



Image of Corruptible Man: Masculinity in the Writings of Athanasius of Alexandria

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a reading of *Life of Anthony* through the lens of gender performance theory and masculinity studies to uncover one fourth-century construction of the ideal Christian man. Through the use of literature contemporary to Athanasius, I argue that Athanasius combined bodily self-presentation with literary and intellectual self-presentation to construct the ideal Christian man and secure his own masculinity in the public eye. One way he achieved this was by creating a hagiographical version of Anthony on whom he could project his own ideological preferences concerning asceticism and masculinity. Athanasius' construction of the Arian as a cunning and feminine figure in his other writings and Anthony as a masculine figure who denounces Arianism effectively typifies fidelity to Nicene orthodoxy as a masculine trait and deviation from Nicene orthodoxy as feminine. This established Anthony as a beacon of masculine orthodoxy for others to emulate.

Keywords: Athanasius of Alexandria, gender, masculinity, *Life of Anthony*, early Christianity, asceticism

INTRODUCTION

According to Giulia Sissa, gender roles in antiquity were “neatly constructed” social and cultural categories that pervaded all aspects of Greco-Roman life.² Even the aesthetic of ancient cities left little to the imagination concerning human bodies and appropriate gender expression. In Greco-Roman art, men are portrayed with defined muscles and tall, proud postures indicative of their roles as governmental or household leaders and soldiers. In contrast, women were sculpted with round breasts and soft gestures, and painted with pale colors. This was the theoretical

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2 Giulia Sissa. *Sex and Sensuality in the Ancient World*. (London: Yale University Press, 2008), 2.

result of a posh life free from the sunlight and physical exertion to which women in lower classes were subject.³ As exemplified in sculpture, the primary space in which gender was constructed was on the body. Bodies were gendered mercilessly in antiquity, with men and women dressing, acting, and speaking in socially regulated manners.⁴

While gender was “neatly constructed” and highly regulated, it is important to note that there was no monolithic or comprehensive Greek, Roman, or Greco-Roman model for either masculinity or femininity. Here, R. W. Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinity is useful. What undergirds all gender critical theory is the assumption that gender presentation is a system of discourses, which serves to justify and maintain asymmetrical systems of power.⁵ Hegemonic masculinity is the “pattern of practices” that allows men continued dominance over women, and access to power in society. It is a set of abstract, rather than descriptive traits that form a normative construction of the ideal man in a particular society. While few men are able to actualize this model of masculine performance, it embodies a culture’s preferred way for men to look and act. The hegemonic form of masculinity in a society allows a certain class of men to dominate women and “less manly” men (or men who significantly diverge from the hegemonic model). A man who diverges from the hegemonic norm while still accessing power and dominating others is showing a form of “complicit masculinity.”⁶ Hegemonic and complicit masculinities arise in certain societal contexts, and new forms of masculinity can replace older hegemonic models as societal values change.⁷

While a multitude of discourses surrounding gender presentation existed simultaneously in antiquity, what remained consistent was an inescapable and

3 Ibid., 2-3.

4 Ibid., 1-3.

5 This assumption is built off of Foucault’s theory of sexuality and Judith Butler’s famous attribution of it to the concept of gender. Foucault, Michel. *History of Sexuality Vol. 1* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 2013); Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity*. (New York: Routledge, 1999).

6 R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt. “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept.” *Gender and Society* Vol. 19, No. 6 (Dec., 2005), 832.

7 Ibid., 832-3.

polarizing impetus to define the female body as analogous but inferior to the male body.⁸ The female body was a failed, partial male body that was weaker, less mature, and less stable than her masculine counterpart. Women did not exist by themselves or for themselves, but always by nature of their inability to achieve manhood. This deep-seated transcultural prejudice was thought of as objective truth, as evidenced by ancient attempts to understand human anatomy and physiology. To call someone effeminate, in the ancient world, was not just to call them womanly but also to mark them as a lesser man or partial attempt at humanity.⁹

However, manhood was not simply a birthright granted to those lucky enough to possess a phallus, but something that had to be created and “won.”¹⁰ According to Maud W. Gleason, bodily self-presentation through rhetorical performance was the primary space in which masculinity was created and “won” in second-century Rome.¹¹ Gleason supports this argument by investigating the public lives of two rival rhetoricians, Polemo of Laodicea and Favorinus of Arles, to uncover the ways in which rhetorical self-presentation served to construct two very different forms of masculinity in the second century.¹² She ultimately concludes that a “stylized repetition of acts” was used to publicly forge the image of a naturalized masculine identity, and that masculinity was vigorously fought for, yet easily lost in the ancient world.¹³

Virginia Burrus rightly extends Gleason’s account of second-century masculinity into the Third and Fourth Centuries, and Averil Cameron goes so far as to claim that the rhetoric of fourth-century Christian bishops “succeeded to the place of the epideictic orators of the Second Sophistic.”¹⁴ However, we are better served in the task of historical reconstruction when we remember that written

8 Giulia Sissa. *Sex and Sensuality in the Ancient World*. 4.

9 Ibid.

10 Maud W. Gleason. *Making Men: Sophists and Self-Presentation in Ancient Rome*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 199), 159.

11 Ibid., 159.

12 Ibid., xxvii-xxviii.

13 Virginia Burrus, *Begotten Not Made: Conceiving Manhood in Late Antiquity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 19.; Gleason, *Making Men*, 159.

14 Averil Cameron. *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: Development of Christian Discourse*. (Berkeley, University of California, 1991), 135.

words had begun to “vie with the authority of the spoken word” in fourth-century Rome.¹⁵ There were a large number of Christian orators in the newly enlarged Roman bureaucracy, and there is no doubt that they too created and presented their masculine selves through public performances of rhetoric.¹⁶ However, the ballooning influence of Christian literature need not continue to take a back seat to rhetorical performance in the game of Greco-Roman masculine identity formation. While Christian bishops had succeeded the famous rhetoricians of the Second Century, they had new tools in the form of written word to accomplish similar goals.

It is in the context of the Christianizing literary economy of the Fourth Century that we see the rise of the written word as a medium for presenting one’s masculinity. Masculinity was no longer a product of physical performance through stylized bodies alone, but literary performance as well.¹⁷ In this paper, I will argue that Athanasius of Alexandria debated issues of power through gendered discourse in his literary writings, and that he not only presented an ideal ascetic leader in his *Life of Anthony*, but a new and idealized form of Christian masculinity for others to emulate.

METHODOLOGY

This paper seeks to engage with Athanasius’ *Life of Anthony* through the lens of Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity. While Butler’s theory focuses on the body as the location of gender performativity, this paper extends this to the literary construction of bodies as well. By placing the locus of gender performativity within the realm of literature, this paper opens up a new avenue for understanding not only Athanasius’ portrayal of gender but the construction and literary performance of gender within the writings of other patristic authors.

15 Burrus, *Begotten Not Made*, 22.

16 Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire*, 135.

17 Burrus, *Begotten Not Made*, 22.

DISCUSSION

Section One: Athanasius and Theological Constructions of Masculinity

Athanasius was a prolific and polemical Early Christian figure. His election as bishop in 328, a mere three years after the council of Nicaea, was immediately and fiercely contested.¹⁸ Letters in defense of Athanasius claim that “Arian madmen” conspired against him, accused him of murder, and sought to have him either executed or exiled.¹⁹ Occasionally, these “Arian madmen” got their way and over his tumultuous 45-year episcopate Athanasius was exiled on multiple occasions. Three of these were spent with monastic supporters in the Egyptian Desert (356-62, 362-3, 365-6).²⁰ While in exile, Athanasius’ authority as a Christian thinker was in a precarious place, and he needed to reassert his validity as an authority figure in the intellectual world of fourth-century Christianity.

Of course these “Arian madmen” were likely pious Christians, confident that they possessed the correct theological doctrine concerning the nature of Jesus. Though remembered exclusively through polemical writings, the name “Arian” or “Arian Christians” was used as a pejorative term for a conglomerate of priests and laypeople that followed the deposed priest Arius.²¹ While fourth-century literature might suggest that evil Arians assailed the passive Athanasius for no legitimate reason, this is not an accurate picture. Athanasius involved himself in campaigns against Arian theology and even Christians who remained in communication with Arian or anti-Athanasian Christians.²² These campaigns were conducted in reaction to Arian theology and Arian Christians achieving a certain level of power and sociopolitical influence that disturbed Athanasius. Athanasius sought to delegitimize Arian Christians and legitimize himself, and Nicene theology, in order to secure his own power as bishop in Alexandria.²³

18 David Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 2, 5.

19 Athanasius, *Orations*, 1.3; 1.19.

20 Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, 8.

21 Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, 3-4.

22 Ibid., 130.

23 Ibid.

While Arian Christians remained loosely loyal to the figure Arius, and Nicene Christians remained loyal to the doctrines established at the Council of Nicaea, some Christians pursued a religious life free from formal allegiances to teachers or councils.²⁴ These Christians were part of a burgeoning ascetic movement and chose to devote themselves to a life of renunciation from wealth, sex, and lavish food.²⁵ Scholars do not know whether these Christians were under the formal authority of any bishops or priests during the late third and early fourth centuries, but Athanasius sought to bring them under his authority in order to shore up his own position as bishop.

Athanasius sought to unify all Egyptian Christians under the formal authority of the hierarchy of Athanasian bishops and priests. However, Christians including Arians disavowed this hierarchy in favor of their own, and saw their own conglomeration of priests and bishops as the authentic Egyptian episcopate. Rather than bring these other Christians under his authority, Athanasius sought to eliminate these groups. Given the unaffiliated nature of ascetic Christians, Athanasius took a friendlier stance toward them, and sought to bring ascetic Christians under his control by integrating them into his Egyptian church hierarchy.

One key way in which Athanasius sought to garner ascetic support, and legitimize his theology and episcopate, was through writing. According to Averil Cameron, Early Christian literature, and the broader genre of Early Christian discourse (defined as all the rhetorical strategies and manners of expression that are particularly characteristic of Christian writing), played a central role in “Christianizing” the empire.²⁶ Athanasius was far from unique in using literature to attempt to influence the political discourse around him.

One important aspect of early Christian discourse was the images it provided for other Christians to imitate. The spiritual biographies of important figures, or genre of *Lives*, offered Christian authors a way to “integrate public and private”

24 Ibid., 3.

25 Ibid., 4.

26 Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire*, 14.

in a new and precariously public way, forming images through words of the ideal Christian life.²⁷ The “basic metaphor of the body” was translated into words and ever present in the genre of *Lives* and Christian literature writ large.²⁸ This resulted in the creation of a new space within which a masculine identity could be fashioned and won, and the images crafted in and presented through Early Christian discourse offered a new avenue to present one’s masculine self in the Fourth Century Rome.

Athanasius’ use of literature for political gain is just one example of the above phenomena. Many early Christian theologians were quick to use this new avenue of masculine creation to connect masculinity with the emerging orthodoxy of the established church in their writings. Figures such as Paul of Samosata, a theatrical bishop and notorious womanizer, were denounced for their erroneous theological beliefs, of which a flamboyant and effeminate lifestyle was supposedly evidence.²⁹ As Virginia Burrus rightly points out, polemical debates over the legitimacy of figures such as Paul of Samosata helped fashion an “orthodox” Christian masculinity for others to emulate.³⁰ In Athanasius’ *Four Orations Against the Arians*, he employs this rhetorical strategy readily and with ease.

In *Orations*, Athanasius connects adherence to Nicene orthodoxy with masculinity. Just as Paul of Samosata’s effeminate lifestyle was evidence of heretical doctrine, Athanasius portrayed his theological adversaries as feminine heretics, while presenting himself as the valiant hero who uncovered Arian heresy and espoused correct Nicene theology. Athanasius begins *Orations* with a divergence into the landscape of ancient paternity, identifying “the Arian” as a daughter of the devil, and younger sister to other heresies.³¹ The transcultural inability to define the feminine without reference to the masculine found here implies that the feminine and heretical Arian, who is an illegitimate daughter of evil, stands in implicit opposition to a legitimate (and masculine) son of good. For Athanasius, he

27 Ibid., 141-2.

28 Ibid., 150.

29 Burrus, *Begotten Not Made*, 25.

30 Ibid., 24-25.

31 Athanasius, *Orations*, 1.1.1.

and other defenders of Nicaea are legitimate sons of God the Father who have not “scatter[ed] with the devil,” while Arians are feminine, cunning and crafty daughters of evil who have walked out on the legitimate church.³² To be masculine, in this text, is to remain with the anti-Arian church and accept the authority of Nicaea.

Moving on from “the Arian” as a general term, Athanasius quickly takes aim at Arius himself. A trend among heretical groups, according to Athanasius, is their names. Christians are named after Christ, while heretics are named after the corrupt human founder of their group. Their names betray their loyalties and they do not worship Christ, but the figures after whom they are named. While it is unlikely that the Arians or other groups saw themselves this way (or called themselves ‘Arians’), Athanasius continued his assault on Arian Christians by identifying Arius as a particularly poor object of worship, and unworthy of the reverence offered to him by his followers. Athanasius says that Arius imitated the “daughter of Heroditas,” who requested John the Baptist’s head on a platter in the gospel of Mark.³³ There were a number of male Roman figures responsible for the death of biblical figures that Athanasius could have compared to Arius. However, he was seeking to discredit and humiliate Arius’s name, and this required stripping it of all masculine connotations. He did this through the continued use of femininity rhetoric, and references to female figures, when writing about the man Arius.

Athanasius also quotes the biblical figure of Wisdom as saying that a man is known “by the utterances of his word.” He is quick to identify the writing “Thalia,” a lost theological treatise written by Arius, as Arius’ “word” and judges him accordingly. According to Athanasius, “Thaliae” possessed an unmistakably effeminate tone due to Arius’ imitation of the daughter of Heroditas. Arius also rivals the daughter of Heroditas in dance, a feminine activity Athanasius connects to heretical beliefs by claiming that Arius danced in his “blasphemies to the Savior.” These two accusations paint a vivid effeminate portrait of Arius, the father to one of the most heinous heresies in the eyes of Athanasius. For Athanasius, the title

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 1.1.2.

‘Arian’ did not simply identify one with the theology of Arius, but the man Arius and the effeminate persona Athanasius crafted around Arius in the first discourse of *Orations*.³⁴

“The Arian,” according to Athanasius, also corrupts the ears of foolish men and seduces them to “take and eat with Eve” of her “loathsome heresy.”³⁵ This is an odd claim when juxtaposed with the labels “cunning” and “crafty” attributed to Arians earlier. Here, those “seduced” into converting to Arianism are associated with the passive and easily outwitted woman, Eve.³⁶ These converts are not blatantly evil women, kin to the devil and other heresies, but beguiled individuals rendered feminine by their inability to maintain adherence to Nicene theology. Put another way, their femininity stems from their weak minds, as they are outwitted by Arian theology and unable to maintain their adherence to Nicene doctrine.

This is an important development in Athanasius’ thought. Here, he sees individuals with weak minds that have been ‘penetrated’ by heretical ideas as feminine. Intellectual strength, as well as physical strength, serves as locations for one to forge their masculinity. Intellectual strength through adherence to correct theological beliefs is therefore rendered as a masculine trait.

As evidenced in *Orations*, effeminacy was knitted together with heretical beliefs in the mind of Athanasius, who sought to define himself as the masculine, and theologically superior opposition to the Arian daughters of the devil.³⁷ However, this text only shows us what Athanasius sees as the heretical feminine, and does not offer any prescriptive examples or images of the proper way to be a Christian man.

This is where we turn to Athanasius’ *Life of Anthony*. To understand what *Life of Anthony*, or ascetic lives more broadly, have to say about masculinity requires one to first look backward along the timeline of Christendom. Prior to the ascetic movement’s flourishing in the Fourth Century, Christians were quite preoccupied

³⁴ Athanasius, *Orations*, 1.1.4.

³⁵ Ibid., 1.1.1.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

with martyrdom tales. While the persecution of Christians was sporadic, literature about persecuted and martyred Christians was popular and influential.³⁸

Martyrdom was overtly masculine. Whether the martyr (or potential martyr) was a man or a woman, the effect of martyrdom was to ‘win’ one’s masculinity. A ‘good’ martyrdom demanded a masculine death, free from emotion.³⁹ One early and obvious example of this is found in *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*. Dated from the mid to late Second Century, this is the earliest evidence we have for the martyrdom tradition in Christianity, and it shows a literary pattern that others would follow.⁴⁰ In this text, Polycarp is an elderly bishop accused of “atheism” by the Roman pro-consul in Smyrna and sentenced to death. When Polycarp enters the arena to be martyred, a voice from heaven tells him to ἀνδρίζου, literally translated as “act like a man.” He then proceeds to confidently and calmly refuse to renounce Christ, or affirm Caesar, though he is given multiple chances. This inevitably leads to his martyrdom, and Polycarp remains subdued as he removes his clothes and the executioners create the fire with which they will burn him. Polycarp refuses to be nailed down and announces that God will give him strength to remain in the fire without nails holding him. However, the fire does not burn him and the executioner stabs him with a dagger to finish the execution. Though his body is quite viscerally penetrated, his mind is not. Polycarp’s acts of self-control and pious devotion all fulfill the heavenly voice’s command to “act like a man” in the face of a violent death.⁴¹

Polycarp is far from the only martyrdom tale to make explicit links to a masculine ideal. In the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, Perpetua is a young wife and mother who converts to Christianity, setting her on the path to martyrdom.⁴²

38 Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, (New York: Columbia University Press), 69.

39 Stephanie L. Cobb, *Dying to be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyrdom Texts*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 61.

40 Sara Parvis, “Martyrdom of Polycarp” in *The Writings of the Apostolic Fathers*, ed. Paul Foster, (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 126 - 146.

41 *The Apostolic Fathers, Volume I: I Clement. II Clement. Ignatius. Polycarp. Didache*, ed. and trans. Bart D. Ehrman, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 320-30.

42 Thomas J. Heffernan, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 125-7.

Like Polycarp, she is given chances to renounce Christianity and go free and refuses. While awaiting her execution, she has a vision in which she is set to fight the devil in a gladiator arena. Before she does this, she is “stripped naked” and becomes “a man.”⁴³ Here, we see Perpetua transcending her femininity in the face of a violent death. Martyrdom was a hyper-masculine event that, if performed correctly, granted women a chance to “win” masculinity in the same way men could. Women too could achieve a level of notoriety in death through ascent to the masculine ideal.

A last instructive text before turning back to Athanasius’ *Life of Anthony* is *The Acts of Paul and Thekla*. This text is not a martyrdom tale, though Thekla comes close to martyrdom on more than one occasion. Rather, this text shows us an early bridge from martyrdom to the world of ascetic Christian thought. Though the ascetic movement would not blossom for over 200 more years, Thekla shows us the masculine ideal wrapped up in practices of renunciation and teaching. Thekla is a young betrothed pagan woman who overhears Paul teaching, and announces that she will pursue an ascetic life. After Thekla’s pronouncement of her desire to follow Paul and refusal to marry, Paul is whipped and exiled from the city and Thekla is sentenced to execution by fire. Miraculously, Thekla is not consumed by the flames, and leaves in search of Paul. She is then assaulted in the street by the magistrate of Antioch and, after fighting back, sentenced to execution again, this time by beasts. Thekla tells Paul that she will cut her hair, which would cause her to look like a man, before facing the beasts. Thekla miraculously survives her second attempted martyrdom and baptizes herself. After this, she finds Paul, who tells her to go and teach the word of God. In the end, Thekla ends her life to preserve her virginity after spending 72 years as a cave dwelling healer.

In this text, the interrelatedness of the martyrdom ethic and the ascetic movement are on full display. When the danger of martyrdom fails to materialize, Early Christians must find another way to perform radical bodily discipline, and win masculinity.⁴⁴ Prior to Thekla’s second martyrdom attempt, she desires to cut

43 Heffernan, *The Passion or Perpetua and Felicity*, 130.

44 Brown, *Body and Society*, 76-7.

her hair. Thekla cutting her hair, and later teaching, are both instances of Thekla taking on the masculine privilege that came with martyrdom, and later, asceticism. This text narrates a transition of Thekla's life from living under an external threat of martyrdom, to living as a reclusive ascetic.

Thekla is a hybrid text in another way, as it also shows characteristics of a Greco-Roman biography. The genre of biography had an ambiguous beginning, and was brought to fruition through the Christian literary tradition. In the Fourth Century BCE, biographically focused writings about Socrates sprang up after his death. Over time, this and other biographically focused writings slowly morphed into the philosopher biographies of late antiquity, such as Iamblichus *On the Pythagorean Life*, or Porphyry's *Life of Pythagoras* and *Life of Plotinus*. The purpose of these early biographies was apologetic. They served to inculcate the reader to the virtues of the subject, in order to persuade them to take up the philosophy and way of life that each subject devised.⁴⁵

It is easy to see the political benefit for Christians in producing their own versions of biographies focused on important Christian figures. Biographies were designed to persuade, and offered the author a significant amount of freedom to import their own ideology into the subject's life and teachings. As heirs to the philosopher biography, there was not an expectation of historical literalness that we now impute into modern biographies. Predictably, the Christian literary world seized on the benefits of this genre when creating the genre of *Lives*, or biographical writings about famous saints or Christian figures.⁴⁶

Section Two: *Life of Anthony* and Christian Masculinity

Athanasius' *Life of Anthony* is a classic example of the genre of *Lives*. In this text, Athanasius does not portray Anthony as he actually was, but as a persuasive model for the ideal Christian man and leader. This model looks both shockingly different from, and similar to, late-antique Roman ideals around masculinity and

45 Hägg, Tomas and Philip Rousseau (ed.), *Greek Biography and Panegyric in Late Antiquity*, p 5-7.

46 Cameron, Averil. *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 57.

leadership. The historical figure Anthony was a philosophically trained desert monastic living in the Third and Fourth Centuries, but Athanasius portrays a very different figure who represents his own ideological preferences. This text serves to persuade Christians of the superiority of the ascetic life, and pagans of the superiority of Christianity.

Written between 356 and 362, *Life of Anthony* follows what would become a commonplace literary formula within the genre of late-antique Christian biography, or *Lives*. More propaganda than historical biography, the story begins with a tale of Anthony's childhood and early years, before transitioning into a topical arrangement of his teachings under the guise of narration. This model for the ideal Christian bishop dissented from the ideal Roman leader. Athanasius was the first to argue that asceticism was the correct life for those wishing to take up the role of bishop in the fourth-century Church.

Rather than meditating on traditional themes of ignorance and knowledge, Athanasius sought to shift the internal Christian life to a focus on corruption and incorruption.⁴⁷ As more people converted, it became politically convenient to seek positions of power in the church. Athanasius thought that ascetic discipline through bodily sublimation, such as the kind portrayed in *Anthony*, should be a precursor to joining church leadership.⁴⁸ Christ is the exemplar of this discipline, but Anthony is the "archetypal human representative."⁴⁹ This idealized version of Anthony quickly spread through the literate members of the Roman Empire and popularized the distinctly late-antique genre of Christian biography known as *Lives*.⁵⁰ Athanasius presents *Life of Anthony* as the proper Christian model for masculine self-presentation in the late Fourth Century.⁵¹

For Athanasius, the formation of a Christian man required constant sublimation of the self through imitation of an eternally consistent form or pattern.⁵²

47 Brakke, David. *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 146.

48 Ibid., 145-6.

49 Ibid., 202-3.

50 Ibid., xvii; 201.; Burrus, *Begotten Not Made*, 36.

51 Burrus, *Begotten Not Made*, 36.

52 Brakke, *Athanasius*, 167.

This human cultivation through sublimation and self-presentation always occurred in tension between a higher divine realm that is characterized by its immutability, and lower created nature characterized by its “chaotic default femaleness,” something which he identifies Arius as having fallen into.⁵³ This femininity must be sublimated through ascetic practice to construct a masculine identity.⁵⁴ Athanasius thought that the goal Christians should strive for is immutability achieved through ascetic practice.⁵⁵

After a short prologue, *Life of Anthony* begins in an Egyptian city where Anthony was raised by wealthy Christian parents. When his parents die, Anthony gives away his newly inherited wealth, leaves his sister in a community of virgins, and joins a monastic community outside of a nearby village.⁵⁶ This act of committing his sister to the community of virgins asserts Athanasius’ approval of the ascetic life for women in community, but effectively removes them from the definition of an ideal desert monastic and man, of which Anthony will shortly become.⁵⁷

In this monastic village Anthony devotes himself to “perfecting his discipline,” learning all he can from the older ascetics with whom he surrounds himself by observing the virtuous qualities performed by each and seeking to acquire them all within himself.⁵⁸ While in this village, he has his first conflict with the devil, who tries to lead him away from this discipline he is perfecting.⁵⁹ The devil assaults him night and day to the point that Anthony’s struggles are noticeable to onlookers. This is the first example of performative masculinity in *Life of Anthony*, as Anthony overcomes the devil through the fortification of his body with “prayers, and fasting.”⁶⁰ It is not coincidence, but a calculated literary device that others see Anthony’s struggle

53 Burrus, *Begotten Not Made*, 69. Athanasius, *Orations* 1.1.2; Athanasius identifies Arius as a “daughter of Herodotus,” writing in an effeminate tone, and “reeling and frolicking” in his blasphemies against the savior.

54 Burrus, *Begotten Not Made*, 69.

55 Ibid., 47; 73.

56 Athanasius, *Life*, 2.

57 While women also ventured into the desert to live isolated ascetic lives, they are excluded from Athanasius’ definition of an ideal desert monastic.

58 Athanasius, *Life*, 2.

59 Ibid., 2-3.

60 Ibid., 2.

and victory over the devil through bodily discipline and faith. Here, Athanasius narrates Anthony's performance of bodily discipline in front of others, showing that performance is still a key part of masculine identity formation within this new construction. In order to resist the mutability of sin, Anthony must repress his fleshy, feminine body and keep it in subjugation, thus remaining immutable, masculine, and victorious.⁶¹

Anthony soon leaves the village to go to a space between the desert and the village, the tombs. Here he is assaulted by evil again, for we are told the devil fears he will bring his ascetic discipline to the entire desert.⁶² Tortured almost to the point of death, Anthony suffers in silence until an acquaintance brings him down to the village where his kinsfolk and villagers gather around him.⁶³ Even in isolation at the tombs, Athanasius is sure to narrate the visibility of Anthony's masculine virtue through resisting the devil's torment. Anthony then returns to the tombs to be tortured again, remaining "unshaken" until the Lord rescues him. The reader now knows that both villagers and God see Anthony's performance of masculine immutability, which God rewards with fame.⁶⁴ Athanasius then tells us that "the desert was colonized by monks" who regarded Anthony as "father."⁶⁵

After the tombs, Anthony wanders alone to the mountain where he spends twenty years training in solitude until people wishing to imitate him arrive and demand he come out.⁶⁶ Anthony emerges looking exactly as he had twenty years earlier, neither fat nor skinny, grieved or pleased, but completely controlled and "even," "abiding in a natural state."⁶⁷ This "natural state" is the result of twenty years of unnatural repeated acts of bodily discipline to naturalize his masculine identity as a 'holy-man.'⁶⁸

61 Ibid., 3.

62 Athanasius, *Life*, 4.

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid.

65 Ibid. 42

66 Ibid., 5.

67 Ibid., 6.

68 Burrus, *Begotten Not Made*, 69.

It is worth noting here a possible physiognomic reading of this scene. This occurs near the beginning of the text, and Anthony's appearance highlights the balanced and controlled nature of his asceticism and foreshadows the great works Anthony will do later in the text. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to give a proper physiognomic analysis of this text, it is worth noting that Anthony's physically ideal appearance is the result of his consistent bodily discipline. Onlookers marvel at his positive physical attributes, which appear paradoxically average to the modern reader. If one is unsure of Athanasius' purpose for describing Anthony's physical state, he quickly tells us that Anthony "maintained equilibrium, like one guided by reason and steadfast in what accords with nature," and that Anthony's "soul was pure."⁶⁹ The fact that his body was neither fat nor emaciated, but utterly balanced was evidence of his balanced and reasonable soul.

Next Anthony returns to the village and teaches to an assembly of monks. This teaching spans a large portion of *Life of Anthony*, and in it he exhorts his fellow ascetics to "hold fast to discipline," and resist cunning and evil demons through "prayer, fasting, and faith in the Lord."⁷⁰ Similar to his *Orations*, Athanasius invokes a theme of gendered cunningness in describing demons as inconsistent (thus feminine) and "ready to change themselves into all forms and assume all appearances" in *Life of Anthony*.⁷¹ This is a stark contrast to Anthony's immutable appearance, which remained the same over twenty years. When Anthony instructs monks on the discernment of spirits he teaches that one's soul will be "unruffled and undisturbed" in the presence of angels, members of the heavenly immutable realm.⁷²

In the latter half of *Life of Anthony*, Anthony oscillates between the desert and the village, continuing to perfect his discipline while performing typical hagiographic wonders such as exorcisms and healings.⁷³ At one point Anthony

⁶⁹ Athanasius, *Life*, 42.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 8.

⁷¹ Ibid., 42.

⁷² Ibid., 11.

⁷³ Ibid., 16-24.

ventures into Alexandria in hopes of being martyred in the Great Persecution. As previously mentioned, martyrdom was the ultimate form of performative masculinity in the Third and early Fourth Century, as it offered Christians the opportunity to show their masculine, steadfast nature in the face of a violent death, and guaranteed their eternal reward.⁷⁴ Athanasius was writing in the 350s, largely after the opportunity for martyrdom had passed, but the memory of martyrdom and reverence for martyrs persisted.⁷⁵ This desire for martyrdom fits with the masculine and immutable picture Athanasius is painting of Anthony.

Anthony also aligns with Athanasius politically and theologically. In *Life of Anthony*, Athanasius is sure to show Anthony rejecting heretical sects he sparred with at Nicaea, such as the Arians and Meletians.⁷⁶ In one particularly telling episode, Athanasius narrates Anthony coming down from his ascetic abode in the mountains to publicly denounce Arians. In this episode, Arians angered Anthony by claiming that Anthony agreed with their theology. Anthony then comes into Alexandria and publicly denounces Arian theology as a “forerunner to the Antichrist.”⁷⁷ When read in light of Athanasius’ *Orations*, this episode offers a performative example of Anthony denouncing feminine heretics in favor of masculine, Nicene orthodoxy. Anthony also reveres the organized Church by observing the rule of the Church “most rigidly” and honoring clergy above himself.⁷⁸ Thus the *Life of Anthony* is as overtly political as it is religious, and aligns theological orthodoxy and religiopolitical subservience to the proper Christian hierarchy with the masculine ideal.

Religiopolitical subservience was rightly orientated toward the Egyptian Church hierarchy in which Athanasius trafficked, and subservience to Roman hierarchy was a more complicated issue. One peculiar episode in *Life of Anthony* helps shed light on this issue. According to Athanasius, Anthony’s fame reached the emperor and his family, and Constantine and his sons wrote to Anthony for advice.⁷⁹

⁷⁴ Brown, *The Body and Society* (New York: Columbia University Press), 69; 73-77.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Athanasius, *Life*, 20-21.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 68-9.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 81.

Anthony tells his fellow monks not to be astonished that a towering figure such as Constantine would write to them as Constantine was still merely a man.

At first, Anthony refuses the letters from Constantine and his son until his fellow monks convince him to read and respond to them, as they were worried they might offend the emperor. Begrudgingly, Anthony responds to Constantine and his sons, lauding them for worshipping Christ and counseling them on salvation.⁸⁰ He then instructs them to be just and merciful. Athanasius concludes this section by claiming that Constantine and his sons rejoiced, and that all “desired to consider him [Anthony] as father.”⁸¹ The idea that the historical Constantine would consider Anthony a father is comically out of place. However, this situates Anthony above Constantine in the Christian *paterfamilias* and as the spiritual leader of the Christian empire. A leading figure in the Egyptian church therefore differed from and sat above other kinds of leadership, even imperial leadership.

To drive home this point that the “wisdom of the world [was] foolishness,” exemplified in the episode with Constantine, Athanasius narrates Anthony interacting with a group of heckling philosophers. He amazes them with his intellect and flips the conventional narrative by calling pagans and their gods superstitious.⁸² Anthony is the head of the spiritual Christian *paterfamilias* in Rome, and his spiritual and philosophic knowledge exceeds not only Constantine, but contemporary Greco-Roman philosophers as well. For Athanasius, spiritual knowledge attained through ascetic discipline trumps knowledge obtained through philosophical education.

In the end of *Life of Anthony*, Athanasius narration of Anthony’s death resembles the paradigmatic death of Socrates as written by Xenophon. In this account of Socrates’ death he shows the “full strength of his soul” by showing “no touch of weakness” in the face of death.⁸³ Similarly, when Anthony realizes that he is dying he calmly informs monks who live nearby. These monks react by weeping and embracing Anthony while he shows no negative emotions. Rather, he speaks

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Athanasius, *Life*, 72-9.

⁸³ Xenophon, *The Apology*.

joyously and exhorts his fellow monks to continue guarding their soul from foul thoughts, imitating the saints, and avoiding heretics. He then requests a simple and immediate burial, breaking with Egyptian custom in a final act of bodily discipline.⁸⁴

CONCLUSION

In writing *Life of Anthony*, Athanasius puts forth a Christianized version of masculinity in narrative form, centered around transcending feminine creation through bodily discipline. In spite of his frequent isolation from others, Athanasius is sure to interpolate scenes in which Anthony's immutable and politically expedient masculinity remains performative. Through this text, Athanasius creates an image of an idealized Christian man for others to imitate.

It is important to note that Athanasius is presenting this as a model for Christian leaders to emulate. It is not simply masculinity for the average Christian, but for those who want to (or already) have power in the Christianizing empire. This shake-up of traditional values in favor of asceticism allowed for hegemonic masculine traits and avenues of power to shift. By inserting this story into the economy of the fourth-century gender discourse, Athanasius sought to destabilize the reigning traits of Greco-Roman hegemonic masculinity to make space for a new, Christian masculinity. While hegemonic masculinity for Roman leaders often centered on military might, philosophical literacy, and self control, Athanasius paints a divergent and subversive masculine image. Ironically inculcating the classical love of knowledge, Athanasius deemphasized the preference for philosophical literacy through a classical education in favor of spiritual education, in which one acquires knowledge from God through bodily discipline. Sex, marriage, even urban space and formal education were all distractions from a proper relationship with God and were not reflective of the ideal Christian man.

While many abhor the modern "sex-negative" theology one can trace to Athanasius and the ascetic movement, placing *Life of Anthony* into the social and literary context of the gender economy it entered shows that this is an oversimplified

⁸⁴ Athanasius, *Life*, 27.

conclusion. Through partaking in the world of ancient discourse in order to shore up his own power, Athanasius was fighting for his own masculinity, and the future of Christian masculinity. Athanasius sought to direct the ways in which men, including himself, could access power in the rapidly Christianizing fourth-century Roman empire. He did so by lifting up and ‘masculinizing’ the ascetic movement to both garner their support and legitimize his own devotional practices. This destabilizing of societal ideals and gender allowed for his own ideas to flourish and turn Christianity once more onto a decidedly ascetic trajectory.

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