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Simeon and Other Women in Theodoret's Religious History: Gender in the Representation of Late Ancient Christian Asceticism

ELLEN MUEHLBERGER

This article explores the use of gender in the *Religious History*, demonstrating the multiple ways that Theodoret of Cyrrhus marked ostensibly male characters with traits associated in ancient medical literature with female bodies. Beyond simply depicting ascetics as extraordinary human beings, these complexly gendered portraits more importantly served as expressions of an argument Theodoret advanced elsewhere: that men and women shared a common human nature. Based on these observations, the article then offers an interpretation of the two bodily examinations performed upon Theodoret's most influential character, Simeon the Stylite, namely that these scenes were carefully narrated to suggest that they were examinations of a female body. In conclusion, I argue scholars should consider the peculiar uses of gender in each ancient representation of early Christian asceticism, rather than assume early Christian texts only associated masculinity with excellence in ascetic practice.

Twenty-five years ago, historian of late antiquity Peter Brown noted that the early-fifth-century text called the *Religious History* was unique among ancient accounts of asceticism because of the prevalence of female characters and female concerns within its pages. Brown's influential book *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early*

I am grateful for the comments I received from the audience who heard an early version of this argument at the North American Patristics Society, for the astute observations of the anonymous readers for *J ECS*, and for the help of Gina Brandolino, Mira Balberg, Todd Berzon, Matthieu Cassin, Chris Frilingos, Julia Kelto Lillis, and Heidi Marx-Wolf.

Christianity described extraordinary men whose diligent practices had made them “so irrefragably sacred” that “they could touch all that was most profane in the life of their admirers.” Of course, what registers as “sacred” or “profane” is subjective; Brown, for his part, marveled at the fact that “childbirth, fertility, and marital wrongs were normal topics of conversation” among the ascetic characters depicted in the *Religious History* and those they helped.¹ To him, it was paradoxical that the rarified ascetic life could be found growing like a delicate shoot upon what he called “the wild rootstock of intercourse and childbearing.”² Indeed, the *Religious History* is replete with female characters. The author of the text, Theodoret of Cyrrhus, included his own mother as an actor in the biographies: according to the *Religious History*, she had trouble in the first place conceiving children; was threatened with a miscarriage when pregnant with Theodoret, her first and only child; and finally had a near-fatal case of puerperal fever—in all of these cases, contact with a practicing ascetic saved her from danger.³ Her experiences are repeated with other female characters: the male ascetics at the center of the *Religious History* help other women conceive, they help women lactate, they offer both advice and love potions to women with wandering husbands. The text’s most extraordinary subject, Simeon the Stylite, also helps several women, including the Queen of the Ishmaelites herself, who praises Simeon for “drawing down the deluge of divine grace” through his prayers.⁴ So, about the *Religious History* being different because of the number of women who have close contact with the ascetics it depicts, Brown was right. But Simeon and the other male ascetics depicted in Theodoret’s *Religious History* do not simply interact with women: many of them also *are* women.

Let me explain. Ancient texts are texts like any other, in that they produce meaning through the construction of, examination of, and sometimes the resolution of difference, and like other texts, ancient texts often use a system of gender as the tool by which they construct such difference. They sort characters into two or more categories (sometimes casually, sometimes explicitly) and assign qualities and values to the characters so

1. Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 327.

2. Brown, *Body and Society*, 330.

3. Theodoret, *Religious History* (henceforth *h. rel.*) 13.16–17, 9.14–15 (Pierre Canivet and Alice Leroy-Molinghen, eds., *Théodoret de Cyr: Histoire des moines de Syrie*, vol. 1, SC 234 [Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1977], 502–6, 430–34); cf. *h. rel.* 9.4–9, where she is also cured of an eye problem.

4. *h. rel.* 26.21 (Pierre Canivet and Alice Leroy-Molinghen, eds., *Théodoret de Cyr: Histoire des moines de Syrie*, vol. 2, SC 257 [Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1979], 204). Unless otherwise noted, translations are mine.

marked, often with reference to functions considered to be constitutive of their presumed physical bodies. In this way, texts rely on assumptions that readers might make about characters when they are marked as one type of human being or another, either confirming those assumptions or using them as foils to create unconventional narrative situations. It is on this level that Simeon, the famous stylite, and many of the other ascetics whose lives are showcased in the *Religious History*, are women. Even though they are marked as male in conventional ways, their characters are given physical qualities and placed in situations that, according to late ancient medical discourses Theodoret knew, marked female bodies.⁵ These ambivalent markings produce an uncanny effect in the text, by which Theodoret conveyed the excellence and sheer strangeness—the “otherworldly nature”—of the ascetics he portrayed.⁶

The fact that Theodoret represented the ascetics of the *Religious History* as extraordinary is not remarkable. That is, after all, the goal of almost all late ancient literature about asceticism: to demonstrate that ascetics, with their surpassing dedication, are different from the rest of humanity. With representation, however, comes theorization. The specific methods Theodoret used to make his subjects appear extraordinary in this piece of literature were determined by how he imagined the human body and its capacities. In the case of most other late ancient representations of ascetics, we are left to reconstruct their authors’ assumptions about humanity from their representations alone. In the case of Theodoret, though, we have the

5. To be clear, I do not argue that we should understand these ascetics as historical women, waiting to be recovered from the text. Establishing the historical experience of women even by looking at characters straightforwardly marked as women in ancient Christian texts is a notoriously difficult prospect. Optimism about finding women in early Christian texts is high in Kate Cooper’s recent work, *Band of Angels: The Forgotten World of Early Christian Women* (London: Atlantic, 2013), which represents a significant shift from her earlier work, especially *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Early Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996). Less optimistic is Ross Shepard Kraemer, *Unreliable Witnesses: Religion, Gender, and History in the Greco-Roman Mediterranean* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), who writes in conversation with Elizabeth A. Clark, for whom three pieces can represent a much larger body of work: “The Lady Vanishes: Dilemmas of a Feminist Historian after the ‘Linguistic Turn,’” *CH* 67 (1998): 1–31 and its twin article, “Holy Women, Holy Words: Early Christian Women, Social History, and the ‘Linguistic Turn,’” *J ECS* 6 (1998): 413–30; and “Women, Gender, and the Study of Christian History,” *CH* 70 (2001): 395–426.

6. On using characteristics understood to be “female” as tools to depict the “otherworldly nature” of certain holy people, see Lynda L. Coon, *Sacred Fictions: Holy Women and Hagiography* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), xviii, an assertion cited and closely mirrored by Theresa Urbainczyk, *Theodoret of Cyrrhus* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 143.

luxury of reading his other surviving works, which contain explanations and defenses of his theories about the human body.⁷ From the context they grant us, it is clear that Theodoret did not give the ascetics of the *Religious History* female qualities merely to make them appear transcendent. Instead, his depictions of ascetic men as women were evidence of a different kind, images supplied to illustrate the claim that he made explicitly elsewhere: that men and women are not different in nature from one another, but vary only in the degree of relative strength or weakness of their bodies. In the first half of this essay, I discuss Theodoret's marking of male ascetics in the *Religious History* as women, and I demonstrate that his innovation depended upon his knowledge of Hippocratic traditions about women's bodies, particularly their porous and liquid nature. The ascetics in the *Religious History* accomplished great feats with liquid they produced from their bodies or controlled in the environment, a trope that tied porous, productive bodies—that is to say, those bodies exhibiting characteristics understood to be constitutive of female bodies—to holy acts. In the second half of the essay, I explore a pair of scenes in the life of Simeon that this reading brings into relief. There are two moments when Simeon's body is examined by others, and I argue that Theodoret's recounting of these examinations suggests that Simeon's body is female. In the conclusion, I reflect on how the *Religious History*, read in the context of Theodoret's ideas about human nature and human bodies, disrupts the scholarly assumption that late ancient Christian asceticism was, commonly and across geographies and cultures, focused on maleness as the marker of excellence.

MARKING GENDER IN LATE ANCIENT TEXTS

The *Religious History* follows some conventional methods to mark most of its ascetics as male. Ancient Greek, the language in which the text was composed, has three gender options for nouns: masculine, feminine, and neuter. Most human characters are marked either male or female by the use of articles, adjectives, and pronouns in reference to them. Thus an adjective about someone—say, “righteous” or “pious”—comes in a form that tells the reader that the subject modified by the adjective is male. Alternately, ascetics in this text can also be marked as male metaphorically, by the fact that Theodoret likened them to male heroes from biblical traditions.

7. Another option is to see the *b. rel.* against the backdrop of Greek readings of human bodies as potentially divine: see Patricia Cox Miller's execution of this strategy in “Desert Asceticism and ‘The Body from Nowhere,’” *J ECS* 2 (1994): 137–53.

Being a “new Moses” or a “new Elisha” implies sharing the same gender as Moses or Elisha.⁸ Such methods of marking gender may seem obvious to the point of banality, but they are so deeply foundational to this (and really, to most) literature that it can be difficult to imagine a text that does not immediately identify a character by gender. For authors, the fact that gender categories already exist in the basest units of composition, words themselves, means that a method of expressing difference and thus creating narrative tension always lies immediately to hand, whether the author makes use of it or not. Taking up that method can be as simple as positing qualities for a character that run counter to the gender with which the character is identified.

Two scholars have already observed that Theodoret used this method in his *Religious History* as he tagged otherwise male ascetics with markers of femininity. In her 2002 book on the text, Theresa Urbainczyk noted the way Theodoret gave male ascetics “the characteristics of virtuous women,” arguing that by having them express “[s]elf-denial, suffering, and passivity,” Theodoret was positioning the ascetics he wrote about to be females, and thus in need of his authoritative, male hand.⁹ Or, in Urbainczyk’s succinct styling, “[j]ust as women need men to show them what to do, so holy men need Theodoret.”¹⁰ In a similar vein, Kathryn Summer Drabinski’s 2006 dissertation emphasized the prevalence of feminine activities undertaken by holy men in the text. Weaving, agricultural work, and other tasks related to generation and reproduction all helped to portray the ascetics of the *Religious History* as “queerly gendered”—male, but involved in work that Drabinski reads as female.¹¹ Additionally, both these scholars have drawn attention to the multiple places in the *Religious History* where male ascetics are spoken of by others as if they were women, or even speak of themselves as if they were women.¹²

8. For Theodoret’s use of such biblical exempla, see Derek Krueger, *Writing and Holiness: The Practice of Authorship in the Early Christian East*, Divinations (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), especially 15–32.

9. Urbainczyk, *Theodoret of Cyrrhus*, 143.

10. Urbainczyk, *Theodoret of Cyrrhus*, 145.

11. Kathryn Summer Drabinski, “Ancient Bodies, Contemporary Selves: Reading Gender in Late Ancient Christian Asceticism” (PhD diss., University of California, 2006), 62, with longer discussion of work identified as reproductive and thus female, 68–78.

12. Aphrahat speaks of himself as the virgin daughter of a king in *b. rel.* 8.8 (discussed by Urbainczyk, *Theodoret of Cyrrhus*, 144); Peter in *b. rel.* 9.2 is said to do “nothing unreasonable” when he takes on the words of the bride to address the Bridegroom (οὐδὲν . . . ἀπεικὸς [SC 234:410], discussed by Drabinski, “Ancient Bodies,” 113–14); ascetics are praised in *b. rel.* 15.6 for giving their love to the Bridegroom

Beyond what methods Urbainczyk and Drabinski have examined, the *Religious History* also marks ostensibly male ascetics as females in another way, namely, by tapping assumptions about female bodies generated by ancient medical theories. Lesley Dean-Jones has explained how the Hippocratic corpus theorized the differences between bodies understood to be male and those understood to be female. The treatise “On the Diseases of Women” states that the female body is “loose” or “porous” (ἀραιά) and thus absorbs and holds liquids more easily and releases them more prodigiously than the male body.¹³ These differences explain the central problem identified in ancient reflections on the female body: the source and regularity of menstruation.¹⁴ In this understanding of humanity, women are more moist by nature and thus produce blood (and milk) easily from the food they ingest; men are less moist, and so have to labor at length to produce and expel even the tiny quantity of liquid typical of their reproductive efforts, semen.¹⁵ Though the bodies that registered as male in antiquity also produced liquids—urine, blood, and sweat among them—these were not read as indicators of incontinence or permeability, as such fluid productivity was read in female bodies.¹⁶ Thus, when men did flow or produce fluid, it was remarkable.¹⁷

“like moderate women” (κατὰ τὰς σώφρονας γυναῖκας [SC 257:24], discussed by Urbainczyk, *Theodoret of Cyrrhus*, 144 and Drabinski, “Ancient Bodies,” 78–79).

13. Lesley Dean-Jones, *Women's Bodies in Classical Greek Science* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 55–56, citing *Mul.* 1.1.

14. Women's bodies, and especially menstruation, were a discrete focus of Hippocratic medicine. As Dean-Jones notes, ten of the sixty surviving Hippocratic treatises were on the subject of gynecology (Dean-Jones, *Women's Bodies*, 10).

15. Dean-Jones addresses this theory of relative wetness of women and dryness of men in *Women's Bodies*, 55–60, citing from *Gland.*, *Epid.*, *Genit.*, *Nat. Puer.*, and *Mul.* For a more general discussion of this trope in ancient medical literature, see Anne Carson, “Putting Her in Her Place: Woman, Dirt, and Desire,” in *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World*, ed. David M. Halperin, John J. Winkler, and Froma I. Zeitlin (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 135–69, particularly the sections titled “Wetness” and “Women Leak.”

16. Dale B. Martin, “Contradictions of Masculinity: Ascetic Inseminators and Menstruating Men in Greco-Roman Culture,” in *Generation and Degeneration: Tropes of Reproduction in Literature and History from Antiquity through Early Modern Europe*, ed. Valeria Finucci and Kevin Brownlee (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 81–108, who argues that even when men bleed in ways that could be aligned with menstruation, they are not registered as feminine.

17. On the remarkable porousness of Jesus' body, see Candida R. Moss, “The Man with the Flow of Power: Porous Bodies in Mark 5:25–34,” *JBL* 129 (2010): 507–19; on the unexpected image of Adam possessing a uterus filled with salt water, see Gillian Clark, “Adam's Womb (Augustine, *Confessions* 13.28) and the Salty Sea,” in *Body and Gender, Soul and Reason in Late Antiquity* (Ashgate: Variorum, 2011),

Early Hippocratic traditions about male and female bodies may seem far removed from the context of Christian asceticism of the fifth century. However, the conceptions of the body articulated in classical medical discourses were persistent and pervasive in late antiquity because ancient medical literature was a genre that privileged preservation. In our world of almost-instant dissemination of new medical discoveries, it can be difficult to remember that the majority of medical writers in antiquity presented themselves as curators of hard-won ancient knowledge about the body and, consequently, as observant of the authority of opinions from the past.¹⁸ To list those whose writings reflect late ancient science about the body available from Theodoret's environment in West Asia and the Mediterranean—Oribasius and Priscianus in the fourth century, Aetius of Amida in the fifth, and later, Paul of Aegira—is to list a group of compilers, rather than authors in the strictest sense, for these writers in their work collected and commented upon authoritative texts.¹⁹ Yet most medical writers from antiquity did innovate; their innovations, however, came in forms that do not announce their novelty. Instead, these writers often couched their innovations as solutions to problems already identified by past medical authorities. Their contributions, then, were new knowledge, but almost always stated in relationship to the presuppositions of the authorities they cited. Offering a new insight into the body was a matter of having a conversation with past writers and thinkers, accepting much of what the more important among them had already established, and then presenting one's own work as a reconfiguration of the knowledge of the past.

Theodoret, for his part, was certainly cognizant of ancient medical traditions, and on issues that could fall under the category of medical or anthropological knowledge, he wrote in much the same style as other late ancient medical writers—conservatively offering new ideas as reconfigurations of the knowledge of the past. Many different parts of Theodoret's extant corpus make reference to medical diagnoses in

VII (89–105); on crying rabbinic men, see Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, "When the Rabbi Weeps: On Reading Gender in Talmudic Aggadah," *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies and Gender Issues* 4 (2001): 56–83.

18. On the doxographical nature of medical writing from antiquity, see Philip J. van der Eijk, "Historical Awareness, Historiography and Doxography in Greek and Roman Medicine," in *Ancient Histories of Medicine: Essays in Medical Doxography and Historiography in Classical Antiquity*, *Studies in Ancient Medicine* 20 (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 1–31.

19. See a general discussion of the Hippocratic tradition and the careers of these specific authors in Owsei Temkin, *Hippocrates in a World of Pagans and Christians* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991).

discussions of healing, exorcisms, theories of creation, and other human performance.²⁰ He had access to, at least, Oribasius's collection of medical theories, and likely others.²¹ Even more directly, Theodoret's own deep knowledge of medical discourses can be seen in his medicalizing treatise, the *Cure for Greek Maladies*, which presents the proper understanding of the human being and the divine world as the "cure" for others' errors. That proper understanding was novel, but Theodoret argued for it as if it were simply a clarification of established traditions of knowledge; as the treatise explains Theodoret's take on the nature of humanity, it refers the reader back to many earlier authorities. At the end of his discussion of the functions of the soul, for example, Theodoret redirected the reader to other writers, saying, "[c]ertainly much has been written on this subject by Hippocrates and Galen, not to mention Plato, Xenophon, Aristotle, Theophrastus, and countless other authors."²² Like other commentators on traditional themes about the human being—medical writers, but also philosophers and theologians—Theodoret mostly worked within the bounds of received knowledge, acknowledging the authority of Hippocratic (and Galenic) medicine even as he also ventured beyond its commonplaces to offer his own adaptations of that knowledge.²³

His most significant innovation was to claim that men and women shared the same nature. As Theodoret explained in the *Cure for Greek Maladies*, the differences that can be observed between men and women are superficial. Making reference to the way that different nationalities of people can be understood to nevertheless share the same human essence, Theodoret argued that men and women, too, have the same essence. This is because God began creation with a single being, Adam, so all things descended from him were of the same nature. That included Eve and,

20. A. Adnès and P. Canivet, "Guérisons miraculeuses et exorcismes dans l'histoire Philothée' de Théodoret de Cyr," *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 171 (1967): 53–82, 149–79.

21. Adnès and Canivet, "Guérisons miraculeuses et exorcismes," 73.

22. *affect.* 5.82 (P. Canivet, *Théodoret de Cyr: Thérapeutique des maladies héliéniques*, vol. 1, SC 57 [Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1958], 253; trans. Thomas Halton, *Theodoret of Cyrus: A Cure for Pagan Maladies*, ACW 67 [New York: Newman Press, 2013], 133).

23. Some scholars approach Theodoret's attitude toward non-Christian knowledge much differently than I do. See Niketas Simiosoglou, *Plato and Theodoret: The Christian Appropriation of Platonic Philosophy and the Hellenic Intellectual Resistance*, Cambridge Classical Studies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) and Yannis Papadogiannakis, *Christianity and Hellenism in the Fifth-Century Greek East: Theodoret's Apologetics against the Greeks in Context*, Hellenic Studies 49 (Washington, DC: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2012).

with her, all women.²⁴ Outside the *Cure for Greek Maladies*, Theodoret affirmed this position when he treated female characters from Scripture; in his commentary on Judges he said quite plainly, “there is a single nature for men and women.”²⁵ In both cases, Theodoret followed this scientific claim about the nature of women with an ethical one: because they have the same nature as men, women should pursue the same path to piety as men do. Thus they should have access to temples and ceremonies as men do, and they should be expected to perform the same functions, like prophesying, that men perform.²⁶ Having been endowed with rationality, women have the same religious responsibilities as any other rational being.

The claim about the sameness of men and women appeared often in Theodoret’s expository writing, but it is also held in the explicit comments voiced by characters in the *Religious History*. For example, one ascetic, Peter, was approached by woman who asks him to heal her. He replied that she could not expect much from him because he “has the same nature” as she does.²⁷ This reply emphasized the limitations of the human being, and Theodoret commented extensively on the general “weakness” of human bodies, both male and female, in the face of the hardships of ascetic life. Theodoret appears to have made a small differentiation between men and women in such comments, for male ascetics experienced weakness as a product of certain events, paralysis and old age first among them.²⁸ Female ascetics were simply in possession of a “weaker body” throughout their lives.²⁹ Regardless of the cause of the body’s weakness, however, both men

24. *affect.* 5.57.

25. *qu.* 12 in *Jud.* (ed. John F. Petruccione, *Theodoret of Cyrus: The Questions on the Octateuch, Volume 2: On Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, and Ruth*, The Library of Early Christianity 2 [Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2007], 328; translation mine): ἀνδρῶν καὶ γυναικῶν μία ἡ φύσις.

26. *affect.* 5.57; *qu.* 12 in *Jud.*

27. *h. rel.* 9.7 (SC 234:420): ὁ δὲ ἄνθρωπος μὲν ἔλεγεν εἶναι καὶ τὴν αὐτὴν ἔχειν φύσιν αὐτῇ.

28. On old age, see Eusebius, who adopts practices to “try to prop up, in some way, the weakness of the body” (*h. rel.* 18.1 [SC 257:54]: ὑπερείδειν τοῦ σώματος τὴν ἀσθένειαν οὕτω πωρὸς πειρώμενος). Zebinas is a “weak old man” (*h. rel.* 24.4 [SC 257:142]: γῆρα . . . καὶ ἀσθενεῖα παλαιόντα); cf. *qu.* 13 in *Num.*, where the end of a Levitical priest’s duties at age fifty is explained by the fact that “at the end [of life], the body is weaker” (ἡ τελευταία δὲ ἀσθενέστερον ἔχει τὸ σῶμα) (Petruccione, ed., and Hill, trans., 2:108). For paralysis, see *h. rel.* 17.2, where Abraham’s paralysis is called a “weakness” from which he is eventually relieved (SC 257:36: τῆς ἀσθενείας ἐκείνης ἀπαλλαγείς).

29. On women’s weakness, see *h. rel.* 29.4, the description of Cyra, who has “a weaker body” (SC 257:234: ἀσθενέστερον σῶμα); cf. Theodoret, *ep.* 17 to Casiana, who is praised for her efforts and urged to moderate her sadness about the “weakness

and women could overcome that weakness by their diligence. Theodoret explained that female ascetics may “happen to have a weaker nature,” but they “demonstrate the same dedication as men.”³⁰ It is clear that Theodoret still subscribed to categories like “maleness” and “femaleness” and the authoritative ideas about what those categories signaled in terms of the human bodies to which they were affixed. But Theodoret was also intent upon the claim that men and women have the same natures and were capable of, even responsible to undertake, the same religious practices.

In addition to such explicit statements about human nature, the *Religious History* contains another register of evidence in favor of Theodoret’s claim that men and women share the same nature, namely argument by narrative example.³¹ By having ostensibly male bodies act, as much as they are able, as female bodies were understood to act, Theodoret offered illustrations that proved the truth of his provocative claim. Because such evidence was rendered in images and actions and not in expository language, it lies below the perceptible level of explicit argumentation: it is one thing to say “men and women have the same nature” and another thing to *show* that men and women have the same nature. Theodoret showed it by turning the common Hippocratic assumption about the bodies of men and women on their heads, combining categories by giving nominally male ascetics bodies that produce copious fluids, as one would expect from female bodies. Compared to other ancient literature about ascetics, the *Religious History* is fairly drowning in bodily products. Male ascetics cry abundant tears: the old man Abraham was known for always “shining with every virtue and gushing forth tears of compunction”;³² Theodotus the Armenian ascetic “poured forth tears night and day”;³³ and Agrippa,

of” her body (Yvan Azéma, ed., *Théodoret de Cyr: Correspondance II (Epist. Sirm. 1–95)*, SC 98 [Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1964], 64: καὶ τῆ τοῦ σώματος ἀσθενείᾳ μετρήσαι τὴν λύπην); and *affect.* 8.66, where female servants are praised because they “struggle mightily with rather weak bodies” (SC 57:334: ἐν ἀσθενέσι δ’ ἄγαν σώμασι γενναίως ἀγωνισάμεναι).

30. *h. rel.* 29.1 (SC 257:232): φύσιν μὲν ἀσθενεστέραν λαχούσαι, τὴν αὐτὴν δὲ τοῖς ἀνδράσι προθυμίαν ἐπιδεικνύμεναι.

31. On the power of narrative example as an accompaniment to propositional arguments in heresiology, see Ellen Muehlberger, “The Legend of Arius’s Death: Imagination, Space, and Filth in Late Ancient Historiography,” *Past & Present* 277 (2015): 3–29.

32. *h. rel.* 3.17 (SC 234:278): ἀρετῇ πάσῃ λάμπων καὶ ἀναβλύζων αἰεὶ τὸ τῆς κατανώξεως δάκρυον.

33. *h. rel.* 5.7 (SC 234:338): νύκτωρ καὶ μεθ’ ἡμέραν τῆς κατανώξεως προχέειν τὰ δάκρυα.

“burning by the flush of desire for divine beauty, continuously drenched his cheeks with tears.”³⁴

Such demonstrations of tears may belong to the trope that developed in late antiquity equating weeping with piety, but they are just one part of a larger motif in the *Religious History*, in which male ascetics produce liquids. Similarly typical in late antiquity is the assertion that ascetics participate in wearying toil, but in Theodoret’s text, that toil was put on display via a special medium: the sweat—physical or metaphorical—of ascetics is repeatedly mentioned as a marker of their dedication. Ascetics can “domesticate the body” by means of sweat.³⁵ Those who have spent a long time in the ascetic life are praised when they continue to seek out things that make them sweat copiously, despite their advanced age.³⁶ One old man arrives at the end of his life as if he were ending a footrace, “dripping with sweat.”³⁷ Theodoret gives his highest possible praise to one ascetic, asking rhetorically, “who could measure his sweat?”³⁸ This all clarifies that the body must also work for an ascetic career to be productive: the soul might labor, but it is the body that sweats.³⁹ Some translations of the *Religious History* dull the effect of Theodoret’s repetition by offering different English words like “exertion” or “effort” for ἰδρῶσι, but Theodoret consistently signaled ascetic exertion in the currency of sweat. And alongside tears and sweat, male ascetics also produce other fluids from their bodies in great capacities. Polychronius, for example, creates so much oil that it meets the needs of several people whose extended hands are “filled with oil.”⁴⁰ Julian conquers a drought by crying into the sand; his tears become “a spring of waters.”⁴¹ By having male ascetics produce so many different liquids so often, Theodoret created puzzling portraits of these excellent human bodies and thereby called into question the divisions assumed between male and female natures, the very thing he sought elsewhere to disprove.

34. *h. rel.* 4.8 (SC 234:310): καὶ τῷ τοῦ ἔρωτος ἐκείνου πυρσῶ πυρπολούμενος δάκρυσι κατέβρεχε διηνεκέσι τὰς παρειάς.

35. *h. rel.* prol. 7 (SC 234:136): ἰδρῶσι δὲ . . . τὸ σῶμα δαμάσαντας.

36. *h. rel.* 4.12 (SC 234:318).

37. *h. rel.* 18.4 (SC 257:56): τούτοις καὶ οὗτος τοῖς ἰδρῶσι περιρροόμενος.

38. *h. rel.* 9.1 (SC 234:406–8): τίς ἂν ἐκείνου τὸν ἰδρῶτα μετρήσειεν; cf. 21.1.

39. *h. rel.* 10.3, cf. 10.9.

40. *h. rel.* 24.7 (SC 257:148): τὸ δὲ ἀνέβλυσεν ὡς δύο καὶ τρεῖς τῶν παρόντων ἐκτεῖναι τὰς χεῖρας καὶ πεπληρωμένας ταύτας τοῦ ἐλαίου λαβεῖν; cf. 14.2, where an ascetic keeps a jar constantly full of oil.

41. *h. rel.* 2.7 (SC 234:214): πηγὴν ὑδάτων, cf. James in *h. rel.* 1.4 who dries up a spring and then restores it to full capacity, and then some.

As is clear from these passages, the liquid nature of male ascetic bodies is extraordinary but, contrary to the way liquidity was framed in Hippocratic medical traditions, it was not treated as a negative attribute or a problem to be solved. Instead, the liquids that Theodoret's subjects produced and controlled were the medium through which healings and miracles occurred. The examples of liquid at holy work abound in the *Religious History*. For the ascetic Julian, it is his sweat that breaks a life-threatening fever when no other cure would work.⁴² Sterile women, demoniac women, pregnant women, all are helped not by a wave of a wand or the touch of a hand, but by the draft of a drink given to them by ascetics.⁴³ The famous Asterius fights off heresy, which is elsewhere called a storm, with the gentle "dew" of his arrival.⁴⁴ Stranger troubles are solved by ascetic bodies that manage liquid resources. First is the case of the woman who cannot help but eat thirty chickens per day; she is finally sated when she drinks a cup of water over which an ascetic had made the sign of the cross.⁴⁵ Second is the favorite steed of a local king, sick and stricken with a painful inability to urinate; with a drink from a special cup and a bit of oil applied by an ascetic, the racehorse does what racehorses are idiomatically known to do.⁴⁶ So the generation of liquid from the porous, productive body, normally an index of femaleness, is here a resource controlled and directed, the primary medium by which ascetics accomplished the miraculous.⁴⁷ Reading through the *Religious History*, a reader is inundated with liquid media produced by male bodies, managed by male bodies, and turned by male bodies to the purpose of good works.

With the overarching preference for maleness embraced by much of early Christian ascetic literature, it might seem that Theodoret was here simply appropriating porousness, something understood culturally to be a female quality, and redefining it as a quality that indicates the pinnacle of ascetic achievement and thus the pinnacle of maleness. Yet Theodoret employed means beyond the theme of fluidity to mark his ascetic superstars as women, and this not in their moments of weakness, but in the very acts that make them admirable as ascetics and worthy of the biographical attention Theodoret gives them. In the next section, I will explain how Theodoret

42. *b. rel.* 2.18.

43. *b. rel.* 8.13–14, 11.4, 13.13, and 13.16–17.

44. *b. rel.* 8.2, 2.16.

45. *b. rel.* 13.9.

46. *b. rel.* 8.11.

47. See also the control of water by Moses in *b. rel.* 1.1, echoed by James' demonstration with water in 1.4.

marked the most famous ascetic featured in the *Religious History*, Simeon the Stylite, as a woman and thus proposed Simeon's extraordinary body as an example of the common human nature of men and women.

THE ASCETIC BODY UNDER EXAMINATION

Ascetic bodies exist to be viewed. That is the message of the prologue to the *Religious History*, where Theodoret explained that he wanted all people to “draw benefit with the eyes” from the stunning models of humanity he would present.⁴⁸ There had long been models available in culture—athletes, heroes—for people to observe, but Theodoret was concerned that the models most people had access to view were perverted, overdone caricatures of people not worthy of imitation.⁴⁹ To him, the ascetics of Syria were more edifying than Olympic athletes, and for that reason he collected the portraits of thirty special people, culminating in a final wish, that all readers, “old men, young men, and women” might find a model of philosophy in his collection on which to gaze and be inspired.⁵⁰ The very sight of ascetics was a motivation to adopt diligent, pious action.⁵¹ If we are to judge from the number of those people inspired by the various models provided by the *Religious History*, the most striking portrait in Theodoret's collection was that of Simeon the Stylite: the story of his strange practices, including living atop a pillar, was widely dispersed after the fifth century and inspired an army of stylite practitioners.⁵² Indeed,

48. *b. rel.* prol. 1 (SC 234:124): καὶ τοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς τὴν ὠφέλειαν ἀρύσασθαι.

49. *b. rel.* prol. 3. As Rebecca Krawiec pointed out in a personal communication, Theodoret disparages some such models as being inappropriately feminine, which suggests his novel models—the excellent men who are also women—are meant as replacements.

50. *b. rel.* 30.7 (SC 257:248): καὶ πρεσβύται καὶ νέοι καὶ γυναῖκες; compare *ep.* 17 to Casiana, in which she is praised for being “an example of philosophy to women as well as to men” (SC 98:64: καὶ γυναῖξιν ὁμοῦ καὶ ἀνδράσι φιλοσοφίας ὑπόδειγμα).

51. Theodoret speaks of himself as a watcher who profits, too (*b. rel.* 27.4). Drabinski (“Ancient Bodies,” 19) compares the relationship between Theodoret's ascetics and those who view them to the beloved horse and the charioteer who views it in *Phaedrus* 253e–256b.

52. English translations of all the narrative material about Simeon are helpfully collected in one volume: Robert Doran, ed., *The Lives of Simeon Stylites*, Cistercian Studies 112 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1992); see also the variant Syriac life in Frederick Lent, trans., *The Life of Saint Simeon Stylites* (Merchantville, NJ: Evolution Publishing, 2009) and the Georgian life mentioned by Paul Peeters, *Orient et Byzance: Le tréfonds oriental de l'hagiographie byzantine* (Brussels: Bollandists, 1950), 115–16, cited by Canivet.

Simeon's pillar dominated the reception history of his story; Anthony Eastmond has detailed how, over time, later Christian readers almost entirely focused on Simeon's pillar as an icon of holiness. Simeon's body, unlike the bodies of other saints, lost prominence with respect to the lasting marker of Simeon's transcendence as seen in Byzantine culture.⁵³

If I am right that the peculiar deployment of gender characteristics evident in the *Religious History* was one component of Theodoret's extended argument about human nature, then we should look again at Simeon's body—or really, at the two moments in Theodoret's text where other people look most closely at Simeon's body. For Theodoret peppered both moments with enough ambiguous, but suggestive, details and allusions to imply that Simeon's body was, in some way, female. The first time the *Religious History* recounts an examination of Simeon's body occurs part-way through Simeon's adult life, when he has been living in a community of male ascetics and practicing extreme fasting. A series of events is set in motion that leads to a forceful examination of Simeon's body and, as a result, his expulsion from the community. Here is how Theodoret told the story, citing a conversation with the current head of Simeon's former monastery as his source:

I heard the very man who is now leading this flock narrate how, at one point, Simeon took a rope prepared of palm—it was very jagged, even to touch by hand—and with it, girded his loins, not placing it outside, but adhering it directly to the skin. He bound it so closely as to wound, in a circle, the entire part around which it lay. When he completed more than ten days in this fashion, the wound had become quite grave, letting loose drops of blood, and someone saw him and asked him the cause of the blood. When he said it was nothing grievous, his fellow athlete overpowered him by force and inserted his hand; he examined the cause and disclosed it to his superior. At once censuring and exhorting, attacking the savageness of the deed, he just barely undid the binding. But he could not persuade him to accept any therapy for the wound.⁵⁴

Simeon's desire for a greater burden of asceticism led him to create a circular wound on his own person by "girding his loins" (δέζωσε τὴν ὀσφύν); in so doing, he made a wound whose leaking blood drew attention and ultimately a violent examination at the hands of another member of the community. In the *Religious History*, the results of this examination are drastic: Simeon is expelled from the community where he had been living

53. Antony Eastmond, "Body vs. Column: The Cults of St. Symeon Stylites," in *Desire and Denial in Byzantium*, ed. Liz James (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), 87–100.

54. *b. rel.* 26.5 (SC 257:168–70).

and, according to Theodoret, he never lived in community with others again.

In most readings of this passage, Simeon was cast out of his community because he had demonstrated immoderation; his self-mortification, namely creating what is taken as a waist-circling wound with rough rope, was a sign of the kind of ungovernable zeal so typical of ascetic superstars and yet incompatible with the ideals of a monastic community. But the persistent gendering of other ascetic subjects in the *Religious History* as women is enough to raise the prospect of another possible reading: that Simeon has altered his body, specifically his loins, and has produced a circular, “grave wound” that disturbs others, even disturbs the social order, when its unruly blood escapes and is visible publicly.⁵⁵ To be direct: I argue that Theodoret’s marking of the other laudable ascetics in his stories as women make it impossible to ignore the gynecological overtones of this inspection of, and expulsion of, Simeon’s bleeding body. And, to be clear: I am not arguing anything about the historical Simeon, such as whether the person who corresponds to Theodoret’s representation was male or female (or was male and then castrated himself). My argument resides at the level of Theodoret’s narrative choices and their effects—how they created portraits that reinforced his claim about men and women having a common human nature.

In addition to the suggestive description of the wound that Simeon makes on his body and its subsequent unruly public bleeding, there are two other features of this passage that lend plausibility to my assertion that Theodoret was signaling both “male” and “female” in his narration of Simeon’s body. First is the event of the examination itself. As both Rebecca Flemming and Charlotte Fonrobert have discussed at length, women’s bodies, not men’s, were the ones that warranted such close scrutiny, according to ancient medical convention.⁵⁶ Bodily examination was a kind of subjectification, and women were its subject: their bodies, when read by authoritative others, produced knowledge. Even if Theodoret’s Christian readers were not entirely aware of this dynamic as a feature of ancient medical practice, Simeon’s examination here alluded to the only other forced gynecological examination that can be said to have been popular in late ancient Christian literature: the famous moment when Salome, the midwife, questions then

55. *b. rel.* 26.5 (SC 257:168): τὸ ἔλκος χαλεπότερον.

56. Rebecca Flemming, *Medicine and the Making of Roman Women: Gender, Nature, and Authority from Celsus to Galen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Charlotte Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Biblical Gender* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

tests Mary's virginity prior to her giving birth in the *Protoevangelium of James*. There, Salome is in disbelief about Mary's state and demandingly "inserts her finger" to examine Mary's "nature" (καὶ ἔβαλε Σαλώμη τὸν δάκτυλον αὐτῆς εἰς τὴν φύσιν αὐτῆς).⁵⁷ And it is then that she realizes that Mary is not what she expected her to be. Given the very wide readership of the *Protoevangelium* in late antiquity, it is plausible that the audience of the *Religious History*, reading that Simeon's "fellow-athlete forcefully inserted his hand" (βιασάμενος ὁ συναγωνιστὴς καὶ τὴν χεῖρα ἐνέβαλε) to examine Simeon's body and was surprised by what he found, would be reminded of Salome, the midwife, and her examination of Mary. Based on that allusion, it would have been easy to associate this scene of bodily examination with that in the *Protoevangelium*, and to register both of them as examinations of a woman's body—an extraordinary body in each case, but a woman's body nonetheless.⁵⁸ For even in the fourth century, the Salome incident was already mentioned by multiple well-known writers in their discussions of the state of Mary's body, so an allusion to the incident here would be entirely in keeping with the influence the *Protoevangelium* had in late ancient elite literature.⁵⁹

A second piece of supporting evidence for my interpretation lies in the resolution of the story, namely, the fact that Simeon was expelled from the monastery as a result of what was discovered in this examination. Again, this turn of events is taken to mean that Simeon's practices were so far beyond even the extremes taken by other ascetics in the monastery that he should be removed, so as not to offer others an example of practices they could not handle. Yet the key to understanding Simeon's expulsion would naturally lie with the explanation Theodoret provided in the story itself, and there he said that Simeon was asked to leave "so as not to harm those constitutionally weaker in the body."⁶⁰ That could certainly be a reference to other male ascetics, who are to be protected from Simeon's

57. *Protev.* 20.

58. Sever M. Voicu ("Ways to Survival for the Infancy Apocrypha," in *Infancy Apocrypha: Stories and Identities*, ed. Claire Clivaz et al. [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011], 401–17) calls the extent of the *Protev.*'s influence "truly amazing" and "resounding," as more than 100 Greek manuscripts are still extant, along with ancient translations into nine other ancient languages, some of them twice (408); additionally, *Protev.* served as the base text for many later apocryphal gospels (406–8).

59. Voicu, "Ways to Survival," 409, where he discusses allusions to the story in works of Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, and an unidentified Constantinopolitan author. It is possible that Theodoret's claim about the commonness of human nature may have been motivated by his estimations of Mary's nature.

60. *b. rel.* 26.5 (SC 257:170): ὡς ἂν μὴ τοῖς ἀσθενέστερον τὸ σῶμα διακειμένοις . . . βλάβης αἴτιος γένοιτο.

overzealous example, and as we have seen, Theodoret could speak of weakness in the body with respect to both men and women. But it is women who have weak bodies more generally according to Theodoret. In that context, his explanation about not harming those weak in body could be a hint toward Simeon's state: he was to be removed not because he would inspire immoderation, but because his female body might inspire other female bodies to attempt asceticism, which his superior at the monastery considered something beyond their constitutional weakness.⁶¹

Theodoret's representation of Simeon as a woman is repeated in a second scene in which Simeon's body is examined, this time atop the famous pillar. Simeon had left his monastic community after the first inspection of his body and began to practice his asceticism apart from others. Eventually, he adopted the grueling method of living on a pillar, spending day and night on a small platform in the open air. Theodoret offered a tale about how Simeon's practice of standing on the pillar had caused his feet to ulcerate; the pus produced from these ulcers had drawn the attention of observers. In response, Simeon told one man in the crowd of his watchers to come up and to look for himself.

He ordered a ladder to be placed against his pillar, and told the man to ascend. First he examined his hands, then he put his hand inside the covering of skin and he saw not only his feet but also the grave wound. Seeing and marveling at the extremity of the wound and learning from him that he had forsaken food, the man came down, came to me, and narrated everything.⁶²

Much like in the earlier scene, the authenticity of this examination is secured by the testimony of an eyewitness, the man who had directly observed Simeon's body. Just *what* that man has seen is my concern here. While most readers have interpreted this as a moment when the observer simply looks at the ulcers created by Simeon's standing, a close reading of the passage brings enough ambiguity to light for us to consider a different interpretation: that is passage is an echo of the earlier story and

61. The ambiguity of the signals in this scene of Theodoret's depiction stands out when the text from the *b. rel.* is placed next to the other accounts of this in the other lives of Simeon, all of which post-date the *b. rel.*: the other Greek life removes any ambiguity about what Simeon has done, by having him wrap not just one portion of himself but rather his entire body with a rope, and no examination could be conducted because there was nothing to see but rope (*Ant.* 5–7). The Syriac life's version of this event is short, barely seventy words, and anticlimactic: Simeon wraps a rope around his body and his superior takes it away (Syriac 21).

62. *b. rel.* 26.23 (SC 257:208).

that this observer, too, has examined Simeon's body and known its unexpected nature.

There are several narrative details that support this interpretation. First, according to Theodoret's reportage, the witness has seen two things instead of just one, for he looked at "not only the feet, but also the grave wound."⁶³ It could be that this means that the observer had seen Simeon's feet and had noticed in addition the ulcer that had formed on one of the feet. It is also plausible and, given the contrastive force of a construction like *μη . . . μόνον, ἀλλὰ καὶ* it is more likely, that what was meant is this: the observer had seen the feet, yes, but also something else other than the feet, namely, the "grave wound" that previously drew the attention of Simeon's brothers in the monastery. And it could be that the "grave wound" is a reference to the ulcer, and not the earlier circular bleeding wound that Simeon had caused himself. But given how careful Theodoret was with language, the fact that the only two instances of the phrase "grave wound" in the text appear in these examination scenes (and they are two of the only three that appear in all of Theodoret's writing), it is not beyond credibility that the phrase was used a second time to link this vignette to Simeon's prior examination. One last detail supports my case for an alternate reading. Simeon ordered the observer who climbs the ladder to "place his hands inside the cloak" in order to examine him.⁶⁴ If the observer were only looking at Simeon's feet and the ulcer on one of them, this step would be unnecessary: a man climbing a ladder to look at Simeon on his pillar would not need to reach inside Simeon's cloak to spy his feet, because they would be the first part of Simeon's body visible to him as he ascended.⁶⁵ Here too, then, Theodoret offered a multivalent and suggestive picture of Simeon's body, making use of specific details to tie this scene to the earlier examination at the monastery.

The manuscript versions of this life of Simeon and other ancient lives of Simeon indicate that ancient interpreters saw in this scene the interpretative possibilities I am exploring here and corrected the scene to exclude such possibilities. First, in several manuscripts representing a slightly later version of Theodoret's text, there is an emendation. Instead of the observer

63. καὶ ἰδεῖν μὴ τοὺς πόδας μόνον, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὸ χαλεπώτατον ἔλκος.

64. περιβολαίου τὴν χεῖρα βαλεῖν.

65. I admit it is possible that by "cloak" (περιβολαίου) Theodoret could mean a garment that covered the feet. But it is unlikely, given that elsewhere in the *h. rel.*, Theodoret finds other cloaks remarkable *because* they cover the wearers' feet (29.4). I take this to mean that for Theodoret, "cloaks" do not normally cover the feet, and thus, the observer must be investigating something else on Simeon's body when he reaches inside the cloak.

seeing “not only the feet but also the grave wound,” an additional word appears, such that the revised text has the observer see “not only the feet but also the grave wound *there*.”⁶⁶ It is a small change, but its effect is to redirect the reader to the feet as the location of the wound, a detail that suggests that whoever made the addition found the dominant version to be insufficient and sought to specify an interpretation. Outside Theodoret’s text, several other lives of Simeon existed in late antiquity, and they also appear to seek to decrease the ambivalence about just what the observer sees when he climbs the ladder. Antony located the wound in the thigh, rather than the foot, while the Syriac life’s extended story about the wound makes constant reference to the feet. In neither of these cases is there an examiner who inspects Simeon.⁶⁷ Other later retellings intensified the wound, in effect removing doubt about what on Simeon’s body bore the mark of his asceticism: Jacob of Serugh reports that Simeon’s foot was not just ulcerated, but was actually amputated.⁶⁸ All of these treatments of the story adjust it in order to direct readers’ attention to Simeon’s feet, and thus suggest Simeon’s ulcerated feet were widely considered the trouble he encountered on his pillar. Yet at the same time, such adjustments point out that Theodoret’s text was not perceived in antiquity to be adequately conveying that message and, as I have demonstrated, was open to other interpretative possibilities.

My insistence on my particular interpretation of this examination of Simeon’s body is motivated by the presence of all the narrative details I have just discussed, but also by one more part of the story: the question that set it in motion. According to Theodoret, the observer was inspired to view Simeon’s body because he wanted to know whether Simeon was “a human being or a bodiless nature.”⁶⁹ Some interpreters see in this question an evocation of the late ancient trope that presented asceticism as an “angelic life,” with “bodiless nature” being a less-than-artful reference to an angel. English translations of the *Religious History* lean in that direction, offering “incorporeal nature” or “bodiless being” as translations of ἀσώματος φύσις.⁷⁰ If we consider Theodoret an author in control of the

66. MSS JQG and W have ἐκεῖνο (SC 257:208, app. crit.).

67. *Ant.* 17 and Syriac 46–52.

68. Discussed by Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Scenting Salvation: Ancient Christianity and the Olfactory Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 216–17.

69. *b. rel.* 26.23 (SC 257:208): ἄνθρωπος εἶ ἢ ἀσώματος φύσις.

70. Doran, *The Lives of Simeon Stylites*, 82, and R. M. Price, *A History of the Monks of Syria by Theodoret of Cyrrhus*, Cistercian Studies 88 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1985), 170.

stories he told and the rhetoric he wielded, and if we give attention to his explicit insistence on theorizing human nature in his other writings, then it becomes very easy to take the observer's question as a clue to the significance of the second story about Simeon. A man wants to know about Simeon's φύσις, and inspects his body and sees its "grave wound." If that wound was a mark of something female, then what the observer learned is that Simeon—and all humans, male or female, strong or weak—are capable of extraordinary feats of piety like Simeon's pillar practice. By viewing Simeon's extraordinary body through the eyes of not just this examiner at the pillar, but the earlier examiner at the monastery, a reader sees a model that in its ambivalent figuring of maleness and femaleness exemplifies Theodoret's claim about the commonness of human nature. It may also do more, demonstrating that those who take on ascetic practice like Simeon come as close as human beings can to expressing the fullness of that common nature.

Though it is clear in context that Theodoret's use of ambivalent signals of gender with respect to Simeon's body was one plank in his larger argument, some readers may still balk at my interpretation. To see not only the moment when Simeon was expelled from the monastery, but also the interaction with the observer at the pillar, as examinations of Simeon's female body is admittedly provocative. Yet my reading is no more inherently provocative than is the long-standing frame through which scholars have often read Simeon's life: focusing on Simeon's pillar practice as the most significant part of his career and then reading the pillar as a symbol of maleness, tied to local fertility rituals and seamlessly evocative of the masculinity required to enact ascetic feats like Simeon's.⁷¹ Some of the motivation to focus on the pillar comes from the importance Simeon's pillar and pillar practices took on over time. But what was important to Simeon's later biographers and readers was not necessarily what was important to

71. A classic statement of this position is H. J. W. Drijvers, "Spätantike Parallelen zur altchristlichen Heiligenverehrung unter besonderer Berücksichtigung des syrischen Stylitenkultes," in *Aspekte frühchristlicher Heiligenverehrung*, ed. Fairy von Lilienfeld (Erlangen: University of Erlangen, 1977), 54–76. Doran, in his introduction to his translation, responded to this position by acknowledging that "male dominance" was "readily symbolized by the phallic-like pillar," but argued the pillar's symbolism could be tied to the Christian cross as well (Doran, *The Lives of Simeon Stylites*, 31). Both David Frankfurter and Charles Stang have given more context and nuance to the place of pillar practice, see David T. M. Frankfurter, "Stylites and *Phallobates*: Pillar Religions in Late Antique Syria," *VC* 44 (1990): 168–98; Charles M. Stang, "Digging Holes and Building Pillars: Simeon Stylites and the 'Geometry' of Ascetic Practice," *HTR* 103 (2010): 447–70.

his first biographer, Theodoret, who placed his focus on Simeon's body and its potential to express multiple facets of human nature. Understanding the complexity of Theodoret's presentation—the unexpected way that he presents Simeon, and other ascetics, as if they were women—is important because as a character, Simeon and his story have had outsized effects on the way we reckon the ancient project of asceticism. His pillar practice and his immoderacy have made Simon central to the trope of the “superstar” or “celebrity” ascetic, whose holiness drew people to want to see and visit him. The superstar trope, in turn, has shaped scholarly accounts of asceticism in late antiquity in various ways.⁷² What would happen if we were to understand Simeon, his body, and his project differently, as Theodoret seemed to signal to us to do? If we considered the ambivalently gendered modes of representation that authors like Theodoret adopted to speak of Simeon's surpassing religious practice, what would change about how we read asceticism as a project related to bodies and gender in early Christianity?

CONCLUSION: RECONSIDERING THE *TELOS* OF MALENESS IN EARLY CHRISTIAN ASCETICISM

Though this line of argument may suggest that Theodoret was valorizing femaleness and women in the *Religious History*, that would be an inaccurate conclusion. For although Theodoret marked some of his honored ascetics with female characteristics, there are still many features of the text that undervalue female characters or even devalue them in comparison

72. The *b. rel.* is the key text providing evidence for Peter Brown's construction of the “holy man” of late antiquity, and Simeon its most striking figure (“The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity,” *JRS* 61 [1971]: 80–101). It is impossible to overstate the influence of this article; John Howe is not as hyperbolic as he seems when he speaks of “Rise and Function” as launching a thousand ships (“Revisiting the Holy Man,” *CHR* 86 [2000]: 640–44, a review of two works inspired by Brown's article: *Charisma and Society: The 25th Anniversary of Peter Brown's Analysis of the Late Antique Holy Man*, ed. Susanna Elm and Naomi Janowitz and published as a special issue of the *JCS* 6 [1998]: 343–539; and *The Cult of the Saints in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages: Essays on the Contribution of Peter Brown*, ed. James Howard-Johnston and Paul Antony Hayward [New York: Oxford University Press, 1999]). Two extremely influential scholars in late antiquity were inspired by Brown's trope of the holy man—Patricia Cox Miller (see her *Biography in Late Antiquity: A Quest for the Holy Man* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983]) and Philip Rousseau (see his *Pachomius: The Making of a Community in Fourth-Century Egypt* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985] and *Basil of Caesarea* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994]).

with male characters. First, the *Religious History* in fact tells stories about female characters unambivalently marked as females but their biographies are much shorter than the average biography of a male ascetic and they are grouped at the end of the text.⁷³ Too, even the stories that form the main body of the *Religious History*—those about male ascetics with strangely female characteristics—make reference to a system of social segregation by sex; they often point to the assumption that women would not and should not come into direct contact with male ascetics.⁷⁴ But the largest piece of evidence that disproves the notion that Theodoret was assigning female characteristics to the male ascetics he honored in order to valorize femaleness lies, paradoxically, in the scenes of the examination of Simeon's body. As I have noted above, a traditional reading of the discovery of Simeon's wound by another monk results in Simeon's departure. For some readers, Simeon had to leave because his example would have endangered the community by inspiring other "histrionic feats of self-mortification."⁷⁵ The reading I have proposed here offers a different logic behind Simeon's expulsion. He was asked to leave when another monk noticed the disturbing fluid products of his body, investigated by searching under his clothes, and having seen the state of his body, decided that it was incompatible with membership in the community. That is, once he was discovered to be a woman, he was expelled.

One way, then, to elaborate on the reading I have proposed would be to adopt Simeon's portrait from the *Religious History* as yet more evidence of a trope identified in the scholarly literature about late ancient asceticism: the tale of the transvestite monk. Multiple saints' lives from the Byzantine period preserve legends of a woman who affects an androgynous appearance, often cutting her hair and starving herself to the point of having an angular, hard appearance; she joins and lives in a monastic community of men; she is discovered, often at her death, to have been a woman.⁷⁶

73. Sections 1 to 28 of the *h. rel.* are each dedicated to an ascetic marked in the traditional ways as male; sections 29 and 30 tell the collective stories of ascetics named "Marana, Cyra, and Domnina." The character of these latter lives are so different, in fact, that some argue these desultory accounts may have been additions to the text, joined to it after its original composition.

74. See, for example, *h. rel.* 3.14 or 8.13.

75. Brown, "Holy Man," 91.

76. The scholarly literature here is long, but begins in English with John Anson, "The Female Transvestite in Early Monasticism: The Origin and Development of a Motif," *Viator* 5 (1974): 1–32. In French, the recent emergence of the theme originates with Évelyne Patlagean, "L'histoire de la femme déguisée en moine et l'évolution de la sainteté féminine à Byzance," *Studi Medievali*, 3rd ser., 17 (1976): 597–623;

These tales are often presented as the natural outgrowth of several quite early apocryphal Christian texts that either depict Christian women wanting to act beyond the strict limits of their gender or that contain direct statements about the necessity women have to “become male” in order to be proper followers of Christ.⁷⁷ Such a view depends on a speculative assumption: that expressions of gender are constant and predictable within ancient Christianity, meaning the same thing across both geographical and temporal expanses. But, as I have tried to show in this essay, systems of representing gender in texts are local and peculiar, related to an author’s specific concerns and style. In short, they are anything but constant.

What is constant, though, is the availability of gender as a system of difference and differentiation by which authors may narratively explore human hierarchy, human potential, and human change. For Theodoret, the signs of gender generated by both language itself and medical discourses about women’s bodies were useful in the context of his wider argument about human beings and their nature. He explained that argument in plain words elsewhere, but he supported it in the *Religious History* with the extraordinary models of humanity whose stories he told. As I noted above, Theodoret wanted these ascetics to be models for all kinds of people. Indeed, he also wanted all kinds of models, including those normally marked as women but also men whose excellence in ascetic practice was

see also Kari Vogt, “‘The Woman-Monk’: A Theme in Byzantine Historiography,” in *Greece and Gender*, ed. Brit Berggren and Nanno Marinatos (Bergen: Norwegian Institute at Athens, 1995), 141–48. These articles focus on Byzantine saints, but there is at least one story that circulated in Egypt as well: see Terry Wilfong, “Reading the Disjointed Body in Coptic: From Physical Modification to Textual Fragmentation,” in *Changing Bodies, Changing Meanings: Studies on the Human Body in Antiquity*, ed. Dominic Montserrat (London: Routledge, 1998), 116–36. For a recent literary study of these stories, see Crystal Lynn Lubinski, *Removing Masculine Layers to Reveal a Holy Womanhood: The Female Transvestite Monks of Late Antique Eastern Christianity* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013).

77. Blossom Stefaniw interprets these early apocryphal sources in “Becoming Men, Staying Women: Gender Ambivalence in Christian Apocryphal Texts and Contexts,” *Feminist Theology* 18 (2010): 341–55. Elizabeth Castelli’s article, “‘I Will Make Mary Male’: Pieties of the Body and Gender Transformation of Christian Women in Late Antiquity,” in *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, ed. Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub (New York: Routledge, 1991), 29–49, follows Anson in linking transvestite monks to the gendered statements in the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Passion of Perpetua*. Stephen J. Davis characterized the early apocryphal statements as intertexts for the later transvestite monk legends in “Crossed Texts, Crossed Sex: Intertextuality and Gender in Early Christian Legends of Holy Women Disguised as Men,” *J ECS* 10 (2002): 1–36.

expressed, in this text, by signs commonly understood to be characteristic of women. To present these models, Theodoret had abandoned the *telos* of maleness for ascetic performance, and we should be careful not to reinscribe it where it did not exist to start. Instead, we should come to terms with the fact that for some ancient Christians, like Theodoret, it was a matter of scientific knowledge that “virtue cannot be distinguished into ‘male’ and ‘female’ types, nor can philosophy be divided into two categories.”⁷⁸

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78. *h. rel.* 30.5 (SC 257:246): οὐκ εἰς ἄρρεν καὶ θῆλυ τὴν ἀρετὴν διακρίνουσα, οὐδὲ εἰς δύο διαφορὰς τὴν φιλοσοφίαν μερίζουσα.