

Askesis and the Appearance of Holiness

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A telling feature of many of the recent titles and subtitles in fields related to late ancient studies is the appeal of the word “making”: the making of orthodoxy, the making of a heretic, the making of a saint, the making of asceticism, making sex, making men, and so on.¹ The use of the word “making” is so appropriate because it communicates an understanding of the “constructed” or historically contingent quality of the phenomenon, personality, or idea examined. This seems particularly crucial for those interested in the social aspects of religious behavior and ideology.

This paper is indebted to several of the studies just mentioned, and is shaped by Peter Brown’s observation that much of late ancient literature functioned to *make* persons into classics,² as well as to the idea that texts sometimes participate in the process of “*making* up people,”³ that is, they create and confer new identities and the classifications by which

1. Rowan Williams, ed., *The Making of Orthodoxy: Essays in Honor of Henry Chadwick* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Virginia Burrus, *The Making of a Heretic: Gender, Authority, and the Priscillianist Controversy*, *The Transformation of the Classical Heritage*, 24 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Samuel Rubenson, *The Letters of St. Antony: Monasticism and the Making of a Saint*, *Studies in Antiquity and Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995); Susanna Elm, “*Virgins of God*”: *The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity*, *Oxford Classical Monographs* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994); Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990); Maud W. Gleason, *Making Men: Sophists and Self-Presentation in Ancient Rome* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

2. Peter Brown, “The Saint as Exemplar in Late Antiquity,” *Representations* 1.2 (1983): 1.

3. Ian Hacking, “Making Up People,” in *Reconstructing Individualism: Autonomy, Individuality, and the Self in Western Thought*, ed. Thomas C. Heller, Morton Sosna, and David E. Wellbery (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), 222–36 (emphasis added).

behavior and conformity can be measured.⁴ Specifically, I will examine the image of the Christian virgin as delineated in the male-authored texts on virginity from the fourth and early fifth century, in order to show how the rhetoric of appearance and lifestyle might be integrated into a social analysis of the “making” of the early Christian ascetic ideal. My analysis will thus have a fairly wide focus on a group of late ancient texts, of similar genre, which share much common material and argumentation even if they are distinguished significantly by their particular contexts and audiences as well as by important differences in the type of living arrangements or organizations reflected in each text. While close to two dozen sources from the early fourth to the early fifth century could be fruitfully examined,⁵ I will rely primarily on works of Jerome, Athanasius, John Chrysostom, Basil of Ancyra, Ambrose of Milan, and Eusebius of Emesa. I am interested in the ways in which the rhetoric and ideology of virginity found in the standard treatments of virginity confer identity through classifying lifestyle models, and how this process relates to male authority and to the construction of heretical deviance. If we understand the *de virginitate* to be at least in part a means by which ascetic aspirations of individual women are channeled into an acceptable pattern of behavior that confirms the authority and virtue of male leaders and bishops, then the fixation on decorum, the fear of deception by false appearance, and the warnings against heretics and flatterers—all standard features of the genre—become essential to ascetic discourse.⁶

4. Ibid.; Mary Douglas, *How Institutions Think* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 100–102.

5. See the discussion in P. Thomas Camelot, “Les traités ‘de virginitate’ au IV^e siècle,” in *Mystique et continence: Travaux scientifiques du VII^e Congrès international d’Avon*, Études Carmélitaines, 13 (Brugge: Desclée de Brouwer, 1952), 273–92. Camelot lists several authors after the beginning of the fourth century: Methodius, Athanasius, Basil of Caesarea, Basil of Ancyra, Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrysostom, Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine (274–75). Michel Aubineau adds also Eusebius of Emesa, Gregory Nazianzus, Evagrius, and the author of the anonymous homily on virginity discussed in this paper (*Grégoire de Nysse: Traité de la virginité* [SC 119: 23–24]).

6. Useful secondary sources on the development of early Christian asceticism in general and the practice and ideology of virginity in particular include Susanna Elm, *Virgins of God*; Kate Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996); David Amand de Mendieta, “La virginité chez Eusèbe d’Émèse et l’ascétisme familial dans la première moitié du IV^e siècle,” *RHE* 50 (1955): 777–820; Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, Lectures on the History of Religions, 13 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); David Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford:

As Kate Cooper has recently observed, asceticism permitted a new system of “social ranking” for women at a time when social rank and prestige seemed locked into the traditional categories of wealth, family, and marriage.⁷ I will argue that in the numerous works devoted to the praise of virginity and the regulation of the virginal life, we find both a firming up of the institutional contours of the virgin’s lifestyle as well as a negotiation of her own new social identity in terms of officially defined choices which are “naturalized,” or perhaps we should say “super-naturalized,” by being grounded in the theology of the angelic life and espousal to Christ.⁸ In other words, the virgin’s status is taken out of the realm of the merely personal or bodily by means of the ideology of virginity, which locates virginity in the realm of the angels and betrothes the virgin to Christ himself. All of the virgin’s behaviors and the appearance of her body itself become, in this context, emblematic of her social status and her allegiances, rather than the simple results of individual whim or undisciplined self-styling.

The works praising virginity typically include detailed instructions for proper conduct and activities by which the virgin is distinguished from “the world” and from “worldly” persons. Indeed, such directives are so common, both in the genre and in ancient moral discourse, that it is easy to miss their profound role in the delineation of virginal identity. Allow me briefly to review some of the typical advice. Virgins should not go about in public, for example, but should stay secluded and keep to themselves even when attending vigils or services. Public excursions

Clarendon Press, 1995); Elizabeth Castelli, “Virginity and its Meaning for Women’s Sexuality in Early Christianity,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 2.1 (1986): 61–88; Camelot, “Traité ‘de virginitate’ au IV^e siècle,” 273–92; Elizabeth A. Clark, “Ascetic Renunciation and Feminine Advancement: A Paradox of Late Ancient Christianity,” *ATHR* 63 (1981): 240–57; eadem, *Jerome, Chrysostom, and Friends: Essays and Translations*, Studies in Women and Religion, 2 (Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1979); eadem, “Theory and Practice in Late Ancient Asceticism: Jerome, Chrysostom, and Augustine,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 5 (Fall 1989): 25–46, 298–307; Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Misogynism and Virginal Feminism in the Fathers of the Church,” in *Religion and Sexism: Images of Women in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974), 150–83; and see my study *The Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998).

7. Cooper, *Virgin and the Bride*, 82–87.

8. On naturalization of social classifications as a stabilizing factor in institutions, see Douglas, *How Institutions Think*, 48; and on the naturalization of differences in lifestyle, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 172.

expose the virgin not only to the dangers of outright physical attack, but more importantly to the associations, habits, and conversations that might lure her away from her own purpose and muddy the distinction between her identity and “theirs.” Jerome, not surprisingly, makes the point with flair. Instructing the virgin to avoid the company of married and aristocratic women, Jerome tells her not to look too often on the life which she has despised in preference for virginity: “learn in this way a holy pride; know that you are better than them.”⁹ The language of haughtiness and scorn serves to reinforce the social *distance* between the virgin and married women.

Likewise, the virgin’s clothing should be modest and simple, and her body should be completely covered, even in her own home. She should avoid exposing her body and causing scandal at the public baths, and choose instead to wash modestly—like a dove, says Athanasius—delicately splashing at a basin.¹⁰ Even the virgin’s speaking and listening are limited as part of a spareness and economy of movement and gesture that signify her detachment from worldly manners and concerns. Athanasius instructs virgins to follow the example of Mary: “her words were calm; her voice, moderate; she did not cry out.”¹¹ And Eusebius of Emesa describes the speech proper to the virgin as “chaste, not ostentatious or abusive or shameful.”¹² Her walk, of course, is in no way provocative or loose, but is also subject to the discipline and control that mark the virgin’s self-presentation.¹³ Finally, her restricted eating not only assists physiologically in the preservation of chastity, as Basil of

9. Jerome, *Ep.* 22.16 (*CSEL* 54:163).

10. J. Lebon, ed., “Athanasiana Syriaca II: Une lettre attribuée à Saint Athanase d’Alexandrie,” *Mus* 41 (1928): 196. I am using Lebon’s French translation of the “Letter to Virgins Who Have Gone to Jerusalem to Pray and Have Returned.” For discussions, see Michel Aubineau, “Les écrits de Saint Athanase sur la virginité,” *RAM* 31 (1955): 151–53; David Brakke, “The Authenticity of the Ascetic Athanasiana,” *Or* 63 (1994): 25–27. English translation, “Second Letter to Virgins,” in Brakke, *Athanasius*, 297.

11. “Letter to Virgins” (L.-Th. Lefort, trans., *S. Athanase: Lettres festales et pastorales en copte*, CSCO 151 [Louvain: L. Durbecq, 1955], 60). For discussions, see Aubineau, “Les écrits de Saint Athanase,” 160–69; Brakke, “Authenticity of the Ascetic Athanasiana,” 19–25. English translation, “First Letter to Virgins,” in Brakke, *Athanasius*, 278.

12. “et loquelae castae et non iactatae aut maledicae aut turpes.” Eusebius of Emesa, *Hom.* 7.23 (É. M. Buytaert, *Eusèbe d’Émèse: Discours conservés en Latin*, *Spicilegium Sacrum Lovaniense* 26 [Louvain: Spicilegium Sacrum, 1953], 191). See de Mendieta, “Eusèbe d’Émèse,” 777–820.

13. John Chrysostom, *De virg.* 63 (*SC* 125: 328).

Ancyra's treatise argues definitively,¹⁴ but also sets her apart from the crowd both by the specific choices and avoidances of foods as well as by her separation from the social ritual of the meal that builds communities and families. In short, writes John Chrysostom, "her eye, her tongue, her demeanor (σχεμα, *habitus*), her walk, and altogether everything is impressed with (from χαρακτηρίζω) an internal discipline."¹⁵

The rhetoric of virginity, with its seeming obsession with bodily details such as these, may thus be examined in light of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of lifestyle, manners, and tastes. Manner, he writes, is the "ideal weapon in strategies of distinction" or "marking distances." But for manner to accomplish the task of marking distance it must communicate. As Bourdieu notes, "'manner' is a symbolic manifestation whose meaning and value depend as much on the perceivers as on the producer."¹⁶ In the treatise on virginity we see the instruction in manner and lifestyle as well as the instilling of the tastes by which such behaviors will be judged as virtuous, honorable, and worthy of imitation, rather than as simple idiosyncrasies.¹⁷ The virgin's lifestyle thus functions as a kind of "brand," to use Bourdieu's term,¹⁸ by which social status is both claimed by the wearer and recognized by the observer. Ambrose insists that no one should need to inquire concerning a virgin's status; it should be clear at first glance from the evidence of her conduct and bearing.¹⁹

Indeed, advocates of the ascetic lifestyle are clear that the individual's appearance and demeanor are subject to observation and assessment. Here they make use of the language and models of physiognomy, that is, the interpretation of character based on the appearance of the body, which has been recently elucidated by Maud Gleason and Tamsyn Barton.²⁰ Ambrose describes Mary as the perfect model for virgins:

14. Basil of Ancyra, *De virg.* 5–12 (PG 30:680A–693C). On the physiology of fasting in Basil's treatise, see my *Burden of the Flesh*, 81–92.

15. John Chrysostom, *De virg.* 63 (SC 125:328).

16. Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 66.

17. Taste "raises the differences inscribed in the physical order of bodies to the symbolic order of significant distinctions" (Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 175).

18. Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 179.

19. Ambrose, *De virg.* 3.3 (PL 16:235C). On woman as "spectacle" and "object of the gaze" in the ascetic writing of John Chrysostom, see Blake Leyerle, "John Chrysostom on the Gaze," *JECS* 1 (1993): 159–74.

20. On physiognomy in late antiquity as related to gender, see Gleason, *Making Men* and Tamsyn S. Barton, *Power and Knowledge: Astrology, Physiognomics, and Medicine under the Roman Empire*, *The Body, in Theory: Histories of Cultural Materialism* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994); see also Elizabeth C. Evans, *Physiognomics in the Ancient World*, *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, 59.5 (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1969).

“There was nothing fierce in her eyes/look, nothing impudent in her acts, no feeble gesture, no loose step, no petulant voice, so that the very outward appearance of her body might be the image of her soul (*mentis*).”²¹ Such inspirational images are linked, however, to the idea of judgment. In different texts the virgin’s parents, the bishop, the reader, the public, Christ as heavenly spouse, and the virgin herself are cast into the role of physiognomist. The unknown author of a homily devoted to virginity instructs parents to reserve support for their daughter’s desire to remain a virgin until they are able to judge her intentions and suitability. Are “her steps honorable, her movements well-ordered and her eye respectful?” Is her desire human or heavenly? How intense are “her fasts and her piety in general?” Only after her activities and movements hold up to such scrutiny should the daughter be dedicated to Christ. The father also judges the *son’s* general appearance for signs of agitation or weakness before encouraging *him* to a life of chastity.²²

As an earthly husband examines his bride’s exterior beauty, according to Athanasius of Alexandria, Christ the bridegroom examines his virgin bride’s “mind, appearance, lifestyle, behavior, gait, clothing, and will” for evidence of her interior character.²³ Basil of Ancyra likewise notes that the good virgin thinks only of pleasing Christ by her “judgment and movement and form and demeanor (σχομα).”²⁴ Further, she knows that she is always under the watchful eye of her bridegroom, who sees not only all of her actions but even all of her thoughts, whisperings, and glances.²⁵ In another passage, Basil notes that the virgin must exercise care when visiting with the “brothers in Christ,”²⁶ and focus on the inner character that is revealed by external appearance.

For because the souls which are in bodies are unable to converse nakedly (γυμνος) with each other concerning virtue, they use the bodies that cover them like instruments, by means of voice and look. And one who is unable to see the beauty of the soul walled up inside the body, or hear it by means of reason, sees the movements of the body in which it exists, and listening

21. Ambrose, *De virg.* 2.7 (PL 16:220B–C).

22. *Homilia de virginitate* 2.18, 5.61 (David Amand and Matthieu-Charles Moons, “Une curieuse homélie grecque inédite sur la virginité, adressée aux pères de famille,” *RBén* 63 [1953]: 39, 53).

23. Athanasius, *De virg.* (J. Lebon, ed. and trans., “Athanasiana Syriaca I: Un Λογος περιο παρθενοας attribué à saint Athanase d’Alexandrie,” *Mus* 40 [1927]: 219; English translation in Brakke, *Athanasius*, 303).

24. Basil of Ancyra, *De virg.* 36 (PG 30:740C–D).

25. Basil of Ancyra, *De virg.* 27–28 (PG 30:725B–728C).

26. On the identity of the brothers in Christ, see Elm, *Virgins of God*, 118–24.

to the voice through this (body), analogously assesses its beauty by these. And it is not only the voice or even the look that displays the image of the soul as if in a mirror; but even a man's dress and laugh and gait testify concerning it.²⁷

Knowing this, the virgin will be able to learn by means of externals what the character of the brother's soul is, and thus will not fall into the trap of loving the external man rather than his soul.²⁸ Thus the virgin here exercises what Tamsyn Barton has called the "diagnostic gaze" of the physiognomist,²⁹ even as she is herself its object throughout the text.

These few examples demonstrate several key points regarding the relation of the treatise on virginity to the social classification and self-definition of the virgin. First, the treatises illustrate what Brown characterized twenty five years ago as the particularly late ancient need for "the acting out of clearly defined rôles by figures with a function in society."³⁰ The texts establish or perpetuate the *contours* of ideal behavior and offer up the everyday tastes and manners by which the virgin's identity and $\Sigma\theta\omicron\varsigma$ (character and demeanor) is asserted. Indeed, each behavior and practice subject to the adjustments of *askesis*—be it eating, walking, or bathing—in itself expresses "a whole relationship to the social world."³¹ Each activity and each feature of her image crystallizes the virgin's distinction from "them": the worldly, the married, the pagan, the heretical. It does not really matter that the particular directives are not unique to Christian ascetic discourse (the ideals of the modest woman, a decorous walk, and light eating, for example, are common in ancient literature). What matters is that the behaviors are part of a constructed model of the "church's virgin."

Second, just as a physiognomist or physiognomic rhetoric can construct the body of an opponent, as Gleason and Barton have shown,³² so ascetic rhetoric both "makes" the virgin's body and encourages her (or the male ecclesiastical leader) to see her own lifestyle as the raw material in need of artistic fashioning and training. Hence the common ethical themes of models and imitation become especially refined in ascetic ethics, as the language of painting, sculpting, and molding is applied to the virgin's $\sigma\chi\omicron\mu\alpha$ and $\Sigma\theta\omicron\varsigma$. Concerning the importance of models for

27. Basil of Ancyra, *De virg.* 36 (PG 30:741A–B).

28. *Ibid.*

29. Barton, *Power and Knowledge*, 97–98.

30. Peter Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," *JRS* 61 (1971): 93.

31. Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 192.

32. Gleason, *Making Men*; Barton, *Power and Knowledge*, 97.

various roles, Jerome, for example, observes in his letter to Paulinus of Nola that every position in life has its proper leaders suitable for imitation. Philosophers, for example, should imitate Pythagoras or Plato, while poets model themselves on Homer or Terence, historians emulate Herodotus and orators learn from Demosthenes and others. In the same way, bishops and presbyters model themselves after the apostles and should try to “possess their dignity (*honorem*),” and monks like Jerome himself imitate Paul and Antony.³³

Of course the “ethics as art” motif is quite common in Christian and non-Christian literature. John Chrysostom, for example, makes good use of it in various moral instructions. He notes that Christian parents are like painters or sculptors responsible for molding their children’s characters: “Setting the canvas up each and every day, painters dab on it for their end result. Sculptors of marble, also, practice in the same way; removing what is not needed and adding what is lacking. So you as well: as if you were sculpting some statues, give all your time to making these wondrous statues for God.”³⁴ Likewise he suggests to catechumens that they think of their souls as paintings: just as the painter corrects the line-drawing before applying permanent color to a piece, so the Christian should correct habits and behavior before the “color” of baptism is added.³⁵

These images of artistic making become more pointed in the context of ascetic training and self-fashioning. The virgin’s character and the quality of her soul are artistic objects in Basil of Ancyra’s treatment. Her soul is like a canvas on which the mind, as a painter, has plainly and unmistakably depicted all of her thoughts. And just as a painter unveils the work of art to public view and for public evaluation, so also the virgin’s soul will be exposed and judged. (Basil goes even further in rather startling language to say that just as nakedness reveals bodily imperfections and blemishes [$\mu\approx\mu\omicron\iota$] when the covering of clothing is removed, so also all of the imperfections of the soul are clearly visible when the veil of flesh is removed.)³⁶ But Basil extends the language of artistic rendering to include not only the image of the soul but also the

33. Jerome, *Ep.* 58.5 (*CSEL* 54:533–34).

34. John Chrysostom, *De inan.* 22 (*SC* 188:106–8). And see Maud Gleason and Aline Rousselle on the practice, described in Soranus and others, of the nurse’s massaging of the infant male body with the goal of molding him into ideal masculine form (Gleason, *Making Men*, 70–73; Aline Rousselle, *Porneia: On Desire and the Body in Antiquity*, trans. Felicia Pheasant [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988], 53–54).

35. John Chrysostom, *Catech.* 2.3 (*PG* 49:235).

36. Basil of Ancyra, *De virg.* 30 (*PG* 30:729C–732C).

appearance of the virgin's body and overall external behavior. When conversing with male ascetics, her appearance should be like an image of God (Θεοῦ ἄγαλμα), drawn in precise features from the top of her head down to her feet, and she should appear (ὀφθεῖσα) in her demeanor and in her word (καὶ σχήματι, καὶ λόγῳ) as the true bride of Christ.³⁷

Thus with the desire to distinguish herself as the bride of Christ and image of God, Basil's virgin might achieve what Bourdieu has so aptly coined "a body for the job,"³⁸ that is, a body that communicates social identity and establishes distance by each one of its practices. What is more, practical ascetic exercises such as fasting, coupled with the control of movements and expression, are the tools by which the virgin constructs, or sculpts, or paints, or molds her own body in imitation of the ideal body presented to her by Basil, or Jerome, or Athanasius, or Ambrose. Basil encourages the bride of Christ to "make her look masculine and her voice hard, and in her walk and generally in every movement of her body, constrain the enticements of pleasure."³⁹ The virgin's body sculpted by ascetic training signals precisely what she *is*, and what she is *not*; she is not to be confused with the female whose bodily appearance attracts the male to pleasure. Likewise Ambrose insists that the virgin "instructs nature" by means of habit and training, in order to achieve the grave, modest, and restrained "look" that proclaims virginal status.⁴⁰

Essentially, Basil, Ambrose and the others instruct women to *become* virgins by *acting* like virgins, to claim the role by playing the role. Here I am reminded of Sartre's well-known description of the French waiter or *garçon de café* who realized his role by means of orchestrated, even exaggerated movements:

His movement is quick and forward, a little too precise, a little too rapid. He comes toward the patrons with a step a little too quick. He bends forward a little too eagerly; his voice, his eyes express an interest a little too solicitous for the order of the customer. Finally there he returns, trying to imitate in his walk the inflexible stiffness of some kind of automaton while carrying his tray with the recklessness of a tightrope walker by putting it in a perpetually unstable, perpetually broken equilibrium which he perpetually

37. Basil of Ancyra, *De virg.* 36 (PG 30:740D–741A). See also 1 (PG 30:672A), where Basil describes himself as an artist painting the image of the virgin in full color and displaying his canvas to the reader.

38. Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 191.

39. Basil of Ancyra, *De virg.* 18 (PG 30:708B).

40. Ambrose, *De virg.* 3.3 (PL 16:235C). See also John Chrysostom, *De virg.* 43 (SC 125:326–28).

re-establishes by a light movement of the arm and hand. All his behavior seems to us a game. . . . But what is he playing? We need not watch long before we can explain it: he is playing at being a waiter in a café. . . . The game is a kind of marking out and investigation. The child plays with his body in order to explore it, to take inventory of it; the waiter in the café plays with his condition in order to *realize* it.⁴¹

Although one might at first expect that there would be a more coercive element in the orchestration of the virgin's demeanor than the waiter's, as the requirements of virginal status are more explicitly stated than the rules for the garçon, Sartre reminds us that society demands conformity in any role or trade, and that conformity is rehearsed in public performance. He elaborates: "There are indeed many precautions to imprison a man in what he is, as if we lived in perpetual fear that he might escape from it, that he might break away and suddenly elude his condition."⁴² Since the body is "a social product which is the only tangible manifestation of the 'person,'"⁴³ perceived behavior becomes the evidence of true social identity.

At the same time, of course, the writers on virginity consistently *deny* that bodily externals are of primary importance, even as they lay out directives and regulations for *askesis*. This is a key element for understanding the relation of the ideology of virginity to the social control of virgins. The claim that bodily behavior, or even physical virginity itself, is not what is "really real" or truly distinctive of the virgin's status serves to elevate virginity above the contingencies of everyday life, cultural context, and individual whim to the highest realm of the angels or the innermost realm of the soul, thereby endowing the social classification of virginity with what Mary Douglas calls naturalizing and stabilizing principles.⁴⁴ For example, Basil of Ancyra insists repeatedly that "true virginity" is virginity of the soul, not the body. Indeed, he warns that it is possible to have a virginal body while lacking a virginal soul, to give all

41. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 59; quoted in Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1959), 75–76.

42. *Ibid.* See also Ian Hacking's discussion of this passage in "Making up People," 231–34.

43. Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 192.

44. Douglas, *How Institutions Think*, 45–53. See 45–46: "To acquire legitimacy, every kind of institution needs a formula that finds its rightness in reason and in nature. . . . Minimally, an institution is only a convention. . . . For a convention to turn into a legitimate social institution it needs a parallel cognitive convention to sustain it."

of one's efforts to the ascetic techniques that keep the body intact while neglecting to preserve the purity of one's soul.⁴⁵ Athanasius and the anonymous author of the homily on virginity similarly caution the woman not to be a virgin in appearance only or in body only, lest she risk being counted among the foolish virgins who, with no oil for their lamps, are kept out of paradise.⁴⁶ (We see the same sort of spiritualization of other ascetic practices, so that fasting, for example, is no longer about what one eats or does not eat, but becomes a moral stance of abstinence from sin.) Thus the bodily behavior is enjoined at the same time it is masked by the spiritual, psychological, or moral gloss.

The two primary foundational and legitimizing principles of the ideology of virginity are the angelic or divine "nature" of virginity (which makes the virginal lifestyle superior to any earthly choice), and the claim that the virgin is the bride of Christ (which makes their union superior to any earthly marriage and still grounds the virgin's identity in traditional patterns of gender).⁴⁷ In this way the virgin's status, and the expectations that accompany it, are presented as if they were born of no arbitrary circumstance, social influence, or institutional definition, but rather have their origin in divine nature and the plan of salvation itself. These *topoi* are so common in the literature that I will mention by way of example only one author, Eusebius of Emesa, who observes that the virginal way of life was brought to earth by the son of God, who makes humans into angels, and that the virgin lives in the company of angels. Although this lifestyle is not natural or human but supernatural and divine, it is not impossible for humans to attain.⁴⁸ Eusebius also elaborates at some length on the unhappiness and drudgery of human marriages in order to distinguish the freedom and detachment of the bride of Christ, yet he also warns the bride to watch her behavior so as not to incur the wrath of Christ as a jealous husband.⁴⁹ Thus along with (and in some tension with) the principle of "angelic" virginity, which is above all human enterprises, the categories of maleness and femaleness also function as naturalized principles in virginal status.

45. Basil of Ancyra, *De virg.* 2, 13 (*PG* 30:672B–673B, 693C).

46. For example, *Hom. de virg.* 7.94 (Amand and Moons, 59); Athanasius, *De virg.* (Lebon, 224; English translation in Brakke, *Athanasius*, 306–7).

47. On the spiritual marriage of the virgin and Christ, see Han J. W. Drijvers, "The Saint as Symbol: Concepts of the Person in Late Antiquity and Early Christianity," in *Concepts of Person in Religion and Thought*, ed. Hans G. Kippenberg, Yme B. Kuiper, and Andy F. Sanders, *Religion and Reason*, 37 (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1990), 150.

48. Eusebius of Emesa, *Hom.* 6.8, 7.5 (Buytaert, 155–56, 178).

49. *Ibid.*, 7.15–17, 26 (Buytaert, 186–87, 193).

The rhetoric of virginity in these ways establishes and reinforces its rarity and distinction from common worldly, human, and everyday lifestyles. It urges conformity to a certain norm of behavior, practices, and choices, while at the same time denying that true virginity is really about such externals. Here is one connection to the fear of deception and the linking of deception and heresy that marks so much of Christian literature in this period.⁵⁰ If virginity is merely bodily intactness, or if ascetic rank is gained merely through the performance of certain physical restraints, then the lines of definition become fluid. If a life dedicated to virginity was theoretically an option for any young Christian, so that this status was not marked off by class or family lines,⁵¹ then a certain level of anxiety over the question of legitimacy for the role is not surprising. This anxiety settles squarely on the image of the impostor, the false virgin and the heretic masquerading as a pious and worthy claimant to the role, who is able to pull off her deception by playing and looking the part.⁵² John Chrysostom and Jerome, for example, both warn of false virgins who wear the right clothes, display the appropriate pallor, and sport the mortified bodies expected of ascetic women, but secretly harbor minds full of heretical ideas or—in Jerome—bellies full of food.⁵³

In language shared with other ancient writers who denounce false philosophers, false prophets, rival orators, heretics, magicians, and flatterers, ascetic theorists vilify those who only appear to be holy, and suggest a more critical eye to identify deceivers. As portrayed by their denouncers, all of these groups are guilty of fraudulent self-fashioning for the purpose of passing themselves off as something to which they have no claim.⁵⁴ We might exemplify the latter in the standard character

50. On the themes of the early Christian rhetorical association of heresy with false appearance and deception, Virginia Burrus' work is key. See "Priscillianist Duplicity Reconsidered," *SP* 33 (1997): 401–6, and "The Heretical Woman as Symbol in Alexander, Athanasius, Epiphanius, and Jerome," *HTR* 84 (1991): 229–48.

51. Cooper, *Virgin and the Bride*, 83–87.

52. See Goffman, *Presentation of Self*, 58–74, on misrepresentation and the performance of status.

53. John Chrysostom, *De virg.* 6 (*SC* 125:108–10); Jerome, *Ep.* 22.27 (*CSEL* 54:184). Richard Vaggione, in his study of the rhetoric of the Arian debates, points out that the accusation of unnatural pallor is common in non-Christian and Christian polemical writing in late antiquity ("Of Monks and Lounge Lizards: 'Arians,' Polemics and Asceticism in the Roman East," in *Arianism After Arius*, ed. Michel R. Barnes and Daniel H. Williams [Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1993], 203).

54. On deception and self-fashioning, see Gleason, *Making Men*, especially 76–81, and my "Wolves in Sheep's Clothing: The Appearance of True and False Piety," *SP* 29 (1997): 127–32.

of the “flatterer” (ὁ κόλαξ). In his treatise entitled “How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend,” Plutarch remarks that in order to worm his way into a desirable association the flatterer “arranges and shapes himself (σχηματίζει) like some material substance, trying to fit and mold himself to those whom he attacks by imitation.”⁵⁵ Yet although the flatterer imitates the moves and behavior of his victims, Plutarch notes that it is all faltering showiness: “the flatterer’s effort is not genuine, honest, straightforward, or unconstrained.” Rather, his movements show only “sweating and shouting, and running to and fro.” He appears as an tacky image painted in “shameless” colors.⁵⁶ Notice how Plutarch has linked ethics, art, appearance, status, and taste in what amounts to an exposure of the flatterer’s inability to play the part with the naturalness and ease that confirm legitimacy for a role.⁵⁷

The fourth-century treatises on virginity and Plutarch’s earlier denunciation of flattery share the same concern over the possibility of deception by imitation and the same assertions of legitimacy and status by means of the negative figure of the self-made person, whether the *parvenue* or the heretic, whose “hyper-correctness” ultimately falters and gives the game away.⁵⁸ The texts we have discussed thus *encourage* the kinds of corrections and adjustments to appearance and behavior that are part of a process of inculturation according to ideal roles and naturalized models; at the same time they *condemn* false appearance achieved through artifice with no natural claim to the role. The linchpin

55. Plutarch, *Quomodo adulator ab amico internoscatur* 51b–c (Frank Cole Babbitt, *Plutarch’s Moralia*, vol. 1 [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949], 276).

56. Plutarch, *Quomodo adulator*, 63f–64a (Babbitt, 338).

57. Erving Goffman notes that while we tend to think of “true” or legitimate performances as being effortless and natural, and “false” performances as requiring much difficult effort (as Plutarch’s description illustrates), in fact everyone learns to act a role through the process of socialization (*Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 73–75).

58. Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 95: “Manner, by definition, only exists for others, and the recognized holders of the legitimate manner and of the power to define the value of manners—dress, bearing, pronunciation—have the privilege of indifference to their own manner (so they never have to *put on* a manner). By contrast, the ‘parvenues’ who presume to join the group of legitimate, i.e., hereditary, possessors of the legitimate manner, without being the product of the same social conditions, are trapped, whatever they do, in a choice between anxious hyper-identification and the negativity which admits its defeat in its very revolt: either the conformity of an ‘assumed’ behaviour whose very correctness or hyper-correctness betrays an imitation, or the ostentatious assertion of difference which is bound to appear as an admission of inability to identify.”

seems to be the constructed principle of “naturalness,” the elusive legitimacy that, after all, can only be expressed and proclaimed through conformity and behavior.⁵⁹ This tension surrounding identity and authenticity may be related to the problem of private authority and personal charisma. The rhetoric of deviance is one way to control individual authority by defining it. This is why the exact same behavior (for example, celibacy, fasting, teaching, or prophecy) and the same features of appearance (for example, paleness, thinness, or “masculinity” among female ascetics) can be “made” either heroic or deviant, depending on the specific context and the individual’s relationship to authority. James Francis has made this argument regarding the figure of the late ancient holy man, and it is particularly useful in thinking about heretical or radical *askesis*.⁶⁰ If the processes of institutionalization and socialization entail setting the terms for bodily definition and perception, as we have seen, then charismatic persons present particular challenges to authority. For, in Bourdieu’s words, charismatic figures have the power “to impose their own self-image as the objective and collective image of their body and being,” and to *make* “the opinion which makes” them.⁶¹ Rhetoric can regain control of body image, symbolic power, and authority by either making the charismatic figure a unique and heroic example or marginalizing her or him as false and deviant.

The language of deception by appearance, which at first glance seems in tension with what we have seen to be the physiognomic *insistence* on the relationship between external appearance and internal character, actually confirms it by functioning as its shadow side. The making of the illegitimate, lying body functions to establish distance between the elite and refined status of the virgin and that which she has rejected. This dynamic is particularly urgent if asceticism allowed for social groupings and rankings that were not necessarily grounded in traditional social structures, as the process of self-definition entails the defining of the

59. See Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 69–70: “Bodily hexis is political mythology realized, *em-bodied*, turned into a permanent disposition, a durable way of standing, speaking, walking, and thereby of feeling and thinking.”

60. James A. Francis, *Subversive Virtue: Asceticism and Authority in the Second-Century Pagan World* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 125.

61. Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 208.

“other” through an assertion of difference.⁶² Yet as Le Boulluec has argued for the development of heresiology in the second and third centuries, we might ask if the making of the heretical or deceptive body in ascetic discourse is not also a construction of a “radical *altérité*” that masks similarities and “intimate dissensions.”⁶³ The early Christian literature on virginity shows clearly that the making of the orthodox virgin required an ideology and naturalizing models that marked the difference and the distance between individual human self-styling and rarified, angelic status.

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62. Jonathan Z. Smith, “Differential Equations: On Constructing the ‘Other,’” Thirteenth Annual University Lecture in Religion, Arizona State University, March 1992.

63. Alain Le Boulluec, *La notion d'hérésie dans la littérature grecque IIe-IIIe siècles*, vol. 2 (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1985), 543, 554-55.

