

The Virgin Desert: Gender Transformation in Fourth-Century Christian Asceticism

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Macrina was a fourth-century ascetic who was famous for her wise counsel. We know of Macrina through her brother Gregory of Nyssa, a rather prolific fourth-century Cappadocian father. In his epistle to the monk Olympius, Gregory wrote in great detail about the life of his sister. Of interest is his introduction of Macrina. After referring to her as a woman, he questioned himself: “if indeed she should be styled woman for I do not know whether it is fitting to designate her by her sex, who so surpassed her sex.”¹ How did Macrina surpass her sex? Is Gregory’s hesitancy to call his sister “woman” indicative of a belief in the inferiority of women? Was Gregory implying that it was necessary to overcome her gender in order to acquire success in ascesis? Though it is obvious that Gregory adored and admired his sister, his reverence for her appears to be at the cost of her femininity.

Macrina is not alone. Amma Sarah, one of the few desert mothers whose sayings are recorded, refers to her own gender transformation: “According to nature I am a woman, but not according to my thoughts.” In fact, many fourth-century female ascetics in early Christianity were praised (and praised themselves) in words which emphasized the putting off of femininity. In order to understand exactly what sort of transformation these women went through, it is necessary to understand how early Christian ascetics understood gender. What did it mean to be woman qua woman? What did the feminine gender represent for early Christian asceticism?

¹ Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Macrina*, trans. by W. K. Lowther Clarke (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1916) published in the Internet Medieval Source Book, 1997, 24 Apr. 2006
<<http://www.fordham.edu/HALSALL/basis/macrina.html>>.

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A cross-section of fourth-century texts from early Christian writers will illustrate that gender was understood as part of a broader theology of creation and the fall. Christian asceticism saw its purpose in attempting to reverse the fall, specifically through the ascetic renunciation of the body and sexuality. Situating these gender transformation texts within the larger context of ascetic belief clearly demonstrates that the transformation of the female sex was more closely related to the redemption of the soul than it was with the negation of femininity.

Transformation, Transcendence, or Negation

Texts which display gender transformation on the part of early female ascetics are often used in order to debate the level of misogyny in the early church. Most current scholarship has interpreted this phenomenon in one of two ways. The first argues that situated in context, such statements represent a challenge to contemporary gender roles. The equation of women with men displayed that unity in Christ countered the social norms of Greco-Roman patriarchy. Understood in light of these patriarchal norms, the early Church was progressive in its understanding of gender.

The second dominant theory argues that gender transformation statements don't challenge, but reinforce the status quo of patriarchy. The transformation of gender seems to be largely a transformation from female to male in order to take part in a new humanity that was primarily masculine. Willi Braun, Professor of Religion at the University of Alberta, wrote an article titled "Body, Character and the Problem of Femaleness in Early Christian Discourse" in which he demonstrates that even at its most inclusive, the early church was primarily androcentric. He argues that while early ascetics did seek to denounce gender differences, it was only through the woman becoming male. Braun supports this thesis with an exegetical appeal to Galatians 3:28: Paul used the masculine form for the word "one" when declaring that male and female were

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one in Christ, even though the feminine and neutered genders were available to him. The “one” which the two genders were urged to become was not androgynous, but masculine. At best, the female is absorbed or erased into an ideal which is given masculine form.²

This second theory does not deny the premises of the first. The fact that the church dared to give women equal status to men was indeed countercultural at the time. Braun and his followers hold contention with the fact that women became equal to men only by becoming men. The belief in masculine superiority was not only maintained but strengthened. Braun argues that the move to virginity and widowhood by female ascetics represented a fleeing from femininity towards masculinity. Even if done for autonomy, the rejection of traditional feminine roles is a rejection of femininity. Female ascetics, who had rejected these traditional roles, were managed by men and complimented by being called “man.” Sometimes they even dressed like men. While early Christianity was unusual in its inclusion of women as leaders, it maintained the assumption that maleness was the human standard.³

This theory seems to make two rather large mistakes. To begin with, it reads current understandings of gender over these fourth-century texts. Second, it ignores the theological assumptions of the early Christian writers. Third, it neglects to situate gender transformation in its true context—asceticism.

The Greco-Roman Understanding of Women

Fourth-century Christianity was greatly influenced by Greco-Roman thought, inheriting many of its presuppositions. Platonic thought dictated a distinction between the body and the soul. The soul was seen as rational and good, partaking in those qualities which represented the participation in the divine. Being a woman implied inferiority. While the female body was seen as

² Willi Braun, “Body, Character and the Problem of Femaleness in Early Christian Discourse,” *Religion and Theology* 9.1&2 (2002): 110-111.

³ Braun 111-112.

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obviously weaker, debate ensued over whether the female soul was also weaker. Aristotle argued that it was—women were unable to reason sufficiently and therefore participated less in the divine. Opposing this view was one held by the Platonists and Stoics. Though it was more difficult for women to become virtuous, they shared a common humanity with men. Given proper training, they could become just as morally upright.⁴ Despite the debate on the state of the female soul, both views see woman as being further away from perfection than men.

In fact, Greco-Roman thought interpreted gender through a theory of monosexuality. Such a theory envisioned a spectrum of masculinity and femininity, in which the *telos* was male. Virtue was identified with the male pole, vice with the female. Men were the standard for humanity.⁵

Braun and his followers argue that early Christian writers, like Gregory of Nyssa, were influenced by Greco-Roman monosexuality. If Gregory of Nyssa grew up in a context where masculinity was the standard of virtue and the *telos* of humanity, his statement concerning Macrina could understandably be interpreted that she had surpassed her sex in order to become male. Braun's opponents would argue that Christianity should be praised for combating such misogyny. In comparison, early Christianity was radically egalitarian by allowing that women could make comparable achievements in ascesis as men.

Christianity, however, does not understand humanity's *telos* in masculinity or femininity. Instead, its *telos* is the transformation and redemption of humanity through Christ. Close inspection of a variety of fourth-century Christian texts will demonstrate that early Christianity's understanding of gender was more closely related to the participation in the glory of the Kingdom of God than Greco-Roman misogyny. In particular, the ascetic tradition sought

⁴ Gillian Clark, *Women in Late Antiquity: Pagan and Christian Lifestyles* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993) 120-121.

⁵ Braun 113-114.

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to participate in this glory by becoming like the angels, who are neither male nor female. It was being “like the angels,” and not being male, which was the *telos* of asceticism.

Fourth-Century Christian Understandings of Women

While Greco-Roman philosophers often spoke to an all-male audience, Christian philosophers, like Augustine and John Chrysostom, spoke as bishops in front of congregations which included many women. Even male ascetics could not escape encountering women who sought their counsel. As a result, early Christian leaders were forced to address the status of women. It is no surprise that there is a wealth of writing from the fourth century on the female gender.⁶ These texts present a large diversity of views. It would be inaccurate to argue that there was one dominant view, and it would be impossible to explore all texts. For this reason, texts from a few influential Church Fathers will be explored as representative of the views of the fourth-century church as a whole. Close examination of these texts will demonstrate that, despite the diversity, there are common beliefs throughout fourth-century Christian texts.

Eve:

During the time of Macrina, Christian writers understood gender in light of the Genesis account of creation and the fall. This account’s implications for the first woman were seen as being valid for all women. To understand Macrina, we must understand Eve.

Augustine and Ambrose both understood the account of creation and the fall to indicate that women were inferior to men. Augustine argued that the only reason Eve was created was for procreation. He reasoned that if God had intended to give man a helper or companion, another man would have been more suitable. The female sex must have been created for the possibility of procreation. Because the female sex existed only to propagate the species,

⁶ G Clark 119-120.

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woman alone could not represent the image of God, but only when united with a man. A man, on the other hand, was sufficient alone to represent the image of God.

Despite his rather harsh treatment of women, Augustine conceded that women were good. He did so in light of their creation by God. Therefore, he argued that it would not be necessary for women to be transformed into men in this life, nor the afterlife. As women, they would be able to participate in the Kingdom of God.⁷

Augustine believed that if Eve's disobedience had not occurred, sex between a man and a woman would still have happened in order for procreation. However, he argues that such an act would be separate from lust. He even thought that it would leave a woman physically a virgin:

The husband, without the alluring sting of passion, with tranquil mind and no destruction of bodily wholeness, would have been poured out in the marital embrace. . .when the wild fire of love did not drive those parts of the body, but that, as there was need, a voluntary power came to aid, the masculine seed then could not have been discharged into the wife's womb, preserving the wholeness of the female genitalia, just as now the flow of menstrual blood can be discharged from a virgin's uterus without injuring that same integrity. For the seed obviously could have been inserted through the same passage by which this other fluid can be ejected. Just as at childbirth the woman's womb would not have been dilated by a groan of pain, but by the impulse of fullness of term, so their sexual organs would have been joined for

⁷ Augustine "Literal Commentary on Genesis," IX, 5 in Elizabeth A. Clark, *Women in the Early Church: Messages of the Fathers of the Church* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1983) 28-9.

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impregnation and conception not by lustful appetite, but by a natural exercise of the will.⁸

He saw the pain of child-bearing, orgasms, sexual desire, and the loss of virginity during intercourse as a result of the fall.⁹

Ambrose also referred to the garden in his argument for the inferiority of women. He pointed out that Eve was the first to be deceived, and that she herself was the one who deceived Adam. Like Augustine, he conceded some goodness to women. Ambrose realized that it was only after Eve was created that God pronounced “It is good.” He explained this tension by arguing that, though it was a woman who brought sin into the world, it was also a woman who brought the possibility for reproduction. By satisfying the need to produce the next generation, a woman fulfilled her duty as a good “helper.”¹⁰

Though Augustine and Ambrose have particularly negative views of women, they concede her goodness (even if only because of the possibility of procreation). Most importantly, neither requires or encourages any sort of gender transformation. Even Augustine, whose views on women were more negative than most of the early Christian writers, did not indicate that it was necessary for women to undergo a gender transformation. It is unwarranted by what we know of early Christian theology to argue that the gender transformation statements concerning fourth-century female ascetics are representative of a religious belief in the need for women to transcend their gender and become like men. While early Christian writers may have been influenced by Greco-Roman philosophy, this influence does not explain the gender transformation statements.

Many of the Church fathers had more positive views of women. Basil of Ancyra saw Adam and Eve as a “parted androgyne,” two parts of an original

⁸ Augustine “The City of God” XIV 26 in EA Clark 46-47.

⁹ Augustine “The City of God” XIV 23, 26 in EA Clark 45-47.

¹⁰ Ambrose “On Paradise” IV, 24; X, 46-48 in EA Clark 29-33.

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neutered whole.¹¹ This origin of gender explains the natural state of interdependence between the sexes. Basil understood the attraction of men for women as equalizing what could otherwise have been a cruel mastery. The need of women for sex and reproduction ensured that women would not be dominated by members of the opposite sex who were often more physically and politically powerful.

The Cappadocian fathers, including Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa believed that the soul was without sex. Male and female were only human categories, part of the animal nature of humanity. Both women and men were made in the image of God. Therefore, they both shared in the possession of the rational aspect of God.¹²

While Augustine and Ambrose believed that women were created for procreation, Gregory of Nyssa believed that gender was created for procreation. Though Adam and Eve were created male and female, he wrote that “the differentiation of the original human nature into two distinct sexes became active only when Adam’s disobedient act of will brought upon him the loss of immortality.”¹³ Gender was instated at the fall, and therefore nonessential to human nature.

Gregory understood humanity as being caught between the glory of Adam and the future restoration of that glory. For him, gender existed only as a temporary measure, created in order for the human race to provide progeny. However, a Christian’s goal was to return to the original purity. This is not to be taken as a condemnation of marriage, gender, or sexuality, but recognition of them as only temporal. It was not necessary for women to undergo gender transformation, but for both sexes to surpass their gender. Early Christians

¹¹ Peter Brown, *Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) 268.

¹² G Clark 122-123.

¹³ Brown 293-295.

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waited for the day when their bodies would be transformed at the resurrection and acknowledged that at that time they would be like the angels, neither male nor female and not being given in marriage.¹⁴

John Chrysostom was greatly influenced by Gregory. He understood Adam and Eve to have lived in a state of virginity in the garden:

Adam and Eve remained apart from marriage, leading the sort of life in Paradise they would have led had they been in Heaven, luxuriating in their association with God. Desire for sexual relation, conception, labor pains, childbirth, and every form of corruptibility was removed from their souls. As a clear stream flows forth from a pure source, so in that place were they adorned with virginity.¹⁵

Chrysostom understood there to be a correlation between the pre-Fall paradise of Eden and heaven. In their relationship with each other, Adam and Eve existed as if in heaven.

This relationship was not only defined by virginity, but by equality. His exegesis of the biblical account supports his view that woman was originally equal in status. However, the fall introduced a hierarchy into the relationship between man and woman:

The first dominance and servitude was that in which men ruled over women. After the original sin, a need arose for this arrangement; before the sin, the woman was like the man. Indeed, when God molded the woman, he used the words in creating her that he had used when he fashioned man. Just as he said in the case of creating the male, “Let us make man after our image and likeness” (Gen. 1:26), rather than “Let there be man,” so also in

¹⁴ Matthew 22:30, Mk 12:25, Luke 20:35.

¹⁵ John Chrysostom “On Virginity” 14, 3 in EA Clark 122-3.

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the case of woman, God did not say, “Let there be woman,” but here he said in addition, “Let us make for him a helper”(Gen. 2:18). And he does not call her simply a “helper,” but “a helper like him,” once more showing the equality of honor.¹⁶

John understood that man and woman were one in likeness and form. After the fall, a difference in authority was introduced into the relationship between man and woman. However, only man shared in the authority of God. Women, who were subject to men, were unlike God who was subject to no one.¹⁷

Though the early church varied in its understanding of gender, the majority of early Christian writers drew their philosophy of gender from a theology of Genesis. Gender was understood in light of sex and reproduction and seen as a nonessential part of the human person. Instead, it represented a falling from the paradise of Eden. This understanding of gender would play a particularly important role in early Christian asceticism, which saw its purpose in returning to that paradise.

Ascetic Understanding of Sexuality:

Early Christian ascetics believed that they could regain a taste of the glory of Adam while still on earth. Though ascetics sought to participate in the glory of Adam, there was a stark recognition that they were still in the body. Asceticism understood the body to be intimately connected with the transformation of the soul. The way ascetics treated their bodies reflected their understanding of redemption. The importance was not on the flesh, but on the state of the heart, which the flesh often mirrored. Adam’s heart had desired God, and the ascetics sought to recapture the glory of Adam by opening their own heart.

¹⁶ John Chrysostom “Discourse 4 on Genesis” 1, in EA Clark 34.

¹⁷ See interpretation of Genesis 3:16 in John Chrysostom “Discourse 4 on Genesis” 1, 2 in EA Clark 33-36.

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Sexuality was particular to the ascetics in that it most intimately reflected the state of the soul. The permanence of sexual fantasy demonstrated the deep connection between human nature and sexual desire. The persistence, depth, and intimacy of sexual temptation led it to represent the unopened heart for the ascetic.¹⁸

Virginitly: Like the Angels

The renunciation of sexuality enabled the ascetics to attain a heart that was open to God like Adam's was. Virginitly, therefore, was of particular importance to early ascetics. It represented a way to begin the transformation and to participate to some extent in the pre-Fall glory of Adam.

Early Christian writings demonstrate that virginitly was part of a looking forward to a future resurrection. Gregory of Nyssa praised virginitly, writing that humans should strive for virginitly in imitation of the angels. By becoming like the angels, humans could escape the attachment towards transitory things. For Gregory, virginitly was heavenly. He understood it as a mediator between humanity and God:

The power of virginitly, then, is such that it abides in the heavens with the Father of spirits; it is in the chorus of the celestial powers, it applies itself to human salvation, and by its power it leads God down to share in human life, while it gives humans wings, so that in virginitly we have a desire for heavenly things. It is as if virginitly were a kind of bond in humans' relationship with God, and by its mediation leads into harmony things that by nature are separated from one another.¹⁹

¹⁸ Brown 222-235.

¹⁹ Gregory of Nyssa "On Virginitly" 2, 3 in EA Clark 119.

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Virginity was not merely a practice. It represented both the redemption of humanity as well as the concern of God for humanity. Its movement was both anthropropic and theotropic.

Gregory even argued that virginity was found in the Trinity. He understood virginity as embodying both purity and incorruptibility. Virginity was also seen as stronger than death. Marriage, which existed as a result of the curse, propitiated death because it brought more people into the world in order to die. Virginity, however, broke this cycle of death, by curtailing the proliferation of mortals. In this way, virginity reversed three of the consequences of the Fall: sexuality, marriage, and death.²⁰

Most important in understanding Macrina is the fact that virginity reversed a fourth consequence of the Fall: gender. Jerome emphasized that the putting on of the new man and rebirth in Christ mentioned in Colossians 3:9-10 were connected with the removal of sex differences. For Jerome, since “Marriage fills the earth, virginity fills Paradise,”²¹ virginity represents one way in which Christians can take part in the kingdom of God. Those who remain virgins will begin participation in the redemption of their bodies:

Virgins begin to be on earth what others will be afterwards in Heaven. If it is promised us that we shall be as the angels (however, among angels there is no difference of sex), either we shall be without sex, as the angels are, or assuredly, as is plainly attested, we may be resurrected in our own sex but shall not perform the sexual function.²²

Two important things should be drawn from this text. First, Jerome is primarily looking forward. The return to the pre-Fall glory of Adam is also a forward

²⁰ Gregory of Nyssa “On Virginity” 4, 8; 4, 9; 13, 1; 14,1 in EA Clark 120-1.

²¹ Jerome “Against Jovinian” I, 16 in EA Clark 127-8.

²² Jerome 131.

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movement in which Christians were looking ahead to the resurrection. Second, this future state would involve being like the angels, including some degree of removal of sex differences.

Female Virginit

The word “virgins” referred to both male and females in the early Church and both were under the same sexual demands. However, for the purposes of this paper, it is necessary to focus on female virginity. Far from being looked down upon, female virgins were extremely respected in the early church. Jerome taught that since virginity began with a woman, Mary, women may experience the blessings of virginity more fully. In the fourth-century, dedicated Christian women were seen by men as possessing prized values. A virgin could bring salvation upon a house. Their prayers were known to protect from disasters; their virginity thought to bring down the very mercy of God.

Female virgins were admired by males as representing continuity in the storm: “She was the one human being who could convincingly be spoken of as having remained as she had first been created.”²³ The female virgins did not go out into the desert like their male counterparts. For women, the city remained the center of holiness. They lived more informal ascetic lives: they were often grouped organically in families, pairs of soul-mates, or served as heads of households.

Their untouched body represented what the desert represented to male ascetics:

To late antique males, the female body was the most alien body of all. It was as antithetical to them as the desert was to the settled land. When consecrated by its virgin state, it could appear like an untouched desert in itself: it was the furthest reach of human flesh

²³ Brown 271.

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turned into something peculiarly precious by the coming of Christ upon it.²⁴

The virgin, in herself, became a desert.²⁵ The female was revered, not to the extent that she had renounced being a woman, but to the extent which she had transcended temporality, beginning the transformation which would be completed at the resurrection.

The Practicality of Virginitly:

At this point, it is necessary to introduce more logistical reasons for gender transformation in early asceticism. Such considerations substantially weaken the argument that the early church was misogynist. It is important to keep in mind the tension which asceticism held between redemption and earthly existence. While at once attempting to both revert to the pre-Fall state and look ahead to the resurrection, early ascetics recognized that they still existed in space and time. Though gender transformation was esteemed, the ascetics recognized that, in the body, they were still male and female. As a result, issues of safety, temptation, and society affected how early ascetics viewed body, sexuality, and marriage.

For Anthony, the father of asceticism, the struggle against sexuality was one part of the attempt to sever his relationship to the world. A bride would have meant settling down in the village. Sexual temptation represented an opposing drive toward matrimony, and thus the world. Therefore the renunciation of his sexual drive was necessary in order to abandon his social status.²⁶

Ascetic literature saw women as representing a temptation which was almost impossible for men to resist. Androgyny not only represented pre-Fall

²⁴ Brown 271.

²⁵ Brown 271.

²⁶ Brown 214-7.

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human nature, but served a very practical purpose in avoiding sexual temptation. In light of the danger of sexual sin, the virgin was urged to deny her femininity.²⁷

Conclusions

Though certain gender transformation statements have been used to demonstrate misogyny in the early church, situating them in the context of asceticism indicates that they are not primarily concerned with leveling or maintaining gender hierarchy. Early Christian ascetics looked backward to gaining a pre-Fall state of the heart, as well as forward to the resurrection. For them, gender was part of their animal nature which though necessary, was only temporal. Through the renunciation of sexuality and gender, they condemned neither, but attempted to participate in the glory of the angels. When Gregory of Nyssa wrote that Macrina surpassed her sex, he was assuming an understanding of sex and gender which was only too human. He believed his sister to have been freed to some extent from the constraints of this world. Gregory recognized that she was already being made a new creation. While on this earth we are still male and female; in the kingdom of heaven, we are already one in Christ.

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²⁷ Brown 268.

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