Introduction

Goths invaded Rome in AD 410, and, like many aristocratic families, a household of three wealthy, Christian senatorial women fled across the Mediterranean to their land holdings in North Africa. They bore the name Anicii, one of the oldest, richest and most respected Roman clans. The family matriarch Proba and her daughter-in-law Juliana, both widows, traveled with Juliana's young daughter Demetrias. Three years later all were publicly acknowledged as exemplary Christian ascetics, and their household was a refuge for ascetic Christian women of different ranks. The two elder widows and the young virgin formed the center of a religious community of extraordinary wealth and influence. Just as the nobility had courted each of them in turn for marriage alliance, now the leaders of ascetic and theological movements courted them. The spiritual tutors of the Anicii women and their community could expect social prestige, political clout, and material support. The women were the recipients of a plethora of missives from important Christian thinkers. These letters and treatises offered the women combined ascetic and theological advice with competitive moves to secure the household's considerable material and moral patronage.[1] Many of the recommendations to the Anicii women are not unique to the Christian ascetic movement, but fall into the category of entirely conventional Roman expectations for virtuous, upper-class women. They are recommendations to be sexually pure, discreet, well covered, domestic, gentle, retiring, frugal; they are recommendations to be modest.

Using the body of material addressed to the women of the Anicii family by the theologians and ascetic theorists Augustine, Jerome, and Pelagius as my central body of evidence, I argue that this modesty, despite its conventionality, was a creative and performative[2] mode of being for late Roman

[1] Brown 1970, 1972; Kurdoch 2003, 2007.
[2] Here I indicate only a mode of being comprised partly of performances. I will distinguish the language of 'performance studies' from that of Judith Butler's 'performativity' below. Both contribute to the critical vocabulary of the book as a whole.

Christian ascetic women, an opportunity for women's agency. I do not define agency in a contemporary liberal feminist sense but attempt to place it within the women's evolving self-understanding in the context of heated debates over freedom in virtuous action.

I begin with an understanding of modesty as a range of activities that includes veiling, seclusion, restraint in dress, modified speech or silence, and highly controlled comportment. Modesty, then and now, also implied an internal disposition. I address this potential interior aspect of modesty after examining aspects of the outward enactment of modest behavior. To support my analyses of modesty as an active and performative enterprise, I draw on the work of feminist ethnographers who have studied similarly 'traditional,' 'conservative,' or 'normative' phenomena among women in non-Western contexts. Both the work of these ethnographers and my own go against the grain of feminist scholarship that focuses on women's resistances to oppressive normative expectations[3] rather than the processes of embodying the cultural ideal. Focusing on the latter challenges the assumption of what anthropologist Saba Mahmood calls "the subject of freedom,"[4] the self who only manifests as a fully aware agent when she resists or subverts patriarchal norms.

Placing modesty under the rubric of agency, implying choice and activity, or of performance, implying intentionality and conscious framing, also assumes a particular kind of subject, if not exactly the Western enlightenment subject whose basic desire is for freedom. It assumes a subject who has and who values choice, who believes she has the capacity to will and to do. The theological debate that provides the context for the letters to the Anicii women revolves around precisely this question: to what extent is the human subject free to will and to perform virtuous action? Just as the question of agency is today the subject of multiple interpretations in multiple disciplines, the question of human moral choice was contested ground during the early fifth century. The centrality of the Pelagian debate in many of the primary sources for my study serves as a warning against simply importing any one or any set of definitions of agency – ancient or contemporary. Named for Pelagius, but including a wide range of late fourth- and fifth-century Latin Christian thinkers, the Pelagian debate centered around theological understandings of human free will, the efficacy of baptism, the necessity of infant baptism, the need for ongoing divine grace to sustain righteousness, and the possibility of

[3] For a good example of feminist anthropology using the category of 'resistance': Okely 1989.
[4] Mahmood 2005: 1–39.

human moral perfection. In a vastly simplified version of the controversy, Augustine is the champion of divine grace who holds a very pessimistic view of human nature and Pelagius is the defender of human free will.[5] Proba, Juliana, and Demetrias were in the middle of a vigorous debate over understandings of choice, freedom, and virtuous 'doing.' While their debate shared many concerns of contemporary discussions, it also placed importance on some entirely different aspects, such as the objective moral content of choices and the role of a divine will, and ignored many questions the twenty-first-century scholar finds crucial, such as the legal status of women and the autonomy of the person.

In the first chapter of the book, I place this study within the genre of feminist historiography. I give a working definition for the topic – modesty – and introduce the primary material. Finally, I discuss the methodological orientation of the work and explore the critical vocabularies I use associated with feminist scholarship and performance studies. The second, third, and fourth chapters separate the external doing of modesty from the implied internal disposition of modesty. I begin in "Apparel, identity, and agency: Demetrias dresses herself" with the modest wearing of clothes and an exploration of the ways that ancient evidence reveals a close association between clothing, personal identity, and moral reputation. I examine the early Christian authors' advice on modesty in clothing in light of contemporary ethnographic accounts of veiling, covering, uncovering, changing garments, etc. From the world of personal garments I move in Chapter 3, "Publicity and domesticity," to the complexities of modest location in space. This chapter deals with the creation of public and private space, the advertisement of a woman's domesticity, and the negotiation of movement between domestic and public places. Chapter 4, "The modest mouth," takes up the analysis of male Roman rhetoric and gender performance and applies it to the verbal modesty expected of the Anicii women and others like them. This chapter also takes up the frequent elision in feminist scholarship between voice and subjectivity.

Garment, location, and speech are not the only activities of modesty I could examine.[6] Glance, movement, self-restraint in eating and drinking, and emotional expression among others are also present in the primary material as components of modesty. These three, however, give a good picture of the creative work of modesty, the level of performative

[5] For more on the theological issues at stake and social history of the controversy see Brown 1970, 1972; E. A. Clark 1992; de Plinval 1943; Rees 1991; Wetzel 1992.
[6] See Shaw 1998.

competence expected by the modest woman's audience, and the potential for successes and failures. Not only did modesty take a lot of *doing*, the authors of advice for ideal Christian ascetic womanhood knew it. They reveal, sometimes very explicitly, sometimes tacitly, the performative nature of modesty.

In the last two chapters, I take up the question of the internality of modesty and the formation of the Christian ascetic woman's virtuous subjectivity. Chapter 5, "Performance anxiety," engages with the primary material that uses misogynistic satire to represent a fear of the hypocritical ascetic who displays false modesty. Concern over the hypocrite shows an anxiety over the performative nature of virtue, in this case, feminine virtue. The only way to tell if a woman was modest was through her performance of modesty – but how to tell if the performance was genuine? Thus, some ancient authors skewer the false ascetic, who behaves suspiciously like their ideal ascetic; others give advice for the formation of an appropriate interior; all show a level of inconsistency and concern over the correspondences between act and disposition. The final chapter, "Modest agencies," maps out the particularities of two of the options for moral agency that were being hotly debated in the very writings that provide our evidence on modesty. If Chapter 5 shows that the subjects of this study were just as interested in subjectivity as we are, Chapter 6 shows that they were just as interested in agency. I attempt to draw out some aspects of both Pelagian and Augustinian theologies of the will and its freedom (or lack thereof) in order to highlight the distinctive options the Anician women and their contemporaries faced in understanding their own virtuous actions and dispositions. I offer no final judgment on the nature of the late ancient Christian ascetic subject and her agency; rather, I show the range of competing ways she could come to understand herself and represent herself within the community.

CHAPTER 1

Spectacular modesty

Feminist history

I locate this book in the field of feminist history, a genre that requires some explanation and qualification. Perhaps the best analyses of the developments and continuing tensions in the practice of writing 'women's history' and 'feminist history' are Joan Wallach Scott's introductory essays in the revised edition of *Gender and the Politics of History*.[1] Women's history emerged as a part of the women's movement in the US and Europe in the 1970s in response to the realization that academic work rarely introduced women as historical subjects.[2] Writers of women's history implicitly and explicitly criticized the absence of women from modern historiography from a number of stances and simultaneously called on women's history, still in its infancy, to support various, sometimes conflicting, political claims. The feminist spirituality movement in the United States relied on excavations of neolithic 'goddess' figurines and other early forays into women's prehistory, for example.[3] Women's history continues to stand in an unstable position. It is a political activity in itself and a source for evidence to legitimate political arguments. This leads to the circular problem that scholars simultaneously search for alternate histories (based on contemporary concerns) and use those alternate histories to legitimate their positions in those contemporary concerns. Other women's studies sub-fields[4] also acknowledge this ambiguity. However, while the

[1] Scott 1988, 1999.

[2] In her 1996 introductory essay to *Feminism and History*, Scott acknowledges "women's history" traces its roots to a significantly earlier period. For example, she cites the speech of a political activist demanding women's suffrage in the context of the French Revolution. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza gives an excellent survey of nineteenth-century American women's historical analysis of biblical texts in the first chapter of *In Memory of Her*. Commonly, however, feminist scholars date the beginning of women's history to the academic boom in women's studies of the 1970s. Scott 1996; Fiorenza 1983.

[3] Eller 1991.

[4] For good introductions to the ambiguities of feminist work in anthropology and archeology respectively: Aggarwal 2000; Hamilton *et al.* 1996.

traditional academic disciplines are equally unstable, their practitioners rarely acknowledge this. History, the source for exempla and 'raw' data, is, according to feminist historians, entirely implicated in political machinations. Consciously or not, its practice and results argue specific views concerning the nature and value of Woman and women, past and present, not to mention the work History does in creating and maintaining the category of Woman into which women must fall. Some historians, under the influence of Marxist or feminist or post-colonial theorists, have been more self-critically aware of the political aspects of their work in the past several decades. Many, however, attempt to maintain the discreet veil of neutral historical fact-gathering and objective analysis.[5] Women's history rarely attempts this.

Scott outlines several approaches in women's history. The first she discusses under the rubric of the feminist pun, "her-story."

> As the play on the word "history" implied, the point was to give value to an experience that had been ignored (hence devalued) and to insist on female agency in the making of history … "Her-story" has many different uses. Some historians gather evidence about women to demonstrate their essential likeness as historical subjects to men. Whether they uncover women participating in major political events or write about women's political action on their own behalf, these historians attempt to fit a new subject – women – into received historical categories, interpreting their actions in terms recognizable to political and social historians … Another strategy associated with "her-story" takes evidence about women and uses it to challenge received interpretations of progress and regress … A different sort of investigation, still within the "her-story" position, departs from the framework of conventional history and offers a new narrative, different periodization, and different causes.[6]

This attempt to recover and reinterpret data concerning women is interwoven with the growth of social history as an increasingly important mode of research and with the continuing struggle over the history and definition of such categories as 'gender,' 'man,' 'woman,' 'sex,' and 'sexuality.' Each of these approaches, from the seemingly simple recovery of sources pertinent to women to complex analyses of historical causes and categories, contains dangers or contradictions to either the aims of feminist activism or the aims of historical research. The plethora of studies focusing on women as historical subjects, for example, serves in some ways to reparticularize and subordinate knowledge about women. An

[5] See the introduction to: E. A. Clark 2001.
[6] Scott 1988, 1999: 18–19.

over-eagerness to interpret historical data referring to Woman as positive for women has badly skewed popular perceptions of some of the most interpretively difficult eras.[7] Alternately, historicizing gender breaks down the early feminists' appeal to universal womanhood. Despite the many contradictions inherent in a project that simultaneously constructs and dismantles the category of Woman and the identity between women, past and present, Scott finds that feminist history is a fruitful political and intellectual pursuit.

> The realization of the radical potential of women's history comes in the writing of histories that focus on women's experiences *and* analyze the way in which politics construct gender and gender constructs politics. Feminist history then becomes not the recounting of great deeds performed by women but the exposure of the often silent and hidden operations of gender that are nonetheless present and defining forces in the organization of most societies. With this approach women's history critically confronts the politics of existing histories and inevitably begins the rewriting of history.[8]

Joan Wallach Scott's definitions for the genre of feminist history provide an important framework for this book. I contribute to women's history by studying material that is very much part of the 'operations of gender' in late ancient Christian society but has only recently attracted attention. Accounts of women in the early church tend to focus on the unusual or controversial activities of women – manly[9] activities – rather than distinctly and stereotypically feminine activities. The latter were largely irrelevant to earlier church historians with little interest in gender and have seemed, perhaps, 'part of the problem rather than part of the solution,' to feminist historians. By focusing on modesty, particularly in the interpretive framework of performance, I hope to 'confront the politics of existing histories' and contribute to 'the rewriting of history.'

Women's history and feminist history have followed similar paths in the sub-discipline of late ancient studies as in other historical sub-disciplines. The attempt to recreate 'her-story' in the early church, as in all of antiquity, confronts major difficulties in the absence of primary source material. Much more exists, however, than scholars have treated with the serious care given to other evidence. Historians have turned increasingly to sources pertaining to women in their efforts at producing quality critical editions and translations for the non-specialist audience. The work

[7] See E. A. Clark 2001; Hamilton *et al.* 1996; Hutton 1997; Meskel 1995.
[8] Scott 1988, 1999: 27.
[9] This is not an outright criticism of the tendency. The early Christian writers themselves often commented on the actions of "manly women."

of source recovery is ongoing and crucial to the enterprise. A wealth of material is suddenly available in critical editions and accurate modern translation. Elizabeth Clark,[10] Joan Petersen,[11] Patricia Cox Miller,[12] and Benedicta Ward[13] have edited collections of Greek and Latin sources while others have produced more focused translations with commentary or translations in the appendices of longer works.[14] Although one may trace most of these efforts to translate or simply publish sources on women in the late antique church to the influence of the women's movement of the 1970s, not all are self-consciously feminist works. Some insist the opposite. Joan Petersen and Benedicta Ward both fall into this category. According to Ward's analysis of repentant prostitutes in early hagiographies, "The sinful woman is also Eve, the mother of all living, and therefore the image is of Everyman, of the human race alienated from the love of God."[15] Ward's translations are not the fruit of a specifically feminist endeavor; indeed, she turns the analysis away from the gender of her subjects and towards the larger framework of repentance and salvation for Everyman. This tendency to underplay the role of contemporary feminist politics in motivating the translation and publication of ancient works on or by women is most often evident in scholarship produced by persons with formal denominational roles or who publish with denominational presses. The issue of contemporary gender politics, even when downplaying political motivations, remains. Many of the key publishers of ancient Christian sources in English translation, not surprisingly, are affiliated with the Roman Catholic or Orthodox churches. This list includes Peregrina Publishers, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, Cistercian Publications, Paulist Press, The Newman Press, and Catholic University of America Press. While all publish valuable scholarly translations and commentaries, the institutional locations prohibit, or at least mute, some forms of explicitly feminist work. When ancient sources continue to be authoritative for institutions, and gender politics constitute a central contemporary area of internal conflict, dissemination of understudied ancient sources on women and gender is risky business.

Even as sources became more widely available, an entirely new body of scholarly work arose devoted to the social history of early Christianity and especially the history of sexuality in the early church.[16] Not all of this

[10] Clark and Hatch 1981; E. A. Clark 1996.
[11] Petersen 1996. [12] Miller 2005. [13] Ward 1987.
[14] Brakke 1998; E. A. Clark 1979; Brock and Harvey 1998; Bongie 2003; Corrigan 1997; Cooper 1993; Krawiec 2002.
[15] Ward: 1987: 8. [16] Brown 1988; Foucault 1985.

work addressed gender, and some that did failed to find favor with many feminist scholars.[17] Brown's study *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* was an early and important analysis of sexuality in the early church. It also exasperates feminist scholars who find that an analysis of sexuality that pays little critical attention to gender is flawed if not offensive. He promises, for instance, "In Jerome's letters and commentaries, we can glimpse the devoted widows and virgins, whose symbolic role Ambrose had spoken of with such resonance, coming alive, as real women, actively engaged in the politics of erudition."[18] Yet his chapter on Jerome is concerned with Jerome, not the women with whom he corresponded and lived, and Brown's analysis focuses on the sexual ideologies of men and their practical consequences for men almost without reference to women. He waxes eloquent on the erudition of Jerome's female friends but hardly attends to the complete control Jerome wields over the memory of these women since their own writings do not survive.

> That Jerome did not encourage women to become theological authors in their own right *meant no more* than that he, like all other late antique males, wished to keep for himself the dubious privilege of being aggressive to other men. Given the contemporary preoccupation with the need to preserve an oasis of Christian culture untainted by male profane learning and by male competitive urges, well-educated "daughters of Jerusalem" – prodigious readers and memorizers of the holy texts and their learned commentaries – could maintain, quite as effectively as could any male monks, the quiet heartbeat of an unsullied Christian truth.[19]

The passage uses gender as a category of analysis – profane learning is male, Christian men should avoid profane learning, only men should write aggressive theological works, women can study theology – but the result is confusing. Is theological writing, since it is aggressive, profane? Is theological study feminine? Why should women be able to engage in a feminine pursuit 'just as well' as any *male* monk? The problem, of course, is that Jerome's seemingly contradictory attitudes towards female scholarship meant a great deal more than Brown admits. They were part of a complex system of gender ideologies that Jerome himself was in the process of reasserting and revising. Several of Peter Brown's students and other scholars influenced by his work set about to correct and refine his analysis of early Christian sexuality by writing the history of women in

[17] See Kate Cooper's criticisms of both Foucault and Paul Veyne in the introduction to: Cooper 1996.
[18] Brown 1988: 365.
[19] Brown 1988: 370. Emphasis added.

the early church. I am a part of this 'genealogy' as a student of Brown's colleague, Roberta Bondi, and his student Béatrice Caseau, both historians with strong feminist interests.[20]

The growth in feminist history often overlaps with the products of the renewed interest in social history. One must note in particular the work of Elizabeth Clark who has made significant contributions to both the recovery of texts and the writing of social history.[21] The ascetic movement provides the wealth of source material on early Christian women and continues to draw scholarly attention. Susanna Elm's *"Virgins of God"* studies the development of monasticism and its role in the Trinitarian conflicts of the fourth century from the perspective of women's asceticism.[22] David Brakke and Rebecca Krawiec examine the relationships between women's and men's asceticism in the cases of Athanasius and Shenoute respectively.[23]

The politics of writing women's history in the early Christian era overlaps not only with the women's movement in general but also with the ongoing women's movement within the Christian churches, especially those churches that have only recently, or still have not, granted women an equal place in the ministry. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Rosemary Ruether stand out as scholars who initiated the call for a new history of women in early Christianity and who provided the political justification for such work. Schüssler Fiorenza, a specialist in New Testament studies, reminds participants in the women's movement at large that Christianity is a crucial aspect of the history of women in the West. "Insofar as biblical religion is still influential today, a cultural and social feminist transformation of Western society must take into account the biblical story and the historical impact of biblical tradition. Western women are not able to discard completely and forget our personal, cultural or religious Christian history."[24] Schüssler Fiorenza does not only believe that biblical history must be "taken into account" in the narrative of patriarchy in the West, but that it ought be reread in such a way as to provide a positive basis for a feminist spirituality:

> While I agree with Ruether that the quest for women's power, independence, and freedom cannot be solely or even primarily formulated in terms of personal-individualist and biological female power but has to be

[20] Many other scholarly genealogies are possible. I comment on Brown because he was the first social historian of early Christianity I encountered as an undergraduate and was a major influence on several of my mentors. They often recommended works by other students of Brown.

[21] This is only a select list of important book-length studies and translations: Clark and Richardson 1977; Clark and Hatch 1981; E. A. Clark 1979, 1983, 1984, 1986, 1992, 1996.

[22] Elm 1994. [23] Brakke 1998; Krawiec 2002. [24] Fiorenza 1983: xix.