

DAILY MARTYRDOM AND THE SUFFERING FEMININE BODY: DISCOURSES OF FEMALE
ASCETICISM IN LATE ANTIQUE AND EARLY MEDIEVAL CHRISTIANITY

by

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ABSTRACT

Early Christian narrative demonstrates the inextricability of body and text. Christian theology and doctrine of the early church was written on and through bodies – the body of Christ, of Mary, of the tortured, mutilated bodies of the martyrs, on the emaciated bodies of ascetics and the continent bodies of virgins. Within these narratives, women's bodies feature heavily.

Body narratives are rife throughout the literature of the early church, and these linguistic representations of bodies; their actions, perceptions, emotions, and thoughts are also embedded in authorial corporal understanding, reflecting their writers' world view and cultural and theological understanding. What is selected by the author, how stories are retold, and how this is communicated to the reader are mediated through the body and through the author's understanding of the body that is depicted. Somatic representations in ancient literature therefore provide an important avenue through which to explore not only early Christian understanding of corporeality, gender and sexuality, but also social, cultural and theological meanings that are inscribed on the bodies to whom we have access.

This thesis seeks to explore the narrative articulation of the female body, focusing on the textual commemoration of corporeal suffering of female ascetics in late antique Christian

hagiography. It considers the rhetorical, theological, didactic and social uses of the suffering female body, by reconsidering these sources as corporeal performances interwoven within other existing discourses and interrogates them through the lens of gender and sexuality, illness and disability, and the history of emotions. In so doing, this thesis will shed new light not only on the accounts of the hagiographic *Lives* examined in this study, but also male and female corporeality, early Christian understandings of gender and sexuality, and eschatological thought.

DEDICATION

During the course of this project, I have seen four amazing, beautiful and inspiring women leave this world. I was lucky to have known them, loved them and been inspired by them, it

is to them that this thesis is dedicated...

To Brenda, Tracy, Val and Dottie.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

In the dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood presents a world living after an environmental disaster in which the land has been rendered toxic and fertility rates have dropped dangerously. The United States has become a totalitarian and theocratic state named the Republic of Gilead in which fertile women are enslaved in sexual servitude, a “national resource,” controlled and subjugated for the “benefit” of the world in which they now exist.¹

Through a series of flashbacks, we learn that Right-wing fundamentalists staged a military coup and quickly subjugated the female population by revoking women's right to work, have a bank account or own property. The female population was then forcibly assigned to categories of womanhood based on their fertility and perceived virtue. Fertile women are forced to become handmaids and sent to the Red Centre where they are subjected to psychological and physical torture designed to indoctrinate them into Gilead's totalitarian regime. The central character and narrator, Offred, a Handmaid in the Republic must wear a uniform designed to conceal her body and to take the name of the man who controls her, she is *of* Fred, no longer an individual in her own right.

¹ Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (London: Vintage, 2017), 75.

My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden. I tell myself it doesn't matter, your name is like your telephone number, useful only to others; but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 94).

By assuming these names, the handmaids' identities are eroded, they are situated in a state of belonging, possessed by the commander to whom they are assigned.

As part of the handmaids' indoctrination, the Aunts who run the Red Centre attempt to reconfigure and reconstruct perceptions of the female body through the manipulation and distortion of a variety of discourses. Women are positioned as the cause of atrocities that were perpetuated on their bodies in the pre-Gilead world, blamed for rape and abuse that they, or women more generally endured.

It's Janine, telling about how she was gang-raped at fourteen and had an abortion... But whose fault was it? Aunt Helena says... Her fault, her fault, her fault, we chant in unison. Who led them on?... She did, She did. She did. Why did God allow such a terrible thing to happen? Teach her a lesson. Teach her a lesson. Teach her a lesson (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 90).

What else should we have expected, asks Aunt Lydia with "The spectacles women used to make of themselves. Oiling themselves like roast meat on a spit, and bare backs and shoulders, on the street, in public and legs, not even stockings on them, no wonder these things used to happen."² Aunt Lydia justifies Gilead's treatment of women by claiming that there is more than one kind of freedom – in the old world, women had "freedom to," now they have been given "freedom from."³ Offred sees some sense to this, recalling that

Women were not protected then.

I remember the rules, rules that were never spelled out but that every woman knew: don't open your door to a stranger, even if he says he is the police... Don't stop on the road to help a motorist pretending to be in trouble. Keep the locks on and keep going. If anyone whistles, don't turn to look (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 34).

² Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 65.

³ Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 34.

Ironically, Aunt Lydia's justifies the subjugation of women because they now have freedom from these behaviours, whilst simultaneously advocating for the continued and enforced sanctioned rape of the Handmaids.

The forced induction of handmaids was prompted in part by the effects of atomic war which caused mass sterility in the former United States.⁴ However, despite the fertility crisis affecting everyone, it is women whose bodies are interrogated. "There is no such thing as a sterile man anymore, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that's the law (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 70-71). To counter the fertility crisis, those women who are proven fertile are deemed crucial to the survival of humanity and valued only for their reproductive capabilities. Offred explains that the handmaids can be beaten into submission, through the use of extreme physical violence. It does not matter if their bodies become disfigured in the process, any punishment can be inflicted on her so long as it does not affect her child-bearing capabilities. "We are containers it's only the insides of our bodies that are important. The outside can become hard and wrinkled, for all they care, like the shell of a nut" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 107). After Moira, one of the handmaids, attempted to escape from the Red Centre, she was brutally punished with "steel cables, frayed at the ends" on the soles of her feet, so that her feet were so swollen she could not wear shoes nor walk for a week. "Her feet did not look like feet at all. They looked like drowned feet, swollen, boneless, except for the colour. They looked like lungs" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 102). Offred explains that "They didn't care what they did to your feet and hands, even if it was permanent. Remember, said Aunt Lydia. For our

⁴ Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 317

purposes your feet and your hands are not essential" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 102)

The handmaids are merely incubators, "We are for breeding purposes: we aren't concubines, geisha girls, courtesans...We are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 146). Their bodies are no longer their own, but instead, through brutal violence, rape and indoctrination, the Republic aims to turn the handmaids into docile, obedient vessels, valued only for, and defined by their fertility.

It is on Offred, and the other handmaids' bodies on which the new regime writes and forms its identity. Their wombs are the locus of meaning for the new society, and they are the sacrificial offering. Offred recognises this, and this affects how she perceives her own body. "I avoid looking down at my body, not so much because it's shameful or immodest but because I don't want to see it. I don't want to look at something that determines me so completely" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 72-73). Sitting, naked in the bath, Offred considers how her own understanding of her body has changed since the formation of Gilead. Once a means of obtaining pleasure, of doing what she willed, and which was wrapped up in her understanding of selfhood, it is now a "national resource" she is reduced to a womb, a container for sperm and an incubator for her oppressor's child.

I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will . . . Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I'm a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 83-84).

Offred's body therefore reflects Gilead's societal norms and constraints as well as being the means on which those norms and constraints are constructed. Her own corporeal understanding is reconstructed by the acts it is allowed to perform, through fear,

punishment and indoctrination. Offred recognises that to survive she must participate (at least superficially) in this creation, "I wait. I compose myself. Myself is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech. What I must present is a made thing, not something born" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 76).

Offred's reflections demonstrate that our bodies are simultaneously a medium through which we experience the world, and at the same time a medium through which the world can be enacted. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred exemplifies this in the changing perceptions of her own body. Her corporal understanding is complex, she holds tight to her pre-Gilead conception of her body, whilst the regime dehumanises her, subjecting her to indoctrination, sexual, physical and mental abuse. Offred's body reflects multiple ideas, concepts and layers of meaning.⁵ Her body is thus "simultaneously a physical and symbolic artefact...both naturally and culturally produced."⁶ Throughout the *HMT*, Atwood employs Offred's body as a corporeal frame of reference. Offred understands her body, to use Michel Foucault's term, as an "inscribed surface of events," it is the medium on which Gileadean values and morality are written as well as being a site which tells her own story.⁷

The HMT demonstrates profoundly how the meanings that we give to bodies that we see, read about or encounter are shaped by language, culture, religion and ideology. The

⁵ On the way the body is used in *The Handmaid's Tale* see Daniel Barkass-Williamson, "How is the Body Used to Characterise the Dystopian Female Identity in the Patriarchal Societies of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*?" *Innervate* 9 (2016-17): 161-166; Julia Kuznetski, "Disempowerment and Bodily Agency in Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments* and the *Handmaid's Tale* TV Series," *The European Legacy* 26 (2021), 287-302.

⁶ Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret M. Lock, "The Mindful Body: A Prolegomenon to Future Work in Medical Anthropology," *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, New Series 1 (1987), 7.

⁷ Michel, Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 148.

character of Offred displays the discursive process of the creation of alternative understandings of the body, of what it means to have the body of a woman and the social function of that body. Atwood's depiction of Offred in this narrative reflects and draws upon contemporary corporeal understanding which posits that although we experience our bodies, the meanings that we give to them are cultural, shaped by language and ideologies. I have begun this thesis with the HMT as I see many analogies in Atwood's use of the female body as a tableau through which theology and doctrine is inscribed with the use of the female body in early Christian hagiographic literature.

Early Christian narrative demonstrates the inextricability of bodies and text. Christian theology and doctrine of the early church was written on and through bodies – the body of Christ, of Mary, of Lazarus, of those nameless people healed by Jesus, of the tortured, mutilated bodies of the martyrs, on the emaciated bodies of ascetics and the continent bodies of virgins. Within these narratives, women's bodies feature heavily. Body narratives are rife throughout the literature of the early church, and these linguistic representations of bodies; their actions, perceptions, emotions, and thoughts are also embedded in authorial corporal understanding, reflecting their writers' world view and cultural and theological understanding. In fact, "body narratives, including the social norms that define the body and its functions, are likewise textual or ideological constructions, 'virtual phantasms' of actual corporeality."⁸ What is selected by the author, how stories are retold, and how this is communicated to the reader are mediated through the body and through the author's understanding of the body that is depicted. Somatic representations in ancient literature

⁸ Kylee-Anne Hingston, *Articulating Bodies: The Narrative Form of Disability and Illness in Victorian Fiction* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019), 3.

therefore provide an interesting and important avenue through which to explore not only early Christian understanding of corporeality, gender and sexuality, but also social, cultural and theological meanings that are inscribed on the bodies to whom we have access.

Analysis of these corporeal representations must therefore form a vital part of the study of early Christianity.

In this thesis, I seek to explore the narrative articulation of the female body, focusing on the textual commemoration of corporeal suffering of female ascetics in late antique Christian hagiography. This thesis is not driven by historiographic motivation; but instead I consider the rhetorical, theological, didactic and social uses of the suffering female body. What is written on and through these bodies? How are these bodies put to work? Why and how were these representations meaningful and purposeful, and what can they tell us about early Christian meaning-making. My sources all depict instances of female suffering and I therefore consider the gendered nature of that suffering, by contextualizing these representations by considering the assumptions, theories and understandings which participated in the formation of categories such as gender, and sexuality, health, and illness in the late antique world. In so doing, I then seek to determine what this can tell us about early Christian understanding of the body, gender and sexuality as well as of disease, disability and health. Further, I consider what part these depictions play in, or contribute to, the formation of social groups, and the construction of identity and power and authority.

The Body

The centrality of the body has been a major focus of feminist theories, particularly since the late 1980s and 1990s, and is now a core part of work undertaken not only by feminist

scholars, but also in the fields of gender studies, disability studies and post-colonial studies amongst other fields.⁹ Feminist scholarship has brought about significant changes in how the body is represented and theorised. Elizabeth Grosz, like Foucault, argues that the body is “socially inscribed” and can no longer be regarded as a pre-cultural given.¹⁰ It can “be seen as the primary object of social production and inscription and can thus be located within a network of socio historical relations.”¹¹ In her 1994 monograph, *Volatile Bodies*, she goes on to say that bodies

Cannot be adequately understood as a historical, pre-cultural, or natural objects in any simple way; they are not only inscribed, marked, engraved by social pressures external to them but are the products, the direct effect, of the very social constitution of nature itself. It is not simply that the body is represented in a variety of ways according to historical, social, and cultural exigencies while it remains basically the same; these factors actively produce the body as a body of a determinate type.¹²

Grosz employs the concept of inscription on the body, using it both literally and metaphorically to claim that

The body has figured as a writing surface on which messages, a text, are inscribed. This metaphors of body writing posits the body, and particularly its epidermic surface, muscular-skeletal frame, ligaments, joints, blood vessels, and internal organs as corporeal surfaces, the blank page on which engraving, graffiti, tattooing, or inscription can take place. This metaphor of the textualized body asserts that the body is a page of material surface, possibly even a book of interfolded leaves... ready to receive, bear, and transmit meanings, messages, or signs, much like a system of writing... The messages or texts produced by this body writing construct bodies as

⁹ See for example works such as Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (London: Routledge, 2000); Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1993); A. Fausto-Sterling *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*. (New York, NY: Basic Books): 2000; Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994).

¹⁰ Conversely, Judith Butler critiques Foucault and others’ concept of the body as socially constructed as they suggest that to claim that the body is socially constructed” holds an implicit understanding that there is a body which can be distinct from or external to the process of construction (Judith Butler, “Foucault and the Paradox of Bodily Inscriptions,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 86 (1989):601-607 (601). They note that some writers, in particular Simone de Beauvoir’s conception of the body suggest that “the body” is a “passive medium on which cultural meanings are inscribed.” (Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 2014), 12).

¹¹ Elizabeth Grosz, “Notes towards a Corporeal Feminism,” *Australian Feminist Studies* 2 (1986) 1-16 (1).

¹² Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), x.

networks of meaning and social significance, producing them as meaningful and functional “subjects” within social and ensembles.¹³

Just as the fictional ideology of Gilead is depicted as being written on the bodies of women, so too modern scholars have demonstrated that the body was a site through which early Christian theology was crafted.

Scholars have increasingly recognised that the textualized female body was harnessed by male authors as a tool to explore the potentialities and intricacies of Christian identity.¹⁴

Indeed it is just this “literary,” rhetorically constructed woman which Elizabeth Clark finds problematic with regards to the historical study of holy women.¹⁵ She notes however that “Interesting work may continue to examine how “woman,” how gender is constructed in early Christian texts, but will also move beyond purely linguistic concerns to explore the social forces at work in these constructions.”¹⁶ Indeed, the female body formed a constitutive aspect of the ideology, theology and social practice which shaped and defined Christian antiquity. As Meghan Henning acknowledges therefore,

The emphasis on gender as a way of interpreting a body that emerged after the linguistic turn, enables us to talk about the operative cultural assumptions of the body in antiquity despite the elusive nature of that body... No longer preoccupied with recovering “real women,” early Christian historians are free to focus instead upon the way in which women and gender are socially constructed in ancient texts.¹⁷

¹³ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 117.

¹⁴ Following the work of such scholars as Elizabeth Clark, many interested in women’s history have acknowledged that we have very little direct access to female perspectives in the ancient world, indeed, the female voice is often elusive (Elizabeth A. Clark, “The Lady Vanishes: Dilemmas of a Feminist Historian after the “Linguistic Turn”.” *Church History* 67, no. 1 (1998): 1-31. See also Patricia Cox Miller, *Women in Early Christianity: Translations from Greek Texts*. (Washington: Catholic University Press, 2005).)

¹⁵ Elizabeth A. Clark, “Holy Women, Holy Words: Early Christian Women, Social History, and the ‘Linguistic Turn,’” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6 (1998): 413-430 (415).

¹⁶ Clark, “Holy Women, Holy Words,” 430.

¹⁷ Meghan R. Henning, *Hell Hath No Fury: Gender, Disability, and the Invention of Damned Bodies in Early Christian Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 16. There is not the space here to give a full a comprehensive list of scholarship which has sought to examine women and gender in ancient texts, instead I provide a brief list of some key studies: Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Caroline Walker

This thesis therefore seeks to explore literary representations of female corporeality in early Christian and late antique discourses and is particularly interested in depictions of female suffering in hagiographic literature. I consider the rhetorical, theological, and social uses of the suffering female body by reconsidering these sources as corporeal performances interwoven within other existing discourses and interrogate them through the lens of gender and sexuality, illness and disability, and the history of emotions.

The Ascetic Body

In 1968, the French historian Évelyne Patagean highlighted the variety and social diversity of those people encountered by saints, in monasteries or towns depicted in hagiographic texts, in fact “C’est la société entière qui a affaire à eux.”¹⁸ The intertwining of the saints’ life with those of his or her community meant that hagiography, Patagean suggested, could provide a wealth of information on social history, in particular on matters and themes such as health, disability, illness, gender, class which are often obscured or omitted from other forms of literature.¹⁹ Patagean’s article began a shift in scholarship which saw the publication of

Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1992); Elizabeth A. Clark, “Women, Gender, and the Study of Christian History” *Church History* 70 (2001): 395-426; L Stephanie Cobb, *Dying to Be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr Texts*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2008; Kate Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996); Rebecca Flemming, *Medicine and the Making of Roman Women: Gender, Nature, and Authority From Celsus to Galen*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000; Helen King, *Hippocrates’ Woman: Reading the Female Body in Ancient Greece* (London: Routledge, 1998); Alicia Myers, *Blessed Among Women?: Mothers and Motherhood in the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); Anna Rebecca Solevag, “Hysterical Women? Gender and Disability in Early Christian Narrative,” in *Disability in Antiquity*, ed. Christian Laes (London: Routledge, 2017)

¹⁸ Évelyne Patagean, “À Byzance: Ancienne Hagiographie et Histoire Sociale,” *Annales* 23 (1968): 106-126 (109).

¹⁹ Elizabeth Clark demonstrates for example that we can learn about senatorial wealth and property, the time it took to travel from Constantinople and Jerusalem, the organisation of women’s monasteries, or the reading patterns of elite female ascetics (Clark, “Holy Women, Holy Words”).

Peter Brown's seminal "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," in 1971.²⁰

Drawing on models of cultural anthropology, particularly from the work of Mary Douglas, Brown offered a glimpse both of the holy man himself as part of late antique society, but also pointed to the actions, interactions, function and role of the holy man as offering a window into late antique society itself. Claudia Rapp describes the influence of Brown's article on scholarship as giving "us the living holy man in contrast to the cult of dead saints," emphasising that the genre of hagiography itself can be given clarity through Brown's work.²¹

Brown's subsequent *The Body and Society* (1988) represented a *tour de force* in considering the body as a site through which to explore the early Christian world.²² In the preface Brown explains that his aim is to study sexual renunciation, and in his own words,

To make clear the notions of the human person and of society implied in such renunciations, and to following detail the reflection and controversy which these notions generated, among Christian writers, on such topics as the nature of sexuality, the relation of men and women, and the structure and meaning of society.²³

The Body and Society demonstrated formidably that the body was a fruitful avenue through which to explore not only perspectives on corporal understanding and sexuality, but also the transformations and changes that early Christianity brought about, and the polymorphic nature of early Christianity.

²⁰ Peter Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971): 80-101.

²¹ Claudia Rapp, "The Origins of Hagiography and the Literature of Early Monasticism: Purpose and Genre Between Tradition and Innovation," in *Unclassical Traditions: Volume I: Alternatives to the Classical Past in Late Antiquity*, eds. Christopher Kelly, Richard Flower and Michael Stuart Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 123.

²² Brown emphasises that this became a book about early Christianity rather than late antiquity in general. (Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), xv

²³ Brown, *The Body and Society*, xiii.

What followed was a period that Brown himself was later to describe as coinciding with a “dam-burst” of scholarly attention and interest to the study of religious studies of late antiquity, particularly he notes, the “existential” aspects of the period, including asceticism, the body, sexuality and gender.²⁴ In his *History of the Body*, Willemini Ruberg describes this corporeal, somatic or bodily turn as a shift from writing history of “disembodied peoples’ thoughts and ideas” which assumed a view of the body as an unaltering, consistent biological entity to a view of the body which underlined its cultural and historical variability.²⁵ Subsequent studies on illness, disease, health, gender, sexuality and disability have further demonstrated the usefulness of the body as a lens through which to examine history and theology.

The Suffering Body

Of key importance to this study is the work of Judith Perkins who, building on Foucault’s work on the self, identified in the early Roman Empire, a discursive focus which led to the construction of the notion of the “self” as sufferer.²⁶ Through analysis of a range of sources from the late first century CE onwards, she identified a cultural proclivity towards representations of the body as vulnerable to suffering and pain that had been absent from literary representation in the ancient world. Perkins claims that these scripts of suffering and bodily pain became assimilated into Christian literary representation in Christian narrative to create new categories of subjects, previously omitted from narrative

²⁴ Peter Brown, “So Debate the World of Late Antiquity Revisited,” *Symbolae Osloenses* 72 (2008): 5-30 (27).

²⁵ Willemini Ruberg, *History of the Body* (London: Red Globe Press, 2020), 1-2.

²⁶ Judith Perkins, *The Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era* (London: Routledge, 1995).

representation such as the poor, the old and the sick.²⁷ These scripts generated a human community focused on suffering and made up of sufferers which was identity forming and community building. She notes that “The discourse of the martyr Acts, representing pain as empowering and death a victory, helped to construct a new understanding of human existence, a new ‘mental set’ toward the world that would have far-reaching consequences.”²⁸ This supposition maintains that the overall prominence and conformity to the notion of the Christian as sufferer eventually became the material of Christian collective memory and was fundamental to the growth and triumph of Christianity itself.

The suffering body is therefore of great importance, and yet the study of late antique discourses of suffering bodies have focused almost solely on martyrological texts, neglecting ascetic literature which also celebrates and validates the corporeal suffering of its protagonists. Further, when the ascetic suffering body is considered in modern scholarship, it is rarely considered in terms of gender. At its broadest perspective, when exploring these representations of female suffering, I will examine what depictions of suffering are doing in a text. Why are they there, for what purpose, and what effect does their inclusion have both within the text itself and for its intended audience? More specifically, I wish to consider whether there was a gendered aspect to these depictions. In a time where writing was hyper fixated on the female body, I ask what these depictions of the suffering female body can tell us. I work on the premise that the bodies we find in ancient texts are constructed as “networks of meaning,” transmitting assumptions, ideas and theology. I seek to examine and explore the narrative articulation of the textualized suffering body by identifying

²⁷ Perkins, *The Suffering Self*, 8.

²⁸ Perkins, *The Suffering Self*, 123.

depictions of female corporeal suffering, and reconsidering these sources through the lens of illness, the history of emotions, race, or gender and sexuality which historically were seen as the purview of other disparate disciplines which will open up new and exciting avenues of exploration.

It is important to mention briefly here that the “suffering female body” is perhaps a misnomer which is worth highlighting here. Literary depictions of pain and of its absence, have been directly engaged in shaping social, cultural and theological meaning and the creation of both individual and communal identity. As Stephanie Cobb observes in her study of the representations of early Christian martyrs, even when being burnt alive, dismembered or tortured, “the Christian body is decidedly *not* in pain.”²⁹ So too, the ascetics examined in these texts. They are placed in situations which we as the reader might unconsciously assume depict a “suffering” body, their bodies are scarred, rotting and worm-infested, yet their absence of pain is frequently part of their narrative representation. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the intransitive verb “to suffer” as “to endure death, pain or distress,” and “to be subject to disability or handicap.”³⁰ I use the term “suffering” therefore to refer to somatic events which depict the body being physically broken or changed in some way or in which pain is felt.

The Female Body

Before considering the details of this study, we must briefly consider the idea of “female” suffering. Simone de Beauvoir famously asserted that

²⁹ Cobb, *Dying to Be Men*, 10.

³⁰ Merriam-Webster’s *Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed., s.v. “suffer.”

One is not born, but rather becomes, woman. No biological, psychical or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female takes on in society; it is civilisation as a whole that elaborates this intermediary product between the male and the eunuch that is called feminine.³¹

Addressing Beauvoir's claim, Judith Butler too recognises this construction of gender more broadly as a continuous process,

If there is something right in Beauvoir's claim that one is not born, but rather becomes a woman, it follows that *woman* itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said originate or to end. As an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification."³²

Gender and the performance of gender are complex. Gender is bound up in other discourses including sexuality, race, class etc and therefore varies geographically, culturally and over time. The creation of this gendered identity, our performance of gender is part of a complex web with no starting or end point. Even Offred's gendered identity and performance, although created by a new regime is based, albeit antagonistically, on condemnation of previous gendered roles and performances.

Thesis Overview

Scholars such as Oyèrónké Oyewùmí caution those studying historical aspects of gender, reminding us that if gender is socially constructed, we should not automatically assume that gender remains the same across time and space, or indeed that it was always a meaningful category,

If gender is a social construction, then we must examine the various cultural/architectural sites where it was constructed, and we must acknowledge that variously located actors (aggregates, groups, interested parties) were part of the construction. We must further acknowledge that if gender is a social construction, then there was a specific time (in different cultural/architectural sites) when it was

³¹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Shelia Malovany-Chevallier (London: Vintage Books, 2010), 146.

³² Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 43

“constructed” and therefore a time before which it was not. Thus, gender, being a social construction, is also a historical and cultural phenomenon.³³

Elsa Barkley Brown also highlights the complexity of gender, critiquing white feminists for assuming that despite things like sexuality, race, ethnicity or class, all women have the same gender. She adds, “We have still to recognize that being a woman is, in fact, not extractable from the context in which one is a woman...We have still to recognize that all women do not have the same gender.”³⁴ I begin therefore in chapter 1 by interrogating how female bodies were conceived of, and reflected upon, in the literature of the ancient world. By briefly considering ancient myth and medical literature I aim to reconstruct multiple ideologies of gender; the assumptions, theories and understandings of which all participated in the formation of the categories of gender in the Greco-Roman world.³⁵ Ascetic discourse builds upon ancient concepts of the body and so it is of particular importance to develop a comprehensive understanding of the way in which women’s bodies were both thought of and used.³⁶ This chapter then continues to examine how women’s bodies were employed

³³ Oyèrónké Oyewùmí, “Visualizing the Body: Western Theories and African Subjects,” in *African Gender Studies: A Reader*, ed. Oyèrónké Oyewùmí (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 11.

³⁴ Elsa Barkley Brown, “‘What Has Happened Here’: The Politics of Difference in Women’s History and Feminist Politics” *Feminist Studies* 18 (1992): 295–312 (300).

³⁵ Rebecca Flemming states that “Medicine is a site of social negotiation, where men and women may meet and interact, both with each other and among themselves...the making of medicine is thus inevitably and multiply bound up with the making of gender.” (Flemming, *Medicine and the Making of Roman Women*, 25).

³⁶ See for example David Brakke, “The Problematization of Nocturnal Emissions in Early Christian Syria, Egypt, and Gaul,” *J ECS* 3 (1995): 436–441; Brown, *The Body and Society*; Virginia Burrus, “Word and Flesh: The Bodies and Sexuality of Ascetic Women in Christian Antiquity,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 10 (1994): 27–51; Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 59–114; Elizabeth Castelli, “Mortifying the Body, Curing the Soul: Beyond Ascetic Dualism in The Life of Syncletica,” *Differences* (1992): 134–153; Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride*; Patricia Cox Miller, “Desert Asceticism and ‘The Body from Nowhere,’” *J ECS* 2 (1994): 137–153; Patricia Cox Miller, *The Corporeal Imagination: Signifying the Holy in Late Ancient Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); Andrew Crislip, *Thorns in the Flesh: Illness and Sanctity in Late Ancient Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013); John M. Dillon, “Rejecting the Body, Refining the Body: Some Remarks on the Development of Platonist Asceticism,” in *Asceticism*, eds. Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 80–87; Hannah Hunt, *Clothed in the Body: Asceticism, the Body and the Spiritual in the Late Antique Era* (London: Routledge, 2016); Hannah Hunt, “Religion and the Body,” in *A Companion to Religion in Late Antiquity*, eds. Josef Lössl, Nicholas J. Baker-Brian (Newark: Wiley & Sons, 2018), 475–492; Margaret R. Miles, *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2006); Aline Rousselle, *Porneia: On Desire and the Body in Antiquity*

rhetorically and theologically in the literature of the early church. Taking examples of the literary representation of female suffering in early Christian narrative from two perspectives, depictions of women who suffered and died, and women who suffered and lived.

Having surveyed the wider discursive field, I then delve deeply into four hagiographic sources from the fourth and fifth centuries CE., taking an episode in which the protagonist of each story is depicted as enduring an episode of corporeal suffering. Chapter 2 looks at a fifth-century account of an austere ascetic anchorite, Syncletica who lived in the desert near Alexandria. This chapter explore the problematic female body through the graphically realistic, but intensely horrific, depiction of Syncletica's long, drawn-out illness that gradually caused her body to waste away. Literature of the late antique period frequently emphasised a link between women's bodies and sordidness and shame. Even having adopted virginity, and undertaken extreme ascetic practice, women were still hampered by the very fact of their own female body. Things work differently in the anonymous fifth-century hagiographic *Life and Activity of the Holy and Blessed Syncletica*. In this chapter, I argue rather than relying on external markers of masculinisation like other literature of the early church, Syncletica transcended her gender through a rhetoric of disgust and corporal suffering. She was no longer a site of sexual desire, but rather an object of disgust.

(Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2013); Samuel Rubenson, "'As Already Translated to the Kingdom While Still in the Body': The Transformation of the Ascetic in Early Egyptian Monasticism," in *Metamorphoses*, eds. Turid Karlsen Sim and Jorunn Økland (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 271-289; Theresa M. Shaw, *The Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998); Maureen A. Tilley, "The Ascetic Body and the (Un)Making of the World of the Martyr," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 59 (1991): 467-479; Robert H. von Thaden Jr., "Glorify God in Your Body: The Redemptive Role of the Body in Early Christian Ascetic Literature (*Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 38, 2003): 191-209.

Paradoxically in this monstrous image, she became a means for her community to combat the “problematic” nature of the feminine body and triumph over the power of their own sexual desire. Through this, Syncletica’s body took on a communal function, employed to provoke and instigate desired behaviours, and was used to explore theological conceptions of the female body.

Chapter 3 examines Gregory of Nyssa’s account of the death of his sister Macrina. In the *Life of Macrina*, Macrina’s corporeality is central to the text, and her death, and post-mortem body take centre-stage. Traditionally, scholars have identified the motif of “becoming male” or of the masculinisation of women in early Christian narrative. In this chapter, I use Gregory’s rendering of Macrina’s death and post-mortem revelation of a scar on her breast to demonstrate that the motif of “becoming male” is perhaps too simplistic to describe what is going on in this text. I argue that Macrina is both masculinised and concurrently feminised. I demonstrate that in situating Macrina throughout the text within ancient categories of noble death, martial wounds and heroic endurance, Gregory demonstrated that she bore all the significant attributes of *virtus*, bravery and, in short, masculinity. However, during her life we can see a clear emphasis on femininity, and maternal suffering which appears to subvert Gregory’s own narrative of Macrina’s masculinity and supposedly masculine virtues. However, by contextualising the post-mortem divulging of Macrina’s breast using Greco-Roman literature, myth and visual images, I argue that the exposure of her breast worked on two levels, simultaneously masculinising as well as feminising her. I conclude that here lies the crux of Gregory’s depiction of Macrina – it is not one of simple masculinization, but of gender ambiguity, a transcendence of gender by becoming *both* masculine and feminine.

The hagiographic *Life of Melania the Younger*, written by the ascetic Melania's companion Gerontius in the late fifth century, is the focus of chapter 4. This narrative has been referred to in numerous studies concerning the role of women, the early Christian elite, and female monasticism in the early church, yet her somatic experience of illness has often gone unobserved.³⁷ Further, in the earliest extant versions of the *Life*, one Latin and one Greek, the accounts of her illness differ in significant ways. By drawing on ancient physiognomic understanding of somatic difference, and concepts of race, alongside Greco-Roman medical theories, I demonstrate how differing interpretive traditions used notions of illness and race in conjunction with ideas of sexuality and gender, and power and identity with very different results. In one as a means of demonstrating and promoting "orthodoxy" whilst in the other, ascetic corporeal notions take precedence and we find a focus on sexuality, concepts of sexual desire and gender. In this chapter, I consider how the inner body, its functionality, inner parts and somatic processes were employed in ascetic literature to negotiate, define and articulate ideas about both the living human body as well as the future eschatological body. It deals with the desexualisation of a female saint as a living model of chastity and as a foreshadowing of the eschatological angelic body. This chapter

³⁷ For a selection see Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550 AD* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 291-300; Catherine M. Chin, "Apostles and Aristocrats," in *Melania: Early Christianity through the Life of One Family*, eds. Catherine M. Chin and Caroline T. Schroeder (Oakland, Cal.: University of California Press, 2017), 19-33; Elizabeth A. Clark, *Melania the Younger: From Rome to Jerusalem* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 39-60; 77-97; Lynda L. Coon, *Sacred Fictions: Holy Women and Hagiography in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 95-119; Christine Luckritz Marquis, "Namesake and Inheritance," in *Melania: Early Christianity through the Life of One Family*, eds. Catherine M. Chin and Caroline T. Schroeder (Oakland, Cal.: University of California Press, 2017), 34-49; Caroline T. Schroeder, "Exemplary Women," in *Melania: Early Christianity through the Life of One Family*, eds. Catherine M. Chin and Caroline T. Schroeder (Oakland, Cal.: University of California Press, 2017), 50-66; Anne Yarbrough, "Christianization in the Fourth Century," *Church History* 45 (1976): 149-165

sheds new light not only on interpretative traditions of one of the earliest accounts of a female saint, but also on the intersection of race, illness, sexuality, healing, and authority interwoven within these accounts. In a time when the living human body, and future eschatological body were in a constant state of negotiation, definition, and articulation, this chapter demonstrates how key theological debates such as the nature of the resurrected body were played out through the suffering female body.

In Chapter 5, I explore the suffering female body from a very different perspective, through the life of a male saint. Previous chapters have demonstrated that narrative representations of female saints “becoming male” are ubiquitous in the literature of the early church and late antique period. However, rather than “becoming male”, in the Syrian ascetic Simeon’s suffering body, we find a desexualisation and de-gendering of the male, employing a gender fluidity which typically characterises accounts of female saints. In Theodoret of Cyrrhus’ account, Simeon the Stylite (c.390-459 CE), an ascetic renowned for situating himself on a pillar for 37 years. Simeon’s self-inflicted corporal mortification resulted in a “grievous wound.” By situating this depiction within Greco-Roman and early Christian literature, I demonstrate that this “grievous wound” is deliberately suggestive of self-castration. This castration effectuates a de-gendering and desexualisation of Simeon in line with early Christian eschatology, soteriology and understanding of gender. In exploring this, I focus on another episode in which Simeon suffers a gruesome affliction of his feet. By contextualising Simeon’s affliction using Greco-Roman medical theories, ancient Jewish literature, and early Christian eschatological arguments, I show that the destruction of Simeon’s feet demonstrates a euphemistic employment of the “feet” which employed a culturally understood use of a somatic part to represent the destruction of his genitals, his

sexuality and his gender. I argue therefore that Simeon's "grievous wound" and in Jacob of Serug's later *Homily on Simeon the Stylite*, actual self-amputation, of Simeon's foot should be read in the same vein as the accounts of female saints whose corporeality employed to demonstrate their de-gendering and desexualisation.

Focusing on the embodied representations of the suffering female body in late antique literary representations not only sheds new light on the specific texts, but also on the discourse of corporeal suffering and fosters conversations on the body as a location of religious expression. It will examine and reassess interpretive traditions of the accounts of early female saints as well as the intersection of gender, race, illness, sanctity, sexuality, soteriology and eschatological thought interwoven within these accounts.

CHAPTER II: THE SUFFERING FEMALE BODY

Our bodies are the “most familiar object people encounter” indeed, everything we do and everything we are is mediated through our bodies.³⁸ Although we experience our bodies, the meanings that we give to them are cultural, shaped by language and ideologies. The body is thus “simultaneously a physical and symbolic artefact...both naturally and culturally produced”.³⁹ How then can we read the *ancient* body? Jennifer Glancy notes that “We are outside the cultural codes and we lack the bodies.”⁴⁰ We cannot assume that there is necessarily a historically constant, common ‘reality’ of the human body, indeed, as Helen King points out, “biological” definitions that we consider to be “normal” could actually mislead scholars when working on ancient corporeal understanding.⁴¹

³⁸ J. C. Chrisler and I. Johnston-Robledo, eds., *Woman's Embodied Self: Feminist Perspectives on Identity and Image*. (Washington: American Psychological Association, 2018), 4.

³⁹ Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret M. Lock, "The Mindful Body: A Prolegomenon to Future Work in Medical Anthropology," *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, New Series, 1 (1987), 7.

⁴⁰ Jennifer Glancy. *Corporeal Knowledge: Early Christian Bodies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 14.

⁴¹ She highlights the work anthropologists have done to draw our attention to this fact arguing that it is “insufficiently rigorous” to assume as biological facts certain things we *think* we know about the human, and particularly the female body. For example, she notes that in the twenty first century, we believe it is normal, indeed a biological fact for a post-pubescent woman to menstruate every month, it is a ‘biological given’, natural, spontaneous and part of being a woman. However, she cites a number of anthropological studies from both contemporary non-Western and past societies which might lead us to the conclusion that this may not be the case in all societies. This she argues, could then alter our understanding of historical texts that we are investigating (Helen King, *Hippocrates' Woman: Reading the Female Body in Ancient Greece* (London: Routledge, 2014), 4-5). Michael Worton gives a relevant example, describing the notion of the primacy of the individual, he contends that this is not a universally accepted notion, but is essentially a modern, Western notion. He reminds us that there are many societies in which the individual is seen rather as a social being whose motives as well as actions are determined collectively by the community and through cultural tradition. Failure to situate these understandings of the body can lead to misunderstandings, he argues that this can particularly be the case for issues of gender which is constructed differently according to local conditions and traditions of sexuality which are frequently implicated in the social structures of control, management and even oppression. (Michael Worton, “Introduction,” in *National Healths: Gender, Sexuality and Health in a Cross-Cultural Context*, eds. Michael Worton and Nana Wilson-Tagoe (London: UCL Press, 2004), 1.

I begin, in this first chapter therefore to consider how the body was represented in ancient literature, focusing on ancient myth and medical literature.⁴² I will consider evidence which illustrates Greco-Roman notions about the nature and construction of the female body and how this manifested itself in the literature of the time, considering what this can tell us about how women's bodies were conceived and understood.⁴³ On a cautionary note, these sources, like most of the extant sources we possess for the ancient world, were written by elite men for other elite men— they therefore describe elite-male viewpoints: simply, they tell us what elite males thought about women's bodies.⁴⁴ However, by examining the way in which female bodies are reflected in ancient myth and medical literature, it is possible to reconstruct ideologies of gender; the assumptions, theories and understandings of which all participate in the formation of the categories of men and women in the Roman Empire and therefore this literature can provide a window into wider cultural understandings, the construction of categories of gender in the ancient world and allows us to begin to read the ancient female body.⁴⁵

⁴² Rebecca Flemming argues that medical texts had a wide readership, certainly "not ignored by wider society, or restricted in their readership to a handful of professionals....The concepts and understandings articulated within them circulated widely among the educated elite, who were active participants in medical discourse in a range of ways." Rebecca Flemming, *Medicine and the Making of Roman Women: Gender, Nature and Authority from Celsus to Galen*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 78.

⁴³ "Medicine is a site of social negotiation, where men and women may meet and interact, both with each other and among themselves...the making of medicine is thus inevitably and multiply bound up with the making of gender." Flemming, *Medicine and the Making of Roman Women*, 25.

⁴⁴ Following the work of such scholars as Elizabeth Clark, many interested in women's history have acknowledged that we have very little direct access to female perspectives in the ancient world, indeed, the female voice is often elusive (Elizabeth A. Clark, "The Lady Vanishes: Dilemmas of a Feminist Historian after the "Linguistic Turn"." *Church History* 67 (1998): 1-31). On women writers in antiquity see Laurie J. Churchill, Phyllis R. Brown, and Jane E. Jeffrey, eds., *Women Writing Latin: From Roman Antiquity to Early Modern Europe* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Ellen Greene, ed., *Women Poets in Ancient Greece and Rome* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005); I.M. Plant, ed., *Women Writers of Ancient Greece and Rome: An Anthology* (London: Equinox Publishing, 2004).

⁴⁵ My examples are not exhaustive and given the nature of this project cannot cover all diversity of thought, geographic differences or delve into aspects of social status. For more in depth studies see Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); Gillian Cloke, *This Female Man of God: Women and Spiritual Power in the Patristic Age, AD 350-450* (London: Routledge, 1995); L. Stephanie Cobb, *Dying to Be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian*

Ancient Myth

Narrative theorists have identified stories as a primary way that societies construct realities, and as complex mechanisms which help people make sense of the world around them. Stories from the ancient world can therefore provide a window through which we catch glimpses of how ancient writers perceived the world around them and made sense of what they saw. According to Sarah Pomeroy, an investigation of classical mythology, “how myths arose and of their connection to external and psychological realities is an essential prelude to the study of the history of women, for the myths of the past molded the attitudes of successive, more sophisticated generations and preserved the continuity of the social order.”⁴⁶ I begin this study therefore with a brief look at ancient mythology in order to begin to see how women and their bodies were perceived in the ancient world. Broadly, what we find in these ancient mythological stories is a negativity, even a hostility at times towards women. The pervasive nature of this representation would suggest that the inherent misogyny present in these stories would not have been perpetuated and indeed effective if it did not reflect an understanding of gendered relationships and understanding of women already present in the wider society.⁴⁷ Due to restraints of space, I limit the study

Martyr Texts (New York, Columbia University Press, 2008); Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride*; Lesley Dean-Jones, *Women's Bodies in Classical Greek Science* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994); Flemming, *Medicine and the Making of Roman Women*; Glancy, *Corporal Knowledge*; King, *Hippocrates' Woman*; Meghan R. Henning, *Disability, and the Invention of Damned Bodies in Early Christian Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021).

⁴⁶ Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 1.

⁴⁷ On the study of women in the classical world see Ronnie Ancona and Georgia Tsouvala, eds., *New Directions in the Study of Women in the Greco-Roman World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021). Jane Cahill concludes that “The stories that we call Greek myth are men’s stories. There is no doubt about this. Their substance is the stuff of men’s lives and fantasies – victory in war, glorious death on the battlefield, heroic enterprise, the slaying of monsters, the fathering of sons (Jane, Cahill, *Her Kind: Stories of Women from Greek Mythology* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 1995), 7.)

of ancient myth here to a single figure, that of Pandora, the first woman, as this was a popular, well-known myth.⁴⁸

The ancient Greek poet, Hesiod, writing in the seventh or eighth century BCE narrates the creation of women in two narratives, *Theogony* and *Works and Days*.⁴⁹ In Hesiod's accounts, man exists first and Pandora, the first woman, is created not from or for man, but formed from earth and given as a "gift" to man as punishment by the gods. In the story, Zeus is deceived by Prometheus, and in retaliation, Zeus enacts a plan to bring sorrow to mankind, declaring that he will give mankind a gift that will be a "great grief" for all men to come.⁵⁰ Zeus commands Hephaestus to mix water with earth, to "make a beautiful, lovely form of a maiden similar in her face to the immortal goddesses" (Hesiod, *Op.* 59-64 [Most, LCL]). She is taught needlework and weaving and is adorned with spring flowers and silvery clothing by the goddess Athena.⁵¹ However, despite her outward beauty, this is all a deception, she is given a deceitful nature and shameful mind. Outwardly she appears harmless, she is charming and beautiful, but she is a "beautiful evil" (Hesiod, *Theog.* 585 [Most, LCL]). Zeus sends Pandora to Prometheus' brother Epimetheus as a gift.⁵² But then, "The woman removed the great lid from the storage jar with her hands and scattered all its

⁴⁸ Looking to the myth of Pandora may appear unusual due to the chronological distance between the sources I will examine in this study. However, as scholars such as Helen King have recognised, Greek medicine (which will be considered in subsequent sections of this chapter) should be analysed within its wider cultural context. Further, the Hippocratic notion that womens' bodies were considerably different to those of men and therefore required a separate branch of medicine, a debate that continued into the first century CE., according to King, "may be seen as the logical consequence of Hesiod's programmatic account of the descendants of Pandora, the first woman, as a separate 'race.'" (King, *Hippocrates' Woman*, 23).

⁴⁹ Hesiod, *Theog.* 561-612 and Hesiod, *Op.* 47-105. Pomeroy suggests that Hesiod's view of humankind was probably consistent with that of the larger population more broadly and so *Theogony* became the benchmark text on evolution of divine beings and the creation of humankind. (Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves*, 1-2).

⁵⁰ Hes., *Op.* 47-68 and Hes., *Theog.* 561-584.

⁵¹ Hes., *Op.* 59-68, Hes., *Theog.* 573-580.

⁵² Hes., *Op.* 90-93.

contents abroad—she wrought baneful evils for human beings,” (Hesiod, *Op.* 93-95 [Most, LCL]) unleashing further evils, miseries and sickness on mankind so that the earth and the seas themselves were full of evils. Hesiod explains that previously mankind had lived apart from evil, there was no deadly disease, nor did man have to toil endlessly, it is Pandora who has unleashed these evils on mankind. Although Pandora is the first woman, Hesiod emphasises that all women are descended from her and describes women as “The deadly race and tribe of women, a great woe for mortals, dwelling with men” (Hes., *Theog.* 590-593 [Most, LCL]).

Pandora, and therefore all women, is physically different to man, beautiful and charming, and necessary for reproduction, but at the same time, a trap and an illusion that must be kept a close watch on and controlled by man lest she bring ruin to society. Pandora was the first woman and therefore a prototype which justified and reinforced female inferiority and highlighted a need for women to be carefully watched and controlled, a warning to men about the danger inherent in women and their bodies.⁵³ In Helen King’s analysis of this story, the trick played on Epimetheus, the “jar” which is opened refers to Pandora herself, more specifically, her womb.⁵⁴ King argues that by opening her womb, her “bitch-mind” is exposed and she can be seen as greedy for all things that Greek society claims belong to her husband, including her womb and sexuality.⁵⁵ This ancient myth also

⁵³ The female characters in Greek myth are defined in terms of men, they are wives, mothers, sexual objects or virgins. Cahill claims that “most of them are bad or unusual women, there is Medea who kills her children, there is Clytemnestra who, though married to the richest king in Greece, commits both adultery and murder, there is Thetis who puts her babies on the fire; there is Jocasta who marries her own son. Side by side with the vicious killers are the mad women and the hapless suicides.” (Cahill, *Her Kind*, 7.)

For a more detailed discussion of women’s bodies in the works of Hesiod, see King, *Hippocrates’ Woman*, 23-27; Alicia Myers, *Blessed Among Women?: Mothers and Motherhood in the New Testament*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 24-26.

⁵⁴ King, *Hippocrates’ Woman*, 24-25.

⁵⁵ King, *Hippocrates’ Woman*, 24.

stresses the fundamental differences between the sexes, they are physically different, created in different ways and segregated in their very nature.

Greco-Roman Medical Writing

Greco-Roman medical writing depicts similar ideas reflected in discussions of anatomy and physiology. Hundreds of centuries after Hesiod wrote the story of Pandora, medical writers continued to argue about the fundamental differences between male and female bodies. Writing in the second century CE, Soranus of Ephesus refers to contemporary debates concerning whether women had “conditions particularly their own” that warranted specific medical treatments.⁵⁶ This debate centred on the somatic nature of male and female bodies. Was the female body so profoundly different to that of the male body that women needed a separate branch of medicine, and separate treatments? These debates suggest that there were diverging views on sexual differentiation, and therefore this is an important place to start to understand how ancient medical writers understood the female body. Medical discourse in the Roman period was heavily influenced by the work of physicians and philosophers from the Classical Greek and Hellenistic eras. Roman physicians considered themselves part of a tradition that extended back to Hippocrates and their work constantly refers back to, adapts and reshapes the traditions and assumptions that these earlier writers had proposed. In this section despite covering a great chronological distance, it makes sense therefore to consider the works of physicians from

⁵⁶ Soranus, *Gynaecology* III.1-5 (Temkin).

the Greco-Roman tradition to map out some key features of their understandings of women's bodies.⁵⁷

The Hippocratic corpus, is a collection of treatises, monographs, case histories, and aphorisms written between the fifth and fourth-century BCE, collected together around the second or third century BCE in Alexandria.⁵⁸ A significant amount of the corpus relates to issues concerning women in part because of their perceived understanding of the different nature of male and female bodies.⁵⁹ For the Hippocratic authors, women were physiologically different to men on fundamental aspects such as their absorption of moisture and the nature of their flesh. Further, when they became ill, women's reproductive systems were frequently cited as the cause of illness and therefore they needed different treatments to men and their own specialised branch of medicine. This was important for the Hippocratic writers, in fact, women were at serious risk of harm should they be treated in the same way as men.

Furthermore, physicians too may err in not inquiring carefully about a disease's cause, and in treating them like diseases in men: indeed, I have seen many women perish in such cases. Rather you must question a patient immediately and in detail about the cause; for there is a great difference in the treatment of women's diseases and those of men." (Hippoc., *De morbis mulierum* I.62 [Potter])

⁵⁷ Soranus himself argued that women experience some conditions namely conception, parturition and lactation that needed separate consideration, otherwise they suffered from the same diseases as men and therefore did not need their own branch of medicine. For his overview on these debates see Soranus, *Gynaecology* III.1-5 (Temkin).

⁵⁸ Hippocrates was a fifth-century physician linked to the island of Cos. Through analysis of style and anatomical knowledge in the texts, scholars generally acknowledge that the corpus was written by multiple authors in different geographical locations over a wide time scale. Much of the corpus can be dated to the second half of the fifth century BC and the first half of the fourth and it is impossible to know which, if any of the texts was written by Hippocrates himself. Despite these differences there are some general patterns of thought which can be seen throughout the corpus, and which prove an invaluable source for understanding Greek views of women's bodies. For an in-depth study of the work of the Hippocratics see King, *Hippocrates' Woman* and Vivian Nutton, *Ancient Medicine* (London: Routledge, 2013).

⁵⁹ Obstetric and gynaecological treatise form a significant part of the Hippocratic corpus and deal with topics which include conception, intercourse, menstruation and childbirth.

Lesley Dean-Jones argues that as the Classical Greeks did not undertake human dissection, it is reasonable to assume that they would focus on external observations which confirmed their cultural understandings of women's bodies.⁶⁰ Dean-Jones describes menstruation as the "linchpin" of both Hippocratic and Aristotelian theories on how women differed from men, she contends therefore that in Classical Greece, women's bodies were "defined significantly in terms of their blood-hydraulics."⁶¹ Menstruation, which was an externally visible difference between male and female bodies was of primary importance in making sense of female physiology.

For the Hippocratics, the human body was essentially a "fluid entity", with women's bodies being wet and spongy compared to men's harder and drier bodies.⁶² They believed that any excess of food was turned into blood, and there could therefore be a surplus of blood.⁶³ Men worked hard and used up their surplus, women however, due to their less active lifestyle and loose, spongy, porous flesh, were unable to use up this surplus and therefore expelled it as menstrual blood. The Hippocratic text *Diseases of Women* explains that

A woman is more porous and softer than a man; this being so, a woman's body draws what is being exhaled from her cavity more quickly and in a greater amount than does a man's... A man, having solider flesh than a woman, will never overfill

⁶⁰ Lesley Dean-Jones, "Menstrual Bleeding according to the Hippocratics and Aristotle" *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 119 (1989): 177-191.; Lesley Ann Dean-Jones, *Women's Bodies in Classical Greek Science* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), 54-55.

⁶¹ Dean-Jones, *Women's Bodies*, 225. Alicia Myers argues that the uterus is the key for defining women in the ancient world. It is the "collection point" for excess blood, and responsible, in the Hippocratic texts, for all "diseases of women" due to its propensity to move from its usual position. It was the key differentiating anatomical feature, the means women gave birth and therefore achieved full womanhood, and therefore, was of central importance for Greco-Roman medical writers' constructions of female physiology. (Myers, *Blessed Among Women*, 31, 24.

⁶² See Hippoc., *Nat. Puer.*; Flemming, *Medicine and the Making of Roman Women*, 95; Dean-Jones, *Women's Bodies*, 55-60.

⁶³ Flemming notes that "Blood was universally conceived of as the main intermediate stage in the transformation of food to flesh" Flemming, *Medicine and the Making of Roman Women*, 98.

with so much blood that, unless some of it is discharged each month, he feels pain, and besides he takes in only as much (sc. blood) as is necessary for the nourishment of his body, and his body—lacking softness as it does—is never overstretched or heated by fullness as a woman's is. A great amount of this is also due in a man to his exerting himself physically more than a woman. (Hippoc., *De morbis mulierum* I.1 [Potter])

The female body as depicted in this passage is already problematic due to an excess of blood which needed to be expelled as menstrual blood. The Hippocratics believed that imbalance of fluid in the body demonstrated itself externally as illness, therefore menstrual blood, if not expelled in the correct amount, consistency and frequency could become problematic and could lead to illness and even death.

For the Greek philosopher Aristotle (b.384 BCE), not only fluid, but also heat defined women's inferior bodies.⁶⁴ Aristotle, agreed with the notion of women having an excess of blood, but for him, menstruation was an external manifestation of a woman's lack of heat. For men, the residue of blood underwent a process of heating called concoction, turning it into semen. Women, were unable to perform this final concoction due to their colder nature, her seminal residue therefore remained blood-like and needed to be expelled.⁶⁵ The female was seen as passive in nature and therefore, unable to concoct blood into semen like men, their only contribution therefore to the generation of children was the contribution of matter.

⁶⁴ The existence of a broad spectrum of Aristotle's writings, his thought and ideologies enables us to explicitly observe a teleological nature to his work in which his theories about the world and society impacted on his understanding of biology and allowed him to explain the functions of living creatures and their bodies. For example, in the *Politics* in which he states "Also, as between the sexes, the male is by nature superior and the female inferior, the male ruler and the female subject. And the same must also necessarily apply in the case of mankind generally." (Arist., *Pol.* 1.1254b13-14.)

⁶⁵ Arist., *Gen. an.* 726b32-727a10; 738a35-37.

Due to a lack of heat in the female body, women were also unable to complete the process of externalising their reproductive organs.⁶⁶ Women were therefore considered to be

An infertile male; the female, in fact, is female on account of inability of a sort, it lacks the power to concoct semen out of the final state of the nourishment (this is either blood, or its counterpart in bloodless animals) because of the coldness of its nature. Thus, just as lack of concoction produces in the bowels diarrhoea, so in the blood-vessels it produces discharges of blood of various sorts, and especially the menstrual discharge (which has to be classed as a discharge of blood, though it is a natural discharge...). (Arist., *Gen. an.* 1.728a19-28 [A. L. Peck]).

Women, for Aristotle, were simply “deformed men,” unable to reach masculine perfection.⁶⁷ As Helen King notes, instead of male and female bodies, there was only “the” body, the normal human form was male, and women were inferior beings whose lack of heat always put them at a disadvantage.⁶⁸

Practising medicine in Rome in the later second century CE, the physician Galen also understood the human body in terms of fluids, in particular the humours. In Galen’s fluid conscious understanding of the body, menstruation was a way that nature compensated for women’s soft, weak bodies. He wrote

Does she [nature] not evacuate all women every month by pouring forth the surfeit of the blood? For it is necessary, I think that the female genus, who stays at home, neither leading a life of hard work nor coming into contact with direct sunlight

⁶⁶ Arist., *Gen. an.*, 2.737a28-30.

⁶⁷ Arist., *Gen. an.*, 1.728a19-28; 2.737a28-304.775a14-16.

⁶⁸ Arist., *Gen. an.*, 726b32-727a10. Robert Mayhew argues against the common charge that Aristotle’s views on women were ideologically based, instead arguing that they are rather based around science, philosophy and empirical observation. He notes that the notion of women as mutilated males could be understood as being ideologically framed, but instead looks to a more nuanced understanding of the statement. Mayhew contends that through observations of eunuchs and castrated animals, Aristotle observed that women were similar to castrated males, “females are like mutilated males” and for Aristotle, this analogy accounted for the observable differences of men and women. Mayhew therefore concludes that there is no evidence that Aristotle’s view of women as mutilated comes from a pre-existing explicit or implicit ideological view of women (Robert Mayhew, *The Female in Aristotle’s Biology: Reason or Rationalization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004) 66.)

should have a natural remedy – the evacuation of the excess” (Galen, *Ven. Sect. Er.* 5 [Flemming]).

Galen believed women to have the same genitals as men except theirs are inside the body and not outside it.⁶⁹ He attributed the cause of this “mutation” and imperfection to women’s lack of heat,

Now just as mankind is the most perfect of all animals, so within mankind the man is more perfect than the woman, and the reason for the perfection is his excess of heat, for heat is Nature’s primary instrument. Hence in those animals that have less of it, her workmanship is necessarily more imperfect, and so it is no wonder that the female is less perfect than the male, by as much as she is colder than he. (Galen, *On the Usefulness of Parts of the Body*, 14 [May]).

There was a good reason however for this imperfection, after all, “it is necessary for there to be a female too,” her inverted reproductive organs were optimally constructed to receive and retain male semen and to be able to nourish a foetus.⁷⁰ Women were imperfect versions of men, whose genitalia had failed to emerge externally due to her colder body and for Galen, the only way to make sense of this was to attribute this imperfection to reproduction and childbearing.⁷¹

In these examples, having a womb and menstruating was key for understanding women’s bodies, both while they were well and when they were not. Their excess of blood, in Aristotle’s opinion brought no significant benefit to women and was only useful for

⁶⁹ Galen, *On the Usefulness of Parts of the Body*, 14.5-6 [trans. May]: “Think first, please, of the man’s [external genitalia] turned in and extending inward between the rectum and the bladder. If this should happen, the scrotum would necessarily take the place of the uterus with the testes lying outside, next to it on either side....Think too, please, of.....the uterus turned outward and projecting. Would not the testes [ovaries] then necessarily be inside it? Would it not contain them like a scrotum?”

⁷⁰ Galen, *Usefulness* 14.6.

⁷¹ “For women are similar to men to the extent that they too are rational animals, that is, capable of acquiring knowledge; but to the extent that the genus of men is stronger and superior in every activity and learning, and women are weaker and inferior, in this they are unlike; and again, women are opposite [to men] in so far as they are female and, on account of this, adapted for childbearing...so it is correct to say that in one respect women are similar to men, in another they are opposite.” (Galen. *On the Doctrines of Hippocrates and Plato*, 9.3.25-26 [trans. Flemming, *Medicine and the Making of Roman Women*, 358]).

reproduction, whilst the Hippocratics concluded that menstruation and pregnancy were necessary for female health and any delay in first menses or regularity of bleeding could be harmful. Soranus acknowledged that menstruation, pregnancy and lactation could have a negative effect on women's bodies as they could rob the body of much needed nourishment but argued that women will (ie. should) continue to marry and have children as that is useful for society, even if harmful to their health.⁷² Indeed, both the Hippocratic writers and Galen also argued that pregnancy or at least regular sex, was an essential part of maintaining female health, ensuring that the uterus was kept moist and in place.⁷³ For this reason, it was determined that young girls probably around twelve to fourteen should be married and have intercourse as soon as possible. Menstruation was significant for a medical understanding of female bodies, as it was for society as a whole, with the onset of menarche signifying a girl's move into the role that she was to play in society, that of a woman, a child-bearer. Menstruation therefore was an external marker of womanhood, medically it marked the difference between male and female bodies, and socially it signified a girl was ready to play her full part in society.

This brief overview of ancient medical thinking about the female body, like the story of Pandora emphasises if not always a negative attitude towards women, a misogynistic attitude in which the male body is the ideal. Inherent in these observations is the understanding that the male body was the perfect body. Perfection was male, and meant

⁷² Soranus *Gyn.* I.27-35 (Temkin). Soranus presents various arguments concerning whether permanent virginity is healthy. He concludes that in his opinion, for both men and women, permanent virginity is the healthier option, however, intercourse, and the continuity and succession of living beings seems to be the general principle of nature (Soranus, *Gyn.* I.32 [Temkin]). He says "Indeed, both menstruation and pregnancy are useful for the propagation of men, but certainly not healthful for the childbearer" (Soranus, *Gyn.* I.42 [Temkin]).

⁷³ For discussions on the ancient concept of the wandering womb, see Flemming, *Medicine and the Making of Roman Women*, 117; Anna Rebecca Solevag, "Hysterical Women? Gender and Disability in Early Christian Narrative." in *Disability in Antiquity*. Christian Laes ed. (London: Routledge, 2017), 322.

having external reproductive organs, anything else was viewed as incomplete or deformed, male was the standard and anything else was substandard.⁷⁴ It is possible to note through the myth of Pandora's creation, and the medical literature discussed here, the interweaving of societal, cultural, medical understandings of male and female bodies.⁷⁵ What is clear, is a recurring theme of female subordination. The female body was thought to be precarious, at risk of serious illness due to an excess of blood, it was cold, soft, moist and porous whilst men's bodies were characterised as hot, hard, dry and impervious. Women differed from men and that difference was always negative, they remained deficient, needing careful, constant monitoring and control and therefore male superiority was a given and whilst women were necessary for reproductive reasons, reproduction took priority over a women's own health.⁷⁶ Ancient physicians began their work with this inherent understanding and any deviation from male normativity only served to reinforce this concept. This is demonstrated most notably in their understanding of the distinctive experiences of women's bodies: of menstruation, pregnancy, parturition and lactation which rather than being celebrated as unique demonstrations of the power of the female body were instead relegated to further proof of women's weakness and inferiority. Defining women's bodies as loose, spongy, porous and cold or as unformed, mutations were value judgements which enabled physicians to create biological constructs which explained the

⁷⁴ He gives an analogy of a mole to clarify his theory, explaining that some animals have no eyes and therefore cannot see like shellfish, others like the mole have well-formed eyes, but cannot see and still other animals are born with eyes and with full sight, and these animals are complete and perfect (with regards to vision). Structurally, a mole's eyes are the same as any other animals, but they do not open, "nor do they project, but are left there imperfect", so too the reproductive organs of a woman, they are structurally the same as men's, but they have not "opened" and she therefore remains imperfect. (Galen, *On the Usefulness of the Parts of the Body* 2.629, [Tallmadge May]).

⁷⁵ Hesiod's myth concerning the creation of women demonstrates clearly how these beliefs about women's bodies were embedded in the wider culture.

⁷⁶ As Flemming notes, "It may only be Galen who cites Aristotle's statement that 'the female is less perfect than the male' as his founding premises; but everybody operated with this as a basic presupposition." Flemming, *Medicine and the Making of Roman Women*, 359.

observable phenomenon of menstruation whilst also colluding with the cultural understanding of women's deficiency and subordination.

Having provided an overview of how women's bodies were perceived in the ancient world and attempted to glean a broader cultural understanding of the female body, we turn now to women's bodies in early Christian literature. I begin with the body of Mary and her role in the birth of Jesus as it is possible to see how these broader cultural assumptions of female corporeality coalesce in early Christian writing before moving on to undertake a wider survey of representations of the suffering female body in early Christian literature. I am interested in exploring these representations to consider how we can understand the woman in pain; the suffering female body and specifically, what Christian interpretations and meanings were attributed to them. In this next part of the introductory overview, I will provide a brief survey of Christian texts which feature the suffering female body, divided into two categories; those who suffered and lived and those who suffered and died.

Christian Bodies

Mary

As previously discussed, in the ancient world, a woman's uterus became the key to understanding her as a physical being; her purpose for being in the world, the reason she was different to men, the source of her problems and the means to ensuring her physical health. The uterus-holding, mutilated male needed explanation and the only explanation was that the primary function of woman was to give birth. Motherhood became a means of identifying, controlling and subjecting women and as Alicia Myers notes, "aligns a woman's

uterus with her identity.”⁷⁷ Motherhood determined the “key locus of female value,” whilst effectively demonstrating women’s adherence to state legislation as well as to the maternal telos which was identified for them.⁷⁸ The danger and pain associated with childbirth, however, was acknowledged. In Euripides’ *Medea*, Medea states that “Men say that we live a life free from danger at home while they fight with the spear. How wrong they are! I would rather stand three times with a shield in battle than give birth once” (Euripides, *Medea* 248-251 [Kovacs]). Medical authors too discuss the violence of childbirth contending that birth occurred when the foetus no longer received an adequate supply of nourishment from the womb and violently breaks free causing pain to the mother, described in a second century funerary inscription as “the unstoppable fury of the newborn infant.”⁷⁹ In the Hebrew Bible, Eve the first woman, is also the first women to give birth. Her motherhood has however been indelibly marked by the God’s proclamation that “I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children.”⁸⁰ In the Biblical account, though, she is also celebrated as “the mother of all living things”, Holly Morse notes that it is late interpretations of these phrases that come to cast more negative connotations to her

⁷⁷ Myers, *Blessed Among Women*, 30.

⁷⁸ The Roman emperor Augustus (27 B.C.E.-14 C.E.) perceived a decline in moral standards as a result of the failure of the upper classes to marry and have children. The *Lex Papia Poppaea* of 18 B.C.E and *Lex Iulia* in 9 C.E introduced a range of incentives to encourage the upper classes to marry and have children through such measures as increased financial advantages and more rapid promotion through the administrative and political ranks and penalties for those who failed to comply. The production of children was therefore of benefit whether morally or financially for the benefit of the state. See Suzanne Dixon, *The Roman Family* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1992), 79 and Anna Rebecca Solevåg, *Birthing Salvation: Gender and Class in Early Christian Childbearing Discourse* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 55-56; Myers, *Blessed Among Women*, 109.

⁷⁹ The analogy of a chick hatching out of an egg is used in the *Nature of the Child* to explain why “a foetus is born when its nourishment runs out” (Hippocrates, *Nat. puer.* 19 [Potter]). “[Birth] comes about when the infant tears some of the internal membranes with its hands and feet by moving and thrashing about. And when one is torn, the power of the remaining ones is weakened. And when the membranes are torn, the foetus is freed from its bond and goes out in a rush; for no longer is there any strength once the membranes fail and have been carried away, nor does the womb have the power to restrain the child.” (Hippocrates, *Nat. puer.* 19 [Potter]).

⁸⁰ Genesis 3:16. See Holly Morse, *Encountering Eve's Afterlives: A New Reception Critical Approach to Genesis 2-4* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020) 129-131 for discussion on the meaning of the suffering

motherhood and to associate her pain in childbearing with the physical pain of menstruation and labour.⁸¹

Early Christian writers began to draw connections between Mary's virginity and the pre-Fall virginity of Eve as well as their connections with childbirth and maternity to form a typological association. The earliest textual evidence of the Eve-Mary typology is found in the works of Justin Martyr (writing c. 135 CE.) and Irenaeus of Lyons (d. c.202). Paralleling Eve with Mary, Justin highlighted the virginal status of both, but contrasted Eve's disobedience to God with Mary's obedience, emphasising that "For Eve, who was a virgin and undefiled, having conceived the word of the serpent, brought forth disobedience and death" (Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 100 [trans. Roberts and Donaldson, *ANF*: 1: 249]). However, through Mary's faithfulness and obedience, she gave birth to the Son of God who reversed the effects of the Fall and so would deliver humankind from death.⁸² Irenaeus makes a similar connection, Eve, "having become disobedient, was made the cause of death, both for herself and to the entire human race." (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.22.4 [trans. Roberts and Donaldson, *ANF* 1: 455].) In contrast, Mary was also a virgin, yet it was through her obedience that she was made "the cause of salvation both to herself and the whole human race." (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.22.4 [trans. Roberts and Donaldson, *ANF* 1: 455].) He elaborates further, stating that there is a link therefore from Mary back to Eve, "the knot of Eve's disobedience was loosened through the obedience of Mary. For what the

⁸¹ Morse, *Encountering Eve's Afterlives*, 138. For a detailed overview of the reception of this passage see Morse, *Encountering Eve's Afterlives* and Jaques van Ruiten, "Eve's Pain in Childbearing? Interpretations of Gen 3: 16a in Biblical and Early Jewish Texts," in *Eve's Children: The Biblical Stories Retold and Interpreted in Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Gerard P. Luttikhuisen (Leiden, Brill, 2003), 3-26.

⁸² Justin Martyr, *Dial.* 100. See also Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.21-22.

virgin Eve bound through unbelief, this the Virgin Mary loosened through faith.” (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.22.4 [trans. Roberts and Donaldson, *ANF* 1: 455].)

This typology also informed and was employed in early discussions around the understanding of Christ’s body. In the first and second centuries, Christians began to consider the theological implications in understanding Christ’s body. As a result, the body of Mary as his mother became the object of scrutinization, and Christians began to ponder specifically on her pregnant and postpartum body. The question of whether Mary felt pain during the birth of Jesus began to develop during the second century.⁸³ In the late second-century apocryphal *Protevangelium of James*, Mary gives birth so quickly, that she almost does not have chance to feel any pain.⁸⁴ The second century *Odes of Solomon*, a source of liturgical texts, hymns and poems, also explicitly describes Mary as birthing without pain. Susan Ashbrook Harvey writes, “*Odes of Solomon* 19, depending on how it is dated, is not only one of our earliest references to the virgin birth, but specifically one of the earliest to highlight the significance of painlessness in Mary’s birth of Jesus (the undoing of Eve’s

⁸³ There are other examples of painless birth in ancient Jewish writings from the first and second centuries. Notably 2 Baruch and Josephus’ *Jewish Antiquities*. For an in-depth discussion see Jennifer A. Glancy, *Corporal Knowledge: Early Christian Bodies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 91-93. Glancy contends that Mary’s painless delivery is frequently attributed to the Eve-Mary typology and should be read in context to Eve’s sentence to labour pains, yet she challenges this assumption, contending that the authors of these texts are more concerned with other issues such as her virginity, whether Mary’s hymen remains intact or whether the delivery was messy rather than whether she suffered labour pains.

⁸⁴ The *Protevangelium* is one of the earliest texts to elaborate on the nativity in the canonical gospels. For further information on dating, reception and manuscripts see J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 49-57. Elliott states that a key feature of this text concerns Mary’s virginity and that the author wished to stress the virginal conception, but also that Mary retained her virginity despite the process of birth. Alicia Myers notes that as pain in childbirth is associated with the sexual sins of Eve, the possibility that Mary could give birth without pain could also highlight a moral superiority and righteousness (Myers, *Blessed Among Women*, 128). On painless birth in Jewish traditions see Myers, *Blessed Among Women*, 128.

punishment from Gen. 3:16).⁸⁵ In contrast, however, the second century Carthaginian theologian, Tertullian depicts Mary's body birthing in painful and messy glory.⁸⁶

Tertullian's *De Carne Christi* was written in response to opponents who denied the physicality of Jesus' body, and who argued that Jesus only appeared to have a real, human body.⁸⁷ Tertullian's prime motive was to demonstrate the humanity of Jesus, that Christ's flesh was real and that he possessed an earthly, fleshy body. To achieve this he stresses in graphic detail the realities of a very real and physical human birth which included the physical pain of Mary during labour. Tertullian's concern is not Mary's body *per se*, but rather her suffering body is a vehicle through which Tertullian established Christ's humanity.⁸⁸

For Tertullian, to demonstrate Christ's human nature, he must have been born in the same way as any other human, he states simply in his books *Against Marcion*, "He was flesh, He was born" ((Tertullian, *Adversus Marcion* 3.XI [trans. A. Menzies ANF 3: 330]). Tertullian states that for his opponent Marcion, the process of birth itself was so repellent that it was

⁸⁵ Susan Ashbrook Harvey, "On Mary's Voice: Gendered Words in Syriac Marian Tradition," in *The Cultural Turn in Late Ancient Studies: Gender, Asceticism and Historiography*, ed. Dale B. Martin and Patricia Cox Miller (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 82. For dating see M. Lattke, "Dating the 'Odes of Solomon,'" *Antichthon* 27 (1993), 45. For gender and the Odes of Solomon see Susan Ashbrook Harvey, "Feminine Imagery for the Divine: the Holy Spirit, the Odes of Solomon, and Early Syriac Tradition," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 37 (1993) 111-139.

⁸⁶ Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 3.11. See also Glancy, *Corporal Knowledge*, 121-126

⁸⁷ See David Wright "Tertullian," in *The Early Christian World*, ed. Philip F. Esler, (London: Routledge, 2000), 1027-1047. Tertullian introduces the three opponents; Marcion who denied both the nativity of Jesus and the reality of his flesh, Apelles who denied the nativity of Jesus but accepted the reality of his flesh, and Valentinus who accepted both the nativity of Jesus and the reality of his flesh, but only in a particular way (Geoffrey D. Dunn, "Mary's Virginité 'in Partu' and Tertullian's Anti-Docetism in 'De Carne Christi' Reconsidered," *JTS* 58 (2007): 467-484).

⁸⁸ Dunn argues that Tertullian's prime concern is to affirm the reality of Christ's human nature, and Mary is therefore merely a means of establishing that Christ was born of real human flesh at the nativity (Dunn, "Mary's Virginité," 469; 478).

inconceivable that Christ had been born in this way.⁸⁹ He repeats a similar argument in *On the Flesh of Christ* emphasising the incongruity for his opponents of Jesus being born, highlighting the messy, disgusting nature of birth.

Come now, beginning from the nativity itself, declaim against the uncleanness of the generative elements within the womb, the filthy concretion of fluid and blood, of the growth of the flesh for nine months long out of that very mire...Of course you are horrified also at the infant, which is shed into life with the embarrassments which accompany it from the womb. (Tertullian, *Carn. Chr.* IV [trans. A. Menzies, *ANF* 3:524]).

He emphasises that others see the foolishness of believing “In a God that has been born, and that of a virgin, and of a fleshly nature too, who wallowed in all the before-mentioned humiliations of nature” (Tertullian, *Carn. Chr.* IV [trans. A. Menzies, *ANF* 3:524]).

Tertullian defends the birth of Christ, arguing that it is his conception which makes him unique not his birth. Using ancient medical theories of embryology that suggested that conception comes about by the male contributing seed and *pneuma* and the female contributing the matter (ie. the menstrual blood), Tertullian states that

For it did not disavow the substance of the flesh when it denied His being “born of blood” but only the matter of the seed, which, as all know, is the warm blood as convected by ebullition into the *coagulum* of the woman’s blood....We thus understand that what is denied is the Lord’s birth after sexual intercourse (as is suggested by the phrase, “the will of man and of the flesh”), not *His nativity* from a woman’s womb. (Tertullian, *Carn. Chr.* XIX [trans. A. Menzies, *ANF* 3:538]).

For Tertullian, this disgusting process of “coagulation” of menstrual blood to create a foetus is essential to demonstrate the humanity of Christ. Jennifer Glancy notes that if Christ is in

⁸⁹ Tertullian writes “Come then, wind up your cavils against the most sacred and reverend works of nature; inveigh against all that you are; destroy the origin of flesh and life; call the womb a sewer of the illustrious animal—in other words, the manufactory for the production of man; dilate on the impure and shameful tortures of parturition, and then on the filthy, troublesome, contemptible issues of the puerperal labour itself!” (Tertullian, *Adversus Marcion* 3.XI [trans. A. Menzies *ANF* 3: 330]).

any way of human form, then for Tertullian, Jesus' humanity is dependent on this "curdling" alongside "his violent separation from the womb."⁹⁰

What interests us in this study is the physical pain of Mary during childbirth. For Tertullian, Mary's body does not differ from any other mothers in a sense, not only does she experience the pain of childbirth, but also of her own body being violently opened through childbirth. Tertullian embraced the idea of pain, repulsion and filth which Marcion rejected by the very fact of his denial of a real birth and human flesh, Marcion's Jesus

Was never delivered from a ten months' writhing in the womb; was never shed forth upon the ground, amidst the sudden pains of parturition, with the unclean issue which flows at such a time through the sewerage of the body...and with that primal wound which severs the child from her who bears him...nor afterwards did he ever wallow in his own uncleanness, in his mother's lap. (Tertullian, *Adversus Marcion* 4.XXI [trans. A. Menzies ANF 3: 382]).

Indeed, for Tertullian, Jesus' time in the womb was marked by pain and humiliation. The violence of the birth is so great that it "opened up" her body, transforming her from virgin to woman.⁹¹ Despite the salvation that Tertullian believed Jesus to bring, Mary's body must still give birth in pain and women will continue to bear the curse of Eve.⁹² For Tertullian it was important that Mary felt pain. By experiencing the pain and the violence of childbirth,

⁹⁰ Glancy, *Corporal Knowledge*, 118. "Tertullian understands Christ's humanity to require that Mary's puerperal experience was as messy as that of any other mother. He refuses to treat Mary's childbearing experience as distinctive from the childbearing experience of any other woman—except, he claims, that Mary's body is more deeply marked than other women's bodies by what he represents as the violence of childbearing." Glancy, *Corporal Knowledge*, 118.

⁹¹ *De Carne Christi* 23. Later Christian theology would assert that at conception and indeed afterwards, Mary would remain a virgin. Indeed, the *Protevangelium of James* asserts that a midwife called Salome tests the claim that Mary was a virgin by inserting her finger into Mary's postpartum vagina in order to test this notion (*Protevangelium of James* 20.) For Tertullian however, the loss of Mary's virginity through childbirth was central to his argument about the humanity of Christ. (Dunn, "Mary's Virginity," 467-84.)

⁹² "In pains and in anxieties dost thou bear (children), woman; and toward thine husband (is) thy inclination, and he lords it over thee.' And do you not know that you are (each) an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too. *You* are the devil's gateway: *you* are the unsealer of that (forbidden) tree: *you* are the first deserter of the divine law: *you* are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. *You* destroyed so easily God's image, man. On account of *your* desert—that is, death—even the Son of God had to die." Tertullian, *De Cultu faeminarum* 1.1 [A. Cleveland Coxe ANF 4:14]).

she suffered, sacrificing her body in direct comparison to the body of her son. Mary's suffering and the sacrifice of her body was essential for Jesus' humanity, just as his suffering was central for humanity itself. For Tertullian, Eve's actions led to ruin and destruction, but Mary's to salvation.⁹³ By linking her to Eve, Tertullian demonstrates how faith, and the sacrifice of a maternal body could have a redemptive quality and also how the maternal body could be used as a rhetorical and theological tool.

Felicitas

Tertullian's use of the maternal body in the context of his argument with Marcion according to Judith Perkins, re-values the maternal body. Perkins argues that this is also evident in the account of an enslaved woman called Felicitas in the *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis* (hereafter *Passio*) which "functions to enact the merit of even the culturally most material and squalid of bodies, the maternal body."⁹⁴ *The Passio* recounts the imprisonment, trial and execution of a group of Carthaginian martyrs (c202-204 CE).⁹⁵ Stephanie Cobb claims that with very few exceptions, the ideologies of early Christian martyr texts are "unconcerned with pain" and that martyr texts deliberately distanced their protagonists from pain by modelling impassibility and impassivity in response to the corporal suffering which is inflicted on them.⁹⁶ We will consider this in greater detail in the

⁹³ Tertullian, *De Carne Christi* 17.5. See also *De Carne* 17.3b-4 for Adam / Jesus typology.

⁹⁴ Judith Perkins, "The Rhetoric of the Maternal Body in the Passion of Perpetua" in *Mapping Gender in Ancient Religious Discourses*, eds. Todd Penner and Caroline Vander Stichele (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 317-325.

⁹⁵ For a discussion on the history of the title of the text see Jan N. Bremmer and Marco Formisano eds., *Perpetua's Passions: Multidisciplinary Approaches to the Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 2.

⁹⁶ L. Stephanie Cobb, *Divine Deliverance: Pain and Painlessness in Early Christian Martyr Texts* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017), 2.

subsequent section, but for now I will consider an example in which a future martyr *does* experience pain – the pain of childbirth.⁹⁷

Felicitas is described as a young, pregnant enslaved girl, one of a number of catechumens arrested in the early third century CE.⁹⁸ She and her co-prisoners are concerned that she will be unable to fight in the arena due to her pregnancy and may therefore suffer her fate later with common criminals.⁹⁹ In response, they pray for her and she immediately goes into premature labour: “And immediately after their prayer the birth pains came upon her. She suffered a great deal in her labour because of the natural difficulty of an eight month’s delivery.”¹⁰⁰ This episode features Felicitas birthing in agony, exposed on the floor of a prison cell with only the jeers of an unsympathetic guard to keep her company. After giving birth, her baby is taken from her, and with her breasts still leaking milk and postpartum lochial blood still dripping from her body, she is martyred. I wish to consider here why she is depicted as suffering so greatly, only to be martyred in the finale of the narrative.

Labouring in the eight month was considered particularly painful and dangerous for both mother and child, and the birth of a female child was also thought to be longer and

⁹⁷ I have included this example in the section on suffering and living, despite Felicitas dying at the end of the narrative. This is a deliberate choice as in the section of text that I am considering is one in which Felicitas suffers but this suffering does *not* lead to her death in that moment.

⁹⁸ *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* II.1 (Heffernan). See Jan N. Bremmer and Marco Formisano, eds., *Perpetua’s Passions: Multidisciplinary Approaches to the Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 36-37 on the social makeup of the group.

⁹⁹ *Passio* XV.2. It was legally forbidden to execute a pregnant woman and dying alone would have lessened the impact of her martyrdom.

¹⁰⁰ Bremmer notes that this quick response to prayer characterised supernatural responses that were contrary to expectation and therefore highlights the divine intervention at work here (Bremmer and Formisano, *Perpetua’s Passions*, 44).

more painful.¹⁰¹ Twice, we are told that Felicitas' is in her eighth month of pregnancy with a female baby underscoring the pain, suffering and danger that she faces at this moment.¹⁰² The guard who observes her labour taunts Felicitas, telling her that the pain she endures now will be nothing compared to what she will feel in the arena when faced with the wild beasts. Felicitas' response is her only direct speech in *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*, stating that "Now I alone suffer what I am suffering, but then there will be another inside me, who will suffer for me, because I am going to suffer for him" (*Passio* XV.5-6 [Heffernan]).¹⁰³ As previously mentioned, Cobb notes that in many early Christian martyr texts, authors go to great lengths to avoid associating the Christian body with pain.¹⁰⁴ What should we make therefore of this absolute insistence that Felicitas' body suffered, in fact it seems essential that the audience understand that she suffered not just normal labour pains, but instead a much heightened version.

Paul Middleton argues that for the author of this narrative, motherhood and martyrdom are incompatible and that Felicitas' pregnancy posed a direct threat to her ability to become a martyr as pregnant women were not allowed to be executed.¹⁰⁵ Therefore, having dealt with the "problem" of the pregnancy, Felicitas is able to fulfil her

¹⁰¹ The Hippocratic corpus reflects the idea that the eighth month was a critical time in pregnancy and therefore, that a baby born in the eighth month of pregnancy would not live and that it could also lead to maternal mortality. See Hippocrates, *Peri oktamênôn*; Aristotle, *Gen. an.* 4.4.772b9-11; Bremmer and Formisano, *Perpetua's Passions*, 44; Solevåg, *Birthing Salvation*, 73-74; Dean-Jones, *Women's Bodies*, 209-211;

¹⁰² *Passio* XV.1; XV.5; XV.7. Solevåg contends that Felicitas' labour echoes the punishment of Eve in childbirth (*Gen* 3.16) which may explain why she does not call on Jesus in labour, only in martyrdom. "Yet Felicitas proceeds from the suffering of childbirth to the suffering of martyrdom – both women thus overcome the devil as they are successful in their *sufferentia carnis*, their perseverance of the flesh." Solevåg, *Birthing Salvation*, 213.

¹⁰³ According to Bremmer, Felicitas' response demonstrates that martyrs interpreted their suffering in ways which made it both tolerable and meaningful. Bremmer and Formisano, *Perpetua's Passions*, 46.

¹⁰⁴ Cobb, *Divine Deliverance*, 2.

¹⁰⁵ *Passio*, XV.2.

true calling as martyr.¹⁰⁶ This is certainly true, but the heightened focus on pain in Felicitas' birth account suggests a more nuanced interpretation. Felicitas' suffering body demonstrates a mimetic quality. Having set the scene, the audience can imagine Felicitas experiencing the great and intense pains of her labour all alone where she is taunted by the guard. This scene is reminiscent of Jesus' crucifixion scene in the Gospel of Matthew in which he is mocked yet remains silent.¹⁰⁷ Felicitas also does not rise to the mocking of the guard, but suffers in the example of Christ who "When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly" (1 Peter 2:23). She simply acknowledges this, saying, "Now I alone suffer what I am suffering, but then there will be another inside me, who will suffer for me, because I am going to suffer for him" (*Passio* XV.5-6 [Heffernan]). In these words, she connects her own suffering, both in the childbearing scene and the martyrdom to follow with that of Christ.¹⁰⁸

In the final scenes of the narrative in which she is about to face the arena, Felicitas is described as "advancing from blood to blood, from the midwife to a net-bearing gladiator—now to be washed after childbirth in a second baptism" (*Passio* XVIII.3 [Heffernan]). It is *because* she endured the extreme pain of her labour that she was able to go from the midwife to the gladiator, the pain, and her endurance of that pain acts as a form of preparation or training for her forthcoming martyrdom. In the birthing account, as Cobb

¹⁰⁶ Paul Middleton, "'Suffer Little Children': Child Sacrifice, Martyrdom, and Identity Formation in Judaism and Christianity," *Journal of Religion and Violence* 4 (2016): 337-356 (349-350).

¹⁰⁷ Matthew 27:27-31; 27:39-43.

¹⁰⁸ See also Philippians 2:7-8. Candida Moss notes by the time the martyr acts were composed, suffering in imitation of Christ and the identification of personal suffering with the suffering of Christ were active practices advocated by writers and church leaders (Candida Moss, *The Other Christs: Imitating Jesus in Ancient Christian Ideologies of Martyrdom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) 19-20).

notes, the word the guard uses for pain, *dolor* is replaced with the verb *patior* which has more of a sense of endurance.¹⁰⁹ There is a sense of reciprocity here, that by enduring the heightened pain and suffering of childbirth, Christ will be with her when she will face more extreme suffering to come in the arena.¹¹⁰ Felicitas is depicted as a model of maternal endurance, forged through a difficult delivery of a premature female baby, her body has withstood this first test and will be able to endure future suffering as she will have Christ with her.¹¹¹

Felicitas' pain in childbearing and her leaky body in the arena are reminiscent of Tertullian's portrayal of Mary and point in two directions, the first is to highlight her femininity and second just as the body of Mary was used as a "site" on which to talk about theology, so too was the body of Felicitas. A key question to consider then is how and why would the body of an enslaved female be beneficial as a "site" to extrapolate the idea of suffering? Felicitas is presented in a particularly feminine way by foregrounding her pregnancy. In Greco-Roman terms, she is the lowest of the low, she is female *and* enslaved, both considered to be the epitome of weakness and passivity. The narrative demonstrates the benefits of suffering for even those whom society deemed the most low and humble, and that even these bodies can be exalted through the endurance of suffering. Virginia Burrus contends that Felicitas' body is "transparent", used as a site of meaning through

¹⁰⁹ Cobb, *Divine Deliverance*, 74. She therefore translates this passage as "I alone endure [*patior*] this; but then another will be in me who will endure [*patietur*] for me, because I also will be enduring [*passura*] for him." (XV.6). Felicitas therefore rejects "pain as a locus of meaning" because she is anticipating the divine analgesia that Christ's presence will bring.

¹¹⁰ This sense of enduring suffering, to gain God's favour can be found in 1 Peter 2:18-21 in which slaves are exhorted to passively endure physical suffering, cf 2 Corinthians 11:16-33.

¹¹¹ As a woman *and* as a slave, she embodies the suffering body. See discussion on Blandina for further elaboration on the body of the female slave.

which the reader sees “through the figure of the tortured, ‘birthing’ slave woman to the image of the suffering Christ within.”¹¹² Christ will suffer for Felicitas, but only *because* she endured, she suffered passively as a slave and as a woman should. In direct conflict with passages such as 1 Timothy 2:15, in the economy of salvation in this text, martyrdom supersedes childbearing. Yet it is precisely because of her pain in childbearing that Jesus will be with her, for Felicitas, she has indeed achieved salvation through childbearing. However, it is not childbearing in itself that has a soteriological aspect, but endurance of pain and suffering which is key.

Peter’s Daughter

Scholars have noted that the appearance of the suffering body in narrative is in direct contrast to other narratives written around the same time. Examining the Greek romances written around the first centuries (BCE. / CE.), Judith Perkins describes the protagonists enduring trials and tribulations, but they emerge unscathed, their bodies unmarked by their suffering.¹¹³ She notes that this “is not an anomaly in the representation of the early centuries A.D. That this was a cultural subject, a so-called ‘subjectivity,’ a particular historical self-understanding.”¹¹⁴ David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder observe this too in the canonical gospels in which through acts of miracle healing, bodies are restored to

¹¹² Virginia Burrus, “Torture and Travail: Producing the Christian Martyr,” in *A Feminist Companion to Patristic Literature*, ed Amy-Jill Levine with Maria Mayo Robbins (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 69.

¹¹³ For example Chariton’s *Chaereas and Callirhoe*, Xenophon’s *Ephesian Tale*, and Achilles Tatius’ *Leucippe and Clitopho*. See Perkins, *The Suffering Self*, 41-76. See also Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride*, 20-44.

¹¹⁴ Judith Perkins, *The Suffering Self*, 77.

normative health.¹¹⁵ What then should we make of cases in which suffering is not resolved?¹¹⁶

The story of Peter's daughter is found only in the Coptic version of the apocryphal *Acts of Peter*.¹¹⁷ The fragment begins with Peter healing many sick people who had come to him. One of the crowd asks why Peter heals the people in the crowd, but does not help his own daughter who is completely paralysed and lying "helpless in the corner" (*Acts of Peter* (Cod. Berol.) [Elliott]). Peter answers that it is God alone who knows why her body is sick, but in order to help the soul of the man who asked the question and to prove God's power, he temporarily heals his daughter, instructing her to get up and walk. After the crowd have seen this miraculous event, Peter then says to her "Return to your place, sit down and be helpless again, for it is good for me and you" (*Acts of Peter* (Cod. Berol.) [Elliott]). Peter explains to the gathered crowd that when his daughter was born, he had a vision that she would be a "stumbling block to many" and would "harm many souls if her body remains well!" (*Acts of Peter* (Cod. Berol.) [Elliott]). The text itself is fragmented, so the whole story is unclear, but we are told that when she was ten, a man called Ptolemy saw her bathing and "often sent for her, for he could not wait..." (*Acts of Peter* (Cod. Berol.) [Elliott]). There is a lacuna in the text and the story resumes with Peter and his wife finding their daughter

¹¹⁵ Healing in the New Testament is thus an "erasure rather than an acceptance of disability." Eradication of disability or impairment is deliberately sought out by those experiencing the disability who are depicted as "pushing their own cure agenda." D Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, "Jesus Thrown Everything off Balance: Disability and Redemption in Biblical Literature," in *This Abled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies*, eds. Hector Avalos, Sarah J Melcher and Jeremy Schipper (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 178. For an overview of disability and the bible see Candida R. Moss and Jeremy Schipper, eds., *Disabilities Studies and Biblical Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

¹¹⁶ Anna Solevåg states that the *Acts of Peter* complicates our understanding of healing narratives in early Christianity as it includes both "un-healing" and infliction of disability (Anna Rebecca Solevåg, *Negotiating the Disabled Body: Representations of Disability in Early Christian Texts* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2018), 75).

¹¹⁷ For dating and textual history see J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 390-399.

“paralysed from head to foot and dried up” (*Acts of Peter* (Cod. Berol.) [Elliott]).¹¹⁸ Their response was to praise God as “he had kept his servant free from defilement and violation” (*Acts of Peter* (Cod. Berol.) [Elliott]). Ptolemy repented and shed so many tears that he became blind, but then a voice in the night instructs him on the proper treatment of virgins and tells him to go to Peter, his eyesight is restored, and he was converted.

This story is disturbing, and whilst we cannot say for sure what happened to Peter’s daughter, the extant text suggests a kind of victim shaming in which her body is deemed sexually problematic. It seems she is taken in some way by Ptolemy who then returns her to her parents in a state of paralysis which is deemed fortuitous as this has saved her from being sexually violated by her kidnapper. Whilst her kidnapper, Ptolemy, is blinded, this is only a temporary state, a state that is rectified once he has been told about the proper treatment of virgins, and his eyesight is restored. Peter’s daughter however remains in a state of paralysis, even though as Peter demonstrates, he has the ability (through God) to heal her. God is praised for protecting Peter’s daughter in this manner with the implication that her body is kept in this state to ensure that she does not become an impediment in the future to the salvation of others.

Candida Moss and Joel Biden argue that this text demonstrates the “rhetorical power of these exhortations to celibacy” and should be seen as a moral tale “articulated by

¹¹⁸ I will consider the dried-up nature of her body in more detail in subsequent chapters, but for scholarly attention to the phrase and the connection to Greco-Roman medicine see Meghan Henning, “Paralysis and Sexuality in Medical Literature and the Acts of Peter,” *JLA* 8 (2015): Solevåg, *Negotiating the Disabled Body*, 79-80.

a horrifying predicament.”¹¹⁹ Which is better, to be permanently incapacitated or to have a body that has been sexually violated?¹²⁰ Meghan Henning concurs with the disturbing nature of this narrative, noting that even in the ancient world the concept of paralysis as being expedient would be unusual.¹²¹ Using ancient medical perspectives, she considers the equation of paralysis and sexual inviolability as reflecting a cultural understanding of the body which essentially sees paralysis invoked as a marker of infertility and sexual dysfunction which would render Peter’s daughter infertile and therefore unsuitable for marriage.¹²² This reading serves as a background for understanding how Peter’s daughter’s paralysis could be deemed “expedient” and which would serve the ascetic ideals of the text, particularly that of chastity. In Henning’s reading, Peter’s daughter is left unhealed to protect her from sexual violence, marriage and childbearing from both Ptolemy and any subsequent suitors.

Healings in the New Testament are often seen as prefigurations of what is to come both for male and female bodies in the eschatological age. Anna Solevåg considers the gendered suffering and unhealing of Peter’s daughter in terms of the resurrection of the body, arguing that the *Acts of Peter* therefore actually preserves a place for the unhealed,

¹¹⁹ Candida R. Moss and Joel S. Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility: Biblical Perspectives of Procreation and Childlessness* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 195.

¹²⁰ We find the debate about whether chastity and virtue are more important than the life of women in other texts in the ancient world. In the Greek Romances, in the story of Leucippe and Clitophon, Leucippe’s mother Panteia who suspects that her daughter has been seduced by her cousin Clitophon, declares that she would rather Leucippe “a wartime atrocity, better raped by a victorious Thracian soldier than this.” In Livy’s story of Lucretia, Lucretia sacrifices her own body for the sake of her reputation.

¹²¹ Meghan Henning, “Paralysis and Sexuality in Medical Literature and the Acts of Peter,” *Journal of Late Antiquity* 8 (2015): 306-321.

¹²² Referring to the Hippocratic corpus and to the works of Galen, Henning contends that there is a popular strand of ancient medical thinking that attributed paralysis as an underlying problem with the body’s temperature, an excessive cooling caused by an imbalance of the humours. Excessive cooling was linked to paralysis, improper blood flow, and for women’s bodies this signalled reproductive dysfunction and infertility. See also Solevåg, *Negotiating the Disabled Body*, 92-111 and Moss and Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility*, 193-196

she notes that “To be able-bodied is not necessarily better in the salvation economy of this text.”¹²³ Indeed, rather than the healed, normative body, the preservation of virginity is the most important point for the perfect female body in heaven. In this case, virginity supersedes bodily perfection. Moss and Baden concur, stating that “No longer is paralysis a sign of divine judgement: it is a precursor to salvation.”¹²⁴ Pointing to the fact that Peter’s daughter is considered beautiful both before *and* after her paralysis, they argue demonstrates that Christians invested a new and subversive significance to the body in which infertility was more highly prized than corporal “perfection,” beauty and fertility.¹²⁵

In this narrative, the body of Peter’s daughter becomes communal property, from which any benefit from her disabilities is not for her, but for the wider Christian community. Her body is held in common and used to convert and to talk about chastity. Peter’s personal attachment to his daughter has been relinquished for the greater good and is affirmed by the positive benefits such as the conversion of Ptolemy, the acquisition of funds he donates for the poor, and the edification of the community. The story of Peter’s daughter marked a change in telos for the body, rather than the restoration of the normative body we find instead a narrative in which the suffering body did not need to be healed, it was purposeful and powerful.

¹²³ Solevåg, *Birthing Salvation*, 325. Solevåg notes that Perpetua’s brother still has a scar on his face, he has not retained the perfect body, but instead bears the marks of his suffering Solevåg, *Birthing Salvation*, 325. Compare this to Jesus appearance before Thomas following the resurrection (John 20:24-29)

¹²⁴ Moss and Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility*, 196.

¹²⁵ Moss and Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility*, 196.

Thecla

The story of Thecla, a young woman in Asia Minor in the first or second century CE is an intriguing mix of romance, adventure, martyrology which would capture the interest of ascetic writers and theologians in the ancient world and whose protagonist would become a source of emulation for women well into the Middle Ages. Her story first appears in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* (APTh) and stands in the wider bracket of Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles.¹²⁶ Despite two attempts on her life, through divine intervention, Thecla does not die at the hands of others.¹²⁷ Thecla does however face a number of trials in which she is depicted as suffering, and which draw on themes already highlighted, those of femininity, endurance and passivity.¹²⁸

The story for Thecla begins when the apostle Paul arrives at Iconium, preaching a message of chastity. Thecla, the daughter of Theocleia is entranced by Paul's speech, remaining at her window for three days to hear him.¹²⁹ After hearing Paul speak, Thecla renounces her marriage to Thamyris to whom she is engaged, to follow Paul. Enraged,

¹²⁶ Tertullian writing around 200 CE is the earliest known external reference for the text

¹²⁷ The *Acts of Paul and Thecla* (APTh) concludes instead that "After testifying these things she went away to Seleucia and after enlightening many there with the word of God, she lay down to her glorious rest." (APTh 43 [Elliott]). This fact did not seem to deter her devotees from designating her a martyr. Candida Moss notes that the term, "retained a certain fluidity and flexibility" in the ancient world and could be "discursively reshaped" instead she concludes that the title "signified authority as much as death and self-abasement and, as such, was mechanistically powerful in asserting the legitimacy of one's position." Candida R. Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom: Diverse Practices, Theologies and Traditions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 4.

¹²⁸ Scholarship on the Apocryphal Acts has focused exponentially on the question of the social worlds of the texts themselves. The prominence of female characters in the APTh and in the Apocryphal Acts as a whole has garnered significant interest in the role of women and the theme of chastity within these texts. Scholars have argued that these texts can be seen as early feminist manifestos written by and for a community of continent women who opposed the directives that women should be silent and submit to patriarchal authority compared to others who have argued that women in ancient texts function as rhetorical devices, used either to support or undermine Greco-Roman institutions of the City, the family or marriage, and therefore question whether there is an possibility of historical reconstruction. For a detailed survey of historiography see Shelly Matthews, "Thinking of Thecla: Issues in Feminist Historiography," *JFSR* 17 (2001): 39-55.

¹²⁹ APTh 8. All quotations are taken from J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 350-388.

Thamyris conspires to have Paul arrested.¹³⁰ Paul is brought before a tribunal and as a result of Thecla's refusal to marry Thamyris and her devotion to Paul, her mother cries out "Burn the wicked one; burn her who will not marry in the midst of the theatre, that all the women who have been taught by this man may be afraid" (*APTh* 20 [Elliott]). The governor then proceeds to cast Paul from the city and condemns Thecla to the arena. In the arena, Thecla is forced to parade naked and then led onto a pyre to be burnt to death. On the pyre, Thecla makes the shape of the cross, and despite the huge flames which surround her, she is not harmed and appears to be released.¹³¹

Later, arriving at Antioch with Paul, Thecla is seen by an influential citizen named Alexander who repeatedly makes sexual advances towards her. Thecla resolutely resists him. Humiliated, Alexander ensures that Thecla is condemned to the arena for a second time, this time, to death by wild beast. Here, we see not only the women of the audience, but the female animals of the arena affected by her plight. When the wild beasts fail to illicit the required response, Thecla holds her arms out in prayer and then throws herself into a large vat of water, saying "In the name of Jesus Christ, on this day I baptize myself" (*APTh* 34 [Elliott]). On so doing, the seals in the tank float to the top, dead and a protective cloud of fire surrounded her so that not only was her nakedness hidden from view, but she was protected from the beasts. Escaping death for a second time, Thecla goes again to Paul, who after hearing everything that has happened to her, is amazed, and tells her to "Go and teach the word of God" (*APTh* 41 [Elliott]).

¹³⁰ *APTh* 13-14.

¹³¹ *APTh* 22.

Thecla's story shows a gradual assumption of control over her body through a series of trials all of which she endures. Autonomy and control over her body, is both implicit and explicit throughout her story; fasting, lack of sleep, renouncing her wealth, and her vow of celibacy enable her to endure the suffering that she faces in the arena.¹³² Her endurance and increasing power is divinely noted and sanctioned and despite the great flames that surrounded her, the beasts that she faces in the arena, or the sexually aggressive patriarchal authority figure who attempts to molest her, she remained untouched.¹³³ Through her endurance of suffering, and her resolute chastity, a woman, who was culturally deemed to be powerless, becomes powerful. This is explicitly demonstrated in her increasing masculinization from virginal girl to gender-bending transvestism with the divine authority to baptise herself and in Paul's exhortation for her to preach the word of God.¹³⁴ This spectacle of potential suffering becomes a spectacle of power which moves the audience, even "the governor wept and marvelled at the power that was in her" (*APTh* 3.22 [Elliott]), subverting the audience's expectations, she neither actually suffers, nor dies.

In this narrative, Thecla is depicted as enduring a variety of trials. Susan Garrett's "cultural modes of affliction" can help to situate these depictions within early Christian narrative as well as thinking through the idea of suffering through a series of trials. Writing about Paul's "thorn" in 2 Corinthians, Garrett used cognitive anthropology to define a number of "shared cognitive schemas" which she defines as socially transmitted, mental

¹³² *APTh* 8 where Thecla remains at the window, watching Paul for three days and three nights, neither sleeping, eating or drinking and *APTh* 18 where Thecla bribes the gatekeep and guards of the prison by giving them her bracelets and a silver mirror.

¹³³ In exactly the same way as Perkins suggests we find in the Greek romances.

¹³⁴ *APTh* 41. Compare this to 2 Corinthians 11:16-33 in which Paul highlights that it is through his suffering that he demonstrates his authority as an apostle.

representations which provide a framework for recalling, reconstructing and describing experiences.¹³⁵ She identifies three dominant “cultural modes of affliction” which provide a useful background to the rhetorical use of suffering and endurance in early Christian literature: the Job model, the paideia model and the cross / resurrection model.¹³⁶ For the *APTh*, the cross / resurrection model is of particular interest. In this model, there is a specific connection between weakness and exaltation and strength: just as Jesus was first weak and then powerful, so too, Paul’s thorn is represented as a weakness which he must endure, and in so doing, he exhibits strength. It is Paul’s endurance of this weakness which is the proof of God’s grace and divine favour, in the same way as the miracles that he performs and by emphasising his weakness, he is implicitly imitating Christ.¹³⁷ Garrett notes that by drawing on these rhetorical models, ancient readers would have understood their implicit assumptions. In the same way, it is possible to see that Thecla’s endurance of suffering in this text symbolises her transformation from weakness to strength, modelled in the footsteps of both Paul and Christ himself.

Drawing on the work of Garrett, Susan Calef also reads the *APTh* in terms of an ancient “interpretive model” that of “testing” which can be found in Greco-Roman, Jewish and Christian literature of this time.¹³⁸ She places Thecla within the context of the Greek romance and contends that ancient readers would have interpreted Thecla’s experiences as akin to the suffering experienced by the protagonist of the romances and of the “afflicted

¹³⁵ Susan Garrett, “Paul’s Thorn and Cultural Models of Affliction,” in *The Social World of the First Christians: Essays in Honor of Wayne A. Meeks*, ed. L. Michael White and O. Larry Yarbrough (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 82-99.

¹³⁶ Garrett, “Paul’s Thorn,” 82-99.

¹³⁷ On suffering like Christ see Moss, *The Other Christs*, 20-44.

¹³⁸ Susan A. Calef, “Thecla ‘Tried and True’ and the Inversion of Romance,” in *A Feminist Companion to the New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine (London: T & T Clark International, 2006), 165.

righteous of the apostolic world.”¹³⁹ Of specific interest in the case of Thecla, is the test or trial by affliction in which Calef describes a protagonist following the path of God, but who then has to face some form of trial or tribulation which potentially threatens this path. It is only through endurance and faith that the protagonist can gain divine recognition and approval.¹⁴⁰ In depicting Thecla as facing these trials, she is positioned implicitly within a mimetic framework of righteous suffering and endurance which ancient readers would have been tuned in to.

This emphasis on the importance of endurance can be found in a range of Greco-Roman literature from the same period. For example, the first century philosopher Musonius Rufus wrote that women will be strong in the endurance of pain and that a woman would “not be willing to submit to anything shameful because of fear of death or unwillingness to suffer hardship, and she would not be intimidated by anyone because he is of noble birth, powerful or wealthy – no, not even if he were the tyrant of her city” (Musonius Rufus, *That One Should Disdain Hardships* 3 [trans. C E Lutz]). Seneca, a Roman contemporary of Jesus expounds on the use of endurance during suffering, and described passive endurance as being comparable to athletes who train to become better fighters and compared endurance under torture to the joy which comes from having endured the pain of childbirth.¹⁴¹ Tertullian too expounds on the benefits of endurance, distinguishing between the Christian sense of patience which incorporates suffering and endurance with the pre-

¹³⁹ Calef, “Thecla ‘Tried and True,’” 165.

¹⁴⁰ Calef, “Thecla ‘Tried and True,’” 163-185. In literature, this is manifested in narratives of Job, the Maccabbean martyrs, Paul and Jesus himself. See Jesus in the wilderness Mk 1.12-13; Matthew 4.1-11 and Luke 4.1-13 and in the Gospel of Mark in which Jesus undergoes a series of trials before the ultimate testing on the cross. For Paul see 1 Cor. 4:9-13; 2 Cor. 4.8-11. See also Revelation 2:10 and 1 Peter 4:12-13.

¹⁴¹ Seneca Ep 28.14; Seneca Ep 78.15-19.

Christians sense of patience.¹⁴² Controlled and conquered in this way, the body can then bear up under the harshness of suffering, torture, and imprisonment.

Perpetua

These themes of trials, endurance and suffering continue in our next group of sources. In this next section, we turn to two female martyrs, Perpetua and Blandina, to examine the suffering female body, but rather than the suffering, living body explored in the previous section, in these texts, it is the unhealed, broken and dying body which is the site of suffering. In Judith Perkin's seminal monograph *The Suffering Self*, to understand why people were attracted to early Christianity, she posits the question "What did inhabitants of the early Roman empire know about Christianity?"¹⁴³ Surveying a range of ancient writers including Tacitus, Galen and Marcus Aurelius, she concludes that Christians were known not for the words of Jesus nor the miraculous healing found in both the canonical and apocryphal texts, but rather for their attitudes towards pain, death and suffering.¹⁴⁴ The sources examined by Perkins predate any systematic, wide spread persecution of Christians and she therefore argues that pagans held this view because this was the message that Christians deliberately presented. She notes that "Christian discourse in the early empire worked to construct a particular subject, a particular self-understanding: namely, the Christian as sufferer."¹⁴⁵ Specifically, that to be a Christian was to suffer and die and argues that "Christian texts of the late first and second centuries almost without exception assiduously project the message that to be Christian was to suffer and die."¹⁴⁶ In the

¹⁴² Tertullian, *De Patientia* 16, esp 16.1.

¹⁴³ Perkins, *The Suffering Self: Pain*, 18.

¹⁴⁴ Perkins, *The Suffering Self*, 18-23.

¹⁴⁵ Perkins, *The Suffering Self*, 24.

¹⁴⁶ Perkins, *The Suffering Self*, 24.

martyrological narratives, the martyrs were both performers who acted out this message as well as reinforcers of this identity both within Christian communities themselves and throughout the wider world.¹⁴⁷

Whilst it is impossible to know the number of Christians who were martyred nor the proportion of male to female martyrs, female martyrs are undeniably prominent in the literary record.¹⁴⁸ As modern readers of the text, it is important, as Lynn Cohick and Amy Brown Hughes remind us, to know that it would not be usual for the ancient Romans to see women in the arena.¹⁴⁹ Yet, women appear in a number of the early Christian martyrologies, in fact, as Gail Streete accurately notes, “female martyrs seem to have been preferred to males as narrative vehicles for the expression of these attitudes and needs.”¹⁵⁰ It is important then to consider the suffering female bodies found in these texts and to consider how and why they were employed. It is to two of these martyrs to whom we now turn, looking first at the martyrdom of Perpetua and then of Blandina.

The *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* is a martyrological account written at the beginning of the third century CE.¹⁵¹ It features Vibia Perpetua who was one of a number of

¹⁴⁷ Perkins, *The Suffering Self*, 25.

¹⁴⁸ Antti Marjanen suggests that this is probably one of the only aspects of early Christian life in which women were treated equally (Antti Marjanen, “Male Women Martyrs: The Function of Gender-Transformation Language in Early Christian Martyrdom Accounts,” in *Metamorphoses: Resurrection, Body and Transformative Practices in Early Christianity*, eds. Turid Karlsen Seim and Jorunn Økland (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009), 231.

¹⁴⁹ Lynn H. Cohick and Amy Brown Hughes, *Christian Women in the Patristic World: Their Influence, Authority and Legacy in the Second through Fifth Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Academic, 2017), 33.

¹⁵⁰ Gail P.C. Streete, “Buying the Stairway to Heaven: Perpetua and Thecla as Early Christian Heroines,” in *A Feminist Companion to the New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine with Maria Mayo Robbins (London: T & T Clark Int., 2006), 187. See also Candida R. Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom: Diverse Practices, Theologies, and Traditions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 22.

¹⁵¹ On dating see Barbara K. Gold, *Perpetua: Athlete of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 13; Thomas J. Heffernan, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 60-78; Ross S. Kraemer and Shira L. Lander, “Perpetua and Felicitas,” in *The Early Christian World*, ed. Philip F. Esler

catechumens arrested alongside Felicitas, discussed earlier in this chapter.¹⁵² Perpetua is described as a young, educated, well-born married woman who had recently given birth to a son.¹⁵³ The account, sandwiched between an editorial introduction and conclusion purports to be the words of Perpetua herself, her own account of imprisonment and martyrdom.¹⁵⁴ We learn of Perpetua's father's desperate attempts to convince his daughter to change her mind and to sacrifice to the gods, and of her separation from her small son who she is still nursing. Following her arrest, the text begins with a confrontation with her father who begs her to recant. In a series of three tests, Perpetua's father endeavours to get her to recant, entreating her on the basis of his old age, the reputation of her family, and her child. Perpetua however does not submit, enduring the scenes before her impassively and seemingly unemotionally, but with some form of confession of faith. Each attempt moves her closer towards her ultimate goal, and after each incident she receives a vision demonstrating divine favour and which begin to affirm her power. Perpetua's father has a dual role, firstly in trying to persuade Perpetua to renounce her faith, and secondly in demonstrating the need for her to relinquish her worldly ties. At the beginning of the narrative, Perpetua is overcome with anxiety and grief at her separation from her baby. After a few days, she arranges for him to stay with her in the prison which brings her great joy and for her, turns the prison into "my palace" (*Passio* III.9 [Heffernan]). Having already severed ties to her father, the last connection to her worldly status as mother are abrogated

(London: Routledge, 2000), 1051-1053; Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 130-132; Brent D. Shaw, "The Passion of Perpetua," *Past and Present* 139 (1993): 3-45 (3 §2)

¹⁵² *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* II.1.

¹⁵³ *Passio* II.2-3.

¹⁵⁴ *Passio* II.3. On the question of authorship and genre see L. Stephanie Cobb, *Dying to Be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr Texts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Gold, *Perpetua*, 13-14; Thomas J. Heffernan, "Philology and Authorship on The *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis*," *Traditio* 50 (1995): 315-25 (320-325); Heffernan, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, 3-8; Kraemer and Lander, "Perpetua and Felicitas," 1054-56; Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 132-137; Shaw, "The Passion of Perpetua," 19-20.

when she answers the procurator's question "Are you Christian?" with the affirmative response "I am a Christian," and her father refuses to send the baby to her to be nursed.

The narrative alternates between details of Perpetua's time in prison leading up to her martyrdom and a number of visions. Through these visions, Perpetua effectuates a narrative in which through the vicissitudes, torment and sacrifice associated with her confession of faith, she is made powerful, enabling her to face martyrdom and effecting an end to the suffering of others. Her first vision is received after she has affirmed that she is Christian and after her father's refusal to let her see her son. In this vision, she sees her brother, Dinocrates who died when he was seven years old from a "cancer of the face" (*Passio* 7.5 [Heffernan]). Perpetua states that his death was horrible and that "All men who saw it loathed the manner of his death" (*Passio* 7.5 [Heffernan]). Dinocrates' fate in the afterlife is bleak, resembling in many ways the prison in which Perpetua now finds herself. He is in a dark place with many others, he is dirty, hot and thirsty. The wound on his face which caused his death remains, and his skin is pale.¹⁵⁵ She explicitly states that he continues to suffer. However, Perpetua knows that she can help him, she describes herself as "worthy," and begins to pray intensely for him.¹⁵⁶ A few days later when she has been kept in the stocks, she receives another vision.¹⁵⁷ She sees Dinocrates again, but now, he has transformed, "his body was clean, well dressed and refreshed, and where the wound was, I saw a scar" (*Passio* VIII.1 [Heffernan]). Previously, despite there being a pool full of water, Dinocrates had been unable to drink, now, there is a golden cup, he can drink, his thirst quenched, and he begins to play in the water as a child would, and she knows that "he

¹⁵⁵ *Passio* VII.4.

¹⁵⁶ *Passio* VII.2-3; VII.9-10.

¹⁵⁷ *Passio* VII.1.

was freed from his suffering" (*Passio* VIII.3-4 [Heffernan]). It is clear that Perpetua has played a key role in his release from suffering.

In her analysis of these visions, Judith Perkins connects Perpetua's suffering in prison to Dinocrates' relief from suffering in the afterlife. Through the suffering she endured in prison, Perpetua is now worthy, she recognises the powerful effect that her own physical and emotional suffering has, it has earned her the right to pray to God for Dinocrates, and her prayers are answered. Perkins suggests that these visions highlight the difference between pagan and Christian suffering.¹⁵⁸ Dinocrates' suffering on earth was horrendous, cruel, and meaningless, and he continued to suffer in the afterlife. Perpetua's suffering however is profitable, earning her influence with God so that she could intercede on Dinocrates' behalf, and his suffering is ended. Perpetua's suffering is therefore both powerful and redemptive. Perkins notes that it is narratives such as these which offered converts to Christianity a powerful and meaningful structure for understanding human pain and suffering.¹⁵⁹

This section of the text focuses clearly on the "right" or Christian way to suffer. Whilst Perpetua's suffering is meaningful, Dinocrates is not. Her father too, who clings to his familial ties and attempts to persuade Perpetua away from the course that she has

¹⁵⁸ Judith B. Perkins, "The 'Passion of Perpetua': A Narrative of Empowerment," *Latomus* 53 (1994): 837-847 (842).

¹⁵⁹ Perkins, "The 'Passion of Perpetua'," 842. Perkins also highlights the recognition of this power by others. Immediately afterwards for example, Pudens who was in charge of the prison is described as recognising the great power in them (IX.1). Later on the day before the games, a crowd comes to the martyrs' last meal, where they see them "bearing witness to the happiness they found in their suffering" (XVII.1) and as a result, many of them converted (XVII.3). The contemporaneous writing of Tertullian also expressed the notion that Christian suffering generated converts (Tertullian, *Apologeticus*, 50)

chosen is also depicted as suffering. He like Perpetua suffers the emotional turmoil of losing a child, and of watching her suffer at the hands of others. He, like the martyrs, is beaten.¹⁶⁰ However, his suffering is not depicted as profitable or purposeful, but embarrassing, and rather than empowering him, he is increasingly presented as pitiful, weak, and feminised.¹⁶¹ Juxtaposed against this is Perpetua who is increasingly empowered and masculinised by her physical and emotional suffering. Immediately after the scene which shows her father's emotional tearing out of his beard, Perpetua has her final vision in which she is in the amphitheatre, condemned to fight the beasts. An Egyptian gladiator appears to fight her, and Perpetua tells us "I was stripped naked, and I became a man" (*Passio* X.7 [Heffernan]).¹⁶² Perpetua herself thus enters the arena having "become a man," ready to fight her opponents.

Following this vision, Perpetua is masculinised further through the self-control and courage she exhibits in the final stages of her martyrdom. She and her fellow martyrs walk willingly, even "joyously" to the arena and once there she faces the crowd, not shying away, and "the intensity of her stare" is so strong that it causes the crowd to look away (*Passio* XVIII.1-2 [Heffernan]).¹⁶³ Unlike her counterpart Felcitas who is depicted in an almost exclusively feminine way, Perpetua addresses the male figures throughout the narrative,

¹⁶⁰ "And when my father persisted in his efforts to change my mind, Hilarianus ordered him to be thrown to the ground and beaten with a rod. My father's suffering made me sad, almost as if I had been beaten. I grieved for his pitiable old age" (*Passio* VI.5 [Heffernan]).

¹⁶¹ On the demasculinsation of Perpetua's father see Cobb, *Dying to be Men*, 101-102.

¹⁶² Candida Moss identifies this vision as a prefiguration of Perpetua's forthcoming martyrdom (Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 136.)

¹⁶³ On her gaze see Elizabeth A. Castelli, "Visions and Voyeurism: Holy Women and the Politics of Sight in Early Christianity," *Protocol of the Colloquy of the Center for Hermeneutical Studies*, new series 2 (Berkeley: Center for Hermeneutical Studies, 1994), 16-17; Cobb, *Dying to be Men*, 110-111; David Frankfurter, "Martyrology and the Prurient Gaze," *J ECS* 17 (2009): 215-245 (221-224). On the male gaze see Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16 (1975): 6-18 and Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1989).

standing up to them, she exhibits rhetorical and persuasive skills, and even on the way to the arena, she advocates for herself and her fellow martyrs (*Passio* XVIII.4-6 [Heffernan]).¹⁶⁴ The masculinity she exhibits is in direct opposition to the male figures of authority that we find throughout the text, men who we might expect to be presented as masculine. These men are emotional, they lack self-control and courage. Even in the final stages of her death, when the male gladiator takes the sword to kill her, he “wavered,” and Perpetua “herself guided it [the sword] to her throat” (*Passio* XXI.9 [Heffernan]), she has the courage and self-control to commit the final act, whereas he does not. She is not a passive victim, but rather an active participant in her own death.¹⁶⁵

The masculinisation of Perpetua, and especially the gender transformation of her final vision has garnered a wealth of scholarship.¹⁶⁶ Virginia Burrus comments that

The complexity and openness of identity is conveyed through the performative ambivalence of her gender, yet only on the stage of shame does that gender becomes visible. Expecting to see a female body humiliated by its exposure to the public eye, we see instead the shameless display of the oiled body of a male athlete. Or, rather, we see both. We see that both are somehow the same and also not the same.¹⁶⁷

Burrus refers here to Perpetua’s vision, but she could equally be referring to her final moments in the arena where we see not only the masculinised body of the martyr, but also

¹⁶⁴ See Solevåg, *Birthing Salvation*, 230-235. Solevåg highlights the difference in social status as an important difference between the representations of the two women. She also demonstrates that Felicitas who is depicted only in a feminine role “in her feminine, childbearing and lactating state,” serves as a foil for Perpetua’s transgender performance (Solevåg, *Birthing Salvation*, 235).

¹⁶⁵ See Solevåg, *Birthing Salvation*, 238-9 on the piercing of her body and the throat as a site of death.

¹⁶⁶ See for example Cobb, *Dying to be Men*, 94-111; Gold, *Perpetua*, 23-46; Barbara K. Gold, “Remaking Perpetua: A Female Martyr Reconstructed,” in *Sex in Antiquity: Exploring Gender and Sexuality in the Ancient World*, eds. Mark Masterson, Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz and James Robson (London: Routledge, 2018), 482-499; Solevåg, *Birthing Salvation*, 222-230.

¹⁶⁷ Virginia Burrus, *Saving Shame, Martyrs, Saints, and Other Abject Subjects* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 31.

her femininity. We see both the body of a female martyr as well as that of the masculinised, self-controlled, and courageous gladiator.¹⁶⁸

In the arena, both the bodies of Perpetua and Felicitas are put on show as they are both rendered naked, and their femininity emphasised.¹⁶⁹ We are told that the beast that is chosen to fight them was not a traditional one, but a wild cow, chosen specifically because their gender was the same as that of the animal. Then they are “stripped naked and covered only with nets they were brought out again. The crowd shuddered, seeing that one was a delicate young girl and that the other had recently given birth as her breasts still dripping with milk” (*Passio* XX.2 [Heffernan]).¹⁷⁰ The crowd seem unhappy at this and so the women are redressed, and Perpetua is depicted as a model of feminine modesty, for when she is thrown down,

She noticed that her tunic was ripped on the side and so she drew it up to cover her thigh more mindful of her modesty than her suffering. Then she requested a pin and she tied up her tousled hair; for it was not right for a martyr to suffer with dishevelled hair since it might appear that she was grieving in her moment of glory. (*Passio* XX.4-5 [Heffernan])

Elizabeth Castelli notes of female suffering that “When, in what seems to be the most extreme form of objectification, women are displayed as spectacle, they are richly enfleshed, and the obsessive attention to the details of their suffering reinscribes their ties

¹⁶⁸ Athletic and gladiatorial images conveyed in and of themselves a masculinity, but also pointed to the perceived characteristics associated with masculinity such as self-control and courage.

¹⁶⁹ On interpretations of nudity in early Christian texts see Miles, *Carnal Knowing*.

¹⁷⁰ Scholars have emphasised though that Perpetua and Felicitas are represented in different ways with many scholars attributing the differing representation to the women’s social status.¹⁷⁰ Solevåg for example sees in this death scene a deliberate and emphasised difference between the bodies of the women which she attributes to their social status. Whilst both are naked, Perpetua is described as “delicate,” whereas Felicitas is described in her post-partum state “her breasts still dripping with milk” (*Passio* XX.2). Solevåg states that “Felicitas’ pain in childbirth and her messy bodily state in the arena highlight the effeminate and slavish component of endurance and passive suffering” (Solevåg, *Birthing Salvation*, 239). This passive suffering is in direct opposition to that of Perpetua’s actions.

to the body.”¹⁷¹ Male bodies are of course referred to in these texts, but as Cobb stresses, the bodies of male martyrs are “noted” whereas the bodies of female martyrs are richly described and receive more attention than the bodies of their male counterparts.¹⁷² This enhanced focus on the body “is a tool of feminization because it reminds the audience of the essential materiality of femininity.”¹⁷³ Later martyrological accounts would focus on the sexual mutilation of the female martyr’s body, we do not find that here, but rather graphic exposure of the women as naked, with particular attention deliberately drawn to their breasts, emphasising their female corporeality.¹⁷⁴ We find in these final scenes a sharp contrast in Perpetua’s representation, a concurrent masculinisation and feminisation.¹⁷⁵

Interpretations of this masculinisation have seen it as serving to “reinforce the widely held ancient pagan idea, amply reinforced in early Christian literature, that women, in imitating men – particularly in rational choices and the extraordinary exercise of control over what were regarded as weak, passive bodies, especially subject to irrational passions –

¹⁷¹ Castelli, *Visions and Voyeurism*, 8.

¹⁷² Cobb, *Dying to Be Men*, 110 §80.

¹⁷³ Cobb, *Dying to Be Men*, 110

¹⁷⁴ In the c. fifth century *Life of Saint Susanna*, Susanna is subjected to a variety of tortures which included having her breasts cut off and thrown to the birds, and in the fifth-sixth century Coptic martyrdom of the Saints Paese and Thecla, Thecla also has her breasts removed and boiling oil poured down her throat. Agatha’s breasts are twisted off and Agnes was sent to a brothel and stripped naked (See for example the *Life of Susanna* 13; AASS, September 4:158 and the *Martyrdom of SS. Paese and Thecla*, in *Four Martyrdoms from the Pierpont Morgan Coptic Codices*, eds. E.A.E. Reymond and J.W.B. Barns, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973)

¹⁷⁵ It is important to note that it is not only in this death scene that we find an “oscillation” throughout the text between masculine and feminine characteristics that Perpetua displays (Solevåg, *Birthing Salvation*, 222-230). She is honourably married, still nursing her son, she exhibits love and care for her son and her final separation from him is described in terms of her breastfeeding.¹⁷⁵ Cobb attributes this “oscillation” to the both the purpose of martyrological narrative, which she sees as both accounts of martyrs’ deaths, as well as guides for the living, and to the needs of the communities for which they were written. In this case then, “It appears to have been unacceptable for the authors of these martyrologies to describe Christian women as being masculine- ie., autonomous, other-worldly, and unyielding – at all times. The shift between masculinization and feminization in these narrative roles for women illustrates a communal concern over appropriate roles for women in two distinct situations inter- and intracommunal. Feminine characteristics such as modesty and submissiveness continued to be idealized within the Christian communities that produced these texts, and so the authors eased the gender tension by illustrating the women’s femininity alongside their masculinity” (Cobb, *Dying to Be Men*, 93).

attained a 'higher state of moral and spiritual perfection'."¹⁷⁶ Antti Marjanen argues that there are differing uses in the language of gender transformation in early Christianity. He concludes that in the martyrological accounts, unlike other early Christian texts, which employ the language of gender transformation, "Early Christian martyrdom accounts give a different impression. The transformation or the transgression of gender roles, i.e., women obtaining male qualities or in rare cases "becoming male," has to do with the successful endurance of martyrdom rather than with spiritual progress in or through the act itself.¹⁷⁷ This is evident if we consider Perpetua's gradual empowerment throughout the narrative. In the beginning, she is taken to prison, she is still depicted in solely feminine terms as daughter and mother and as emotional. She is anxious and worries about her baby, she feels fear and is terrified "because I had never before known such darkness" (*Passio* III.5 [Heffernan]). When she is baptised, "The Spirit told me that nothing else should be sought from the water other than the endurance of the body" (*Passio* III.4 [Heffernan]), and this is certainly what she receives. Through her suffering in prison, through her belief and her confirmation of faith, she is favoured by God, so that she does not feel pain. Even the painful condition of mastitis which many women experience on cessation of breastfeeding is prevented, and she says, "as God willed, the baby no longer desired my breasts, nor did they ache and become inflamed, so that I might not be tormented by worry for my child or by the pain in my breasts" (*Passio* VI.8 [Heffernan]). It is at this final separation from her child, at her realisation that God is easing her suffering, and her realisation that she could endure the suffering that she has already faced that she

¹⁷⁶ Gail P.C. Streete, *Redeemed Bodies: Women Martyrs in Early Christianity* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 21.

¹⁷⁷ Marjanen, "Male Women Martyrs," 247.

acknowledges that she is “worthy,” and she realises the power of her suffering, and receives the visions of her brother.

Thus, the story of Perpetua at once both conforms to and subverts cultural ideas about women and their bodies. It both plays on and employs Greco-Roman gender expectations whilst concurrently subverting them to inscribe a range of religious and social meanings on her suffering body. The value and power of the Christian suffering body is emphasised, her body not only tells the story of martyrdom, but is employed as a multi-faceted textual device, to give meaning and purpose to suffering and to the endurance of suffering.

Blandina

Our final source can be found in the anonymous *Letter of the Churches of Vienne and Lyons* preserved in Eusebius of Caesarea’s *Historia Ecclesiastica*, and describes the martyrdom of an enslaved woman named Blandina and three male companions in Gaul in 177 C.E.¹⁷⁸ The narrative foregrounds suffering, describing the “magnitude of the blessed martyrs’ sufferings, we are incapable of describing in detail; indeed it would be impossible to put it down in writing” (*The Letter of the Churches of Lyons and Vienne* 1.4 [Musurillo]). As Candida Moss notes, “One of the most distinctive aspects of the *Letter of the Churches of Vienne and Lyons* is its voyeuristic focus on torture and bodily degradation. The author delights in the licking of whips, dissolution of bodily parts, and contortions of the body.”¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁸ All translations from “The Letter of the Churches of Lyons and Vienne,” in *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, ed. Herbert Musurillo (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 62-85. See Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 100–121 for an in-depth study of this text.

¹⁷⁹ Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 107-108.

Their suffering is a defining feature of the text, however, Blandida's ability to withstand suffering, as we found in the accounts of Thecla and in Perpetua's martyrdom, is also empowering.

Eusebius describes how Christians along with their pagan slaves from the two communities of Lyon and Vienne are rounded up after a full-scale investigation. He names the deacon Sanctus of Vienne, the newly baptised Maturus, Attalus, a "pillar and ground of the community," and Blandina as coming to the attention of the soldiers. Blandina stands out immediately, she is an enslaved woman, described as the person "through whom Christ proved that the things men think cheap, ugly, and contemptuous are deemed worthy of glory before God, by reason of her love for him which was not merely vaunted in appearance but demonstrated in achievement" (*The Letter of the Churches of Lyons and Vienne* 1.17 [Musurillo]). Her mistress, also among the martyrs is concerned that Blandida would not be able to confess due to her "bodily weakness" (*The Letter of the Churches of Lyons and Vienne* 1.18 [Musurillo]). So far, she is introduced both implicitly and explicitly with the implied cultural expectations of weakness, and lowliness implied by both her enslaved status and her femininity. Her inclusion in the list of venerable men and the explicit description of her as cheap and ugly are designed to further reinforce her perceived low status, even her mistress thinks that she will not have the fortitude to withstand torture and make a confession of faith.¹⁸⁰

¹⁸⁰ Moss suggests that this also demonstrates an underlying concern for the potential of apostasy in the face of possible martyrdom and torture (Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 108).

Scholars have focused on Blandina's enslaved status arguing that the text relies on the categories associated with the obligations of servile status.¹⁸¹ J. Albert Harrill contends that the trope of the loyal and faithful slave was used in early Christian texts, the faithful slave was one "who accepted the master's authority and point of view so fully as to endure torture and to give all, even life itself, to save the master."¹⁸² In early Christian texts, enslaved people are used to model a spectacle of faith, designed to be emulated by others. Solevåg argues that the feminine, enslaved body of Blandina is employed in the narrative as a spectacle, a site to "exhibit suffering at its most cruel form".¹⁸³ This representation of Blandina in contrast to the upper-class Perpetua, takes a different form,

Blandina figures the Christian rehabilitation of the humble, the elevation of an abased figure: in the intensity of her slave-like suffering she represents Christ. Eusebius is not alone in recognizing the resemblance of battered slave bodies to the battered body of Christ. 1 Peter encourages slaves to accept unjust beating from their masters by noting that Christ himself had been abused and suffered, a formulation that, while giving meaning to the suffering of slaves, inculcates submissiveness (2.18-25).¹⁸⁴

Perpetua exhibits the "authoritative presence of an elite woman habituated as a *domina*" whilst Blandina's enslaved, female body is employed specifically to model her changing status and empowerment from cheap, ugly and disempowered to an exalted, empowered martyr whilst still retaining a submissiveness to Christ.¹⁸⁵

Despite days of torture and pain, her culturally implied low status is subverted and

Blandina was filled with such power that even those who were taking turns to torture her in every way from dawn to dusk were weary and exhausted. They themselves admitted that they were beaten, that there was nothing further they

¹⁸¹ See for example Burrus, *Saving Shame*, 23-28 and Glancy, *Corporal Knowledge*, 59-61.

¹⁸² J. Albert Harrill, *Slaves in the New Testament: Literary, Social and Moral Dimensions* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006) 145-146

¹⁸³ Solevåg, *Birthing Salvation*, 232.

¹⁸⁴ Glancy, *Corporal Knowledge*, 60.

¹⁸⁵ Glancy, *Corporal Knowledge*, 59

could do to her, and they were surprised that she was still breathing, for her entire body was broken and torn” (*The Letter of the Churches of Lyons and Vienne* 1.18 [Musurillo]).

She is taken to the arena where she is

Hung on a post and exposed as bait for the wild animals that were let loose on her. She seemed to hang there in the form of a cross, and by her fervent prayer she aroused intense enthusiasm in those who were undergoing their ordeal, for in their torment with their physical eyes they saw in the person of their sister him who was crucified for them, that he might convince all who believe in him that all who suffer for Christ’s glory will have eternal fellowship in the living God (*The Letter of the Churches of Lyons and Vienne* 1.41 [Musurillo]).

The animals however do not touch her, and she is returned to her cell. Her Christ-like performance in the arena, Eusebius informs us, is a victory through which “tiny, weak, and insignificant as she was, she would give inspiration to her brothers, for she had put on Christ, that mighty and invincible athlete, and had overcome the Adversary in many contests, and through her conflict had won the crown of immortality” (*The Letter of the Churches of Lyons and Vienne* 1.42 [Musurillo]). As Moss explains,

Her cross-like form... enables the other martyrs to look through her to Christ...In the eyes of the other martyrs, Blandina herself disappears, in her place and in her physical form they see only Christ crucified. The transformative quality of her imitation of the crucifixion is so strong that the martyr herself vanishes; her identity is transformed into and is subsumed by that of Christ.¹⁸⁶

The audience no longer see an ugly, weak, suffering female body, they see her transformed, hanging in the form of the cross in the likeness of Jesus.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁶ Moss, *The Other Christs*, 62.

¹⁸⁷ Virginia Burrus sees Blandina’s gender as important here as she reads not only Christological significance in this passage, but identifies Blandina as represented as a second Eve (Burrus, *Saving Shame*, 26).

On the final day of the games, Blandina is brought back to the arena, this time with a fifteen-year-old boy called Ponticus. They had been forced to watch the torture of the other martyrs and had been tortured themselves but continued to remain resolute.¹⁸⁸

She was urging him on and strengthening him, and after nobly enduring every torment, gave up his spirit. The blessed Blandina was last of all: like a noble mother encouraging her children, she sent them before her in triumph to the King, and then, after duplicating in her own body all her children's sufferings, she hastened to rejoin them, rejoicing and glorifying in her death as though she had been invited to a bridal banquet instead of being a victim of the beasts. After the scourges, the animals, and the hot griddle, she was at last tossed into a net and exposed to a bull. After being tossed a good deal by the animal, she no longer perceived what was happening because of the hope and possession of all she believed in and because of her intimacy with Christ. Thus she too was offered sacrifice, while the pagans themselves admitted that no woman had ever suffered so much in their experience (*The Letter of the Churches of Lyons and Vienne* 1.54-56 [Musurillo]).

Blandina's endurance of corporal suffering in the arena is presented as giving her some form of "intimacy with Christ," so that she is further empowered. It acts as an analgesic (as with Perpetua,) so that she is no longer able to perceive the physical pain inflicted on her body.¹⁸⁹ This insignificant, tiny, weak woman becomes masculinised and powerful through her suffering and imitation of Christ in the arena, and she is described as a mighty, invincible athlete.

Examining the use of gladiatorial imagery in the accounts of female martyrs, Johannes Vorster argues that this was not to promote female empowerment, but rather as a means of promoting male interests.¹⁹⁰ He contends that the tortured female bodies found

¹⁸⁸ *The Letter of the Churches of Lyons and Vienne* 1.53.

¹⁸⁹ Perkins notes that throughout the text we find either the curative or the empowering power of pain (Perkins, "The 'Passion of Perpetua,'" 846). On pain in the early martyr accounts see Cobb, *Divine Deliverance*.

¹⁹⁰ On the use of the "gladiatorial model," see Johannes N. Vorster, "The Blood of Female Martyrs as the Sperm of the Early Church," *Religion and Theology* 9 (2002), 8-41. (30-35).

in these texts become perfect bodies only because they are transformed into bodies of perfection –the male bodies of gladiators

The gladiatorial model did not simply allow female martyrs entry into the world of males, but it changed them into males. The imperfection of the female body was entrenched to such an extent by a single-sex regulatory body that it had to be transformed into a male body. For at least some of our early Christian male authors, honour and nobility were qualities so intimately associated with masculinity that only 'maleness' could exhibit them. As such, the female body had to be 'unmade', had to suffer a loss of identity. With this formulation, expression was given to a motive that was quite widespread in the early Christian communities the female-must become male, the female must conform to the perfection of the male body. The stories of the female martyrs therefore resurrected their tortured bodies, but served to entrench and reproduce the regulatory, male body.¹⁹¹

However, whilst Blandina is masculinised using gladiatorial imagery, she is also simultaneously feminised through Eusebius' construction of her as a mother. Although not described as a mother herself, she is ascribed a maternal role, as a "noble mother" to the other martyrs and who encourages her spiritual children on their way to martyrdom before she herself meets her end.¹⁹² As Marjanen observes though, this maternal representation subverts the expected norm as instead of protecting her child from harm, Blandina encourages him towards martyrdom, sending him off to his death.¹⁹³ It is she who gives the fifteen-year-old Ponticus the strength to successfully endure his torture and martyrdom.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹¹ Johannes N. Vorster, "The Blood of Female Martyrs as the Sperm of the Early Church," *Religion and Theology* 9 (2002), 8-41. (33-34)

¹⁹² *The Letter of the Churches of Lyons and Vienne* 1.55.

¹⁹³ Marjanen, *Male Women Martyrs*, 11.

¹⁹⁴ In his translation of the text, Herbert Musurillo suggests that this alludes to the Maccabean mother (2 Macc. 7.20-3). *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, ed. Herbert Musurillo (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 79 §27. Both Moss and Cobb concur, drawing parallels with this portrayal and that of the Maccabean mother. Moss highlights the biblical allusions within this text which are both explicit and implicit (Cobb, *Dying to be Men*, 115 and Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 112). Moss draws discrete connections between the characterization of Ponticus which recalls the Maccabean Eleazar and Blandina as the Maccabean mother. Moss draws attention to the use of the noun τέκνα ("children"), arguing that its significance is its use as a plural, despite there only being one "child," Ponticus in the text. She contends that "using the plural form accentuates the link with the Maccabean mother (Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 112).

The depiction of Blandina in this narrative emphasises that even for those members of society perceived as the most powerless and vulnerable, the endurance of pain and suffering was transformative and empowering.¹⁹⁵ In the opening of the text itself, this is stressed,

Arrayed against him was God's grace, which protected the weak, and raised up sturdy pillars that could by their endurance take on themselves all the attacks of the Evil One. These then charged into battle, holding up under every sort of abuse and torment, indeed, they made light of their great burden as they sped on to Christ, proving without question that the sufferings of the present time are not to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us" (*The Letter of the Churches of Lyons and Vienne* 1.6 [Musurillo]).

This passage reveals one of the key messages in this text. It is God's grace which enables the weak to be raised up and through their endurance able to withstand any abuse that they might be subjected to.

Conclusion

In her study of social memory of suffering in the context of the early church, Elizabeth Castelli contends that early Christians almost immediately positioned the historical experience of persecution within a framework of meaning, a metanarrative of history, salvation and suffering which served a rhetorical purpose of creating a persuasive, continuous and purposeful historical narrative.¹⁹⁶ Judith Perkins claims that these scripts of suffering became the material of Christian collective memory and were part of a widespread cultural concern which used representations of suffering and bodily pain to construct a new subjectivity and which combined suffering with heroic endurance and submission. Brent D.

¹⁹⁵ Perkins draws our attention to a range of texts which highlight the social vulnerability of the protagonist, pointing out that even for those who have higher social status, authors often stress their vulnerability (Perkins, "The 'Passion of Perpetua'", 847.

¹⁹⁶ Elizabeth A. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 57-60.

Shaw concurs, identifying a discourse of the body which reflected a particular emphasis on patient endurance and the “elevation of passive power and resistance to a position in written texts.”¹⁹⁷

In combining these early Christian sources with sources from the wider Greco-Roman world, it is possible to see the coalescing of broader cultural assumptions about the female body and femininity with theology. In a world in which important theological questions were being debated and in which identity formation was central, the female body was a deliberate choice employed specifically to define, prescribe, and rehearse theology and ideology and to subvert, and revise cultural values. Physical pain, suffering and emotional tribulations were put to use and rendered as purposeful, expedient and redemptive. The suffering feminine body was purposeful, whether she suffered the brutal effects of sexual violence, childbirth, or the wrath of the arena. The rhetoric of the suffering feminine body was identity forming and theologically significant, it took broader cultural concepts of the ancient world and appropriated them in the form of the passive, suffering feminine body and used these performances to give a place to suffering and endurance in the wider newly forming Christian communities of the ancient world.

Ascetic discourse of the late antique world built on the ancient concepts of the body as highlighted at the beginning of this chapter as well as employing the female body as a site of suffering and endurance on which theology and doctrine was written. Indeed, ascetic literature depicts a range of corporeal performances which celebrated the suffering female

¹⁹⁷ Brent D. Shaw, “Body / Power / Identity: Passions of the Martyrs,” *J ECS* (1996): 269-312 (295).

ascetic body and like these earlier Christian narratives, rendered these performances as purposeful. Having examined the wider discursive field, we turn now to these texts undertaking a close analysis of sources from the fourth and fifth centuries which consider the literary representation of the suffering female body.

CHAPTER III: OOZING WITH AFFLICTION: DISGUST AND THE OBLITERATION OF GENDER IN THE LATE ANTIQUE BODY

On August 9th 2010, the face of Aesha Mohammadzai appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine.¹⁹⁸ Born in Afghanistan, at the age of twelve, Aesha had been given in marriage to a Taliban family as restitution for a crime committed by her uncle. She suffered years of abuse and beatings before finally attempting to escape but was caught in her attempt to flee. To punish her, her father-in-law and five other men, including her husband, held her at gunpoint, taking her into the mountains, where they brutally held her down, hacked off her nose and ears and left her unconscious in a pool of blood. Rescued and now safe in the United States, Aesha agreed to be photographed for the cover of *Time*. The now iconic image awarded World Press Photo of the Year showed the mutilated face of this young girl, the victim of brutal torture and abuse at the hand of the Taliban. This powerfully emotive image has been appropriated by campaigners to depict the disturbing plight of women in Afghanistan, and as an embodiment of oppression, “a living symbol of the potential fate of women if the Taliban's strict interpretation of Shari'a law returned to rule the land.”¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁸ Photograph by Jodi Bieber, “What Happens If We Leave Afghanistan,” *Time Magazine*, August 10th 2010, front cover.

¹⁹⁹ John Wendle, “The Aisha Bibi Case: Her Father Wants to Petition the Taliban for Justice.” Thursday, July 14, 2011. Accessed at <https://tinyurl.com/4z4ud8u8>. Conversely, Andrew Anthony argued that for those who wanted to see the troops withdrawn, the images of Afghan women such as Aesha were used as propaganda to support the occupation of Afghanistan. They “acted as a symbol of what they were fighting against, and for those who wanted to see them withdrawn, it was a piece of emotional propaganda or ‘war-porn’” (Andrew Anthony, “Afghanistan's propaganda war takes a new twist,” Sunday 5th December 2010 *The Guardian*, <https://tinyurl.com/j5d94jj8>).

Visual imagery of victims of war, terror and abuse are nothing new in the world's media. The image of a young girl fleeing from a napalm attack on Vietnam in 1972 or the "Falling Man" who jumped from the burning World Trade Centre on 9/11 are just two very memorable and poignant examples.²⁰⁰ But there is something different about facial disfigurement. In her study on war and the aesthetics of disfigurement, Suzannah Biernoff observes that despite an abundance of archived images from the First World War depicting soldiers with facial disfigurement, there was a "relative absence of facial injury from the public visual culture of the war."²⁰¹ Biernoff documents an unspoken "culture of aversion" which obscured the images and indeed the actual faces of those who had been disfigured.²⁰² Soldiers who had been physically injured and healed or who had suffered limb amputation were pictured as the "heroes" of war, the sanitised and acceptable rendering of its consequences. It would seem that images of the dead, of "men burned and maimed to the condition of animals" or of soldiers with amputated limbs could be used to demonstrate the horror of war or the heroic actions of those involved, but facial disfigurement was just a step too far.²⁰³

The photograph of Aesha spoke to the public in ways that other images of violence could not because there is something about facial disfigurement that speaks to us.²⁰⁴ Our

²⁰⁰ Nick Ut, "Girl, 9, Survives Napalm Burns," *The New York Times*. 12th June 1972 and Richard Drew, "The Falling Man," *The New York Times*. 12th September 2001.

²⁰¹ Suzannah Biernoff, *Portraits of Violence : War and the Aesthetics of Disfigurement* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 10.

²⁰² Biernoff, *Portraits of Violence*, 13.

²⁰³ The surgeon Harold Delf Gillies' description of the aftermath of the Somme cited in Andrew Bamji, "Facial Surgery: The Patient's Experience." In *Facing Armageddon: The First World War Experienced*, ed. Hugh Cecil and Peter H. Liddle, (London: Leo Cooper, 1996), 495.

²⁰⁴ Patricia Skinner attributes this in part to the 'triumphing over adversity' model used in the media in which stories of people who have sustained facial disfigurement have been used as a vehicle for raising

face, is the place on which we ascribe our identity, on which we read emotions and on which classical ideals of beauty are read.²⁰⁵ Its destruction spoke just as powerfully in the ancient world as it does to us in modern times. In Gregory of Nyssa's homily *On the Love of the Poor* for example, he addressed the effects of disfiguration of those who suffered with diseases such as leprosy, describing it as "a frightful malady" which robs the sufferer of their "human form" and turned them into "monstrous" "beasts."²⁰⁶

In this chapter, we examine an ancient case of facial deformity, that of the late antique ascetic, Syncletica found in the fifth-century hagiographic *Life and Activity of the*

understanding, awareness, and often funding to support charity work. She cites the Falklands veteran Simon Weston, James Partridge the founder of the charity Changing Faces, and the female survivors of domestic abuse by their partners: Katie Piper, Carmen Tarleton and Tina Nash (Patricia Skinner, "'Better Off Dead Than Disfigured?' The Challenges of Facial Injury in the Pre-Modern Past," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 26 (2016): 25-41). See also Simon Weston, *Going Back: Return to the Falklands* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1992); James Partridge, *Changing Faces: The Challenge of Facial Disfigurement* (London: Penguin, 1990); Katie Piper, *Beautiful* (London: Ebury Press, 2011); Carmen Blandin Tarleton, *Overcome: Burned, Blinded, and Blessed* (Writers of the Round Table Press, 2013) and Tina Nash, *Out of the Darkness* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2012).

²⁰⁵ Modern studies reflect a connection between identity and the face. In a recent study, researchers stress that as well as the important physiological functions of the face, "Self-concept revolves around the face, as it is the primary means by which humans recognize and interact with each other and the primary mode of self-expression, emotional expression, and social interaction. The intimate relationship between self-concept and appearance is also well documented, and the face is a major component of body image and self-worth. It affects how one is perceived and evaluated by others, guiding their impressions and behavior." (William J. Rifkin, Rami S. Kantar, Safi Ali-Khan, Natalie M. Plana, J. Rodrigo Diaz-Siso, Manos Tsakiris, and Eduardo D. Rodriguez, "Facial Disfigurement and Identity: A Review of the Literature and Implications for Facial Transplantation," *AMA Journal of Ethics* 20 (2018): 309-323 (310)). Hartung et al have studied facial deformity from the perspective of behavioural and brain responses to facial disfigurement. The study begins with the hypothesis that there is a general negative bias against disfigured faces which was tested by recording participants brain responses in a functional MRI study. They concluded that neural responses to photographs of disfigured faces demonstrated an "implicit 'disfigured is bad' bias." They note that in modern popular culture, this could explain why villains are frequently depicted as facially disfigured (Scar from the Lion King, James Bond villains Le Chiffre, Emilio Largo, Ernst Stavro Blofeld and Two Face from the Batman Universe are just some notable examples they give) thus conforming to an automatic stereotype which exists (Franziska Hartung et al., "Behavioural and Neural Responses to Facial Disfigurement. *Sci. Rep.* 9: 8021 (2019). On ancient writers, Candida Moss notes that "Greek and Roman aesthetics emphasized bodily wholeness and symmetry. As Plotinus puts it, 'Almost everyone declares . . . that the beautiful thing is symmetrical.' Ancient physiognomic treatises and popular bias linked bodily difference to character flaws and disobedience to the gods. Beauty and virtue were intertwined" (Candida R. Moss, *Divine Bodies: Resurrecting Perfection in the New Testament and Early Christianity* (Yale University Press, 2019), 60).

²⁰⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Love of the Poor* 1.

Holy and Blessed Syncletica.²⁰⁷ Syncletica is depicted as an austere ascetic living in the Alexandrian desert until at 80 years old, the “devil” launched a relentless assault on her body, in the form of a protracted illness. Her body appears to fragment and disintegrate before our eyes. Beginning with her internal organs, the devil broke her lungs into pieces which were expelled from her mouth via spittle and racked her body with fever. Syncletica was then silenced, her “speech organ” attacked and the most graphic depiction of her illness focused on her mouth and face, where

He made her gums putrid....And the bone fell out; the spreading passed into the whole jaw and became decay of the body pressing on the neighbouring parts; and in forty days the bone was worm-eaten. And within the space of two months’ time, there was a hole. The surrounding spaces were all becoming black. And the bone itself was corrupted, and little by little wasted away; putrefaction and the heaviest stench governed her whole body. (Pseudo-Athanasius, *Vita Syncletica* 111 [Castelli]).

Piece by piece her body was consumed, corpse-like with bones disintegrating, worm-infested, and emitting an inhuman stench.

Just as the image and story of Aesha’s suffering and disfigurement in the twenty-first century, the graphic, disturbing and lurid representation of Syncletica’s suffering body speaks to us not only on a humane level, but also as a site on which meanings were forged. Using the *Life and Activity of the Holy and Blessed Syncletica*, I will demonstrate how the discursive suffering body, enmeshed in the value-system of the late antique ascetic world functioned as a locus for defining boundaries. I argue that through a literary performance of gender and of gendered expectations, this text employed Syncletica’s facial disintegration and corporal suffering to establish communal boundaries and identity and was a site

²⁰⁷ All translations are from Elizabeth Castelli, “The Life and Activity of the Holy and Blessed Teacher Syncletica,” in *Ascetic Behavior in Greco Roman Antiquity: A Sourcebook*, ed. Vincent Wimbush (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1990), 255-311. Hereafter I will abbreviate the text to the *Life of Syncletica* or *Life*.

through which theological and ideological conceptions of sexuality, virginity, and corporeality were deliberated.²⁰⁸

Dating, Composition and Authorship

The *Life of Syncletica* is one of the earliest accounts of a female saint after the Acts of the Martyrs.²⁰⁹ Frustratingly, for the modern scholar, it is a text full of uncertainties both around textual composition as well as details about its protagonist. Since the fourteenth century, the text has been attributed to Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria (c.296-373), and believed to be a companion text to the *Life of Antony*, written for female monks.²¹⁰ As early as the eighteenth century, however, scholars disputed the attribution to Athanasius.²¹¹ The re-discovery of a number of previously lost works of the fourth-century ascetic Evagrius Ponticus (d.399) in the twentieth century, further supported the view that Athanasius could not have written the text. Identifying “the pervasive and undeniable influence of Evagrius” in the *Life of Syncletica*, scholars have proceeded to further identify similarities between the *Life of Syncletica* and the work of a disciple of Evagrius, the theologian John Cassian

²⁰⁸ On gender as performance see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Tenth Anniversary Edition* (London: Routledge, 2002,) and Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (Florence: Taylor & Francis Group, 2014.)

²⁰⁹ Other Lives of early Christian women from around the same time period include Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Macrina*; Anon., *Life of Olympias*; Gerontius, *Life of Melania the Younger*; Anon., *Life of Mary the Harlot*; the *Life of Saint Pelagia* (attributed to a deacon named Jacob). There are other shorter accounts of female ascetics in Palladius, *Lausiac History* and Theodoret of Cyrus, *History of the Monks of Egypt*.

²¹⁰ In his *Historia Ecclesiastica*, Nicephorus Callistus Xanthopoulos of Constantinople (c. 1256–c. 1335), a cleric at the basilica of Hagia Sophia, credited the text to Athanasius, stating that after having written the *Life of Antony* for monks, Athanasius wrote the text as an alternative narrative for women.

²¹¹ The French Benedictine monk, Bernard de Montfaucon (1655-1741) concluded that the difference in literary style and the absence of any external evidence attributing the text to Athanasius in the centuries after his death meant that the text was in fact a spurious work. (John McClintock and James Strong, “Polycarp the Ascetic,” in *Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature: Volume 8* (New York: Harper, 1879), 363). Elizabeth Bryson Bongie maintains that claims that Athanasius wrote the text are “manifestly false for reasons of style and content” (Elizabeth Bryson Bongie, *The Life and Regimen of the Blessed and Holy Syncletica by Pseudo-Athanasius. Part One: The Translation* (Eugene, Oregon: Wiff & Stock, 2005), 5). See also Lucian Regnault, introduction to *Vie de Sainte Syncletique*, by Odile Bénédict Bernard (Spiritualite Orientale, 9: Bellefontaine, 1972), x-xiii.

(d.450.)²¹² Drawing parallels to the work of Evagrius and Cassian, suggests that the text was composed later, most significantly after 373 when Athanasius died. However, scholars continue to debate the relationship between the *Life of Antony* and the *Life of Syncletica*, even though shared authorship is now rejected.²¹³ Individual sayings in the *Life of Syncletica* also appear in the Latin collections of the *Apophthegm Patrum* from the sixth century and therefore provides us with a *terminus ad quem* for the *Life of Syncletica's* composition.²¹⁴ Most scholars therefore assume that the text was composed around the mid-fifth century, and authorship remains unknown.²¹⁵

²¹² Mary Schaffer, *The Life and Regimen of the Blessed and Holy Syncletica by Pseudo-Athanasius. Part Two: A Study of the Life* (Eugene: Wiff & Stock, 2005), 9. See also Kevin Corrigan, "Syncletica and Macrina: Two Early Lives of Women Saints," *Vox Benedictina* 6 (1989): 241-257, para 3 and Regnault, introduction, xiii-xiv. On the similarities between Cassian and the *Life* see Regnault, introduction, xiii-xiv. Schaffer suggests there are close links between Cassian's writing on spiritual knowledge in *Conference* 14 (Schaffer, *The Life and Regimen*, 11.)

²¹³ Emphasising that the text was "probably" not written by Athanasius, Mary Forman, suggests that there are however similarities between the *Life of Syncletica* and the *Life of Antony*. She speculates that these similarities should be attributed to the author's familiarity with the literary style and themes of the *Life of Antony* and was able to use them to draw parallels in the *Life of Syncletica* (Mary Forman, "Amma Syncletica: A Spirituality of Experience," *Vox Benedictina: A Journal of Translations from Monastic Sources* 10 (1993): 199-237, para 2 and 3). On the parallels between the *Life of Syncletica* and the *Life of Antony* see Lucian Regnault, introduction to *Vie de Sainte Syncletique*, by Odile Bénédicte Bernard (Spiritualite Orientale, 9: Bellefontaine, 1972), viii-ix.

²¹⁴ This supposition assumes that the *Life* was written first and that the Sayings were taken from the *Life* and not vice versa. Only one of the sayings attributed to her is not found in the *Life* (Saying 11 in the Greek edition) but according to A. S. E. Parker, should be attributed to Hyperechius, in the sixth-century *Adhortatio ad monachos* (A.S.E. Parker, "The *Vita Syncleticae*: Its Manuscripts, Ascetical Teachings and its Use in Monastic Sources," *Studia Patristica* 30 (1997): 234). For a summary of the relationship between the *Life* and the *Apophthegmata* see Regnault, introduction, xiv-xvi and Schaffer, *The Life and Regimen Part Two*, 12.

²¹⁵ Other possible contenders for authorship are the otherwise the unknown Arsenius of Pegadæ and Polycarp the Ascetic. These names originate from a reference in the 1879 *Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature* in which the entry for "Polycarp the ascetic" states that an ancient manuscript held by the Vatican library attributes the *Life of Syncletica* to Polycarp the ascetic. It also claims that a copy of the *Life of Syncletica* was found in the papers of the French patrologist, François Combefis (1605-1679) following his death. This copy contained a clause stating that the "discourses or sayings" of Syncletica had been "reported" by "the blessed Arsenius of Pegadæ." (John McClintock and James Strong, "Polycarp the Ascetic," 363). In her summary of the manuscript tradition of the *Life*, A. S. E. Parker states that there are ten manuscripts which carry the text and three which have excerpts. Of these texts, eight are attributed to Athanasius, three to Polycarp and one to Arsenius. (A.S.E. Parker, "The *Vita Syncleticae*," 231). On dating the text to the fifth century see Bongie, *The Life and Regimen*, 5; Castelli, "The Life and Activity," 265; Corrigan, "Syncletica and Macrina," 1; Forman, "Amma Syncletica," no page numbers; Peter Anthony Mena, "Scenting Saintliness: The Ailing Body, Chicana Feminism, and Communal Identity in Ancient Christianity," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 33 (2017): 10; A.S.E. Parker, "The *Vita Syncleticae*," 231; Schaffer, *The Life and Regimen*, 9

The *Life of Syncletica* itself contains few internal clues to the date or circumstances of its composition. Working backwards from the text would suggest that Syncletica lived around the late fourth to early fifth century.²¹⁶ The scant biographical information within the text combined with the fact that the only evidence we have of Syncletica's historical existence is the *Life* itself and her sayings in the *Apophthegm Patrum*, have led some scholars to suggest that she was in fact a completely fictitious character.²¹⁷ Others however contend that her inclusion in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* along with only two other women emphasises her historical veracity.²¹⁸ Corrigan further asserts that it is precisely *because* the text has so little historical information and the author does not attempt to address this omission combined with the lack of miraculous events, that we should believe she was a real historical person.²¹⁹ Although the historical "reality" of Syncletica is far from certain, the *Life* itself is anything but formulaic, especially in the latter stages when she becomes ill, it is therefore important to study as a textual response, regardless of Syncletica's lived experience.

²¹⁶ Corrigan suggests that she was born c.350 at the earliest (Corrigan, "Syncletica and Macrina," para. 3).

²¹⁷ For some scholars, Syncletica's very name also adds to the argument that Syncletica was not a real, historical person. Exploring the etymology of the name Syncletica, Tim Vivian demonstrates that the masculine *sunkletikos* refers to a man of senatorial rank whilst the feminine *sunkletike* could refer to a woman of senatorial rank or instead the wife of someone of senatorial rank. However, he also noted that the author of the *Life of Syncletica* describes her as being "The one who is named for the heavenly assembly (*sunklētos*)," noting that the root of *synletos* comes from *klesis* and from the verb *kaleo*, to call and that the idea of being called together is perhaps suggestive that she is in fact an invention of the author. (Tim Vivian, "Syncletica of Palestine: A Sixth-Century Female Anchorite." *Vox Benedictina*, Summer (1993), no page numbers). Schaffer asserts that the author of the text used the literal meaning of her name as a means of demonstrating the spiritual significance of her life. She maintains that the reference to "heavenly assembly" has a scriptural basis which signals to the audience of the text that Syncletica's life should be read figuratively as the life of the Church. (Schaffer, *The Life and Regimen*, 15-16.)

²¹⁸ Amma Theodora and Sara are the only other women featured in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*. Schaffer contends that the significance of her inclusion should not be underestimated as it puts her on par with her male counterparts. (Schaffer, *The Life and Regimen*, 16.)

²¹⁹ Corrigan describes the "unadorned nakedness of the discourse" (Corrigan, "Syncletica and Macrina," para 12).

Overview of the Text

The biographical information available in the text tells us that Syncletica was from a Christian family of Macedonian heritage whose ancestors had moved to Alexandria. She had three siblings, all devout Christians, her two brothers had died, one at a young age, the other at twenty-five, and her sister who was blind.²²⁰ Despite therefore being her parents' only hope to continue her family line and despite being exceedingly attractive and having many suitors, Syncletica herself was solely focused on a life of chastity, "hearing worldly marriage, she imagined divine marriage; and overlooking many suitors, she possessed the inclination for the divine Bridegroom alone" (Pseudo-Athanasius, *Vita Syncletica* 7 [Castelli]).

Like other saints, Syncletica began her ascetic programme with a narrative of what Alison Goddard Elliott refers to as a symbolic spiritual descent into death. Elliott notes that this spiritual descent was often depicted as a spatial development in the narrative, for example a journey or change of location and for many, their first stop towards sanctity was the grave.²²¹ Examples of confined, tomb-like sanctuaries occupied by the saint, or of actual burial of the saints themselves or of someone else, marked their symbolic death in the world and acted as a rite of passage before their rebirth and ascent towards heaven as they began their ascetic life.²²² The beginning of Syncletica's life of asceticism is marked in this

²²⁰ Pseudo-Athanasius, *Vita Syncletica*, 5; 11.

²²¹ Alison Goddard Elliott, *Roads to Paradise: Reading the Lives of the Early Saints* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1987), 77-102. Goddard describes the movement from the "world" to the desert as a symbolic "process of disengagement" in which the saint would leave behind worldly preoccupations and cross a clear boundary and move towards the spiritual.

²²² Antony's initial withdrawal had been to a tomb (Athanasius, *Life of Antony*, 8-9), others lived in tomb-like places, often in spaces so small they could not stand. Displaced burial could also mark withdrawal from the world, where the ascetic came upon someone who had just died and needed burial. For a comprehensive selection of examples see Elliott, *Roads to Paradise*, 104-116. Mary Forman asserts that the practice of seclusion for meditation was practiced in Egypt by the priests who lived inside the Serapeum temple at Memphis, "The practice of visiting the tombs was considered an experience of a 'living death': one approached a likeness to death and from there journeyed to the 'frontiers of the beyond' in the hope of arriving at a

way. Following the death of her parents, she and her sister left the paternal home, journeying to a remote tomb of a relative.²²³ To further mark the next stage in her life, she put away her cosmetics, distributed her wealth and property to the poor, and having summoned an elder, cut her hair ready to begin the ascetic life.²²⁴ As news of her holiness spread, she was visited by great numbers of women who persuaded her to teach them.

So far, there are many parallels between the text and the *Life of Antony* as other scholars have observed. However, where the narrative differs substantially is in Syncletica's old age when we are told that she was attacked by the "devil" who undertook a relentless assault on her body. Bearing this suffering with Job-like endurance, Syncletica faced a battle greater than those of the "oldest martyrs."²²⁵ She endured a long, drawn-out illness which gradually ate away her body from the inside piece by piece culminating in the putrefaction of her mouth and face. Graphically realistic, but intensely horrific, illness permeated her body and somatic destruction, wasting and putrefaction occurred until her fragmented body exuded an "inhuman stench" from within and her body oozed with affliction.

Transcendence of Gender

Narrative representations of women being "made male" are ubiquitous in the literature of the early church.²²⁶ The trope of Christian women transcending gender in late

secret, hidden understanding. The walls of these tombs were covered in frescoes and texts describing the Kingdom of the Dead: judgement, the nightly journey of the sun, the Infernal Regions and the Realm of the Dead. One can easily imagine how phantasms of various kinds could be conjured up as the pilgrim fasted and prayed in the midst of such vivid pictures of human, divine and monstrous creatures who inhabited the land of the dead." (Forman, "Amma Syncletica," para 12.)

²²³ Pseudo-Athanasius, *Vita Syncletica* 5; 11.

²²⁴ Pseudo-Athanasius, *Vita Syncletica*, 11; 12.

²²⁵ Pseudo-Athanasius, *Vita Syncletica* 104-106.

²²⁶ On masculinity in early and Late Antique Christianity see: Virginia Burrus, "Begotten, Not Made": Conceiving Manhood in Late Antiquity (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000); L. Stephanie Cobb, *Dying to*

antique hagiography is complex, embedded in theological, cultural and social notions of femininity, soteriology and sanctity, and in this chapter, I explore some of these themes and consider how they apply to the *Life of Syncletica*. As with a range of late antique hagiography, the *Life* employs a variety of common tropes to make Syncletica “male” or rather to de-feminise her. However, I argue that Syncletica also transcended her gender through a rhetoric of disgust and corporal suffering. I contend that the illness that permeated her body causing somatic destruction and putrefaction was employed as the prime site of her de-sexualisation and de-gendering. Whilst it is not possible to provide an in-depth study of virginity and the transcendence of gender within the confines of this essay, I will consider some contextual background which will elucidate the depiction of the de-feminisation of women and women being “made male” which are relevant to situating Syncletica’s illness as a means of defeminisation. I will explore how the Greco-Roman understandings of the inferiority and sexuality of women combined with reinterpretations of the story of Eve and the connections between Eve and Mary in ascetic thought. This will demonstrate how notions of virginity, the ascetic life and concepts of sexuality and sexual desire were wrestled with by late antique Christians and will in turn illuminate the portrayal of Syncletica’s corporal suffering within the text. By situating Syncletica’s illness within this broader contextual framework, using Greco-Roman medical theories, exploring ancient olfactory cultural codes, and examining a range of ascetic and scriptural references, in

Be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr Texts (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Colleen M. Conway, *Behold the Man: Jesus and Greco-Roman Masculinity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Maud, W Gleason, *Making Men: Sophists and Self Presentation in Ancient Rome* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); Thomas Lacqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990); Stephen D. Moore and Janice Capel Anderson, “Taking It like a Man: Masculinity in 4 Maccabees,” *JBL* 117 (1998): 249-273; Jonathan Walters, “Invading the Roman Body: Manliness and Impenetrability in Roman Thought.” in *Roman Sexualities*, edited by Hallett, Judith P. & Skinner, Marilyn B.. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 1997), 29–43

particular the reception of John 11 and the raising of Lazarus, I demonstrate that Syncletica's illness can be situated within a common cultural framework employed to evoke horror and disgust. In so doing, Syncletica's body took on a communal function, employed to provoke and instigate desired behaviours, and was used to explore theological conceptions of the female body.

Myth, medical literature and society itself interweaved in the Greco-Roman world, to concurrently preserve cultural understandings and values whilst also reinforcing and determining them. As demonstrated in chapter 1, what can be noted in medical literature as well as in myth, is a recurring theme of female subordination. The female body was thought to be precarious, at risk of serious illness due to an excess of blood, it was cold, soft, moist and porous whilst men's bodies were characterised as hot, hard, dry and impervious.²²⁷ Women differed from men and that difference was always negative, they remained deficient, and whilst women were necessary for reproductive reasons, reproduction took priority over a women's own health.²²⁸ In ancient myths, it was women who were culpable for the evils of the world. These narratives acted as warnings to men about the danger inherent in women and their bodies, whilst justifying and reinforcing female inferiority.²²⁹ In the ancient Greek poet, Hesiod's account of human creation,

²²⁷ Defining women's bodies as loose, spongy, porous and cold were value judgements which enabled physicians to create biological constructs which explained the observable phenomenon of menstruation whilst also colluding with the cultural understanding of women's deficiency and subordination.

²²⁸ As Flemming notes, "It may only be Galen who cites Aristotle's statement that 'the female is less perfect than the male' as his founding premises; but everybody operated with this as a basic presupposition." Rebecca Flemming, *Medicine and the Making of Roman Women: Gender, Nature, and Authority from Celsus to Galen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 359.

²²⁹ For a more detailed discussion of women's bodies in the works of Hesiod, see Helen King, *Hippocrates' Woman: Reading the Female Body in Ancient Greece* (London: Routledge, 1998), 23-27; Alicia Myers, *Blessed Among Women?: Mothers and Motherhood in the New Testament*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 24-26.

Pandora, the first woman was formed after man, moulded from clay and given to men by the gods as punishment. Representative of all women, she was physically different to man, beautiful and charming, yet inherently deceitful and sexually voracious and therefore must be carefully observed and controlled by man.²³⁰

The myth of Pandora can be read alongside the story of creation in *Genesis*. Specifically, changing interpretations of the nature of Eve are important for an understanding of late ancient view of women and specifically, female ascetic representation.²³¹ In Genesis 2-3, Eve like Pandora, is a later creation, but created *from* Adam, as part of God's plan for humanity. The Hebrew Bible does not attribute the cause of sinfulness and evil in the world to Eve, but during the post-exilic and Hellenistic era, and possibly as a direct result of syncretisation of Eve with Pandora, the emphasis on the origin of sin shifted towards Genesis 2-3. Eve was subsequently attributed responsibility for the onset of sin and the "Fall" became sexualised. As early as the second century BCE., Ben Sirach wrote that, "From a woman, sin had its beginning, and because of her we all die."²³² By the first century CE., in the Greek *Life of Adam and Eve*, which continues the story of Adam and Eve after leaving the Garden of Eden, Eve takes full responsibility for their

²³⁰ "For from her is the race of women and female kind: of her is the deadly race and tribe of women who live amongst mortal men to their great trouble." Hesiod, *Theogony*, 590-593.

For a more detailed discussion of women's bodies in the works of Hesiod, see Helen King, *Hippocrates' Woman*, 23-27; Alicia Myers, *Blessed Among Women?: Mothers and Motherhood in the New Testament*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 24-26.

²³¹ For an overview of the developing traditions associated with Eve see Holly Morse, *Encountering Eve's Afterlives: A New Reception Critical Approach to Genesis 2-4* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020)

²³² Sirach, 25:24. For an alternative interpretation see Jack Levison, "Is Eve to Blame: A Contextual Analysis of Sirach 25:24," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 47 (1985): 617-23.

expulsion.²³³ She is blamed for the introduction of suffering, sin and death to humankind, and like Pandora, the sin that she committed was explicitly sexual.²³⁴

These ancient narratives reinforced female inferiority, emphasised the sexualisation of women and the problematic nature of the female body.²³⁵ But if women's bodies were inherently problematic, how could they enter the Kingdom of God? How could they be made perfect in heaven if they were not perfect in life, and how could this problematic sexual body be accounted for? In hagiography that focuses on female sanctity, the motif of gender transformation is one of the most fundamental means of demonstrating holiness, whilst simultaneously reflecting an anxiety with the female body which tacitly suggested that only by transcending their gender could women be acknowledged as holy.²³⁶

The conception of sexual difference as a barrier to achieving perfection is not unique to Christianity and can be found much earlier in writings such as Plato's *Symposium*.²³⁷ In Christian literature, the notion of merging or erasure of gender differentiation can be found as early as the first century in the Pauline epistles. Being "in Christ" in Galatians 3:28 for

²³³ On the reception of the *Life of Adam and Eve* see Gary A. Anderson and Michael E. Stone, *A Synopsis of the Books of Adam and Eve*, EJL 5 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994).

²³⁴ On taking responsibility for the original seduction see *Greek Life of Adam and Eve* 9.2; 10.1–11.3; 14.2; 19.1–21.6; 29.8–9.

²³⁵ The Pandora myth by Hesiod and the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis were not the only stories of the origin of women in Mediterranean antiquity, but they were two of the most popular and influential in the context of this study.

²³⁶ In depicting the female body, de-gendering of holy women was not the sole means by which women could achieve salvation, salvation by childbirth is one other example. On motherhood and early Christianity see Jennifer A. Glancy, *Corporal Knowledge: Early Christian Bodies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Alicia Myers, *Blessed Among Women? Mothers and Motherhood in the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017) and Anna Rebecca Solevåg, *Birthing Salvation: Gender and Class in Early Christian Childbearing Discourse* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

²³⁷ Plato, *Symposium*, 192d5-e2 and 193c5 demonstrated the idea that a return to perfection could only be achieved by the de-gendering of individuals, see also Plato's *Symposium* see Michael Groneberg, "Myth and Science Around Gender and Sexuality: Eros and The Three Sexes in Plato's *Symposium*." *Diogenes* 208: 39-49.

example suggests the eradication of social, cultural, and even biological boundary markers. Whilst some scholars highlight the egalitarian nature of this passage, Colleen Conway reads this dictum in the context of androgyny. So, while it appears to imply male and female equality, it is rather the collapsing of the female and assimilation with the male.²³⁸ A similar notion can be seen in the work of the Egyptian Jewish philosopher, Philo of Alexandria (d. c. 50 CE), writing around the same time as Paul. “For progress is indeed nothing else than the giving up of the female gender by changing into the male, since the female gender is material, passive, corporeal... while the male is active, rational,...and more akin to mind and thought” (Philo, *Questiones et solutions in Exodum* 1.8 [trans. Marcus]). For Philo, movement towards virtue was not eradication of gender as such, but eradication of the feminine to become more masculine. This is common too of the Christian tradition. Rather than a move towards androgyny or oneness, transcendence of gender is specifically a transcendence of femininity.²³⁹ This concept can be noted in the earliest non-canonical Christian reference to “becoming male,” found in the Gospel of Thomas. “Simon Peter said to them, ‘Let Mary leave us, because women are not worthy of life.’ Jesus said, ‘Look, I shall lead her so that I will make her male in order that she also may become a living spirit, resembling you males. For every woman who makes herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven’” (*Gospel of Thomas*, logion 114 [trans. Elliott]). This passage explicitly denotes the

²³⁸ Colleen M. Conway, *Behold the Man: Jesus and Greco-Roman Masculinity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 80-81. Susanna Elm determines that “If the ascetic life transforms humans into angels, if angels neither marry nor are given in marriage (Matt. 22:30), and if there is neither male nor female in Jesus Christ, then the symbiosis of male and female ascetics represents the highest form of ascetic perfection. If through asceticism a woman achieves “male” virtue (*aretē*), and is thereby transformed into a ‘manly woman’ then she has not achieved true equality with her male counterparts, but has been transformed into an ideal, complete human being.” (Susanna Elm, *Virgins of God: The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996) preface ix).

²³⁹ Recent scholarship has begun to consider both male ascetics and even Jesus himself as exhibiting markers of femininity. See for example Ellen Muehlberger, “Simeon and Other Women in Theodoret’s Religious History: Gender in the Representation of Late Ancient Christian Asceticism,” *J ECS* 23 (2015), 583-606.

need for the *female* disciple to change, it is only she who needs to be masculinised.

Significantly here, is the notion that becoming male has something to do with salvation, and that by becoming male, women have a means of entering the kingdom of God.

Modelled on examples such as Thecla, ascetic women in literary representations frequently marked their move into the ascetic life with an external display of masculinisation.²⁴⁰ Categories of gender were fluid, performative and social and identification as masculine was not as simple as whether or not one had a penis, but rather, could be located in an individual's ability, or perceived ability to exert control over oneself and / or of others. Masculinity was mutable in that it was in the eyes of the beholder rather than in an individual's own assessment of themselves. Signifiers of masculinity could be so subtle that in narrative representation, particularly for the modern reader, these references can often go unnoticed – concepts such as control of one's own body and athletic imagery for example are much more explicit, whereas references to tone of voice, mannerisms, emotions, manner of speech are less clear.²⁴¹

In Syncletica's case, Pseudo-Athanasius used a range of both explicit and tacit motifs throughout the text to signify her move away from the feminine. At the beginning of the story, Syncletica conformed to the typical gendered Roman social norms. She was the

²⁴⁰ This is certainly demonstrated in narrative representations.

²⁴¹ On masculinity in the ancient world and in early Christianity see Virginia Burrus, *Begotten Not Made: Conceiving Manhood in Late Antiquity* (Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press, 2000); L. Stephanie Cobb, *Dying to Be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr Texts* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2008), 60-91; Colleen Conway, *Behold the Man: Jesus and Greco-Roman Masculinity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 15-34; Maud W. Gleason, *Making Men: Sophists and Self-Presentation in Ancient Rome* (Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 1995); Judith P. Hallett and Marilyn B. Skinner eds., *Roman Sexualities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997) and Stephen D. Moore and Janice Capel Anderson eds., *New Testament Masculinities* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003).

model Roman daughter, portrayed as a beautiful young maiden, whose exceeding physical beauty attracted many potential suitors.²⁴² Following the death of her parents, Syncletica summoned one of the elders, cut her own hair and put away her cosmetics. Early Christian texts often employed the trope of cutting hair or changing clothes to signal the beginning of a spiritual journey.²⁴³ Hair represented worldly attractions, it was the “ornament according to life” which “honors, glories, the acquisition of possessions, bright raiment of clothing, the intimacies of baths, pleasures of food” (Pseudo-Athanasius, *Vita Syncletica* 80 [Castelli]). Ridding oneself of these accoutrements demonstrated a detachment from social and worldly ties before beginning the ascetic life. It was only at this point, that Syncletica really begin preparation for her spiritual journey towards God through training and with “long sufferings” (Pseudo-Athanasius, *Vita Syncletica*, 12 [Castelli]).²⁴⁴ Just as in the journey to the tomb, cutting her hair demonstrated the renunciation of the worldly pleasures and marked a move towards the spiritual life of asceticism.

The trope of the cutting of the hair was significant in late antique times and the modern reader could easily miss the nuanced interpretations. In ancient times, a woman’s hair, was an immediately visible sign of her beauty, social status and sexual availability.²⁴⁵

²⁴² Pseudo-Athanasius, *Vita Syncletica*, 7; 5

²⁴³ On hair and early Christian ascetics see Kristi Upson-Saia, “Hairiness and Holiness in the Early Christian Desert,” in *Dressing Judeans and Christians in Antiquity*, eds. Kristi Upson-Saia, Carly Daniel-Hughes and Alicia J. Batten (London: Routledge, 2014).

²⁴⁴ We are not told what fate befalls her sister, who was “deprived of sight” we can assume that she was provided for in some way or may have joined Syncletica in her ascetic practice. (Pseudo-Athanasius, *Vita Syncletica*, 11.) There are some similarities here with Antony and his sister (Athanasius, *Life of Antony* 2 [trans. Robertson NPNF 2/4:198-221]).

²⁴⁵ Elizabeth Bartman, “Hair and the Artifice of Roman Female Adornment,” *American Journal of Archaeology* 105 (2001): 1-25; Alicia J. Batten, “Neither Gold nor Braided Hair (1 Timothy 2.9; 1 Peter 3.3): Adornment, Gender, and Honour in Antiquity,” *NTS* 55 (2009): 484-501; Margaret R Miles, *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 1989), 48-51 and Kristi Upson-Saia, *Early Christian Dress: Gender, Virtue, and Authority* (New York: Routledge, 2011), chapter 1 and chapter 3.

The cutting of hair was then an outward sign of her rejection of gendered social norms, a renouncement of sexuality and potentially a negation of male authority to which a woman had previously yielded too. This might explain why ascetic women who cut their hair or who dressed in men's clothing like Thecla, were sometimes viewed as problematic. Jerome (d.420) for example counselled Eustochium to avoid those who "Change their garb and assume the mien of men, being ashamed of being what they were born to be—women. They cut off their hair and are not ashamed to look like eunuchs" (Jerome, *To Eustochium* 27 [trans. Freemantle, *NPNF* 2/6:34]).²⁴⁶ Pseudo-Athanasius however, clearly establishes that Syncletica undertook these external signs in an appropriate manner, by submission to male authority. She is depicted as a good Christian daughter who submitted to parental authority, only beginning her ascetic life once her parents died and then when she cuts her hair, she only does so after summoning one of the elders, implying that she was doing so under the authority of someone more superior than herself. Parallels to Perpetua could be drawn here. As discussed in the previous chapter, Perpetua's masculinisation took many forms, but one aspect is her detachment from the earthly relationships which define her as female, significantly those of daughter and mother. Whilst Syncletica's defeminisation takes a similar form, it appears to be a less antagonistic separation from her worldly ties, rather, she is a good Roman daughter until her parents die and then she begins her ascetic life still under appropriate supervision. There is perhaps an implicit message here for those who read her story of the correct way to undertake a life of asceticism.

²⁴⁶ At the Council of Gangra women who wore men's clothing and cut their hair were condemned "Women, too, disregarding decent custom, and, instead of womanly apparel, wearing men's clothes, thinking to be justified because of these; while many of them, under a pretext of piety, cut off the growth of hair, which is natural to woman" (*Synodical Letter of the Council of Gangra* [trans. Henry R. Percival *NPNF* 2/14: 91]).

Interestingly, there is a significant link between Syncletica's first steps towards masculinisation and virginity.²⁴⁷ Despite being a virgin up to this point, it was only when she began the process of relinquishing her worldly ties and the external markers of femininity that Syncletica was deemed "worthy" of being called "virgin."²⁴⁸ From this point, imagery of the contending athlete marks her ascetic progress, "Then she was again in her paternal courtyards, being trained [*progumnadzō*] sufficiently in sufferings; and having been led to the very height of the stadium, she made progress in virtues," and undertook "manly deeds" [*andragathēmata*]" (Pseudo-Athanasius, *Vita Syncletica* 13 [Castelli]).²⁴⁹ Christians were frequently depicted as noble athletes or gladiators and the language of training and contests was used to signify the strength, courage, and active nature of both male and female protagonists.²⁵⁰

The developing Marian theology and the Eve-Mary typology offered a different model of salvation. The earliest textual evidence of the Eve-Mary typology is found in the

²⁴⁷ On the connection between hair and masculinity see Aretaeus, "Causes and Symptoms of Chronic Diseases" 2.5 (The Extant Works of Aretaeus, the Cappadocian, ed. Francis Adams (Boston: Milford House), 1972) Plucking out the hair from one's beard is a common biblical expression of mourning (eg Jer. 48:37) but the Hebrew Bible also narrates the humiliation experienced by the man whose beard is removed (eg., 2 Sam. 10; Isa. 50), perhaps reflecting a diminished masculinity. Perpetua's father is depicted as progressively de-masculinised, partly through the removal of his hair, "My father came in to see me. He was worn out with grief. He started plucking out his beard and flinging the whiskers on the ground, prostrating himself before me, cursing his old age." "The Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicity," 9 trans. Joseph Farrell in *Perpetua's Passions: Multidisciplinary Approaches to the Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, eds. Jan N. Bremmer and Marco Formisano (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 15-23. Aristotle made the connection between reproductive fluids ie semen (in both men and women), the presence of hair and masculinity "Women do not go bald; for their nature resembles that of children: for neither produces seminal fluid." (Aristotle, Gen. an. 784a). Clement too linked hairiness and heat (Paedagogus 3.3). On virginity in early Christianity see: Elizabeth A. Castelli, "Virginity and Its Meaning for Women's Sexuality in Early Christianity." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 2 (1996): 61-88; Elizabeth A. Castelli, "Sex and Sexual Renunciation II: Developments in Research since 2000." Pages 372-384 in *The Early Christian World*. Edited by Philip F. Esler. London: Routledge, 2017; Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride* and Suzanna Elm, "Virgins of God:" *the Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

²⁴⁸ Pseudo-Athanasius, *Vita Syncletica*, 11.

²⁴⁹ See also 8; 10; 13; 31; 60; 71; 89; 98; 102; 106; 111.

²⁵⁰ This is most notably demonstrated in Perpetua's vision in which she is transformed into a male gladiator *Passio X* [Heffernan]).

works of Justin Martyr (d. 165) and Irenaeus of Lyons (d. c.202). Paralleling Eve with Mary, Justin highlighted the virginal status of both, but contrasted Eve's disobedience to God with Mary's obedience, emphasising that "For Eve, who was a virgin and undefiled, having conceived the word of the serpent, brought forth disobedience and death." However, through Mary's faithfulness and obedience, she gave birth to the Son of God who reversed the effects of the Fall and so would deliver humankind from death.²⁵¹ Patristic writers argued that by reversing the effects of the Fall, humans could be led back towards God and to a restoration of paradise lost. For example, Gregory of Nyssa recommended that

We must begin at the end of the route of departure (which lies nearest to ourselves); just as those who have travelled far from their friends at home, when they turn to reach again the place from which they started, first leave that district which they reached at the end of their outward journey. (Gregory of Nyssa, *On virginity* 12 [trans. Moore and Wilson, *NPNF* 2/5:358]).

Marriage (as the socially acceptable means of begetting children) had been the final stage in humankind's separation from God, and therefore renunciation of marriage was the first step to return to God.²⁵²

Virgins had therefore already begun this process in their avoidance of the married life. Redirecting the Greco-Roman concept of marriage and procreation as the teleological goal of women, instead, Syncletica, like many patristic writers used the perils of childbirth as a deterrent for married life,

In general for women the hatred in the world is great; for they bear children, difficulty and in danger, and they endure nourishing babies with milk, and they are ill with them when their children are ill; and they survive these things, without having the result of their labor. For either the ones who have been borne in the womb are disabled in their bodies, or in perversity the ones who have been poured forth murder the ones who brought them forth. Therefore knowing these things, let is not

²⁵¹ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 100. See also Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.21-22.

²⁵² According to Gregory of Nyssa, the final step was to divest ourselves of the coverings of nakedness, the coats of skins, namely the wisdom of the flesh (Gregory of Nyssa, *On virginity* 12).

be enticed by the enemy, as if having a relaxed and carefree existence. For when they give birth, they perish from sufferings; when they don't bear children, they waste away sterile and childless under reproaches. (Pseudo-Athanasius, *Vita Syncletica* 42 [Castelli]).²⁵³

To adopt the virgin life was a refusal of the body to operate within societal expectations on a day-to-day basis but also acted a refusal to participate within the preciously established eschatological framework “as an instrument of succession unto death.”²⁵⁴ Instead, virginity acted as a “boundary line of death,” it firstly halted the power of death, and then began the reversal of the effects of the Fall, obliterating the power of death over humankind. This concept is evident through the depiction of Syncletica's illness. Towards the end of her life, in her battle against Satan, her body acted as a literal boundary of death, by terminating Satan's power. Virginity, fasting, cutting her hair and her ascetic practice served to de-feminise Syncletica, but through her illness, her femininity was obliterated, and she progressed even further towards the reversal of the Fall.

In this final battle, presented in the text as being against the “good-hating devil”, “he asks the oldest virgin to the final struggle.”²⁵⁵ Syncletica faced the devil and faced a battle greater than that of Job and of the martyrs.²⁵⁶ By this time, it was only the devil who failed to see the strength of Syncletica's virtuous body and in fact, the battle only served to strengthen her further

²⁵³ Castelli notes that the Pauline notion that marriage was good, but virginity better was the cornerstone on which patristic discourses on the preferability of virginity were constructed (cf. 1 Cor 7:38.). This was a common topos in which the Hellenistic rhetoric of pain acted as a clear deterrent and was used at length to present the contrast between married and virginal life. (Castelli, “Virginity,” e68-70.). In 22 chapters of his treatise *On Virginity*, John Chrysostom for example refers to the pain of childbirth and how to avoid it. See John Chrysostom *Virg* 51-72, see also Gregory of Nyssa *Virg* 3.

²⁵⁴ Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation In Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) 301.

²⁵⁵ Pseudo-Athanasius, *Vita Syncletica*, 104.

²⁵⁶ Pseudo-Athanasius, *Vita Syncletica*, 106.

And seeking a feast, he became food. For she was offered as bait through the snare by the weakness of the body; seeing a woman, he looked down on her, for he did not know of her virile mind. He observed ailing members, for he was blind and not able to observe her strongest spirit. (Pseudo-Athanasius, *Vita Syncletica*, 112 [Castelli]).

The final battle ground was in her illness and she was “Nobly subjected to such a plague, she did not lapse in her spirit, but again the blessed one contested against the enemy.”²⁵⁷ It was in this battle in which she demonstrated masculinity, not in choosing whether or not to be ill, but rather in *how* she reacted to her illness and imminent death.²⁵⁸ Displaying the Pauline notion that it is in weakness that one becomes strong, Syncletica’s reaction to her illness is significant in that it is non-existent.²⁵⁹ A reader might expect to see a weak, frail old woman at eighty years old, instead, she exhibited all the markers of a virile man, and by doing so, the text reveals the extent of her de-gendering.

Self-control through the mastery of the passions was a pervading motif within multiple cultural discourses. Mastering desire, anger and self-restraint in eating and drinking are found in an extensive range of literature from this time. Ironically, death was a key place to demonstrate volition, by refusing to submit to another’s will and choosing how or when to die.²⁶⁰ How one dealt with pain and suffering and in particular how one died were notable examples of courage and bravery, in short of masculinity. Bravery on the battlefield was an obvious source of evidence for masculine prowess but death considered to be nobly borne was a prime site for displays of masculinity by demonstrating *virtus*, in

²⁵⁷ Pseudo-Athanasius, *Vita Syncletica*, 107.

²⁵⁸ for example, she “did not agree to have human aid brought to her, demonstrating again in this her own virility [*andreia*].” (Pseudo-Athanasius, *Vita Syncletica*, 111).

²⁵⁹ 2 Cor 12:9. ADD REFERENCE TO COBB PAIN AND PAINLESSNESS

²⁶⁰ Female martyrs such as Perpetua demonstrated volition at her death by guiding the gladiator’s hand to her own throat (The *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*, 21.9)

particular self-restraint, and self-control and which marked the sufferer as heroic. Castelli notes that the phrase in the martyrdom of Polycarp which encourages Polycarp to “Be strong, Polycarp, and play the man,” generated a new tradition and set of associations.²⁶¹ She emphasises that by using this scriptural quotation, Polycarp was situated within a biblical tradition of military strength and masculine endurance within discourses of persecution.²⁶² This effectively steered an audience to a particular interpretation of his death by placing it in line with the noble deaths of the Greco-Roman and Jewish warriors and philosophers, the martyr’s death was a masculinised death. However, noble, masculine death was not the sole preserve of men as demonstrated already in the martyrdom of Perpetua and Blandina.²⁶³ Syncletica’s illness and subsequent death are placed within this framework through depicting it as death in battle. Hers was however a spiritual battle against Satan in which she was actively involved through her use of prayer and fasting as her “weapons and shield.”²⁶⁴

Unlike other female ascetics whose de-feminisation is depicted solely by externally discarding the culturally acknowledged accoutrements of femininity or in their behaviour, Syncletica’s de-feminisation is also depicted as an internal process. The contrasting internal and external are frequently highlighted within the text and it is the internal which is discernibly accentuated. In a metaphor likening the spiritual journey to the construction of a building, Syncletica constructs a “secure tower” and rather than only attend to the external elements, “she did the opposite thing. For she did not bring with her external

²⁶¹ *Mart. Pol.* 9.1

²⁶² For example, Josh. 1:6, 7, 9; Deut. 31:6, 7, 23; Pss. 26:14; 30:25; Dan. 10:19.

²⁶³ For an overview on women dying nobly see Candida R. Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom: Diverse Practices, Theologies, and Traditions*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).30-31.

²⁶⁴ Pseudo-Athanasius, *Vita Syncletica* 18.

materials, but rather she poured out internal things” (Pseudo-Athanasius, *Vita Syncletica*, 13 [Castelli]). The ascetic life was not simply about the external, the external body was corruptible and could waste away, but through this wasting away, the inner person could be restored.²⁶⁵ As in the *Life of Antony*, mortification of the external body was one step on the road towards God, but it was not enough to simply overcome the body, the internal thoughts must be overcome too. David Brakke emphasises that through her illness, Syncletica’s internal body is both literally and metaphorically exposed, so her audience is able to view the virility within.²⁶⁶ It works therefore by visibly displaying the proof of her masculinization.

Other ascetic women were also described as being masculinised, Amma Sarah reportedly described herself as “a woman by nature but not in reason.”²⁶⁷ John Chrysostom said of Olympias “Don’t say ‘woman’ but ‘what a man!’ Because this is a man, despite her physical appearance.”²⁶⁸ Syncletica’s masculinisation goes a step further, the function of presenting the internal and external certainly suggests a complete transcendence of her female nature both externally and internally. This emphasis on the internal and external linked to masculinisation has parallels in early Christian literature, specifically in the Gospel of Thomas which states that “When you make the two one, and when you make the inner as the outer and the outer as the inner and the upper as the lower, and when you make the

²⁶⁵ “Our body, which becomes empty by means of ascetic practice, does not weigh down the directed power. The apostle, as a witness to this says: ‘As much as the external person is corrupted, that much the internal person is restored.’ Pseudo-Athanasius, *Vita Syncletica*, 93. (Syncletica quotes 2 Cor 4:16).

²⁶⁶ David Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk: Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 191.

²⁶⁷ Sayings of the Desert Fathers, 4. See also Gregory of Nyssa, *On virginity* 20, 4 and the *Life of Melania* 39.

²⁶⁸ *The Life of Olympias*, 3.

male and the female into a single one, so that the male is not male and the female not female...then you shall enter the kingdom" (*Gospel of Thomas*, logion 22 [trans. Elliott]).²⁶⁹

Satan began his assault on Syncletica from the inside out. Like a "bloodthirsty executioner," he commenced with her lungs, expelling pieces of them from her body "by means of spittle." She experienced unrelenting fever and over time, her body wasted away.²⁷⁰

Emphasising how brutal this attack was, in an example of one upmanship Pseudo-Athanasius claims her suffering was greater than that on the martyrs themselves, "Thus I do not think that the oldest martyrs struggled more bravely than the famous Syncletica. For whether he brought to them death by the sword or fire, they were gentler than the present trials of Syncletica" (Pseudo-Athanasius, *Vita Syncletica* 106 [Castelli]). He then began a "greater and more difficult" attack, this time in the manner of Job, on her external body.²⁷¹

Now, Syncletica is silenced, her "speech organ" attacked and after having pain in one tooth, the most graphic depiction of her illness is focused on her mouth and face.

He made her gums putrid in like manner. And the bone fell out; the spreading passed into the whole jaw, and became decay of the body pressing on the neighbouring parts; and in forty days the bone was worm-eaten. And within the space of two months' time, there was a hole. The surrounding spaces were all becoming black. And the bone itself was corrupted, and little by little wasted away; putrefaction and the heaviest stench governed her whole body (Pseudo-Athanasius, *Vita Syncletica* 111 [Castelli]).

²⁶⁹ Richard Valantasis argues that "The believer can no longer understand the self as male or female, above or below, inside or outside, but rather must understand the self as something else, something beyond these categories." It is about remaking the self, the transformation of the body and the eradication of gender. Richard Valantasis, "The Question of Early Christian Identity: Three Strategies Exploring A Third Genos," in *A Feminist Companion to the New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine (London: T & T Clark International, 2006), 65-66. On male and female in the *Gospel of Thomas* see Marvin W. Meyer, "Making Mary Male: The Categories of 'Male' and 'Female' in the Gospel of Thomas," *NTS* 31 (1985), 554-70

²⁷⁰ Pseudo-Athanasius, *Vita Syncletica*, 105-106.

²⁷¹ Pseudo-Athanasius, *Vita Syncletica*, 106.

Feminisation

Despite an insistence on emphasising the masculinisation of women in early Christian texts, as Stephanie Cobb has demonstrated, there was, concurrently, a need to emphasise that these women were in fact still women. Cobb notes that scholarship highlighting the masculinization of women and in particular of the female martyrs, often tends to gloss over the simultaneous feminising of the martyr found within the same text.²⁷² As demonstrated in chapter 1, this complex characterisation comprised a masculinising of the female protagonists whilst at the same time highlighting their femininity in two different ways, firstly by accentuating or ascribing to them a maternal role and secondly by eroticising their bodies. Perpetua's role as mother and her concern for her child is demonstrated, whilst Felicitas actually gives birth in prison and subsequently enters the arena with her postpartum breasts dripping milk.²⁷³ Blandina, despite not actually having her own children, was ascribed the role of sacrificial mother, like the Maccabean mother, she is depicted as a "noble mother" encouraging her "children" towards their own martyrdom.²⁷⁴ Agathonikē is another example as the proconsul at her trial attempts to remind her of her maternal role encouraging her to "Have pity on yourself and your children" (The Martyrdom of Carpus, Papyrus, and Agathonikē (Latin recession) 6 [trans. Musurillo]). Alternatively women's bodies were put on display, and often eroticised for both the audience within the text and at the same time for the audience experiencing the text. Both Agnes and Irenē were exhibited, nude in brothels.²⁷⁵ Agathonikē removed her own clothing before jumping on the

²⁷² Cobb, *Dying to be Men*, 7.

²⁷³ *Passio* XV and XX [Heffernan]).

²⁷⁴ *Letter of the Churches of Vienne and Lyons* V.1.55 On Blandina and her depiction as a mother see Cobb, *Dying to be Men*, 114-116.

²⁷⁵ *Martyrdom of Saints Agapē, Irenē, and Chionē at Saloniki* 5 [trans. Musurillo]).

stake, whilst the audience beheld her naked beauty.²⁷⁶ Perpetua is described as “delicate,” and when her tunic is torn, she modestly covers herself, the audience is almost encouraged to imagine that they, along with the spectators in the arena, have glimpsed the beautiful, feminine body underneath.

But in late antiquity, when writing about virgin ascetics, these rhetorical devices to feminise a protagonist were not available, in particular, maternal depictions were redundant. In later ascetic texts, women were de-feminised by being portrayed as transvestite monks, their femininity was usually revealed at the point of their death when their bodies were prepared for burial.²⁷⁷ In Syncletica’s case, her illness does this work instead, it reminds us that she is a woman. I contend that in Greco-Roman terms, her illness would have been understood as a specifically female illness, resulting from her lack of sexual activity and ascetic life. But by destroying her face, traditionally the site of feminine beauty, and her mouth, culturally associated with the female sexual organs in such graphic,

²⁷⁶ *Martyrdom of Carpus, Papyrus, and Agathonikē* 6 [trans. Musurillo].

²⁷⁷ See the story of Pelagia, “the harlot” by the deacon James of Edessa in Benedicta Ward, *Harlots of the Desert: A Study of Repentance in Early Monastic Sources* (Trappist, Kentucky: Cistercian Publications, 1987), 57-75 and *The Life of St. Mary/Marinos* *Life of St. Mary/Marinos*; tr. N. Constatas, in *Holy Women of Byzantium*, ed. Alice-Mary Talbot (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1996). Monastic legends from the fifth, sixth and seventh century depict a number of transvestite female saints, for further examples see the *Lives of Saints* Saints Anastasia (Anastasios), Apolinaria (Dorotheos), Athanasia (wife of Andronikos), Eugenia (Eugenios), Euphrosyne (Smaragdus), Hilaria (Hilarion), Matrona (Babylas), Susannah (John), and Theodora (Theodoros). On female transvestism in early Christianity see M. Delcourt, *Hermaphrodite: Myths and Rites of the Bisexual Figure in Classical Antiquity* (London: Studio Books, 1961), 84–102; John Anson, “The Female Transvestite in Early Monasticism: the Origin and Development of a Motif,” *Viator* 5 (1974), 1-32; 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): 1– 36; Elizabeth Castelli, “‘I Will Make Mary Male’: Pieties of the Body and Gender Transformation of Christian Women in Late Antiquity,” in *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, ed. J. Epstein and K. Straub (New York: Routledge, 1991), 29–49, esp. 44–47; Susan Ashbrook Harvey, “Women in Early Byzantine Hagiography: Reversing the Story,” in *That Gentle Strength: Historical Perspectives on Women in Christianity*, ed. L. Coon, K. Haldane, and E. Sommer (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990) 36–59.

and horrific terms, the author holds up her femininity and then completely expunges any evidence of it.

The association of the mouth with the uterus was common in Greco-Roman medicine and rhetoric. In ancient anatomical thinking, writers postulated a link between the uterus and vagina and the mouth and nostrils by suggesting the existence of a channel which linked the two.²⁷⁸ The application of treatments for the womb via the mouth or nostrils is one such example, “Test for fertility: boil a head of garlic and apply it to the uterus; on the next day have the woman examine herself by palpating with a finger; and if her mouth smells, the sign is positive” (Hippocrates, *On the Nature of Women* 96 [trans. Potter]).²⁷⁹ Or if the uterus had moved upward and was causing “suffocation,” the author of *Nature of Women* recommended holding “all sorts of evil-smelling fumigations under the patient’s nostrils: pitch, sulfur, horn, lamp wick, seal oil, castoreum; below her genitalia (fumigate with) fragrant ones” (Hippocrates, *On the Nature of Women*, 26 [trans Potter]).²⁸⁰ Galen too explicitly connected the anatomical features of the mouth and female sexual organs.²⁸¹

²⁷⁸ Helen King explains that although this channel is not explicitly described in literature, prescribed cures, contexts and therapies imply its existence (Helen King, *Hippocrates' Woman: Reading the Female Body in Ancient Greece* (London: Routledge, 1998), 28.) King gives a number of examples such as treatments aimed at the womb being applied via the mouth, examples of pain felt in the throat when menstruation is imminent or on the deepening of a girl’s voice after the loss of her virginity. Interestingly King notes that analogies between the mouth and womb / vagina continued well into the nineteenth century and are still present in modern medical terminology eg “labia” (lips) and “cervix” (neck). See also Lesley Dean-Jones, *Women’s Bodies in Classical Greek Science* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 69.

²⁷⁹ Lesley Dean-Jones suggests that the idea of a tube linking the vagina to the mouth would explain the presence of a cure for bad breath within the Hippocratic gynaecology. (Dean-Jones, *Women’s Bodies*, 72-73.)

²⁸⁰ In *Therapeutics of Acute Diseases*, Soranus that compares the effect of smell on the womb and compares the womb to an animal “is subject to the affections of an animal in smelling; for it follows after fragrant things as if for pleasure, and flees from fetid and disagreeable things as if for dislike” (11.10).

²⁸¹ Galen. *On the Usefulness of the Parts of the Body*, trans Margaret Tallmadge May; (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968), 15.3. See also Soranus, Gyn. 1.3.6-12; Hippocrates, Mul. 1.2, 40, 85. Classicists have widely recognised a correlation between the “top and bottom” of the female body see Nancy Demand, *Birth, Death*

The womb was seen as the antecedent of illnesses in women, “The uterus is the cause of all these diseases; for however it changes from its normal position...it produces diseases”

(Hippocrates, *On the Nature of Woman* 47 [trans. Potter]. If the womb had moved to the liver,

She will suddenly lose her speech, grind her teeth, and take on a livid coloring—these things befall her suddenly while she is in a healthy state. This happens to unmarried women, especially if they are advanced in age and widowed, but also if they are young and widowed after having had children. (Hippocrates, *On the Nature of Woman*, 3 [trans. Potter].

In the Hippocratic text *Diseases of Women*, this perceived “movement” could occur if the womb lacked moisture from abstaining from sexual intercourse, at which point it would “turn around” or go elsewhere.²⁸² Fatigue and insufficient nourishment could also cause the womb to move.²⁸³ If menstruation ceased, a range of side effects could follow: thick urine, a swollen abdomen, loss of appetite, difficulty in sleeping, grinding of teeth, irregular breathing and loss of voice. This condition was most likely to occur in older woman who no longer had intercourse but could also occur in childless or barren women who had not experienced the “beneficial purging” of childbirth and lochial bleeding.²⁸⁴ Galen also saw the womb as the cause of many illnesses, despite disagreeing with the Hippocratic concept of womb movement. He believed that retention of female seed in the womb (ie. not released through sexual intercourse), could lead to decomposition of the seed and poisonous humours contaminating the body.²⁸⁵ Those who were most at risk were those

and Motherhood in Classical Greece (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1994), 18, 64 and Dean-Jones, *Women’s Bodies*, 73-74.

²⁸² Hippocrates. *Diseases of Women* 1.2. Edited and translated by Paul Potter. Loeb Classical Library 538. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018.

²⁸³ Hippocrates. *Diseases of Women* .32.

²⁸⁴ Hippocrates. *Diseases of Women* 2.127.

²⁸⁵ Galen, *On the Affected Parts*, 6.5.

who no longer had sexual intercourse, but this could also be caused by fasting or lack of sleep.²⁸⁶

As an ascetic virgin, Syncletica fasted, did not engage in sexual intercourse, and we may assume no longer menstruated (due to both her age and her ascetic practice). Therefore, in ancient medical thinking, her humours would have dried up, and her body retained an excess of female seed. The fever, spittle, loss of appetite, difficulty sleeping and loss of voice she experienced were symptoms which could have been understood as female specific malady. One which was caused by the retention of the female seed due to her ascetic lifestyle, specifically sexual abstinence, fasting and lack of sleep. Her illness therefore worked simultaneously, highlighting her femininity whilst concurrently demonstrating the success of her ascetic practice. There were, therefore, clear correlations in these works between lack of sexual activity, the mouth and illness generally in the female body. Although it may not appear so to a modern reader, in ancient medical thinking, Syncletica's fever, spittle, and loss of voice were symptoms that read as a specifically gynaecological sickness induced by her ascetic lifestyle, notably sexual abstinence and fasting. By implicitly presenting with symptoms of a gynaecological malady, the author holds up Syncletica's femininity, but in attacking her face and mouth, he destroys the traditional Greco-Roman markers of femininity: she was no longer beautiful, no longer sexually desirable. The destruction of her mouth is symbolic of the destruction of her sexual organs, and so she is no longer fertile. She is desexualised and degendered. This

²⁸⁶ It is interesting to note that various forms of fumigations and strong smells were prescribed as a means of drawing out the hysteria. Bringing of incense by the doctor was in line with medical cures suggested here by practitioners at the time but appropriated by the author to point rather from the cure of the body towards the cure of the soul.

degendering works alongside a simultaneous concern in the text to manage bodily desires. Through Syncletica's disintegrating body, she became a means for her community to combat the perceived sexual nature of the feminine body and triumph over the power of desire.

Fasting

In the developing ideology of virginity and asceticism of the late antique world, fasting was a crucial element and central to the ascetic practice and the virginial life.²⁸⁷ For Syncletica, fasting was "the protection and foundation of other things," and a "salutary remedy" which cured the body.²⁸⁸ Here we find again a concern for the internal state of her body that pervades the whole text and which is enmeshed in Greco-Roman understandings of the body, interconnected with cultural concerns associated with sexuality, gender and the human body.

Greco- Roman medical theories of menstruation and sexuality are fundamental to understanding ascetic discourse, particularly with regards to the somatic practices and representations of female asceticism. Ancient understandings of the connection between menstruation and fasting and the physical effects on the female body such as amenorrhea (the absence of menstruation), the loss of physical features of femaleness and sexual desire will elucidate aspects of ascetic hagiography, specifically representations of female ascetics in the late antique period.²⁸⁹ We will look briefly next at the Greco-Roman association of

²⁸⁷ Shaw, *The Burden of the Flesh* and Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*.

²⁸⁸ Pseudo-Athanasius, *Vita Syncletica*, 10, Castelli notes that "Here, fasting is characterized as a physical remedy, playing on the spiritual and medical nuances of *sōtērios*." (Castelli, "Pseudo-Athanasius, §21.)

²⁸⁹ Shaw, Peter Brown, and Bynum all contend that female ascetics specifically acknowledged as being able to endure long fasts. (Shaw, *The Burden of the Flesh*, 235-252; Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women,*

food and fasting and their link with sexuality which were fundamental to discourses of virginity in late antiquity which were specifically based on ancient medical systems and understanding of the physiology of the body. Locating ascetic fasting within this context will shed new light on the corporeal representations of Syncletica's body within this text.

By the fifth century, fasting had become inextricably associated with the curbing of sexual desire.²⁹⁰ Scriptural references provided some models for fasting more generally, but it was towards medical theories about the body, in particular Galen's, that Christian writers turned to provide the framework and specific details.²⁹¹ Teresa Shaw describes this framework as linking "eating to sexual desire, sexual desire to the Fall and the Fall to embodiment (or at least bodily suffering), gender differentiation (or at least gender hierarchy), and death."²⁹²

Galen's ideas on the effect of diet and nutrition on the development of semen (in both men and women) provide an important background to understanding ascetic fasting and were used by Christian writers in the late antique period to support their arguments on virginity and fasting.²⁹³ Of cardinal importance is the ancient understanding that food is

and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 269 and Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*.

²⁹⁰ Shaw clarifies the relationship between fasting and sexuality in late antiquity by considering how medical theories of the body influenced late antique Christian thinkers who wrote about virginity. Shaw's work is significant as she identifies that behind the developing ideology of virginity in late antiquity was a theoretical framework that linked eating to sexual desire hence why fasting was such a central issue (Shaw, *The Burden of the Flesh*). On sexual desire and fasting, see also Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* and Brakke, "The Problematization of Nocturnal Emissions," 436-441.

²⁹¹ See for example Deuteronomy 9:18; 2 Samuel 12:15-16; Ezra 8:21; Isaiah 58:3-7; Daniel 9:3; Joel 2:12; Matthew 6:16-18; Luke 4:2; Acts 13:3; 14:23.

²⁹² Shaw, *Burden of the Flesh*, 223.

²⁹³ For an overview of Greco-Roman medicine and ascetic fasting see For an excellent overview see Shaw, *Burden of the Flesh*, esp. 79-128.

transformed into the reproductive fluids alongside Galen's humoral theory. In this system, the human body consisted of four bodily humors or fluids, blood, black bile, yellow bile and phlegm which combined with the four qualities, warm, cold, dry and moist and the four elements, fire, earth, air and water.²⁹⁴ A healthy body was a balanced body in which the humors, qualities and elements were aligned.²⁹⁵ Conversely, illness was understood in terms of imbalance and disharmony, especially of the humors and diet and nutrition were vital components in maintaining harmony. Of particular importance for this study is the notion, that blood was conceived as a product of digestion and that menstrual blood, semen and breast milk, the reproductive fluids, were conceived as residues from the concoction of blood.

Ancient medical writers universally agreed that the human body was made out of blood which was the "final concoction" of food.²⁹⁶ Unlike Aristotle, Galen maintained that both men and women produced semen, but in keeping with the inferiority of women's bodies, distinguished male and female semen by attributing *pneuma*, the active principle in the creation of life, to the male seed only.²⁹⁷ In Galen's system, diet and nutrition had an essential role to play in the forming of, amount of, and balance within the body of these reproductive fluids as the four humors were products of digestion. As semen and the reproductive fluids were residues of blood and blood was the "final concoction" of food, it

²⁹⁴ Galen, *Hygiene: Book 1*. Translated by Ian Johnston (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2020).

²⁹⁵ "Health is a sort of harmony . . . for in every instance, health in us is a due proportion of moist, dry, warm and cold, sometimes of molecules and pores, sometimes of atoms or items or minims or isotopes, or of each of their primary elements; but always we function in our parts through their due proportion." (Galen, *Hygiene* 1.3)

²⁹⁶ Aristotle. *Parts of Animals* 2.4.651a14. Translated by A. L. Peck. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1937).

²⁹⁷ Galen. *On the Usefulness of the Parts of the Body* 14.3. Translated by Margaret Tallmadge May. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968).

was understood that controlling the diet could control not only bodily health, but also fertility, sexual health, and desire.

Knowledge of the properties or “faculties” of various food was for Galen, crucial to maintain the balance of the body, in the treatment of diseases, and gynaecological problems.²⁹⁸ More specifically as an increase in semen was thought to lead to an increase in sexual desire, food management could also either diminish or heighten sexual desire. Sources of food were ascribed heating properties which would generate semen and thereby increase sexual desire or cooling and drying properties which would repress semen and reduce sexual desire.²⁹⁹ Further, eating too little food could dry up the humors and repress semen and sexual desire, whilst conversely, eating too much food stimulated the humors, generated semen and increased sexual desire.

Both implicitly and explicitly in the ascetic literature of the late antique period, fasting and food avoidance was backed by Galen’s science of the humors. A treatise for virgins written in the fourth century, for example states that “Fasting...cures diseases, dries up the bodily humors, puts demons to flight, gets rid of impure thoughts, makes the mind clearer and the heart purer, the body sanctified, and raises man to the throne of God” Pseudo Athanasius, *De Virginitate* 7 [trans. Brakke]]. Through elimination of food or by careful choices made in diet, late antique Christians believed they could “dry up the humors” and reduce or even eliminate sexual desire. Food, therefore, would come to be one method that Christians used and encouraged others to use, to clear the mind of sexual

²⁹⁸ See Galen, *On the Faculties of Food*, trans. Arthur John Brock (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

²⁹⁹ See Galen, *On the Faculties of Food* and an overview by Shaw, *The Burden of the Flesh*, 53-64.

thought, moderate lust and sexual desire, and subsequently return to the Edenic state of the pre-Fall Adam and Eve.

In ancient debate of human origins, nature, and fate, food, gender distinction, sexual procreation, and embodiment are all intertwined. This is demonstrated in both Hesiod's myth of the golden age and the myth of creation found in Genesis.³⁰⁰ Early Christian visions of humanity, the fall and eschatological fulfilment reveal similar theological and anthropological understandings and for this reason, fourth century ascetic theory connected notions of fasting and virginity to eschatological expectations. As Shaw emphasises, "ascetic discipline looks back to the garden and forwards to the kingdom."³⁰¹ The expectation that fasting and self-denial could change the nature and functions of the ascetic body was part of an overarching model in which these physical changes could overcome the limitations of the flesh imposed on humankind following the fall.

Demonstrating her spirituality (and sanctity) from the very beginning of the text, and in line with Greco-Roman understanding of the body, Syncletica had already found the "cure" for her body, which had brought "blossom to her soul" (Pseudo-Athanasius, *Vita Syncletica* 10). We are explicitly told "What is useful in the present war? Clearly, painful ascetic practice and pure prayer.... But the best of all is to rule over the stomach; for thus one is able to govern even the sexual pleasures" (Pseudo-Athanasius, *Vita Syncletica*, 29). Syncletica's body had no need for physical food, and even repelled nourishment and in antithesis to the norm, her body flourished.

³⁰⁰ Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 109-201 (M. L. West, ed, *Hesiod: Works and Days* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

³⁰¹ Shaw, *Burden of the Flesh*, 163.

And if she ever had to eat outside of the accustomed time, she experienced the opposite things from those who eat. For her face was a pallor, and the weight of her body collapsed. For as the beginnings lay things out, so in general the things that depend on it follow from it. For while to those for whom food becomes and bears pleasure, the weight of the body flourishes; to those for whom the opposite occurs, their flesh is undernourished and slight. The sickly witness to my word. (Pseudo-Athanasius, *Vita Syncletica* 10 [Castelli]).³⁰²

Syncletica demonstrated even at this early point that the spiritual “food” of Christ was sufficient. An ascetic called John had a similar reaction. John stood under a rock for three years, eating only the communion on a Sunday,

When his feet had swollen and split from his standing motionless for so long, and the discharge had caused putrefaction, an angel appeared and touched his mouth, saying ‘Christ is meat indeed for you and the Holy spirit is drink indeed (cf John 6:55). For the time being this spiritual food is sufficient; otherwise, your stomach will become too heavy, and you will vomit. (*Historia Monachorum in Aegypto*, 17.3 [trans. Russell]).

Having already discarded the vestiges of socially determined femininity by abnegating marriage and childbearing, and by rejecting the outward markers of femininity by cutting her hair and abandoning cosmetics, Syncletica had already begun a transcendence of her female nature. Through fasting, her body had physically changed and the reversal of the effects of the fall had begun as demonstrated in her reaction to food.

Desire

Behind the concept of fasting then was an association with governing sexuality and desire. As I have already demonstrated, the *Life of Syncletica* demonstrates a concern to de-gender Syncletica, it simultaneously depicts a concern to manage bodily desires. Here, ascetic theory and practice combine with the Greco-Roman understanding of the female

³⁰² Castelli notes that this salutary remedy is avoidance of food and to cure the body meant to repress its desires. (Castelli, “The Life and Activity,” 270 §22).

body as found in the myth of Pandora or in the changing interpretations of Eve as previously discussed. Through Syncletica's body, specifically in the vivid and depiction of her disintegrating body, she became a means for her community to combat the sexual nature of the feminine body and triumph over their inherent female nature and the power of desire. To demonstrate this, I will now consider how corporeal desire was considered in ascetic literature from this period.

We have previously considered how ancient myths considered women, their bodies, and their inherent sexual nature in the stories of Pandora and Eve. Turning now to ascetic literature in the late antique period, the problematic nature of physical desire was often contemplated. More specifically though, women were viewed as problematic, sexual beings. They were subordinate and passive but had been given the power of sexual attraction over men. It was the power that the female body held over the male body that ascetics were expected to overcome. In the mid-fourth century treatise *On the True Purity of Virginity* by Basil of Ancyra, he expounded on the attraction between men and women which he saw as biological fact. He thought that in dividing the human species into male and female, the "Creator" or "Demiurge" placed a "fragment" within the nature of each sex to create both a desire for sexual union and a strong affection towards their own children to populate the earth.³⁰³ The form and feel of women's bodies was designed specifically to add to this attraction and to encourage procreation. Tertullian had used a similar argument against the virgins in Carthage to encourage them to wear the veil.³⁰⁴ For Tertullian,

³⁰³ For a detailed overview of Basil of Ancyra's understanding of the creation of men and women see Teresa M. Shaw, "Creation, Virginity and Diet in Fourth-Century Christianity: Basil of Ancyra's *On the True Purity of Virginity*," *Gender & History* 9 (1997): 579-596.

³⁰⁴ Tertullian, *On the Veiling of Virgins*.

women's flesh was inherently sexual, sordid and dangerous and needed to be covered or shielded in order to hide the alluring nature of their flesh and to protect others (men) from sinning.³⁰⁵

The lives of the early ascetics provide a catalogue of examples of the problematic nature of sexual temptation.³⁰⁶ Moses the Black (d. 405), who had converted from a life of crime, struggled with adjusting to the monastic life, despairing of his inability to endure the temptation of fornication.³⁰⁷ Jerome too, in a letter to Eustochium admits that even though he was "pale and my frame chilled with fasting; yet my mind was burning with desire, and the fires of lust kept bubbling up before me when my flesh was good and dead" (Jerome, *To Eustochium* 7 [trans. Freemantle, *NPNF* 2/6:24-25]).³⁰⁸ It was not only male ascetics who felt the pull of sexuality. Mary of Egypt (d. c. 421) struggled for seventeen years with the "wild beast of huge and irrational desires,"

As for the thoughts that would push me into harlotry again, I do not know, Father; how can I tell you about those? When such thoughts grew in me, I would fling myself on the ground and flood the earth with weeping, hoping that She [Virgin Mary] would stand by me who had been my guarantor, appearing to me in my disobedience and threatening me with punishment for my crimes (Sophronius, *Life of St Mary of Egypt*, 14 [trans. Ward])

Amma Sarah, one of the early Desert Mothers also spent her time in a monastic cell near Skete, tempted by lust.³⁰⁹

³⁰⁵ Tertullian, *On Female Fashion* 2.13.3 and 2.13.7 and Tertullian, *On the Veiling of Virgins*.

³⁰⁶ "Women were presented as a source of perpetual temptation to which the male body could be expected to respond instantly" (Brown, *The Body and Society*, 242).

³⁰⁷ *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Moses 1. Translated by Benedicta Ward in *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: the Alphabetical Collection* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1975).

³⁰⁸ A number of sources specifically depict the devil as a woman, for example Athanasius, *The Life of Antony* 3 and *The Life of Pachomius*, 19. On the gendering of the demonic see Brakke, *Demons*, 7; 199-212 and throughout.

³⁰⁹ *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Sarah 1 [trans. Ward].

Avoidance of human contact (where possible) at first seemed to provide the ideal solution, but as Antony's struggle demonstrated, it was not that easy. "He who wishes to live in solitude in the desert is delivered from three conflicts: hearing, speech and sight; there is only one conflict for him and that is with fornication" (*Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, "Anthony the Great," 11 [trans. Ward]). Coming into contact with women could be hazardous and so the prostitute Pelagia rebuked the desert father Ephriam when he was staring at her. She asked why he was looking at her so intently, arguing, "It is natural that I should look at you, for I was formed out of you; but as for you, you have no reason to look at me for it was the earth from which you were formed and it is on that that your eyes should be fixed" (*Vita S. Ephraem* [trans Ward]).³¹⁰ Isolation from women however did not solve the problem as it was not only women who posed a challenge. Other male monks could be just as alluring. Similarly, young boys who were part of the monastic community were equally problematic, so much so that they could be seen as an impediment towards spiritual progress. Abba John the Dwarf stated that "He who gorges himself and talks with a boy has already in his thoughts committed fornication with him" (*Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Abba John the Dwarf 4 [trans. Ward]).³¹¹

Syncletica chose to eschew contact with other people, "From youth, she avoided contact not only with men, but also women."³¹² It is interesting to note that she kept away from women "not to be glorified by hyperbole of ascetic practice," but also "in order not to be beguiled away from virtue by bodily necessity" (Pseudo-Athanasius, *Vita Syncletica* 16

³¹⁰From the Armenian cited in Benedicta Ward, *Harlots of the Desert: A Study of Repentance in Early Monastic Sources* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1987), 61.

³¹¹ We see here the explicit connection between over-eating and sexual desire.

³¹² Castelli notes that *hai homophuloi* literally means "of the same breed, akin" but due to the context should be translated as "women". (Castelli, "The Life and Activity," §36.)

[Castelli]). Placed within the context of an avoidance of people to obviate sexual temptation and avoiding being dragged down with “bodily desires” in the subsequent chapter, it appears to suggest that the female body could be just as much a source of temptation for other women as well as men.³¹³

Other ascetics had more physical solutions. We are told by Palladius that Evagrius stood naked in a well for the whole night, Philoromus shut himself away and wore “irons” and when desire rose in Ammonius he would heat “an iron in the fire he would apply it to his members, so that he became a mass of ulcers” (Palladius, *Lausiac History* 38.14; 45.2 and 11.4 [trans. Butler]). Like Amma Sarah, rather than eradicate desire, for Syncletica, what was important was having the strength to deal with it.³¹⁴ It seems that ascetic practice, no matter how great, was not always enough to completely eradicate desire.

For although the storm abated, the sea has not become weaker; and if the second passed, nevertheless the third remains. And if the event has been banished, that which causes it is still present. It is thus in the present situation: even if the spirit of desire has been cast out, likewise the one exercising power over it is not far away. (Pseudo-Athanasius, *Vita Syncletica* 19 [Castelli]).

Antony had been tested in the same way and afterwards questioned God, asking why he had not intervened

Where were you? Why did you not appear at the beginning to make my pains to cease?’ And a voice came to him, ‘Antony, I was here, but I waited to see your fight; since you have endured, and did not surrender, I will always be a helper for you, and will make your name known everywhere.’ Having heard this, Antony arose and prayed, and received such strength that he perceived that he had more power in his body than formerly (Athanasius, *Life of Antony*, 10. [trans. Robertson]).

³¹³ Pseudo-Athanasius, *Vita Syncletica*, 17.

³¹⁴ Pseudo-Athanasius, *Vita Syncletica*, 18.

Just as in the story of Job, God permitted Satan to attack the righteous “in order to strengthen the exercise of the virtuous soul” (Pseudo-Athanasius, *Vita Syncletica* 18) and just as with Job, it was endurance which marked the saint as righteous.

It was not only flesh and blood humans that were problematic, but visual images or memories of women which could inspire sexual desire. Palladius for example on entering the desert was so overcome by visions of women that he nearly left.³¹⁵ Another monk told Abba Cyrus of Alexandria that his “thoughts are about old and new representations of them: it is their remembrance which overcomes me” (Palladius, *Lausiac History* 23 [trans. Lowther Clarke]). Look only at the face of your own mother, recommended Ambrose, because other women’s faces may dwell in your thoughts and so “a secret wound may fester in your breast.”³¹⁶ *Syncletica*, also focused on the thorny issue of images which lead to sexual desire.³¹⁷ To combat these destructive thoughts, *Syncletica*’s first solution was “painful ascetic practice and pure prayer,” and fasting.³¹⁸ However, she also employed an Evagrian concept of driving back a nail with a nail, ie replacing one image with another. She

³¹⁵ Palladius, *Lausiac History*, 23.

³¹⁶ In a sermon by John Chrysostom in which he expounds on the memory of the martyrs, Chrysostom proclaims that “[E]ach of you who are present is that saint’s tomb, a tomb that has life and soul. For, if I were to open up the conscience of each of you who are present, I would find this saint dwelling inside your mind” (John Chrysostom, *On Saint Eustathius*, 3 [trans. W. Mayer in *The Cult of the Saints: St John Chrysostom* (New York: SVS Press, 2006), 49-62]). Chrysostom encourages the congregation to form an image of the saint in their mind and to use this image as a model of virtue.

³¹⁷ “Have you conquered material and practicable fornication. The enemy will set before your fornication of the senses. And even whenever you will prevent this for yourself, it lurks in the spaces of thought, moving you towards spiritual battle. It introduces seemly faces and [memories of] ancient associations to those who live the solitary life. Therefore it is necessary not to assent to these visions; for it is written ‘If the spirit of the powerful one rises up against you, do not give up your place’ (Eccl 10:4). For assenting to these things is equal to worldly fornication. For it says, ‘the powerful are punished powerfully’ (Wis 6:6.) therefore great is the struggle against the spirit of fornication. For it is the first among the evils of the enemy toward the perdition of the soul. And this the blessed Job, hinting, said to the devil: ‘[Behold] the one who has power in the centre of his belly’” Pseudo-Athanasius, *Vita Syncletica*, 26.

³¹⁸ Pseudo-Athanasius, *Vita Syncletica* 49 notes that prevailing over the passions and governing the stomach will completely restrain sexual pleasure.

maintained that one should imagine a contrasting image which rather than eliciting feelings of sexual desire, elicited feelings of disgust and thoughts of death.³¹⁹

When the most shameful thought has occurred, offer instead the opposite to it. For if a vision of seemly appearance should come into being in the regions of thought, which reasonably in this case one must punish, erase the eyes of the image, and extract flesh from the cheeks; cut away under the lips, and further imagine the ugly coagulated state of bare bone. Further contemplate whatever was desired; for thus thought may be able to hold back the vain wandered. For the object of love was nothing but a mixture of blood and phlegm, the very things that provides a use for a woven robe for living beings. Thus therefore by means of such thoughts it is likely to drive off polluted evil....still it is necessary on the whole to represent the body of the beloved as a wound that smells oppressive, and is inclined to putrefy, briefly out, as resembling a corpse, or to imagine oneself as a corpse (Pseudo-Athanasius, *Vita Syncletica*, 29 [Castelli]).

This is reminiscent of the account of another ascetic, an anonymous monk who constantly recalled the memory of a beautiful women. On finding out that she had died, he visited her tomb and soaked his cloak in the fluids leaking from her decomposing body. He then used the stench of her dying body to curb his thoughts and feelings of desire for her which lingered in him.³²⁰ In both *Syncletica*'s and the anonymous monk's methods for curbing sexual desire, the use of odour and the images of death and decomposition are an expedient means of refocusing the ascetic's mind. It is to the use of odour and the images of death to which we now turn.

Smell

Growing olfactory knowledge has prompted historians to consider how smells were perceived in the ancient world and the meanings associated with textual references to

³¹⁹ Evagrius also argued that the humankind had forfeited the image of God following the Fall. Their minds, weighed down by the corporal and by the passions of the body remained separated from God. Evagrius believed that it was only by combatting the *loismoi*, the thoughts and images within the mind which arouse the passions, that we would be able to return to God.

³²⁰ Sayings of the Desert Fathers, Arsenius, 5.26.

sensory imagery within early Christian texts.³²¹ Scholarship has demonstrated that in the ancient world, olfactory sensibilities and practices were expressed as cultural codes sustained by medical science, mythology, social systems and ritual processes.³²² Put simply, “good” smells were associated with “good” things and “bad” smells associated with “bad.” The dichotomies: good and evil; immortality and mortality; incorruptibility and decay; divine favour, and displeasure and health and illness, could all be alluded to through the use of olfactory renderings.

Sensory representations in literature were commonly used to elicit a desired response towards or perception of an individual based on the physiognomic belief that a person's inner attributes (disposition, morality, and characteristics) could be exposed externally. Sanctity and holiness could therefore be demonstrated swiftly using olfactory signposting. The sweet smell of sanctity, and the “fragrance of paradise” pervaded the monastic literature of the late antique and early medieval periods.³²³ A dead monk according to John Climacus could ooze this odour for example and everyone knew exactly what it signified.

Three days after the death of this saintly monk, when we had finished the customary rites, the place where he lay was suddenly filled with a great fragrance. We were allowed by the superior to open the coffin in which he lay, and when this was done we had sight of what seemed like two streams of myrrh flowing from his venerable feet. The teacher said to all of us, ‘Look, the sweat of his labours has been offered

³²¹ Over the last thirty years, there has been a sensory turn in contemporary scholarship within a wide range of fields including cultural studies, anthropology, historiography, natural sciences and psychology. For an overview of the field of sensory studies see For secondary scholarship see Constance Classen, David Howes and Anthony Synnot, *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell* (London: Routledge, 1994); David Howes, *The Expanding Field of Sensory Studies* online at <http://www.sensorystudies.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/The-Expanding-Field-of-Sensory-Studies-v.1.0-July-2013.pdf> ; Hans J Rindisbacher, “What’s This Smell? Shifting Worlds of Olfactory Perception,” *KulturPoetik* 15 (2015): 70-104

³²² Odours could be used in medical diagnosis for example in Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* 2.49 and were crucial in curing problems within the female body (Thucydides. *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 2.49 [trans C. F. Smith, LCL]).

³²³ St Ephrem the Syrian, “Hymn IX.17,” [trans. Brock]].

up as myrrh to God, and has been truly accepted. (John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Step 4 [trans Luibheid and Russell]).

Once Syncletica began her ascetic life, she too exuded this sweet fragrance, “Thus having withdrawn [anachōreō] by herself, she became perfect in good works. As time went on, and when her virtue blossomed, the sweet fragrance of her most glorious sufferings passed on to many” (Pseudo-Athanasius, *Vita Syncletica*, 21 [Castelli]). Peter Mena argues that it is the permeability of Syncletica’s body which permits the transmission of sanctity, the sweet fragrance allows a sensory experience for her disciples who sense, feel and experience her holiness and who can “literally inhale her knowledge through her saintly scent.”³²⁴

In the same way, bad smells and sensory images could elicit negative responses and were employed to signify the negative moral character of that person. Depictions of the deaths of Judas, Herod and Arius for example abound with grotesque, and vivid imagery and olfactory allusions. At the end of his life, Judas was bloated, deformed, full of puss and worms, “And his genitals became more disgusting and larger than anyone’s; simply by relieving himself, to his wanton shame, he emitted pus and worms that flowed through his entire body” (Papias, *Fragments* 4.2 [trans. Ehrman]). According to Josephus, Herod of Judea “fell ill of a sickness through which he stank, and his body melted away into a mass of worms, and he suffered most grievous pains, and at length people were unable to come near him because of his putrid smell....His bowels and legs were swollen with running sores, and matter flowed from them, he was consumed by worms” (*Cave of Treasures*, [trans. Budge], 218).³²⁵ One account of the death of Arius described how fearing a “loosening of

³²⁴ Peter Anthony Mena. "Scenting Saintliness: The Ailing Body, Chicana Feminism, and Communal Identity in Ancient Christianity." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 33, no. 2 (2017): 13-14

³²⁵ Josephus’ account reflects the equation of a grisly death following committing evil crimes (having John the Baptist murdered).

the bowels”, Arius rushed to a privy where he became faint and “His bottom fell through along with his excrement. The thing which doctors call the rectum immediately fell out through his bottom, with a lot of blood following, and the rest of his intestines flowed out together with his spleen and his liver, and he died immediately” (Socrates, *Church History* I.38.7 [trans. Périchon and Maraval]).³²⁶ These graphically sensory depictions of grotesque bodies covered in putrefaction, puss, stench and excrement drew on culturally established meanings to demonstrate the negative moral characteristics of a person. Quite simply, if they smelt “bad” they were “bad.”

Unlike other saints, the smell of virtue did not linger on Syncletica for her entire life. In fact, in the last stages of her illness, Syncletica’s body appears to have more in common with Judas, Herod and Arius than with the fragrant, holy saints. Her body, already full of decay and rotting worms begins to emit a foul, “inhuman odour”, an “inhuman stench” so abhorrent that those who cared for her could not bear to be near her.³²⁷ Andrew Crislip in *Thorns in the Flesh* demonstrates that illness itself could be read as a form of ascetic practice and there are certainly references to this in this text.³²⁸ There are also references to the use of stench as a component of ascetic practice.³²⁹ For Syncletica’s disciples, her illness works to strengthen the faith of those around her, “For perceiving with their eyes the sufferings, they strengthened further the will. For the wounds of the body of that one [Syncletica] cured the stricken souls. And one could see the caution and healing of those

³²⁶ On the legend of Arius’ death see Ellen Muehlberger, “The Legend of Arius’ Death: Imagination, Space and Filth in Late Ancient Historiography,” *Past and Present* 227 (2015) 3-29.

³²⁷ Pseudo-Athanasius, *Vita Syncletica*, 111

³²⁸ Crislip, *Thorns in the Flesh*, 81-108.

³²⁹ See David Brakke, *Demons*, 202-203.

who saw the greatness of soul and patient endurance of the blessed one” (Pseudo-Athanasius, *Vita Syncletica*, 110 [Castelli]). Suffering in this text is also didactic

For us, the evil that is originated from God is the most useful kind. For toward salvation of the soul and the education of the body are the famines and droughts, illnesses and sufferings, and all other various accidents. For the salvific remedies that they supposed were evil of the soul were not truly evil, these bear conversion to us from the mightier one. For what son is there that the father does not educate? (Pseudo-Athanasius, *Vita Syncletica*, 84 [Castelli]).

This passage suggests that suffering is both a lesson for the person suffering, but also for the community affected by suffering. Syncletica’s corporeal decomposition therefore acts as a form of community building asceticism. Mena goes a step further to argue that the employment of stench in this text further served to develop a communal identity. He contends that Syncletica’s community try to help her, but they struggle to withstand the foul stench omitted by her body however, when needed, they still attend to her. Mena observes therefore that their inability to escape the stench of her body, meant that the stench crossed from her body to theirs and connected them to her in a profound way.³³⁰

I concur with Crislip and Mena that endurance of the stench of Syncletica’s body, combined with being forced to gaze on her rotting, corpse-like body as it gradually decomposed before their eyes is depicted as a form of ascetic practice for those who care for her. In fact, we are told explicitly that it was beneficial for the whole community. “Who did not shudder, seeing such great plague? Who was not helped, seeing the patient endurance of the blessed one, and forming a notion in her of the fall of the enemy?” (Pseudo-Athanasius, *Vita Syncletica* 112). By witnessing the spectacle of Syncletica’s

³³⁰ Peter Anthony Mena. "Scenting Saintliness: The Ailing Body, Chicana Feminism, and Communal Identity in Ancient Christianity." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 33, no. 2 (2017): 15.

suffering, like those who witnessed the spectacle of the suffering martyr, her disciples were transformed. I will consider the spectacle and visibility of her illness and further meanings associated with reference to the stench coming from her body, but first it is important to consider briefly how early Christians used and manipulated olfactory codes as this will help to determine the way in which Syncletica's illness was expedient for her community.

Incense

Modern scholarship has demonstrated that Christians drew on these olfactory cultural codes to construct experiences, and to redefine meanings.³³¹ The account of the martyrdom of Polycarp is a prime example, in which Polycarp's death is given meaning using olfactory symbolism. As the pyre was lit, "He was within it not as burning flesh, but rather as bread being baked, or like gold and silver being purified in a smelting furnace. And from it we perceived such a delightful fragrance as though it were smoking incense or some other costly perfume" (Martyrdom of Polycarp 15 [trans. Musurillo]).

Encouraged to reconsider the smell of Polycarp's burning flesh and instead to recall the smell of bread and of incense, his death was given new meaning. This olfactory addition alluded to the notion of sacrifice. With the Pauline interpretation of Jesus' death as an expiatory sacrifice, the sacrificial language and imagery of the Jewish scriptures was increasingly used to give meaning to portrayals of death and suffering in early Christian texts. Susan Ashbrook Harvey notes that "Christians were a sacrificial people – the aroma of

³³¹ Constance Classen, David Howes and Anthony Synnot, *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell* (London: Routledge, 1994); Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Scenting Salvation: Ancient Christianity and the Olfactory Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Mark S. R. Jenner, "Follow Your Nose? Smell, Smelling and Their Histories," *The American Historical Review* (2011): 335-351 and Lionel Rothkrug, "The 'Odour of Sanctity,' and the Hebrew Origins of Christian Relic Veneration." *Historical Reflections* (1981): 95-142.

bread adorned their altars; the odor of burning flesh accompanied their martyrs. Christians used these smells to explain their actions and interpret the events they experienced, they articulated them specifically as the smells of sacrifice.”³³² This rhetoric of sacrifice combined with incense imagery provided a means for early Christians to demonstrate symbolic meaning of those who had died in persecution.

Initially refusing to undertake sacrifice using incense to the Roman gods, by the fourth and fifth centuries, both textual and archaeological evidence demonstrates that in liturgical practice, ceremony and private devotional practice, incense and holy oil were increasingly used. Harvey notes that within this “enhanced olfactory piety”, a range of meanings were utilised. The language of incense offerings in early Christian texts was used to metaphorically signal the sacrifice of Christ himself, martyrdom, and the self-sacrifice involved in Christian life and to signal divine knowledge, divine presence, and divine relationships.³³³ Ephrem the Syrian for example used the image of incense to compare the deaths of the martyrs to the death of Christ, saying that “Incenses are, like them, cast into the fire their scents rise up like their good Lord who by means of His death breathed out the fragrance of His life.”³³⁴

In a similar fashion, to the account in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, the introduction of an olfactory sensation transforms the way Syncletica’s illness should be interpreted. Syncletica’s body was wasting away, and the putrefaction became so great that she exudes

³³² Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Scenting Salvation: Ancient Christianity and the Olfactory Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 21.

³³³ For scriptural references see Ps141:2; 2 Cor 2:14-16; Philippians 4:18 Ephesians 5:2.

³³⁴ Ephrem, Hymns on Virginit 11.14; trans McVey, Ephrem the Syrian Hymns, 309.

an “inhuman odour,” her disciples approach kindling incense.³³⁵ Just the briefest of allusions to incense however, very quickly and deftly, transforms her suffering. No longer should we understand the stench emanating from her as an indication of moral inadequacy, but instead, in the words of St. Paul, Syncletica became “a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God,” a communal sacrifice whose suffering was for the benefit of others.³³⁶

Supporting this concept is how the author labours to depict Syncletica as a martyr, who in fact, suffered more than any martyr who had come before her.

Thus I do not think that the oldest martyrs struggled more bravely than the famous Syncletica. For the abominable one attacked them from the outside. For whether he brought them to death by the sword, or fire, they were gentler than the present trials of Syncletica. For instead of a fiery furnace burning her inward parts from below, the fire is burning from inside bit by bit. And in the manner of a file over a very long time, her body wastes away. And it is truly weighty and inhumane to speak about. For the ones entrusted with judicial powers, when they wish to set upon the more serious inner punishments, they destroy them by means of the slightest fire; thus the enemy from the insides made her punishment by causing the smouldering fever unceasing night and day. (Pseudo-Athanasius, *Vita Syncletica*, 106 [Castelli]).

Mirroring the bodies of the martyrs’ which were torn open, fragmented and burned and were read as sacrificial, Syncletica’s body functions in the same manner. Just as the female body had been rhetorically used in Greco-Roman discourse as beneficial to society through childbirth, Christians in a twist of rhetoric demonstrated that it was now the *denial* of their sexuality which demonstrated their own daily sacrifice for the benefit of their community.³³⁷

³³⁵ Pseudo-Athanasius, *Vita Syncletica* 111.

³³⁶ Ephesians 5:1-2.

³³⁷ Discourses on virginity took up these ideas of martyrdom and notions of sacrifice and the language of martyrdom permeated texts concerning virginity. Scriptural references can be found in Romans 12: 1 “I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, on the basis of God’s mercy, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable act of worship. Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.” Ambrose states that “Virginity is not praiseworthy because it is found in martyrs, but because itself makes martyrs” (Ambrose, *Virg.* 1.3.10 [trans. Romestin *NPNF* 2/10:365]), and whilst virginity was not a precursor for martyrdom, those who died with their bodies sexually intact gained, argued Ambrose,

They were living martyrs and a “whole burnt-offering” (Athanasius of Alexandria, Letter to the Virgins 19 [trans Brakke]).³³⁸

Disgust

In the literature of the early church, Christian writers reframed traditional Greco-Roman ideologies of power by transforming the traditionally powerless members of society, depicted as disgusting, ugly, or weak into models of social power.³³⁹ I contend that disgust at the sight and smell of Syncletica’s body, like so many other examples in Christian literature, was transformed into a “pearl.” By situating Syncletica’s illness within a common cultural framework, evoking horror, disgust and despair that many would have been familiar with, Pseudo Athanasius transformed her body, “offered as bait” for the benefit of all.³⁴⁰ By transforming and opening up her body into a grotesque, voyeuristic spectacle she, like the apostles before her became “like men sentenced to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels and to human beings” (Pseudo-Athanasius, *Vita Syncletica* 20 [Catelli]). In this final section, I will consider the spectacle of that suffering, the rhetoric of disgust and its use and theological significance within the text.

Syncletica’s illness blurs the boundaries between living body and decomposing corpse. Her long, drawn-out death, although referred to as being over a period of years,

“Each crown, that of martyrdom and that of virginity” (Ambrose, Virg. 2.4.24 [trans. Romestin *NPNF* 2/10:377]).

³³⁸ Cyprian, *On the Dress of Virgins*, 22. See also the *Life of Saint Helia* which expounds on the necessity for virgins to be a living sacrifice. “Who is more excellent than our virgin who, stained by no one’s blood, offered herself as a living sacrifice by destroying the vices of her body?” (*Life of Helia* 1.588-590 [trans. Burrus]).

³³⁹ On the body and power see Brent D. Shaw, “Body / Power / Identity: Passions of the Martyrs.” *J ECS* 4 (1996): 269-312.

³⁴⁰ Pseudo-Athanasius, *Vita Syncletica*, 112.

appears to fragment and disintegrate before our very eyes. Beginning with her internal organs, “the good-hating devil” like a “bloodthirsty executioner” broke up her lung into pieces which were expelled from her mouth via spittle and her body was racked with fever, “burning her inward parts from below.”³⁴¹ Then, moving to the external, after a pain in her tooth, her gums grew putrid, and the bone fell out. The neighbouring parts became worm-infested, a hole appeared, and the surrounding places turned black.³⁴² In many ways, Syncletica’s illness marks a second spiritual descent / death. Piece by piece her body was consumed.³⁴³ Wounded not only from the outside, but internally too, her body wasted away, corpse-like with bones disintegrating, skeletal, worm-infested and emitting an inhuman stench.³⁴⁴ Her body oozes with affliction.

The account of Syncletica’s dying body is so close to the earlier chapter in which Syncletica advised that to negate sexual temptation, one should envision their object of desire as a putrefying corpse that they should surely be read together. She advises that as a means to negate sexual temptation, they should envision their object of desire as a putrefying corpse. Foreshadowing her own analogous demise, this image gives meaning to her death.

Therefore what is useful in the present war? Clearly, painful ascetic practice and pure prayer; these have emerged generally as able to keep off all destructive thoughts.³⁴⁵ But it is necessary to use some particular notions for expelling the plague from the soul in the present circumstances. When the most shameful thought has occurred, offer instead the opposite to it. For if a vision of seemingly appearance should come into being in the regions of thought, which reasonably in this case one must punish, erase the eyes of the image, and extract flesh from the cheeks; cut away under the lips, and further imagine the ugly coagulated state of

³⁴¹ Pseudo-Athanasius, *Vita Syncletica*, 104-6.

³⁴² Pseudo-Athanasius, *Vita Syncletica*, 111.

³⁴³ Pseudo-Athanasius, *Vita Syncletica*, 104-111.

³⁴⁴ Pseudo-Athanasius, *Vita Syncletica*, 111

³⁴⁵ Cf 17, 19

bare bone. Further contemplate whatever was desired; for thus thought may be able to hold back the vain wandered. For the object of love was nothing but a mixture of blood and phlegm, the very thing that provides a use for a woven robe for living beings. Thus therefore by means of such thoughts it is likely to drive off polluted evil. And just as it is fitting to drive back a nail with a nail, so it is with a demon.³⁴⁶ Still it is necessary on the whole to represent the body of the beloved [erōmenos] as a wound that smells oppressive, and is inclined to putrefy, briefly put, as resembling a corpse, or to imagine oneself as a corpse. But the best of all is to rule over the stomach; for this one is able to give even the sexual pleasures. (Pseudo-Athanasius, *Vita Syncletica*, 29 [Castelli]).

At the end of her life, Syncletica became the embodied form of this image. Her decomposing body acts metaphorically for her disciples to 'dip their rag into', she literally becomes the visual image of disgust foreshadowed in the earlier image. Just as when Evagrius went to sleep, he would recall the tortures of hell

Remember also what happens in hell and think about the state of the souls down there, their painful silence, their most bitter groanings, their fear, their strife, their waiting. Think of their grief without end and the tears their souls shed eternally...The eternal fire, worms that rest not, the darkness, gnashing of teeth, fear and supplications. (*Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Evagrius, 1 [trans. Ward]).

Syncletica's body became a living embodiment of the images found in the tours of hell, decomposing, worm infested, fragmented, and torn. She became a sensory deterrent that her disciples could gaze upon and smell to allay their own corporeal desires as well as a means of forcing her disciples and those who heard her story to both smell and to gaze upon death. Her disfigurement was preferable to allowing her community to fall into sin and so she became an icon, a visual reminder and deterrent against sexual desire for the benefit of others salvation whilst concurrently reminding us of the fate that we have in store for us.

³⁴⁶ Compare to Evagrius praktikos 58

On Disgust

Employing Mary Douglas' theoretical framework on dirt, modern scholars suggest that the emotion of disgust is culturally determined and mutable, deeply embedded in social and cultural systems of meaning. Only when something disturbs this social and cultural order is it regarded as disgusting or abject. William Miller suggests that "Disgust conveys a strong sense of aversion to something perceived as dangerous because of its powers to contaminate, infect, or pollute."³⁴⁷ For many cultures, disgust relates to fear of violation of the boundaries of the body itself, and therefore has clearly defined links to the mouth, to sex, other bodily excretions, poor hygiene, and death. Interestingly, the account of Syncletica's illness has all these elements.

Many scholars argue that the most potent feelings of disgust are exhibited when we see, hear, or touch the unhealthy body, the dying body, or rotting corpse. In Kristeva's seminal *Powers of Horror*, she identifies the corpse as the most disgusting waste matter.³⁴⁸ Kristeva suggests that this is because within abjection lurks a threat, it is something which is not I, and which questions the fragility of our world and of ourselves. She says "Refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These bodily fluids, this defilement,...are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border."³⁴⁹ Whilst scholars such as Kristeva argue that the corpse and its excretions are the most abject of waste, I argue that Syncletica's body is deliberately put

³⁴⁷ William Ian Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 2.

³⁴⁸ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 3-4.

³⁴⁹ Julia Kristeva, "'Approaching Abjection,' From Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection," in *Classic Readings on Monster Theory*, ed. Asa Simon Mittman and Marcus Hensel (Leeds: Arc Humanities Press, 2018), 69.

on show specifically to ensure that the audience think about death, so that they *cannot* “thrust aside” these thoughts, and they *cannot* extricate themselves from the border. For what purpose would Syncletica’s body be employed in such a way? As Miller states, disgust is intimately connected to the creation of culture by drawing “the lines between defilement and purity, clean and filthy, those crucial boundaries disgust is called to police.”³⁵⁰ This is true of Syncletica’s illness. We are not encouraged to feel sympathetic towards her, her body is *supposed* to elicit disgust. She is disgusting because she is out of place, disturbing the ancient sense of beauty and order with regards to both femininity and sanctity. She is depicted as an image of the grotesque, confusing the categories of living and dead, to evoke a visceral response specifically designed to police the lines of social and moral behaviour.

This graphic and grotesque representation of bodily decomposition combined with the stench of her body calls to mind the story of Lazarus. Liturgical authors and iconographers frequently centred their depictions of Lazarus on the olfactory sensations that those who were witness to his resurrection would have experienced. Pseudo-Macarius for example commented that “For Lazarus also, whom the Lord raised up, exuded so fetid an odour that no one could approach his tomb” (Pseudo-Macarius. *Homily* 30.8 [trans. Maloney]). Basil of Seleucia (d. c.460) when retelling the story of Lazarus to his congregation employed a similar vivid picture of the rotting, worm infested body of the already dead Lazarus who “Appeared among the living, he whose inward parts were ravaged, and who was given up to worms, an object of waste. His eyes were putrid, his

³⁵⁰ Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust*, 2.

sinews were torn asunder, his shoulders and hands were separated, his bones were disjointed, his nerves and marrows and veins were dissolved to juices" (Basil, *Homily on Lazarus* 9 [trans. Cunningham]). This description, just as that of Syncletica, was designed to elicit disgust and forced the listener to picture the vivid image of both the body of Syncletica and of Lazarus and indeed of their own bodies which will at some point meet this same fate. Images of the "grotesque" such as these are of a hybrid nature, a mixture of the actual and the monstrous, they are "disturbing displays, which we still have to look at because somewhere deep down we know that in all its strangeness, the horror is really about ourselves."³⁵¹

Gazing upon and smelling the decomposing body of Syncletica forces a direct comparison therefore to the body of Lazarus who despite his body lying cold in the tomb, and emitting a foul stench, was raised. The story of Lazarus' resurrection pointed to the resurrection of both Jesus himself and humankind more generally. By employing the story of Lazarus and emphasising the condition of his body before he was raised, early Christian writers demonstrated the proof of God's power not simply to resurrect the body of one man, but also the promise of bodily resurrection for all.³⁵²

The physical nature of the resurrection, the salvation of human flesh and the relationship of body and soul in this life and the next were contentious issues in the early

³⁵¹ "Grotesques often present metamorphoses and hybrids, and they tend to deform figures, accentuating processes that open up bodies to transformation, such as eating and vomiting, penetration, birth-giving and decay." Thomas Arentzen, "Dissolving with Lazarus: Late Ancient Liturgical Bodies in Pieces," *Studia Theologica- Nordic Journal of Theology* (2017):173-198, 177.

³⁵² On the use of the story of Lazarus as a means of subverting claims against a fleshly resurrection see Jennifer R. Strawbridge, "How the Body of Lazarus Helps to Solve a Pauline Problem." *New Testament Studies* 63 (2017): 588-603.

church. Opponents of a fleshly resurrection shied away from bodily decomposition, using images of the rotting corpse and the abject nature of the human body to demonstrate that the resurrection would *not* be of the flesh, pronouncing the resurrection of the flesh as exceedingly vile, loathsome and impossible. Origen cites Celsus for example who insisted not only that the hope that those who were long dead would rise was a hope “cherished by worms,” because dead bodies are “more worthless than dung,” but also asked why anyone would want a body “full of those things which is not even honourable to mention,” to exist forever.³⁵³ But this abject, leaky, messy body and the abhorrent corpse were exploitable, and were instead embraced by early Christian writers. Jennifer R. Strawbridge notes that early Christian writers such as Irenaeus, Tertullian and Augustine employed texts such as the raising of Lazarus to defend their belief in the resurrection of the flesh. It was precisely God’s ability to raise the putrefied, rotting and stench filled body of Lazarus which served as proof for the resurrection of the flesh.³⁵⁴ As Peter Brown has demonstrated, the transformation of the ascetic body was viewed as a foretaste of the bodily resurrection, and the putrid, repulsive body of Lazarus as the model of the resurrection, becomes the archetype for the ascetic body. Gazing upon and smelling the decomposing body of Syncletica forced a direct comparison therefore to Lazarus whose body, despite lying cold in the tomb, and emitting a foul stench, was raised.

As Kristeva identified, behind abjection there hides a threat. The spectacle of Syncletica’s body, slowly metamorphizing into a corpse acts in this very manner. Whilst Syncletica’s body is not our own, it reminds us of what is in store for our bodies. This

³⁵³ Origen, *Against Celsus* V.14 [trans. Crombie, *ANF* 4:549]].

³⁵⁴ Strawbridge, "How the Body of Lazarus Helps to Solve a Pauline Problem," 588-603.

description was designed to elicit disgust, forcing the listener to picture the vivid image of the bodies of both Lazarus and Syncletica as well as their own bodies which will meet this same fate. Ironically, in reminding the audience of the prototypical resurrection of Lazarus, it reminds them of the surety of the resurrection of the rotted cadaver whilst simultaneously threatening what awaits (in hell) should they be unable to control sexual behaviour and impulses. Syncletica's disfigurement was preferable to allowing her community to fall into sin and so she became a visual reminder and deterrent against sexual desire for the benefit of other's salvation whilst concurrently there lurked a threat, a reminder of the fate that could be in store.

Conclusion

By the fifth century, despite a wealth of literature depicting the ideal of Christian virginity, the female body remained problematic. Even having adopted the virginial life, undertaken extreme ascetic practice and fasting, women were still hampered by the very fact of their own female body. In other ascetic literature, particularly those tales of the transvestite monks, the eradication of external markings of gender through the ascetic lifestyle meant that some women (according to hagiographic narrative) had abandoned their female nature to the extreme that they were able to live incognito holy (male) lives. Yet, often in death, their biological identity as women was revealed. Syncletica was different. By fasting, by external manifestations of masculinity and by sacrificing her body to the virginial life, she was on par with others. However, in suffering her long drawn-out death, she became the ascetic extraordinaire whose body transcended its own female nature and its own corporeal nature by breaking down boundaries and occupying a space between life and putrescence. She was no longer a site of sexual desire, but rather an

object of disgust. Her body is leaky, corpse-like and worm-infested, the antithesis of Greco-Roman ideals of beauty. In fact, her femaleness was obliterated and rather than a sexual being, inspiring lust, her body, reminiscent of the bodies found in the tours of hell, inspired disgust, and horror. In a unique manner, she had completely overcome the feminine, not governed by sexual desire, nor inspiring sexual desire, but evoking a visceral response specifically designed to police the lines of social and moral behaviour. Taking on a communal function she became the example of disgust which enabled the salvation of anyone who saw her or who heard her story.

Kristeva maintains that the liquefaction and rotting of the body which becomes the corpse is a spectacle of disgust, and this was most certainly the case, but this spectacle was exploitable. By situating Syncletica's illness within a common cultural framework, evoking horror and disgust, the author transformed her body for the benefit of all. Syncletica's somatic destruction served as a reminder of God's ability to raise the decaying body of Lazarus which acted as assurance for early Christians of the integrity and salvation of the flesh, but which also served as a reminder of the absolute dissolution of, or never-ending torture of the body should it fail inspection at the final judgement. Disgust here, therefore, has a social and moral component. The visceral, pervasive, and sensory depiction is implanted in its readers / onlooker's memory to serve as an unforgettable reminder to maintain and police the boundaries of both the individual as well as the social body. Paradoxically in this monstrous image, she represented the transformation of all humanity and the proof of Jesus as the source of salvation.

By opening up her body into a grotesque, voyeuristic spectacle the abject was employed in a multifaceted rhetoric to both elicit disgust as well as to demonstrate sanctity. This text depicts Syncletica as an ideal model of sanctity, of obedience, of ascetic practice and endurance, but also models the danger of the sexual body for the community itself, but more specifically, the danger inherent in the sexual, female body. Ironically, it is not Syncletica's decaying, corpse-like body, which is perceived as abject and dangerous, but rather the sexual female body which has the potential to contaminate or pollute.

CHAPTER IV: WOUNDED BODIES, BARING THE BREAST AND BECOMING ANGELIC: GENDER FLUIDITY IN LATE ANTIQUE HAGIOGRAPHY

Introduction

From the “deep-creased scars” on Santiago’s hands in Hemmingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea* to Harry Potter’s distinctive lightning bolt shaped scar on his forehead, scars tell a tale and remind us of an important past and sometimes future.³⁵⁵ As Professor Dumbledore tells Professor McGonagall, “Scars can come in useful. I have one myself above my left knee which is a perfect map of the London Underground.”³⁵⁶ In the world of cinematography and literature, narrative depictions of scars can shape our understanding of a character’s personality or provide a back story. They can be sites of memory, of changing bodies, of uniqueness, of horror, of pain, or of love and happiness. They are fundamentally sites of meaning.

In Tony Morrison’s *Beloved*, women’s scarred bodies mirror their life experiences.³⁵⁷ From the scars on the former slave Sethe’s back, inflicted through sexual and physical brutality, to the branding on her mother’s rib cage, the marked and violated bodies of these women tell multiple stories of both the characters themselves but also of real-life violence and brutality enacted upon countless enslaved women who were deprived of their own voice. François Pitavy notes that

³⁵⁵ See Ernest Hemmingway, *The Old Man and the Sea* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1952), 5 and J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* (London, Bloomsbury, 1997).

³⁵⁶ J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* (London, Bloomsbury Pub., 1997), 17. This is in response to Professor McGonagall asking whether Dumbledore could do something about the scar on baby Harry’s forehead.

³⁵⁷ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (London: Vintage Classics, 2007). The story *Beloved* itself is based on a true story of an enslaved woman, Margaret Garner (1833-1858) who fled from a plantation in Boone County with her husband and four young children. When the family was found, Garner used a butcher’s knife to kill her young daughter and attempted to kill her three other children to prevent them from going back to a life of slavery.

To those who have been deprived of language, those scars are precisely the words they have to tell, the unerasable site of their memories. The slaves' narratives are inscribed on their bodies, it has become the text of their stories and the most powerful signifier of their personal and communal histories.³⁵⁸

The act of branding, the scar which Sethe's mother bears, a mark forever on her skin, signifies imposed identity, an act of enforced ownership by white slave owners. Whilst these scars were inflicted to enforce belonging, ironically, her mother's scar simultaneously becomes a source of her own individual identity.

She picked me up and carried me behind the smokehouse. Back there she opened up her dress front and lifted her breast and pointed under it. Right on her rib was a circle and a cross burnt right in the skin. She said, 'This is your ma'am. This,' and she pointed. 'I am the only one got this mark now. The rest dead. If something happens to me and you can't tell me by my face, you can know me by this mark.'³⁵⁹

Sethe has her own scars. They are thick scars branching across her back, inflicted by brutal whipping. Scholars have posited multiple readings of this scar. As an emblem of communality: of a relationship of female healing between Amy and Sethe, of a generational bond between Sethe and her mother or of her connection to her children and the pain a mother would be willing to go through for her children.³⁶⁰ It is a sign for many therefore of connection and community in opposition to the enforced isolation and separation which so many enslaved people were forced to endure. Others have read into the significance of the scar shaped like a "tree" claiming that Morrison intended the reference to refer to the hidden sexual violence experienced by enslaved black women. "Morrison piggybacks on the

³⁵⁸ Francois, Pitavy, "From Middle Passage to Holocaust: The Black Body as a Site of Memory.," in *Sites of Memory in American Literatures and Cultures*, ed. Udo J. Hebel (Heidelberg. Germany: Universitätsverlag, 2003), 62.

³⁵⁹ Morrison, *Beloved*, ch 6.

³⁶⁰ Cynthia Dobbs, "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: Bodies Returned, Modernism Revisited," *African American Review* 32 (1998): 563-578; Anita Durkin, "Object Written, Written Object: Slavery, Scarring, and Complications of 'Beloved,'" *African American Review* 41 (2007): 541-556; Sandy Alexandre, "From the Same Tree: Gender and Iconography in Representations of Violence in *Beloved*." *Signs* 36 (2011): 915-940.

power and currency of lynching iconography – particularly tree imagery – as a way to demonstrate continuity between violence committed against black men and woman “³⁶¹ It becomes a powerful symbol of the “near invisibility of black women’s victimage.”³⁶² Through the story itself, Sethe’s own body and its scar are continually reassessed, redefined and reinterpreted. Its meaning is not only drawn from the scar itself, but also from its location. It is on a part of her body which she cannot see, her back, and she is therefore both reliant on, and controlled by, other’s interpretations of these marks. Sethe herself interprets it in the context in which it was received, in her attempt to escape from a world of brutality, pain, violence and humiliation, as the price that she paid for her escape. Amy’s reading of Sethe’s wounds transforms them into something beautiful.³⁶³ However, when Sethe and Paul D begin to make love and he sees the scars, his reaction is one of disgust, he sees them not as a beautiful tree, but as “a revolting clump of scars.”³⁶⁴ Sandy Alexandre states that “The tree is in the eye of the beholder, and the placement of the scar on her back renders Sethe a non-beholder, and consequently a *tableau vivant*, open for interpretation.”³⁶⁵

Just as Sethe’s body becomes a corporeal frame of reference within the text, so too the body of Macrina, a fourth century ascetic whose life is depicted by her brother Gregory

³⁶¹ Alexandre, “From the Same Tree,” 916.

³⁶² Alexandre, “From the Same Tree,” 925

³⁶³ This appeal to nature is perhaps a coping mechanism, a way of ignoring the horror of the wounds that had been inflicted on her. Sethe does the same earlier in the text when she recalls the lynching of the Sweet Home boys “Boys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world. It shamed her – remembering the wonderful soughing trees rather than the boys.” (Morrison, *Beloved*, ch 6)

³⁶⁴ Morrison, *Beloved*, ch 21

³⁶⁵ Alexandre, “From the Same Tree, 924.

of Nyssa in the *Life of Saint Macrina*.³⁶⁶ The *Life*, a homage to an “honoured person,” is a story of corporal meaning. It is the physical body of Macrina which demonstrates and reflects multiple ideas, concepts and layers of meaning. She too bears a scar, hers hidden until death, and as her corpse lays awaiting preparation, it is gazed on by a loyal follower and by her brother, it is they, just as Amy and Paul D, who interpret its meaning. Like Sethe’s “chokecherry tree,” it is not simply Macrina’s scar which is significant, but also its location, hidden on her breast and exposed to our gaze, which also has implications for how we should read the scar, her body and her actions.

Written between 380 and 383 CE., the *VSM* is the Cappadocian Father, Gregory of Nyssa’s account of the life of his older sister Macrina. However, it is Macrina’s death, the lead up to her death and subsequent funeral which form the bulk of Gregory’s account. It is here we should focus our attention as Gregory positions Macrina within the category of noble death and within the motif of a person’s death telling us about their life. It is her death which gives meaning to her life, and which proves the nature of her character. In this chapter, I take Macrina’s death as the starting point. After considering the depiction of her death and placing it within its Greco-Roman literary context, I will then consider her scar. Previous scholarship has focused on the meaning of her scar, drawing literary parallels to ancient literature, however, the location of her scar has not been questioned. In a society in which the public display of a woman’s breast was socially unacceptable, the location of the scar and the post-mortem revealing of her breast to Gregory must be crucial to understanding Gregory’s depiction of Macrina. To address this lacuna, I will explore motifs

³⁶⁶ *Vita Sanctae Macrinae* (hereafter *VSM*). Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Saint Macrina*. Translated by Kevin Corrigan. Pages 21-54 in *The Life of Saint Macrina by Gregory, Bishop of Nyssa*, ed. Kevin Corrigan (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2001).

of breast exposure in both ancient narrative and visual depictions to construe the implications of the placement of her scar as well as the purpose of revealing her breast after she has died. I suggest that the revelation of Macrina's breast is a means of demonstrating a transcendence of gender, a means of situating her in an eschatological framework in which she participates, and which reflects Gregory's eschatological and soteriological understanding of the ascetic life.

Macrina and her Death

Macrina was part of a distinguished Christian family based in Caesarea. She was the eldest of ten children, born to Basil and Emmelia around 330 CE.³⁶⁷ Among her siblings were Naucratus who died in a hunting accident, Peter (c.340-391), Bishop of Sebaste and the influential theologians and proponents of early monasticism, Basil of Caesarea (d. 379 CE.) and Gregory of Nyssa (c.335-395 CE.), two of the Cappadocian Fathers.³⁶⁸ Macrina appears to have had a great influence on Gregory, he describes her as living a life of such quality that "Should not be forgotten for the future and that she who had raised herself through philosophy to the highest of human virtue should not pass along this way veiled and in silence" (Nyssa, *VSM* [Corrigan], 21). Macrina is depicted in the role of ideal Roman

³⁶⁷ Macrina was the granddaughter of Macrina the Elder who had connections with and was possibly taught by Gregory Thaumaturgus (c.213-270), Bishop of Neo-Caesarea. See Basil of Caesarea, Epistle CCIV.6, *NPNF* 2/8: 245; Basil of Caesarea, Epistle CCXXIII.3, *NPNF* 2/8: 263; Gregory of Nazianzus, Oration XLIII. 3-8 *NPNF* 2/7:396-398 and Nyssa, *VSM* (Nyssa, *VSM* [trans. Corrigan], 22). Scholars debate the number of children as the *VSM* initially states that Macrina's mother had "four sons and five daughters" (*VSM* (Nyssa, *VSM* [trans. Corrigan], 25) and then when her mother is dying, Emmelia's prayer when she dedicates her first and last children to God, she says "So may sanctification come to this my first and to this my tenth born" *VSM* (Nyssa, *VSM* [trans. Corrigan], 32). On the siblings of Macrina and Gregory see M. Aubineau, *Traité de la virginité*, Sources chrétiennes 119 (Paris: Cerf, 1966)21-82; Kevin Corrigan, "Introduction," in *The Life of Saint Macrina by Gregory, Bishop of Nyssa*, ed. Kevin Corrigan (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2005), 5-6; Anthony Meredith, *Gregory of Nyssa* (London: Routledge, 1999), 2 and J. Emile Pfister, "A Biographical Note: The Brothers and Sisters of St. Gregory of Nyssa," *Vigiliae Christianae* 18 (1964): 108-113.

³⁶⁸ Naucratus and his death is described in the *VSM* (Nyssa, *VSM* [Corrigan], 27-28).

daughter, the epitome of female beauty, “There did not seem to be any such marvel in the whole of that country which could compare with her beauty and gracefulness, so that not even painters’ hands could come close to her fresh beauty” (Nyssa, *VSM* [Corrigan], 24). We are given the impression that Macrina would win a contest of feminine virtues, she prepared bread with her own hand and was “especially skilled in the working of wool” an activity which was frequently employed in ancient literature to define women as ideal, virtuous *matrona*.³⁶⁹

Although Macrina doesn’t experience childbirth herself, she is defined in a nurturing maternal role, taking on the role of surrogate mother to her siblings and to the virgins in her community. From the time of her brother Peter’s birth,

When he had only been a few moments at the breast, his eldest sister, the subject of our story, snatched him straight up from the woman who was nursing him and brought him up herself... She became everything for the child, father, teacher, guide, mother, counsellor. (Nyssa, *VSM* [Corrigan], 31).

So too in her role as surrogate mother for those “girls who called her by the name of mother and nurse....They were those who had been left prostrate along the roadways at the time of the famine and she had picked them up, nursed them, brought them back to health and guided them personally to the pure, uncorrupted life” (Nyssa, *VSM* [Corrigan], 44).

Macrina is a paradigm of the ideal Christian Roman women, daughter and mother, a reinterpretation and refining of roles within a Christian framework in which she exhibits the

³⁶⁹ Nyssa, *VSM* (Corrigan), 23 and 25. On the depiction of wool-working in Roman literature see Alison Waters, “The Ideal of Lucretia in Augustan Latin Poetry” (PhD diss., University of Calgary, 2013), <http://hdl.handle.net/11023/705>.

desired traits and characteristics of a Roman mother and wife, but without physically giving birth, getting married or having sex.³⁷⁰

After expounding on Macrina's early life and family history, the majority of the narrative focuses on the end of Macrina's life. When their brother Basil dies, Gregory describes himself as journeying to see Macrina, yearning to share his grief with her.³⁷¹ However, on his arrival, he finds that Macrina was herself prostrated and close to death, and the subsequent narrative focuses on her death and interment.³⁷² Gregory wrote two accounts of Macrina's death, one the hagiographic *VSM* and the other *On the Soul and Resurrection* a dialogue with Macrina on her deathbed.³⁷³ I focus primarily on the account within the *VSM* in which the prominence of Macrina's death is noteworthy. Indeed, as J. Warren Smith has observed, "Nyssen's biography of Macrina could as easily have been entitled *De Morti Macrinae*, for more than half of the narrative concerns Nyssen's visit with Macrina in the days and hours immediately preceding her death. Her death is its climax."³⁷⁴

³⁷⁰ Her depiction as a virgin mother draws obvious parallels to Mary, but depictions of women as mothers who are not biological mothers is not unique in early Christian literature. Blandina, an early Christian martyr is a case in point.

³⁷¹ Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and Resurrection* (trans. William Moore and Henry Austin Wilson, *NPNF* 2/5: 429)

³⁷² Nyssa, *VSM* (Corrigan), 33-51.

³⁷³ *On the Soul and Resurrection* bears a striking resemblance to Plato's *Phaedo*, and Macrina is "Presented as the Christian Socrates, equal to, or even surpassing, that profound intelligence. The Socratic typology also enters into the *VSM*, both in the 'ideal philosophy' which is central to Macrina's life and also in the dramatic fibre of the whole work, centred upon the death bed of a mighty religious and intellectual leader" (Kevin Corrigan, "Introduction," in *The Life of Saint Macrina by Gregory, Bishop of Nyssa*, ed. Kevin Corrigan [Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2005], 13). Corrigan suggests therefore that although the two texts are independent of each other, they should be read in tandem

³⁷⁴ J. Warren Smith, "A Just and Reasonable Grief: The Death and Function of a Holy Woman in Gregory of Nyssa's Life of Macrina." *J ECS* 12 (2004), 59. Johann Kirsch described it as "a biography in the form of a panegyric" (Johann Peter Kirsch, "St. Macrina the Younger," *The Catholic Encyclopedia* Vol. 9 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910)).

On his arrival to Macrina's community of virgins, Gregory discovers that "Macrina was already caught in the grip of a grievous sickness, but was resting not on a bed or couch, but on the ground, on a plank covered with sack-cloth, with another plank supporting her head and designed to serve instead of a pillow" (Nyssa, *VSM* [Corrigan], 34). She also hides her suffering from Gregory, attempting "to stifle her groans and forced herself somehow to hide her tortured gasping for breath" (Nyssa, *VSM* [Corrigan], 35). Gregory positions her suffering both explicitly and implicitly in a category of noble sufferers and biblical exemplars who model endurance in the face of great suffering.

And just as we hear in the story of Job, that the man was wasting away covered at every point of his entire body with festering and oozing sores, and yet he did not allow his perception, by means of his power of reasoned reflection, to incline towards his pain...it was something like this that I was also seeing in the case of the great Macrina; although the fever was devouring all her strength and driving her headlong to death, she refreshed her body as if with some kind of morning dew, and so she kept her mind unhindered in the contemplation of sublime things, without being at all affected by a sickness of such severity (Nyssa, *VSM* [Corrigan], 35-36).

Despite the pain and suffering which she faces, she endures it heroically, in fact, despite its attack on her body, she maintains her self-composure, keeping her mind focused on her spiritual devotion to God. As Macrina's health declines further, her breathing becomes laboured, her "tongue burned dry by the fever and was no longer able to articulate her words" (Nyssa, *VSM* [Corrigan], 43). Finally, after uttering a last prayer and making the shape of the cross, she dies.³⁷⁵ The women of her community, having held their sorrow in check begin to wail and weep, for "their suffering could no longer be contained in silence, and their grief was like a fire smouldering away at their souls, all at once a bitter,

³⁷⁵ Nyssa, *VSM* (Corrigan), 43.

uncontrollable wailing erupted” (Nyssa, *VSM* [Corrigan], 44)). Gregory too is swept up by this tide of emotion, giving himself over entirely to lamentation.³⁷⁶

Subsequently, a widow by the name of Vetiana, assists Gregory to lay out Macrina’s body.³⁷⁷ Whereupon, Gregory is shocked to find that Macrina’s only possessions are those which she was wearing. “Look at her cloak, look at the veil on her head, the worn sandals on her feet; this is her wealth, this is her fortune! Apart from what you see there is nothing laid by in hidden chests or chambers in reserve” (Nyssa, *VSM* [trans. Corrigan], 46). She is however wearing a necklace made up on an iron cross and a ring hanging on a chain. Gregory offers the cross to Vetiana and keeps the ring for himself. He says that Vetiana looked intently at the ring, saying “Your choice of this piece has not missed the mark; for the stone in the ring is hollow and in it is hidden a fragment of the wood of life; and so the seal with its engraving reveals from above what is hidden below” (Nyssa, *VSM* [Corrigan], 47). Immediately after this exchange, Vetiana declares “Do not let the greatest wonder accomplished by this holy lady..pass by unrecorded” (Nyssa, *VSM* [Corrigan], 47). When Gregory asks to what she is referring, she “Laid bare a part of Macrina’s breast and asked. ‘Do you see this faint, tiny mark below the skin? It looks like a scar left by a small needle’” (Nyssa, *VSM* [Corrigan], 47). Gregory asks her what is so marvellous about this tiny scar, and Vetiana tells him that on that spot there had been a painful growth, a tumour which had been too dangerous to cut away as it was so close to Macrina’s heart, Despite Emmelia begging Macrina to seek medical assistance, she refused, on the grounds that “baring a part

³⁷⁶ Nyssa, *VSM* (Corrigan), 44.

³⁷⁷ On preparation of the body after death see Valerie M. Hope, *Death in Ancient Rome: A Sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 2007), 97-99.

of her body to strangers was worse than being sick" (Nyssa, *VSM* [Corrigan], 48).³⁷⁸ Macrina had instead visited the sanctuary, where she remained for the entire night, weeping copious amounts of tears which wet the ground forming mud. Macrina applied the concoction of tears and dirt to the affected place and her mother made the sign of the cross on the affliction which then disappeared. However, "'This little mark,' she continued, 'appeared also at the time in place of this horrible tumour and stayed there till the end to be a reminder, I think, of God's visitation, as an impetus and cause for constant thanksgiving to God'" (Nyssa, *VSM* [Corrigan], 48).

Suffering

As previously mentioned, Macrina's endurance of suffering is also compared to that of Job.³⁷⁹ The reference to Job places Macrina's forthcoming death into a context of scriptural prefiguration and exemplification. Job is frequently invoked by hagiographic authors to highlight the endurance of a saint when faced with some form of either physical or emotional suffering. Gregory of Tours for example, compares the sixth century Monegund's loss of her two daughters to that of Job and when Syncletica becomes ill, her suffering is directly compared to that of Job as being even more significant and brutal than his.³⁸⁰ Using cognitive anthropology, Susan Garret has identified "shared cognitive schemas" or "cultural models" which provide a framework for remembering, reconstructing

³⁷⁸ In an oration dated sometime between 369-374 CE., Gregory Nazianzen recalls a similar incident in which his sister also refused to allow doctors to treat her after her carriage had overturned, seriously injuring her. Nazianzen reasoned that this was "Both because she shrunk from the inspection and the hands of men, preserving, even in suffering, her modesty, and also awaiting her justification from Him Who allowed this to happen, so that she owed her preservation to none other than to Him" (Gregory Nazianzen, *Oration VIII.15* [Browne and Swallow, NPNF 2/07:242]).

³⁷⁹ Nyssa, *VSM* (Corrigan), 35-6.

³⁸⁰ Gregory of Tours, *Life of the Fathers* XIX.1, trans. Edward James (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), 118-119 and *Pseudo-Athanasius, The Life and Activity of the Holy and Blessed Teacher Syncletica* 106 (trans. Castelli). See also Gerontius, *The Life of Melania the Younger* 9 (trans. Clark).

and describing experiences. She identifies three cultural models of affliction in early Christian literature, one of which is the “Job Model.” In this model, Job is a paragon of virtue, providing a model of patient, quiet endurance.³⁸¹ This is certainly true of the *VSM*, indeed, Gregory states that Macrina suffered through her afflictions with patient endurance, never turning away from God, just like Job, and continuing her holy work. However, by invoking Job, Gregory goes further, it is not simply Macrina’s patient endurance that he wishes to stress. In comparing Macrina’s dying body to that of the festering and oozing body of Job, he highlights her endurance of suffering, but also establishes the importance of the suffering she will face. Nancy Caciola contends that sanctity is historically determined, culturally constructed and socially enacted. It is performative in that “the performer (saint) colludes with the audience (contextual community) in an ongoing play of creation and shifting re-creation.”³⁸² In this model, the community, including the hagiographer and the secondary audience who are accessing this literature, assess the value of the saint’s actions by their conformity to figural precedents and subsequently interpret those actions as saintly (or not). Through Gregory’s commentary on the value of Macrina’s suffering, he is expecting the audience to access a set of culturally constructed symbols that allow them (with his help) to make sense of her death, and by implication therefore, her life.

As well as positioning Macrina’s suffering with biblical precedents, it is also possible to draw many parallels with Macrina’s death and the Greco-Roman genre of the deathbed

³⁸¹ Susan Garret, “Paul’s Thorn and Cultural Models of Affliction,” in *The Social World of the First Christians: Essays in Honour of Wayne A. Meeks*, eds. L.M White and O.L Yarborough (Minneapolis, 1995), 82-99. See also Susan R. Garrett, “The Patience of Job and the Patience of Jesus: A Journal of Bible and Theology,” *Interpretation* 53 (1999): 254-264.

³⁸² Nancy Caciola, ‘Through a Glass, Darkly: Recent Work on Sanctity and Society. A Review Article’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol 38, 2 (1996), 301-309(302).

account. Just as ancient literary depictions of the deaths of famous and important men were used to draw meaning from their lives and teachings, so too with Macrina. It is a subtle way of signalling to an ancient audience, positioning Macrina within a framework of noble, heroic death and specifically of masculinity. By examining depictions of death and some of the features of noble death, I will argue that Gregory situates Macrina in the categories of noble death and heroic suffering to depict Macrina as masculinised, part of his theological agenda, related to virginity and gender which will be discussed later in this chapter.

Noble Death and Dying Well

Death itself was thought to reveal the true nature of a person, whether that be in the manner of their death or in the way that death was approached in the days, hours or minutes leading up to a person's final moments.³⁸³ Writing in the first century CE, Seneca, for example, articulated the view that "death will deliver the final judgement in your case" (Seneca, Epistle XXVI [trans. Gummere]). The act of "dying well" was subjective and might refer to the hope of a quick and pain free death whilst for others, death in battle was the most fitting conclusion to their life, others considered their state of mind at the time of death as most important. By whatever means it came about, the act of dying divulged a person's inner character, their worth and their moral standing and in literary depictions, death was therefore an ideal means to demonstrate the true character of a protagonist.

³⁸³ Catherine Edwards cites the death of Cato as the key exemplum, and the works of Seneca and Tacitus as playing an important role in the transmission of the notion of politically and morally significant deaths to later cultures (Catherine Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 5-6.

Deathbed accounts were a traditional genre from antiquity which delineated the last days or moments of a person's life.³⁸⁴ It was a highly gendered genre, with extant accounts written almost exclusively about famous men, used to create and promulgate the memory of a person and to disseminate their memory to later generations.³⁸⁵ Frequently the protagonist was depicted as dying with a variety of spectators as witnesses to the manner of their death and to hear their dying words.³⁸⁶ Typically, their dying words reflected their authority, would be used to give one final lesson to their followers or to convey some form of sententious wisdom.³⁸⁷

The first-century BCE. poet and philosopher Lucretius wrote that observing how someone faces death can tell us much about their character, "Thus it is more useful to scrutinize a man in danger or peril, and to discern in adversity what manner of man he is: for only then are the words of truth drawn up from the very heart, the mask is torn off, the reality remains" (Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* 3.55 [trans. Rouse]). "Silent scripts" of power, body and identity drew on pre-existing belief systems to demonstrate meaning to an audience and dying nobly, came to be a prime means of demonstrating virtue.³⁸⁸ Conversely

³⁸⁴ On accounts of death in ancient Rome see Mario Erasmio, *Reading Death in Ancient Rome* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2008). On death and dying in ancient Rome see Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome*; Valerie M. Hope, *Death in Ancient Rome: A Sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 2007) and Valerie M. Hope, *Roman Death: The Dying and the Dead in Ancient Rome*, (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2009).

³⁸⁵ Ancient examples can be found in Plato's account of Socrates' last hours in the *Phaedo* or the testaments attributed to the biblical patriarchs Levi, Joseph and Benjamin.

³⁸⁶ Gregory is the main spectator, and as such is afforded an authoritative voice in the sense that it is his responsibility to recount and disseminate the final actions and words of this holy woman. In writing this text, Gregory not only creates and promulgates the memory of Macrina, but also his own memory as both witness to those last moments as well as his position as the chronicler of those important words.

³⁸⁷ Ellen Muehlberger notes that these spectators were then responsible for the transmission of these words, frequently as a piece of writing. She describes the deathbed account then as a "portrait of the end of a life, but it is more centrally a portrait of the birth of a text." Ellen Muehlberger, *Moment of Reckoning: Imagined Death and Its Consequences in Late Ancient Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 35.

³⁸⁸ On traditions of noble death see Jan Willem van Henten and Friedrich Avemarie, *Martyrdom and Noble Death: Selected Texts from Graeco-Roman, Jewish and Christian Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 2002), 9-41.

other characters were depicted as enduring cowardly, gruesome or even disgusting deaths, reflecting negatively on their life, character or teachings.³⁸⁹ Herod of Judea for example, “fell ill of a sickness through which he stank, and his body melted away into a mass of worms....His bowels and legs were swollen with running sores, and matter flowed from them, he was consumed by worms” (*Cave of Treasures*, [trans. Budge], 218). One account of the death of Arius described how fearing a “loosening of the bowels”, Arius rushed to a privy where he became faint and

His bottom fell through along with his excrement. The thing which doctors call the rectum immediately fell out through his bottom, with a lot of blood following, and the rest of his intestines flowed out together with his spleen and his liver, and he died immediately (Socrates, *Church History* I.38.7 [trans. Périchon and Maraval]).

These graphically sensory depictions of grotesque bodies covered in putrefaction, puss, stench and excrement drew on culturally established meanings to demonstrate the negative moral characteristics of a person.³⁹⁰

Roman intellectuals admired both the noble death of soldiers on the battlefield as well as the noble death of self-sacrifice in the tradition of Socrates.³⁹¹ However, as the higher aristocratic families increasingly became excluded from military service, the concept of *virtus*, previously centred around military connotations and linked to masculinity and bravery was reimagined and noble death functioned as an occasion to prove one’s

³⁸⁹ On “silent scripts” of power see Brent D. Shaw, *Body / Power / Identity: Passions of the Martyrs* *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 4:3, 269-312.

³⁹⁰ See Candida R. Moss, “A Note on the Death of Judas in Papias,” *New Testament Studies* 65 (2019): 388-397; Ellen Muehlberger, “The Legend of Arius’ Death: Imagination, Space and Filth in Late Ancient Historiography,” *Past and Present* 227 (2015) 3-29; Jesse E. Robertson, *The Death of Judas: The Characterization of Judas Iscariot in Three Early Christian Accounts of his Death* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2012); Solevåg, *Negotiating the Disabled Body*, 117-131.

³⁹¹ For a detailed overview see Jan Willem Van Henten and Friedrich Avemarie, *Martyrdom and Noble Death: Selected Texts from Greeco-Roman, Jewish and Christian Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 2002).

masculinity, heroic virtue, self-control and bravery.³⁹² By demonstrating “silent scripts” of masculinity such as the ability, or perceived ability, to exert control over oneself or of others, lack of fear, and self-restraint at their death, endurance of pain, illness and disease could be sites in which non-military protagonists could admirably display heroic *virtus* and masculinity. It was not only military leaders therefore who could demonstrate how to die well. *Virtus* could be found in “any place whatever” so much so that Seneca wrote “There is, I assure you, a place for virtue even upon a bed of sickness. It is not only the sword and the battle-line that prove the soul alert and unconquered by fear; a man can display bravery even when wrapped in his bed-clothes” (Seneca, *Epistle* LXXVIII.21 [trans. Gummere]). Despite the reimagining of ways of demonstrating a noble death, it was still very much a gendered performance and a prime site for displays of masculinity. Establishing that a person had bravely endured the pain and suffering leading to their demise, faced their forthcoming death with self-control and lack of fear demonstrated their masculinity. Ironically, death and dying were key locations therefore to demonstrate the virtues of famous men and therefore to demonstrate masculinity.³⁹³

³⁹² Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome*, 7.

³⁹³ On masculinity in early and Late Antique Christianity see: Virginia Burrus, “Begotten, Not Made”: Conceiving Manhood in Late Antiquity (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000); L. Stephanie Cobb, *Dying to Be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr Texts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Colleen M. Conway, *Behold the Man: Jesus and Greco-Roman Masculinity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Maud, W Gleason, *Making Men: Sophists and Self Presentation in Ancient Rome* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995); Thomas Lacqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990); Moore, Stephen D. & Janice Capel Anderson, Janice Capel . 1998. “Taking It like a Man: Masculinity in 4 Maccabees.” *Journal of Biblical Literature* (1998): 249-273; Jonathan Walters, “Invading the Roman Body: Manliness and Impenetrability in Roman Thought,” in *Roman Sexualities*, eds. Judith P. Hallett and Marilyn B. Skinner (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 1997), 29–43.

Lucretia and the Female Corpse

Despite the association with of noble death with masculinity, it was not only men in ancient Greco-Roman literature who were depicted as dying nobly.³⁹⁴ The story of Lucretia in particular, was one that resonated with the Romans and far beyond into the middle-ages and modern world.³⁹⁵ The earliest surviving extended account of the story of the rape of Lucretia was written by Livy c. 27-25BCE as part of his *History of Rome*. According to Livy, Lucretia's story begins following a bet between Sextus Tarquinius, the son of the king and Collatinus, the husband of Lucretia.³⁹⁶ Tarquinius, perceiving Lucretia to be the most beautiful and chaste woman, determines to force himself on her. Creeping into her room at night, he threatens to kill her if she does not submit.³⁹⁷ When she refuses to yield to him, he threatens to kill her and to place the body of his slave in bed with her and so she submits.³⁹⁸ After the rape, Lucretia summons her father and husband, telling them of the incident. Although they believe her to be innocent, she states that, "Though I acquit myself of the sin, I do not absolve myself from punishment; not in time to come shall ever unchaste woman live through the example of Lucretia" (Livy, *History of Rome* I.58.11). Then, taking a knife, concealed in her dress, she plunges it at once into her heart, dying as she sinks to the ground.

³⁹⁴ For an overview on women dying nobly see Candida R. Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom: Diverse Practices, Theologies, and Traditions*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).30-31.

³⁹⁵ Lucretia was a figure much discussed by Christians in the third and fourth century, Tertullian, Jerome and Augustine for example all mention Lucretia.

³⁹⁶ Livy, *History of Rome* I.57 (trans. B.O. Foster).

³⁹⁷ "Be still Lucretia! I am Sextus Tarquinius. My sword is in my hand. Utter a sound, and you die!" (Livy, *Ab Urbe* I.58.3).

³⁹⁸ Livy, *History of Rome* I.58.5.

In female noble death, the same focus on the manner in which they died was important too. Lucretia herself explicitly claims that it is in her death where we shall find meaning, claiming that “death shall be my witness.” Whilst Lucretia’s femininity is emphasised throughout her story, the manner of her death was heralded by a number of Roman writers as a paragon of manly courage.³⁹⁹ In Ovid’s account of her death, he describes her as a woman of manly spirit “*animi matrona virilis*.”⁴⁰⁰ In Valerius Maximus’ précis of Lucretia’s rape, he states that Lucretia was a “model of Roman chastity, whose manly spirit by Fortune’s malignant error was allotted a woman’s body” (Valerius Maximus, *Memorable Doings and Sayings* VI.1.1 [trans. D. R. Shackleton Bailey]). Gregory depicts Macrina in the same manner, beginning his narrative by stating that he will recall “The life of an honoured person; it was a woman who prompted our narrative, if, that is, we may call her a woman, for I do not know if it is appropriate to apply a name drawn from nature to one who has risen above nature” (Nyssa, *VSM* [Corrigan], 21). Like Lucretia, Macrina is depicted as a model of both chastity and manly courage, who does not fear to face her death, an important trope that we find in both martyrological and ascetic literature in late antiquity.

Macrina’s death is represented as a noble death, and she models masculine self-control and a lack of emotion, particularly of fear in the face of her anticipated death.⁴⁰¹ For Seneca, one must overcome the fear of death to have a peaceful life. He compares living

³⁹⁹ Candida Moss notes though that despite Lucretia’s masculinised suicide, “Lucretia is only temporarily masculinized for, in the end, her manly suicide by plunging a concealed dagger into her own heart reads—in a text voyeuristically preoccupied by the form of her body—as penetration.” Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 33.

⁴⁰⁰ Ovid, *Fasti*, 2.847.

⁴⁰¹ On the fear of death see Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome*, 78-112.

with the fear of death as akin to living in slavery, “It is a wonderful thing to learn thoroughly how to die...we must always be learning it. ‘Think on death.’ In saying this, he bids us think on freedom. He who has learned to die has unlearned slavery; he is above any external power, or, at any rate, he is beyond it (Seneca, *Epistle* XXVI.9-10 [trans. Gummere]). In another letter, he writes

All you need to do is to advance; you will thus understand that some things are less to be dreaded, precisely because they inspire us with great fear...Death arrives; it would be a thing to dread, if it could remain with you. But death must either not come at all, or else must come and pass away...No man can have a peaceful life who thinks too much about lengthening it, or believes that living through many consulships is a great blessing (Seneca, *Epistle* IV.3-4 [trans. Gummere]).

The Greek philosopher Epicurus (d. c. 270 BCE.) argued that the sign of a wise man was one who had conquered the fear of death.

For there is nothing fearful in life for one who has grasped that there is nothing fearful in the absence of life. Thus, he is a fool who says that he fears death not because it will be painful when present but because it is painful when it is still to come...But the many sometimes flee death as the greatest of bad things and sometimes choose it as a relief from the bad things in life. But the wise man neither rejects life nor fears death. For living does not offend him, nor does he believe not living to be something bad (Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus* 125-126 [trans. Inwood and Gerson]).

Macrina models this lack of fear and acceptance of her forthcoming death. Hers is a Christianised version though as not only does she model acceptance of death, but rather she rejoiced at the prospect of what was to come, running towards it like an athlete towards her prize.

For, in reality, just as a runner who has overtaken his rival and is already close to the finish of the race-course, when he draws near to the prize and sees the victor’s crown, rejoices in his heart, as though he had already won the prizes which lie before him, and proclaims his victory to his supporters in the audience, from a similar intention Macrina gave us to hope for greater things for her, since she was already looking towards the prize of her upward calling (Nyssa, *VSM* [Corrigan], 37).⁴⁰²

⁴⁰² Cf 2 Tim 4.7-8.

It is Macrina's belief in what was to come which enabled her to face death with self-control and lack of fear, and in turn it is this belief which empowers her community. In Gregory's *On the Soul and Resurrection*, Macrina rebukes Gregory saying, "Isn't this what disturbs and distracts your mind, the fear that the soul does not last forever, but leaves with the dissolution of the body?" Macrina herself evidently does not have this same fear, demonstrating her faith in God.⁴⁰³ J. Warren Smith notes that "It is Macrina's self-mastery and transcendence of worldly concerns in anticipation of her union with Christ that mediate Christian hope to her community of virgins and so train them in the proper way to live and to face death."⁴⁰⁴ Even Gregory himself is "divinely inspired," praising her lack of fear,

For not even in her last breaths to feel anything strange in the expectation of death nor to fear separation from life, but with sublime thinking to philosophise upon what she had chosen for this life, right from the beginning up to her last breath, to me seemed no longer to be part of human realities. Instead it was as if an angel had providentially assumed human form, an angel in whom there was no affinity for, nor attachment to, the life of the flesh about whom it was not unreasonable that her thinking should remain impassible, since the flesh did not drag it down to its own passions" (Nyssa, *VSM* [Corrigan], 40).

Thus, Macrina's death is firmly placed in the category of a masculine, Greco-Roman noble death whilst coalescing with an eschatological understanding. In this multivalent description, Gregory employs "silent scripts" to signal virtuous, masculine ideals; lack of fear, lack of emotion and bravery whilst simultaneously depicting Macrina as passionless and angelic.

On his journey to see Macrina, Gregory experiences a vision which he states, "made me apprehensive for the future...and I foresaw some distress for my soul" (Nyssa, *VSM*

⁴⁰³ Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection* (trans. Moore and Austin).

⁴⁰⁴ Smith, "A Just and Reasonable Grief, 57.

[Corrigan], 33-34). In this dream, Gregory is holding the relics of martyrs in his hands, and the relics are emitting a bright light. Unable to discern the meaning of this dream, he experiences a foreboding which he comes to understand on his perusal of his sister's disease-ridden, Job-like body. He states that "For what I had seen seemed to unveil the hidden meaning of the vision in my dream. What I had seen before me was truly the remains of a holy martyr, one who was dead to sin, but illumined by the indwelling grace of the Holy Spirit" (Nyssa, *VSM* [Corrigan], 36-37). Gregory frequently stresses that Macrina is special, whilst we know nothing about his other sisters, immediately Gregory establishes Macrina's uniqueness. He describes her as an "honoured person; it was a woman who prompted our narrative, if, that is, we may call her a woman, for I do not know if it is appropriate to apply a name drawn from nature to one who has risen above nature" (Nyssa, *VSM* [Corrigan], 21). She was "a votive offering," reaching the "highest limit of human virtue," which had been acknowledged even before Macrina's birth when during labour her mother received a vision in which "Someone in suprahuman majesty of form and shape appeared to address the little child by the name of Thekla" (Nyssa, *VSM* [Corrigan], 22). Yet here, poised on the brink of death, her experience and endurance of suffering she is even more, she is a living martyr, "dead to sin," she is already angelic.⁴⁰⁵

However, there is a further aspect of Livy's account of Lucretia's death which I will draw attention to which is significant for our exploration of Macrina's death; the spectacle of the female corpse. Interestingly, it is not only Lucretia's rape which incites political activity, indeed, rape and sexual violence of chaste and virtuous women seems to

⁴⁰⁵ Nyssa, *VSM* (Corrigan), 37, 40.

foreshadow major political developments throughout Livy's account.⁴⁰⁶ It is however *after* these women disappear from the narrative, either in death or by omission, that their bodies are made powerful.⁴⁰⁷ Likewise, it is *after* Lucretia's death, that Brutus incites the people to take up arms against the tyrant kings and the Republic is established. As Lucretia's family is engulfed in grief, Brutus removes the knife from Lucretia's breast whilst swearing vengeance and revenge. He then carries her body into the marketplace, displaying Lucretia's corpse to the men who are there. The display of her body moved all those present to "take up their sword" against those who had perpetrated the crime against Lucretia and her family.

Whence came this new spirit in the breast of Brutus? As he bade them, so they swore. Grief was swallowed up in anger; and when Brutus summoned them to make war from that very moment on the power of the kings, they followed his lead. They carried out Lucretia's corpse from the house and bore it to the marketplace, where men crowded about them, attracted, as they were bound to be, by the amazing character of the strange event and its heinousness. Every man had his own complaint to make of the prince's crime and his violence. They were moved, not only by the father's sorrow, but by the fact that it was Brutus who chid their tears and idle lamentations and urged them to take up the sword, as befitted men and Romans, against those who had dared to treat them as enemies. (Livy, *History of Rome* I.59).

Lucretia's corpse, displayed in this manner stimulated male action, that of Brutus himself but also of the crowd of men in the marketplace to enact change.

⁴⁰⁶ In the *Histories*, other women endure sexual violence: Rhea Silvia, a vestal virgin is raped by the god Mars resulting in the birth of Romulus (the founder of Rome) and Remus; lacking wives, the early Roman men abduct and rape the neighbouring Sabine women which ensures the survival of the early Roman population; and the father of a virgin, Verginia is "forced" to kill his own daughter in order to avoid her threatened rape. Livy notes that her death is "no less dreadful than the rape and suicide of Lucretia," explicitly drawing a parallel to both women's deaths and the subsequent change of regime which occurs when the decemvirate is disestablished and the re-establishment of the Republic.

⁴⁰⁷ Melissa M Matthes notes that this is still the case in modern rape cases. She explains that the beaten, physically marked bodies of rape victims can be more powerful in convincing a jury that rape occurred than the verbal testimony of a victim. Melissa M. Matthes, *The Rape of Lucretia and the Founding of Republics: Readings in Livy, Machiavelli and Rousseau* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 2000), 30-31.

Whilst the events leading to Lucretia's suicide are important for the story, it was her corpse that motivated action, in this case political, both semi-privately when Brutus gazes at her body, removes the knife from the wound in her breast, and swears to avenge her death. More publicly, Lucretia's body is taken and displayed in the forum, seeing her corpse, the people too are moved to action. In fact, Eleanor Glendinning argues that the display of Lucretia's body "was arguably as politically resonant as the display of Julius Caesar's corpse in 44BC."⁴⁰⁸ It is thus her dead body that gives meaning to the actions that led to her suicide and which is the impetus for others to take action. A. M. Keith concurs, stating that In Roman literature, "dead and dying women assume a new thematic and aesthetic prominence, for the beautiful female corpse possesses an intrinsic importance in Roman political myths of war and city foundation, the pre-eminent subjects of epic at Rome."⁴⁰⁹

Macrina's Corpse and Wound

To witness another's corpse, argues Elias Canetti, consoles the survivors that they are still alive – "The moment of survival is the moment of power."⁴¹⁰ This is certainly true for Gregory, Macrina is now silent – if she ever had a voice (all of her words are narrated through Gregory.) Gregory takes over the display of her body, the meaning given to her scar and the narratives of pre-mortem miraculous healing – and the control of her memory. Gregory now takes full control, organising the funeral, it is he who tells the stories of her miraculous healing and by doing so he adds to his own authority. Bearing witness to the nobility of the task this responsibility constructs the reader as a person of dignity, honour,

⁴⁰⁸ Eleanor Glendinning, "Reinventing Lucretia: Rape, Suicide and Redemption from Classical Antiquity to the Medieval Era." *International Journal of Classical Tradition* 20 (2013), 65.

⁴⁰⁹ A. M. Keith, *Engendering Rome : Women in Latin Epic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 10.

⁴¹⁰ Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power* (London: Macmillan, 1962), 227.

and status. By placing himself as audience and spectator it is Gregory who takes control, asserting his authority, he, the survivor takes action, just as the men who responded to Lucretia's corpse, and grief binds Macrina's community to Gregory who now steps up to take control.

The exposure of Macrina's corpse by Vetiana, and Gregory's perusal of a scar located on part of her breast leaves the modern reader feeling somewhat uncomfortable.⁴¹¹ After all, the saint herself had refused to allow a doctor to see her naked body.⁴¹² But there does appear to be a precedent in Roman literature, a predication for gazing upon the bodies of women after their death.⁴¹³ Whilst the manner of their death or the events leading to their death are important, it is the spectacle of the female corpse which is frequently and graphically highlighted.⁴¹⁴ In Roman literature, death was frequently depicted quite graphically as a means of encouraging and assisting readers or listeners to visualise the dying subject.⁴¹⁵ Early Christian literature also adopted these literary techniques using visuality and visual piety combined with a dependence on revelation, on "showing not telling" as a means of demonstrating truth.⁴¹⁶ Early Christian martyrdom narratives continued to describe the torture, death and treatment of a martyr's corpse in graphic

⁴¹¹ Nyssa, *VSM* [Corrigan], 47-48.

⁴¹² Nyssa, *VSM*, 48.

⁴¹³ On the "male gaze" see Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen* 16 (1975): 6-18.

⁴¹⁴ See for example Tacitus' and Suetonius' accounts of the murder of Agrippina by Nero. After having his mother, Agrippina killed, both Tacitus and Suetonius (Nero 34) depict Nero as gazing on his mother's body and praising her beauty.

⁴¹⁵ Catharine Edwards claims that witnessing the gladiatorial contests and games in the arena conditioned Roman attitudes towards death and dying, ensuring that it became an edifying subject for display. Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome*, 47. This must also have had an impact on how death was both depicted and thought about.

⁴¹⁶ Averil Cameron, *History as Text* (London: Duckworth, 1989). Augustine notes that the etymology of the term *monstrum* is from the verb *monstrare* meaning "to show" or "to demonstrate." For Augustine then, deformities or monstrosities of the martyred body become opportunities to demonstrate the power of God. (see Augustine, *The City of God*, XX1.8).

detail. These depictions were highly gendered and whereas men's bodies are described, women's bodies are depicted in "graphic and repetitive detail, the spectacle of women's tortures and humiliations are far more likely to be explicitly sexual tortures or at the very least the descriptions themselves coded with sexuality."⁴¹⁷

In the *VSM*, as Gregory and Vetiana make preparations for laying out Macrina's body, Vetiana reveals a scar to Gregory on Macrina's breast. She "laid bare a part of Macrina's breast," showing him a small scar saying "Do you see this faint, tiny mark below the skin? It looks like a scar left by a small needle" (Nyssa, *VSM* [Corrigan], 47). Gregory is puzzled and wonders what is so important about the scar. An episode immediately before Macrina's breast and scar are revealed, signals to the reader the importance of this part of the story. In preparing Macrina's body for burial, Gregory and Vetiana find Macrina's necklace consisting of a "cross of iron and a ring of the same material, both of which were hung on a slender chain and had always been over her heart" (Nyssa, *VSM* [Corrigan], 47). Gregory offers Vetiana the cross, taking the ring for himself. Vetiana looks at him intently before explaining that on the ring, the "mark on the seal above shows what is hidden below." In the very next passage, Gregory is shown Macrina's "tiny mark" which must also be interpreted as a mark which shows "what is hidden below." The scar is significant therefore as it reveals something of the character and nature of Macrina. I argue that located on her chest, Macrina's scar, understood in the Greco-Roman context is one of honour and manly valour, a badge of virtue that styles her identity.

⁴¹⁷ Castelli, *Visions and Voyeurism*, 8.

For Georgia Frank, Macrina's scar was an act of memory work providing both a fixed point for others to remember Macrina by, a site of locational memory as well as a site on which to situate her shifting identities, of sister, martyr, philosopher, leader of a community of women, mother and father.⁴¹⁸ Frank contends that Macrina's scar is modelled on Homer's heroic Greek, Odysseus.⁴¹⁹ In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus returns home, remaining incognito, however, whilst washing his feet, his old nursemaid discovers a scar on his leg by which she immediately recognises his true identity.⁴²⁰ Notions of heroism, the power of suffering and identity are elicited by evoking the story of Odysseus' scar, but also of memory. For Frank, Odysseus scar was a mimetic instrument by which to represent and remember.⁴²¹ Odysseus scar was understood as a mark of heroism, but also acted as a gateway into his past allowing the readers a glimpse of his heroic backstory. So too, for Macrina, for once Macrina's scar is "read" by Vetiana, we the audience are offered a window into Macrina's past through a series of flashbacks. Macrina's scar therefore becomes a "post-mortem point of entry into her past."⁴²²

Just as Odysseus' scar was a means of revealing both his identity and his past history, so too, the use of marks, wounds and scars signified both something identity marking as well as theologically significant to an ancient audience. Responding to Frank's article,

⁴¹⁸ Georgia Frank, "Macrina's Scar: Homeric Allusion and Heroic Identity in Gregory of Nyssa's 'Life of Macrina,'" *J ECS* 8 (2000), 528.

⁴¹⁹ On Gergory's use of classical literature in his work see Frank, "Macrina's Scar," 511-30; Arnaldo Momigliano, "The Life of St Macrina by Gregory of Nyssa," in *On Pagans, Jews and Christians* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1987), 206-21; Ellen Muhelberger, "Salvage: Macrina and the Christian Project of Cultural Reclamation," *Church History* 81 (2012): 273-297; Catharine P Roth, "Platonic and Pauline Elements in the Ascent of the Soul in Gregory of Nyssa's Dialogue?? on the Soul and Resurrection," *Vigiliae Christianae* 46 (1992): 20-30.

⁴²⁰ Homer, *Odyssey*, book 19.

⁴²¹ Odysseus is known by the scar on his thigh, revealed by his former nurse (Odyssey 19-385-475).

⁴²² Frank, "Macrina's Scar," 519.

Virginia Burrus asks if Gregory purposefully intended Macrina's scar to be equated with the scar of Odysseus or with the wounds of Christ and the martyrs, why in fact did he not use similar phraseology. Gregory describes the mark as "a tiny mark below the skin," not as a wound or even scar.⁴²³ She asks then why does he describe it as a "sign" (*semeîon*) or "mark" (*stigma*) rather than as scarred by a wound which would accentuate the parallels between the texts?⁴²⁴ Burrus contends that this distinction is important and therefore that the mark on Macrina's body should be read more in the vein of a tattoo, a tattoo that was inscribed by God onto Macrina's body. By considering the meaning of tattoos in the ancient world, Burrus goes on to consider the implications of this insinuation. Tattooing in ancient Greek and Roman culture was a form of social stigmatization, used to indicate possession in the case of slaves or punishment in the case of criminals, it was therefore a means to mark a person physically and very much visually as "other," and as oppressed for all to see. Burrus notes that just as in other realms, in particular the discourse around martyrdom and the death of Christ himself, Christians transformed marks of shame and turned them into symbols of power. Just as Paul declared "Henceforth let no one give me trouble, for I carry the stigmata of Lord Jesus on my body" (Gal 6.17). Even the associations of the most negative of marks could be transformed into powerful symbols.⁴²⁵

Just as the marks of branding on Sethe's mother's ribs or even Sethe's own scarred back in Morrison's *Beloved*, scars and wounds in the ancient world could be used as identity markers. Whilst Sethe's mother, objects to her branded skin as a mark of belonging to a

⁴²³ Nyssa, *VSM* (Corrigan), 47.

⁴²⁴ Virginia Burrus, "Macrina's Tattoo," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 33 (2003), 404.

⁴²⁵ On stigmata and tattoos in the fourth century and the Christian reinterpretation of these mark see Susanna Elm, "'Pierced by Bronze Needles': Anti-Montanist Charges of Ritual Stigmatization in their Fourth Century Context," *J ECS* 4 (1996): 409 – 439.

slave owner, she nevertheless acknowledges that this is the one mark on her body that is unique (now) to her. In the ancient world, scars were also considered identity markers, Suetonius for example describes Augustus' requirement that any man who visited his daughter should have his complexion, height, marks and scars recorded.⁴²⁶ Unlike the stigma associated with physical deformities, disabilities or the marks of disease, displaying the "right" kind of scar could be an effective means of demonstrating a man's character in the ancient world. Wounds on the back demonstrated the cowardly nature of someone who had fled from an enemy, wounds on the thigh were debateable, but wounds on the chest indicated the exemplary, virtuous nature of a person who courageously faced an enemy. The exhibition of scars received in military campaigns, particularly those on the chest, at least as a literary *topoi* suggested honour, virtue and bravery of the wounded man who had served the *res publica* by courageously risking his life.⁴²⁷

Displaying the right kind of scar could therefore bring honour, and authority to a person. The Roman historian Plutarch recounted that Alexander the Great advised his father Philip about the honour of war wounds, saying

"Be of good cheer, father, and go on your way rejoicing, that at each step you may recall your valour" ... How, then, think you, did he glory in his own wounds, remembering by each part of his wounded body a nation overcome, a victory won, the capture of cities, the surrender of kings? He did not cover over nor hide his scars, but bore them with him openly as symbolic representations, graven on his body, of virtue and manly courage.⁴²⁸

⁴²⁶ Suetonius, *The Life of Augustus*, 65.3.

⁴²⁷ See R.J. Evans, "Displaying Honourable Scars: A Roman Gimmick." *Acta Classica* 42 (1999): 77-94 on whether the public exhibition of wounds incurred during military campaigns was a feature of public life or constituted nothing more than a literary *topos*.

⁴²⁸ Plutarch, *Moralia*, "On the Fortune or the Virtue of Alexander," 331 BCE, from Greek trans Frank Cole Babbitt, Loeb Classical Library, 1936.

In the early third century CE, in a speech denouncing Servius Galba, the Roman senator Marcus Servilius Pulex Germinus uses his scars as leverage, declaring,

I have on twenty-three occasions challenged and fought an enemy... I possess a body adorned with honourable scars, every one of them received in front... As a veteran soldier before young soldiers, I have displayed this body of mine which has often been marred by the sword; let Galba uncover his sleek and untouched person (Livy, *History of Rome* XLV.39 [Alfred C. Schlesinger, LCL]).

The presence of wounds, scars and deformities was also an area of discussion for early Christians in terms of how they would be dealt with in the resurrection.⁴²⁹ Whilst most Christians agreed that there would be some sort of corporeal resurrection, the finer details were debateable and the nature of the resurrected body, was a cause of much discussion and debate. Early Christian theologians considered how scars, wounds, deformities and disabilities, markers of a corruptible body, could be reconciled with the incorruptible bodies of the future resurrection. In Candida Moss' analysis of Jesus' post-resurrection body, she notes that the marks on his resurrected body are used to both confirm Jesus' identity and confirm the reality of the resurrection.⁴³⁰ She stresses that it is an important topic

Not only because the resurrection has been and is a fundamental dogmatic claim for Christians but also because, as Paul suggests, the manner in which everyone will be resurrected is patterned after the resurrection of Jesus. If Jesus is recognized by his wounds, then should we not imagine that the resurrection of everyone else will

⁴²⁹ See for example Gillian Clark, "Bodies and Blood: Late Antique Debate on Martyrdom, Virginity and Resurrection," in *Changing Bodies, Changing Meanings: Studies on the Human Body in Antiquity*, ed. Dominic Montserrat (London: Routledge, 1998); Beth Felker Jones, *Marks of His Wounds: Gender Politics and Bodily Resurrection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Outi Lehtipuu, *Debates over the Resurrection of the Dead: Constructing Early Christian Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 109-157; Candida R. Moss, *Divine Bodies: Resurrecting Perfection in the New Testament and Early Christianity* (Yale University Press, 2019), 22-40; Kristi Upson-Saia, "Resurrecting Deformity: Augustine on Wounded and Scarred Bodies in the Heavenly Realm," in *Disability in Judaism, Christianity and Islam: Sacred Texts, Historical Traditions and Social Analysis*, eds. Darla Schumm and Michael J. Stolz (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011)

⁴³⁰ Moss, *Divine Bodies*, 24.

similarly preserve premortem marks, and by extension, all kinds of infirmities? With the exception of a few patristic authors...the dominant view has seen resurrection as a process of eschatological healing.⁴³¹

Methodius for example compared God to a craftsman who could reassemble and remodel the original material of a pot or statue to erase any faults or blemishes whilst still retaining the same original components.⁴³²

Wherefore, if he should wish it to be perfectly beautiful and faultless, it must be broken up and recast, in order that all the disfigurements and mutilations inflicted upon it by treachery and envy, may be got rid of by the breaking up and recasting of it, while the image is restored again uninjured and unalloyed to the same form as before, and made as like itself as possible. For it is impossible for an image under the hands of the original artist to be lost, even if it be melted down again, for it may be restored; but it is possible for blemishes and injuries to be put off, for they melt away and cannot be restored... For the melting down of the statue in the former case corresponds to the death and dissolution of the body in the latter, and the remoulding of the material in the former, to the resurrection after death in the latter (Methodius, *From the Discourse on the Resurrection* I.6 [trans. William R. Clark]).

Like an artist, God would thus be able to keep the original material and properties of a person whilst altering any features that might be aesthetically displeasing to the ancient eye.

Augustine however, adopted an approach which found a place for some wounds and deformities in the resurrected body, significantly those gained from martyrdom. Kristi Upson-Saia's argues that Augustine

Deviates notably from his contemporaries. While he certainly agrees with the prevailing contempt for disabled bodies when he argues that most deformities are gross malformations that will need to be healed in the heavenly realm, Augustine surprisingly argues that other deformities will be a part of the perfect spiritual body, entirely worthy of the heavenly space. Thus, he calls into question the conventionally

⁴³¹ Moss, *Divine Bodies*, 25.

⁴³² Methodius, *From the Discourse on the Resurrection* I.6 (trans. William R. Clark, ANF 6: 364-377.

wholesale denigration of all bodily deformities and defects that pervaded the literature of his time.⁴³³

Augustine uses a similar analogy to Methodius, arguing that

The restoration will be such that the deformity will disappear while the substance will be preserved intact. A human artist can melt down a statue which for some reason he had cast with a deformity, and recast it in perfect beauty, so that none of its substance is lost, but only its deformity” (Augustine, *City of God against the Pagans* XXII. 19 [Green, LCL]).

He comments that if the human artist can do this, then God most certainly will, asking rhetorically “If the human artist can do this, what must we think of the almighty Artist? Will he not be able to remove and destroy all the deformities of human bodies, not only the common ones, but also the rare and monstrous?” (Augustine, *City of God* XXII. 19 [Green, LCL]).

However, Augustine goes on to discuss the wounds and tortured bodies of the martyrs, acknowledging that

Our love for the blessed martyrs somehow leads us to wish in that kingdom to see in their bodies the scars of the wounds which they have suffered for the name of Christ, and perhaps we shall see them. For it will not be a deformity in them, but an honour, and in their body will shine a certain beauty, not of the body, but of virtue. Still, if limbs have been cut off or torn away from the martyrs, they will not for this reason be without those limbs in the resurrection. For it was said to them: “A hair of your head shall not perish.” But if in that new age it is fitting that the marks of their glorious wounds be seen in that immortal flesh, then in the place where the limbs were struck off or cut away that they might be separated, there will be seen scars, but the limbs will nevertheless be restored, not destroyed. And so though all the defects that may have befallen the body will then be gone, the marks of virtue are not to be considered or spoken of as defects (Augustine, *City of God* XXII. 19 [Green, LCL]).

In this discussion, he continues to maintain a “harmony of parts” in order not to offend.

Severed limbs for example will be reattached and there is some element of eschatological

⁴³³ Upson-Saia, “Resurrecting Deformity,” 94.

healing, but the martyr will be left with “the marks of virtue” (Augustine, *City of God* XXII. 19 [Green, LCL]). By altering the depiction of these wounds not as deformities which were aesthetically displeasing to the ancient mind, but as “marks of virtue” and holiness, these scars and wounds could testify not to the corporeal nature of the human body but to the spiritual identity of their host. Upson-Saia concludes therefore that

The heavenly martyrs’ scars harkened back to the earthly body even while it marked the transformation of that body. It was a multivalent sign that gestured to the continuity and discontinuity of resurrection bodies with earthly bodies. It manifested not just the telos — the perfected, resurrected body— but the history of salvation in the body: from creation to fall to redemption, enabling one to apprehend the glory of resurrection and redemption.⁴³⁴

Whilst these scars were identity markers, they were so much more, as Upson-Saia notes, they were multivalent symbols of theology written on imagined post-resurrection bodies and rather than gloss over their presence, Augustine instructed his audiences to focus on the wounds of the martyrs, to visualise them and to discern meaning from them.

The tortured and broken bodies of the martyrs became a central focus of martyrological literature, revealing spiritual truths, communicating the power and presence of God and the hope of the resurrection to come. In Prudentius’ (d.c.413) *Crowns of Martyrdom* for example, the glory of suffering by cruel torturers is expounded in great detail, and it is through the inflicted wounds that martyrs became the “saints of God.” In his hymn to the martyr Romanus, Prudentius recounts the interminable torture of Romanus, but also the heavenly recording of each of his injuries in minute detail,

An angel standing in the presence of God took down all that the martyr said and all he bore, and not only recorded the words of his discourse but with his pen drew exact pictures of the wounds on his sides and cheeks and breast and throat. The measure of blood from each was noted, and how in each case the gash ploughed out

⁴³⁴ Upson-Saia, “Resurrecting Deformity,” 109.

the wound, whether deep or wide or on the surface, long or short, the violence of the pain, the extent of the cut; no drop of blood did he let go for nought (Prudentius, *Crowns of Martyrdom* X.1119-1130 [H. J. Thomson, LCL]).

Every single mark or wound inflicted on the martyr therefore was significant.

Adapting ancient physiognomic concepts that determined that a person's character, nature and personality could be interpreted by external corporal factors, late ancient Christian texts demonstrated that some scars and wounds could be read as badges of honour, linking them to the martyrs, Paul and Jesus himself. In his *Ecclesiastical History*, Theodoret of Cyrrhus (d.459), uses a narrative of suffering to defend orthodoxy and theology in the context of historiography. He describes the bishops assembled at the Council of Nicaea, who had been wounded and scarred by persecution, many of whom "like the holy apostle, bore in their bodies the marks of the Lord Jesus Christ" (Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *Ecclesiastical History* I.6 [trans. Blomfield Jackson, *NPNF* 2/3: 43]). Paul, bishop of Neo-Caesarea, for example, "Had been deprived of the use of both hands by the application of a red-hot iron, by which the nerves which gave motion to the muscles had been contracted and rendered dead. Some had had the right eye dug out, others had lost the right arm....In short, the Council looked like an assembled army of martyrs" (Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History* I.6 [trans. Jackson, *NPNF* 2/3: 43]). In this context, the "heroes" of his text are juxtaposed against Jesus, Paul, and the martyrs to create a mimetic chain of suffering. Their wounds and scars become badges of honour and identity markers.

In situating the wound on her chest, Macrina's body is inscribed with manly virtue. As previously mentioned, she is situated in a chain of heroic mimetic suffering, with a "battle scar" to show what she has endured. Gregory goes further though, positioning

Macrina's scar as a martyr's wound, one that marks something that is hidden, it communicated the presence of Christ and revealed her spiritual identity. After seeing her scar, Gregory reminds us of the prophetic vision he had on his way to see Macrina and at once renders Macrina as icon, her body is now a relic which he holds in his hands, "exactly as in the vision I had" on par with the martyrs, and her body, despite being covered by a dark mantle shone for all to see.⁴³⁵ This connection between her shining body possibly alludes to the angelic eschatological body, for example, Origen describes the eschatological body as "like the bodies of angels, ethereal and of a shining light" (Origen, *Commentary on Matthew* 17.29-30).⁴³⁶ In the *City of God*, Augustine describes the bodies of the resurrected, saying "And how agreeable will the colours be when the righteous shall shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father!" (Augustine, *City of God* XXII.19 [Green, LCL]). He continues, describing the martyrs, in whose bodies "will shine a certain beauty, not of the body, but of virtue" (Augustine, *City of God* XXII.19 [Green, LCL]).

Baring the Breast

Whilst the location of Macrina's scar is important, the physical act of exposing Macrina's breast has not been considered in modern scholarship.⁴³⁷ If every detail of a person's death was of great importance, and particularly in a society in which the public display of a woman's breast was socially unacceptable, then the location of the scar and the post-mortem revealing of her breast to Gregory must be crucial to understanding Gregory's

⁴³⁵ Nyssa, *VSM* (Corrigan), 33 and 48

⁴³⁶ Cited in Bynum, *Resurrection*, 67.

⁴³⁷ Franks comments that Gregory's insertion into the narrative of a "scar where the story requires none," positions Macrina in a mimetic tradition of the "saintly wounded." She briefly comments that the location of the scar "recalls Christ's chest wound" (John 20:27). See Frank, "Macrina's Scar," 514.

depiction of Macrina's death.⁴³⁸ Further, having situated Macrina as masculine in the manner of dying and in the positioning of her scar, the revelation of her breast appears to subvert Gregory's narrative by firmly re-establishing Macrina's femininity. In this section, I aim to demonstrate that the motif of the exposure of a breast was a common theme in both Greco-Roman literature and visual iconography and that by contextualising this motif and considering when and how it was used in the ancient world we will be able to consider meanings and inferences that ancient readers would have drawn from the post-mortem exposure of Macrina's breast. I will look specifically at depictions of the goddess Roma and the Amazonians, which use the baring of a breast to demonstrate both masculine virtue whilst simultaneously highlighting femininity. I contend that the exposure of Macrina's breast positions Macrina within a framework linking her to Greco-Roman female protagonists, goddesses, and female martyrs whose stories have included breast baring and wounds. In so doing, it becomes one of many means used by Gregory to emphasise Macrina's transcendence of gender, a common trope in late antique hagiographic texts.

Baring the breast was a well-known motif within Greco-Roman literary and material culture.⁴³⁹ Studies of early Greek sculpture have identified that whilst depictions of total female nudity are scant, from around the fifth century BCE a long lasting popular theme emerged, the exposure of a single breast on otherwise clothed female figures.⁴⁴⁰ In her

⁴³⁸ On Macrina's scar see Virginia Burrus, "Macrina's Tattoo." *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 33 (2003): 403-417 and Georgia Frank, "Macrina's Scar," 511-530.

⁴³⁹ On the exposure of the female breast in ancient literature, art and architecture see Larissa Bonfante, "Nudity as a Costume in Classical Art," *American Journal of Archaeology* 93 (1989): 543-70; Beth Cohen, "Divesting the Female Breast of Clothes in Classical Sculpture," in *Naked Truths : Women, Sexuality and Gender in Classical Art and Archaeology*, ed. Ann O. Koloski-Ostrow, Claire L. Lyons and Boymel Kampen (London: Taylor & Francis, 1997), 66-92; Lillian Joyce, "Roma and the Virtuous Breast." *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* 59/60 (2014): 1-49.

⁴⁴⁰ M Bieber, *Ancient Copies, Contributions to the History of Greek and Roman Art* (New York: New York University Press, 1977), 59 and 63.

study of visual and literary examples of breast exposure from ancient Greece, Beth Cohen identified four categories of this type of representation including: the violently exposed breast, uncovered following a violent incident involving another person; the accidental exposure of the breast due to loose clothing or disarray; the purposeful exposure of the breast, often by a nursing mother or during erotic encounters and finally women whose garments appear to be deliberately designed to expose the breast.⁴⁴¹ Certainly these themes resonate with ancient Greco-Roman attitudes towards women which depict them as either sexualised beings, violated women or as mothers as discussed in chapter two of this thesis.⁴⁴²

In her study of classical Greek art, Larissa Bonfante highlights the power of images of the female breast, noting that “The image of the female breast was too powerful to be represented lightly.”⁴⁴³ This is also true in literary depictions, where characters purposefully bared their breast to elicit significant effects on those who gazed on their bodies. In ancient literature, Helen of Troy bared her breasts to induce her husband Menelaus not to kill her for adultery, and likewise, after killing her husband, Clytemnestra bared her breasts to her son in a plea to avoid being killed by him, and Hecuba bared her breasts to her son Hector in an attempt to influence his actions. In Euripides’ *Hecuba*, Polyxena is depicted as undergoing a willing death in preference to becoming enslaved and offers her captor the

⁴⁴¹ Examples of which can be found in Archaic bronze statuettes which may depict virgins who took place in a race during a festival to celebrate the goddess Hera at Olympia or now lost statues which are described in literary sources which depict the Spartan female victors who were said to have revealed their breast.

⁴⁴² Beth Cohen, “Divesting the Female Breast of Clothes in Classical Sculpture,” in *Naked Truths: Women, Sexuality and Gender in Classical Art and Archaeology*, ed. Ann O. Koloski-Ostrow, Claire L. Lyons and Boymel Kampen (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 1997), 66-92.

⁴⁴³ Larissa Bonfante, “Nudity as a Costume in Classical Art,” *American Journal of Archaeology* 93 (1989), 568.

choice between cutting her neck or her chest.⁴⁴⁴ Whilst depicting her manner of dying as masculinised, at the same time, her death is simultaneously eroticised and feminised by the exposure of her breasts when she tears open her robe and her breasts are described as “lovely as a goddess’ statue” (Euripides, *Hecuba* 560-561 [Kovacs, LCL]).⁴⁴⁵ Later receptions of Polyxena’s death also draw on both her femininity as well as her masculine virtue, Ovid for example describes her as “the brave, ill-fated maid, with more than woman’s courage” (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* XIII.451 [Frank Justus Miller, LCL]) before she instructs her captor to “plunge your sword deep in my throat and breast!” (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* XIII.456-459 [Frank Justus Miller, LCL]).⁴⁴⁶

Breast exposure can also be found in depictions of the goddess Roma throughout the Greco-Roman world. Depictions of the goddess Roma varied over time and geographical location however, she was frequently dressed in masculine or military clothing, and a common attribute for her depiction was also an exposed breast.⁴⁴⁷ Roma appears to have originally been conceived in the Eastern Greek cities and used as a means of demonstrating loyalty to Rome but came to be used as part of the imperial cult as the personification of the city of Rome and a symbol for the entire Roman empire. Lacking a back story, artists and writers appropriated a variety of characteristics, attributes and visual imagery from existing goddesses and mythological women to depict her. She featured in a variety of visual iconography of the Roman empire including public monuments, on coins and in private

⁴⁴⁴ Euripides, *Hecuba*, 563-565.

⁴⁴⁵ ὡς ἀγάλματος κάλλιστα.

⁴⁴⁶ “*fortis et infelix et plus quam femina virgo*,” (Ovid, *Met.* 13.451).

⁴⁴⁷ On the goddess Roma see Valéry Berlincourt, “Dea Roma and Mars,” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 110 (2019): 453-482; Elena di Filippo Balestrazzi, “Roma,” In *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*, vol. 8. (Zurich: Artemis Verlag, 1997); Lillian Joyce, “Roma and the Virtuous Breast,” *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* 59/60 (2014): 1-49.

media such as cameos.⁴⁴⁸ In her study on the motif of breast exposure and the goddess Roma, Lilian Joyce considered the clothing in which Roma is depicted. Roma's clothing was typically of a military nature, but Joyce contends that this martial imagery resonated specifically with portrayals of the Amazons. Indeed, she concludes that out of the 263 statues she surveyed, at least 69% of them wore Amazonian or semi-Amazonian dress suggesting that the Amazonians were the most important precedent for the visual construction of imagery of Roma.⁴⁴⁹

The original Amazonian legends depict four Greek heroes Bellerophon, Achilles, Heracles and Theseus and their encounters with the Amazonians, a tribe of brave and strong female warriors. The earliest extant literary depiction of the Amazons can be dated to the eight-century BCE in Homer's *Iliad* in which he refers to them as *antianeirai* translated variously as either "equal to men," "man-like," or "antagonistic to men." Dated to the fifth-century BCE., Herodotus' explicitly emphasises the Amazonian women's separation from, and dissention of, the expected conventions for women in the Greek world.⁴⁵⁰ They claimed

We could not dwell with your women; for we and they have not the same customs. We shoot with the bow and throw the javelin and ride, but the crafts of women we have never learned; and your women do none of the things whereof we speak, but abide in their waggons working at women's crafts, and never go abroad a-hunting or for aught else (Herodotus, *The Persian Wars* IV.114 [A.D. Godley, LCL]).

By the sixth century BCE., the motif of "Amazonomachy," the depiction of the Amazonians in battle had become popularised, appearing on pottery, wall friezes, household items and

⁴⁴⁸ Whilst not many images of the goddess Roma survived outside of Rome or its immediate vicinity, two coins minted in Nicodemia and Constantinople demonstrate that the image was not just confined to the western parts of the empire. These coins depict the goddess Roma dressed in military clothing and in each one her right breast is exposed.

⁴⁴⁹ Joyce, "Roma and the Virtuous Breast," 49.

⁴⁵⁰ On the Amazons as outsiders and as women see Lorna Hardwick, "Ancient Amazons - Heroes, Outsiders or Women?" *Greece & Rome* 37, (1990): 14-36.

jewellery. The Amazons were depicted in explicitly masculinised terms, as warriors, at times almost unrecognisable as women, dressed in military clothing, holding weapons, sitting astride their horses, and dying violently in combat. As the ancient Greek orator Lysias noted, “They were esteemed more as men on account of their courage than as women on account of their nature. They were thought to excel men more in spirit than they were thought to be inferior due to their bodies” (Lysias, *Funeral Oration* II.4 [trans W. R. M. Lamb]).

Yet the visual and literary depictions varied in one aspect which is pertinent to our project. In the literary depictions of the Amazons, they were thought to have practiced a form of breast mutilation either in the form of amputation or binding to improve their ability to fight. The Ionian historian Hellanicus, writing at the end of the fifth century BCE., posited an explanation for the etymology of the term “Amazons” explaining that the term Amazon actually derives from “without” and *mazos*, “breast” because the Amazons cauterized the right breast, removing it in order to use a bow string more effectively.⁴⁵¹ However, in the visual tradition of the Greco-Roman empire, Amazonians were never depicted as having only one breast, which would have gone against the classical aesthetics and social norms and would have been seen as a deformity. The Amazonian women were therefore often depicted with one breast exposed. The exposure of the Amazonian breast created a sense of gender ambiguity. On the one hand, wholly masculinised in their depictions as warriors, and incomplete women who shunned the traditional Greek roles

⁴⁵¹ Ancient writers pondered on the etymology of the term Amazon, contemporaries of Hellanicus disagreed with this interpretation. The origin of the word is unknown, and a variety of suggestions were posited by ancient writers. See J. H. Blok, *The Early Amazons, Modern and Ancient Perspectives on a Persistent Myth* (Leiden: Brill, 1995).

ascribed to women, whilst the act of exposing the breast marked them as unquestionably female.

In considering depictions of breast exposure, there materialises a distinguishable, analogous relationship in the Greco-Roman world between masculinity, manly valour, alongside femininity to create an image of gender ambiguity. This continued to be the case in early Christian literature. In martyrological sources, breast exposure could be the result of specific and deliberate gender-based violence in which the breasts were removed or mutilated.⁴⁵² But this frequently occurs when the woman is exhibiting “masculine” endurance of suffering. Before being decapitated, Barbara was stripped, scourged and her breasts were cut off. During the Decian persecution, Quintianus ordered Agatha to be stretched on the rack “a torment generally accompanied by stripes, the tearing of the sides with iron hooks, and by blazing with blazing torches.”⁴⁵³ Enraged at how she endured this torture, Quintianus ordered her “breast to be cruelly crushed and afterwards cut off.”⁴⁵⁴ In the *Acts of Carpus, Papyrus and Agathonice*, the crowd implore Agathonice to “Have pity on yourself and your children,” however, she responds, “My children have God who protects them.”⁴⁵⁵ She is later undressed so the spectators can marvel at her beauty. In the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*, whilst Perpetua’s breast is not exposed during most of the story, the many references to her infant son at her breast, of her nursing him and of the lack of pain in her breasts when she is forced to cease lactation, ensure that with some subtlety, her

⁴⁵² Other examples focus on the exposure of the breasts of scantily clad or naked women. The twelve-year-old Agnes was sent to a brothel where she was stripped naked, and Irenê was taken to a brothel, naked.

⁴⁵³ Herbert Thurston and Donald Attwater (eds.), *Butler’s Lives of the Saints I: January, February, March* (London: Burns and Oats, 1956), 256.

⁴⁵⁴ Thurston and Attwater (eds.), *Butler’s Lives of the Saints*, 256.

⁴⁵⁵ *Acts of Carpus, Papyrus and Agathonice*, Latin rec. 6 (Musurillo).

breasts are exposed to the audience's imagination.⁴⁵⁶ Felicitas' breasts on the other hand are explicitly exposed to the crowd, as she enters the arena "a woman fresh from childbirth with milk still dripping from her breasts" (*Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* XX.2 [trans Heffernan]). Both Perpetua and Felicitas are stripped naked as they enter the arena.⁴⁵⁷

It is possible to observe something similar in hagiographic stories about female saints. In ascetic literature, the exposure of a woman's breast appears primarily to be associated with female ascetics who have been masculinised through depictions of them as transvestite monks. In these stories women cut their hair, wear men's clothing and are admitted to monasteries where they are praised for their exemplary faith. The monks are perceived by those around them as male, and often described as "eunuchs."⁴⁵⁸ It is not until their deaths when their bodies are revealed that they are discovered to in fact be women. Mary/Marinos is revealed to be a woman only once they are found dead in their cell,

But as they were preparing to wash him, they discovered that he was a woman, and shrieking, they all began to cry out in a single voice, "Lord, have mercy." The superior, hearing their cries, asked them, "What troubles you so?" And they said, "Brother Marinos is a woman." Drawing near and seeing [for himself], the [superior] cast himself down at her feet (*The Life and Conduct of the blessed Mary who Changed her Name to Marinos* 18-19 [trans. Talbot]).

⁴⁵⁶ *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* (Heffernan) 2.2; 3.8 and 6.8. On Perpetua and breastfeeding see Dova Stamatia, "Lactation Cessation and the Realities of Martyrdom in The Passion of Saint Perpetua." *Illinois Classical Studies* 42 (2017): 245-65.

⁴⁵⁷ *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* XX.2 (Heffernan).

⁴⁵⁸ This may simply be a way to account for such things such as a lack of facial hair which one might expect from a male, thus adding credibility to the stories. Kristi Upson-Saia however notes that P124

likening the saint to a eunuch also reminds readers that the cross-dresser fails to achieve a wholly masculine physiology, marked by facial hair and a deep voice, and evokes readers also to recall other bodily failings, such as the lack of male genitalia. Ultimately, then, masculinity is defined according to features of the body, features that the eunuch does not possess. Although the eunuch category allows the cross-dresser to be perceived as a "not woman," it is a category that also marks the saint as being an incomplete man.³⁴ By casting the cross-dressers as eunuchs, therefore, the narratives create the impression that masculinity can only be fully achieved by real men and that women disguised as men can pass only partially and under much suspicion

In the story of Anastasia/Anastasios, Anastasios who is described as an old man and eunuch predicts his imminent death. He instructs Abba Daniel and his disciple that when the time comes, they should not take “what I am wearing, but send me to our Lord just as I am, so that others may not learn of my secret” (*The Story of Anastasia* 6 [trans. Brock and Harvey]). When Anastasios succumbs to the fever and dies, the disciple prepares the body, seeing “that on his chest he had women's breasts, looking like two shrivelled up leaves” (*The Story of Anastasia* 7 [trans. Brock and Harvey]). The disciple later asks Abba Daniel saying “Father, did you know that the eunuch we buried was a woman? As I was putting on the burial garment, I felt and noticed that she had breasts hanging down like two withered leaves” (*The Story of Anastasia* 8 [trans. Brock and Harvey]). Even when all those around the ascetic are convinced of their masculinity, as Upson-Saia observes, “in the end her appearance is always shown to be a temporary façade that obfuscated her true femininity.”⁴⁵⁹ She goes on to observe that

In these typical episodes, vitae authors align femininity with the body beneath the disguise. Although the cross-dressers have renounced sexual activity (i.e., the sexual use of their bodies) and appear “as men”, the vitae authors make the female body – especially breasts/nipples – constitutive of femininity. The male disguise, therefore, is constructed to be secondary, temporary, and always incomplete.⁴⁶⁰

Whilst the exposure of her breast does feminise Macrina, by considering the context of breast exposure in Greco-Roman literature, visual iconography, and subsequent martyrological and ascetic literature, revelation of the breast appears rather than an act of feminising a protagonist, rather an indication of gender ambiguity. Macrina’s noble death, the wound on her breast as well as the exposure of the breast itself becomes a means of

⁴⁵⁹ Kristi Upson-Saia. “Gender and Narrative Performance in Early Christian Cross-Dressing Saints’ Lives,” *Studia Patristica* 45 (2010): 43-48 (46).

⁴⁶⁰ Upson-Saia. “Gender and Narrative Performance,” 46-47.

situating Macrina in a framework of literary and visual iconography which signal a gender ambiguity of heroic women.

Gender Ambiguity

Gregory tells us almost immediately about the virility of Macrina, and in death he situates her as dying a noble and masculine death, with a wound on her front which demonstrates masculinised virtue. Whilst the exposure of her breast does appear to feminise Macrina and complicate Gregory's narrative, by considering the context of breast exposure in Greco-Roman literature, visual iconography, and martyrological literature, revealing her breast may in fact be read as signalling a gender ambiguity. We have examined Macrina as feminine, beautiful, maternal surrogate mother and then considered how Gregory masculinises her, particularly through her suffering and death. Using Gregory's representations of gender and virginity found in his other works, I will now demonstrate that Gregory employs an unstable gender representation of Macrina throughout the narrative, to situate her as angelic. Gregory's understanding of gender is tied up in his protological, eschatological and soteriological thinking, and in line with other Christian texts of this period, I argue that Macrina's body is depicted as a prefiguration of the eschatological post-resurrection body during her life as well as in death. Macrina's scar and the revelation of her breast should be understood therefore as confirmation of her angelic nature and thus saying something about the resurrected body. Her breast is revealed because for Gregory, it is both symbolic of her angelic nature, as well as a marker of her identity

Gregory and gender

Gregory's understanding of gender is tied up in his protological, eschatological and soteriological thinking.⁴⁶¹ In Gregory's conjectures on the nature of the prelapsarian body in *On the Making of Men*, he contemplates the meaning of man being created "after our image and likeness," and asks, "How then is man, this mortal, passible, shortlived being, the image of that nature which is immortal, pure, and everlasting?" (Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man* XVI.4 [trans. Wace]). His answer is that God first created man in his likeness and subsequently divided this original creation into male and female.

Thus the creation of our nature is in a sense twofold: one made like to God, one divided according to this distinction...it first says, "God created man, in the image of God created He him," and then, adding to what has been said, "male and female created He them,"—a thing which is alien from our conceptions of God (Nyssa, *On the Making of Man* XVI.8 [trans. Wace]).⁴⁶²

Gregory then goes on to explain why "after the making of His image God contrived for His work the distinction of male and female" (Nyssa, *On the Making of Man* XVII.4 [trans. Moore and Wilson NPNF 2/5:406]).⁴⁶³ For Gregory, the fractionalization of the original creation was

⁴⁶¹ For more detailed analysis of Gregory's understanding of gender see On Gregory's understanding of gender see John Behr, "The Rational Animal: A Rereading of Gregory of Nyssa's *De hominis opificio*," J ECS 7 (1999) 219-47; Hans Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa: An Anagogical Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 85-116; Peter Brown, *Body and Society*, 285-304; Virginia Burrus, "Is Macrina a Woman? Gregory of Nyssa's *Dialogue on the Soul and Resurrection*," in *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Graham Ward (Malden, MA.: Blackwell Publishing, 2001); Sarah Coakley, "The Eschatological Body: Gender, Transformation and God," *Modern Theology* 16 (2000): 61-73; Fellipe do Vale, "Cappadocian or Augustinian? Adjudicating Debates on Gender in the Resurrection," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 21 (2019): 182-198; Verna E. F. Harrison, "Gender, Generation, and Virginitly in Cappadocian Theology," *Journal of Theological Studies* 47 (1996): 38-68; Mark D. Hart, "Reconciliation of Body and Soul: Gregory Marriage," *Theological Studies* 51 (1990): 450-78; J. Warren Smith, "The Body of Paradise and the Body of the Resurrection: Gender and the Angelic Life in Gregory of Nyssa's 'De hominis opificio,'" *Harvard Theological Review* 99 (2006): 207-228.

⁴⁶² Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man* XV.1 [trans. Wace].

⁴⁶³ Leah DeVun notes that "conversations about both the creation and the resurrection, questions about 'androgyny' or 'hermaphroditism' surfaced repeatedly, revealing key assumptions about the sexed body and its place in the narrative of Christian time" (Leah DeVun, "Heavenly Hermaphrodites: Sexual Difference at the Beginning and End of Time," *Postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies* 9 (2018): 132-146 (133)).

part of God's plan, when he envisioned humankind's fall.⁴⁶⁴ It was this separation that made sexual reproduction possible and from this point, he states our passions sprung forth, evidence for which is the likeness between the passions that appear in humankind and in animals. As animal life entered the world, humankind took something of their nature, he specifically refers here to their mode of generation as well as anger, cowardice, boldness, desire of gain, and dislike of loss.⁴⁶⁵

Gregory associates the genderless prelapsarian body with the imagined eschatological angelic body. This association is based on Jesus' response to the Sadducees in the synoptic gospels when they ask him about the resurrection. Gregory says

Our Lord answered their argument so as not only to instruct the Sadducees, but also to reveal to all that come after them the mystery of the resurrection-life: 'for in the resurrection,' He says, 'they neither marry, nor are given in marriage; neither can they die any more, for they are equal to the angels, and are the children of God, being the children of the resurrection.' Now the resurrection promises us nothing else than the restoration of the fallen to their ancient state; for the grace we look for is a certain return to the first life, bringing back again to Paradise him who was cast out from it. If then the life of those restored is closely related to that of the angels, it is clear that the life before the transgression was a kind of angelic life, and hence also our return to the ancient condition of our life is compared to the angels (Nyssa, *On the Making of Man* XVII.2 [trans. Moore and Wilson NPNF 2/5:406]).

In Hans Boersma analysis, he observes that Gregory

Regards the 'tunics of hide' (the post-lapsarian condition of the body) as penultimate and as problematic in significant ways. Gregory is deeply impressed with the need for an anagogical transposition that will allow us to leave behind all of the diastemic characteristics of the mortal body, including gender, sexuality, childbearing, maturation, nourishment, bodily functions, disease, bodily passions, and death. In short, all of these dimensions characterize the life that we have in common with the 'brutish animals' and that we are to leave behind. It is the virginal life, particularly as

⁴⁶⁴ See Verna E. F. Harrison, "Male and Female in Cappadocian Theology." *The Journal of Theological Studies*, 41 (1990): 441-71. According to DeVun, Gregory's "rather radical" claim was that sexual differentiation rather than sex and sexuality had resulted from the Fall, this is in stark comparison to Augustine's understanding in *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*. (DeVun, "Heavenly Hermaphrodites," 134.

⁴⁶⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man* XVIII.1 [trans. Wace].

we witness it in Macrina, which gives us an anticipatory glance into the virginal life of the resurrection.⁴⁶⁶

This association of the angelic life with a return to the “ancient condition,” is fundamental to Gregory’s depiction of Macrina, and is key to understanding the revelation of Macrina’s scar and breast.

As with other Christian writers of the time, Gregory explicitly equates the ascetic life with the angelic life,

In fact, the Life of Virginité seems to be an actual representation of the blessedness in the world to come, showing as it does in itself so many signs of the presence of those expected blessings which are reserved for us there...because he enjoys even in this present life a certain exquisite glory of all the blessed results of our resurrection. For our Lord has announced that the life after our resurrection shall be as that of the angels. Now the peculiarity of the angelic nature is that they are strangers to marriage; therefore the blessing of this promise has been already received by him who has not only mingled his own glory with the halo of the Saints, but also by the stainlessness of his life has so imitated the purity of these incorporeal beings. (Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginité* [trans. Moore and Wilson *NPNF* 2/5: 360]).

This association is something we find in a range of other texts from the same period, in fact as Ellen Muehlberger notes, “the equation of ascetic life with the angelic one permeated ancient writing about the renunciatory efforts of Christians.”⁴⁶⁷ Like Gregory, many early Christians employed Luke 20:27-40, Matt 22:23-33 and Mark 12:18-25 to envision the resurrected body as angelic. Looking back to the pre-Fall body described in Genesis and Jesus’ response to the Sadducees in the Synoptics to argue that renunciation of sex could bring about an angelic existence even before death.⁴⁶⁸ Muehlberger writes “The idea that renunciation of sexuality might, in some way, make human beings “equal to angels” was a

⁴⁶⁶ Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue*, 87.

⁴⁶⁷ Ellen Muehlberger, *Angels in Late Ancient Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 148.

⁴⁶⁸ See Muehlberger, *Angels*, 148-175 (esp. 151-152).

powerfully attractive metaphor for the writers who sought to articulate the place of virginity in early Christian practice.”⁴⁶⁹

In his treatise *On Virginity*, Gregory articulates this soteriological understanding of the role virginity,

Now if we are destined “to depart hence, and be with Christ” we must begin at the end of the route of departure (which lies nearest to ourselves)...Marriage, then, is the last stage of our separation from the life that was led in Paradise; marriage therefore, as our discourse has been suggesting, is the first thing to be left; it is the first station as it were for our departure to Christ. Next, we must retire from all anxious toil upon the land, such as man was bound to after his sin. Next we must divest ourselves of those coverings of our nakedness, the coats of skins, namely the wisdom of the flesh; we must renounce all shameful things done in secret, and be covered no longer with the fig-leaves of this bitter world. (Nyssa, *On Virginity* XII [trans. Moore and Wilson *NPNF* 2/5: 358])

Renunciation of marriage and therefore sex was the beginning of the return to God. In her dying prayer, Macrina acknowledges the power of virginity, saying

You redeemed us from the curse and from sin, having become both on our behalf. You have crushed the heads of the serpent who had seized man in his jaws because of the abyss of our disobedience. You have opened up for us a path to the resurrection, having broken down the gates of hell and reduced to impotence the one who had power over death (Nyssa, *VSM* [Corrigan], 41).

In the practice of virginity, “The long unbroken career of decay and death, which has intervened between the first man and the lives of virginity which have been led, is interrupted” (Nyssa, *On Virginity* [trans. Moore and Wilson *NPNF* 2/5: 359]). Virginity acted as a metaphorical rampart, protecting the body from subsequent attacks, “It could not be indeed that death should cease working as long as the human race by marriage was working too; he walked the path of life with all preceding generations...but he found in virginity a

⁴⁶⁹ Muehlberger, *Angels*, 152.

barrier, to pass which was an impossible feat" (Nyssa, *On Virginity* XIII [trans. Moore and Wilson *NPNF* 2/5: 359]).

In fact, the benefits that follow from virginity, "pervades everything that is, or is considered, a right condition of the soul," comparing it to the ripples formed when a stone is thrown into a pool (Nyssa, *On Virginity* XIV [trans. Moore and Wilson *NPNF* 2/5: 360-1]). For as the virtues are "not disunited from each other, and that to grasp the principle of any one virtue will be impossible to one who has not seized that which underlies the rest, and that the man who shows one virtue in his character will necessarily show them all" (Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity* XIV [trans. Moore and Wilson *NPNF* 2/5: 361]). This suggests a ripple effect in which once one has chosen the virginial life, the journey back to God is not simply about sex or its absence but will also affect the passions and gender too.

The Passions

Gregory's comprehension of creation and his characterization of the virgin life as angelic has profound implications for his understanding of human embodiment and subsequently his representation of Macrina.⁴⁷⁰ He already represents Macrina as living the angelic life because she has renounced marriage and sex, but the complex representation of Macrina's gender alongside her conquering of the passions throughout the text, further demonstrates her return to the prelapsarian body and therefore to God.

⁴⁷⁰ Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue*, 112.

Even within the depiction of Macrina in a feminine maternal role, as surrogate mother for her siblings and community as discussed earlier, she exhibits traits associated with the depiction of masculinity. She is Peter's surrogate mother, but also his father, teacher, and guide. She exhibits perfect self-mastery, a trait which characterises masculinity. We have already discussed this in terms of her death, but we also find examples throughout the text. Self-control through the mastery of the passions was one of the pervading motifs within multiple cultural discourses of the ancient world. Mastery of the passions was a central element of depictions of masculinity in antiquity and conversely therefore women were often depicted as emotional and unable to control their emotions. Displays of anger, lust or grief for example were considered notable effeminate.⁴⁷¹ Macrina however was able to deal with episodes which repeatedly challenged that control. These "successive attacks" and her response to them, according to Gregory demonstrated her true nature,

The high quality of her thinking was thoroughly tested by successive attacks of painful grief to reveal the authentic and undebased nature of her soul, first by the death of her other brother Naucratus, after this by the separation from her mother and third when Basil, the common honour of our family, departed from human life. So she stood her ground like an undefeated athlete, who does not cringe at any point before the onslaught of misfortune (Nyssa, *VSM* [Corrigan], 33).

So successful was her mastery of the passions that not only was she able to maintain her own self-control, but she was also able to support her mother when they received word that Naucratus had been killed in a hunting accident.⁴⁷² Despite being "perfect in every virtue," Gregory tells us that for their mother Emmelia, "nature prevailed."⁴⁷³ J. Warren Smith

⁴⁷¹ Seneca considered the display of grief as demonstrating lack of control and therefore effeminate. He warned Marullus who had lost a son that "a man who collapses and clings to his dead: they call him womanish and weak." (Seneca, *Epistle*, 99.18.)

⁴⁷² Nyssa, *VSM* [Corrigan], 28.

⁴⁷³ Nyssa, *VSM* [Corrigan], 28.

considers this reference to refer to Emmelia's "natural revulsion to death."⁴⁷⁴ However, "feminine" or "maternal" nature may be more appropriate here so that her natural maternal love for her son prevailed and she became "breathless, speechless and fainted away on the spot." By "placing reason in opposition to passion," Macrina not only keeps herself from falling into grief, but draws back her mother from the edge as well and because of this, her mother does not respond to her maternal grief in a "base or womanish way," she does not "shout out against her evil fortune, tear her cloak, bewail her suffering or stir up lamentations and their mournful chantings," but instead "endured the attacks of nature with calm, resisting them with her own reasoned reflections and with those suggested by her daughter in order to heal her pain" (Nyssa, *VSM* [Corrigan], 29).

Macrina is passionless, no longer female, but neither is she male. She is depicted as non-binary, her gender is ambiguous and unstable and this is how Gregory further demonstrates her angelic nature. The destabilization of gender and her gender fluidity throughout the narrative signals her transcendence of gender, and her angelic nature. In the *VSM*, Macrina transcends gender by becoming being *both* masculinised and feminized. By encompassing both male and female, Macrina demonstrates that a virginial life of asceticism is a move towards an eschatological destiny. Gregory explicitly describes this when he imagines her community,

What human works could ever bring such a mode of existence before one's gaze – in a community whose way of life lay at the boundaries between human nature and the nature which is without body, to be encompassed by bodily shape and to live the organs of sense was thereby to possess a nature inferior to that of the angelic and the incorporeal. Perhaps one might even go so far as to say that the difference was minimal, because, although they lived in the flesh, by virtue of their affinity with the incorporeal powers they were not weighed by the attractive pull of the body, but

⁴⁷⁴ Smith, "A Just and Reasonable Grief," 70.

their lives were borne upwards, poised on high and they took their souls' flight in concert with the heavenly powers" (Nyssa, *VSM* [Corrigan], 30).

Macrina's body is therefore a prefiguration of the imagined eschatological body.

The motif of "becoming male" as exhibited in so many early Christian texts about women was previously thought to be a complete move away from femininity.⁴⁷⁵ Elizabeth Castelli for example argues that "The feminine has no place in this virginal order; it is explicitly banished, along with passion, materiality, and the body itself."⁴⁷⁶ Daniel Boyarin has argued that "the myth of the primal androgyne – that is, an anthropology whereby souls are engendered and only the fallen body is divided into sexes – is...a dominant structuring metaphor of gender for the early church."⁴⁷⁷ He asserts that through celibacy women in early Christian literature cease to be women and become male and that "the manipulation of conventional gender categories, seems to produce an androgyne who is always gendered male."⁴⁷⁸ More recently scholars such as Stephanie Cobb have drawn our attention to the complex characterisation of ancient texts in which women are depicted as masculinised whilst simultaneously their female bodies and virtues are stressed.⁴⁷⁹ She specifically draws our attention to the glossing over of comments by modern scholars when ancient authors also feminise female protagonists within the same stories in which they are masculinised. Blossom Stefaniw is accurate therefore in her suggestion that the term "gender ambivalence" is a more useful term to apply to these texts. She notes that "it is certainly

⁴⁷⁵ Elizabeth Castelli describes the trope of women "becoming male" as "one of the central signifiers for female piety" (Castelli, "I Will Make Mary Male," 30).

⁴⁷⁶ Elizabeth Castelli, "Virginité and its Meaning," 78.

⁴⁷⁷ Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 196.

⁴⁷⁸ Daniel Boyarin, "Gender," in *Critical Terms in Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 125-126.

⁴⁷⁹ Cobb, *Dying to Be Men*, 92-123.

more accurate to speak of ambivalence than equality, because women who are said to have been made men or to have taken on manly attributes are not subsequently completely removed from the social category 'woman.'"⁴⁸⁰ The complexity of gender as presented in the VSM narrative suggests a transcendence of gender by exhibiting displays of both genders, she is in fact both non-binary, and asexual. The gender fluid Macrina is shown through displays of *both* genders whilst ultimately preserving a body that retains all of its original features needed to maintain her identity, her female body. Gregory's Macrina is non-binary, inconsistent and fluid, but her body retains its original gendered identity.⁴⁸¹

Conclusion

Gregory of Nyssa drew on his classical education and a range of sources and inspiration in his depictions of Macrina.⁴⁸² In situating Macrina throughout the text within ancient categories of noble death, martial wounds and heroic endurance, Gregory demonstrates that she bears all of the significant attributes of *virtus*, bravery and in short masculinity. By gazing at her corpse and baring her breast it might appear that Gregory subverts his own narrative of Macrina's masculinity and masculine virtues by feminising her. However, contextualising the divulging of Macrina's breast using Greco-Roman literature, myth and visual images, we can argue that the exposure of her breast actually

⁴⁸⁰ Blossom Stefaniw, "Becoming Men, Staying Women: Gender Ambivalence in Christian Apocryphal Texts and Contexts," *Feminist Theology* 18 (2010): 343-344.

⁴⁸¹ It should be noted that Gregory's depiction of himself in the story also exhibits some gender fluidity, for example in his response to Macrina's death, he is overcome with emotion and joins in with the feminine crying happening around him (Nyssa, *VSM* [Corrigan], 43).

⁴⁸² Other scholars have drawn similar conclusions about Gregory's use of classical literature in his writing. See for example Frank, "Macrina's Scar," 511-30; Arnaldo Momigliano, "The Life of St Macrina by Gregory of Nyssa," in *On Pagans, Jews and Christians* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1987), 206-21; Muhelberger, "Salvage"; Catharine P Roth, "Platonic and Pauline Elements in the Ascent of the Soul in Gregory of Nyssa's Dialogue On the Soul and Resurrection," *Vigiliae Christianae* 46 (1992): 20-30.

simultaneously masculinises as well as feminises her, offering a portrait of culturally recognisable gender ambiguity. I think here lies the crux of Gregory's depiction of Macrina – it is not one of masculinization, but of gender ambiguity, a transcendence of gender by becoming *both* masculine and feminine.

Macrina's corporeality is central to the text, both on an immediate surface level as well as in deducing Gregory's theological meaning, and her illness, death, scar, revelation of her breast, and post-mortem body take centre-stage. For Gregory, gender was a temporary (and therefore mutable), earthly construct that would be eradicated in the eschatological realm. For Gregory, it is her closed, sealed off virginal body that participates in the first step of humankind's return to God. However, it was the coalescence of her virginity combined with her transcendence of gender, that moved Macrina beyond worldly passions enabling her to face death and block its power. In so doing, Gregory's theology is inscribed on Macrina's body

CHAPTER V: THE LIFE OF MELANIA: A TALE OF TWO ILLNESSES

In his influential book *The Presentation of Self in Every Day Life*, sociologist Erving Goffman employed the imagery of theatre to illustrate a theory of social interaction. In this model, individuals give meaning to themselves, their situation or to others through “performance” in front of an audience or set of observers who in turn effect the individual’s performance.⁴⁸³ This analysis has become influential in modern analyses of social media culminating in the adoption of the phrase “virtue signalling,” which the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as “To express oneself or act in a way thought to be motivated primarily by a wish to exhibit one’s good character, social conscience, political convictions..., or to garner recognition and approval.”⁴⁸⁴ Like many examples of writing in both the modern world and in ancient literature, the fifth-century hagiographic *Life of Melania the Younger* constitutes a late antique form of virtue signalling, or ‘impression management’ through a number of “performances.”

⁴⁸³ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959).

⁴⁸⁴ *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), “virtue signal.” James Bartholomew claims to have invented the phrase “virtue signalling,” see James Bartholomew, “I Invented ‘virtue signalling.’ Now it’s Taking Over the World,” *The Spectator* (10th October 2015.)

There can be no doubt that integral to the narrative of Melania's (c.385-439 CE.) life in the *Life of Melania the Younger* is the vast wealth at her disposal. From external sources, we know that this is historically accurate. Melania was of senatorial descent, and possibly "one of the richest women in the Roman Empire of her era."⁴⁸⁵ From the gens Valerii, a distinguished and aristocratic family, with links through the women of her family by marriage to the gens Antonia and the Ceionii Rufii, Melania could trace her lineage through proconsuls, consuls and prefects of Rome. As part of one of the most prominent patrician families of ancient Rome, Melania's familial ties are enough to enliven an interest by historians into her. Her wealth however acts as a foil, a form of Christian virtue signalling with which to demonstrate her and her husband Valerius Pinianus' extensive renunciation and dispersal of property and money in the form of feeding the poor, endowing churches and monasteries, patronage, selling of property, freeing of slaves and ransom of captives. So pervasive is this theme that much of the modern scholarship on Melania herself and the hagiographical *Life* written about her, focuses on her wealth, property and social networks of kin, patronage, and friendships.⁴⁸⁶ Yet her somatic experience of illness and subsequent healing depicted in the text, also employed as a form of virtue signalling often goes unobserved or warrants only brief mention. Further, in the earliest extant versions of the *Life*, one Latin and one Greek, the accounts of her illness differ in important ways.⁴⁸⁷

⁴⁸⁵ Clark, *Melania the Younger: From Rome to Jerusalem*, 1.

⁴⁸⁶ Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, 291-300; Chin, "Apostles and Aristocrats," 19-33; Clark, *Melania the Younger: From Rome to Jerusalem*, 39-60; Marquis, "Namesake and Inheritance," 34-49; Schroeder, "Exemplary Women," 50-66; Anne Yarbrough, "Christianization in the Fourth Century," *Church History* 45 (1976): 149-165

⁴⁸⁷ I use Clark's translation of the Greek version: "The Life of Saint Melania the Younger," in trans. Clark, *Melania*, 200-240 and the Latin from "The Life of Melania the Younger by Gerontius," trans. Caroline White in *Lives of Roman Christian Women* (London: Penguin Books, 2010), 179-230

Melania's hagiographic *Life*, written by her companion Gerontius in the fifth century, is preserved in two editions, in Greek and Latin. By examining the different representations of her illness in these two accounts I will show the diverse rhetorical and ideological uses to which representations of suffering were put. In the Greek text, Melania's illness is used as a peripheral form of virtue signalling and impression management as a means of demonstrating and promoting orthodoxy and defining and policing heresy through the demonization of heretics. Whilst in the Latin text we find a focus on sexuality, concepts of sexual desire and gender which are ensconced in early Christian notions of the resurrected body.

The use of the body to define orthodoxy draws on a long tradition, that stems back to Paul and 1 Corinthians in particular, in which the Christian community itself was described and identified as a body that must be surveilled and bounded. It is also representative of the emerging Christian consensus that resurrection of the body is the *sine qua non* of participation in the Christian community, as Claudia Setzer has argued.⁴⁸⁸ In the past 50 years scholarship of the New Testament and early Christianity has taken a bodily turn in focusing on the ways that bodies are shaped by cultural and socioeconomic norms and markers including gender, disability, race, social status, and ethnicity. This work has taken place alongside a traditional yet reinvigorated interest in the resurrection of the body as championed by scholars like Outi Lehtipuu, Claudia Setzer, Taylor Petrey, and Candida Moss.⁴⁸⁹ Others, like Jennifer Strawbridge have teased out how ideas about the

⁴⁸⁸ Claudia Setzer, *Resurrection of the Body in Early Judaism and Early Christianity* (Boston: Brill, 2004), 96 and Candida R. Moss, *Divine Bodies: Resurrecting Perfection in the New Testament and Early Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 14-16.

⁴⁸⁹ See for example Outi Lehtipuu, *Debates over the Resurrection of the Dead: Constructing early Christian Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Moss, *Divine Bodies*; Taylor G. Petrey, *Resurrecting Parts:*

resurrection of the body and bodily realities affects the reception of biblical figures like Lazarus in Patristic literature.⁴⁹⁰ This chapter uses the figure of Melania the Younger and the account of her life and illness as a lens through which to examine the reception and rearticulation of the body in early Christian literature.

Through a close reading of the representations of Melania's illness and healing, and by drawing on ancient physiognomic understanding of somatic difference, and concepts of race, alongside Greco-Roman medical theories on the nature of the human body, I will demonstrate how differing interpretive traditions used notions of illness, corporeality, and race in conjunction with ideas of sexuality and gender, and power and identity with very different results. This chapter will therefore shed new light not only on interpretative traditions of one of the earliest accounts of a female saint, but also on the intersection of race, illness, sexuality, and authority which are interwoven within these accounts. To draw out and investigate these differences, I begin with a brief summary of the discovery of the two versions and will then undertake an analysis of the use of the disaccords in each of the texts in order to appreciate how these differences affect how the texts should be understood.

The Text

The two versions of the *Life of Melania* were discovered within a few years of each other at the end of the nineteenth century. The Latin version was found in 1884 by Cardinal

Early Christians on Desire, Reproduction, and Sexual Difference (London: Routledge, 2016); Setzer, *Resurrection of the Body*, 96

⁴⁹⁰ Jennifer Strawbridge, "How the Body of Lazarus Helps to Solve a Pauline Problem," *NTS* 63 (2017): 588-603.

Mariano Rampolla del Tindaro (1843-1913) in the Escorial library. Rampolla delayed publishing the text due to pressures of his public duties, and during this delay, the Greek *vita* was discovered at the Barberini library and published by the Bollandists. Rampolla published the Latin *vita* in 1905 in an extensive work entitled *Santa Melania giuniore, senatrice romana: Documenti contemporanei e note*, which contained the Latin *vita*, Greek *vita* with an Italian translation and a chapter of Palladius' *Lausiac History* which refers to Melania.⁴⁹¹ Rampolla's Latin translation relied on the Escorial codex which he discovered, as well as fragments from eight other codices dating from the eighth to the fifteenth century. The Greek relied on the Barberini codex published by the Bollandists a few years previously which dated from around the eleventh century.⁴⁹² The text has since been translated into German, French, English and Russian.⁴⁹³

After Rampolla's publication scholarly debate ensued, particularly regarding the priority of each text as well as the original language in which the *Life* was composed. Whilst Rampolla favoured Latin as the original language, he conceded that neither the Escorial codex nor the Barberini codex were the original text and that therefore both the Latin and Greek versions derive from a lost common text.⁴⁹⁴ Modern scholarly consensus regards the

⁴⁹¹ Mariano Cardinale Rampolla del Tindaro, *Santa Melania giuniore, senatrice romana: Documenti contemporanei e note* (Rome: Tipografia Vaticana, 1905).

⁴⁹² On the discovery of Latin and Greek versions of Melania's *Life*, see Laurence, *Gérontius, Vie latine*, chap. 3; Elizabeth A. Clark, *The Life of Melania the Younger: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1984) 1–24; Denys Gorce, *Vie de Sainte Mélanie* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1962), 7–20, 45–62; Clark, *Melania the Younger*, 5–6.

⁴⁹³ *Griechische liturgien: Leben der hl. väter, von Palladius. Leben der hl. Melania, von Gerontius*, trans. Regimus Storf, Theodor Schermann and Stephan Krottenthaler (Kempton & Muenchen: J. Kösel, 1912); Gorce, *Vie de Sainte Mélanie* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1962); Clark, *The Life of Melania the Younger: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary*; Patrick Laurence, *La vie latine de sainte Mélanie* (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 2002); "The Life of Melania the Younger by Gerontius," trans. Caroline White in *Lives of Roman Christian Women* (London: Penguin Books, 2010), 179–230; Elizabeth A. Clark, *Melania the Younger: From Rome to Jerusalem*, 200–240.

⁴⁹⁴ For discussion of the arguments for the priority of each text see Laurence, *Gérontius, Vie latine*, 122–46, and Clark, *Life of Melania the Younger*, 4–13. Rampolla argued for the priority of the Latin text.

Greek as the earlier of the two versions and concurs that neither the Latin nor Greek precisely reproduce the original text.⁴⁹⁵ On the question of original authorship, modern scholars agree that the author was a companion of Melania, the monk Gerontius (c.395-485 CE) who succeeded her as head of the monasteries she founded in Jerusalem.⁴⁹⁶ The two versions follow the same basic narrative, however, there are significant variations between the two and these additions and eliminations have been attributed to the editors or redactors of each version. I begin with a brief comparison of the two versions, and consider how scholars have understood the attack on Melania's body in the Greek version. I will then re-examine the Latin version of the attack and Melania's subsequent illness and recovery in so doing, I hope to show how the reception of anatomical thinking in early Christian texts shed light on our understanding of early Christian anthropology and eschatology.

The Greek Vita

In the Greek *Vita*, Melania's "performance" is one of staunch orthodoxy, indeed, "her zeal for the orthodox faith...was warmer than fire" (Gerontius, *Life of Melania* prologue [trans Clark]). She brought back to God "Samaritans, pagans and heretics," and if anyone was even "nominally a heretic," she refused to accept anything from them, even donations to the poor.⁴⁹⁷ Whilst Gerontius highlights Melania's evasion of anyone who might be deemed heretical, external sources in fact confute this rendering of her activity. In fact, by considering these sources, and Melania's social network, it is evident that Melania was

⁴⁹⁵ On which language the original text was written see Clark, *The Life of Melania the Younger: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary*, 4-17.

⁴⁹⁶ On the identity of Gerontius and when he came to know Melania see Gorce, *Vie*, 54-62; Laurence, *Gérontius, Vie latine*, 118-21, and Clark, *Life of Melania*, 13-16 and 20. For external sources on Gerontius see John Rufus, *The Life of Peter the Iberian* 44-48 and Cyril of Scythopolis, *Life of Euthymius* 42.14-15, 49.8, 62.20, 67.14-15, 115.2, 127.19.

⁴⁹⁷ Gerontius, *Life of Melania* 27; 28; 29 (trans Clark).

discernibly actively involved in, at the very least, meeting with “heretical” thinkers and engaging with heretical trends of the time. In modern scholarship, Elizabeth Clark has demonstrated, that at various points, Melania can be linked to Origenism, Donatism and Pelagianism.⁴⁹⁸ In ancient sources, Palladius reports that Melania’s grandmother, Melania the Elder was forced to return to Rome to obviate her granddaughter from being “completely ruined by evil teaching or heresy or bad living.”⁴⁹⁹ Interestingly, the *Vita* itself fails to even mention Melania’s grandmother, a deliberate strategy Clark suggests, to combat suspicions of heresy that were attached to the elder Melania’s name following the Origenist controversy.⁵⁰⁰ Nor does the *Vita* mention other important people or events in Melania’s life such as Melania and Pinian’s close relationship with Rufinus, a key opponent of Jerome in the Origenist controversy, her relationship with Paulinus of Nola (a close friend of Pelagius,) or her meeting with Pelagius himself in Palestine in 418 CE.⁵⁰¹ Whilst from an historian’s point of view the absence of these references in the *Life* is frustrating, it is also telling of a deliberate attempt by Geronitus to minimise Melania’s association with anyone considered problematic or indeed heretical.

⁴⁹⁸ Clark, *Melania the Younger*, 141-145

⁴⁹⁹ Palladius, *Lausiac History* 54 (trans. Butler.)

⁵⁰⁰ Melania the Elder can be linked firmly to pro-Origen faction through her close long-term relationship with Jerome’s key opponent Rufinus, she is known to have been a keen reader of Origen’s works and associated with many men who deemed Origenists such as Evagrius Ponticus, Palladius and the Tall Brothers. On the social networks at work within the Origenist controversy see Elizabeth A. Clark, *The Origenist Controversy: The Cultural Construction of an Early Christian Debate* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

⁵⁰¹⁵⁰¹ On Melania’s connections with these men see Clark *The Life of Melania the Younger: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary*, 148-151; Clark, *Melania the Younger: From Rome to Jerusalem* 121-122; Susanna Drake, “Friends and Heretics,” in *Melania: Early Christianity through the Life of One Family*, eds. Catherine M. Chin and Caroline T. Schroeder (Oakland, Cal.: University of California Press, 2017), 171-185.

In the Greek version of the narrative, we find Melania pitted against the Nestorian heresy, references to which are notably absent in the Latin version.⁵⁰² In the story, Melania is living in Jerusalem after having left Rome.⁵⁰³ She hears news of her uncle Volusian being sent to Constantinople as part of a delegation on the betrothal of the empress Eudoxia to the emperor Valentinian III and decides to take the opportunity to visit him there.⁵⁰⁴ Volusian was a close friend of Augustine, and despite Augustine's efforts to convert him to Christianity, Volusian, is still a pagan, and Melania's trip to Constantinople is presented in the narrative as a mission to "save his soul."⁵⁰⁵

However, we are told that the devil was already at work in Constantinople, and that "the Devil, through the impure doctrine of Nestorius, greatly agitated the souls of simple-minded persons" (Gerontius, *Life of Melania* 54 [Clark]).⁵⁰⁶ Once she arrives in Constantinople, Melania meets with the women of the city to discuss the orthodox faith, and in so doing, she strengthens their beliefs and brings many back to the faith.⁵⁰⁷ As a result of these endeavours, Melania angers the devil who

Became extremely envious, both of those who came to her for their edification and because of the salvation of her uncle. He disguised himself as a young black man

⁵⁰² Clark claims "Such additions and subtractions in the Latin text suggest that its editor wished to remove Melania from any association with Monophysite tendencies and to maximize her Romanity, presenting her as a model of orthodoxy suitable for emulation by Westerners" (Clark, *The Life of Melania the Younger*, 24). In his discussion of orthodoxy and heresy in the early Church, Henry Chadwick also observes that it was not unusual for writers to omit, overlook or minimise connections with groups or figures deemed to be problematic (Henry Chadwick, *Heresy and Orthodoxy in the Early Church* (Brookfield, Vt.: Gower, 1991)).

⁵⁰³ Melania and Pinian are reported as staying in Africa for seven years before they continued to Jerusalem (Gerontius, *Life of Melania* 34-35 (trans. Clark)).

⁵⁰⁴ Gerontius, *Life of Melania* 50 (trans. Clark). The marriage itself took place in 437 CE. For a list of the offices held by Volusian see Elizabeth A. Clark, *Melania the Younger*, 50.

⁵⁰⁵ Gerontius, *Life of Melania* 50 (trans. Clark). Using Augustine's extant letters between himself, Volusian and another friend, Marcellinus, it is possible to identify Volusian's concerns with Christianity and therefore possibly his reasons for not converting, despite obvious attempts by others to elicit a conversion. Clark suggests that Augustine's dedication of *The City of God* to Volusian was part of this attempt (Clark, *Melania*, 130.)

⁵⁰⁶ On Nestorius and the Nestorianism heresy see Clark, *Melania* 187-194.

⁵⁰⁷ Gerontius, *Life of Melania* 54 (trans. Clark).

(*melana neaniskon*) and came to her saying, “For how long are you going to destroy my aspirations by your words? Know, therefore, that if I am able to harden the hearts of Lausus and the emperors . . . [lacuna in text]. Otherwise, I will inflict upon your body such tortures that even you will fear for your life and will be forced to become silent (Gerontius, *Life of Melania* 54 [Clark]).

Melania subsequently felt pain in her hips became unconscious and was unable to speak, enduring “unspeakable suffering.”⁵⁰⁸ On the seventh day, she was brought news that her uncle was on the point of death, and despite her own pain, Melania insists she should be taken to him. Before arriving, Melania receives reports that her uncle had received baptism, and when the news is relayed to Melania, she immediately recovered and “The Devil, having been put to shame, departed at the same hour, and along with him all the pains left the blessed one completely. She, who before had not been able to lift herself up, now climbed up all the steps by herself and entered through the side door of the palace” (Gerontius, *Life of Melania* 55 [Clark]). Melania sat with Volusian, and at daybreak, he finally passed away with Melania exclaiming that “God in his goodness is so greatly concerned for even one soul that he so ordained him [Volusian] to come here from Rome and sent us here from Jerusalem, so that a soul who had lived in ignorance its entire lifetime might be saved” (Gerontius, *Life of Melania* 55 [Clark]). It is clear in this account that the heresy, Volusian’s conversion and Melania’s illness are interwoven.

The Latin Vita

In the Latin version of the narrative, heretics are not mentioned. Melania does speak with a number of married ladies and religious women who are so affected by her words that they are strengthened in their faith, give alms and decide to practice chastity.⁵⁰⁹

⁵⁰⁸ Gerontius, *Life of Melania* 54 (trans Clark).

⁵⁰⁹ Gerontius, *Life of Melania* 54 (trans White).

The devil becomes envious of Melania's and so appears to her "in the guise of a young Ethiopian of fearsome appearance," and threatens that if she does not leave "I will inflict pain on your whole body and put your life in danger" (Gerontius, *Life of Melania* 54 [trans White]). Then, "an intense pain suddenly struck her in the kidneys, and she lay for three hours as if she were dead" (Gerontius, *Life of Melania* 54 [White]). On hearing of her uncle's conversion, the pain immediately left her, and "her feet, dry as wood, which she had been unable to move, recovered now that she was restored to health" (Gerontius, *Life of Melania* 55 [White]). Other than the omission of the Nestorian heresy from this account, the description of the devil, the reference to the attack on Melania's kidneys and the effect on her feet and inability to move are important to understand how Melania's illness is employed within this text. On their own, these differences could be considered issues of translation or interpretation, but I argue that in the Latin version, they work concurrently to signal a particular somatic understanding. I will consider in detail these differences, looking first at the description of the devil in the Greek version of the narrative and then turning to the Latin version to ask what function the black or Ethiopian demon has in each of these texts and then considering how this impacts on our understanding of Melania's illness that follows.

Greek Description of the Devil

In the Greek version of the *Life*, the adjectival description of the devil as a "young black man" (*melana neaniskon*) acted as a polemical device signalling to the audience the evil, sinful and polluted nature of those who ascribed to Nestorian beliefs. We find the colour black as an ominous sign in a range of Greco-Roman pagan writings, frequently

associated with the underworld and death.⁵¹⁰ In Greco-Roman literature, symbolic use of the colours black and white and the associated terms dark and light equated blackness and darkness with death, the underworld, sin and evil and white and light as its antonym, demonstrating goodness and life.⁵¹¹ These are concepts also present in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, for example when separating light from darkness in Genesis, “God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness” (Genesis 1:3-4). In Thessalonians 5.5, Paul says “But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness” (Thess. 5:5).

Blackness and darkness in antithesis to light could also be used to demonstrate ignorance and understanding and as a metaphor referring to moving from sin, evil, idolatry and sexual immorality (often Jewish or pagan) to the Christian life which is one of goodness, righteousness and truth.⁵¹² Ephesians 5 for example states “Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes on those who are disobedient. Therefore do not be associated with them, for once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Walk as children of light, for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true” (Eph. 5:6-8).⁵¹³ In Acts, Saul is on his way to Damascus, when Jesus appears to telling him “I will rescue you from your people and from the

⁵¹⁰ For a concise overview of examples see David M. Goldenberg, “Racism, Color Symbolism, and Color Prejudice,” in *The Origins of Racism in the West*, eds. Miriam Eliav-Feldon, Benjamin Isaac and Joseph Ziegler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 91-92.

⁵¹¹ See Peter Frost, “Attitudes towards Blacks in the Early Christian Era,” *The Second Century: A Journal of Early Christian Studies* 8 (1991): 1-11; Nicholas F. Gier, “The Color of Sin / The Color of Skin: Ancient Color Blindness and the Philosophical Origins of Modern Racism,” *JRT* 46 (1989): 42-52; Robert E. Hood, *Begrimed and Black: Christian Traditions on Blacks and Blackness* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994).

⁵¹² Romans 2:19; Matthew 5:14; Ephesians 4:18 and 5:8-9

⁵¹³ See also the righteous clothed in white robes in Revelation 6.11 and 7.13.

gentiles—to whom I am sending you to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God” (Acts 26:17-18).

In David Goldberg’s study on racism, colour prejudice and colour symbolism, he notes that despite these uses in biblical literature, these metaphorical representations do not include black people in its repertoire of metaphors that represent evil. However, this negative colour symbolism, possibly as an extension of the Greco-Roman association of evil, sin, death and the underworld gradually extended notably to the Devil, his work and his demons equating them with the colour black, people of dark skin, black animals, or with specific ethnic identities, as Egyptians or Ethiopians. As early as the late first / early second century in the writer of the *Epistle of Barnabas*, refers to the Devil as “the Black One” without explanation and which was presumably understandable to its contemporary audience.⁵¹⁴ As Gay Byron has identified, these ethno-political rhetorics were employed to define the theological boundaries of the church.⁵¹⁵ We turn now back to the *Life of Melania* to see an example of this.

The appearance of the devil as a manifest sign of evil is intensified in the *Vita* by the adjectival description of his appearance as a “young black man” (*melana neaniskon*). Byron has demonstrated that this use of symbolic colour difference represents a discursive strategy of othering based on inherent understandings of blackness in the ancient world.⁵¹⁶ In this example, the use of blackness to describe the appearance of the demon is

⁵¹⁴ *Epistle of Barnabas* 4:9 and 20:1. “But the path of the Black One is crooked and filled with a curse. For it is the path of eternal death which comes with punishment” (*Epistle of Barnabas* 20.1 (Ehrman, LCL).

⁵¹⁵ Gay L. Byron, *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Difference in Early Christian Literature* (London: Routledge, 2002), 104-121.

⁵¹⁶ Byron, *Symbolic Blackness*, 105.

vituperative, used to police boundaries of orthodoxy. It is employed here specifically to clarify issues of faith in that the “Black One,” understood as evil, supports Nestorianism which by association becomes evil too. The presence of the black demon therefore vilifies the Nestorians. In this example, the use of blackness to describe the appearance of the demon is vituperative and used to police boundaries of “orthodox” faith. The appearance of the demon works in a similar fashion, thereby intensifying the meaning of “black.” David Brakke has demonstrated that in monastic literature, at its most basic, the “blackness of..[a] demon, by providing an unmistakable sign of evil, could clarify an ambiguous situation...and display a monk’s gift of discernment.”⁵¹⁷ Likewise, it is used here specifically to clarify issues of faith in that the “Black One,” who is understood as evil, supports Nestorianism which then by association becomes evil too. The presence of the demon as a young black man here vilifies the Nestorians whilst simultaneously highlighting Melania’s orthodoxy and faith.

Illness

In the Devil’s attack Melania is silenced, unable to continue her support of the orthodox faith. As Mary Douglas has demonstrated, the body can represent any bounded system and “its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious.”⁵¹⁸ Here, the Devil’s attack, and his attempt to penetrate and defile Melania’s body is symbolic of the Nestorian’s perceived threat to violate and defile the social body of the church. Whilst the demon was able to inflict pain on Melania and briefly silence her, this attack is temporary. Unable to permanently penetrate Melania’s body, her corporal

⁵¹⁷ David Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk: Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 506.

⁵¹⁸ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 2003), 116.

integrity endured and her health is ultimately restored. In the narrative, God's work is revealed through Melania's uncle's baptism, the overthrowing of the devil, and Melania's full recovery. Melania's healing is thus linked to Volusian's conversion as proof of the righteousness of orthodoxy. Indeed, the acts of healing and conversion leave no ambiguity for the audience as to the "correct" interpretation.

The devil, his appearance as a "black man," illness, healing and conversion in this version of the text, provided a recognizable conceptual framework of spiritual combat against the forces of evil which policed the boundaries of orthodoxy and demonstrated the truth and authenticity of the orthodox faith, Melania herself, any other actors within the narrative as well as for Gerontius, the author himself. Thus, the corporeal experience of illness and symbolic colour difference were utilised to counter heresy and to negotiate and affirm boundaries of faith and authority and preserve and reinforce community purity. Just as the demon could not permanently affect the body of the saint, the heretical practices of the Nestorians could not take permanent root in the body of the church.

Latin Devil and Illness

Unlike the Greek version, there is a notable absence of the Nestorian heresy in the Latin text. Clark attributes this omission to an attempt by its author to "remove Melania from any association with Monophysite tendencies and to maximize her Romaninity, presenting her as a model of orthodoxy suitable for emulation by Westerners."⁵¹⁹ In the following part of the chapter, I argue that the differences in this part of the narrative have

⁵¹⁹ Gerontius, *Life of Melania* 24 (trans Clark).

further significance. Rather than Melania's body being employed to police heresy, instead, I will demonstrate that like other examples in ascetic literature, the Ethiopian demon in the Latin version represents the threat of sexual temptation and that Melania's subsequent illness uses a commonly understood framework of Greco-Roman medical theories about the female body alongside concepts of race to say something to the audience about sexuality, concepts of sexual desire and gender and which further elucidate a late antique understanding of the resurrected body.

We have already briefly considered how the "Black One" and the "Young Black man" was employed in the Greek version of the text. In the Latin version, the devil who attacks Melania becomes a demon who is described as "A young Ethiopian of fearsome appearance" (Gerontius, *Life of Melania* 54 [White]). Scholars have observed that with reference to ancient employment of the terms Black, Ethiopian and Egyptian, there is an inconsistency and ambiguity in usage. Frequently, the terms black, Black, Ethiopian and Egyptian could be synonymous and used interchangeably.⁵²⁰ However, scholars such as Gay Byron have argued that whilst it is important to note the interchangeability and different uses of these terms, it is not enough simply to observe that there are these ambiguities present in the texts of early Christian literature. In *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Difference in Early Christian Literature*, Byron undertook a systematic reinterpretation of the multiple

⁵²⁰ Both Frank Snowden and D. B. Saddington argue that the term *Aethiops* was both a generic term, and the most common identifier for Black people in antiquity (D. B. Saddington, "Race Relations in the Roman Empire," *ANRW* 2.3 (1975): 119 and Frank M. Snowden Jr., *Blacks in Antiquity: Ethiopians in the Greco-Roman Experience* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970), 15. Nicholas Gier concurs, concluding that the term for Black people in the ancient world in Greek was "Ethiopians" (*aithiophoi*), and which could be applied to any and all Black people from "the top of Africa and into Nubia, present day Sudan" (Gier, "The Color of Sin," 1).

meaning of Blacks and blackness, Ethiopian and Egyptian in ancient literature.⁵²¹ Bryon demonstrates how ancient Christian authors used these ethnic groups as polemical devices or ethnic tropes for the purpose of clarifying the self-definitions of early Christianity and its place within the Greco -Roman world, particularly as a means of defining themselves in relation to perceived threats and challenges.⁵²² As stated earlier, this is exactly how the “black demon” works in the Greek *Life of Melania*. With reference to the different phrasing in the Latin life, Byron comments that “the Ethiopian (black man) was used as a polemical device for shaping an orthodox understanding of Melania and her teachings,” seeing this “ethnic reference as a symbolic trope,” acting in the same way as the “young black man” of the Greek version.⁵²³

However, as monastic literature developed, there was a shift in usage which is important to examine to elucidate its use in the Latin text. In Christian writing, demons began to take on a more humanised form, and in many instances, were represented as Ethiopian or black African.⁵²⁴ In the late second-century *Acts of Peter*, Marcellus wakes and describes a dream to Peter in which he says

I saw you sitting in an elevated place and before you a great multitude and a very ugly woman in appearance an Ethiopian, not an Egyptian, but very black, clad in filthy rags, who danced with an iron chain about the neck and a chain on her hands

⁵²¹ Byron, *Symbolic Blackness*, 23.

⁵²² Byron, *Symbolic Blackness*, 22.

⁵²³ Byron, *Symbolic Blackness*, 108.

⁵²⁴ David M. Goldenberg, “Racism, Color Symbolism, and Color Prejudice,” in *The Origins of Racism in the West*, eds. Miriam Eliav-Feldon, Benjamin Isaac, Joseph Ziegler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 92. Brakke notes that the preponderance of Egyptian writers and figures in the early church and late antique period meant a move away from the Egyptian as being used to refer to sin and evilness. He says “The Egyptian, then stood between the Ethiopian, whose truly black skin defined one end of the spectrum and the unmarked ideal somatic type whose skin was neither too dark nor too light, not surprising, then, when the ‘in-between’ Egyptians did the talking, they used Ethiopians as exemplars of blackness and thus sin” (David Brakke, “Ethiopian Demons: Male Sexuality, the Black-Skinned Other, and the Monastic Self,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 10 (2001): 501-535 (507-8). On the struggle of the ascetic and the demonic more broadly see Brakke, *Demons*.

and feet. When you saw her you said to me with a loud voice, "Marcellus, this dancer is the whole power of Simon and of his god; behead her (Acts of Peter 22 [trans. Eliot]).

Brakke describes the origins of the Ethiopian demon as "a seemingly obvious corollary to the use of light or whiteness to symbolize the good" and therefore acted as symbolic evil.⁵²⁵

David Goldberg observes that

The innovation of Christianity was not in the essential nature of the association of black and evil. It was rather, in the degree of application of this association. In the church fathers the theme of Ethiopian blackness became a crucial component of the Christian focus on the battle between good and evil, which pervades patristic writing."⁵²⁶

In his analysis of the trope of the black / Ethiopian demon in early monastic literature of the fourth and fifth century, Brakke determined that the appearance of black or Ethiopian demons whilst being extensive, were numerically few. By this he means that there were examples in every form of ascetic literature, including hagiography, travel accounts, treatises and collections of sayings, so examples can be found in the *Apophthegmata partum*, the *Historia Monachorum* and the *Lausiac History*, *Life of Antony* and John Cassian's *Conferences*. Brakke concludes therefore that authorial use of Ethiopian demons was ubiquitous and deliberate, but not used for all and every example of the demonic. As a result, he concluded therefore that it must be exercised in specific instances to illustrate something about the demonic and was exploited at certain moments in ascetic discourse.⁵²⁷

In attempting to understand and conceptualise the cultural and social logic behind this image, Brakke demonstrates that as demons became Ethiopianised, they adopted the

⁵²⁵ Brakke, *Demons*, 159.

⁵²⁶ Goldenberg, "Racism," 95. For examples on the patristic use of this colour symbolism see Goldenberg, "Racism," 93-94.

⁵²⁷ Brakke, "Ethiopian Demons," 504-506.

Greco-Roman stereotype of hypersexuality associated with the Ethiopian somatic type which subsequently effected the employment of the Ethiopian demon and explains why it was used at specific moments in ascetic narrative.⁵²⁸ Our earliest extant evidence of the use of the black demon in monastic literature is the appearance of a “black boy” in Athanasius’ *Life of Antony* (c.357 CE.). In this text, demons appear throughout the narrative, yet the adjective black used to describe demons is only used in one instance within the text. Having already attempted but failed to lead Antony astray the devil settles on using the weapons “in the navel of his belly,” attempting to arouse in Antony sexual desire which Athanasius claimed was “the first snare of the young” (Athanasius, *The Life of Antony* [trans. Robertson, NPNF 2/4:197]). Antony’s struggles with the demon of fornication were so great that even those who saw him could see the struggle which was taking place. First, the devil attempted to entice him by suggesting “foul thoughts,” and then one attempted to “fire him with lust.” Then the devil took on the shape of a woman and, “imitated all her acts simply to beguile Antony” (Athanasius, *The Life of Antony* 5 [trans. Robertson, NPNF 2/4:197]). When Antony resisted these temptations, the Devil instead appeared in the guise of a “black boy, taking a visible shape in accordance with the color of his mind” (Athanasius, *The Life of Antony* 6 [trans. Robertson, NPNF 2/4:197]). Whilst “black” appears to suggest here an implicit designation of negativity and more precisely evilness, even at this early point, it is linked specifically within a corporeal context of sexuality, sexual attraction and desire. The boy’s appearance works to both say something about the nature of sexuality and sexual desire in the context of ascetic life, but also reveals Antony’s virtue by his ability to avoid giving in to the temptation.

⁵²⁸ Brakke, *Demons*, 162-163.

Brakke concludes therefore that at its most basic level blackness as a sign of evil was employed in order to facilitate the development of the ascetic self, to clarify ambiguous positions.⁵²⁹ However, combining representations of the Black person as “Other,” the associated Ethiopian hypersexuality and the colour symbolism of black as sinful and evil resulted in images in monastic sources of Black and Ethiopian men and women as sexual tempters, associated with forbidden pleasures, a form that the devil would take in order to lure the ascetic away from their faith, abandoning it for the sexual pleasures that the Black man, boy, woman or girl could offer. It was an externally visible manifestation of an internal conflict. To make this even more explicit, this colour symbolism was frequently combined with olfactory symbolism which highlighted the foul, filthy or stench-ridden nature of these temptations. These images were concurrently disgusting, seductive and erotic.

Employing these culturally prevalent ancient stereotypes and physiognomic understanding of somatic difference, ascetic writers increasingly depicted the devil appearing in visual form not only as Black, but more precisely as Ethiopian. Harnessing these notions, ascetic writers used the term Ethiopian in a way that their audience would understand not only the evil nature of the demon, but significantly also the hyper-sexual nature of their depictions.⁵³⁰ In the story of a brother who visits the Abba Heraclides to ask for assistance after being attacked by the devil. The Abba builds him a cell and tells the brother to remain there until Saturday, when he is “afflicted” he should eat, drink and sleep,

⁵²⁹ Brakke, *Demons*, 160.

⁵³⁰ On the intersection of late antique representations of desert monasticism and geographical thought in Christian historiography see A. H. Merrills, “Monks, Monsters, and Barbarians: Re-Defining the African Periphery in Late Antiquity,” *J ECS* 12 (2004): 217-244.

but not leave the cell. However, after two days, when the brother goes to lie down, he sees an “Ethiopian lying there who gnashed his teeth at him” (*Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Heraclides 1 [trans. Ward]). Instead of remaining in his cell, the brother runs to get help from the Abba saying, “On my bed I saw a black Ethiopian” (*Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Heraclides 1 [trans. Ward]). Abba Heraclides explains to the brother that it is because he has not been obedient or followed his instructions and this is why he suffered the attack and proceeds to instruct him on the discipline of living a solitary life. The appearance of this “black Ethiopian” at night-time, lying on the brother’s bed, combined with the associated hypersexuality of the Ethiopian allows the reader to understand that the demon is sexually tempting him at night, when he was most vulnerable.

In a second example, an anonymous man went to Scete to become a monk, bringing with him his young son. As the child grows up, he begins to experience “the battles...coming upon him,” ie the temptations of sexual pleasure, he tells his father that he does not have the strength to fight and will instead return to the world. His father pleads with him, encouraging him to go alone into the inner desert for forty days. The young man complies, but this time, “a very foul-smelling Ethiopian woman” appears to him and he struggles to bear the stench of her

It appeared before him as a very foul-smelling Ethiopian woman, so that he could not bear her stench. He would chase her away and she said to him: “I appear to be sweet in the hearts of men but, thanks to your obedience and your labour, God did not permit me to lead you astray and he revealed my evil smell to you” (“N.173/5.27,” in *The Anonymous Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, [trans John Wortley], 115-117).

Here as in the previous example, the ascetic is faced with the threat of fornication, but this ascetic remained obedient to an older superior and despite the allure of the sexualised

demon, he is able to identify its true nature from the foul-smelling odour it exudes. As David Brakke has demonstrated, because of the culturally established stereotype of the hypersexuality of the Ethiopian, combined with an association of blackness with sin and evilness, meant by describing a demon as “Ethiopian,” an author could clarify the evilness of that demon. It was not only evil but was a sexual evil and was an effective way of demonstrating sexual appetency.

I contend that by describing the demon as “Ethiopian” in the Latin version of the *Life of Melania*, like the Ethiopian demons who appear to the monks described above, the demon who appears to Melania launches the temptation of fornication and sexual desire on Melania. Women were considered sexualised, sexual beings, often presented as tempters rather than those being tempted, but we do see examples of other female ascetics in hagiographical discourse also having to endure the threat of sexual temptation. Mary of Egypt describes how as a girl she was “On fire with untiring and clamorous desire for lust,” and then once she entered the desert, had “Struggled for seventeen years with the wild beasts of huge and irrational desires” (Sophronius, *The Life of St Mary of Egypt* XIII and XIX [trans. Benedicta Ward]). Amma Sarah also waged warfare against the demon of fornication for over thirteen years.⁵³¹

Discerning the Ethiopian demon which attacks Melania as one specifically representing sexual evil can be elucidated further if we consider what happens to her in the aftermath of the attack. The demon threatens Melania, telling her that he will invoke pain

⁵³¹ Anon, *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Sarah 1-2 (trans. Benedicta Ward in *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1975), 229-230.

on her body and endanger her life, then, “an intense pain suddenly struck her in the kidneys, and she lay for three hours as if she were dead.”⁵³² This reference to the pain in her kidneys is oddly specific and noteworthy. Modern scholars have noted that the monstrous, gruesome and often disturbingly lurid, accounts of the ailments suffered by figures such as Herod, Arius and Judas should be read as physiognomic, noting that they point to an insight into the character of that individual.⁵³³ Yet the account of Melania’s illness has not been read in the same manner. I contend that like those who wrote about Herod, Arius and Judas, the text employs both an ancient physiognomic understanding of the body alongside Greco-Roman and early Christian corporal understanding to signal a specific meaning, and that the attack on her kidneys works in conjunction with the presence of the “Ethiopian” demon. In this part of the chapter, I consider the ancient cultural understanding of the kidneys through an examination of the Hebrew Bible, the Greco-Roman medical corpus, and early Christian works and then draw out late antique constructions to demonstrate how the pain in Melania’s kidneys could have been understood by contemporary readers.

Kidneys in Medicine and Broader Culture

Modern commentators acknowledge that it is frequently at the nascency of pain that we become keenly aware of having a body.⁵³⁴ The kidneys however, unlike the heart or

⁵³² Gerontius, *The Life of Melania the Younger* 54 (trans White).

⁵³³ Papias, *Fragments* 4.2; *Cave of Treasures*, [trans. Budge], 218; Socrates, *Church History* I.38.7 [trans. Périchon and Maraval. For secondary reading on these passages see Candida R. Moss, “A Note on the Death of Judas in Papias,” *New Testament Studies* 65 (2019): 388-397; Ellen Muehlberger, “The Legend of Arius’ Death: Imagination, Space and Filth in Late Ancient Historiography,” *Past and Present* 227 (2015) 3-29; Jesse E. Robertson, *The Death of Judas: The Characterization of Judas Iscariot in Three Early Christian Accounts of his Death* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2012); Solevåg, *Negotiating the Disabled Body*, 117-131.

⁵³⁴ Drew Leder, *The Absent Body* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 3,92; Robert Murphy, *The Body Silent* (New York: Norton, 1990), 12.

brain for example are a part of the body that in the English speaking, western world we often only mention if we are aware of some form of pathology associated with them. However, sources demonstrate that the kidneys were referred to not only in the medical corpuses of the ancient world, but also in a broad assortment of literature and indicate both a medicalised understanding as well as more of an abstract application.

In the canonical New Testament, the sole reference to the kidneys appears in the *Book of Revelation*. In 2:18-29, John admonishes the church in Thyatira, condemning them for tolerating a so-called “prophet,” Jezebel, who misleads others into sexual immorality and eating of food sacrificed to idols (2:20). She had been encouraged to “repent of her immorality,” but refused to do so and so we are told that the Son of God says,

I am throwing her on a bed, and those who commit adultery with her I am throwing into great distress, unless they repent of her doings; and I will strike her children dead. And all the churches will know that I am the one who searches minds (νεφρούς) and hearts (καρδίας), and I will give to each of you as your works deserve. (Rev. 2.22-23).

The reference to the kidneys is found in the second part of verse 23. Rather than a literal translation of “hearts and kidneys” however, most modern translations and commentaries render the phrase as “hearts and minds.”⁵³⁵ The implicit purpose here, is “to differentiate [the] noble allegorical functions of the kidneys from their mundane physiologic function as excretory organs.”⁵³⁶ What this division of “noble” and “mundane” functions obscures, however, is the interconnectivity of medical and metaphorical thinking. While in modern

⁵³⁵ Metaphorical translations: NIV, NLT, ESV, NASB, NASB 1995, NASB 1977, ISV, NAB, NRSV. See David E. Aune, *Revelation 1-5* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 196; Brian K. Blount, *Revelation: A Commentary* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 61; G. K. Beale and David H. Campbell, *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2015), 64. A similar phenomenon is at work in the translation of the Hebrew Bible with the rare exception of explicitly sacrificial examples (Exod. 29:13 and Lev. 3:4).

⁵³⁶ Garabed Eknoyan “The Kidneys in the Bible: What Happened?” *J Am Soc Nephrol* 16 (2005): 3464-3471 (3470).

English, kidneys do not feature as part of our metaphorical vocabulary, in antiquity they were both medical functionaries and cultural touchpoints, infused with multi-layered and nuanced meanings. By examining how the kidneys were employed in ancient texts, I demonstrate that the kidneys had a medically informed figurative use that identified them as the specific site of sexual desire.

The final part of the warning in Revelation, following the violent threat is in the second clause of v23, translated in the NRSV as “And all the churches will know that I am the one who searches minds (νεφρούς) and hearts (καρδίας), and I will give to each of you as your works deserve.” Of all the commentaries on Rev. 2:23, only Ben Witherington acknowledges the more straightforward literal meaning of the Greek *nephros* (νεφρούς) which he writes “Means literally kidneys, which were seen as the seat of affections, much as we would use the term ‘heart.’ Whereas heart in the text has a sense closer to what we mean by mind – the rational faculty or intellect.”⁵³⁷ Scholarly consensus maintains that the reference is an allusion to the phrase in Jeremiah 17:10, “I the Lord test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to the fruit of their doings” (Jeremiah 17.10).⁵³⁸ Yet Jeremiah 17.10 is not the only reference to the kidneys in the Hebrew Bible, in fact, there are over thirty references to the “kidneys,” and whilst many are found in the Pentateuch dealing with sacrificial offering of animals, scholarly consensus is that the remaining references were used figuratively and metaphorically.⁵³⁹

⁵³⁷ Ben Witherington III, *Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 104-105.

⁵³⁸ Aune, *Revelation*, 207; Beale and Campbell, *Revelation*, 66; Gordon D. Fee, *Revelation* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2013), 41.

⁵³⁹ There are 11 references to the liver as part of the animal sacrifice, see Ex 29:12-13; 29:22; Lev 3:4; 3:10; 3:15; 4:9; 7:4; 8:16; 8:25; 9:10 and 9:19. Whilst there is some disparity over which viscera should be included in sacrificial rites, there seems a general consensus that sacrifice should include the kidneys and perirenal fat of an animal, possibly because the kidneys were seen as the locus of the animal’s force itself. (Giovanni Maio,

The kidneys were employed in the Hebrew Bible as metaphor grounded in psychosomatic anatomy to express a broad range of emotions such as joy, rage, desire, sorrow, and discontent.⁵⁴⁰ Emotions and ideas had a corporal origin which Laura Quick explains was because

There was no dualism of body and soul, but rather the “body”..., encoded in the entity of the person...In this context, the heart was particularly important as the core of conscience and thought. Understanding and receptivity derived from the ears, anger from the liver or nose. Joy was located in the kidneys, which could also index right and wrong modes of behaviour. More general terms with the semantic range of ‘innards’ or ‘guts’ were also used to index anger, distress or disgust...Thus the body itself was understood to be a sentient object, the seat of personality.⁵⁴¹

Mark Smith suggests that metaphorical language which utilises the internal organs to express emotions does so because that is where the emotion was thought to be physically experienced and demonstrates a lack of differentiation in the ancient world between physical sickness and emotional suffering.⁵⁴² However, the metaphorical use of the kidneys stretches further.

The location of the kidneys as particularly inaccessible internal organs meant that they were obscured from view. This concealed, innermost part of the human body was then understood as the place that housed the most secret and hidden parts of a human being, not just their emotions, but also their desires and place of moral discernment and could

“The Metaphorical and Mythical Use of the Kidney in Antiquity,” *Am. J. Nephrology* 19 (1999): 101-106 see also Mason D. Lancaster, “Metaphor Research and the Hebrew Bible,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 19: 235-285.

⁵⁴⁰ Rejoicing: Prov. 23:15-16; Rage: 1 Mac. 2:24; Desire: Job 19:27; Discontent: Ps. 73:21; Spiritual need and suffering: Job 16:13; Lam. 3:13.

⁵⁴¹ Laura Quick, “The Hidden Body as Literary Strategy in 4QWiles of the Wicked Woman (4Q184),” *Dead Sea Discoveries* 27 (2020): 234-256 (241-242).

⁵⁴² Mark S. Smith, “The Heart and Innards in Israelite Emotional Expressions: Notes from Anthropology and Psychobiology,” *JBL* 117 (1998): 427-436.

therefore be understood as the locus of human conscience. Giovanni Maio argues that defining the kidneys as ‘the seat of human emotion,’ is too limited, and instead they should be regarded as “the global seat of the most secret and inner portions of the human soul.”⁵⁴³ The kidneys are often represented alongside the heart.⁵⁴⁴ Eknoyan identifies this pairing as representing “the central essence of a person,” or whole personality.⁵⁴⁵ In this interpretation, the heart represents the upper cavity of the body “the seat of reason, of thought and deliberation,” and the kidneys the lower part of the body, and is associated with ‘the most inner stirrings of the emotional life.’⁵⁴⁶ This tandem association of heart and kidneys therefore alludes to the wholeness of both the intellectual and emotional nature of a human.

In this understanding, the heart and kidneys enclosed within them evidence of the central essence of a person, these hidden constituents of the human body could not be seen by anyone other than God and therefore, only God could know a person’s true feelings and thoughts. These ideas converge in the concept of God as the ‘examiner’ who could look at the heart and kidneys of a person to know their true nature, to evaluate their faith and therefore determine their fate. As a result, when faced with persecution or illness, the prophets and psalmists beseeched God to inspect their bodies, specifically, this combination of hearts and kidneys, to discern their righteousness in the hope that God himself would find them worthy and end their suffering.⁵⁴⁷ Scholars have understood Rev. 2.23 in the

⁵⁴³ Maio, “The Metaphorical and Mythical Use of the Kidney,” 104.

⁵⁴⁴ Most frequently with the heart first, either as an expression ‘heart and kidneys,’ or in consecutive clauses (Jer. 17:10; Ps 7:9; 73:21; Prov. 23:15-16. The kidneys come first in Jeremiah 11:20; 20:12; and Wisdom of Solomon 1:6. The kidneys appear on their own in 1 Mac. 2:24).

⁵⁴⁵ Eknoyan “The Kidneys in the Bible,” 3468.

⁵⁴⁶ Maio, “The Metaphorical and Mythical Use of the Kidney,” 104.

⁵⁴⁷ Psalm 7:8-11; 26:2; cf. Jer. 11:20; 17:9-10; 20:12.

same vein, notably that Christ has the power to examine their inner parts, to know their true self and then “Give to each of you as your works deserve” (Rev. 2.23).⁵⁴⁸

Ancient medical understanding of the kidneys and their functions can be gleaned through a variety of anatomical observations, descriptions, anecdotes of pathological characteristics and renderings of diagnoses and prognoses of urologic symptoms and renal diseases.⁵⁴⁹ Within these texts there is an explicit association of the kidneys with the excretion of urine and waste as we might expect, but also with the production of sperm, possibly a relationship that stems from an association of the emission of both urine and sperm from the penis. Consequently, when discussing the acceptability of urinating in public and the problematic consequences of delaying urination, the Babylonian Talmud reports that the rabbis taught that there are

Two channels...in the membrum of a human being, one of which discharges urine and the other semen, and the distance between them is no more than the peel of garlic. If then a person needs to ease himself, and one channel interferes with the other, he is found to be impotent (*B. Bekoroth* 44b [trans. Brauner]).

⁵⁴⁸ DeSilva describes 2:23 as a reminder to the Thyatirans that Christ “has an infallible ability to see both what we show and what we hide, even from ourselves” (David A. DeSilva, “Out of Our Minds? Appeals to Reason (Logos) in the Seven Oracles of Revelation 2-3,” *JSNT* 31 (2008): 123-155 [140]). Beale and Campbell link the phrase back to the image of Christ’s ‘eyes like a flame of fire’ in v. 18 because “Christ’s knowledge pierces to the core of our beings and is the basis for the judgment or reward which He renders, further indication of His divine nature and functions” (Beale and Campbell, *Revelation*, 66). Both Aune and Brian Blount also demonstrate that this clause makes an important Christological point critically linking Christ with God in his ability to both look into the core of a person as well as to pronounce future judgement (Aune, *Revelation*, 206; Blount, *Revelation*, 64). Similarly, Gordon Fee describes the “very high Christology,” assumed by this declaration, arguing that the ability to see into the hearts of people and know their true and deepest motives distinguished Yahweh from other gods of the time (Fee, *Revelation*, 23). Therefore, in Revelation, “all the churches” will know that it is Christ himself who now also “assumes this highest of divine characteristics” (Fee, *Revelation*, 41).

⁵⁴⁹ For an overview see Athanasios Diamandopoulos, Pavlos Goudas and Dimitrios Oreopoulos, “Thirty-six Hippocratic Aphorisms of Nephrologic Interest,” *Am. J. Kidney Diseases* 54 (2009): 143-153; Estée Dvorjetski, “The History of Nephrology in the Talmudic Corpus,” *Am. J. Nephrology* 22 (2002): 119-129 and Effie Poulakou and S.G. Marketos, “Renal Terminology from the Corpus Hippocraticum,” *Am. J. Nephrology* 22 (2002): 146-151.

Having incorrectly noted an absence of kidneys in birds and fish, Aristotle identified the kidney as a non-essential organ whose primary function was processing residue (ie by-products of digestion).⁵⁵⁰ In Aristotelian physiology, semen was concocted from the residues of the digestive process.⁵⁵¹ The testicles themselves were not integral to the formation of semen but acted merely like “stone weights which women hang on their looms,” anchoring these passages in place (Aristotle, *GA*. 717A 35-B1). The Hippocratic corpus featured a range of observations, characteristics, and diagnoses on a variety of renal pathologies. The kidneys themselves are described as being attached to cords from the spine and the artery. They are heart-shaped, symmetrical, coloured like apples, with two ducts that reach the top of the bladder and act as a filter for imbibed drink.⁵⁵² The kidneys were also part of the spermatoc production process: “When the semen once has arrived at this cord, it passes to the kidneys...From the kidneys it passes through the interior of the testes to the penis, not where the urine passes, but there is another adjoining passage for it” (Hippocrates, *Genit.* [Potter, LCL]). Through a process of ‘pangenesis,’ the most potent and fattiest parts of fluid from the whole body was thought to be carried through the spinal cord into the kidneys, and through the interior of the testes into the penis. Then through a process of heating and agitation, the liquid foams and is secreted (Hippocrates, *Genit.* 1 [Potter LCL]).

It is worth briefly noting that although these examples refer to the production and passage of semen in relation to the kidneys, and reflect only depictions of male bodies,

⁵⁵⁰ Aristotle, *Parts of Animals* III, 7, 670b and III 671b, 4-6.

⁵⁵¹ Aristotle, *GA*. 726a26-30 [Peck, LCL]). Aristotle thought that women’s bodies did not have sufficient heat for this process and therefore did not have the ability to turn this residue into semen, evidence of this was seen in menstrual discharge (Aristotle, *GA*. 726a30-728 [Peck, LCL]).

⁵⁵² Hippocrates, *De ossium natura* 1-4

ancient medical thought demonstrates the belief that both male and female produced semen.⁵⁵³ The Greek philosopher, Diogenes of Apollonia therefore describes the spermatic vessels in relation to both mens' and womens' bodies. He noted that there are thin vessels which extend "under the skin and through the flesh into the kidneys and terminate at the testicles in men and at the uterus in women... They are called 'spermatic'" (Diogenes of Apollonia, *Testimonia*, Part 2: D27 [Most, LCL]). Philo of Alexandria also described how the kidneys were related to the testicles and generative organs, they are "Situated beside them and give them neighbourly assistance and co-operate in promoting the easy passage of nature's seed" (Philo, *On the Special Laws* [Colson, LCL]).

Anatomical association of the kidneys with spermatic production created the impression that not only semen, but sexual desire too was located in the kidneys, evidence for which is ascertained from a variety of non-medical narrative texts. One such example can be found in the fifth century B.C.E. comedy *Lysistrata* by Aristophanes. The eponymous Lysistrata plans to affect an end to war by inciting the women of Athens to withhold sexual relations from their husbands to force them to negotiate peace. In one example, Cinesias arrived at the Acropolis, visibly aroused, looking for his wife Myrrhine. Myrrhine took him home and made him think that she was about to have sex with him. However, instead of doing so, she reminded him that he must vote for peace and runs off. The sexually aroused

⁵⁵³ Hippocrates, *Generation* 6 demonstrates the view that there is male and female sperm, although states that men must be conceived from the stronger sperm (ie the man's), Aristotle viewed menstrual discharge as 'impure' semen (Aristotle, GA. II 737a 28-30 [Peck, LCL]). Galen maintained that both men and women produced semen, but in keeping with the inferiority of women's bodies, distinguished male and female semen by attributing *pneuma*, the active principle in the creation of life, to the male seed only. (Galen. *On the UP*, 14.3.) On ancient understanding of sperm see Sophia M. Connell, *Aristotle on Female Animals: A Study of the Generation of Animals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 93-120 and Anna Rebecca Solevåg, *Birthing Salvation: Gender and Class in Early Christian Childbearing Discourse* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 72.

Cinesias declared that Myrrhine “pumped me up and dropped me flat!” to which the men’s leader commiserated saying

Yes, frightful agony, you wretch...
Sure I do feel for you, alas!
What kidney could bear it,
what soul, what testicles,
what loins, what crotch,
thus stretched on the rack
and never getting a morning lay?
(Aristophanes, *Lysistrata* 959-966 [Adapted from Henderson, LCL].

This assumed relationship between the kidney and testicles at times could confuse the reader as to which the author was actually referring. A point the grammarian Athenaeus of Naucratis (d.C3 CE.) explained when he described a reference in Philippides’ *Rejuvenation* which showed the “gluttony” (and perhaps sexual appetite) of the courtesan Gnathaena.

The scene occurred during a dinner party where

After all these dishes, (a slave) came carrying a large number of testicles. The other women pretended not to notice them, but the bloodthirsty Gnathaena laughed and said, “What nice kidneys, by the beloved Demeter!” And she grabbed two and gobbled them down, making everyone collapse on their backs in laughter.
(Athenaeus of Naucratis, *The Learned Banqueters* Book 4e 384e-f [Olson, LCL]).

By the third century CE Galen notably criticised those who regard the kidneys as spermatid ducts, contending rather that they acted solely as organs of urinary function. He emphasized the absurdity of viewing the kidneys as anything other, arguing that not only eminent physicians, but also “practically every butcher is aware of this.” (Galen, *De fac. Nat.* I.XIII [Brock LCL]). That Galen needed to defend this, however, suggests that there were other medical professionals who did see the kidneys as the site of spermatogenesis or even that this was a common, popular view. Writing at a similar time to Galen, Origen of Alexandria appears to be cognisant of this assumed relationship between the kidneys,

spermatic production, and sexual desire, and employs it in his exegesis of the psalms. The fact that Origen does so in a homily further implies that his audience would also have an appreciation of the kidneys in the same manner, and that the notion of the kidneys as having something to do with spermatic generation and sexual desire must have been a commonly held view. Origen's understanding of the kidneys in his exegesis is largely metaphorical, but in his *Homilies on the Psalms*, the spiritual kidneys have an analogous function to the corporal kidneys.⁵⁵⁴

So what happens in the kidneys of the soul is analogous to what happens in the kidneys of the body. The sperm comes together in the kidneys...In the same way, the fertile soul has the potentialities of spiritual seeds in its kidneys (Origen, *Hom. 2 on Ps.15.3* [Poulos]).

Just as the corporal kidneys were responsible for the production and generation of human seed, which had the latent potential to become new life, the analogous function of the 'kidneys of the soul' was as the production of 'spiritual seeds' which had the potential to become principles and ideas which also existed as potentials. Origen suggested that

When in the Scripture God examines the secret things, he examines the hearts and the kidneys. And perhaps, when he examines the kidneys, he also scrutinizes and investigates those seed-like thoughts, enclosed in the soul, which, previously, had not entered into the heart (Origen, *Hom 2 on Ps. 15. 2, 3* [Poulos]).

By the fourth century CE., bishop, Nemesisius of Emesa explicitly ascribed to the kidneys the function of stimulators of sexual desire, writing that they were "Purgers of the blood and excitors of sexual desire. For the veins which empty into the testicles [...] pass directly through the kidneys, deriving thence a certain pungency provocative of lust" (Nemesisius of Emesa, *On the Nature of Man* 28.45: P.G. 40:716A [Telfer]). In a similar fashion, Basil of Ancyra conjectured that the body, primed for sexual activity, was full of

⁵⁵⁴ Origen, *Hom. 2 on Ps. 15* section 5 [Alex Poulos]).

heat and that sexual desire itself “boils” in the kidneys, as they were the location of sexual energy.⁵⁵⁵ He further employed this concept in an extended metaphor which compared the ascetic life with the sacrifice of Moses, by describing how Moses was instructed to burn “The lobe of the liver, but not the whole liver, and the fat covering the stomach but not the stomach itself, and not only the fat of the kidney but the kidneys themselves with their fat” (Basil of Ancyra, *On virginity* 68 [Shaw]). Taking each of these elements, he described the lobe of the liver as the site of sinful desire which should be cut away. He recognised that the stomach itself was indispensable, because of the body’s need for nutrition, but that virgins, could “cut away the fat” by fasting. Associating the kidneys with sexual desire in married life, he postulated that as the kidneys could be “burnt,” they were not necessary for life, in the same manner, neither was desire for sexual intercourse, ‘for it is possible to live without the kidneys, that is without marriage, and from hence already in life to practice the angelic life of virginity’ (Basil of Ancyra, *De virg.* 68 [Shaw]). Essentially, any form of sexual desire be it “sinful” or in marriage was unnecessary and should be cauterized. Whilst Basil of Ancyra employed the kidneys metaphorically in this example, he drew on a medically informed, culturally understandable language which posited an internal body part as the location of sexual desire. In a broad range of literature from the early church, including ascetic treatises and early Christian narrative we find the concept of sexual desire, the passions and of sin as located in specific somatic parts or somatic systems alongside a motif of concern for the interior body.

⁵⁵⁵ Basil of Ancyra, *On the True Purity of Virginity* 61 cited in Teresa M. Shaw *The Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 90 (esp §32).

If the kidneys were understood as the locus of sexual desire, then impairment of kidney function or pain in the kidney demonstrates a suspension of function and the cessation of sexual desire and explains some oddly specific references to the kidneys in ascetic literature. In the *Life of Saint Pachomius*, Palaemon suffered kidney trouble brought on by “his practices of abstinence” (*Life of Saint Pachomius* 13).⁵⁵⁶ If we read this as an abstinence from sexual activity, then the reference to his kidney makes sense, implying that abstaining from sexual activity caused Palaemon to feel pain in his kidneys. In another source, Palladius’ account of John Chrysostom’s early career, the link between the impairment of the kidneys and the abrogation of sexual desire is more explicit. Whilst delineating Chrysostom’s early life and extreme asceticism, there is an underlying theme of Chrysostom’s battle with, and subsequent conquest over, sexual desire. Palladius reports that when Chrysostom, was a young man, “youth was hot within him,” so he left the city to live in the neighbouring mountains. There, he continued to battle “the rocks of pleasure” and so went to live a solitary life in a cave. However, “two years spent without lying down by night or day deadened his gastric organs, and the functions of the kidneys were impaired by the cold,” so he was forced to leave his cave and return to the church (Palladius, *Dialogue on the Life of St. John Chrysostom* 5 [Moore]). Reading Chrysostom’s impairment of kidney function as a response not to abstinence from food or drink (which is not mentioned) but rather as a triumphant defeat of bodily passions and sexual desire, repositions Chrysostom’s relinquishing of the ascetic life, which otherwise could be seen as a failure. Chrysostom’s youthful, hot body, bubbling with sexual desire and passion was problematic, and may have led him into sin, but in the wilderness, he conquered the passions to such an extent that the

⁵⁵⁶ “Soon after this the venerable Palaemon began to suffer from kidney trouble, brought on by his practices of abstinence, and his whole body began to suffer with a most debilitating illness.” (Abbot of Tabennisi, *Life of Saint Pachomius* 13 [trans. Benedict Baker]).

function of his kidneys, the site of sexual desire had been impaired. In this reading, Chrysostom's departure from the desert would not be understood as a failing, but rather as a particularly successful ascetic endeavour, as on returning to the "world," he had mastered the self-control needed to be an exemplary ascetic bishop.

Returning to the attack on Melania, having already established that the attack in the Latin version is from a racialized Ethiopian demon employed as a sign of sexual temptation, the demon further attacks a site synonymous in the ancient world with the perceived location of sexual desire. Like the account of Chrysostom, the pain in Melania's kidneys signaled an impairment and an ineffectuality of function. Sexual desire and corporal passion had thus been eradicated within her body, a conjecture that is confirmed on examination of how her body is described once "healed." This attack dries out the body and transforms her. Her healing is not a reversion to a previous state but rather she becomes masculinized and statuesque. This is a way of demonstrating her apatheia and the absence of passion in her body. The de-gendering and de-sexualization work hand in hand to transform her into an angelic body that prefigures the eschatological resurrected body. We hear echoes here of the cauterization of the body of the woman with the flow of Blood in the Synoptic tradition and the paralysis of Peter's Daughter in the Acts of Peter. I will demonstrate that like other depictions of early female ascetics, Melania's illness in the Latin version uses a commonly understood framework of Greco-Roman medical theories about the female body to say something to the audience about sexuality, concepts of sexual desire and gender and which further elucidate a late antique understanding of the resurrected body.

Drying Out

In the account, after the attack, Melania was rendered immobile, however she

Glorified God, and at once all the pain left her and the devil was thrown into confusion. Her feet, dry as wood, which she had been unable to move, recovered now that she was restored to health.....she, who had hardly been able to be carried in a litter; now walked unaided up the steps to the upper floor (Gerontius, *The Life of Melania the Younger* 55 [trans White]).⁵⁵⁷

This description of her feet being “as dry as wood,” is interesting, and by considering Greco-Roman medical theories alongside early Christian narratives, I will demonstrate how this drying up of her body can be read as an expression of infertility, of barrenness and as a body which had achieved a corporeal state of apatheia. After the attack on the locus of sexual desire, her body which was as if dead and dry, had become defeminised, no longer responsive to the sexual drive that defined femininity. In so doing, Melania was depicted as prefiguring the eschatological body.

In G. E. R. Lloyd’s analysis of Greek philosophy, Lloyd concluded that the Greeks associated “wet” with living and “dry” with the dead. With regards to human beings, “dead” body parts such as the fingernails could be described as dry, and the Greek tragedian Aesch says “(And) of the dead, in whom there is no moisture” (Aeschylus, Fragment 229 [trans. Sommerstein, LCL]). As the elderly moved closer towards death, it was thought that their bodies would become drier and so in Homer’s *Odyssey*, when Athena is about to turn

⁵⁵⁷ The phrase is present in both the Latin and Greek versions of the text. The Greek version provides the briefest reference, we are told that those around Melania were afraid to even touch her “since her foot was like dry wood.” Gerontius, *Life of Melania* 55 (trans Clark).

Odysseus into an old man, she tells him that she will “dry up” his fine skin.⁵⁵⁸ In Greco-Roman medical thought, the fundamental difference in male and female bodies lay, not solely in their external genitalia, but rather in their perceived internal processes, significantly in their relative heat and porosity.⁵⁵⁹

For Aristotle, menstruation was visible proof of women’s wetter bodies. In an inherently valued based judgement, Aristotle deduced that women’s deficient heat meant they were unable to heat blood to a level that could convert it into semen, unlike men. Aristotle thought that a process called concoction transformed food into blood through the agency of heat.⁵⁶⁰ With their greater heat, the male body was able to further concoct blood into semen, a process that the female body was unable to manage due to its colder nature. Women’s bodies therefore had an excess of blood which was expelled from their bodies as menstruation.⁵⁶¹ The excess of blood in women, secreted as menstrual blood, was for Aristotle, proof of women’s colder nature, but also meant that the female body was thought to be significantly wetter than that of a man.⁵⁶²

⁵⁵⁸ Hesiod, *Op.* 743; Plato, *Rep.* 387c and Homer, *Od.* xiii 392

⁵⁵⁹ Dean-Jones describes women’s bodies as defined in terms of their “blood-hydraulics” (Dean-Jones, *Women’s Bodies*, 225).

⁵⁶⁰ Aristotle, *Parts of Animals* II 650a4-14 (trans. Peck LCL 323:132-133.)

⁵⁶¹ This inability meant that women were considered infertile, naturally deformed males, whose bodies were inherently inferior Aristotle, *GA.* IV 775a5-21 (trans. Peck LCL 366:458-459 – 460-461.) Further, a boy actually resembles a woman in physique, and a woman is as it were an infertile male; the female, in fact, is female on account of inability of a sort, viz., it lacks the power to concoct semen out of the final state of the nourishment (this is either blood, or its counterpart in bloodless animals) because of the coldness of its nature. Aristotle, *GA.* 728a18-22 (trans. Peck LCL 366:102-103.)

⁵⁶² Aristotle wrote “Further, a boy actually resembles a woman in physique, and a woman is as it were an infertile male; the female, in fact, is female on account of inability of a sort, viz., it lacks the power to concoct semen out of the final state of the nourishment (this is either blood, or its counterpart in bloodless animals) because of the coldness of its nature. Thus, just as lack of concoction produces in the bowels diarrhoea, so in the blood-vessels it produces discharges of blood of various sorts, and especially the menstrual discharge (which has to be classed as a discharge of blood, though it is a natural discharge, and the rest are morbid ones)” (Aristotle, *GA.* 728a18-22 (trans. A. L. Peck LCL 366:102-103.)

For the Hippocratics, the human body was essentially a “fluid entity,” with women’s bodies being wet and spongy compared to men’s harder and drier bodies.⁵⁶³ “A woman’s flesh is more spongelike and softer than a man’s: since this is so, the woman’s body draws moisture both with more speed and in greater quantity from the belly than does the body of a man” (Hippocrates, *Diseases of Women* 1.1 [trans Hanson]).⁵⁶⁴ As a result of having a more sedentary lifestyle combined with their spongy, porous flesh, women had a surplus of blood which needed to be expelled as menstrual blood. Due to their natural deficiency of heat and their moist, porous bodies, women were prone to illness and disease and needed to be closely monitored.

The womb was considered particularly problematic as it was thought to be a dry organ, which if it became too dry could become displaced. The solution was thought invariably to recommend sexual intercourse to maintain women’s health as sexual intercourse and the resulting ejaculation of sperm or the liquid released from a woman’s body during sex which then “descends into her womb and the womb becomes moist,” was what women “needed” to maintain their health.

If women have intercourse, they are more healthy; if they don’t they are less healthy. This is because the womb becomes moist in intercourse and not dry; when a womb is drier than it should be, it often suffers violent dislocation” (Hippocrates, *Generating Seed* [trans. Hanson 582-583]).⁵⁶⁵

⁵⁶³See Hippoc., *Nat. Puer.*; Flemming, *Medicine and the Making of Roman Women*, 95; Dean-Jones, *Women’s Bodies*, 55-60.

⁵⁶⁴ They use the analogy here to explain this principle whereby if one was to hold flocks of wool and a woven carpet over water for two days and nights, and then weighed them, the wool would be heavier than the carpet because the wool is more porous and soft and will absorb a greater amount of moisture. The carpet being denser and more compact will absorb less moisture. The female body is like the wool, being more porous and will therefore draw more moisture into her body than a man. As her body is softer, her body fills with blood and unless the blood can be discharged from her body, she will become unwell and feel pain.

⁵⁶⁵ See also Hippocrates, *Nature of the Child* 4 (trans Paul Potter LCL 520:40-41.)

Therefore, for the Hippocratics, if the womb did not receive the optimal amount of moisture, it would move within the body seeking moisture and subsequently becoming problematic. Young girls whose wombs had never been irrigated with semen were therefore at great risk and should be married and engage in sexual activity as soon as their first menstrual period to keep them healthy.⁵⁶⁶ Further, the body of the older widow who no longer had sex and whose body, as it got older, was thought to be becoming drier was at significant risk.

The pronatalistic work of these ancient medical writers endeavoured to guard and maintain the fertility of women. Interestingly, modern surveys of disabilities and impairments that women present with in biblical literature demonstrate that infertility and barrenness are the most frequent disabilities in Genesis.⁵⁶⁷ In the New Testament, the miraculous pregnancy of Elisabeth and the stories of the women with the flow of blood and Jarius' daughter all reflect a concern and interest in women's reproductive health. In the post-biblical era, Christian writers however demonstrated not a concern for maintaining female fertility, but rather the maintenance and preservation of virginity and chastity. Early Christian writers concerned with sexual renunciation employed these same somatic conceptions. Through cooling and drying regimes, it was thought that the ascetic could both cool and dry out the body to such an extent that the generative fluids, semen in particular,

⁵⁶⁶ Women who have not had children can become ill due to their menses more seriously and sooner than a woman who has given birth (Hippocrates, *Diseases of Women* 1.1 (trans. Hanson.) Further, women who are pregnant do not become ill because of their menses, whereas women who are not pregnant, if they do not menstruate, can become ill (*Nature of the Child* 4 (trans Paul Potter LCL).)

⁵⁶⁷ Barrenness is the most common disability for women in Genesis a pattern which is continued in the New Testament (Rebecca Raphael, *Biblical Corpora: Representations of Disability in Hebrew Biblical Literature* (New York: T & T Clark, 2008). See also Anna Rebecca Solevåg, "Hysterical Women? Gender and Disability in Early Christian Narrative," in Christian Laes (ed.) *Disability in Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 2017), 315-327. Candida R. Moss and Joel S. Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility: Biblical Perspectives on Procreation and Childlessness* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

would either dry up or not be produced in the first place. The rationale therefore was that sexual desire, as a physical process could be controlled and even eliminated. Whilst the body needed to be preserved intact for judgement, individual body parts and corporeal functions could be “liberated from their offices” and so for example, Tertullian writes that “even in the present life there may be cessations of their office for our stomachs and our generative organs” (Tertullian, *On Resurrection LX* [Menziez, ANF]). This cessation of somatic function acted as a prefiguration of the eschatological body.

See here faint outlines of our future strength! We even, as we may be able, excuse our mouths from food, and withdraw our sexes from union. How many voluntary eunuchs are there! How many virgins espoused to Christ! How many, both of men and women, whom nature has made sterile, with a structure which cannot procreate! Now, if even here on earth both the functions and the pleasures of our members may be suspended, with an intermission which, like the dispensation itself, can only be a temporary one (Tertullian, *On Resurrection LX* [Menziez, ANF]).

Cessation of somatic physical processes, particularly those of the reproductive system can be found in the Synoptic tradition with the healing of the woman with flow of blood and in the apocryphal acts with the representation of the paralysis of Peter’s daughter in the Coptic fragment of the *Acts of Peter*.⁵⁶⁸

Later ascetic theorists demonstrated more explicitly that sexual desire, as a physiological process could be controlled and even eliminated by employing cooling and drying regimes, dietary abstinence, and careful food choices to affect the generative fluids and processes of the body, or the function of the reproductive organs themselves.⁵⁶⁹

⁵⁶⁸ See Meghan Henning, “Paralysis and Sexuality in Medical Literature and the Acts of Peter,” *JLA* 8 (2015): 306-321; Candida R. Moss, “The Man with the Flow of Power: Porous Bodies in Mark 5:25-34), 507-519; Candida R. Moss and Joel S. Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility*, 192-196; Anna Rebecca Solevåg, “Hysterical Women,” 315-327.

⁵⁶⁹ David Brakke, “The Problematization of Nocturnal Emissions in Early Christian Syria, Egypt and Gaul,” *J ECS* (1995): 419-460; Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*; Teresa M. Shaw, *The Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998).

Through careful management, the bubbling, boiling heat of the body could be extinguished and the body's natural passions, and the irksome itch of sexual desire could be managed. In the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, we are told that "The monk raises his soul from the depths by drying out his body. Fasting dries up the source of pleasure" (*Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Pelagius and John collection, IV, 47 [trans. Rouselle, 172]). John Cassian explained that any excess of liquid in the body must be eliminated in order to suppress sexual arousal because

The quantity of urine which gathers constantly while we are asleep, overfilling the bladder, arouses the relaxed members of eunuchs and children as well as grown men....one must eradicate this excess even to the point of idle and parched members every day, this physical movement which you consider inevitable becomes rarer and also weaker (John Cassian, *Conferences* XII.7, 9 and 11 [trans. Rouselle, 173]).

Whilst evidence of male sexual desire could be found in the presence of nocturnal emissions, the moist, soft, fertile, and sexual female body, dried out and hardened by the ascetic life, was the external proof of women's move towards the desired sexless, non-generative and barren ascetic body.

Ascetic theorists such as Basil of Ancyra and Jerome advise on how to achieve this drying up through diet linked to the Galenic framework of the four qualities of moisture, dryness, heat and cold. Jerome advised Eustochium that "When cloyed the mind immediately grows sluggish, and when the ground is watered it puts forth the thorns of lust" (Jerome, *Epistle* 22.17 [trans. W. H. Fremantle, G. Lewis and W. G. Martley NPNF 2/6.]). He further observed that after eating a meal, the effect of a full stomach may mean that one could be "excited by the alluring train of sensual desires." Therefore, the person who mortified their body "Is not afraid to say: 'I have become like a bottle in the frost. Whatever there was in me of the moisture of lust has been dried out of me'" (Jerome, *Epistle* 22.17

[trans. Fremantle, Lewis and Martley NPNF 2/6]). This somatic drying out represented a repression of the sexual humors and therefore sexual desire in both the female and male body. The female body that was considered moister than that of the male obviously therefore had to work harder to do this.

In Christian hagiography, from the late-fifth to seventh century, we find brief, but informative mentions of accomplished female ascetics, often those who are living as transvestite monks, as dry, hard and death-like. These descriptions act to both de-feminise and de-sexualise their protagonist. Defeminization of the female saints occurs on different levels in these texts, cutting their hair and donning male clothing, and living the extreme ascetic life, meant that they were frequently recognised by their peers as “eunuchs.” However, the physicality of their defeminization is fascinating. Now acknowledged by their peers as masculine, externally and possibly superficially, they can pass as a man. Their physical transformation however occurs both literally and figuratively. The body of the female, modified by ascetic living is frequently described in terms of dryness, hardening, and death. Emaciated by fasting, Pelagia was unrecognisable, with eyes that had sunk into her face “like a great pit.”⁵⁷⁰ Mary of Egypt’s body was described as “black as if scorched by the fierce heat of the sun,”⁵⁷¹ and having lived for years in a swamp infested with mosquitos, Apollinaria’s body is “like the shell of a tortoise,” hard, dry and rough.⁵⁷² Whilst these briefest descriptions point to the drying out and “masculinising” of the female saint’s body, in the legend of Hilaria / Hilarion, the text is much more explicit, her dryness is specifically linked to her breasts and menstruation. Hilaria, a daughter of the Byzantine emperor Zeno

⁵⁷⁰ Deacon James, *The Life of Saint Pelagia the Harlot* XIV (trans. Benedicta Ward, 74.)

⁵⁷¹ Sophronius, *The Life of St. Mary of Egypt*, VII (trans. Benedicta Ward, 41.)

⁵⁷² *Vita Apollinariae* (trans. Teresa M. Shaw, 245.)

desired to enter a monastery. She ran away and dressed as a man she was permitted entrance to the monastery of Apa Pambo. Nine years later,

When they saw the girl beardless amongst the brethren, they called her Hilarion the eunuch, for there were many men in such a condition. Her breasts were not like the breasts of other women, on account of her ascetic practices they were withered; and she was not subjected to the illness of women, for God had ordained it in this way ("The Legend of Hilaria: The Story of the Two Daughters of King Zeno," [trans. A. J. Wensinck], 9).

In the Syriac version of the text, whilst washing her corpse, the monks realise that Hilaria is a woman and Aba Daniel perceived that her breasts were "like two withered leaves."⁵⁷³

In the story of the transvestite monks, not only are they performing masculinity, but in the drying, shrivelling and hardening of the feminine body, their somatic nature has *become* more like that of a man, so that the ascetics' dry, shrivelled and barren body was unrecognisably feminine.⁵⁷⁴ By drying up her body, she was no longer reproductive, experiencing no menstruation and her breast shrivelled. Both her generative procreative nature and also her feminine sexuality have been fully repressed.⁵⁷⁵ As Teresa Shaw notes

If we consider the protological association of sexuality, death, and the fall with the female, or with gender differentiation and hierarchy, then for a female ascetic to mortify her body to the point of unrecognised femaleness, even to the point of sterility, is truly a return to paradise.⁵⁷⁶

⁵⁷³ "The Story of the Holy Hilaria, the Daughter of King Zeno," (Syriac text) (trans. A. J. Wensinck in *Legends of Eastern saint; Chiefly from Syriac Sources* (Leyden: Brill, 1913), XXVIII.

⁵⁷⁴ On gender performativity see Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* 40 (1988): 519-31 and Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

⁵⁷⁵ Shaw argues that whilst references to amenorrhea and withered breasts in ascetic literature alone do not constitute enough evidence in themselves to point to a trend in late ancient ascetic physiology, nevertheless, given all the evidence, Shaw argues that amenorrhea must have been a recognised phenomenon among the most austere female ascetics, understood in a similar vein as the attempt by male ascetics to dry out the body to stop nocturnal emissions as in the writings of John Cassian. Both then would be an external demonstration that the body was no longer subject to sexual impulses (Teresa M. Shaw, *The Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998 247).

⁵⁷⁶ Shaw, *Burden*, 246.

In this manner, the imperfect, problematic female body had been overcome, in its non-generative state, dry state, it has moved away from the feminine and closer to the masculine. She is no longer procreative nor subject (or the cause of) to sexual desire.⁵⁷⁷

In Basil of Ancyra's thinking the drying out of the female body linked back to the associations of Greek philosophy as previously noted which posited correlations between dryness and death. The metaphorical virginal body was therefore an "unfeeling sculpture" and "a dead stump," her body had achieved *apatheia*, an absence of passion, her body is "dead".⁵⁷⁸ Therefore, she stands as "an excellent sculpture of God, unmoved towards every mental image and every touch" (Basil of Ancyra, *De virg.* 58 [trans Shaw]). Basil's female virgin however, cannot quite overcome her problematic female body, the ascetic life and any activity she undertakes to affect the transformation of her body are only useful to a point. In this world, she was still "lame in that equality because of the garment of the female [body]" (Basil of Ancyra, *De virg* 51 [trans Shaw]).

Melania too had become lame, encumbered by her female body and the assault of the demon on her body, yet because of her prayer and faith, like Basil's virgin, she demonstrates through her illness that she has risen above her femininity. This passage from Basil's *On Virginity* is particularly poignant when we consider the dryness of Melania's foot. Basil described the angelic condition of the virgin,

In this angelic condition, the virgin is able to touch the servants of the bridegroom—as Christ washed the feet of his disciples and as Mary kissed the Lord's feet—because she touches with dead hands, and the bodies she touches are also dead to

⁵⁷⁷ She is equivalent in many respects to the eunuch that she is mistaken for, on the gender continuum, she is no longer feminine, but neither is she masculine.

⁵⁷⁸ Basil of Ancyra, *De virg.* 51 and 66 (trans Shaw); see also 53; and 64.

pleasure. The physical touches therefore do not incite images and fantasies in the soul, and the flames of passion remain cold (Basil of Ancyra, *De virg* 52 [trans Shaw]).

The virgin therefore is “like an image of God,” who stands before others

As an excellent sculpture of God, unmoved towards every mental image and every touch, with her soul thus protected from corrupting influences creeping in through the senses. The virgin therefore earns the honors promised (in Isaiah 56:4–5) to the eunuchs who “keep the Lord’s sabbath,” for her very body and passionless soul represent a “complete day of rest” (Basil of Ancyra, *De virg* 58 [trans Shaw]).

In the same way, Melania’s somatic response to the Ethiopian demon’s sexualised attack directed at the very site of sexual desire is one of desiccation, hardening, a deadening of the passions. Her feminine nature as a generative, sexual being overcome. She is passionless and statuesque, a model of *apatheia*. Melania was “healed,” overcoming her “lameness,” through her chastity and *apatheia*. Her body however does not return to its previous state, but has changed somehow and she is able to join the “same rank as men,” and there is a subtle shift in how she is represented.

Melania had attained spiritual perfection through her *apatheia*, in the Greek text this is explicitly referred to, and she is referred to as ““advancing toward perfection,” and at her death, she was received into heaven by the angels who “received her with joy, for in her corruptible body, she had imitated their lack of passion [*apatheia*]” Gerontius, *Life of Melania* 20 and 70 [trans Clark]). In the Latin text, this explicit reference to *apatheia* is absent, and she is praised instead by the angels “because they could see in her a reflection of their own way of life, which she lived to perfection while she was still on earth” (Gerontius, *The Life of Melania the Younger* 70 [trans White]).⁵⁷⁹ In both versions though,

⁵⁷⁹ On *apatheia* and spiritual perfection and the links to the Origenist and Pelagian Controversy see Susanna Drake, “Friends and Heretics,” in *Melania: Early Christianity Through the Life of One Family* ed. Catherine Michael Chin and Caroline T. Schroeder (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017), 175–177.

she has attained a level of perfection on earth.⁵⁸⁰ Confirming this are references which again, are only found in the Latin version. After the attack, Melania's body does not return to its previous state, but changes somehow and she joins the "same rank as men," and there is a subtle shift in how she is represented. After Volusian's death, Melania began the long and arduous trip back to Jerusalem. In this section, the author repeatedly compares Melania to the men she is travelling with, in each case emphasising her superior "masculinity." As the author notes, this is because "Melania did not have the worries usually experienced by women because of their fragility of their sex, for her faith gave her strength" (Gerontius, *The Life of Melania the Younger* 56 [trans White]). Unlike the men, despite the hardships of the journey, she refused to rest or to stop her usual fasting, the men however, "Whom you might assume were stronger because of our sex and nature, were shattered by the hardships of the journey."⁵⁸¹ When the group arrived at a mountain called Modicus, the severe weather impeded their journey and meant that their animals were unable to cross. This final section is worth quoting in full as it highlights both her "masculinity" as well as her achieved state of *apatheia*.

So Melania dismounted and set off on foot just as if she were a man – you had to see it to believe it! We did not want to allow her to walk, saying "Get up on your mule! You are exhausted by too much fasting and your delicate limbs cannot bear the hardships of the journey." I am telling the truth when I say that she refused to listen to anyone and she arrived in Malagurdolo with such masculine determination, while continuing talking to us about scriptural matters, that we were all amazed to find we were weaker than she and that our faces were frozen by the extreme cold, while she felt absolutely nothing.⁵⁸²

⁵⁸⁰ Compare this to Gregory of Nyssa's description of his sister Macrina in the *Life of Saint Macrina* in which she demonstrates *apatheia* at the unexpected death of her brother Naucratis and in her response to her illness which preceded her death. Macrina had advanced in her control of the passions to such an extent that she had become an angel in human form, just as the women who were part of her ascetic community had overcome their passions, achieved *apatheia* to such an extent that these virgins had risen above their human and feminine nature that they and created an angelic-like life on earth.

⁵⁸¹ Gerontius, *The Life of Melania the Younger* 56 (trans White).

⁵⁸² Gerontius, *The Life of Melania the Younger* 56 (trans White).

As a result of the attack on her body, Melania had attained spiritual perfection through her *apatheia*, and she is praised at her death by the angels “because they could see in her a reflection of their own way of life, which she lived to perfection while she was still on earth” (Gerontius, *The Life of Melania the Younger* 70 [trans White]).⁵⁸³

Textual evidence from this period depicts an eschatological interpretation of virginity in which the virgins body parallels that of the heavenly angelic body in a proleptic actualization of the angelic life.⁵⁸⁴ Having originally been created in the image of God, humankind had fallen “by dragging the soul toward passionate desire” (Basil of Caesarea, *Sermones ascetici* 1.1. [trans Shaw, 196]).⁵⁸⁵ Resisting the pull of that desire by attaining a passionless state was key to inaugurate a return to the Edenic, angelic state. In response to the devil’s attack, Melania’s body had become passionless, sexless and barren, beginning to function on earth as it would after the resurrection. Thus, the desexualising, drying up of the female body, acted on two levels. In the current age, it demonstrated the cessation of the generative, sexual female body and marked a return to the barren, sexless Edenic state, whilst simultaneously acted as a foreshadowing of the somatic eschatological body.

⁵⁸³ On *apatheia* and spiritual perfection and the links to the Origenist and Pelagian Controversy see Susanna Drake, “Friends and Heretics,” in *Melania: Early Christianity Through the Life of One Family* ed Catherine M Chin and Caroline T. Schroeder (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017), 175-177. Compare this to Gregory of Nyssa’s description of his sister Macrina in the *Life of Saint Macrina* in which she demonstrates *apatheia* at the unexpected death of her brother Naucratis and in her response to her illness which preceded her death. Macrina had advanced in her control of the passions to such an extent that she had become an angel in human form, just as the women who were part of her ascetic community had overcome their passions, achieved *apatheia* to such an extent that these virgins had risen above their human and feminine nature that they and created an angelic-like life on earth.

⁵⁸⁴ See Turid Karlsen Seim, *The Double Message, Patterns of Gender in Luke-Acts* (London: T & T Clark, 1990), 217-218. As Gregory of Nyssa wrote, “The life of virginity seems to be an actual representation of the blessedness in the world to come, showing as it does in itself so many signs of the presence of those expected blessings which are reserved for us there” (Gregory of Nyssa, *On virginity* 13 [trans. William Moore and Henry Austin Wilson NPNF 2/5]).

⁵⁸⁵ On Basil of Caesarea, asceticism and the return to paradise see Shaw, *Burden*, 196-198.

Conclusion

As Candida Moss and Joel Baden observe, “The barrenness of the resurrected body was a fundamental tenet of proto-orthodox and Latin interpretations of the resurrected life.”⁵⁸⁶ But if the life of chastity and virginity was a representation of the world to come, then how could the Christian writer demonstrate this? How could ascetic writers demonstrate that the female ascetic had already reached the angelic life on earth? In the Latin version of the *Life*, Melania’s illness does just this, in attacking her kidneys, the Ethiopian demon affects a change in Melania internally, her pain signalling an impairment and an ineffectuality of the locus of sexual desire, which then dried her body leaving her passionless and “feeling absolutely nothing.” It thus defends a non-generative, non-sexual heavenly ideal whilst maintaining a material continuity, allowing for an intactness of the body at the resurrection, and eliminating the thorny issue debated by early Christian theologians of the problematic quandary of the presence (or lack of) genitals in the eschaton. Melania’s illness in the Latin text should therefore be read in the same vein as the woman with the flow of blood in the Synoptics and the account of Peter’s daughter in the *Acts of Peter* which depict illness and internal changes within the female body which reflect not only contemporary corporeal, social and theological understandings of the female body but were also entrenched in theological, doctrinal and social notions of the resurrected body.

For early Christian writers it was necessary to demonstrate a lack of function of the reproductive systems, digestive systems or organs of the internal body, parts that could lead us to sin. Thus, the internal body, its organs and its processes became a central concern

⁵⁸⁶ Candida R. Moss, and Joel S. Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility: Biblical Perspectives on Procreation and Childlessness*, Princeton University Press, 2015, 227.

both for the current times as well as for the future eschatological times. The two were directly interconnected. As modern scholars have demonstrated, many stories of women in early Christianity share cognate themes, addressing the subject of sexual renunciation and the “challenge” of the female body or the sexual body more broadly. It is therefore not implausible to consider Melania’s illness in the same vein. Melania’s immobility and somatic desiccation can be read as an expression of infertility, of barrenness and as a body which had achieved a corporeal state of *apatheia*. Like other texts of the same period, it draws on a culturally established, medicalised understanding of the functionality of the body’s organs, parts, and somatic processes. The importance of the inner body, its parts, processes, and functionality would become a central tenant to theological, doctrinal, and social notions of both the living as well as the resurrected body, as well as to ascetic practice and literary representation. In subsequent centuries these corporal representations develop into more explicit and graphic externalised changes to the bodies of the female saints in the form of the later hagiographical topos which depicts the external obliteration of the feminine body to signal the internal changes which have occurred.

Whilst I have focused primarily on the Latin version of the narrative, the two versions of this hagiographic narrative demonstrate early Christian meaning making and the different ways early Christians employed the body, particularly the female body. The two versions of the *Life of Melania* demonstrate how bodies could be exploited to make theological, doctrinal and social points. By examining the depictions of Melania’s somatic experience, I have demonstrated that key issues for the church: identify formation, establishment and maintenance of communal boundaries and key theological debates such as the nature of the resurrected body were played out through the suffering female body.

CHAPTER VI: “WAIT FOR ME UNTIL I COME AND DO NOT GRIEVE...WE WILL BE ONE WHEN WE ARE RESURRECTED”: SIMEON’S FEET, BECOMING FEMALE AND THE DESEXUALISATION OF SAINTS IN LATE ANTIQUITY.

In this chapter I continue to study the suffering female body, but from a very different perspective, through the life of a male saint. From the village of Sisa in modern-day Syria, the ascetic Simeon the Stylite (c.390-459 CE), spent 47 years atop a pillar longing “to soar to heaven and leave this earthly sojourn.”⁵⁸⁷ In a “new” and “strange” spectacle worthy of inclusion in the unique and bizarre exploits of his biblical precursors, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Isaiah, Simeon stood, performing miraculous healings in imitation of Christ.⁵⁸⁸ However, the uniqueness of Simeon’s activity, alongside the ensuing fame has sometimes eclipsed the corporeal focus of events recounted in his hagiographic *Lives*. There are multiple accounts of Simeon’s life, dating from the early fifth to late sixth century, and in all the accounts, Simeon’s wounded, violable and afflicted body is central. Peter Brown’s observation that the life of the holy man is “marked by so many histrionic feats of self-mortification” is

⁵⁸⁷ Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *The Life of Saint Simeon Stylites* (trans. Robert Doran in *The Lives of Simeon Stylites* (Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1992), 75. In Antonius, *The Life and Daily Mode of Living of the Blessed Simeon the Stylite* 28, he gives the figure of 47 years (Antonius, *The Life and Daily Mode of Living of the Blessed Simeon the Stylite* 28 (trans. Robert Doran) in Doran, *Lives of Simeon Stylites* (Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1992), 97. On dating events and activities in Simeon’s life see Doran, *Lives of Simeon Stylites*, 16-17.

⁵⁸⁸ Theodoret, *The Life of Saint Simeon Stylites* 12 (trans. Robert Doran), 111 and Antonius, *The Life of the Blessed Simeon the Stylite* 13 (trans. Robert Doran).

particularly true in the accounts of Simeon's life.⁵⁸⁹ In this chapter, I examine Theodoret of Cyrrhus' depiction of Simeon's self-mortification to argue that Simeon's suffering body is presented in female terms and that Simeon's self-mortification was an act of self-castration which degendered and emasculated the stylite.

Narrative representations of women "becoming male" are widespread in the literature of the early church and late antique period. However, rather than "becoming male", in Simeon Stylite's suffering body, we find a desexualisation and de-gendering of the *male*, employing a gender fluidity which usually characterises accounts of female saints. In Theodoret's fifth-century hagiography, Simeon's self-inflicted corporal mortification resulted in a grievous wound, the aftermath of which is depicted as emasculating and unmanning.⁵⁹⁰ By situating this account within Greco-Roman and early Christian literature, I demonstrate that Simeon's self-wounding, and the resulting grievous wound is deliberately suggestive of castration. This self-inflicted castration effectuates a de-gendering and desexualisation of Simeon in line with early Christian eschatology, soteriology and understanding of gender. In so doing he models the gender ambiguity and non-reproductive ideal suggested in Jesus' exhortation about making oneself a eunuch for the kingdom of heaven.⁵⁹¹ It also resonates with early Christian writings which viewed the cessation of somatic function and abrogation of gender as a prefiguration of the eschatological body.

⁵⁸⁹ Peter Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971): 80-101 (91).

⁵⁹⁰ Theodoret of Cyrrhus. *A History of the Monks of Syria XXVI.5* (trans. by R. M. Price, in *A History of the Monks of Syria* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1985), 162.

⁵⁹¹ Matthew 19:11-12.

Further I focus on the later account of Simeon's wounded foot, demonstrating the euphemistic use of the "foot" to represent the genitals in ancient Jewish, Near Eastern and Greco-Roman literature, and which was employed both as a symbol of eroticism and sexuality, and impotence and castration. I show that Simeon's afflicted foot is therefore an extension of his self-castration. The destruction of Simeon's foot/genitals works in the same vein as the accounts of female saints whose bodies are "made male," both are corporeal metamorphoses which demonstrate an element of perceived holiness; the non-reproductive and degendered corporal status. Both the account of Simeon's self-mortification and Simeon's fetid foot represent an attempt to "unman" Simeon, to demonstrate his non-reproductive and degendered status. Like the examples of female saints "becoming male," in Simeon's case we find a "becoming unmale," demonstrating a gender ambiguity and desexualisation which both draws on early Christian literature on the abrogation of gender and representation of eunuchs as well as Greco-Roman concepts of masculinity.⁵⁹² In these vignettes, Simeon's "becoming unmale" is a physical, temporal prefiguration of the eschatological body.

With this understanding in mind, I turn to a later account, that of Jacob of Serug's (449-521 CE.) *Homily on Simeon the Stylite* which depicts Simeon amputating his own foot. I argue that Jacob combined the two incidents found in Theodoret's version of the *Life of Simeon*, and, using the euphemistic term "foot" his Simeon substantiates a literal understanding of the Synoptic tradition in which we find the exhortation to rid ourselves of specific body parts which cause us to sin. It is also congruous with depictions found in

⁵⁹² I have deliberately chosen the term "becoming unmale" rather than opting for "becoming female" to demonstrate a fluidity of gender, a move away from being "male" towards a gender ambiguity and neutrality.

apocryphal and hagiographic literature in which individual body parts and corporeal functions are cauterised or excised in the prophylactic prevention of sin.⁵⁹³ Simeon removes the locus of sexual sin thus desexualising and de-gendering his body. Furthermore, Jacob's corporal rendering resonates with ideas found in early Christian writings which viewed the cessation of somatic reproductive function as a foreshadowing of the eschatological, angelic body.

Whilst much has been written on female saints "becoming male," little has been said about how male saints could also be degendered. Work on literary accounts of female saints in particular has demonstrated that ancient writers drew on traditional aspects of Greco-Roman gender performance, only to subvert them.⁵⁹⁴ In examining these accounts of Simeon's body, I aim to demonstrate not only the complexities of gender in the ancient world, but also to show that hagiographic representation drew on existing models of chastity and gender ambiguity to depict a complex portrait of a male saint as degendered, emasculated and thus holy.

Theodoret's *Historia Religiosa*

Having previously written a history of the Church, formulated as a continuation of Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*, Theodoret of Cyrrhus turned his attention to the ascetics of Syria, compiling the *Religious History*. This hagiographic narrative written c.440, was an account of "excellent men, the athletes of virtue," and features accounts of around thirty ascetics

⁵⁹³ Matt. 18:6-8; Mark 9:42-45; Luke 17.1-4.

⁵⁹⁴ Coon, *Sacred Fictions*, xviii.

divided chronologically and by gender.⁵⁹⁵ According to Theodoret, his aim was to record in plain facts, “the life of those alone who have appeared like stars in the east and reached the ends of the world with their rays.”⁵⁹⁶ Theodoret determines that he recorded these narratives in order that these ascetics should not be forgotten “a device against oblivion and an aid to memory.”⁵⁹⁷ Whilst its translator R. M. Price was somewhat scathing in his description of the *Religious History*, describing it as

Magnificent as a series of stories, but feeble as a series of portraits...it is the same ideal of saintliness that is reiterated again and again; and monotony is accentuated by the tone of panegyric, with its rigorous refusal to attribute to any of the holy men defects or limitations.⁵⁹⁸

the vignettes Theodoret narrates give a fascinating and vivid depiction of Syrian ascetics in which corporeality and spirituality go hand in hand.

Theodoret assures his audience that despite emulating “bodiless beings,” these ascetics *were* human beings, their nature “mortal and full of innumerable passions,” but they had attracted divine grace through their resolve, and

Bore nobly the revolt of the passions and were steadfast in shaking off the showers of the devil’s darts. Repressing the body and subduing it, to use the apostolic phrase, they soothed the inflammation of the irascible part and compelled the madness of the desires to be at rest (Theodoret, *History of the Monks* Prologue 5 [trans. Price])

⁵⁹⁵ Theodoret, *History of the Monks* Prologue 1 (trans. Price), 3. R. M. Price provides a *terminus post quem* for the *Religious History* of 437 CE and a reference by Theodoret himself in a letter dating from 448 (epistle 82) to the text provides a *terminus ante quem* of 448. Scholars frequently use either 440 CE or 444 CE as date of composition. See R. M. Price, *A History of the Monks of Syria by Theodoret of Cyrrhus* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1985) xiv-xv for a detailed account of reasons for differing dating. Theodoret orders the ascetics starting with men who were already dead at the time he was writing (to ch. 20), following this with male ascetics who were still alive (chs. 21-28) and finally ending with two chapters on female ascetics (chs. 29-30). Price’s translation divides the work into thirty chapters, however, since its publication, Paul Devos has established that the original text was only 28 chapters, see Paul Devos, “La structure de l’Histoire Philothée de Théodoret de Cyr: Le nombre de chapitres,” *AnBoll* 97 (1979): 319–35.

⁵⁹⁶ Theodoret, *History of the Monks* Prologue 9 (trans. Price), 7.

⁵⁹⁷ Theodoret, *History of the Monks* Prologue 2 (trans. Price), 3-4.

⁵⁹⁸ R. M. Price, *A History of the Monks of Syria* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1985), xv.

He describes the ascetics as engaged in combat with an enemy who is “bodiless, invisible encroaching unperceived, plotting secretly, setting ambush, and attacking suddenly.”⁵⁹⁹ By recording the lives of these holy men and women, he aims to record “the forms of invisible souls and display unseen wars and secret struggles.”⁶⁰⁰

Theodoret’s ascetics wore hair clothing and practiced extreme fasting in common with other contemporary hagiographic accounts.⁶⁰¹ They enclosed themselves within cells and holes in the ground no bigger than their own bodies and endured the extremes of the elements.⁶⁰² Endurance of disease and illness also features as a form of ascetic practice.⁶⁰³ An ascetic called Limnaeus’ refused to accept medical help for the “disease of the grips,” which caused agonizing pain, and its sufferers to “roll about like lunatics, turning over on this side and on that, at the same time stretching out and then bending back their legs.” However,

He benefited from no medical help, could not endure a bed, and got no relief from medicines or food; but seated on a plank lying on the ground, he received treatment by prayer and the sign of the cross (Theodoret, *History of the Monks* XXII.4 [trans. Price])

On another occasion, Limnaeus was bitten ten times on the foot and hand by a snake, afflicting him with “bitter pains all over.” Again, rather than accept medical assistance, he

⁵⁹⁹ Theodoret, *History of the Monks* Prologue 4 (trans. Price), 5.

⁶⁰⁰ Theodoret, *History of the Monks* Prologue 3 (trans. Price), 4.

⁶⁰¹ See for example Theodoret, *History of the Monks* III. 3; XVII.6; XVIII. 4 (trans. Price), 38; 122-123; 127.

⁶⁰² Living in a hole in the ground which looked like the den of a fox, Simeon the Elder for example, became “Wild to look at, with unkempt hair, shrivelled face, the limbs of his body reduced to a skeleton, dressed in some dirty rags sewn together with palm shoots.” (Theodoret, *History of the Monks* VI. 9 (trans. Price)). Eusebius of Asikha was “Frozen in winter and burnt in summer, he bore with endurance the contrasting temperatures of the air, his face shrivelled up and all the limbs of his body wasted away. He so exhausted his body with many labors that his belt could not even stay on his waist, but slipped downwards, since there was nothing to hinder it; for his buttocks and hips had been worn away and provided an easy downward passage for the belt.” (Theodoret, *HR* XVIII.1 (trans. Price)). For further examples see Theodoret, *History of the Monks* III. 2 and 5; XIX.1-2; XXI.4; XXVII.2 (trans. Price).

⁶⁰³ See Crislip, *Thorns in the Flesh*.

“applied to his wounds the remedies only of faith-the sign of the cross, prayer, and invocation of God” (Theodoret, *History of the Monks* XXII.5 [trans. Price])

Whilst some somatic mortification evidently arose through the vagrancies of life, other ascetics carefully planned and contrived their own means of mortifying the body. Theodoret graphically narrates a story of an ascetic who suffered from an extreme case of fever and diarrhoea, of “flux of bile moving downwards, hurting the guts, causing pressure and forcing one to run outside.” Instead of relieving himself, the ascetic instead “sat there torn by contrary impulses: while nature pressed him to go and evacuate, shame before the attendant crowd compelled him to stay in the same position” (Theodoret, *History of the Monks* XXI.5 [trans. Price]). Theodoret attempted to comfort him and reached into his clothing to rub his back, only to discover “The great load of iron that bound his waist and his neck; and other chains, two in front and two behind, extending obliquely from the circle round his neck to the circle below, and forming the shape of the letter X” (Theodoret, *History of the Monks* XXI.8 [trans. Price]).

Theodosius was also said to have worn iron on his neck, his loins and both his hands, and the ascetic Eusebius increased the amount of iron weighing down his body until it weighed two hundred and fifty pounds.⁶⁰⁴ Theodoret reports that Eusebius of Teleda bound his waist with an iron belt and attached a very heavy collar, so that he was forced to bend over, stooping to the ground.⁶⁰⁵ In another example, Thalelaeus made

Two wheels of two cubits in diameter, he joined both wheels together with planks not fitted to each other but separated apart. Then seating himself inside and fixing these separated planks firmly with bolts and nails, he hung the wheel up in the air.

⁶⁰⁴ Theodoret, *History of the Monks* X.2 and III. 19 (trans. Price), 89-90 and 19.

⁶⁰⁵ Theodoret, *History of the Monks* IV.6-7 (trans. Price), 52.

Fixing three other tall wooden stakes in the ground and connecting their upper ends with other pieces of wood, he fastened the double wheel in the midst of them and raised it up, the inside of the wheel having a height of two cubits and a breadth of a cubit. Sitting or rather suspended in this, he has spent ten years up till now. Since he has a very big body, not even sitting can he straighten his neck, but he always sits bent double, with his forehead tightly pressed against his knees (Theodoret, *History of the Monks* XXVIII. 3 [trans. Price]).

Female ascetics also undertook somatic mortifications. Marana and Cyra spent forty-two years immured in an enclosure, wearing chains which were so heavy that “even a well-built man could not carry [them].” With the result that Cyra “with her weaker body” was bent to the ground, unable to straighten up.⁶⁰⁶ Domnina too fasted to such an extent that her body became skeletal and half dead, her skin thin, her fat and flesh worn away from her labours.⁶⁰⁷

This brief examination of Theodoret’s ascetics problematises an episode from his depiction of the *Life of Simeon Stylites*, specifically that Simeon was asked to leave the monastery in which he lived due to his extreme somatic mortification. Theodoret tells the story of this incident thus:

Simeon took a rope prepared of palm—it was very jagged, even to touch by hand—and with it, girded his loins, not placing it outside, but adhering it directly to the skin. He bound it so closely as to wound, in a circle, the entire part around which it lay. When he completed more than ten days in this fashion, the wound had become quite grave, letting loose drops of blood, and someone saw him and asked him the cause of the blood. When he said it was nothing grievous, his fellow athlete overpowered him by force and inserted his hand; he examined the cause and disclosed it to his superior. At once censuring and exhorting, attacking the savageness of the deed, he just barely undid the binding. But he could not persuade him to accept any therapy for the wound (Theodoret, *HR* 26.5 [trans. Muehlberger])⁶⁰⁸

⁶⁰⁶ Theodoret, *History of the Monks* XXIX. 4-6 (trans. Price), 184.

⁶⁰⁷ Theodoret, *History of the Monks* XXX.2 (trans. Price), 186-7.

⁶⁰⁸ Theodoret, *HR* 26.5 (trans. Muehlberger in Ellen Muhelberger, “Simeon and Other Women in Theodoret’s Religious History: Gender in the Representation of Late Ancient Christian Asceticism,” *J ECS* 23 (2015): 583-606 (596).

As a result of this, “they ordered him to depart from this wrestling-school, lest he should be a cause of harm to those with a weaker bodily constitution who might try to emulate what was beyond their powers” (Theodoret, *History of the Monks* XXVI.5 [trans. Price]).

The *Religious History* explicitly demonstrates the extreme lengths that Syrian ascetics went to in their pursuit of the ascetic life. Whilst other ascetics are praised for these actions, or at the very least they are represented as part and parcel of the ascetic life, why should Simeon’s actions have resulted in condemnation and him being dismissed from the monastery? How and why were his actions different from those of the others as outlined here?

Previous Scholarship

Employing Lynda L Coon’s understanding of the “paradoxical nature of sacred gender,” Theresa Urbainczyk notes that many of Theodoret’s ascetics in his *Religious History* despite described as male, display the characteristics of “virtuous women.”⁶⁰⁹ They model characteristics of self-denial, suffering and passivity all of which were considered feminine qualities.⁶¹⁰ In another recent study Ellen Muehlberger develops Urbainczyk’s work, drawing attention to more corporeal aspects of Theodoret’s depiction of these ascetics. She claims that

Simeon, the famous stylite, and many other ascetics whose lives are showcased in the *Religious History*, are women. Even though they are marked as male in conventional ways, their characters are given physical qualities and placed in situations that, according to late ancient medical discourses Theodoret knew, marked female bodies.⁶¹¹

⁶⁰⁹ Coon, *Sacred Fictions*, xviii and Theresa Urbainczyk, *Theodoret of Cyrrhus: The Bishop and the Holy Man* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 143.

⁶¹⁰ Urbainczyk, *Theodoret of Cyrrhus*, 143. On suffering as a female characteristic see Meghan R. Henning, *Hell Hath No Fury: Gender, Disability, and the Invention of Damned Bodies in Early Christian Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021) p??

⁶¹¹ Muehlberger, “Simeon and Other Women,” 585.

In a detailed exegesis of the corporeality of the feminine qualities found in Theodoret's representation of Simeon, Muehlberger postulates an alternative reading. She suggests that Theodoret employs allusions and ambiguous, suggestive details to imply that Simeon's body was in some way actually female.⁶¹²

Muehlberger begins her study by highlighting the ways in which Theodoret marks his ascetics with feminine characteristics by employing and subverting ancient assumptions of the nature of male and female bodies.⁶¹³ In ancient medical understanding, the female body was considered permeable and leaky while the male body was dry and hard and whilst it did produce liquids: semen, sweat and blood for example, these were not considered to delineate permeability or leakiness.⁶¹⁴ In literary representation, when men *did* produce other liquids and when those liquids flowed profusely, the author was making a deliberate statement, worthy of examination.⁶¹⁵ Throughout the *Religious History*, Theodoret subverts Hippocratic understanding of male and female bodies by

Giving nominally male ascetics bodies that produce copious fluids, as one would expect from female bodies. Compared to other ancient literature about ascetics, the *Religious History* is fairly drowning in bodily products.⁶¹⁶

⁶¹² As a caveat, Muehlberger is clear to demonstrate that she is not commenting on the actual, historical body of Simeon, but rather on Theodoret's narrative choices and descriptions (Muehlberger, "Simeon and Other Women," 597).

⁶¹³ Theodoret himself suggests that he is familiar with ancient medical literature when he notes that "certainly much has been written on this subject by Hippocrates and Galen, not to mention Plato, Xenophon, Aristotle, Theophrastus, and countless other authors," cited in Muehlberger, "Simeon and Other Women," 590. On ancient understanding of male and female bodies see Rebecca Flemming, *Medicine and the Making of Roman Women: Gender, Nature, and Authority From Celsus to Galen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). Helen King, *Hippocrates' Woman: Reading the Female Body in Ancient Greece* (London: Routledge, 1998), 21-39.

⁶¹⁴ On fluids and the ancient body see Mark Bradley, Victoria Leonard, and Laurence Totelin (eds.), *Bodily Fluids in Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 2021) and Manfred Horstmanshoff, Helen King and Claus Zittel (eds.), *Blood, Sweat and Tears – The Changing Concepts of Physiology from Antiquity into Early Modern Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

⁶¹⁵ Muehlberger, "Simeon and Other Women," 588.

⁶¹⁶ Muehlberger, "Simeon and Other Women," 592. See for example, Theodoret, *History of the Monks* prologue 7; II.7; III.17; IV.8; IV.12; V.7; X.3; X.9; XXIV.7 (trans. Price).

She notes that this usually feminine somatic quality is not considered negative, in fact, the liquids produced by the ascetics are prized, in fact, it is through the medium of tears and sweat that they accomplish their miraculous work. Muehlberger further demonstrates that this was just one of the ways in which Theodoret implicitly demonstrated his understanding of human bodies, a view which he stated explicitly in his commentary on Judges, that “there is a single nature for men and women.”⁶¹⁷ This idea of a single nature for both men and women was based on the assumption that as Eve was created from Adam, they shared the same nature.⁶¹⁸

Examining in detail the incident in which Simeon mortifies his body by tying the rope around himself, Muehlberger highlights the production of fluid from the wound. Simeon’s self-mortification is so extreme that it breaks the skin, and he bleeds profusely. She explains, Simeon

Altered his body specifically his loins and has produced a circular “grave wound” that disturbs others, even disturbs the social order when its unruly blood escapes and is visible publicly.⁶¹⁹

The expulsion of blood in an extreme example of fluidity leaking from Simeon’s body is enough to mark his body as feminine. Simeon’s body is then examined by a monk who observed the “disturbing fluid” produced by his body

By searching under his clothes, and having seen the state of his body decided that it was incompatible with membership in the community – that is once he was discovered to be a woman, he was expelled.⁶²⁰

⁶¹⁷ Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *Questions on Judges* 12 (trans. John F. Petruccione and Robert C. Hill in *Theodoret of Cyrus: The Questions on the Octateuch. Volume 2: On Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, and Ruth*. (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 328.

⁶¹⁸ Muehlberger, “Simeon and Other Women,” 590.

⁶¹⁹ Muehlberger, “Simeon and Other Women,” 596.

⁶²⁰ Muehlberger, “Simeon and Other Women,” 604.

In support of her argument, Muehlberger suggests that both the flow of blood and the examination of Simeon's body have gynaecological overtones which allude to a well-known early Christian narrative found in the *Protoevangelium of James*. In this account, the midwife Salome questions Mary's virginity and so proceeds to undertake a physical examination in which she "inserts her finger."⁶²¹ Like Salome, Simeon's fellow monk "forcefully inserted his hand" to conduct his physical examination of Simeon's body. Muehlberger stresses that it is the resulting conclusions drawn from this examination which led to Simeon's expulsion and suggests that he was found to be a woman. Muehlberger concludes that in Theodoret's *Life of Simeon*, we find an example of the trope of the transvestite monk, common in late antique lives of female saints from the Byzantine period.

In this chapter, I wish to examine these ideas further, I concur with Muehlberger and Urbainczyk that Theodoret's depiction of Simeon employs a range of feminising characteristics. I build on these ideas by looking in greater depth at the examination of Simeon's body to demonstrate how this is depicted within the realms of Greco-Roman rhetorics of masculinity to argue that whatever Simeon did to his body in his initial self-wounding was something that demasculinised, degendered and desexualised Simeon. I examine briefly Greco-Roman concepts of masculinity to show how the penetration of Simeon's body by his monastic companion demonstrated his demasculinisation. I then go on to consider what Simeon had done to cause this response.

⁶²¹ *Protevangelium of James* 20.

Penetration

Should scholars wish to demonstrate Judith Butler's notion that gender is performance, a culturally mutable, social construct, they need look no further than the construction of masculinity in the Greco-Roman world.⁶²² Preserved in a vast array of varied sources, including legal codes, anatomical treatises, philosophical texts, and moral commentaries, the pervasive and immutable ideology of masculinity emerges. Contrary to what one might expect, masculinity was defined, only in small part by, a relationship between physical anatomy and gendered identity. Whilst Roman law did require babies to be assigned a gender at birth through observation of external somatic features, construction of gender was a complex performance of gendered ideals relying little on sexual anatomy. Masculinity was in the eye of the beholder as much as in an individual's self-identification, and therefore was mutable and required continued work. Masculinity was almost continually defined as a continuum with male at one end, and non-male at the opposing end, with varying degrees of maleness and non-maleness throughout the spectrum. Deciphering masculinity entailed a complex understanding of ancient physiognomy and rhetoric, which involved analysis not only of external physical characteristics, but such aspects such as gait, tone of voice, physical gestures, and deportment.⁶²³

⁶²² On gender performativity see Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* 40 (1988): 519-31 and Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999). On masculinity in the ancient world and in early Christianity see Burrus, *Begotten Not Made*; L. Stephanie Cobb, *Dying to Be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr Texts* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2008), 60-91; Colleen Conway, *Behold the Man: Jesus and Greco-Roman Masculinity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 15-34; Maud W. Gleason, *Making Men: Sophists and Self-Presentation in Ancient Rome* (Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 1995); Judith P. Hallett and Marilyn B. Skinner eds., *Roman Sexualities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997) and Stephen D. Moore and Janice Capel Anderson eds., *New Testament Masculinities* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003).

⁶²³ See Conway, *Behold the Man*, 18-20.

Whilst defining boundaries of behaviour in the early Christian church, Clement of Alexandria (d. c.215 CE.) infused his reading of scripture with these traditional Greco-Roman understandings of gender and masculinity. Clement offers a critique of men's behaviour especially the embellishment of the body, the rationale behind this critique synthesises his understanding of Genesis alongside traditional Greco-Roman concepts of gender differentiation. He says that

The mark of the man, the beard, by which he is seen to be a man, is older than Eve, and is the token of the superior nature. In this God deemed it right that he should excel, and dispersed hair over man's whole body. Whatever smoothness and softness was in him He abstracted from his side when He formed the woman Eve, physically receptive, his partner in parentage, his help in household management, while he (for he had parted with all smoothness) remained a man, and shows himself man. And to him has been assigned action, as to her suffering; for what is shaggy is drier and warmer than what is smooth. Wherefore males have both more hair and more heat than females, animals that are entire than the emasculated, perfect than imperfect. It is therefore impious to desecrate the symbol of manhood, hairiness. (Clement of Alexandria, *The Instructor* 3.3 (trans. Roberts, Donaldson, and Cleveland Coxe, ANF 2/:276).

For Clement, the beard was a defining feature of a man and masculinity as well as symbolic of his "superior nature." Men bodies were physically different to those of women, not only because of their hairiness, they were hotter and drier, and different in their perceived actions.⁶²⁴ Men were active, "assigned action," and women therefore implicitly passive. Eve, and by implication all women are also described as "physically receptive." Clement does not elaborate on what this means for men, suffice to say that "he..[Adam] remained a man," but through his implied dichotomies, we should understand that man must be physically *unreceptive*. This passage embodies a variety of codes of masculinity, and it is the concept of men as being physically unreceptive, specifically the concept of penetration as a

⁶²⁴ On ancient understanding of male and female bodies see Lesley Ann Dean-Jones, *Women's Bodies in Classical Greek Science* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996); Flemming, *Medicine and the Making of Roman Women*; King, *Hippocrates' Woman: Reading the Female Body*; Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender From the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992).

marker of gender boundaries which is relevant to our analysis of Simeon's examination and to which I now turn.

For the ancient Romans, sex was understood in terms of power. It assumed that in a sexual act there was always an active and a passive participant; the active participant penetrated, and the passive participant was penetrated. Thus, the role of passive participant, assumed to have been penetrated sexually by another person, was described as "having a woman's experience," *muliebria pati*.⁶²⁵ Employing the term *muliebria*, delineates the person being penetrated as womanly, ie. not a man. "Intercourse was construed solely as bodily penetration of an inferior, a scenario that automatically reduced the penetrated individual – woman, boy, or even adult male- to a 'feminized' state."⁶²⁶ Penetration equated to domination and therefore, to be penetrated meant to be dominated. It thereby inscribed a relationship of power. Jonathan Walters uses the term "impenetrable penetrators" to identify "a wider conceptual pattern that characterized those of high social status as being able to defend the boundaries of their body from invasive assaults of all kinds."⁶²⁷ Here, we find a marker of gender boundaries characterized on the "basis of perceived bodily integrity and freedom, or the lack of it, from invasion from the outside."⁶²⁸ Concepts around penetration do not solely refer to sexual penetration, as Walters states, "Verbal propositions and pestering, touching, beating, and sexual penetration – all are seen as degrading invasions of the personal space of the victim of these assaults."⁶²⁹ A

⁶²⁵ Jonathan Walters, "Invading the Roman Body: Manliness and Impenetrability in Roman Thought," in Judith P. Hallett and Marilyn B. Skinner (eds.), *Roman Sexualities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 30.

⁶²⁶ Marilyn B. Skinner, "Introduction," in Judith P. Hallett and Marilyn B. Skinner (eds.), *Roman Sexualities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 3.

⁶²⁷ Walters, "Invading the Roman Body," 30.

⁶²⁸ Walters, "Invading the Roman Body," 30.

⁶²⁹ Walters, "Invading the Roman Body," 30.

penetrated body signalled the loss or absence of true manliness, and a perceived, actual or implied failure to act like a man incurred moral shaming.⁶³⁰

The Latin term *Impidicus*, literally “unchaste” which was used to designate someone who had been (passively) sexually penetrated implied “loss of honour, acknowledgment of inferiority, and lack of virility.”⁶³¹ To be penetrated threatened both the integrity of the body as well as a person’s moral integrity. Thus as Colleen Conway observes, “the core of masculine identity resided not in the body per se but rather in what one did with, and allowed to be done to, one’s body.”⁶³² Masculine identity depended on corporal inviolability whether real or perceived, actual or metaphorical, and the “horror of the feminine,” or perhaps more accurately the horror of unmanning pervades Greco-Roman literature. These observations are significant when we consider Theodoret’s depiction of Simeon’s self-inflicted wound. In wounding his body and breaking the skin, not only are Simeon’s corporal boundaries broken down so that he is able to leak fluid from his body, which in Greco-Roman terms marked him as feminine, but this action led to him being “forcibly” penetrated by his fellow monk. Throughout this penetrative examination, Simeon remains passive, he is physically receptive, further allowing the boundaries of his body to be

⁶³⁰ Both Walters and Jennifer Glancy stress therefore that male slaves were not recognised as men. In their subjugation, enslaved men were denied control of their own corporal boundaries, and therefore, are never described as *virī*, but rather *homines*. They are not men, because of their perceived failure to exert control over their own bodies (Walters, “Invading the Roman Body,” 31 and Jennifer A. Glancy, *Corporal Knowledge: Early Christian Bodies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). Only freemen could defend their bodies against penetration, and so the capability to safeguard the body against others was connected to social status. This hierarchical discourse of penetration demonstrates that “at the top of the social ladder stood the impenetrable penetrator.” (Chris Frilingos, “Sexing the Lamb,” in Stephen D. Moore and Janice Capel Anderson (eds.), *New Testament Masculinities* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 297-317.

⁶³¹ As Matthew Kuefler notes, “Virtue was so intimately linked to maleness in the Roman universe that it is impossible to separate Roman definitions of masculinity from more general notions of ideal human behaviour,” Matthew Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch: Gender Ambiguity and Christian Ideology in Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 19.

⁶³² Conway, *Behold the Man*, 21.

compromised. His act of self-wounding is therefore depicted as emasculating, signalling a loss of virility and he is unmanned.

Castration and Eunuchs

Considering the other evidence in the *Religious History*, Simeon's somatic mortification is not unique, other ascetics both male and female mortified their body in a variety of ways. Simeon's self-inflicted corporal mortification resulted in a "grievous wound," the aftermath of which is depicted as emasculating and unmanning both in terms of the resulting flow of fluids as well as in what he allows done to his body, in its penetration and in his passivity in response. By situating this account within Greco-Roman and early Christian literature, I demonstrate that Simeon's self-wounding, the resulting "grievous wound" and emasculation of his body is deliberately suggestive of self-castration. This self-inflicted castration is what effectuates the de-gendering and desexualisation of Simeon's body, and which is in line with early Christian eschatology, soteriology and understanding of gender. To demonstrate this, I look first to Greco-Roman understanding of castration and eunuchs and then turn to early Christian writings to show how castration, whether literal or metaphorical was theorised by early Christians.

I begin by considering how eunuchs were defined to explain how Theodoret's description of the manner in which Simeon inflicts the "grievous wound" could be considered indicative of castration. Evidence for legal definitions of eunuchs can be found in an amendment to the Augustinian law codes of the late first century BCE. to the first century CE, the *Lex Julia et Papia*. Within this amendment, the jurist Ulpian attempted to define the term "eunuch" to clarify Roman inheritance rights. He firstly assigns to the word

“eunuch” a general designation, but further distinguishes between different types of eunuchs. There are “those who are eunuchs by nature, those who are made eunuchs [*thlibiae thasiae*], and any other kind of eunuchs [*aliud genus spadonum*].”⁶³³ Roman inheritance law further suggested four more specific categories of eunuchs, which appear to be based on the methods used to perform the castration alongside the resulting effects.⁶³⁴ Congenital eunuchs, or “eunuchs by nature” included those with undeveloped testes or external genitals at birth or which failed to develop later in life. *Spadones*, was a generic term based on the Greek verb *spēn* meaning to “tear or rend,” which could encompass all types of eunuchs, but specifically referring to those whose genitals had been amputated. We also find *Thlibiae* from the verb meaning “press, bruise, or confine” from the practice of employing a ligature around the scrotum to sever the sperm duct, “*thladiæ*” which means “crushed” and “*castrati*” which denotes the surgical detachment of the penis or testicles from the body.⁶³⁵

⁶³³ *Digesta Iustiniani*. 50.16.128 (T. Mommsen and P. Krueger (eds.) and A. Watson (trans.), Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985).

⁶³⁴ On medical castration in antiquity see Jacqueline G. M. König, “Emasculating healers. Medical castration practices in Greco-Roman antiquity,” *Journal of Ancient History* 9 (2021): 221-237 and Jacqueline G. M. König, “Ancient Greco-Roman Views of the Testicle in Celsus and Beyond” *Rosetta* 13 (2013): 104-110.

⁶³⁵ A later source from the seventh century describes methods of castration, one of which was by pressing “Compression is performed thus: children, still of tender age, are placed in a vessel of hot water, and then when the bodily parts are softened in the bath, the testicles are to be squeezed with the fingers until they disappear and being dissolved can no longer be felt.” (Paul of Aegina, *Epitome of Medicine* 6.69, trans. Francis Adams, *The Seven Books of Paulus Aegineta*, vol. 2 (London: The Sydenham Society, 1846): 379–80). In Soranus’ *Gynaecology*, he refers to cases in which bruising occurs to the testicles, presumably here referring to accidents rather than deliberate attempts at castration, “If the testicles are bruised (*thilbomenoi*), sometimes they retract into the upper parts, sometimes dissolve and thus some boys become cyrptorchids, others eunuchs” (Soranus, *Gynecology* 2.40.5). Cf. Deut. 23:1 “He whose testicles are crushed or whose male member is cut off shall not enter the assembly of the Lord.” On these definitions see Walter Stevenson, “The Rise of Eunuchs in Greco-Roman Antiquity,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* (1995): 497 and J. David Hester, “Eunuchs and the Postgender Jesus: Matthew 19:12 and Transgressive Sexualities,” *JSNT* 28 (2005), 21 §20. David Hester identifies seven terms with a semantic field for “Eunuch” in Greek and even more in Latin, all of which reflect the means of castration.

In Theodoret's account, Simeon takes a jagged rope, and "with it girded his loins, not placing it outside, but adhering it directly to the skin. He bound it so closely as to wound, in a circle, the entire part around which it lay."⁶³⁶ This description is evocative of a ligature, the rope is wrapped so tightly around a part of Simeon's body that it causes blood to issue forth from his body and cause a "grievous wound" just as the *thlibiae* had done to perform their castration.⁶³⁷ The specific part of the body is not referenced by Theodoret, he merely refers to the rope as being wrapped around the "part of his body," and as Taylor Petrey notes, "the use of the term "parts" refers at times euphemistically to the genitals."⁶³⁸ That he is described as "girding his loins" (διέζωσε τὴν ὀσφύν) with the makeshift rope in the sentence before is itself suggestive of castration. Some early Christians looked to the prophets as exemplars for the ascetic life and understood their "girding the loins" as referring to castration in the manner of the eunuchs described as "*thlibiae*."⁶³⁹ Jerome was pressed to deny this by instead highlighting the masculinity of the prophets employing some of the rhetoric of masculinity discussed earlier in this chapter.

With your loins girt," Scripture says, and to the apostles Christ gives the command: "Let your loins be girt about and your lamps burning." John [the Baptist], too, wears a leather girdle about his loins; and there was nothing soft or effeminate in Elijah either, but every bit of him was hard and virile (he certainly was a hairy man); he too, is described as having worn a girdle of leather about his loins."⁶⁴⁰

⁶³⁶ Theodoret, *HR*. 26.5 (trans Muehlberger), 596.

⁶³⁷ On the use of ligatures in antiquity see Christine F. Salazar, *The Treatment of War Wounds in Graeco-Roman Antiquity* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 44-45.

⁶³⁸ Taylor G. Petrey, *Resurrecting Parts: Early Christians on Desire, Reproduction, and Sexual Difference* (London: Routledge, 2016), 20.

⁶³⁹ On alternative understandings of "loin girding" see Katherine Low, "Implications Surrounding Girding the Loins in Light of Gender, Body, and Power," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 36 (2011): 3-30.

⁶⁴⁰ Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch*, 270.

The implication being that as the prophets were so manly, they could not have been castrated. In Origen's *Treatise on the Passover*, he elucidates the phrase "girding the loins," stating that

With Scripture thus attesting that the loins are there for copulation...We are ordered, when we eat the Passover, to be pure of bodily sexual union, for this is what the girding of the loins means. Thus Scripture teaches us to bind up the bodily source of seed and to repress inclinations to sexual relations when we partake of the flesh of Christ (Origen, *Treatise on the Passover* 35.16-36.7 [trans. Daly]).⁶⁴¹

Whilst Origen does not refer to castration, he understood the phrase as referring to sexual activity, and that to "gird the loins" meant a refraining from or repressing of sexual desire.

Ancient literature reflected a heightened concern with the gender ambiguity of the eunuch. They were described as "exiles from the society of the human race, belonging neither to one sex nor the other," or as "half-men."⁶⁴² Herodotus describes a business run by Panionius of Chios who would procure "beautiful boys," have them castrated and sent to Sardis and Ephesus to be sold.⁶⁴³ One of his victims confronted Panionius, asking why he committed such a wicked deed, which had made him "to be no man, but a thing of nought?"⁶⁴⁴ The idea that eunuchs were no longer male seems to be a general consensus in ancient literature, however, whilst they could define what they *were not*, they struggled to

⁶⁴¹ Origen, *Treatise on the Passover* 35.16-36.7, trans. Robert J. Daly in *Origen Treatise on the Passover and Dialogue of Origen with Heraclides and his Fellow Bishops on the Father, the Son, and the Soul* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992).

⁶⁴² Claudius Mamertinus, *A Speech of Thanks to the Emperor Julian* 19.4 (trans. Marna M. Morgan in Samuel N.C. Lieu (ed.). *The Emperor Julian: Panegyric and Polemic: Claudius Mamertinus, John Chrysostom, Emphrem the Syrian* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1989), 29. Apuleius refers to eunuchs as "half-men" (Apuleius, *Metamorphoses (The Golden Ass)* (J. Arthur Hanson, LCL).) Whilst Katherine Ringrose deals with a slightly later period, her monograph *The Perfect Servant: Eunuchs and the Social Construction of Gender in Byzantium* is useful for providing a broader contextual background, including defining "eunuchs" and the language and biology of gender (Katherine M. Ringrose, *The Perfect Servant: Eunuchs and the Social Construction of Gender in Byzantium* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 1-66).

⁶⁴³ Herodotus, *The Histories* 8.105.2 trans A.D. Godley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920).

⁶⁴⁴ Herodotus, *The Histories* 8.106.3 (trans. Godley).

define what they *were*. Severus Alexander (r. 222-235) is quoted as describing them as a “third sex of the human race [*tertius genus hominum*],” and later, Gregory of Nazianzus (d. c. 390CE.) would describe the eunuch as “effeminate and unmanly men, of doubtful sex.”⁶⁴⁵ In an age which reflected a cultural anxiety over masculinity, and in which the equation of masculinity with moral excellence was paramount, the eunuch obviously posed a challenging and problematic dilemma.

For early Christians this gender ambiguity was complicated by a saying attributed to Jesus in the *Gospel of Matthew* in which Jesus appears to advocate becoming a eunuch.⁶⁴⁶ In Matthew 19, Jesus was questioned by the Pharisees on the legality of divorce. Following this conversation, the disciples conclude that it might be better in fact not to marry, Jesus replies that,

For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can (Matt. 19:11-12).

Not only does this saying reflect the contemporary definitions of eunuchs outlined above as either congenital or being made by other humans, it also adds an additional category, those who make themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven. Whilst many saw this as a figurative statement referring to chastity, there were certainly some Christians who took

⁶⁴⁵ *Historia Augusta*, Alexander Severus 23, trans. by David Magie and revised by David Rohrbacher (LCL. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022); Gregory of Nazianzus, *On the Great Athanasius* 21 (trans. Charles Gordon Browne, NPNF 2/7:275. On eunuchs as a third gender see Ringrose, *The Perfect Servant*, 4– 7.

⁶⁴⁶ On the role of the eunuch in Matthew 19:12 see J. D. Hester, “Eunuchs and the Postgender Jesus: Matthew 19.12 and Transgressive Sexualities,” *JSNT* 28 (2005): 13– 40.

this statement literally, as an exhortation to castrate oneself, and who “embraced radical corporeal asceticism as a fundamental part of Christian devotion.”⁶⁴⁷

Unfortunately, our only surviving evidence of self-castration in early Christianity is from those who disparaged the practice, and overall, the early church fathers, like their pagan contemporaries, were critical of the practice of castration. On the rites that were involved in celebrating the Roman gods, the Christian apologist, Minucius Felix (d.250) notes of the Galli priests that “He whose shameful parts are cut off, how greatly does he wrong God in seeking to propitiate Him in this manner! Since if God wished for eunuchs, He could bring them as such into existence and would not make them so afterwards” (Minucius Felix, *The Octavius of Minucius Felix* 24 [trans. Wallis. ANF 4:187-188]).⁶⁴⁸

In his *Liber peristephanon*, Prudentius describes an attempt to force the soon to be martyr Romanus to venerate the pagan gods. Romanus however critiques the violence of pagans, citing the castration of their priests as proof.

Shall I go to Cybele’s pine-grove? No, for there stands in my way the lad who emasculated himself because of her lust, and by a grievous wound cutting the parts of shame saved himself from the unchaste goddess’ embrace, a eunuch for whom the Mother has to lament in many a rite (Prudentius, *Crowns of Martyrdom* X. 196-200 [trans. Thomson]).

Romanus describes the castration as a mutilation of the loins, a “sacrifice of his genitals,” which in so doing unmans a person. It is interesting to note in both these accounts the similar semantic fields here as employed by Theodoret; the shameful “parts” which are cut off for example, and most notably the “grievous wound” in Prudentius’ account.

⁶⁴⁷ Daniel F. Caner, “The Practice and Prohibition of Self-Castration in Early Christianity,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 51 (1997): 396-415 (398).

⁶⁴⁸ Minucius Felix, *The Octavius of Minucius Felix* 24 (trans. R. Wallis. ANF 4:187-188).

The earliest example of Christian zeal for castration can be found in the writing of Justin Martyr who describes how a young man petitioned the Alexandrian Prefect “asking that permission might be given to a doctor to make him a eunuch.”⁶⁴⁹ Whilst this could be considered a unique example, a ruling from the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE *does* suggest that voluntary castration was in fact an issue. Whilst not prohibiting the act of castration as such, the Council ordered that men who had wilfully castrated themselves should not remain in their post nor be admitted to the clergy.

If anyone in sickness has been subjected by physicians to a surgical operation, or if he has been castrated by barbarians, let him remain among the clergy; but, if any one in sound health has castrated himself, it behoves that such an one, if [already] enrolled among the clergy, should cease [from his ministry], and that from henceforth no such person should be promoted. But, as it is evident that this is said of those who wilfully do the thing and presume to castrate themselves, so if any have been made eunuchs by barbarians, or by their masters, and should otherwise be found worthy, such men the Canon admits to the clergy (*Canons of the Council of Nicea* Canon 1 [trans. Percival, *NPNF* 2/14: 8]).

This canon suggests that if a person was born a eunuch, or if castration had been performed for medical reasons or through persecution, then they were exempt from this ruling.⁶⁵⁰

Arthur Vööbus cites the fifth-century *Rule of Rabbula* which states that “No one of the sons of the church...shall dare to castrate himself,” as evidence that the practice of self-castration remained an issue in Syria beyond the fourth century.⁶⁵¹

⁶⁴⁹ Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 29 (trans. Marcus Dods and George Reith, *ANF* 1:172).

⁶⁵⁰ Eusebius refers to the presbyter of Antioch, Dorotheus, a eunuch from birth (Eusebius of Caesarea, *Church History* vii.32.2-3 (trans. Rev. Arthur Cushman McGiffert, *NPNF* 2/1:317). In Socrates Scholasticus’ *Ecclesiastical History*, he describes how when the bishop of Antioch, Leontius was a presbyter he had been removed from his post. He attributes this to Leontius performing act of self-castration in order to remove any suspicion of illicit sexual acts with a woman called Eustolium. Leontius continued to live with Eustolium, knowing that he could not be accused of having a sexual relationship. He was later appointed as bishop of the church at Antioch at the insistence of the Emperor Constantius. (Socrates Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History* II.26 (trans. A.C. Zenos, *NPNF* 2/2:54).

⁶⁵¹ *Rules of Rabbūlā for the Qūiāmā* 55, trans. A. Vööbus in *Syriac and Arabic Documents regarding Legislation Relative to Syrian Asceticism*, (Stockholm: The Estonian Theological Society in Exile, 1960), 49. Vööbus also cites an example from the second canon of the Synod of 410 in the church of Seleucia-Ctesiphon which states

Probably the best-known example of Christian self-castration was the case of Origen of Alexandria.⁶⁵² The historian Eusebius claimed that Origen had taken the exhortation in Matthew literally, and in a moment of youthful, albeit misguided zeal had made himself a eunuch.

A deed was done by him which evidenced an immature and youthful mind, but at the same time gave the highest proof of faith and continence. For he took the words, there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake in too literal and extreme a sense. And in order to fulfil the Saviour's word...he carried out in action the word of the Saviour (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.8.1 [trans. Cushman McGiffert, NPNF 2/1: 254]).

The veracity of this claim remains unproven, but Jerome certainly believed it, noting that Origen that "So greatly did he abhor sensuality that, out of a zeal for God but yet one not according to knowledge, he castrated himself with a knife."⁶⁵³

A further narrative example can be found in the apocryphal *Acts of John* which depicts a scene of extreme sexual renunciation involving self-castration. A young man who had lusted after a married woman killed his own father. The father had exhorted the man to live a chaste life, but this had enraged the young man who subsequently struck his father down, further intending to kill the woman he lusted over as well as her husband.⁶⁵⁴ Instead,

that "no man who voluntarily has made himself an eunuch and has destroyed his generative nature, will be received into the church." He concludes that "In the absence of direct information we must be content with these observations which indicate the possibility of the spread of this practice in Syrian asceticism so that this...was a serious problem." (Arthur Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient: A Contribution to the History of Culture in the Near East* I. (Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1958), 273-4.)

⁶⁵² Hester also lists Valentinus (mid-second century), Julius Cassianus (mid-second century), Basilides (early second century), Leontios of Antiochia, later Bishop of Jerusalem (late-fourth century), Melito "the Eunuch" and Origen (early third century) (J. David Hester, "Eunuchs and the Postgender Jesus: Matthew 19.12 and Transgressive Sexualities," *JSNT* 28 (2005): 13-40 (33)).

⁶⁵³ Jerome, *Epistle 84 To Pammachius and Oceanus* 84.8 (trans. W.H. Fremantle, G. Lewis and W.G. Martley NPNF 2/6: 179-180).

⁶⁵⁴ *Acts of John* 49 in J.K. Elliot (trans.), *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 231-239.

John brought the young man's father back to life, and the young man, deciding that it was his genitals that were the source of his problems, took a sickle to them to assuage himself of his sexual lust.

When the young man saw the unexpected resurrection of his father and his own salvation, he took the sickle and cut off his genitals. And running into the house where he kept his adulteress, he flung them at her saying, 'On your account I became a parricide and should also become a murderer both of you two and myself. Here is the cause of all. God has had mercy upon me, because I have seen his power' (*Acts of John* 53 [trans. Elliott]).⁶⁵⁵

The young man's self-castration is not considered problematic in this text, his actions are not condemned, nor is he healed.⁶⁵⁶

The idea of becoming a eunuch for the sake of the kingdom of heaven was problematic though. Perhaps in an attempt to mitigate the challenge of physical castration, but still comply with Jesus' statement about making oneself a "eunuch for God," Christian writers at times depicted saints as symbolically castrated. John Cassian for example tells a story of an eastern ascetic saying

There came to him an angel in a vision of the night, and seemed to open his belly, and to remove from his bowels a sort of fiery fleshly humour, and to cast it away, and restore everything to its place as before; and lo he said, the incitements of your flesh are removed, and you may be sure that you have this day obtained that lasting purity of body for which you have faithfully asked (John Cassian, *Conferences VII. 2* [trans. Gibson, *NPNF 2/11:362*]).⁶⁵⁷

⁶⁵⁵ Compare this to Lucian's account of the Galli "Any young man who has resolved on this action, strips off his clothes, and with a loud shout bursts into the midst of the crowd, and picks up a sword from a number of swords which I suppose have been kept ready for many years for this purpose. He takes it and castrates himself and then runs wild through the city, bearing in his hands what he has cut off. He casts it into any house at will, and from this house he receives women's raiment and ornaments. Thus they act during their ceremonies of castration." (Lucian, *De Dea Syria* 50-51 (trans. Herbert A. Strong and John Garstang), 84.

⁶⁵⁶ Anna Rebecca Solevåg, *Negotiating the Disabled Body: Representations of Disability in Early Christian Texts* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2018), 144.

⁶⁵⁷ John Cassian, *Conferences VII. 2* (trans. Edgar C.S. Gibson, *NPNF 2/11:362*).

For Cassian, it was the literal amputation of body parts that was problematic, the metaphorical amputation of the members of the body to avoid sin though was to be embraced.

Seeing Simeon's self-wounding as castration (whether physical, spiritual, metaphorical) is not quite as surprising as it may sound. I have already established that there were Christians who saw in Jesus' exhortation in Matthew, a literal command to castrate themselves, but the exorcizing of body parts even by the fifth century, had a long and meaningful history. In an essay entitled "Mutilation and Meaning," Stephen Greenblatt describes Christianity as a religion which gave meaning to wounded bodies, noting that it was in fact founded upon a wounded god. Jesus was

An incarnate God, a God made flesh. And that flesh was repeatedly, spectacularly, and, as it were, crucially wounded. The root perception . . . is that there is a link between mutilation, as a universal emblem of corporeal vulnerability and abjection, and holiness. Pauline Christianity saw the physical marks on Jesus' body, from his circumcision to his scourging, piercing, and crucifixion, as the signs of his exalted sanctity, the salvific manifestations of a divine love that willingly embraces mortal vulnerability.⁶⁵⁸

Early Christian martyrological accounts bear witness to the literary depiction of mutilation, amputation and dismemberment of the body.

Hagiographical tales of ascetics continue this theme of mutilation and amputation, but under a different guise, frequently as illness or in the ascetic's battle against sexuality. In these cases, mutilation and amputation, is frequently associated with the male genitals. The Syriac writer John of Ephesus (d.c. 588) tells of the ascetic Aaron, who "Fell under a

⁶⁵⁸ Stephen Greenblatt, "Mutilation and Meaning," in Carla Mazzio and David Hillman (eds.), *The Body in Parts: Fantasies of Corporeality in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 221-241 (223).

serious disease of gangrene in his loins; and bore this affliction with great discretion, until his loin was eaten up and mutilated and had vanished down to its root” (John of Ephesus, *Lives of the Eastern Saints* 38 [trans Ashbrooke Harvey]).⁶⁵⁹ More examples can be found in Palladius’ *Lausiac History*. These examples demonstrate a clear connection between dismemberment and mutilation of the genitals with sexual desire. The ascetic Pachon is depicted as undergoing a “fight of fornication,” and is tormented relentlessly by a sexualised Ethiopian demon until “I found a small asp, picked it up, and placed it on my genitals, so that I might die by being bitten in this way. Although I rubbed the head of the beast against my genitals, because they were the cause of my temptation, I was not bitten” (Palladius, *Lausiac History* 23 [trans Brakke]).⁶⁶⁰

Whilst he does not die, nor is actually bitten by the snake, it appears that this act is what finally releases him from his battle against fornication. In the subsequent chapter, Palladius narrates the story of the ascetic Stephen who is found suffering from an illness. The precise location of his affliction is often omitted from translations, but which literally translates as “He suffered from the condition called cancer, which produced ulcers all over his testicles and the head of the penis.”⁶⁶¹ What is interesting in this account is that this physical suffering is directly situated on the genitals, and whilst a doctor operates on Stephen, presumably undertaking some form of amputation, Stephen is demasculinised and desexualised, remaining passive as someone is cutting away a part of his body “behaving

⁶⁵⁹ John of Ephesus, *Lives of the Eastern Saints* 38, trans Susan Ashbrooke Harvey in “Physicians and Ascetics in John of Ephesus: An Expedient Alliance,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 38 (1984): 87-93 (88).

⁶⁶⁰ Palladius, *Lausiac History* 23, trans David Brakke in *Demons and the Making of the Monk: Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), 173.

⁶⁶¹ Palladius, *Lausiac History* 24.2, (*kat’ autous tous topous tōn didumōn kai tēs balanou*) trans. Andrew Crislip in *Thorns in the Flesh: Illness and Sanctity in Late Ancient Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 17.

just as if another man were being cut. Though the flesh was cut away like hair, he was insensible.”⁶⁶² In removing his genitals, he becomes demasculinised, feminised further in his passivity while his flesh is being cut away, and by undertaking the female work of weaving during the procedure.⁶⁶³ Stephen suggests that “perhaps my flesh deserves chastisement, and it is fitting that it should pay the penalty now rather than when I have quitted the arena.”⁶⁶⁴ In this account, the associations are explicit between the amputation of Stephen’s genitals, the chastisement of the flesh and possible future judgement.⁶⁶⁵ It is described as being better to remove the source of possible temptation rather than face the consequences of that sin in the eschatological age.

This notion is reflected by Maxims of Sextus, who says that the Gospel of Matthew encourages its audience to cast away body parts, “Every part of the body which persuades you to not practice moderation, cast [it] away! For it is better to live in moderation without this part than destructively with it.”⁶⁶⁶ Origen also cites Philo whom he says argues that “it

⁶⁶² Palladius, *Lausiac History* 24.2, W. K. Lowther Clarke (trans.) in *Palladius: The Lausiac History* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1918).

⁶⁶³ Lynda Coon discusses the acts of spinning, sewing and weaving as a gendered demonstrations of feminine chastity and notes that “In male sacred fiction, cross-dressing or working wool thus appear as ceremonial punishments. In female vitae, however, cloth working is a crucial aspect of female piety.” Coon, *Sacred Fictions*, 41-43 (43).

⁶⁶⁴ Palladius, *Lausiac History* 24.3 (trans. Lowther Clarke).

⁶⁶⁵ In another example which associates the removal of a body part with the fight against temptation, Jerome tells the story of an unnamed martyr during the persecution under Decius and Valerian. “A beautiful prostitute came up to him and began to stroke his neck with gentle caresses, and...to touch his private parts with her hands: when his body was roused to lust as a result, this shameful conqueress lay down on top of him. The soldier of Christ did not know what to do or where to turn: he who had not yielded to tortures was being overcome by pleasure. At last, by divine inspiration, he bit off his tongue and spat it out in her face, as she kissed him; and so the sense of lust was overcome by the sharp pain that replaced it,” Jerome, *Life of Paul of Thebes* 3 in Caroline White (trans.), *Early Christian Lives* (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 76-84 (76).

⁶⁶⁶ Maximus Sextus, *Sentences* 13 quoted by Origen of Alexandria in Origen of Alexandria, *Commentary on Matthew* XV 3 in Justin M. Gohl (trans.), Origen of Alexandria, *Commentary on the Gospel according to Matthew* Book 15 (2019) https://www.academia.edu/31581897/Origen_of_Alexandrias_Commentary_on_Matthew_Book_15_An_English_Translation_Revised_2019_.

is better to make oneself a eunuch than to desirously rage after unlawful sexual unions.”⁶⁶⁷

These examples highlight the extreme lengths that some ascetics would go to in order to combat sexual temptation. They also demonstrate that other ascetics, at least in their literary representation, saw amputation or mutilation of body parts, most obviously, the genitals as an integral means of allaying sexual desire and ensuring the ascetic did not fall into sin.⁶⁶⁸ The idea of corporeal mutilation or amputation as a way of combatting sexual temptation has its roots in some of the earliest Christian writings, found in the synoptic gospels. In the Synoptic tradition, there is an exhortation to rid ourselves of specific body parts which caused us to sin.⁶⁶⁹

If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell (Mk 9:43-47).

Whilst the exorcising of a body part is depicted as more beneficial than the alternative of falling into sin, it also implies that in exorcising specific body parts, which are the location of the sin, the sin itself will cease.⁶⁷⁰ This is an idea that we will return to later in the chapter.

⁶⁶⁷ Philo, *On the Worse Loving to Attack the Better*, quoted by Origen, *Commentary on Matthew* XV 3 (Gohl).

⁶⁶⁸ This notion is featured in Antonius' version of the Life of Simeon. When his self-inflicted wound is discovered, Simeon cries out, telling his fellow monks that he should not be judged for what he has done, for "all injustice and covetousness are in me, for I am an ocean of sins." This greatly upsets the monks and the abbot, and leads to the abbot asking Simeon how at eighteen years old he could have sinned to such an extent that he would need to treat his body in such way, and Simeon responds saying "'The prophet David said: 'Behold, I was brought forth in iniquities, and in sins did my mother conceive me.' I have been clothed the same as everyone else.'" Simeon appears to suggest that the body is inherently sinful." (Antonius, *The Life and Daily Mode of Living of the Blessed Simeon* 8 in Robert Doran (trans.), *The Lives of Simeon Stylites* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1992, 90.

⁶⁶⁹ Matt. 18:6-8; Mk 9:42-45; Luke 17:1-4.

⁶⁷⁰ Darrell Bock, *Mark* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 264 and Moss, *Divine Bodies*, 45-65.

The notion of castration, of cutting away a part of the body appears to be tied up in discussions around sexuality and sin, certainly in the ascetic literature examined here. Whilst the actual physical act of self-castration was alarming to those who criticised its practice, the figure of the eunuch as a metaphorical, “spiritual” eunuch was employed as a symbol of chastity, as “the male equivalent of the untouched female virgin.”⁶⁷¹ Athenagoras in an apology addressed to Marcus Aurelius thus says,

You might find among us, both men and women, growing old and unmarried in the hope of living more closely with God. But if remaining in virginity and the state of a eunuch draws one nearer to God, while the indulgence of carnal thoughts and desires leads one away.⁶⁷²

Thus the “eunuch” could be employed using contemporary vernacular, and in line with scripture, to demonstrate in the act of chastity, a closeness to God and thus a moral superiority and integrity. Therefore, despite being expelled from the monastery, and in terms of Greco-Roman masculinity, considered as no longer virile and unmanly, in his act of self-castration, Simeon is elevated above the abbot and other monks, he is ascribed a moral integrity and spirituality which places him in a superior moral position.

Ideas around amputation, castration, and mutilation of the genitals however are tied up in a more complex understanding of the body, eschatology and soteriology. Lack of evidence means that we cannot know for sure what those Christians who opted for a literal understanding of becoming a eunuch really believed, but as Matthew Kuefler has suggested, we can go some way to reconstructing their thoughts through the counterarguments of their opponents. Kuefler concludes therefore that

⁶⁷¹ Daniel F. Caner, “The Practice of Self-Castration in Early Christianity,” *Vigilae Christianae* 51 (1997): 401.

⁶⁷² Athenagoras, *Leg. pro. Christ* 33,2-4 ed. B. Pouderon (SC 379; Paris 1992) 196-98 translated by Caner, “The Practice of Self-Castration,” 400.

In some Christian circles, self-castration may have expressed a belief in the ultimate human restoration to original existence as angels, a return from multiplicity in male and female to unity in androgyny. In other Christian circles self-castration may have been seen as the return to sexual innocence such as existed before the fall of Adam and Eve and thus to deeper intimacy with God. It is also possible that Christian self-made eunuchs saw in their actions a means to realize the gender and social ambiguity of earliest Christianity... As eunuchs they were able to embody not only the “no more male or female” in Christ⁶⁷³

In this way, ideas of eunuchs, castration and amputation, situated within Greco-Roman concepts of anthropology, gender and sexuality could be employed to talk about key theological, protological, and eschatological ideas.

The notion that eunuchs could embody the gender ambiguity of such texts as Galatians 3:27-28 can be seen in the wealth of modern research on female saints “becoming male.” The transcending of gender roles as a model of female sanctity has been widely written about in recent scholarship on female saints.⁶⁷⁴ This desexualisation is complex “The creative tension...between ‘manly’ piety and female sexual identity is consistently fostered on an intertextual level by the interplay of competing cultural discourses about gender.”⁶⁷⁵ It could take a variety of explicit and implicit forms both material and corporeal,

⁶⁷³ Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch*, 264.

⁶⁷⁴ See for example John Anson, “The Female Transvestite in Early Monasticism: The Origin and Development of a Motif,” *Viator* 5 (1974): 1-32; David Brakke, “The Lady Appears: Materializations of ‘Woman’ in Early Monastic Literature,” pages 25-39 in Dale B. Martin and Patricia Cox Miller (eds.), *The Cultural Turn in Late Ancient Studies: Gender, Asceticism, and Historiography* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); Castelli, “I Will Make Mary Male,” 29-49; Gillian Cloke, *This Female Man of God: Women and Spiritual Power in the Patristic Age, AD 350-450* (London: Routledge); L. Stephanie Cobb, *Dying to be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr Texts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Stephen J. Davis, “Crossed Texts, Crossed Sex: Intertextuality and Gender in Early Christian Legends of Holy Women Disguised as Men,” *J ECS* 10 (2002): 1-36; Hannah Hunt, “Transvestite Women Saints: Performing Asceticism in Late Antiquity,” *RIHA Journal* 0225 (2019): no page numbers; Evelyn Patagean, “L’histoire de la femme déguisée en moine et l’évolution de la sainteté féminine à Byzance,” *Studi Medievali* 3 (1976): 597-623; Alicia Spencer-Hall and Blake Gutt (eds.), *Trans and Genderqueer Subjects in Medieval Hagiography* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021); Blosson Stefaniw, “Becoming Men, Staying Women: Gender Ambivalence in Christian Apocryphal Texts and Contexts,” *Feminist Theology* 18 (2010): 341-355; Kristi Upson-Saia, *Early Christian Dress: Gender, Virtue, and Authority* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 59-103.

⁶⁷⁵ Stephen J. Davis, “Crossed Texts, Crossed Sex: Intertextuality and Gender in Early Christian Legends of Holy Women Disguised as Men,” *J ECS* 10 (2002): 31-2.

as well as simply in how a writer spoke about his subject. In Porphyry's (d. c. 305) letter to his wife, Marcella he writes, "Neither trouble yourself much whether you are male or female in body, nor look upon yourself as a woman, for I did not approach you as such. Flee all that is womanish in the soul, as though you had a man's body" (Porphyry, *To his Wife Marcella* 33 [trans. Alice Zimmern]).⁶⁷⁶

The apocryphal acts depict women in their rejection of sexual intercourse and sexual desire being referred to as men. For example, in a speech to Maximilla, urging her to remain "chaste and pure, holy, unsullied," Andrew exhorts Maximilla, calling her "wise man" to stand firm, saying "Do not be overcome by the inferior. You whom I entreat as a man..."⁶⁷⁷ In the *Lausiac History*, Palladius explains that he will tell his readers about "God-inspired matrons, who with masculine and perfect mind have successfully accomplished the struggles of virtuous asceticism."⁶⁷⁸ Referring later to Melania the Elder, as "the female man of God" and to Olympias saying she should be considered not as a "'woman' but rather [a]'manly creature.' She is a man in everything but body."⁶⁷⁹

Further, in the topos of the transvestite monk, found in sources from the fifth to seventh centuries, female-born saints, are disguised as monks and often described as, or identified as, eunuchs.⁶⁸⁰ In one such example, a man called Eugenios decided to enter a

⁶⁷⁶ Porphyry, *To his Wife Marcella* 33, trans. Alice Zimmern (London: George Redway, 1896), 39-59.

⁶⁷⁷ *Acts of Andrew* 41 in J.K. Elliot (trans.), *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 231-239.

⁶⁷⁸ Palladius, *Lausiac History* preface, trans W. K. Lowther Clarke in *Palladius: The Lausiac History* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1918).

⁶⁷⁹ Palladius, *An Historical Dialogue of Palladius, Bishop of Helenopolis, with Theodore, Deacon of Rome, on the Life of the Blessed John Chrysostom, Bishop of Constantinople* 16, trans. Robert T. Myer, *Palladius Dialogue on the Life of St John Chrysostom* (New York: Newman Press, 1985), 105.

⁶⁸⁰ Davis lists: Anastasia (Anastasios), Apolinaria (Dorotheos), Athanasia, Eugenia (Eugenios), Euphrosyne (Smaragdus), Hilaria (Hilarion), Mary (Marinos), Matrona (Babylas), Pelegia (Pelagius), Susannah (John), and

monastery and wished to take his devout daughter Mary with him. He describes Mary as “female,” and herein lay the problem, for Eugenios states that it was through “the members of your sex that the devil wages war on the servants of God.”⁶⁸¹ Following his scathing remarks on her gender, Mary immediately defeminises herself, cut off her hair, dressed like a man, and changed her name to Marinos whereupon she was able to enter the monastery with her father where the monks “considered her to be a eunuch, for she was beardless and of delicate voice.”⁶⁸² In another example, Hilaria’s body is both visibly *and* internally changed and defeminised,

When they saw the girl beardless amongst the brethren, they called her Hilarion the eunuch, for there were many men in such a condition. Her breasts were not like the breasts of other women, on account of her ascetic practices they were withered; and she was not subjected to the illness of women, for God had ordained it in this way (*The Story of the Two Daughters of King Zeno* (Coptic text) [trans. A. J Wensinck]).⁶⁸³

After dressing in the clothes of a bishop and running away, Pelagia, the Harlot was unrecognisable as the famed “monk and eunuch,” Pelagius, with her changed face and body and eyes that had sunk into her face “like a great pit.”⁶⁸⁴

This focus on the state of the body is also an important part of the description of the born-female transvestite monk. As already mentioned, Hilaria’s breasts had “withered” and she no longer menstruated, and Pelagia was unrecognisable, emaciated by fasting, with eyes sunken inwards. Mary of Egypt’s body was described as “black as if scorched by the

Theodora (Theodorus). Stephen J. Davis, “Crossed Texts, Crossed Sex: Intertextuality and Gender in Early Christian Legends of Holy Women Disguised as Men,” *J ECS* 10 (2002): 1-36.

⁶⁸¹ *The Life and Conduct of the Blessed Mary who Changed Her Name to Marinos* 3, trans. Nicholas Conostas in Alice-May Talbot (ed.), *Holy Women of Byzantium: Ten Saints’ Lives in English Translation* (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 2006):7-12.

⁶⁸² *The Life and Conduct of the Blessed Mary* 5 (trans. Conostas).

⁶⁸³ *The Story of the Two Daughters of King Zeno* (Coptic text), (trans. A. J Wensinck in *Legends of Eastern Saints Volume II: The Legend of Hilaria* (Leyden: Brill, 1913), 9.

⁶⁸⁴ Deacon James, *The Life of Saint Pelagia the Harlot* XIV (trans. Benedicta Ward, 74.)

fierce heat of the sun,” and having lived for years in a swamp infested with mosquitos, Apollinaria’s body was “like the shell of a tortoise,” hard, dry and rough.⁶⁸⁵ In the drying, shrivelling and hardening of the female ascetic’s body, her corporal nature becomes more like that of a man, her breasts are “withered,” her body is hardened. By drying up her body, she is no longer reproductive, experiencing no menstruation, her breasts shrivelled, her generative nature has been fully repressed, she was unrecognisably feminine. As Teresa Shaw notes

If we consider the protological association of sexuality, death, and the fall with the female, or with gender differentiation and hierarchy, then for a female ascetic to mortify her body to the point of unrecognised femaleness, even to the point of sterility, is truly a return to paradise.⁶⁸⁶

She is no longer procreative nor subject (or the cause of) to sexual desire. She is equivalent in many respects to the eunuch that she is mistaken for, on the gender continuum, she is no longer feminine, but neither is she masculine.

The idea of transcending gender has its roots in the very earliest of Christian literature. Paul had insisted that there was no more male nor female in his letter to the Galatians.⁶⁸⁷ It also has its roots not only in theories of eschatological fulfilment but also of a return to the original primal androgyny. The *Gospel according to Thomas* depicts a transcendence of sexuality and connected with it of gender in which we will become like children.⁶⁸⁸

Jesus said to them, “When you make the two one, and make the inside like the outside and the outside like the inside and the upper like the lower; and you make

⁶⁸⁵ Sophronius, *The Life of St. Mary of Egypt* VII, trans Benedicta Ward in *Harlots of the Desert: A Study of Repentance in Early Monastic Sources* (Kalamazoo, MI.: Cistercian Publications, 1987): 35-56. *Vita Apollinariae* (Drescher, 157) (trans. Shaw, *Burden*, 245).

⁶⁸⁶ Shaw, *Burden*, 246.

⁶⁸⁷ *Galatians* 3:28.

⁶⁸⁸ See also Mark 10:15 and Matthew 18:3-4.

the male and the female be a single one, with the male no longer being male and the female no longer female; when you make eyes in the place of an eye and a hand in the place of a hand and a foot in the place of a foot, an image in the place of an image— then you will enter the kingdom” (*The Gospel according to Thomas* 22 [trans. Ehrman and Pleše]).⁶⁸⁹

This gender ambiguity is further reflected in Jesus’ response to Simon Peter’s later dismissal of Mary,

Jesus said, “Look, I am going to guide her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every female who makes herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven” (*The Gospel according to Thomas* 114 [trans. Ehrman and Pleše]).

In these sayings, Jesus’ disciples are required to become like infants, to transcend their sexuality and their gender.

This association of transcendence of gender and sexuality with being child-like, is further emphasised with a theme of being naked and the innocence of children and their unashamedness at being naked. The disciples ask Jesus, “When will you appear to us and when shall we see you?” and Jesus says to them,

“When you strip naked without being ashamed and take your clothes and place them under your feet like little children and stamp on them, then you will see the Son of the Living One, and you will not be afraid.”⁶⁹⁰

These concepts of nakedness and child-like innocence also resonate with the depiction of Adam and Eve before the Fall in the garden of Eden who “were both naked and were not ashamed.”⁶⁹¹ Further, they imply that a certain androgyny or asexuality is a requirement for salvation.⁶⁹²

⁶⁸⁹ *The Gospel according to Thomas* 22 trans. Bart Ehrman and Zlatko Pleše in *The Apocryphal Gospels: Texts and Translations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁶⁹⁰ Gospel of Thomas 37 (trans. Bart Ehrman and Zlatko Pleše in *The Apocryphal Gospels: Texts and Translations*, Oxford University Press, on page 319

⁶⁹¹ Genesis 2:25.

⁶⁹² In John Martens study of sexuality in early Christian Syrian literature, he views sexuality, as presented in these Syriac texts as a “disability at the heart of human existence.” He notes that sexuality was viewed, at least within many examples of the extant early Syrian Christian literature, as something which posed an impediment to salvation, and which must therefore be healed (John W. Martens, “The Disability Within: Sexual Desire as

Later Syriac theologians described the original human beings in the same manner; genderless, androgynous and asexual. Before the creation of Eve, Ephrem describes Adam as “both one and two; one in that he was man [Adam], two in that he was created male and female.”⁶⁹³ For Aphrahat, sexual differentiation and sexuality were a direct result of the Fall,

And as regards that which I said; that there they shall not take wives, nor is male distinguished from female, our Lord and His Apostles have taught us...For, as for Eve, to spread abroad generation, God took her out from Adam, that she might become the mother of all living; but yet in that world there is no female; even as in heaven also there is no female, nor generation, nor use of concupiscence (Aphrahat, *Demonstration XXII.50.13* [trans. James Barmby *NPNF 2/13:406*]).

Daniel Boyarin has suggested that “the myth of the primal androgyne – that is, an anthropology whereby souls are engendered and only the fallen body is divided into sexes – is thus a dominant structuring metaphor of gender for the early church.”⁶⁹⁴ Whilst eunuchs occasioned unease in part because their gender ambiguity, they also provided a model of gender transcendence which connected the prelapsarian genderless body with the eschatological body and with the corporality of the temporal body. Anna Solevåg identifies something similar in Matthew 19:10-12, which she notes reinterprets the eunuch as a “preferred state, an insider position, rather than a despised category.”⁶⁹⁵ The eunuch in his unrepudative and gender ambiguous state was exceptionally primed both in the present world, as well as in the world to come. These notions of obliteration of gender, of primal androgyny or gender transcendence have been identified by modern scholars in the

Disability in Syriac Christianity” in Christian Laes (ed.) *Disability in Antiquity* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 376-387.)

⁶⁹³ Ephrem, *Commentary on Genesis 2, 12* cited Robert Murray in *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Syriac Tradition* (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 302.

⁶⁹⁴ Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 196.

⁶⁹⁵ Anna Rebecca Solevåg, *Negotiating the Disabled Body: Representations of Disability in Early Christian Texts* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2018), 142.

metamorphoses of the female saints as outlined above, but rarely in examples of male ascetics. I argue that Simeon's self-castration should be read in this paradigm, as an extreme act in which he is rendered androgynous and asexual. He is degendered and his body is penetrated in an ultimate demonstration of his de-masculinisation. A second incident in the text further corroborates this understanding.

Feet as the Site of His Second Wound

Theodoret later narrates a further account of Simeon being wounded. In this account, Theodoret employs parallel phrasing to link what on the face of it are two separate incidents. As a result of standing on his column, a sore developed on Simeon's left foot which oozed pus continually.⁶⁹⁶ As in the first incident, the wound is examined, this time by a deacon,

First he examined his hands, then he put his hand inside the covering of skin and he saw not only his feet but also the grave wound. Seeing and marvelling at the extremity of the wound and learning from him that he had forsaken food, the man came down. Symeon ordered a ladder to be placed against the pillar, and told him to ascend and first examine his hands, and then to place his hand inside his cloak of skins and look at not only his feet but also his severe ulcer. After seeing and marvelling at the excess of the wound and learning from him that he does take food, he came down from there, and coming to me recounted everything (Theodoret, *History of the Monks* XXVI.23, [trans. Price]).

The Greek reads “καὶ ἰδεῖν μὴ τοὺς πόδας μόνον, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὸ χαλεπώτατον ἔλκος.

χαλεπώτατον ἔλκος” can be rendered “hard to bear, painful, sore, or grievous wound, festering wound, sore or ulcer.”⁶⁹⁷ This phrase is employed twice within Theodoret's

⁶⁹⁶ Theodoret, *History of the Monks* XXVI.23, (trans. Price), 170-171.

⁶⁹⁷ The use of the terms wound, ulcer, sore, abscess are synonymous. In the Syriac translation of the bible, the Peshitta, the phrase is found in Luke 16:20-21 to describe the sores on Lazarus' body. Jacob of Serug would use similar phrasing to describe the woman with the flow of blood as wanting to bind up her “great sore,” also referring to it as a painful “ulcer.” On Jacob's use of this phrase see Erin Galgay Walsh, “Giving Voice to Pain: New Testament Narratives of Healing in the Poetry of Jacob of Serugh,” *Journal of Early Christian History* (2022): 96-118 (88). Whilst Doran translates this as a “malignant ulcer,” he notes that literally it says “an ulcer

account of Simeon's life, both here and in chapter 26.5.⁶⁹⁸ It is highly probable that it is a deliberate attempt therefore to refer the reader back to the earlier vignette.⁶⁹⁹ In this manner, Simeon's wounded feet are explicitly associated with the grave or grievous wound of the original self-inflicted castration.⁷⁰⁰

In an alternative version of Simeon's *Life*, by Antonius, the site of Simeon's wound is repositioned to the thigh rather than his foot.

The devil...smote him on his thigh with a pain called a tumour, just as happened to the blessed Job. His thigh grew putrid and accordingly he stood on one foot for two years" (Antonius, *The Life and Daily Mode of Living of the Blessed Simeon* 17 [trans. Doran]).⁷⁰¹

Other scholars have viewed this as a deliberate strategy to draw attention to the divergent sites of the wounds and to emphasise the diametric nature of the wounds.⁷⁰² However, by looking to ancient literature, I demonstrate that both the feet and thighs were employed as euphemisms for the male genitals in a wide range of Greco-Roman and Jewish literature.

of Cheiron" which he says is "perhaps named after the incurable and malignant sore that Cheiron received from his wrestle with the Centaurs," Robert Doran, *The Lives of Simeon Stylites* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1992), 81 §31.

In the story of Chiron, a poison arrow fell from out of a quiver and accidentally struck Chiron's foot. The arrow is tipped with the blood of the Hydra, which subsequently mixed with Chiron's blood and despite tending the wound, the "gnawing poison...soaked into the bones and the whole body (401-404) rendering him in unbearable pain for an incurable wound. Chiron however is immortal and unable to put an end to this pain through death and so struck a bargain with Zeus so that he could end the pain and die in return for Prometheus' freedom.

⁶⁹⁸ It only appears one further time in the whole of Theodoret's extant corpus (Muehlberger, "Simeon and Other Women," 600).

⁶⁹⁹ See Muehlberger, "Simeon and Other Women," 600.

⁷⁰⁰ Muehlberger observes that in several slightly later manuscript editions, an almost imperceptible revision of the text states instead that the bystander sees "not only the feet but also the grave wound there." (In MSS JQG). She sees this as an attempt to redirect the readers' attention away from the "wound" and towards the feet as an alternative wound (Muehlberger, "Simeon and Other Women," 601).

⁷⁰¹ Antonius, *The Life and Daily Mode of Living of the Blessed Simeon* 17 in Robert Doran (trans.), *The Lives of Simeon Stylites* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1992), 94. The Syriac Life does not quite gloss over the details, but it is obvious that his suffering takes a back stage, the account is succinct and to the point. Having bound his feet on top of the pillar, Simeon's feet "ruptured from much standing" and his vertebrae become dislocated because of his constant supplication. (*The Syriac Life of Saint Simeon Stylites* 45 in Robert Doran (trans.), *The Lives of Simeon Stylites* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1992), 129.

⁷⁰² Muehlberger, "Simeon and Other Women," 601.

This synonymous use of somatic parts would explain both Theodoret's depiction of Simeon's second wound as well as account for the repositioning of Simeon's wound in Antonius' account.⁷⁰³ In the following section of this chapter, I explore representations of feet and thighs in ancient literature in order to further demonstrate that the grievous wound observed on Simeon's foot (and thigh) refers back to the initial wound, a castration. The single wound associated with his feet/thigh/genitals should, like Simeon's self-wounding, be seen as representative of a move towards the desired eschatological body, and back to the primal androgyne, thereby emphasising Simeon's non-reproductive and degendered body. This is highlighted when Simeon's body is examined, when the bystander asks, "Are you human or an incorporeal nature?" Just as other writers correlated the transcendence of gender in temporal times with the genderless, angelic life, Simeon's wound situates him in the realm of the angelic.⁷⁰⁴

Feet and Sexuality

The site of Simeon's wound is significant.⁷⁰⁵ In Christine Salazar's treatment of war wounds in Greco-Roman antiquity, she observes that

Even when the authors were rendering actual events...the writing down of such descriptions was the result of a conscious choice between a large number of actual happenings...The inclusion of scenes of wounding in works of essentially non-medical literature was based on the idea that these scenes were a way of representing a heroic idea."⁷⁰⁶

⁷⁰³ On Theodoret's use of figurative and typological language see Derek Krueger, "Typological Figuration in Theodoret of Cyrrhus' Religious History and the Art of Postbiblical Narrative," *JECS* 5 (1997): 393-419.

⁷⁰⁴ Theodoret, *The Life of Saint Simeon Stylites* 23 (trans. Doran), 82.

⁷⁰⁵ On mobility impairments particularly those to the legs and feet see Christian Laes, *Disabilities and the Disabled in the Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 149-167.

⁷⁰⁶ Christine F. Salazar, *The Treatment of War Wounds in Greco-Roman Antiquity* (Leiden: Brill, 2000): 126.

Scholars of hagiographic literature would concur that hagiographic authors made conscious decisions about what to include about their protagonists in their narratives. Saints like all human beings became ill, caught diseases, and died, but what their hagiographers chose to include in their narratives is important, and we should consider what message they intended to deliver in so doing. That all of Simeon's hagiographers chose to include this incident in an account of Simeon's life is significant in itself and warrants further investigation. The specifics of his afflictions, and the somatic part affected are equally worthy of attention. I suggest that Theodoret employs a well-established association of the feet with the genitals. In so doing, I argue that Theodoret connects this wound with Simeon's self-castration and signals a number of important meanings to his audience.

The connection between feet and reproductive organs is prevalent in body metaphors and euphemisms as rhetorical devices within the Hebrew Bible and Near-Eastern literature.⁷⁰⁷ Scott B. Noegel explains that in the Hebrew Bible, euphemisms were employed specifically to avoid reference to death, sex, distasteful things or to avoid negative references to oneself or to God.⁷⁰⁸ Within the Hebrew Bible, a number of metonymies were employed in relation to sexual body parts, frequently employing other related body parts. For the penis we find "hand," "leg," "thigh," "haunch," "knee," and "heel."⁷⁰⁹ In Genesis 24,

⁷⁰⁷ See for example Gwendolyn Leick's study of eroticism and sexuality in Mesopotamian mythology in which she highlights the use of word plays, allusions, and *double entendres*, including the euphemistic use of 'foot' for the penis (Gwendolyn Leick, *Sex and Eroticism in Mesopotamian Literature* (London: Routledge, 2003): 33-34 and 265-66.)

⁷⁰⁸ Scott B. Noegel, "Euphemism in the Hebrew Bible" in *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics Vol 1 A-F* edited by Geoffrey Khan et al (Leiden: Brill, 2013): 869-871. The *Encyclopaedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics* defines euphemism as the "substitution of a word that is unpleasant, offensive, or taboo with another word."

⁷⁰⁹ Isa 57:8; Isa. 7:20; Gen.24:2; Job. 40:17b; Ezek. 7:17; Jer. 13:22. Others include 'flesh' (Lev. 15:2), 'tail' (Job. 40:17a), 'stream' (Ezek. 23:20), 'vessel' (1 Sam. 21.6), 'little' as in little finger (1 Kgs. 12:10) and specifically for testicles 'objects that invoke shame' (Deut. 25.11). For the female genitalia 'navel' (Song 7:3), 'mouth' (Prov. 30:20), 'tongue' (Isa. 57:4) and 'dishonor' (Jer. 13:26) see Noegel, "Euphemism in the Hebrew Bible," 869-70.

“thigh” is employed to refer to the male genitals as the organ of reproduction.⁷¹⁰ We also find the phrase which literally states the persons who “came out of his thigh” but meaning and usually translated as his descendants.⁷¹¹ In Judges, after killing King Eglon, Ehud disappears into the roof chamber, locking the doors behind him. The servants assumed that he was “relieving himself,” literally “He is only covering the feet.”⁷¹² Here, “covering his feet” is widely acknowledged by interpreters to be a reference to urination. Similarly, in 1 Sam. 24:3, translated in the NRSV as “Saul went to relieve himself,” Saul literally goes to “cover his feet” in the cave. In 1 Kings 15:23, King Asa is described in his old age as being “diseased in his feet,” a condition which led to his death. There have been a number of interpretations of this phrase, including medical diagnoses of gout, gangrene, and dropsy, but recent scholarship has scholars considered whether this is a euphemism, a sanitised way of describing some type of disease based in the genitals. Jeremy Schipper notes that “considering Asa’s advanced age...[the] description of an otherwise unspecified genital dysfunction in v. 23b seems plausible.”⁷¹³ Words meaning foot, thigh or leg were employed therefore as a synonym for genitalia in the mundane act of going to the toilet, and possibly to demonstrate genital disease or dysfunction. A further use was in contexts which suggest a sexually motivated use.

We find the same for the female genitals for example, in Deuteronomy “the afterbirth that comes out from between her thighs,” is a euphemism for the female genitals (Deut. 28:57).

⁷¹⁰ Gen. 24:2, 9 and 27:29.

⁷¹¹ Gen. 46:26; Exod. 1:5; Judg. 8:30.

⁷¹² Judges 3:24.

⁷¹³ Jeremy Schipper, “Deuteronomy 24:5 and King Asa’s Foot Disease in 1 Kings 15:23b,” *JBL* 128 (2009): 643-648. Schipper compares this to 1 Kgs. 1:1-4 in which David, old and advanced in years, could not “get warm,” and so his servants determined to find a virgin for him. Despite finding a beautiful, young Shunammite woman, Abishag to attend and serve the king, he “did not know her sexually.” Again, a polite way of referring to some problem, issue or disease related to his genitals.

Andy Warren-Rothlin notes that “when the context very strongly suggests sexuality, even a very clear reference to the feet must be understood as deliberate double-entendre.”⁷¹⁴ In a scene from the Book of Ruth, Naomi instructs Ruth to

Wash and anoint yourself, and put on your best clothes and go down to the threshing floor, but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. When he lies down, observe the place where he lies; then go and uncover his feet and lie down, and he will tell you what to do (Ruth 3:3-4).⁷¹⁵

Several commentators suggest that in this context, the reference to feet here should be interpreted as a euphemistic expression for the penis.⁷¹⁶ The erotic nature of feet, highlighted in many cultures, both modern and ancient, was also employed in the literature of ancient Greece.⁷¹⁷ Daniel B. Levine for example notes Sappho’s use of the erotic nature of feet and footsteps, in particular, when she longs for Anaktoria, in an erotic image which focuses equally on her face and her footsteps.⁷¹⁸ When women were described as desirable, they were frequently hailed as being of fine or slender ankle.⁷¹⁹ Greek tragedy and comedy from the sixth century BCE onwards, provides a number of examples where the

⁷¹⁴ Andy Warren-Rothlin, “Euphemisms and Bible Translations,” in Geoffery Khan (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics* (Leiden: Brill, 2013): 866.

⁷¹⁵ See also Judg. 5:27 and 2 Sam. 11:8-11; a Sam 25:41; Prov. 7:11.

⁷¹⁶ See for example Jack M. Sasson, *Ruth a New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995): 67 and Phyllis Trible, “Ruth in the Hebrew Bible” in Carol L. Meyers (ed.), *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal / Deuterocanonical Books and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000): 147 and Andy Warren-Rothlin, “Euphemisms and Bible Translations,” in Geoffery Khan (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 866.

⁷¹⁷ On the erotic nature of both feet and shoes see P.H. Benamou, “Erotic and Sado-masochistic foot and shoe,” *Med Chir Pied* 22 (2006): 43-64; Jutta Jain-Neubauer, *Feet & Footwear in Indian Culture* (Toronto: Bata Shoe Museum in association with Mapin Publishing, 2000); C. McDowell, *Shoes: Fashion and Fantasy* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1994); Valerie Steele, *Fetish: Fashion, Sex and Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); William A. Rossi, *The Sex Life of the Foot and Shoe* (New York: Saturday Review Press, 1976). On the erotic nature of feet in antiquity see Daniel B. Levine, “Epaton Bama (‘Her Lovely Footstep’): The Erotics of Feet in Ancient Greece,” in Douglas L. Cairns (ed.), *Body Language in the Greek and Roman Worlds* (Swansea: The Classical Press of Wales, 2005), 55-72. Richard Caldwell links the modern concept of “foot fetish” in psychoanalysis to an “unconscious association between foot and phallus” which is confirmed in Greek literature (Richard S. Caldwell, *The Origin of the Gods: A Psychoanalytic Study of Greek Theogonic Myth*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 178.

⁷¹⁸ Levine, “Epaton Bama (‘Her Lovely Footstep’), 55-56.

⁷¹⁹ For examples see Levine, “Epaton Bama,” 56-57.

foot pertains in some way to both male and female genitalia. In Euripides' *Medea*, Aegeus tells Medea "Do not let the wineskin's salient foot untie..." ie don't get drunk and have sex "...until you come to hearth and home again."⁷²⁰ In Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, the Magistrate speaks of unfaithful wives, using the erotic association of the foot and shoes

Another husband says this to a shoemaker, a teenager sporting no boyish cock: "Shoemaker, about my wife's tootsy: the thong is squeezing her pinky winky, where she's tender. So why don't you drop in on her some lunchtime and loosen it up so there's more play down there?" (Aristophanes, *Lysistrata* 414-419 [trans. Henderson]).

Aristophanes here correlates the feet and toes with a woman's vagina.

In his psychoanalytic study of Greek myth, R. S. Caldwell examines the symbolic significance of feet in Greek myth, recognising the association between foot and phallus. Caldwell highlights an underlying connection between the Greek god, Hephaistos' disability, his lameness, and his impotence and sexual failure.⁷²¹ Classicists have observed that "a disproportionate number of figures in Greek mythology were either lame, like Hephaestus and Oedipus, or met death through a leg wound, as did Achilles, Paris, Cheiron, and Eurydice."⁷²² In D. Felton's analysis of thigh wounds in Greco-Roman epic and historiography, she notes that it is not uncommon to find a range of wounded body parts,

⁷²⁰ Euripides, *Medea* 679 (trans. David Kovacs).

⁷²¹ Richard Caldwell, *The Origins of the Gods: A Psychoanalytic Study of Greek Theogonic Myth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989): 177-178. Caldwell also demonstrates that from the stem *ped-* comes the word *pedion* meaning 'plain' ie the ground on which one can walk (as opposed to marshland or mountainous land) and *pedion* was used as a metaphor for the female genitals, see Aristophanes description of the Boeotian woman as the "beautiful *pedion*" in Aristophanes, *Lysistrata* 89 translated by Henderson as "...with all her lush bottomland...Indeed, and with her bush most elegantly pruned." This also relates in significance to the use of the word *leimon* (meadow, ie uncultivated ground) as a metaphor for "virgin female genitals" (see Euripides, *Kyklops* 171). Caldwell highlights the lingering use of this symbolic language in English language and customs, for example the phrase "virgin territory" and the practice of tying old shoes to the wedding car following a marriage service. On the Hephaestus myth and disability see Sara Deris, "Examining the Hephaestus Myth through a Disability Studies Perspective," *Prandium: The Journal of Historical Studies* 2 (2013): 11-18.

⁷²² P.L. Hays, *The Limping Hero: Grotesques in Literature* (New York, New York University Press, 1971), 3.

but that thigh wounds were surprisingly rare. Felton demonstrates that thigh wounds in Greco-Roman myth, epic and historiography, were utilised as a euphemistic or metaphoric trope which signified castration or impotence. This impotence could be symbolic of political or spiritual weakness, but also physical, often employed as an act of foreshadowing, in which a metaphorical castration through the wounded thigh portends either a lack of virility and heroic status and / or the actual impending loss of male heirs. These wounds are frequently employed in a folkloric motif known as the “mutilated hero,” in which “a cultural reality – a significant war injury – can become a literary metaphor for impotence or castration.”⁷²³ Felton ascribes this use of thigh wounds in such a manner to the ancient belief that semen was produced in the marrow of the thigh (amongst other places throughout the body) as well as the propinquity of the thigh to the genitals. Felton suggests therefore that any wound to the thigh or any injury which resulted in lameness would signal a loss of virility, sterility, or impotence.

An interesting parallel to Simeon’s initial wound can be found in the wounding of Menelaus in Homer’s *Iliad*. Menelaus is wounded on his thigh, near the groin by an arrow and immediately dark blood flowed from the wound like “When a woman stains ivory with scarlet...even so, Menelaus, were your thighs stained with blood, your shapely thighs and your legs and your fair ankles beneath” (Homer, *Iliad* 4.135-40 [trans. Murray]).

As the blood flows down his legs, Homer draws attention to Menelaus’ shapely thighs and fair ankles. In his superficial wound and the act of bleeding, Menelaus is feminised.

⁷²³ D. Felton, “Thigh Wounds in Homer and Virgil: Cultural Reality and Literary Metaphor,” in Arum Park (ed.), *Resemblance and Reality in Greek Thought* (London: Routledge, 2017): 239-258 (239). See also D. Felton, “The Motif of the ‘Mutilated Hero’ in Herodotus,” *Phoenix* 68 (2014): 47-61.

Norman Simms suggests that this passage demonstrates a shocking gender reversal in which “Menelaus has a flow of blood that is compared to that of a woman’s: in other words, menstrual blood, in the traditional designation of the female as the being who bleeds without being wounded.”⁷²⁴

Through a multifaceted simile Homer compares Menelaus to female workers, focuses on the excess of blood flowing from Menelaus’ body, and highlights the feminine nature of his legs and ankles. Despite the wound not being fatal, those who observe the bleeding are horrified, and even the warrior Agamemnon shudders at the sight.⁷²⁵ Simms argues that

When Menelaus’s bloody wound is properly observed, it calls attention to itself as a mock castration or circumcision. The joke from Athena is to push the arrow down below his belt and then make it protrude as though he were sexually aroused, at the same time as it makes him bleed like a woman in her flowers.⁷²⁶

Despite being wounded in the action of war, the wound feminises Menelaus, and he becomes impotent, less virile and loses his heroic status.

If we read Theodoret’s depiction of Simeon’s wounded “foot” as synonymic for the “wounding” of the genitals, then the first point to note is that this would account for the difference between Theodoret and Antonius’ versions in which the location of the wound was transferred to the thigh. Both the thigh and the foot are euphemisms and therefore are synonymous with the genitals and with each other. Just as the Theodoret’s vignette which depicts Simeon’s self-wounding, this wounded foot in line with other Greco-Roman texts, is symbolic of castration and physical impotence and functions as a means of signalling

⁷²⁴ Norman Simms, “The Healing of Aeneas and Menelaus: Wound-Healers in Ancient Greek and Classical Roman Medicine,” https://www.geocities.ws/psychohistory2001/Healing_of_Aeneas.html.

⁷²⁵ Homer, *Iliad* 4.148 (A. T. Murray, LCL 170:174-175).

⁷²⁶ Simms, “The Healing of Aeneas and Menelaus,” no page numbers.

Simeon's loss of virility and demasculinisation. In Simeon's case though, this does not equate to a loss of heroic status, rather his loss of virility enhances it. This understanding of the text becomes even more apparent if we turn to a slightly later account of the same incident. Jacob of Serug's *Homily of Simeon Stylite* which was written about half a century after Theodoret's account. In his homily, Jacob employs the trope of the mutilated hero: his hero, Simeon is wounded in battle against Satan and receives a wound in his foot which also symbolises castration and impotence.

Jacob of Serug

Little is known of the life of Jacob of Serug (c.451-521 CE), but his prolific literary works survive with his extant corpus including almost 400 metrical homilies, six prose homilies and 42 letters and other works including Lives of holy men.⁷²⁷ We do know that he was a monk, priest and later Bishop of Batnan in the region of Serug and that he was involved in the theological debates following the highly contentious Council of Chalcedon in 451CE. Jacob's poetic homilies reflect corporeal themes, such as the body in pain.⁷²⁸ As Erin Galgay Walsh has demonstrated, in his homilies on women, Jacob "Centres the listener's attention to the physical pain, emotional distress, and the social implications of the bodily conditions of the biblical characters."⁷²⁹ Galgay Walsh shows that multiple layers of meaning are woven throughout the narratives. In particular, the embodied experience of pain acts as a canvas

⁷²⁷ See Roger Akhrass, "A List of Homilies of Mar Jacob of Seugh," *Syriac Orthodox Patriarchal Journal* 53 (2015): 87-161. This extant corpus is thought to be only about half of the original 763 homilies he wrote during his lifetime.

⁷²⁸ For example, in Homily 169 on the woman with a bent spine from Luke 13:10-17 and Homily 170 and on the woman with the flow of blood.

⁷²⁹ Erin Galgay Walsh, "Giving Voice to Pain: New Testament Narratives of Healing in the Poetry of Jacob of Serugh," *Journal of Early Christian History* (2022): 96-118 (96).

on which Jacob draws attention to the symbolic value of corporal suffering as a vehicle to address soteriological, theological and social issues.

Galgay Walsh's observation is certainly true of another surviving homily which focuses on Simeon. Jacob's homily addresses three specific aspects of Simeon's life: the pillar as the locus of Simeon's battle against Satan, his wounded and festering foot and finally Simeon's death.⁷³⁰ Omitting the rope incident from his narrative, much of the homily is taken up with the episode of Simeon's foot. This account is presented as a cosmic battle against Satan and his forces who appear in the guise of animals to do battle against him.⁷³¹ Despite the attack being waged against him, Simeon remained steadfast, continuing to stand atop his column. What follows is a scuffle between Satan and Simeon. Satan attempts to grab Simeon, who alludes capture, slipping from Satan's grasp, and hurling him onto the platform and then trampling on his neck. While Satan is trapped, he retaliates by biting Simeon on the foot, but Simeon kicks him away as if he was a dog and throws him from the column. Satan is shamed and embarrassed by this turn of events and observing that Simeon continued to remain steadfast, attempted one last attack in which

He crippled him, so that he would leave off his field of labor without bringing it to completion. His foot developed a gangrenous putrescent ulcer, and harsh pain came and went through all his body. And fearful pains of death seized him, but he endured them. For he did not murmur, nor was he hindered from his labor (Jacob of Serug, *Simeon the Stylite* 655 (trans. Harvey)).

⁷³⁰ For a detailed summary of these key events see Susan Ashbrook Harvey, "Jacob of Serug, Homily on Simeon the Stylite: Introduction" in Vincent L. Wimbush (ed.), *Ascetic Behaviour in Greco-Roman Antiquity: A Sourcebook* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990):15-17.

⁷³¹ Jacob of Serug, *Homily on Simeon the Stylite* 651-652, in Susan Ashbrook Harvey (trans.), "Jacob of Serug, Homily on Simeon the Stylite," in Vincent L. Wimbush (ed.), *Ascetic Behaviour in Greco-Roman Antiquity: A Sourcebook* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 17-28.

This infection “Grew strong and acted mightily on the holy one his flesh decayed and his foot stood exposed. He lifted his voice and the angels marvelled at his fortitude, while he sang with the harp of David on the pillar, ‘My foot stands straight and does not bend.’”

(Jacob of Serug, *Simeon the Stylite* 655 [trans. Ashbrook Harvey]).

Simeon remained resolute, goading Satan, telling him to

Increase the torment like a craftsman for good gold so that I will grow bright, and as for you, your craftsmanship will have been exhausted. Strike me not only on the feet if you can: strike all my body and continue without boasting...Do not think that I am hindered by your blows, for I will not cease from the labor to which I have applied myself...strike hard, as you did Job, whose companion I am. Your scourging is feeble and your struggles weak and your battle is slack (Jacob of Serug, *Simeon the Stylite* 656 [trans. Ashbrook Harvey]).

In response, Satan increases Simeon’s suffering, “And he watched his foot as it rotted and its flesh decayed. And the foot stood bare like a tree beautiful with branches. He saw that there was nothing on it but tendons and bones” (Jacob of Serug, *Simeon the Stylite* 657 [trans. Ashbrook Harvey]).

Amputation

Jacob then depicts something unique from the hagiographic sources of Simeon’s life. After watching Satan’s bite turn gangrenous, Simeon amputated his own foot,

He saw that the wearied heifer could not bear the yoke, and he sought to unhitch her from her work... The blessed man did a marvellous deed that has never been done before: he cut off his foot that he would not be hindered from his work.⁷³² Who would not weep at having his foot cut off at its joint?” (Jacob of Serug, *Simeon the Stylite* [trans. Ashbrook Harvey], 657.

⁷³² This account resembles Herodotus’ story of Hegesistratus who amputates his foot in order to escape from the stocks in which he is imprisoned (Herodotus, *The Persian Wars* Book IX.37 (trans. A.D. Godley, LCL: 120:202-205).

In a vivid description of the aftereffects of this amputation, Jacob tells us that “As Satan was wallowing in blood and sprinkled with pus and covered in mucus, and the rocks were spattered, the just man nevertheless sang. While a branch of his body was cut off from its tree, his face was exuding delightful dew and comely glory” (Jacob of Serug, *Simeon the Stylite* [trans. Ashbrook Harvey], 657).

This depiction of amputation as a result of infection is consistent with ancient sources which demonstrate an understanding that body parts might sometimes require amputation to halt the spread of infection.⁷³³ Galen wrote that

Whenever some part is made gangrenous and it can be amputated, like a finger, or a foot, or the extremity of an arm, we do not put up with bearing this uselessly and carrying it around like an unnatural burden (Galen, *Method of Medicine* I [trans. Johnston and Horsley]).⁷³⁴

Further, amputation was in some cases seen as a means of self-preservation which patients themselves could opt for to preserve their own life.

But if you will reflect that for the sake of being cured the sick sometimes have their bones scraped and removed, and their veins pulled out, and that sometimes members are amputated which could not be left without causing destruction to the whole body, you will allow yourself to be convinced of this as well,—that ills are sometimes for the good of those to whom they come (Seneca, *On Providence* [trans. Basore]).

These medicalized understandings of amputation were employed in ancient writing in a variety of metaphorical and rhetorical ways.⁷³⁵

⁷³³ On how to perform an amputation see Celsus, *On Medicine* Book VII.33 (W.G. Spencer, LCL). On amputation in the Greco-Roman world see Christian Laes, *Disabilities and the Disabled in the Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 159-60.

⁷³⁴ Galen, *Method of Medicine* I (trans. Ian Johnston and G. H. R. Horsley, LCL 516:108-109).

⁷³⁵ On amputation metaphors and exile see Eric Fournier, “Amputation Metaphors and the Rhetoric of Exile: Purity and Pollution in Late Antique Christianity in Julia Hillner, Jakob Enberg and Jörg Ulrich (eds.), *Clerical Exile in Late Antiquity* (New York: Peter Lang, 2016), 231-249. See also Claudian, *Against Eutropius* Book II. 10-19 (trans. M. Platnauer, LCL 135:184-187) and the *Acts of the Council of Chalcedon* 3.98, translated by R. Price and M. Gaddis, *The Acts of the Council of Chalcedon* (TTH: Liverpool, 2005), 111. On amputation and salvation see Moss, *Divine Bodies*, 45-65.

As previously mentioned, in the Synoptic tradition, there is an exhortation to amputate specific body parts which could cause us to sin.⁷³⁶ Here, I consider the specific use of the “foot” in this saying. In scholarly exegesis of Mark 9:42-48, Rudolph Pesch suggested that the triad hand, foot and eye in a Jewish context might represent the key sites of sinful influence in a person.⁷³⁷ Will Demig and Adela Yarbro Collins in their commentaries both posit a sexual context for each of the offences associated with the amputation of body parts in this passage. This is elucidated when considered alongside a parallel text, the rabbinic tractate *Niddah* from the Babylonian Talmud,

R. Eleazar said, ‘What does Scripture mean in saying, “Your hands are full of blood” [Isa 1.15]? - These are they who commit adultery with the hand.’
It was taught in the school of R. Ishmael, ““You shall not commit adultery” [Exod 20.14] means there shall be in you no adultery, neither with the hand nor with the foot (m. Nid. Page 13b [trans. Demig])⁷³⁸

The text continues “In the case of men it is to be cut off [*m. Nid. 2:1*]... R. Tarfon said, 'A hand touching his genitals is to be cut off, his hand upon his stomach!' . . . 'It is good that his stomach will be split and he will not go down to the pit of destruction” (M. Nid. Page 13b [trans. Demig]).⁷³⁹

Based on the parallels between the texts, Demig suggests that the sexual offence alluded to with reference to the hand is that of masturbation or “adultery with the hand.” An offense condemned by the rabbis due to the loss of semen, and therefore the loss of potential life.⁷⁴⁰ If this is the case, then use of the foot refers to “adultery of the foot” and employs

⁷³⁶ Mark 9:42-48; Matt 18:6-8; Luke 17:1-4.

⁷³⁷ Rudolf Pesch, *Das Markusevangelium* (Freiburg: Herder, 1989), 115.

⁷³⁸ M. Nid. Page 13b cited in Will Demig, “Mark 9. 42-10.12, Matthew 5.27-32, and B. Nid. 13b: A First Century Discussion of Male Sexuality,” *New Test. Stud.* 36 (1990): 130-141 (133).

⁷³⁹ M. Nid. Page 13b cited in Demig, “Mark 9,” 133.

⁷⁴⁰ b. Nid. 13a [section c]; 13b [section a]), Demig, “Mark 9,” 133.

the euphemistic “foot” to mean “adultery with the penis” or rather adultery involving sexual intercourse.⁷⁴¹ This understanding of the association of somatic parts to sexual acts in the Markan text is perhaps corroborated by its parallel in Matthew in which it has a more explicitly sexual context.

Many scholars have understood these injunctions as punitive metaphor, which “contrast the horrifying prospect of punitive amputation with the severity of post-mortem annihilation.”⁷⁴² There are however, also examples as demonstrated earlier in this chapter, found in both literature about Christian eunuchs and in ascetic literature which depict examples of male genital amputation, disease and mutilation not as punitive, but rather as prophylactic action against sexual desire. The excising of a body part is depicted as an action less severe than facing the eschatological consequences of allowing the body to fall into sin. If as I suggest “foot” was understood as having a euphemistic meaning, then when Simeon amputates his foot, he does so to prophylactically to avoid the possibility of gangrenous sin contaminating his whole body, and in this case the sin is sexual. He therefore removes the specific source of sin.

Resurrection and Integrity

Despite the removal of the source of sin though, Jacob is keen to depict this situation as a temporary respite and that when it came to the resurrection, Simeon’s body would in fact be whole again. In the text therefore, in a bizarre passage, in which Simeon converses with, and sings to his own foot, he is keen to assure his audience that this amputation will only

⁷⁴¹ The offence of the eyes could therefore allude to looking lustfully at someone. See Demig, “Mark 9. 42,” 134.

⁷⁴² Moss, *Divine Bodies*, 46.

last during Simeon's temporal life, and they (Simeon and his foot) will be reunited. At the resurrection, his foot will be grafted back onto his body, and he will rise whole to face judgement.

When the "corpse of his foot" is set before him, Simeon offers it comfort, singing "Why are you shaken and grieved since your hope is kept (Ps. 42:5)? For again onto that tree from which you have been cut off you will be grafted. Go, wait for me until I come and do not grieve. For without you I will not rise up on the last day. Whether to the bridal chamber or Gehenna I will walk on you...We will be one when we are resurrected just as we have been, for death or life, for judgement or fire, or for the kingdom, I will not rise up from the grave and leave you (Jacob of Serug, "Simeon the Stylite," 658 [trans. Ashbrook Harvey]).

The eschatological ramifications suggested in this passage are clear, it is imperative that Simeon's body will be whole to face divine judgement.

In the centuries before Jacob wrote his homily, the association of specific body parts with sin was tied up in conversations, debates amid disagreements around the nature of the resurrected body, eschatological theories and soteriology. Whilst passages such as Mark 12:25 and Matthew 19:10-12 appeared to advocate the ineffectuality and redundancy of the genitals in the eschaton, for many the resurrection of the integral body was imperative and Jacob's homily must be situated within this framework. Lack of clear definition within scripture regarding the nature of the resurrected body led to heated debates. Opponents of a fleshly resurrection commented on the already abject and flawed nature of the human body, to argue that the fleshly body could not rise in the eschaton. Even amongst those who argued *for* a resurrection of the flesh, the specific nature of this eschatological body was contestable. Early Christian thinkers looked to scripture and the actions of Jesus himself to define and elucidate their theories. Irenaeus argued that in his healing miracles, Jesus demonstrated the importance of (the preservation of) somatic parts, asking

What was His object in healing [different] portions of the flesh, and restoring them to their original condition, if those parts which had been healed by Him were not in a position to obtain salvation? For if it was [merely] a temporary benefit which He conferred, He granted nothing of importance to those who were the subjects of His healing (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* V.12.6 (trans. Roberts and Rambaut, *ANF* 1.539)).⁷⁴³

Employing the raising of Lazarus in John 11, as a foreshadowing of the eschatological body, he comments,

Those who were healed were made whole in those members which had in times past been afflicted; and the dead rose in the identical bodies, their limbs and bodies receiving health, and that life which was granted by the Lord, who prefigures eternal things by temporal, and shows that it is He who is Himself able to extend both healing and life to His handiwork (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* V.13.1 [trans. Roberts and Rambaut, *ANF* 1.539]).⁷⁴⁴

These narratives, especially the raising of Lazarus therefore acted as prefigurative models for the eschatological “healing” that would take place in which the flesh would rise, and the limbs and bodies would receive health.⁷⁴⁵

The anonymous author of an early treatise *On the Resurrection*, Pseudo-Justin explained how his opponents claimed that “If then the flesh rise, it must rise the same as it falls; so that if it die with one eye, it must rise one-eyed; if lame, lame; if defective in any part of the body, in this part the man must rise deficient” (Pseudo-Justin Martyr, *On the Resurrection* IV [trans. Dods, *ANF* 1:295]).⁷⁴⁶ Pseudo-Justin is quick to assert that these people are “blinded...in the eyes of their hearts!” In fact, like Irenaeus, he too found

⁷⁴³ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* V.12.6 (trans. Alexander Roberts and William Rambaut, *ANF* 1.539).

⁷⁴⁴ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* V.13.1 (trans. Roberts and Rambaut, *ANF* 1.539).

⁷⁴⁵ On the use of Lazarus and the resurrection of the flesh see Jennifer R. Strawbridge, “How the Body of Lazarus Helps to Solve a Pauline Problem,” *New Testament Studies* 63 (2017): 588-603. On the concept of “heavenly healing see Candida R. Moss, “Heavenly Healing: Eschatological Cleansing and the Resurrection of the Dead in the Early Church.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 79 (2011): 991-1017.

⁷⁴⁶ This treatise was previously attributed to Justin Martyr, but this is now disputed by modern scholars. For this reason, dating and context are unknown.

evidence in the healing miracles of Jesus, arguing that if Jesus was able to heal the sick and make others whole, then surely in the resurrection God would be able to do even greater things.

For if on earth He healed the sicknesses of the flesh, and made the body whole, much more will He do this in the resurrection, so that the flesh shall rise perfect and entire. In this manner, then, shall those dreaded difficulties of theirs be healed (Pseudo-Justin, *On the Resurrection* IV [trans. Dods, *ANF* 1:295]).

The resurrection would therefore see the “perfection” and restoration of the body. Other writers also argued that God’s ability to raise the body was a question of power. Tertullian asked

What is the good of believing in the resurrection, unless your faith embraces the whole of it? If the flesh is to be repaired after its dissolution, much more will it be restored after some violent injury. Greater cases prescribe rules for lesser ones. Is not the amputation or the crushing of a limb the death of that limb? Now, if the death of the whole person is rescinded by its resurrection, what must we say of the death of a part of him? If we are changed for glory, how much more for integrity! Any loss sustained by our bodies is an accident to them, but their entirety is their natural property. In this condition we are born... Natural condition is prior to injury. As life is bestowed by God, so is it restored by Him. As we are when we receive it, so are we when we recover it. To nature, not to injury, are we restored; to our state by birth, not to our condition by accident, do we rise again (Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh* LVII [trans. Peter Holmes, *ANF* 3: 589]).

Tertullian maintained that God had the power to restore a person’s body to their “natural condition” despite whatever corporal changes they had undergone in their lifetime as a result of illness or injury.

The fourth-century Syrian theologian Ephraim employed Jesus’ healing of Peter’s severed ear in Luke 22 to argue for the reassembling of the human body at the resurrection.⁷⁴⁷

⁷⁴⁷ Luke 22:47-53.

For, if the divine one bent down and took the ear that was cut off from Simon and thrown away, and attached it again so that nothing was lost, how much more will he then at the resurrection search for every bit so that nothing of their dust remains behind. And as in the fiery furnace not a hair of their head perished, so he makes known the care he will practice at the resurrection (Ephraim, *Carmina Nisibena*, hymn 4(6.9)).⁷⁴⁸

Ephraim considered what happened to the bodies of the martyrs at the resurrection, arguing that

For the works of each will be to him a garment that he bears on his body. So one will wear the clothing of fasts and watching, prayers and humility, another the mantel of belief and the crown of chastity. The members of one will be stamped with the traces of iron teeth, the rack, and beatings. Another will bear on her shoulder a brand or carry severed members (Ephraim, *Sermones* III).⁷⁴⁹

Ephraim maintains that their bodies will retain the marks of their torture, *but* their limbs and bodies will be reassembled.

However, in the raising of the integral body, specific sites of corporal sinfulness, notably the genitals and reproductive parts were problematic. How could there be a somatic resurrection that included the sinful parts of the body? Further, if Matthew 19:10-12 and Mark 12:25 suggest that sexual intercourse, marriage and reproduction would have no place in the eschaton and that the genitals would be redundant and the flesh were to rise whole with all of its parts, ready for eschatological judgement, then how could the genitals be present in the resurrected body, but conversely, how could they not?⁷⁵⁰ As Pseudo-Justin's opponents reportedly argued,

Clearly if the body will have all the parts and portions, how is it not absurd to say those things exist after the resurrection from the dead, since the Savior said "They will neither marry nor will be given in marriage, but they will be as angels in

⁷⁴⁸ Ephraim, *Carmina Nisibena*, hymn 46.9 cited in Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body*, 76.

⁷⁴⁹ Ephraim, *Sermones* III, cited in Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body*, 77.

⁷⁵⁰ On the Resurrection and sexuality see Candida R. Moss, *Divine Bodies: Resurrecting Perfection in the New Testament and Early Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019) and Petrey, *Resurrecting Parts*.

heaven.”⁷⁵¹ They say, “The angels do not have flesh, nor do they eat, nor do they have sexual intercourse. Just so, neither will there be a fleshly resurrection” (Pseudo-Justin, *On the Resurrection* II [trans. Dods, *ANF* 1: 293]).

For some therefore, the resurrection of the flesh in its entirety was incompatible with the continued presence of the genitals.

However, a number of Christian thinkers concluded that whilst the genitals would be redundant in the eschaton, they *were* still needed in order that the body would rise whole. To demonstrate how this could still be so, they looked to the function of the organs, thinking that was also indelibly entwined in discussions of virginity and celibacy. Pseudo-Justin criticises his opponents in fact for assuming that if the parts of the body are all present, then their function too must still be in action, an argument he intends to refute,

They say, then, if the body shall rise entire, and in possession of all its members, it necessarily follows that the functions of the members shall also be in existence; that the womb shall become pregnant, and the male also discharge his function of generation, and the rest of the members in like manner. Now let this argument stand or fall by this one assertion. For this being proved false, their whole objection will be removed (Pseudo-Justin, *On the Resurrection* 3 [trans. Dods, *ANF* 1.295]).

He continues,

On [the] one hand it seems clear that the parts doing these things do them here, but on the other that it is not necessary to do these things according to principle...The function of the womb is to get pregnant and the male part to sow seed. But just as, if these parts are destined to do these functions, so it is not necessary for them to do them on principle (at least we see many women who do not get pregnant, such as the sterile, even though they have wombs), thus it is not immediately necessary to both have a womb and get pregnant (Pseudo-Justin, *On the Resurrection* 3 [trans. Dods, *ANF* 1.295]).

Those who lived a life of virginity were in fact demonstratable proof of this. Even though virgins possessed genitals and reproductive organs, through their abstention from sexual

⁷⁵¹ Mt 22:30. See also Mk. 12:25.

intercourse, they proved that “if the flesh abandons these functions even from now, that it will abandon them in the coming age.”⁷⁵²

But even some women who are not barren abolish sexual intercourse, being virgins from the beginning; and others from a certain time. And we see also men being virgins from the beginning, and some from a certain time, so that through them unlawful marriage on account of desires is destroyed (Pseudo-Justin, *On the Resurrection* 3 [trans. Dods, ANF 1.295]).

And so, as Taylor Petrey has observed,

In the early Christian treatises explaining the nature of the future resurrected bodies, reproduction does not occur, bodily fluids cease to flow, and bodies are not penetrated, nor do they penetrate. This curated body was presented as a solution to the mortal body’s seeming incompatibility with the heavenly realm.⁷⁵³

If, as writers such as Irenaeus suggested, the body in temporal times acted as a prefiguration of the resurrected body, then how could temporal bodies anticipate the resurrected body when these fluidless, nonreproductive “angelic” bodies were presented as the eschatological “goal.”⁷⁵⁴

For writers such as Tertullian, individual body parts and corporeal functions could be ‘liberated from their offices’ and so for example, he writes that “even in the present life there may be cessations of their office for our stomachs and our generative organs.”⁷⁵⁵ This cessation of somatic function acted as a prefiguration of the eschatological body.

See here faint outlines of our future strength! We even, as we may be able, excuse our mouths from food, and withdraw our sexes from union. How many voluntary eunuchs are there! How many virgins espoused to Christ! How many, both of men and women, whom nature has made sterile, with a structure which cannot procreate! Now, if even here on earth both the functions and the pleasures of our members may be suspended, with an intermission which, like the dispensation itself,

⁷⁵² Pseudo-Justin, *On the Resurrection* 3 (trans. Dods, ANF 1.295).

⁷⁵³ Petrey, *Resurrecting Parts*, 2. See also Candida R. Moss, and Joel S. Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility: Biblical Perspectives on Procreation and Childlessness* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 200-228.

⁷⁵⁴ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* V.13.1 (trans. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, ANF 1:539).

⁷⁵⁵ Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh* LX and LXI (trans. Holmes, ANF 3: 592-593).

can only be a temporary one (Tertullian, *On Resurrection* LXI (trans. Holmes, *ANF* 3: 593]).

Examples of the depiction of cessation of somatic physical processes, particularly those of the female reproductive system can be found in the Synoptic tradition with the healing of the woman with flow of blood and in the apocryphal acts with the representation of the paralysis of Peter's daughter in the Coptic fragment of the *Acts of Peter*.⁷⁵⁶ Hilaria's withered, leaf-like breasts and lack of menstruation, and Apollonaria's skin like a dry tortoise are further examples employed in ascetic literature. Later ascetic theorists demonstrated more explicitly that sexual desire, as a physiological process in both men and women could be controlled and even eliminated by employing cooling and drying regimes, dietary abstinence, and careful food choices, in order to affect the generative fluids and processes of the body, or the function of the reproductive organs themselves.⁷⁵⁷ For male ascetics this is particularly notable in the concern from the third century onwards of reducing or eliminating the occurrence of nocturnal emissions in monks.⁷⁵⁸ We find therefore, in the treatises on asceticism and virginity and in a range of hagiography, that ascetics are depicted as achieving an angelic nature even before the eschaton, through somatic mortification, reproduction became redundant and their corporeal state beyond procreation. However, their bodies remained whole in anticipation of future judgement.

⁷⁵⁶ Meghan Henning, "Paralysis and Sexuality in Medical Literature and the Acts of Peter," *Journal of Late Antiquity* 8, no. 2 (2015): 306-321; Candida R. Moss, "The Man with the Flow of Power: Porous Bodies in Mark 5:25-34," *JBL* 129 (2010): 507-519 and Solevåg, *Negotiating the Disabled Body*, 78-84.

⁷⁵⁷ See Teresa M. Shaw, *The Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998).

⁷⁵⁸ For an overview see David Brakke, "The Problematization of Nocturnal Emissions in Early Christian Syria, Egypt and Gaul," *J ECS* 3:419-60.

Rather than drying out his body, as was the case for the female ascetics described above, Simeon cuts off - he removes and exorcises - the part of the body that is problematic. He is degendered, desexualised, and non-reproductive and in so doing he begins a transformation, taking on an angelic form, and “his face was exuding delightful dew and comely glory.”⁷⁵⁹ This interpretation is corroborated when considering a hymn written by Jacob in which he explicitly describes the glory of the resurrection and the renewal and reconstruction of bones and bodies,

At that signal by which all creation is dissolved,
the body of man will be girt with life that it may rise....
It binds up bodies and dissolves the courses of hosts.
It renews beauties and reconstructs His image which was destroyed...
The sound of the resurrection reconstructs bones and breaks bodies, it binds bodies
and raises up the dead with great glory (Jacob of Serug, *On the Creation of Adam and the Resurrection of the Dead* X.382-396 [trans. Matthews Jr.], ⁷⁶⁰

The “limbs will rise up together with their components” and the body will be “like an angel, clothed in glory and radiant.”⁷⁶¹ In the same way, Jacob explains that “While a branch of his body was cut off from its tree, his face was exuding delightful dew and comely glory.”⁷⁶² In excising “a branch of his body,” Simeon’s face begins to show his angelic nature. Jacob alludes here to Isaiah’s image of a tree and its association with eunuchs in his description of Simeon exorcising of unwanted “branches.”⁷⁶³ In using the metaphorical depiction of

⁷⁵⁹ Jacob of Serug, “Simeon the Stylite,” 658 (trans. Ashbrook Harvey).

⁷⁶⁰ Jacob of Serug, *On the Creation of Adam and the Resurrection of the Dead* X.382-396, in Edward G. Matthews Jr. (trans.), *Jacob of Sarug’s Homily on the Creation of Adam and the Resurrection of the Dead* (Piscataway, NJ.: Gorgias Press, 2014).

⁷⁶¹ Jacob of Serug, *On the Creation of Adam* XI-XII (trans. Matthews).

⁷⁶² Jacob of Serug, “Simeon the Stylite,” 658 (trans. Ashbrook Harvey).

⁷⁶³ Isaiah 56.3-6. This allusion was also employed by the second century docetic teacher Julius Cassian in his condemnation of sexual intercourse and God’s blessing of the eunuch, “No one should say that because we have the parts of the body that we do, with the female shaped one way and the male another, one for receiving, the other for inseminating, sexual intercourse has God’s approval. For if this disposition was from the God towards whom we are eagerly pressing, he would not have blessed eunuchs, and the prophet would not have said that they are ‘not an unfruitful tree’ taking an analogy from the tree for the man who by deliberate choice emasculates himself from ideas of this sort.” Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* III.13.91 (trans. John Ferguson in *Clement of Alexandria: Stromateis – Book 3* (Washington: Catholic University Press, 1991), 313-314). Compare Matt 19:12 and Isa. 56.3.

Simeon body being like a tree, Jacob draws allusions to the eschatological promise found in Isaiah, as well as in Matthew 19:10-12, in which eunuchs will be included in the kingdom of God.⁷⁶⁴

Theodoret also develops the idea of the ascetic life as being the “angelic life” in *The Cure of Hellenic Maladies* his understanding is explicitly combined with the sexless and non-reproductive understanding of the angelic body,

Intercourse with females is superfluous for the angels: as immortal they have no need of increase, and as bodiless they are incapable of sexual activity. Another reason calling them holy is that there is nothing of the earth about them: instead, separated from all earthly passions they labor as a heavenly choir (Theodoret, *The Cure of Hellenic Maladies* III. 91-2 [trans. Price]).⁷⁶⁵

The notion of suppression of the body’s urges, refraining from sexual activity alongside androgyny as an imitation of the angelic life is clear in Jacob’s account. Once Simeon removes his “foot,” he is no longer male, no longer liable to the possibility of sexual sin contaminating his body, he assumes an angelic-like form and is described as “an angel in the body...not comparable with men but with angels.”⁷⁶⁶

Conclusion

Through a variety of literary strategies Theodoret depicts Simeon effectuating a self-castration which renders him a eunuch, and which precipitates his expulsion from the

⁷⁶⁴ Caroline Walker Bynum has singled out the seed as the oldest Christian metaphor for the resurrection of the body, found in 1 Corinthians. Later various other natural metaphors would be employed, Clement for example in his letter to the Corinthians tells them to compare themselves to a tree. In this case the eunuch is characterized by a metaphor, “Ah, I am a dried-up tree.” Jeremiah 11:19 uses the metaphor of the tree in a similar way: “But I was like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter. And I did not know it was against me that they devised schemes, saying, ‘Let us destroy the tree with its fruit, let us cut him off from the land of the living, so that his name will no longer be remembered’!”

⁷⁶⁵ Theodoret, *The Cure of Hellenic Maladies* III. 91-2, in R. M. Price (trans.), *A History of the Monks of Syria* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1985), xxx-xxxi.

⁷⁶⁶ Jacob of Serug, “Simeon the Stylite,” 660 (trans. Ashbrook Harvey).

monastery in line with early Christian condemnation of castration. Simeon's self-mortification, the single wound associated with his "loins"/"parts"/"foot," is a corporeal metamorphosis which demonstrates an element of perceived holiness; the non-reproductive and degendered corporal status. It brings about a move towards the desired eschatological body, and back to the primal androgyne in line with early Christian eschatology, soteriology and understanding of gender, similar in meaning to the "becoming male" trope found in representations of female ascetics in hagiographic literature. Simeon's "becoming *unmale*" is a physical, temporal prefiguration of the eschatological body

I argue that Jacob of Serug understood Theodore's account in this manner. In Jacob's homily Simeon receives only a single wound and he amputates his "foot"/genitals. This is not depicted as problematic, in fact, Simeon assumes an angelic-like form and is praised for his "marvellous deed." Simeon's amputation is depicted as a prophylactic prevention of sin, a literal understanding of the Synoptic exhortation to rid ourselves of specific body parts which cause us to sin. Once Simeon removes his "foot," he is no longer susceptible to the possibility of sexual sin contaminating his body, no longer able to procreate, and no longer male. In his amputation of his body part, he has desexualised and de-gendered his body. In so doing he models the gender ambiguity and non-reproductive ideal suggested in Jesus' exhortation about making oneself a eunuch for the kingdom of heaven.⁷⁶⁷ It is a cessation of somatic reproductive function as a foreshadowing of the eschatological, angelic body, and a move towards the gender neutrality suggested in texts such as *Galatians* 3:28, the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Gospel of the Egyptians*. Just as other

⁷⁶⁷ Matthew 19:11-12.

writers correlated the transcendence of gender in temporal times with the genderless, angelic life, Simeon's wound situates him in the realm of the angelic. His body in its non-reproductive, genderless and non-sexual state becomes a paradigmatic foreshadowing of the eschatological age as found in Matthew 19:10-12 and Matthew 22:30. Jacob transforms Theodoret's version of Simeon's castration, bringing it in accordance with these representations and with developing eschatological thought through his insistence that the amputation is ephemeral.

Whilst much has been written on female saints "becoming male," little has been said about how literary depictions of male saints also demonstrate a gender fluidity which drew on existing models of chastity and gender neutrality to depict complex portraits of male saints as degendered, emasculated, non-reproductive, chaste and thus holy. Despite engendering controversy and dissonance, the figure of the eunuch in early Christianity was both serviceable and functional. It provided a model of gender neutrality and lack of procreative power which could allow writers to connect the corporality of the temporal body with eschatological and protological concepts. Ascetic literature adapted this model to acknowledge the condemnation of castration whilst still emphasising a heightened chastity and non-reproductive capacity of the male body.

Castration in all its guises in the ancient world accorded a sense of alerity which was harnessed certainly by writers after the third century as a model of extreme chastity and sexual continence. However, this was often not in the literal physical sense, but rather in a spiritual sense. Simeon's self-mortification and amputated "foot" alongside the examples of other male ascetics whose genitals were disease ridden, impaired, mutilated or amputated

provide alternative models that employed the actual, physical destruction of the male genitals in varying manners, but which also acknowledged a cultural unease relating to eunuchs and castration. Castration is rendered through the *inadvertent* destruction of the genitals which then becomes a fortuitous turn of events for the ascetic or as in the case of Simeon, castration is intimated through a variety of stylistic devices which allude to the specific nature of the somatic mortification. In this manner, hagiographers appropriated culturally recognised models which functioned as a demonstration of the somatic abrogation of sexual desire and of gender ambiguity in the temporal body of the ascetic thereby enhancing holiness.

CHAPTER VII: CONCLUSION

In the novel *Matilda* by Roald Dahl a young, academically precocious girl, starts school, where she meets the formidable headmistress Mrs Trunchbull, who relentlessly terrorises both pupils and staff alike. We are told that “There was an aura of menace about her even at a distance, and when she came up close you could almost feel the dangerous heat radiating from her as from a red-hot rod of metal.”⁷⁶⁸ Dahl later adds that “Her face, I’m afraid, was neither a thing of beauty nor a joy for ever. She had an obstinate chin, a cruel mouth and small arrogant eyes.”⁷⁶⁹ A quick survey of villains in modern children’s literature reveals a similar array of physiognomic imagery employed by authors to reveal the characters’ personality. From Mrs Trunchbull to Voldemort, Captain Hook, or Count Olaf, physiognomic narrative insertion appears to be a useful tool for the modern author to provide a gateway into the mind and motives of their antiheroes.

In the ancient world, physiognomy was perceived as an effective, scientific tool which formed part of a wider world view in which the nature of a person, their inner character, could be gleaned from their external physical appearance, demeanour, speech, and even in the way a

⁷⁶⁸ Roald Dahl, *Matilda* (London: Puffin Books, 1988), 67.

⁷⁶⁹ Dahl, *Matilda*, 83.

person moved.⁷⁷⁰ Aristotle for example wrote that “The physiognomist draws his data from movements,...from habits as appearing in the face, from the growth of hair, from the smoothness of the skin, from voice, from the condition of the flesh, from parts of the body, and from the general character of the body” (Aristotle, *Physiognomics*, 14.806a28-34 [trans. Hett]). Through these observations, it was thought that a person’s character could be displayed externally, the body was “a kind of expression of the soul.”⁷⁷¹ This “physiognomic consciousness” pervaded the ancient world and can be found in a broad range of ancient literature.⁷⁷² Through the interlocking discourses of physiognomic and medicalised corporal understanding the body could show not tell, a rhetorical and literary device through which an author could signal multiple meanings to an audience.

Modern scholarship has identified the use of physiognomy as a literary device in a range of early Christian literature.⁷⁷³ The sources explored in this thesis should be seen in a similar vein. The bodies in the texts, already infused with societal and cultural meaning, were

⁷⁷⁰ Elizabeth C. Evans, “Physiognomics in the Ancient World.” *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 59 (1969): 1-101 (74-82); Maud W. Gleason, “The Semiotics of Gender: Physiognomy and Self-Fashioning in the Second Century C.E.,” in *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient World*, eds. David M. Halperin, John J. Winkler, and Froma I. Zeitlin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 389-415; J. Cale Johnson and Alessandro Stavru, eds., *Visualizing the Invisible with the Human Body: Physiognomy and Ekphrasis in the Ancient World* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019); Laetitia Marcucci, “Physiognomic roots in the rhetoric of Cicero and Quintilian: The application and transformation of traditional physiognomics,” in *Visualizing the Invisible with the Human Body: Physiognomy and Ekphrasis in the Ancient World*, ed. J. Cale Johnson and Alessandro Stavru (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019)

⁷⁷¹ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* 1.1.85 (R.G. Bury, LCL).

⁷⁷² The scholar Elizabeth Evans identified a “physiognomic consciousness” which pervaded the ancient world. Citing examples from over 2000 ancient Greco-Roman texts, she demonstrates, that physiognomic descriptions appear in all major genres of literature. Evans was one of the first modern scholars to explore the use of physiognomic principles in early Christian literature, citing Ambrose, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Nemesius of Emesa as brief case studies from the fourth century (Evans, “Physiognomics,” 74-82).

⁷⁷³ See for example Mikeal C. Parsons, *Body and Character in Luke and Acts: The Subversion of Physiognomy in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic Press, 2006). Chad Hartsock develops this further in his investigation of the use of physical features in characterisation, delving particularly into the use of blindness as a physical marker of characterization in Luke-Acts (Chad Hartsock, *Sight and Blindness in Luke-Acts: The Use of Physical Features in Characterization* (Leiden: Brill, 2008)). See also Isaac T. Soon, “The Little Messiah: Jesus as τῆ ἡλικία μικρός in Luke 19:3,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 142 (2023): 151-170.

employed not only as pedagogic devices, but theology, doctrine and societal change was inscribed on, in, and through these corporeal representations. These bodies were designed to be “read” and just as in other ancient traditions, the connection between the external manifestation of internal characteristics could be employed to predict future conditions.

These polysemic suffering bodies worked like a series of thought experiments through which the formulation of both established and new understandings were played out to transmit meanings. These multiple layers of meaning in the corporal metamorphoses and suffering bodies of saints position the body as narrative, as a body of communication, a site of religious, social, theological and identity-constructing expression.

The importance of corporal suffering in the sources in this study is self-evident. At their most straightforward, they emphasise the advantages of the suffering body for both the protagonists themselves and the care givers who are tasked to respond to the physical needs of the person who is wounded, ill, bleeding, odorous or malnourished. Syncletica’s disciples must endure the stench of her pustulant, decomposing body, and through her wounded body and patient endurance, she “cured the stricken souls” thereby increasing the faith of those around her.⁷⁷⁴ Gregory of Nyssa must watch his sister die and then prepare her body for interment.⁷⁷⁵ It further gives the ascetic themselves an opportunity to develop and demonstrate Job-like endurance. In his battle with Satan, Simeon goads Satan into increasing his torment so that “like a craftsman for good gold so that I will grow bright.”⁷⁷⁶ However,

⁷⁷⁴ Pseudo-Athanasius, *The Life and Activity of the Holy and Blessed Teacher Syncletica* 110; 112 (trans. Castelli);

⁷⁷⁵ Nyssa, *VSM* (Corrigan), 34-51.

⁷⁷⁶ Jacob of Serug, *Homily on Simeon the Stylite* 656 (trans. Ashbrook Harvey).

the wounded, ill, disease ridden, or even dead ascetic body was more nuanced, I have demonstrated in this thesis that care for the ill or dying ascetic or the ascetic's endurance of suffering is just one layer of what are actually multi-layered, complex accounts. In these final words, I wish to briefly consider these multi-faceted meanings and to highlight some of the areas in which this study therefore contributes to our understanding of early hagiographic representation.

Ascetic literature demonstrates a desire for the ascetic body to mirror the eschatological body. However, in literary representations of female saints, chastity and virginity were not always sufficient on their own, the female body had to *internally* demonstrate its similitude to the eschatological body, to the non-procreative, non-sexual angelic ideal.⁷⁷⁷ Modern scholars have identified the desiccation of the female body as one way in which ancient writers demonstrated this. In the stories of the transvestite monks, the ascetics' dry, shrivelled bodies were no longer recognisably female, but also externally demonstrated an internal barrenness. In a range of literature from the woman with the flow of blood, to Peter's daughter, Hilaria and Apollinaria, the external manifestation of the female body explicitly demonstrates a lack of procreative ability thus signalling their holiness. The desexualising and drying up of the female body in the temporal times demonstrated the ascetic ideal whilst also prefiguring the anticipated eschatological body.

In this study, in every case each illness or suffering body part has been shown to have been situated at either the locus of sexuality or at a site that was employed euphemistically or was

⁷⁷⁷ I focus on female here, but we also see examples for male saints, for example in attempts to reduce nocturnal emissions see David Brakke, "The Problematization of Nocturnal Emissions in Early Christian Syria, Egypt, and Gaul," *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 3 (1995): 436-441.

synonymous with a site of sexuality. In the wider Greco-Roman world, as well as in many early Christian sources, wounds and afflictions of the body were employed by ancient writers using a physiognomic and medicalised understanding to tell us something about the protagonist, and hagiographic texts are no different. Inclusion of specific body parts in any narrative in the ancient world mattered, and the site of illness, wounds, afflictions and pain (or its absence) mattered. The inclusion of illness, pain and suffering at the locus of sexual sites, particularly in texts which deal with sanctity is a conscious choice that authors made and like the desiccation of the female body, reflects a need to define the reproductive and sexual capacity of the saint.

In all of the hagiographic accounts in this thesis, the desexualisation and degendering of the saints through their corporal suffering is also presented in terms of eschatological understanding. We see here embodied eschatology in which the somatic nature of the saints metaphorizes, reflecting the eschatological understanding of the source's author, whilst also providing a means for them to demonstrate the internal correspondence of the saints' bodies to the future eschatological body. As Tertullian had predicted, "even in the present life there may be cessations of their office for our stomachs and our generative organs."⁷⁷⁸ Not only are these bodies non-sexual, but they are prefigurations of the eschatological body: barren, non-generative, degendered, and desexualised.

This study has demonstrated the complexity of understanding corporal representations and gender transformations. Female saints when they cut their hair, abandon cosmetics, and

⁷⁷⁸ Tertullian, *On Resurrection LX* (trans. Menzies, ANF 3:591-592.)

choose a life of virginity are described as “becoming male” as they change the way they look and abandon the socially prescribed telos of the female body in their rejection of their role as child bearers. The case studies analysed in this thesis also demonstrate a deeper connection between sexuality and ancient understanding of identity and gender and partly reflect attempts by theologians to define the body and to reconsider identity formation in light of changing social need. In its desexualisation the body became confusing – if the gendered human body was defined or described in terms of sexuality then how could it be understood if it did not engage in sex or procreation? These sources highlight that sexual desire and reproduction were inextricably linked to ancient corporal understanding (and as Simeon shows, not just the female body) and therefore separating one from the other was complex.

The final chapter which discusses representations of Simeon’s body draws a number of important conclusions that impacts the study of these (and other) texts. Firstly, it calls attention to the possibility of gender transformations for both male as well as female saints, counterbalancing the focus of gender transformation by modern scholars on female saints becoming male. Further, while the female saints in this study are masculinised and described as becoming male, their gender transformation is complex and not solely in binary terms. In Simeon’s case, he is not feminised, but rather unmanned, emasculated and degendered which suggests a disparate gender transformation which is significant for our understanding of female saints becoming male. Whilst there is an asymmetry of gender at work here it suggests that masculinity is not always the apex of sanctity and holiness in early Christianity and complicates the idea of a gender spectrum that positions female at the lower or inferior end and male at the upper or superior end and which positions ascetic transformation as being solely from female to male. While scholarship has typically focused on gender fluidity

in literary representations of female ascetics, I suggest that Simeon is only one of many examples of male saints that could be studied, and there is certainly more work that could and should be done here.

I began this thesis with the assertion that the body in its literary representation is something that can be read. Bodies are meaningful because they are part of the narrative, participating in the drama of the story as it unfolds, they would have been and will continue to be read in different ways depending on the reader's decoding of the author's embodiment techniques. What we can say of these texts is that they offer another example of gender variance in corporal representations in the late antique world. A group of sources which are unlike the ones previously recognised in ascetic literature in which the suffering body both reflects and writes theology and sanctity.

This thesis adds to the corpus of literature which highlights the rich and complex history of gender variance in the historical past, a need for which has been highlighted by modern scholars.⁷⁷⁹ In the introduction of a recent issue of the *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, Max Strassfeld and Robyn Henderson-Esponzoza allude to transmisogyny and troubles between religious studies and "trans" studies arguing that "if the trouble between religious studies and trans studies lies originally in the field of theology, then its redress must come from within theology specifically."⁷⁸⁰ Further, scholars have identified a vital need to underpin current discussions of contemporary transgender matters with historical approaches to gender in

⁷⁷⁹ M. W. Bychowski et al., "'Trans*Historicities:' A Roundtable Discussion," *Transgender Studies Quarterly* (2018) 658–685 (659–660).

⁷⁸⁰ Max Strassfeld and Robyn Henderson-Espinoza, "Introduction: Mapping Trans Studies in Religion," *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 6 (2019): 283–296.

order to encourage “trans” as a lens of analysis within historical and theological scholarship of gender. My hope is that my work will become a part of this conversation.

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