

Introduction

SETTING THE SCENE

The reception of the Eastern Father of the late fourth century Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 335–94) has been variable over the centuries and often overshadowed by his so-called Cappadocian counterparts, Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nazianzus. The mid-twentieth century witnessed a profound awakening of interest in his thought that has continued somewhat unabated in Western scholarship to this day.¹ One particularly rich train of interpretation drew its inspiration from Jean Daniélou's treatment of desire in Gregory's writings.² These studies, which emerged within predominantly Anglo-American circles, sought to bring Gregory's thought into counterpoint with postmodern discussions of gender and sexuality. One unfortunate effect of these otherwise exciting scholarly developments has been their often unchallenged Freudian and Foucauldian interpretations of asceticism. The pioneering late antique historian Peter Brown³ was instrumental in the world of Anglo-American scholarship in reigniting interest in asceticism, and its power in society. Many other historians and cultural critics followed his lead, including those like Elizabeth Clark,⁴ who added an analysis of gender into her sophisticated account of Christian asceticism. There is, I believe, something missing in these discussions—namely an examination of the theological motivations of ascetics themselves, however odd they may seem to modern sensibilities. Alongside late antique studies stands patristic scholarship, offering a more avowedly theological treatment of Gregory's works.⁵ But the development of his ascetical thinking, especially during significant moments of transition in his life and episcopal career, has arguably received insufficient attention.

There are, therefore, significant lacunae in the reception history of Gregory's thought despite the multiple perspectives that have been brought to bear on it. It is against this backdrop that this study seeks to mark a new moment in the interpretation of Gregory's ascetical theology. Its overarching aim is to look afresh at the developments of his thinking and to give renewed focus to the theme of diachronic maturation in the spiritual life. In doing so, I shall make some important advances in the study of Gregory's thought that deserve, for now at least, a brief elucidation.

First, by examining Gregory's vision of the ascetic life within the context of his theological commitments, we will expose the theoretical overdetermination at play in some recent readings of his thought. Theories of power, subversion, normalcy, and fluidity will give way in this study to discussions of protology, eschatology, spiritual ascent, sin, and purity. Second, the findings of this study will highlight the dangers of imposing postmodern presumptions about gender onto Gregory's descriptions of erotic spiritual growth. Detailed analysis of the interplay of male and female characteristics in Gregory's works will reveal a spiritual horizon of meaning at work, which finds little correspondence in the secular taxonomies of contemporary discussion. Third, what has most eluded recent commentators is Gregory's insistence that ascetical transformation must occur in a set order. There has been considerable room for confusion about these stages of maturation. Some commentators have fastened preemptively onto Gregory's theorization of the heights of spiritual ascent, where with much *élan* they have discovered fascinatingly labile descriptions of gender. However, this approach overlooks the importance of ascetical self-mastery, without which, Gregory duly cautions, people will misguidedly search for representations of disordered fleshly desire in spiritual texts.

The methodology of this study involves examining Gregory's corpus in chronological order.⁶ It represents the first attempt in the literature to offer a comprehensive explication of Gregory's ascetic theory with reference to the developments of his thinking over the course of his life. In establishing a chronology of Gregory's writings, I began by reading and analyzing works whose dating has been generally agreed upon. The *De virginitate*, the *De anima et resurrectione* (henceforth *De anima*), the *Vita Sanctae Macrinae*, the *De hominis opificio*, the *In Canticum canticorum* (henceforth *In Cant*), and various letters belong to this category. I was then able to note thematic trajectories in Gregory's thought and adjudicate between scholarly disagreements on more contested works. A detailed justification for the chronology proposed in this study is provided in the appendix, along with a summary of scholarly views on the dating of each of Gregory's works.

One potential objection to this methodological approach is that discussions on dating are circular. It may be argued that commentators have interpretive biases or views that lend support to a particular idea of progression or development in Gregory's thought. They then arrange Gregory's writings to fit within their selected framework of development, grouping texts together based on perceived thematic

convergences. The chronology is subsequently used to justify developments in Gregory's thought, thereby making the argument circular. To this objection, I offer two responses. First, the chronological phase to which a text belongs is taken here to be more significant than its exact date. From this perspective, there is considerable agreement among scholars, despite differences in thematic concerns. Second, by adopting this methodological approach, I was compelled to adjudicate between different scholarly views on dating from the perspective of trends in Gregory's ascetic theory. Whilst this does not completely remove elements of subjectivity from the equation, it provides another set of criteria for dating and thereby prevents an undisciplined or vicious circularity.

A final word on methodology: the diachronic method of exegesis is, I suggest, the corollary of Gregory's construal of spiritual ascent (*anabasis*) as constant progress (*prokopē*) in the moral life and in one's relationship with Christ.⁷ By incorporating the theme of perpetual progress into the methodological nexus of this study, it is hoped that we will appreciate Gregory's ascetical theology as itself an evolving, mutable (*treptos*) intellectual project, subject to change (*metastasis*) and growth (*auxēsis*) over the course of his life. The convergence of maturational theory and methodology is not, of course, logically necessary, since Gregory could have advanced the notion of perpetual progress without changing his mind on certain theological issues. Nonetheless, the diachronic method allows us to see how Gregory adjusts and refines his thinking over time whilst highlighting the limitations of an overly systematizing analysis of his views on the body and desire.

The methodological approach of this study also opens Gregory's ascetical theology up to further development beyond its inevitable limitations (*horoi*) in time and history. In the conclusion of this study, I shall offer some suggestions of how his novel and challenging insights can contribute a new way of thinking to contemporary Western discussions about gender and sexuality. I do so, however, by gesture and intimation, mindful that this second phase of theorization deserves more thorough and detailed analysis than can be afforded here.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE STUDY

The main substance of this study is divided into three parts, each relating both to a separate chronological phase of Gregory's life work and to a unifying thematic principle within that phase: Part One—the early phase (371–September 378); Part Two—the middle phase (September 378–387);⁸ and Part Three—the late phase (387–394).⁹

Part One, "The Integrative Significance of the Body in the Life of Virtue," examines Gregory's early ascetical theology, covering a span of roughly seven years—from the composition of the *De virginitate*, his earliest work (371), to the death of his brother, Basil of Caesarea, in September 378.¹⁰

Chapter 1, “Marriage, Celibacy, and Pederasty,” begins with an analysis of Mark Hart’s essay on Gregory’s *De virginitate* and advances the case for the integrative view of the virtues in the life of virginity. I argue that for Gregory, virginity is emblematic of the angelic life and the privileged point of entry into the life of virtue, but Christians who pursue the life of virginity must also eschew all other vices. This leads onto an area of discussion that has been subject to considerable misunderstanding—the difference between the Platonic ideal of the chaste love of a man for an adolescent boy and Christian virginity. For Gregory, celibacy replicates the spiritual outcomes of Platonic pederasty but removes the need for a physical example of beauty, the beloved, to redirect erotic desire toward the Form of Beauty.

Chapter 2, “The Integration of the Virtues,” highlights a potential methodological problem in recent commentaries on Gregory’s theorization of desire in which his discussion of sexual desire is treated as a self-contained area of moral reflection. According to Gregory’s rendition of the doctrine of the reciprocity of the virtues, the moderation of one’s sexual desires is placed within an overarching project of moral and spiritual transformation in which, as in Plato, physical sexual desire for other people is set in a spectrum of transformative possibilities en route to desire for the divine. I argue that the reciprocity of the virtues in Gregory’s thought is motivated not by an abstract deliberation on the nature of the virtues (as some have suggested) but by the demands of uncompromising spiritual fidelity to Christ, which is the goal of the ascetic life.

Having placed sexual abstinence within the larger context of the virtuous life, I proceed in chapter 3, “Gregory’s Emerging Theory of Desire,” to outline key concepts in Gregory’s theory of desire: passion; moderation; the criterion of need in assessing whether a bodily desire is legitimate; and the disjunction between satiety and fulfillment. The chapter ends with some reflections on the moral evocations associated with the language of effeminizing or womanish passion and manly strength.

Part Two, “The Ascetical and Eschatological Mixture of Male and Female,” examines the significance of two major life events—the death of his siblings, first Basil and then Macrina—on Gregory’s theological and philosophical reflections. Here, also, I examine some of the doctrinal controversies with which Gregory contended as bishop of Nyssa.

Chapter 4, “A Worldly Life of Desire: Marriage, Children, Money, and Sex,” begins with a recapitulation of the ascetic themes of the early period and charts their development in the middle phase of Gregory’s literary career. It highlights Gregory’s application (and adaptation) of Plato’s account of mixed pleasures, which he uses to characterize human life after the Fall. This leads onto an analysis of the sufferings of the ascetic life, which Gregory portrays as a counterweight to the pursuit of worldly pleasure. I argue that whereas the *De virginitate* presents the life of virginity as an ascetic release from the worldly burdens of marriage, Gregory

in the middle period highlights the sufferings that accompany lifelong celibacy (such as loneliness). What then follows is a discussion of sexual hierarchy in marriage, which Gregory appears to support on the basis of biblical authority, and his contempt for worldly manifestations of female vice.

In chapter 5, “The Death of Siblings,” I turn to the much-disputed question of the restoration of genitalia in Gregory’s account of the general resurrection. I argue that he is operating with two rival anthropologies (one based on Genesis 1:27a–b; the other, on Genesis 2), which offer different perspectives on the eschatological finality of sexual differentiation. Looking at his writings diachronically reveals why these two anthropologies came into contact with each other during the middle phase of his literary career and why they do not reach a point of resolution or synthesis in his theorization on the restoration of human genitalia. These discussions of embodied difference lead us to an analysis of their spiritual and moral associations. I show that for Gregory, male virility needs to be renounced in the moral life just as much as female passion (in semantic usages to be discussed). I do so by drawing attention to the neglected figure of Naucratus, one of Gregory’s brothers, who overcame his manhood to make advancements in the moral life. For Gregory, the fallen characteristics of both male and female need to be chastened and transformed through the bodily disciplines of the ascetic life.

Chapter 6, “Doctrinal Controversies: Christological and Trinitarian,” examines Gregory’s doctrine of God as it developed in the context of the Eunomian controversy, particularly focusing on how he resists the language of activity and passivity (and thus, by cultural association, male and female, respectively) from being applied to the Godhead. The full relevance of Gregory’s doctrine of God for the ascetic life is then discussed in depth. I argue that for Gregory, the *imitatio Dei* summons the ascetic to a life beyond the fallen associations of male and female because the persons of the Trinity cannot be described as either passive or active depending on their relationship to each other.

Part Three, “Erotic Intimacy with Christ and the Maturation of Desire,” sees the aging bishop, in the late phase of his literary career, retreat from ecclesiastical affairs and focus more intensely than ever before on the implications of diachronic progress in the spiritual life.

In chapter 7, “Spiritual Maturation: Virginity and the Narrative of Progress,” I show that “virginity” now denotes purity of heart in a general moral sense and can therefore be applied to married Christians—as long as their desires are chastened and transformed through the practices of prayer and virtue. The disjunction opposing *parthenia* to *porneia* is used to contrast the life of virtue and vice (more generally understood), not simply sexual abstinence and sexual vice. Gregory also applies the theme of maturation to the conjugal life—a point so far overlooked in the secondary literature and one that provides new insights into his understanding of the order (*taxis*) of love in the life of virtue. The chapter ends with a detailed elucidation

of Gregory's diachronically theorized account of spiritual maturation, which highlights the essential incorporation of erotic desire into the practice of contemplation.

In chapter 8, "Male and Female: Diachronic Exchanges," I highlight a new development in Gregory's thinking. His immersion in the Song of Songs, with its descriptions of the Virgin Bride longing for her Bridegroom, allows him to view the cultivation of the *imago Dei* as more than just a mixture of male and female virtues (as in the middle period). He now argues that the soul's shifting identifications with male and female characteristics take place in a particular order. This diachronic progression begins with the life of vice and passion (identified as womanish), which is replaced through ascetical discipline by the virtuous (manly) life, and then finally superseded by the soul's identification with the passionate Virgin Bride of Christ.

So much by way of introduction to the central structure and argument of this study. As will be clear, my focus on erotic transformation still puts interest in what we now call "sexuality" (and attendant subjects) at the heart of discussion for the purposes of correcting misinformed accounts of Gregory's ascetical theology. However, in continuing that focus, I am also deeply concerned to show how these issues fit into the wider context of the transformation of desire more generally. Some important further methodological remarks are now in order. Let us turn our attentions first to some vital terminological caveats.

RESISTING THE CHARGE OF ANACHRONISM: SEMANTIC AND TERMINOLOGICAL CLARIFICATIONS

This study is framed by two central themes, and in both cases I am importing terms that Gregory does not himself use but whose application here is, I believe, justified. The first is erotic transformation; the second is ascetical theology.

Erotic Transformation

When I refer to erotic transformation, I do not wish to suggest that there is a stand-alone sphere of ethical and spiritual reflection that can be separated from Gregory's wider discussion of ascetical transformation. In fact, one of the very first findings of this study is that erotic transformation is integrated within the broader moral summons to practice all the virtues. In other words, the moderation of sexual desire has a significant influence on the myriad other aspects of the moral life. Likewise, ostensibly nonsexual ascetical practices, such as fasting and the renunciation of wealth, help to rechannel erotic desire (in its generalized sense) toward its true goal in Christ.

Although Gregory never explicitly speaks of erotic transformation in the way that I do in this study, it is the best overall term for his ascetical project. Even so, the term "erotic transformation" needs to be placed within a wider framework still—the explication of Gregory's whole approach to the management and transformation of the body and desire. It is here that I have found the term "ascetical theology"

indispensable for the purposes of this study. Here, also, it has to be acknowledged that this language has its own complications.

Ascetical Theology

There are two major difficulties with the expression “ascetical theology”. The first is that the term “asceticism” is a modern construct.¹¹ No equivalent term can be found in Gregory’s linguistic repertoire. Second, to speak of ascetical theology as a concretized category and to use it to describe Gregory’s often unsystematic thought could be seen to be potentially distorting. Let me address these points in turn while also defending the use of the language of ascetical theology in this study.

The first point lays this study open to the charge of anachronism by highlighting potential disjunctions between contemporary terminology and the language that Gregory himself uses. Gregory never refers to an ascetic person (*askētēs*). What is more, the substantive *askēsis* (“exercise,” “practice,” “training”), from which the modern term “asceticism” derives, appears no more than five times in total in Gregory’s writings,¹² and never with the technical meaning of a disciplined bodily practice. Although the verb *askein* appears much more often by comparison—seventeen times in total—it describes a wide range of practices. Some of the practices to which it refers inculcate virtue (*aretē*), piety (*eusebeia*), and justice (*dikaiosynē*).¹³ It is also used in reference to the practice of abstention from meat and wine,¹⁴ as well as the exercise of moderation in self-control (*enkrateia*).¹⁵ In these instances, we may be justified in speaking of ascetical practices. However, in the vast majority of cases, the verb *askein* describes various sorts of training, without spiritual or moral connotations, such as physical exercise,¹⁶ dancing monkeys(!),¹⁷ wool work,¹⁸ pedagogy,¹⁹ and the schooling of a child.²⁰ Gregory also uses the verb to describe the act of pouring new wine into old wineskins, following Matthew 9:17.²¹ Finally, on only one occasion, it refers to intentionally evil practices²² (rather than sins of omission in which one neglects, say, to practice justice).²³

If the language of asceticism is not in the forefront of Gregory’s mind, how then does he speak of the bodily disciplines of the life of virtue? His use of vocabulary is inconsistent, indeed sometimes exasperatingly so. Gregory refers on one occasion to the training (*paideia*) of “the chaste [*enkratēs*] and austere [*katesklēkōs*] and sensually unpleasant way of life” (*De tridui spatio*, GNO IX/1 296:19–22).²⁴ The use of *paideia* here is evocative of the pagan *paideia* of the philosophers of ancient Greece.²⁵ For Gregory, the life of monastics, whom he describes in the *Vita Sanctae Macrinae* as philosophers (*hoi philosophountes*, 37:8),²⁶ replaces the tradition of the *vita contemplativa*. He, therefore, describes active withdrawal from worldly affairs in the *De vita Moysis* as “a greater philosophy” (*De vita Moysis* I:19).²⁷ The training of the philosophic life is compared with, and ultimately superseded by, the ascetic undertakings of the monastic life, and thus is described in similar terms. In other references to ascetical practice, Gregory speaks of the need to exercise (*progymnazein*) oneself

through the ethical propaedeutics of the Book of Proverbs (*In Ecclesiasten*, GNO V 277:5).²⁸ Furthermore, in the *De vita Moysis*, Gregory refers to “the rough way of life according to self-control” (*hē tracheia diagōgē kat’ enkrateian*, *De vita Moysis* II:187)²⁹ and “the disciplined [*sōphronesteros*] life” (*De vita Moysis* II:279)³⁰ characterized by self-control (*enkrateia*) rather than self-indulgence (*tryphē*, *De vita Moysis* II:286).³¹ These references to ascetical discipline are by no means exhaustive. Many more terms and expressions will arise in the course of this inquiry. For now, we should simply be cognizant of the richly variegated language that Gregory uses in his writings, language that I have shown to be subsumable within the category ascetical theology for the purposes of this study.

A further difficulty with the language of asceticism is created by the fact that Gregory does not limit the worth and significance of ascetical practice to the monastic life. Everyone who pursues the life of virtue needs to discipline the flesh through bodily practices. Some terminological clarifications may be helpful at this stage. Even though Gregory never uses the term “monk” (*monachos*), he sometimes speaks of “the life of virginity” (*ho tēs parthenias bios*) as the lifelong pursuit of celibacy among monastics. At the same time, “true virginity” (*hē alēthēs parthenia*) refers to not just sexual self-restraint but the felicitous integration of sexual temperance (which enjoins lifelong celibacy onto monastics) with the whole cohort of virtues. The life of virtue (*hē kat’ aretēn politeia*) calls for sexual temperance (*hē sōphrosynē*), which requires total abstinence in celibacy and moderation in marriage. I shall therefore use expressions such as “the ascetic life,” “asceticism,” and “ascetical practice” in a generalized sense to refer to bodily practices undertaken by all Christians, not just monastics.

Now I turn to the second potential objection—that extracting certain themes from Gregory’s writings and subsuming them under the category of ascetical theology is an artificially systematizing endeavor. Gregory “disliked”³² the systematized syllogistic thinking that characterized Aristotle’s writings.³³ Even in his more “didactic and systematic” works—such as the *Oratio catechetica magna* (henceforth *Oratio catechetica*), the *Contra Eunomium*, and the *In illud: Tunc et ipse filius*—Gregory is “tempered by his rhetorical fervor” and “prefers to yield to the impulse of the moment.”³⁴ There is no treatise specifically on asceticism that conveniently systematizes his thinking in one place. Although Werner Jaeger believes that the *De instituto Christiano* is Gregory’s attempt “to expound his philosophy of the ascetic life as a whole,”³⁵ it does not in fact offer an exhaustive account of Gregory’s ascetical theology. Given that ascetical themes permeate most of his writings, it has been necessary in this study to examine his entire corpus for the sake of comprehensiveness.

How, then, may we counter the charge of imposing false systematicity onto Gregory’s thought? It is true that in discussing his ascetical theology, we are creating order out of a largely unsystematic constellation of ideas. However, a redress to the potential charge of anachronism may be sought in the distinction popularized

by anthropologists between “etic” analysis,³⁶ which “utilizes the investigator’s categories in explanation,” and “emic” analysis, which uses “native categories in explanation.”³⁷ These terms were derived from “phonetic” and “phonemic” by the American linguist and anthropologist Kenneth L. Pike in 1954.³⁸ The etic/emic distinction enables us both to attend to the particularities of Gregory’s rich and varied vocabulary and to offer a detailed, systematic presentation of his views on the body and desire without falling prey to distorting anachronisms.

So why retain the term “ascetical theology” at all? I do so in part because it has been used for centuries to denote a branch of Roman Catholic theology that has dealt with the practices of virtue and the mortification of bodily vice. It is thus a term of convenience that gives thematic unity to a range of concerns germane to this study’s interests in the body and desire. Another reason is that some of Gregory’s writings have been regarded as primarily ascetical in content. Jaeger places the *De instituto Christiano*, the *De professione Christiana ad Harmonium* (henceforth *De professione*), the *De perfectione Christiana ad Olympium monachum* (henceforth *De perfectione*), the *De virginitate*, and the *Vita Sanctae Macrinae*³⁹ under the heading *Opera ascetica* (GNO VIII/1), largely though not entirely following J. P. Migne’s *Patrologiae cursus completus (series Graeca)*, volume 46.⁴⁰ So by referring to Gregory’s ascetical theology, I am following a well-established tradition in the scholarship of his thought whilst also broadening its scope by examining Gregory’s entire corpus, not just those writings commonly labeled “ascetical.”⁴¹

There has been a particularly influential tendency in the literature to differentiate between Gregory’s ascetical and his mystical writings.⁴² This distinction, which is normative in Roman Catholic theology, first emerged as late as the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries,⁴³ and was popularized by the Italian Jesuit Giovanni Battista Scaramelli (1687–1752) in his two treatises *Direttorio ascetico* (1752) and *Direttorio mistico* (published posthumously in 1754).⁴⁴ In this study, however, the use of the term “ascetical theology” does not derive its rationale from a false disjunction between mysticism and asceticism.⁴⁵ The ascetical themes of inquiry are firmly situated within the context of Gregory’s theological commitments, including his core conviction that spiritual intimacy with Christ is inexorably linked to ascetical self-mastery.

Gender and Sexuality

The title of this study refers to the body and desire, and not to gender and sexuality, in order to avoid a range of theoretical associations in contemporary political and ethical discourse. Let me outline some of the difficulties that these two terms present.

There was a period in the 1960s and 1970s when “gender” was clearly distinguished from “sex” in Western second-wave feminism.⁴⁶ “Sex” referred to the biological/genital distinction between male and female, whereas “gender” referred to

cultural interpretations of sexual morphology in which masculine and feminine are assigned complementary characteristics. Notwithstanding the worth of this distinction as a political strategy in a particular period of the emancipation of women in the twentieth century, it is important for our present purposes to recognize that the registers of meaning upon which Gregory's linguistic repertoire operates are essentially distinct from the secularized categories of contemporary parlance.

For Gregory, "male" (*arrēn*) and "female" (*thēlys*), "man" (*anēr*) and "woman" (*gynē*), primarily denote physiological differentiations. He is influenced by the diversity of use of these terms in the Bible and in pagan sources, as we will soon see. The word *genos*, moreover, refers to one or other of the separate sexes in Gregory's *œuvre*—the division *kata genos* is the division of humanity into male and female. But Gregory is also interested in the moral and spiritual evocations of male and female characteristics that are not exclusive to one or the other sex. In other words, women can acquire male moral characteristics and vice versa. The adjectives *gynaikeios* ("womanish," "effeminate"), *malakos* ("soft," "effeminate"),⁴⁷ *anandros* ("cowardly," "wanting in manhood") describe various forms of vice, whereas the adjectives *andreios* ("manly," "courageous") and *andrōdēs* ("manly") refer to acts of virtue or virtuous dispositions. Gregory uses a range of verbs, such as *malakizesthai*, *thryptein*, and *katamalassein* (among others), which mean "to soften," "to make effeminate," "to enervate." To introduce the language of gender here is, I believe, misleading. Gregory never contrasts biology with culture as the modern reader is wont to do. The theological question at stake, for Gregory, is how fleshly desire, originally received in anticipation of the Fall as part of our animalistic nature, is redeemed in the spiritual life. The implications of that question for sexual morphology are considerable. If sexual desire is linked to embodied difference *qua* male and female, given to humanity for the purposes of reproduction in anticipation of the Fall, what will become of human genitalia at the general resurrection, when erotic desire will be refashioned in the service of contemplation?

Furthermore, the changes in male and female characteristics with which the soul variously identifies at different stages in spiritual ascent suggest that the term "gender" (as a unitary or stable category) is overall unhelpful in our discussions of Gregory's thought. A more detailed examination of male and female characteristics, both fleshly and spiritual, awaits us in the main body of this study. All that needs to be said now is that Gregory's theorization of the body and desire cannot be straightforwardly compared to the sex/gender disjunction popularized in Western second-wave feminism. Nor, indeed, does it map onto the more recent ideological blurring of these terms adopted by Judith Butler and others in her stead.

The language of sexuality poses similar challenges. Again, if we uncritically use the language of contemporary parlance, we risk introducing anachronistic theoretical presumptions into our field of inquiry. There is, for example, no equivalent term in Gregory's linguistic repertoire for sexuality, which in popular contempo-

rary usage denotes a diverse range of sexual experiences, practices, and phenomena. Even more problematic is “sexual orientation” (along with its associated terms, “heterosexuality,” “homosexuality,” and “bisexuality”), which refers to a settled and exclusive, or at least predominant, sexual desire for one or other sex, or indeed both. It has been widely acknowledged since the work of Michel Foucault that homosexuality is a modern construct. To impose it onto late antique descriptions of same-sex desire or practices is, therefore, at least potentially anachronistic. It is one of the more remarkable aspects of late antique thinking that desire is regarded as labile in a manner quite at odds with the typological notion of desire at play in the modern conception of sexual orientation. An area of potential misunderstanding is Gregory’s expostulations against effeminacy (in semantic usages discussed above), which has nothing to do with what we now call “homosexuality.” It refers to the weakening of one’s resolve against sin, and the succumbing to bodily pleasure as an immediate and false goal.

Gregory has a whole stock of words available to describe sexual desires and practices. The most obvious of these is *erōs* and its adjectival form *erōtikos*, whose usage is inspired by the Platonic dialogues, particularly the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*. Key to these texts is the idea that erotic desire propels the soul toward the eternal Form of Beauty, and that the soul must be progressively purified before entering the divine realm. Other terms used by Gregory include *epithymia* (“desire,” “yearning”), *pothos* (“longing”), *epithymētikos* (“desiring,” “coveting,” “lusting after”),⁴⁸ *erasmios* (“beloved,” “lovable,” “lovely,” “love,” “desire”), *erastēs* (“lover”), *lyssa* (“craving”), *prospatheia* (“passionate attachment”), *pathos* (“passion”). These terms have a wider range of meaning than that of specifically sexual desire. They also describe fleshly cravings for food, money, fame, and wealth—and the soul’s erotic yearning for God.

Sexual intercourse is denoted by the following terms: *mixis* or *anakrasis* (“mixing,” “mingling”), *synapheia* (“combination,” “connection,” “union,” “junction”), *genesis* (“generation”)—hence *hē gennētikē tēs physeōs dynamis* (“the generative faculty of nature”)—*homilia* (“sexual intercourse”), and *syzygia* (“union,” “coupling,” “copulation”). The procreation of children is occasionally described as *paidopoiia*. Nuptial language pervades Gregory’s writings: *gamos* (“wedding,” “marriage”) and its adjectival form *gamikos* can refer to physical marriage and spiritual marriage with Christ. Gregory also uses *philandria* to describe marital love in a generalized (not exclusively sexual) sense.

In his discussions on desire as a general phenomenon, Gregory employs a range of terminology, though often inconsistently. For the purposes of clarity, I have divided some of Gregory’s most prominent terms into five categories. As with *erōs*, each word mentioned below can have both spiritual and harmartiological connotations depending on the context of usage. The exception is (5), which is used in the former sense only.

1. The pleasure and gladness engendered by desire: *hēdonē* or *hēdys* (“pleasure”), *apolausis* (“enjoyment”), *euphrosynē* (“gladness,” “enjoyment,” “merriment”).⁴⁹
2. The movements or impulses of the soul: *kinēsis* (“motion”), *hormē* (“impulse,” “drive”), *rhōpē* (“impulse”).
3. Appetite/desire/conation: *orexis* (which is often roughly equivalent to *epithymia*)—and *epheis*.
4. Passion/affection: *pathēma* (“affection,” “feeling”), *prospatheia* (“passionate attachment”), *hēdypatheia*, *pathētikos*, *empathēs*.
5. Love: *agapē* and its adjectival form *agapētikos*.

It is striking to find so many studies lapsing into the kind of terminological anachronism I am seeking to eschew. It is the purpose of this study to cut across two dominant categories of interpretation in the study of Gregory that reflect a growing chasm between patristics, on the one hand, and the newly formed discipline of early Christian studies, on the other hand.⁵⁰ My overarching intention is to resist a reductively historical reading of Gregory’s ascetical theology in which his moral and spiritual demands are rendered impotent to the ethical dilemmas of our contemporary age. At the same time, this inquiry also reacts against what may be characterized as an exoticized reading of asceticism in which Gregory becomes the cultural icon of postmodern rupture and subversion. The former, it seems to me, offers an overly contextualized reading of Gregory—so much so, in fact, that it contributes very little to contemporary philosophical and ethical discussion. The latter takes Gregory out of his late antique context and uses his ascetical theology to uphold nonascetical goals.

Since this study seeks to cut creatively across these two approaches, it is necessary to offer a brief genealogy of Western twentieth-century scholarship on Gregory to understand why his thought was brought into counterpoint with contemporary discussions of gender and sexuality.

THE RENAISSANCE OF SCHOLARLY INTEREST IN GREGORY OF NYSSA: FROM OBSCURITY TO APPROBATION TO EISEGESIS

The modern renaissance of research on Gregory of Nyssa has elevated the youngest and last of the Cappadocian Fathers from obscurity—or, at best, sporadic periods of interest—to contemporary approbation. Although Gregory now holds a special kind of renown within the Western academy for his contributions to discussions on gender, apophaticism, and desire, dramatically transforming how we think about the theology of the Church Fathers, this has not always been the case. In fact, Gregory’s Christology aroused suspicions of heterodoxy over the centuries,

because it could be equally cited by monophysites and dyophysites; his espousal of the doctrine of universal salvation (*apokatastasis*) was also problematic.⁵¹ These suspicions continued long into the twentieth century. Gregory's Christology has been described as "crude and tentative"⁵² and "basically Nestorian in tendency."⁵³ His famous Trinitarian analogy, which compares human nature to the divine essence and individual persons to the Trinitarian persons, has been viewed as "unfortunate" because of its "inescapably tritheistic" tendencies.⁵⁴ And his use of the language of mingling (*mixis*, *krasis*, and related cognate terms) in his Christology raised a number of concerns, not least at Chalcedon, for its associations with the very Apollinarianism that Gregory himself sought to condemn, causing it to be sidelined by Western histories of the development of dogma.⁵⁵

For many decades, Western scholarship treated Gregory as a (somewhat unwilling) dogmatician—and a bad one at that. Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writers such as Adolf von Harnack,⁵⁶ Friedrich Loofs,⁵⁷ Reinhold Seeberg,⁵⁸ and Karl Holl⁵⁹ tended to regard the period of the fourth century, including the thought of the Cappadocian Fathers themselves, in a very restricted dogmatic sense.⁶⁰ The whole venture of charting the history of dogma across the centuries, in which these scholars were involved, meant that the Cappadocian Fathers were perceived not as thinkers with varied theological and philosophical interests but chiefly as opponents of heresy, who contended against Arianism, Sabellianism, Eunomianism, Macedonianism, and so forth. In these studies, Gregory was considered second in importance to Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nazianzus, and moreover not nearly so sophisticated philosophically.⁶¹ By supposedly acquiescing to Greek philosophy, Gregory was thought to be one of many patristic theologians involved in what von Harnack called the Hellenization (*Hellenisierung*) of Christianity.⁶²

It is against this background of interest in dogma as well as Gregory's purported collaboration in the Hellenization of Christianity that a new phase of scholarship burgeoned in the mid-twentieth century. Three seminal studies from this period reveal an interest not in writing a *Dogmengeschichte* but in spirituality and mysticism: Jean Daniélou's *Platonisme et théologie mystique* (1944)—the most celebrated and influential of studies in this area of discussion; Hans Urs von Balthasar's *Présence et pensée* (1942); and Endre von Ivánka's *Hellenisches und christliches im frühbyzantinischen Geistesleben* (1948). These works and related monographs published at around the same time⁶³ explored the intersections between Gregory's account of spirituality and what may be regarded, in rather generalized terms, as Platonism or Neo-Platonism.⁶⁴ They represented a watershed in scholarship by offering a positive perspective on the influence of Greek thought on Gregory's theology.⁶⁵ Until then, as I have already remarked in the case of von Harnack, the *communis opinio*—against which there had been some objection⁶⁶—was that Gregory uncritically acquiesced to Greek thought. The tide of opinion was now beginning to change. Whereas Harold Cherniss had argued that Gregory "merely

applied Christian names to Plato's doctrine and called it Christian theology,"⁶⁷ Daniélou was now claiming that Gregory had transformed his philosophical patrimony.⁶⁸

Of the three authors mentioned above, it was Daniélou (1905–74) whose work, *Platonisme et théologie mystique*, became the seminal study on Gregory's mysticism.⁶⁹ Original to *Platonisme et théologie mystique* was its delineation of "les grands traits de la doctrine spirituelle,"⁷⁰ which include "la vie spirituelle," "les sens spirituels," "la théologie spirituelle" and "l'expérience mystique."⁷¹ Although Daniélou himself described "les sens spirituels"⁷² and *epektasis*⁷³ as "doctrines"—which no doubt owed something to Karl Rahner's treatment of the doctrine of the spiritual senses in the thought of Origen⁷⁴—the nature of Daniélou's inquiry differed substantially from the dogmatic focus of patristic scholarship at the time.

This shift in the portrayal of Gregory from dogmatician to mystical theologian faced considerable opposition from Ekkehard Mühlenberg,⁷⁵ whose views were largely followed by Ronald Heine.⁷⁶ Mühlenberg chastised Daniélou as well as von Balthasar and Walther Völker for thinking that Gregory has a notion of mystical experience whose origins could be traced back to the tradition of Platonic mysticism. Mühlenberg argued that the relationship between Gregory's theology and classical metaphysics is in fact agonistic. He also claimed that Daniélou had anachronistically conflated the doctrine of *epektasis* with descriptions of mystical union in the writings of later medieval theologians.⁷⁷

Daniélou's focus on "la théologie spirituelle" and "l'expérience mystique" has also been criticized for relying on potentially distorting and anachronistic taxonomies. The fraught term "mysticism," for instance, has no direct terminological equivalent in Gregory's works. Although he uses the adjective *mystikos* (from which "mysticism" derives), it does not carry the level of systematicity that Daniélou seems to think it does.⁷⁸ Furthermore, all efforts to isolate "la mystique grégorienne" as a distinct area of theorization seem to reflect what some have described as a "modern . . . separation" between philosophy (specifically, epistemology) and so-called spirituality.⁷⁹

Notwithstanding the legitimacy of these concerns—as well as the continued interest in the doctrinal⁸⁰ and philosophical⁸¹ coherence of Gregory's thought—the influence of Daniélou's study on scholarly perceptions of Gregory should not be underestimated. He released Gregory from the straitjacket of dogmatics and elicited a *frisson* of excitement in Gregory's theorization of spiritual desire. We may, at this juncture, wonder: What were Daniélou's original motivations for studying Gregory's account of desire in spiritual ascent? How do these motivations differ from late twentieth-century interests in Gregory's theology that emerged in predominantly Anglo-American scholarship? The movement that came to be known as *Nouvelle Théologie* offers some clues that enable us to answer the first of these questions.⁸²

The followers of the *ressourcement* movement challenged the neoscholastic disjunction between nature and supernatural grace that had reigned supreme in Roman Catholic theology since the promulgation of Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Aeterni Patris* in 1879. Rejecting the neo-Thomistic scholasticism of the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century, these *nouveaux* theologians embarked upon a program of repriming known as *ressourcement*. They reexamined patristic and medieval texts to develop a sacramental ontology in which Grace permeates nature.⁸³ Henri de Lubac (1896–1991), one of the main protagonists of the movement, condemned the secularism thought to be implied in the notion of *pura natura*,⁸⁴ describing it as “Pelagian.”⁸⁵ He reread Thomas Aquinas⁸⁶ and argued that there is, for Thomas, a natural human desire for the vision of God.

If we look at the critical stance that *Nouvelle Théologie* took against the neo-Thomist interpretation of the relationship between Grace and nature, we begin to develop a clearer understanding of Daniélou's interests in Gregory.⁸⁷ Gregory's conviction that spiritual ascent is propelled by a desire rooted naturally in the soul was attractive to Daniélou because it seemed to undermine the neo-Thomist disjunction between Grace and nature. It is no surprise, therefore, that Daniélou wrote in *Platonisme et théologie mystique* that “l'expérience de la douceur de Dieu, du parfum divin est le fruit normal du progrès de la vie de la grâce en nous.” Gregory's description of a desire “from below” that abides in “la vie normale de la grâce sanctifiante” and gives rise to “le développement normal de la grâce sanctifiante” in the spiritual life led Daniélou to conclude that “l'expérience mystique” is not totally discontinuous from “la vie spirituelle normale.”⁸⁸ Gregory's mysticism and spirituality remain to this day, at least for some, the most captivating aspects of his theology.⁸⁹ But I am more interested here in how Daniélou's original interest in spiritual desire, shaped by the *ressourcement* movement, led to an unintended development—the Anglo-American fascination in Gregory's rendition of erotic desire for God and its attendant gendered imagery.

One problematic aspect of this strand of Anglo-American scholarship has been its sidelining of the role of ascetic discipline in shaping desire for God. This is not to say that Daniélou himself overlooked ascetical themes in Gregory's writings. In “la première partie” of his study, entitled *La lumière; ou, De la purification*,⁹⁰ Daniélou adumbrates Gregory's ascetical vision in relation to “la purification des passions,” “la conquête de l'apatheia,” “les tuniques de peau,” “la lutte contre les tentations,” and “la parrhésie.” But what primarily fascinated Daniélou was Gregory's mystical vision, especially its rendition of spiritual desire (*erōs* and *agapē*)⁹¹ and “l'amour extatique.”⁹² It is this emphasis that most exercised Anglo-American scholarship, in part because of coalescing influences at the time.

Two major strands of influence in the late twentieth century led to renewed fascination in the topic of asceticism in late antique studies.⁹³ The first was Foucault's three-volume *Histoire de la sexualité*, which highlighted the entanglements of power,

sexuality, and desire in late antique asceticism as well as modern-day psychoanalysis and was counterpoised by a number of critical voices, including that of Pierre Hadot.⁹⁴ The second strand of influence was the work of Peter Brown in general but particularly his book *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (1988), which underlyingly relied on Freudian and post-Freudian theorizations of erotic desire for its analysis of gender and sexuality in early Christian asceticism.⁹⁵ Equally influential was his work on the holy man,⁹⁶ which interpreted the extreme practices of Syrian ascetics⁹⁷ in light of the late antique patronage system. Brown's distinctive contribution to the study of asceticism was to regard the bodily disciplines of the ascetic life as an analytic tool⁹⁸ for understanding the cultural shifts in the fourth and fifth centuries of the Roman Empire, following in part the inspiration of Mary Douglas's work on the body and purity.⁹⁹ In doing so, Brown catalyzed what has been dubbed the "cultural turn"¹⁰⁰ in late antique studies, which was in part an intentional supersession of theological and patristic analyses of asceticism.

If we return in a more focused way to the twentieth-century reception of Gregory's thought, it is worth noting that he was initially derided by early feminist¹⁰¹ theologians for his supposed espousal of patriarchal ideals¹⁰² and viewed as only a slight improvement on Augustine,¹⁰³ who had generally become a disparaged figure in feminist theology. However, a more positive stance was taken by scholars such as Verna Harrison, Sarah Coakley, and Virginia Burrus, who were predominantly interested in Gregory's rendition of spiritual ascent, his use of male and female imagery, and his portrayal of erotic desire for the divine. All concerned sought to explore, albeit in sometimes quite different ways, Gregory's potential contributions to feminism and gender theory. This strand of scholarship seemed to draw on Daniélou's earlier compilation of excerpts from Gregory's mystical writings, translated into English by Herbert Musurillo in 1961 (in the U.S.A.) and 1962 (in the U.K.),¹⁰⁴ which facilitated greater access to these seminal texts within the Anglophone world. What was significant about *From Glory to Glory* and indeed *Platonisme et théologie mystique* was the attention they gave to the *De vita Moysis* and the *In Cant*, texts that became crucial for Verna Harrison, Sarah Coakley, and Virginia Burrus in their work on gender. So it is Daniélou's interests in spirituality and mysticism that first drew scholarly attention to Gregory's rendition of desire. That interest then came into confluence with a range of theoretical associations in the study of gender and sexuality that had begun to flourish in the Anglo-American academy in the late twentieth century.

One particularly interesting reading that self-consciously draws Gregory into contemporary theory is that of Virginia Burrus—but he is, I believe, drawn into a conversation that is anachronistic to his own. The problem with *Begotten, Not Made*, her most influential work, is that it subscribes to a libertine ethic of erotic and gender fluidity. Burrus uses various anachronistic expressions, such as "sublimated homoerot-

icism,”¹⁰⁵ “androcentrism,”¹⁰⁶ and “androgyny’s fluidity,”¹⁰⁷ without qualification. By her own reckoning, she seeks to produce “multiple and fluid” readings of the Church Fathers that will lead to “still queerer encounters.”¹⁰⁸ In the course of this study, I shall demonstrate that many of these predominantly Anglo-American studies—of which Burrus’s is arguably the most problematic—have fastened onto a mature stage of spiritual ascent, represented in Gregory’s most celebrated work, the *In Cant*, in which gender appears to be most fluid. In doing so, they have sidelined the ascetical implications of erotic transformation.

In this brief overview of scholarship on Gregory of Nyssa, I have described some salient currents of thought in the twentieth century. My aim has been to show that modern interests in gender and sexuality are indebted to the rediscovery of Gregory as a writer on spirituality and mysticism. But to get to grips with what Gregory says about the body and desire, it is important first to lay aside some contemporary Western presumptions that have animated scholarly discussion over the last few decades. To counter these anachronisms, I shall now attend to Gregory’s historical context by situating his thinking within the late antique milieu.