton: 1989), 92; quoted in Rowlandson, 77. But compare this to another passage in which Jesus remarks that males have to become female to enter the Father's domain. See footnote 99.

[71] Several collections of the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* were put together in Late Antiquity.

[72] Pelagius the Deacon and John the Subdeacon, "Sayings of the Fathers," in *The Desert Fathers,* trans. Helen Waddell, ed. (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1957), 10.76. 'Elle a dit encore aux frères: 'Moi je suis un homme; c'est vous qui êtes des femmes" (Supplement 991, *Gerontikon*; quoted in Ewa Wipszycka, "L'Ascétisme féminin dans L'Égypte tardive," in *Le rôle et le statut de la Demme en Égypte hellénistique, romaine et byzantine: Actes du Colloque International, Bruxelles, Leuven 24-29 Novembre 1997*, ed. Henri Melaerts and Leon Mooren [Sterling, Virginia: Peeters, 2002], 382).

[73] Brown*,* 383.

[74] Orig. *In Exod. PG* 12.305; quoted in Cloke, 33.

who ignores sin, which is to say female fragility."[75] The potential eradication of gender

difference is a commentary on the possibility of gender equality, though the two notions

are not necessarily interchangeable. For some writers, the eradication of difference was

deemed necessary not because the genders were equal, but rather, because they were

unequal and eradication was the only way women could achieve spiritual advancement.

Competition between such divergent viewpoints must be taken into account when

attempting to reconstruct women's reactions to a seemingly misogynistic master

discourse. The negotiation of contested meanings provided just the sort of ambiguity

useful to women seeking a positive read on their gender. Alexandria's philosophical

community was fertile ground for the growth of contested sites of meaning. An

atmosphere of already heated debate was facilitated by the diverse social milieu of the

schools. Before religious violence began to interfere with academic life in the fifth

century, the trade of ideas among thinkers of different faiths and cultures was facilitated

by a standard *paideia*, shared rhetorical tools, and similar ontological and epistemological

models.[76] A common frame of reference was to the advantage of competitors seeking

adherents from the same pool of potential followers.[77]

Competition, in turn, nuanced the emerging discourse. Publishing polemics that

attacked rival intellectuals, writers relied heavily upon intertextual techniques that

allowed them to appropriate rival arguments.[78] Intertextual strategies, involving the use

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[75] Orig. *In Levit*. *PG* 12.188; quoted in Cloke, 33.

[76] Watts, *City* 154.

[77] Ibid., 166. To combat Alexandria's tradition of competing teachers, Athanasius promoted Christ as the only legitimate teacher. See Brakke, 66.

[78] These techniques limited the degree to which a document could be taken as a self-contained piece of evidence. As a result, each document could only be interpreted when embedded within a larger

of quotations and allusions borrowed from other writers, may have served the immediate purpose of fashioning a persuasive argument, but it was part of a larger philosophical project. For Clement of Alexandria, imitation was a worthwhile spiritual endeavor. According to Clement, Moses "represented Isaac as a consecrated sacrifice and then chose him for himself to be for us a type of the ordering of salvation."[79] Thus, Scripture provided models of likeness, imitation of which helped close the gap between a religious adherent and the divine.[80]

In the discourse of the Alexandrian schools, likeness—mimesis—was a tool of philosophical advancement. The work of Philo is helpful for contextualizing later developments in this regard. Philo's brand of Middle Platonism privileged a transcendent higher being, or reality, as the source of knowledge and the most correct object of one's philosophical or religious attention. As Philo explained, "the image of God is an original pattern [*archetypos*] of which copies are made, and every copy [*mimēma*] desires [*pothein*] that of which it is a copy, and to be present with it." By increasing their likeness to the divine, humans—created in the divine image—could reduce the gap separating them from the divine.[81]

Schools of thought differed as to the degree of separation existing between an adherent and the divine. In many ways, this disagreement had an impact on perceptions of gender. As attitudes towards the material world shaped perspectives towards the body, the gender of the divine was even called into question. In the process, the signs by which

context. Stephen J. Davis, "Crossed Texts, Crossed Sex: Intertextuality and Gender in Early Christian Legends of Holy Women Disguised as Men," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 10 (2002): 13.

[79] Clem. Al. *Strom.* 2.5.20.2.

[80] Intertextuality enhanced the mimetic qualities of Clement's writings. See Dawson, 210.

[81] Philo *Legum Allegoriarum* 2.4; quoted in Dawson, 88.

gender might be identified fell into contention. These issues could not help but inform

beliefs about women's ability to progress towards the divine.

Gender and the Material World

Alexandrian scholars propagated a wide-range of attitudes towards the material

world.[82] Gnostics believed it was the work of a demiurge and so not worthy of

veneration. Orthodox Christians were more positive, attributing Creation to God's

efforts. Yet divinity was still privileged over the material world. Like some pagan

Platonists, a subset of Christians believed asceticism would help free a person from the

bodily needs that hinder progression towards the divine.[83] A writer's stance, however,

could shift based on the context of the discussion. Plotinus, for example, tended to write

of the body in a negative sense when contrasting it with the divine, but in a positive sense

when disputing Gnostic claims that the material world was a work of evil.[84] So a

negative attitude towards the material world did not necessarily translate into wholesale

rejection of the body.

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[82] Medical opinion was also pertinent. In his *Gynaecology*, the Alexandrian physician Soranus (2nd cent.) went some way towards redressing the Greco-Roman tendency of regarding women as an aberration or deformation of a more perfect male form. By seeking to understand the physiology of women in their own right, Soranus suggested that women deserved attention as unique creatures.

[83] According to Clement, "The soul of man is confessedly the better part of man, and the body the inferior. But neither is the soul good by nature, nor, on the other hand, is the body bad by nature" (Clem. Al. *Strom.* 4.26, *Clement of Alexandria II: Ante Nicene Christian Library Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325 Part 12,* ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson [Edinburgh: T & Clark, 1869, reprint Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2004] [book on-line]; available from http://books.google.com/books?id=J2HK63jK5_EC&pg=PA216&lpg=PA216&dq=%22The+soul+of+man +is+confessedly+the+better+part+of+man%22&source=web&ots=B7jugZpSi2&sig=m2YsuLMUrDxY4si AB3UElc6D0x4#PPA200,M1; Internet).

[84] E. Jane Cooper, "Escapism or Engagement? Plotinus and Feminism," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 23 (2007): 93. According to Plotinus, "to despise this sphere, and the Gods within it, or anything else that is lower, is not the way to goodness." (Plotinus, *The Enneads,* trans. Stephen MacKenna [London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1969], 2.19.15, 2.19.16). Also see John Rist, "Pseudo-Ammonius and the Soul/Body Problem in Some Platonic Texts of Late Antiquity," *The American Journal of Philology* 109 (1988): 414-15.

Within Christianity itself, disagreements over the relationship between the material world and the divine led to arguments over Christ's assumption of a body. Arius understood there to be a rather sharp division between the material world and the divine. The division was so serious, in fact, that Arius denied that Christ could enjoy a full share of divinity if He really occupied a human body.[85] The orthodox bishops, Athanasius, Theophilus[86] and Cyril, fervently disputed these conclusions. Notably, Cyril did so by invoking the symbolism of motherhood: Christ was corporeal because he was born from a human woman.[87] The term *Theotokos,* "Mother of God," became a rallying cry for Cyril's supporters.[88] Mary was not the only option for a Late Antique theologian interested in this debate. Antiochene theologians took a very different route in their efforts to prove Christ's share of humanity, using the doctrine of the "assumed man" to show how Christ took on flesh.[89] Mary's role in Alexandrian discourse suggests that

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[85] Watts, *City* 172.

[86] Theophilus chastised ascetics in the region around Alexandria for professing beliefs suspiciously like that of Arius. See Norman Russell, *Theophilus of Alexandria* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 100.

[87] The semiological implications of the debate are explored by John McGuckin, *St. Cyril of Alexandria the Christological Controversy: Its History, Theology, and Texts* (New York: E. J. Brill, 1994), 155-63

[88] Cyril wrote to the monks of Egypt, "when we have thus demonstrated that he who is born from the holy Virgin is God by nature . . . no one could have any hesitation that we ought to . . . profess that she may be called Mother of God" (Cyril *Ep.* 1, *PG*.77.9-40; *AC* 1.1.1, 10-23, *St. Cyril of Alexandria the Christological Controversy: Its History, Theology, and Texts,* trans. John McGuckin [New York: E. J. Brill, 1994], 248). The importance of this issue to the redemption was brought up in Cyril's second letter to Nestorius: "because the Word hypostatically united human reality to himself, 'for us and for our salvation,' and came forth of a woman, this is why he is said to have been begotten in a fleshly manner" (Cyril *Ep.* 4, *PG* 77.44-50; *St. Cyril of Alexandria the Christological Controversy: Its History, Theology, and Texts,* trans. John McGuckin [New York: E. J. Brill, 1994], 264).

[89] Noona Verna Harrison, "Women, Human Identity, and the Image of God: Antiochene Interpretations," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 9 (2002): 225-26.

women occupied a privileged position in the symbolic mindset of the city's pro-corporeal writers.[90]

An interest in endowing the body with significance appears to have been part of the Late Antique "material turn." This was "a shift in the late ancient religious sensibility regarding the signifying potential of the material world, a shift that reconfigured the relation between materiality and meaning in a positive direction."[91] As divinity became associated with redemptive flesh, the body became integral to the salvation project. Consequently, real bodies gained merit. Patricia Cox Miller argues that the reader of an ascetic text, for instance, was meant to suffer along with the subject of the text. The reader's imagination helped him or her achieve salvation by proxy.[92]

This process was aided by visual cues encouraging the viewer's identification with the subject's body. Thus, pilgrim flasks from the healing shrine of Abu Menas bore the image of a bare-chested Thecla. According to *The Acts of Paul and Thecla,* the saint had been stripped by her anti-Christian persecutors. Viewers of the flask would have remembered this incident and may have even recalled the story of Eugenia, an Alexandrian ascetic who was forced to expose herself in court to prove her gender.[93]

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[90] E. Jane Cooper notes that "affirmation of embodiment is central to much current feminist theorizing of divinity" (Cooper, 80).

[91] Patricia Cox Miller, "Visceral Seeing: The Holy Body in Late Ancient Christianity," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 12 (2004): 392.

[92] Ibid., 397. Alterity was introduced in ascetic discourse whenever gendered flesh posited the existence of a competing anti-ascetic narrative. Significantly, Richard Valantasis' treatment of asceticism emphasizes its performative nature. See Richard Valantasis, "Constructions of Power in Asceticism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 63 (1995): 807. If performance, by definition, requires physical activity, then the ascetic body was intimately engaged in the very practice by which the body was denied.

[93] Davis, "Pilgrimage" 307. The saint had been stripped more than once by persecutors. Nonplussed, she claimed God would clothe her in salvation (*The Acts of P. and T.* 37).

Tellingly, neither Thecla nor Eugenia appear to have actually existed. Thecla was invented in the second century and inserted into a first century context. Eugenia was probably invented in the fifth century but was said to have lived in the second century. So both their stories were constructed, making them all the more integral to the task of explicating gender constructions. Artisans and hagiographers emphasized the role of gender in the discourse by highlighting Thecla and Eugenia's nudity. Consequently, ordinary Christian women could experience a visceral connection. Imagining their ordeal, viewers suffered along with Thecla and Eugenia, and gained the spiritual rewards of that suffering.[94]

To be sure, writers such as Clement defended women from the charge that their bodies were impediments to salvation. According to Clement, in the *Gospel of the Egyptians*, when "Salome asked, 'How long will death maintain its power?' the Lord said, 'As long as you women bear children.'" However, Clement argued, the Lord "is not speaking of life as evil and the creation as rotten. He is giving instruction about the normal course of nature. Death is always following on the heels of birth."[95] A passage that superficially condemned women and their role as mothers was reinterpreted as an allegorical commentary on the inevitability of death, something Christians sought to overcome. Of course, it is by no means incidental that the *Gospel of the Egyptians* used motherhood to symbolize death. It is important, though, that Clement resisted this interpretation. Elsewhere he wrote, "both men and women practice the same sort of virtue . . . this world is the only place in which the female is distinguished from the male." In the world to come, rewards "await not man or woman as such, but the human

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[94] Miller, "Visceral" 402.

[95] Clem. Al. *Strom.* 3.6.45.3, trans. Ferguson. Also see Dawson, 227-28.

person, freed from the lust that in this life had made it either male or female."[96] Hence, at

least for Clement, women's access to the divine was not impaired by gender.

Rival scholars, who believed that gender was an artifact of the flesh, argued that

women might gain salvation, but could do so only by masochistically rejecting their

gender. The foundation for this had been laid by Philo, according to whom "Progress is

indeed nothing else than the giving up of the female gender by changing into the male,

since the male is active, rational, incorporeal and more akin to mind and thought."[97]

Denigrating the material world and the sense-perceptions that communicated knowledge

of that world, Philo expressed his distaste for the world by effeminizing it.[98] To others,

rejection of the world and flesh need not translate into rejection of women. Pagan

Platonists had interpreted the creation of Adam and Eve in Genesis as a division of what

had once been an androgynous creature. The creation of separate genders was deemed

the source of the human plight. Reunification meant salvation, and vice versa.[99]

Compared to Clement, Cyril, and the orthodox Christians who were attracted to

Thecla and Eugenia's stories, Philo, Gnostics, and Arians were much closer to rejecting

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[96] Clem. Al. *Paed.* 1.10, trans. Simon Wood (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1954).

[97] Philo *Questions and Answers on Exodus* 1.8, trans. Ralph Marcus (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953); quoted in Wayne Meeks, "The Image of the Androgyne: Some Uses of a Symbol in Earliest Christianity," *History of Religions* 13 (1974), 196.

[98] Meeks, 176.

[99] Philo contradicted himself on the subject, dismissing the notion that man was originally androgynous (*de Vita Contemplativa* 57-63) but elsewhere writing of Adam as a bisexual creature and Eve as "half his body" (Philo *Quaestiones in Genesim G* 1.25 and *De opificio mundi* 151f; quoted in Meeks, 186, n. 92). According to the *Gospel of Philip*, death was invented when Eve was separated from Adam. Death would cease to exist upon their reunification (*Gospel of Philip*, trans. R. Wilson [London: Mowbray, 1962], 71; quoted in Meeks, 189). The *Gospel of Thomas* claims salvation will result when the two become one, with the "inside like the outside and the outside as the inside" (*The Original Gospel of Thomas in Translation* 22.1.7, trans. April Deconick [New York: T & T Clark, 2006]). In Clement, "The soul stands aside from the mere appearance of shape whereby male is distinguished from female." Unity is "neither male nor female." He criticized a Platonist who argued "that the soul is divine in origin and has come to our world of birth and decay after being made effeminate by desire" (Clem. Al. *Strom.* 3.13.93.3, trans. Ferguson).

the flesh.[100] Yet of those who were closer to rejecting the flesh, Philo was less positive

about women's ability to access the divine than were the Gnostics or Arians. While there

were exceptions to this rule, such a continuum provides an important corrective to

historiography that tends to see notions of the divine in monolithic terms. It is going too

far to argue, for example, that "the divine" is "a hostile term for feminists" or that its

usage "pulls together all that is valued, and separates all that is rejected, creating 'the

Other' as repository for what is rejected or feared." Nor is it necessarily true that

"Monotheism functions as a mask for a debilitating dualism, a binary hierarchy that . . .

obscures the fantastic multiplicity of be-ing."[101] The continuum of attitudes towards

women and the material world shown by Late Antique thinkers defy such simplistic

interpretations.

<u>Gendering the Divine</u>

Despite their differences, Philo and Clement both created feminine images of the

divine. Philo wrote of God as a nurse who provides proper nourishment to the faithful.

In Clement, the mother Church has no milk because Christ is the milk, generated from

the breasts of His Father.[102] Some commentators have argued that this sort of

feminization did not constitute a meaningful commentary on gender. To this end,

Michael Williams explains that Wisdom in Sirach is female not because her usage is

meant to make "a point about motherhood, or the female role, or even gender at all, but

rather about wisdom." Wisdom's gender "is essentially incidental, providing

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[100] According to Plotinus, Gnostic "teaching leads to a hate and utter abandonment of the body" (Plotinus, *Enn.* 2.9.18).

[101] Emily Culpepper, "Contemporary Goddess Thealogy: A Sympathetic Critique," in *Shaping New Vision: Gender and Values in American Culture*, ed. Clarissa W. Atkinson, Constance H. Buchanan, and Margaret R. Miles (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1987), 65-66; quoted in Cooper, 79.

[102] Clem. Al. *Paed.* 1.42, 46.

metaphorical 'color' but no profound 'message.'" The real message of this text involves the need for "obedience to the divine instruction found in the Torah."[103] Unfortunately, Williams does not appear to appreciate the degree to which gender was both a tool and a product of culture. Gender could only be used as a tool of hermeneutics insofar as its use made sense within gender constructions. It is by no means incidental that women were deemed suitable symbols of communicating a message about obedience. This usage reflected women's subordination in Late Antique society and, as will be discussed below, the gendered construction of an adherent's relationship to the divine.

Ancient writers knew what they were doing when they employed what were otherwise arbitrarily gendered terms. Philo explained: "While Wisdom's name is feminine, her nature is manly. As indeed all the virtues have women's titles, but powers and activities of consummate men (ἀνδρῶν τελειοτάτων)." He concludes that one should "pay no heed to the gender of the words, and let us say that the daughter of God, even Wisdom, is not only masculine but father."[104] Philo's defensive posture in this passage implies the presence of a discourse against which he was reacting—a discourse that saw a congruence between gender in the real world and gender in allegory. Perhaps a rival thinker had daringly suggested that gendered language reflected gender reality. In refuting that position, Philo betrayed the contested nature of the issue. His willingness to

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[103] Michael Williams, "Variety in Gnostic Perspectives on Gender," in *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism*, ed. Karen King (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International), 7.

[104] Philo *De fuga* 51-52; quoted in Richard Smith, "Sex Education in Gnostic Schools," in *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism*, ed. Karen King (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2000), 359.

engage gender as a tool of hermeneutics was influential on later writers, such as Clement.[105]

Despite Philo, women showed an attraction for the attribution of feminine characteristics to a masculine divine. Epiphanius (ca 310/20-403) recorded the words of a Montanist woman of Phrygia who claimed that "Christ came to me in the form of a woman."[106] The *Life of Syncletica*—an anonymous fourth century work written about a (possibly invented) female ascetic who lived in Alexandria before moving to the desert—declares "From his [God's] breasts we are fed with milk, the Old and New Testaments."[107] The *Life of Syncletica* may have been written by a man,[108] but Caroline Bynum's work with medieval women shows how strongly women could be drawn to images of a feminine divine.[109]

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[105] The difference between Clement and Philo, Dawson argues, is that Philo placed lexicology over meaning, and Clement vice versa. Clement's analysis of the Salome text, discussed above, and of the term eunuch, discussed below, demonstrate his ability to engage gender as a category that may be separated from the thing it claims to describe (Dawson, 23, 199-200). For Clement, though, unlike Philo, the effort to increase likeness to the divine did not require a woman to switch genders.

[106] Epiph. *Panarion* 49.1.3, *The Panarion of St. Epiphanius, Bishop of Salamis: Selected Passages,* trans. Philip Amidon (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990). Nicola Denzey argues that certain Gnostic tracts discovered at Nag Hammadi show a tendency towards feminization of the divine that is reminiscent of Montanism. Moreover, *Dialexis (Dialogue beween an Orthodox and a Montanist)* may have been composed in Alexandria. See Nicola Denzey, "What Did the Montanists Read?" *The Harvard Theological Review* 94 (2001): 427-48.

[107] "The Life and Activity of the Holy and Blessed Teacher Syncletica" 21. Other "mothering" metaphors abound in the *Life of Syncletica*: "Sinners, like embryos dead in the womb in the mother," unlike "fetuses inside their mother, perfected . . . are brought to a greater security" ("The Life and Activity of the Holy and Blessed Teacher Syncletica" 91).

[108] If one takes it for granted that documents written by women would inevitably differ from that of men, one must also accept the sort of essentializing discourse wherein gender is a natural, rather than a cultural, distinction. Such a notion limits efforts to understand how society shapes the way gender is perceived. Indeed, scholars who deny the validity of men's commentary on women reaffirm the binarism they claim to oppose. In and of itself, the notion of "'[w]omen' may also, paradoxically, be the creation of the very structures of domination that feminism seeks to expose and subvert" (Virginia Burrus, "A Response: Contested Terms: *History, Feminism, Religion,*" *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 22 [2000]: 53).

[109] Caroline Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984).

Attitudes towards the gender of the material world and the divine were

complicated by semiotics. Some thinkers envisioned progression towards the divine as a

series of substitutions between a sign and that which the sign signified. For instance, the

attraction between an adherent and the divine was likened to the attraction felt between

gendered bodies which were but substitutes for the true object of adoration, the divine. In

Joseph and Aseneth, a second century[110] text composed in the Alexandrian milieu if not

in Alexandria itself, the union between an adherent and the divine is metaphorically

represented through the marriage of Aseneth and Joseph. The Platonic model provided

six centuries earlier in the *Symposium* recommended the contemplation of beautiful

bodies for aspirants wanting to direct their attention towards the divine. In their

perfection, these beautiful bodies were reflections, or signs, representing the divine.

These bodies attracted aspirants, encouraging a longing for the divine of which the bodies

were but a reflection. Thus, a body inspired aspirants to move beyond flesh—as a mere

stand-in or sign—and to proceed to that which the flesh actually signified.[111] Yet,

because a gendered body could overly distract an adherent, it was a false sign, evidence

that humans had not achieved full likeness with the divine.[112] Therefore, for many

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[110] Dunand believes it is older (Dunand, 256). If he is correct, it nevertheless depicts a model of romantic salvation that continued to be influential in Late Antiquity.

[111] Plato *Symp.* 210-13, *Lysis, Symposium, and Gorgias,* trans. W. R. M. Lamb (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1914). Although Plato's model involved same-sex love between men, the effeminate connotations were cast upon the subordinate. In any case, later writers did not limit the paradigm to male-male relations. According to E. Jane Cooper, Plotinus' commentary on the *Symposium* proceeds "in a general and gender-neutral way about the attraction to bodies as preliminary to the ascent, without privileging any particular kind of sexual orientation" (Cooper, 87).

[112] Frustration arises because "every image [*pasa . . . eikōn*] by its deceptive resemblance [*homoiotēs euparagōgos*] falsifies the original [*to archetypon*]" (Philo De p*raemiis et poenis* 29; quoted in Dawson, 88). Evagrius Ponticus recognized that one of the major impediments to contemplation of the divine resided in the intrusion of extraneous signs or "images" that distracted a person from concentration on the divine. Artifacts of sensory knowledge, these "images"—or *noēmata*—had to be removed from the

thinkers, gender was an artifact of this world and would disappear in the world to come.[113]

Signifiers of gender included both genitalia and behavioral indicators. The *kinaidos*—a man who engaged in sexual intercourse with men only, or with men as well as women—was deemed effeminate by virtue of his tendency towards shimmying movements, high-pitched speech, elaborate clothing, and hairless faces.[114] When in public, Christian virgins were advised to move slowly and decorously, in clothing that neither swished as they moved nor showed their ankles.[115] Similar standards were established by writers unconnected with Alexandria. Ambrose (338-397), bishop of Milan, advocated manipulating gender signs so that the sexual identity of Christian virgins would be discernible upon sight.[116] Basil of Ancyra (d. 362), an anti-Arian writer, explained the relationship between gender signs and the soul: "because the souls which are in bodies are unable to converse nakedly (γυμνῶς) with each other concerning virtue, they use the bodies that cover them like instruments, by means of voice and look."[117]

mind before a person could hope to contemplate a divinity existing beyond sensory data. Hence, Evagrius wrote that "prayer is the setting aside of *noēmata*" (Evagrius Ponticus, "Prayer 71," *Euagrius Ponticus,* ed. W. Frankenberg [Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1912], 562-634; quoted in Columba Stewart, "Imageless Prayer in Evagrius Ponticus," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 9 [2001], 190).

[113] According to Meeks, Paul's *Letter to the Corinthians* reflects this distinction—Paul believed the end of days would be marked by equality between the sexes, but since this time had not yet arrived, humans were mired in the "land of unlikeness" and therefore had no choice but to continue to adorn themselves with the signs (i.e., costumes) that distinguished gender. See Meeks, 208.

[114] Clement's assault on the *kinaidos* seems aimed at the *kinaidos'* rejection of masculinity. Clement directed contempt at the feminine characteristics the *kinaidos*: hairlessness, perfumed and oiled flesh, trailing garments, bejeweled flesh, and mincing steps (Clem. Al. *Paed.* 3.3.21-23). Montserrat wonders the extent to which this description accurately reflected a subculture of Alexandrian homosexuality, as opposed to Clement's personal constructions of gender (Montserrat, 148). In Late Antiquity, male prostitutes were burned in Rome for seeming too effeminate. See Brown, 383.

[115] Clem. Al. *Paed.* 3.10.113-4.

[116] Ambrose *De virg.* 3.3, *PL* 16:235C; quoted in Teresa M. Shaw, "Askesis and the Appearance of Holiness," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6 (1998): 493.

[117] Basil *De virg.* 36, *PG* 30:741A-B; quoted in Shaw, 490.

Virgins were encouraged to make physical signs of sexual identity—which included gender and sexual availability—conform with the spiritual status of their souls. So, not only were they to internalize modesty and a disinterest in sex, they were to outwardly demonstrate modesty and disinterest in sex. It was insufficient to cultivate the internal and not the external, or vice versa.

Writers knew well enough that signs could communicate the wrong sexual identity. Cyprian (d. 258), bishop of Carthage, questioned whether physical confirmation of an unbroken hymen was an accurate test of virginity, "since the hand and eye of the midwives may frequently be mistaken, and . . . she could have sinned in some other part of her person which can be sullied and yet cannot be examined."[118] Likewise, mistrust was shown towards gendered clothing practices. Women who donned men's clothing as proof of their celibacy were condemned by the fourth century Council of Gangra. The language of the edict suggests that the condemnation stemmed from doubt over whether or not clothing alone could truthfully establish one's sexual and spiritual purity in the eyes of others.[119]

In some narratives, gender cues were manipulated so as to provide a commentary on the nature of progression towards the divine. In *Joseph and Aseneth*, Aseneth's gender was employed in ways that reflected real-world perceptions of women,[120] but it

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[118] Cyprian *Ep.* 4.3.1, *CChr.SL* 3B, 20-2; quoted in Daniel Caner, "The Practice and Prohibition of Self-Castration in Early Christianity," *Vigilae Christianae* 51 (1997): 414.

[119] "Canons from the Council of Gangra," in *Ascetic Behavior in Greco-Roman Antiquity: A Sourcebook,* trans. O. Larry Yarbrough, ed. Vincent Wimbush (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990): 118-55. See also Caner, 414.

[120] For instance, Kraemer argues that Aseneth's use of space reflects traditional private/public dichotomies of female/male. Other commentators have interpreted her gender as a byproduct of language—the gendering of certain allegorical terms. See Ross Shepard Kraemer, *When Aseneth Met Joseph: A Late Antique Tale of the Biblical Patriarch and His Egyptian Wife, Reconsidered* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 192, 210. Nevertheless, gendered terminology was no linguistic accident,

was used allegorically to represent the transformations through which an adherent must go in order to obtain unity with the divine. Aseneth was a female, pagan, Egyptian who had to convert to marry the Jewish Joseph. Aseneth's gender was integral to the allegorical message of the text. According to Douglas Parrott, the author of the allegory deemed Aseneth a suitable stand-in for an irrational soul[121] because Greco-Roman tradition had long accepted that women were somewhat irrational and susceptible to distraction if left on their own. Gaining control of the soul, via male influence, required Aseneth to become male. Hence, the angel assisting Aseneth in her bridal preparations asked her to remove her veil, and then told her that she had become a man. When the angel told Aseneth to replace her veil, it was implied that doing so would return Aseneth to her original gender.[122] The latter was an indicator of difference, that is, proof of Aseneth's separation from the divine.[123]

For Parrott and Ross Kraemer, the removal of the veil is tantamount to cross-dressing, especially since it was at this point that Aseneth was told that she had become male. Significantly, cross-dressing was a popular motif in Late Antique Alexandrian

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contra Rachel Moriarty, "Playing the Man'—the Courage of Christian Martyrs, Translated and Transposed,' in *Gender and Christian Religion*, ed. R. N. Swanson (New York: The Bydell Press, 1998), 7.

[121] In Pseudo-Macarius, the hapless soul struggles through the woods, her clothes tearing on brambles. See Pseudo-Macarius the Egyptian "Homily IV" 3, in *Ascetic Behavior in Greco-Roman Antiquity: A Sourcebook,* trans. Richard Valantasis, ed. Vincent Wimbush, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).

[122] Douglas Parrott, "A Response to Jewish and Greek Heroines," in *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism,* ed. Karen King (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International), 93-94.

[123] Kraemer, 194. Similarly, the ascetic's use "of Christ as a mimetic model actually contributes to the destabilization of bipolar gender categories . . . At the same time that the ethic of imitation tries to inculcate 'sameness,' it takes as its presupposition the prior existence of difference." This is the difference separating the aspirant from the divine. See Davis, "Crossed" 34.

literature.[124] After fleeing Constantinople in the guise of a man, a woman by the name of

Hilaria supposedly arrived in Alexandria, entered the church of St. Mark, received divine

inspiration, and traveled to Scetis to seclude herself in a monastery.[125] Theodora, a

resident of Alexandria, apparently cut off her hair and fled to a monastery as punishment

for committing adultery. Years later, a woman who saw Theodora on the road took her

for a man, attempted to seduce her,[126] then accused Theodora of fathering her child.

Theodora cared for the child, was accepted back into her monastery, and was revealed as

a man only upon her death.[127] Less extreme examples of cross-dressing appear in the *Life

of Syncletica,* where virgins were compared to athletes,[128] and Syncletica was not

"deemed worthy of the name 'virgin'" until she cut her hair.[129] Elsewhere, she was

compared to a soldier and was praised for her male courage (*andreia*).[130]

Significantly, ethnographic evidence has suggested that cross-dressing is a

common element of rituals meant to unite an adherent with the divine.[131] Yet, cross-

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[124] Examples not discussed here include Castissima (see Joyce E. Salisbury, *Church Fathers, Independent Virgins*, [New York: Verso, 1991], 104) and Euphrosune (see Caner, 414).

[125] Davis points out that Hilaria's receipt of divine inspiration recalls that received by St. Antony in Athanasius' hagiography of the saint. See Davis, "Crossed" 20.

[126] Other literature of the period suggests that female homoeroticism elicited far greater anxiety than male homoeroticism, for a woman's assumption of a man's sexual interests was perceived as but part of a larger plot to assume his social identity. This was a threat to social and gender hierarchy. See Judith Hallett, "Female Homoeroticism and the Denial of Roman Reality," in *Roman Sexualities*, ed. Judith P. Hallett and Marilyn B. Skinner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 255-76. For anxiety towards homoerotic behavior, see Clem. Al. *Paed*. 3.3. At Hermopolis Magna, a love spell (four/fifth century?) was cast to attract a woman to another woman. See *Suppl. Mag*. 1, 1-25; quoted in Rowlandson, 361-62.

[127] Davis, "Crossed" 25-26.

[128] "The Life and Activity of the Holy and Blessed Teacher Syncletica" 26.

[129] "The Life and Activity of the Holy and Blessed Teacher Syncletica" 11.

[130] "The Life and Activity of the Holy and Blessed Teacher Syncletica" 19, 111. But masculinization carries risks—the soul can be tricked into arrogance by reflecting upon *andragathēmata* ("The Life and Activity of the Holy and Blessed Teacher Syncletica" 49).

[131] Dennis Ronald MacDonald, "Corinthian Veils and Gnostic Androgynes," in *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism*, ed. Karen King (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International), 288.

dressing narratives need not have had an exotic source. Average Christians could not

have helped but notice how female ascetics seemed to lose secondary sexual

characteristics with extreme fasting.[132] Cross-dressing no doubt conferred practical

benefits in a male dominated society. Nonetheless, Virginia Burrus cautions against

efforts to normalize transvestites, lest one obscure "the complex and often unconscious

eroticism of such self-transformations and masquerades." Convenient explanations (such

as, the practical benefits of a male guise in a male dominated society) "rewrite the story

of the transvestite subject as a cultural symptom . . . the consequent reinscription of

'male' and 'female,' even if tempered (or impelled) by feminist consciousness, reaffirms

the patriarchal binary."[133] Instead, Burrus encourages readers to consider the ways in

which the inscription of gender signs disrupts the relationship between gender and the

body.

The complicated semiotics of gender are well evinced by the tale of Eugenia.

Inspired by Thecla's example,[134] Eugenia cut off her hair and adopted men's clothing.[135]

Along with two eunuchs from her retinue, she joined a monastery, presenting herself in

the guise of a eunuch.[136] While Eugenia was living in the monastery, she gained fame for

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[132] Susannah Elm, *'Virgins of God' The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 269. Modern studies show that long-term fasting decreases sexual drive, but some ancient writers claimed that sexual desire actually increased during the initial stages of fasting. See Aline Rouselle, *Porneia: On Desire and the Body in Antiquity,* trans. Felicia Pheasant (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1983), 176-77.

[133] Virginia Burrus, *The Sex Lives of Saints of Saints: An Erotics of Ancient Hagiography* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2004), 145.

[134] In the Latin version of this tale, Eugenia read the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* during a journey away from Alexandria, a trip made for the express purpose of meeting Christians. See Davis, "Pilgrimage" 329, n. 95.

[135] The reaction of Eugenia's parents to her "death" appears to have been modeled on a similar scene in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla.* See Davis, "Pilgrimage" 330.

[136] Justin Martyr *Apology* 29.1-2, *Die altesten Apologeten,* ed. E. Goodspeed (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1914) 45; quoted in Caner, 396.

the gift of healing. She was often called upon to treat women, one of whom fell in love

with her. When Eugenia spurned the love-smitten patient, the latter accused the female

monk of making advances. Eugenia was placed on trial in Alexandria, with her own

father sitting as judge. To defend herself from the charge of sexual impropriety, Eugenia

ripped open her clothes "and the chaste breasts which were upon the bosom of a pure

virgin were seen."[137] This language, which suggests that breasts might be put upon the

body, recalls language from Clement and others wherein the flesh is a suit of clothing.[138]

In Eugenia's tale, breasts were ornamentation for a bosom that was virginal, a sign that

Eugenia had not seduced a woman as could a man. Hence, these breasts were signifiers

of sexual austerity. As a woman, Eugenia communicated her sexual austerity by showing

the presence of a sexual signifier; however, previously, as a man, Eugenia had

communicated her sexual austerity by professing not the presence of a sexual signifier,

but rather the loss of one, removed when she became a eunuch.[139]

It seems surprising that a eunuch would have been accused of sexual impropriety,

but other writing from this period indicates that castration was thought to have

ambiguous results on the sexual drive. Late Antique surgeons could cut off the supply of

semen passing through the *vas deferens* without causing additional damage. More

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[137] "Life of Eugenia," *Select Narratives of Holy Women*, trans. Smith Lewis (London: Cambridge University Press, 1900); quoted in Davis, "Crossed" 18.

[138] Clement knew of thinkers who considered bodies "tunics of skin," a notion he rejected. See Clem. Al. *Strom.* 3.95.2, trans. Ferguson, and Meeks, 187, n. 94.

[139] Ordinary women did not have to expose themselves to prove their gender, so Eugenia's identification via bared breasts was over-signification. J. Anson has argued that the seductive quality of the transvestite monk lay in this oversignification. She was too male and too female at the same time. Anson contends that these tales provided a "safe" format in which celibate male writers could express their longing for female companionship. Salisbury disagrees, arguing that this theory does not account for the (possibly) threatening nature of the independence these women exercised. See Salisbury 108-9.

extreme forms of genital alteration involved crushing or tying off the testicles.[140] There

was a mental dimension to castration as well. To Clement, eunuchs included men who

had not been physically altered at all. They were merely celibate.[141] Palladius described

a "spiritual" castration that was performed upon an ascetic seeking relief from lust.[142]

Consequently, it is not always clear what the term "eunuch" was meant to indicate.

Interestingly, eunuchs risked accusations of effeminacy. Athanasius, for instance,

accused a castrated rival of adopting feminine ways.[143] According to Pliny (23-79), the

gender of eunuchs was far from obvious: *tertium . . . semivir genus habent*.[144] An

Alexandrian text on magic includes a chapter on creating a *kinaidos*, by means of which

the victim would be deprived of erections and made effeminate.[145] Galen (129-200/16), a

Greek physician, claimed castration made a man effeminate by depriving him of heat.[146]

Although there was a connection between gender and biology, the ramifications of this

connection were not automatic. Had they been, there would have been nothing to

dispute. Thus, the bodies of eunuchs were contested space for gender.[147]

In Cyril's homily *Against Eunuchs*, the bishop warned that the eunuchs whom his

congregation trusted "to sleep with their women as guardians" ensured no more than the

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[140] Kathryn Ringrose, "Living in the Shadows: Eunuchs and Gender in Byzantium," in *Third Sex, Third Gender: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History*, ed. Gilbert Herdt (New York: Zone Books, 1994), 91.

[141] Clem. Al. *Strom.* 3.15.99, trans. Ferguson.

[142] "Three angels came to him . . . They took hold of him, one by the hands and one by the feet, and the third took a razor and castrated him—not actually, but in the dream" (Palladius, *The Lausiac History,* 29, trans. Robert Meyer [Westminster: The Newman Press, 1965]).

[143] Athan. *H. Ar.* 28, *Opera Omnia,* 198.2-4; quoted in Brakke, 34.

[144] Plin. *HN* 11.49, ed. C. Mayhoff (Leipzig: 1909), 369; quoted in Caner, 399.

[145] Montserrat, 149.

[146] Ringrose, 88.

[147] Davis, "Crossed" 28.

semblance of chastity.[148] Basil of Ancyra claimed that men who "have cut off only their

testicles, burn with greater and less restrained desire for sexual union, and . . . not only do

they feel this ardor, but they think they can defile any women they meet without risk."[149]

In this passage, the rejection of sex is said to increase desire. If Basil exaggerated, it is

because his construction of castration was intended to undermine the arguments of

heterdox Christians who advocated castration as a rejection of the material world via

rejection of sex.[150] His criticism of castration implies that Eugenia would have been

more vulnerable to the charge of sexual impropriety as an eunuch than as a (nude)

woman.

Basil clearly felt that castration had an ambiguous impact on men's sexual drive,

but the authors of certain Greek medical texts believed that the excision of male-like

genitalia from women blunted women's sexual drive. Modern commentators heatedly

debate whether or not female circumcision was practiced in Late Antique Egypt.[151]

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[148] Cyril *Hom.* 19, *Georgii Monachi Chrenicon,* ed. C. de Boor (Leipzig: 1904), 652; quoted in Caner, 412.

[149] Basil *De Virginitate de Saint Basile : Text vieux-Slave et traduction française,* trans. A. Vaillant (Paris : Institut d'Études slaves, 1943), 77; quoted in Rouselle, 123. In Palladius, a monk who went to Alexandria to have an affair with a prostitute did not return to the desert until venereal disease effectively left him castrated (Palladius *Lausiac History* 1.23, *Stories of the Holy Fathers,* trans. Ernest A. Wallis Budge [New York: Oxford University Press, 1934]). However, according to Clement, "To be a eunuch does not of itself make a person righteous . . . unless he performs the commandments" (Clem. Al. *Strom.* 3.15.98.2, trans. Ferguson).

[150] Caner calls castration "an ambiguous signifier," for abstinence and mental purity "were not in fact made clear or guaranteed by this seemingly unambiguous form of bodily inscription" (Caner, 398).

[151] Montserrat argues that female circumcision was a projection of the colonizers (Greco-Romans) upon the colonized (Egyptians), and was not practiced in Egypt until much later (with the introduction of Islam). See Montserrat, *Sex,* 42. A sarcophagus dating from the Middle Period does refer to an "uncircumcised girl," though there is some debate about the translation of "uncircumcised." Another reference to female circumcision, dated to 160 B.C.E., suggests that it was considered a rite performed in preparation for marriage. Both Philo and Ambrose wrote of Egyptians circumcising boys and girls at the age of fourteen. See Mary Knight, "Curing Cut or Ritual Mutilation?: Some Remarks on the Practice of Female and Male Circumcision in Greco-Roman Egypt," *Isis* 92 (2001): 330-33. Assuming female circumcision was practiced, and it was a prerequisite for marriage, were Christian virgins excused? Or did they continue to undergo the ritual in preparation for spiritual marriage to Christ?

Unfortunately, the poor state of remains in and around Alexandria impedes investigators'

abilities to detect female circumcision. Greek medical texts of the period nevertheless

treat female circumcision as a real phenomenon. Although these texts attribute the

practice to medical, not cultural, reasons, in so doing they expose how medicine too was

engaged in the construction of gender. Aetios, a sixth century physician who studied in

Alexandria, claimed that an enlarged clitoris could not help but be subjected to "continual

rubbing against the clothes," something "that stimulates the appetite for sexual

intercourse. On this account, it seemed proper to the Egyptians to remove it before it

became greatly enlarged, especially at that time when the girls were about to be

married."[152] Caelius Aurelius (5th cent. commentator on the Alexandria physician

Soranus[153]), Muschio (6th cent.[?] translator of Soranus), and Paul of Aegina (7th cent.

Alexandrian physician) agreed that women with enlarged clitorises "have erections of

this part just like men and eagerly desire sexual intercourse."[154] An enlarged clitoris was

thought to make women manly, simultaneously increasing sexual drive. However, the

notion that female circumcision would impair women's sexual drive must reflect cultural,

not scientific, conclusions, for modern studies have found that women who have

undergone female circumcision at puberty have normal sexual drives as adults.[155]

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[152] Aetios 16.105 *Gynaekologie des Aetios, sive sermo sextus decimus et ultimus, zum erstenmale aus Handschriften veroffentlicht*, ed. Skevos Zervos (Leipzig: Fock, 1901) n. 22; quoted in Knight, 327.

[153] Soranus is credited with composing an influential passage on the subject, but the original text is no longer extant (Knight, 322).

[154] In Paul of Aegina's text, the discussion of female circumcision directly follows a section on hermaphrodites. This placement underscores the relationship between female circumcision and sexual ambiguity. Paul of Aegina *De re medica* 6.70, *Corpus Medicorum Graecorum*, 9.2, ed. I. L. Heiberg (Leipzig: Teubner, 1924); quoted in Knight, 325-26.

[155] Knight, 334.

Female circumcision may not have really blunted sexual drives, but it is significant that writers believed that the subject of the operation had to lose her masculinity—become more feminine—to achieve sexual continence. As a eunuch and then as a bare-chested woman, Eugenia's sexual austerity—and thus her sanctity—was effeminate. So like, narratives involving surgical alteration of "male" genitalia on women's bodies, the inscription of a female gender on a potentially masculine body suggested that men were more prone to sexual impropriety than women. Joyce Salisbury argues that cross-dressing narratives imposed a double standard—allowing women to achieve sanctity only as men—but the evidence does not support this conclusion. Indeed, *contra* Salisbury,[156] some holy men were perceived as cross-dressers, especially the effeminate eunuchs.

These eunuchs were more than effeminate, they associated with women to excess. Athanasius claimed that his self-castrated rival had performed the operation so that he could continue living with a woman without risking the charge of sexual impropriety.[157] Origen's self-castration was attributed to his desire to remain above suspicion while working with women.[158] Palladius's case of "spiritual" castration was performed so that the patient might continue working with a convent, free from the pangs of lust.[159]

Critics of self-castration were put off to find spiritually or physically castrated rivals working closely with women. Competition for female adherents could be fierce.[160]

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[156] Salisbury, 101.

[157] Athan. *H. Ar.* 28, quoted in Brakke, 34.

[158] Euseb. *HE* 6.8.2. See also Caner, 411 Origen quoted Philo in asserting that "it is better to make oneself a eunuch than to rage madly for unlawful sexual intercourse" (Origen *Comment in Matt.* 10.3, *Origenes Werke* 10, ed. E. Klostermann [Berlin: 1935], 354-55; quoted in Caner, 402).

[159] Palladius *Lausiac History* 29, trans. Budge. Also see Caner, 411.

[160] See below for Athanasius' conflict with Arius.

Yet more may have been at stake. Thomas Laquer has argued that Late Antique

discourse employed a single-sex model, with the male gender serving as the gold

standard. Male and female genders lay on either side of the spectrum. Men served as the

definitive model, and women were taken as an aberration.[161] The effeminacy of

spiritually or physically castrated men was dangerous in a single-sex model that

privileged the male end of the spectrum. The sexual impotence and passivity of the male

ascetic cast men in a role that was traditionally female.

Gendering Submission

Late Antique popular literature likewise turned male celibacy into an effeminate

act. Achilles Tatius' second century *Leukippe and Kleitophon*—part of which is set in

Alexandria—suggests that women were better suited for virginity than men.[162] Leukippe,

the heroine, resists sexual violence and demands that her fiancée, Kleitophon, put up a

similar fight. At one point, the cross-dressing Kleitophon protests to Leukippe: "I have

imitated your virginity, if there be any virginity in men."[163] Kleitophon previously

indicated that he had sought out the services of prostitutes. So Kleitophon clarifies, "If

there be any such thing as virginity among us men, then that I have preserved with

respect to Leucippe."[164] This fuzzy reasoning leads Virginia Burrus to conclude "that the

discursive performance of male virginity is an ambivalent act of mimicry that effects a

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[161] Thomas Laquer, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 22.

[162] Virginia Burrus points out the parallels between Leukippe's suffering and that of female Christian martyrs who were threatened with sexual violence if they did not recant their religious vocations. See Virginia Burrus, "Mimicking Virgins: Colonial Ambivalence and the Ancient Romance," *Arethusa* 38 (2005): 61.

[163] Achilles Tatius *Clitophon and Leucippe* 5.20.5, trans. S. Gaselee (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1917). See also Burrus, "Mimicking" 61.

[164] Achilles Tatius *Clitophon and Leucippe* 8.5.8. See also Burrus, "Mimicking" 62.

crisis of signification—'if the word has any meaning,' 'if one can speak of such a thing.'"[165] A man was in danger of becoming womanish if he pursued a course of celibacy.

Similarly, the romantic model for progression towards the divine presented in *Joseph and Aseneth* cast the adherent in the role of a woman.[166] The Gnostic *Exegesis of the Soul*—discovered at Nag Hammadi—employs the same sort of model. The text narrates the Soul's allegorical descent into matter and journey back to the divine. Originally, when dwelling with her Father, the Soul had a womb, but according to the author of the allegory, the Soul was still androgynous at this point. Leaving her Father, the Soul descended into the world, and assumed flesh and a gender. Her womb turned outwards like male genitalia. Prostituting herself, the Soul repented at last and cried out for salvation: "Save me, Father . . . for I abandoned my house and fled from my maiden's quarters; restore me to Thyself again."[167] Her repentance was rewarded with the arrival of a divine bridegroom. Turning the Soul into a bride, the resolution of this tale inscribes her with a feminine gender. According to the author, her womb turned inward like a woman's.[168] So the adherent gained allegorical salvation as a woman united with a masculine divine.

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[165] Burrus, 62 "Mimicking".

[166] Burrus, "Mimicking" 68. The apparent denigration of women who distracted men from their love affairs with the divine merely underscores the romantic nature of this venture. See Palladius *Lausiac History* 5, trans. Budge.

[167] *Exeg. Soul* 128.34-129.2, *Nag Hammadi Library,* trans. W. C. Robinson (New York: HarperOne, 1990), 180-87; quoted in Madeleine Scopello, "Jewish and Greek Heroines in the Nag Hammadi Library," in *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism,* ed. Karen King (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2000), 73.

[168] Ibid.

Tellingly, the discourse surrounding martyrdom was gendered towards similar ends. The term *passio* as applied to martyrdom recast the suffering as a sexual experience, the climax of which was salvation. Earlier, in pagan literature, *passio* had carried connotations of an effeminate flesh made to withstand the sexual assault of a dominate male. The Christian men who were martyred gained salvation by suffering like women.[169] When Christian writers celebrated subservience as a route towards spiritual advancement, they lent credence to experiences of submission and passivity that carried effeminate connotations. Embracing these portrayals, Christian women may not have been moving that far away from their culturally prescribed gender roles. Salvation via subservience meant becoming female.[170] If eunuchs and female fathers evoked horror,[171] perhaps it is because they suggested that men who wanted to achieve salvation would have to become female.

<u>Defining Categories</u>

The female man of God not only challenged categorization—blurring gender distinctions—s/he challenged the possibility of category itself.[172] As a woman in one of the *Sayings of the Desert* explained, a perfect monk would not notice her gender.[173] If

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[169] Brent Shaw, "Body/Power/Identity: Passions of the Martyrs," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 4 (1996): 297.

[170] Kraemer, 204. Roman poetry similarly co-opted women as symbols of submission. Some commentators have argued that this usage verged on the pornographic, with women becoming no more than passive objects for male desire. Marjorie Skinner disagrees, proposing that women were essential to the intellectual exercise of "playing the Other." Women supplied "alternative subject positions permitting scope for emotive fantasy." While "their passions were gendered 'feminine,' a male reader was expected to discharge his own repressed feelings through sentimental involvement in the character's predicament" (Marilyn Skinner, "Introduction: *Quod multo fit aliter in Graecia . . .,*" in *Roman Sexualities*, ed. Judith P. Hallett and Marilyn B. Skinner [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997], 145).

[171] Female fathers represented the "grotesque body that seems to transgress all boundaries and confuse all efforts of categorization" (Burrus, *Sex* 144).

[172] Miller, "Harlot" 94.

[173] Pelagius and John *Sayings* 4.52.

Late Antique writers were absolutely certain that women were incapable of achieving sanctity, they never would have suggested the possibility. When dichotomies, like female/male, try to "overcome or undermine each other, they are mutually shaped by their dialectical dance."[174] If hard and fast definitions of gender existed in Late Antiquity, they were in danger of disruption. The attempt to assert authority predicated the presence of dissent.

Hermeneutical traditions ensured the dialectical nature of gender construction. Intertextuality meant that no interpretation could ever be absolutely right, for there was always room for the introduction of new texts and more debate. These influences complicate the interpretation of narratives that seem to disparage women. One such narrative describes how Macarius, an Egyptian holy man who lived in the *chora* around Alexandria, cured a girl suffering a skin disease. This cure was accomplished, "but in such a way that no femininity showed in her form, no feminine parts were apparent so that in all her contact with men she never beguiled them with womanly deceits."[175] According to Gillian Cloke, "womanly parts" in this tale are equivalent to "womanly deceits." Curing the girl meant treating her "womanly parts" as a symptom of disease. Cloke concludes that "womanly parts" disqualified women's spiritual advancement. The gender could not "transcend gender differences."[176] Nor did it represent a "third sex."[177]

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[174] William Sewell, Jr., "The Concept(s) of Culture," in *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture,* ed. Victoria Bonnell and Lynn Hunt (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999): 56-57.

[175] *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* Macarius 21, *PL* 21.387-462, *The Lives of the Desert Fathers*, trans. Norman Russell (Oxford: Mowbray, 1981); quoted in Cloke, 220.

[176] Benedicta Ward, *Harlots of the Desert: A Study of Repentance in Early Monastic Sources* (London: Mowbray, 1987), 62; quoted in Cloke, 221.

[177] Elizabeth Clark, *Women in the Early Church* (Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1983), 17; quoted in Cloke, 221.

Women "could only disguise the sex they had."[178] Cloke's interpretation accords with the views of Late Antique writers who questioned women's ability to access the divine. Unfortunately, it does little to address the ambiguity generated when other writers are considered.

To be sure, Macarius' hagiographer was but one voice in a heated debate on the place of gender in religious pursuits. As Clement's interpretation of the Salome text demonstrates, ostensibly negative terminology—such as "womanly parts"—need not have been taken at face value, that is, as a reflection on women's sinful natures. The "deceit" posed by "womanly flesh" is surely that temptation that distances an aspirant from the loftier temptation of union with the divine.

Temptation was an inevitable danger in religious groups. The castigation of women as a source of this temptation obscured the degree to which men also posed a temptation, to men as well as women.[179] Celibate women were known to succumb to lust, engaging in illicit affairs.[180] This is not because women were inherently corporeal and sexual, although some writers may have suggested as much. Instead, it was because women, like men, suffered distraction. Regardless, even a harlot, whose "lips are full of sin and . . . hands are stained with iniquity," could claim to be made in the image of the divine and seek union, saying "You who have made me, have mercy on me."[181]

The dialectical nature of this discourse exposes fissures in the debate—fissures that were open to exploitation by real women seeking to assert their ability to achieve

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[178] Cloke 220-21.

[179] Rouselle, 148.

[180] See discussion below about Ephraim of Edessa's *Life of Mary* and *The Life of St. Kyriacus*.

[181] "Life of Thäis," *Harlots of the Desert, A Study of Repentance in Early Monastic Sources*, trans. Benedicta Ward (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, Inc., 1987), 83-84.

spiritual advancement. When thinkers suggested that women could not achieve salvation, perhaps women like Macarius' patient responded by blurring gender distinctions. Beliefs about the relationship between gender and the material world did not automatically spell the condemnation of women. Thanks to *Theotokos* and Thecla, women could identify with a spirituality predicated upon bodily experiences. Efforts to gender the divine may have been similarly rewarding. The use of gender signs was so complicated that it is difficult to determine the real relationship between the body and gender. With women masquerading as eunuchs and male eunuchs (whether spiritual or physical) assuming effeminate traits, gender as a category was completely undermined. The gendering of religious adherence as an act of submission further threatened efforts to define absolute categories. If anything meaningful was taken from this, perhaps it was no more than a sense of ambiguity and an appreciation for how susceptible the discourse was to negotiation.

Understanding this intellectual framework allows one to explore more fruitfully how women actually occupied space. A major source of women's writings, epistles sent by women[182] from Alexandria, demonstrates that they were far from passive in response to their environment. Appreciation for their active engagement with life sheds light on questions of agency. The women who criticized family members, invested in Christian building projects, or participated as the victims/perpetrators of religious violence were hardly the type to accept blindly any denigration of their gender. Certainly, women faced obstacles, but they would have sought to transform experiences to validate their sense of self-worth.

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[182] Either penned by their hand or written at their behest.

Chapter 3: Letters of Alienation

Several letters preserved from the Imperial period and Late Antiquity testify to the movement of women in and around Alexandria, and to women's interest in maintaining social contacts outside the city. Early though these letters may be, they describe conditions of urban life that would have remained relatively unchanged as Christianity gained dominance. A sense of disruption—as a move to the city separated women from loved ones in the *chora*—was no doubt just as disturbing in the fifth century as it was in the second century. So it is noteworthy that Christianity embraced alienation, turning an otherwise negative experience into a reaffirmation of religious identity.

Indeed, many letters appear to have been sent by women simply to inform the recipients that the senders had reached Alexandria safely. In a letter dated to the first or second century, a woman informed her "brother"[183] that she had arrived safely in Alexandria after a six day journey.[184] A century later, a woman sent a letter to her mother (who was probably in Fayyūm) to indicate that she had arrived safely after only four days.[185] Such journeys were not free from jeopardy. A letter sent in (perhaps) the second century describes how a woman traveler's foot was seriously injured during the trip.[186] An aversion to frivolous travel is suggested by a second century letter asking the recipient to clarify her plans—if the latter is going to Antinoopolis, the sender will join

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[183] The word "brother" could be an indicator of either a sibling relationship or a term of endearment for a husband. See Montserrat, *Sex* 89.

[184] *BGU* 3.843; quoted in Roger S. Bagnall and Raffaella Cribiore, ed., *Women's Letters from Ancient Egypt, 300 BC-AD 800* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2006), 364.

[185] *BGU* 7.1680; quoted in in Bagnall, 365

[186] *BGU* 13.2350; quoted in Bagnall, 366.

her.[187] One of the miracles attributed to Sts. Cyril and John at the nearby pilgrimage site of Menouthis involved curing a woman who was injured during the journey to the shrine.[188]

The difficulties associated with travel meant that new arrivals and long-time residents of Alexandria could be cutoff from friends and family. The complications of separation could be numerous. In the late second-early third century, a daughter sent a letter to her mother—who was living in Alexandria—threatening to throw herself in the sea if a dispute with a female associate was not settled soon.[189] A mother living in third century Alexandria sent a disgruntled letter to her daughter in Karanis. The mother was separated from her husband, who was quarrelling with her daughter's husband. In addition, the mother was afraid that her daughter blamed her for a dispute with another woman.[190] Could these issues have been settled more easily if the family was together?

Disrupted social networks like this may have actually encouraged the spread of Christianity. Women newly arrived in the city without friends or family may have grieved over the loss of social ties, but if preserved, these ties may have posed a bar to the exploration of non-traditional—that is, Christian—spirituality.[191] Comparative evidence underscores the appeal of conversion to women who feel marginalized. Even temporary marginalization—during periods of liminality (for example, right before marriage)—can

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[187] *P.Bingen* 74; quoted in Bagnall, 367.

[188] Dominic Montserrat, "Carrying on the Work of the Earlier Firm': Doctors, Medicine and Christianity in the *Thaumata* of Sophronius of Jerusalem,' in *Health in Antiquity*, ed. Helen King (New York: Routledge, 2005), 239.

[189] *P.Petaus* 29; quoted in Bagnall, 276.

[190] *P.Mich*. 8.514; quoted in Bagnall, 269.

[191] Stark, 86.

predispose women towards conversion.[192] *Joseph and Aseneth* fits this pattern, with

Aseneth's pre-marital liminality giving way to conversion and an exit from liminality.[193]

Conversion as a reaction to marginalization appears in Clement's writings as well.[194]

An awareness of alterity and fears of ostracism haunt women's correspondence.[195]

Alexandrian women went to great lengths to maintain contacts outside the city. Letters

often contain instructions for sending or receiving additional communications.[196] Some

letters express loneliness. One woman complained because the recipient of her

communication (second-third century) "did not think it worthy to send . . . a single

letter."[197] A daughter sent an epistle (second-third century) to her father reminding him

of their separation—"I want you to know that I am alone. Keep in mind, 'My daughter is

in Alexandria,' so that I may know that I have a father, so that they may not see me as

someone without parents."[198] Another daughter protested to her father, who was living in

Philadelphia, "It is eight months already since I came to Alexandria but you did not write

to me a single letter. Again you do not treat me like your daughter (but) like your

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[192] Ross Shepard Kraemer, "The Conversion of Women to Ascetic Forms of Christianity," *Signs* 6 (1980): 304.

[193] Parrott, 93-94.

[194] For instance, Clement advises his reader: "So never set your sights on pleasing the crowd. We do not practice what delights them. Our knowledge is a long way from their disposition" (Clem. Al. *Strom.* 1.41.6, trans. Ferguson).

[195] Theocritus' *Idyll 2* describes how a woman, inexplicably bereft of family in an unspecified city, is drawn into sexual licentiousness. This creature may have been one of any number of immigrant women drawn to Alexandria in the Hellenistic period, lacking the protection of a male relative and so forced to pursue prostitution (Skinner, *Sexuality* 181). For Christianity's treatment of prostitutes, see below.

[196] Sempronius wrote from Alexandria to let his mother know that he had received two letters from her through different messengers. A second letter indicates that he has taken advantage of someone going her way to write her. See *P.Mich*. 15.751-52; quoted in Rowlandson, 145.

[197] Dependence on the recipient is underscored by a request for oil needed when the sender gives birth. However, the woman sending this letter was by no means helpless, for she funded a brother's journey upcountry. Her family seems especially prone to travel. At the time of this letter, the sender's mother was preparing for a trip to Alexandria. See *P.Mich*. 8.508; quoted in Bagnall, 398-99.

[198] *W.Chr*. 100; quoted in Bagnall, 288.

enemy." This letter (ca. 296 C.E.) opens with a Christian greeting, but letters sent by the woman's husband shift between Christian and pagan greetings.[199] The family's correspondence does not contain enough information to explain the differing degrees of religious expression. At the very least, the husband appears to have maintained contacts within the pagan community. Perhaps his wife's feelings of isolation augmented her realignment towards Christianity. Alexandria's Christian community provided a new set of social contacts, with alienation from the dominate culture drawing the Christian network ever closer.[200]

The conversion of marginalized women would have been augmented by the efforts of bishops who took an active interest in addressing women's needs. John the Almsgiver (7th cent.), for example, built seven hospitals in Alexandria so that women who had just given birth could complete their confinement and receive alms before returning home.[201] Women who felt isolated in urban Alexandrian society may have been drawn to the sense of community offered in the growing Christian population. With Christians like Clement validating alienation as a worthwhile experience, women may also have felt that the marginalization they experienced on the basis of their gender had found redemption.

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[199] *P.Mich*. 3.221; quoted in Bagnall, 294.

[200] Giovanni Ruffini, "Late Antique Pagan Networks from Athens to the Thebaid," in *Ancient Alexandria between Egypt and Greece,* ed. W. V. Harris and Giovanni Ruffini (Boston: Brill, 2004), 253. Female victims of love magic may have been set up to suffer similar feelings of isolation. David Frankfurter interprets this sort of love magic as a socially constructed attack seeking to separate the subject from her social bonds (husband/parents) so that she has no choice but to turn to the person on whose behalf the spell was cast. See David Frankfurter, "The Perils of Love: Magic and Countermagic in Coptic Egypt," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 10 (2001): 481-83.

[201] "Life of John the Almsgiver" 1.7, *Three Byzantine Saints: Contemporary Biographies of St. Daniel the Stylite, St. Theodore of Sykeon and St. John the Almsgiver,* trans. Elizabeth Dawes, (Crestwood: St. Vladmir's Seminary Press, 1997).

Chapter 4: Converting Space

Women's use of space reflected the contradictory—but related—experiences of alienation and group membership. Alienated though she was from spaces associated with other faiths or loose morals, the ideal Christian woman took up occupation of areas appropriated for her use. This had an imaginary dimension as well, with virginal bodies defining the borders within which Christian values were "performed."

Several questions remain as to how the Christianization of Alexandrian space affected attitudes towards gender. Did pagan sacred space that was particularly associated with women become Christian space oriented towards women, or did it lose its gendered character? When the shrine dedicated to Aphrodite (on or near the Heptastadion)[202] closed, did its female adherents simply vanish from that locale? Or were they redirected towards a new Christian space? If the latter, was it a space that was uniquely geared towards women, or did they have to share with men? Of course, the gender of a pagan deity need not have reflected the gender of its worshipers. When the temple of Isis Pharia was converted into Agia Sophia in the third century, sailors complained that they would be unable to navigate the harbor without the protection of the goddess.[203] When the Serapeum was destroyed, women discovered that the special invitations they had received from the male deity (to enjoy incubation rites) were part of a priest's efforts at seduction.[204]

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[202] Haas, *Alexandria* 144-45.

[203] Ibid.*,* 211.

[204] Frank R. Trombley, *Hellenic Religion and Christianization c. 370-529* (New York: E. J. Brill, 1993), 136.

Women were not just passive observers of the urban transformation. A rich virgin funded a Christian hospital[205] and, during Theophilus' bishopric, a widow went to great lengths to bequeath money for projects that interested her (monasteries, hostels, and hospitals for the poor).[206] Women went so far as to transform their homes in order to accommodate Christianity. The wealthy woman who supported Origen hosted religious meetings in her home.[207] As a hostess, she helped domesticate Christianity. A sixth-century fresco of the Virgin Mary at Kom-el-Dikka similarly brought the feminine divine into the everyday life of the home. The courtyard at Kom el-Dikka, where the fresco was found, may have served as a private oratory, the likes of which would have catered to the many subversive strains of Christianity that flourished throughout Alexandria's turbulent religious history. As late as the seventh century, the Monophysite bishop of Alexandria was reduced to secret visits in the homes of followers.[208] If the fresco reflected a specifically feminine interest in the divine, this would be an example of intentionally gendered Christian space in Alexandria.[209]

Violence against women during this period was highly symbolic of religious issues. As mentioned earlier, Philo had advised Jewish women to restrict themselves to the innermost areas of the house, and discouraged them from venturing to the Synagogue

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[205] Albeit against her will (Palladius *Lausiac History* 6, trans. Budge).

[206] A heated dispute broke out between Theophilus and the priest left in charge of the money. In the end, the priest was exiled. See Haas, *Alexandria* 446, n. 45.

[207] The picture of private devotion is further complicated by Gnostic and Hermetic groups, which did not mark space in the same way because they did not require edifices preserved exclusively for religious use. See Haas, *Alexandria* 141, 257.

[208] Haas, *Alexandria* 203.

[209] Of course, just as men were drawn to Isis Pharia, so too men may have been drawn to Mary. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that this image—rather than one of Christ by Himself—was chosen. As will be discussed further below, issues involving *Theotokos* had particular significance for both Alexandrian theology and the events surrounding the dismantling of the Isis shrine at Menouthis.

unless the streets were quiet. So when, during the anti-Jewish riots, Roman officials

dragged Jewish women into the agora and the theater, it was "a symbol that Roman

power went beyond the public space of the city." Not even the private space of residents

was safe from intervention.[210] In the first century, a woman sent a letter to her "brother"

complaining that he had not come to Alexandria, forcing her to remain in the city

throughout the "strife." Roger Bagnall argues that this "strife" is a reference to the anti-

Jewish riots under Flaccus.[211] Whether or not this is true, and whether or not this woman

was actually a target of the "strife," her chagrin is suggestive of the difficulties faced by

women during outbreaks of violence. One can only wonder how many other women

wanted to leave the city during times of "strife," but were prevented by reliance—

emotional or financial—on men.

Alexandria's penchant for unruliness[212] dated back to the Ptolemaic period.

Demonstrations ranged from public screaming matches to mob violence. Examining the

implications of such violence, Haas' work reveals the extent to which it reflected a highly

ritualized discourse between public officials and the city.[213] Public processions were

community exercises, implicating the entire population in the proceedings. In one

procession, Quinta (late 2nd cent.), a Christian woman, was dragged "right through the

city over the rough paved road," and beaten by the mob "as they went, till they arrived at

the same place, where they stoned her to death." The spectators were active participants

in the event, shouting support for Quinta and blocking the path of the procession or else

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[210] Richard Alston, "Philo's 'In Flaccum': Ethnicity and Social Space in Roman Alexandria," *Greece & Rome*, 44 (1997): 170-2.

[211] *SB* 16.12589; quoted in Bagnall, 287.

[212] Haas also argues that this penchant was a literary trope. See Haas, *Alexandria* 11.

[213] Haas, *Alexandria* 241.

contributing to her suffering with physical violence.[214] As a civic ritual, this procession

and others like it served to unite the community—if only for an instant—in denouncing

the victim as a threat to civic harmony.

Religious violence reflected debates over "who controlled the symbols of civic

consciousness . . . the sites that dominated the city's landscape" since these were "the

arenas of public discourse."[215] When the female pagan philosopher Hypatia (350-415)

was murdered at the Caesarion, it redefined the temple monument in Christian terms.[216]

Hypatia, too, was dragged through the streets. Just as Alexandria had defined its streets

as pagan territory with the execution of martyrs like Quinta, it later redefined these streets

as Christian territory by executing pagans. In the process, as active participants in this

violence, women helped "perform" the transformation of Alexandria's religious face.[217]

Because the movement of women through Alexandria's streets could be so highly

symbolic, this movement was placed under increasing scrutiny by writers such as

Clement and Athanasius. The latter was particularly interested in the movement of

virgins. Athanasius believed virgins were an indispensable tool in the Christianization of

Alexandria, since they attracted converts impressed by ascetic devotions.[218] Pagan

virgins were not unheard of, but Athanasius distinguished them from Christians by—

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[214] Euseb. *Hist. eccl.* 6.41.

[215] Haas, *Alexandria* 13.

[216] Ibid., 313.

[217] Athanasius, for one, accused pagan women of participating in an attack on a Christian church during his exile. See Haas, *Alexandria* 284.

[218] According to Athanasius, "the pagans who see them express their admiration for them as the Word's temple" (Athan. *Apol. Const.* 33.1-12; quoted in Brakke, 17). Christian virgins provided other benefits as well. Athanasius advised a rich woman who was concerned about a legal affair to spend the night with a community of virgins who would pray on her behalf (Athan. *Can. Ath.* 99; quoted in Brakke, 30).

among other things—their failure to segregate themselves from men.[219] He advised

Christian virgins to avoid all contact with men other than qualified priests, and warned

them not to risk living with men, even celibately. Virgins who did so were

subintroductae,[220] and the men with whom they lived were effeminate.[221] The virgin

with whom Athanasius' self-castrated rival lived was mockingly referred to as "a wife as

far as he [the rival] is concerned, although she is *called* a virgin."[222]

Athanasius' virgin *par excellence* was like an enclosed garden.[223] Because he

recommended that every house support a virgin, householders had to enforce certain

spatial guidelines. "Whoso hath a virgin daughter, let him not take her with him unto the

church with her people; but he shall go with her unto a virgins' nunnery. . . . With them

she shall pass the night watching and shall [then] return unto her house."[224] Virgins were

discouraged from holding vigils for dead sisters since "it is not fitting for a virgin to be

seen after sunset."[225] Since Athanasius knew a virgin who lived in "a simple house and

small cell,"[226] women must have been following his advice, either on their own initiative

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[219] Echoing Philo, Athanasius went on to claim that pagans did not practice true virginity because they knew nothing of God. See Brakke, 54-55.

[220] Brakke, 30.

[221] Ibid., 32.

[222] Athan. *H. Ar.* 28; quoted in Brakke, 34. This is hard to reconcile with Palladius' claim that Athanasius once took refuge from the Arians by hiding in the cell of a virgin so lovely that she was avoided by others for fear that she would inspire lust. The virgin's beauty was key to Athanasius' choice—no one would suspect him of such a thing (Palladius *Lausiac History* 63, trans. Budge). The *Festal Index* for 357 and 358 states that Athanasius was being concealed in the city of Alexandria and was hunted by the authorities "with much oppression, many being in danger on his account" (*Fest. Index* 28, 30, and 32, *SC* 317.257-61; quoted in Elm, 357). A year later, the *Index* reports that the prefect, searching a private cell for Athanasius, tortured a virgin whom he found (Elm, 357).

[223] Athan. *Second Letter to Virgins* 30, "Select Ascetic and Pastoral Writings of Athanasius"; quoted in Brakke, 301.

[224] Athan. *Can. Ath.* 98; quoted in Brakke, 27.

[225] Athan. *First letter to Virgins* 13; quoted in Brakke, 35.

[226] Brakke, 26.

or at his behest. They continued to pursue domesticity—isolated virgins attached to

individual homes—in the very midst of (and despite competition with) convents.[227]

Women who failed to seclude themselves risked criticism. Earlier, Clement had

chastised women who hired carriers, not out of a praiseworthy desire to hide themselves

behind the curtains, but rather "to attract attention . . . they betray their true character by

keeping the curtain pulled back and staring intently at those who gaze."[228] Clement's

criticism has attracted the ire of scholars such as Kathy Gaca, who goes so far as to claim

that "the city of God in Clement's *Paedagogus* outdoes Margaret Atwood's worst-case

scenario of biblical social order in *The Handmaid's Tale*." Gaca wonders if public

violence was meted out to transgressors.[229] Perhaps it was, but it hardly seems likely

that, in Clement's time, failure to uphold Christian values was already punished as a

transgression of civic interests in a largely pagan city.

Clement's use of architectural metaphors nevertheless transformed his critique of

pagan women into a form of city planning. He compared women who adorned

themselves to pagan temples, pretty from the outside, but empty inside.[230] Similar

metaphors appear in the *Life of Syncletica*. Like Clement and Athanasius,[231] the author of

the *Life of Syncletica* discouraged women from letting their gaze wander in public, for

thieves might enter through the senses like smoke blackening the windows of a house.[232]

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[227] Wipszycka, 377.

[228] Clem. Al. *Paed*. 3.4.27.

[229] Kathy Gaca, *The Making of Fornication: Eros, Ethics, and Political Reform in Greek Philosophy and Early Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California, 2003), 269.

[230] Clem. Al. *Paed*. 3.2.11.

[231] The *Life of Syncletica* was falsely attributed to Athanasius.

[232] "The Life and Activity of the Holy and Blessed Teacher Syncletica" 24-26. Similarly, Athanasius advised virgins: 'let your thoughts not wander . . . outside...'because the Lord lodges solitaries in a house" (Athan. *On Vir*. 95-6, "Der dem Athanasius zugeschriebene Traktat PERI PARTHENIAS,"

Warning that a soul might be brought to ruin just as a house is destroyed by attacks upon

the foundation, roof, or windows, the *Life of Syncletica* advised Christians to defend

themselves, explaining that "the foundation is good works, the roof is faith, and the

windows are senses."[233] A virgin had to fortify her soul for fear of the effect she might

have on others. Men tempted by her appearance could be damaged just as if they were

trapped in a falling house.[234] Inspiring and resisting temptation, virginal bodies

symbolized the boundaries within which Christian values could be "performed."

In the midst of this Christian urban planning, religious violence began to break

out between Christians as well. In the conflict between Arianism and orthodoxy, writers

such as Athanasius turned attacks to their advantage, garnering supporters shocked at the

perpetrators' barbarity. Thus, Athanasius wrote of female followers who were "thrown

into prison" by Arians, while "houses of orphans and widows were seized along with

their loaves of bread; attacks were made upon houses, and Christians were driven out in

the night."[235] Arians supposedly insulted virgins "as they walked along the streets, and

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Sitzungsberichte der Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften 33 [1935] 1029; quoted in Davis, "Pilgrimage" 326-27, n. 86).

[233] "The Life and Activity of the Holy and Blessed Teacher Syncletica" 46.

[234] "The Life and Activity of the Holy and Blessed Teacher Syncletica" 79. Athanasius claimed Bathsheba and Susannah contributed to the fall of the men who had observed them bathing (Brakke, 42). Consequently, he encouraged virgins to bathe from basins only, and solely out of necessity (Elm, 334). In so doing, he was seconding Clement, who had discouraged women from using the public baths (Clem. Al. *Paed*. 3.5.31-33), of which there may have been more than 4000 by the time of the Arab conquest (Haas, *Alexandria* 68). Pagan statuary could be seen in the baths as late as the fifth century (Zach. of Myt. *Life of Sev*. 34f; quoted in Trombley, 13).

[235] Athan. *de Fug*. 6.3, *Werke,* ed. Hans-George Opitz (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1935-41), 2.72; quoted in Stephen Davis, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 104. Athanasius accused both pagans and Arians of attacks on virgins and orthodox Churches. See Haas, "Arians" 240. During one of these assaults, only women were present in the church because it was after the dismissal (Elm, 368). Virgins and widows presumably participated at church in a variety of ways (guarding the doors, etc.) but the fact that these women had just sat down could imply instructional or liturgical activities. See Athan. *Hist Ar*. 55, *Werke,* ed. Hans-George Opitz (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1935-41), 2.214; referenced in Elm, 368, n. 96. The only other evidence about women's

caused their heads to be uncovered by their young men."[236] Worst still, "holy and

undefiled virgins were being stripped naked and suffering treatment which is not to be

named; and if they resisted they were in danger of their lives." In one hour, thirty-four

virgins, married women, and men were scourged and thrown into prison.[237]

As if that were not enough, Arians "gave permission to the females of their party

to insult whom they chose."[238] Pushing orthodox Christians out of public areas, Arians

replaced them with their own women. Athanasius' predecessor as bishop, Alexander (d.

326), complained that Arians had introduced women into court, and "dishonored

Christianity by permitting their young girls to ramble about the streets."[239] If this is an

accurate portrayal of Arian behavior,[240] women may have been drawn to the faith because

it allowed them to express greater agency than orthodoxy. Notably, Alexander also

accused the Arians of going "about to different cities with no other intent than to deliver

letters under the pretext of friendship and in the name of peace, and . . . to obtain other

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participation in church dates from the second century, when Dionysius of Alexandria had forbidden women
from approaching the Eucharist while menstruating (Brown, 150).

[236] Athan. *Hist. Ar.* 48, 58-63, *Werke,* ed. Hans-George Opitz (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1935-41),
2.211, 215-18, 222; quoted in Elm, 368.

[237] Athan. *Ep. Encyc.* 3, 4, *Werke,* ed. Hans-George Opitz (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1935-41), 2.172-3;
quoted in Elm, 361. According to Athanasius, a Manichaean military commander forced virgins to stand
next to a pyre. When they refused to vow allegiance to Arianism, the commander had them stripped and
beaten. Afterwards, virgins loyal to Athanasius were exiled to the Great Oasis. Stephen Davis argues that
a tomb decorated with a procession of virgins in the Kharga Oasis (which was part of the Great Oasis)
depicts these exiled Alexandrian virgins. The procession appears below a depiction of Thecla on her pyre,
recalling—perhaps—the pyre with which Athanasius' supporters had been threatened. See Athan. *Fug.* 6-
7, *PG* 25.652A-C; quoted in Davis, *Cult* 159.

[238] Athan. *Hist. Ar.* 48, 58-63, 72, *Werke,* ed. Hans-George Opitz (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1935-41),
2.211, 215-18, 222; quoted in Elm, 368.

[239] Alex. *Urk.* 14, *Werke,* ed. Hans-George Opitz (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1935-41), 3.19-29; quoted
in Elm, 350.

[240] Was this just rhetoric meant to castigate Arianism through an association with women? See
below.

letters in return, in order to deceive a few 'silly women who are laden with sins.'"[241] If

so, Arians prospered by facilitating women's social networks.[242] The previous discussion

about the value women placed on correspondence indicates that any role Arians might

have played in promoting correspondence would have posed as a powerful attraction to

potential converts.

It is perhaps no coincidence that Epiphanius emphasized Arius' appeal to women.

The heretic was "charming in his speech, and able to persuade and flatter souls. In no

time therefore he managed to draw apart from the church into a single group seven

hundred virgins."[243] Even as an exaggeration, seven hundred is an impressive number.[244]

Some of this success may have been due to Arian efforts to frame theological disputes

according to women's experiences. Arians asked mothers if they had ever had a son

before they gave birth. If no, then nor could Christ have existed before He was conceived

and, therefore, He was not co-existent with God. This appeal to feminine experience

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[241] Alex. *Urk.* 14.5, 58, *Werke,* ed. Hans-George Opitz (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1935-41), 3.20, 29; quoted in Elm, 351. Burrus contends that, *contra* Elm, this statement was merely as a scriptural reference, and was not evidence that Arians are carrying letters for women. See Virginia Burrus, "The Heretical Woman as Symbol in Alexander, Athanasius, Epiphanius, and Jerome," *The Harvard Theological Review,* 84 (1991): 235.

[242] These would be literate networks, or at least networks with access to resources for reading and writing letters. A fourth century letter sent by a woman goes so far as to suggest that books occasioned the maintenance of social ties: "To my dearest lady sister in the Lord, greeting. Lend the Ezra, since I lent you the little Genesis" (*POxy.* 63.4365; quoted in Rowlandson, 78). Plusianus (bishop of Lycopolis?) arbitrated an inheritance dispute in which a virgin was accused of stealing Christian books (see Brakke, 23) and a virgin bequeathed a book composed by Clement of Alexandria to Palladius (see Elm, 317). Notably, a third century Oxyrhynchite statue depicts a woman holding a book (Rowlandson, 301).

[243] Epiphanius does not provide any evidence for these women's social milieu. Epiph. *Adv. Haer*. 69.3.2.

[244] Assuming, that is, that Epiphanius did not inflate these numbers to discredit Arianism via an association with women.

inspired Athanasius' ire. He attacked the Arians for wasting their time with "little women" and using "effeminate little words."[245]

Some of Alexander and Athanasius' language on this subject suggests that they saw an inherent connection between women and heresy. Alluding to 2 Tim 3:6-7, Alexander wrote of "silly women" being led into temptation.[246] Casting heresy as a woman, Athanasius wrote that Arianism "pretends to wrap herself in the words of scripture . . . she has already misled some of the foolish . . . [who] take and eat in the manner of Eve." Elsewhere, Athanasius claimed that Arius "rivaled the dance of [Herodias' daughter], prancing and frolicking in evil sayings against the Savior."[247] Otherwise, Arianism was castigated as a "heresy of eunuchs."[248]

Despite the negative implications of this rhetoric, Athanasius' female followers refused to abandon him even when the distribution of grain was stopped by imperial authorities hoping to discourage his supporters.[249] In documents addressed to women, Athanasius was far less disparaging towards their sex. For virgins who had taken vows to the Church, Athanasius asked them to defend their bridegroom from claims that He was

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[245] Athan. *Or. ad Ar*. 1.22-6, *PG* 26.57, 59, 65; quoted in Elm 353. Elm argues that this reference to "little women" is meant to suggest that the Arians patronized prostitutes. Burrus disagrees (Burrus, "Heretical" 234, n. 13).

[246] Burrus, "Heretical" 239.

[247] Athanasius, *Orationes tres adversus Arianos* 1.1-2; quoted in Burrus, "Heretical" 236.

[248] Athanasius, *Historia Arianorum ad monacos,* 5.38; quoted in Burrus, "Heretical" 238. Carol Christ has argued that women throughout history have been drawn to heretical movements. Assuming that heresy tends to challenge what Carol Christ derides as the patriarchal inclinations of orthodoxy, she claims that women are naturally drawn to the anti-patriarchal discourse. Stark, 82. Her approach misses the point, however, insofar as she embraces 'the inherently androcentric dichotomy of 'right-thinking male' and 'heretical female" (Burrus, "Heretical" 231). On the attraction of women to heresy, see James E. Goehring, "Libertine or Liberated: Women in the So-called Libertine Gnostic Communities," *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism,* ed. Karen King (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International), 339-42.

[249] Haas, "Arian," 241. Constantine had to discourage the clergy and holy virgins from acting out when he refused to reinstate Athanasius. See Elm, 365.

not the same substance as God.[250] So he too appealed to feminine experience, that is, experience as a wife.

When Arians gained control over Alexandria's churches, Athanasius yet again advised seclusion. The virgins he told to stay at home were less likely to suffer violence there. He comforted followers by privileging spiritual space over the physical space they were losing: "others have obtained the churches through violence, while you have been thrown out . . . who has more: the person who possesses the place or the one who possess the faith? . . . [Space] is holy if the Holy One dwells there."[251] Athanasius took a similar tact when reassuring virgins who longed for the Holy Land: "Let your bodies be on earth, but your minds in heaven. Your dwelling place is your father's house, but your way of life is with the heavenly Father."[252] For Athanasius, Christian virgins and their use of space carried special valence because their presence was enough to establish the presence of orthodoxy, even if the space they occupied was no larger than a single room attached to a house.[253]

For Christians, then, urban planning was not limited to the conversion of pagan shrines into churches or the erection of Christian hospitals. Effective though such tactics surely were, an imaginary form of urban planning was pivotal in conceptualizing the way a Christian woman was expected to "perform" her identity. For the women who fell victim to violence in the streets, a retreat inside was more than a strategy of self-

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[250] Athanasius also discouraged virgins from following Hieracas. See Elm, 338.

[251] Athan. *PG* 26; quoted in David Brakke, "Outside of the Places, Within the Truth': Athanasius of Alexandria and the Localization of the Holy,' in *Pilgrimage and Holy Space in Late Antique Egypt,* ed. David Frankfurter (Boston: Brill, 1998), 473.

[252] Athan. *Second Letter to the Virgins* 2.6.

[253] Brakke, "Outside" 452.

preservation. It required that they, with their own "minds in heaven," identify private,

intimate space, and their very thoughts, with sanctity.

Chapter 5: Converting Death

An appreciation for the imaginary dimensions of urban planning makes it easier to understand why a conversion of Alexandria's cemeteries went hand-in-hand with a conversion of concepts about death and suffering. As reminders of death, Alexandria's cemeteries were automatically implicated in debates over salvation. It is no accident that they were sites of competition (Arians versus orthodox and pagans versus Christians). Whereas traditional beliefs posited that the deceased continued to play a vital role in the community of the living, Christians took this a step further. Martyrs and ascetics imitated the dead, embracing suffering as a tool of spiritual transformation. In turn, the effeminate connotations of passive suffering created problems for writers who sought to deny women access to religious experience.

At least in the fourth century, Arians appear to have controlled the necropolis and martyrium of St. Mark in the Boukolion, perhaps sparking Athanasius' efforts to bar virgins from the cemeteries. A letter composed by Athanasius, preserved in Theodoret (c. 393-c. 457), complains of "the impiety of the Arians, [who] block up the gates, and sit like so many demons around the tombs, in order to hinder the dead from being interred."[254] George the Cappadocian incited controversy over his control of a *collegium* of grave-diggers and coffin-bearers.[255]

Cemeteries had been important sites of Christian activity in Alexandria since at least the third century. Twice, in the mid-third and early fourth centuries, the Roman

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[254] Theodoret *HE* 2.11; quoted in Haas, "Arians" 238.

[255] Haas, "Arians" 237.

state had tried to bar Christians from meeting in the city's cemeteries.[256] Yet, cemeteries

continued to pose an attraction. Before she withdrew into the desert, Syncletica moved

into the tomb of a relative,[257] and Palladius knew of a woman who had immured herself

in a tomb lest men be led astray by her beauty.[258]

In the tombs themselves, imaginary representations of women's presence were

limited. Funerary imagery and inscriptions referring to women were less common under

imperial rule than in previous centuries.[259] However, two exceptions—one Christian and

the other pagan—are indicative of the changing attitudes towards women and death. An

early fifth century Alexandrian tombstone commemorates the deceased, asking: "Jesus

Christ . . . remember the sleep and repose of your slave Zoneene, the most pious and law-

loving. And judge her fit to dwell . . . in the bosom of the holy fathers Abraham, Isaac

and Jacob."[260] An earlier (first century?) pagan funerary monument paints a very

different picture: "Lords of the Underworld . . . receive this wreckage of a miserable

stranger, me, Thermion, born from her father Lysanias, and the noble wife of Simalos."

It is remarkable that a presumably elite pagan woman was said to have become

"wreckage" while a "slave" to the Christian God escaped any such condemnation, resting

in "sleep and repose." This was not because Thermion was unloved. To be sure, her

husband promised to "raise up all the children you bore me in a manner worthy of my

love for you . . . your earlier child, I shall hold fast in the same manner . . . because you

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[256] Euseb. *Hist. eccl.* 7.11, 9.2.

[257] Davis, *Cult* 108.

[258] Palladius *Lausiac History* 5, trans. Budge.

[259] The Stagni tomb and the Main tomb at Kom el-Shoqafa may be rare exceptions. See Marjorie Susan Venit, *Monumental Tombs of Ancient Alexandria: The Theatre of the Dead* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 135, 166.

[260] *IGA* 5.48; quoted in Rowlandson, 83.

had a way of behaving that was blameless during your life."[261] The paradigm-shift of values reflected in these epitaphs suggests Christianity's role in changing attitudes towards death. By casting Zoneene as a slave, her tombstone identified her as an embodiment of Christ's humble nature, and thus all the more worthy of salvation.[262]

Christianization had a less obvious impact on other burial practices. Despite some aversion, Christians did engage in mummification[263] and were not opposed to reusing pagan tombs, effacing decoration and adding inscriptions to Christianize the space.[264] The most extensive Christian hypogeum excavated in Alexandria (in the necropolis of Hadra) follows the Ptolemaic/Roman gallery design with minor alterations, including a small Christian chapel cut above the opening to a loculus inside the first gallery.[265] The so-called Wescher tomb at Kom el-Shoqafa combined Christian and pagan elements, with Christ portrayed alongside a partially nude Venus-like image.[266] Had the pagan overtones of the Venus imagery been divested of its religious overtones?[267] Not at all, if Clement's condemnation of domestic pagan statuary is to be

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[261] *I.Métr*. 46; quoted in Rowlandson, 347-48.

[262] Peter Brown, *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 100-10.

[263] Cremation appears to have been much more common among Greeks than mummification, but towards the end of the Ptolemaic Period, mummification became increasingly popular. It is unclear whether the poor quality of mummies prepared in Late Antiquity is due to ineptitude or poverty. See Dunand, 324-27.

[264] Christian burials have been found at the eastern cemetery at Hadra, the western cemetery at Gabbari, and the southwestern cemetery at Kom el-Shoqafa. Few Christian tombs have been identified, perhaps because many Christians reused pagan tombs, or because their tombs were not architecturally distinct from pagan tombs. See Venit, 181. If this was syncretism, a similar process occurred in the Ptolemaic and early Roman period, when Egyptian and Greek funerary imagery ran side by side, by design, not accident. See Marjorie Susan Venit, "The Tomb from Tigrane Pasha Street and the Iconography of Death in Roman Alexandria," *American Journal of Archaeology* 101 (1997): 701.

[265] Venit, *Monumental* 181.

[266] Ibid., 184-85.

[267] The spacious *loculi* and *arcosolia* were given over to Christian meetings while pagan funerary practices, like tomb-side banquets, were continued. See Venit, *Monumental* 181-88.

taken at face value. Clement decried this statuary as incentives to lust, with the cultivation of cultural tastes leading so-called Christians into spiritual adultery.[268] As reminders of death, cemeteries had once been an incentive for securing offspring and pursuing life's pleasures. With the advent of Christianity, they encouraged abstinence for adherents seeking salvation.[269] The inclusion of both Venus and Mary in the Wescher tomb suggests that issues of procreative sex and women's sexuality were still in flux.

Transformations of funerary space proceeded alongside developments in the intellectual realm. Reverence for the dead, and belief that martyred saints could act as intercessors with the divine,[270] recalled Isiac mortuary practices. Participation in the latter had assured the salvation not only of the deceased (following Isis' example in caring for Osiris) but salvation for the caregiver as well. Christian martyr cults were laid overtop the fertile soil of Egyptian pagan belief, wherein death was thought to sever a person from the web of social interaction. Funerary rites reinstalled the deceased into this web of relations. In traditional Egyptian faith, the deceased assumed responsibilities as an intercessor between the living and the dead.[271] Sociological evidence underscores how, especially in small social networks, any death (particularly that of a key figure) can substantially impair the network's ability to maintain communication among members. A death can also galvanize the remaining members, serving as a powerful symbol around

[268] Clem. Al. *Exhor.* 4.5.

[269] Brown, *Body* 136.

[270] Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 62.

[271] Jan Assmann, *Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt,* trans. David Lorton. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 403.

which the network might rally.[272] Early Christians apparently made the most of this,

using the deaths of key figures to unite their growing social network. Like the dead in

traditional Egyptian belief, martyrs never really left the social network. So long as

Christians continued to meet at martyriums (like St. Mark's in Alexandria) and the dead

continued to act as intercessors in the Afterlife, a vast social network reaching all the way

up to heaven was maintained.

Alexandria's Egyptian context further nuanced the development of concepts about

the deceased body as a source of knowledge and power. Preservation of the body via

mummification (with the reassembled Osiris supplying the prototype), reduced corruption

after death.[273] Corpses remained available for the use of the community as intermediaries

with the Otherworld.[274] In the Coptic *Apocalypse of Elijah*, dated to the third century,[275]

the flesh of a martyred virgin is translated into a substance of material benefit to her

community. Killed by "the Shameless One," the heroine's blood became "a healing

[ⲟⲩⲃⲁⲓ̈] for the people."[276] In Alexandria, the Christian martyr transformed the space of

suffering into a place of sanctity. Normally, Quinta's execution and ritual procession

through the streets of the city would have symbolized the community's mutual

condemnation of her behavior. Once Christianity transformed punishment into an avenue

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[272] Pagans failed to take advantage of this opportunity, and this may be one of the reasons their dwindling numbers never recovered. See Ruffini, 253.

[273] Assmann, 39 and David Frankfurter, "The Cult of the Martyrs in Egypt before Constantine: The Evidence of the Coptic 'Apocalypse of Elijah,'" *Vigiliae Christianae* 48 (1994): 31.

[274] Frankfurter, "Cult" 32.

[275] Frankfurter argues that this text was generated for and by Christians living in the *chora* around Alexandria. See Frankfurther, "Cult" 30.

[276] This is translated from the Sahidic text. *Apocolypse of Elijah*, 4:3-6, *Die Apokalypse des Elias, eine unbekannte Apokalypse, und Bruchsticke der Sophnias-Apokalypse* (Leipzig: 1899); quoted in Frankfurther, "Cult" 30.

to salvation, the streets in which Quinta suffered took on new resonance as sacred Christian territory.[277]

In turn, identification with the victim of sacrifice, Christ, transformed the martyr's flesh into a place of holiness. The narration of torture—the violations suffered by the flesh—merely emphasized the perfection attributed to the flesh after death (which prefigured the perfection to be achieved at resurrection). In some martyrologies, the martyr's dead body is said to have gone for days without suffering decay. The violations that occurred before death contrast sharply with the incorruptibility of the flesh after death. In this way, the body itself came to represent the Christian's triumph over death.[278]

Modern scholars of state violence have suggested that the knowledge that is gained through violence carries a different valence than other forms of learning. It is somehow more real than knowledge gained by rival means. The mutilated body "becomes the site for resolving uncertainty through brutal forms of violation, dismemberment and disposal. It makes identity holy."[279] Hence, this was another form of discourse that would have been subject to Late Antique hermeneutics.

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[277] According to Athanasius, Antony refused to be made the subject of a martyrium. In *Festal Letters* 41 and 42, Athanasius condemned a variety of practices surrounding the bodies of martyrs. Brakke contends that martyr cult threatened Athanasius' power, for relics could be carried from church to church, appropriating followers as they moved. See Brakke, "Outside," 463, 466.

[278] Brown, *Cult* 81.

[279] Bernd Weisbrod, "Religious Languages of Violence. Some Reflections on the Reading of Extremes," in *Cultures of Violence: Interpersonal Violence in Historical Perspective,* ed. Stuart Carroll (New York: Pallgrave MacMillan, 2007), 73. To this end, martyrdom may have been similar to modern examples of torture, of which it has been said that death "turns a body inside out and finds proof of its betrayal . . . in a sort of premortem autopsy . . . which . . . achieves categorical certainty through death and dismemberment" (A. Appadurai, "Dead Certainty: Ethnic Violence in the Era of Globalization," *Public Culture* [1998]: 232; quoted in Weisbrod, 72).

Perhaps most importantly, for the victims of martyrdom, Christian ideology uniquely inverted the power structures and thus the knowledge systems within which torture and persecution functioned. The psychologist Peter Suedfeld posits five basic objectives for torture: information, incrimination, intimidation, isolation, and indoctrination. Maureen Tilley argues that all of these would have been subverted by Early Christian ideology. There was no need for Romans to torture Christians in search of information, for martyrs did not hide the nature of their crimes. Rather, in refusing to recant, they forced authorities to take notice of criminal behavior. Since Christians were volunteering for martyrdom, there was hardly any need for incrimination.[280] An elderly Alexandrian virgin (late 2nd cent.) voluntarily threw herself on a pyre built by her persecutors.[281] As for the third objective, intimidation, Roman officials secured mixed results in this regard since narratives of martyrdom encouraged others to resist persecution. Furthermore, the theological dimensions of martyrdom assured martyrs access to an otherworldly social network (so that they enjoyed visions of Christ, for example). Isolation as a route to salvation—evinced by Athanasius' discourse about the spiritual value of virgins secluding themselves—mitigated its usefulness as a punishment. The pain inflicted through torture may have been intended as a lesson transmitted via the victim's flesh,[282] but Christian ideology effectively subverted indoctrination by reinterpreting the information transmitted through the body. Early Christians remapped their flesh so that it "became *terra incognita* for their torturers and a safe place for the

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[280] Maureen Tilley, "The Ascetic Body and the (Un)Making of the World of the Martyr," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 59 (1991): 468.

[281] Euseb. *Hist. eccl.* 6.41.

[282] Tilley, 469.

well-prepared martyrs."[283] Likewise, for the ascetic, "*eros* thrives in the refusal of the

telos of satisfaction; pleasure is perversely intensified through the prolongation of

pain."[284] This inversion of values fueled salvation projects that sought to turn the body

into a vehicle for redemption.

As suffering became uniquely linked to the Christian sense of self, the choice to

passively endure an ordeal came to provide an unique opportunity for the expression of

agency. According to social theorists such as Marc-Henry Soulet, personal identity

always offers fertile grounds for transformation, even when socioeconomic or state

restrictions limit one's freedom. Passivity redefined as an expression of agency—"weak

acting"[285]—was indispensable to Late Antique martyrs, for whom patient suffering was a

path to salvation.

This could only be perceived as an expression of agency if martyrs could seize the

upper-hand. By voluntarily throwing themselves on pyres or demanding that the torturer

increase his efforts, martyrs asserted their power.[286] Simple endurance was praiseworthy,

but the audience had to believe the victim was declining to respond out of a position of

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[283] Ibid., 475. Clement suggested that asceticism imitated martyrdom (Clem. Al. *Strom*. 4.5, Ferguson). As for the spatial dimensions of ascetism, according to Valantasis, withdrawal's real value lay in creating space wherein ascetic identity could be defined (Valantasis, 807).

[284] Burrus, *Sex* 10.

[285] Marc-Henry Soulet, "Facing Social Vulnerability and Coming Through: Towards a Theory of Weak Acting," in *Coping and Pulling Through: Action Processes in Vulnerable Situations,* ed. Vivianne Chatel and Marc-Henry Soulet, trans. Margaret Lainsbury (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2004), 139.

[286] Carlin Barton, "Savage Miracles: The Redemption of Lost Honor in Roman Society and the Sacrament of the Gladiator and the Martyr," *Representations* (1994): 56.

strength, not weakness.[287] Significantly, endurance of this sort was often envisioned as a

particularly feminine virtue.[288]

Insofar as women occupied socioeconomically and politically vulnerable

positions, they could identify with Christ's suffering without going so far as to suffer

martyrdom.[289] According to Jonathan Walters, state violence and sexual penetration

were "in Roman terms structurally equivalent." So Christians, even male citizens, who

underwent the penetrative act of torture underwent a feminine experience.[290] Thus,

Clement saw fit to discuss martyrdom and the endurance of an impious husband in the

same text.[291] Other writers emphasized the gender of female martyrs. According to

Eusebius (c. 263-339?), historian and bishop of Palestine, a wealthy Alexandrian woman

was saved from execution by her feminine allurements.[292] He also wrote of martyrs

threatened with rape.[293] Palladius described a Christian slave whose piety drove her to

resist sexual advances. She was punished for this resistance by the prefect of Alexandria,

who executed her on religious grounds.[294] The suffering body was, to the extent that it

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[287] Ibid., 59.

[288] Seneca the Younger tried to remove the feminine connotations of suffering: "*Quid ergo? Non sentis si illum muliebriter tuleris?*" (Sen. *Ep* 78.15-19; quoted in Brent Shaw, 294).

[289] Brent Shaw, 297

[290] Jonathan Walters, "Invading the Roman Body: Manliness and Impenetrability in Roman Thought," in *Roman Sexualities,* ed. Judith P. Hallett and Marilyn B. Skinner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 39.

[291] Clem. Al. *Strom.* 4.8, trans. Ferguson. In 10 B.C.E. an Alexandrian woman attempted to divorce an abusive husband (*BGU* 4.1105, *BL* 2.2.23; quoted in Rowlandson, 324). Two legal documents from Oxyrhynchus dated to the fourth-fifth century describe abusive husbands (*POxy.* 6.903, *BL* 3.133 and *POxy.* 3581; quoted in Rowlandson, 324).

[292] Euseb. *Hist. eccl.* 8.14.

[293] Euseb. *Hist. eccl.* 6.5.

[294] Palladius *Lausiac History* 3, trans. Budge.

suffered, the feminine body. Consequently, women enjoyed unique access to a prized salvation route.

The same battle that was being waged over the use of Alexandria's cemeteries and tombs—Christians versus pagans and orthodox versus Arians—was being waged over the bodies of the martyred. Rejecting any attempt to assert a Roman master discourse, Christian martyrs reinterpreted the body's suffering as a validation of their values. If a victim of torture could do this—or at least be represented in this fashion—why not an ordinary woman faced with a Christian master discourse challenging her right to spiritual advancement?

Chapter 6: Suffering Carnally

Women may have been predisposed towards identification with suffering, but all Christians, whatever their station in life, had access to the sort of knowledge afforded via the body's suffering. By practicing chastity, which was possible even in marriage, ordinary Christians could channel bodily deprivations—and the physical knowledge gained thereby—into spiritual power. When Christians rejected the body via chastity, it was because rejection of the body was thought to provide access to this new kind of power. These efforts could not help but focus attention on the body and sex.[295] In turn, narratives involving sex invoked prostitutes as the ultimate image of sinful carnality. In the course of doing so, however, these narratives challenged the power structure of a sexual economy and blurred the gender distinctions that justified denying women access to the divine.

It is pertinent that, given the growing interest in chastity as a path to salvation, Alexandria had a reputation for loose morals. Dio Chrysostom (ca. 40-ca. 120) claimed that Alexandrians were like "women of low repute, who, however wanton they may be at home, should behave with decorum when they go abroad, and yet it is especially in the streets that they are most guilty of misconduct."[296] Palladius wrote of Alexandria as the place to go for sex. He claimed that John of Lycopolis advised a woman not to venture to Alexandria lest she suffer temptation.[297] One of the monks in the *Lausiac History* went to Alexandria "persecuted by lust as by a fire," and visited the theatres, circuses and

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[295] Brown, *Body* 239.

[296] Dio Chrys. *Or.* 32.32, *Dio Chrysostom*, trans. J. W. Cohoon and H. Lamar Crosby (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 1940.

[297] Palladius *Lausiac History* 35, trans. Budge.

taverns. Finally, "he went to one of those women who are at the head of the grade of harlots."[298] The public places of Alexandria and the women who frequented such areas were the means by which this monk "performed" his spiritual lapse.

Like the virgins told to assume modest attire, prostitutes may have been identifiable by their clothing. Special costumes were prescribed for prostitutes in other cities of the Empire.[299] If prostitutes in Alexandria could be identified by sight, the streets they occupied would have been visibly marked by their presence. After their presence turned these areas into "red zone" districts,[300] any woman (even a virgin) may have been perceived as sexually available, regardless of how she was dressed, merely for occupying that space. The Elder Seneca (54 B.C.E.-39 C.E.) argued that the preservation of virginity meant nothing if a woman had entered a *lupanar*. She was effectively tainted and had to be barred from the temples.[301]

In Artemidorus' second century dream book, brothel-settings were bad omens. Dreaming of a prostitute, though, was a good omen. Combining the two—sex with a prostitute in a brothel—was a predictor of disgrace.[302] A prostitute (a bad omen) carried the opposite connotation from the space she inhabited (a good omen). Yet, she was identified by her occupation of this space. Augustine of Hippo (354-430) elaborated on this contradiction: "lust requires for its consummation darkness and secrecy . . . permitted pleasures still shrink from the eye . . . even shameless men call this shameful;

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[298] Palladius *Lausiac History* 23, trans. Budge.

[299] Montserrat, *Sex* 131.

[300] Efforts to zone prostitution popped up as a hallmark of the early medieval period. See Thomas A. J. McGinn, *The Economy of Prostitution in the Roman World: A Study of Social History and the Brothel* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2007), 110.

[301] Sen. *Controv.* 1.2; quoted in Rebecca Flemming, "*Quae Corpore Quaestum Facit*: The Sexual Economy of Female Prostitution in the Roman Empire," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 89 (1999): 43.

[302] Flemming, 85.

and though they love the pleasure, dare not display it."[303] Lustful men loved prostitutes but they dared not admit it. The prostitute was precious to Christians as well, for as a representative of sex, she was a constant reminder of the carnality through which, if only by resistance, Christians secured salvation.[304] Without harlots (real or imaginary), how could Christians have proved they could withstand temptation?

Unfortunately, the rejection of sex could make sex even more tempting. In one of the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, a woman dedicated to God had to discourage her own brother from visiting her lest either of them fall into temptation.[305] Another *Saying of the Desert Fathers* tells of a monk who used his cloak to carry his mother across a river for fear her flesh would remind him of other women.[306] It was so common for monks to have sex with women living in the villages dotting the semi-arid region around Alexandria, that women were successful in falsely accusing monks of fathering their children.[307]

In response, Christian writers tried to displace desire with horror. Desire for the body translated into horror of the body. This horror was fueled by desire for the divinity. No doubt, these substitutions were disconcerting to outsiders. As Richard Valantasis explains, the ascetic subject "elicits either positive or negative modalities from the observer depending upon the affinity experienced with the goal and direction of ascetic practice." To an ascetic, acts of abstinence are "positive signs of a real, truthful subject;

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[303] August. *De civ. D.* 14.18, trans. Marcus Dods (New York: The Modern Library, 1950).

[304] As Montserrat has so finely put it, prostitutes "Out on the streets of the great city or hanging around in its taverns, they were visible and recognisable, perfect illustrations of the paradoxical idea that what is socially peripheral is often symbolically central" (Montserrat, *Sex,* 111).

[305] Pelagius and John *Sayings* 4.61.

[306] Pelagius and John *Sayings* 4.68.

[307] Palladius *Lausiac History* 2.41; trans. Meyer. Men were also tempted by other men. For that reason, Macarius advised monks to flee children seen in the desert. See Rouselle, 148.

but to a member of the dominant [non-ascetic] culture . . . [it] signifies sickness."[308] Hence, the misogynistic overtones of ascetic discourse, though hardly benign, were a means to an end. Horror was substituted for physical desire, as spiritual desire pushed the aspirant towards the divine.

The prostitute's symbolic importance in this regard is well demonstrated by a story Palladius recorded about a prostitute who thought it would be amusing to visit the cell of a monk living in the desert around Alexandria. Claiming that she had lost her way, the prostitute begged the monk's assistance. He granted her entrance into the outermost room of his cell and locked himself inside the innermost room. When she complained, saying that she would be eaten by wild animals (how secure was the first room?), the monk allowed her to share the innermost room of his cell. He then spent the rest of the night burning his fingers in a candle's flame, trying to distract himself from her inviting presence. The next morning, the prostitute was discovered dead, frightened to death by the ascetic's excessive behavior. Fortunately, the monk's prayers restored her to life.[309]

It was probably not unheard of for prostitutes to visit monks' cells, either out of curiosity or in search of clients. But this prostitute's successive invasions of the monk's sacred space seem almost allegorical. If the monk thought the outermost room of his cell provided adequate shelter for a woman, he ought to have been able to trade places with her. He could have left the prostitute safely inside the innermost room while he retreated outside, where he would have been less likely to give into temptation. Perhaps the Late

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[308] Valantasis, 801.

[309] Palladius *Lausiac History* 5.37; trans. Meyer.

Antique symbolic mindset simply could not accept the seclusion of a public sex-worker where Athanasius preferred to place virgins.[310]

The masochistic nature of this tale, with a prostitute dying for fear of ascetic excesses, hardly suggests that Christianity had much sympathy for sex workers. Indeed, it is unclear to what extent Christianity improved conditions for prostitutes. Early on, there appears to have been little interest in converting them.[311] In Alexandria, the area around the Gate of the Sun where prostitutes gathered was also the site of a church dedicated to St. Metras, an Alexandrian martyr. In the early seventh century, the ascetic Vitalios reformed some of the prostitutes living in this quarter. These reformations met resistance when the parishioners of St. Metras found their church filling with reformed sex-workers.[312] The disruption this must have created is implied by John Moschus (c. 550-619), an ascetic visitor to Egypt, who described how a prostitute failed to convince her neighbors to sponsor her efforts to enter the church. When she claimed that angelic assistance had secured her baptism, her neighbors protested. She was not accepted into the community of Christians until the bishop of Alexandria intervened in the dispute.[313]

Whatever the impact of Christianity on real prostitutes, the allegorical prostitute became a paradigmatic symbol of Christian conversion. One of the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* describes how a monk convinced his sister to abandon prostitution. Leaving the brothel, she declined his offer of a cloak, saying she would rather go outside uncovered than remain in a "place" where prostitution had exposed her to sin. Later, though, her

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[310] See below for further discussion of secluded prostitutes.

[311] Alan Kreider, "Changing Patterns of Conversion in the West," in *The Origins of Christendom in the West* (New York: T&T Clark. 2001), 33. Empress Theodora's (c. 500-548) foundation of a convent for reformed prostitutes did not occur until the sixth century.

[312] Haas, *Alexandria* 211-12.

[313] Ibid., 48-49.

otherwise sympathetic brother refused to walk next to her in public, lest people think

them guilty of sexual impropriety. Following a short separation, he returned to his

sister's side to find her dead, her bare feet covered in blood.[314]

Having escaped the place of sin, the prostitute's gender was still sufficient to cast

doubt on her brother's reputation. Although she had reformed, her cloak-less and shoe-

less state continued to expose her flesh to the public eye. Yet the absence of luxuries like

shoes and a cloak suggests ascetic parallels. John of Ephesus (c. 507-c. 586) touched

upon the ascetic possibilities of harlotry in his *Lives of Eastern Saints*, writing about a

man and woman living in Amida. Partnered in a spiritual marriage, they masqueraded as

a pimp and prostitute. They endured social stigma and humiliation as a form of penance,

but disappeared whenever the client appeared for the arranged assignation.[315] The faux-

harlot's suffering was *imitatio Christi*.[316]

Perhaps the most famous of the reformed harlots, the legendary—probably

fictitious—Mary of Egypt, began her career in Alexandria in the fifth or sixth century,

though her *Life* was recorded in the seventh century. In the city, she indulged in every

sexual excess. Mary enjoyed sex so much that she discarded the economic aspect of the

exchange, offering herself for free.[317] One day she noticed a large group of pilgrims

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[314] *The World of the Desert Fathers: Stories and Sayings from the Anonymous Series of the Apophthegmata Patrum*, ed. Columba Stewart (Kalamazoo: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997); quoted in Benedicta Ward, *Harlots of the Desert, A Study of Repentance in Early Monastic Sources*, (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, Inc., 1987), 79.

[315] Dorothea French, "Maintaining Boundaries: The Status of Actresses in Early Christian Society," *Vigiliae Christianae* 52 (1998): 317.

[316] See Miller on Mary of Egypt's *imitatio Christi* (Miller, "Harlot" 94).

[317] By refusing economic reimbursement, Mary mimicked the sacred prostitutes of the pagans. More importantly, though, Mary "nakedly exposes the secret of seduction as a 'free gift' that radically disrupts the claims of the masculinist economy of sexuality as production and consumption" (Burrus, *Sex* 156).

boarding ships. So she must have frequented areas—such as the docks—associated with prostitution, in Alexandria's imaginary landscape if not its real landscape. Learning that the pilgrims were traveling to Jerusalem, Mary traded sexual favors in exchange for passage. Her journey was not driven by any religious feeling; rather, she lusted after new sights and experiences. Mocking Christian pilgrimage, she attempted to transgress boundaries, penetrating into the heart of the holy city *par excellence*. But Mary's transgression succeeded only up to a point. She was dismayed to discover herself barred from a church dedicated to the Virgin Mary. An invisible force prevented her from entering.[318] Recognizing the miraculous nature of this event, Mary was inspired to convert. Repenting of her former sins, she retreated into the desert. In the years that followed, her body was ravaged by asceticism.[319] She *quae corpore quaestum facit*[320] now secured her salvation using the same raw material—her flesh.

Notably, Mary of Egypt is presented as the agent of her own exploitation. Pre-conversion, she willingly offered herself to customers. Post-conversion, she chose to wander naked, exposed to anyone who might find her. When she was discovered by a monk, the clothes he offered did not fully cover her nude body. Although she declined at first to tell him her story, she soon gave in and, through him, was exposed to the hagiographical audience.[321]

Unfortunately, it is not clear if real prostitutes enjoyed a comparable level of independence. *Ostraka* from Elephantine show prostitutes dealing with authorities

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[318] Recalling Seneca's ban on prostitutes entering temples?

[319] *PL* 73, cols. 671-90, *BHL* 545; quoted in Ward, 35-56.

[320] Borrowed from Flemming, 38.

[321] Though she resists the hagiographer's overtures, this resistance is a part of the seduction, increasing anticipation. See Burrus, *Sex* 155.

independently,[322] and Alexandria's prostitutes had the potential to develop a network of

sorts, with a central register of prostitutes—even if this only facilitated their taxation[323]—

and a *collegium*.[324] This network, relying also on the hostels that clustered around the

gates and harbors,[325] may have provided much needed support (paying funerary costs?),

but it is difficult to determine how much protection it afforded from violence or social

stigmatization.

A fourth century document from Hermopolis sheds further light on the situation.

It records a court case against an Alexandrian official who murdered a prostitute.[326] The

prefect condemned the prostitute's work, but he took "pity upon the wretch because when

she was alive she was available to anyone who wanted her, just like a corpse."[327] The

murderer was ordered to provide the victim's mother financial compensation.[328]

It is unclear what role the victim played in her own sexual exploitation. She could

not have been a slave, for she was sending money home to her mother. Yet her

independence is suspect, for she was given to the brothel owner by her mother,[329] who is

depicted as the agent of her daughter's exploitation. The mother explained her request

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[322] Flemming, 46.

[323] Montserrat, *Sex* 121.

[324] Haas, *Alexandria* 58.

[325] Ibid., 31.

[326] Montserrat suggests that this case is merely allegorical, with the prostitute representing love (Montserrat, *Sex* 135). If he is correct, the case is still a useful commentary on perceptions towards prostitution during this period.

[327] *BGU* 4.1024 col. 6, *BL* 1.88-9, 7.17m 9.25; quoted in Rowlandson, 271.

[328] To Montserrat, this decision reflects the influence of a newly emergent Christian morality (Montserrat, *Sex* 134). Ramsey MacMullen disagrees. After all, this case was written up in the same era that Jerome (ca. 340-427) was recommending execution for women who engaged in extramarital affairs. The negative tone of this discourse means that women could only have been converted by force (Ramsey MacMullen, *Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth to Eight Centuries,* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997], 8). See below for further discussion of conversion.

[329] Montserrat, *Sex* 108.

for "a subsistence allowance as a small recompense" for her daughter's death: "It was for this reason that I gave my daughter to the brothel-keeper." No male kin come up in the narrative, and perhaps the victim would have had other socioeconomic options had she any living male relatives. However, Early Christian legislation attacking the *lenones patres*[330] reveals that male kin were not always a safeguard. Late Antique writers indicate that money was clearly a cause for other people "to prostitute" a woman, but it was rarely a reason for the prostitute herself to pursue this line of work.[331] When prostitutes were represented as the agents of their exploitation, it was often suggested that they were naturally lustful, and would have been sexually indiscreet whether or not they were paid. It was simply coincidental that they could be paid for acts they would have performed for free.[332]

Ephraem of Edessa's fourth century *Life of Mary* accuses a reformed prostitute of being the agent of her own exploitation, but the violence of the narrative complicates the issue of agency. Originally an ascetic virgin, the prostitute of the tale first succumbed to lust when she climbed out of the window of her cell and gave herself to a monk. Her agency at this point is obscured by indications that the devil had laid traps for her, just as the monk waited to ambush her. After giving into lust, Mary proceeded to beat herself about the face and tear her clothes. She dared not go near the window through which the monk had first seen her, this aversion recalling Syncletica's comments on women's responsibility for inspiring lust. Feeling unworthy to continue as an ascetic, Mary became a prostitute, a somewhat contradictory move towards the very sort of sexuality

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[330] Flemming, 41.

[331] Hence, a Christian reformed by John the Dwarf had been driven into prostitution by greedy men (John the Dwarf *Saying* 40; quoted in Ward, 77).

[332] Flemming, 43.

that had torn her from her bridegroom, Christ.[333] Having once subjected herself to

violence and sex, Mary chose to subject herself to sexual exploitation at the hands of

potentially violent customers. Significantly, modern psychological research shows an

increase in sexual risk behavior among some rape survivors.[334] In such cases, it is

difficult to see where victim leaves off and actor picks up.[335]

Despite evidence of this sort, Virginia Burrus persists in seeing the more famous

Mary—Mary of Egypt—as an agent rather than a victim. According to Burrus, Mary of

Egypt's voluntary exploitation—both before and after conversion—ought to be taken

seriously, as desire "that exceeds closed economies of sex and sexuality."[336] To Burrus,

hagiography itself is part of the reformed harlot's seduction. Because signifiers always

lead away from the object they are signifying, a search for knowledge of the divine must

invoke a model of seduction. Divinity and the seeker—seducer and seduced—take turns

upping the ante in a cycle that has no end. The satisfaction of one is the victory of the

other and vice versa.[337] Hence, Late Antique power structures that normally would have

meant a prostitute's exploitation were undermined by hagiography. For reformed harlots

who seduced their audience,[338] "the violence of seduction—is different, 'an escalation of

violence and grace' that eclipses the drive to dominate." Absolute domination would

mean death—"the death of desire, the annihilation of difference"—as lover and beloved

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[333] Ephraem of Edessa, "The Life of St. Mary the Harlot," in *The Desert Fathers,* trans. Helen Waddell (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1957), 190-202.

[334] S. Dingfelder, "Rape Circumstances Differentially Affect Later Sexual Behavior," *American Psychological Association* 35 (2004): 11.

[335] This must be considered in the light of martyrologies involving rape or the threat of rape. Some suggest that women ought to choose death rather than suffer rape; so if a woman is raped, she bears responsibility.

[336] Burrus, *Sex* 132.

[337] Ibid., 158.

[338] Ibid., 146.

merged. So, issues of agency and dominance were complicated by the romantic tone of the discourse.[339]

Furthermore, Mary's assumption of the active role in her seduction placed her in the man's role, for a prostitute actively seeking sex imitated the sexually dominate male.[340] Thus, Philaenis[341]—a fourth century B.C.E. courtesan—appeared in a poem by Martial (40-ca. 102) mimicking the sexually penetrative nature of a man.[342] If sexual dominance made a prostitute masculine, when power was handed over to the public—who could gaze at a prostitute freely— the prostitute lost dominance and became feminine. This contradiction creates problems for interpreting Mary's use of space. She was barred from Christian space before her conversion, but did not retreat inside following her conversion; rather, she escaped outward. Unlike Athanasius' secluded virgins, Mary moved out, not in. Where the city represented sin, wilderness became salvation. Sanctity was located in the body of the reformed harlot. It was wherever she was, just as it was present wherever Athanasius' virgins were. Women's use of space had spiritual meaning.

Spatial paradigms appear in a host of other tales starring female repentants. A prostitute mentioned by Palladius was barred from entering a church, not by a physical force, but by a priest.[343] *The Life of St. Kyriacus* recounts the story of a nun who fled a

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[339] Ibid., 158.

[340] Clem. Al. *Paed.* 3.21.

[341] Clement criticized art collectors who sought after images of Philaenis demonstrating various sexual positions (Clem. Al. *Exhor. to the Gr.* 4.5). She was falsely credited with composing *The Art of Love*, a second century fragment of which has been uncovered at Oxyrhynchus. See Montserrat, *Sex* 114.

[342] Martial *Epigram* 7.67, *Epigrams,* trans. D. R. Shackleton Bailey (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993). See also Holt Parker, "The Teratogenic Grid," in *Roman Sexualities*, ed. Judith P. Hallett and Marilyn B. Skinner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 53.

[343] Palladius *Lausiac History* 2.38, trans. Budge.

sexual scandal and was discovered, like Mary of Egypt, naked in the wild.[344] In these

cases, the post-repentance exposure provides a corollary to the prostitute's pre-repentance

public work. Brothels, however, posited a contradiction—they were enclosed space,

which otherwise would be considered virginal, and yet they were public space. John the

Dwarf, an ascetic operating in the desert around Alexandria, managed to gain access to a

prostituted orphan by pretending to be a customer.[345] Unlike true virgins, prostitutes

were always obtainable. It was simply a matter of purchasing their services.[346] After all,

their bodies were subject to the uninhibited public gaze.[347] This poses a problem for

interpreting other forms of public exposure, specifically, the exposure of female martyrs.

Merely by virtue of its public nature, martyrdom carried gendered valence. In

The Acts of Paul and Thecla and Eusebius' *History of the Church*, the exposure of female

flesh was meted out as a form of punishment. In describing such ordeals, the narrative

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[344] Ward, 29.

[345] He then convinced the prostitute to repent and depart from the brothel (John the Dwarf *Saying* 40; quoted in Ward, 77). In these cases, the prostitute's pre-conversion seclusion is a form of reverse signification. John the Dwarf struggled to gain access like a faithful adherent seeking the loved one. Yet, the bars to access were but an illusion, for the prostitute was available to anyone who sought her services, something John demonstrated as soon as he claimed to be a client. Reformed prostitutes did seclude themselves. Palladius wrote of a reformed prostitute placed in a convent where she was free to do whatever she wanted, including wander at whim. Of her own volition, she requested that her food be restricted and she be locked in a cell (Palladius *Lausiac History* 2.37; trans. Meyer). The *Life of St. Thaïs* invokes a similar spatial paradigm. Posing as one of Thaïs' clients, Abba Paphnutius secured an invitation over her threshold. Once inside, he inquired if there was a more private room to which they might retire. Thaïs reassured him that the room they were in was hidden from the eyes of everyone but God. Clearly predisposed towards Christianity, Thaïs took little convincing to repent. She followed Paphnutius to a convent, where he locked her in a cell against her will. By the time Paphnutius released Thaïs—after a fellow monk saw a heavenly vision in which the ex-prostitute's bed was surrounded by angels—she had grown so attracted to isolation that she did not care to exit a cell in which she was forced to urinate ("Life of Thaïs" 83-84).

[346] One of the *Sayings* describes how a rich lord asked for a courtesan's hand in marriage. Accepting, the courtesan then refused to answer the calls of her old clients, secluding herself inside. According to the narrator, "this courtesan is our soul, that her lovers are the passions, that the lord is Christ, that the inner chamber is the eternal dwelling place, those who whistle are evil demons but the soul always takes refuge in the Lord" (John the Dwarf *Saying* 16; quoted in Ward, 33-34).

[347] Catherine Edwards, "Unspeakable Professions: Public Performance and Prostitution in Ancient Rome," in *Roman Sexualities*, ed. Judith P. Hallett and Marilyn B. Skinner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 85.

structure of a martyrology exposes the victims to the reader's eye in voyeuristic fashion.

Like the state authorities who used exposure as punishment, the reader enjoys the

privileged position of examining the martyr's body. Visibility, though, was a source of

power to the victim. According to Peter Brown, "the bodies of women, exposed to

innumerable misfortunes in the pursuit of their love, were potentially the most vulnerable

of all bodies, and their resilience, for that reason, was the most impressive."[348] The agent

of persecution—the Roman state—was made to seem all the more impressive when "seen

from the viewpoint of the most vulnerable of all its potential victims, the unprotected

virgin woman."[349] The suffering was made to seem greater when the sense of

exploitation was heightened. As the suffering increased, so too did the value of the

martyrdom. Therefore, the meaning communicated by the text was enhanced by the

emphasis placed on the exploitation—exposure—of suffering women.

While it is unknown what Alexandrian women thought of exposure, a

Carthaginian woman, Perpetua (d. 203/9), apparently longed for such treatment. She

complained bitterly that she was being starved in prison, hidden away from the eyes of

the public. She wanted to be seen. Visibility meant execution, which was the route to

power for a Christian martyr,[350] who sought to seize that power by transforming public

executions into battles for Christian salvation. Female martyrs such as Perpetua were

compared to "gladiators" because they showed *andreia*. Yet, in becoming gladiators—

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[348] Brown, *Body* 154.

[349] Ibid., 156. Clement wrote that women had the same nature as men, and therefore were
similarly suited for martyrdom and virtue (Clem. Al. *Strom.* 4.8, 4.19, trans. Ferguson). However, other
writers indicated that women's martyrdom was more noteworthy because they were women. See John
McGuckin, "Martyr Devotion in the Alexandrian School: Origen to Athanasius," in *Martyrs and
Maryrologies*, ed. Diana Wood (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1993), 41.

[350] Brown, *Body* 141.

and thus male—they simultaneously became publicly carnal, and in a woman's body, like a prostitute. Just as female martyrs became male, ascetics and reformed harlots were defeminized by the ravages of asceticism, but when the hagiographer exposed them to the public eye, they became publicly carnal like a prostitute.[351] The sanctified visibility of a Christian martyr and ascetic appears to have complicated the interpretation of the prostitute's visibility. Perhaps this is one possible source for the interest in reforming harlots, at least in narrative, and for doing so within a spatial paradigm.

Like her virginal counterpart, a reformed harlot was constantly struggling to close the gap separating her from the divine. First as a sex-worker and then later, seducing the hagiographer and his audience to draw them closer to God, a harlot could never fully participate in rejection or desire. To be sure, an aspirant could only want what she did not have. Desire is defined by rejection. As Valantasis puts it, "to be a renunciant identifies by negation the state from which the ascetic has emerged while at the same time identifying the state toward which the asceticism is oriented."[352] Consequently, reformed harlots—like female ascetics—could never be categorized, for categorization implies resolution of the salvation project. Until she completed the project—that is, died and was saved—a woman's status was in constant flux.

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[351] Davis, "Crossed" 28.

[352] Valantasis, 802.

Chapter 7: Wandering Women and Ailing Female Bodies

Reformed harlots were not the only women who wandered. Their tendency to do so, though, may be related to arguments over whether or not this was appropriate behavior for proper Christian women. In the flurry of legends about women withdrawing into the desert and secluding themselves in search of salvation, it is important to remember that ordinary women did seek ascetic retreat. Despite the difficulties, they penetrated into the desert around Alexandria. Some did so less permanently, seeking merely a temporary withdrawal to pilgrimage sites like Menouthis and Abu Menas. A pilgrimage was thought to be redemptive in and of itself, but because Menouthis and Abu Menas treated women for their physical ailments, the experiences a woman had there could validate her identity as an embodied creature. In addition, as physical suffering accrued spiritual currency, women found another avenue through which to access the divine.

Given the potential for spiritual advancement in the desert, one would think it exerted a tremendous pull on female ascetics. The popularity of retreat meant that it became more and more difficult to find space to which an ascetic might withdraw. Thus, Athanasius wrote "the desert was made a city by monks."[353] In spite of this, Susannah Elm can find no sources that definitively place women more than two days walk beyond inhabited space.[354]

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[353] Athan. *Life of Ant*. 14, *Early Christian Lives*, trans. Caroline White (New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1998).

[354] Elm, 259-60.

Indeed, efforts were made to resist the penetration of women into the desert. Theodora's (later 3rd cent.) *Sayings,* for example, warn against *akedia*, which is the depression and ennui that can attack even the most successful ascetic. *Akedia* manifests itself as a sort of illness that, however debilitating, inspires wanderlust. Theodora's deprecating comments on the subject echo those of Evagrius Ponticus (345-399), a Christian writer and ascetic who operated in the desert region around Alexandria.[355] He wrote to Melania the Elder (d. 410) asking that she use her influence "to prevent those [women] who have renounced the world from needlessly walking around over such roads." He asked "how, traveling over those distances, they can avoid drinking the waters of Gihon . . . either in their thoughts or in their deeds."[356] Elsewhere, Evagrius advised virgins to ignore the words of "wandering old women."[357] The context of Evagrius' complaints implies that he was concerned that women would visit him and other men living in the desert. Given the dangers of sexual temptation—and the potential redemptive benefits of shunning sex—it is not hard to imagine why men balked at coming into contact with physical reminders of what they were missing.

So when women did penetrate into the desert, they were not met with open arms. Pelagius and John wrote of a female pilgrim from Rome who arranged with Theophilus to visit Arsenius, a monk living in Canopus. When the monk refused to meet her, she ambushed him outside his cell. Angry, he inquired if she knew that she was a woman, and as such should not travel. Angrier still, he demanded to know if she would travel to

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[355] Ibid., 264.

[356] Evagrius *Ep*. 7, *Euagrius Ponticus, Epp.,* ed. W. Frakenberg (Berlin: Abhandlungen der koniglichen Akademie der Wissenschaft zu Gottingen, 1912); repr. (Nendeln, 1970), 571, 573; quoted in Elm, 277-78.

[357] Evagrius *Sententiae ad Virginem* 13, *Evagrius Ponticus: Nonnenspiegel und Monchsspiegel,* ed. H. Gressmann (Leipzig, 1913), 147; quoted in Elm, 279.

Rome, announce her success, "and turn the sea into a high road of women coming" to see him.[358] Efforts to discourage female pilgrims crop up in Athanasius' writing as well. He comforted a group of virgins longing for Jerusalem by advising them to internalize the sacred, traveling in their minds, not reality.[359] In the fifth century, Claudianus Mamertus advised Christians to stop seeking the "pilgrimage of place": "On that account let us no longer stay as strangers (*peregriemur*) in Alexandria, but turn away from Egypt, having sailed over the sea of errors and crossed the desert of ignorance, so that we may enter the homeland of truth."[360] He preferred that Christians pursue internal pilgrimages.[361]

Discouragement of this sort was not enough to stop female pilgrims like Egeria (c. 4th cent.) and Melania, who both visited Alexandria during their extensive travels. Social networks even developed to support female pilgrims. For example, while in the Holy Land, the virgins with whom Athanasius corresponded stayed with a community of women who offered hospitality to female ascetics.[362] In Egypt, the monasteries and

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[358] Pelagius and John *Sayings* 2.7-8. The narrative reasserts the authority of male leadership, as Theophilus and Arsenius chastise the pilgrim, whose subsequent illness is attributed to her attempts to flout male authority. However, this narrative may still be read for evidence of women's resistance against an anti-female discourse.

[359] Athan. *Second Letter to the Virgins* 2.5, 3, 1, 2.6.

[360] Claudianus Mamertus *De statu animae* 3.2, ed. A. Engelbrecht, CSEL, 11, 175; quoted in Davis, "Pilgrimage" 325. The attack on external pilgrimages was not always gendered. Jerome encouraged Marcella to visit Jerusalem to "see Lazarus come forth in winding bands" (Jer. *Ep*. 46.13, *CSEL* 54, 343; quoted in Blake Leyerle, "Landscape as Cartography in Early Christian Pilgrimage Narratives," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64 [1996]: 131). But he discouraged Paulinus of Nola: "Change of place does not bring us closer to God" (Jer. *Ep*. 58.3, *CSEL* 54, 530-531; quoted in Leyerle, 131).

[361] Pseudo-Macarius wrote that, merely by turning to Christ, a Christian could return to the space where Christ dwelled when on earth (Pseudo-Macarius *Homily* 4.25). Belief was a passport to the Otherworld. Evagrius Ponticus claimed that "if we believe in Christ and keep his commandments we will cross over the Jordan and march into the 'city of palms'" (Evag. *Anti*., *Ascetic Behavior in Greco-Roman Antiquity: A Sourcebook,* trans. Michael O'Laughlin, ed. Vincent Wimbush [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990]).

[362] Elm, 334.

shrines dotting the landscape around Alexandria may have provided a similar subsistence network for pilgrims.[363]

A popular site with such pilgrims,[364] Menouthis originally had been the site of a shrine to Isis[365] catering to pagans and Christians.[366] Theophilus built a church on the site, but pagan elements continued to thrive. Sophronius (560-638)—an Egyptian ascetic and, later, bishop of Jerusalem—claimed that a demon, in the form of a woman, appeared in the desert and lured people away from Christianity with false oracles and useless medical treatments. To combat the popularity of this demon and its shrine, Cyril installed the relics of Sts. Cyrus and John in a martyrium at Menouthis.

After the relics were brought from Alexandria in an elaborate procession,[367] Cyril proceeded to attack the worship of Isis: "Among the demons there is neither male nor female. What kind of character can they [i.e., the demons masquerading as Isis at Menouthis] have when they want to be called by girls' names?"[368] For Cyril then, Christianization involved an attack on feminine portrayals of the divine.

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[363] Davis, "Pilgrimage" 327.

[364] Montserrat surmises that pilgrims going to Jerusalem often visited Menouthis and Abu Menas during the trip. See Dominic Montserrat, "Pilgrimage to the Shrine of SS Cyrus and John at Menouthis in Late Antiquity," in *Pilgrimage and Holy Space in Late Antique Egypt,* ed. David Frankfurter (Boston: Brill, 1998), 257.

[365] The name "Menouthis" may be derived from "*m'3 n ntr*" (Demotic), that is, "a place of divinity." No archaeological evidence of Cyril's martyrium has been found, but literature suggests that the pagan shrine was located near the edge of the sea (Montserrat, "Pilgrimage" 260). In the second or third century, a statue of Isis was sent from Menouthis to Pharos, attesting to the sort of religious network that must have operated at the time (David Frankfurther, *Religion in Roman Egypt: Assimilation and Resistance* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998], 102). The Isis shrine at Pharos remained in operation into the sixth century (Dunand, 237).

[366] R.E. Witt, *Isis in the Ancient World* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), 188.

[367] Montserrat, "Pilgrimage" 261.

[368] McGuckin contends that this might be an allusion to the Navigium, a festival of Isis during which male devotees cross-dressed (*PG* 77.1105; quoted in McGuckin, *St. Cyril* 19). Witt argues that

In the 480s, additional controversy was sparked when a woman was taken to Menouthis' Isis shrine seeking a cure for infertility.[369] Christian students in Alexandria who learned of the cure challenged its veracity. Subsequent attempts to "test" the shrine led to violence after Isis' powers were called into question. Verbal and physical fights between Christians and pagans culminated in a legal battle, following which a group of monks and clergy marched to Menouthis and dismantled the pagan temple.[370] The contents were carried back to Alexandria and paraded through the streets. Pagan statues were collected from all over the city and taken from private homes, then thrown into a large bonfire along with the statues from Isis' temple.[371]

The public procession of pagan statuary and the destruction of the latter indicated the community's overriding desire for the conversion of areas associated with Isis. It is unclear whether or not Isis' temples in Alexandria's harbor, the Bruchion, or along the city's margins were still in operation at this time.[372] As Serapis' spouse, she was a representative of civic leadership, at least until the Serapeum was destroyed in the late fourth century.[373] As late as the sixth century, though, Isis was portrayed as Tyche.[374]

Clement's reference to Christ erasing the works of women (Clem. Al. *Strom.* 3.63.2, trans. Ferguson) was really about ending worship of Isis (Witt, 278).

[369] The source for this narrative, Zachariah of Mytilene, makes no mention of the shrine to Cyrus and John. McGuckin argues that the Chalcedonian Sophronius "invented" Cyril's translation of the relics in order to make it seem as if the Christian shrine originated before the Monophysites seized power in Alexandria. Refuting McGuckin, Montserrat suggests that after Cyril's death, persecution of Cyril's supporters by Dioscorus—Cyril's successor as bishop—may have involved turning Cyril's martyrium into a backwater. Later, competition with Abu Menas as a pilgrimage site would have impeded Menouthis' ability to recover once Cyril's memory returned to favor. See Montserrat, "Pilgrimage" 261-63.

[370] A priestess installed on the site helped the priests defend the temple from the mob of Christians. See Frankfurter, *Religion* 200.

[371] Zach. of Myt. *Life of Sev.* 34f; quoted in Trombley, 13.

[372] Haas, *Alexandria* 149-50.

[373] The destruction of Alexandria's Serapeum and Canopus' Isis temple redirected pagan attention towards Menouthis, although Trombley believes that Menouthis' Isis shrine was also partially dismantled at this time. See Frankfurther, *Religion* 165 and Trombley, 5. Festivals associated with Isis—the Ameysia

Tradition universalized Isis, identifying her with other goddesses[375] and making her a

powerful rival for Christian visions of the divine.[376]

Perhaps out of a sense of competition, proponents of the term *Theotokos*

transferred some of Isis' attributions to the Virgin Mary. In a panegyric to the Virgin,

delivered in the Great Church of Constantinople, Proclus (412-485) declared that the

"earth and sea attend the Virgin, the sea gently smoothing her billows for the passage of

ships."[377] The sixth century *Akathistos* referred to Mary as a ship transporting Christians

seeking salvation and, in another verse, the source of a river with many streams. Isis had

long been recognized as a patron for sailors and a guardian for the mouth of the many-

streamed Nile. Proclus also referred to Mary as a loom and weaver, attributions

associated with Isis, who was credited with the invention of weaving.[378]

In Alexandria, Mary's assumption of Isis' powers went along with the

incorporation of Isis' iconography in a Christian format. The sixth-century fresco of the

Virgin Mary found in a private residence in Kom el-Dikka resembles images of Isis.

Like a fourth century painting of Isis put up in a domestic setting in Fayyūm, the Kom el-

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(celebrating her birth) and the Isia (honoring her efforts to resurrect Osiris)—were last mentioned in the third and fourth centuries, respectively. Since the Ameysia was not celebrated before the assertion of Roman authority, the disappearance of these festivals cannot be attributed to a disinterest in native religion under Romanization. See Frankfurther, *Religion* 56, 61.

[374] Haas, *Alexandria* 133.

[375] Dunand, 237. A second century text from Oxyrhynchus praises Isis in her "many forms, Aphrodite. . . Hestia . . . Maia . . . Kore . . . ruler of the world" (*POxy*. 11.1380; quoted in Rowlandson, 51-53).

[376] John McGuckin suggests that anxiety over the term *Theotokos* was driven partially by a fear that Mary would be taken as some sort of a goddess. When supporters of the term triumphed on the first day of the synod at Ephesus, celebrating women carried torches and marched in a procession whose outer appearance was not unlike the honors once paid to Isis. See McGuckin, *Cyril* 30, 88-89.

[377] *ACO*, I, 1, 1, 103; quoted in K. Holum, *Theodosian Empresses: Women and Imperial Dominion in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 156.

[378] Vasiliki Limberis, *Divine Heiress: The Virgin Mary and the Creation of Christian* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 133.

Dikka fresco shows Mary supporting her son on her left knee. [379] Although Mary is not actually nursing in the Kom el-Dikka fresco, Late Antique Coptic secco paintings do represent Mary in this fashion.[380] They resemble Isis *lactans* images found on grave *stelae*[381] and in homes in Fayyūm.[382]

Inconographically and socially, nursing was an important signifier of motherhood. During the conflict over the power of Isis' shine at Menouthis, Christians inquired whether or not the woman who had supposedly given birth through Isis' intercession[383] was nursing her newborn. If she was incapable of nursing, the child must have been adopted, and the shrine's cure was faked.[384] Elsewhere, Christian writers put forth nursing as proof of orthodox doctrine. Athanasius argued that Mary had nursed Christ; therefore, she must have given birth to Him, and as such deserved the title "Mother of

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[379] Often, Isis was depicted with bared breasts, but perhaps in response to Christian influence, she began to appear fully clothed as well. See Thomas Mathews and Norman Muller, "Isis and Mary in Early Icons," in *Images of the Mother of God: Perceptions of the Theotokos in Byzantium*, ed. Maria Vasilakē (Aldershot, Hants, England: Ashgate Pub, 2005), 6.

[380] Elizabeth Bolman, "The Enigmatic Coptic Galaktotrophousa and the Cult of the Virgin Mary in Egypt," in *Images of the Mother of God: Perceptions of the Theotokos in Byzantium*, ed. Maria Vasilakē (Aldershot, Hants, England: Ashgate Pub, 2005), 13.

[381] Gail Petersen Corrington, "The Milk of Salvation: Redemption by the Mother in Late Antiquity and Early Christianity," *The Harvard Theological Review* 82 (1989): 403. Also, see Mieczyslaw Rodziewicz, *Alexandrie III: Les habitations romaines tardives d'Alexandrie à la lumière des fouilles polonaises à Kôm el-Dikka*, Warsaw: PWN – Éditions Scientifiques de Pologne, 1984), 206.

[382] Dunand, 302.

[383] Isis was reputed to be a midwife. Her association with childbirth was still acknowledged as late as the 1920s, in a ritual demonstrating the great lengths to which women might go to enhance their fertility. Village dwellers who wished to become pregnant visited a tomb with charms, including one of Isis, which were rubbed on the women's skin and dipped in water of which the hopeful women then drank. See Joyce Tyldesley, *Daughters of Isis: Women of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 72, 261.

[384] According to Zachariah, the unfortunate woman in this case could not have passed such a test. Zach. of Myt. *Life of Sev.* 19; quoted in Trombley, 17.

God."[385] In a world where upper class women nursed their children only occasionally,[386] it is noteworthy that nursing played such a large part in such disputes.

The relationship between the Kom el-Dikka iconography and the lives of real women has nonetheless been challenged. Gail Corrington argues that it was meant to communicate a political, not familial or biological, relationship between mother and child. Thus, Mary and Isis were simply thrones for their sons. Indeed, "the majesty of Christ . . . and the royalty of the *Thetotokos* through her relationship to him—an inversion of the relationship between Isis and Horus—is emphasized at the expense of their humanity."[387] Yet, this interpretation fails to take into account the conflict over the doctrine of *Theotokos*. Opponents of the term may have considered Mary a "temple of our Lord's flesh,"[388] but defenders argued that Mary participated in the salvation not solely as a throne, but as a biological mother whose humanity ensured Christ's role in the salvation. To Proclus, Mary was a symbol through which "women are honored."[389] Far from precluding identification with real women,[390] the political implications of the Kom el-Dikka iconography indicated that women's work with respect to childrearing was worthy of merit.

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[385] Athanasius wrote that "Nature itself plainly indicates to us that it was impossible for a virgin to have milk unless she had given birth to a child" (Letter of Athanasius to Epictetus 5; *Later Treatises of St Athanasius* [Oxford: 1881]; quoted in McGuckin, *Cyril* 382-83).

[386] Corrington, 403. An Alexandrian contract dating to 13 B.C.E. secured the services of a wet nurse (*BGU* 4.1058, *BL* 8.39-40; quoted in Rowlandson, 275-6).

[387] Corrington, 412.

[388] Holum, *Theodosian* 156.

[389] *ACO*, I, 1, 1, 103; quoted in Holum, *Theodosian* 156.

[390] An Isis *lactans* motif appears on a *denarius* of Julia Domna (170-217). Julia Domna's power derived from her relationship with male emperors, just as the Virgin Mary's power derived from her relationship with Christ (Witt, 224, 236, 242). Clearly, though, Julia Domna had an intense desire to be viewed as a mother who had nourished her child with her own body.

In spite of this, Corrington believes that Mary offered women a self-defeating message, for women who followed the example set by the Kom el-Dikka iconography could never achieve the same sanctity. Natural childbirth could not escape the taint of sin because real women could not retain their virginity and give birth.[391] In some versions of the Isis tradition, she too was a virgin, inseminating herself with Osiris' seed after his death.[392] So, Mary's virgin birth was not unique, and Christian attitudes towards celibacy were not hegemonic. Writers such as Clement advocated celibacy, but did not condemn marriage or reproductive sex.[393] Athanasius wrote of fertile virgins reproducing through the purity of their thoughts, impregnated by contemplation on the divine.[394] Aelia Pulcheria (399-453), whose support for Cyril was pivotal in the dispute over *Theotokos,* identified herself with Mary via shared virginity, asking "Have I not given birth to God?"[395]

As for orthodox Christian women who did engage in reproductive sex, they could rest assured that Mary's contribution to the gestation of Christ[396] was performed as a

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[391] Corrington, 412.

[392] A fourth century festival in Alexandria celebrated Kore's virgin birth, apparently in emulation of Christian practices (G. W. Bowersock, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity* [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990], 26-27.). Tertullian (ca. 160–235) praised Isis' female devotees for their chastity (Corrington, 412). In Xenophon of Ephesus' *Ephesiaca*, when the heroine is purchased in Alexandria, she defends her virginity by claiming that she has been dedicated to Isis. Praying to the goddess for assistance (in mimicry of Christian martyrs, albeit with a happier ending?) she is saved from wild dogs by a soldier who is then inspired to pray to Isis. In the end, the heroine is reunited with her husband in front of a temple dedicated to Isis. See Xenophon of Ephesus, "An Ephesian Tale," in *Anthology of Ancient Greek Popular Literature,* trans. Moses Hadas, ed. William Hansen (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 3-49.

[393] Clem. Al. *Paed.* 2.10.95.

[394] Brakke, *Athanasius* 75-76.

[395] *Lettre à Cosme* 8 (*PO*, XIII, 279); quoted in Holum, *Theosodian* 153.

[396] Cyril may have implicitly endorsed Aristotle's rather limited views on the mother's contribution to offspring: "This does not mean that the nature of the Word or his divinity took the beginning to its existence from the holy virgin" (Cyril *Ep.* 4, *PG* 77.44-50; quoted in McGuckin, *Cyril* 265). Athanasius, however, defended the Virgin's contribution: Mary was needed so that Christ "might receive this body from her, and offer it up as his own for us." Gabriel's words to Mary remove any "hint of

corporeal being. Her physical contribution was indispensable to the project of salvation,

for through it, Christ assumed the humanity that allowed Him to redeem mankind.

Discourse defending this position may not have effaced pejorative references to Eve or

women's contribution to the Fall, but it does suggest what aspects of Christianity may

have been particularly attractive to Late Antique mothers.

No doubt these women would have been attracted by Mary's concern for healing

physical ailments. A fifth century (?) parchment discovered in Oxyrhynchus pleaded

"heal and watch over also your servant . . . Pray through the intercession of our lady the

mother of God."[397] A seventh century piece of parchment, meant to be worn on a string

around a woman's neck, asked "Lord, come for mercy and good will upon your servant

So.ro., for her health . . . . through the intercession of . . . our Mistress, the all-glorious

Mother of God and ever virginal Mary."[398] Such aid would have been extremely useful

during the risky period of pregnancy and childbirth. The *Life of Syncletica* sums up the

difficulties: women give birth with difficulty, then nourish their babies, endure illness

alongside their children, and yet enjoy little reward, for children are almost certainly

disabled physically or mentally. The dilemma faced by women is double-edged since

"when they give birth, they perish from sufferings; when they don't bear children, they

waste away sterile and childless under reproaches."[399] This passage may have been

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a body introduced into her from outside, rather that men might believe the body was naturally born from her" (Athanasius *Letter to Epicetus* 4-5; *Later Treatises of St Athanasius* [Oxford: 1881]; quoted in McGuckin, *Cyril* 382-83). Gregory Nazianzen elaborated still further, denouncing anyone who asserted "that He only passed through the Virgin as through a channel, and was not at once divinely and humanly formed in her . . . humanly because in accordance with the laws of gestation" (Gregory Nazianzen *Ep.* 101, *PG* 37; *Select Orations and Letters, Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, trans. Browne and Swallow [London: 1894], 176-93; quoted in McGuckin, *Cyril* 391).

[397] *POxy.* 8.1151; quoted in Rowlandson, 82.

[398] *Magica varia* 2*, Pap.Brux.* 25; quoted in Rowlandson, 337-38.

[399] "The Life and Activity of the Holy and Blessed Teacher Syncletica" 42.

written by a man hoping to attract women to celibacy; nonetheless, it goes a long way towards portraying women as feeling subjects with valid fears about the multifold risks of childbirth. When Isis' shrine at Menouthis was closed, Mary no doubt assumed some of the goddess' responsibilities towards women suffering reproductive problems.[400]

Abu Menas too posed a particular attraction for female pilgrims. An ivory pyxis depicting Menas shows four pilgrims, two of each gender.[401] According to legend, Menas had been conceived through the intercession of the Virgin Mary. Upon reaching adulthood, he entered the military and was martyred under Emperor Diocletian (ruled 285-305). His fellow soldiers transported his body to Alexandria, and later put it on a camel (or two) to return east. However, the camel(s) would only go so far before refusing to proceed. Menas was buried on the spot. Sometime later, a shepherd happened to notice that one of his sheep was cured of a skin disease after coming into contact with water emerging from a spring at the site of the burial. The miraculous water was soon sought after by ailing Christians, including an emperor's daughter. Supposedly, she dedicated a church to the Virgin Mary at the site of the healing spring.[402]

A special interest in attracting female pilgrims to Abu Menas is suggested by sixteen pilgrim flasks found at Kom-el-Dikka, the site of the Virgin fresco. These flasks

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[400] Another virgin, the pagan goddess Artemis, was similarly concerned with ensuring safe deliveries (Skinner, *Sexuality* 135).

[401] Davis, *Cult* 221.

[402] Most sources do not mention this church, giving Menas pride of place. Archaeological examination of Abu Menas has uncovered statues of monkeys and Horus-Harpocrates, indicating pagan activity. The earliest archaeological evidence for a church dates to the early fifth century. The Great Basilica built at the end of the century was the largest church in Egypt at the time. A town catering to pilgrims grew up around the churches, with a colonnaded north-south street. Narrowing as it approached the central square, this street would have helped to heighten the newcomer's anticipation. The central square was surrounded by churches, hospitals, hostels, and workshops. Separation of the sexes was afforded by two sets of sleeping quarters and baths. See Grossman, 282-88.

show Menas on one side and Thecla on the other.[403] The latter's popularity among

female adherents is well attested. Tertullian (ca. 160-235), a Carthaginian church leader,

claimed that women who wanted to assert their right to perform baptism invoked

Thecla's example.[404] Athanasius[405] and Isidore of Pelusium[406] (d. ca. 449)—an

Alexandrian ascetic—recommended her as a role model to virgins in Alexandria. Since

Eugenia was said to have owned a copy *of The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, it must have

been available. To be sure, passages from the text have been discovered near Alexandria,

in Antinoopolis and Oxyrhynchus.[407]

Yet Thecla's connection to Menas is somewhat obscure. The *Miracles of Saint

Menas*, a medieval manuscript that appears to contain Late Antique folklore, tells how a

pilgrim seeking a shrine dedicated to Thecla, which was located in the area of Abu

Menas, was miraculously rescued by Menas from rape. Menas then brought the pilgrim

to his own shrine.[408] In *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, Thecla too was a wandering woman

subjected to attempted rape.[409] Hence, Thecla was a role model to other wandering

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[403] Over one-hundred Menas flasks were found here. See Haas, *Alexandria*, 194.

[404] Egeria read a copy of the Thecla's *Life* on the way to the saint's martyrium in Seleucia. See Davis, "Pilgrimage" 331.

[405] Davis, "Pilgrimage" 313.

[406] Davis, *Cult* 105.

[407] Ibid., 85.

[408] Since the pilgrim had set out from Philoxenite—a town built by imperial order specifically for pilgrims traveling through the area, and the attempted rapist was a soldier, issues of female security during ostensibly "safe" pilgrimage appears to have been uppermost in the narrator's mind. See Davis, "Pilgrimage" 314, n. 49, 321-23. Burrus offers a post-colonial interpretation of the account: the effort "to locate aggression in the 'other' (e.g., bandits and soldiers) [is] a possible response to Roman domination." Thus, resistance to rape demonstrated a desire to preserve native authority. See Burrus, "Mimicking" 65, n.22. This is an intriguing theory, but it is impossible to verify in the absence of information regarding the ethnicity of both the victim and perpetrator.

[409] When Alexander assaulted Thecla, she protested "[f]orce not the stranger [i.e., traveler], force not the handmaid of God" (*Acts of P. and T.* 26).

women,[410] and two stories in *The Miracles of St. Thecla* give her credit for saving women from rape in the vicinity of her shrine in the East. Menas' rescue followed similar lines, but because he took the rescued woman to his own shrine, not Thecla's, he was actually stealing her adherents. No doubt this story earned him the devotion of women impressed by his concern, but the tale only encouraged "safe" pilgrimages made under his protection to his shrine.[411]

Although Abu Menas and the martyrium at Menouthis were devoted to male saints, as healing shrines, they were concerned with ailing female bodies.[412] Healing narratives inverted social hierarchies to assert the supremacy of a Christian discourse wherein women, the sick, and the impoverished were privileged because they were thought to imitate Christ's suffering and humble status.[413] Competition at the healing shrines could be fierce, though, so women had to be proactive in seeking care.

This competition was reflected in the use of space. Efficacy was sometimes thought to be a reflection of space—the closer to the saints' relics, the better.

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[410] Davis, "Pilgrimage" 318-21.

[411] Menas' rescue appropriated Thecla's adherents, but since Thecla's shrine does not appear to have existed—no archaeological evidence has been found—he invented her constituency before stealing them. See Davis, "Pilgrimage" 314, 323. The same process would have operated with respect to the church dedicated to the Virgin Mary at Abu Menas. No archaeological evidence for this church has been found, so if it was "invented," the author of the invention must have been counting on Mary having a constituency from which he could draw. Simultaneously, the tale about Menas' conception would have promoted Mary's efficacy as an intercessor in childbirth.

[412] Alexandria's size and placement in the trade and pilgrimage network was by no means advantageous to the health of visitors or inhabitants. The influx of new pathogens, the presence of populations large enough to support "density-dependent" diseases, and poor waste disposal systems hardly made Late Antique cities the most healthful locations. See Neville Morley, "The Salubriousness of the Roman City," *Health in Antiquity*, ed. Helen King (New York: Routledge, 2005), 196-97.

[413] Brown, *Poverty* 107. The Canons of Athanasius, a fourth-century document attributed (probably falsely) to the bishop, charges the church with care of the poor "for they are His image and likeness" (*Canons of Athanasius* 80*; The Canons of Athanasius of Alexandria. The Arabic and Coptic Versions*, ed. Wilhelm Riedel and W. E. Crum [London: Williams and Norgate, 1904], 49; quoted in Ric Barrett-Lennard, "The *Canons of Hippolytus* and Christian Concern with Illness, Health, and Healing," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 13 (2005): 158).

Sophronius' account about Menouthis describes how a rich woman paid to sleep on a bed next to the relics because she thought her close proximity to the saints would help her secure a cure. When the miracle did not follow the spatial imperative, the exception communicated an important lesson about the pilgrim's low status as a "good" Christian. A poor woman forced to sleep outside the gate on the ground was cured instead, and the rich woman was forced to abase herself before she could receive a cure.[414] Religious ideology was "performed" through miracles like this, where the setting influenced the meanings that were produced. Bodies became sites of meaning simply by their placement in space, because spatial location reflected social status.[415] In this miracle, the rich woman's proximity to the relics was a reflection of her high socioeconomic status. When she was denied the benefits of that status, social structure was inverted, at least temporarily, to communicate the redemptive benefits of subservience.[416]

If only because healing shrines were not accessible by everyone, they became focal points of spiritual power. This power could be stolen, as when Menas appropriated the pilgrim traveling to Thecla's shrine.[417] Power could be commodified as well. The pilgrim flasks found at Kom-el-Dikka harnessed the power pouring out of the sacred

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[414] In miracle 42, an Egyptian man was cured his first night at the shrine, despite the presence of three women who were still uncured after a year. The Egyptian received his cure after sleeping directly in front of the relics. Most of the cures accomplished at Menouthis seem to have been brought about while the patient was sleeping in the basilica. Occasionally, the basilica was so full that visitors had to sleep in the *hierateion*. See Montserrat, "Carrying" 269-72.

[415] Valantasis, 789.

[416] Ritual discourse may simultaneously deny and affirm hierarchy. Indeed, it must do so if it has any hope of appealing to a diverse clientele. See Montserrat, "Pilgrimage" 277. Surely, the Christian shrine at Menouthis accomplished this delicate balancing act, catering to people, even Jews, from all walks of life.

[417] Unlike Menas, Cyrus and John rarely left their shrine, and usually did so only to tell a pilgrim to visit. In addition, Menouthis does not appear to have generated *eulogiai* like the flasks from Abu Menas. See Montserrat, "Pilgrimage" 271.

landscape for re-distribution.[418] Souvenirs like this gave pilgrims their first contact with

focal points of power. They were also mini-sites in and of themselves, especially for

people who were unable to make the journey,[419] such as women warned against

wandering.[420]

It is significant that women ardently pursued treatment for their physical ills,

especially since women's bodies were a source of so much contention in Late Antique

thought. Ethnographic evidence suggests that when women have low life expectancies

and poor access to medical health, passivity towards personal health impairs their ability

to interpret physiological signs of disease in themselves.[421] Hence, women in vulnerable

socioeconomic or political circumstances tend to report that they are in better health than

physiological evidence indicates. By contrast, men in the same societies, although they

enjoy better health on average, are more prone to report illness. So, although they

deemed women the "weaker" sex, it is not surprising that Late Antique writings rarely

portrayed women capitalizing upon their "weakness" by falling ill or acting sickly.

Women's physical health was simply not a worthwhile issue.[422] Consequently, the

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[418] Leyerle, 137.

[419] Ibid., 128-29.

[420] Alice-Mary Talbot, "Pilgrimage to Healing Shrines: The Evidence of Miracle Accounts,"
Dumbarton Oaks Papers 56 (2002): 161. According to the *Coptic Synaxarium,* a woman who sold falsely
curative water from Abu Menas fell victim to possession. See Grossman, 292, n. 49.

[421] Yet as traditional caregivers, women have a vested interest in the health of the entire
community. A second century text reveals a mother's intimate involvement in her son's illness. Just as her
son's suffering was her own, his recovery via divine aid was experienced by his mother as a divine vision
(*POxy*. 1381; quoted in Dunand, 304). In one of the *Sayings,* an abbot fell ill and requested to be moved
into the room of a woman who cared for him. Realizing others suspect him of licentiousness with his
nurse, the abbot prayed that she would be rewarded in the afterlife (*Sayings* 24; quoted in *The Desert
Fathers,* trans. Helen Waddell (Ann Arbor: Ann Arbor Books, 1936), 133.

[422] Rebecca Flemming, *Medicine and the Making of Roman Women: Gender, Nature, and
Authority from Celsus to Galen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000)*,* 74.

women who visited Abu Menas and Menouthis in search of medical care were asserting their self-worth in a unique way.

The discourse of a suffering flesh fostered under Christianity—via identification with Christ—validated women's personal suffering.[423] Tellingly, when writing about illness, Seneca the Younger (4 B.C.E.-65 C.E.) used images involving public torture.[424] Such language allows one to see illness through the lens of martyrdom, which, as discussed earlier, bore a gendered valence. Again, the suffering flesh—the flesh worthy of salvation because it suffered—was female because it suffered. In turn, since health is "practiced, produced, through 'forming oneself as a subject who [has] the proper, necessary, and sufficient concern for his body,'"[425] the rites at Menouthis and Abu Menas (from the first sight of a Menas flask to the payment offered after the receipt of a cure) offered an important opportunity for Late Antique women to present themselves as worthwhile bodies.[426] Isis' shrine would have offered similar opportunities, so this insight does not shed much light on a woman's reason for converting. Nevertheless, once conversion did occur, this does suggest ways in which women may have approached the Christian faith. With disease recast as a means to salvation, the struggle for good health was a struggle to assert both personal value and a right to salvation.[427]

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[423] "There was more involved in this process than a Freudian return of the repressed body as sign." For a sick pilgrim who saw images of a half-nude Thecla on the Abu Menas' flasks, "These bodies are not simply signs or symbols, and their depiction as corporeally real" was integral to actual efforts to justify the provision of medical care to ailing flesh (Miller, "Visceral" 404).

[424] Sen. *Ep.* 67; quoted in Brent Shaw 294.

[425] Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality* II, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1986), 108; quoted in Flemming, *Medicine* 65.

[426] One pilgrim went so far as to blame the saints for injuries sustained during the journey to Menouthis (miracle 30). See Montserrat, "Carrying" 239.

[427] Jole Agrimi and Chiara Crisciani, *Western Medical Thought from Antiquity to the Middle Ages,* trans. Antony Shugaar, ed. Mirko D. Grmek (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 174.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

The status of women in early Christianity has been the subject of heated debate.

Historians hoping to explain conversion as a project whereby women endeavored to

improve their status have come up against critics who argue that women's status was far

higher in non-Christian contexts. This issue of status has only complicated matters. As

Elizabeth Castelli has pointed out: "What does it mean to claim that Christian women (in

general) possessed a higher status than their Greco-Roman counterparts (in general)?"

Marital status, geographical location, and class so complicate the issue that

generalizations are impossible.[428]

Recent sociological work on conversion suggests that converts are drawn to new

faiths that satisfy deprivations suffered under old faiths.[429] Unfortunately, the

deprivation-compensation model tends to reduce the issue of conversion to a

"scoreboard" of pluses and minuses.[430] The same piece of evidence may be taken as

proof of either a "plus" or "minus" depending on the interpreter's agenda.[431]

Conversions did take place under the influence of the patron-client relationship[432] and

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[428] Elizabeth Castelli, "Gender, Theory, and *The Rise of Christianity*: A Response to Rodney Stark," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6, 2 (1998): 230-31.

[429] Stark and Bainbridge, 182.

[430] Ross Kraemer defends "deprivation-compensation" theory, claiming that a theological bias is often behind efforts to refute the role of social conditions in conversion. Because deprivation-compensation theory can be take to suggest "that religions express no external ultimate truth . . . scholars with theological interests have an a priori stake in its refutation" (Kraemer, "Conversion" 302, n. 11).

[431] For example, see above for arguments as to whether the feminization of an otherwise masculine divine reflected "positively" or "negatively" upon women.

[432] See K. Holum, "In the Blinking of an Eye: The Christianizing of Classical Cities in the Levant," *Religion and Politics in the Ancient Near East*, ed. Adele Berlin (Bethesda: University Press of Maryland, 1996): 131-50. In Alexandria, this ought to be considered in the context of the extreme loyalty shown towards by each quarter to its own particular preacher. Haas, *Alexandria* 236.

force.[433] Nonetheless, women did convert to Christianity of their own volition, against

the enormous obstacle of state persecution. The "scoreboard" model too often uses

modern Western definitions to determine what should be interpreted as a "plus" as

opposed to a "minus." If the women who voluntarily embraced Christianity are denied

legitimacy,[434] then what advances have been made in the effort to understand women's

religious experience? A more nuanced approach is required. Since women clearly

favored paganism and Christianity—remaining pagan in the face of increasing opposition

or risking persecution as Christians—both sides must have thought their "scores" looked

promising.[435]

Thus, the final transition to Christianity involved other factors, such as the

increasingly limited range of choices for a pagan woman seeking religious experiences.

Theophilus, credited with a mania for building, made great strides in supplanting

Alexandria's pagan shrines with Christian churches. A century after he saw to it that the

Serapeum was dismantled, Christians dismantled the Isis temple at Menouthis. Women

who wanted to continue their religious traditions had no choice but to seek satisfaction

within Christianity. Converts, whether or not they were willing, must have worked out

compromises with Christianity to make the best of their situations.

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[433] See MacMullen, 8.

[434] If paganism was more "positive" for women than Christianity, then the women who converted to Christianity would be like the modern women who defend supposedly misogynistic Muslim practices. For modern efforts to combat an essentializing discourse that tends to define positive experiences per Western notions see Lila Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others," *American Anthropologist* 104, 3 (2002): 783-790.

[435] The discovery of so-called crosses on the walls of the Serapeum during this period served both sides of the "scoreboard." The historian Rufinus of Aquileia (340/5-410) claimed the crosses convinced many pagans to convert to Christianity, but another historian, Socrates Scholasticus (b. c. 380), claimed that they were identified with either Christ or Serapis depending on the faith of the speaker. See Dunand, 327, 337.

Compromise and negotiation played a prominent role in how women experienced Christianity. The dialectical nature of the discourse indicates that absolute hegemony was impossible, for one gender would always be set against the other, shaping responses and threatening leakage. Hence, Cyril had to invoke Isis (if only as a rejected demon) in his promotion of Cyrus and John's shrine. Yet Cyril did not have to invoke Mary in his defense of Christ's corporeality. Isis had centuries of history with Menouthis, but Mary did not have a comparable history in debates over Christ's humanity. Like Clement, Athanasius, and the other male writers who praised female sanctity, Cyril must have thought women had a place in theological discourse. If his usage was no more than symbolic, this does not undermine the weight of the commentary offered on gender. Were Late Antique men and women absolutely certain that men represented the sole expression of sanctity, *Theotokos,* reformed harlots, and female eunuchs, ascetics, martyrs, and pilgrims never would have existed.

John Moschus' reformed prostitute, the collectors of the pilgrim flasks who sat in front of the Virgin Mary fresco at Kom el-Dikka, and the virgins who shut themselves away—none of these women may have thought of themselves exactly as their male representatives suggested. The sophisticated hermeneutics of the day demanded that any reference to gender be read intertextually. This opens a window into the sort of negotiation that went on everyday. Whenever a male writer referenced the feminine, he introduced the possibility of alterity, indicating resistance to a master discourse or even competition among rival discourses.

As Alexandria's streets, already gendered by pagan and Jewish activity, acquired new layers of meaning, women represented their support for one religious faction or

another merely by their presence in or absence from public spaces. Meanwhile, the

Christian women who undertook pilgrimages to healing shrines asserted their

significance as physical subjects worthy of divinely-gifted health. This did not

distinguish Christianity from paganism, but it did distinguish Christian pilgrimage sites

from what critics argue was a predominately misogynistic discourse. Identification with

a suffering Christ and salvation through subservience no doubt carried special resonance

for women for whom passive endurance and subservience was a part of normal life. If

women could endure these experiences and still feel that life had meaning, then surely

Christian women could do the same, especially in the midst of a faith for which passive

endurance carried spiritual valence. The reinterpretation of otherwise negative

experiences as something positive, combined with a daily expression of agency through

the use of space, allowed women to assert their right to salvation.

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