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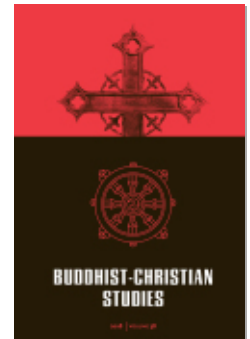
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Carol S. Anderson
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ABSTRACT

This article explores the implications of early Buddhist and Christian textual analyses of gender and sex for contemporary questions about gender and physical bodies. One of the tenets of contemporary studies of gender and sexuality is the unmooring of the category of gender from the biologically identifiable and sexed bodies. Christian literature reveals a binary view of sex and gender that allowed women only very limited access to spiritual training and community. The Pāli canon and commentarial traditions, in contrast, draw on both *vinaya* legal and *abhidhamma* analytic traditions to lay out a relationship between biologically sexed bodies and gender that is not, fundamentally, essentialist yet still retains an analysis of material bodies and sex. Tracing the actual passages through the commentaries on one *vinaya* passage, this essay shows how the logic of *vinaya* and *abhidhamma* analyses of physical bodies, gender, and behavior is both unique to each genre while being used by commentators to explain the difference between male and female bodies and gender. At the same time, this article confirms recent scholarship that argues the Pāli commentaries are markedly sexist in their devaluation of women and female gender where the Pāli canon is not.

Practitioners of both Pāli Buddhism and early Christianity included monastics, male and female. In both communities, the sexes practiced separately, and the presence of one in a locus reserved for the other would be cause for consternation and concern. Despite many obstacles to women participating with the male monastics, textual evidence of that very situation abounds in both traditions. Its occurrence, however, was recognized and handled quite differently among Buddhists than among Christians. For the Buddhist material we discuss herein, the context is perceived as spontaneous sex change. For the Christian material, the context is that of transvestite female saints. We will consider first the Buddhist materials, then the early Christian, and finally, draw some comparative conclusions.

KEYWORDS: gender, Buddhist-Christian dialogue, women, transgender, sex change, early Buddhism, classical Christianity.

PART I. THE PĀLI BUDDHIST SOURCES

In this first part of our article, we explore the difference that the genres of Pāli texts make to our understandings of gender and sex in the canonical and commentarial literature, as well as a substantive examination of two different passages that offer explanations of gender in a Pāli Buddhist framework. In terms of the historical context for these texts, the oral compilations, and recitations of the root *vinaya* texts of the Pāli canon should probably be dated between the first century BCE and the second or third century CE, and the commentaries can be reliably dated to the late fifth century CE. The commentaries are grouped into the fifth and sixth centuries, and then in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. All the texts with which we are working are in Pāli, a north Indian Middle Indo-Aryan language closely related to Sanskrit. The Buddhist Sanskrit sources are comparable, but including them is beyond the scope of this essay. The broad argument that we wish to make is that the Pāli canon and commentarial traditions draw on both *vinaya* legal and *abbidhamma* analytic traditions to lay out a relationship between biologically sexed bodies and gender that is not, fundamentally, essentialist. One of the tenets of contemporary analyses of gender is that gender should be unmoored from the anchor of physically sexed bodies to overcome, to some degree, the oppression experienced by non-male-bodied humans. The history of scholarship on sex documents the persistence of a gender binary, and Pāli Buddhism has been so classified. Along with others, we have sought to document that the early Pāli teachings are not quite so essentialist, and the evidence discussed here will enable us to understand the significance of the genres of *abbidhamma* analyses and *vinaya* legal analyses regarding the definition of “gender” and “sex” in this tradition.

A. *Vinaya Sources*

The root passage in the Pāli canon that provides us with an entrée into these questions of gender and sex in the early Buddhist tradition is a curious one.

Now at that time the sexual features (*liṅga*) of a woman appeared on a certain monk. They told the Blessed One about this matter. [He said,] “Monks, I prescribe the same teacher, the same ordination, the same rainy seasons together with the nuns. I prescribe reinstatement among the nuns for those offenses that nuns share in common with monks. According to those offenses of monks that are not shared in common with nuns, there is no offense.”

Now at that time, the sexual features (*liṅga*) of a man appeared on a certain nun. They told the Blessed One about this matter. [He said,] “Monks, I prescribe the same teacher, the same ordination, the same rainy seasons in relation to the monks. I prescribe reinstatement among the monks for those offenses that monks share in common with the nuns. According to those offences of nuns that are not shared in common with monks, there is no offense.” (Vin 3.35; Horner 1.54; Scherer 2006).¹

This passage appears in the *Vinayaṭīkā*, which is one of the three different “bas-kets” of teachings in the Pāli canon and commentaries: *vinaya* (discipline), *sutta/sūtra*

(story), and *abbidhamma/abbidbarma* (further or higher dharma). Each of these collections is called a *piṭaka*, which is usually translated as “basket,” but we get a clearer sense of the term if we envision it as a “thread,” particularly as a thread of the teachings that became identified as the Buddhist canon. The *Vinayapiṭaka* contains the legal traditions or rules on how to live in the intentional monastic communities for monks and nuns. Thus, the Buddha’s instructions to his followers when they bring this case of a change of sex to him is to address the cases in terms of the legal standing of the monk or nun who experiences the change in sex. The term that we are translating as sexual features is *liṅga*, a word that carries a wealth of different interpretations and connotations. It can refer to the actual sexual genitalia of males and females (for humans as well as non-humans), it refers to the linguistic markers of gender in language, and can accurately be translated as what we would today call gender—the cultural meanings assigned to the biological organs of males and females. Other common translations of *liṅga* include “sign,” “characteristic,” “feature,” “sex,” or “organ.” When paired with “male” (*purisa*) or “female” (*itthi*), the compound should properly be construed as “the features/organs of a male/man” and “the features/organ of a female/woman.”

These two verses are the basis for a series of commentaries that stretch into the early modern period, as late as the seventeenth century in one Burmese commentary. There is a rather remarkable continuity in the commentaries that reflects the concern of commentators with the genre of the works upon which they are commenting. “Commentary,” Richard Nance writes, “has long been recognized as the preeminent vehicle for the dispensation of knowledge in India” (Nance 2012, 4). How Buddhist commentators did and do what they do is a topic that has only begun to receive the rich attention it deserves, and we wish simply to draw attention to a handful of the challenges, constraints, and opportunities that greet us when turning to the commentarial work on this intriguing passage regarding a change of sex.

We are, however, ill-equipped to read them [the commentaries], and approaching them for the first time can be a disorienting and frustrating experience. Buddhist sūtra commentaries were composed according to rhetorical protocols that we do not share. In contrast to the smooth narrative flow of a sūtra text, the commentaries contain a jumble of statements, phrases, and single terms, accompanied by lengthy digressions on issues that may appear only peripherally related to the sūtra under discussion. (Nance 2012, 7)

Nance points out that we need to understand the conventions that shape commentary, and Maria Heim concurs. In her work on the commentaries of Buddhaghōṣa, a fifth-century South Indian commentator on the Pāli Buddhist canon, she observes that his commentaries are designed to open possibilities for understanding. She writes:

It is expansive in two ways. First, the writing of commentaries and the process of exposition are considered by the tradition to be a process that can go on indefinitely, and it often seems that it has—the body of commentarial material one can look at on any particular passage is often considerable. The texts are

also highly intertextual within these layers—sermons refer to other sermons, Buddhaghōṣa invokes other passages in his commentary—and following the web of connections for even one passage can be time-consuming (though usually highly rewarding). (Heim 2014, 12)

The analysis that follows takes both observations to heart: we need to understand that the commentaries are not neatly composed prose explanations of the canonical materials; the reverse is more often the case. Further, the intertextuality of the commentaries in the Pāli tradition is one of the keys to understanding how this tradition understood the relationship between gender and physical bodies.

The first commentary on this passage is rather lengthy, and was composed by Buddhaghōṣa in the late fifth century. It is a commentary on the *vinaya* passage above, and thus begins with matters of status, standing, and the role of the saṅgha. We immediately see that the concern of the *vinaya* for Buddhaghōṣa was not meaning, as Heim suggests: “We recall that while Buddhaghōṣa suggests that the *Suttanta* and the *abhidhamma* concern questions of meaning, he claims that the *vinaya* is about actions, training, and matters of restraint” (2014, 133).

We can see this observation borne out in the *Samantapaṣādikā*, the commentary on the *Vinaya* passage. Written by Buddhaghōṣa, this is the earliest and one of the most comprehensive commentaries on the passage.² Note the primary concern with the rules and guidelines for how to live with a change of sex.

In the fourteenth case, the *līṅga* [female sexual characteristic] of a woman appears, means: in the middle of the night when he was asleep, [his] male form with things like beard and moustache, disappear entirely [and] the female form appeared. “Just that preceptor, just that full ordination” means I allow exactly the same teacher (*upajjhāyā*), [and] exactly the same ordination [previously performed].” The meaning is: “I allow the same ordination previously taken, and the same teacher previously chosen, but there is no need to take a [new] preceptor or undergo [an additional] full ordination.” “The same years [lit. rainy seasons]” means “I allow [seniority to be determined by] the same number of years, exactly the same number of years since a monk’s ordination.” This does not mean, the number of years that will pass from this moment forward (i.e., from the moment of the sex change). “In the company of nuns” means “I allow the provision of meeting with or being in the company of nuns.” Thus it is said, “Now it is not proper [for the monk turned nun] to live among monks, now [she] should go to a nunnery to live together with nuns.” “Those offences shared by monks and nuns” means either those offenses of the monks that require confession (i.e., all offenses except *pārājikā* and *sambādisesa*) or those offenses that require probation³ (i.e., *sambādisesa* offenses) that are shared by nuns.” [“To remove those offences in the presence of the nuns,”] means “when [those offences] are removed according to the legal procedures [of the *Vinaya*], then I allow these offences to be removed in the presence of the nuns.” “There is no infringement of those offences” means “There is no infringement of those offenses, such as emission of semen, that are not held in common by nuns and monks.” Again, those offenses intrinsic to his original *līṅga* (sexual characteristics), those are not offenses according to the text.

But this opinion is independent from the text (i.e., the *Vinaya*) but follows it closely—regarding these two *liṅga*: the male *liṅga* are greater and female *liṅga* are lesser; therefore, male *liṅga* disappear due to strong unwholesome activity. Female *liṅga* arise due to mildly wholesome activity. But the female *liṅga* disappears due to mildly unwholesome activity. Male *liṅga* is established due to strong wholesome activities. To reiterate, in these two cases it [i.e., the male *liṅga*] disappears due to unwholesomeness, and it appears due to wholesomeness.⁴

Thus, if female *liṅga* appear to one of two bhikkhus who have come together, going to sleep, having laid down to sleep in one house, having had conversation about dhamma or studied together, there is an offense related to both sharing a bed. So, if one of them wakes up in the middle of the night, sees the change, and is pained and distressed, the other monk consoles him, saying “It’s all right, that’s the problem with *saṃsāra*. A door is given by the perfectly enlightened one, then whether monk or nun, the revealed dharma is the unobstructed path to heaven.” When he has been reassured, he should say, “It is best if you go to the nunnery. Do you have any friends who are nuns?” If she has [friends], having said, “There are such nuns,” or if or even if there aren’t any friends, having said “[There] aren’t any,” so when they say there aren’t, the monk [turned nun] should say to the monk, “Help, lead me now, first of all, to a nunnery.” [Then] that monk, together with her, should go to the nuns who are either her friends or his friends. And while going he should not go alone. (cf. Kieffer-Pülz 2018, 51–53)

The commentarial passage continues at some length, explaining just how a monk shouldn’t travel alone, which rules can be abrogated to find an accommodating monastery or nunnery, and so on. Except for the passage on *why* the sex change occurred, Buddhaghōṣa’s entire commentary focuses on the ramifications of the sex change, setting aside all questions or concerns about the fact of sex change itself. Bhikkhu Anālayo and others have pointed this out, drawing attention to the “basically non-judgmental reaction of the Buddha” (Kieffer-Pülz 2018; Anālayo 2014, 113; Scherer 2006, 67f.; Anderson 2016b). The passage on the *cause* for the disappearance of male *liṅga* and the disappearance of female *liṅga* is unusual, and tracing it back leads us to sources contained in the commentaries of the *Abhidhammapiṭaka*. In the passage above, the material taken from the *abhidhamma* commentaries becomes thoroughly integrated into later commentaries and subcommentaries on this passage in the tradition but is absent from the earliest canonical layers. As von Hinüber has pointed out, this makes a certain amount of sense if Buddhaghōṣa was the author of these commentaries—he was familiar with both genres, the *vinaya* and the *abhidhamma*. The intertextuality also indicates that these commentaries were composed at roughly the same period, somewhere between the late fourth and early sixth centuries (von Hinüber 1996, §313).⁵

The Pāli phrase used to introduce this *abhidhamma* explanation is worth noting: “But this opinion with close attention to the text independent of the canon” (*ayaṃ pana pālimutto okkantikavinicchayo*). The term “independent of the canon” (*pālimutto*) refers to opinions on Buddhist law that are based on the *Vinaya* (the text) but are

not found in the *Vinaya* itself (von Hinüber 1996, §218). The term here introduces material from the *abhidhamma* commentaries. Returning to the introduction of the *abhidhamma* passage, “a judgement with close attention to the text” (*okkantikavinichayo*) is less frequently found in the commentaries (Cone 2001, 1:557). Kieffer-Pülz translates this phrase as, “But the [following] is the regulation independent from the text (*Vinaya*) [but] fitting in with [it]” (2018, 52–53). The use of the phrase signals that the author deliberately included material not found in the canon, drawn from another commentary, to bear on matters of *vinaya* (discipline). There isn’t any indication in this passage or in the subcommentaries about why strong or weak positive *kamma* (or actions) produce a change of gender, but Anālayo has suggested that the misogyny commonly associated with early Buddhist literature should be attributed to the commentaries instead of the canonical layers (2014, 142). This evidence certainly supports that hypothesis: where the *Vinaya* itself has an even exchange: a nun develops male genitalia, and a monk develops female genitalia, the commentaries attribute it to weak and strong actions. Buddhaghosa’s *Vinaya* commentary, then, reflects the concern with the rules that govern the monastic orders: seniority, residence, practice, and community. Even with the attribution of weak and strong actions as the cause for a change of gender, compassion is woven throughout the commentarial explanation: one’s friends should commiserate with him or her as they experience such a change of gender, and they should bend the rules—which are happily suspended—to help their friend find a welcoming nunnery (or monastery).

B. Abhidhamma Sources

The same passage is found in commentary attributed to Buddhaghosa on the *Dhammasaṅgani*, the *Atthasālinī*—in fact, not only is the same passage found in that commentary, but the same explanation of the fact of the sex change is repeated in the *Atthasālinī*.

Of these two controlling faculties, the feminine has the characteristic (of knowing) the state of a woman, the function of showing “this is woman,” the manifestation which is the cause of femininity in feature, mark, occupation, deportment. The masculine controlling faculty has the characteristic of (knowing) the state of man, the function of showing “this is man,” the manifestation which is the cause of masculinity in feature, etc. Both came into being during the procedure of the first inhabitants of this cycle, subsequently they arise at conception. Matter coming into being at conception fluctuates during procedure and changes its features; and matter coming into being during procedure does likewise; as he said (*yathāba*): “At that time in a certain bhikkhu the features of a woman were revealed; at that time in a certain female bhikkhu the features of a man were revealed.” Of the two, the masculine sex is superior, the feminine is inferior. Therefore, the former disappears through grossly immoral conduct; the latter may be brought about by weak morality. But in disappearing, the latter does so by weak immorality, the former may be brought about by strong morality. Thus, both disappear through immorality

and may be brought about by morality. (Dhs-a 322–323 = Maung Tin and Rhys Davids 1958, 419–421)

The text in bold is identical with both the passage in Buddhaghōṣa’s commentary on the root text from the *Vinayaṭīkā*, and is introduced with commonly used words, “as [the author of the quoted text has] said.”⁶ The cause of a change of sex is correlated with one’s actions, which in turn shape one’s karma. Unlike most Indian traditions that recognize a change of sex (or gender) from one life to the next, this passage concerns sex change within the same life—even back and forth over a period of weeks or months. Anālayo explains it best: “The commentary explains that a loss of maleness is the result of a strong unwholesome deed, and its replacement by femaleness is due to a weak wholesome deed. Conversely, loss of femaleness is the result of a weak unwholesome deed, and its replacement with maleness is due to a strong wholesome deed” (2014, 113).⁷ This explanation about why sex change occurs is embedded in the commentary on the *Dhammasaṅgānī*’s explanation of the faculties of femininity and masculinity, and this context provides us with a relatively fuller understanding of the Pāli understanding of the relationship between physically sexed bodies, gender, and behavior. What does the author of the *abbidhamma* commentary gain by citing the passage on sex change from the *Vinayaṭīkā* within this explanation of the faculties of masculinity and femininity?

The *Dhammasaṅgānī* is one of two *abbidhamma* canonical texts that consists of lists in different combinations and groups, which consist of various combinations of dhammas, the smallest components of those elements, both mental and material, that make up our lives and the world in which we live.⁸ As its first British translator explained, “the whole manual is shown to be, as it professes to be, a compendium, or, more literally, a co-enumeration of dhammā” (Rhys Davids 1900, xxxi). In contrast with the *vinaya* focus on regulation and training, the nature of the *abbidhamma* method is to break down “conscious awareness (*citta*) and material phenomena” (Heim 2014, 87). *Abbidhamma* analysis provides us with the categories to dissect and identify the moments that make up the substance of our lives. By tracing the *cittas*, or discrete units of conscious awareness, Heim points out that “they are seen to be made up of any number of the 52 mental factors (*cetasikas*)” (2014, 87). These are not exhaustive combinations; the lists both open endless possible experiences and give us the magnifying glass with which to analyze them in minute detail. “Although our ordinary experience of our mental processes involves a continuous stream of awarenesses, the *abbidhamma* breaks down the series into discrete and irreducible parts, even while it acknowledges that these parts always show up in groups with other parts” (Heim 2014, 88). Heim points out that these *abbidhamma* analyses are not terribly helpful when it comes to understanding daily actions and behaviors, although she notes that scholars have recognized that the Theravādins do not see ultimate teachings as truer than conventional teachings; both have their place (Heim 2014, 90). The *abbidhamma* method that breaks down the world into its “discrete and irreducible parts” frames the Pāli concept of what we would call gender insofar in terms of the *indriyas* (controlling faculties), which are classified as derived or secondary forms of matter in the canonical *Dhammasaṅgānī*.

In the discussion of derived dhamma (*upādā dhammā*) in the *Dhammasaṅgani*, the text turns to an explanation of *itthindriyaṃ* and *purisindriyaṃ*, or the faculties of a female or a woman and the male faculty. The materiality of these faculties is important to this discussion of physical bodies and gender, insofar as there is no question whatsoever that the faculties of femininity and masculinity are material in nature. They are not, however, static or permanent. The relationship between these derived dhammas and primary matter is not spelled out in detail in the *Dhammasaṅgani*, but is explained as secondary in other *abhidhamma* works (Ronkin 2005, 56).⁹ The ways in which the faculties control human behavior is compared to ministers of state, “who have freedom of control in each region and who do not interfere with each other. This relation specifically refers to the faculties that determine one’s behavior by exercising control over their associated mental states, capacitating them to appear in consciousness” (Ronkin 2005, 220).¹⁰ Thus, where the *vinaya* is concerned with regulations, laws, and guidelines for monastic life, the genre of *abhidhamma* breaks down our daily experiences into the constituent parts in order to understand the impermanence and insubstantiality of existence itself.

The *Dhammasaṅgani* locates the controlling male and female faculties as types of derived matter; as Cabezón has recently noted, “male and female faculties are the material, biological substances that cause sexual differentiation and that therefore allow us to distinguish males and females from each other” (2017, 357). However, the faculties of femininity and masculinity manifest themselves in terms that we call gendered behaviors today. The commentator of the *Atthasalinī* quoted the passage on sex change from the *Vinayaṭṭhaka* in order to support his explanation of the faculties of masculinity and femininity, and prefaced his citation of the *Vinayaṭṭhaka* with a paragraph or two explaining just how the faculties shape gendered behavior. Here is the canonical passage that anchors the commentary:

[633] What is that form which is femininity (*itthindriyaṃ*)? That which is of the female, feminine in appearance, feminine in characteristics, in occupation, in deportment, feminine in condition and being—this is that form which constitutes femininity.¹¹

[634] What is that form which is masculinity (*purisindriyaṃ*)? That which is of the male, masculine in appearance, masculine in characteristics, in occupation, in deportment, masculine in condition and being—this is that form which constitutes masculinity. (Rhys Davids 1900, 190–191)

Here is the commentary, and this explanation for what we recognize as gender is taken to be the representation of a classically binary system of gender, rooted in a biological conception of sex. A closer reading, though, indicates otherwise.

In the exposition of the female faculty, “that which” is an expression showing the reason. The meaning here is: “by whatever cause a woman has feminine features,” etc., where “feature” is shape. To expand: The shape of a woman’s hands, feet, neck, breast, etc., is not like that of a man’s. The female lower body is broad, the upper body is less broad. The hands and feet are small, the mouth

is small." "Marks" is recognizable sign. The female breast is prominent. The face is without beard or moustache. The dressing of the hair, the wearing of the clothes are also unlike those of a man. "Occupation" is action. Thus, in youth women play with tiny shallow baskets, pestles and mortars, variegated dolls, and weave string with clay-fibre. "Department" is mode of going or gait, etc. Thus, there is a want of assertion in women's walking, standing, lying down, sitting, eating, swallowing. Indeed, when a man of that description is seen, folk say, "He walks, stands, etc., like a woman." "Female in condition and being"—these two have one meaning: the nature of woman, which is born of kamma and produced at the instant of conception. But female features, etc., are not the female faculty; they are produced in course of process because of that faculty. When there is seed, the tree grows because of the seed, and is replete with branch and twig and stands filling the sky; so when there is the female faculty called femininity [or female], female features, etc., come to be. The female faculty should be regarded as the seed; as the tree stands growing and filling the sky because of the seed, so the female features, etc., arise in course of procedure because of that faculty. Herein the controlling faculty is not known by visual cognition but only by mind-cognition. But female features, etc., are known by visual as well as by mind-cognition. "This is that matter which is the female controlling faculty" means "such matter is not as the eye-controlling faculty, etc., are in the male." By natural law the controlling faculty of a woman is only female.

And the same [322] with the male faculty. Male features, etc., should be understood as the opposite of the female. For the shape of the hands, feet, neck, breast, etc., of a man is unlike the shape of those of a woman. For a man's upper body is broad, the lower body is less broad; his hands and feet are large, the face is large, the breast-flesh is less full; beard and moustaches grow. Hairdressing and the wearing of clothes are not like those of women. In youth they play with chariots and ploughs, etc., make sandbanks and dig ponds. There is assertion in their walking, etc. When a woman is seen taking long strides, etc., folk say "she walks like a man." The rest is the same as was said of the female controlling faculty.

Of these two controlling faculties, the female has the characteristic (of knowing) the state of a woman, the function of showing "this is woman," the manifestation which is the cause of femininity in feature, mark, occupation, department. The male controlling faculty has the characteristic of (knowing) the state of man, the function of showing "this is a man," the manifestation which is the cause of masculinity in feature, etc. Both came into being during the procedure of the first inhabitants of this cycle, subsequently they arise at conception. Matter coming into being at conception fluctuates during procedure and changes its features; and matter coming into being during procedure does likewise; as has been said: "At that time in a certain bhikkhu the features of a woman were revealed; at that time in a certain female bhikkhu the features of a man were revealed." Of the two, the masculine sex is superior, the feminine is inferior. Therefore, the former disappears through grossly immoral conduct; the latter may be brought about by weak morality. But in disappearing, the latter does so by weak immorality, the former may be brought about by strong morality. Thus, both disappear through immorality and may be brought about

by morality. (*Dhs-a* 322–323 = Maung Tin and Rhys Davids 1958, 419–421; see also Cabezón 2017, 361–367)

The logic associated with the faculties and the arising of gender becomes quite clear if we line up the canonical passage with the commentary.

Dhs. What is that form which is female (*itthindriyam*)? That which is of the female, feminine in appearance, feminine in characteristics, in occupation, in deportment, feminine in condition and being—this is that form which constitutes femininity.

Dhs-a. In the exposition of the female controlling faculty, “**that which**” is an expression showing the reason. The meaning here is: “**by whatever cause a woman has female features,**” etc., where “feature” is shape. To expand: The shape of a woman’s hands, feet, neck, breast, etc., is not like that of a man’s.

In other words, the faculty of femininity is the cause for the physical features associated with women, the characteristics associated with femininity, occupation, deportment, and so on. The same is true for the faculty of masculinity in the same way. The faculty comes first, and the physical features follow. The commentary explains this again, comparing the relationship between the faculties of femininity and masculinity to physical features as a seed to a tree: “When there is a seed the tree grows from the seed, and is replete with branch and twig and stands filling the sky; so when there is the feminine controlling faculty called femininity, feminine features, etc., come to be. The feminine controlling faculty should be regarded as the seed; as the tree stands growing and filling the sky because of the seed, so the feminine features, etc., arise in course of procedure because of that faculty.” The same is true for the faculty of masculinity. Further, behavior that we would call gendered behavior today flows from the female and male faculties, which are material in nature.

Within this argument that the faculties of “gender” are the seeds that produce appearance, shape, form, and so on that mark gender, the commentator refers to the sex change passage of the *Vinayapīṭaka*, apparently to underscore that “matter coming into being at conception fluctuates.” This is simply an odd characteristic to emphasize, particularly when set against the relative essentialism of the previous descriptions (women like to play with dolls, men like to play with chariots and ploughs). Nonetheless, this is the commentator’s point: matter changes, and gender can fluctuate.¹² After that reference, though, the commentator makes his point about the superiority of the masculine gender and the inferiority of the feminine. The entire passage ends with this assertion, and the commentary moves into a discussion of the next faculty. So, why insert this reference to the fact of gender change? It remains a puzzle, but one observation seems quite clear, that this is the opening for the asymmetry of the genders, in contrast to the symmetry of the *Vinaya* and the two faculties in this *abbidhamma* passage. The conclusion that we draw, too, is that given the nature of Buddhist conceptions of matter, gender could not, by the fact of its materiality according to *abbidhamma* analysis, be a fixed and stable feature of humans. Femininity

and masculinity *had* to change, and the *Vinaya* explanation is the best one that the commentator could find to document that fluctuation.

PART II. THE CHRISTIAN SOURCES

The early Christian literature reveals the same obsession with sexual behavior and a similar perceived need to control it as we found in the early Buddhist literature. The early church fathers seem to have struggled to make room for women who shared their devotional and monastic inclinations. As Stephen J. Davis points out, in the early hagiographical literature “women are alternatively castigated as fallen daughters of Eve and lauded as heroic models for pious imitation” (2002, 2). Those few who are worthy of special praise are described as “having transcended the limitations of their sex,” revealing a clear hierarchy of gender-based sanctity (*ibid.*). We do not find examples of sex change and/or how to accommodate it in Christian monastic rules.

What we do find is the recurring image of the transvestite female saint, the woman who disguises herself as a man to pursue her monastic ambitions: “this asymmetrical process of transformation, whereby the ‘female’ could, under certain rather extraordinary spiritual conditions, become ‘male,’ marks an important early, but by no means unique, example of a remarkable cultural phenomenon, the destabilization of gender identity in the history of a tradition usually seen to cast gender in fairly fixed and dualistic terms” (Castelli 1991, 46–47). Such females were not seen as truly male, as the transsexual Buddhists were, but as merely passing for men. Their true gender identities were often open secrets.

Nearly a dozen hagiographies of such saints appeared between the fifth and seventh centuries. Some may be derived from others, a clear indication that the trope “works,” that the normally unacceptable transvestism was, in these limited circumstances, acceptable. These tales seemed to hold particular fascination for the inmates of all-male monasteries; the three extant manuscripts of the *Life of St. Mary/Marinos* are preserved in libraries on Mt. Athos in Greece, where no females, human or animal, are allowed.

Other cross-dressing saints whose lives were catalogued during this period include Anastasia/Anastasios, Apolinaria/Dorotheos, Athanasia, Eugenia/Eugenios, Euphrosyne/Smaragdus, Hilaria/Hilarion, Matrona/Babylos, Pelagia/Pelagius, Susannah/John, and Theodora/Theodorus. Their stories are quite similar. Some sought to escape impending marriage and wanted to travel freely to join a monastery. Some sought to leave their marriages for their religious pursuits, with or without spousal consent. And some mark departures from promiscuity by cutting their hair and entering a monastery. Most take few, or none, into their confidence as they enter the monastic life, and the ultimate discovery of the deception amazes so much that the hagiographers declare the women’s sanctity (Davis 2002, 5). Later, again as women, they attained official sainthood within the Church.

Some transvestite saints took up such austere lives that their bodies changed significantly. They lost a great deal of weight, so much that menstrual periods ceased and breasts all but disappeared. Regardless of dress choice, they no longer looked like

what women are expected to look like. In this way the troublesome (to men) female bodies were erased (Davis 2002, 11). Davis argues, effectively, that the hagiographies of these transvestite saints are knit together in various ways from a core of five cultural elements: hagiographies of previous such women; hagiographies of certain early Christian men; contemporary discourse on eunuchs; the Genesis story of Potiphar's wife; and contemporary discourse on femaleness in community (Davis 2002, 15). "The saint's body is effectively clothed in this patchwork, a patchwork of texts and images that present her in sexually ambiguous or male terms—the female saint who is not female, and yet still is" (Davis 2002, 15). What connects the tales is the transvestism, the disguise a woman dons to "pass" as male.

Authors present that change of dress matter-of-factly, with no comment. The literary model for the behavior is the earliest such life, the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, dating to the second century. The subsequent *Life of Eugenia* (fifth–sixth century) explicitly draws from that example, and Davis postulates that others do so implicitly, and so their authors say little about it (2002, 16). In other words, writers can be assumed to know their sectarian literary history.

Thecla, then, is the archetype for the transvestite saint. The book of Deuteronomy, however, explicitly forbids cross-dressing: "No woman shall wear an article of man's clothing, nor shall a man put on woman's dress; for those who do these things are abominable to the Lord your God" (Deut. 22.5).

These women's acts are transgressive, and yet the women are held as models of piety. Thecla justifies cutting her hair by claiming that "the removal of her 'beguiling' hair will enable her to avoid the looks of the overcurious" (Anson 1974, 3). Brakke points out that there are many good reasons for a woman alone in the desert to adopt male dress (2003, 89). "For Thecla male attire represented communion with Christ" (Anson 1974, 11). Eugenia said: "although a woman, I have acted the part of a man by behaving with manliness, by boldly embracing the chastity which is alone in Christ."¹³

We can then look at the situation as a theological statement about the women, whose erasure of obvious gender markers embodies the words found in (Paul's letter to the) Galatians 3:28: "There is no such thing as Jew and Greek, slave and freeman, male and female; for you are all one person in Christ Jesus." As Anson says, "incorporation into the body of Christ brings the initiate into a state of primal perfection transcending all distinctions, including those of sex" (1974, 7).

In every case, the women's bodies are de-feminized, whether through the simple acts of tonsure and transvestism, or the severe austerities that shrink the body, or by becoming (perceived as) a eunuch.¹⁴ Eunuchs were liminal figures in the ancient Mediterranean, able to cross social boundaries by virtue of their "dubious sex" (Davis 2002, 22). Transvestite women are often mistaken for eunuchs, as we see in Apollinaria, the *Life of St. Mary/Marinos*, the *Life of Hilaria*, and in the life of Pelagia (Davis 2002, 22). In some lives the women quite deliberately cultivate that misunderstanding. For example, Eugenia imitates the Ethiopian eunuch from the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* to enable "herself to overcome the limitations of her sex. Eugenia later tries to describe this process in terms of a (temporary) shift in gender from female to male:

‘and being a woman by nature, in order that I might gain everlasting life, I became a man for a short time.’¹⁵

The behavior seems to remove these women from the category “woman.” Can we say that it then inserts them into the category “man”? Perhaps not, but they do occupy a liminal space between the binaries. Palladius, speaking of Olympias, an ascetic and deaconess of Constantinople, said “Do not say ‘woman,’ but ‘such a man,’ for she is a man in contrast to the form of her body” (Brakke 2006, 195). In the third-century *The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas*, Perpetua describes a series of visions, in the last of which her body is transformed from female to male (Castelli 1991, 35).

Davis argues that “the intertextual presentation of Christ as a mimetic model actually contributes to the destabilization of bipolar gender categories in the representation of the female saint. At the same time that the ethic of imitation tries to inculcate ‘sameness,’ it takes as its presupposition the prior existence of difference” (2002, 34). Several scholars have drawn attention to “the sexually ambiguous representation of Christ” in early Christian art and literature (Davis 2002, 35). David Brakke looks at much of the same primary source material from the standpoint of a gender studies scholar. In early Christian writings, maleness is associated with strength and discipline, and authors would say that certain women were “made male” or “became men” to portray their virtue and piety. Perpetua, who fought off demons, says “I became a man” to do so (Brakke 2003, 389).

Whereas early female saints demonstrated their piety and spiritual worthiness, slightly later women used monasticism and austerity for the same ends. Some of the lives of these saints, or the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, suggest an understanding of the difference between “sex” (the physical body) and “gender” (behavior and culture), as when Sarah tells some visiting monks, “It is I who am a man, you who are women.”¹⁶ The monastic ideal was the absence of sex and gender. The appearance of an obviously female individual into that environment broke the illusion of asexuality.

Using Judith Butler’s ideas about gender as performative, Brakke claims that the ancient transvestite saints “became ‘male’ by performing ascetic acts,” acts that are the prerogative of (male) monks (2003, 390). Often these women function to shame their brothers, who fail to live up to them.

Meeks notes that sex roles were clearly differentiated in Greco-Roman society (1974, 183), and that while transvestism, or elements of transvestism, is not unusual in religious ritual, “there is no hint in the earliest Christian sources of ritual transvestism” (1974, 184). After a careful reading of Paul’s letters for any modification of these social roles, Meeks concludes that the Galatians verse was merely metaphor (1974, 208).

Ellen Muehlberger considers the case of Simeon, a supposedly male ascetic whom Theodoret describes in his *Religious History*. At one point Simeon’s body was examined and discovered to be female, and he was expelled from his monastery for violating the rules of social sex segregation. “If we considered the ambivalently gendered modes of representation that authors like Theodoret adopted to speak of Simeon’s surpassing religious practice, what would change about how we read asceticism as a project related to bodies and gender in early Christianity?” (Muehlberger 2015,

603). “Theodoret had abandoned the *telos* of maleness for ascetic performance” (2015, 606).

Very often a transvestite saint is falsely accused of sexual impropriety. In lives where that accusation arises, the saint humbly accepts the consequences, and the falsity of the charge comes to light only upon her death (Davis 2002, 26). Anson considers the situation an example of vicarious guilt projected upon the transvestite saint’s innocence, and that thereby frees her/his guilty brothers: “[T]he secret longing for a woman in a monastery is brilliantly concealed by disguising the woman as a man and making her appear guilty of the very temptation to which the monks are most subject; finally, after she has been punished for their desires, their guilt is compensated by turning her into a saint with universal remorse and sanctimonious worship” (1974, 30).

Cloke says that “writers who took a positive line about women’s capacities often stressed that the nature became equal because so often the work was” (1995, 214). They “became equal” to men, but did not *become* men. Palladius described Melania the Elder as “the female man of God,” for example (ibid.). “The female monk’s visible female body belied her interior manliness. . . . A female body contained within it a virile spirit, normally unseen, but amazingly some female monks could visually display the masculinization that demonic combat engendered in the monk, whether male or female” (Brakke 2006, 193).

Muehlberger says, “Even though they are marked as male in conventional ways, their characters are given physical qualities and placed in situations that, according to late ancient medical discourses, . . . marked female bodies” (2015, 585). Theodoret’s depictions of ascetic men as women illustrate the claim “that men and women are not different in nature from one another, but vary only in the degree of relative strength or weakness of their bodies” (Muehlberger 2015, 586). Theodoret innovatively claimed “that men and women shared the same nature” (2015, 590).

Female transvestism was not condoned. Supporting the Galatians’ injunction, a fourth-century council condemned women who presented as male for the sake of asceticism. Castelli notes that what made it problematic for women to cut their hair, was the fact that “women’s hair stands for their subjugation” (1991, 44). The very presence of the injunction strongly suggests that some women had indeed been eschewing normative gender roles to pursue their spiritual ambitions.

Elizabeth Castelli draws from the apocryphal *Gospel of Thomas*, where we first find the notion “that women can gain access to holiness and salvation by ‘becoming male’” (1991, 30). That text, Castelli argues, views sexual difference as a problem to be resolved in order for salvation to occur (1991, 31). She distinguishes between a Platonic notion of “oneness” and the notion of the “androgynous,” which is not desirable (1991, 32). “The female can and should strive to become male . . . since the male embodies the generic ‘human’” (1991, 33).

The *Gospel of Thomas* concludes as follows:

(114) 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.”

CONCLUSIONS

Untangling contemporary understandings of sex, gender, and perhaps gender expression—for lack of a more precise word to refer to gendered types of human behavior—is no easy task when it comes to this material. At the same time, the passages analyzed here indicate an awareness of the fact that physically sexed bodies were related to gendered forms of behavior in some rather sophisticated ways. Whether we are convinced by the argument that the faculties give rise to physically sexed bodies and gendered forms of behavior as a seed gives rise to a tree, the different kinds of *abhidhamma* analysis demonstrate that this system was not readily reduced to an essentialist binary rooted in physically sexed human bodies. Further, the fact that the *vinaya* offers solutions—legal solutions—to the possibility of a change of sex indicates that there is a degree of awareness of the mutability of physically sexed bodies.

The Christian material does talk of change of sex, but in a very different way. In early Christianity we see a destabilization of the bipolar gender schema through the attempt to erode sexual difference. In every case described, women appear in male guise, a confirmation of the hierarchy that privileges the male. “Although . . . ‘gender-bending’ was a feature of Christian portrayals of ascetic heroes from early on, Thecla being a noted example, still the gender that was ‘bent’ was typically female rather than male” (Miller 2003, 419).

The female saints’ transgressive behavior constitutes a crossing of gender boundaries but never their destruction (Miller 2003, 426). Their actions separate them from their own sexuality and, Miller claims, displace the actions of Eve (2003, 425).

At the same time, we should not take these passages as a blanket statement of acceptance for any kind of gender crossing, bending, or queering, as it were. Both traditions unambiguously reject non-normatively sexed bodies for monastic life (Anderson 2016a; Cabezón 2017), and as we have seen here, map a layer of misogyny onto both the *vinaya* passage describing a change of sex, and the Christian hagiographical material describing sexual disguise. Where the canonical passage offers the same case for monks as it does for nuns, the commentaries in both the *vinaya* and *abhidhamma* sources draw on the same explanation that claims that to be male is to be superior and to be female is to be inferior. Likewise with the Christian material, the default human is male. In that regard, this material supports Anālayo’s thesis that there is evidence for a more negative attitude toward women emerging in commentarial literature in contrast to strands of canonical stories about the advantages of a female birth (2014, 142).

NOTES

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1. The translations have been done by both authors unless otherwise cited.

2. This commentary likely dates to a century or so before 489 CE. Later traditions attribute this commentary to the Indian scholar Buddhaghōṣa (370–450 CE), but the evidence indicates that the work was not likely that of a single author (von Hinüber 1996, 103–105). We know that this commentary was translated into Chinese in 489 CE, thus providing us with the *terminus ante quem*, the latest possible date for this work (Heirman 2004 and Pinte 2011). It is possible, however, that the work was completed earlier in the fifth century (von Hinüber 1996, 102, and 88 n. 308). Anderson 2016b, 236–237.

3. Kieffer-Pülz 2018, 51. She prefers “removal” instead of “probation” as a translation for *vuṭṭhānagāminiyo*. This translation is not as clear as it could be, but it is an accurate translation. Von Hinüber explains that “only Saṃghādisesa offences are classified as *vuṭṭhānagāminī* . . . because they are “removed” by *parivāsa* [having spent time on probation].” In other words, the second class of offenses, *saṃghādisesa*, require confession before their fellow monks, a period of probation or penance, and then formal readmission. In this way, “removal” is an accurate translation as von Hinüber notes; however, we have used “probation” instead, insofar as this term conveys the logic of this sentence more clearly. See von Hinüber 1997, 91 n. 15, and Cabezón 2017, 134–135 n. 353.

4. See Kieffer-Pülz 2018, 32, for a different translation of this sentence.

5. See Kieffer-Pülz 2016, 9–45. She lays out the relationship between all of the sources that contain this sex change passage and the techniques that the commentators used to construct their arguments.

6. Kieffer-Pülz, 2014, 70, on the translation of *āba*.

7. Anālayo 2014, 113. He has a critique of Powers’s translation of this passage in note 14, where he concludes that the commentary is more nuanced than Powers seems to indicate (citing Powers 2009, 126).

8. See also Heim 2014, 85.

9. “The *Nikāyas* allude to the distinction between the *mahābhūtas* as primary material elements (*rūpa-dhamma*) and the secondary, derived material elements (*upādā-rūpa*), but no attempt is made to explain how and why the latter are secondary to the former. The *Dhammasaṅgānī* does not go much beyond the *Nikāyas* in this respect. Preliminary information is found in the *Paṭṭhāna*, where it is said that the four *mahābhūtas* stand in relation to the *upādā-rūpas* as causal conditions (*paccaya*) by way of simultaneity (*sahajāta*), support (*nissaya*), presence (*atthi*) and non-disappearance (*avigata*). The *upādā-dhammas* thus emanate simultaneously with the *rūpa-dhammas* but they are elements that describe how material phenomena are perceived through our senses, and hence are secondary to the latter. The *mahābhūtas* are assigned a primary position in the sense that they are recognized as the ultimate, irreducible data of matter” (Ronkin 2005, 56).

10. “The sixteenth condition, controlling faculty (*indriyapaccaya*), obtains when a conditioning event relates to its conditioned events by controlling them. It is likened to several ministers of state who have freedom of control in each region and who do not interfere with each other. This relation specifically refers to the faculties that determine one’s behaviour by exercising control over their associated mental states, capacitating them to appear in consciousness. These include the six sense *indriyas* (the five plus the mental one, *manindriya*), but also additional faculties such as the female (*itthindriya*) and male faculties (*purisindriya*), the life faculty (*jīvindriya*), and various other controlling motives, like bodily pleasure faculty (*sukhindriya*), confidence (*saddindriya*), concentration (*samādhindriya*), awareness (*satindriya*) and others. For example, the faculty of confidence controls one’s trust in the triple gem, the awareness faculty oversees one’s cultivation of the four *satipaṭṭhānas*, and the bodily pleasure faculty governs experiencing bodily pleasure. The Abhidhamma enumerates twenty-two *indriyas*, and the significance attributed to them in moulding one’s behaviour may have led the Abhidhammikas to formulate this causal conditioning relation that is held among the faculties as they facilitate the rise of *dbammas* in consciousness” (Ronkin 2005, 220).

11. See C. A. F. Rhys Davids’s remark on page 15 in *Buddhist Manual of Psychological Ethics*,

“The case of woman and attribute of femininity, it remarks, is different. (This may be a groping after the distinction between concrete and abstract.)”

12. Cabezón discusses these passages in his recent and excellent study. José Ignacio Cabezón, *Sexuality in Classical South Asian Buddhism*, 361–362. We are in agreement on the role of the faculties and the material basis of gendered behavior in these texts.

13. Anson 1974, 23, citing *The Life of Eugenia*.

14. Davis 2002, 29. Rarely is the body re-feminized. Susannah, however, is tortured during her life as a (male) monk and her breasts amputated. Just then an angel intervenes and restores the breasts and thus also Susannah’s female identity.

15. Davis 2002, 24, citing *The Life of Eugenia*.

16. Brakke 2003, 390; *Sayings*, 192–193.

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