

‘THIS FEMALE MAN OF GOD’

Women and spiritual power in the patristic age, AD
350–450

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1

INTRODUCTION

‘Holy’ women?

About this time... Danus was accused by his wife, who wished merely to frighten him, of some trivial offences. Somehow or other Rufinus...shamelessly seduced this light woman and then cajoled her into a dangerous plot. He persuaded her to accuse her innocent husband of treason by weaving a tissue of lies...

(Ammianus Marcellinus *Histories* 16.8)

Many women of high birth were convicted of the disgrace of adultery or fornication and put to death. Among these the most notorious were Claritas and Flaviana; for when the latter was being taken to her death, even the clothing that she wore was ripped off her back, nor was she allowed enough to keep even her private parts covered... Esaias, with some others who had been convicted for committing adultery with Rufina, was attempting to have her husband Marcellus tried for treason... in the midst of these horrors and others like them a married woman called Hesychia, who was charged with an attempted crime and kept under guard in the house of an official, was in such terror of torture that she pressed her face into the feather bed on which she was lying and killed herself by suffocation.

(Ammianus Marcellinus *Histories* 28.1)

Who can sufficiently praise our dear Lea’s mode of living?... becoming the head of a convent, she proved a true mother to the virgins in it: she wore harsh sackcloth instead of soft woven fabric, passed sleepless nights in prayer, instructing her companions more by her own example than by instruction. Her humility was so great that she, once the mistress of many, was now the servant of all... She was heedless of her dress, neglected her hair and only ate the roughest food.

(Jerome *Let.* 23.2)

Shut up in her narrow cell [Asella] wandered in paradise. Her recreation was fasting and her refreshment was hunger...she took her gold necklace made in the lamprey style...and without the knowledge of her parents, sold it. Then putting on the kind of sombre dress her mother had never wanted her to wear she concluded her pious undertaking by consecrating herself henceforth to the Lord.

(Jerome *Let.* 24.3)

Marcella...refrained from eating meat, and she knew the scent of wine but not its taste... She rarely appeared in public and took pains to shun the houses of great ladies so that she would not have to see what she had renounced for all time... She gave away her ornaments and other possessions to people already rich, content to throw her money away rather than grieve her mother.

(Jerome *Let.* 127.4)

This book examines the kind of women Jerome was writing about; and where and why they chose to part company with the lives of the women of whom Ammianus was writing. It explores the abandonment of many of the classical models for womanhood with the increasing appeal of a life of dedication to an ideal of Christianity amongst women in the world of the later Roman Empire. It examines the rise in popularity of (particularly) ascetic Christianity in the later fourth century and early fifth century, from the grass roots of the movement through to its purchase at the top end of the social scale; and looks at the religious adventures and endeavours of clusters of extremely devout Christian women during the period referred to as the patristic age. It is an attempt to give an overall picture of the form, nature and scope of their activities; of the thinking of their peers, both clerical and lay, about them, set in a context of social background and perceptions.

This is a period and a topic rife with inconsistency and ambiguity: such an exploration is made more complicated by being on the knifeedge of the boundary between the classical and the early mediaeval world. Consider the above excerpts. They were taken from two roughly contemporaneous eyewitness accounts of incidents involving female activities in urban Roman life towards the end of the fourth century. They could scarcely be more different; indeed, they barely seem to represent the same place. The first set are part of an account by a pagan, a historian of Roman times and *moeurs* in the traditional mould, of current society *causes célèbres*: this account is in its form and content entirely the product of classical antiquity. The second set are descriptions by a Christian writer of much venerated colleagues and their ministries, in what was to become a semi-formulaic hagiographical manner: the form and content of this writing is the property of theologians and church historians.

To think of these two accounts as to the same degree historical, and the events they relate as happening almost side by side requires a pause, and a reframing of perceptions. Happening at the same time, they yet demand a completely different set of mental furniture. The one is experienced as classical history and the other as church history—and it is difficult to fit the two into the same frame of reference because these two sorts of history are viewed on such different levels. (From having trained simultaneously with both classical historians and mediaevalists, it is a divide over which I am perhaps particularly sensitive.) It is salutary to think that the same framework of events and personalities were known to both the two men, both writing of the Rome they had lived and worked in at much the same time. It is still more salutary to consider for a moment that the women they are writing about could be the *same women*—except for their fates. They were out of the same social bracket, the senatorial top-drawer élite: however, those written of by Ammianus are the proper and fitting heirs to their classical foremothers such that it could be Dio Chrysostom or Suetonius writing, and the tone is resolutely reminiscent of the golden age of imperial Rome. Jerome's women are already the precursors of Radegund and Hildegard in the twilight world of early mediaeval devotion and they have become most definitely the representatives of the church and church historians; it is the kind of rhetoric which will set the tone for Gregory of Tours, Helgaud and Bede.

This sets a context for the topic I have chosen to write on: just where did the change come about? And, particularly, who were these 'holy' women, and where do they come into it? We know rather a lot about the holy men at this time: of pious males there was something of an embarrassment of riches at this period.

These were the men who moulded Christianity as we know it and have been dogging it ever since; just as an example, note how many quotations from Augustine, Ambrose, Jerome and Chrysostom have surfaced in the recent debate on the ordination of women. But: what women? I have found when people have enquired into my topic—even those knowing more than a little about the era—that the almost automatic question has been, ‘Were there any holy women?’—closely followed by, ‘you can’t have found many... (subtext: or we surely would have heard about them)’. Yes; many. There were large numbers of extremely active women of high-profile piety at this time, some of them enormously wealthy, powerful and influential, the stars of their contemporary Christian stage no less than the men. It is more lately that they have come to be overlooked so completely.

The period covered in this book is fairly limited in scope, the boundaries being the last half of the fourth century and the first half of the fifth; limited of necessity because of the enormous amount happening in it. This is the period of settlement and reconsideration following the success of the battle of the Christian movement for legitimacy; of the church coming to terms with the consequences of moving from martyrdom to mainstream in one generation: a seachange that left church writers floundering as much as secular sources. Take, for instance, the two turning-points highlighted in Peter Brown’s influential 1961 study of the effect of Roman women in the process of christianisation in this period: the deaths of Vettius Praetextatus Agorius and Rufius Antonius Agrypnius Volusianus. Between the deaths of these two—similarly high-profile, selfconsciously state-oriented pagans with a generation between them the known world changed in an upsurge of barbarian, Christian and, as I hope to show, female activity. Praetextatus died in 384: two years after Gratian’s official disestablishment of pagan cults in Rome, and in the same year as the impassioned debate between pagan and Christian influences on the Emperor over the removal of the Altar of Victory from the senate house, and as the arrival in Rome of Augustine, and probably Ammianus. Volusianus died in 437—and his not-quite-forcible deathbed conversion, smiling through clenched teeth at the interference of his niece Melania the Younger, was indicative of the writing on the wall. In between the deaths of these two aristocratic old recidivists, *Roma aeterna* was sacked, as were many of the temples representing much that had been most civilised about classical antiquity; Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome, Chrysostom, Basil and their kind were industriously pouring out the stuff that was to change the face of the world; and the larger part of their aristocratic contemporaries adopted Christianity.

Some of these contemporaries, aristocratic and otherwise, are to be found amongst the ‘holy’ women I have studied—but only some. Many women of the later Roman period found assimilating Christianity did not alter their experience or perceptions of life by much; as with today, levels of observance varied with belief. For many men and women, the same diurnal round of life went on as it had; going to church rather than to the temples was simply assimilated as part of life and did not necessarily impinge much on their view of the world around them or their response to it. Amongst such men, attending church became a public relations necessity in the same way that sacrificing to the Gods had been (Ammianus Marcellinus *Histories* 21.2), and assassination was as likely to happen to a general returning from church as from a pagan ritual (*ibid.* 15.5); women would make visits to churches and *martyria* the occasions of assignations in the same way their forebears had used temple-going (Jerome *Let.* 107.9, 147), or were even seduced in church, by church functionaries (Sozomen *EH* 7.16). Many women still lived under the spell of the wealthy, dissipated social world over which Roman writers had moralised for centuries. The women Ammianus wrote of in the scandalous adultery trials did not evidently notice that they were living in a period identifiable specifically by its Christianity; in a time, moreover, when it behoved each soul to behave as if they were to be carried off to heaven on the next cloud.

But this is part of the fascination of this particular area of study. In large part, the women about whom I am writing as heroines of Christian rhetoric and legend were the same kind of women as the *causes célèbres*

written of by Ammianus; the same upper-class heroines (and villainesses) who would have attracted note in 'classical' antiquity, for inspiring or betraying their menfolk, or perhaps for contributing to the well-being of their *patria*—but in this generation they employed these qualities rather differently. Ammianus was writing about a world that does not, in his account, seem to be much different from that of previous Roman historians—but it was: and it was changing fast, most notably in the persons and activities of its citizens. The women examined in this book were those for whom a belief in Christianity not only impinged on their view of the world but for whom it necessitated an active change; women emanating from an unexceptionable family or social background, who subsequently made a decision to distance themselves from it. Some women at this time thought deeply about the nature of Christianity and the logical conclusions of Christian commandments, and determined to carry them out to the best of their abilities. These women often 'removed' themselves—altogether in a literal and physical sense, or just slightly, within their own homes and minds—from the common course of events, in order to pursue a greater level of concentration on the things of holiness. In doing so, they were perceived by their families and peers as being 'holy'; were thought of as being 'soldiers of Christ', 'renowned', 'known for virtue'; as overtly playing with different goal-posts from others of their circles. Their 'different' motivations were evident to those around them and they were accordingly identified and described by their 'different' status. I shall examine this phenomenon, how it was believed to happen in women, and how the theologians said it should affect them. However, women following this different motivation were less susceptible of obvious definition than the men following it, who had a clear variety of acceptable, definable paths available to them: reader, deacon, monk, priest, bishop and so on. I shall therefore also examine the routes to a holy lifestyle women did find, both those accepted and those disallowed.

For this has long been the problem with this period and this topic of study: for years, even centuries, the thought, decisions and writings of the churchmen of the patristic age have been influential entirely in self-referential terms; observed and studied rather as if these men, and their ideas, arose out of a vacuum—the ideas in themselves, the pure thought produced, all that need be considered. But no thought arises out of a vacuum. All ideas are the product of an environment: and in this case, the fathers' thought-processes were the product of a female environment—that is to say an environment set up, maintained by and filled with (pious) females—as I shall show. These great men of their age were bought and sold by women. One common and unifying fact about these patristic church writers —of Augustine, John Chrysostom, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, Palladius, Rufinus, and most conspicuous of all, Jerome is that they were surrounded and supported by women; relays of women. In addition, most of them attest to an early female influence, specifically defined in terms of Christian piety, on their subsequent development.

For this is the crux of what I discovered when I was researching for this study: the absolute ubiquity of these 'holy' women—once one starts to look for them. It is not possible—or it should not be possible—to separate them from a study of the patristic age, for or they are everywhere: humble women from the lowest levels of the social strata adopting harsh lives as hermits with such frequency that priests and monks tripped over them at every turn; middle class *Hausfraus* planting ideological trip-wires in the consciences of their children and turning out priests, monks and bishops by the seminary-load; on up to the élite women of the very top-drawer who gave up on secular life and their worldly possessions to such an extent that they precipitated economic crises at the heart of the empire.

This is, of course, partly an attempt to justify what may look like a loose frame of reference for this study: looking only for pious Christian women of the mid-fourth to mid-fifth centuries, there was just so much going on, ranging from the intriguing and enlightening to the simply weird, that I felt there was a great need for a general over-view of how much pious female activity and of what different kinds was taking place; and, particularly, how the different classes of women and styles of activity interwove and cross-

fertilised each other. Much ink has been expended in the examination of certain of the upper-class women, mainly by classicists—but not all of them and certainly not all together and as a consideration of the phenomenon they collectively presented. Further examination has been done into some of the aspects of the female side of monasticism, predominantly by church historians; but again, in a variety of fragmented and discrete studies. This is an attempt to demonstrate how much activity was happening, amongst how many females all within a short space of time, and how great was the crossreferencing between them.

A particular phenomenon taken to denote the presence of 'holiness' in individuals of this age was the decision to adopt a sterner than usual version of the Christian life: the undertaking of an 'ascetic' life. After some generations since legitimacy, participation in Christianity, and observing a degree of commitment within it, had normalised and settled down, relatively speaking. The trend that in our period is perceptibly odd and separate and special, and goes some way to filling the gap left by martyrdom as a sign of extra commitment to the faith, is the decision for some kind of ascetic life. And a consideration of the ascetic movement further reinforces the need for looking at aristocratic women of the courts of Rome and Constantinople and peasant women from the deserts of Egypt, Palestine and Syria in the same volume—and the same breath. The ascetic movement encompassed both and the former learned their asceticism at the instance and example of the latter.

The disparity cannot be overstated between these women who admired and imitated each other. The women who have traditionally tended to attract the attention of both the fathers and classical historians were out of the very top drawer of society. For a suitable comparison of today one would have to imagine women with the material resources and position in public awareness of, say, Princess Diana and the Duchess of Kent, Ivana Trump and Leona Helmsley, and then imagine them all being swept away by the teachings of the Plymouth Brethren or the Reverend Sun Myung Moon; to such a degree of commitment as to make over all their resources to the movement, doff their power-dressing and executive lifestyles in favour of wearing jeans and tee-shirts, living in shabby communes and handing out tracts on street-corners. The change, for some of the objects of my study, between the environment from which they emanated and that which they chose to adopt was really that extreme: it was not just that they 'got religion', but that some of them took to one of the most excessive and dramatic versions of it, on the far ar fringe of acceptability. And, further, this was a version that was causing severe angst amongst those in the upper echelons of their own church, who were most acutely aware of the church's need to acquire gentrification. And these blue-blooded women learned their extremism at the instance of the women of the *humiliores*. Some aristocrats fled to the environs and the influence of the peasants and vowed great envy of the simplicity and directness of the latter's route to God—though not infrequently finding the reality rather different from their enthusiasts' imaginings. They then told tales to their own disadvantage of how they had been wrong-footed and edified by these holy peasants; witness the experiences of Melania the Elder, Melania the Younger and Paula. And Marcella and her ladies 'created a desert in the city', trying for the coenobitic life without the wilderness, in their exaggerated admiration for all they could learn of what seemed to be a more direct route to God than the urban and urbane modes of worship they knew already. Then, in their turn becoming spearheads of such tendencies, these ladies became themselves models and mentors to others and attracted many women of all stations around them. Because of the inter-relatedness of these influences it is impossible to examine one without the other; in addition to which the attitudes and problems attendant upon the decision for this life show root similarities which belie the different conditions of the women undertaking them.

But women in particular had to be careful in adopting this kind of extreme tack. From Eve onwards, women were seen by the Christian theorists as the natural first victims of deception, and from the very first condemnation of the very first non-orthodox tendency were regarded peculiarly apt pupils at propagating heresy; 'Do not pay heed to a woman, O Israel. Lift yourself above the evil designs of woman, for it is woman

who hunts for the precious souls of men... Do not believe a vulgar woman: for every heresy is a vulgar woman' (Epiphanius *Medicine Box* 79.8), a view reinforced by experience of the 'petticoat troubles' of Montanists, Donatists, Pelagians, Circumcellions and so on and so forth. Jerome had a hit-list of such examples:

It was with the help of the whore Helena that Simon Magus founded his sect; troops of women accompanied Nicholas of Antioch, that inventor of pollutions; it was a woman that Marcion sent as his precursor to Rome, to undermine the souls of men in readiness for his traps;... Montanus...used two wealthy noblewomen, Prisca and Maximilla first to bribe and then to subvert many churches;... when Arius was determined to lead the world into darkness, he commenced by deceiving the Emperor's sister; it was the resources of Lucilla that helped Donatus to pervert many people throughout Africa with his filthy version of baptism.

(Jerome *Let.* 133.4)

Women were ever first with new movements (though few, if any, of their contemporary critics made the link that this was one of the factors responsible for the swifter spread also of mainstream Christianity): but found, all too often, what had seemed firm ground cut from under them with a more or less arbitrary decision by a pope or church council that a previously tolerated movement was in fact heterodox.

This is not a study of women of the heretical movements—it has enough to do to keep up with notable women accepted by the 'legitimate' church: but this thinking underlines the difficulties for many female worshippers of the time. Women were amongst the first and most ardent followers of patristic preaching; and caused great discomfort to the said preachers by at times taking the preaching too literally. Witness the embarrassment of writers who must explain to over-ardent female devotees why their teaching should not in fact be followed: who, for instance, having preached greatly on the virtues of chastity and poverty, were forced to explain to a wife why she must not then desert her husband to pursue these 'preeminent virtues'; or, having lauded the virgin life to the skies, had to explain to a teenage girl who had chained herself to the altar in mid-service in protest at family opposition why, though manifestly the most blessed state, virginity should still not be undertaken in defiance of her family (see p. 130 and 137).

A century before, this kind of vehemence had been perceived by church writers as a positive characteristic, one that provided women with the tenacity to make a martyr like Perpetua or Felicitas, and encouraged other, perhaps weaker, believers. In the later patristic age vehemence meets with an ambivalent attitude; some of these women earned admiration, but some, as those above, were seen as an embarrassment to a church that was learning the need to fit itself to the established world rather than stand in opposition to it. This was the expression of the tension between the mainstream tendencies of the more urbane church leaders and the apocalyptic preaching of those embracing the eschatological thinking that taught that the twilight of the world was nigh. While this was a dilemma experienced by the whole church, there was a particular edge to it for women: whether to knuckle under to the more oppressive rhetoric, become quieter and more submissive—particularly given the automatic association of their more extreme activities with suspicions of heresy; or (as some of their supporters seem to have been advocating) to become yet more noisy and notorious in their piety, flaunting the strength of the 'weaker sex' to shame others into better lives.

With this in mind, I shall be highlighting mainly 'orthodox', patristically approved women; with a leavening of 'unorthodox' and vilified women to demonstrate how they became unacceptable. This last verdict, however, can be a delicate distinction to draw when one cleric's meat for debate was another cleric's poison, and women were praised or denounced for comparable actions simply depending on which writer addressed them; even the same woman could be called called by the same cleric at different times

'the most noble of the women of Rome' and the new Thecla (Jerome *Chronici Canones*), and 'she whose black name bears witness to the darkness of her treachery' (Jerome *Let.* 133.3). A saint for some, Melania the Elder became 'tainted' for others with her Origenism, to the extent that she was thought too dubious a figure for even a word of her to appear in the account written of the life of her grand-daughter and namesake, Melania the Younger—even though it was the example of her 'dubious' grandmother that had propelled this saintly lady into taking up the life. And this decision by male writers, to vilify or beatify, in itself was largely a matter of luck, dependent on the 'star' cleric to which a devout woman chose to hitch her wagon. Melania had simply supported and served Rufinus and followed him into his intellectual dilemmas as Paula did Jerome; it was very much the luck of the draw that Melania and Rufinus became suspected 'heretics' rather than Jerome and Paula (and given how many more people Jerome upset, to many of their contemporaries it seemed a close-run contest). Following the 'wrong' cleric was all part of the dangers of being devout for women, whether aristocrat or peasant—as witness the circumcellion women or those 'deceived' by Donatist priests (see p. 76).

As far as the actual writing on women goes, the 'celebrities' are certainly useful for detailed information and analysis, and the possibility of some kind of account of their entire life being uncovered to us; their problems are those attendant on their fame, i.e. a tendency of writers on them to tidy up loose ends. (Not uniformly, though; some of the *Vitae* from this period are all too evidently just in the middle of the divide mentioned earlier in this chapter; they hover fascinatingly, if uncomfortably, between representing the tailend of the Roman tradition of warts-and-all portraiture and the beginning of the mediaeval style of spotless hagiography.) The achievements of the humbler women tend to be told of more in told of more in anecdotal cameos, or in the context of an account of a community. Their problems must have been more typical to the general experience of women in this age and life and we do know a reasonable amount from them; their problems or enlightenments are told us, though often without much of a background to the life of the woman or community from whom it comes—but, on the other hand, without the sanitising that dogs the accounts of the saints.

So the juxtaposition of individuals and communities, highborn and humble, East and West: the kind of testimony that has attracted some unfavourable opinions as being 'the anecdotal evidence of stray items from diverse sources' (cf. Saller and Garnsey 1987) I have used extensively. This is because it serves to illustrate, not least, how very extensive is such evidence, how widely divergent and yet how similar; and because at the other end of the spectrum lie dangers of being too narrow, too skewed towards the doings of the aristocracy and urban dwellers. But in the period I am observing, the élite and those writing the tale of their times became suddenly, overwhelmingly interested in the doings of those who previously would barely have merited an inch of expensive writing-space. So I have taken in both ends of the spectrum in my overview, using whatever it can uncover: juxtaposing literary and anecdotal evidence with whatever can be gleaned from medical notes, legal asides, epigrams, letters, tombstones and inscriptions; above all, attempting to set the patristic sources aside for the moment from their almost intrinsic permeation with the odour of sanctity and legality attendant on a theological text, and subjecting them to the godless scrutiny of the social historian. This approach is the more necessary because, unlike in other areas of study, one of the outstanding and most frequently stressed problems with the study of women in the early church is the lack of an authentic voice from those most nearly concerned; as I shall deal with in the next chapter.

PATRISTIC PERCEPTIONS

The sources and the problems

The women in this study, inspired by the ascetic Christian tendencies of their age, will be observed mainly from the viewpoint of the patristic authors. It is through these male commentators we must look at the women: from them learn the kind of rhetoric addressed to women and their condition, the models held up for imitation, exemplary females adduced from personal experience; and from them receive assessments of whether and how women lived up to the ideals projected for them. All of this has to be received through the medium of the church Fathers of necessity. The first and most obvious problem in studying women of the early church is that what these women thought of themselves and their devotions has not survived in their own writings—though some of the writers purport to be using their words.

The only writings indisputably by women from this period are fairly peripheral in their usefulness: the *Pilgrimage of Egeria*, the *Cento* of Faltonia Betitia Proba, and the *Martyrdom of St Cyprian* by the Empress Eudocia. Of these three, *Egeria* is the only factual, personalised account and provides a partial portrait of one well-todo devotee in action at an isolated point in her life: but it has all the limitations of a travel diary, and a fragmentary and problematic one at that. Its provenance and even the identity of its heroine are dubious; she is profoundly unhelpful with names and details of the personalities she meets *en route*; and this is a circumspection that even extends to information about herself. The work tells us very little of her and her sisters' more normal surroundings, activities and thoughts, and thus deprives us of a first-hand participant's account of a community of nuns of the time.¹ Proba's *Cento* is a devotional epic poem on the life of Christ composed entirely (in the commonly used cento format of the day) from lines and half-lines of Virgil. On a literary level it argues a massive knowledge of Virgil as well as of theology, and the work, despite Jerome's harsh comments² achieved a certain success as a popular school text into the middle ages (and that despite Gelasius' decree of 496 relegating it to be included in the 'apocalyptic' writings, to be used only for private reading). Nonetheless, its interest is primarily literary, and for the fact of a much read best-seller of the day having been written by a woman. Eudocia's *Life of St Cyprian* was the only one to survive of a reputed six works by her, including poetic paraphrases of the Octateuch and of the prophets Daniel and Zacharias, a paean to her husband Theodosius' victory over the Persians in 422 and a Homeric cento on the life of Christ. Evidently a widely-read lady of some energy, she is perhaps not best represented by her sole surviving work, which is gullible, fantastical and full of the metaphysical preoccupations of the time. By intention at least of historical/hagiographical purport, *Cyprian* is for the purposes of any kind of serious investigation or critique of its author's times about as helpful as *Hello!* magazine would be for future social historians of this era.

This being so, we are left with mainly the copious but tendentious writings of the male authors in order to try and gain an understanding of the lot of women; the limitations of this are self-evident. We can examine what we are told by the patristic sources of these women's motivations and their practical pursuit of their vocations, set them in the context of their social milieu, and consider the various pressures on them from

church and social background. But while attempts can be made to discern the real, as opposed to the attributed, motives of the women concerned, it must always be borne in mind that all of what we can deduce is filtered through the outlook of the male writers and what they wish to highlight, or fail to tell us. Any direct question of what women really thought of what they did is self-frustrating. Even when considering what can be learned inadvertently, from the ways in which women made achievements that surprised the patristic writers, or how they were reckoned to have failed, we are still faced in that telling with a mass of patristic presuppositions that render any sense of objectivity largely spurious. The best effects can be achieved by juxtaposing social evidence with the clerical rhetoric to come up with a more overall picture; evidence to be found in legal documentation and epigraphic material. The legal sources, though equally from the male perspective, are perhaps more representative of the overall social picture and give more insight into factors actors such as the pressure on the more unorthodox to conform. But for the actual written detail of the lives of pious women of these centuries we should remember at all times that we are in the invidious position of interpreting what the Fathers reported women as doing in response to what the Fathers advised them to do.

The absence of written evidence by women is not to say that they did not contribute to the intellectual life of the period; the foremost Christian women of the day were obviously greatly aware of the importance of scholastic and literary skills in disseminating Christianity. Literarily admired women studied and argued on theology and biblical commentaries and studies, or assisted established male authorities, as did Melania the Elder, Melania the Younger, Marcella, Paula, Eustochium and Olympias. Their scholarly capacities seem frequently so prodigious as to astound the men who wrote of them; Melania the Elder,³ for instance, evidently could have taught some of her male colleagues a thing or two in this respect according to Palladius:

being very industrious and loving literature, she turned night into day, perusing every writing of the ancient commentators including 3,000,000 lines of Origen and 250,000 of Gregory, Stephen, Pierius, Basil and other standard writers. Nor did she read them through only once and casually, but laboriously went through each book seven or eight times.

(LH 60)

Jerome's distinguished follower Marcella,⁴ he says, asked questions he found hard to answer and corrected priests—giving her pronouncement as Jerome's in order not to offend,

For she knew that the apostle had said: "I suffer not a woman to teach" (1 Tim. 2:12), and she did not wish to seem to inflict a wrong upon the male sex, many of whom questioned her (including priests sometimes) concerning obscure and doubtful points.

(Jerome *Let.* 127.7)

She also worked with him against Origenism, writing a succession of letters challenging the heretics and helping to get them condemned. Jerome himself complained of the exactions of her detailed theological queries and the demands she made on his writing due to her neversatisfied intellectual curiosity. Paula and her daughter Eustochium⁵ learned Greek and Hebrew, until they were more proficient in it than Jerome, to assist him in his studies; indeed, he recommend to another Christian lady, Laeta, that her small daughter be educated in Greek, just as boys were, with small bribes to expedite her learning.⁶ This kind of learning was, it seems, what devout women were understood to excel in: the literacy which might be of use in support of men, translating, copying, disseminating what they themselves might not write. Melania the Younger⁷ won fame for her community's industrious copying and dissemination of texts known for their elegance and correctness.⁸

But women of this period, however literate and literary, did not, it seems, comment on what they found around them, and did not write history. Nor do their undoubted contributions to the epistolary rounds survive.⁹ Jerome, Augustine and Chrysostom preserved copies of their outgoing letters to these women, but none of the letters that provoked their replies. The judgements on the times and the participants were made by the Fathers; trained rhetors, lawyers, philosophers turned Christian theorists, or sometimes sincere, undistinguished men justified by inspiration.

The only outstanding exception to this general rule is in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, the anonymously written collections of the *Sayings* of the desert Fathers, which, amongst the collected wisdom of a myriad, frequently anonymous, coenobites and eremites, include what purport to be the teachings of three women, in their own reported speech. While making it clear at least that there were women of renown in the desert communities, with sayings attributed to them which were thought worthy of inclusion in the collections, this evidence needs its own caveat: as oral tradition transmitted to written memorials of Coptic, Syriac, Aramaic, Greek and (later) Latin origins by copyists who 'did not regard themselves as bound to transfer any written material that they had without change' (Ward 1975a:xiii), and with a premium placed on spiritual edification over historical authenticity—'written to answer the question in the mind of the reader, "Why am I told this?"' not the question "How did this come about?"' (Ward 1987:91)—the *Sayings of the Fathers* are frustrating as often as they are illuminating and to be used with care. The voices of the women reported by them are sufficiently different and have enough incidental personal detail to seem to be reasonably representative; but 'authenticity' is a will-o'-the-wisp quality when applied to writings emanating from the desert.

Bearing these reservations in mind, however, holy women were a frequent enough source of inspiration to Christian writers of the fourth and fifth centuries to be extremely well observed, from the centrally influential ascetics of Rome and Constantinople in their aristocratic 'cells' to the extreme eremitic tendencies of the desert mothers. Individually eminent women particularly attracted wide documentation. When Olympias turned her back on secular glory and combated the establishment on behalf of Chrysostom (see p. 181), we hear of it from two ecclesiastical historians, Sozomen and Palladius of Helenopolis, as well as from her anonymous hagiographer, and from Chrysostom's own letters.¹⁰ When Melania the Elder left family, friends, and the centre of the civilised world in favour of self-immolation in Palestine (see p. 94), we have the voices of Palladius, Jerome and Paulinus of Nola as witness¹¹; on Proba, Anicia Juliana and Demetrias we have Jerome, Augustine and Pelagius. The presence of these women generated sermons and homilies, on them and to them, inspirational works, commentaries and exegesis, histories, *Vitae*, and, often most revealing, letters.

The first obvious categorisation to make of male writers on women is that of the many who can offer observations derived from close personal relations with women of conspicuous piety; many of the eminent writers and male saints of the period seem to have their own devoutness inspired, reflected, or actually directed by a sister, a mother, an aunt of particularly devotional disposition. Piety seems to beget piety in certain families in this field of survey; the writers so studied all too frequently acknowledge the benign influence of a devout female relative.

Certainly Augustine, one of the most prolific and influential writers of the fourth century, found his progress towards catholicism (and his attempted evasion of it) dogged by feminine influence. His mother Monica was a strong-minded woman of deep and unwavering devotion to her faith and the provincial African church traditions she had always known,¹² and she upheld these for her son against the indifference of his pagan father, Patricius. Hers was the more resonant presence in his upbringing in small-town Thagaste, a presence that after he was grown he could not escape: she continued to pursue him, first in person when he rebelled against her beliefs, and after her death by still occupying a deep-rooted place

within his conscience. His treatment of Monica's life in his *Confessions*, and his further references to her influence in more general works of theology such as *De Beata Vita* and *De Ordine* are unique for the clear light in which they show his piety as relative to hers and her influence as the deciding factor in his capitulation to his vocation. Gregory of Nazianzus was another cleric created by the ambition of a formidable mother. His mother Nonna, herself from an impeccably Christian family, also ensured her talented son was brought up austerely in her own beliefs during his early upbringing in and around the family estates at Nazianzus in south-west Cappadocia. In all Gregory's writings on the personal, Nonna has a prominent place, cast as responsible for or the ordination of his father and himself, and the main influence on his sister's devout lifestyle also, by his account. In the case of Gregory of Nyssa, his elder sister Macrina was the strong influence on their mother Emmelia along with the rest of the family: he related of his sister in his *Life of Macrina* how she bore the responsibility for his ordination and that of his brothers, Basil of Caesarea and Peter, having practically brought them up and completed their education herself. Besides this she trained her mother in the religious life, the two women finally co-instituting a convent at the family estates at Annesi. Gregory's manner in the *Life of Macrina* when treating of her intellectual and spiritual apparatus verges on the awe-struck; and in his account of her counselling to his vocation are telling echoes of the 'big sister' whom he still seems to consider very much his intellectual superior.

Other sources with female relatives eminently suitable for similar eulogisation are less helpful. John Chrysostom was possessed of a mother, Anthusa, who, widowed early and left in sole charge of the upbringing of her brilliant son, was a woman able to draw encomia on the superior quality of Christian motherhood out of even notably misogynistic pagans; as well as an aunt who was a deaconess noted by Palladius.¹³ But he writes only incidentally and reprovingly of his mother and emphasises how in certain respects her maternal concern overcame her devoutness: she tried to prevent him becoming a priest. Ambrose's few extant letters to his sister Marcellina, the superior of a convent, tell us almost nothing about her, serving only to enlighten us as to Ambrose's situation; though in this connection it is worth observing that the otherwise more helpful Augustine has a similarly unregarded and barely attested sister (and according to some traditions two); we know that he constructed a rule for a convent run by her but from him we do not even know her name.

Paulinus of Nola is very nearly as frustrating: usefully related as he was to the famous Melania the Elder and possessed of a wife, Therasia, who was noted for her own devotion, still he was a writer more concerned with literary style, theological niceties and his patron saint than with preserving a factual account of his life and times. His usefulness as a historical witness is thus limited, except occasionally: for instance, in a letter to Sulpicius Severus, he gives one particularly vivid cameo of Melania in action, when recounting a visit she made to him—though this is subject to the limitations of his treating the occasion in a consciously traditional style calculated to do justice to the *dignitas* bestowed on his family by this old-style visitation from an illustrious connection. On the pious women more intimately connected with him, he is unfortunately more reticent; denying us, for instance, the opportunity of any insights into his (latterly) continent marriage with 'the Tanaquil of our times', Therasia, a consort who aroused much admiration in their Christian acquaintances. Small items and phrases only from his letters and poems make this reticent aristocrat still a useful, though tantalising, witness.

Other men wrote on women from the standpoint of being an admirer or follower of a notable holy female. Some wrote from the position of advisor to devout female satellites, to counsel, admonish and praise them, to their further renown. Augustine, for instance, courted notable Christian women such as Proba, her daughter Anicia Juliana and grand-daughter Demetrias, and used them as soundingboards for various of his improving addresses. He attempted to do the same thing with Melania Junior and her mother Albina, and his failure to do so provoked some of the more interesting and revealing letters about his

relations with his congregation as well as with the aristocracy. John Chrysostom was similarly in the centre of a network of pious aristocratic females, and might have been as illuminating a source as Augustine, but he largely fails to fulfil promise here as in the family sphere. Surrounded and supported by ladies eminent in birth as in spirituality while he was as Patriarch in Constantinople, we yet get no systematic account from him of his relations with them; again, with one partial exception. This was that of Olympias, his friend, provider and disciple, who was so influential and instrumental to him and many other bishops of the Eastern church. That she was important to him we may deduce from the witness of other writers who testify to his spiritual and material dependence on her; but his letters to her, though certainly indicative of a high and even affectionate regard are not a reasoned account of their relationship, such as we gain from other writers in close proximity to outstanding women.

One of the most helpful and informative of the Fathers with regard to names, narrative details and statuses of pious women of his day was, ironically enough, one who most often and stridently doubted their capacity for spirituality (and that despite being surrounded by some of the most ferociously ascetic females of the age): the problematic Jerome. Around Jerome we find a large circle of women to whom he writes and makes reference and his relationships with whom he is forced to defend against the scandalous tongues of Roman society gossip-lovers. The majority of information about these comes from the more workaday letters of which Marcella received so many, and those of a more rhetorical nature, of exhortation or consolation or admonition. *Letter 22* to Eustochium on the Virgin's profession, and *Letter 54* to Furia on the duty of remaining a widow, are each really a broadsheet, advertising his stance respectively on virginity and widowhood; *Letter 77*, to Oceanus about the death of Fabiola, a kind of text exercise in consolation on bereavement, in Christian imitation of the stoic Roman set pieces in such an eventuality.

In his letters, more illuminating in their passionate rhetoric of vituperation and self-justification than those of any of the other Fathers, we have Jerome's account of Paula's severance with her family and her commencement of a life of asceticism alongside him: a contemporary eyewitness (albeit one with an axe to grind) to a noblewoman's experience of the road to *ascesis* through adverse peer and family family pressure, and through personal tragedies such as the death of her eldest daughter Blesilla—arguably a victim of her own ascetic fervour. Jerome is simply interested in women, possibly in response to their interest in him; the number of female admirers and followers attested is not coincidental. It is difficult to find parallels in other writers with such items as his long and detailed letter to Laeta about the proper Christian upbringing for her small daughter (who eventually ended up at Bethlehem as Eustochium's successor as the head of the women's convent Paula and Jerome had instituted) or his letter to Pacatula on feminine training for her small child, or his whimsically graceful note of thanks to the youthful Eustochium for a gift of bracelets, doves and cherries.

Nor is Jerome alone in using his letters partly as the excuse for a general airing of dogma; the letters of these great men received often as widespread an airing as their theological treatises. They were part of the Christian expression of the *ratio bene vivendi*, the Roman preoccupation with the good life translated into terms of Christian duty. The letters are intensely conscious of obligation and of literary merit: witness Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome, John Chrysostom, Paulinus of Nola, Basil of Caesarea, following Symmachus, Praetextatus, Macrobius and Libanius in writing to their large circle of acquaintances who eagerly copy the letters and pass them on.

But besides great men writing to satellite holy women, we have the witnesses of more humble men who were themselves the satellites of female luminaries, writing of their close acquaintance with these saintly ladies. Such a one wrote the anonymous *Life of Olympias, Deaconess*; in similar case was Gerontius, the successor of Melania the Younger as head of her community, who wrote her *Life*. These have the disadvantages of being written more in arrears and at a greater distance than, for instance, Gregory of Nyssa's

Life of Macrina or Gregory of Nazianzus' biographical works on his family, in addition to which, as hagiography rather than biography, they are subject to a certain amount of historical revisionism. Nonetheless, leaving on one side the increasingly formulaic attitudes depicted for their subjects, their background is helpful.

Other writers were enthusiasts or hangers-on of less close acquaintance, collecting scrap-books of sanctity which include useful information on workaday female piety along with occasionally piquant cameos of some of the celebrities. The *Apophthegmata Patrum* noted above comes into this category; Palladius is another prime example. While knowing personally many of the most eminent holy men and women around during his sojourn in the desert he is content to give a spectator's account rather than entering the dogmatic lists. Palladius is a particularly enthusiastic and gallant witness where women are concerned, and actually addresses himself to balancing out some of the more misogynistic claims of the male writers of his period; he proclaims that he is positively concerned

to mention in my book certain women with manly qualities, to whom God apportioned labours equal to those of men; lest any should pretend that women are too feeble to practise virtue perfectly. Now I have seen many such and met many distinguished virgins and widows...

(LH 41)

—and he is at pains to relate what he can of all those he has met and heard of through others, even of isolated, 'little' folk for whom he has no name; he is very useful in his little vignettes of some of the more obscurely devout desert women who practised extreme forms of self-denial in isolation. His accounts of notable holy women on the other hand, such as Melania the Elder (with whom he travelled) and Olympias in his *Lausiac History* and *Dialogues*, are no less invaluable for being less closely bound up with them than some of our witnesses.

All the above, and many others besides also contributed to the great body of exhortatory literature which provides us with yet more material for consideration. For instance, virtually every Christian thinker of any note felt eld constrained to add his voice in the debate over continence. Most galloped into prose over avowed virginity: following Tertullian's strident lead of the preceding century, Ambrose, Augustine, John Chrysostom, Jerome, Gregories of Nyssa and Nazianus, Basils of Caesarea and Ancyra, Clement of Alexandria and Methodius are just the most notable writers on this topic. But there are also enough treatises from different voices on widowhood and marriage to make a useful synthesis of their common points. Some writers were particularly alert to women's problems: Augustine, for instance, besides his valuable personal witness on a close female relative, shows a predisposition towards a positive estimate of the value of female piety, which makes him a valuable contributor of more indirect textual material assessing women's contribution to ascetic spirituality in his time. His exhortations to women's lot are not empty homilies imparted to the intellectual air, but concerned directives written to real women of his acquaintance seeking help in these regions of theological dispute. In the case of *On the Good of Widowhood* and *On Virginity* the women concerned are a mother and daughter we hear of (used again as the prop for inspirational homilies) from other church Fathers: Anicia Juliana and her daughter Demetrias, originating from the very topmost rank of Roman society but showing the familial tendency towards asceticism that is a feature of the age. Gregory of Nyssa similarly shows himself in possession of an understanding of women's issues gained from a closer perspective, in his *On Virginity*; a gentler work than many on this topic. In exhortatory areas, John Chrysostom is unexpectedly helpful: in a series of homilies addressing the theology of 'women's problems'— *On Not Marrying Again*, *On the Kind of Women who Ought to be Taken as Wives*, *On Virginity*, *On the Necessity of Guarding Virginity*—he takes a perhaps surprisingly perceptive line on the

difficulties encountered by his female adherents, as he considers the issues of the powers of women within the church and their troubles over celibacy. Incidentally this tendency also crops up in others of his works not addressed to the generality of women, in his more personal *Letter to a Young Widow* and in portions of *On the Priesthood* and various of his exegetical homilies.

In addition to the highly personalised contributions of these men, we have much anonymous, more generic evidence about the issues raised by female devotions in the variety of teaching documents abounding from this period: the *Teaching of the Apostles*, *Church Order*, the *Apostolic Constitutions* and *Canons*, to say nothing of the canons of the various church councils. As with the law of the land, these are more eloquent about what the recipients were doing amiss, particularly where there is reinforcement and repetition: and are sometimes a useful index to cases of the Fathers being overenthusiastic about the capacity of their female protégés for ministry.

The treatment of women's concerns by men could be handled with great sympathy and discretion, depending on the author. Augustine's predispositions, for instance, give him a slightly hectoring tone when writing general discourses on subjects in the abstract—on Christian concepts of marriage, widowhood and so on—but also have the effect that in the particular, when writing of individuals, he is much more pliable and warm with his female subjects. Monica, painted in lively colours wherever she appears, is made to express surprise in *De Ordine* that a woman's words should be recorded in such a discourse; but in the Socratic atmosphere of *De Beata Vita* she serves as a useful foil for Augustine when, with characteristic bluntness and determination, she compels him to explain fully anything she (and by implication the untrained mind in the audience) does not understand.¹⁴ Contrast this, however, with Gregory of Nyssa humbly according Macrina the central, philosopher's role in their Socratic dialogue on the origin and final home of the soul at her deathbed. Endowed with a great capacity for hero-worship of his formidable family, Gregory's treatment of them is also informative in its differences: 'Macrina is brought near by a biography, Basil is made distant by a panegyric' (Momigliano 1985:449). The difference may reflect family dynamics; it is more likely to represent the difference between what was proper in the treatment to a pious male, who represented the priesthood, and a pious female, however devout and awe-inspiring a sister.

What is illuminating from all of this is that however fierce the degree with which views on women, often derived from the more nugatory pronouncements of the apostle Paul (see [Chapter 3](#)) were held, a great and constant double-think is in evidence in our sources. All, even the sternest of the Fathers, while embracing apostolic teaching on women as sinful in nature so subject in worship, nonetheless know and approve as 'superior' certain female exemplars to their sex. Every single writer knows of some female paragon or paragons (though each must of course be 'unique' in their virtue), astonishing in devotion, sufficiently pious to be examples even to their male contemporaries. Even Jerome the hard-liner, while fully subscribing to the point of view that 'women are burdened by sins, carried about by every wind of doctrine, always learning and never reaching knowledge of the truth' (Jerome *Let.* 133.4) yet found so many women to admire and counsel that his name became a byword amongst the scandal-seekers in Rome, as he bitterly complained;¹⁵ the monk who was so tormented by she-demons seems to have been equally beset by she-saints. If knowledge of female involvement is rather lacking from our picture of this time, it is not necessarily for want of such involvement; nor necessarily from a want of reportage in the male sources of the time.