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To Rise beyond their Sex: The Representation of Female Cross-Dressing Saints in Caxton's *Vitas Patrum*.

In his last translation, a major collection of saints' lives, which England's first printer finished on the last day of his life, he includes four female saints who can be classified as so-called 'cross-dressers' or 'transvestite saints'.

The image of the 'manly woman', developed in New Testament sources and continued by the Church Fathers as an idealized picture of the Christian woman of distinction forms the basis of the literary motif of the cross-dressing nun who lives among her fellow monks in disguise until after her death her true identity is discovered and the whole community (of men) cries out in great surprise at God's wondrous ways.

In my paper, I will discuss the lives of the four cross-dressing women in the *Vitas Patrum*, and another saint, Mary of Egypt, who shares many of the features of the transvestite saints. The most obvious question raised when reading these lives is, "Why do the women cross-dress?" Much of the research that has been done on the topic has sought to answer the question in a feminist fashion, arguing that the women felt the need to free themselves from the restrictions imposed on them by a male dominated church. I will argue that for the women to postulate a break with social traditions tries to explain this literary motif by transferring modern views about women and society onto historical texts (anachronistic approach). On close inspection, however, the texts show that the reasons for cross-dressing were often of a purely practical nature, or, if they were psychologically motivated at all, they reveal a complete internalisation of the misogynist image which had been handed down from antiquity to the late Middle Ages (and further).