

“THE WOMAN MONK”

A THEME IN BYZANTINE HAGIOGRAPHY

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When little girls played games in fourth-century Syria, the Greek author Theodoret tells us, they played monks and demons: one, dressed in rags, would put her little friends into stiches of laughter by exorcising them. This delightful glimpse into a Syrian childhood scene more than 1600 years ago, points to the prestige of the saintly monk and may serve as a vignette to what must appear to a 20th century public an unexpected and somewhat strange theme in the setting of Christian hagiography: the woman-transvestite saint.

That women disguised themselves as monks and lived as hermits, or as members of a male monastic community, is in fact, a recurrent theme in the first and oldest layers of Byzantine hagiography. There is an abundance of texts and we know at least 12 *vitae* in great detail. The Greek, Syriac and Coptic versions of their life-stories prove to what extent these stories have been widely popular, and also how great their diffusion was in the Graeco-Roman world from the 4th century on. Once this *topos* was created, it made its way into the stock of literary themes of the Medieval West. One example - the most famous - should suffice: The female pope Johanna, giving birth to a child during an ecclesiastical procession (9th century).

The “Woman-Monk” of Late Antiquity is not forgotten; until today she occupies a place in the Greek as well as the Coptic Synaxarion. The names, if not the complete stories of Hilaria, Marina, Pelagia, Eugenia, and Appolinaria - to name but a few - are well-known in the Orthodox world. In the Coptic Orthodox Church (Egypt), the relics of Saint Hilaria and Saint Marina still attract thousands of people every year. Saint Hilaria’s relics are venerated in the famous monastery of St. Macarios in the Wadi Natrun desert between Cairo and Alexandria. And in the heart of Cairo, in Haret al-Rum - the “Westerner’s Street” - in the crowded and dusty parts of the Muslim areas of the town - is hidden the church where the relics of Saint Marina can be seen, and where her cult is very much alive.

Texts and chronology

The historical *dossier* of our woman-monks is virtually unexplored. The classification of the Greek narratives have been preliminarily published and interpreted by E. Patlagean. The Coptic and Syriac dossiers have both remained untouched.

The first versions of these life-stories are regarded as belonging to the literary context of the Greek *Apophthegmata Patrum*. The subsequent stories from the *Synaxaria* and *Typika* show the diffusion and later survival in the Eastern Church.

The Latin versions are no older than the 7th century, and represent an Eastern spirituality which never took firm roots in the West. The Greek narratives seem to be constituted in the 6th and first decades of the 7th century.

Two *vitae* are most probably older than these Greek texts: the life of Pelagia, accepted as a 5th century narrative, and the life of Marina, supposed to be the first such story, later became a model for other narratives.

The whole cycle has to be situated in the Graeco-Oriental era in the first Byzantine period (the 4th to the 7th century). The Syriac and Coptic versions both suggest the first part of the 6th century and proved a success in monophysite circles.

The narratives

The saint was the most admired figure, the model for human existence, and the image of the true Christian. The saint's life summed up widespread ideals, common to Byzantine culture as a whole, and proved which qualities were the most valued. From this period of stylites and gyrovags, the woman-monk may serve as a mirror, to catch another glimpse from a surprising angle of an aspect of religious anthropology.

From the twelve women-saints whose lives are recorded in great detail, I have chosen the life of Saint Hilaria and the story of Saint Marina according to the Coptic Synaxarion. These narratives are considered the earliest, upon which the later ones have been modeled, and contain all the main elements of the life of the transvestite saint.

Hilaria

Hilaria is one of the most famous "woman-monks", and there are quite a number of instances of her in Coptic literature, especially in connection with Scetis - the monastic settlement in the North.

Hilaria is said to have been the elder daughter of the Byzantine emperor Zeno, and to have had a younger sister. Hilaria was profoundly influenced by the cult of the 49 fathers of Scetis, a cult

which the Coptic narrative describes as the Egyptian link to Constantinople. Thus influenced, she determined to adopt monastic life herself.

To this end she assumed the disguise of a courier and traveled secretly to Alexandria. There she met the deacon Theodore in the church of Saint Mark and asked him to guide her to Scetis. He consented, and Hilaria was again disguised as a courier in male attire. The deacon and the supposed courier went to the shrine of Abu Menas and from there to Scetis where they met the great abba Pambo. She asked to be admitted to monastic life here, but Pambo said that as she was obviously tenderly nurtured, she would find it too hard to submit to the rigorous life of the desert. She had better go to Ennaton outside Alexandria where the conditions were easier. Hilaria, however, persisted, and finally she was assigned a cell, the monks assuming her to be a man and calling her "Hilary the Eunuch" because she was beardless.

In the meantime her younger sister was taken ill and the Emperor determined to send her to Scetis in the hope that she might be healed by the prayers of the Fathers.

When the princess and her escort arrived, the monks were called together, and informed that the princess was possessed by a devil, and were asked if one of them would take her to his cell; but this they all refused to do. Then it was suggested that the eunuch Hilary might take her, and so she/he did.

After seven days sojourn in Hilary's cell the princess was completely cured, she returned home, and related to her father how for seven days she had shared a cell with one of the monks. At this news her father was highly astonished and resolved to make a fuller enquiry into this conduct so unlike that usually credited to the monks of Scetis. To this purpose he wrote to Scetis saying that he suffered from a weakness of the heart which prevented him from going all the way to Scetis, but asking that the monk Hilary be sent to him, as he had already been successful in treating his daughter. So Hilaria was sent to Constantinople and introduced to the Emperor, who asked why he had kissed the princess and shared his bed with her, and if he was not moved by carnal love. Not to give an unfavorable impression of the monks of Scetis, Hilaria felt compelled to disclose

that she was his daughter, and sister to the princess. She made her father and sister promise to keep her secret. The Emperor agreed, and in recognition of the healing of his younger daughter endowed the monastery of Scetis with a regular supply of bread and wine for the Holy Eucharist. Hilaria then returned to Scetis and lived there for a 12 more years, and on her death-bed she begged Abba Pambo to have her buried as she was, without washing or burial preparation, but to reveal her history and identity to the monks.

Marina

Saint Catherine's monastery at Sinai has a chapel consecrated to Saint Marina, and one of the famous icons of the monastery shows us Saint Catherine and Saint Marina together (12th Century). They were two of the most venerated female saints of the Middle Ages, both East and West

Marina's story is one of the most popular in the Coptic Church today, and her images are sold all over Christian Egypt. She is depicted with a child, and wearing the characteristic cowl of the Coptic monk.

The Coptic *vita* tells her story. She was the daughter of wealthy Christian parents. Her mother died, and the girl, who desired above all to enter a convent, was left with the father, whose mind was also set upon the ascetic life. Marina's father sold all his goods and entered a monastery intending to provide for his young daughter, but died before he could do so. Marina then assumed male attire and entered the monastery where she was known as Marinus.

On one occasion, when she was travelling with three other monks, all of them had to pass the night at an inn where soldiers also were lodging. One of the soldiers slept with the innkeeper's daughter, and advised her that if she became pregnant, she should name the young monk Marinus as the father. This she did, and the innkeeper turned up at the monastery and complained to the superior who censured Marinus severely and expelled him from the community. The innkeeper's daughter bore a son, and her father took the child to Marinus demanding that s/he support it.

For three years Marinus/Marina lived outside the monastery and cared for the infant. Then the monks appealed to the superior asking him to re-admit Marinus, as s/he had given so many signs of piety and penitence. Permission was granted and Marinus returned, but s/he was strictly admonished and had a number of restrictions laid upon him/her.

For forty years s/he remained in the monastery, setting an example of piety, and the child in his/her charge was taught devout practices and became a monk.

When finally Marinus died, it was only as her body was being made ready for the burial that the secret of her sex was discovered, and her innocence of the charge brought against her was revealed to the community.

Common narrative elements

These two narratives are - as all the others - preoccupied by the theme of transgressing gender roles, not only of transcending them. The problem of sexuality, the social and cultural interpretation of

sexuality, as well as the interaction between generations are constant elements in these narratives. The "women-monk" *vitae* are all centered around the following themes:

1. *Changing of name of the heroine.* This is, of course, a common procedure when leaving the world; in these narratives the name is transformed into the male form and in accordance with the *change of habit*.

In most cases, choosing the ascetic life does not represent an escape from an engagement or an undesired marriage, which is a common feature in other female saints *vitae*. Here, the woman leaves the world with the consent of her father. The theme is not the braving of the authority of the father, but, on the contrary, it is the fulfilment of the father's ascetic desires.

2. *The change of habit* constitutes the main element of the story, the focus of the narrative and the reason for dramatic developments. Thereafter the heroine has achieved a complete change, both of individual and social as well as sexual identity. Hilaria is no longer recognized by her own sister, or her father, and she is not recognized as a woman by the monks. In the life of Eugenia, another "woman-monk" saint, her father is even confessing to her for years without discovering her real identity. This theme has another variant which could be called: the destruction of femininity. We are told that at the burial of Pelagia, who was famous for her beauty, her sponsor, the deacon James, pronounces the elegical words: "Her breasts were not like the breasts of other women, on account of her ascetic practice, they were withered". Appolinaria became "like a turtle shell".

This destruction of positive sexual identification leads us to

3. *The saint is considered as a eunuch.* This element made the story probable in the Byzantine world where monks and hermits are bearded. In this way, the eunuch, as an image of transcended sexual categories, the spiritual promises of Matthew 19:12, "... and there be eunuchs which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake". The woman who is no longer of the weaker sex has a potential to evince manly virtue, *andreia*.

4. *False accusations of sexual sin.* This motif is obvious in Marina's story, where she seems to be back in a female role. Her taking care of the baby deserves a lengthy commentary, but I shall just point to the fact that infant care was seen as the proper function of eunuchs as well as for women.

5. This theme of false accusation has as its opposite the theme of *aquisition of male authority*, otherwise inaccessible to women. This theme is developed in all the *vitae* subsequent to Marina and Hilaria: Pelagius/Pelagia - elected as higoumenos (abbot) of a male monastery, was hearing confessions, exactly as did Eugenia. Her *conscience*, it is true, followed the established norms:

"... admonishing her that she was a woman, and that it was not fitting that she should be the commander and governor to the men of God-.

6. *The denouement*: the higoumenos's discovery and recognition of the saint's identity at the last minute before death, or more frequently, as in the case of Marina: the discovery of sexual identity at the moment of death or of burial. In this way, the humble sufferings of the saint and the falsity of the charges against her are revealed.

The historical context

How and why was this theme of sexual disguise introduced as an hagiographic theme?

It is a well documented fact that in the early monastic period women ascetics were living as hermits in the desert, some dressing exactly like male hermits. In itself, this fact points to the very practical need of a woman living alone in the desert to protect herself. So the possibility of confusion was very much a reality. In *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, the story of Abba Bessarion - as told by his companion Doulas - clearly illustrates this point:

We walked on and a cave where we found a brother seated, engaged in plaiting a rope. He did not raise his eyes to us or greet us, since he did not want to enter into conversation with us.. On our return, we came again to the cave where we had seen the brother. Bessarion said to me, 'Let us go and see him, perhaps God has told him to speak to us. When we had entered we found him dead. The old man said to me, 'come, brother, let us take the body; it is for this reason that God has sent us here'. When we took the body to bury it, we perceived it was a woman. Filled with astonishment, the old man said, 'See how the women triumph over Satan while we still behave badly in the towns'.

This could probably serve as a point of departure for imagination and phantacies, and in this way develop into a literary motif concerning transgression of an interdiction relating to the opposite gender.

We also know positively of the presence of eunuchs in monastic life during the period of Late Antiquity. In some areas, the eunuchs had

their own monasteries, as in Bithynia (now Turkey). The unbearded eunuch made it possible, or at least likely, that a woman could be mistaken for a eunuch and become accepted in a male community. The Church in the Council of Nicaea (325) and Pope Leo I (c.395) anathemized self-mutilations of this kind, but the eunuch whose mutilation was not self-inflicted was a well-known and accepted figure in early monastic communities. The unbearded young man, on the other hand, was met with much more suspicion; he presented the danger of homosexual temptations.

A sect was established by Eustatius of Sebaste, in which women cut their hair and dressed as men. We know of their existence from the official anathema of the Council of Gangra in 345:

‘If, because of presumed asceticism, any woman changes her clothing, and in place of the clothing customary for women adopts that of men, let her be anathema’ (Canon 13) and: ‘If, because of presumed asceticism, any woman cuts her hair, which God gave (her) as a reminder of her subjection, under the impression that this annuls the ordinance of subjection, let her be anathema’ (Canon 17).

One century later, the Theodosian Code reiterated the prohibition against female tonsure. Thus it seems possible that the transvestite virgin saints had an historical existence as the female counterparts to those self-emasculated “eunuchs for heaven’s sake” of whom Origen (3rd century) constitutes the most famous example. But how could what seems to be a marginal or heretical theme become a quite important motif in orthodox hagiography?

The theme of women disguised or dressed like men is evident in the earliest Christian literature: In the apocryphal *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, Thecla, a well-born and beautiful virgin, upon hearing Paul preaching, renounces her fiance to follow the apostle. In the course of her wanderings, she cut her hair and assumed temporarily a male garb. Thecla was one of the most admired female saints of the ancient Church, and her manly appearance is sometimes iconographically depicted.

Another famous scene of a woman appearing as a man is in the autobiography of the martyr Perpetua (edited before 225), where in a dream the night before her martyrdom, she is undressed in the arena and changed into a man in order to fight the devil in the shape of an Egyptian. Both Thecla’s disguise and Perpetua’s transformation can be seen as a symbol of sacred initiation, and as an interpretation of the New Testament passage of “becoming male as a metaphorical expression of salvation. The *literal interpretation* of the Scripture: Galatians 3:27-28, thus provides the biblical authority for the ritual

performance of the “putting on” of Christ related to baptism: “For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female...”

Thus New Testament metaphors may have served as a point of departure for the development of an hagiographic topos.

The narratives of disguised women monks also reflect the aspiration of the early Christian ascetical movements for creating a “new world”. For women this was translated into the idiom of acquiring male virtues - *andreaia* ; of achieving man-likeness.

Heretic groups, on their side, interpreted this anticipation of heavenly existence on earth in a literal sense: same dress - as in Eutyches group, or the same prerogatives - as in the Montanist group with woman prophets, preachers, and baptizers.

Orthodox metaphors may thus have developed into a romanesque narrative, an hagiographic genre determined by a social and ideological context.

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