

1-2006

## The Sex Lives of Saints: An Erotics of Ancient Hagiography [Review]

Rubén R. Dupertuis

Trinity University, [rdupertu@trinity.edu](mailto:rdupertu@trinity.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/relig\\_faculty](http://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/relig_faculty)



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

---

### Repository Citation

Dupertuis, R. R. (2006). [Review of the book *The sex lives of saints: An erotics of ancient hagiography*, by V. Burrus]. *Religious Studies Review*, 32, 49. doi: 10.1111/j.1748-0922.2006.00036\_2.x

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Religion Department at Digital Commons @ Trinity. It has been accepted for inclusion in Religion Faculty Research by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Trinity. For more information, please contact [jcostanz@trinity.edu](mailto:jcostanz@trinity.edu).

you, too, I wish this thank you, this 'A Dieu' whose image is in you also." Such an ending fits, for it symbolizes the supernatural beauty that has always drawn people to venerate saints.

Grant Kaplan

Loyola University, New Orleans

**THE SEX LIVES OF SAINTS: AN EROTICS OF ANCIENT HAGIOGRAPHY.** By Virginia Burrus. Divinations: Reading Late Ancient Religion. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004. Pp. vi + 216. \$42.50, ISBN 0-8122-3745-5.

In the difficult yet rewarding book Burrus offers "countererotic" readings of fourth- and fifth-century CE hagiographies in which she challenges understandings that take ascetic lives of saints as sublimating sexual desire; rather, Burrus reads these texts as the site of an "exuberant eroticism" that constantly relocates and displaces erotic desire. After an introductory chapter, Burrus first focuses on Jerome's "queer" Lives of Paul, Malchus, and Hilarion. A second chapter treats the eroticized lives of three women: Jerome's friend Paula, Gregory of Nyssa's sister Macrina, and Augustine's mother, Monica. A third chapter focuses on several treatments of Martin of Tours in the writings of Sulpicius Severus, emphasizing homoerotic and sadomasochistic themes. A fourth and final chapter offers readings of three "holy harlots"—Mary from the Syrian Life of Abraham, Pelagia of Antioch, and Mary of Egypt. The suggestive, intertextual readings are simultaneously informal—including sometimes jarring parenthetical intrusions and brief autobiographical reflections—and reflect careful engagement with a range of discourses—including theories of sex and gender, postcolonial and feminist theories, and the works of M. Foucault, G. Bataille, D. Halperin, G. Hampham, L. Barsani, and J. Baudrillard. Ideally suited for graduate students and specialists already familiar with her theoretical conversation partners and debates about the history of sexuality, this rich book pays back the effort required in reading it.

Rubén R. Dupertuis

Centre College

**AMBROSE'S PATRIARCHS: ETHICS FOR THE COMMON MAN.** By Marcia L. Colish. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005. Pp. vii + 193. \$15.00, ISBN 0-268-02365-4.

In *Ambrose's Patriarchs*, Colish shifts the discussion on the bishop's patriarchal treatises from source-critical considerations to their function in the liturgical life of the Milanese church. She argues that Ambrose created these writings in order to instruct Roman catechumens (*competentes*) on their new identity as members of the people of Israel and to provide them with practical examples of ethical virtue. By infusing Greco-Roman philosophical and legal ideals within his reading of the Genesis narratives, Ambrose presents the patriarchs as

stoicized Christian sages who either progressed toward moral perfection (e.g. Abraham and Isaac) or maintained it throughout their lives (e.g. Jacob and Joseph). Colish argues that the bishop's ethics is a natural outgrowth of his anthropology, which eschews a strict Platonic dualism for a holistic view of the human person whose mind and body must both work to control the passions in order to attain virtue. In so doing, Ambrose becomes the first patristic author to provide a lay audience with a model for becoming virtuous Christians without having to discard their responsibilities to Roman social and political life. Colish's analysis is polished and convincing, and is suitable for both graduate students and scholars alike.

David M. Reis

College of Sante Fe

**AN ECSTASY OF FOLLY: PROPHECY AND AUTHORITY IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY.** By Laura Nasrallah. Harvard Theological Studies, 52. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003. Pp. xii + 225. \$25.00, ISBN 0-674-01228-3.

Nasrallah's book is a valuable contribution to the study of prophecy and ecstatic manifestations in early Christianity, for its reading of representative Christian texts within the larger context of debates about such phenomena in the Greco-Roman world, and for viewing the materials through the lens of rhetorical criticism. Nasrallah focuses on three texts or authors: Paul's discussion of the gifts of the Spirit in 1 Corinthians, Tertullian's defense of prophecy in *De anima* and related texts, and the Anti-Phrygian source, Nasrallah's name for the late second—early-third-century source probably embedded in Epiphanius' *Panarion*. Nasrallah argues that taxonomies of forms of ecstasy or ways in which one can communicate with the divine are not neutral or objective claims; rather, they are rhetorical constructions that serve both to limit authority of some and to grant it to others (usually the speaker or writer). Claims about the periodization of history are likewise not neutral; they serve to delimit who can know the divine in what way. Tertullian, for example, understood prophecy to be a viable mode of communication with the divine, while the contemporary Anti-Phrygian source argued it had ceased after the apostolic age. Nasrallah strongly criticizes modern scholarship for too quickly accepting some texts' claims without questioning their rhetorical contexts. A revision of the author's dissertation, the book is sometimes difficult to follow, and somewhat repetitive. On the whole, however, it is a fine book, one that will be of interest primarily to specialists already familiar with the primary texts and the debates about prophecy in early Christianity.

Rubén R. Dupertuis

Centre College

**GRACE AND CHRISTOLOGY IN THE EARLY CHURCH.** By Donald Fairbairn.

Oxford Early Christian Studies. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. Pp. xvii + 257. \$80.00, ISBN 0-19-925614-4.

Fairbairn sets himself the twofold task "to clarify the question of what the central issue in the [Nestorian] controversy was, and therefore also the question of whether there was a substantial theological consensus in the fifth-century Church." The second is clearly the overarching purpose for the book, so I will give it priority, even though its principal content concerns the first. Fairbairn argues that a theological consensus did in fact exist which establishes what he calls "historical authority" by which to judge "our varied [contemporary] efforts to describe Christ's person." Unfortunately, Fairbairn never completely succeeds in establishing such a consensus, nor does he mount an argument for "historical authority" as a standard for judging contemporary theological claims, nor does he explain why the fifth century ought to be considered uniquely authoritative in establishing "historical authority." The work strikes the reader more as an apologetic enterprise than a historical analysis, and, sadly, the apologetic affects the analysis. Fairbairn's examination of the link between soteriology and christology in the arguments is quite good, but his intimations that this is the sole or primary motivation behind the controversy is overly simplistic. His desire to advance the claim that the Alexandrian position represents "the belief of the early Church as a whole" leads him to force a number of early Christian thinkers into an ill-fitting mold. The book will be of some interest to those exploring the theological underpinnings of the Nestorian controversy and Chalcedonian formulations.

David Hall

Centre College

**THE LETTERS OF PETER DAMIAN: 121-150.** Translated by Owen Blum and Irven Resnick. Fathers of the Church: Medieval Continuation, 6. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2004. Pp. xxvi + 195. \$39.95, ISBN 0-8132-1372-X.

Before his death in 1998, the Franciscan Owen Blum had produced four volumes of Peter's correspondence (*Letters* 1-120) in English translation as part of the series *Fathers of the Church: Medieval Continuation* (1989-98), and had begun work on the fifth volume (*Letters* 121-50). His unfinished work was completed by Irven Resnick of the University of Tennessee, who plans to complete the sixth and final collection of *Letters* in translation sometime in 2005. All six volumes of translation are based on the critical edition of the *Letters* produced by Kurt Reindel in four volumes (1983-93) for inclusion in the series *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*; Blum had collaborated with Reindel in this venture. Peter's *Letters* offer a privileged glimpse at the thought of the eleventh-century reformer; those included in this volume can be dated 1065-71.