



EARLY CHRISTIAN WOMEN AND PAGAN OPINION

THE POWER OF THE HYSTERICAL WOMAN

Margaret Y. MacDonald

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MARGARET Y. MACDONALD

*Department of Religious Studies
University of Ottawa*



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521561747

© Cambridge University Press 1996

First published in 1996

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data applied for

ISBN-13 978-0-521-56174-7 hardback

ISBN-10 0-521-56174-4 hardback

ISBN-13 978-0-521-56728-2 paperback

ISBN-10 0-521-56728-9 paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2005

This is a study of how women figured in public reaction to the church from New Testament times to Christianity's encounter with the pagan critics of the second century CE. The reference to a hysterical woman was made by the most prolific critic of Christianity, Celsus, and he meant a follower of Jesus, probably Mary Magdalene, who was at the centre of efforts to create and promote belief in the resurrection. MacDonald draws attention to the conviction, emerging from the works of several pagan authors, that female initiative was central to Christianity's development; she sets out to explore the relationship between this and the common Greco-Roman belief that women were inclined towards excesses in matters of religion. The findings of cultural anthropologists of Mediterranean societies are examined in an effort to probe the societal values that shaped public opinion and early church teaching. Concerns expressed in New Testament and early Christian texts about the respectability of women, and even generally about their behaviour, are seen in a new light when one appreciates that outsiders focused on early church women and understood their activities as a reflection of the nature of the group as a whole.

*Early Christian women
and pagan opinion*

For Duncan, Delia, and Jake

Preface

Although I have been working intensively on this book for about five years, many of its themes have occupied my thoughts for much longer. In preparing *The Pauline Churches* (Cambridge University Press, 1988) I became fascinated with the question of how the reaction of non-believers to early Christian groups may have affected life in the early church. *Early Christian women and pagan opinion* considers this question with a specific focus on early Christian women.

In conducting this study I was frequently required to venture outside my own field of Early Christian Studies to consider the work of anthropologists of Mediterranean societies and the work of scholars in the area of women and religion. Given the interdisciplinary nature of my study, I set out deliberately to write a book which I hope will interest specialists, but will also engage more general readers. I have made extensive use of footnotes throughout which will offer scholars of early Christianity further information about textual backgrounds and related studies.

My investigation has been enriched by many conversations with graduate students. In addition, I have received assistance from students working in conjunction with the Canadian Centre for Research on Women and Religion at the University of Ottawa. Steven Muir, a doctoral candidate in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Ottawa, deserves special mention for editing, bibliographical work, and proof-reading.

For his judicious advice on the general shape of the book and for organizing the initial reaction to my work in the form of very valuable readers' reports, I would like to thank my editor at

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Cambridge University Press, Alex Wright. I would also like to express my appreciation to two colleagues, Professor Naomi Goldenberg of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Ottawa and Professor Eileen Schuller of the Department of Religious Studies at McMaster University, who have offered support in various forms.

During the course of conducting the research for this book I received funding from the University of Ottawa and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. In particular, the support I received from the Faculty of Arts at the University of Ottawa as a complement to my SSHRC grant, which took the form of release from some teaching responsibilities, was instrumental in allowing me to complete my study in a timely manner.

The past five years of my life have involved not only the creation of this book, but also the birth of my two children, Delia and Jake. This book is dedicated to my husband Duncan and my two children who have all shared in the difficulties and the joys of the enterprise.

Abbreviations

ANF	A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (eds.), <i>The Ante-Nicene Fathers</i>
BAGD	W. Bauer, W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and F. W. Danker, <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the NT</i>
<i>Barn.</i>	<i>Barnabas</i>
BTB	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CH	<i>Church History</i>
<i>1 Clem.</i>	<i>1 Clement</i>
Clem. Alex. Strom.	Clement of Alexandria, <i>Stromateis</i>
<i>Did.</i>	<i>Didache</i>
GRBS	<i>Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies</i>
HDR	Harvard Dissertations in Religion
<i>Herm. Man.</i>	<i>Hermas, Mandate</i>
<i>Herm. Sim.</i>	<i>Hermas, Similitude</i>
<i>Herm. Vis.</i>	<i>Hermas, Vision</i>
HR	<i>History of Religions</i>
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
Ign. Magn.	Ignatius, <i>Letter to the Magnesians</i>
Ign. Pol.	Ignatius, <i>Letter to Polycarp</i>
Ign. Smyrn.	Ignatius, <i>Letter to the Smyrnaeans</i>
Ign. Trall.	Ignatius, <i>Letter to the Trallians</i>
JAAR	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>
JAC	<i>Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JFSR	<i>Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion</i>

Abbreviations

<i>JR</i>	<i>Journal of Religion</i>
<i>JRH</i>	<i>Journal of Religious History</i>
<i>JSNT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
<i>Mart. Pol.</i>	<i>Martyrdom of Polycarp</i>
<i>NHL</i>	J. Robinson (ed.), <i>Nag Hammadi Library in English</i>
<i>NovT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
<i>NRSV</i>	<i>New Revised Standard Version</i>
<i>NT Apoc.</i>	E. Hennecke and W. Schneemelcher (eds.), <i>New Testament Apocrypha</i>
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
<i>Orig. C. Cels.</i>	Origen, <i>Contra Celsum</i>
<i>Pol. Phil.</i>	Polycarp, <i>Letter to the Philippians</i>
<i>RSV</i>	<i>Revised Standard Version</i>
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBLMS	Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series
SBLSP	Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
<i>SR</i>	<i>Studies in Religion / Sciences Religieuses</i>
<i>VC</i>	<i>Vigiliae christianae</i>

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Introduction

Defining the task

Among the second-century critics of early Christianity, Celsus was the most prolific. Unfortunately, we possess very little information about his life. His book *The True Doctrine*, written about 170 CE, no longer exists, and it is known to us only from a rebuttal composed by Origen some seventy years later, *Contra Celsum*. Luckily Origen quotes Celsus at length, and we are thus in a good position to recover much of what Celsus originally said. Of particular importance for this study is Celsus' remarkable interest in the presence of women among Jesus' followers, and in their role in the development of Christianity. In fact, Celsus describes the Christian resurrection belief as having been created by a 'hysterical woman' who was deluded by sorcery:

But we must examine this question whether anyone who really died ever rose again with the same body . . . But who saw this? A hysterical female, as you say, and perhaps some other one of those who were deluded by the same sorcery, who either dreamt in a certain state of mind and through wishful thinking had a hallucination due to some mistaken notion (an experience which has happened to thousands), or, which is more likely, wanted to impress others by telling this fantastic tale, and so by this cock-and-bull story to provide a chance for other beggars.¹

The mention of a hysterical woman may be simply a general attempt to ridicule the beliefs of a cult which sprang from the

¹ See Orig. *C. Cels.* 2.55; 3.55; trans. Henry Chadwick (Cambridge University Press, 1953). The identification of the hysterical female as Mary Magdalene and the text as a whole are discussed fully in Part I pp. 104–9.

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foolish imaginings of women; as we will see, other foreign religions had been critiqued similarly. But Celsus' knowledge of the Christian tradition is substantial enough that it is possible that he was familiar with the important role women play in resurrection accounts, and with the role of Mary of Magdala in particular. The lingering memory in early Christian circles about Mary as a follower of Jesus, a witness to the resurrection, and a herald of the news of the appearance of the risen Christ, is made clear by her prominence in New Testament traditions (Mark 16.1–11; Matt. 28.1–8; Luke 24.1–11; John 20.1–18) and in several gnostic writings from the second and third centuries CE.² Celsus noted that women continued to play a prominent role, acting as leaders in church groups after the death of Jesus, and he described the participation of women in Christianity's seditious evangelizing tactics. If Celsus' remarks were substantive rather than simply being a stereotypical attempt to chide early Christians, he was asserting that from its inception to his own day, Christianity had been very much a women's religion.³

Celsus' labelling of a woman with a talent for the invention of religious belief as 'hysterical' reflects a well-attested sentiment in the Roman Empire that women were inclined towards excesses in matters of religion. Commenting on Celsus' description of early Christianity as a lurer of women, the historian Ramsay MacMullen stated, 'Ardent credulity was presented as a weakness characteristic of the sex, pagan or Christian.'⁴ At times this weakness took the form of addiction to religious matters, a trait said to be found only rarely in men.⁵ At times it took the form of outright allegiance to a strange new religious group. According to the

² See for example: *Gospel of Philip*, 59.5–11; 63.32–6; trans. Wesley W. Isenberg, *NHL*; *Gospel of Mary*, 17; trans. Karen L. King, George W. MacRae, R. McL. Wilson, Douglas M. Parrott, *NHL*. For many other references see Kathleen E. Corley, *Private Women, Public Meals: Social Conflict in the Synoptic Tradition* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1993) 114 n.28.

³ See Orig. *C. Cels.* 3.55. The notion of 'women's religions' is an important concept in the recent excellent study by Ross S. Kraemer, *Her Share of the Blessings: Women's Religions Among Pagans, Jews, and Christians in the Greco-Roman World* (Oxford and NY: Oxford University, 1992) 3.

⁴ R. MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire (AD 100–400)* (New Haven and London: Yale, 1984) 39.

⁵ See Strabo, *Geography*, 7.3.4 (c. 297); trans. H. L. Jones (LCL 1924); cited in Kraemer, *Her Share*, 3.

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ancient author Plutarch, fidelity to one's husband meant fidelity to his gods and the ability to 'shut the front door tight upon all queer rituals and outlandish superstitions. For with no god do stealthy and secret rites performed by a woman find any favour.'⁶

The Greek term 'πάροιςτος', rendered here as 'hysterical', deserves special attention at the outset.⁷ I have opted for this translation and not for the alternate, and no doubt less 'loaded', translation of πάροιςτος as 'frenzied'.⁸ I have done so because 'hysterical' in the modern world is so strongly associated with women's behaviour which is out of control, with female nature that has gone morally and intellectually awry, with weakness and vulnerability inherent in the female sex. When Celsus' description of the woman witness to the resurrection is read in relation to his descriptions of other women these stereotypical perceptions about

⁶ Plutarch, *Moralia (Advice to Bride and Groom)* 140D; trans. F. C. Babbitt (LCL 1928). For more evidence that women were considered especially susceptible to strange religious impulses see Margaret Y. MacDonald, 'Early Christian Women Married to Unbelievers', *SR* 19:2 (1990) 229–31; Kraemer, *Her Share*, 211 n.1; MacMullen, *Christianizing*, 137 n.33.

⁷ Orig. *C. Cels.* 2.55; 2.59. See *Patristic Greek Lexicon*, G. Lampe (ed.) (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968) s.v. πάροιςτος. In adopting the translation of this term as 'hysterical', I am following Chadwick (see n.1 above). I am grateful to my research assistant Dilys Patterson for pointing out the fluid meaning of this word. I am also grateful to Steven Muir for the study he undertook of this term and its cognates. Some of the results of his investigation can be seen in 'Rebellion, Debauchery, and Frenzy in the Septuagint', *Nuntius* 16 .2 (1993) 19–21. Although this is not a common word, it is derived from the more common term οἰσπράω which refers to the sting of the gadfly, and metaphorically to frenzy or madness. It often has a sexual connotation: Euripedes, *Bacchae*, trans. A. S. Way (LCL 1916) 32; 119; 1229 offers an especially appropriate illustration of this sense. See Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), s.v. οἰσπράω. The term πάροιςτος is to be distinguished from ὑστερικός, the Greek term from which the English 'hysterical' is derived. The literal meaning of ὑστερικός is 'suffering in the womb', a disease of women which produces such broad symptoms as apnea and convulsions. Although there are some convergences in meaning, in ancient literature ὑστερικός does not seem to be as directly associated with deranged behaviour as πάροιςτος. On the Greek term ὑστερικός see Liddell and Scott, *Greek English Lexicon*. In the medical writings of Soranus and Galen this condition is said to produce such symptoms as apnea, fainting, and convulsions. According to Soranus, deranged behaviour appears as a type of after-effect of ὑστερικός. See Galen, *On the Affected Parts*, 6.5; trans. Rudolph E. Siegel (Basel: S. Karger, 1976); Soranus, *Gynecology*, 3.4.26; trans. Owsei Temkin (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1956). It is interesting to consider the implications of the association of involuntary celibacy with ὑστερικός in ancient medical writings. This point will be discussed further in Part 2.

⁸ Chadwick translates the term as 'hysterical' (see n.1 above). Note, however, that Harold Remus adopts the translation of Celsus' phrase as 'frenzied woman' in *Pagan-Christian Conflict over Miracle in the Second Century* (Cambridge, MA: Philadelphia Patristics Foundation, 1983) 107.

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women emerge clearly. It is precisely these perceptions that I would like to recall for my readers in order that they might reflect upon how strongly stereotypes impinge upon characterizations of female behaviour both in ancient and modern societies – in order that they may sense the seemingly timeless imprint of stereotypes on the collective imagination.

I have, however, decided to set the stage for my discussion with Celsus' description of the hysterical woman for a further reason. The account moves quickly from testimony that a woman behaved in predictably deranged ways to an unwitting admission of the importance of her involvement in the telling of the tale. Moreover, while he clearly sought to downplay success, Celsus' efforts belie the fact that by the second century CE a significant population found the 'cock-and-bull' story to be convincing. The description of the 'hysterical woman' calls to mind the ambivalent attitude in antiquity towards religious talents displayed by women: these talents were both admired and held in great suspicion. For an illustration of this perception of religious talent we might consider the Sybil, a prophetess of obscure origin known to us from Jewish and pagan sources. Her proximity to early Christian circles is revealed by her appearance in an early second-century Christian text, *The Shepherd of Hermas*. During the course of his adventures Hermas mistakenly assumes that an elderly lady seen in a vision bearing a book of 'revelations' is the Sybil (she turns out to be the church).⁹ Hermas' assumption and the disclosure of the woman's true identity are perhaps inspired by a need to respond to a common opinion of non-Christians about the prominence of female prophets and teachers in the early church. Celsus recounts that some early Christians are in fact 'Sybillists'.¹⁰ Within early Christian groups the influence of women teachers was a subject of concern and could sometimes even elicit wrath, as is suggested by the haunting depictions of the suffering that will befall the prophetess Jezebel of the church at Thyatira (Rev. 2.19–23).¹¹

The word 'hysterical' (παροιστρος) employed by Celsus in

⁹ *Herm. Vis.* 2.4.1. See *The Shepherd of Hermas* in K. Lake trans., *Apostolic Fathers II* (LCL 1913). On the origins of the Sybil see Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1986) 202–3. ¹⁰ *Orig. C. Cels.* 6.34.

¹¹ See also Kraemer's interesting discussion of Jewish 'witches' in *Her Share*, 90, 108–9.

conjunction with the term 'sorcery' certainly calls to mind the notion of a deluded, deranged female, but we should be cautious about reading Celsus' clearly derogatory description as implying that the prototypic Christian (hysterical) woman was powerless or without influence. Important male figures in the development of Christianity receive similar categorization. In other places in Celsus' account (as recorded by Origen) *πάροιςτρος* refers to the utterings of false prophets and messianic pretenders, which Origen takes to mean the prophets of Hebrew Scripture.¹² Furthermore, far from being simply deluded and immobilized by hysteria, the woman described by Celsus was an active witness, a teller of a fantastic tale. As will be discussed later in this volume, Christians could likewise describe women as both victims (e.g. 2 Tim. 3.6–7) and dangerous perpetrators (e.g. 1 Tim. 5.13) of fantastic tales. Thus, Christians and non-Christians shared the sentiment that women were inclined toward excesses in religious matters. The result, I will argue, was that early Christian women who risked public censure for their religious activities also were often the object of careful monitoring by those inside the church.

In order to gain a greater sense of the dual image of the hysterical woman as both deluded female and influential evangelist, it is valuable to assemble the references to women made by the first non-Christian observers of early Christianity. In Part 1 of this book I examine the comments of second-century pagan¹³ authors who refer specifically to early Christian women. The early church works from the first and second centuries CE (including the New Testament) discussed in Parts 2 and 3 offer further indications of how women figured in public opinion about Christianity. My goal in Parts 2 and 3, however, also is to shed light on how public opinion about women in the church shaped early Christian teaching concerning women and, therefore, affected the lives of women. Generally, I aim to illustrate in this book the importance of the issue of female visibility in the relationship between the early church and Greco-Roman society. I seek to show what aspects of

¹² *C.Cels.* 7.9–10.

¹³ The word 'pagan' has no derogatory meaning in this book. It is employed in the usual sense adopted by scholars of the ancient world to distinguish Jews and early Christians from others in the Greco-Roman world.