

1. LIFE OF ST. MARY/MARINOS

translated by Nicholas Constatas

Introduction

St. Mary (also called Marinos) belongs to the remarkable group of so-called transvestite nuns (i.e., nuns who disguised themselves as monks) popular in Byzantine hagiography from the fifth to the ninth centuries. Their popularity was by no means limited to the Greek-speaking world, and the story of Mary/Marinos appeared in Latin, Syriac, Coptic, Ethiopic, Armenian, Arabic, and much later, medieval German and French versions.¹ Thus, in contrast to many of the holy women in this volume who had only localized cults, Mary/Marinos, whose geographic origins are shrouded in legend, was venerated throughout the medieval world, in both east and west. She is commemorated in the *Synaxarion of Constantinople* on 12 February.²

According to her *vita*, Mary, with hair cut short, dressed like a man, and renamed Marinos, followed her father into a monastery where she lived undetected as a monk. Remaining in the monastery after her father's death, "Marinos" was eventually accused of fathering a child. She did not deny her "crime," but voluntarily accepted severe punishment and raised the infant in the monastery. Her sex, and with it her innocence of the paternity charges, was not revealed until after her death. Although the story does not locate Mary in any specific historical or geographical context, it has been suggested that the original *vita* was written in Greek sometime between the early sixth

¹ The Latin *vita* was edited by L. Clugnet, *ROC* 6 (1901), 357–78; the Syriac by F. Nau, *ROC* 6 (1901), 283–89; the Coptic by H. Hyvernat, *ROC* 7 (1902), 136–52; the Ethiopic by E. Pereira, *ROC* 8 (1902), 614–22; the Arabic by I. Guidi and E. Blochet, *ROC* 7 (1902) 245–64; and the medieval German and French versions by L. Clugnet, *ROC* 7 (1902), 478–500, 647–67; for the Armenian version, see P. Peeters, *Bibliotheca hagiographica orientalis* [= SubsHag, 10] (Brussels, 1910), 151, no. 690.

² *SynaxCP* 460.

and mid-seventh centuries, probably in Syria.³ The *vita* of Mary/Marinos translated here, termed by Richard the *vita antiqua*, is in his view the version closest to the original *Life* of the sixth or seventh century, which underwent considerable changes over time as the result of oral transmission. The *vita antiqua* is preserved in three Athonite manuscripts, the oldest of which (Vatopedi 38) dates to the tenth century.⁴ The anonymous author writes in a simple and vivid style, making extensive use of dialogue and omitting the characteristic *prooimion*. The *vita* is also notable for the almost total absence of scriptural citations.

Monastic writers and their audiences were fascinated by stories of holy transvestites, and despite the injunction of Deuteronomy 22:5,⁵ more than a dozen different *vitae* were composed on this theme, which seems to have originated in the second-century *Acts* of St. Thekla.⁶ One thus reads of St. Anastasia Patrikia, who fled the advances of the emperor Justinian (and the jealousy of his wife Theodora) by hiding in the Egyptian desert as the monk Anastasios, or St. Matrona of Perge,⁷ whose transvestite masquerade as the monk Babylas was exposed by her pierced earlobes, or St. Euphrosyne of Alexandria, who, as the attractive novice Smaragdus, was removed to an isolated cell

³ Basing his conclusions on a later redaction of the *vita*, L. Clugnet suggested that Mary lived near Tripoli in Syria in the 5th century ("Histoire de sainte Marine," *ROC* 6 [1901], 276–77). According to M. Richard, "La Vie Ancienne de Sainte Marie surnommée Marinos," in *Corona Gratiarum*, I (Brugge, 1975), 112, the original *vita* was written between 525 and 650. Richard discusses the various versions of the *vita* on pp. 83–87 of his article. A Syrian provenance for the motif of the transvestite nun has recently been reasserted by S. A. Harvey, *Asceticism and Society in Crisis. John of Ephesus and the Lives of the Eastern Saints* (Berkeley, 1990), 115–16, who remarks that the "(transvestite nun) motif crystallized the misogyny that had become an integral part of the Syrian church."

⁴ Richard, "La Vie Ancienne," 86–87.

⁵ "The apparel of a man shall not be on a woman, neither shall a man put on a woman's dress; for every one that does these things is an abomination to the Lord thy God."

⁶ The connection with St. Thekla was made by an anonymous referee. A catalogue of twelve female transvestite saints, citing editions and manuscripts, can be found in Patlagean, "La femme deguisee," 600–602. Patlagean's list does not include St. Susanah/John (*AASS*, Sept. 6:153–59 and *SynaxCP* 58–59).

⁷ See *Life* no. 2 in this volume.

when “he” became a source of temptation to the other monks. Others, such as St. Apollinaria/Dorotheos, St. Eugenia/Eugenios, St. Susannah/John, and St. Theodora/Theodore, refused to disclose their true identity even though, like Mary/Marinos, they too were falsely accused and peremptorily condemned for seduction and rape.⁸

H. Delehayé’s reductive characterization of Mary’s *vita* as a “pious novellette,” the plot of which was a “favorite subject of the purveyors of edifying fiction,”⁹ probably underestimates the significant social, psychological, and religious concepts embodied in the dramatic figure of the saintly female transvestite. The holy transvestite nun is an enigmatic, though compelling figure. Unified in her contradictions of the masculine and the feminine, indeed constituted by those very contradictions, the transvestite nun is a symbol of the ambiguities, tensions, and hostility that often comprised Early Christian attitudes toward women.¹⁰ Although these attitudes are difficult to characterize without caricaturizing, women were generally perceived as having to transcend their inferior feminine nature to attain spiritual virility and manliness. In this vertiginous conquest of manhood by woman, Mary/Marinos is a hero of virile temperament, and at the same time a hero who suffers, voluntarily accepting marginalization, victimization, and helplessness. Ironically, her exploits suggest that the feminine element is part of the ambivalence of virile strength, and that it may serve to balance and amplify that strength, as well as subvert its authoritative claims to dominance and hegemony.

⁸ It should be noted that late antique hagiography also included tales of *men* who were falsely accused of impregnating a woman and who endured this calumny with humility; see, for example, C. Butler, *The Lausiac History of Palladius* (Cambridge, 1898), chap. 70, pp. 165–67; Eng. trans. R. T. Meyer, *Palladius: The Lausiac History* (London, 1965) 151–52; *Apophthegmata Patrum*, chap. 40.1 (PG 65:257–60), with Eng. trans. by B. Ward, *The Desert Christian: Sayings of the Desert Fathers. The Alphabetical Collection* (New York, 1965), 124–125.

⁹ H. Delehayé, *The Legends of the Saints* (New York, 1962), 51; see also 150–54. The book was originally published in Brussels in 1905 as *Les légendes hagiographiques*.

¹⁰ These attitudes have been surveyed by Patlagean in “La femme déguisée,” 605–9. See also W. A. Meeks, “The Image of the Androgyne: Some Uses of Symbol in Earliest Christianity,” *History of Religions* 13 (1973–74), 165–208; A. Rousselle, *Porneia. On Desire and the Body in Antiquity*, trans. F. Pheasant (Oxford, 1988), esp. 24–46, 141–59; and K. Aspegren, *The Male Woman: A Feminine Ideal in the Early Church*, ed. R. Kieffer (Uppsala, 1990).

Modern attempts to interpret the saintly transvestite have ranged from the psychological¹¹ and the literary,¹² to the socioreligious¹³ and theological.¹⁴ Although there is something of value in each of these interpretive approaches, it should also be noted that the story of Mary/Marinos is primarily a drama of elaborate personal transformation, a grand exchange of otherness. The dramatic movement of the *vita* consequently unfolds as a harrowing ritual of initiation, a mysterious rite of passage marked by three characteristic stages: separation, liminality, and reaggregation.¹⁵ Accordingly, the initiate is deprived of the old status at the beginning and accorded the new status at the end. The middle phase is marked by a dark ambiguity, isolation, the threat of annihilation, and often an inversion of the role that the final phase will confer (i.e., the saint putting on a man's clothes before being accepted as a "man"). There is often a segregation of those being initiated, as if they were dangerous or unworthy. Mary/Marinos, like many transvestite nuns, was thought to be a

¹¹ M. Delcourt, "Le complexe de Diane dans l'hagiographie chretienne," *RHR* 153 (1958), 1–33, and eadem, "Female Saints in Masculine Clothing," *Hermaphrodite: Myths and Rites of the Bisexual Figure in Classical Antiquity*, trans. J. Nicholson (London, 1961), 84–102. Delcourt explains the story in (Freudian) terms of the heroine's psychology and suggests that the change of clothes is a form of self-mutilation in pursuit of androgynous perfection.

¹² J. Anson, "The Female Transvestite in Early Monasticism: The Origin and Development of a Motif," *Viator* 5 (1974), 1–32. Anson, arguing that the story neither records real female behavior nor shows any interest in female characterization, contextualizes the motif in a male society dedicated to celibacy and given to an excess of anti-feminism. Anson suggests that the story is a "wish-fulfillment dream of domestication of the demonic seductress," and that the "secret longing for a woman in a monastery is brilliantly concealed by disguising the woman as a man and making her appear guilty of the very temptation to which the monks are most subject. After being punished for their desires, their guilt is compensated by turning her into a saint with universal remorse and sanctimonious worship" (pp. 17, 30).

¹³ Patlagean, "La femme deguisee," and V. L. Bullough, "Transvestism in the Middle Ages," in *Sexual Practices and the Medieval Church*, ed. V. L. Bullough and J. Brundage (Baltimore, New York, 1982), 43–54.

¹⁴ E. g., S. A. Harvey, "Women in Early Byzantine Hagiography: Reversing the Story," in *That Gentle Strength: Historical Perspectives on Women in Christianity*, ed. L. Coon, K. Haldane, and E. Sommer (Charlottesville, Va., 1990), 46–50.

¹⁵ For this, and what follows, see A. Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. M. B. Vizedom and G. L. Caffee (London, 1960), and K. Dowden, *Death and the Maiden: Girl's Initiation Rites in Greek Mythology* (London, 1989).

eunuch and lived on the periphery of the community. Transvestite nuns are creatures of the margins.¹⁶

The process of initiation and transformation is a passage from one social role or status to another, and as such it marks boundaries and defines categories. It suggests that society consists not of individuals but of types, signified by costume and dress.¹⁷ If monastic culture defines and privileges certain values, thus making monasticism possible, these values may often be restrictive and confining, such as the notion that women are spiritually inferior to men. In contriving a ritual of transition, the culture attempts to address and solve a problem that it has itself created. Accordingly, the lives of the saintly transvestite nuns suggest a moment when monastic androcentrism became a problem, or at least a question, to itself. In the symbolic process of redefinition, undefined and uncontrollable human potential is momentarily released, and the saint abandons structured relations in recognition of a more fundamental unity.

¹⁶ The marginalization of the eunuch may be more than a literary commonplace; cf. the numerous instances of separate monasteries established exclusively for eunuchs cited in R. Guiland, "Les eunuques dans l'empire byzantin," *REB* 1 (1943), 197–238, esp. 202–5. The most recent treatment of the Byzantine eunuch is found in K. M. Ringrose, "Living in the Shadows: Eunuchs and Gender in Byzantium," in *Third Sex, Third Gender. Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History*, ed. G. Herdt (New York, 1994), 85–109, 507–18, esp. 97–98.

¹⁷ Cf. J. Herrin, "In Search of Byzantine Women: Three Avenues of Approach," in *Images of Women in Antiquity*, ed. A. Cameron and A. Kuhrt (Detroit, 1983), 179: "Apparel, far more than physique, identified a person. The monastic disguises adopted by women enabled them to simulate a holiness reserved by male ecclesiastical authorities to men only. To the church fathers, the very idea of a holy woman was a contradiction in terms, which women could only get round by pretending to be men."

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[p. 87]

T	L	C		B	M
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1. There was a certain man named Eugenios who lived in purity, piety, and in the fear of God. He had an honorable and devout wife,¹⁹ who bore him a daughter whom he named Mary. When his wife died, the father raised the child with much teaching and in <the ways of> a pious life.

2. When the young girl grew up, her father said to her, “My child, behold, all that I own I place in your hands, for I am departing in order to save my soul.” Hearing these things <said> by her father, the young girl said to him, “Father, do you wish to save your own soul and see mine destroyed? Do you not know what the Lord says? That the *good shepherd giveth his life for his sheep*?”²⁰ And again she said <to him>, “The one who saves the soul is like the one who [p. 88] created it.”

3. Hearing these things, her father was moved to compunction at her words, for she was weeping and lamenting. He therefore began to speak to her and said, “Child, what am I to do with you? You are a female, and I desire to enter a monastery. How then can you remain with me? For it is through the members of your sex that the devil wages war on the servants of God.” To which his daughter responded, “Not so, my lord, for I shall not enter <the monastery> as you say, but I shall first cut o the hair of my head, and clothe myself like a man, and then enter the monastery with you.”

4. The <father>, after distributing all his possessions among the poor, followed the advice of his daughter and cut o the hair of her head, dressed her in the clothing of a man, and changed her name to Marinos.²¹ And he charged her saying, “Child, take heed how you conduct yourself, for you are about to enter into the midst of fire, for a woman in no way enters a <male>

¹⁸ This title is based on Richard, “La Vie Ancienne,” 113. The numbering and division of paragraphs follow the Richard edition.

¹⁹ In another version of the *vita*, the wife is called Eugenia; cf. L. Clugnet, *ROC* 6 (1901), 575.3.

²⁰ Jn. 10:11.

²¹ In this *vita*, the father transformed the gender of his daughter (although it was her idea), whereas in the *vita* of Matrona she herself was responsible for the disguise.

monastery. Preserve yourself therefore blameless before God, so that we may fulfill our vows.” And taking his daughter, he entered the cenobitic monastery.

5. Day by day, the child advanced in all the virtues, in obedience, in humility, and in much asceticism. After she lived thus for a few years in the monastery, <some of the monks> considered her to be a eunuch, for she was beardless and of delicate voice. Others considered that <this condition> was instead the result of her great asceticism, for she partook of food only every second day.

6. Eventually it came to pass that her father died, but <Mary, remaining in the monastery>, <continued> to progress in asceticism and in obedience, so that [p. 89] she received from God the gift of healing those who were troubled by demons. For if she placed her hand upon any of the sick, they were immediately healed.

7. Living together within the cenobitic monastery were forty men. Now once a month four of the brethren were officially sent forth to minister to the needs²² of the monastery, because they were responsible for looking after other monks as well, the solitaries, <who lived> outside <the community>. Midway on their journey was an inn, where both those going and those coming were, on account of the great distance, accustomed to <stop and> rest. Moreover, the innkeeper provided <the monks> with many courtesies, accommodating them each with particular solicitude.

8. One day, the superior, summoning *abba*²³ Marinos, said to him, “Brother, I know your conduct, how in all things you are perfect and unwavering in your obedience. Be willing then to go forth and attend to the needs of the monastery, for the brethren are annoyed that you do not go forth unto service. For in doing this you will obtain a greater reward from God.”²⁴ At

²² “To minister to the needs”-ἀπεστέλλοντο εἰς τὰς ἀποκρίσεις. Cf. Dorotheos of Gaza, *On Refusal to Judge our Neighbor* (PG 88:1696 ; Eng. trans. in E. P. Wheeler, *Dorotheos of Gaza, Discourses and Sayings* [Kalamazoo, Mich., 1977], 138): “Those who run messages (οἱ ἀποκριτάριοι), who have outside ministries, are the feet. . . . Are you the foot? Do your errands.” For the term ἀποκριτάριος, cf. also Cyril of Scythopolis, *The Life of St. Abraamius*, ed. E. Schwartz, *Kyrillos von Skythopolis* (Leipzig, 1939), 244.7; trans. R. M. Price, *Lives of the Monks of Palestine* (Kalamazoo, Mich., 1991), 273.

²³ *Abbas* or *abba* was a term of respect for monks in general, not limited to abbots.

²⁴ Cf. Justinian, *Novella* 133.5 (*CIC* 3:672), which strongly urges the appointment of either aged or eunuch monks to the position of *apokrisiarios* to avoid the likelihood of sexual liaisons.

these words, Marinos fell down at his feet and said, "Father, pray for me, and wherever you direct me, there I shall go."

9. One day, therefore, when Marinos had gone forth unto service along with three other brethren, and while they were all lodging at the inn, it came to pass that a certain soldier deflowered the innkeeper's daughter, who thereupon became pregnant. The soldier said to her, "If your father should learn of this, say that 'It was the young monk who slept with me.'" Her father, upon realizing that she was pregnant, questioned her closely, saying, "How did this happen to you?" And she placed [p. 90] the blame on Marinos, saying, "The young monk from the monastery, the attractive one called Marinos, he made me pregnant."

10. Thoroughly outraged, the innkeeper made his way to the monastery, shouting accusations and saying, "Where is that charlatan, that pseudo-Christian, whom you call a Christian?" When one of the stewards²⁵ came to meet him, he said, "Welcome." But the <innkeeper> replied, "The hour was an evil one in which I made your acquaintance." In like manner he said to the father superior, "May I never see another monk," and other such things. When he was asked why he was saying these things, he answered, "I had but a single daughter, who I hoped would support me in my old age, but look at what Marinos has done to her, he whom you call a Christian—he has deflowered her and she is pregnant." The superior said to him, "What can I do for you, brother, since <Marinos> is not here at the moment? When he returns from his duties, however, I will have no recourse but to expel him from the monastery."

11. When Marinos returned with the three other monks, the superior said to him, "Is this your conduct, and is this your asceticism, that while lodging at the inn you deflowered the innkeeper's daughter? And now her father, coming here, has made us all a spectacle to the laity." Hearing these things, Marinos fell upon his face, saying, "Forgive me, father, for I have sinned as a man." But the superior, filled with wrath, cast him out saying, "Never again shall you enter this monastery."

12. Leaving [p. 91] the monastery, <Marinos> immediately sat down outside the monastery gate, and there endured the freezing cold and the burning heat. Thereafter, those entering the monastery used to ask him, "Why are you sitting outdoors?" To which he would reply, "Because I fornicated and have been expelled from the monastery."

13. When the day arrived for the innkeeper's daughter to give birth, she

²⁵ "Steward" = ἀποκρισιάριος.

bore a male child, and the girl's father took the <infant> and brought it to the monastery. Finding Marinos sitting outside the gate, he threw the child down before him and said, "Here is the child which you have wickedly engendered. Take it." And immediately the innkeeper departed.²⁶

14. Marinos, picking up the child, was filled with distress and said, "Yes, I have received the just reward for my sins, but why should this wretched babe perish here with me?" Accordingly he undertook to procure milk from some shepherds, and so nursed the child as its father. But the distress that overwhelmed him was not all, for the child, whimpering and wailing, continually soiled his [Marinos'] garments.

15. After the passage of three years, the monks entreated the superior saying, "Father, forgive this brother; his punishment is sufficient, for he has confessed his fault to all." But when they saw that the superior remained unmoved, the brethren said, "If you do not receive him back, then we too will leave the monastery. For how can we ask God to forgive our sins, when today marks the third year that he has been sitting in the open air [p. 92] beyond the gate, and we do not forgive him?"

16. The superior, considering these things, said to them, "For the sake of your love, I accept him." And summoning Marinos he said to him, "On account of the sin which you have committed, you are not worthy to resume your former position here. Nevertheless, on account of the brethren's love, I accept you back into our ranks, but only as the last and least of all." At this Marinos began to weep and said, "Even this is a great thing for me, my lord, for you have deemed me worthy to come inside the gate, so that I might thus be given the honor of serving the holy fathers."

17. Consequently the superior assigned him the lowliest chores of the monastery, and he performed them <all> scrupulously and with great devotion. But the child was forever following him about, crying and saying, "Dada, Dada," and such things as children say when they wish to eat. Thus, in addition to the <usual> trials and temptations that beset a monk, Marinos was continually anxious about procuring and providing sustenance for the child. When the boy grew up, he remained in the monastery, and having been raised in the practice of virtues he was deemed worthy of the monastic habit.

18. One day, after a considerable passage of time, the superior inquired

²⁶ Cf. J. Boswell, *The Kindness of Strangers. The Abandonment of Children in Western Europe from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance* (New York, 1988), 138–97, esp. 189–97.

of the brethren, “Where is Marinos? Today is the third day that I have not seen him singing in the choir. He was always the first to be found standing there before the start of the service. Go to his cell, and see whether he is lying ill.” Going [p. 93] to his cell, they found him dead, and informed the superior, saying, “Brother Marinos has died.” But the <superior> said, “In what state did his wretched soul depart? What defense can he make for the sin that he committed?” <Having thus spoken, the superior then> directed that <Marinos> be buried. But as they were preparing to wash him, they discovered that he was a woman, and shrieking, they all began to cry out in a single voice, “Lord, have mercy.”

19. The superior, hearing their cries, asked them, “What troubles you so?” And they said, “Brother Marinos is a woman.” Drawing near and seeing <for himself>, the <superior> cast himself down at her feet, and with many tears cried out, “Forgive me, for I have sinned against you. I shall lie dead here at your holy feet until such time as I hear forgiveness for all the wrongs that I have done you.” And while he was uttering many such lamentations, as well as things yet more remarkable, a voice spoke to him saying, “Had you acted knowingly, this sin would not be forgiven you. But since you acted unknowingly, your sin is forgiven.”

20. The superior thereupon sent <word> to the innkeeper to come and see him. When he arrived, the superior said to him, “Marinos is dead.” The innkeeper replied, “May God forgive him, for he has made of my house a desolation.” But the superior said [p. 94] to him, “You must repent, brother, for you have sinned before God. You also incited me by your words, and for your sake I also sinned, for Marinos is a woman.” Hearing this, the innkeeper was astonished and wondered greatly at his words. And the superior took the innkeeper and showed him that <Marinos> was a woman. At this <the innkeeper> began to lament and to marvel at what had happened.

21. They buried her holy remains and placed them in blessed caskets,²⁷ all the while glorifying God with psalms and hymns. When these things were

²⁷ “Blessed caskets” = θήκαις όσίαις. It is not clear whether this phrase is simply a poetic plural (as in the *vita* of Athanasia of Aegina [no. 6 in this volume], ed. Halkin, chap. 9, p. 186), or if it designates a double casket, perhaps similar to the one described by Sozomenos, *Ecclesiastical History*, IX.17 (PG 67:1629): “A double casket, the inner one of wood, and the outer of lead (λαρνάκα διπλήν, ξυλινην την ενδον, εν μολυβδινη τη εξωθεν). L. Robert has noted, however, that “le mot θηκη est des plus vagues dans la terminologie des monuments funeraires” (*Hellenica* 11–12 [1960], 387).

completed, the innkeeper's daughter appeared, possessed by a demon, and confessing the truth that she had been seduced by the soldier. And she was immediately healed at the tomb of the blessed Mary, and everyone glorified God because of this sign, and because of <Mary's> patient endurance, for she vigorously endured <her trials> until death, refusing to make herself known. Let us then, beloved, zealously emulate the blessed Mary and her patient endurance, so that on the day of judgment we may find mercy from our Lord Jesus Christ, to Whom belongs glory and dominion to the ages of ages. Amen.