

The Perception of Women in
Late Antiquity and the impact
it had on Female Asceticism.

By Katherine Helen Barker

Student Number- 29000306

Submitted – March 2014

Master's Degrees by Examination and Dissertation

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Abstract

This study aims to explore and explain why women in Late Antiquity felt inspired to be ascetic. Early Church Fathers believed all women were flawed like Eve, and the dissertation highlights how these negative perceptions could be overcome when women became ascetic. An object of the study is to illustrate how females, in Late Antiquity, were able to gain the same respect and holiness as their male contemporaries through their ascetic journey. Female martyrs, such as Perpetua, gained this respect by acquiring virtues associated with being male. Whilst Melania the younger and Egeria, illustrate how they gained freedom, either by crossing gender boundaries, or through some other form of liberation. In whichever way, they gained liberation, ultimately they were seen as asexual beings and not viewed in the Church as female; either as a mother, a daughter or a wife, but simply viewed as a holy, honourable and wise people.

The perception of females by Church Fathers is central to the study. The way women were perceived in Classical medical theory had a direct link to the way Church Fathers thought and acted. Classical medical theory shows how the female body was considered inferior to the male body, even stemming from before conception. The theory illustrates how the female body had to be in the right condition to produce a baby boy, if not, and it was too hot or too cold, a girl would be produced. It becomes evident that Christianity was born into a society that viewed women as inferior and subservient to men. This was reinforced by Church Fathers, who believed all women were like the flawed Eve, and should ultimately aspire to be like the Virgin Mary.

The study aims to illustrate how women, in Late Antiquity, were perceived as inferior, but asceticism enabled them to follow in the footsteps of Christ. Female ascetics in Late Antiquity did not ascribe to the self-fulfilling prophecy of women that the Church Fathers offered them, but it had the adverse effect. Female ascetics in Late Antiquity were inspired to overcome and shed the negative virtues attributed to them. Although this study does build upon previous research on this topic, and is not entirely unique, it offers a slightly different perspective, arguing the negative perception of women in Late Antiquity that the Church Fathers held, actually had a positive effect on female ascetics, and inspired them.

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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Background

Within the dissertation the status and perception of women in Late Antiquity will be discussed, considering how this impacted and inspired female asceticism. There has been more and more written on this subject over the last decade, however it was essential for the dissertation to maintain a central focus. The dissertation focuses on how women were seen as inferior to men in society and in the Church in Late Antiquity, and then moves on to show how women could overcome these perceptions by becoming ascetic. Not only did women become ascetic because they felt some sort of vocational calling towards it, but they also gained an element of freedom and liberation and were able to cast off the negative perceptions associated with being female and, metaphysically, become male.

Within the dissertation there has been many primary and secondary sources used to help analyse the research topic. Due to time restraints and word limitation I was unable to cover every aspect on the research area, nonetheless the most valid and appropriate information has been sourced and used. I would have preferred to have spent more time on the perception of women in the Old and New Testament. This is partly covered in the thesis, but not to full extent it deserves, but I feel the most relevant parts were highlighted.

The dissertation will start by discussing how women were perceived in classical medical theory. It argues the way the female body was perceived was very different from that of today. The dissertation will consider how men were considered more solid and more robust because of the embryonic process this theory describes. Female imperfection was explained by the comparative heat deficiency of females.¹ The negative perception of women was in the minds and attitudes of the early Church Fathers because of the society they were in. Classical medical theory had left its lasting mark and many early Church Fathers, in Late Antiquity, believed that every woman was like Eve and inherited the eternal sin. This will be discussed in the next part of the dissertation. However, some Church Fathers respected and even wrote about ascetic women in a very positive way, and were even friends with them. Jerome

¹ Maud Gleason, *Making Men, Sophists and Self-Presentation in Ancient Rome* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 352.

praises his friend Eustochium for taking a vow of celibacy and tells her she is a 'bride of Christ,'² thus showing that the 'Church Fathers had a dualistic view of women. While, in general, women were perceived as the 'second sex'³, and inferior to men, they were also considered to be 'brides of Christ'.⁴ The perception of women was beginning to be slightly blurred; if females were able to gain the same respect and holiness as a man by becoming ascetic, they had become a metaphysical man. Chapter four of the dissertation will examine how it was possible for female martyrs and ascetics to acquire the same virtues as their male counterparts. Many modern scholars argue these holy women were transvestites. Within the dissertation I wish to illustrate this is not the case, and they wished to transcend 'both genders and become an asexual eunuch for Christ'.⁵

Chapter five of the dissertation will discuss the lives of two ascetic women; Egeria and Melania the younger. The aim of this section is to expand upon the point illustrated in the previous section: women were able to gain more freedom, either physically or mentally, by becoming ascetic. They were able to challenge the perceptions of women by demonstrating their holiness. This section also illustrates how female ascetics were able to travel, given the freedom to go pilgrimages without a male.

The research question is not unique, and there are lots of different angles which could have been taken. The issue of gender identification and gender boundaries has provoked a lot of discussion and debate over recent years. Scholars have focused on the reason why women dressed as men, was because they were transvestites.⁶ However, the study will argue that, the reason why these ascetics wished to dress as men was to become asexual and, ultimately, obtain the highest achievement they could. The study aims to show that the negative perceptions associated with females acted as a kind of catalyst to inspire these holy women.

² Elizabeth A. Clark, 'Devil's Gateway and Brides of Christ: Women in the Early Christian World', in Elizabeth A. Clark (ed.), *Ascetic Piety and Women's Faith: Essays on Late Ancient Christianity* (Lewiston: Mellen Press, 1986), p. 27.

³ Deborah F. Sawyer, *Women and Religion in First Christian Centuries* (London: Routledge, 1996), p.150.

⁴ Clark, 'Devil's Gateway and Brides of Christ', p. 27.

⁵ Joyce E. Salisbury, *Church Fathers, Independent Virgins* (London; New York: Verso, 1991), p. 103.

⁶ John Anson, 'The Female Transvestite in Early Monasticism: The Origin and Development of a Motif,' *Viator* 5 (1974), pp. 1-32.

1.2 Research Questions

In order to achieve the aim of the dissertation four research questions need to be addressed throughout the dissertation

1. How were women perceived in classical medical theory, and how this inspired females to become ascetic?
2. How were women perceived by Church Fathers in Late Antiquity?
3. Could female ascetics cross gender boundaries in order to gain the same respect as their male contemporaries?
4. Could female ascetics really gain freedom, liberation and inspiration?

The aim of the dissertation is to illustrate how female could overcome the negative perceptions associated with them in Late Antiquity, and actually be inspired to be ascetic and want to follow in the footsteps of Christ. 'There can be neither Jew nor Greek, there can be neither slave nor freeman, there can be neither male nor female –for you are all one in Christ Jesus' .(Gal 3:28)

1.3 Research Methodology

The methodology used within this dissertation was chosen for practical reasons, as it is historically based. There are many primary and secondary sources used in the dissertation. The type of methodology used will be books, journals, articles within books and journals and occasionally, the internet. There will be many books and articles used in an attempt to provide a balanced opinion. Journals will be extremely helpful, as theologians, such as Elizabeth A. Clark are well respected within this field of research, and offer an indispensable insight into the topic. The dissertation will analyse the lives of holy women: Eregia, Pelagia, Perpetua, Euphrosyne and Melania the younger. To access this information it was necessary to look at their life documents. This gives us information about the individuals, and a record of their experiences and actions. Personal documents are open to interpretation, they may say more about the subjective states of individuals than the events they are describing, although they allow a greater insight into an individual's behaviour, actions, emotions, and an understanding of society's expectation and perceptions. Personal documents which are meant to be read by others, in this case autobiographies and letters may be written with an audience in mind, but gives an insight into how people thought and were perceived. The letters and homilies written by the early Church Fathers were written with an audience in mind, and, because they were not written retrospectively, provide a real insight into how they felt and thought, and what the Churches

perceptions and expectations were. The Diary of Egeria may be considered to offer more validity as it is much more personal and not intended for public consumption. Having been written at the time of the event, it provides spontaneity and first hand information.

1.4 The Literature Review

There have been many scholars who have written on this subject, especially feminist theologians. The scholars who have contributed the most to this research topic are Elizabeth A. Clark, Joyce E. Salisbury and L. Stephanie Cobb. Their work has brought great insight into the topic, examining how women were perceived in the Church, and offering a glimpse at the opportunities available to ascetic women.

One of the primary sources I will be using is *The Hippocrates*; this offers a great insight into how women were perceived in classical medical theory. A survey of classical medical theory provides an awareness of the assumptions and perceptions associated with male attitudes towards women in Late Antiquity. The works which will be discussed in the dissertation present a very different understanding of the human body from what we understand today. The *Hippocratic Corpus*, *Galen and Nemesius of Emesa* are some of the primary sources which will be used. They have been very useful and offer some explanation of how the female body was viewed in early Christianity.

Elizabeth A. Clark has contributed a great deal to the topic, especially in her book: *Ascetic Piety and Women's Faith: Essays on Late Ancient Christianity*. The chapter which is especially important to the dissertation is, 'Devil's Gateway and Bride of Christ; Women in the Early Christian World'. This chapter discusses how women were perceived in early Christianity. She considers how the Old and the New Testament portray women, whilst also considering the pagan attitude towards women. Clark discusses the growth of asceticism in early Christianity and how this was connected with the negative view of women in Christianity. The only way women could overcome the negative perceptions was either becoming ascetic or celibate. Clark shows how some women, who were ascetic, were able to gain freedom, first as martyrs and, later as ascetics themselves.

Joyce E. Salisbury has contributed a lot to the topic of the freedom given to female ascetics in Late Antiquity, particularly in her book: *Church Fathers, Independent Virgins*. She analyses the lives of seven early Christian women, fictional, legendary and historical; illustrating that asceticism gave women more freedom. They were able to travel, have an education and overcome gender perceptions. She suggests female ascetics dressed like men in order to become asexual; being neither male nor female, and thus gaining the respect of other holy men. The dissertation will discuss how the lives of two ascetic women, Egeria and Melania the Younger, were given the opportunity to travel because of their asceticism. She argues women were viewed as sexual temptresses by the early Church Fathers, and she uses primary sources to illustrate this. The book highlights how the lives of the seven women discussed offered an alternative to the patristic view of females and sexuality. She offers an alternative view of chastity and sexuality from the pietistic view.

L. Stephanie Cobb contributes a different and very valid aspect to the dissertation in her book: *Dying to be Men*. She writes a monograph illustrating how early Christian martyrdom was influenced by gender perceptions. She investigates the use of gladiatorial and athletic imagery in acts of martyrdom, illustrating this image is closely connected with the early Christian martyrs. She then moves onto discuss the virtues of the martyrs: self control, rationality and endurance, even if the martyr was female. She considers the lives of female martyrs; Perpetua being the one who bears relevance to the dissertation. This will be examined in great detail in the dissertation. Despite its being before the period I wished to discuss, I feel the cross over between martyrdom and asceticism is too important to ignore. The vision which is most important to the dissertation is Perpetua's fourth vision, where she appears to herself to become a man. Cobb shows how Perpetua becomes more and more masculine the closer to her martyrdom she approaches, by the virtues she acquires along the way. Cobb highlights the masculinity and femininity of the female martyr, comparing them to athletes and gladiators, but also showing that the female martyr had female virtues too, such as modesty and beauty. However, Cobb argues masculinity, with regard to early Christian identity, was very strong: 'being a Christian meant being a man'.⁷

⁷ L. Stephanie Cobb, *Dying to Be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr texts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), p.124.

Perpetua's Passion, which is written by Joyce E. Salisbury, discusses the subject of Perpetua's martyrdom in more detail. We learn about what led up to the event and what flowed from it. Salisbury describes the social and religious environment within which Perpetua lived. Salisbury explains the expectations to which a Roman woman of Perpetua's status was held. The book describes her actual story in 'prison' and 'the arena'. Her arrest, trial and experiences in prison are described. Salisbury demonstrates the authority of martyrs in the early Church. The fourth vision has been the subject of numerous feminist readers. In the arena Perpetua strips off conventional roles: daughter, wife, mother and woman. Overall, I would argue Salisbury is helpful in offering a rational interpretive framework.

Gillian Cloke is also a scholar that contributes a great deal to the topic, especially concerning the holiness of women in Late Antiquity. Within the dissertation I have used the book: *This Female Man Of God: Women and Spiritual Power in the Patristic Age, AD 350-450*. She offers a good overview of women and asceticism in the fourth and fifth century. She discusses the position of women and how this might affect their lives; she takes into account marriage and the legal position of women within the family. She moves onto discuss how Church Fathers advocate celibacy and illustrates the holiness that can be achieved for women through asceticism. She examines the lives of a number of women: Paula, Melania the elder, Melania the younger and Marcella, treating them well and examining them fairly.

CHAPTER 2

THE EFFECT OF CLASSICAL MEDICAL THEORY ON THE PERCEPTION OF WOMEN

2.1 Introduction

This chapter offers an insight into how females, and their bodies were viewed by classical medical theory. It soon becomes evident women were viewed as subservient to men; physically, psychologically and mentally. Women were thought of as baby making machines, simply there to produce an heir. Women were not given freedom or liberation in society. The way women were viewed in classical medical theory crossed over into the way women were viewed in society; they were viewed very negatively. Women appeared to be facing an insurmountable barrier in attempting to achieve the same respect as male counterparts. So why were women inspired to become ascetic?

In classical medical theory females were considered to be inferior to males, they were thought of as 'incomplete males'.⁸ They were deemed by physicians to be too hot or too cold, their flesh was too wet and spongy and wool like.⁹ The way in which females were viewed in physiological terms was very negative, and this negativity could never be overcome. The womb was thought to be like an oven, where the seed is 'baked'. In the *Dream book* a hearth represents the woman.¹⁰ Not only were women simply viewed as baby making objects, they also had to have the right physical attributes to conceive a male, being neither too lean nor too fat. Soranus describes how a future husband would get a midwife to examine his fiancée. She examined the general appearance of the girl, 'fertile women had broad hips, freckled skin, should not be too weak or too strong...the girl's colouring was also considered very important, if she grew dark or blushed suddenly she was too passionate and would simply destroy a man's seed'.¹¹ As if this was not humiliating enough for the girl/woman, the midwife would then examine her genitals; some doctors recommended using vaginal suppositories or vaginal fumigation.¹² When we look at the way females were viewed in classical medicine, is it hardly surprising female Christians wished to become ascetic, not only were they given the opportunity to overcome negative

⁸ Dale B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (Michigan: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 32.

⁹ Helen King, *Hippocrates' Woman: Reading the Female Body in Ancient Greece* (London; New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 29.

¹⁰ King, *Hippocrates' Woman* p. 33.

¹¹ Aline Rouselle, *Porneia: On Desire and the Body in Antiquity* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988), p. 21.

¹² *Ibid*, p.21.

virtues attached to them, but also to be looked at more positively in society as a whole, possibly presenting an alluring and inspiring incentive, to some women, to aspire to asceticism.

2.2 Before they were conceived women were perceived as inferior

Classical medical theory was based on the perception that the human body was made up from the four elements that pass through the cosmos: earth, air, fire and water.¹³ For the human body to be in good health these elements were required in equilibrium, otherwise it resulted in an 'imbalanced temperament'.¹⁴ The fiery element was important in procreation as it determined the biological sex. From the time of the Hippocratic collection, it was believed that the uterus consisted of two chambers; the right side was a hot cavity and the left side a cool cavity. Women were thought to have two testicles like men,¹⁵ but they remained internal and less perfect.¹⁶ Male embryos came from the right chamber, as it was thought to retain more heat, and females came from the left as it was heat deficit.¹⁷ There is some muddled logic in this theory, as most people are right handed, kick with their right foot and throw with their right hand and, until a few decades ago, students were forced to write with their right hand, so one can understand why the right side of the uterus was considered superior to the left. It was also thought that the male embryo came from the right testicle of a man, as the blood was purified by the kidneys, therefore was thicker and hotter than the blood produced by the left testicle.¹⁸ However, if the male sperm was not thick enough, female sperm might win. Doctors advised men to bind their left testicle so that only the right produced sperm.¹⁹ The Hippocratic *On Generation* states the female foetus takes longer to form than the male, the male only taking only 30 days to form, whereas the female takes 42 days to form.²⁰ It was believed the female foetus was weaker and more fluid than the male. The female foetus begins to move at four months, the stronger male foetus begins to move at three months.²¹ This is because the female foetus was formed in the cooler part of the uterus and created by

¹³ Nemesius of Emesa, *On the Nature of Man*, trans, William Telfer, *Cyril of Jerusalem and Nemesius of Emesa*, Library of Christian Classics, vol. 4 (London: SCM Press, 1955), p. 4.

¹⁴ Hippocrates, *On Affections*, in Martin, *The Corinthian Body*, p. 148.

¹⁵ Rousselle, *Porneia*, p. 48.

¹⁶ Mary Harlow, 'In the Name of the Father: Procreation and Patriarchy' in Lin Fox & John Salmon, *Thinking Men, Masculinity and its Self-Representation in the Classical Tradition*, vol.7 (London: New York: Routledge, 1998), P.159.

¹⁷ Galen, *De usu.*, 14.7, quoted in Rebecca Flemming, *Medicine and the Making of Roman Women: Gender, Nature and Authority from Celsus to Galen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), P. 310.

¹⁸ Rousselle, *Porneia*, P. 48.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, P. 48.

²⁰ Martin, *The Corinthian Body*, P. 32.

²¹ *Ibid*, p.32.

the weaker seed. The theories that have been discussed so far certainly view females as the weaker sex, even from before the time of conception. Females were viewed as imperfect, even as defective; males were simply stronger, cooler and not 'spongy'.²² Yet again it is fascinating to think how these theories were thought up, as women sometimes do put on weight after childbirth and develop cellulite, which perhaps could look a bit soft and sponge like. Highlighting why women may be inspired to become ascetic, not only to overcome negative perceptions, but also to escape the outward physical scars of childbirth, maintaining a more male like body.

The women of Antiquity said that when they had given birth to girls they had experienced a bad pregnancy, and when they had given birth to boys they had had a good pregnancy.²³ Soranus suggests that it could not be generalised like this, however the women themselves felt certain that the pregnancy was more troublesome when carrying a girl, experiencing more sickness, and the delivery itself was more painful.²⁴ Whether this was the case or not we will never really know, but it does, it demonstrates even women thought baby girls were more troublesome than boys, accentuating the fact that classical medical theory not only impacted on the way men thought, but also on the way women thought too.

2.3 The state of a women's womb predetermined the sex of the child.

According to the *Hippocratic theories*, the state of the womb determines the sex of the child. Females were produced by cold and wet wombs, whilst hot, dry wombs would produce a male with a 'strong constitution'.²⁵ The female was advised to watch her diet, a 'hot' and 'dry' diet would produce a male child, whereas a female child would be produced if a 'cool' and 'moist' diet was followed.²⁶ Plato thought the womb was a 'living creature desiring union which, if it remains unfruitful beyond its proper season, travels around the body blocking passages, obstructing breathing, and causing diseases'.²⁷ Plato's idea came from the Hippocratic theory, which ascribed 'hysteria' to the wandering womb'.²⁸ Soranus, also writing in the second century CE did not believe the womb was an animal; however he

²² King, *Hippocrates' Woman*, p. 29.

²³ Rouselle, *Porneia*, p. 48.

²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 48.

²⁵ Martin, *The Corinthian Body*, p. 32.

²⁶ *Ibid*, p.32.

²⁷ King, *Hippocrates' Woman*, p. 222.

²⁸ *Ibid*, P.222.

goes onto say 'in some ways it behaves like it were, as it responds to cooling and loosening drugs'.²⁹ The Hippocratic corpus claimed the use of 'scent theory' would coax the uterus back into place; the use of foul smelling and pleasant odours in order to repel the uterus back to its proper position.³⁰ Plato thought the womb could move throughout the whole body and could cause suffocation. The 'scent theory' was offered when the female said her nose was blocked and her eyes were hurting; the theory was to wash her with hot water, if this was unsuccessful, pour laurel over her head, anoint with rose oil and fumigate her vagina with sweet smells, while foul smells were put under her nose.³¹ Other theories believed to stop the 'wandering womb' included washing, oiling and wrapping bandages around the body to ensure the womb did not move.³² However misplaced this theory appears it reinforces the negative perceptions associated with the female body. If a female could not control her own body, what chance did she have to control herself in society without the help of a man?

2.4 Women had no control over their own bodies

The theory of the wandering womb implies females had no control over their own bodies, suggesting they needed male's to intervene to help control the female's body, just like a man controls his slave, illustrating the power/submission relationship in Roman society.³³ This would suggest a positive reason for why some Christian women being inspired to become ascetic, as they would have celibate, and be master of their own bodies, and look to Christ, only, to help control their bodies. However, it interesting to read that the males penis is said to be disobedient and 'self willed', illustrating that men were not always in control of their own bodies. Tlmaeus believed that the part of the soul which was concerned with bodily desires was connected to the soul like a 'wild creature'.³⁴ It was understood that when some of humankind proved themselves to be unjust they became female, but the gods gave everyone sexual desire.³⁵ The males' penis was disobedient and did not obey reason. Suggesting there is a similarity between the penis and the womb, as they both move independently of the will.

²⁹ King, *Hippocrates' Woman*, p. 223.

³⁰ Ibid, p.36.

³¹ Ibid, p.36.

³² Ibid, p.36.

³³ Ibid, p.26.

³⁴ King, *Hippocrates' Woman*, p. 223.

³⁵ Ibid, p.223.

As mentioned above, it was understood, in the first and second centuries CE that a woman's flesh was softer and more porous than a man's, becoming too full of blood and needing to be drained off, causing the female's body to overheat and cause pain. Men did not suffer this as their flesh was more solid.

'Because a man has more solid flesh than a woman, he is never totally overfilled with blood that pain results if some of his blood does not exit each month. He draws whatever quantity of blood is needed for his nourishment; since his body is not soft, it does not become overstrained nor is it heated up by fullness, as in the case of a woman. The fact that a man works harder than a woman contributes greatly to this; for hard work draws off some of the fluid'.³⁶

With some ironic logic the Hippocrates go onto explain that the womb dries up due the heat of the female's body, causing it to seek moisture, hence the reason its wandering around the body, as discussed previously. It was believed that intercourse helped prevent the womb from drying up, as it produces moisture, 'if her womb is damp from coitus and her belly is not empty, her womb is not easily displaced'.³⁷ The Hippocrates claim, 'if women have intercourse, they are more healthy; if they don't, they are less healthy...while intercourse is warming the blood and making it more fluid, it also furnishes an easier path for menstruation. When the menses do not flow, the woman's body becomes sickly'.³⁸ Women were recommended not to do strenuous exercise, as it could result in drying out the body and stopping menstruation, resulting in their becoming 'manish'.³⁹ The Hippocratic theories considered women to be imperfect because of their wetness; however it was also understood to be the required condition for reproduction.⁴⁰ These arguments appear to be problematic in understanding why females would be inspired to become ascetic, requiring celibacy, but opinions were changing and virginity was starting to be understood as the best option for women. The Hippocratic corpus was pushing the point that women were physically, and emotionally weaker than men, asserting they needed a man to help overcome their physical weakness, however, ascetic women proved this was not the case, illustrating

³⁶Martin, *The Corinthian Body*, p. 222.

³⁷ Ibid, p.222.

³⁸ Ibid, p.223.

³⁹ L. Dean-Jones 'The Cultural Construct of the Female Body in Classical Greek Science', in Mark Golden & Peter Toohey (eds), *Sex and Difference in Ancient Greece and Rome* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), p. 183-201.

⁴⁰Ann E. Hanson, 'The Medical Writers' Woman', in David M. Halperin, John J. Winkler, Froma I, Zeitlin (eds), *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 320.

women were able to be independent and strong, thus reinforcing the point that women may have been inspired to be ascetic in order to shed the perception associated with them.

2.5 Women and their psychological state

By the second century the theory of the 'wandering womb' was not really believed to be true, just as the womb being thought of an animal was viewed as 'totally absurd'.⁴¹ The uterus was now understood to be 'fairly well fastened down'.⁴² Soranus suggests that sexual moderation and even virginity would not cause a female to be ill, he even goes as far as suggesting that permanent virginity does not harm a woman's health, but it enables her to act in 'manly ways'.⁴³ This view does seem to be quite a turning point in Church History for women, but we must remember this only related to her reproductive duties and females were still considered psychologically weaker than males. It was believed women were physiologically and psychologically wet. In Greek thought it was considered the soundest condition for the body was dryness, provided it was not too dry.⁴⁴ A dry soul is wisest and best, while wetness is a deficient condition'.⁴⁵ The best condition for the body is dry stability, which the female physique can never achieve; this is partly due to the innate wetness in women.⁴⁶ Aristotle informs us that the female body is softer and 'more easily moved to tears, pity, jealousy, despondency, fear and rash impulses'.⁴⁷ Men were much more capable of rational thought due to their dry and hot nature, the female mind was 'senseless' 'unreasonable' and 'stupid'.⁴⁸ This will be discussed in more detail later, when the martyrdom of Perpetua is examined. As the martyrdom story unfolds it becomes evident Perpetua was able to take control of her own body, both physically and emotionally. She was becoming more and more like a man as the story continues.

⁴¹ Ibid, p.73.

⁴² Ibid, p.73.

⁴³ Hanson, 'The Medical Writers' Woman', p. 331.

⁴⁴ Halperin, *Before Sexuality*, p.137.

⁴⁵ Ibid, p.137.

⁴⁶ Ibid, p.137.

⁴⁷ Ibid, p.137.

⁴⁸ Hippocratic Corpus, *Nature of Man; Reimen*, trans. William H. S. Jones, Hippocrates (London; New York: Heinemann; Putnam, 1931), p. 287.

Classical medical theory has given an insight into how women and their bodies were viewed in Roman society. Their bodies were weaker, and not as developed as males' bodies. They were viewed as having no control over their own bodies. This concept was therefore in the minds of the people who lived in that society. Early Church Fathers were well aware of this perception, overlapping into their thoughts about women. The perception of women in society was very similar to the way they were recognised in Church. Theologically they were understood to be the second sex, inferior to men. The next chapter will illustrate how women were seen by Church Fathers, which at times is a dualistic view.

CHAPTER 3

THE PERCEPTION OF WOMEN BY EARLY CHURCH FATHERS

3.1 Introduction

Classical medical theory has given a great insight into how women were perceived as inferior because of the faults and imperfections of their bodies. The Church also viewed women as inferior, but not just because of their bodies, it was also based on Scripture. Early Church Fathers used Scripture to substantiate their argument, illustrating how women were second class citizens to men. However, the issue is not as unequivocal as one may think. In this chapter I will discuss how the Genesis creation was portrayed by patristic scholars to undermine women; whom they all identified with the figure Eve. Elizabeth. A. Clark claims, “The Church Fathers intended to assert female subordination to male authority by identifying all women with Eve and creating a strategy of containment to restrict female authority”.⁴⁹ She goes on to say, ‘that in appealing to the creation narratives, the Fathers were ‘universalising’ women to provide a justification for female subordination by presenting the secondary status of women as a natural and eternal state’⁵⁰ The dissertation will discuss, briefly, how other early Church Fathers held the same opinion, and viewed women as the by product of Eve. Tertullian held the view that, ‘Eve’s sin was so great that because of her the rest of womankind fall outside the redemptive power of Christ, and sees Eve as ‘every woman against female ecclesiastical authority and teaching’.⁵¹

Most early Church Fathers upheld this view and believed that all women were like Eve and inherited the eternal sin. This issue is more complicated than one would expect, as many Church Fathers had female friends whom they highly respected and wrote about, thus illustrating that ascetic women were beginning to provoke arguments. Women may be viewed in a negative light, but ascetic women could overturn these perceptions, providing the inspiration to become ascetic. The issues are sometimes ambiguous, as some Church Fathers regarded women as less equal in body, but equal in soul, which seems very Pauline like in flavour. Nonetheless, the Female figures which were respected by Church Fathers, such as Jerome, were ascetic. Perhaps this reminds us why women in Late Antiquity were inspired to be ascetic. In Late antiquity celibacy and asceticism began to be favoured over marriage, The

⁴⁹ Elizabeth A. Clark, ‘Ideology, History, and the Construction of ‘Woman’ in Late Ancient Christianity’, in *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 2:2 (1994), pp. 155-184.

⁵⁰ Ibid, pp.160-168.

⁵¹ Ibid, p.168.

New Testament seems to support this, as the Gospels represent Jesus as unmarried and He taught that those who, 'became eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven were blessed' (Matt 19:12).⁵²

3.2 Women's role in the early Church

In the early Church women played a vital role in the, not only were they deaconesses and priests, but they were the first to see the risen Lord. The Gospel of John tells us how Mary Magdalene was the first to see the risen Lord. In Rom 16:1-3 Paul was working side by side with women,

'I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church of Cenchrea; give herein the Lord, a welcome worthy of God's people, and help her with whatever she needs from you – she herself has come to the help of many people, including myself'.

In 1 Cor 16:19 we find Priscilla and Aquila; a wife and husband team at the Church of Corinth. John Chrysostom wrote that Priscilla was a teacher of Apollo's, who became the pastor at the church of Corinth after Paul left.⁵³ Holy women in Late Antiquity may have wished for this time again, where women were able to be recognised for achievements within the Church, and not simply recognised for their physical attributes. Scripture, not only provided Church Fathers with literature to support their opinion, but it also provided ascetic women with the inspiration to fulfil their spiritual goal.

One wonders, why did this change? And why were women thought of second class citizens and not allowed to even speak in Church?⁵⁴ Tertullian argued 'it is not permitted for a woman to speak in the Church, but neither is it permitted for her to teach, nor to baptise, nor to offer, nor to claim to herself a lot in any manly function'.⁵⁵ One reason why women were starting to be viewed as subordinate to men might be because Christianity had to reassess its social outlook to be more accepted. Early Christianity endured a lot of persecution and did not wish to provoke authorities any more, hence the reason for social conformity. The first major persecution of Christians began by Emperor Nero in 65 CE, who was responsible for the fire of Rome. The first century Christians believed the second coming of Christ would happen very soon. There was a link between this and the roles that females exercised within Church.

⁵² Jean F. O'Barr, *Women and a New Academy: Gender and Cultural Contexts* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), p. 174.

⁵³ Florence. M. Gillman, *Women who knew Paul* (Collegeville, Mill: Liturgical Press, 1992), pp. 49-55.

⁵⁴ See 1 Cor 14:33-36.

⁵⁵ Matthew Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch: Masculinity, Gender, Ambiguity, and Christian Ideology in Late Antiquity* (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 85.

Deborah Sawyer suggests, 'Women may have been given power because of their belief in imminent return of Christ and the eschatological overturning of earthly authority'.⁵⁶ When this did not happen, Christianity had to conform to society in order to be accepted: in Roman society females were considered to be in the private arena of society, while males were considered to be in the public sphere of society. When Christians realised that the second coming of Christ was not imminent, male leadership and hierarchy had to become the norm. When we consider the history of Christianity and the persecution it endured it becomes easier to understand why women were seen in a negative light. It does leave one to wonder why this attitude towards females was not reversed when Christianity was legalised.

3.3 Women were perceived to be like Eve.

Church Fathers seemed to adopt an extreme aversion towards women, and their role within the Church. Not only were women not allowed leadership roles in Christianity, but they were also to blame for the whole 'fall' of society, because of Eve:

*'I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man: she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve: and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor' (1 Tim 2:12-15).*⁵⁷

Tertullian addressed a female audience, reinforcing the inferiority of them;

'If such strong faith remained on earth, as strong as the reward of faith is expected in heaven, not one of you, dearest sisters, from the time she acknowledged the living God and learned about herself, that is, about the condition of women, would have desired a more charming dress. She would rather strive for an appearance characterised by neglect. She would carry herself around like Eve, mourning and penitent – and you know not that you are also an Eve'.⁵⁸

It soon becomes noticeable how the early Church Fathers used scripture in a bespoke way. They used pieces of Scripture which backed up their argument, and failed to mention other pieces of scripture which may have helped elevate women's position in society. They consistently referred to Genesis 2: the story where Eve is created second, from Adam's rib, rather than Genesis 1, in which male and female are

⁵⁶ Sawyer, *Women and Religion*, p. 149.

⁵⁷ Clark, 'Ideology, History, and the Construction of 'Woman'', p. 166.

⁵⁸ Elizabeth A. Clark, *Women in the Early Church: Message of the Fathers 13* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1990), P. 39.

created at the same time: 'God created man in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them' (Gen 1:26). Conversely, in Genesis 2 it states 'It is not right that the man should be alone. I shall make you a helper...God fashioned the rib he had taken from the man into a woman, and brought her to the man' (Gen 2:18, 22). Illustrating how women were viewed as inferior to males and were considered as males 'helpers' in Late Antiquity.

Nevertheless, women were placed in the correct sexual hierarchy within Christian theology. Eve was viewed as the 'second sex', as she was made after Adam and out of Adam, and because of her disobedience she was not made in the image of God.⁵⁹ If there was any doubt or ambivalence over this John Chrysostom, in his sermons on Genesis, makes it quite clear: he reads the creation and 'Fall' stories as an intertext with some texts from the New Testament⁶⁰ He reads Genesis 1 alongside Corinthians 11, 'he is the image of God and reflects God's glory; but woman is the reflection of man's glory. For man did not come from woman; no, woman came from man, but woman for the sake of man' (Corinthians. 11). He argues it is only males who enjoy the blessings of 'God's image'.⁶¹ He goes onto say the 'image of God' means authority, and only men have this quality: like God in the heavens, so the male on earth has no superior and rules over all (including females).⁶² Thus deducing it was the order of creation that made women inferior and did not bear the image of God in the same way as males. Church Fathers selected and interpreted Biblical Scripture in any ways that would reinforce their argument, never alluding to passages which illustrate female leadership roles within the Church.

Early Church Fathers believed it was Eve who brought sin into the world. It was she who ate the fruit from the tree in the Garden of Eden,

'The woman saw the tree was good to eat and pleasing to the eye and that it was enticing for the wisdom that it could give. So she took some its fruit and ate it. She also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate it...'have you been eating from the tree I forbade you to eat? The man replied, 'It was the woman you put with me; she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it' (Gen 3: 6, 12).

As in the case of the passage from 1 Timothy, Tertullian argues from the perspective in Genesis 3, and sees Eve as 'everywoman': 'God's judgement on this lives on in our age: the guilt necessarily lives on as

⁵⁹ Sawyer, *Women and Religion in First Christian Centuries*, p. 150.

⁶⁰ Clark, 'Ideology, History, and the Construction of 'Woman'', p. 176.

⁶¹ Ibid, p.176.

⁶² Ibid, p.176.

well. You are the Devil's gateway; you are the unsealer of that tree: you are the first foresaker of the divine law; you are the one who persuaded him whom the Devil was not brave enough to approach: you so lightly crushed the image of God, the man Adam: because of your punishment, that is death, even the Son of God had to die. And you think to adorn yourself beyond your 'tunics of skins' (Gen 3:21)⁶³.

Interestingly, though, Augustine takes a different perspective and argues that it was Eve not Adam who was led astray:

'Maybe the woman had not yet received this grace that comes with the knowledge of God, but would have acquired it only gradually, under the man's rule and management. Paul's words were not meaningless, 'For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not led astray, but the woman was, and was made guilty of transgression (1 Tim.2:13-14). Even when asked, Adam says, 'She gave me from the tree and I ate'. She, to be sure, did speak the words, 'The serpent led me astray' (Gen. 3:13).⁶⁴

Therefore, it was Eve's vulnerability that caused her punishment. She was the one who brought sin into the world, she was the originator of sin, and Early Church Fathers saw her as the embodiment of all womankind. Whatever Eve's original role, the early Church Fathers agreed she was responsible for the sin in Genesis 3. As early as the second century CE, the Bishop of Lyons composed a treatise about this. 'Eve was disobedient, to be sure, since she did obey when she was still a virgin. Indeed, she had a husband, Adam, but was still a virgin; Eve, having become disobedient, was made the cause of death both for herself and the entire human race'.⁶⁵ It appears salvation for women comes through child-bearing, modest dress and behaviour. Augustine echoes this argument in his belief that the only reason for woman's existence was procreation: He asks why were women created at all? And he answers, 'all women were created purely for procreation'.⁶⁶

Women were viewed by many Church Fathers as being disobedient. Eve was to blame for the downfall of humanity, women inherited this, and were eternally at fault. Conversely, Mary a virgin, was chosen to, carry and give birth to the Son of God; apparently portraying her as the very antithesis of the sinful Eve and womankind. This appears to demonstrate there was a dualistic view of women by the Church Fathers. We must also consider that if it was not for Eve and her disobedience we would not have found

⁶³ Ibid, p.176.

⁶⁴ Clark, *Women in the Early Church*, p. 41.

⁶⁵ Ibid, p.38.

⁶⁶ Dorothy J. Lucas, *A History of Women in Religion: Unequal Justice* (Xulon Classic, 2010) p. 36.

free will. At this point it is difficult to understand why women in Late Antiquity would be inspired, but the reason becomes clearer when the Church Fathers perception of the Virgin Mary is examined.

3.4 Women and their changing legal position.

At this point it is worthwhile mentioning the legal position women held, and how this differed from the position they were given in the Church. By the second century women had the legal right to initiate divorce; previously this only belonged to males. During the second century edicts permitted some men to leave property in their wills to their mothers; earlier they were forbidden to even own property.⁶⁷ Mothers were allowed to leave properties to their children and to bequeath their dowries to their children.⁶⁸ At the beginning of the fourth Century, Constantine permitted women over eighteen and of good character to control their own property. A law passed in 414 CE ordered that all contracts made by women were considered binding, and also permitted women to act as guardians for their children.⁶⁹ Due to this increased legal control over property and income women were able to make financial contributions to the early Church. Nonetheless, women were still seen as subordinate by the Church and were assigned to perform certain ceremonial acts only. Tertullian argued 'it is not permitted to a woman to speak in the Church, nor to baptise, nor to offer, nor to claim to herself a lot in any manly function'.⁷⁰ It has been argued that women were permitted to exercise some unofficial spiritual authority in the Church, but this was only available to the wealthy who were able to offer a financial contribution.⁷¹

One may wonder why women were considered such a threat in the Church, whilst their legal status was changing so positively. Within the Church women were considered to be the embodiment of Eve and they should not have any authority. So why were women attracted to asceticism in Late Antiquity? This is where it becomes even more confusing, as the very same early Church Fathers who preached on Eve and how women inherited her eternal sin had female ascetic friends whom they respected highly and spoke of as 'brides of Christ'.⁷² A conundrum covered in greater detail, further in this section of the dissertation. I would like to remain focused on the figure of Eve for the moment, and briefly discuss how the early Church Fathers compared this figure with the figure of the Virgin Mary.

⁶⁷ Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch* p. 72.

⁶⁸ Ibid, p.72.

⁶⁹ Ibid, p.73.

⁷⁰ Ibid, P.150.

⁷¹ Ibid, p.150.

⁷² Clark, 'Devils Gateway and Brides of Christ', pp. 23-60.

3.5 Women should aspire to be like the Virgin Mary

Justin Martyr discussed the link between the Eve and the Virgin Mary in the early part of the second century. Irenaeus, in the late half of the second century CE, spoke, about the differences and the similarities of the two women.⁷³ Irenaeus' views can be found in his sermon *Against Heresies*:

*'Mary the Virgin is found to be obedient. She says, 'Behold your handmaid, Lord; let it be done with me according to your word (Luke 1:38). Eve was disobedient; she did not obey when she was still a virgin. Eve having become disobedient was made the cause of death both for herself and for the entire human race. Mary's obedience made her the cause of salvation both for herself and for the entire human race.'*⁷⁴

Mary and Eve are both central characters in the redemptive work of Christ, and the bond between the two women was recognised in Christianity: Eve is the prototype of the one to come: Mary.⁷⁵ Mary was the prototype for all women to aspire to, because she was obedient and answered God's call with grace and dignity. The contrasting representations of Eve and Mary were also written about by Justin Martyr (165 CE) and Tertullian (220 CE).⁷⁶ Irenaeus contrasted the two women without sexual connotations. Augustine on the other hand, linked the original sin which Eve committed with lust. Garber notes 'this led to redefinition of 'obedience' and 'disobedience' in terms of chastity and lust.'⁷⁷ However, Irenaeus's comparison of the two virgins, led to the contrast between the sinful 'mulier' and the saintly 'Virgo'.⁷⁸

Patristic writers represented Eve as Mary's opposite: Eve disobeyed, Mary obeyed: Eve lacked faith, Mary remained faithful. Mary is the fulfilment of everything that Eve was meant to be, she is the second Eve, and she is the antithesis of the first. It is interesting to note, that recent feminists have observed that Mary is an unachievable standard for women to attain. Marina Warner believes this view of Mary is an unachievable target, and actual women will always fall short ultimately promoting misogyny.⁷⁹

Theresa Coletti argues the Virgin Mary is an impossible model; no other woman can remain a virgin and

⁷³Sawyer, *Women and Religion in First Christian Centuries*, p. 150.

⁷⁴Clark, *Women in the Early Church*, p. 40.

⁷⁵ Sawyer, *Women and Religion in First Christian Centuries*, p. 151.

⁷⁶ Clark, *Women in the Early Church*, p. 38.

⁷⁷ Ibid, p.38.

⁷⁸ Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom. St. Hildegards Theology of the Feminine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), p. 167.

⁷⁹ Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London: Picador, 1985).

also give birth to a child.⁸⁰ Mary Daly thinks 'the inimitability of the Virgin Mother model...has left all women essentially identified with Eve'.⁸¹ However, if women in Late Antiquity had a positive role model to aspire to, and they had a possibility of being recognised for their role within the Church, just like the Virgin Mary had, it would have filled them with encouragement and inspiration

The Church Fathers recognised the importance of celibacy. The Virgin Mary was a central character not only because she carried the Messiah, but because she was a virgin. Mary was a highly respected character in Late Antiquity, perhaps encouraging and inspiring women in Late Antiquity were attracted and inspired to be ascetic. Some Early Church Fathers deliberating about the subordination and disobedience of women, others believed that ascetic women should be revered and respected, just like the Virgin Mary was (and still is).

3.6 The changing perception of women by Church Fathers

As aforementioned, the very same Church Fathers that spoke of women as subservient also wrote about their holy female friends with honour and praise. Jerome had various female friends whom he held in high respect. He understood that other Early Church Fathers may not understand his opinion so spoke of it with sensitivity and appealed to the New Testament:

*'An unbelieving reader might perhaps laugh at me for labouring so long over the praises of the ladies. He will rather condemn himself for pride than us for the foolishness if he will ponder how the holy women who were companions of our Lord and saviour ministered to him from their own substance (Lk. 8:25), how the three Marys stood before the cross (Jn. 19:25) and how especially Mary Magdalene...'*⁸²

John Chrysostom famously spoke openly about the subordination of women, stating that 'women turned men into cowardly lions'⁸³. Nevertheless, it is reported he had a close friend; Olympias, whom he wrote about in a positive fashion in his letters to her.⁸⁴ In the *Life of Olympias*, her merits are discussed:

⁸⁰ Theresa Coletti, 'Purity and Danger; the Paradox of Mary's body and the En-gendering of the Infancy Narrative, in the English Mystery Cycles, in Linda Lomperis and Sarah Stanbury (eds.), *Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval Literature* (Philadelphia; university of Pennsylvania Press), p .66.

⁸¹ Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), p. 81.

⁸² Clark, 'Devils Gateway and Brides of Christ', p. 27.

⁸³ Ibid, p.27.

⁸⁴ Ibid, p.27.

'She helped the monasteries and convents, the beggars, the prisoners, and those in exile; she distributed her alms over the entire world. The blessed Olympias herself burst the supreme limit in her almsgiving and her humility, so that nothing can be found greater than what she did. She had a life without vanity, an appearance without pretence, character without affection, a face without adornment; she had an immaterial body, intelligence without conceit, charity without limits, immeasurable self-control, rectitude of thought, undying hope in God,,: she was the ornament of all the humble and was in addition worthily honoured by the most holy patriarch John'.⁸⁵

It becomes noticeable that the Early Church Fathers' views about women were confusing, and at times, they contradicted themselves. We must remember that Christianity was a new religion in Late Antiquity and it wished to be accepted without persecution, so it was easier to conform to social normality and argue that women were considered subservient to men, although some Early Church Fathers, as illustrated above, believed female martyrs and ascetics to be 'brides of Christ'.⁸⁶ Jerome praises his female friend, Eustochium for taking a vow of celibacy, and tells her she is the bride of Christ'.⁸⁷ He writes about Eustochium and her fiancé Jesus as swooning lovers, and uses the erotic language from the Song of Songs.⁸⁸ At the end of his letter Jerome depicts the two lovers meeting in heaven, where she had flown to meet Jesus. In heaven she reinforces the love between the two by stating the words of Song and Songs, 'Many waters cannot quench love, and neither can the floods drown it'.⁸⁹

This chapter has highlighted the fact that women in Late Antiquity were perceived by Church Fathers in a dualistic light, but, even when the Church Fathers praised females for their holy and ascetic attitude and outlook, they sometimes did it in an apologetic manner. Overall, women in Late Antiquity were perceived in a negative light by the Church and by society, despite their acquiring greater legal rights, and some Church Fathers were at least beginning to speak of women in a more positive way. Because generally women were considered inferior and subservient to men within society and the Church, they were compelled to reevaluate the way they were thinking and the way they acted. Ascetic women in Late Antiquity wanted to be recognised for the inspirational role they played in the Church, which led

⁸⁵ Ibid, p.28.

⁸⁶ Ibid, p.28.

⁸⁷ Ibid, p.28.

⁸⁸ O'Barr, *Women and a New Academy*, p. 84.

⁸⁹ Ibid, p.84.

some to believe that in order to achieve their ascetic goal they had to become a man. They did not physically become a man, but they were inspired enough to become a metaphysical man.

CHAPTER 4

GENDER BOUNDARIES AND THE PERCEPTION OF WOMEN

4.1 Introduction

The dissertation will now move onto discuss how ascetic women were inspired because they 'became male'.⁹⁰ They were able to gain the respect and praise of their contemporaries by becoming one of them, either by the clothes they were wearing, or the way their body developed because of an ascetic lifestyle. The martyrdom of Perpetua tells us that in a vision, she 'suddenly was a man'.⁹¹ Macrina was a fourth century ascetic, and her brother Gregory of Nyssa wrote about her life. In his introduction he refers to her as a woman, but later he appears to question himself; 'If indeed she should be styled woman for I do not know whether it is fitting to designate her by sex, who so surpasses her sex'.⁹² Melania the younger was awarded 'a gold medal of gender reclassification for her achievement in piety'.⁹³ This part of the dissertation will illustrate that female ascetics in Late Antiquity could gain the same virtues as male ascetics and become metaphysically male.

Clark recognises that, 'female ascetics were sometimes, said to have become 'men', whilst at other times they were said to become 'angels'.⁹⁴ Jerome phrased it, 'once a woman prefers Jesus Christ to a husband and babies, she ceases to be a woman. And will be called a man'.⁹⁵ Before Christianity was legitimised women could defeat their deficiencies through martyrdom, but afterwards, they turned to asceticism. Female martyrs are frequently called 'virile' and were believed to possess 'manly spirit'.⁹⁶ Perpetua and Felicity are the most well known female martyrs. In Perpetua's (martyred 203 CE) account of her martyrdom there are various male virtues presented. On the day Perpetua was due to confront the beasts in the arena, as punishment for her refusal to deny her wish to be a Christian, she had a

⁹⁰ Marilyn Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), p. 57.

⁹¹ Joyce. E Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion: The Death and Memory of a Young Roman Woman* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 107.

⁹² Gillian Cloke, *'This Female Man of God': Women and Spiritual Power in the Patristic Age, AD 350-450* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 214.

⁹³ *Ibid*, p.214.

⁹⁴ Elizabeth A. Clark, *Ascetic Piety and Women's Faith: Essays in Late Ancient Christianity* (Lewiston: Mellen Press, 1986), p. 43.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 43.

⁹⁶ Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), p. 76.

vision, in this vision she went to the arena and she discovered that she 'suddenly was a man'.⁹⁷ It will be discussed later whether she actually viewed herself as male physically or if it was because of the manly virtues she was acquiring.

4.2 Perpetua's martyrdom

Perpetua and Felicitas of North Africa were the most famous female martyrs. Perpetua wrote part of the account herself. In her fourth vision on the eve of her appearance in the arena, she is led to the amphitheatre; where she is to compete against an Egyptian who is identified as the devil.⁹⁸ Perpetua's robes are removed and she declares, 'I became a man'.⁹⁹

'Pomponius the deacon came to the prison led me into the centre of the arena. I looked at the enormous crowd who watched with astonishment. I was surprised that no beasts were let loose on me; for I knew that I was condemned to die by the beasts. Then out came an Egyptian against me. My clothes were stripped off, and suddenly I was a man. My seconds began to rub me down with oil'.¹⁰⁰

She defeated the Egyptian easily by treading on his head exactly as in a previous vision when she stood on a great serpent who guarded the foot of a ladder reaching to heaven: 'At the foot of the ladder lay a dragon of enormous size, and it would attack those who tried to climb up and try to terrify them doing so...' Perpetua I am waiting for you. But take care; do not let the dragon bite you. He will harm you. I said, 'in the name of Jesus Christ.' Slowly, as though he were afraid of me, the dragon stuck his head out from underneath the ladder. Then, using it as my first step, I trod on his head and went up'.¹⁰¹ By her willingness to confront the dragon, she illustrated her man virtues, of strength and courage, rather than displaying the expected weakness and subservience of a woman. Some Commentators have argued the dragon (serpent) and the Egyptian represented the devil.¹⁰² Artemidorus offers a different interpretation, arguing 'venomous animals represented powerful men, and further signified parents'.¹⁰³ She wished to gain spiritual progression in her life, and in order to achieve this she had to question her father's

⁹⁷ Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion*, p. 107.

⁹⁸ Cobb, *Dying to Be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr texts*, p. 105.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 105.

¹⁰⁰ Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion*, p. 107.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, p.99.

¹⁰² *Ibid*, p.99.

¹⁰³ Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion*, p. 100.

authority. Perpetua's father appears in the narrative after her arrest, he attempts to persuade her to give up her faith:

*'Daughter...have pity on my grey head-have pity on me your father, if I have favoured you above all your brothers, if I have raised you to reach this prime of your life. Do not abandon me to the reproach of men. Think of your brothers, think of your mother and your aunt, think of your child, who will not be able to live once you are gone. Give up your pride!'*¹⁰⁴

Perpetua's father tried to persuade her to come back to her family. He reminded her of her relatives and her baby (whom she was still breast feeding), but she stands firm and refuses to give up her faith. At this stage her father was trying to remind her of her female responsibilities. She was a daughter and a mother. He thought she should look after her family. Despite her father's appeals, Perpetua's call to Christ was too strong, and she was courageous enough to shed these perceptions, and follow her sad martyrdom story. Tertullian warned the martyrs that their relatives would try to draw them back¹⁰⁵, but Perpetua would not be persuaded:

*'This was the way my father spoke out of love for me, kissing my hands and throwing himself down before me. With tears in his eyes he no longer addressed me as a daughter but as a woman. I was sorry for my father's sake, because he alone of all my kin would be unhappy to see me suffer. I tried to comfort him, and he left me in great sorrow.'*¹⁰⁶

When Perpetua refuses to deny her faith her father becomes angry and even violent, he appears as if he were going to 'pluck her eyes out'.¹⁰⁷ Cobb explains, 'his violent actions rob him of his masculinity because they expose his lack of self-control'.¹⁰⁸ These two encounters have a lot of familial language within them, illustrating the social relationships and expectations of that time. Perpetua was not only expected by her father to take care of her family, but it was what society also expected. Halvor Moxnes notes even after marriage in the imperial period women were still legally controlled by their father.¹⁰⁹ He does not appeal to this legal right, and does not assert his power over her, but tries to persuade her

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, p.89.

¹⁰⁵ Tertullian 'To The Martyrs', in R. Arbesmann (trans), *Disciplinary, Moral and Ascetical work*, (New York, 1959).

¹⁰⁶ Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion*, p .89.

¹⁰⁷ Cobb, *Dying to Be Men*, p. 97.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, p.97.

¹⁰⁹ Halvor Moxnes, *Constructing Early Christian Families: Family as Social Reality and Metaphor* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 103-120.

by appealing to family attachments. Cobb notes 'it highlights Perpetua's masculinity even more...since masculinity is measured relatively it does not mean Perpetua has become male and her father female, but it does illustrate that the balance of masculinity has shifted from father to daughter...Perpetua's actions show her to be more masculine, while her father's actions show him to be less so'.¹¹⁰ Even though Perpetua knew the final outcome for her was death, she felt so inspired that this was the right calling for her, she was overcoming any virtues associated with females without actually realising she was.

Her father appears again with her child at the prison dock, pleading with her to 'perform the sacrifice-have pity on your baby'.¹¹¹ The proconsul Hilarianus said, 'Have pity on your father's grey head; have pity on your infant son. Offer the sacrifice for the welfare of the emperors', this emotional overture still, does not have the desired outcome. Cobb notes, 'she is not persuaded to live by her womanly emotion that would lead her to recant her declaration of faith even if it would save her father. Rather, she retains manly reason, by virtue of which she remains firm in her commitment to her faith and her death'.¹¹² Perpetua replied, 'I will not...I am a Christian.'¹¹³ Both her father and the proconsul have legal authority over Perpetua, and both confront her. Perpetua refuses to obey her father and the proconsul's demands; she illustrates self control and does not get angry. Peter Dronke suggests 'by giving up her name and renaming herself as a Christian, Perpetua has taken on a new identity'.¹¹⁴ Perpetua no longer belonged to Rome when she identified herself as a Christian. Hilarianus started to persecute her father; 'Hilarianus ordered him to be thrown to the ground and I myself had been beaten. I felt sorry for his pathetic old age'.¹¹⁵ Perpetua may have felt sorry and *beaten with a rod. I felt sorry for father, just as if* compassion for her father, but she still stood firm to her faith, and her new identity had 'separated her from her father once and for all'.¹¹⁶ Perpetua appears to be happy when Hilarianus passed judgement: '*We were condemned to beasts, and we returned to prison in high spirits.*'¹¹⁷ Even her father's pleas were

¹¹⁰ Cobb, *Dying to Be Men*, p. 100.

¹¹¹ Ibid, p.90.

¹¹² Ibid, p.101.

¹¹³ Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion*, p. 90.

¹¹⁴ Peter Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages; A Critical Study from Perpetua to Marguerite Porete* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 5.

¹¹⁵ Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion*, p. 91.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, p.91.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, p.91.

not enough for her to refuse her faith, her Christian faith was so strong that she was giving up her old life as a woman to become a recognised and inspirational Christian martyr.

Perpetua's father appears again just before her death;

'My father came to me being devoured by sorrow. He began to pluck out his beard and threw himself on the ground; he then threw himself down and reproached his years and began to say such words as would move all creation'.¹¹⁸

Perpetua does not speak, she seems to distance herself from her father, she appears to show no emotion... 'her disinterestedness highlights her masculinity'.¹¹⁹ Her father seems unable to control his emotions. Throughout the narrative he becomes less masculine, showing his love for his daughter, pleading with her, and losing control emotionally. Perpetua, on the other hand is becoming more and more masculine by the virtues she is displaying and the courage she is showing. Perpetua seeks to avoid emotional ties with her son, unlike her father, who was emotionally tied to her. Perpetua's father not only loses his own self-control, but he is also unable to control those under his authority.

Richard Hawley notes that, in Antiquity, the, 'greatest symbol of masculinity (apart from the phallus itself) is the beard'.¹²⁰ Classical medical theories argue that females were not completely formed. They were defective males because, 'their coldness has resulted in internal reproductive organs, and, they have higher voices and lack body hair. It is heat that produces body hair and sperm, an attribute of males'.¹²¹ Musonius Rufus notes, 'the beard is a covering provided by nature as a symbol of the male, like the cock's crest and the lion's mane'.¹²² Clement thinks Eve was formed from a hairless part of Adams body, meaning he remains a man, and shows masculinity.¹²³ Therefore Perpetua's father was tearing out his masculinity by tearing out his beard. Perpetua's journey was inspired by Christ, she wanted to show her commitment and love for Christ, and was willing to do anything to make this possible.

¹¹⁸Cobb, *Dying to Be Men*, p. 101.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, p. 101.

¹²⁰ Richard Hawley, 'The Body as spectacle in Attic drama', in Lin Fox & John Salmon, *Thinking Men, Masculinity and its Self-Representation in the Classical Tradition*, vol.7 (London: New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 91.

¹²¹ Cobb, *Dying to Be Men*, p. 102.

¹²² Gleason, *Making Men*, p. 91.

¹²³ Cobb, *Dying to Be Men*, p. 102.

Ultimately, the whole experience, so far, has shown the role reversal of daughter and father. Her father was emotional, pleading with Perpetua using no authority and seems to humiliate himself by throwing himself to the ground and plucking out his beard. Perpetua, on the other hand was building up her masculinity throughout the narrative. Although she felt sorry, and had pity for her father she was able to show little emotion and was able give up her father -ties and even her own son, whom she was weaning in prison. As she declared,

'As God willed, the baby had no further desire for the breast, nor did I suffer any inflammation; and so I was relieved of any anxiety for my child and of any discomfort in my breasts'.¹²⁴

It appears the natural process of lactation stopped; she is relieved that she no longer has to nurse and even worry about her own baby. Classical medical theories may explain why this process of lactation stopped: 'since males have a higher body temperature, their fluids burn off rather than being emitted through milk or menses, as in the case with colder females.'¹²⁵ Her natural and biological female responsibilities were ceasing, not only was she shedding the negative perceptions associated with females, but she was also shedding her own female biological responsibilities.

Cobb notes 'thus, bodily discharges are signs of femininity. The editor reveals Perpetua's masculinity not only by illustrating her internal strength but also by commenting on her physical constitution.'¹²⁶ She has also detached herself from her father, and she says 'Then for a few days after I gave thanks to the Lord that I was free from my father, and I was refreshed by his absence'.¹²⁷ This appears to echo the sentiment in the final saying of the Gospel of Thomas, which suggests that only a woman who makes herself male can be saved:

'Jesus said, "Look, I will guide her 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.'¹²⁸

As mentioned before in her fourth vision Perpetua 'became a man'.¹²⁹ This image has provoked a lot of discussion, as it has been viewed as complicated and disturbing. Patricia Cox Miller questions 'Does this

¹²⁴ Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion*, p. 91.

¹²⁵ *Ibid*, p.104.

¹²⁶ *Ibid*, p.105.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, p.102.

¹²⁸ Patterson, S., *The Gnostic society Library, The Nag Hammadi Library: The Gospel of Thomas*, on line at <http://gnosis.org/naghamm/gosthom.html> (25th January 2013).

transformation reflect the reality of a male dominated world in which, to achieve power, Perpetua must see herself as male?¹³⁰ Mary Ann Rossi suggests 'is this a Christian symbol in which the martyr imitates Christ in whom there was to be no male or female?'¹³¹ Rousselle questions 'Is it an image derived from a troubled mind?'¹³² The image continues with Perpetua wrestling and beating the Egyptian:

'We draw close to one another and began to let our fists fly. My opponent tried to get hold of my feet, but I kept striking him in the face with the heels of my feet. Then I was raised up into the air and I began to pummel him. He fell flat on his face and I stepped on his head. The crowd began to shout and my assistants started singing psalms. Then I walked up to the trainer and took the branch. He kissed me and said to me; peace be with you, my daughter!' I began to walk in triumph towards the gate of life. Then I awake'.¹³³

As mentioned above many scholars have suggested she became male because of the patriarchal society in which she lived, perhaps it was a quest for liberation?¹³⁴ This argument seems quite implausible because of the society in which Perpetua lived. But we must remember, although it says in the vision, 'suddenly I was a man'¹³⁵, it appears to have been a more gradual process, as her masculinity was growing throughout the text, and this statement might be when she realized herself what was actually happening.

One could ask if this was this how Perpetua was feeling on the eve of her martyrdom. In her dream it was not a vivid transformation. It appears to offer an insight into how Perpetua was viewing her own transformation had she transformed into a man. Perpetua had been required to be courageous throughout her ordeal, this being a virtue associated with men. She had crossed gender boundaries, having acquired many virtues that were associated with manliness: courage, endurance and strength. Rachel Moriarty argues, 'manliness does not come automatically to those of the male sex, while courage was associated with manliness, men could easily fall short of that ideal, whereas women could surpass

¹²⁹ Cobb, *Dying to Be Men*, p. 105.

¹³⁰ Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion*, p. 102.

¹³¹ Mary Ann Rossi 'The Passion of Perpetua, Everywoman of Late Antiquity', in Robert Smith and John Lounibos (eds.), *Pagan and Christian Anxiety; a response to E. R. Dodds*, (Lanham: University Press of America, 1984), p. 61.

¹³² Robert Rousselle, 'The Dreams of Vibia Perpetua; analysis of a Female Martyr', *Journal Psychohistory* 14 (1987), p. 204.

¹³³ Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion*, p. 108.

¹³⁴ Cobb, *Dying to Be Men*, p. 105.

¹³⁵ Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion*, p. 107.

men in courage.¹³⁶ Moriarty goes on to point out while women martyrs such as Perpetua and Blandina, were depicted as crossing boundaries by changing into men, male martyrs, could not be described in female terms and gynaecological terms.¹³⁷ The narrative of Saint Perpetua has demonstrated she was able to cross gender boundaries and was able to be recognized for the virtues she had gained. She was not viewed as a wife, mother, daughter or woman, but as a courageous and brave Christian. The weak female body had changed into a strong and powerful witness. These virtues she demonstrated were the same virtues ascetic women in Late Antiquity sought to gain, and wished they, too, could become 'one in Christ'.

As mentioned before in Late Antiquity martyrdom was no longer an option to show a Christian's commitment to Christ, the option female Christians turned to was asceticism. They were able to prove their love for Christ through the way they lived, rather than the way they died. Nonetheless, martyrdom left a lasting mark, and female ascetics aspired to be like them. They wished to gain the same virtues, and overcome the negative perceptions associated with them, just like female martyrs had done. The next chapter will examine how this happened, and illustrate how female ascetics were able to cross gender boundaries.

¹³⁶ Rachel Moriarty, 'Playing the Man – the Courage of Christian Martyrs', in Robert N. Swanson (ed), *Gender and Christian Religion, Papers Read at the 1996 Summer Meeting and the 1997 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society* (New York: The Boydell Press, 1998), pp. 1-11.

¹³⁷ Ibid, pp.1-11.

CHAPTER 5

FEMALE ASCETICS AND THEIR VIRTUES.

5.1 Introduction

In Late Antiquity, the stigma attached to being female was overcome by some female ascetics, by their acquiring the same virtues as males. Gillian Cloke notes, 'When fourth century church writers considered virtuous women they would invariably refer to her sex, to set her apart'.¹³⁸ Virtue and masculinity were closely connected for early Christian writers: 'in both Latin and Greek, the very name of virtue-*virtus*, *andreia* – derives from words for manliness - *vir*, *andros*'.¹³⁹ Plato associates masculinity with virtue; he lists prudence, justice, manliness and self-control as the four principal virtues.¹⁴⁰ In Late Antiquity it was believed that to be masculine, one must be in control of one's passions. It was understood that it was typical for a woman to have no control over her emotion. Perpetua's martyrdom story contradicts this notion. In times of personal sorrow, convention dictated that one should not mourn for long periods of time, 'Our forefathers have enacted that, in the case of women, a year should be the limit for mourning; not that they needed to mourn for so long, but that they should mourn no longer. In the case of men, no rules are laid down, because to mourn at all is not regarded as honourable'.¹⁴¹ Seneca remarks, 'the inability to control one's emotions-in this case, grief-was womanish and antithetical to masculinity'.¹⁴² Women were thought to be more prone to anger than males. To be angry is to be inferior and 'other'.¹⁴³ As discussed in detail above, female martyrs such as Perpetua and Blandina were seen to be masculine because of the virtues they had gained; they were not emotional, were seen to be in control of themselves, showed courage and, ultimately gained a new identity: being considered male. Being virtuous was associated with being a man, so for female ascetics to be called 'manly' would signify recognition of their being virtuous – 'woman more like men than nature would allow'¹⁴⁴

There are many examples of women who managed to accomplish this. Melania the Elder was a woman who was recorded as having achieved this. Paulinus of Nola said this about her, 'What a woman she is, if

¹³⁸Cloke, 'This Female Man of God', p. 213.

¹³⁹ Ibid, p.213.

¹⁴⁰ Cobb, *Dying to Be Men*, p. 62.

¹⁴¹ Ibid, p.62.

¹⁴² Ibid, p.62.

¹⁴³ Cobb, *Dying to Be Men*, p. 64.

¹⁴⁴ Cloke, 'This Female Man of God', p. 214.

one can call so manly a Christian a woman'.¹⁴⁵ Palladius even goes as far as to describe Melania the Elder as 'the female man of God'.¹⁴⁶ In Melania the Younger's biography it states that she was accepted by the fathers of Nitria 'like man', as she performed 'manly deeds'. Her biography goes on to state, 'she had surpassed the limits of her sex and taken on a mentality that was manly'.¹⁴⁷ Illustrating there is a connection between the physical and metaphysical.

Some female saints, when they committed to a life of chastity, would dress in men's clothes and live as men. In the apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla, Thecla started to dress as a man when she was a missionary with Paul. Saint Perpetua stripped off her clothes and became a man in a dream. Some scholars believe they were transvestite women, however. Vern Bullough argues 'women gained status when they dressed as men, so they did it; men lost status if they dressed as women, so they did not do it.'¹⁴⁸ Early Church Fathers did not approve of cross dressing, as they thought it would 'threaten the social order'.¹⁴⁹ Ambrose argued '...what nature herself abhors must be unsuitable. ... Nature clothes each sex in its proper raiment.'¹⁵⁰ Jerome disapproved of cross dressing too; he did not allow Eustochium to have any form of contact with women who wore men's clothes.¹⁵¹ This was echoed at the early fourth century Council of Gangra, which forbade either sex to adopt the clothing of the other; 'If any woman, under pretence of asceticism, shall change her apparel and, instead of a woman's accustomed clothing, shall put on that of a man, let her be an anathema'.¹⁵²

Deut 22:5 forbade cross dressing: 'A woman must not dress like a man, nor a man like a woman; anyone who does this is detestable to God'. Therefore, it was forbidden in the ancient Church. The theatrical practice of actors and actresses cross-dressing as part of the plot was accepted in Late Antiquity. Contrary to the accepted convention, in Late Antiquity, some ascetical women dressed like males probably in monks' clothes. They possibly dressed in such a way to either gain the status within society they deserved or to show they had actually gained the virtues attached to masculinity which could only

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, p.214.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, p.214.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, p.214.

¹⁴⁸ Vern Bullough, 'Transvestites in the Middle Ages,' *American Journal of Sociology* 79, (1974), pp. 1381-94.

¹⁴⁹ Salisbury, *Church Fathers, Independent Virgins*, p. 98.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, p.98.

¹⁵¹ Ibid, p.98.

¹⁵² New Advent, Synod of Gangra (4th century), online at <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3804.htm> (7th March 2013).

be recognized if they became male. But the Church at the Council in 451 CE forbade this change of attire. Conversely ascetic women who dressed like men in Late Antiquity, and whose gender was revealed after they had died, were not belittled. Sandra Lowerre states, 'they are praised for their highly virtuous, 'manly' lives.'¹⁵³ There must have been a few women who felt the desire to dress this way, otherwise there would be no need for the prohibition. As discussed earlier in the dissertation many Early Church Fathers believed women were inferior to men. They argued Eve brought sin into the world. Tertullian argues, 'you are the Devil's gateway; you are the unsealer of that tree'.¹⁵⁴ However, Lowerre reminds us, 'female virgins could achieve a high degree of purity and holiness if they abided by certain and very strict rules.'¹⁵⁵

As noted above some laws and scripture in Late Antiquity, forbade women and men dressing like each other. But Lowerre notes, 'in numerous works of the Church Fathers, women were urged to become more manly, their 'virile virtues' were praised'.¹⁵⁶ Church Fathers believed women were inherently evil and could only become a better person by shedding her female traits.¹⁵⁷ Two ascetical women in the fifth and sixth century CE Pelagia and Euphrosyne were so inspired by their ascetical urges they chose to dress as men in order to overturn the social stigma attached to women and femininity. The lives of these two women will briefly be discussed to show how female asceticism in Late Antiquity could offer 'freedom from gender identification'.¹⁵⁸

5.2 The life of Pelagia

The life of Pelagia offers an insight into the inspiration for female asceticism, and demonstrates how Church Fathers and society's negative perceptions of females could be overcome by crossing gender boundaries. Pelagia, whose life story was written by James, the Deacon, lived in the fifth century at Antioch. The narrative starts when there was a meeting in the forecourt, attended by eight Bishops, and

¹⁵³ Sandra Lowerre, 'The Rise Beyond Their Sex: Female Cross-Dressing Saints in Caxton's *Vitas Patrum*', in Thomas Honegger (ed), *Riddles, Knights and Cross-Dressing: Essays on Medieval English Language*, (Switzerland: European Academic Publishers, 2004), p. 55.

¹⁵⁴ Clark, 'Ideology, History and the Construction of 'Woman'', p. 176.

¹⁵⁵ Lowerre, 'The Rise Beyond Their Sex', p. 56.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, p.56.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, p.56.

¹⁵⁸ Salisbury, *Church Fathers, Independent Virgins*, p. 99.

Pelagia rode by on a donkey.¹⁵⁹ She might have been a prostitute. However, Sandra Lowerre suggests she might have been an actress, because in Roman thought and law, prostitutes and actresses were often linked as both performed to please others and they received money for this.¹⁶⁰ James the Deacon describes the scene:

*The foremost prostitute of Antioch was seated on a donkey and accompanied by a great and fanciful procession. She seemed to be clothed in nothing but gold and pearls. The male and female slaves accompanying her were clothed in costly garments. The worldly crowd could not get enough of beauty and attractiveness. As they passed by us the air was filled with scent of musk and other delicious scents.*¹⁶¹

It is interesting to note that all actors and actresses in Rome were denied full citizenship and were thought of as prostitutes. However, an edict in 371 CE allowed actors and actresses to be baptized on their deathbed provided the Bishop approved and they renounced their profession.¹⁶² Another edict in 381 CE allowed actresses and actors to convert to Christianity.¹⁶³ Even if Pelagia was an actress and not a prostitute, the two professions were linked and she was thought of as the dregs of society. Pelagia a woman of financial independence is often linked to Mary Magdalene, who is often mythologized as a prostitute, but unlike Mary Magdalene who played a central role in Biblical Scripture, and was seemingly respected and honoured by Early Church Fathers for her to remain in this very central position. Pelagia was not only subservient because of her sex, but also frowned upon in society and in the Church because of her lifestyle.

Bishop Nonnus at the meeting began to cry, and asked, 'did not the beauty of the woman delight you...it greatly delighted me and well pleased was I with her beauty'.¹⁶⁴ He was disturbed by his reaction, and went to his lodgings to think, 'Lord Christ, have mercy on a sinner, for a single day's adorning of a prostitute is far beyond the adorning of my soul...she promised to please men, and has kept her word. I have promised to please God, and have lied'.¹⁶⁵ This led to the Bishop realising he was not perfect and could also be tempted. This is quite unusual as it appears to reverse social and biblical

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, p.99.

¹⁶⁰ Virginia Scott, *Women on the Stage in Early Modern France 1540-1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p .47.

¹⁶¹ Ibid, p 47.

¹⁶² Ibid, p.49.

¹⁶³ Ibid, p.49.

¹⁶⁴ Salisbury, *Church Fathers, Independent Virgins*, p .99.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, p.99.

expectations; on the surface it appears to be the way we expect it to be; the man being tempted by the woman's beauty. However, it does not normally involve the male questioning himself about his own faults and imperfections. As mentioned in the previous chapter, crying was not a manly virtue, as Bishop Nonnus was crying. Even at this early stage it demonstrates Pelagia was in control of the situation, and Bishop Nonnus was losing control of himself. Subsequently, Nonnus had a dream reassuring himself and others that his soul was cleansed:

'I was standing near the horns of the altar when a black dove kept flying over me. It was filthy and stank. After the congregation had departed, the dove approached again. I caught the dove and plunged it into the holy water of the church. It was made clean and the foul smell disappeared. The dove emerged from the water as white as snow and flew up to heaven'.¹⁶⁶

Nonnus wrote a sermon comparing the beauty of the prostitute, and the way she can use it to please her clients, with the 'half hearted Christian who fails to beautify his soul for God'.¹⁶⁷ Michelle Sauer points out this sounds like a love story between Nonnus and Pelagia, which they did not act on,¹⁶⁸ mirroring the saga of Mary Magdalene and Jesus love story. Pelagia was there and heard the sermon, and was so moved she asked to be baptized. She was refused, but she persisted, saying,

'You shall answer to God for my soul, and if you delay to baptise me, I shall charge all my evil deeds to you...May you deny God and worship idols if you do not this day make me born again and a bride of Christ'.¹⁶⁹

She was then permitted to be baptized. Pelagia's life was changing, and it was changing on her terms. Although she started as a temptress, she became inspired enough to want to be part of the Church family, defying the bishop's refusal and demanding her acceptance with the Church.

Before her baptism she was asked what her name was, to which she replied,

'At birth the name I received was Pelagia. However, the townspeople of Antioch call me Margarite, because of the pearls with which I was

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, p.100.

¹⁶⁷ Michelle M. Sauer, 'Pelagia', in Melissa Hope Ditmore, *Encyclopedia of Prostitutes and Sex Work* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1984), p.354.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, p. 354.

¹⁶⁹ Salisbury, *Church Fathers, Independent Virgins*, p. 101.

adorned from the Devil's work'...then the Bishop answered 'your name is Pelagia'.¹⁷⁰

At this point it was as if she was reborn. She was baptised ready to start her new life. Although society negatively perceived Pelagia because of her profession she was able to be accepted in the Church, and hoped to overturn these perceptions. Her name at birth, and her name used as a prostitute suggests she had two identities: one pure and holy, the other sinful. She was willing, happy and ready to change her identity.

Eight days after her baptism she was supposed to take off her white clothes and dress like a normal Christian woman; instead she chose to dress like a man. Joyce Salisbury says, "she rose by night and laid aside her white robes and put on the tunic and cloak of Bishop Nonnus...she disappeared into the night and was not seen again in the city of Antioch."¹⁷¹ This is where the story starts to bear particular relevance to the dissertation. Why had she decided to dress in such a way? Was she trying to be like Nonnus? Was she trying to be like a man or a spiritual man? Was she trying to be asexual? We will never know the real reason why she did this, but we do know that it reveals a new beginning for her, a new start where no one knew who she was before her conversion. She was now ready to take on her new identity. Perhaps the start of her ascetic journey was beginning and she was able to escape the constraints associated with her gender...she had gained freedom from her gender. This narrative illustrates the reason why women in Late Antiquity were inspired to become ascetic: they were given the opportunity to start a new life with less social restrictions. Honegger suggests, 'Pelagia effectively renders her sex irrelevant; her goal, like that of the voluntary eunuch is asexuality'.¹⁷²

Pelagia was already considered to be a holy woman, as Nonnus compared her to Mary in the Gospel of Luke. Pelagia's godmother was upset by her departure. Nonnus comforted her by saying, 'weep not, daughter, but rejoice rather with great joy, for Pelagia has chosen the better part, even as Mary, whom the Lord put before Martha in the Gospel'.¹⁷³ Mary rejected the traditional role of a woman, just as Pelagia did, and it seems quite astonishing Nonnus not only approved of her actions but also respected her decision. It is interesting how she was positively compared to female characters within the Bible. She

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, p.101.

¹⁷¹ Ibid, p.102.

¹⁷² Lowerre, 'The Rise Beyond Their Sex', p. 81.

¹⁷³ Salisbury, *Church Fathers, Independent Virgins*, p. 103.

was not compared to Eve, who was believed to have led to the downfall of humanity, but to the Virgin Mary. Were the Church Fathers changing their perception of women, or was it because Pelagia was an outstanding and strong women, able to think and act independently?

Several years later, Nonnus sent James into the desert to visit a famous and respected hermit called Pelagius. He found the hermit, who was Pelagia, but he did not recognise her or even think it was a woman. She had managed to transcend 'both genders...she was an asexual eunuch for Christ'.¹⁷⁴ One could ask how he did not recognise her; after all he had seen her before. Andrew Beresford suggests 'the rigours of asceticism have taken their toll...her once incomparable beauty has been replaced by a withered and emaciated appearance, indicative of her spiritual ascent'.¹⁷⁵ She had become a 'bride of Christ'. James and Pelagia prayed together in her cell and still he did not recognise her. He travelled around for a while before revisiting the cell, only to find she had died. It was only then that he and the monks discovered who the holy eunuch really was. She was indeed a spiritual man. This holy ascetic woman was truly an inspiration, who had overcome the negative perceptions, and was not identified by her gender. Even when she was dressed as a man, she was not recognised as a man, she was recognised as a holy eunuch, thus highlighting the reason why female asceticism flourished in Late Antiquity, as they were given freedom from gender identification.

5.3 The life of Euphrosyne

Euphrosyne was born in the fifth century CE in Alexandria, into a wealthy, pious and respected family. She was a miracle child, born to a couple who thought they were barren, and only after fervent prayers, the abbot joining in their prayers did they finally conceive.¹⁷⁶ When Euphrosyne was twelve her mother died. Her father educated her and taught her scripture. Joyce Salisbury, notes 'her name spread throughout the city because of her wisdom, her love of learning and her great beauty'.¹⁷⁷ Although the story of Pelagia is very different at this point from that of Euphrosyne, it is interesting that the beauty of the two women is highlighted; almost illustrating the external femininity of the two, while, also,

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, p.103.

¹⁷⁵ Andrew M, Beresford, *The Legends of Holy Harlots: Thias and Pelagia in Medieval Spanish literature* (Woodbridge: Tamesis, 2007), p. 126

¹⁷⁶ Salisbury, *Church Fathers, Independent Virgins*, p. 104.

¹⁷⁷ Joyce E. Salisbury, *Women in the Ancient world* (California: Congress Press, 2001), p. 112.

demonstrating how men may have been tempted by their beauty. This also poses an obstacle for the two women, as the feminine virtues attached to females were instantly attached to them, and the more masculine virtues such as courage would never have been seen in the two, based on how beautiful they were. This may be the reason why the two women, eventually, dressed as men, not actually to be men, but to have the opportunity to obtain the same status in society and the Church as a man.

It was social convention in Late Antiquity that women should get married, so that was what her father wanted to happen. Before she was due to be married her father took her to the monastery where he went to pray for the conception of her.¹⁷⁸ She was flabbergasted by her experience, and said, 'Blessed are all who live in this place. They are like angels who praise God without ceasing. And after death they will be worthy of eternal life.'¹⁷⁹ This experience made her reassess her life: no longer wanting to marry, but wishing to join a monastic order. She no longer wanted to conform to society's expectations. She longed to shed the negative perceptions associated with being female. Fearful of her father's dissension, she remained silent. However, it transpires, these desires were never far from her thoughts. She wanted to be a part of the Church, she wanted to lead an ascetic life, and she wanted to be a bride of Christ. She wished to take on a new identity, and no longer be viewed as a subservient woman. A monk came to visit her and she asked a lot of questions about ascetic life in a monastery and expressed her desire to join. The monk encouraged her saying; "do not give your body up into corruption, nor surrender your beauty to shameful passion, but be whole in your purity as a bride of Christ, who will give you the kingdom of heaven. Run and hide; join a monastery and there will be saved."¹⁸⁰ She answered with quite an odd response, 'who will tonsure me? For I do not wish to be shaved by a layman, but by a servant of God.'¹⁸¹

Her response highlights two issues she was worried about. Firstly, in the fourth century females' hair was seen as part their sexuality and gender, in fact a law was passed in 390 CE that forbade such tonsuring; 'Women who shall have shorn their hair contrary to divine and human laws...should be debarred from the doors of a church.'¹⁸² She seems to be concerned about what society thinks and how she is labelled in society. Church Fathers too, such as Tertullian and Jerome disapproved of women

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, p.112.

¹⁷⁹ Salisbury, *Church Fathers, Independent Virgins*, p. 105.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, p.105.

¹⁸¹ Ibid, p.105.

¹⁸² Salisbury, *Women in the Ancient world*, p. 113.

cutting their hair. Secondly, she was concerned about who was going to cut her hair. If she needed to take such radical action she was only willing to let someone from the Church perform such an act. She was showing real religious and ascetic motivations; her transformation was beginning, but social conventions and expectations were still a stumbling block, she somehow had to overcome her own mindset, and her physical appearance. She wanted to join the monastery, not to escape her pending marriage and run away from her father, which may appear to be her motivations, but because she wished to commit her life to Christ, and a monastic life was the only way she could see this happening. She was scared her father would find her and make her marry, she decided the only way her father would not recognise her was to enter a male monastery; 'she took off her women's clothes, dressed herself in the clothing of a man, and left her house'.¹⁸³ Almost as if she was casting off her old self in order to become a new person, she was casting off her old coat in order to obtain a new persona. This demonstrated pivotal moment in Pelagia's life, not only was she changing her life externally, but also internally. She was beginning to shed the old perceptions associated with being a female.

She joined the monastery, and just as Pelagia had done before, she changed her name, to 'Emerald'.¹⁸⁴ But, when she entered the monastery the other monks saw how beautiful she was and thought they might be tempted by this, so she was sent to live in a separate cell. Salisbury recognises,

'she had truly become an asexual eunuch of God; it was not she who was tempted...the monks, however, were still prey to the frailties of carnal flesh; they could be drawn to a beautiful eunuch. Emerald peacefully withdrew to the cell and began a life of such zealous piety that all were astounded'.¹⁸⁵

Reminding us of Pelagia's story, and how tempted Bishop Nonnus was. Euphrosyne was still recognised because of her feminine qualities, but she was inspired enough to continue on her spiritual and ascetic journey. But, if the monks felt like they would be tempted, it questions their 'manly virtues'. They were admitting a possible lack of control whilst Pelagia possessed total control and was not tempted at all.

Paphnutius prayed for Pelagia's return, but to no avail. He even prayed with the respected and recluse at the monastery (who unbeknown to him was his daughter). He did not recognise her. It has been suggested that just as Pelagia's appearance changed so much because of her ascetic living, the same had

¹⁸³ Salisbury, *Church Fathers, Independent Virgins*, p. 106.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid*, p.106.

¹⁸⁵ Salisbury, *Women in the Ancient world*, p. 113.

happened to Euphrosyne. But how could you not recognise your own daughter? Nonetheless, he did not recognise her for whatever reason. Had she truly transcended into an asexual being and become a 'spiritual man'? Euphrosyne must have been a strong, dedicated and courageous woman to be able to face her father and offer him spiritual direction, I what must have been emotional encounters.

She lived in the monastery for a long time before she fell sick and was dying. Paphnutius visited Emerald frequently, hoping to have his prayers answered about the whereabouts of his missing daughter. When she knew she was dying she revealed her true identity to her father saying; 'My father...end your grief for Euphrosyne your daughter. I am she.'¹⁸⁶ He ran to the monks explaining what had happened. The monks gave thanks to God for her and her life's work. It is interesting that the monks were not angry they had been deceived, or annoyed by the fact a woman had been living amongst them for many years, she was simply seen as a holy person. She had overcome the frailties and inadequacies linked to being female, and had become a bride of Christ.

The two stories highlight why women in Late Antiquity were inspired to be ascetic. Not only had they gained a new identity by dressing as men, but they were viewed as wise and holy people. Lay and holy people wished to seek their wisdom and advice. People travelled to pray with them and spend time with these ascetic women. Women in Late Antiquity were viewed as objects belonging to their husband or father; these ascetic women had no such ties and were given freedom from gender identity.

This chapter has examined how ascetic women in Late Antiquity were able to gain freedom from gender identification because of the virtues they acquired. Even when the men around the ascetic women discovered they were actually female, they were not angry or annoyed. They simply gave thanks and praised their holiness, highlighting how the perceptions of the Church Fathers regarding female could be overturned. The women were respected and accepted not by actually becoming male, but by gaining the same virtues associated with being male. This chapter has noted how female ascetics were able to gain freedom from gender identification, and achieve independence enabling them to go on pilgrimages unaccompanied by a male escort. They were able to gain the same respect as their male counterparts, through spreading the good news. Some female ascetics in Late Antiquity felt this was their calling and were able to fulfil this through their spiritual journey.

¹⁸⁶ Salisbury, *Church Fathers, Independent Virgins*, p. 107.

CHAPTER 6

THE FREEDOM AND LIBERATION OF FEMALE ASCETICS.

6.1 Introduction

In Late Antiquity female ascetics were inspired to become ascetic not only to escape the negative perceptions attributed to women, but also to gain more freedom and liberation. Clark comments, 'It was not an escape from marriage; however, their renunciations, motivated by religious concerns, seemed to liberate them from traditional bonds of marriage.'¹⁸⁷ In Late Antiquity women were considered to be possessions of men. They belonged to their father and then to their husband, they had few rights (although as discussed, they were gaining more legal rights), and in general, society thought they should be married and remain in the private spheres of society. Women were considered to be weak, both emotionally and physically, they were considered to be gossips and subservient. Elizabeth Clark notes, 'women who undertook an ascetic programme miraculously overcame light mindedness, vanity and lack of intelligence'.¹⁸⁸ As we can see asceticism was not for the faint hearted. Women who felt a calling for this had to be strong, independent and single minded.

Women in Late Antiquity were not able to travel without their fathers or husbands. However, ascetic women were able to go on pilgrimages, and some argue they were given credit for it.¹⁸⁹ Since the growth of the Church Christians have travelled for 'the sake of Christ'.¹⁹⁰ The Apostles left everything to follow Christ on his mission. As time went on people went on pilgrimages either to retrace the 'footsteps of Christ'¹⁹¹, or to develop their spiritual health, or both. Journeying was instilled in the mind of Holy people, and was an important part of some ascetics' lives.

Desert fathers and mothers are examples of such holy travel Saint Antony is one of the most famous exemplar, removing himself from normal society, and distancing himself from human company, in order to 'seek God'¹⁹². He moved to the desert to seek solitude, and people came to seek advice and spiritual health. There are numerous examples of desert mothers and fathers who moved to the desert for such

¹⁸⁷Clark, *Ascetic Piety and Women's Faith*, p. 42.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid, p.42.

¹⁸⁹ Jean. F O'Barr, *Women and a New Academy*, p. 95.

¹⁹⁰ Salisbury, *Church Fathers, Independent Virgins*, p. 83.

¹⁹¹ Ibid, p.83.

¹⁹² Ibid, p.83.

experiences. Such a female account was written by Saint Jerome about his friend Paula.¹⁹³ She travelled to Cornelius' house in Caesarea, the valley where Joshua told the sun to stand still, to Bethlehem where Jesus was born, and to the cave where Lot slept with his daughters. The account also tells us she crossed the Egyptian desert with 'manly courage'.¹⁹⁴ This is a fascinating concept and shows how truly the ascetic was accepted by the Church. Even though she was a woman, Church Fathers were able to look beyond her physical attributes and accept her as truly holy, demonstrating to one the real reasons why women in Late Antiquity were inspired to be an ascetic. Jerome goes on to say, 'she discounted her sex and the weakness of her frame'.¹⁹⁵ She was acknowledged by Jerome as being courageous, a virtue associated with men. She was crossing gender boundaries, and despite retaining her womanly appearance, her exploits were accepted because of her 'manly' virtues.

One of the most respected and highly regarded female ascetics in Late Antiquity is Egeria. The account was written by herself¹⁹⁶, one of a few and rare pieces of ancient Christian literature written by a woman. She was probably a nun and was writing an account of her experiences to her 'sisters'.¹⁹⁷ This will be discussed in more detail later, in order to illustrate how an ascetic woman could really gain freedom to travel in late Antiquity. Another female ascetic who gained holy status through her holy travelling was Melania the younger, who was a very different person from Egeria, but equally as amazing and inspirational. She was the granddaughter of Melania the Elder, who played an inspirational part in her life. She travelled to many places, and was eventually recognised and acknowledged as the holy woman she really was.¹⁹⁸

6.2 Egeria's diary.

In Egeria's diaries very little information is given about her life. One may presume, as the diaries were written for sisters, they would know already who she was, where she came from and at what time she was writing. We do know she was a dedicated virgin and she travelled from North-West Spain and through the Holy Land for three years (381-384 CE).¹⁹⁹ Her diary indicates she was very conscious of

¹⁹³ O'Barr, *Women and a New Academy*, p. 95.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid, p.95.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid, p. 95.

¹⁹⁶ George E. Gingras, *Egeria: Diary of a Pilgrimage*, (New York: Newman Press, 1970).

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Salisbury, *Church Fathers, Independent Virgins*. p. 93.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid, p.93.

'monastic milieu'.²⁰⁰ She travelled to remote places, such as Peninsula and Sinai, to visit monks, and travelled to Asia Minor to see her friend Marthana, a deaconess. The diary shows there was a 'spiritual purpose'²⁰¹ for her travels and there are numerous acts to her devotional services. Travelling in Late Antiquity was difficult, made even harder for women as they were considered to be subservient to, and needed to be controlled by, men. Added to which the political unrest, at the time made travelling dangerous and sometimes needed to be escorted. In view of these difficulties some scholars think Egeria was from a high ranking family, as she was able to gain military escorts and the service of officials.²⁰²

Egeria's diary offers us an eye witness account of the pilgrimages, as it was written in the first person. Each of the journeys Egeria undertook was a 'true pilgrimage motivated by a specific religious objective.'²⁰³ The diary describes four journeys taken by Egeria. Egeria's pilgrimages stand out from many who travelled during Late Antiquity, due to the distance she travelled, and regions in which travelled, which tended to be 'isolated, rugged, inhospitable and perilous regions'.²⁰⁴ Her diary records her pilgrimage to Mount Sinai, a retracing of the route of the Exodus (Ch 1-9): a journey to Mount Nebo, where Moses died (Ch 10-12), she went to Haaron to visit Job's tomb (Ch 13-16), she then visited the tomb of Saint Thomas and the house of Abraham in Carrhae (Ch 17-19).²⁰⁵

The central purpose for her journeys was to confirm her faith in Scripture by coming into personal contact with 'places marked by the action of God on man'.²⁰⁶ She also wanted to meet and pray with people whom she considered to be the best exemplar of Christian life, the monks of Sinai, Palestine and Mesopotamia. When Egeria arrived at her destination, which was a biblical site, she reinforced her strong belief in Scripture and her holiness by not providing personal observations of the site, but she would often paraphrase Scripture. Overall Egeria's diary is an important piece of Christian literature, demonstrating she had the freedom to travel because she was an ascetic. But it must be remembered she was not just travelling because she was able to, even though she did seem to enjoy it, she travelled for a religious and spiritually-motivated reasons. Egeria's is truly inspirational. Throughout the literature

²⁰⁰ Gingras, *Egeria: Diary of a Pilgrimage*, p. 8.

²⁰¹ *Ibid*, p.8.

²⁰² Gingras, *Egeria: Diary of a Pilgrimage*, P. 8.

²⁰³ *Ibid*, p.8.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid*, p.17.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid*, p.17.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid*, p.19.

there is no reference of any negative perceptions associated with women in Late Antiquity. Whether she never encountered this or she chose not to, record it we will never know, but we can presume it was not a great issue or she would have recorded it. She was recognised, not only in Church, but also in society, because of her virtues and holy contributions to the Church. Not only was she able to gain freedom through travelling, but she was also able to shed the negative perceptions associated with women.

6.3 The life of Melania the younger

Melania the younger was born 385 CE, and she was born into a Roman family. Her family was politically influential and some members had been in the forefront of the early Roman ascetic movement.²⁰⁷

Melania the younger's grandmother had been a monastic founder, a pilgrim, an ascetic and an 'independent woman in her own right'.²⁰⁸ The Life of Melania the younger was not written in the first person, but Gerontius, who was a priest in Melania's monasteries. The book describes the life of a privileged, wealthy and spoiled girl who developed into a holy ascetic. Throughout the text it demonstrates how she aspired to live the simple ascetic life, but it was not possible for her to do this until later on in life.

The book describes how she was deeply influenced by her grandmother, and from an early age she 'yearned for Christ and longed for bodily chastity'.²⁰⁹ However, the demands of her family, because of social expectations required her to produce heirs. Therefore, she was married at the very young age of fourteen to Pinian. At the very beginning she wished to remain a virgin and have a spiritual marriage with him, she even went so far as to offer him all her wealth if he left her virginity intact.²¹⁰ Asceticism was her true calling, but she was unable to pursue it. Not only did her family expect her to marry but society did, and it would have been considered quite peculiar if she had not complied, even bringing shame upon the family. She begged Pinian, saying '...leave my body free so that I may bring it without stain along with my soul to Christ'.²¹¹ Pinian insisted she must bear him two children, and they had a daughter. Adding a twist to the tale, she tried to run away, but certain 'holy men' suggested she should

²⁰⁷ Salisbury, *Church Fathers, Independent Virgins*, p. 89.

²⁰⁸ Ibid, p.89.

²⁰⁹ Ibid, p.89.

²¹⁰ Ibid, p.89.

²¹¹ Elizabeth A. Clark, *The Life of Melania the Younger* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1984), pp.83-92.

not do so but stay there and convert her husband to an ascetic life.²¹² The book tells us how slowly she began to change what she wore to show her ascetic mindset externally. She began by wearing rough wool under the soft silk clothing of Roman upper classes.

Melania the younger was being drawn deeply to an ascetic life, and she did not look after herself throughout her second pregnancy. She insisted upon kneeling in chapel at all night vigils during the later stages of her pregnancy, and she bribed eunuchs to lie to her father to say she was relaxing ²¹³while she was kneeling. Needless to say, her son was born prematurely and sadly died after being baptized. She was very ill after the birth, in fact she was near to death. Melania told Pinian the only way she would survive would be if he vowed to a purely spiritual marriage, to which he agreed. She made a complete recovery, and to make the next step in ascetic journey she 'renounced silk altogether and let the world see the rough wool'.²¹⁴

Melania was now twenty, and asked if Pinian if he would wear plain clothes too. He seemed reluctant, but eventually he agreed. Even at this early stage of her spiritual journey she had a massive influence on her husband's decisions, which in Late Antiquity was a tremendous leap, as it seems she was able to make her own decisions as well as influencing her husband's, which is quite a role reversal in that society. She obviously had a strong ascetic yearning and wished to pass this on to her loved ones. She had the freedom of thought and the freedom of choice because of her ascetic impulses. I am of the opinion that because of her and her husband's privileged life before this, they decided to approach asceticism gradually, before embracing the structures that extreme asceticism demanded. They visited the sick and gave alms to the poor. They decided to give all their wealth away, giving money to monasteries and buying islands for ascetics to use for withdrawing from society.²¹⁵

After she sold her possessions she advanced in her ascetic journey by fasting. At times she was reported to only eat mouldy bread on Saturdays and Sundays.²¹⁶ Her freedom of thought and her independence led her to learn to read and write as well as learn Greek and Latin: skills women not usually able to

²¹² Salisbury, *Church Fathers, Independent Virgins*, p. 89.

²¹³ Ibid, p.89.

²¹⁴ Ibid, p.90.

²¹⁵ Ibid, p.91.

²¹⁶ Cloke, *'This Female Man of God'*, p .39.

obtain in Late Antiquity.²¹⁷ It is noted that she alone was able to decide what she read and how much.²¹⁸ This leads to wondering how much she benefited from the support of her husband, and her marital status, and whether she would have progressed so smoothly had she been unmarried?

She began to further her journey by assuming the public role of a teacher, influencing many people's lives. Later she decided, like many desert fathers and mothers, she wanted to withdraw from society, and decided to live in cell, spending a great deal of time in prayer and fasting alone.²¹⁹ But, because she was fairly well known and respected this proved impossible as people were seeking her advice. She and Pinion journeyed to Africa, Jerusalem and Egypt. At this point Melanie appears to have reached the status she longed for. While in Nutria she visited hermits in their cells and was received 'as if she were a man'.²²⁰ She had managed to escape social conventions and become a holy ascetic woman in her own right. Ultimately, Melanie achieved a great deal in her life time. She gained freedom to travel, freedom of thought and freedom from social constraints. Surely this was the reason why so many women were inspired to the ascetic life in Late Antiquity.

²¹⁷ Salisbury, *Church Fathers, Independent Virgins*, p. 92.

²¹⁸ *Ibid*, p.92.

²¹⁹ *Ibid*, p.92.

²²⁰ *Ibid*, p.92.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

The aim of dissertation was to highlight how women were perceived in Late Antiquity and how this impacted on the attitude of female ascetics and inspired them to become ascetics. The dissertation started with Classical medical theory, and illustrated how women and their bodies were viewed in a very negative light. It also demonstrated how women were viewed as ‘imperfect males’²²¹. They were thought of as not fully developed men; possessing immature, internal genitalia as opposed to the fully developed, hardy male organ. Females were seen as either being too hot or too cold, emotionally unstable, and with little, or no, control over their own bodies. According to the theory of the ‘wandering womb’, it was like a raging animal roaming around the female body.²²² The dissertation discussed how females were considered to be inferior from the time of conception. It was believed that female embryos came from the left chamber of the womb, as it was deficient in heat, and the female foetus took longer to form because it was weaker.²²³ The sex of the foetus was determined by several factors pertaining to a woman’s condition: whether a woman had broad enough hips, had the right colouring and, ultimately, if her womb was in a healthy condition.²²⁴ It was rarely mentioned in the Hippocratic corpus the sex of the embryo had anything to do with the condition of the male, however it is briefly advises males to bind their left testicle up in order to reduce the risk of producing a female.²²⁵

Classical medical theory illustrates how women were perceived in medical terms, and how this crossed over into how women were viewed in society. Medically the female body was seen as inferior as and weaker than the male body. In society this perception overlapped with the way women were viewed psychologically and theologically. It was important to discuss classical medical theory regarding women within the dissertation as it shows how women were viewed in society, and what the impact of this view had upon the early Church Fathers.

²²¹ Martin, *The Corinthian Body*, p. 32.

²²² King, *Hippocrates’ Woman*, p.222.

²²³ Galen, *De usu.*, 14.7, quoted in Flemming, *Medicine and the Making of Roman Women: Gender, Nature and Authority from Celsius to Galen*, p. 310.

²²⁴ Rouselle, *Porneia*, p. 21.

²²⁵ *Ibid*, p.48.

Women in society in Late Antiquity were viewed as possessions of men, they were owned by either their father or their husband, and had little or no legal rights.²²⁶ They had little or no authority within the Church either because of the current society it was in. Despite, the very early Church designating positions of authority for women, this stance soon changed, and women were yet again viewed as the weaker sex. There are many examples of women in leadership roles in the Church in the Pauline letters. In Romans 16 Phoebe was recognised as a deacon and was even named. Prisca was also mentioned in the letters, and was named before her husband, recognising she was the more dominant of the two.²²⁷ We must also remember Mary Magdalene who was present at Jesus' two most prominent moments; his crucifixion and his resurrection. One wonders why this position changed and why these examples were still part of the canon. One can only speculate as to the reason for this dichotomy. The very early Church assumed the second coming of Christ was imminent, and that He would save them. Perhaps they did not feel the necessity to the constraints of the society in which they were to live for such short a time. When this did happen they had to re-evaluate their position and perceptions in order to be accepted in society. As Christianity would have been viewed as a radical movement, in order to survive and avoid persecution they would have found it more expedient to accept, and conform to, society's dictates: the subservience of women.

The society, in which the early Church Fathers lived heavily impacted on the way they thought and acted. Just as the society in which we live heavily influences the way we think and act. The early Church Fathers used Biblical Scripture to back up their arguments, stating that it was Eve's sin that manifested in every woman, and this sin was inherited, and led to the downfall of all humankind.²²⁸ The creation stories were used repeatedly to substantiate their argument, arguing women were made second, out of Adam²²⁹, illustrating that they were the weaker sex, and eternally dependent on man. The Church Fathers did not mention the first creation story in Genesis, where man and woman were both created together in God's image. The dissertation demonstrated how the early Church Fathers viewed women in a negative light, with the exception of holy women, who were eventually seen in a more positive light: being praised and honoured by these same Church Fathers.

²²⁶ Lucas, *A History of Women in Religion*, p.36.

²²⁷. Ann Loades, *A Feminist Theology; A reader* (London: SPCK, 1990), p. 63.

²²⁸ Sawyer, *Women and Religion*, p .149.

²²⁹ Clark, 'Ideology, History, and the Construction of 'Woman'', p. 166.

In Late Antiquity society women were viewed in a negative way by society and the Church, and were considered to be psychologically and physically weaker than males. So what effect did this have upon holy women in Late Antiquity? The aim of the dissertation was to highlight that some holy women thought they had enough inner strength, faith and perseverance to overcome these negative perceptions and become 'asexual'. Some female martyrs and ascetics actually thought they became male.²³⁰ In a vision Perpetua dreamt she become male. Throughout her life she was acquiring more and more virtues attributed to a male. She was seen to be in control of her emotions, he was courageous and possessed immense stamina. Her virtues were becoming more masculine as her martyrdom story unfolds. Not all virtues associated with being a male were physical such as self-control, fortitude. Logic and determination therefore a female could possess virtues, which could characterise them as male in Late Antiquity.

The perception the early Church Fathers had of women was very negative, but for some holy women this had a positive impact. They were able to cross over gender boundaries, and become 'asexual'²³¹, they were neither viewed as male or female. The life of Pelagia was discussed in the dissertation, demonstrating how her beauty made Bishop Nonnus question his own faith, as he was mesmerised by her beauty.²³² She realised her life was to be one dedicated to Christ, and in order to achieve this ascetic goal she disguised herself as a male, donning male clothes, and ran away to a male monastery.²³³ She was respected and revered within the monastery, and was recognised as a 'holy eunuch'.²³⁴ People travelled to seek her advice and to pray with her. She was no longer seen as male or female, but had become asexual. She had crossed over all gender boundaries, and had become 'one in Christ'.²³⁵ Even when she died, and the monks knew she was a female, she was still respected and honoured. She lived during the fifth century, and even though Christianity was legal, men were still viewed as superior and wiser than women. She had managed to overcome the negative perceptions early Church Fathers held about women, not simply because she had changed the way she dressed, but also because she had gained the same virtues and characteristics associated with holy men. She had ultimately decided to go against what society wanted and expected, and gained an honourable position within the Church.

²³⁰ See Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion*.

²³¹ Salisbury, *Church Father, Independent Virgins*. p. 99.

²³² *Ibid*, p.99.

²³³ *Ibid*, p.103.

²³⁴ *Ibid*, p.103.

²³⁵ Salisbury, *Church Father, Independent Virgins*. p. 99.

It was not essential for holy women to take on the garb of men in order to be considered a man, with all the privileges and freedom that men enjoyed: indeed Melania the younger, did not don herself in male clothing, but gradually replaced her resplendent clothing and fine silks for plainer styles made of course wool.²³⁶ Despite her not taking on the appearance of a man, she was allowed to flaunt society's conventions. This strongly motivated, female went on pilgrimages, alone: signifying her acceptance as a holy woman. To achieve this recognition, she began adapting her way of life in order to show her desire to lead a true ascetic life. Giving up her privileged life, fasting and even eating mouldy bread,²³⁷ all contributed to her showing her dedication to Christ, and ultimately being acknowledged, by society, as a holy woman. Despite the fact she was physically a woman this had little or no influence on the lifestyle she chose to live. She was inspired to go on pilgrimages to share the good news of Christ; she travelled to Egypt and to Nitria, and she was received by the holy men 'as if she were a man'²³⁸. This illustrates how she had crossed over many gender boundaries, even though she was physically recognised as a woman by men, they spoke with her, and honoured her like they would if she was a man.

The negative perceptions the early Church Fathers held about women were being reversed in this story. She was accepted by men, not as a weak woman, but as an equal: praying and talking with them. The life of Melania the younger gives no indication that she wished to be a man physically, but she wanted to be recognised as a holy person, neither as a male or a female. She was fortunate that she was able to travel, and the reason she wished to travel was not to go against the norms of society, but because she was inspired by her calling to be a holy woman and a Christian ascetic.

The overall aim of the dissertation was to highlight the perception of women in Late Antiquity, and illustrate how this impacted on ascetic women. The dissertation has illustrated that women were seen as inferior to men within the Church, and within society. However, this negative perception had a positive influence on some ascetic women; they were able to cross over many gender boundaries in order to achieve their goal. The main disadvantage of the subject being historically based was the impossibility of interviewing the female ascetics personally, so one can only hypothesise as to their real feelings and motivation based on written accounts. The outstanding point throughout the dissertation is the courage of these women to defy the suffocating constraints of the time, by casting off considered womanly failings: such as weakness of the body, inconsistency of thought, and lack of logic. She had to

²³⁶ Ibid, p.92.

²³⁷ Ibid, p.92.

²³⁸ Ibid, p.93.

be seen as strong in body, fearless in adversity, rational and determined: just like a man was viewed. Only thus, was she able to gain her independence and to live her life dedicated to Christ, accepted by society and the Church. They are iconic women and need to be given the respect and honour they truly deserve. The dissertation has not proved any striking new revelations, but it has illustrated how holy women in Late Antiquity were able to overcome negative perceptions and become holy people in their own right. There are many questions which will remain unanswered regarding ascetic women in Late Antiquity because of the historical constraints but, it answers a lot of questions about women and their status within the Church today; the Catholic Church still do not accept female ordination, and the Anglican Church have not yet said 'yes' to female Bishops. It seems society is changing its perception of women, but is the Church?

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