Divine Drag: Unveiling Ascetic Afflictions through Hierarchy, Race, and Queerness

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Abstract: Inspired by Dr. Mike Chin's innovative essay collection, where he invited ancient historians to explore the workings of a chosen concept in the ancient world through a single word, this paper applies a similar approach to investigate early Christian asceticism. Focused on the theme of "representation," the study examines hagiographies, rule books, and encounters with demons to uncover how ascetics externalized inner struggles related to sexuality, power dynamics, and spiritual excellence. It explores how these struggles manifested as representations of hierarchies, queerness, and race within the ascetic landscape. Furthermore, the paper explores the impact of representation on communal dynamics, reputation management, and the negotiation of statuses within ascetic hierarchical communities. In adopting this approach, the study aims to shed light on the intricate and diverse nature of representation within the context of early Christian asceticism.

In early Christian asceticism, the politics of representation reflected the theological and social landscape at a time when Christianity had not yet fully defined itself. In turn, certain sects sought to gain prominence and favor in the political sphere through their ideas of what practices and ideals a Christian ought to have. Through an exploration of hagiographies depicting trans-saints and black demons and books, as well as rule books admonishing against gazing upon young boys, this essay will demonstrate how early Christian ascetics transfigured their innermost afflictions and desires around sexuality, power dynamics, and an unwavering pursuit of spiritual excellence into external representations of hierarchies, queerness, and race.

Starting in the third and fourth centuries, Christianity began to take on a clearer identity. One strong rhetorical development was the concept of cosmological warfare, where "the fighters are human beings; those assisting them are God's angels; and their opponents are the foul demons" (Brakke, 2009, p. 49). So, while demons already existed in other religious and cultural traditions, "Evagrius of Pontus crafted the most sophisticated demonology to emerge from early Christian monasticism and perhaps from ancient Christianity as a whole" (Brakke, 2009, p. 2). Evagrius, one of the most influential Christian theologians in the late fourth century, played a pivotal role in developing the Christian theology of contemplative prayer and asceticism, which laid the groundwork for a tradition of spiritual life embraced by both Eastern and Western Christian churches. Evagrius and other ascetics developed the idea that there were certain thoughts tied to emotions and images. Each internal thought, such as lust, vainglory, and avarice, became personified into external figures called demons that had their own agency. For example, in Evagrius's *Against the Thoughts of Fornication,* he writes, "Against the demon of fornication that imitates the form of a beautiful naked woman" (Brakke, 2009, p. 76). Here, the monk is projecting his desire for fornication with a woman, personifying it into a female demon. This does not mean a literal woman is tempting the monk. Instead, the monk's desire gets mapped onto women writ large as inherently lustful beings.

In the realm of spiritual combat, monks and ascetics functioned as God's fighters, wielding metaphorical weapons like prayers and the pursuit of virtuous living (Brakke, 2009). Their commitment went beyond personal salvation, extending to the communal fabric where they actively "[equipped] the most negligent among the brethren with their weapons" (Ponticus and Sinkewicz, 2003, p. 97). This ethos of shared responsibility and mutual support became foundational as monastic practices evolved.

To promote even further virtuous living, monasteries physically distanced from society were envisioned as sanctuaries for individuals seeking a profound connection with God. Evagrius, following a period of personal turmoil after he fell in love with a married woman, embraced monasticism in the deserts of Nitria and Kellia (Brakke, 2009, p. 2). Meanwhile, Pachomius, revered as a prominent figure among the Desert Fathers, led the charge in establishing Christian cenobitic monasticism, deliberately distancing adherents from the trappings of worldly existence (Harmless, 2004, p. 115). Cenobitic monasticism emphasized a structured, communal existence, where obedience to the religious superior mirrored divine authority. People from all social strata willingly abandoned their previous lives, possessions, and titles to escape the distractions of lay society and adopt the communal ethos of cenobitic monasticism.

Of course, the abandonment of one's life is not enough to fully remove one's logismoi - a term encompassing tempting thoughts. Evagrius meticulously categorized these logismoi into eight distinct categories: gastrimargia (gluttony), pornéia (lust), philarguria (avarice), lupè (sadness), orgè (anger), acedia (depression or disgust with life), kenodoxia (vainglory), and perèphania (pride). These logismoi are often regarded as the precursors to the seven deadly sins. Hierarchies within monastic communities

were therefore established not only to uphold these spiritual microcosmos of virtuous living but also to aid in the constant battle against these tempting thoughts. Despite the absence of explicit delineation of a formal hierarchy, the prevalent usage of the term "old men" (abbas/fathers/superiors) suggests an implicit hierarchy rooted in seniority. These individuals held higher status and assumed roles as spiritual guides for the younger monks (Gleason, 1998, p. 503). The purpose of these rule books was to preserve the monastery's hierarchies, as enforcement of rules took on a rigorous, ritualistic form within the monastery's sacred walls. The ascetic lifestyle serves as an external representation of their unwavering commitment to the pursuit of divine connection while fighting their inner afflictions.

Poachomius's rule book offers us a rare glimpse into ascetics' envisioned lives. The mandates included prayer, psalm-singing, study of scripture, manual labor, modest meals, punctuality, and a lack of personal items. This ethos emphasized monk equality, discouraging decisions based on personal inclinations to preserve an ideal, frictionless, and contemplative existence. As one reads the book and sees almost identical rules being iterated over and over again, this repetition suggests that these rules were often violated in instances of self-indulgence, implying the ascetic succumbed to their thoughts/ demons. So, Pachomius's struggle in establishing social order without a clear blueprint shows the importance of social cohesion and solidarity in a society so reliant on extreme equality.

To prevent the gradual erosion of the monastery's social fabric through self-indulgence, stringent measures were implemented. For example, monks and nuns required permission to leave the monastery, minimizing exposure to external temptations (Ehrman and Jacobs, 2004). Even women, referred to as "weaker vessels," were housed separately so that "the brothers may freely tend to its duty and no occasion for detraction to be given to anybody" (Ehrman and Jacobs, 2004, p. 295). Even though women were perceived as the weaker sex, and therefore more likely to succumb to their temptations, men still believed that women's lust could cause men to fail in fulfilling their duties.

Whereas Pachomius emphasized the fulfillment of godly duties and the avoidance of distractions to aid monks in their inner contemplation, Shenoute adopted a distinct approach to maintaining discipline. He relied on gossip and open communication about others' faults, stating, "Let us not hide one another's sin, so God is not wrathful against us…" — a departure from Pachomius, who argued against unnecessary speech among monks (Layton, 2014, p. 103). This practice manifested two crucial aspects within Shenoute's monastery. First, it reinforced the link between sexual desire and shame to deter various sexual acts, such as washing a child alone. Second, it created a panopticon within the holy establishment, where the impact of a monk's inner shame is intensified by the collective scrutiny of those who witnessed the transgression and others who learned about the acts. By encouraging the verbalization of shame, Shenoute's strategy externalizes the inner turmoil experienced by ascetics engaged in sinful acts.

This communal dialogue played a crucial role in reputation management, an ongoing concern in the social dynamics of ascetic communities. Highly regarded individuals, including senior Abbas, experienced performance anxiety due to the potential impact of gossip on the rankings of leading anchorites and displacement (Gleason, 1998, pp. 516-517). In monastic communities' aim to dismantle established hierarchies of wealth and political status, newly crafted monastic hierarchies filled the vacuum. These spiritual hierarchies, perceived as indicators of one's closeness to God, provided a discreet avenue for monks to pursue their desire for advancement without being seen as vain. Thus, gossip not only shaped communal narratives but also intricately became a part of the continuous process of negotiating the flux statuses within ascetic hierarchical communities.

Exploring the intricacies of sexual regulation within monastic settings, ranging from the separation of men and women to the shaming of lustful gazes, illuminates the concerted effort to

control the sexual desires of ascetic individuals. The repeated sexual regulations and anxieties surrounding young boys suggest an implicit acknowledgment of the homoerotic allure of young boys, shaping an image in the minds of ascetics that young boys are beautiful and therefore desirable. The idea of young boys as desirable did not originate with Christianity; traces of this perception can be found in pagan Greco-Roman society before the evolution of Christianity as a distinct identity. However, these rule books entwine Christian demonology - the study of demons within Christian religious belief and myth - with the desire of young boys within this cultural context. Shenoute's rule book, for example, consistently condemns gazing at young boys. Caroline Schroeder argues that the "monks who read, hear, and rewrite these texts [including rule books] participate in a voyeuristic erotic experience" despite operating under the guise of shaming others and exercising extreme self-control (Schroeder, 2009, p. 345). These texts therefore become physical representations of the inner desires and afflictions of monks who desire young boys but do not actually engage in looking at them.

However, for monks who do gaze at young boys, the act of gazing is suggested to carry a neutral moral valency. Yet, when desire becomes intertwined with the gaze, as is often the case, it is considered sinful. The arbitrary nature of one's true intentions complicates the delineation of acceptable behavior, exemplified by the enigmatic lines: "Not simply embracing another monk, but embracing *with passion* poses the threat; not simply kissing a child, but kissing *with passion*…" (Schroeder, 2009, p. 342) The use of the term "passion" introduces a subjective element, making the gaze a "means of justified voyeurism" in addition to the voyeuristic erotic experience monks can have when engaging in these rule books (Schroeder, 2009, p. 338). Given the challenge of discerning whether the boundary of acceptable behavior has been transgressed, the responsibility falls on the individual in question "to bear witness against himself" (Foucault, 1999, pp. 182-183). Thus, the emphasis on renunciation of sexual practices transitions toward interior reflection. Ascetics, in their pursuit of virtue, find themselves in a perpetual state of self-surveillance, monitoring and renouncing their innermost temptations and seductions with no telos in sight. This introspective vigilance is compounded by the external panopticon imposed upon them by other ascetics.

The genre of early Christian hagiographies narrated the lives of saints as they propagated Christian ideologies in the image of God. A myriad of these narratives exhibit pronounced queer coding. In Jerome's *Life of Paul*, a narrative unfolds where a restrained martyr faces a sexually charged encounter with a beautiful prostitute. Tormented by the conflict between his desires and spiritual convictions, he turns to divine inspiration and, in a radical act, bites off his tongue, stating, "the sense of lust was overcome by the sharp pain that replaced it" (White et al., 1998, p. 76). By removing his tongue, a physical, sensory representation of his inner desire and bodily pleasure, he undergoes a form of literal self-castration and cleanses the act of fornication from sin as supported by *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, which one apophthegm stating that "there is a natural impulse inherent in the body, but it does not operate if the soul is unwilling" (Wortley, 2012, p. 59).

However, Virginia Burrus delves deeper into the symbolic significance of the physical act of self-castration. She argues that tongue-biting holds broader connotations related to gender, control, and expression. The act, seen as a form of gender-switching, connects the act to cultural codes that define a woman's relationship with language, as a woman can only assert control over her tongue by destroying it (Burrus, 2004, p. 27). The martyr's experience transcends mere emasculation or feminization, leaving uncertainty regarding the martyr's position given the conventional gender norms of this historical era. Instead, it situates the martyr within the fluid expressions of gender, locating them "in the gaps, in the fragments, in the very mobility of their shifting desire" (Burrus, 2004, p. 27).

These notions of gender-bending become more clear in a widely successful literary subsect of hagiographies that center around trans-saints, such as the *Pelagia of Antioch* and *Life of Marianus.* In the *Pelagia of Antioch*, Pelagia's gender is already inverted from the beginning. She is assigned male characteristics from her dress, scarf, and wealth "as though she were a man" (Brock and Harvey, 2010, p. 43). The author could have said "like a man," but instead stated "as though she were a man" to imply that the figure's maleness existed inside Pelagia before her spiritual and physical transformation. Despite being explicitly given male characteristics, the monks in the story admit they are captivated by Pelagia's beauty, breaking conventional Christian boundaries around sexual attraction. Pelagia, a prostitute, should be seen as a person of lower status, yet "her appearance incited everyone who set eyes on her to fall in love with her" and so "when the holy bishops saw her, they averted their eyes from her, as though she was some sinful object" (Brock and Harvey, 2010, p. 43). Previously, the gaze had been a way for monks to indulge in their inner desires. However, Pelagia's ambiguously gendered being is so powerful and threatening to the monk's self-control that the gaze moves into the interior, forcing the monks to restabilize their connection to the ascetic life.

After her baptism, marking her spiritual journey with God, she even requests Nonnos's clothing, disappearing from the city in male clothing (Brock and Harvey, 2010, p. 58). To everyone, Pelagia no longer exists. Instead, the monk Pelagio is societally accepted as a eunuch as "[Pelagia's] astounding beauty had all faded away, her laughing and bright face that … had become ugly, … as a result of much fasting and the keeping of vigils" (Brock and Harvey, 2010, p. 60). By staying true to ascetic practices, Pelagia physically transforms into Pelagio. Nonnos even says "I received a blessing from her as if from a male eunuch who was a renowned monk, a perfect and righteous disciple of Christ" (Brock and Harvey, 2010, p. 60). Nonnos recognizes Pelagio's transcended power, unknowingly accepting Pelagio's bodily state as male.

Although *The Life of Marinos* does not begin with a character who lives their life in sin before becoming a monk, the narrative follows a very similar pattern to *Pelagia of Antioch*. In her early youth, Mary disguises herself as a man and adopts the name Marinos to reside in the monastery alongside her father (Talbot, 1996, p. 7). Throughout Marinos's stay, he embraces the ascetic life successfully until he is falsely accused of fornication and impregnation. The motive behind Marino's decision to accept these accusations and say "I have sinned as a man" remains unstated (Talbot, 1996, p. 9). One interpretation is that being accused of impregnating someone fulfills Marinos's latent longing to be acknowledged as a male. Despite living almost their entire life in the monastery, Marinos is more attached to their male/eunuch identity than maintaining their current position within the monastic community.

Overall, the stories of trans-saints are examples of ancient works offering glimpses into the complex reality of gender norms within a monastic context. These saints, often assigned female at birth, navigate most of their lives as male-presenting eunuchs and serve as "embodiments of genderqueer figures" (Betancourt, 2020, p. 109). The narratives unfold with variations, as some characters choose to maintain their assigned gender after they are discovered, while others beg that they "retain their gender identities posthumously" (Betancourt, 2020, p. 91). In the Greco-Roman cultural context, the vertical one-sex model is often used as a framework for understanding gender and sexuality. The trans-saints, by overturning their assigned gender and embracing a eunuch identity, effectively inverted this vertical hierarchy, depicting a horizontal spectrum. Betancourt argues that eunuchs, portrayed as "nonbinary and gender-fluid in their bodies, roles, perception, and passing," could not be forced into a fixed state (Betancourt, 2020, p. 109). Positioned within the category of

eunuchs, trans-saints navigated a fluid state of gender subjectivity, echoing the complexities observed in narratives like the martyr in *The Life of Paul* and complicating the traditional one-sex model.

Trans-saints' strong desire for spiritual and bodily transformation may stem from the notion that "to become male … was to conquer the earthly attachment to the flesh and transition from feminine inferiority to masculine superiority" (Betancourt, 2020, p. 97). The stories of trans-saints provide readers with external representations of their internal desires and struggles. While these narratives don't explicitly detail the saints' internal conflicts about gender identity, cultural contexts suggest severe consequences for acting on such desires publicly given that even the temporary act of "cross-dressing in any capacity and in either direction was prohibited not only by biblical traditions but also by Church councils and imperial law codes" (Betancourt, 2020, p. 99). Despite the risks of violence, the monastic community provided camouflage of ascetics' inner gender fluidity as physical transformation signified devotion to asceticism, where trans-saints spiritually transcended higher than their male counterparts.

Early Christian internal afflictions and desires of ascetic superstars were externally represented through race by intertwining racial imagery with the struggles of ascetic life, sexual temptation, and the negotiation of stereotypes within monastic communities. It is worth noting that the ancients lacked modern conceptions of racial categorization. Instead, according to David Brakke (2006), this association arose from broader "ethnocentric reactions to foreignness in bodies and cultures" (p. 158). This symbolism finds its roots in biblical narratives, such as the well-known declaration in Genesis 1:3–4 that "God saw that the light was good," and Paul's description of believers as "children of light" in 1 Thessalonians, distinguishing them from darkness (Brakke, 2006, p. 159). Consequently, the association of dark or burnt skin became a coded reference to Ethiopian people, who typically had darker skin than most monastics (Brakke, 2006, p. 159). In Greco-Roman culture, where blackness was associated with evil, Ethiopians were often perceived as demons on earth, particularly demons of porneia. This effectively relegated Ethiopian monks and laypeople to a lower status as living representations of monastic logismoi.

The Ethiopian demon perpetuated pre-existing Greco-Roman stereotypes of Ethiopian people being lustful beings, according to David Brakke (Brakke, 2006, p. 163). Hagiography then continued to build upon this notion. For example, "the devil's appearance as a black boy in the Life of Antony… [is augmented] with themes of sexuality and power. The context is erotic temptations, which Athanasius calls 'the weapons of the belly's navel'" (Brakke, 2006, p. 160). The phrase "weapons of the belly's navel" refers to Anthony's carnal desires and the vulnerability of human nature to physical appetites, which the devil takes advantage of in the form of Anthony's great desire, a black boy. Therefore, the narrative intertwines the monk's struggle with both sexual desires and a confrontation with the power of the devil.

Within the framework of the one-sex model, "the power of the black demon of fornication is contained or constrained by a feminized appearance…that of a feminized boy" (Brakke, 2006, p. 162). The monks projected their internal struggles with desire onto external figures, portraying the demons as powerful symbols of temptation associated with racialized characteristics. It is important to remember though that the demon does not inherently have a power but rather its "power is the projected strength or irresistibility of the monk's attraction to the erotic object, whether women or boy" (Brakke, 2006, p. 162). Therefore, the monks give the demons power and therefore also have the power and strength to beat the demons as the black demon proclaims: "Many a man have I deceived and very many have I overthrown; but now when I attacked you and your efforts as I have done with many others, I proved too weak" (Athanasius and Meyer, 1950, p. 23).

The therapeutic purpose of these encounters, as argued by Brakke, lies in the monks' ability to embody alterity within themselves, fostering self-reflection towards an improved ascetic state (Brakke, 2006, p. 175). Bringing into discussion the social anxieties monks experienced, encounters with Ethiopian demons played a significant role in stabilizing the monks' identities within this world of hierarchies. When ascetics faced black demons, it became a symbolic representation of their encounter with their own struggles of the flesh. These tempting demons can be seen as testing the monk's commitment to ascetic principles and the monastic way of life. Each encounter involves a moment where the ascetic either has to fight off the demon or succumb to their desires. The monks' decision to resist the black demons solidifies a static and one-dimensional portrayal of the Ethiopian demon as hypersexual. However, after fighting off the black demons, the demons rather than being perceived as potent are rendered powerlessness.

While stories with Ethiopian demons paint them as one-dimensional, stories of Ethiopian monks greatly complicate this narrative. Examples such as Abba Moses and other powerful Ethiopian ascetics challenge this fixity by being portrayed both as menacing evil invaders and as exemplars of ascetic transformation, revealing the transformability of the Ethiopian identity within the monastic context. Abba Moses, by embodying both the demonic and the ascetic, engages in a negotiation of these stereotypes. The mimicry of demonic traits (before conversion) and ascetic virtues (after conversion) challenges and disrupts the fixity of racial and cultural stereotypes, where even a fellow monastic says “I am obliged to tell [you] about his wicked behavior in order to demonstrate the excellence of his conversion” (Brakke, 2006, p. 178).

Other monks, revealing their internal phobias when confronted with someone "too ascetic" or "too evil," employ racial language to diminish Moses’ newfound virtues. Reacting to the taunts, Moses, in addressing himself as "you black one" and questioning his humanity by asking, "So why do you go among human beings?" engages in an act of self-degradation (Brakke, 2006, p. 157). This self-deprecating language serves as a form of internalized one-downmanship, where Abba Moses adopts derogatory racial terms traditionally used against him and turns them inward. Given vanity and pride were considered detrimental to spiritual progress, Abba Moses' status reversal becomes a demonstration of his commitment to ascetic principles and transcends him spiritually over the other monks in the story (Gleason, 1998, p. 521). Therefore, the ambivalence surrounding the Ethiopian demons, being both demonic and potentially transformative, reflects the internal conflicts within the monks’ spiritual journey.

Overall, the theme of representation emerges as a guiding thread, weaving together the diverse narratives of monks, ascetic superstars, and the demons that populated their inner worlds. Ascetics engaged in cosmological warfare, personifying internal thoughts as demons, strategically using these external representations to grapple with inner struggles and seek divine aid for self-mastery. Monastic hierarchies, shaped by regulations and ritualistic behaviors, externally manifest ascetic commitment as fighters for God. Queerness, as seen in the lives of trans-saints like Pelagia and Mary, are not merely narratives of spiritual transformation challenging societal norms around gender. These tales reveal more nuanced inner desires beyond the traditional understanding of logismoi within the monastic community. Navigating where queerness intertwines with racialized temptations, ascetic homoerotic desires are manifested in encounters with black demons taking the form of young boys. Recognizing these lived subjectivities in this historical world helps us dismantle the misconception that such intersections of queerness and race are an anachronistic imposition on historical narratives. These representations therefore underscore the entangled nature of early Christian discussions on sexuality, power, and the perpetual pursuit of spiritual excellence within the ascetic landscape.

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