WEARING IT WELL: GENDER AT WORK IN THE SHADOW OF EMPIRE

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On this brief journey into the unstable domain of gender in antiquity, various figures will serve as guideposts, including a pair of prostitutes, one from the book of Revelation, the other from late antique Antioch. I begin with the latter. She plays the starring role in a story about a woman who became a man who became a woman. Our narrator, James the Deacon, relates this astonishing tale of sin and redemption: he recounts that eight bishops, including his own, Nonnus, were called to the church of the martyr Julian. Gathered outside the door, the bishops persuaded Nonnus to speak to them. They listened intently, until they were distracted by the arrival of Pelagia, an actress and—what is the same thing to late antique minds—a prostitute. James describes the alarming encounter:

Now while we were marveling at his holy teaching, lo, suddenly there came among us the chief actress of Antioch, the first in the chorus of the theatre, sitting on a donkey. 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 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. (Pelagia 2)

The holy men were appalled: “there was not one who did not hide his face in his veil or his scapular, averting their eyes as if from a very great sin” (2). Not one but Nonnus, that is.

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1 James the Deacon, Life of Saint Pelagia the Harlot. I follow the English translation of Benedicta Ward, Harlots of the Desert (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian, 1987), 35–56, which is based on the Latin text Vita Sanctae Pelagiae, Meretricis found in PL 73:663–72. Also see the English translation from the Syriac, the earliest extant witness, in Sebastian Brock and Susan Ashbrook Harvey, ed. and trans., Holy Women of the Syrian Orient (TCH 13; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 41–62. On the dating of the account, see Brock and Harvey, Holy Women, 40. My reading of this life is shaped by Virginia Burrus’s analysis in Sex Lives of the Saints: An Erotics of Ancient Hagiography (Divinations; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 128–59. Translations from the biblical text are taken from the nrsV; those from other classical sources are from the LCL.
The great bishop stared at Pelagia without compunction; even “after she had gone by, he turned round and still gazed after her” (3). Sensing that his behavior had left his fellow bishops confused, Nonnus declared that he admired not only Pelagia’s appearance but also the effort behind the façade; he himself and the bishops, by contrast, possessed nothing as beautiful: “What do you think, beloved brothers, how many hours does this woman spend in her chamber giving all her mind and attention to adorning herself for the play, in order to lack nothing in the beauty and the adornment of her body?” (3). But we, Nonnus continued, “why do we not adorn ourselves and wash the dirt from our unhappy souls, why do we let ourselves lie so neglected...I know I am a sinner and unworthy, for today the ornaments of a harlot have shone more brightly than the ornaments of my soul” (3–4). One wonders if this explanation brought relief to the troubled minds of the clergy.

No matter, for now there was a connection between Nonnus and Pelagia and soon afterwards she sought out the bishop. The two exchanged letters and Pelagia returned to the church, this time without her retinue of collared children, insisting that Nonnus should baptize her. Eight days later, Pelagia shed her baptismal robe, put on instead the tunic of Nonnus and secretly left for the Mount of Olives, upon which she built a monastic cell.

Several years passed before James met Pelagia again and, when he did, he did not realize that he had. When James asked Nonnus to give him leave to conduct a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, the bishop assented, slyly adding, “When you reach the city of Jerusalem, ask the whereabouts of a certain brother Pelagius, a monk and a eunuch...go and visit him; truly I think you will be helped by him” (13). The benighted James, not understanding that Pelagia had become “Pelagius,” followed his master’s instructions; and while Pelagia-turned-Pelagius recognized him, the deacon remained ignorant of this new identity: “How,” pleads James, “could I have known her again with a face so emaciated by fasting?” (14). Their conversation was brief: at the mention of Nonnus, Pelagius remarked, “Tell him to pray for me, for he is a saint of God” (14). James returned to the city, learning predictably that the fame of Pelagius resounded throughout the monasteries of Jerusalem. Impressed, he went to Pelagius again but was too late: in the cell he found a dead monk.

James disseminated the news to the monks of Jerusalem and they converged upon the Mount of Olives to prepare the body for burial,