

Toward Community Beyond Gender Binaries: Gregory of Nyssa's Transgendering as Part of his Transformative Eschatology

Michael Nausner

To cite this article: Michael Nausner (2001) Toward Community Beyond Gender Binaries: Gregory of Nyssa's Transgendering as Part of his Transformative Eschatology, *Theology & Sexuality*, 2002:16, 55-65

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/135583580200801606>



Published online: 21 Apr 2015.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 4



View related articles [↗](#)



Citing articles: 2 View citing articles [↗](#)

**Toward Community Beyond Gender Binaries:
Gregory of Nyssa's Transgendering as Part of
his Transformative Eschatology**

Michael Nausner

mnausner@drew.edu

Abstract

In this article Nausner explores the concept of gender transcendence which he rephrases in terms of transgendering in the theology of Gregory of Nyssa. Nausner argues that such destabilizing of gender was not confined to the sacraments but present throughout the Christian life in Gregory's thought. Gregory is presented as prefiguring the project of queer theory in rendering gender slippery and non-essential not least in his performance of his own masculinity.

With this article¹ I want to join the choir of voices who during the last decade have highlighted the relevance of Gregory of Nyssa's treatment of gender. Especially thanks to Verna Harrison's effort the centrality of gender transcendence in Gregory's writings has become clear. Early on she describes his understanding of the unity in Christ as a state, 'in which the distinction between male and female no longer exists'.² She argues that this gender transcendence for Gregory 'is a surpassing of the limitations and divisions that can hinder each man or woman from acquiring a fullness of human life and goodness'.³

1. A version of this article was presented at the Men's Studies Session during the American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting in November 2000. The session dealt predominantly with Daniel Boyarin's book, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

2. Verna Harrison, 'Male and Female in Cappadocian Theology', *Journal of Theological Studies* 41 (1990), pp. 441-71 (442).

3. Verna Harrison, 'Gender, Generation, and Virginity in Cappadocian Theology', *Journal of Theological Studies* 47 (1996), pp. 38-68 (66).

Harrison successfully demonstrates the crucial significance of gender transcendence in Gregory's writings and as a key notion of this transcendence a spiritual *giving birth*, which for men 'entails a certain gender reversal'.⁴ But the consequences of this remarkably destabilizing concept she seems to confine to the realm of sacramental experience, especially the Eucharist, and to the changed social roles and desexualized identities in asceticism. In a different vein, other feminist scholars have long emphasized the subversive consequences that asceticism can have for traditional gender distinctions, and how it can play a liberating role especially for women. 'The chief route to the acquisition of greater freedom for Christian women in the patristic era was asceticism', as Elizabeth Clark phrases it.⁵

The question I am posing in this article is whether the potential consequences of such radical concepts as gender transcendence and gender reversal are limited to sacramental experience and to asceticism. I want to suggest that Gregory's discursive gender disruptions bear a broader potentiality for gender roles. What I call his *transformative eschatology* entails participation in the divine and suggests destabilizing consequences for fixed masculine and feminine identity. A playful and mutual transgending, rather than transcendence of gender, is at work in this eschatology.

What I don't want to do in this article, and here I adopt a phrase of Daniel Boyarin, is to argue for some 'essential, continuous [Christian] countergendering',⁶ but rather for a mostly neglected potentiality of four specific treatises of Gregory of Nyssa. I want to argue that Gregory's view of gender was *not* supportive of the kind of late antique orthodox Christianity, that 'was no longer involved in a subversion of all hierarchies of empire, having become imperial itself'.⁷ Gregory, I think, in many ways was an example for those men in late antiquity, about whom Boyarin writes that they 'resisted the modes of masculinity most succinctly symbolized by the imperial phallus'.⁸ In some of his writings Gregory depicts his own masculinity 'in resistance to dominant civic models of manhood', as Virginia Burrus suggests.⁹ In her reading of

4. Harrison, 'Gender, Generation, and Virginité', p. 68.

5. Elizabeth Clark, *Women in the Early Church* (Wilmington, DE: Glazier, 1983), p. 17.

6. Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct*, p. 24.

7. Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct*, pp. 22-23.

8. Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct*, p. 82.

9. Virginia Burrus, *Begotten not Made: Conceiving Manhood in Late Antiquity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 83. See also Virginia Burrus, 'Queer Father: Gregory of Nyssa and the Subversion of Identity', in Gerard Loughlin (ed.),

Gregory's *Life of Moses*,¹⁰ she shows how he, on his way beyond gender binaries, freely plays with homoerotic imagery – of course, in a time when heterosexuality was not invented yet.

An important *caveat* needs to be kept in mind when dealing with feminized male discourse. Is it 'appropriating "femininity" while oppressing women'?¹¹ Does Gregory's degendering work as 'a masculine strategy to erase the reality of an "otherness" in human discourse'?¹² Burrus makes it clear that this tendency exists in Gregory, when she writes that 'the blurring of genders works consistently to the advantage of Gregory's manhood',¹³ and that he 'continually makes himself female so as ultimately to become more male'.¹⁴ I take this as a legitimate warning not to indulge in unrestrained admiration of Gregory's *intentional* construction of a community beyond stable gender distinctions. But I want to suggest that there is a potentiality in that direction.¹⁵

I want to suggest, in other words, that Gregory's writings – intentionally or not – provide us with matters 'of considerable import for politics, sexual politics',¹⁶ as Rowan Williams puts it. While Williams seems to refer mainly to the question of the ordination of women, Sarah Coakley suggests that Gregory can be understood as *denaturalizing* sex and gender à la Judith Butler,¹⁷ and that to him gender binaries, which exist in unredeemed humanity, are overthrown in the eschatological community of the redeemed.¹⁸ She reads Butler as joining Gregory in providing us with a vision 'of bodily (and gendered) transformations

Queer Theology: New Perspectives on Sex and Gender (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, forthcoming).

10. Burrus, *Begotten not Made*, pp. 123-30.

11. Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct*, p. xix.

12. Rowan Williams, 'Macrina's Deathbed Revisited: Gregory of Nyssa on Mind and Passion', in L.R. Wickham and C.P. Bammel (eds.), *Christian Faith and Greek Philosophy in Late Antiquity: Essays in Tribute to George Christopher Stead* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1993), pp. 227-46 (244).

13. Burrus, *Begotten not Made*, p. 84.

14. Burrus, *Begotten not Made*, p. 187.

15. John Milbank does not seem to admit such a potentiality. After noticing Gregory's view that 'it is possible to be in the same instance both receptive and donating' and describing this 'conception as "active reception"' ('The Force of Identity' in *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1997], pp. 194-216 [195]) he insists that 'in the case of Gregory, the social and synchronic remain in the eschaton', with the exception of monasticism (p. 206).

16. Williams, 'Macrina's Deathbed Revisited', p. 244.

17. Sarah Coakley, 'The Eschatological Body: Gender, Transformation and God', *Modern Theology* 16.1 (2000), pp. 61-73 (65).

18. Coakley, 'The Eschatological Body', p. 69.

that press forward from the present'.¹⁹ After making these startling connections, however, Coakley in a somewhat cryptic manner cautiously re-establishes the boundaries between 'previously-banned sexual pleasure' (my emphasis) and 'asceticism costing not less than everything'.²⁰

To me it is clear that Gregory, in spite of his repeated recurrence to gender stereotypes, aims at a community that transforms lives in resistance to communal life that is structured in accordance to fixed gender identities and erotic roles.²¹

One of the most striking and frequently noted features²² in Gregory's understanding of gender, found already in his early treatise *On the Making of Humankind*, is the fact that sexual difference according to his conviction is not to be found in the original creation.²³ It is the restoration of the original creation with which he ultimately seems to be concerned. An unambiguous hierarchy between male as primary and superior and female as secondary and inferior is therefore difficult to

19. Coakley, 'The Eschatological Body', p. 64.

20. Coakley, 'The Eschatological Body', p. 70.

21. I agree with Francis Young that Gregory's texts are a good example for the Foucauldian understanding of discourse as shaping worlds, and that Gregory's discourse 'can shape relationships on earth as well as in heaven' (F. Young, 'Sexuality and Devotion: Mystical Readings of the Song of Songs', *Theology & Sexuality* 14 [2001], pp. 80-96 [96]). What she describes as gender inconsistencies, however, I will later on in this article characterize with the more dynamic term 'oscillation'. But I don't share her hopes of finding a 'post-feminist (p. 81) relativizing of gender, given the brilliant relativizing work that has been done by feminists such as Judith Butler.

22. 'On the Making of Man', in *Select Writings and Letters* (trans. William Moore and Henry Austin Wilson; repr., 1893, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Vol. 5, 2nd series; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994; 2nd edn, 1999), pp. 386-427 (404-405). Here Gregory is dependent on Origen and ultimately Philo. For a description of Philo's understanding of the dual creation of humanity and its relevance for gender discourse see Daniel Boyarin, 'Gender', in Mark C. Taylor (ed.), *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 117-35 (119-22).

23. John Behr recently has questioned that assumption, stating that according to Gregory '[h]uman beings are not and never were, nor were ever meant to be, solely intellectual beings, as the angels, but they embrace both dimensions of creation, the asexual rational part and the sexual irrational'. And later: 'The addition of this irrational and bestial mode of generation is not the postlapsarian addition of the "garments of skin", but the second of the two aspects of God's original creative activity' ('The Rational Animal: A Rereading of Gregory of Nyssa's *De Hominis Opificio*', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 7.2 [1999], pp. 219-47 [235, 240]). Behr, however, would support the understanding that Gregory rejected strict gender binaries, which is crucial for the argument of this article: 'Gregory did not want those who read his treatise to equate the male/female distinction with what human reality is intended to be' (p. 247).

establish. While sexual difference is transient, it is not dismissed, but, as Peter Brown writes, 'sexuality and marriage spoke of God's gentle persistence in carrying the human race to its appointed fullness, if now by a long detour'.²⁴

It seems to me that Gregory writes his Macrinan treatises (*On the Soul and Resurrection* and *The Life of Macrina*²⁵) in order to show his readers what the desired condition for humanity could look like. However much Gregory sees the goal of the restoration of humanity beyond gender binaries in the future, the hagiography about Macrina suggests that divine community has concrete significance for our everyday life. It is about a bodily reality, as Patricia Cox Miller remarks. 'Macrina's body provided a glimpse of the transformation that all might hope for'.²⁶ Macrina seemed to have reached this reality in her bodily life, which hints at a possibility of community beyond gender binaries in this life.

But, as so often, Gregory does not give his readers a smooth ride. One is constantly thrown back and forth between seemingly contradicting impressions. At one time one gets the sense of a clear male bias and the favoring of an ideal of masculinity, at other times one is led to believe that femininity is to be strived for. Then again the fusion of masculinity and femininity into a higher union seems to be the final goal and androcentrism abandoned due to a 'fundamental spiritual equality between male and female'.²⁷

Gregory's structuring of gender is here 'inherently shifty and unstable'.²⁸ By confusing gender differentiations in the relation to his sister Macrina, he not only prepares his readers for paradise, but actually lets aspects of divinely restored humanity become enacted.

Gregory presents his sister functioning in a way that in antiquity generally would be reserved for men. In *On the Soul and Resurrection* he almost exclusively refers to her as the teacher (ἡ διδάσκαλος — feminine article with masculine noun) and lets her initiate a dialogue of Platonic style. On her deathbed she still argues with the same ease and clarity as

24. Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (Lectures on the History of Religions; New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 296.

25. Gregory of Nyssa, *Ascetical Works* (trans. Virginia Woods Callahan; Washington DC: Fathers of the Church, 1967), pp. 163-272. Subsequent references (*anim. et res.* and *v. Macr.*) are from this source.

26. Patricia Cox Miller, 'Dreaming the Body: An Aesthetics of Asceticism', in Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (eds.), *Asceticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 281-300 (288).

27. Williams, 'Macrina's Deathbed Revisited', p. 243.

28. Burrus, *Begotten not Made*, p. 120.

Socrates in the *Phaedo* waiting for his death sentence to be fulfilled. Comparable only to male philosophers she 'raised herself to the highest peak of human virtue through philosophy', (*v. Macr.* 163) provided 'leadership to the goal of philosophy' (*v. Macr.* 167) for her mother and guided her in a manly manner not to 'react in an ignoble and womanish fashion' upon Basil's death, (*v. Macr.* 170) herself remaining 'like an undefeated athlete' (*v. Macr.* 173). Further on she became not only a teacher, but even a father for her younger brother Peter (*v. Macr.* 171).

These masculine traits in Macrina's personality, however, can be paralleled with some feminine traits, which complicate the claim that Gregory saw specifically her *manhood* as a presupposition for her holiness. While she is described as leading her mother to the higher goal of philosophy, Gregory later mentions that she cared 'for her mother's body...often even making bread for her mother with her own hands' (*v. Macr.* 167). She is also called the mother of her younger brother Peter. She both 'reared him herself and led him to all the higher education' (*v. Macr.* 171). She was both 'skilled in the working of wool' (*v. Macr.* 165) and devoted to the pursuit of higher philosophy.

An intriguing contrast to her dwelling in the higher *male* realm of philosophy is the symbiosis with her mother. Macrina's mother perceived herself to have encompassed Macrina 'in her womb at all times and under all circumstances' (*v. Macr.* 166). As 'the earliest flowering' of her 'mother's womb' (*v. Macr.* 163) Macrina seems in some respect never to have left the intimacy with her mother. In a sense she is reproducing what Julia Kristeva has called 'the strange gamut of forgotten body relationship' with the mother.²⁹ This *bodily* symbiosis provides a contrast to the *intellectual* significance Macrina had for the rest of her family.

Decidedly unmasculine is finally also her depiction as the divine bride. Before 'leaving this mortal life' Macrina is described by Gregory as demonstrating the 'pure love of the unseen Bridegroom which she had secretly nourished in the depths of her soul' (*v. Macr.* 179). This bridal aspect of Macrina's identity is in tension with her philosophical identity and shows that Gregory's gendering is too complex to be described simply as a masculinization of Macrina.

But even as Macrina's femininity is complex, so too is 'Gregory's masculinity...clearly a complicated affair'.³⁰ If Macrina initially can be seen as masculine in her Socratic role and her detachment from passions,

29. Burrus, *Begotten not Made*, p. 122 quoting Julia Kristeva, *Stabat Mater* in Toril Moi (ed.), *The Kristeva Reader* (trans. León S. Roudiez; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), pp. 160-86 (174).

30. Burrus, *Begotten not Made*, p. 83.

Gregory depicts himself in a rather feminine way in his encounter with Macrina. When reminded of the death of Basil, Gregory's soul was afflicted and tears poured from his eyes, while Macrina resisted the passion of mourning and made the mentioning of Basil 'a starting point toward the higher philosophy' (*v. Macr.* 175). It is the sight of the dying Macrina which causes Gregory's outburst of pain (*anim. et res.* 198). After Macrina's death, Gregory was 'deadened by grief' (*v. Macr.* 181) and, swept away by the weeping of the virgins, 'like a mountain stream overflowing' gave himself 'over wholly to lamentation' (*v. Macr.* 182). While Gregory describes himself as the more emotional part in relation to his rather passionless sister, he nevertheless is able to fulfill his (distinctly male) duties as bishop and priest, performs the funeral ceremony (*v. Macr.* 181-82) and authoritatively disciplines the 'disorderly conduct' of the weeping virgins 'in a loud voice' (*v. Macr.* 183), even if he is 'downcast and tearful' (*v. Macr.* 188) again after the ceremony. Moreover, it is not always entirely clear who is taking the male role of the teacher. While Macrina most of the time offers explanations and parables, Gregory towards the end of their encounter seems to take the same role, when he suggests a way to understand bodily resurrection (*anim. et res.* 261-64). He elusively hides behind the stylized dialogue, maybe because he 'has not yet come to terms with his own role in that story'.³¹ That Gregory does not come to terms with his own (gender) role probably is an important part of the message of the treatise.

Gregory writes about his sister Macrina as someone 'who went beyond the nature of a woman' (*v. Macr.* 163). The *beyond* to my mind is not so much trying to make a man of Macrina,³² but rather serves to describe her as someone who became an example for restored humanity, which according to Gregory transcends gender. Gregory describes Macrina's gender transcendence as *oscillating* between male and female roles. While describing her in that way, he himself seems to be drawn into a similar kind of unstable movement back and forth between the gender roles.

If *oscillation* can be used as a term to describe Macrina's 'shifts' between the gender roles, it can serve as a heading over Gregory's *Commentary on the Song of Songs*³³ as well, at least for my purposes. I read

31. M.B. Pranger, *Narrative Dimensions in Gregory of Nyssa's Life of Macrina* (Studia Patristica, 32; Leuven: Peeters, 1997), pp. 201-207 (204).

32. Gillian Cloke includes Macrina among those holy women in late antiquity, about whom it can be said that they were more man than woman and who in essential respects clearly, and self-evidently were male (*This Female Man of God: Women and Spiritual Power in the Patristic Age, AD 350-450* [London: Routledge, 1995], p. 220).

33. *From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa's Mystical Writings* (Intro-

large parts of that commentary as enacting a startling oscillation between orderly hierarchies and exceeding ecstasies, thereby disrupting fixed gendered identities.

The starting point for my approach to the *Commentary on the Song of Songs* is a sentence from the fourth homily, in which Gregory points out that 'everything should have its correct and proper order much more so should there be a right order in the matter of love' (*Cant.* 177). Gregory, thus, wants to bring order into a profoundly disorderly text and thereby to teach orderliness to struggling Christians. And, indeed, there are many examples of Gregory's ordering efforts. Most obvious is his strong emphasis upon the distinction between the spiritual and the bodily. The image of a loving couple is to be understood as 'a pure and spiritual marriage with God that has nothing to do with the body' (*Cant.* 153). Solomon's great wisdom, according to Gregory, consists in dealing with chastity 'by means of words which seem to suggest the opposite', but really reveal 'a meaning which is incorruptible' (*Cant.* 154).

Several hierarchical orders emerge from that spiritual reading of the text. By consistently interpreting material and bodily images in a spiritual manner, Gregory ascribes superiority to spirituality over against materiality. That becomes explicit when he writes about the properties of the soul as 'truly our own' and about 'things of the body and external things' as 'things foreign to us' (*Cant.* 230). At times one gets the impression that the material world in a Platonic sense is seen as less real or even non-existent in comparison with the spiritual.

Corresponding to this principal dichotomy between spirituality and materiality is the distance between soul and nature, which Gregory sees exemplified in the image of the lily. The lily is here a symbol for the soul. 'There is a good distance between the flower and the ground, for the reason...that its beauty might remain pure up above and not be defiled by contact with earth' (*Cant.* 173). But even in the supposedly purely spiritual realm, where the soul approaches God, Gregory makes hierarchical distinctions, which become obvious in the gender imagery he is using. Time and again the male bridegroom is described as being 'above' the female bride who in turn with good desires 'looks up at Him' (*Cant.* 174). The bride is the one who is 'protected from the violation...by the power of Him Who commanded her' (*Cant.* 196). One can read these and other passages as support for the view that 'salvation does not liberate

duction by Jean Daniélou; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971; Crestwood: St Vladimir Seminary Press, 2nd edn, 1995). Subsequent references to the *Commentary on the Song of Songs* (*Cant.*) are from this source.

women from male domination here on earth', and that 'before God all Christians are as women',³⁴ as Rosemary Radford-Ruether suggests.

Most charged are the passages in which Gregory describes the soul as the explicitly female lover. The female soul in her ascent to the bridegroom goes through several climaxes, in which she receptively and submissively exposes her femininity. Entering the wine cellar of the bridegroom, she wants to see how his garments become red and then be 'subject to charity' (*Cant.* 176). Encountering the bridegroom, who has become a bowman now, 'she glories in the wound' caused by the bowman's love and 'by the tearing of the arrow she opens...an entrance into herself', which transforms the encounter into 'a scene of nuptial joy' (*Cant.* 179). But even as 'the soul unites itself with God...the bride still laments as though she were still deprived of her goal' (*Cant.* 200). Once again she 'opened her soul to the Word by removing the veil before her heart, that is, her flesh'. Thereby 'she made a passage for the Word' and 'when He enters, the soul makes Him her garment' (*Cant.* 251). Finally, even the watchmen, who beat her up, are described as male penetrators. That they strike her with rods is excused by the explanation that God 'cures by striking' (*Cant.* 265). The bride's outcry 'The keepers struck me!' is interpreted by Gregory as a 'glorying in the progress she has made towards heaven'. 'The blow of the divine rod has penetrated deeply' and caused a wound, which she is proud of (*Cant.* 267).

Is Gregory of Nyssa's commentary on the Song of Songs an example of an imposed 'order' reflecting pure patriarchal hierarchy and female submission? That conclusion could be drawn from the highly selective examples given so far. But the matter proves to be more complicated. The commentary is far from limiting itself to a neat and framed order. There are eruptions and transcendences of different kinds, which makes one wonder how Gregory in all that could find a 'correct and proper order' (*Cant.* 177).

As one goes along with the text it becomes increasingly difficult to detect a clearly circumscribed order, since the metaphors often are elusive substances such as fragrances and liquids of different kinds. Odors of spikenard (*Cant.* 164), myrrh (*Cant.* 167), vine, cypress (*Cant.* 169) and many others, together with liquids of varying intoxicating character (wine, milk, honey, water and blood) seem to contribute to an *uncontrolled ecstasy* rather than *proper order*. Wine at times is consumed seemingly without restraint by the bride (*Cant.* 176). But far superior to wine is 'the milk we draw from the divine breast' (*Cant.* 157).

34. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women and Redemption: A Theological History* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), p. 77.

The leaving behind of any kind of frame most explicitly is expressed in a passage describing the bride's frustrated desire. 'She desires her Beloved to enter in. But He passes by. And she goes out, not remaining where she was' (*Cant.* 263). Her *going out* seems to indicate a transgression of any order or frame. Every conceivable order is shaken and confused by her ecstatic action. This ecstasy is not only described in an abstract manner but can be traced in the text itself. In the already mentioned sensual descriptions of the interaction between bride and bridegroom (*Cant.* 179, 198, 251), one can in the density of the text itself feel the surging power of erotic attraction. The loss of reason is close at hand. The intellectual seems here clearly to be 'shot through with desire', as Daniel Boyarin writes.³⁵ At one point Gregory gets so caught up in his own description that he slips from the narrative mode into the first person singular and, identifying with the ecstatic bride, cries out: 'I am carried on my flight and yet I rest in the arms of my Master' (*Cant.* 180).

If what is urged in our text is 'continual ecstasy' (*Cant.* 239), which to a certain extent always means continual transcendence of order, one wonders whether the orderly gender hierarchy can stay intact in all this *going out* of orderliness. Repeatedly Gregory describes the bride in the traditional submissive position receiving the dart from the bowman of love. The imagery seems plain and little surprising. But how is the reader to understand the sudden transformation of the bride from target to arrow? 'Now she sees herself as the arrow itself' (*Cant.* 179). At once it is the bride who becomes a fiery dart, aimed at a good target. As the imagery gets more conflated, the clear distinction into male and female becomes less convincing.

And what about the eternal father at the top of the ascent? Even that image gets shaken when Gregory at the end of one of the descriptions of ecstatic ascent (*Cant.* 197-203) writes that we 'would be right in understanding the mother here as the first Cause of our being' (*Cant.* 203). In the end Gregory comes back to the divine mother,³⁶ the mother of the dove, who is spirit. 'The nature of the parent is always visible in the offspring'. The dove's mother, he concludes, 'must be that Dove that came down from heaven to the Jordan, as John testifies' (*Cant.* 287). Here, one

35. Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct*, p. ix.

36. Following Karin Bjerre-Aspegren, Ruth Albrecht points out that it was quite daring of Gregory to use such female imagery for the divine: 'Mit dem Gebrauch des Mutterbildes betrat Gregor ein Gebiet, das nach den ersten Abgrenzungsprozessen der christlichen Gruppierungen gegeneinander den sogenannten Häretikern überlassen worden war' (*Das Leben der heiligen Makrina auf dem Hintergrund der Thekla-Traditionen. Studien zu den Ursprüngen des weiblichen Mönchtums im 4. Jahrhundert in Kleinasien* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986), p. 205.

can detect a double feminine imagery in the human divine relationship, if we stay with the image of the bride as metaphor for the soul.³⁷

Gregory's gender hierarchy, thus, is far from stable and the divine and the human person are perceived as acting in both male and female ways. On the one hand Gregory provides us with a number of orders on different levels. On the other hand these orders are transient and meant to be transcended in an uncompromising (erotic) striving for divine love that dissolves stable gender binaries. It is the *oscillation* between orderliness and ecstasy, between male and female imagery that constitutes Gregory's *transformative eschatology*, leaving us in a dynamic process of transgenering. To the extent that Gregory has succeeded in drawing us into his world, we may need to live with the awareness that our gendered identities after all are not *created* norms but malleable roles to be continuously and playfully enacted again and again.

37. See also Burrus, *Begotten not Made*, p. 130.