

What Does It Mean When a Woman Is Called or Portrayed as a Man?

The Idea of Gender Transformation in Early Christian Texts and in Modern Times

The *Gospel of Thomas*, the most important non-canonical early Christian source containing teachings attributed to Jesus, ends with a brief, but dramatic dialogue between Jesus and his disciples, for whom Peter is the spokesperson. The topic of their conversation is the position of Mary Magdalene within the circle of disciples:

Simon Peter said to them, “Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of life.” Jesus said: “I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven” (*Gospel of Thomas* 114).

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It becomes clear in the text that Jesus does not agree with Peter’s claim about women’s worthlessness, but sides rather with Mary Magdalene and other women in the argument. According to Jesus, women are worthy of life and they too may enter the kingdom of heaven. By implication, he also insists that Mary Magdalene, and thus presumably also other women, can belong to the circle of disciples on one condition. They must be transformed and make themselves male. What on earth does this mean? What kind of transformation is the text talking about? To be sure, this ancient text cannot speak about sex-change in the modern sense, but what can then be meant with this ‘making oneself male?’

A few weeks ago, I received a letter from a female reader of the *Gospel of Thomas* who was so puzzled by the ending of the text as it now stands that she was convinced that the original text must have been reshaped in some way. Even the scholars who have worked extensively with the *Gospel of Thomas* are fairly unsure about the possible meaning of what Jesus said. This is illustrated by the variety of interpretations which have been advanced (Marjanen 1996: 48–55). At this point, we cannot go into these interpretations but we look at other early Christian texts in which similar gender transformation language is used and in which that language and its

function seem to be more easily construed. Those texts will introduce us more thoroughly to the notion of ‘females becoming male’ and will shed some light on the last lines of the *Gospel of Thomas* as well.

Becoming male: means of protection and demonstration of decency

There are texts in which a woman is said to put on a male appearance, either by cutting her hair or donning male dress to hide her gender. This kind of disguise is understandable in a culture, such as the ancient Mediterranean culture, in which women were not, for example, expected to travel alone or together with men who were not part of their family or at least part of their closest circle of acquaintances. The male impersonation of women could thus serve as a means of protection from violations and as a demonstration of decency. To give one example, in a Syrian hagiographical story, Pelagia, a wealthy, beautiful prostitute of Antioch, hears a moving sermon delivered by a visiting Egyptian bishop, Nonnos, and is converted and baptized by him (Brock and Ashbrook Harvey 1997: 40–62). After her baptism, she renounces her wealth and decides to retire to the life of a recluse on the Mount of Olives. Putting on a male dress, she is able to leave Antioch secretly. After arriving at the Mount of Olives, she continues to hide her real identity and becomes known as the eunuch Pelagios. She has lost her earlier beauty but now she becomes famous because of her virtuous life and performance of miracles. It is only when she dies that people become aware of her real biological sex.

Becoming male: a metaphor for spiritual advancement

Even in the example of Pelagia, a means of protection and a demonstration of decency are not the only and probably not even the primary reasons for male impersonation. The story ends with a somewhat amusing, but rather revealing, reference to people’s reaction when they find the dead body of Pelagia: “Praise to you, Lord; how many hidden saints you have on earth – and not just men, but women as well!” Between the lines, the people’s surprise suggests that women were not expected to exhibit as much sanctity and spiritual advancement as men. Hence, the woman Pelagia must have undergone her ‘gender transformation’ and become the man Pelagios to be allowed to assume a higher spiritual existence.

A similar example is offered by Thecla, a female companion of Paul in the 2nd century *Acts of Paul and Thecla* (Schneemelcher 1992). Attracted by the teachings of Paul to the extent that her interest in his company was almost akin to that of an admirer (19–20), Thecla deserts her fiancé and commits herself to chastity which is the central theme of Paul’s proclamation (10). Being temporarily separated from Paul, Thecla is seized and tortured because of her faith, but then released. After that she baptizes herself and puts on a male cloak (40). Together with some young men and women, she then goes to look for Paul and meets him in a town called Myra. After Paul was informed of all that had happened to her, he authorized her to “go and teach the word of God” (41). The fact that she travels together with her male and female companions indicates that her male impersonation does not serve to disguise her sex and thus to protect her from violations. It is, however, seen as a concrete sign of her spiritual advancement in terms of devotion to the ascetic life.

Male impersonation also had a subversive dimension. The Hellenistic-Jewish philosopher Philo presents the women members of a Jewish religious community near Alexandria, the so-called Therapeutae, as having attained a kind of relative equality with men (*De vita contemplativa*; Colson *et al.* 9:112–168). In his description of ordinary women, however, he insists that they are by no means allowed to consider themselves on a par with men or to transgress their normal gender roles. They are explicitly not supposed to assume a male appearance (*De virtutibus* 21; Colson *et al.* 8:174–75). Attitudes like Philo's may to some extent explain why gender transformation language did not always result in concrete actions in the texts. 'Being male' represented spiritual advancement also in those cases where women did not undergo an external male impersonation, but where their real or assumed spiritual power and influence elevated them in a higher spiritual hierarchy and they were called men.

In his *Homiliae in Josue* (Sources chrétiennes 71: 267), the early 3rd century theologian Origen states: "It is the difference between hearts which decides whether somebody is a man or a woman. How many women are there who before God belong to strong men, and how many men must be counted among weak and sluggish women." Wanting to emphasize the great significance of his sister as his instructor, the 4th century theologian Gregory of Nyssa calls Macrina a man (*Vita Macrinae* 1; Sources chrétiennes 178: 140). In turn, another 4th century theologian, John Chrysostom, praises his woman disciple Olympias as follows: "Don't say a 'woman' but 'what a man!' because this is a man, despite her physical appearance" (*Life of Olympias* 3; cf. Torjesen 1993: 211). To be sure, these 'compliments' did not prevent these male theologians from denigrating women in general (Clark 2004: 177). In fact, the whole idea of 'female becoming male' was based on the culturally conditioned fact that all that had to do with the feminine represented that which was conceived as weak, irrational, unstable, and spiritually inferior. Masculine terminology, on the other hand, symbolized all that which was valiant, rational, courageous, immovable, and spiritually perfect (Meyer 1985).

As femaleness functioned as a negative religious symbol, its opposite, i.e., maleness, thus became a metaphor for spiritual progress, even for salvation. Although the metaphorical speech about maleness and femaleness was supposed to affect all people's lives, there was also a tendency to start limiting this kind of symbolic use of gendered terminology to women only. In other words, spiritually ordinary women are 'females', whereas spiritually extraordinary women can 'become male' or 'like males', whatever this meant in each particular case. The last lines of the *Gospel of Thomas* are likely to be seen against this backdrop as well. The opportunity for Mary Magdalene and other women to belong to the circle of disciples depends on their willingness and capacity to become male, i.e. spiritually advanced. In the context of the *Gospel of Thomas*, this most probably meant some kind of ascetic state. According to Jesus, through this, women reached the same spiritual level as their male counterparts: women might thus become living spirits "resembling...males".

Becoming male: obtaining male qualities for the successful endurance of hardships

When early Christian texts discuss the idea of gender transformation in terms of 'females becoming male', they do not necessarily make an

explicit reference to a concrete or metaphorical male impersonation. For example, although the expression ‘becoming male’ occurs very rarely in texts which portray martyred scenes of women, the idea of gender transformation is often present in them. It may take place by assuming qualities ordinarily attributed to masculinity. It is very common that women martyrs are described as Christian gladiators, athletes or soldiers. To give just one example, in a Syrian martyrdom account *Febronia*, in which the women of a convent face the challenge of being seized by Roman soldiers and taken to court, the abbess of the convent, Bryene, encourages the title character of the text, Febronia, saying: “Remember the wrestlers who went before you, who underwent a glorious martyrdom, receiving a crown of victory from the heavenly ringmaster of the light. These people were not just men, but they include women and children as well” (Brock and Ashbrook Harvey 1997: 150–176).

In the gladiatorial context, two significant male characteristics, courage and strength, were needed. In addition, Christian martyrdom accounts refer to the endurance (Lat. *patientia*, Gr. *hypomonē*) of the martyrs, male and female alike. Although *patientia* (*hypomonē*) was normally seen as a female virtue associated with passivity and more precisely with giving birth, in the context of athletic contests and political fights, it took on a special nuance. This is illustrated by Seneca, the 1st century Roman philosopher and politician, who emphasized that the endurance requested of the athletes and those who were politically tortured was ‘courageous endurance’, as distinct from womanish *patientia* (Shaw 1996). Thus, in that context it became a male quality. When female martyrs were also described as exhibiting this male *patientia*, it, in fact, signified a kind of transformation from femaleness to maleness.

The discussion about the use and function of the early Christian gender transformation language can be summarized as follows: (1) If gendered language is used to describe spirituality or a Christian way of living more generally, feminine terminology stands for a less successful performance, if not for a failure; (2) ‘becoming male’ is a symbol of spiritual progress; (3) femaleness can be transformed into maleness through a religious conversion, spiritual growth, or the endurance of hardships; (4) the transformation may be a mental or spiritual process (conversion, spiritual growth) or a change in lifestyle (e.g. acceptance of sexual asceticism or martyrdom). In those cases, it may apply to both sexes, but it may also take place through concrete actions by which one alters appearance (e.g. a woman putting on male dress or cutting her hair); (5) although ‘becoming male’ language is chauvinistic, at least from our modern perspective, in early Christianity it was not necessarily consciously employed to denigrate women who were called or portrayed as men. In the *Gospel of Thomas* 114, for example, the Jesus of the text, by indicating his willingness to make Mary and other women ‘male’, elevates her to the same level as her male companions both in the circle of disciples and the kingdom of heaven.

Women made ‘male’ in modern times

The use of gender transformation language is not only a phenomenon of bygone days. Even in our modern days, women are called and portrayed as men although the function of gender transformation language is not necessarily the same. For the sake of comparison, let me give three examples. The first comes from the same cultural area as our ancient examples

but it is much more recent. Anton Blok, an anthropologist who investigated the male and female roles in a Mediterranean society of the 1970s, interviewed a male informant who described a woman living in his village who was forced by circumstances to take care of many things which were considered men's affairs as follows: "... she is a woman who only lacks testicles to make her a man" (Gilmore 1987: 9). Since the informant clearly regarded his characterization of the woman as favorable, it actually resembles pretty much some of our ancient examples. Without understanding the chauvinistic implications of his statement, the informant thought that presenting the woman as 'nearly a man' is a compliment in the same way as the Jesus of the *Gospel of Thomas* saw his own statement about the 'male' Mary Magdalene.

In even a more sophisticated modern setting, characterized in principle by non-chauvinistic attitudes and equality between the sexes, gender transformation language is used to reinforce the stereotypical notions of gender roles. Let me give you two examples. The first relates to the hostage drama in the Persian Gulf last spring when some British Royal Marines were captured by Iranian soldiers without offering any resistance. In order to be freed from the awkward situation, the British Marines agreed to collaborate with their captors to the extent that they both apologized for their actions and criticized the politics of their own country. The American military historian Ralph Peters was highly annoyed about the sheepish behavior of the British soldiers in his article in the *New York Post* (April 3, 2007). His criticism reached its climax in the rhetorical question: "Was Margaret Thatcher the last real man in Britain?" Here, gender transformation language takes on a function somewhat different from that in the ancient texts. (I have found only one example of similar use in the ancient texts I have studied.) Although the rhetorical question certainly says something about Mr. Peters' perception of Mrs. Thatcher's character, its primary function is not to speak about her. In this context, a woman is called a man because somebody wants to disparage real men by implying that their behavior in this particular situation was womanish.

The second example relates to the coming presidential elections in the USA, and I found it by 'googling'. I wanted to see what happens when I search for information by combining two entries, one being the phrase "what a man", and the other being the name of a prominent woman politician. Madeleine Albright did not give interesting results, but Hillary Clinton did. I found a website entitled "Hillary Clinton is the Right Man for the Job." Under the title, there is a picture in which Hillary Clinton is viewed from behind with her face turned toward the camera. She is standing in front of a urinal and the picture wants to give the impression that she is urinating in a manly fashion. This tasteless picture makes it clear that, unlike the ancient versions of gender transformation language, the use of the term 'man' on the title of the page is not a benign attempt to say something positive about a woman who is called a man. The text and the picture serve not only to undermine the credibility of a candidate for the highest political office in the world, they go even further. In an extremely chauvinistic manner, the website subscribes to a conservative notion that a real woman should not even aspire to enter an arena traditionally belonging to men. Gender transformation language is thus used for the denigration of the entire female sex.

This last modern example does not actually have any correspondence in ancient sources. In antiquity, masculine terminology and masculine qualities were so clearly linked with positive values and human characteristics that their use in connection with complimenting women was somehow understandable, despite the chauvinistic connotations these kinds of compliments inevitably have from a modern perspective. The last modern example, in turn, exhibits a use of gender transformation language which cannot be justified in any situation.

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