

**Jesters, Jongleurs, Clowns and Other Unsavoury Types:
A Review of Benedicta Ward's *Harlots of the Desert:*
A Study of Repentance in Early Monastic Sources. Cistercian Studies
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To begin with, I draw from one of the many engaging quotes Benedicta Ward sprinkles throughout her book, *Harlots of the Desert: A Study of Repentance in Early Monastic Sources*: “Beauty consuming itself like incense burned before God in solitude far from the eyes of men became the most stirring image of penance conceivable.”¹ This quote continues to reverberate with me, not simply for the imagery the words themselves invoke, but more specifically for the underlying assumptions about gender a statement like that infers.

In this review I will focus on dealing with the role the repentant woman played in early Christian stories, but more specifically I will focus solely on Pelagia and amma Sarah. Although Ward gives many fine examples of harlot women and their subsequent salvation(s), for a paper of this depth and scope, I will focus exclusively on these women because I find myself extremely interested in their story, as well as what their tales tell us about gender roles at the time. Pelagia's story belongs to a group of literature focusing on prostitutes, although technically, “Pelagia was a well-known actress in Antioch, and therefore belonged, in the eyes of the Church, to a class of immoral persons which included jesters, mimics, jongleurs, clowns, as well as prostitutes.”² These groups of stories are, as Ward tells us,

¹ Benedicta Ward, *Harlots of the Desert: A Study of Repentance in Early Monastic Sources*, Cistercian Studies 106 (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1987), 10.

² *Ibid.*, 59.

the stories of the *meretrices*; Pelagia the actress of Antioch, Thaïs the harlot, and Maria the niece of Abraham. Such accounts were deliberately used as a balance to the accounts of the good women of the monastic world...each of the harlots was involved in commercial transactions about sex, from which each was set free to live on the heights of ascetic love and prayer. Such accounts provided a stimulus and an encouragement for all Christians, but especially for monks.³

Pelagia's tale is a brief one: she is scantily clad and passes by a group of Christian bishops having a talk outdoors. They all avert their eyes from her beauty, save for Bishop Nonnus, who stares at her great beauty. The next day, Pelagia hears Nonnus preaching and is moved to repent. First she wrote to him, and then visited him begging for baptism, which Nonnus grants. She then acquires men's clothing from Nonnus and flees by night, only the two of them knowing of her plans. "Years later, when James the Deacon was going to visit Palestine, Nonnus told him to visit a hermit there called Pelagius. When James found the cell of the solitary, he discovered that the inmate had just died, venerated throughout the country for austerity and prayer; the hermit was Pelagia."⁴

Albeit brief, Pelagia's story is rife with interesting commentary on gender. I focus first on one of the most obvious statements: that of her wearing men's clothes after her baptism. Ward tells us that one of the reasons for women wearing men's clothing when living in the desert by themselves would be purely for reasons relating to protection, but she is willing to claim that "there is more to it than that."⁵ She goes on to tell her readers that,

the way to have a place in the world of early monasticism was to transcend gender differences either by life in a single sex community, or by undertaking a solitary form of life in which it was more prudent, for example in the desert where there were hostile marauders, for a woman to dress as a man. Either way opened the path of return, for men and for women, to the paradisaal

³ Ibid., 58.

⁴ Ibid., 60.

⁵ Ibid., 62.

state of unfallen Adam, or rather, the heaven of the new Adam, where ‘there is neither male nor female’ (Gal. 3.28).⁶

Although I can buy somewhat into the idea of women donning men’s clothing for safety, I have a harder time warming to her idea that the way to claim a stake for oneself in the early church was to “transcend gender differences.” Instead, I am more of the opinion that her statement is one word too long. It should read instead that it is the act of transcending gender itself which must be accomplished by women, and it is exclusively women who have “gender,” as it were. Men are simply humans, but women, in the very essence of their being, have gender, and attached to that is a sexual appetite and raging hormones to boot. So then, it is not simply a case of both men and women transcending gender differences to attain equality with one another, it is women who must forgo and overcome their gender, and in the process become *like* men in order to be their equal. It is a distinct and important difference. Indeed, when we leave Ward’s commentary for a moment and delve into the hagiography of Pelagia herself, we find that along with escaping into the night in men’s clothing (which as I stated before, I can somewhat come to terms with from a safety standpoint) she had also changed her name to Pelagius, and had become “a monk and a eunuch, who has lived there [Jerusalem] for some years shut up and alone.”⁷ Moreover, it was said that “great indeed was the fame of the monk Pelagius.”⁸ She was a great teacher living as a man, and although the issue is not addressed in either the hagiography itself or Ward’s subsequent commentary on it, I think it is a fair and pertinent question to at least ask whether or not the validity of her power and teachings would have withstood the public revelation of her sex during her lifetime.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 73.

⁸ Ibid.

Ward also gives the example of amma Sarah who lived alone by the Nile for sixty years, and although she did not don men's clothing, she personifies what I mean when I infer that women must transcend their own gender to become like men as opposed to both sexes eking out equality within early Christianity.

Two remarks of hers show how deeply she felt her equality with men in monastic life to be, which went much deeper than details of dress: she said, "according to my nature I am a woman but not according to my thoughts", and to some visiting monks she said, 'It is I who am a man, you who are women.'⁹

Amma Sarah feels equal to men, but it is not as Ward argues, because both men and women have overcome their respective gender differences, it is plainly because amma Sarah has become as masculine as she can.

As I stated, I disagree with Ward's theory that both sexes overcome gender differences, opting instead for the idea that it is women who must overcome their gender and become men, but ironically I think she somewhat disagrees with her own statement as well, for she goes on to state that, "the idea of 'becoming a man' through undertaking monastic life is connected with the freedom offered to women by Christianity itself. Life in the desert, *anachoreisis*, was a practical demonstration of freedom from the limitations and responsibilities of society."¹⁰

These sentences to me, at least, seem a little unrelated. I agree with her that life in the desert is, at its very core, a freedom from the limitations of urban life. However, there is nothing inherent in choosing to remove oneself from city life and society that presupposes a masculine identity. Moreover, life in the desert is not mutually exclusive with, as she suggests, "the freedom offered to women by Christianity itself." In fact, as I understand it at least, these hagiographies exist and were read because of the inherent uniqueness of giving up one's societal

⁹ Ibid., 63.

¹⁰ Ibid.

role and becoming monastic; they are not indicative of the decisions of the majority of Christians, even in the early centuries. It is *because* of the rarity and “specialness” of these acts that they are revered in the first place! That being said, I would say that for a woman to have a powerful voice of authority within early Christianity she must first work towards overcoming her inherent gender, with all those emotions and yearnings encapsulated within it. I think here specifically of amma Sarah, who for the first thirteen of her sixty year monastic life had to battle, first and foremost, the “demon of lust.”¹¹ Although not stated in Ward’s commentary, I think it is safe to infer that she had to first battle this lust before she could move on to more lofty goals related to holiness.

Another aspect of Pelagia’s hagiography I find interesting is the emphasis placed on her beauty. We are told that,

She was dressed in the height of fantasy, wearing nothing but gold, pearls, and precious stones, even her bare feet were covered with gold and pearls. With her went a great throng of boys and girls, all dressed in cloth of gold with collars of gold on their necks, going before and following her. So great was her beauty that all the ages of mankind could never come to the end of it.¹²

Although the hagiography would have us believe that her beauty is included in the story to teach a lesson to Nonnus and his followers, I cannot help but feel as if the imagery of a beautiful woman wearing nothing but jewels and riding a donkey is not included for some mild titillation. After all, these stories were read by many celibate monks and have been transcribed through all the centuries for some reason. I admittedly poke fun a little here, but it is worth mentioning that these stories, apart from being commentaries on holiness, were also, more so than I think we acknowledge, forms of entertainment as well.

¹¹ Ibid., 62.

¹² Ibid., 67.

While I think that Benedicta Ward gives her readers a superb commentary on the lives of early “harlot” women within the church, when it comes to her idea of men and women transcending gender differences, I think she is a little off base, and I think it comes from a place of wanting to find recognition within a tradition of which she is a strict adherent.¹³ To reiterate, I do not believe that, as Ward claims, both men and women of early Christianity had to transcend gender differences to come to a place where, as Paul puts it, “there is no man or woman” (Gal 3.28), nor to arrive at the “paridisal state of the unfallen Adam.” This is Ward’s theology speaking here, and for that I cannot hold it against her. She makes no apologies for approaching hagiographies and the accounts of these harlots as anything but a devout Christian. I do, however, think that by leading first with her theological viewpoint she is doing somewhat of a disservice to the historicity of the writings and the settings in which they were composed.

So far as I can see, using the examples of the stories of Pelagia and amma Sarah, it is not a case of both sexes overcoming their respective gender differences to find an equal and common playing field, but instead it is women who must overcome their innate feminine gender to become more like men in order to achieve some sense of equality when it comes to authority within the early Christian church.

¹³ She is a member of the Sisters of the Love of God.