Images of Female Holiness

The “Lives” of holy women share many similarities with their male ascetic counterparts who strove for holiness through often extreme practices of self-denial and self-discipline. However, their stories reveal that societal constructions of gender impose on women particular pressures that must be negotiated in order to attain holiness. A women’s pursuit of divine things frequently resulting in a departure from certain cultural gender norms and expectations. In the stories of Perpetua and Felicity, Martha, Macrina and Susan three common pressures associated with gender can be identified: 1) having one’s identity defined and delineated by one’s role or position in the family; 2) struggling with the ‘natural inferiority’ of the female body that requires transcendence to manliness first; 3) subverting normative attributes femininity and actions of a normative female. These three pressures are encountered in particular times and places by each of the women in our stories and continue to be edifying to women today as examples of courage, strength and holiness.

The first common element in these narratives is how each women’s identity is described in relation to her relatives. This highlights the familial responsibilities the female ascetic is understood to reject. The reality is that women are, and were, defined by their relationships with male figures. Their status and wealth were determined by their family too. From the outset of the account of Perpetua we are told of her marital status, her immediate family members, including “a son an infant at the breast.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Martha is described as the “daughter of the glorious Posi”[[2]](#footnote-2) and later as “betrothed of Christ.”[[3]](#footnote-3) The *Life of Macrina* opens with Macrina’s resistance to marriage[[4]](#footnote-4) and her vow to never leave her mother.[[5]](#footnote-5) *The Life of Susan* provides us with a contrasting image of a holy women who shirks familial identifiers and responsibilities, going so far as to change her name to deflect any inquiries by family members who might come looking for her.[[6]](#footnote-6) These holy women by ‘choosing’ martyrdom or ascetic practices have rejected the predetermined roles society placed on them.

The second common element in these stories is the overt gender ranking when it comes to what a woman ‘needs to do’ in order to be faithful in her pursuit of holiness. The philosophical/ideological *milieu* in these early centuries of the Christian movement were strongly influenced by the thinking and understanding of Plato. In many respects these ascetic women have already crossed gender boundaries in exchanging their female social identities as fiancé/betrothed, wife, mother, sister for male social identities as fighter, victor, teacher, philosopher, or hermit. The Christian ascetic identity raised a woman to the dignity of a man, as in the case of Macrina whose brother questioned “whether it is fitting to designate her by sex.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Not only that, but it erased the natural shame and inferiority of a woman. The *Life of Susan* celebrates a woman “holy and manly in Christ”[[8]](#footnote-8) and someone who in solitude was instructed in “manliness”[[9]](#footnote-9) in order to resist demoniac forces. Perpetua, in her vision of victory over an Egyptian gladiator, saw herself as a man.[[10]](#footnote-10) Martha, though strongly identifying as a woman in her discourse with Mobed, also sees herself mirroring Isaac, and as the sacrificial lamb. This, though not male *per se* is still a move away from her female social identity. It is clear from these stories that to become holy as a woman, one must first become male at least symbolically. There are a variety of ways to do this but all include exhibiting particularly attributes that are deemed naturally male, such as strength, steadfastness, reason and wisdom.

The third common element is linked to both the first and second, is the courageous refusal to marry and to instead embrace virginity. Other than Perpetua and Felicity who were concerned that their maternal and family roles might prevent them from fully participating in God’s glory,[[11]](#footnote-11) Martha, Macrina and Suasn all boldly embraced a life of celibacy. As noted by Irvin and Sunquist, “celibacy challenged narrow definitions of gender roles and enabled women to experience social and spiritual empowerment.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Men also chose to lead chaste lives, however the social realities of men and women are vastly different and therefore they do not bear the burden of social expectations equally. The choice of abstaining from marriage and childbearing is a uniquely subversive act for a woman, so much so that we see holy women going to extraordinary lengths to preserve their virginity. Martha claims to be “betrothed to Christ”[[13]](#footnote-13) in order to refuse the king’s decree to marry or be killed. Macrina insists that it is absurd that her parents to continue to bring her proposals of marriage when, because of the hope of resurrection, her late fiancé remained alive in heaven.[[14]](#footnote-14) Susan covered her face and eyes so that she never saw the face of a man in 25 years, so to protect both herself and any man from suffering harm.[[15]](#footnote-15)

These three pressures were navigated and frequently subverted in particular times and places, *The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicity* is a *Passio* from the Pre-Constantine period in Carthage in the early 3rd-century when localized persecution of Christians was still occurring within the Roman Empire. *The Martyrdom of Martha* comes from outside the Roman Empire in neighboring Persia. The mention of “Shapur, king or kings and lord of all regions”[[16]](#footnote-16) is a reference to Shapur II the tenth Shah of shahs of the Sassanian Empire. Zorastrianism is also referred to implicitly as “the religion of the excellent gods who care for the world.”[[17]](#footnote-17) Placing Martha in the early to mid 4th-century during a time when hostility between the Zoroastrian regime of the Persians and the Christian Roman Empire was increasing. Macrina, one of the Cappadocians along with her brothers, made considerable contributions to theological thought in the post-Nicea period[[18]](#footnote-18). The *Life of Susan* records her flight to Alexandria because of the persecution that came on the heels of the Council of Chalcedon (451). Each women is rooted in a particular place and time, shaping the actions they need to take in order to live a faithful Christian life of holiness.

In the earlier centuries of the Christian movement in the Greco-Roman world, North Africa and Southwest Asia the female was often understood as, if not the direct opposite to the male, at least inferior to male. The inferiority of the female sex therefore created unique challenges for women committed to the Christian life. The pursuit of divine things is always a struggle against the temptations of the material world and fleshly desires. For women, this pursuit put them in direct conflict with the elements of their natural existence which were inherently lower than that of a man. These accounts of women who reinterpret or reject their familial relationships and responsibilities, who transcend the so-called limitation of their sex, and who commit to lives outside of the prescribed sexual-relational norm by preserving their virginity, are remarkable stories of subversive Christian women. Their lives remain edifying to women today as examples of courage, strength and holiness.

*[1413 words]*

1. John W. Coakley and Andrea Sterk, “The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicity,” 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. John W. Coakley and Andrea Sterk, “The Martyrdom of Martha, Daughter of Posi, Who Was a Daughter of the Covenant,” 110. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. John W. Coakley and Andrea Sterk, 111. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. John W. Coakley and Andrea Sterk, “Gregory of Nyssa, Life of Macrina,” 148–49. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. John W. Coakley and Andrea Sterk, 149. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. John W. Coakley and Andrea Sterk, “John of Ephesus, Life of Susan,” 185. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. John W. Coakley and Andrea Sterk, “Gregory of Nyssa, Life of Macrina,” 147. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. John W. Coakley and Andrea Sterk, “John of Ephesus, Life of Susan,” 184. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. John W. Coakley and Andrea Sterk, 185. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. John W. Coakley and Andrea Sterk, “The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicity,” 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. John W. Coakley and Andrea Sterk, 31, 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Dale T. Irvin and Scott W. Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement*, Volume 1: Earliest Christianity to 1453:142. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. John W. Coakley and Andrea Sterk, “The Martyrdom of Martha, Daughter of Posi, Who Was a Daughter of the Covenant,” 111. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. John W. Coakley and Andrea Sterk, “Gregory of Nyssa, Life of Macrina,” 149. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. John W. Coakley and Andrea Sterk, “John of Ephesus, Life of Susan,” 187. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. John W. Coakley and Andrea Sterk, “The Martyrdom of Martha, Daughter of Posi, Who Was a Daughter of the Covenant,” 111. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. John W. Coakley and Andrea Sterk, 111. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Dale T. Irvin and Scott W. Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement*, Volume 1: Earliest Christianity to 1453:186. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)