

# READINGS BEHIND THE EARLY CHRISTIAN *QUEER* EXPERIENCES: LIVES AND PASSIONS OF TRANSGENDER NUNS

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LARISA ORLOV VILIMONVIĆ

Faculty of Philosophy, Department of History, University of Belgrade

This paper deals with the ideas of queer experiences in the Early Christian movement, seen through early Christian epistemologies of gender and patristic thought focused on sex differences. The lives and passions of transgender nuns are used in discussing various aspects of gender fluidity in early Christianity. Theoretically, the paper rests on the idea of the performativity of gender, that is, on the ways gender was constructed and how body modifications enabled renegotiation of gender categories. It also focuses on the social context of queer experiences in the late antique period with regard to Roman social norms.

Keywords: transgender nuns, gender fluidity, Christian virgins, eunuchs, cross-dressing, Christian femininity

The apparel of a man shall not be on a woman,  
neither shall a man put on a woman's dress;  
For everyone that does these things  
is an abomination to the Lord thy God (Deut. 22: 5)

For the sake of Him for whom we long  
we honour what he has fashioned as much as if the fashioner  
himself were present: the logos of nature demands as much,  
and legislates for them as of equal honour, cutting off from  
nature any preconceived inequality that is manifest in any  
particular thing, and embracing everything within itself in  
accordance with the one power of sameness.  
(Maximus the Confessor, *Letter 2*)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Louth 1996: 87–88.

## CHRISTIAN EPISTEMOLOGIES OF GENDER

Austere Christian morals, clearly divided gender-roles, procreation as the focal point of women's lives, and the trinitary epistemology of a woman's life shrouded in pre-marital virginity, motherhood, and chaste widowhood were all concepts that were developed during the first Christian millennium. Ambrose of Milan minutely articulated these ideas:

A field bears forth many fruits, but the better field overflows with both fruit and flowers. Such a field is the Church, fecund with varied bounty. Here you may discern the seeds of virginity in full bloom; there widowhood, standing powerful in its seriousness, as if in an orchard; elsewhere, the Church's marriages, like a cornfield filling the world with its fertile harvest, or like a wine-press of the Lord Jesus overflowing with the prudence of the marital vineyard, where the faithful fruit of marriage abounds. (Migne 1845: 6.34)<sup>2</sup>

The concepts that we today clearly discern as the main pillars of Christian ethics developed slowly, and they were closely connected with the acknowledgement, institutionalization, and organization of the First Christian Church of the Roman Empire. During its formative phase, from the 1st to 4th century A.D., Christianity traversed a steep path from a Judaic sect to the canonic official religion of the Roman Empire at the end of the 4th century, along which it absorbed various Hellenistic epistemologies regarding the concept of the Divine, which were central to the early Christian gender discourse.

During the first two centuries, Christianity included a plurality of various epistemologies, among which the most intricate and peculiar was Gnosticism, which developed idiosyncratic views on the divine feminine entity, which complemented the masculine deity. In the *Gospel of Philip*, the Holy Spirit was recognized as both Mother and Virgin. The divine Mother was characterized as the mystical Silence, the Holy Spirit and Wisdom (*Sophia*), the first universal creator (Pagels 1989: 53–54). Some Gnostics developed the idea that Genesis 1: 26–27 teaches an androgynous creation, which was a view present in other exegetical traditions closely related to the platonic concept of the androgynous primordial whole:

In the first place, there were three kinds of human beings, not merely the two sexes, male and female, as at present: there was a third kind as well, which had equal shares of the other two, and whose name survives though, the thing itself has vanished. For “man-woman” was then a unity in form no less than the name, composed of both sexes and sharing equally in male and female; whereas now it has come to be merely a name of reproach. (Fowler 1925: 189c–193e)<sup>3</sup>

As Daniel Boyarin stresses, the whole Western discourse on gender “owes its existence to the particular synergy of Platonistic philosophy and the myths of Genesis” (Boyarin 1997: 15).

<sup>2</sup> For commentary and translation see Cooper 1995: 78.

<sup>3</sup> 189e: ἀνδρόγυνον γὰρ ἔν τότε μὲν ἦν καὶ εἶδος καὶ ὄνομα ἐξ ἀμφοτέρων κοινὸν τοῦ τε ἄρρενος καὶ θήλειος, νῦν δὲ οὐκ ἔστιν ἀλλ' ἢ ἐν ὀνειδείᾳ ὄνομα κείμενον., For commentary see Pagels 1989: 56.

From the 1st to 3rd century, Christianity was a radical social movement, a safe zone for numerous *queer* experiences. They were queer in the sense that they were “destabilizing the normative, hegemonic discourses and conceptions” of the Roman culture, especially those related to sex, gender, and sexuality (Vander Stichele and Penner 2009: 23). As Ashley Purpura recently pointed out, Orthodox “tradition”, which reinvents a strict patriarchal hierarchy, actually “points toward a more fluid understanding of the relationship between one’s sex and gender performance”. Byzantine hagiographies offer numerous accounts of more complex identities than this modern “tradition” acknowledges (Purpura 2019: 3). In this paper, I will investigate the fluidity of the newly emerging identities within the early Christian community.

Byzantine hagiographical texts analyzed here present women’s holiness that “breaks out and beyond expected gender limitations” (Purpura 2019: 7). Women’s transgression into manliness was represented as a step to salvation, and this, even though it moved along the patriarchal conceptions of gender, opened the field for communicating aspects of gender fluidity (ibid.: 10). New reconfigurations of gender roles introduced by Christianity set forth the blurring of gender lines established within Roman society, with still dominant masculine perfection tightly related to the Platonic concept of the divine univocal Whole (Boyarin 1997: 13–15). For femininity and womanhood, the early Christian period was a tumultuous period of great change, in which Roman *femininity* had to be renegotiated to be elevated to the *manly* Christ. In the period before the exegetical tradition, which focused on the redemption of the Original Sin, and the rise of the Second Eve – the Virgin Mary – whose rising cult constructed new forms of the divinized femininity, women had found other paths of their introduction into the community of the holy ones (Gador-Whyte 2013: 77–93).

The renegotiation of the binary gender-divide had at least two early precedents: the apocryphal *Gospel of Thomas* and the Paulian idea of equality in Christ (Galatians 3: 28) which brought fissures into the strict division between males and females.<sup>4</sup> Although the initial phases of the Christian movement exhibited remarkable openness toward women, and especially in the role of Christ’s disciples (Luke 10: 38–42.), Paul’s teachings retained the Jewish idea about a monistic, masculine God, and “divinely ordained hierarchy of social subordination” (1 Corinthians 11: 7–9; Pagels 1989: 61). From the 3rd century, the point of divine reference was masculinity. The textual starting point should be the *Gospel of Thomas* when Simon Peter demands that Mary Magdalene leave them since “women are not worthy of life”, and Jesus answers: “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” (Elliott 1993: 147; Castelli 1991: 29–49).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> For Paul’s contradictory statements between Galatians 3: 28 and 1 Corinthians 11 and 14, Boyarin offered an interpretation that Paul’s concern about equality was tightly connected to the notion of spiritual equality achieved after baptism in the “non-corporeal body of the risen Christ” (Boyarin 1997: 16).

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Boyarin explains the emergence of this Universal male in the following way: “the peculiar configuration of the biblical story which first describes a male-and-female creature, then gives it the name ‘man,’ and then reinscribes that very ‘man’ as male, when combined with two peculiarly Greek cultural themes, the devaluation of the belated and the obsession with unity, produced the universal male” (Boyarin 1997: 15).

In the *Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla* from the 2nd century, we see the intention of integrating females into the church ministry. An ardent devotee of Paul, Thecla insisted on following him. She asked Paul to be baptized and promised to cut her hair as “a sign of commitment”, but Paul feared that she might succumb to future temptation: “It is a shameless age, and you are beautiful. I am afraid lest another temptation come upon you worse than the first and that you withstand it not, but be cowardly”.<sup>6</sup> At this particular moment, Thecla preserved her feminine appearance since another powerful man fell in love with her. After the second trial, when Thecla triumphed over beasts, she gained both male and female followers, but she took on a male garb: “having sewed the tunic to make a man’s cloak, she came to Myra, and found Paul speaking the word of God. And Paul was astonished at seeing her and the crowd with her, thinking that some new trial was coming upon her. And when she saw him, she said: I have received the baptism, Paul.”<sup>7</sup>

One of the first Christian theologians, Tertullian, writing around 200 A.D., complained about the mistakenly apprehended message from the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* on the right of women “to teach and baptize” (Thelwall 1869: 17). However, Stephen Davis argues that this reference might have been a later textual interpolation, since Latin manuscripts differ at this very point (Davis 2008: 7, n. 20.). Notwithstanding the possibility that this might not have been Tertullian’s original thought, he remains prominent for his accusatory speech against women: “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” (Thelwall 1869: 304–322).

Women, we will see, were encouraged to act “manly”, which was an obvious intention to redefine strict gender roles, and behind such practice was a path to the divine. One of the first Christian thinkers addressing the issue of sexual differentiation as a temporary state of affairs was Gregory of Nyssa (335–395) (Cadenhead 2018: 150). In his work *De Vita Moysis* I:12, he set Abraham and Sara as male and female exemplars of virtue, stating that “the free choice of virtue or evil is set before both equally” (Malherbe and Ferguson 1978: 32; Cadenhead 2018: 139). Nevertheless, later, he argued that both man and women “need to emulate manly virtue”:

Everyone knows that anything placed in a world of change never remains the same but is always passing from one state to another; the alteration always bringing about something better or worse. The narrative is to be understood according to its real intention. For the material and passionate disposition to which human nature is carried when it falls is the female form of life, whose birth is favored by the tyrant. The austerity

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0816.htm> (accessed 24 February 2021); “καὶ εἶπεν Θεκλα τῷ Παύλῳ Περικαροῦμαι καὶ ἀκολουθήσω σοι ὅπου δᾶν πορεύῃ” (Lipsius and Bonnet 1891: 253). For commentary see Davis 2008: 6.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0816.htm> (accessed 24 February 2021); “ἀναζωσαμένη καὶ ῥάψαι τὸν χιτῶνα εἰς ἐπενδύτην σχήματι ἀνδρικοῦ” (Lipsius and Bonnet 1891: 266).

and intensity of virtue is the male birth, which is hostile to the tyrant and suspected of insurrection against his rule. (Malherbe and Ferguson 1978: 55)

The most important aspects that we find in this treatise are *free will* and the possibility of *change*, which in the epistemology of gender meant a transition from femaleness, a material state, into maleness, a spiritual state. Also, as Cadenhead argued, Gregory of Nyssa introduced a form of soul maturing which, during that process, transcended worldly passions in order to reach the status of the Virgin Bride of Christ, stressing that gender transgression in the process of spiritual maturation was not just a one-way path leading from worldly femininity to spiritual masculinity (Cadenhead 2018: 143–144). Nevertheless, most prominent examples dealing with holy women that came from the pen of the Nyssan and Gregory of Nazianzus retained the rhetoric of women's need to transcend into maleness to attain virtue. Thus, in the life of his sister Macrina, Gregory of Nyssa stated the following: "In this case it was a woman who provided us with our subject; if indeed she should be styled woman, for I do not know whether it is fitting to designate her by her sex, who so surpassed her sex" (Maraval 1971: 140; Corrigan 1987: 26). As Susanna Elm argued, Macrina engendered a "new female image", which progressed "beyond male and female" (Elm 1994: 101). While Macrina was a representative of a "manly woman", Gregory of Nazianzus, in his VIII oration dedicated to his sister Gorgonia, maintained the idea of virtuous femininity throughout, adjusted to typical feminine roles. However, in the final chapter, he concludes with an idea of the genderless soul as a medium that surpasses bodily sexual differences: "O nature of woman overcoming that of man in the common struggle for salvation, and demonstrating that the distinction between male and female is one of the body not of the soul!" (Migne 1857: 35.217).<sup>8</sup> Lives of transgender nuns will show that the distinction between male and female could be attained even on the bodily level.

The idea of the erasure of sex differences in the ascent to God was an epistemology that achieved its full potential two hundred years later, in the thought of Maximus the Confessor (580–662):

In order to bring about the union of everything with God as its cause, the human person begins first of all with its own division, and then, ascending through the intermediate steps by order and rank, it reaches the end of its high ascent, which passes through all things in search of unity, to God, in whom there is no division. It accomplishes this by shaking off every natural property of sexual differentiation into male and female by the most dispassionate relationship to divine virtue. This sexual differentiation clearly depends in no way on the primordial reason behind the divine purpose concerning human generation. Thus it is shown to be and becomes simply a human person in accordance with the divine purpose, no longer divided by being called male or female. It is no longer separated as it now is into parts, and it achieves this through the perfect knowledge, as I said, of its own logos, in accordance with which it is. (*Difficulty* 41 – Louth 1996: 155)

<sup>8</sup> Translation available at [https://www.elpenor.org/gregory Nazianzen/gorgonia.asp?pg=7](https://www.elpenor.org/gregory%20Nazianzen/gorgonia.asp?pg=7).

Masculinization of the feminine that we encounter in Byzantine hagiographies influenced social practices and even social movements, essentially defying the established social order, although it appears that it went along its gender premises. This process of female gender transgression could also be read against a predominant model for conceptualizing the body in antiquity, derived from Aristotle's. This model was based on the "one-sex" model, in which the male body was considered perfect, while females were perceived as its derivative. Females were considered inferior males, and such a view was greatly popularized by Galen's anatomy from the 2nd century A.D. (Walter Laquer 1990: 27–33; Vander Stichele and Penner 2009: 60–61). Seen through this epistemological context, women's masculinization could be interpreted as another concession to the overt patriarchal suppositions (Purpura 2019: 9). Nevertheless, one should bear in mind what counted as *womanness* for Roman and Byzantine authors. Womanness was a state of passivity, corporeality, and uncontrollable desires. Having this in mind, overcoming womanness was a movement toward *a more philosophic way of life*. Such a way of life was for the first time open to women as well. Christianity gave an impetus for gender transgression by re-configuring the notion of "natural" presuppositions by splitting biological sex (manifested in the *body*) from the gendered *soul*, opening the possibility for several performative reconfigurations of the soul – to become womanly, manly or to lose sexual differentiation. As we intend to show, most early Christian practices were going against the *natural* order of Roman society.

The introduction of gender fluidity in early Christian discourse, which encouraged women to become manly, shows proclivity toward a reconfiguration of the established gender norms. It also opened a path of renegotiating femininity in a decisively new way by introducing affirmative contexts that in the Greco-Roman, Hellenistic and Jewish tradition had been strictly confined to men and masculinity.

The rise of new, Christian femininities and the possibility of gender fluidity shows potential for Butlerian performativity, which opens a path to the playing out of a particular identity, which transforms one subjectivity, and the sense of self, temporarily or permanently (Butler 2002: 173; Vander Stichele and Penner 2009: 22). Notwithstanding the view that *manly women* could have been just an appropriation of manly gender roles delineated within the heteronormative practice, there is also a possibility to read them in the same way as Butler reads drag – "In imitating gender, they implicitly reveal the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency" (Butler 2002: 175). Body and gender mutability in Christian discourse – and in this paper specifically in the cases of transgender nuns – shows how gender and even sex (in the most radical cases) are "denaturalized by means of performance" (Butler 2002: 175).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Although in most of the Lives of transgender nuns, the aspect of their true nature – their biological sex – is stressed, some examples show a radical fading of biological differences achieved through severe asceticism through which women lose their breasts and their menstrual period (cf. Betancourt 2020: 140).

Regarding this, my interest lies in the concepts of transgender nuns and Christian virgins, both – as I will argue – a form of queerness based on sex as well as gender performativity. The concept of Christian virgins should be understood intersectionally, as a conflation of gender, class, and age. Contrary to the order of the Vestals – which was an elite Roman institution of young female virgins chosen from patrician families, and thus released from *patria potestas* – the concept of Christian virgins enabled the freedom of choice for women of lower social classes to be exempt from sexual exploitation. As Amy Richlin pointed out, bodies of slave women “were the sexual property of the owner”, and they “would have experienced their own bodies very differently from the way free women did” (Richlin 2014: 224). In the case of paradigmatic harlots who had renounced their former lives, the most radical change was the change in social status, where the new choice of life enabled them to evade legislative and social marginality denoted by the concept of *infamia*. It is against these social concepts that the new identities will be analyzed. To understand this radical concept of queerness which refers to the renouncement of sex and gender and the free choice to live a life of a transgender monk, one must read it against the concepts of Roman sexuality and Roman division of gender roles.

## TRANSGENDER NUNS IN SOCIAL CONTEXT AND TEXTUAL RHETORIC

After this short overview of the ideas behind gender fluidity in early Christianity and the epistemologies which have produced and engendered the context of manly Christian women, we now turn to the phenomenon of transgender nuns, present in several Lives of Holy Byzantine women.<sup>10</sup> The metatextual combination of Platonic philosophy and the Hebrew myth, along with the Aristotelian contextualization of the body, produced a particular gender discourse in which the man was given exclusive sanction with God, whereby androgynous primordial creation gave precedence to male as a precursor of female, creating an epistemological and later, factual, social and cultural subordination of women to men.

My interest lies in exploring the social formation of *queer identities* in Early Christianity and the interaction between different identity roles during this period (Helvie 2010: 1142–1143).<sup>11</sup> The concept of *queerness* is a fluid category that entails both gender and sexual identity. Moreover, it also entails the concept of “happy limbo of a non-identity”, as a world which surpasses categories of sex and of identity (Butler 2002: 120). In both cases, my idea behind using the term *queer* is to stress the meaning, discursive and structural resonance of newly emerging identities in early Christian discourse, for the theorizing

<sup>10</sup> These Lives are available in English translations in two editions: Talbot 1996 and in Papaioannou 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Helvie 2010: 1142–1143.

of power and resistance to the dominant Roman patriarchal structures.<sup>12</sup> An obviously anachronistic term is useful to denote the amalgam of new Christian identities which were creating a specific cultural space that was epistemologically provocative, especially in terms of gender and sex.

Reading certain experiences as queer enables us to understand complex historical processes which introduced the possibility to destabilize normative and hegemonic discourses. In this sense, women's queering in early Christian society through their performance of manliness destabilized the later Roman cultural and social norm concerning women's roles and their function within the complex social structure. In addition to transgender nuns, another category of non-normative identities were Christian virgins, which were much more than disguised nuns: they were a challenge to the Roman patriarchal order in which women's value lay in their ability to procreate.

Roland Betancourt, the only Byzantine scholar dealing with the concept of queerness in Byzantium, insists on the use of transgenderism, instead of "transvestism" and cross-dressing, and deploys this term throughout his book on *Byzantine Intersectionality*.<sup>13</sup> I concur with his proposition since female nuns' male attire presents more than just a temporary cosmetic body modification category. In many cases, this concept entailed a way of life in the non-binary gender. That is, these nuns lived their monastic lives as male-eunuchs in male monasteries. Furthermore, even after their gender was revealed, some decided to continue their lives as male eunuchs (Betancourt 2020: 126). The existence of the "third gender" – eunuchs – within Roman society had enabled this gender transgression, both as a potentially factual story and as a rhetorical tool for achieving a certain authorial goal. The category of eunuchs provided a social landscape for the rhetorical acceptance of queer women. From the authorial standpoint, eunuchism was a liminal category of spiritual maturity, of resolute body transformation and of factual or imaginary sexual desires. Eunuchism was a polysemous category within monastic communities since it potentially instilled unnatural desires in monks. By the middle Byzantine period, eunuchs and women were officially banned from male monasteries, although they were still admitted reluctantly (Thomas and Hero 2000: 35). The life of transgender nun St. Euphrosyne depicts the temptations of the androgynous monk – "When she entered the refectory, however, her beauty so tempted her brothers that he was compelled to remove her to a distant and isolated cell. Here she undertook a life of such strict austerity that she became the wonder of the entire community" (Anson 1974: 16). Nearly the same semiotic value in the Greco-Roman tradition of sexual desirability of women and young adolescent boys personified in eunuchs from the perspective of a male gaze, enabled continuous reconfigurations of these plots. Women, disguised as men, enter male monasteries and continue their lives as eunuchs. Yet, their physical appearance in several cases

<sup>12</sup> For the theoretical framework see Jagose 1996: 76–77.

<sup>13</sup> The term "transvestism" is pejorative, while "cross-dressing" refers to dressing as a form of expression, not as a choice of a particular gender identity (Betancourt 2020: 123).



is used as an innuendo of illicit sexual desires on the level of the plot, as was the case with Euphrosyne, or with Eugenia/Eugenios, or as a self-reflective play for mollifying potentially calamitous desires among monks.

The lives of transgender nuns offer numerous reconfigurations of gender identity. In the story of the nun Mary/Marinos, who was accused of fathering a child, she chose willingly to immerse in yet another identity – that of fatherhood (Purpura 2019: 12). The sexual charge led upon the nun Mary/Marinos was a fate of the newly acquired male identity of a still “attractive” eunuch monk. An almost unavoidable plot of sexual transgression was tightly connected to the essential, though formally disguised, nun’s femininity.

Mary/Marinos’ fatherhood could be read against Matrona of Perge’s deliberate renunciation of her own child, which was assessed as something “quite beyond nature itself” (Talbot 1996: 21). It is important to note that what we see from the cases of women committed to virgin lives or women who renounce their children, transform into fathers, or continue their lives as men is that all these identities were considered *contrary to nature* and were willingly chosen as a life path, or were discursively constructed as praiseworthy life paths. Many women who had chosen to live as men also died as men. One of the introductory notes about Paul preaching *Paul and Thecla’s Acts* makes an important case. Paul was accused before the local magistrate of alienating citizens’ wives with his “unnatural teachings”. Two things are important to note – Paul’s teachings’ influence on women and the definition of his teachings as going “against nature” (Anson 1974: 2).

The case of Matrona of Perge presents a rather different story, for the driving motive of her transgenderism – the heroine flees from her violent husband who pursues her as far as Mt. Sinai – and for the subsequent recovery of her female gender. In the end, she establishes a female monastery in Constantinople, where she dies as its abbess. The Life of Matrona of Perge shows at the beginning that her “transgenderism” was temporary, merely a means to an end, “a mode of escape or concealment”, while for Mary/Marinos, it was a complete transition and a life choice, “a sufficient reason for suffering and humiliation” (Anson 1974: 28).

## QUEERING OF THE FEMALE BODY

Transgender nuns performed gender through bodily modifications such as short hair, male robe, fasting, and ascetic practices that changed their bodies, temporarily or permanently. They lived as eunuchs, a third gender, in masculine communities. A role model and predecessor of this queer identity was Thecla, whose gender transcendence was a viable path of women’s entry into the public sphere. The male garb on Thecla’s body was sufficient to recontextualize her in a completely new identity, depriving her of the requirements, presuppositions and limitations of the feminine gender, as constructed and maintained by Roman society. Verdicts imposed on her vividly show how the Roman

system of discipline and punishment worked in the cases of potential destabilization of the hegemonic discourse.<sup>14</sup>

By choosing to continue life as a different gender, transgender nuns were destabilizing Roman social power structures. Choosing to live as a different gender represents the first intervention into strict patriarchal gender roles. The heroines usually flee from an unwanted marriage or an abusive husband, although we also find motives of intensive male-centered family love – paternal or spousal. They spend several years before their true gender is revealed, and some of them spend the rest of their life in the newly assigned gender. The second intervention into strict patriarchal gender roles is the moment after the revelation, when the community of men accepts them irrespective of their gender or ascertains their holiness if their gender is revealed upon their death. The third intervention into strict patriarchal gender norms are narratives in which the leading motif is the “manly woman”.

One of the most interesting aspects is their outer appearance, the performative side of their new gender. As Betancourt pointed out, “rather than being limited to dress and grooming, the means of transformation affected the very composition of the body, as ascetic practices were understood to wear away the flesh and alter the feminine figure into a more masculine form, through a rougher, darker, and faded beauty” (2020: 126). Such was the case of Pelagia/Pelagios, whose “skin color had been transformed”, whose “eyes had become hollow, and everything about her had been altered and changed because of her abstinence; indeed no one else in Jerusalem, when seeing her, suspected that he was looking at a woman” (Papaioannou 2017: 80–81). That was a direct antinomy to the former context of her *truly* feminine body, “whose beauty stunned those who beheld her, captivating them in their desire for her” (Brock and Harvey 1998: 42). While being a harlot, Pelagia was “filling the air around her with color and fragrance: the latter from the scent of her perfumes, the former from the luster of her gems and pearls” (Papaioannou 2017: 64–65).<sup>15</sup> The loss of these emphasized feminine traits was depicted in her bodily transformation, which stood as an indicator of her spiritual metamorphosis.

The faded beauty was not, however, the unifying motive of all transgender lives. In the cases of Mary/Marinos, “the attractive one”, who was accused of deflowering an innkeeper’s daughter, and Eugenia/Eugenios, whose “youthful appearance and a beautiful face” had instilled an intense sexual desire in her devotee Melanthia, the intense fasting and bodily mortification did not lead to the fading of beauty (Talbot 1996: 9; Papaioannou 2017: 218–219). This plot, which echoes Potiphar’s wife’s biblical story, was a recurrent motif in transgender lives, and John Anson suggested it was the male monks’ way to fight their intense encumbrance with feminine sexuality by transposing the same burden to their female heroines (Anson 1974: 30). However, the insistence on a male youth’s beauty

<sup>14</sup> Christian life proved deeply offensive to the basic moral structures of their persecuting societies (Brock and Harvey 1998: 16).

<sup>15</sup> For a more nuanced physical description of Pelagia’s faded beauty, see Brock and Harvey 1998: 60.

also suggests intimate homoerotic tensions that were not unfamiliar in the monastic communities. This story gives potential for queer experiences on the author-text level. One might assume that male adolescents' attractiveness to which the female ascetic was aligned lies behind these plots.<sup>16</sup> Although the plot is heteronormative on the surface – a woman falls in love with a young and beautiful man or accuses a monk of fathering her child – the authorial aesthetic of male adolescent beauty bears homoerotic overtones.

The fading of one's beauty through spiritual conversion, as was the case in Pelagia's story, bears close similarities to the narrative of the Life of Mary of Egypt. Both Pelagia and Mary of Egypt were former harlots whose appearance stood as a visual representation of their licentious lives. Therefore, their spiritual conversion corresponds to their corporeal change. Their fading beauty and an apparent ugliness and deformity of the new ascetic body reconfigures the gender rhetoric of Greco-Roman aesthetical physiognomy (Vander Stichele and Penner 2009: 47). Deformed and depraved bodies no longer stand as a token of social and cultural marginality. Instead, they present a symbol of the new spiritual path to holiness, which was embedded in the relinquishment of corporeality, and in that sense, of femininity as well. The newly emerging rhetoric of the body enabled queering of the female body so that it came to be perceived beyond sexual allure. Non-normative female ascetic bodies could, in this instance, "achieve a rhetorical aim that ideal and normal bodies could not" (Vander Stichele and Penner 2009: 47). The aim was an assertion of the possibility of female spiritual transcendence. Their corporeal defeminization (gradual rotting of their flesh) correlates with their spiritual masculinization.

Mary of Egypt, when monk Zosimas saw her, was "a naked figure whose body was black, as if tanned by the scorching of the sun. It had on its head hair white as wool, and even this was sparse as it did not reach below the neck of its body" (Talbot 1996: 76). The impression of this passage strongly alludes to the genderlessness of Mary's body, which was first perceived as "a demonic phantom", but very soon it inspired Zosimas with pleasure, who was "filled with joy at that incredible sight" (Talbot 1996: 76). The first symptom of Mary's body's femininity was her nakedness, which presents a dominant male visualization of the woman, especially in hagiographies. In Mary's Life, her nakedness is presented as a "feminine weakness": "I cannot turn toward you and be seen by you face to face, for as you see I am a woman and I am naked, and I am ashamed to have my body uncovered. But if you are really willing to grant one favor to a sinful woman, throw me the garment that you are wearing so that with it I may cover my feminine weakness and turn toward you and receive your blessing" (Talbot 1996: 77). The nakedness of a woman in the lives of unrevealed transgender nuns presents the final proof of their biological sex. Although presented as part of funeral rites, the postmortem disclosure of their true feminine nature is confronted with the rules which applied to monks. The monastic funeral rite starts with a detailed description of the dressing of the monk in his cell, stressing that

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<sup>16</sup> For a young male as a "natural" object of sexual desire to adult males in Roman society see Walters 1997: 31–33.

it is not permitted to see his nakedness (Velikovska 2001: 38). This might suggest that a monk's naked body should not be exposed to onlookers save for those who were in charge of the ritual washing. Nevertheless, as we see from our hagiographies, this rule did not apply to transgender nuns, whose nakedness served as a final assertion of their birth-assigned sex, that is, their womanness. In the case of Mary/Marinos, the nakedness of her dead body was a sight which served as the corroboration of her birth-assigned sex several times – first before the brothers, then before the superior, and finally before the innkeeper whose daughter had accused him of fathering her child. In these scenes, the male gaze presents a final narrative tool for the corroboration of her sanctity, which was conducted through a practice that was culturally deeply problematic since it also entailed the notion of shamefulness. In the martyrdom of St. Barbara, the final scenes are focused on the cruelest idea of the torturer – to strip her naked and parade her through the entire land while being flogged with even more whippings (Papaioannou 2017: 174–175). Exposed in “such shameful public spectacle”, Barbara called Christ to cover her nakedness and “make her limbs invisible to the eyes of impious men” (ibid.). God came to her rescue by placing an invisible garment around her. Similar punishment occurred in the Martyrdom of Perpetua, whose clothes were stripped off, and suddenly, she was a man (Musurillo 1972: 10).

The case of St. Eugenia/Eugenios shows how shameful the revelation of their feminine nature was for transgender nuns. Being pressed by false charges of sexual assault, Eugenia “was forced to the great shamelessness of her accuser to do something beyond the bounds of modesty; grabbing her tunic, she ripped it apart from top to bottom; and exposing certain parts of her truly holy body, she showed everyone that both by nature and in truth she was a woman” (Papaioannou 2017: 228–229).

Mary of Egypt was covered by Zosimas's manly robe, and she “covered certain parts of her body that ought to be covered more than others”. Upon covering her feminine parts and transcending once again into bodily genderlessness, Mary was approached for the blessing. Gender prohibitions for Mary's blessing were explained in the following words: “Since grace is manifested not by official rank, but is usually indicated by spiritual attitudes, you should bless me for the sake of the Lord and pray for one who needs your help” (Talbot 1996: 78). This passage is essential for understanding the fluid categories of spiritual guidance within the Christian discourse, which did not strictly conform to institutional rules. Ascetics in particular presented a powerful marginal and non-normative community that followed their own rules and established specific relations with the divine. Ascetics' connection to the divine was detached from the logocentric circumscription of God, and the innately masculine and elitist discursive form.

Without learning to read, without being cognizant of psalms and sacred texts, Mary was still acquainted with the word of God, “which is living and powerful” (Talbot 1996: 87). Although Mary of Egypt did not spend her life as a disguised monk, her appearance correlates with the complete loss of femininity and moves her to the non-binary category.

We could, of course, easily find fault with the recurrent need of Christian authors to re-configure femininity, which was almost always, for purposes of holiness, changed through the appropriation of masculine traits. Nevertheless, such practice was just a new way of negotiating gender fluidity, which will be explained below.

## BECOMING MALE: CLOTHING AND IDENTITY FORMATION

The lives of transgender nuns offer an insight into the social formation of identity and clearly reveal the performative side of gender. As Susan Crane in her study on the *Ritual, Clothing and Identity in the Middle Ages* emphasizes, clothing presents a vehicle that confers different identity meanings. In Roman society, clothing was strictly connected to social status. References that come from laws against rape reveal some striking elements regarding clothing, which can be contextualized even in contemporary society. If a man “charged with *inuria* as sexual harassment could bring up the defense that the woman was dressed like a prostitute or slave”, in that case, “the charge would not stand” (Nguyen 2006: 92–93; also Walters 1997: 36). The flexibility of social status based on apparel is also evident from the example of St. Euphemia, who was married off to a Goth, who, after marrying the girl, took her to the “land of his origins” and as they “began to approach his house, that wicked man forgot all about his affection for his new wife, disregarded oaths and agreements” [...] and removed her clothes as well as her golden jewellery. He dressed her shamefully as a slave in rags and said: “O woman, I have both children and wife. You should thus call yourself a captive slave and obey all of my wife’s commands” (Papaioannou 2017: 126–127). This example clearly shows the performative power of changing clothes, which was a rite of passage and had high symbolic value. The metaphor of changing clothes was followed by a change of a character’s agency and a radical alteration of life circumstances within the text (Xeravits 2013: 276). In Judith’s biblical story, before she goes to the tyrants’ tent to act as a seductress, she changes her clothes – she puts away her widow’s robe and adorns her body. In the same vein, when Mary, the Niece of Abraham of Qidun, was raped, “she tore off the garment she was wearing” and “wrapped herself in shame” (Brock and Harvey 1998: 30). Considering herself guilty for being defiled and losing all hope for salvation, Mary decided to leave the ascetic life, described in the narrative in the following manner: “So straight away she got up and left for another town. She changed the precious monastic garb she had been wearing and established herself in a low tavern (as a prostitute)” (Brock and Harvey 1998: 31). This symbolical act suggests that clothing as a powerful identity marker was replete with fixed ethical values which could not be renegotiated.

Clothing formed and reiterated identities even within the legal system, and one should bear in mind the *queerness* of gender-inappropriate robe in late antique society. Roman society, which was culturally built on the idea that the feminine gender was feeble, nurtured particular grievances against men taking women’s attire. The most renowned example

was Elagabalus's effeminate behavior and clothing (Dio Cass: 465). Nevertheless, there are rare examples of the negative assessment of women in male clothing. In the life of Pelagia, before she converted to Christianity, she also behaved gender inappropriately by having "her head uncovered, with a scarf thrown around her shoulders in a shameless fashion, as though she were a man". Her "garb was not very different from a man's, apart from her makeup" (Brock and Harvey 1998: 43). In Pelagia's case, we see the possibility of a negative evaluation of women taking men's apparel and adopting men's behavioral models. In this sense, it was connected to Pelagia's appearance in the public sphere, where she, paradoxically, acted as an emasculated man, intentionally seducing beholders.

Positive evaluation of women taking men's attire emerged in early Christian discourse, and was closely related to women's agency, breaking the established cultural norms. A paradigmatic example of Thecla refers to her movement between gendered spaces – public vs. private – coupled with the gendered conception of spiritual guidance and public speech. Thecla's preaching and wandering throughout eastern provinces was sanctioned through her gender-appropriate clothing – the male garb. Manly appearance gave her license to preach and guide.

Stories of women donning a man's monastic garb could be understood as an example of a "spiritual journey to God, which was embedded in the liturgical practices associated with the high priest's approach to the Holy of Holies, the sacred centre of the Temple in Jerusalem: The closer a priestly figure gets to the Holy of Holies, the more elaborate his vestments. Each successive step toward God requires a different physical form" (Partridge 2008: 60; Anderson 2001: 122). In these early Christian stories, women changed their physical form when they approached God.

The case of Matrona of Perge is important for understanding the performativity of gender through her temporary acceptance of transgenderism since her birth-assigned sex was revealed after three years upon her taking the male garb. Her transgression into masculinity did not end when she was revealed, although some researchers consider it conclusively over (Betancourt 2020: 128–129). A gendered conception of spiritual guidance and public speech is again in the focus of the narrator. Matrona chooses to change herself according to her role model – a male monk called Bassianos – even after she had formed her female monastic community. Thus, her gender transgressive behavior becomes a zeal she pursues until the end of her life, unrelated to the immediate cause which had first pushed her into being transgender – an escape from domestic violence. In the concluding part of her *life*, the author concludes that "she became a role model after she became an exact copy of her teacher the most holy Bassianos and was proven a flawless mirror of his way of life" (Talbot 1996: 63). Her teacher also gave her authority to lay hands on others, and what is more important, while doing that, he had conferred upon her a "dark leather men's girdle and white men's cloaks, which they wear constantly" (Talbot 1996: 63–64). This suggests that her spiritual authority derived from men, which could be easily explained within the context of male ministry within the Christian church.

It also suggests that her outer appearance remained masculine, although visual material from the *Menologion of Basil II* depicts Matrona wearing the female monastic garb (Betancourt 2020: 129). Moreover, Matrona intentionally chose to wear a male monastic garb which the onlookers perceived as being “of strange nature” (Talbot 1996: 53). Such willing and consistent gender performance was used, of course, to confirm her ascent to God. These masculine *paraphernaliae* that Matrona wore were a mark of her authority and were most probably used by the author to address feminine holiness in the male monastic environment.

As we have stressed, the queering of women was considered particularly beneficial within the Christian epistemologies of salvation, yet it was not reserved strictly for women. Although not without certain ambivalence, Christianity accepted eunuchism as the only form of the queering of men, which could be considered a path to holiness. The most authoritative sources were Isaiah 56:5, Matt 19:12 and Acts 8:34–38, which show the potential of reconfiguring numerous gender identities affirmatively. Especially insightful is the passage from Matthew, that among eunuchs “there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven”.<sup>17</sup> The most important aspect was a deliberate choice and a possibility to live in a new identity. As Peter Brown persuasively argued, “eunuch was notorious (and repulsive to many) because he had dared to shift the massive boundary between the sexes” (Brown 1988: 169). Eunuch was a human being “exiled from either gender”, which was an identity status that could conform to the patristic epistemologies of salvation.

The acceptance of gender fluidity within early Christianity defined some of the most important non-essentialist views. Virginity, as an innately unnatural life choice, and eunuchism were defended using the same arguments. The changing of nature, i.e., the cutting of the life-giving limb, was defended by Theophilact of Ochrid from the XI century, as the same as ascetic life practices which mortified the body, by going against its “nature” (Gautier 1980: 288–331). Allegorical interpretations of the Scriptures and rich exegetical tradition also provided affirmative views on gender fluidity. Eunuchism was defended as a somatic state with the fertile potential for “heavenly words and deeds”, while virginity was conceived as “the original state in which body and soul had joined”, almost identical to the primordial genderless whole (Gautier 1980: 52; Brown 1988: 170).

## CONCLUSION: DESTABILIZATION OF THE “NATURAL” ORDER

Sexuality in Roman society was closely connected with hegemonic masculinity notions – active sexual roles were reserved exclusively for “freeborn Roman citizen in good

<sup>17</sup> εἰσὶν γὰρ εὐνοῦχοι οἵτινες ἐκ κοιλίας μητρὸς ἐγεννήθησαν οὕτως, καὶ εἰσὶν εὐνοῦχοι οἵτινες εὐνοῦχίσθησαν ὑπὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων, καὶ εἰσὶν εὐνοῦχοι οἵτινες εὐνοῦχισαν ἑαυτοὺς διὰ τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν. ὁ δυνάμενος χωρεῖν χωρεῖτω. – <http://www.greekbible.com/> (accessed 24 February 2021).

standing”, while their objects of desire varied from women to young men, or to adult males of lower social status (Walters 1997: 32). In such a system, where the Roman man (*vir Romanus*) appropriated sex as an “impenetrable penetrator” to hold and reiterate his familial and political power, the renouncement of sex was a form of anti-patriarchal insurgence (Walters 1997: 30). Apart from this social meaning, the renouncement of sex attained its philosophical and religious importance in the Christian exegetical tradition, whose epistemologies of gender moved along the idea of the erasure of sexual differences in the afterlife.

Hellenistic themes about the androgynous or even genderless primordial Whole influenced patristic thought. They reached its peak in the thought of Maximus the Confessor, for whom the Incarnation in Jesus Christ “has done away with the difference and division of nature into male and female which human nature in no way needed for generation, as some hold, and without which it would perhaps have been possible. There was no necessity for these things to have lasted forever. For in Christ Jesus, says the divine Apostle, there is neither male nor female” (Gal. 3: 28) (Louth 1996: 157).

Maximus’s epistemology followed the idea that sexual differences were introduced because of the original sin (Partridge 2008: 36). Concerning this, Doru Costache has argued that Maximus the Confessor’s spiritual anthropology was constructed around the “existential mode irrespective of gender”, which is a view he exposes in *Difficulty 41* (Costache 2013: 290). Confessor’s thought presents the closure of one exegetical cycle based on Hellenistic philosophy and syncretic amalgamation of the Greek myth. This complex epistemology of gender in early Christian thought was necessary to discuss queer experiences of women in early Christianity since it aptly shows various possibilities for identity reconfigurations.

Our next step was to understand the performativity of gender by reading the lives of transgender nuns, which clearly show gender fluidity and its dependence on bodily modifications, the manner of speaking and even motions through gendered spaces.

Early Christian thought encouraged virility in women and their gender transgression, which is a phenomenon most strikingly present in the textual tradition of transgender nuns. Nevertheless, this phenomenon of “virile femininity” was not restricted exclusively to women who lived as men. It was a single phenomenon within a set of new reconfigurations of both masculinities and femininities in late antiquity, moving beyond their culturally ascribed boundaries. Christianity offered freedom to choose a life path that would lead to holiness, and that life path was, in our paradigmatic examples, almost always directed “against the natural order”.

Another important aspect was the introduction of the topic of women sanctity into the textual canon. Behind this important process laid the reason for the negotiation of femininity through the masculine conception of it. In the introductory part of the holy life of Susan, John of Ephesus justifies himself to his (presumably male) audience for



writing about a holy woman, “manly in Christ”, who so much astonished him with her appearance, words, and strength in God “that she seemed to me not at all out of place in this series of stories of holy men, with whom she strains to enter the same narrow gate” (Brock and Harvey 1998: 133–134). In the *Passion of Kyprianos and Ioustina* by Symeon Metaphrastes, we come across the following authorial explanation: “Suffering in this way, she endured so bravely that she showed nothing ignoble nor what one would expect of her female and weak gender”.<sup>18</sup> Masculinization of women in the *Lives of Holy Women* was necessary to mollify the idea that “the attack of the evil one against holy men is mostly made through women, even when they are far away” (Brock and Harvey 1998: 138). By acting as men, women became a relevant topic for the manly audience, and new femininities were renegotiated beyond the constraints of their sexuality.

The topic of transgender nuns provides an opportunity to understand the fluidity of gender throughout history and the performative aspects of gender in antiquity. One of the most important constructors of identity was clothing, which referred to social status, legal status, and religious status, entailing spiritual maturity in the ascent to God. Ascetic practices of holy women show how these radical daily practices led even to the performativity of biological sex.

Most of these new Christian identities had a unique motif of the *unnatural* mode of life. Unnatural life choices were explained through elaborate metaphysics, and most importantly, through the people’s right to choose a life path. Ideas concerning free will were used in patristic thought to overcome the state of sin. We designated the queering of women in early Christianity as a new identity that had destabilized dominant norms in Roman society regarding gender, sex, and sexuality. Women who were selecting virginity, asceticism and transgender identity all pertain to this group. Women preaching, wandering throughout public spaces, and gathering followers promoted behavior that was “deeply offensive to the basic moral structures of their persecuting societies” (Brock and Harvey 1998: 16). Masculinizing these women might be a concession to patriarchal epistemologies, but it nevertheless shows that “unnatural life choices” were a means of renegotiating gender norms in late antique society.

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<sup>18</sup> Καὶ οὕτω πάσχουσα, γενναίως διεκαρτέρει, ὡς αὐτὴν μηδὲν ἀγεννὲς ἢ τῆ θηλεία φύσει καὶ ἀσθενεῖ κατάλληλον ἐπιδείξασθαι (Papaioannou 2017: 42–43).

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## ČITANJA IZA RANOKRŠĆANSKIH QUEER ISKUSTAVA: ŽIVOTI I STRADANJA TRANSRODNIH MONAHINJA

Rad se bavi razumijevanjem koncepta *queera* i *queer*-iskustava u okviru ranokršćanskog pokreta, u skladu s ranokršćanskim epistemologijama roda i patrističke misli usmjerene na egzegezu spolnih razlika. U prvom je poglavlju sažeto predstavljena kršćanska epistemologija "roda", koja seže unatrag do antičkih modela, ali iskazuje i nova tumačenja roda koja su ponudili Grgur iz Nise i Maksim Ispovjednik. Drugo poglavlje o transrodni monahinjama u društvenoj i tekstualnoj retorici nastoji istaknuti dvostruki značaj tog novog kršćanskog iskustva – novog identiteta – u odnosu na rimsko društvo u koje-

mu je izniklo, zbog čega ga i definiramo kao “*queer* iskustvo” – i u odnosu na autore samih tekstova koji su ta iskustva prenosili i prikazivali svojoj publici. Treće poglavlje “*Queer*anje ženskog tijela” govori o načinima privremenih ili permanentnih tjelesnih modifikacija kojima su monahinje pribjegavale u fazi rodne transgresije. Te se modifikacije analiziraju u značenjskom kontekstu ženskog tijela u okviru rimskog diskursa. U poglavlju “Postanak muškarcem: odijevanje i formiranje identiteta” analizira se možda najupečatljivij identitetski marker rodne transgresije – odjeća, koja se također sagledava u kontekstu rimskog društvenog sustava i značenja koja su upisivana u odijevanje. U zaključku je istaknuta onovremena “neprirodnost” ranokršćanskog diskursa, kada je riječ o tijelu, rodu i seksualnosti, što je predstavljalo važnu destabilizatorsku komponentu za tadašnji društveni sustav. Također, zaključak ističe kako je “neprirodnost” postupno ulazila u kršćanski diskurs kroz kršćansku ontologiju, vraćajući nas na početak rada i razmišljanja o tome kako su najutjecajiji mislioci Istočne crkve pružili sasvim revolucionarna rješenja u percepciji naizgled neporozne rodne dihotomije, predstavljajući brisanje rodova kao ultimativni put u usponu k božanskom.

Ključne riječi: transrodne monahinje, rodna fluidnost, kršćanske djevice, eunusi, cross-dressing, rimski maskulinitet, kršćanski feminitet