

## THE PRACTICE AND PROHIBITION OF SELF-CASTRATION IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY

BY

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### 1. *Opposing Attitudes towards Self-Castration as an Expression of Continence: Justin Martyr and Basil of Ancyra*

In his *Apology* Justin Martyr tells how a young man in Alexandria petitioned the Roman prefect for permission to be castrated.<sup>1</sup> Permission was denied, but Justin's apologetical use and evident approval of the effort itself are striking.<sup>2</sup> The youth intended, so Justin writes, to persuade non-Christians that sexual promiscuity was not a μυστήριον, or secret rite, among Christians, and he cites the incident to demonstrate that some Christians forgo marriage altogether and live completely in continence.

Written in the middle of the second century c.e., this is the earliest documentation of the impulse exhibited by certain early Christians towards self-castration as an expression of Christian chastity. Two centuries later Basil of Ancyra devoted several sections of his treatise *On the True Integrity of Virginity* (ca. 336-58) to the same practice. Unlike Justin, however, Basil hardly considers this evidence of a man's continence: on the contrary, those who "perversely" castrate themselves "by this very deed make a declaration of their own licentiousness (ἀκολασία)."<sup>3</sup> Our modern sensibilities may require no explanation for the shift from approval to disapproval of self-castration these two authors illustrate. Yet their testimony provokes basic

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<sup>1</sup> *Apol.* 29,1-2, ed. E. Goodspeed, in *Die ältesten Apologeten* (Göttingen 1914) 45: 'Ἄλλ' ἢ τὴν ἀρχὴν οὐκ ἐγαμοῦμεν, εἰ μὴ ἐπὶ παίδων ἀνατροφῇ, ἢ παραιτούμενοι τὸ γήμασθαι τέλεον ἐνεκρατευόμεθα. Καὶ ἤδη τις τῶν ἡμετέρων, ὑπὲρ τοῦ πείσαι ἡμᾶς ὅτι οὐκ ἔστιν ἡμῖν μυστήριον ἢ ἀνέδην μίξις, βιβλίδιον ἀνέδωκεν ἐν Ἀλεξανδρείᾳ Φήλικι ἡγεμονεύοντι, ἀξιῶν ἐπιτρέψαι ἱατρῷ τοὺς διδύμους αὐτοῦ ἀφελεῖν. Felix's prefecture has been dated ca. 150-153.

<sup>2</sup> H. Chadwick, *The Sentences of Sextus* (Texts and Studies 5; Cambridge 1959) 110.

<sup>3</sup> *De virg.* 61 (PG 30, 793A): ἑαυτοὺς ἀτόπως ἡκρωτηρίασαν, αὐτῷ τῷ ἔργῳ ἀκολασίαν ἑαυτῶν μακρόθεν κατηγοροῦντες.

questions: Why did Basil consider it such a matter of concern, both in general and for the readers of his treatise in particular? or more simply, What appeal was there for Justin's youth and other Christians in such a dramatic act as self-castration?

The practice and prohibition of self-castration in early Christianity has only received passing historical notice in conjunction with studies of the interpretation of Matthew 19:12<sup>4</sup> or the debate over Origen's alleged self-castration.<sup>5</sup> These studies, like the orthodox treatises from which the evidence must be drawn, tend to marginalize self-castration as a rare act on the "lunatic fringe"<sup>6</sup> of early Christian asceticism. Their view needs modification. Though testimony is scanty, sources from the fourth century indicate that by then self-castration had become a real problem in the nascent Church. Basil, for example, excuses his discussion of it by asserting a need to "check the many such eunuchs" who had "already grown prominent in the Church."<sup>7</sup> A more general concern appears in the *Nicaean Canons* and the so-called *Apostolic Constitutions* which contain statutes against self-made eunuchs both among the laity and the clergy.<sup>8</sup> The authors of these canons perceived self-castration as an indication of certain Christian teachings they deemed heretical. Yet the subsequent dismissal of the act by both ancient and modern authorities as merely an extreme expression of heretical perversity<sup>9</sup> does little to further our understanding of the actual concerns and motives of Christians who chose to do it. This paper argues instead that self-castration should be viewed more generally as a practice of early Christians who, prompted by their understanding of Matthew 19:12 and

<sup>4</sup> E.g., W. Baur, "Matth. 19,12 und die alten Christen," in *Neutestamentliche Studien. Georg Heinrici zu seinem 70. Geburtstag*, ed. H. Windisch (Leipzig 1914) 235-44; G. Caspari, *Politics and Exegesis: Origen and the Two Swords* (Berkeley 1979) 56-64.

<sup>5</sup> H. Chadwick, *op. cit.*, 109-112; R. Hanson, "A Note on Origen's Self-Mutilation," *Vigiliae Christianae* 20 (1966) 81-82; P. Cox, *Biography in Late Antiquity: A Quest for the Holy Man* (Berkeley 1983) 88-90 and S. Elm, "Virgins of God": *The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford 1994) 122-24.

<sup>6</sup> Chadwick, *op. cit.*, 111; cf. Baur, *op. cit.*, 241.

<sup>7</sup> *De virg.* 62 (797A): εἰς τὸ ἀναστεῖλαι πολλοὺς ἥδη τοιούτους ἐπιπολάσαντας τῇ Ἐκκλησίᾳ εὐνοούχους.

<sup>8</sup> *Const. Apost.* 8,47,21-24; Nicaean Council can. 1 (produced below, n. 47).

<sup>9</sup> A. Vööbus, for example, while admitting in a footnote that Origen denies self-castration was a practice of Marcion's followers, asserts in his main text that Marcionites "did not hesitate to mutilate their bodies" (*History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient* 1 [CSCO 184; Louvain 1958] 51 and n. 94), extrapolating from Tertullian's somewhat vague remark (below, n. 35).

other influences (not necessarily by alliance to a heretical group), embraced radical corporeal asceticism as a fundamental part of Christian devotion. Moreover, the sources indicate that self-castration was sometimes adopted by male ascetics to allay suspicion which might otherwise arise from their living with female ascetics. Its prohibition was concomitant not only with a growing concern to determine acceptable ascetic practice, but acceptable social practices between ascetics as well: how avowed male and female virgins ought to associate with each other, and what outward signs should manifest their virginal status. In conclusion I will suggest that one reason for its condemnation was that castration proved an ambiguous signifier, since the continence (ἐγκράτεια) and self-control (σωφροσύνη) of the castrated Christian were not in fact made clear or guaranteed by this seemingly unambiguous form of bodily inscription.

## 2. *Christian Eunuchs and Orthodox Praxis*

Eunuchs were no new breed to the Roman empire of the Christian era. Castration had long been the physical mark of slavery (of slaves brought in from outside the empire)<sup>10</sup> and of religious devotion in the so-called oriental cults.<sup>11</sup> Although Domitian and Nerva had banned castration within the borders of the empire and Hadrian had made it a capital offense for both castrator and castrated,<sup>12</sup> the laws evidently did not apply to those who had castrated themselves,<sup>13</sup> and the practice continued, as it had for hundreds of years, among the "Galli" priests and devotees of Cybele (Magna Mater), Atargatis and the Scythian goddess. Ancient references to eunuchs express a general belief that eunuchs constituted a bizarre race of

<sup>10</sup> K. Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves* (Sociological Studies in Roman History 1; Cambridge 1978), 172 n. 4 and p. 192; P. Guyot, *Eunuchen als Sklaven und Freigelassene in der griechisch-römischen Antike* (Stuttgarter Beiträge zur Geschichte und Politik 14; Stuttgart, 1980).

<sup>11</sup> A.D. Nock, "Eunuchs in Ancient Religion," in Z. Stewart, ed., *Essays on Religion and the Ancient World* 1 (Cambridge, MA 1972) 6-15.

<sup>12</sup> Cass. Dio 67,2,3; 68,2,4; Suet. *Domit.* 7,1; *Digest* 48,8,4,2. Roman jurisprudence conceived castration as tantamount to murder and assimilated it to circumcision: see *Digest* 48,8,11,1. Their legal relationship is discussed by E. Smallwood, "The Legislation of Hadrian and Antoninus Pius against Circumcision," *Latomus* 18 (1959) 334-47 and 20 (1961) 93-96.

<sup>13</sup> A. Rousselle, in *Porneia: On Desire and the Body in Antiquity*, trans. F. Pheasant (Cambridge, MA 1988) 126, observes that Roman law says nothing about anyone who *se abscidit*, *se eviravit*, and there is no testimony for its application to the Galli.

indeterminate gender.<sup>14</sup> Most fundamentally, castration conferred a distinct mark of alterity upon the castrated.<sup>15</sup> This milieu and perception of eunuchs must be taken into an account of the Christian practice of castration, in so far as it would not have been a wholly unthinkable (albeit radical) option for a man in the empire to choose as a means of setting himself apart from others, either religiously or socially, while at the same time following what he perceived to be the demands of his religion.<sup>16</sup> We do not possess sources which reveal the significance of eunuchism in non-Christian devotion.<sup>17</sup> The Christian sources, however, indicate that the figure of the eunuch provided early Christians with an emblem of extreme chastity, highlighting a sharp contrast in sexual conduct between Christians and pagans.

The apologists Justin and Athenagoras seized upon this figure and invested it with the virtue of sexual continence. This was not a virtue outsiders commonly associated with Christianity in the late second century. As a pagan critic remarks in Minucius Felix's *Octavius* (ca. 170-75),

They introduce everywhere a kind of religious lust, a promiscuous "brotherhood" and "sisterhood" by which ordinary fornication, under the cover of a hallowed name, is converted to incest.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> E.g., *tertium . . . semiviri genus habent* (Pliny, *H.N.* 11, 49 [110], ed. C. Mayhoff [Leipzig 1909] 369); εὐνούχων γένος . . . ἄνδρῶν (Basil. Caes., *Ep.* 115, ed. R. Deferrari [Loeb; Cambridge, MA 1987] 230); *ab utroque sexu aut naturae origo aut clades corporis separavit* (Claud. Mamert., *Gratianum Act.* 19,4, ed. G. Barabino [Genova 1965] 98). See M. Gleason, *Making Men* (Princeton 1995) 133-34 and 161.

<sup>15</sup> P. Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York 1988) 169; Nock, *op. cit.*, 14.

<sup>16</sup> While references to self-made Christian eunuchs are found in western (e.g., below, n. 68) as well as eastern texts, the evidence comes mostly from the east, especially the region of Phrygia (e.g. below, n. 31) where the rites of the Galli originated. This regional concentration suggests the non-Christian practice of self-castration was germane to the Christian, but only Basil of Ancyra specifically draws this link (below, n. 32).

<sup>17</sup> Nock (among others) believes pagans castrated themselves to ensure their ritual purity; against this view cf. Rousselle, *op. cit.*, 125-127. Seneca observes that Romans commonly attributed divinity to those who mutilate their bodies: *cum aliquis secandi lacertos suos artifex brachia atque umeros suspensa manu cruentat . . . divinum esse eum . . . affirmatis* (*De vita beata*, 26,8, ed. L. Renolds [Oxford 1977] 196), and Tertullian remarks that among pagans *alia vis* [i.e., a divine influence] *promunietur in eo qui genitalia vel lacertos . . . prosequat* (*Apol.* 23,3; ed. H. Hoppe [CSEL 69; Wein 1939] 64).

<sup>18</sup> *Oct.* 9,2, ed. J. Beaujeu (Paris 1964) 12: *se promisce appellant fratres et sorores, ut etiam non insolens stuprum intercessionem sacri nominis fiat incestum*. For similar charges see, e.g., Justin *Apol.* 26,7; *Dial.* 10; Tatian, 25; Tertullian, *Apol.* 4,11; Origen, *C.Cel.* 6,40.

Of course, charges of sexual impropriety were regularly laid against fringe religious groups in Rome. Nonetheless by the late-second century Christian groups enjoying a revolutionary sense of social liberation by virtue of their baptism had sprung up there and elsewhere.<sup>19</sup> From the group celibacy of the Encratites to the sexual libertinism reportedly espoused by such Egyptian groups as the Barbeliotes and Carpocrations, the communal interaction these Christian groups enjoyed challenged propriety by mingling male and female in close, if not sexual, proximity.<sup>20</sup>

It was perhaps in response to suspicions of such groups that Justin Martyr and the young Alexandrian of his *Apology* felt the need to prove (one rhetorically, the other physically) that continence was indeed a Christian virtue both in theory and practice. Self-castration for them offered the clearest proof. About twenty years later (ca. 177), Athenagoras addressed an apology to Marcus Aurelius that employed the figure of the eunuch again to illustrate the fusion of Christian regard for chastity with practice:

You might find many among us, both men and women, growing old and unmarried in the hope of living more closely with God. But if remaining in virginity and the state of a eunuch draws one nearer to God, while the indulgence of carnal thoughts and desires leads one away, then all the more do we abstain from doing that which we avoid thinking about. For our interests lie not in the study of words, but in the display and teaching of deeds.<sup>21</sup>

In stark contrast to such Christian “eunuchs” Athenagoras inveighs against those pagans who

have set up a market for fornication . . . outraging all the noblest and fairest bodies in all sorts of ways, dishonoring God’s fair craftsmanship. . . . These adulterers and pederasts defame [our] eunuchs and once-married.<sup>22</sup>

In this early apology Athenagoras presents the figure of the eunuch in terms that were to become accepted in orthodox Christianity—not as a

<sup>19</sup> In the *didaskaleia* of such teachers as Marcion, Tatian and Valentinus: Brown, *op. cit.*, 86-91.

<sup>20</sup> See below, n. 53.

<sup>21</sup> *Leg. pro Christ.* 33,2-4, ed. B. Pouderon (SC 379; Paris 1992) 196-98: Εύροις δ’ ἂν πολλοὺς τῶν παρ’ ἡμῖν καὶ ἄνδρας καὶ γυναῖκας καταγυράσκοντας ἀγάμους ἐλπίδι τοῦ μάλλον συνέσεσθαι τῷ θεῷ. Εἰ δὲ τὸ ἐν παρθενίᾳ καὶ ἐν εὐνουχίᾳ μέναι, μᾶλλον παρίστησι τῷ θεῷ, τὸ δὲ μέχρις ἐννοίας καὶ ἐπιθυμίας ἐλθεῖν ἀπάγει· ὧν τὰς ἐννοίας φεύγομεν, πολὺ πρότερον τὰ ἔργα παραιτούμεθα. Οὐ γάρ (ἐν) μελέτῃ λόγων ἀλλ’ ἐπιδείξει καὶ διδασκαλίᾳ ἔργων τὰ ἡμέτερα.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 34,2-3 (198-200): ἀτιμοῦντες καὶ τὸ ποιητὸν τοῦ θεοῦ καλόν . . . κακίζοντες οἱ μοιχοὶ καὶ παιδερασταὶ τοὺς εὐνούχους καὶ μονογάμους.

physical eunuch (the context does not support this interpretation) but rather a "spiritual" eunuch, simply the male equivalent of the untouched female virgin. He uses it to underscore how Christians "exercise the greatest care . . . on behalf of those to whom we apply the names of brothers and sisters . . . that their bodies remain undefiled and uncorrupted."<sup>23</sup> These apologists thus used the figure of the eunuch to project a very different image of Christian sexuality against the prevailing suspicions of their time.

But while apologists may have found this image rhetorically useful for depicting Christian moral integrity to outsiders, many Christians were dismayed to see it take physical form among themselves. The notoriety of Origen's alleged self-castration (ca. 209) is a case in point. When, despite his care to conceal the act, it became known to his Christian community, the bishop Demetrius responded with worried ambivalence: though admitting the "zeal and sincerity of faith" it exhibited, Demetrius "marveled at [Origen] exceedingly for his rashness."<sup>24</sup> According to Eusebius the bishop eventually found it a useful basis of slander against Origen, and later Origen himself advised young men not to go so far in their "fanciful fear of God and unmeasured desire for self-control."<sup>25</sup> Perhaps remembering the reception of his own self-castration, he warns that those who do so will only "subject themselves to reproach, perhaps also to ignominy, not only from those alien to the faith, but even from all those who usually forgive the deeds of men" (i.e., fellow Christians).<sup>26</sup>

Indeed, the tacit approval with which Justin regards his Alexandrian youth is exceptional in the extant Christian sources. The second/third century apocryphal *Acts of John* presents another young man who, upon converting

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 32,5 (196).

<sup>24</sup> Eusebius, *H.E.* 6,8,3, ed. G. Bardy (SC 41; Paris 1955) 96: Εὖ μάλα μὲν αὐτὸν ἀποθανυμάζει τοῦ τομήματος, τὴν δὲ γε προθυμίαν καὶ τὸ γνήσιον αὐτοῦ τῆς πίστεως ἀποδεξάμενος. Origen's concealment: 6,8,2.

<sup>25</sup> Origen, *Comment. in Matt. XV* 1, ed. E. Klostermann – E. Benz, in *Origenes Werke* 10 (GCS 40; Berlin 1935) 349: φαντασίᾳ φόβου Θεοῦ καὶ σωφορσύνης ἀμέτρῳ ἔρωσι.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*: ἑαυτοὺς ὑποβεβλήκασιν ὀνειδισμῷ, τάχα δὲ καὶ αἰσχύνῃ . . . καὶ παρὰ τοῖς πᾶσι μᾶλλον τοῖς ἀνθρώποις πράγμασι συγγινώσκουσιν. Later in the commentary he contrasts his former literal interpretation of Matt. 19:12 with his later spiritual interpretation: Ἡμεῖς δὲ Χριστὸν (τὸν λόγον τοῦ Θεοῦ) "κατὰ σάρκα" καὶ κατὰ τὸ γράμμα ποτὲ νοήσαντες, "(ἀλλὰ) νῦν οὐκέτι" γινώσκοντες, οὐκ εὐδοκοῦμεν ὡς καλῶς ἐξειληφόσι τοῖς καὶ τὸν τρίτον εὐνουχισμόν [of Matt. 19:12] ἑαυτοῖς προφάσει τῆς βασιλείας τῶν οὐρανῶν ἐπάγουσι, *ibid.*, 3 (GCS 40, 354). I am therefore inclined to accept Origen's self-castration as historical fact, a νεανίεμμα he later renounced. Eusebius clearly believed its historicity, but presents it as a conscientious attempt to avoid slander: below, n. 63.

to Christianity, “took the sickle and cut off his private parts.” When he ran to John to show what he had done, the apostle displayed little charity toward the man’s first act as a Christian: it was rather “the devices of Satan” that had made him “cut off [his] unruly members as if this were a virtuous act.”<sup>27</sup> But despite John’s assurance on this point, neophytes in the early Christian centuries may well have had trouble discerning which ascetic acts had the approval of God and which were the “devices of Satan,” or exactly what limits should be placed upon their zeal for ἐγκράτεια. Until the limits of “orthodox” theory and practice had become established, widely disseminated and enforced, such zealots received very different signals as to what they should do with this particularly problematic area of the body. The anti-heretical works of Irenaeus, Clement and Epiphanius amply exhibit the sheer variety of Christian speculation on, and experimentation with, their corporeal status between the second and fourth centuries. Different groups sanctioned different acts. However, although acts of self-mortification became mostly associated with unorthodox Christian teachers, it is important for our understanding of the phenomenon of self-castration to see that these were not its only recognized proponents. In response to men who had “dared to castrate” themselves, Origin makes a studied appeal in his *Commentary on Matthew* against the influence of non-Christian texts which are able to incite a “more fervent soul” towards “this sort of rashness.”<sup>28</sup> He cites a passage from the *Maxims* of Sextus, “a book borne in esteem by many,” urging its reader to “cast away every part of the body that misleads you to a lack of self-control, since it is better for you to live without the part in self-control than to live with it to your peril.” Origin states that Sextus has “provided an inducement” for self-castration by writing, with apparent allusion to medical amputation, that

You may see men cutting off and casting away parts of their body in order that the rest may be strong; how much better to do this for the sake of self-control?

Origin also cites Philo’s treatise *The Worse is Accustomed to Attack the Better* as a provocation towards the act, since Philo there asserts “it is better to make oneself a eunuch than to rage madly for unlawful sexual intercourse.”<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> *Act. Johannis* 53-54, trans. G. Stead in E. Hennecke, W. Schneemelcher and R. McL. Wilson, eds., *New Testament Apocrypha* 2 (Philadelphia 1965) 241.

<sup>28</sup> *Comment. in Matt. XV* 3 (GCS 40, 354): ἐωράκεμεν τοὺς τολμήσαντας καὶ ἐντετεύχειμεν τοῖς δυναμένοις θερμότεραν κινήσαι ψυχὴν (καὶ πιστὴν μὲν, οὐ λογικὴν δὲ) πρὸς τὸ τοιοῦτον τόλμημα.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, (354-55): Φησὶ δὴ Σέξτος ἐν ταῖς Γνώμαϊς, βιβλίῳ φερομένῳ παρὰ πολλοῖς ὡς

The influence of precepts such as these would have been reinforced by the association of eunuchism, literal or figurative, with outstanding members of the Christian community. After all, if a teacher as revered as Origen was believed to have castrated himself, or a figure as revered as Melito, Bishop of Sardis, was referred to as “the eunuch, living wholly in the Holy Spirit,”<sup>30</sup> or if such an epithet could appear on a Christian gravestone,<sup>31</sup> and self-castration had already been a technique of long-standing in non-Christian devotional circles,<sup>32</sup> it is not so surprising that many young Christians, “young men hot with the faith” who “possess a passion for self-control, though not according to knowledge,”<sup>33</sup> thought it admirable to use a knife or sickle in the service of their zeal.

In Origen’s view, such youths simply acted out of a combined “fear toward God” and naiveté with respect to the true meaning of the scriptures.<sup>34</sup> For Tertullian and the author of the *Acts of John*, however, self-made eunuchs represented something more sinister. As Tertullian’s association of eunuchs with a Marcionite conception of God makes clear,<sup>35</sup> by the third century

δοκίμῳ· πᾶν μέρος τοῦ σώματος τὸ ἀναπεῖθόν σε μὴ σωφρονεῖν, ῥῖψον· ἄμεινον γὰρ χωρὶς τοῦ μέρους ζῆν σωφρόνως ἢ μετὰ τοῦ μέρους ὀλεθρίως”. καὶ πάλιν . . . ἀφορμὴν διδοὺς ἐπὶ τὸ παραπλήσιον λέγει· “ἀνθρώπους ἴδοις ἂν ὑπὲρ τοῦ τὸ λοιπὸν τοῦ σώματος ἔχειν ἐρρωμένον ἀποκόπτοντας αὐτῶν καὶ ρίπτοντας μέρη· πόσῳ βέλτιον ὑπὲρ τοῦ σωφρονεῖν;” καὶ Φίλων . . . φησὶν . . . ὅτι “ἐξευνουχισθῆναι μὲν ἄμεινον ἢ πρὸς συνουσίας ἐκνόμους λυτῶν”. Origen quotes precepts 13 and 273 of Sextus’ *Maxims*; Chadwick believes Sextus himself was referring to physical castration (*op. cit.*, 99-100).

<sup>30</sup> Eusebius, *H.E.* 5,24,5 (SC 41, 68): τὸν εὐνούχον, τὸν ἐν ἀγίῳ πνεύματι πάντα πολυτευσάμενον.

<sup>31</sup> As in inscription #11 (from Laodicea Combusta) dated between 323 and 350 by W. Calder, “The Epigraphy of the Anatolian Heresies,” in W. Buckler – W. Calder, eds., *Anatolian Studies Presented to Sir William Mitchell Ramsay* (Manchester 1923) 90-91: [ὁ δεῖνα υἱῷ] Αὐρ. Ἀππᾶ πρεσβ[υτέρ] (1) φ ευνούκῳ . . . μνήμης χάρι[ν]. Calder’s assertion that ευνούκῳ should be interpreted literally may be questioned, since it may have been used here to describe Appas’ celibacy (or spirituality: he was married) as it apparently was used to describe Melito’s.

<sup>32</sup> Basil, writing near Phrygia, suggests the affinity of Christians who castrate themselves with the “Greeks in the past,” i.e., the Galli of the region: Φανερόν γάρ, ὅτι δαίμονος μεθοδεῖα τὸ ἔργον· διότι ὁ μὲν πάλιν βίος παρ’ Ἑλλήσι τούτους, νυνὶ δὲ παρ’ ἡμῖν ἀτόπως ὑπέδειξε, *De virg.* 62 (797A).

<sup>33</sup> Origen, *Comment. in Matt. XV* 3 (GCS 40, 355): θερμῶν μὲν τῇ (δὲ) πίστει νεωτέρων, οἷς ὁμολογεῖν χρὴ ὅτι ἔρωτα σωφροσύνης ἔχουσιν “ἀλλ’ οὐ κατ’ ἐπίγνωσιν.”

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 1 (349): ἀπὸ φόβου μὲν τοῦ πρὸς Θεὸν, ἀνεπιστημόνως δέ. Also see below, n. 43.

<sup>35</sup> *Ad Marc.* 4,11, ed. A. Kroymann (CSEL 47; Wein 1906) 451: Marcion’s God *conjunctas non admittit, neminem tinguūt nisi caelibem aut spadonem*. *Spadonem* however may not mean here a man who has castrated himself. Tertullian himself distinguishes the celibate



critics perceived the act as emblematic of a specific theological orientation and attitude towards material creation which not only effected the way a person viewed marriage, but also how he perceived his corporeal status. In other words, self-castration became associated with the "dualist" doctrines espoused by Marcion, Tatian *et al.*, which tended to denigrate the body as the nagging link between the human soul and the evils they believed inherent in the material world. Unfortunately their teachings allegedly conducive towards self-castration can only be read in the fringes of the discourse of more "orthodox" writers, especially in their discussions of Matthew 19:12. There Jesus himself presents the figure of the eunuch as a religious ideal for his disciples:

There are eunuchs, that were so born from their mothers' womb; and there are eunuchs, that were made so by men; and there are eunuchs that have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven.<sup>36</sup>

Whatever Jesus had intended by this utterance, its radical suggestion begged either literal practice or hermeneutic revision among subsequent Christian thinkers and practitioners. It is in fact one of the few gospel passages that may be read as an exhortation to asceticism or a basis for a hierarchy of Christian practitioners: "Not all men can receive this saying, but they to whom it is given . . . he that is able to receive it, let him receive it." Certainly Origen's characterization of the soul of the self-castrator as *πιστὴν μὲν, οὐ λογικὴν δὲ* suggests that the gut reaction of certain Christians to this passage was to "make themselves a eunuch for the kingdom of heaven." However, none of the exegeses that have come down to us advocate a literal interpretation of the passage.<sup>37</sup> On the contrary: the more "orthodox" writers used exegesis either to moderate corporeal asceticism or check it completely.

Clement of Alexandria, whose early third-century *Miscellanies* preserves the earliest known attempt to interpret Mt. 19:12, exemplifies this. According to Clement, the followers of the second-century Christian teacher Basilides believed the passage signified three types of celibates: those "by nature," i.e. by an innate revulsion toward women; those "by necessity," certain

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*spadones voluntarii* in his own church from those who "*officia membrorum ludibrose . . . oblatrant*": *De carn. res.* 61, ed. A. Kroymann (CSEL 47; Wein 1906) 122-23.

<sup>36</sup> Matt. 19:11-12: ὁ δὲ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς, Οὐ πάντες χωροῦσιν τὸν λόγον τούτου, ἀλλ' οἷς δέδοται, εἰσὶν γὰρ εὐνοῦχοι οἵτινες ἐκ κοιλίας μητρὸς ἐγεννήθησαν οὕτως, καὶ εἰσὶν εὐνοῦχοι οἵτινες εὐνουχίσθησαν ὑπὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων, καὶ εἰσὶν εὐνοῦχοι οἵτινες εὐνούχισαν ἑαυτοὺς διὰ τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν. ὁ δυνάμενος χωρεῖν χωρεῖτω.

<sup>37</sup> Baur, *op. cit.*, provides a general discussion of early references to Matt. 19:12.

θεατρικοί ἀσκηταί who “control themselves because of their passion for fame” as well as those physically castrated by some misfortune; and those “by reasoned principle,” who opt for celibacy “because of the distractions involved in marriage.”<sup>38</sup> Though Clement criticizes other attitudes the Basilidians supposedly held about marriage, he does not specifically criticize their interpretation of Matthew; indeed their equation of the third type of eunuch with celibacy by “reasoned principle” seems to accord with his own view that “one man may make himself a eunuch [i.e., remain celibate], another join in marriage to have children; both ought to have the aim of remaining firmly opposed to any lower standard.”<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless in other instances Clement deradicalizes the third type of eunuch even further, in order to affirm the Christians’ right to marry against the objections of certain “high strung” Christian teachers who found in the scriptural eunuchs (including, besides Mt. 19:12, those of Isaiah 56:3: “Let not the eunuch say, ‘Behold, I am a dry tree.’ For thus says Jehovah of eunuchs that keep my Sabbaths, and choose the things that please me, and hold fast my covenants: . . . I will give them an everlasting name, that shall not be cut off”) their justification for promoting total sexual abstinence. Clement says that such teachers (particularly a certain Julius Cassius, who had written a work entitled *On Continence* or *On Eunuchism*) “through continence, euphemistically blaspheme against creation and the holy creator.”<sup>40</sup> Rather than interpreting scriptural eunuchs as symbols of sexual continence, Clement argues instead that “a eunuch [as in Is. 56:3] does not mean a man who has been castrated, or even an unmarried man, but a man who is unproductive of truth,” who nevertheless observes God’s precepts and so attains “higher esteem than those educated in word alone without right conduct.” While Clement affirms that “those who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven” are “blessed,” he glosses Mt. 19:12 to mean those who are “free from all sin by their abstinence from the world.”<sup>41</sup> Thus

<sup>38</sup> *Strom.* 3,1,1,2-4, ed. O. Stählin – L. Früchtel in *Clemens Alexandrinus* 2 (GCS 52 [15]; Berlin 1960) 195: “οἱ δὲ ἕνεκα τῆς αἰωνίου βασιλείας εὐνουχίσαντες ἑαυτοὺς διὰ τὰ ἐκ τοῦ γαμοῦ,” φασί, “συμβαίνοντα, τὸν ἐπιλογισμὸν τοῦτον λαμβάνουσι, τὴν περὶ τὸν πορισμὸν τῶν ἐπιτηδείων ἀσχολίαν δεδιότες.”

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 3,12,79,3 (231): Ἡ πρόθεσις τε ἐκάστου, τοῦ τε ἑαυτὸν εὐνουχίσαντος τοῦ τε αὖ γάμῳ διὰ παιδοποιίαν συζεύξαντος, ἀνένδοτος πρὸς τὸ ἦττον διαμένειν ὀφείλει.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 3,5,40,2 (214): τὸ ὑπέρτονον ἄγουσαι, ἐγγάτειαν διὰ δυσσεβείας . . . καταγγέλλουσι . . . ; 3,6,45,1 (216): Τοῖς δὲ εὐφήμως δι’ ἐγκρατείας ἀσεβοῦσιν εἷς τε τὴν κτίσιν καὶ τὸν ἅγιον δημιουργόν. On Julius Cassianus and his work, see 3,13,91-92.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 3,15,99,1 (241), refuting Cassianus’ use of Is. 56:3 with Mt. 19:12 (see 3,13,91,2)

through allegorical exegesis Clement divests the eunuchs of Is. 56:3 and Mt. 19:12 of any sexual significance: rather than legitimizing an “impious” stress on sexual abstinence, for him they simply represent abstinence from the immoral trappings of “the world” in general.

With this shift Clement represents a distinct break from previous writers, who all had referred to the eunuch specifically as a symbol of sexual continence. His effort to free the figure of all physical implications was perhaps calculated to appeal to the clergy of his era, recruited from married Alexandrian householders.<sup>42</sup> Such a social concern may have also accompanied the theological objections towards self-castration voiced by Church authorities of the fourth century, by which time an ascetic movement that included not merely renunciation of marriage but also extreme forms of self-mortification had become influential and widespread in Christian communities. To judge from the sources, the numbers of Christians who had castrated themselves had by that time become rather conspicuous. In addition to the testimony of Basil who, as quoted above, was alarmed by the spread of “many such men” in the Church, Epiphanius of Salamis observed by 377 that “not a few” monks in Egypt had “dared to make themselves eunuchs.”<sup>43</sup> He describes one Transjordanian sect, the Valesians, who

are all castrated except for a few . . . when they take someone as a disciple, as long as he has not yet been castrated he does not partake of animal flesh. But once they have persuaded or forced him to be castrated, then he partakes of anything whatsoever. . . . They not merely discipline their own this way, but often impose the same on strangers passing through, entertained by them as guests.

to advocate complete sexual abstinence: εὐνοῦχος τοίνυν οὐχ ὁ κατηναγκασμένος τὰ μόρια οὐδὲ μὴν ὁ ἄγαμος εἴρηται, ἀλλ’ ὁ ἄγονος ἀληθείας. “ξύλον” οὗτος “ξηρὸν” ἦν πρότερον, ὑπακούσας δὲ τῷ λόγῳ καὶ “φυλάξας τὰ σάββατα” κατὰ ἀποχὴν ἁμαρτημάτων καὶ ποιήσας τὰς ἐντολὰς ἐντιμότερος ἔσται τῶν ἄνευ πολιτείας ὀρθῆς λόγῳ μόνῃ παιδευομένων; 3,15,99,4 (241-42, glossing Mt. 19-12): ἀλλ’ “οἱ μὲν εὐνουχίσαντες ἑαυτοὺς” ἀπὸ πάσης ἁμαρτίας “διὰ τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν” μακάριοι οὗτοί εἰσιν, οἱ τοῦ κόσμου νηστεύοντες. For Clement, continence is an internal virtue of the soul, not to be displayed outwardly; cf. 3,6,48,3 (218): ἡ ἐγκράτεια ψυχῆς ἀρετὴ, ἡ οὐκ ἐν φανερώ, ἀλλ’ ἐν ἀποκρύφῳ.

<sup>42</sup> Brown, *op. cit.*, 58.

<sup>43</sup> *De fide* 13,5, ed. K. Holl – J. Dummer in *Epiphanius* 3 (GCS; Berlin 1985) 513: ἔτεροι δὲ καὶ οὐκ ὀλίγοι εὐνουχίζειν ἑαυτοὺς . . . δῆθεν νεανιεύματος χάριν ἐτόλμησαν. An early Latin apophthegm (“PJ” 15.88; PL 73.968-969) tells how Epiphanius confronted two monks who *aemulationem autem habentes vocis evangelicae, sed non secundum scientiam, castraverunt se quasi propter regna coelorum*.

Epiphanius adds that “most of these Valesians had been in the Church up to a certain time, until their madness spread, and they were expelled.”<sup>44</sup> Thirteen years later John Chrysostom inveighed against those who had mutilated themselves around Antioch.<sup>45</sup>

The practice of self-castration thus persisted despite its condemnation in early Church regulations. Both the Council of Nicaea (canon 1, 325) and the authors of the *Apostolic Constitutions* (canons 22-24, drawn up perhaps at Antioch, ca. 380)<sup>46</sup> banned such men from entering the clergy; the latter also punished the laity who castrated themselves with three years' excommunication. The *Apostolic Constitutions* clearly articulate the belief that self-castration stemmed from a view of the material world deemed heretical: “Let not one who has mutilated himself become a cleric: for he is . . . an enemy of God's creation.”<sup>47</sup> Thus the Church came to turn against Christian eunuchs the charge Athenagoras had made against pagans for “dishonoring God's fair craftsmanship.” Self-castration, always a mark of alterity, had become an indication of heretical sympathies within the Church. John Chrysostom calls such eunuchs “men who scorn God's creation,” and assimilates them to Manichaeans, whom he accuses of self-castration as well.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>44</sup> *Pan.* 58,1,4-7, ed. K. Holl – J. Dummer in *Epiphanius* 2 (GCS; Berlin 1980) 358: εἰσὶ δὲ πάντες ἀπόκοποι πλὴν ὀλίγων . . . καὶ ὅταν λάβωσιν ἄνθρωπον εἰς μαθητείαν, καθ' ὅσον μὲν χρόνον οὕτω τῶν μορίων ἀπετμήθη, ἐμψύχων οὐ μεταλαμβάνει· ὅταν δὲ πείσωσι τὸν τοιοῦτον ἢ μετὰ ἀνάγκης αὐτὸν ἀποτέμωσι, τότε πᾶν ὅτιοῦν μεταλαμβάνει ὡς ἡδὴ πεπαυμένος ἀγῶνος καὶ μηκέτι ἐπικίνδυνος ὢν εἰς τὸ ἐποτρύνεσθαι διὰ τῶν ἐδεσμάτων εἰς ἡδονὴν ἦκειν ἐπιθυμίας. οὐ μόνον δὲ τοὺς ἰδίους τοῦτον ἀπαρτίζουσι τὸν τρόπον, ἀλλὰ πολ- λάκις καὶ ξένους παρερχομένους καὶ παρ' αὐτοῖς ἐπιζευωθέντας ταύτῃ διέθεντο τῇ ἀγωγῇ. Trans. F. Williams, *The Panarion of St. Epiphanius of Salamis II and III* (Leiden 1987) 99, who notes that Epiphanius' sources are oral (98 n. 1).

<sup>45</sup> *In cap. V. Ep. ad Gal. comm.* 3,717 (PG 61, 668).

<sup>46</sup> M. Metzger, “Origine et date de CA,” in *Les Constitutions Apostoliques* 1 (SC 329; Paris 1985) 54-62.

<sup>47</sup> *Const. Apost.* 8,47,22, ed. M. Metzger in *Les Constitutions Apostoliques* 3 (SC 336; Paris 1987) 280: Ὁ ἀκρωτηριάσας ἑαυτὸν μὴ γινέσθω κληρικός· αὐτοφονευτὴς γάρ ἐστιν καὶ τῆς τοῦ Θεοῦ δημιουργίας ἐχθρός; 23: Εἴ τις κληρικός ὢν ἑαυτὸν ἀκρωτηριάσει, καθαιρεῖσθαι· φονεὺς γάρ ἐστιν ἑαυτοῦ. 24: Λαϊκὸς ἑαυτὸν ἀκρωτηριάσας ἀφορίζεσθαι ἔτη τρία· ἐπίβουλος γάρ ἐστιν ἑαυτοῦ. (Canon 21 permits eunuchs castrated by others to become bishops.) Council of Nicaea, canon 1, ed. J. Hefele – H. Leclercq in *Histoire des conciles* 1,1 (Hildesheim 1973) 528-29: εἰ δὲ τις υἱαῖνων ἑαυτὸν ἐξέτεμε, τοῦτον καὶ ἐν τῷ κλήρῳ ἐξεταζόμενον πεπαῦσθαι προσήκει, καὶ ἐκ τοῦ δεῦρο μηδένα τῶν τοιούτων χρῆναι προάγεσθαι . . . εἴ τινες ὑπὸ βαρβάρων ἢ δεσποτῶν εὐνουχίσθησαν, εὐρίσκονται δὲ ἄλλως ἄξιοι, τοὺς τοιούτους εἰς κλῆρον προσίεται ὁ κανὼν.

<sup>48</sup> *In cap. V. Ep. ad Galat. comm.* 3,717 (PG 61, 668): τὴν τοῦ Θεοῦ δημιουργίαν δια-

Matthew 19:12 presented early Christian apologists and teachers with a vivid image that might designate a Christian elite, singled out as “those to whom it is given.” Since Jesus did not clarify what characteristics—physical, moral or intellectual—the figure of the eunuch signified, it posed a challenge for exegetes to determine these themselves. For the more “orthodox” authorities, self-made Christian eunuchs represented the most dire consequence of literal-minded, “heretical” hermeneutics, especially those which legitimized a harshly corporeal mode of asceticism. Indeed it seems appropriate that John Chrysostom addressed this practice in his *Commentary to Galatians*. In Galatians Paul tells how he debated whether circumcision should be required as a mark of Christian faith. Paul argued that, by virtue of their baptism in Christ, Christians no longer had to apply the commandments of the Torah to themselves literally, and therefore did not have to undergo physical circumcision. The relevance of Paul’s hermeneutic position to the later issue of self-castration is made explicit by Origen in his *Commentary on Matthew*. Citing II Corinthians 3:6, Origen states that Paul’s dictum that “The letter killeth, the spirit giveth life” must certainly be applied in an interpretation of Mt. 19:12.<sup>49</sup> Not to do so, Origen asserts, is to adhere to the teaching of Marcion, who claimed that scriptures ought not to be interpreted allegorically.<sup>50</sup> Two hundred years after Paul the areas of the body had slightly changed, but the issue was still the same; and instead of Jewish Christians representing the other side of the debate, that position had become identified with heretical Christians.<sup>51</sup>

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βάλλοντες, καὶ τοῖς Μανιχαίοις συμπράττοντες . . . οὗτοι δὲ διὰ τῶν ἔργων τοῖς χαλεποῖς δόγμασι τούτους διδόνασιν ἀφορμὴν· ὥς γὰρ ἔχθρὸν καὶ ἐπίβουλὸν ἀποκόπτουσι τὸ μέλος.

<sup>49</sup> *Comment. in Matt. XV* 1 (GCS 40, 351): Τὸ γράμμα ἀποκτείνει, τὸ δὲ πνεῦμα ζωοποιεῖ, τοῦτο δὲ καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν κατὰ τὸν προκείμενον τρόπον ὁμολογητέον.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 3 (356): εἴπερ τι ἀκόλουθον ἑαυτῷ ὁ Μαρκίων πεποίηκε φάσκων μὴ δεῖν ἀλληγορεῖν τὴν γραφὴν.

<sup>51</sup> The problem of self-castration did not end in the fourth century: cf. Rule #55 of the fifth-century monastic rules attributed to Rabbula: “No one of the sons of the church, those upon whom the name of the Messiah has been called, shall dare to castrate himself” (trans. A. Vööbus, *Syriac and Arabic Documents regarding Legislation Relative to Syrian Asceticism* [Papers of the Estonian Theological Society in Exile 11; Stockholm 1960] 49). See also *idem*, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient* 2 (CSCO 197; Louvain 1960) 257-58; Nilus of Ancyra, *Ep.* 1,323 (PG 79, 200A); Cyril of Scythopolis, *V. Sabae* 41.

### 3. *Self-Castration and Social Relations of Male and Female Ascetics*

Basil's treatise on virginity, however, attests that self-castration involved other issues besides theology. His discussion of eunuchs is mainly concerned with the practical matter of the danger they posed to virgins.<sup>52</sup> He thus places the phenomenon of self-castration in a social context similar to that which raised suspicions among pagans: namely, close relations between male and female virgins. This issue received considerable attention from Church fathers, and suggests other motives behind the practice and prohibition of self-castration.

In Galatians 3:28 Paul presents his audience with the potentially revolutionary notion that Christianity had obliterated traditional social boundaries: "There can be neither Jew nor Greek, slave or free man, male or female; for you are all one in Jesus Christ." By the mid-second century communal travel and cohabitation between the sexes had become a feature of certain early Christian communities, premised by a mutual commitment to chastity.<sup>53</sup> But like their pagan critics, few Christian writers appear to have believed men and women could share such companionship without succumbing to sexual temptations.<sup>54</sup> A late second/early third-century treatise addressed to male and female virgins reflects such doubts. Its author cites

evil rumors and reports concerning shameless men who, under the pretext of a fear of God, have their dwellings with maidens . . . and walk with them along the road and in solitary places alone, a course which is full of dangers, stumbling blocks and pit-falls, nor in any respect right for Christians and those who fear God to conduct themselves.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>52</sup> *De virg.* 64 (800B): Διὸ εἴπερ σκοπός ἐστι τῇ παρθένῳ ἄφθορον ἑαυτῆς τὴν ἔνδον παρθενίαν φυλάττειν, ἀκριβοῦτόω καὶ τὰς πρὸς τούτους [i.e., men who have castrated themselves] ἀει ὁμιλίᾳς. For general discussion of Basil's treatise, its audience and social context, see Elm, *op. cit.*, 113-24.

<sup>53</sup> Brown, *op. cit.*, 92-102; Elm, *op. cit.*, 47-59, 184-223.

<sup>54</sup> E.g., Epiphanius, whose allegations against the "Encratites" are similar to those lodged against Christians in the *Octavius*: *Pan.* 47,3,1 (GCS [1980] 218). Clement's account of the apostles' missionary conduct (*Strom.* 3,6,53,3; GCS 52, 220) illustrates an orthodox ideal for male-female ascetic relations. He imagines these couples traveled together, but were married; were married, but lived as brothers and sisters; instructed men and women, but males instructed males while females instructed females δι' ὧν καὶ εἰς τὴν γυναικωνίτιν ἀδιαβλήτως παρεισεδύετο ἡ τοῦ κυρίου διδασκαλία.

<sup>55</sup> Ps.-Clement, *Ep. I ad virg.* 10 This section of the treatise (originally written in Greek) survives in a Syriac text ed. T. Beelen, PG 1, 402A, whose Latin trans. (superior to that in PG) appears in F.X. Funk, ed., *Patres Apostolici* 2.2 (Tübingen 1913) 8:

The third and fourth-century phenomenon of the *virgines subintroductae*, the spiritual female friends and students of certain male ascetics and clerics, seems to have been a survival from such communities of travelers (and *didaskaleia*) of an earlier period. Eusebius records a letter describing the actions of a council at Antioch (268) brought against Paul of Samosata who, besides teaching objectionable doctrine, was known to keep such women in his household; his presbyters and deacons allegedly kept such company as well.<sup>56</sup> Cyprian addressed a similar situation at Carthage, ca. 250. There women,

despite the fact that they once made the firm resolve to preserve their chaste status, have subsequently shared the same bed with men . . . while insisting on their virginity.<sup>57</sup>

Cyprian laments that “so many men” and “very many virgins” have been corrupted by “unlawful and perilous associations of this kind.”<sup>58</sup> Other Christian authorities shared his distress. The councils of Elvira (canon 27, 306), Ancyra (canon 19, 314) and Nicaea (canon 3) reiterate the same position: “It cannot be permitted to either bishop, priest or any other cleric to have in his house a female companion, with the exception of his mother, sister, aunt of such persons who are free from all suspicion.”<sup>59</sup> Repeated prohibitions against this arrangement demonstrate its continuing appeal at the time of Basil’s treatise.

The situation prompting Basil’s discussion of self-made eunuchs was that of Christians who had castrated themselves precisely “in order to obtain

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loquimur de iis, quae loquimur, ob malos rumores de impudentibus quibusdam hominibus, qui sub pietatis praetextu cum virginibus habitant . . . aut soli cum illis deambulant per viam et solitudinem, viam periculis plenam et plenam offendiculis et laqueis et foveis, cuiusmodi agendi ratio Christianos et religiosos prorsus dedecet. English trans. B. Pratten, in A. Roberts – J. Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* 8 (Buffalo 1886) 58. A. von Harnack’s “Die pseudoclementinischen Briefe De virginitate und die Entstehung des Mönchthums,” *Sitzungsberichte der königlich preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin* 21 (1891) 361-85, remains the most thorough discussion of the treatise’ author (anonymous, but identified by the fourth century with Clement of Rome), date and provenance (Syria, or perhaps Palestine). Coptic fragments indicate its author originally addressed male virgins as eunuchs: A. Guillaumont, *Annuaire du Collège de France* 1981/82, 433.

<sup>56</sup> *H.E.* 7,30,12.

<sup>57</sup> *Ep.* 4,1,1, ed. G. Diercks (CChr.SL 3B; Turnhout 1994) 17.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 4,2,3.

<sup>59</sup> Nicaean Council, canon 3 (Hefele-Leclercq, 536-37). The Ancyran canon (*ibid.*, 321) prohibits virgins from living as “sisters” with anyone (not just clerics).

license for themselves" since "they want to live with women"<sup>60</sup> without danger or suspicion. Basil's testimony for such a motive is supported by isolated cases mentioned by Palladius, Eusebius and Socrates. Palladius records the vision of an Egyptian monk named Elias who, being especially φιλοπάρενος, built a monastery on his property to care for wandering virgins. But tempted by desire, he withdrew to the desert and prayed either for death or the removal of his passion so he could care for the women κατὰ λόγον.<sup>61</sup> In response two sympathetic angels held down his arms and legs while a third castrated him: "thus . . . in his vision he was, one might say, thoroughly restored." Elias then safely lived another forty years ministering to female ascetics, "assuring the fathers that passion did not arise" in his thoughts thereafter.<sup>62</sup>

Although Elias' castration occurred only in a vision, the tale indicates how some men found in castration both a solution to the problem of prolonged exposure to the opposite sex and a means of explaining how they could live with women chastely. Eusebius presents Origen's self-castration as an attempt to avoid the slander of non-Christians which might have arisen "because, though young in age, he discoursed on things divine not only with men, but with women."<sup>63</sup> Socrates reports that Leontius, an Arian presbyter at Antioch in the early fourth century, was motivated to castrate himself "in order to remove all suspicion of illicit intercourse with a woman named Eustolium, with whom he spent a considerable amount of his time." After castrating himself, "he thenceforth lived more freely with her, since there was no longer any ground for slander against her."<sup>64</sup> Each describes different instances of castration, but they share the recognition that those castrated believed this act allayed any suspicion about sexual impropriety as they taught, cared for or lived with chaste women.

<sup>60</sup> *De virg.* 64 (800D): εἰρήκαμεν . . . περὶ τῶν ἱν' ἐξουσίαν ἑαυτοῖς πραγματεύσονται, ὡς θέλουσιν ὁμιλεῖν γυναιξίν, ἀποκοψαμένων ἀτόπως.

<sup>61</sup> *H.L.* 29, ed. C. Butler in *The Lausiaca History of Palladius* (Text and Studies 6; Cambridge 1904) 84-85.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, (85): Ἐδοξεν οὖν ἐν τῇ ἐκστάσει, ὡς ἂν εἴποι τις, καὶ ἀποθεραπεύεσθαι. Afterwards Elias asserted τοῖς πατράσιν ὅτι εἰς τὴν διάνοιάν μου οὐκ ἀναβαίνει πάθος.

<sup>63</sup> *H.E.* 6,8,2 (SC 41, 95-96): διὰ τὸ νέον τὴν ἡλικίαν ὄντα μὴ ἀνδράσι μόνον, καὶ γυναιξὶ δὲ τὰ θεῖα προσομιλεῖν, ὡς ἂν πᾶσαν τὴν παρὰ τοῖς ἀπίστοις αἰσχρὰς διαβολῆς ὑπόνοιαν.

<sup>64</sup> Socrates, *H.E.* 2,26 (PG 67, 269A): τὴν εἰς αὐτὴν αἰσχρὰν ὑπόνοιαν ἐπικρύψαι σπουδάσας, τῶν γεννητικῶν ἐξέτεμεν ἑαυτὸν, καὶ τοῦ λοιποῦ παρῆρησιέστερον τῇ γυναικὶ συνδιήγεν, ὡς μὴ ἔχων δι' ἃ εἰς αὐτὴν διεβάλλετο.



As Aline Rousselle observes, "In ancient times as in our day, there was a tendency to ignore or forget the fact that men who have no testicles still possess sexual powers."<sup>65</sup> Just as an Elias could be "persuaded" that he had been "relieved" of his "passion" by his vision of castration,<sup>66</sup> so was popular belief apparently persuaded that a man who had been castrated could be a safe companion for virgins. Because of the prevalence of this belief Cyril of Alexandria, in an early fifth-century homily *Against Eunuchs*, sternly warned wealthy members of his congregation that the eunuchs whom they trusted "to sleep with their women as guardians" really offered only "semblances" of self-control.<sup>67</sup> This trust extended all the more to Christians who had expressly become eunuchs "for the kingdom of heaven."<sup>68</sup> Basil's discussion is designed to dispel such naiveté. Such men, he writes,

being unable to control themselves, and fearing they might be caught in the act, wholly liberate themselves for sexual intercourse by cutting off the evidence of this activity, that they might act on their desire as they wish. . . .<sup>69</sup>

Drawing on a background in medicine, Basil differs from all other writers on this subject in that he supports his case with medical theory, describing in detail how pent-in sperm boils up in the eunuch and torments him until he finds relief. By cleverly using his apparent impotence as "bait" to deceive a woman, he can gain easy access to her chamber and have sex with her without restraint. As proof Basil relates two cases known to him where eunuchs had seduced women, including a "virgin of the Church," in this manner.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Rousselle, *op. cit.*, 123 n. 65.

<sup>66</sup> *H.L.* 29 (Butler, 85) *πέπεισμαι ἀπηλλάχθαι τοῦ πάθους*.

<sup>67</sup> Cyril of Alexandria, *Hom.* 19, ed. C. de Boor in *Georgii Monachi Chronicon* 2 (Leipzig 1904) 652: μετὰ γυναικῶν δὲ ὡς φύλακες ὅμα καὶ σωφροσύνης δῆθεν ἰνδάλματα καθεύδοντες . . . τούτους γὰρ ἄνθρωποι καὶ μάλιστα προύχοντες, ὡς σώφρονες παραδεχόμενοι, πιστεύουσι καὶ εἰσοικίζουσιν. See also 654.

<sup>68</sup> As attested by the third-century *De singularitate clericorum* 33 (ed. G. Hartel [CSEL 3,3; Wein 1871] 208-09) which denounces self-made eunuchs as heretics, but not as unchaste; they at least exhibit superior chastity than clerics who, living with virgins, claim to be spiritual eunuchs: *in confusioem spadonum non dubito meliores adserere, qui nec sibi quidem parcunt*.

<sup>69</sup> *De virg.* 61 (793B): Οὐ δυνάμενοι γὰρ κρατεῖν ἑαυτῶν, εἴτα φοβούμενοι φωραθῆναι ἐπὶ τῷ ἔργῳ, ἵνα ἐξῇ αὐτοῖς ὡς βούλονται τῇ ἐπιθυμίᾳ κεχρησθαι . . . ἀποκόψαντες τὸν ἑλεγχον τῆς ἐνεργείας, ἐλευθεριάζουσιν ἀκρατῶς πρὸς τὰς μίξεις.

<sup>70</sup> Medical explication: 61, 796AB; "bait": *ibid.*: δέλεαρ δὲ τῶν διδύμων εὐνουχίαν τῇ γυναικὶ εἰς ἀπάτην δεινῶς ποιησάμενος, ἀκολαστότερον μίγνυται (see also 796D); case studies: 796B, D.

Basil's main point is that self-castration, though it might appear to signify self-control, is in reality a deception (in Cyril's phrase, a σωφροσύνης δῆθεν ἰνδάλμα). Such men are all the more insidious and dangerous because they appear to be emasculated. Basil counters that, as a bull is still a bull whether it has horns or not, so a man "who has cut off all his genitalia, does not become a woman by the loss of these; he is still by nature a man."<sup>71</sup> The success of this deception upon both men and women in Christian communities called for exposé. Yet Basil and Cyril were not the first to warn against equating castration with chastity. Already in the second and early third century the non-Christian writers Artemidorus and Philostratus associated false chastity and untrustworthiness with the ambiguity of eunuchs' sex. Thus Artemidorus considered the Galli, eunuchs and impotent men the kinds of people (along with actors, sophists and poor men) one ought not trust: "even if they do not say anything, they indicate false expectations, since by nature they cannot be numbered among men or women."<sup>72</sup> Philostratus' digression on eunuchs in his *Life of Apollonius* bears remarkable similarity to Basil's. While Apollonius' companion Damis naively assumes ("it is obvious to any child") eunuchs to be sufficiently chaste to enter women's apartments "since the operation of castration has deprived them of having sexual intercourse," Apollonius contends that "even eunuchs feel desire" and cannot be said to possess σωφροσύνη merely by virtue of castration, since this "consists not in one's not giving in to sexual intercourse when aroused with desire, but in abstinence and appearing superior to this madness."<sup>73</sup> These authors, by calling the eunuch's physical condition to be a deceptive signifier, broke the conventional wisdom of their day; their point had to be reiterated all the more in a Christian milieu whose tradition had long associated eunuchs with chastity and was still developing its monastic institutions.

About twenty years after the Council of Nicaea banned men who had castrated themselves from the clergy, another council met at Gangara in

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 63 (797CD): ἀλλ' ἔτι ἄρσιν ἐστὶ τὴν φύσιν, κἂν μὴ ἔχη τὰ μόρια.

<sup>72</sup> *Onirocrit.* 2,69, ed. R. Pack (Leipzig 1963) 196: οὔτοι γὰρ καὶ μὴ λέγοντές τι ψευδεῖς τὰς ἐλπίδας εἶναι μηνύουσι διὰ τὸ φύσει μήτε ἐν ἀνδράσι μήτε ἐν γυναιξὶν ἀριθμεῖσθαι.

<sup>73</sup> *V. Apollonii* 1,33, ed. V. Mumprecht (Munich 1983) 100-102: Damis: τοῦτο . . . καὶ παιδὶ δῆλον· ἐπειδὴ γὰρ ἡ τομὴ τὸ ἀφροδισιάζειν ἀφαιρεῖται σφᾶς. Apollonius: καὶ εὐνοῦχοι ἐρώσι καὶ τὸ ἐπιθυμητικόν, ὅπερ ἐσάγονται διὰ τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν, οὐκ ἀπομαραίνεται σφῶν . . . οὐκ ἂν μοι δοκῶ τοὺς εὐνοῦχους ποτὲ ἐς τὰ τῶν σωφρονοούντων ἦθι προσγράψαι . . . σωφροσύνη γὰρ τὸ ὀρεγόμενον τε καὶ ὀρμῶντα μὴ ἠτᾶσθαι ἀφροδισίων, ἀλλ' ἀπέχεσθαι . . . τῆς λύττης ταύτης.

central Asia Minor to judge what they considered ascetic improprieties espoused by Eustathius of Sebaste. Among the practices the council condemned were those physically altering the appearance of female ascetics "under the pretense of asceticism": "Women now assume men's clothes," the council charged, "and think themselves justified thereby; nay, many shave their heads under the pretext of piety."<sup>74</sup> Though the reasons it considered these acts objectionable are not made explicit, they appear to have touched the same nerve that was sensitive to the male practice of self-castration. This is further indicated by the later *Life of Euphrosune of Alexandria*. Euphrosune secretly shaved her head and put on a monk's habit to gain access to a local monastery. At the monastery gate she presented herself as a eunuch and was accepted as such to pass many years in the company of the monks.<sup>75</sup> Euphrosune had symbolically castrated herself.<sup>76</sup> Though, unlike the eunuchs Basil condemns, Euphrosune is depicted as being innocently motivated by piety, her act was a deception nonetheless, and in the end she is revealed to the sympathetic monks as the woman she remained all along. Indeed, as Church fathers had long recognized, no bodily mark could guarantee chastity. At Carthage Cyprian had warned that even physical examination of a virgin could prove nothing,

since the hand and the eye of the midwives may frequently be mistaken, and, besides, even if she is found to be an unsullied virgin in her private parts, she could have sinned in some other part of her person which can be sullied and yet cannot be examined.

The integrity of the hymen on the female body, like the absence of testicles on the male, could not be acknowledged as a valid proof of chaste conduct when men and women mingled in Christian communities. Watchdogs like Cyprian and Basil were all the more wary of such corporeal signifiers precisely because they were so widely accepted as valid. Far safer, Cyprian writes, that male and female virgins remain separate.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>74</sup> Synodal Letter, Hefele-Leclercq, *Histoire des conciles* 1,2 (Hildesheim 1973) 1031-32.

<sup>75</sup> *The Life of Euphrosune of Alexandria*, ed. and trans. A.S. Lewis in *Studia Sinaitica* 19 (London 1900) 53.

<sup>76</sup> J.E. Salisbury, *Church Fathers, Independent Virgins* (New York 1991) 104-10. This and other tales of female transvestitism are discussed by (among others) J. Anson, "The Female Transvestite in Early Monasticism: The Origin and Development of a Motif," *Viator* 5 (1974) 1-32 and E. Patlagean, "L'Histoire de la femme déguisée en moine et l'évolution de la sainteté féminine à Byzance," *Studi Medievali* 17 (1976) 597-623.

<sup>77</sup> *Ep.* 4,3,1 (CChr.SL 3B, 20-21): *nec aliqua putet se posse hac excusatione defendi, quod inspici et probari possit an virgo sit, cum et manus obstetricum et oculus saepe fallatur. Et si incorrupta*

The early Christian fathers were challenged as to whether they would accept a literal rendering of Matthew 19:12 as the “greatest demonstration” (to use Eusebius’ description of Origen’s self-castration) “of faith and at the same time of self-control.”<sup>78</sup> The Church ultimately rejected its validity for both doctrinal and social reasons. In the course of its fourth century debates concerning the definition of “orthodox” Christianity, and in the canons regulating proper Christian behavior, the Church increasingly established itself as the successor to the polis and its norms. A figure that was once used to signify the virtuous alterity of Christian communities to non-Christians became a figure of suspicious alterity within the orthodox Church itself. Radical manifestations of an ideal de-sexualization, whether realized by communal cohabitation of the sexes or by the physical act of self-castration on the part of certain individuals, became a “heretical” threat to the orthodox community. Whatever credit was given to Paul’s affirmation in Galatians 3:28 that “there can be no male or female” in Christ, it was the apparent intention of orthodoxy that women remain marked as women, men as men, readily identifiable as such and separate.<sup>79</sup>

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*inventa fuerit virgo ea parte qua mulier potest esse, potuerit tamen et ex alia corporis parte peccasse quae corrumpi potest et tamen inspicere non potest.* Separation of sexes: 4,2,1.

<sup>78</sup> *H.E.* 6,8,1 (SC 41, 95): πίστεώς γε μὴν ὁμοῦ καὶ σωφροσύνης μέγιστον δαίγμα περιέχον.

<sup>79</sup> I would like to thank Susanna Elm, the late Amos Funkenstein and Bill North for their constructive criticism on this paper.