CHAPTER 2

Holiness, Femininity, and Authority

Introduction

The gates of heaven opened to men and women alike, but the path leading to them might not be the same for all. The practices of asceticism were strenuous, Gregory thought, akin to the physical hardships of battle, and as such they required virtues he associated with masculinity, like courage and fortitude in the face of overwhelming odds. Yet for Gregory, the relationship between gender and sanctity was complex. As he stressed regarding the saintly Monegund, some women exhibited these virtues nevertheless, ‘sweating in these battles and winning the field’. Equally complex was the relationship between chastity and sanctity. As a bishop, Gregory was expected to observe sexual abstinence, and he mentioned many saints who did the same, but he also praised certain sexually active people for their piety, and he was even willing to describe them as ‘chaste’ so long as they kept their activities within express boundaries. Gregory’s views, therefore, cannot be straightjacketed into a predetermined framework that has been used for understanding gender and social relations in other sources. For all his nuance, however, on one matter Gregory was uncomplicated: women were expected to submit to the authority of the (exclusively male) episcopate, regardless of their own level of saintliness. As we shall see in Chapter 3, this maxim created some difficulties for him, such as when he narrated the clash between the pious Radegund and her local bishop, Maroveus. For Gregory, gender, sanctity, and the social order fitted together, sometimes awkwardly, to create the framework in which he displayed his portraits of the women of his day.

Monegund: Exemplar and Holy Woman

In the penultimate section of his Life of the Fathers, which included twenty chapters, each dedicated to a particular saint, Gregory recounted the life of Monegund, a high-status woman from the city of Chartres who, after marriage and children, became an anchorite on her husbands estates before departing to live as a nun in Tours. Because the nineteen other saints who featured in the work were all male, Gregory devoted his attention to the issue of female
sanctity in the chapter’s preface. Quoted in full below, this represents a rare instance in which Gregory discussed the matter expressly:¹

The manifest gifts of divine favour, which descend upon mankind from heaven, cannot be comprehended through the senses, through speech, or through writing, because the Saviour of the World himself, from the formless origins of this universe, was revealed to the patriarchs, announced to the prophets, and then finally deigned to appear in the womb of Mary ever virgin. The almighty and immortal Creator took on the covering of mortal flesh and died for the redemption of men, who were dead through sin, then rose again victorious. We were gravely wounded by our misdeeds—waylaid and stabbed by robbers on the road—and he, mixing oil and wine, led us to a tavern of heavenly remedy, that is to say the teachings of the holy church.

He encourages us to defend ourselves with his continuous instruction and to live by the example of the saints. He has provided us with models drawn not only from holy men, but also from those of the inferior sex who press on with virility rather than half-heartedly. He grants a share of his heavenly kingdom not only to men, who fight in a manner befitting, but also to women, sweating in these battles and winning the field. We can see this now with the blessed Monegund, who left the land of her birth and (like the prudent queen who went to hear the wisdom of Solomon) journeyed to this church of St Martin to behold his miracles which are dispensed every day, and to draw from the sacerdotal well, by which she is able to open the gates of Paradise.

The spiritual struggle consumed the same energies as physical combat, and those men who fought to attain sanctity acted in a manner ‘befitting’ their gender (decertantes legitime). Women approached these pursuits with a certain reluctance (segniter, ‘sluggishly’ or ‘half-heartedly’), but Monegund adopted