

Virginity and the Patristic Tradition;
Spenser's *Faerie Queene* and the Reformation

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Summary

It has long been recognised that chastity is a problem in Book III of *The Faerie Queene*. The problem arises in part because the poem does not clearly define chastity but instead ambiguously praises it both as virginity and marital love. Behind the poem, too, lies the problem of Elizabeth with her Protestant virginity sometimes represented in Britomart, sometimes in Belpheobe, but also dangerously Catholic in its iconography. Indeed, wherever we turn in *The Faerie Queene* there are tangles of meaning. The contention of this thesis is that these problems are not merely surface writings, but stem from the Protestant breach with the Church Fathers and the long history of virginity. That history, I suggest in the main body of the thesis, has been broadly ignored by the critics who, by failing to grasp its theological complexity and development, have failed to produce an adequate platform from which to read the Protestant reformers and *The Faerie Queene*.

The thesis is divided into two main parts. The Introduction examines recent critical discussions of virginity in Spenser, the Middle Ages and patristics, thus working backwards historically to the patristic writings themselves where I offer, in Part I, a detailed examination of the growth of the theological significance of virginity. Part II then looks at the reformers' attacks on virginity, Luther and Erasmus especially, before turning to a discussion of the troubled meanings of virginity and chastity in Spenser's epic poem.

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Preface

The present thesis explores the complex development of virginity in the patristic writings of the Church Fathers, the challenge of the Protestant reformers Luther and Erasmus to this ideal and the troubled representation of chastity in Book III of Spenser's Protestant epic poem, *The Faerie Queene*.

The Introduction examines recent criticism of Spenser's poem, medieval virginity and patristic writings to suggest that the current concern with gender and the body has obscured the theological complexity and history of virginity inherited by the Middle Ages and the Reformation. Part I of the thesis then sets out to show how the concept of virginity developed from the early Church in the writings of the Church Fathers and how this history has been misunderstood. Because this part relies heavily on unfamiliar primary material, the thesis provides a full account partly via detailed footnotes. Biographical information of each Father is given in order to provide a context for the production of their works. This account, beginning with Tertullian in the early third century, and concluding with Augustine in the late fourth century, then serves as a background for a discussion of the reformers Luther and Erasmus and their engagement with and critique of patristic writings on virginity in Part II. The final chapter returns to the problem of chastity in *The Faerie Queene*, in particular Book III and its narrative continuations in Books IV and V.

It is not, however, the contention of this thesis that the patristic writings addressed in Part I were direct source texts for Spenser. Rather, it argues that an appreciation of patristic writings which contributed to the development of the doctrine of virginity is important for understanding the flourishing of the cult of virginity and the complex theological ideas that are enshrined within it. In addition, it is necessary to understand the patristic tradition in order to appreciate the theological wrangling in the Reformation on issues concerning virginity, such as monasticism and mandatory clerical celibacy. The Reformation debates about these

issues were not simply a rejection of corrupt practices but involved the reassessment and ultimately the rejection of an intricate and rich theological tradition.

Part II seeks to offer an explanation of the issues involved in the Reformation's interrogation and rejection of consecrated virginity. It does this by looking briefly at the writings of Martin Luther and Desiderius Erasmus, the two great continental reformers and voices of Protestant Reformation and Renaissance Humanism respectively. The Reformation debates in which these two authors partook represented a resurrection of much older, patristic debates. Luther's fracturing of 'virginity' as a conceptual idea into Church practices – monasticism and mandatory sacerdotal celibacy – led, however to an undermining of its orthodox meanings, and the final chapter of the thesis seeks to demonstrate how these controversies inform Spenser's treatment of chastity in Book III of *The Faerie Queene*.

Spenser engages with a variety of issues connected with the doctrine of virginity and its relationship to chaste marriage. Spenser, however, not only has to negotiate the rich patristic tradition and the political aspects of Reformation theology, but his treatment of virginity also has to deal with the political figure of England's Protestant Virgin Queen and her troubling iconography. Not surprisingly, perhaps, the depiction of chastity in *The Faerie Queene* proves as ambiguous as the poem's dark allegory. To be aware of the struggles of the Church Fathers to define and defend virginity in all its theological complexity is to begin to understand why Renaissance writers like Spenser found both a rich topic in virginity but also a political, moral and religious aporia.

Introduction: The Virgins and the Critics

i. Renaissance Literary Studies

Where any consideration of virginity in the Renaissance exists, it is Queen Elizabeth I's personal cult of virginity that dominates discussions.¹ Not surprisingly, perhaps, critical studies of *The Faerie Queene* which focus on the virginal chastity of the queen tend to assert its political dimension rather than its theological importance or spiritual complexity. In an essay surveying gendered readings of Spenser, Elizabeth Bellamy notes that 'gender-based studies of Spenser, dating from the early 1980s, often focussed on the sexual politics of Elizabeth's cult of chastity'.² This trend has continued ever since. Louis Montrose, for example, interrogates the queen's cult in the light of John Knox's *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* (1588) and episodes in Books II and V of *The Faerie Queene*.³ He argues that Spenser's works are saturated by 'the vexed relationship of gender and power', which are indicative of 'a pervasively masculinist early modern culture' and a 'late Elizabethan articulation of the interplay between dominant gender paradigms and emergent political paradigms'.⁴ Maureen Quilligan, in a discussion on the importance of gendered readership, says that the third book of *The Faerie Queene*, entitled *The Legend of Chastity*, 'directly addressed the problem of the queen's politically powerful virginity and the dynamics of its erotic

¹ Discussions on Elizabeth's cult of virginity owe much to Francis Yates' work on Tudor portraiture. Cf. Francis A. Yates, *Selected Works: Astraea*, Vol. V (London and New York: Routledge, 1975).

² Elizabeth Jane Bellamy, 'Gender', in *A Critical Companion to Spenser Studies*, ed. Bart van Es (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 76-97, (p. 93).

³ He argues that Knox's tract 'encapsulates certain persistent thematic, imagistic, and rhetorical elements that are writ large across Spenser's *Faerie Queene*.' Louis Montrose, 'Spenser and the Elizabethan Political Imaginary', *EHL*, Vol. 69, No. 4 (Winter, 2002), 907-946, (p. 909).

⁴ Montrose, 'Spenser and the Elizabethan Political Imaginary', p. 907.

allure’.⁵ Other studies suggest that Book III represents male anxiety about female rulers. Thus, Mary Villeponteaux argues that ‘[t]he virgin knight Britomart is the figure in the poem who best exemplifies Spenser’s ambivalent depiction of women’s authority’.⁶ The understanding of *The Faerie Queene* as a comment on female authority is shared also by Judith H. Anderson in her essay “‘In liuing colours bright hew’’: The Queen of Spenser’s Central Books’.⁷ More comprehensively, Philippa Berry’s *Of Chastity and Power: Elizabethan Literature and the Unmarried Queen* examines Elizabeth’s cult of virginity from the perspective of its appropriation of Petrarchan love imagery and argues that

The idea of feminine chastity which was emphasised by Petrarch and the Renaissance Neoplatonists acquired a new and unexpected significance when associated with a woman who was possessed of both political and spiritual authority.⁸

While this may be so, Berry’s argument overlooks the obvious tension between the spiritual and political aspects of virginity. The ‘political’ had, after all, emerged from denying the ‘spiritual’ aspects of virginity in the Reformation.

Whereas Berry discusses the literary influences adopted by Elizabeth in her cult, the complexities of the Elizabethan cult of the virgin seem to have been overlooked, or oversimplified, by other critics. In her book, *Transforming Desire: Erotic Knowledge in*

⁵ Maureen Quilligan, ‘The Gender of the Reader and the Problem of Sexuality [in Books III and IV]’, in *Critical Essays on Edmund Spenser*, ed. Mihoko Suzuki (New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1996), pp. 133-151, (p. 133).

⁶ Mary Villeponteaux, ‘Displacing Feminine Authority in *The Faerie Queene*’, *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 35, No. 1, *The English Renaissance* (Winter, 1995), 53-67, (p. 53).

⁷ Cf. Anderson: ‘Even in the 1590 *Faerie Queene*, Spenser’s reverence for Queen Elizabeth is accompanied by a cautionary awareness of the temptations and dangers of queenly power and by a complementary awareness of the cost – the denial or exclusion of human possibilities – an ennobling idea exacts of its bearer.’ Judith H. Anderson, “‘In liuing colours bright hew’’: The Queen of Spenser’s Central Books’, in *Critical Essays on Edmund Spenser*, ed. Mihoko Suzuki (New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1996), pp. 168-182, (p. 168).

⁸ Philippa Berry, *Of Chastity and Power: Elizabethan Literature and the Unmarried Queen* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 1.

Books III and IV of 'The Faerie Queene', which argues that Spenser's *Faerie Queene* offers a critique of contemporary sexual ideology,⁹ Lauren Silberman comments that:

Social historians observe that the Elizabethan preoccupation with female chastity reflected the need to ensure the legitimacy of heirs in a system of primogeniture. Insofar as that preoccupation became a cult of virginity, it served its social purposes badly, especially in light of the widely held Elizabethan belief that the initial act of intercourse would not produce offspring.¹⁰

Silberman's acceptance of the assessment of social historians on the causes of the development of the Elizabethan cult of virginity ignores not only the cultural importance of the patristic and medieval ideal, but also the extent to which ideas such as chastity in marriage replaced virginity as the premier form of chastity in the post-Reformation state. No less contentious, Elizabeth D. Harvey, following Leah S. Marcus,¹¹ understands Elizabeth's virginal state as based solely on the disastrous 'reproductive histories' of her family.¹² Although social and personal factors may have been important in Elizabeth's decision not to marry, there were more complicated theological issues at stake in the

⁹ Cf. Silberman: 'My reading of *The Faerie Queene* considers that poem as much more critical of conventional Elizabethan sexual ideology than do most feminist analyses of Spenser. One of the best and fullest versions of the feminist reading of Spenser and implicated in the sexual politics of his age may be found in Sheila Cavanagh's lucid and learned book, *Wanton Eyes and Chaste Desires: Female Sexuality in "The Faerie Queene"*.' Lauren Silberman, *Transforming Desire: Erotic Knowledge in Books III and IV of 'The Faerie Queene'* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1995), p. 143n.1.

¹⁰ Silberman, *Transforming Desire*, p. 104. In a similar vein, Linda Gregerson expands on the importance of chastity for practical, social reasons: 'Female chastity was the bearer of formidable ideological and practical significance; it was the indispensable guarantor of social coherence, legitimate title and the orderly maintenance and transfer of material wealth, including land tenure.' Linda Gregerson, 'Sexual Politics', in *The Cambridge Companion to Spenser*, ed. Andrew Hadfield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 180-199, (p. 180).

¹¹ Cf. Leah S. Marcus, 'Erasing the Stigma of Daughterhood: Mary I, Elizabeth I, and Henry VIII', in *Daughters and Fathers*, eds. Lynda E. Boose and Betty S. Flowers (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), pp. 400-417.

¹² Cf. Harvey: 'Her parents' reproductive histories shaped hers: Henry VIII's desire for a male heir permanently altered England's religious destiny, and Anne Boleyn's inability to produce a son ultimately led to her execution. Elizabeth's half-sister, Mary I, had widely publicised false pregnancies that brought public embarrassment and linked her in her subject's eyes and her own to Henry's VIII's procreative vulnerabilities.' Elizabeth D. Harvey, 'Spenser, Virginity, and Sexuality', in *Early Modern English Poetry: A Critical Companion*, eds. Patrick Cheney, Andrew Hadfield and Garrett A Sullivan, Jr. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 102-112, (p. 102).

adoption of virginity that Spenser's poem is all too aware of, not least the changed significance of post-Reformation virginity and chastity.

Feminist readings often dominate discussions of chastity in *The Faerie Queene*. Sheila T. Cavanagh's *Wanton Eyes and Chaste Desires: Female Sexuality in 'The Faerie Queene'*, for instance, identifies misogynistic threads throughout Spenser's text. She speaks of Britomart's masculine guise which she claims is characteristic of the

central subversion of women which infiltrates the epic. In Spenser's epic, women, however virtuous, generally evoke suspicion. Female sexuality remains intertwined with images of danger actual or potential. Women and wickedness often seem synonymous, resembling Tasso's misogynistic pronouncement in 1599 which equates women with 'a foule fault, a wicked vice or a hatefull monster' (Sig.C3v) and Alexander Niccholes's warning in 1615 that 'good wives are many times so like unto bad, that they are hardly descerned betwixt' (Sig.B4v).¹³

Much of Cavanagh's reading of *The Faerie Queene* is predicated on the assumption that virtue, because of its etymological association with manliness, is always gendered as male and so women, by their very nature, cannot be virtuous.¹⁴ Ingenious though this theory may be, it fails to take into consideration the fact that, although the meaning of *virtus*, the Latin word from which virtue is derived, does indeed have a nuance of

¹³ Sheila T. Cavanagh, *Wanton Eyes and Chaste Desires: Female Sexuality in 'The Faerie Queene'* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), pp. 1-2. This quotation demonstrates Cavanagh's tendency to make cultural assertions based on the evidence of texts published after *The Faerie Queene*.

¹⁴ Cf. Cavanagh: 'The dilemma about the gendered role of women in Spenser's *Faerie Queene* is most broadly illustrated by Spenser's approach to the concept of "virtue", which is the allegorical subject of his poem. For, of course, the word "virtue" derives from the Latin term for "manliness" or "valour" (OED). [...] "Virtue's" root in "manliness" is apparent throughout the *Faerie Queene*. With few exceptions in the poem or in the life many writers in this period portray, since women cannot achieve "manliness", they aspire instead to "their" virtue – chastity – thereby opening up a new realm of contradictions and problems. [...] as the etymology for "virtue" suggests, women in the poem are excluded from being "virtuous" and the term's root in "manliness" closely characterises the tenor of virtue promoted and valued in the text.' Cavanagh, *Wanton Eyes and Chaste Desires*, pp. 8-10. Cf. Lockerd: 'As John Hankins, among others, has asserted, Spenser is conscious of the derivation of "virtue" from Latin "virtus", originally meaning martial courage. The conjunction of moral and martial senses in the word makes all the more plausible a presentation of moral virtues as warring knights.' Benjamin G. Lockerd, *The Sacred Marriage: Psychic Integration in 'The Faerie Queene'* (London and Toronto: Associated University Press, 1987), p. 83.

manliness and appears to be derived from the Latin word for man, *vir*, grammatically it is a female noun. In fact, the Latin cognates of the all the virtues that Spenser focuses on in *The Faerie Queene* are feminine nouns.¹⁵ A note, sequestered at the back of her book, indicates that Cavanagh is aware of the female gendering of *virtus*, but she does not discuss it in the main body of the book since it so obviously contradicts her theory.¹⁶ More significantly, Cavanagh seems to suggest that the moral perfection implied in the term is absent from the Latin term, and a later development.¹⁷ However, the Latin Dictionary gives evidence that the use of *virtus* to designate moral virtue as early as 450 B.C., and also refers to Cicero's use of the term in precisely this way.¹⁸ Virtue is a more sophisticated term and more nuanced than Cavanagh allows.

Susan Frye's feminist article 'Of Chastity and Violence: Elizabeth I and Edmund Spenser in the House of Busyrane', in which she discusses rape in *The Faerie Queene*,¹⁹ makes a distinction between Elizabeth's own idea of virginity and that represented by Spenser:

Book 3 of *The Faerie Queene* makes visible the dialectic between Queen Elizabeth's conceptualisation of chastity as virginal – which in the sixteenth century meant self-possessed, powerful, and magical – and Spenser's assertion of the more predominant views of women as vulnerable, threatened, and thus logically protected and possessed by men.²⁰

¹⁵ *Temperatio* (Temperance); *Castitas* (Chastity); *Iustitia* (Justice); *Comitas* (Courtesy).

¹⁶ Cf. Cavanagh: 'Warner Berthoff is certainly correct when he points out that "Virtue" is "feminine in gender in Latin and the Romance languages" and that individual virtues are often given female allegorical forms (53); nevertheless, *The Faerie Queene* and many other works still separate the concept of virtue from the possibility of female realisation.' Cavanagh, *Wanton Eyes and Chaste Desires*, p. 175n.27.

¹⁷ Cf. Cavanagh: 'Common usage of the word has expanded its meaning to include concepts such as good behaviour, purity of thought, and spiritual transcendence.' Cavanagh, *Wanton Eyes and Chaste Desires*, p. 8.

¹⁸ Cf. *A Latin-English Dictionary, based upon the works of Forcellini and Freund*, ed. William Smith (London: John Murray, 1855), p. 1199.

¹⁹ For another essay on rape, see Katherine Eggert, 'Spenser's Ravishment: Rape and Rapture in *The Faerie Queene*', *Representations*, No. 70 (Spring, 2000), 1-26.

²⁰ Susan Frye, 'Of Chastity and Violence: Elizabeth I and Edmund Spenser in the House of Busyrane', *Signs*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Autumn, 1994), 49-78, (p. 50).

Frye's assertion that virginity was considered to be 'self-possessed, powerful, and magical' in the sixteenth century is supported only by her whole-hearted approval of Louis Montrose's interpretation of Tudor portraiture, which is at times a little tenuous and not universally accepted.²¹ Elizabeth's virginity was certainly an important part of her personal propaganda, but Frye does not provide any qualifications for the meanings she proffers for 'Elizabeth's conceptualisation of chastity', nor does she consider whether there were any other sixteenth-century notions of chastity. In a similar way, Lesley W. Brill also seems to take liberties with the sixteenth-century idea of the meaning of chastity. He argues that

In Book III of *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser presents chastity as a particular realisation of the potentialities of human sexuality. [...] Spenser's was a more energetic conception than the one we indicate today by the word 'chastity', which usually means either abstinence from sexual intercourse or unswerving marital fidelity.²²

Brill's assertion implies that the sixteenth-century understanding of chastity was substantially different from modern definitions, but fails to articulate what this earlier concept of chastity might be, or whether what he terms Spenser's 'more energetic' chastity differs from the understanding of that of his contemporaries. Brill also makes the peculiar assertion that Florimell cannot make a claim to chastity because she has merely

²¹ Cf. King: 'Louis Montrose, 315, proposes that the presence of a virgin-knot in the *Armada Portrait* (ca. 1588) "suggests a causal relationship between her sanctified chastity and the providential destruction of the Spanish Catholic invaders" without exploring the alternative possibility that this jeweled bow is no more than a straightforward symbol of the kind that appears throughout Elizabeth's pre- and post-Armada portraiture. His daring view is based upon an analogy to his interpretation of Henry VIII's codpiece in the Holbein cartoon of *Henry VIII with Henry VII*, which argues for the presence of political symbolism in "the king's phallic self-assertion" (312-14). Here again, Montrose neglects the alternative possibility that this appendage is no more than an item of conventional attire. Codpieces appear with some frequency in portraits of Renaissance royalty, nobility, and commoners.' John N. King, 'Queene Elizabeth I: Representations of the Virgin Queen', *Renaissance Quarterly*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (Spring, 1990), 30-74, (p. 59n. 66). Cf. Louis Montrose 'The Elizabethan Subject and the Spenserian Text', *Literary Theory/Renaissance Texts*, eds. Patricia Parker and David Quint (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), pp. 303-40.

²² Lesley W. Brill, 'Chastity as Ideal Sexuality in the Third Book of *The Faerie Queene*', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 11, No. 1, *The English Renaissance* (Winter, 1971), 15-26, (p. 15).

avoided seduction. Spenser, he argues, ‘discredits the idea that chastity is a negative virtue; that it involves no more than a steadfast refusal to be seduced’.²³ Brill does not seem to recognise that Spenser interrogates various types of chastity in Book III of *The Faerie Queene*. It cannot be concluded, then, as Brill does, that Florimell is unchaste ‘[i]n Spenser’s terms’, not least because Spenser’s ‘terms’ are not easy to define.²⁴

Notably, none of the above studies considers the importance of the religious significance of virginity. Such an absence is a serious deficiency. However, a neglect of theological ideas in the study of English literature seems to have been a long-standing problem, as Virgil K. Whitaker noted in 1952:

Theology is a subject which the student of English literature is likely to view from afar, with indifference if not actual hostility. Yet no subject was better known, at least in its fundamentals, to Elizabethan writers.²⁵

The theological back-drop of Book I of *The Faerie Queene*, with its more obvious concern with religious allegory and apocalyptic influences, has, of course, been widely studied.²⁶ Some recent studies have looked at moments of iconoclasm, such as Guyon’s destruction of the Bower of Bliss in Book II, or other episodes in *The Faerie Queene* in

²³ Brill, ‘Chastity as Ideal Sexuality’, p. 25.

²⁴ Cf. Brill: ‘In Spenser’s terms Florimell is unchaste. She is as untouched by the sacred sexual fires of Britomart as she is by Busyrane’s demonism. If she preserves her maidenhead for Marinell [...] it is largely because of the ludicrous incompetence of her assailants.’ Brill, ‘Chastity as Ideal Sexuality’, p. 25.

²⁵ Virgil K. Whitaker, ‘The Theological Structure of the *Faerie Queene*’, *ELH*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Sep., 1952), 151-164, (pp. 151). He continues: ‘In petty school they learned to read from a primer that consisted merely of selections from the Book of Common Prayer, and they memorized the Catechism from the prayer book as well as sentences from the Scriptures. In grammar school they studied the same catechism in Latin and Greek versions and also, before 1570, the elaborate Latin catechisms of Calvin or Erasmus. After 1570 they mastered the catechism of Alexander Nowell, which had appended to it an elaborate glossary that indicates and demands an advanced knowledge of theological concepts. They seem also to have been questioned on the Thirty-Nine Articles. For all but the incorrigibly irreligious, therefore, moral problems inevitably involved theological problems.’ Whitaker, ‘The Theological Structure of the *Faerie Queene*’, pp. 151-2.

²⁶ Cf. Lewis: ‘Innumerable details come from the Bible, and specifically from those books of the Bible which have meant much to Protestantism – the Pauline epistles and the Revelation.’ Lewis, *The Allegory of Love*, p. 311.

which art is destroyed.²⁷ Yet few critics seem to associate Book III with any engagement with theological ideas, despite its title.²⁸ Chastity, it might appear, is no longer recognised to have any religious or spiritual significance in the Renaissance. An exception is Harold Weatherby's *Mirrors of Celestial Grace: Patristic Theology in Spenser's Allegory* which primarily argues for a patristic influence on Spenser in Books I and II. John N. King's assessment of Weatherby's study, however, is less than complimentary.²⁹ Although Weatherby's argument for the direct influence of more obscure patristic writings and the Greek liturgy on *The Faerie Queene* is not generally convincing, he does provide some interesting observations and, in his conclusion, he recognises some of the religious complexities which trouble the third book of *The Faerie Queene*.³⁰ It is those

²⁷ Cf. Greenblatt: 'If the totality of the destruction, the calculated absence of "remorse or drawing back", links this episode to the colonial policy of Lord Grey which Spenser undertook to defend, the language of the stanza recalls yet another government policy, our third "restoration" of the narrative: the destruction of Catholic Church furnishings. [...] There is about the Bower of Bliss the taint of a graven image designed to appeal to the sensual as opposed to the spiritual nature, to turn the wonder and admiration of men away from the mystery of divine love. [...] It is not surprising, then, to find a close parallel between the evils of the Bower and the evils attributed to the misuse of religious images. [...] Statues of the Virgin were dismembered by unruly crowds, frescoes were whitewashed over and carvings in "Lady Chapels" were smashed in order to free men from thralldom to what an Elizabethan lawyer calls, in describing the pope, "the witch of the world".' Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1984 [1980]), pp. 188-9.

²⁸ Cf. Davis: 'Christian theology contributes nothing to the allegory apart from the legend of holiness.' B. E. C. Davis, *Edmund Spenser: A Critical Study* (New York: Russell and Russell, inc., 1962), p. 66.

²⁹ Cf. King: 'Although Harold Weatherby's *Mirrors of Celestial Grace: Patristic Thought in Spenser's Allegory* (1994) bears some affinity to Roman Catholic readings of Spenserian texts, he has constructed an arcane interpretative model without precedent in existing scholarship. He argues that *The Faerie Queene* is indebted not to the theology of St Augustine, but to other Greek and Latin patristic authorities and to the Greek Orthodox liturgy. His highly debatable argument throws new light on old theological cruxes concerning Spenser's unorthodox choice of the legend of St George as a model for Book I and the Red Cross Knight's late baptism during the climactic battle with the Dragon (I.xi).' John N. King, 'Religion', in *A Critical Companion to Spenser Studies*, ed. Bart van Es (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 58-75, (pp. 72-3).

³⁰ Cf. Weatherby: 'The issue at stake is *eros* and Spenser's attitude towards it. His ostensible thesis is clear: That, since chastity is nubile, *eros*, when properly directed, is an ennobling emotion, a "most sacred fire" (III.iii.i), a "kindly flame", and the root of "honor and all vertue" (IV.Proem.2). Most critics take Spenser at his word, concentrate on his celebration of married chastity, and perhaps underestimate the complexity of the poem. [...] Though sexual love properly directed (which is to say, to marriage), may be all the good things which Spenser (and the critics) say it is, there are in fact very few instances of proper direction and many of improper. Indeed for the author of the House of Busirane and the Cave of Lust to call *eros* a "kindly flame" (in either sense of the adjective) approaches irony. [...] We find many more instances of

complexities rooted in the patristic tradition that Renaissance scholars and critics have neglected and which this thesis aims to explore.

ii. Virginité and Medieval Literary Studies

In the absence of an examination of religious virginité in Renaissance studies of post-Reformation texts, it would seem logical to look to studies of pre-Reformation texts that deal with virginité, and particularly to the flowering of the virginité cult in the Middle Ages for such a discussion. However, the neglect of a theological understanding of virginité is also evident in medieval scholarship. In 1933, J. M. Campbell drew attention to the failure of medieval literary scholarship in the late-Victorian and early twentieth century to engage with patristic material.³¹ In his essay on the influence of the Church Fathers on the medieval period, he sought to demonstrate the enormous debt that the medieval world owed to patristic theologians, not only in terms of religious doctrine, but in the very fabric of their culture. Campbell thought that the failure of critics to engage with patristic texts was partly due to a tendency to focus on the Germanic influences on English literature, rather than on the classical influences,³² but perhaps even more because of the

all but universal assumption, stretching from Renaissance days until near our own, that the Fathers were of no concern of secular scholarship; that they were apart from those currents and movements whereby civilization could be interpreted, that undoubtedly they had their title to the attention of learned men, but only of those savants whose interests were apologetic and theological.³³

destructive passions than of happy marriages.’ Harold L. Weatherby, *Mirrors of Celestial Grace: Patristic Theology in Spenser’s Allegory* (Toronto and London: University of Toronto Press, 1994), pp. 193-4.

³¹ Cf. Campbell: ‘That the Fathers of the Church, at least the Latin Fathers, deserve systematic attention from students of the literature of the mediaeval England – Old English, Middle English, Anglo-Latin, Anglo-Norman – has not become, I believe, a generally fruitful conviction of scholarship.’ J. M. Campbell, ‘Patristic Studies and the Literature of Mediaeval England’, *Speculum*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (Oct., 1933), 465-478, (p. 465).

³² Cf. Campbell, ‘Patristic Studies’, p. 469.

³³ Campbell, ‘Patristic Studies’, p. 469.

In the case of virginity studies in literary criticism, this failure to consult patristic material when considering influences on medieval literature does not appear to have changed, even though virginity is a fundamentally religious ideal. The medieval tradition of virginity is built on scriptural and patristic foundations, and therefore all discussions of virginity should include an awareness of the corpus of religious writings which underpin the whole tradition. There is an acknowledgement among critics of virginity studies that virginity owes much of its development to patristic writers,³⁴ but, despite the concession that virginity is underpinned by a religious discourse, there is still a critical reluctance to explore its theological significance.

No literary study to date, in fact, seems to be conversant with the body of patristic literature on virginity. In part, this appears to stem from a belief that previous scholarship has dealt effectively with the foundational writings of the Church Fathers. Kathleen Coyne Kelly, for instance, declares:

In these introductory remarks, it is hardly possible to survey the entire history of virginity that underpins and runs through late medieval texts. Nor is it necessary to do so, given the many excellent studies that examine virginity in its specific historical contexts, particularly with respect to the cult of Mary, the virgin *par excellence* in the writings of the Church Fathers and in later medieval commentaries.³⁵

³⁴ In *Medieval Virginites* Anke Bernau, Ruth Evans and Sarah Salih hail virginity as ‘one of the great inventions of medieval Christian culture’. Anke Bernau, Ruth Evans and Sarah Salih, ‘Introduction’ to *Medieval Virginites*, ed. Anke Bernau, Ruth Evans and Sarah Salih (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), pp. 1-13, (p. 3). Coyne Kelly acknowledges the religious origins of the ideal of virginity: ‘The Bible provides the spiritual and theological underpinnings for defining chastity, and the writings of the Church Fathers provide the detailed exposition. The earliest patristic writers follow Paul in his insistence on the necessity of both bodily and spiritual integrity’. However, she then says, ‘Yet the writings of Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine, and others do not furnish us with an ideologically uniform, internally consistent body of thought on the subject of virginity.’ Kathleen Coyne Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 3. Although the ideal of virginity is developmental, like all doctrine, all the orthodox Church Fathers who write on it agree on its biblical authorisation. It is ideologically consistent; the differences in the treatises of Jerome and Augustine tend to be on the subject of marriage, rather than the ideological positioning of virginity.

³⁵ Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages*, p. 2.

Kelly's assertion that it is not possible to discuss the full history of virginity, and, second, that there is no need to do so, is not untypical. Her statement reflects the general unwillingness of critics to engage with the religious importance of virginity, and their fragmentary engagement with patristic material.³⁶ A case in point is the second chapter of Anke Bernau's *Virgins: A Cultural History*, which ostensibly 'traces the most profound influence on ideas of virginity over the past eight hundred years: Christianity'.³⁷ The chapter, however, only sketchily discusses the patristic roots of virginity; she notes that 'Medieval Catholicism, drawing on the writings of Church Fathers such as Jerome and Ambrose, saw virginity as the most exalted of all states of being, especially for women'.³⁸ This short sentence constitutes the whole discussion of the patristic influence on virginity, apart from a short paragraph on Tertullian which follows the interpretation of Sarah Salih,³⁹ and a brief, but historically inaccurate, recognition of the patristic origins of the *sponsa Christi* motif.⁴⁰ Further discussion of Christianity is even more generalised and problematic, such as the comment that

Catholic thinkers pointed out that the two main figures of worship in Christianity – Christ and the Blessed Virgin Mary – were virgins, and they were extolled as ideals which believers should aspire to.⁴¹

³⁶ Joyce Salisbury states that 'Historians and theologians have written volumes on virginity in the early centuries of Christianity'. Joyce E. Salisbury, *Church Fathers, Independent Virgins*, (London and New York: Verso, 1992), p. 26. Salisbury's citation of these 'volumes written on virginity', however, turns out to be only Bugge's essay, *Virginitas*, which she refers to as the 'best work' on the history and theology of virginity. Kelly's allusion to the 'many excellent studies that examine virginity' (Kelly, *Performing Virginity*, p. 2.) which eradicates the need of further study proves to be just a reference to Bugge's *Virginitas*, Salisbury's *Independent Virgins*, *Church Fathers* and Peter Brown's *The Body and Society*.

³⁷ Anke Bernau, *Virgins: A Cultural History* (London: Granta, 2007), p. xiii. Bernau seems to be unaware that Christianity has been a profound influence on virginity for much longer than 'the past eight hundred years'.

³⁸ Bernau, *Virgins: A Cultural History*, p. 31.

³⁹ Cf. Bernau, *Virgins: A Cultural History*, p. 36; pp. 43-44. For Salih's discussion, see pp. 24-6 below.

⁴⁰ Cf. Bernau: 'The idea of the soul in general and of the female virgin in particular as a bride of Christ has a long history in Western Christianity, beginning around the fourth century AD, and is invoked by writers such as Augustine, Ambrose and Tertullian.' Bernau, *Virgins: A Cultural History*, p. 44.

⁴¹ Bernau, *Virgins: A Cultural History*, p. 39.

Such a statement exposes a fundamental deficiency in the understanding of Christian theology as it fails to distinguish between the worship (*latría*) which is due to God alone, and the veneration which is shown to His mother (*hyperdulia*). At no point in orthodox Christianity was Mary regarded as a ‘figure of worship’.

There are, as one might expect, a few exceptions to the tendency to ignore the central role of the Church Fathers in articulating the virginity tradition. These, however, tend not to give a balanced critique of patristic material. R. Howard Bloch, in his essay ‘Chaucer’s Maiden Head: “The Physician’s Tale” and the Poetics of Virginity’, for instance, makes only a reductive survey of patristic texts – confined to a maximum of five pages – and comes to some curious conclusions: that the link between seeing and desire later found in courtly love literature was invented in the discourse of the Church Fathers;⁴² that the Fathers make no distinction between desire and being desired and blame the woman on all accounts;⁴³ that ‘[a]lmost to a man they [...] are obsessed by public baths’;⁴⁴ and that ‘a certain inescapable logic of virginity [...] leads syllogistically

⁴² Cf. Bloch: ‘There is in the founding thinking of the problem of desire in the first four centuries of the Christian era a profound link, which will surface occulted in the twelfth century to dominate the Western love tradition, between the distortion implicit in the gaze and erotic desire.’ R. Howard Bloch, ‘Chaucer’s Maiden Head: “The Physician’s Tale” and the Poetics of Virginity’, *Representations*, No. 28, *Special Issue: Essays in Memory of Joel Fineman* (Autumn, 1999), 113-134, (p. 117).

⁴³ Cf. Bloch: ‘According to the Patristic totalising scheme of desire, there can be no difference between the state of desiring and of being desired; a virgin is a woman who has never been desired by a man.’ Bloch, ‘Chaucer’s Maiden Head’, p. 116.

⁴⁴ Bloch, ‘Chaucer’s Maiden Head’, p. 117. In his book, Bloch also claims that, ‘One need only look at the titles of the essays of the early church fathers – Tertullian’s ‘On the Veiling of Virgins’, ‘On Exhortation to Chastity’; Ambrose’s ‘Concerning Virgins’; Augustine’s *On Holy Virginity*; Gregory of Nyssa’s *On Virginity*; Cyprian’s ‘The Dress of Virgins’; Novation’s ‘In Praise of Purity’; Chrysostom’s *On Virginity, Against Remarriage*; Methodius’ *Treatise on Chastity* – to realise what an obsession chastity was.’ R. Howard Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 93-4. In reality, however, the number of patristic writings written specifically on virginity, which amounts to roughly thirty treatises, is miniscule in proportion compared to the vast body of patristic literature. For example, the works collected in *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Latina* amounts to 227 volumes of material from the Latin Fathers of the Church, and *The Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca* amounts to 161 volumes of material by the Greek Fathers, a total of 388 volumes. A very rough estimate of the number of treatises contained in these volumes, based on a conservative estimate of 30 treatises per volume, would provide a total of 11,640 – less than 0.3% of

to the conclusion that the only good virgin – that is, the only true virgin – is a dead virgin'.⁴⁵ Bloch's references to patristic material take the form of short passages quoted out of context and so, more often than not, distort the primary material. His essay 'Medieval Misogyny', and his book of the same title, reveals why. In the essay he argues that

one of the assumptions governing our perception of the Middle Ages is the viral presence of antifeminism. [...] it dominates ecclesiastical writings, letters, sermons, theological tracts, discussions and compilations of canon law; scientific works, as part and parcel of biological, gynecological, and medical knowledge; and philosophy. The discourse of misogyny runs like a rich vein throughout the breadth of medieval literature.⁴⁶

Bloch's work simply serves to reinforce this impression of virulent misogyny in patristic writings, rather than providing a balanced discussion. He demonstrates no awareness that the various treatises on virginity, for example, were written at different time periods and in different parts of the world and, thus, were shaped by diverse cultural milieux. In some cases, tracts were written in reaction to a particular historical event. Nowhere does Bloch acknowledge that the Church Fathers were influenced by different schools of thought or by changes in the Church, especially the advancement of theology and the codification of doctrine. All, he claims, is merely a discourse of misogyny.

One other oft-cited critic who attempts to provide a history of virginity is John Bugge. As the title *Virginitas: An Essay in the History of a Medieval Ideal* suggests, the

patristic writings on virginity. Of course, this does not include incidental references to virginity. Elizabeth Abbot, in a popularist feminist *A History of Celibacy*, misreads Christian attitudes towards the body, mistakenly believing that the promotion of virginity stems from a disgust for the body, rather than from theological and scriptural inferences. She, like Bloch, describes Christianity as 'sex-negative, [and] celibacy-obsessed.' Elizabeth Abbot, *A History of Celibacy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Da Capo Press, 2001), p. 17.

⁴⁵ Bloch, 'Chaucer's Maiden Head', p. 120.

⁴⁶ R. Howard Bloch, 'Medieval Misogyny', *Representations*, No. 20, *Special Issue: Misogyny, Misandry, and Misanthropy* (Autumn, 1987), 1-24, (p. 1).

main focus of his essay is the medieval period, but he also looks to the Early Christian origins of virginity. He begins his journey through the history of virginity with Genesis:

To understand virginity one must start at the Beginning. It is not just the logical place to begin, it is the only place, for the belief in the perfective character of virginity is intertwined with the mysteries of the creation, man's primal life in a garden of innocence, and an original transgression.⁴⁷

Genesis may seem to be the obvious place to begin a discussion of virginity as it depicts the age of prelapsarian virginity. However, although an understanding of Genesis is important for understanding the virginal tradition, it is not where the narrative of Christian virginity begins and it is a common misapprehension that Genesis is the starting point of the virginal tradition.⁴⁸ Thus for example, like Bugge, Bloch makes a generalised statement about the role of Eden with regard to virginity:

For the early church fathers virginity always carries a reference to Adam and Eve before the fall, a time when, it was assumed, because of the absence of sexuality the sexes were equal.⁴⁹

This is misleading. Not all early Church Fathers speak of virginity in connection with Adam and Eve. The patristic treatises which deal exclusively with virginity do not consider the place of the Edenic narrative in the tradition until the fourth century, and it

⁴⁷ John Bugge, *Virginitas: An Essay in the History of a Medieval Ideal* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975), p. 5.

⁴⁸ If this were the case, then it would stand to reason that Judaism should also regard virginity as a religious ideal, because Genesis also provides the narrative origin for them, too, in the Torah which is the same as the Christian Pentateuch. This is not the case. In fact, Judaism has no tradition of virginity; on the contrary, the Jews value motherhood and childbearing, not perpetual celibacy. The obvious exceptions to this rule are the Essenes, who are believed to be the authors of the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the *θεραπευταί* (*Therapeutae*), a Jewish sect whom Philo discusses (See Philo, *De Vita Contemplativa (On the Contemplative Life, or Suppliants)*, in *The Works of Philo*, trans. C. D. Yonge (USA: Hendrickson, 2006), pp. 698-706, (p. 698). It should also be remembered that in Genesis, God gives His first command to mankind, which is to 'increase and multiply', an idea which does not tally with an assertion that Genesis is an obvious starting point for virginity. Indeed, throughout the Old Testament barrenness was seen as a reproach and was only valuable in the sense that the removal of sterility was evidence of divine intervention. Cf. Genesis 17: 16; Genesis 20: 17-18; Genesis 25: 21; Genesis 30: 1; Genesis 30: 22; IV Kings 4: 14-17. Childbirth is referred to as a blessing. Cf. Ruth 4: 11; I Kings 1: 19-20. Barrenness as divine punishment for illicit sexual relations in Leviticus: Leviticus 20: 21. The punishment for David's illicit relations with Bathsheba is the death of their son (II Kings 12: 18).

⁴⁹ Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love*, p. 97.

cannot, therefore, be seen as the motivating principle for the endorsement of virginity.⁵⁰

In the earliest patristic writings, the authorisation for virginity is firmly located in the New Testament and in the person of Christ; He alone brings the virtue of virginity into the world at His nativity and sanctifies it in His own being. Alongside the mistaken belief that Eden is the starting point for the tradition of virginity is the belief that Mary is the originator of the tradition. Bloch's assertion is once more typical: 'the notion of virginity is all bound up in doctrinal reference to Mary, the virgin, who redeems Eve.'⁵¹ The relationship between Mariology and the growth of the ascetic tradition is complex. Mary does indeed have an important place in the tradition but again she does not enter it until the fourth century, which was the great Mariological age and also saw a massive increase in consecrated virginity. Initially, however, the concept of virginity and, indeed, Mary's own virginity were more important for the bearing they had on Christology.⁵²

Not only does Bugge, like Bloch, misread the scriptural starting point for the virginal tradition, but he also deliberately perpetuates misinformation about the

⁵⁰ The fourth-century interest in ascetic interpretations of the fall in virginity treatises may be due to an increase in Genesis exegesis more generally. Clark notes that there is a notable shift in Ambrose's exegesis on Genesis in terms of ascetic readings: 'Nor does Ambrose exploit the themes of Genesis 1-3 in his early ascetic writings. In three works dating to 376-377 (*De Viduis*, *De Virginibus*, and *De Virginitate*), there is little reference to Genesis. Only in *De Institutione Virginis*, composed at Eastertime 393, does Ambrose comment in detail on such verse as "It is not good for a man to be alone" (Genesis 2: 18). In a surprising move, he argues here that in their commission of sin, Eve is more easily excused than Adam, and that even her penalty (pain in childbearing) has the recompense of salvation, as we learn from I Timothy 2:15.' Elizabeth A. Clark, 'Heresy, Asceticism, Adam, and Eve: Interpretations of Genesis 1-3 in the Later Latin Fathers', *Ascetic Piety and Women's Faith: Essays on Late Ancient Christianity* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1986), pp. 353-385, (pp. 356-7).

⁵¹ Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love*, p. 97.

⁵² Cf. Cameron: 'It was natural, too, that the developed articulation of Christian discourse on celibacy and virginity should have reached its height (though the ideas had been present long before) together with the fourth and fifth-century preoccupation with Christology. Its culmination, in a logical sense, came with the Council of Ephesus in AD 431 which recognised the status of Jesus' mother, Mary, as the mother of God, that is, which settled the orthodox doctrine of the Incarnation, for which Mary's virginal status and miraculous delivery were prerequisites. It was also entirely predictable that it was exactly now – not earlier – that the Virgin Mary began to acquire the beginnings of a cult in her own right.' Averil Cameron, 'Virginity as Metaphor: Women and the Rhetoric of Early Christianity' in *History as Text: The Writing of Ancient History* ed. Averil Cameron (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd: 1989) pp. 181-205, (pp. 182-3).

theological origin of virginity when he suggests that its beginnings are to be found in heretical gnostic theology. This blurring of the boundaries between orthodoxy and heterodoxy appears to be politically motivated. Bugge self-consciously tries to collapse the difference between the two by using the confusing term ‘Christian gnosis’.⁵³

The choice of terms is purposive; it is meant to suggest conspicuous similarities between ‘Christian gnosis’ and heterodox or pagan gnosticism, the most fundamental of which is a radical metaphysical and anthropological dualism in which the spiritual is practically equated with good and matter with evil.⁵⁴

Although Bugge disavows the intention of suggesting that there is no difference between heterodoxy and orthodoxy, he cites heterodox sources alongside orthodox sources and credits them both indiscriminately and unsystematically. There are, too, other worries about Bugge’s narrative. In his essay, Bugge excuses his lack of thoroughness by acknowledging the enormity of the task of investigating the theological aspects of virginity:

An exhaustive investigation of the theological ideal would require massive documentation; with no claim to such thoroughness this attempt may perhaps be pardoned for trusting to a minimum of footnoting, and that of the exemplary, rather than the statistically conclusive sort.⁵⁵

By ‘exemplary’ Bugge appears to mean selective examples to suit his own argument.

Nevertheless, even though Bugge has been criticised for his unscholarly methods,⁵⁶ and he himself disavows a claim to thoroughness in his analysis, he still remains one of the

⁵³ Cf. Wittig: ‘If the paucity of substantial documentation from primary sources is frequently an obstacle to accepting the book’s argument, even when it appears – always in translation or paraphrase – it often fails to substantiate the “gnostic” thesis clearly.’ Joseph S. Wittig, ‘Review of *Virginitas: An Essay in the History of a Medieval Ideal* by John Bugge’, *Speculum*, Vol. 52, No. 4 (Oct., 1977), 938-941, (p. 939).

⁵⁴ Bugge, *Virginitas*, p. 7.

⁵⁵ Bugge, *Virginitas*, p. vii.

⁵⁶ Wittig’s review is better informed and more convincing than the essay it is reviewing: ‘The general terms in which [the argument] is often presented, the sweeping statements, the manner in which the author manipulates and interprets such texts as he does quote, all urge the reader to approach its conclusions sceptically. [...] Sweeping generalizations are frequent. For instance, in assessing the early church’s attitude towards marriage (pp. 67-75) and in claiming that marriage gained “respectability” only in the West (p. 77), the author seems undisturbed that his references are largely to heterodoxies.’ Wittig, ‘Review of *Virginitas*’, p. 939.

only sources for a history of virginity and so continues to influence literary scholars by default.⁵⁷

Apart from Bloch and Bugge, few other medieval critics who study virginity in literature address the role of the Church Fathers in the tradition of virginity. If they do so, they tend to demonstrate no more than a passing acquaintance with the Fathers, and this is generally confined to the inflammatory comments of more controversial Fathers. In a review of Sarah Salih's *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England*, for example, Thomas J. Heffernan notes the weakness of Salih's treatment of patristic material:

Chapter 2 is the weakest since this chapter presents the foundations of medieval theorising on virginity, particularly that of the Fathers, too briefly and with little discussion of the important tradition of the Greek Church. There is no mention of Irenaeus of Lyons or of Athanasius of Alexandria, both of whom restricted virginity to biological chastity. There is but one mention of Ambrose, who wrote at least six treatises on virginity and whose 'On Virgins' (c. 377) is his longest ascetical treatise, and of Gregory of Nyssa and John Chrysostom. I found Salih's analysis of Tertullian's 'On the Veiling of Virgins' (c. 206-213) summary and reductive.⁵⁸

Salih's 'summary and reductive' reading of Tertullian's treatise forms the basis for her thesis where her misreading leads her to propose that virginity is a third gender. Her treatment of Tertullian's tract is, unfortunately, typical of the approach adopted by critics of virginity studies.

A fundamental cause of the disregarding of patristic sources in medieval and other studies is the shift in methodological ideology. Increasingly, scholarship reflects the secular concerns of a twenty-first century society to the detriment of texts steeped in a religious discourse. In discussing methodological approaches in the introduction to a

⁵⁷ Cf. Salisbury: 'John Bugge, in his excellent analysis of the tradition of virginity, stressed the importance of the Gnostic tradition, seeing in it the "soul of monasticism", which equated 'virginity with the ontological state of prelapsarian human nature'. Salisbury, p. 3. Cf. Bugge, p. 30.

⁵⁸ Thomas J. Heffernan, 'Review of *Versions of Virginity in Later Medieval England* by Sarah Salih', *Speculum*, Vol. 78, No. 4 (Oct., 2003), 1388-1390, (p. 1389).

collection of essays, *Gender and Holiness: Men, women and saints in late medieval Europe*, for example, Samantha J. E. Riches and Sarah Salih state that they ‘are aware of the imperative not to accept orthodoxy on its own terms’.⁵⁹ This critical perspective reflects the same undermining of orthodoxy seen in Bugge’s essay and points to an implicit and sometimes explicit hostility to an orthodox understanding of virginity. In turn, this leads not only to anachronistic readings of medieval virginity, but also to a misrepresentation of the whole tradition which is very much rooted in the development of Catholic theology.⁶⁰ This hostility is evident in the way that studies on virginity often end, paradoxically, with a moral statement emphasising the cultural strangeness of religious virginity and its seeming irrelevance to the modern world.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Samantha J. E. Riches and Sarah Salih, ‘Introduction’ to *Gender and Holiness: Men, women and saints in late medieval Europe*, eds. Samantha J. E. Riches and Sarah Salih (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 1-8, (p. 5). Robert Mills accepts ‘Sarah Beckwith’s invitation [to] see religion as an “insistently this-worldly activity, a set of structuring practices and processes in which human relationships, sexual, social, symbolic, are invested”’. He says: ‘It is imperative that we recognise the ways in which Christ’s body was a fundamentally ambivalent symbol, invested with both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic significance. We need, as she puts it, “terms of reference beyond the theological”’. Robert Mills, ‘Ecce homo’, in *Gender and Holiness: Men, women and saints in late medieval Europe*, eds. Samantha J. E. Riches and Sarah Salih (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 152-173, (p.164). Mills quotes Sarah Beckwith, *Christ’s body: Identity, Culture and Society in Late Medieval Writings* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 18; p. 2.

⁶⁰ The profane is prioritised over the sacred as Robert Mills reads the body of the naked Christ in queer terms. He cites criticisms by reformers against iconography, which allege the danger of erotic responses to Christ’s form on the cross. However, Mills fails to recognise that iconoclastic propaganda is not necessarily a reliable indicator of the existence of such readings as their criticism was calculated to elicit a violent response against iconography. The revolting nature of the claims was calculated to produce the desired response against the continued use of icons in devotion. Cf. Mills, ‘Ecce Homo’, p. 163.

⁶¹ Salih’s conclusion takes a strange moral tone to assess the relevance, or, as she is more inclined to say, the irrelevance of virginity for modern society: ‘I doubt whether any of this has any direct relevance to the modern world. Virginity is regaining credibility as a lifestyle, but this is a different virginity from the medieval versions, one with personal, but not cosmic, benefits. Wonderful though the medieval ideal is, I cannot regret its passing; it was the product of a gender system which whatever its theoretical fluidity would be experienced by a modern person as intolerably constraining. Perhaps I have proved only what history always proves; that things were different once, and therefore that they will be again.’ Sarah Salih, *Versions of Virginity* (Cambridge: D S Brewer, 2001), p. 244. Peter Brown likewise ends on a similar note: ‘To modern persons, whatever their religious beliefs, the Early Christian themes of sexual renunciation, of continence, celibacy, and the virgin life have come to carry with them icy overtones. The very fact that modern Europe and America grew out of the Christian world that replaced the Roman Empire in the Middle Ages has ensured that, even today, these notions still crowd in upon us, as pale, forbidding presences. Historians must bring to them their due measure of warm, red blood. By studying their precise social and religious context, the scholar can give back to these ideas a little of the human weight that they

iii. Feminist Virginitude Studies

As one might expect, virginitude studies, originating as it does from a feminist tradition,⁶² has a very strong feminist bias. Like Renaissance studies of virginitude, virginitude studies tends to be concerned with issues of gender and misogyny. Joyce Salisbury notes also a critical tendency towards ‘an insensitive and too easy rejection of the early Fathers as misogynist, without a consideration of the opinions and fears that shaped their proclamations’.⁶³ Much feminist criticism focuses on what it sees as the ‘opinions and fears’ of the Church Fathers, which, it argues, are the root of their misogyny. Salisbury herself, somewhat paradoxically, reads the attitudes of the fathers as prompted by misogynistic concerns and refers to their discourse of virginitude as ‘[t]he theory which argued for control of holy women’.⁶⁴ Her thesis claims that there are two opposing discourses of virginitude: that of the Church Fathers and that of the virgins themselves, whom we meet in the virginal lives. She claims that this latter, alternative discourse of virginitude empowers and frees women and that it does so at the expense of the patristic narrative. However, she notes briefly that most of the virgins whom she discusses are fictional,⁶⁵ but dismisses any concerns that their historical inauthenticity might invalidate the more authentic female voice of virginitude which she purports to recover:

once carried in their own time. When such an offering is made, the chill shades may speak to us again, and perhaps more gently than we had thought they might, in the strange tongue of a long-lost Christianity. Whether they will say anything of help or comfort for our own times the readers of this book must decide for themselves.’ Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), pp. 446-7.

⁶² Cf. Salih, Bernau and Evans: ‘Virginitude studies developed from women’s studies, and has often had a strong feminist commitment.’ Salih, Bernau and Evans, ‘Introduction’ to *Medieval Virginitudes*, p. 4.

⁶³ Joyce E. Salisbury, *Church Fathers, Independent Virgins* (London and New York: Verso, 1992), p. 26.

⁶⁴ Salisbury, *Church Fathers, Independent Virgins*, pp. 5-6.

⁶⁵ Cf. Salisbury: ‘The stories presented here represent a range of historical accuracy. Some of the Lives, like those of Egeria, Melania, and perhaps Pelagia, are probably fairly accurate, describing actions of real women in their search for spirituality. The Life of Helia, on the other hand, is probably a purely fictional account composed to make a point about virginitude. Between these two extremes lie degrees of historical precision. The Life of Constantina is a fictional life attributed to a historical person, while the Life of Mary

What is more significant than the historical reality of these women, therefore, is the fact that their legends existed, were read, were popular, and provided models for the faithful to emulate.⁶⁶

Salisbury's logic seems odd: if she rejects patristic writings as an inauthentic articulation of virginity, fictional saints' lives, which may well have been written by men, hardly provide an authentic or different narrative. In addition, her understanding that saints' lives offer an alternative discourse to that of the Church Fathers relies on reading the Fathers as primarily misogynistic. The Fathers, she says,

had a profound fear of sexuality that might draw them from spirituality, and an intense fear of women, in whom they thought sexuality resided. Therefore they thought to save both men and women from temptation by controlling women who might wish to be spiritual by having them live enclosed, silent and obedient lives.⁶⁷

Salisbury's reading, then, does not differ from those whom she had previously criticised for offering 'insensitive' readings of the Church Fathers.

In contrast to Salisbury's argument that saints' lives provide a proto-feminist account of virginity, medieval virgin-martyr legends are often seen to be particularly oppressive for women. Karen A. Winstead sums up the common feminist critical approaches to this form of hagiography:

Many feminists have argued that virgin martyr legends participate in a system of myths that has sustained women's subjugation through the ages. An extreme expression of the argument goes something like this: virgin martyr legends insist that the only good woman is a chaste woman; a woman's chastity is guaranteed only by her death; therefore, the only good woman is a dead woman.⁶⁸

of Egypt, is a highly miraculous account which draws on several previous stories. [...] The last Life, Castissima's may come closest to the example of Mary of Egypt, a fictional life that was a prototype of the lives of some real ascetic women.' Salisbury, *Church Fathers, Independent Virgins*, p. 58.

⁶⁶ Salisbury, *Church Fathers, Independent Virgins*, p. 58.

⁶⁷ Salisbury, *Church Fathers, Independent Virgins*, p. 37.

⁶⁸ Karen A. Winstead, 'Introduction' to *Chaste Passions: Medieval English Virgin Martyr Legends*, ed. and trans. Karen A. Winstead (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2000), pp. 1-8, (pp. 2-3). Cf. Bloch: 'A certain inescapable logic of virginity, most evident in medieval hagiography, leads syllogistically to the conclusion that the only real virgin – that is, the only true virgin – is a dead virgin.' Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love*, p. 108.

Maud Burnett McInerney, for example, notes that '[i]t has been argued too that the image of the virgin martyr [...] functions as a projection of the most brutal kind of rape fantasy'.⁶⁹ McInerney herself identifies a conflicting discourse in the rhetoric of virginity, which 'claim[s] freedoms of various sorts for women in the name of virginity, and [...] den[ies] women such freedoms in the name of virginity'.⁷⁰ She sees this double narrative as misogynistic in origin:

This discourse of virginity seems to arise out of male anxiety, perhaps even envy, concerning the integrity of the female body, and manifests itself in strict repression of women by men with access to legal, religious, and social power.⁷¹

The assertion that the patristic narrative of virginity is essentially misogynistic and simply a weapon of female repression has thus become something of an accepted platitude.⁷² As a result, patristic texts are rarely examined from anything other than a hostile, late twentieth-century perspective and seldom seen as anything other than a thinly-veiled attempt to control female sexuality by fearful men. The religious and theological significance of virginity is forcibly muted and interpretations of virginity become increasingly divorced from knowledge of the texts that articulate its meaning.

iv. Performative Virginity

As well as a general hostility towards the Fathers and their writings, predominant critical perspectives show a readiness to offer new, often secular, versions of the nature of

⁶⁹ Maud Burnett McInerney, 'Rhetoric, Power, and Integrity in the Passion of the Virgin Martyr', in *Menacing Virgins: Representing Virginity in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, eds. Kathleen Coyne Kelly and Marina Leslie (Ontario and London: Associated University Press, 1999), pp. 50-70, (p. 70). McInerney directs the reader to Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, 'Saints' Lives and the Female Reader,' *FMLS* 27 (1991), pp. 315-16.

⁷⁰ Maud Burnett McInerney, *Eloquent Virgins from Thecla to Joan of Arc* (Hampshire: Macmillan Palgrave, 2003), p. 8

⁷¹ McInerney, *Eloquent Virgins*, p. 10-11.

⁷² Cf. Salisbury: 'the Latin Fathers did work out a theoretical position that would let them preserve the ideal of virginity and yet keep celibate women subservient.' Salisbury, *Church Fathers, Independent Virgins*, p. 5.

virginity. Several critics, including Sarah Salih, Kathleen Coyne Kelly,⁷³ Katherine J. Lewis,⁷⁴ Samantha J. E. Riches,⁷⁵ and Anke Bernau, following Judith Butler's *Performative Gender*, insist on the performative nature of virginity. Bernau, for instance, in a discussion of the *Ancrene Wisse*, argues for a linguistic construction of virginity created through the speech act of confession,⁷⁶ an idea which seems to owe a debt to Foucault.⁷⁷ However, it is difficult to be convinced that confession articulates virginity. Confession is a complex sacrament, which involves the articulation and, through this, the forgiveness of sins. Therefore, rather than the articulation of the pure inner self, confession is an acknowledgement of the pollution of the inner self. The sincere repentance and confession of sins, the absolution, administered by the priest through his office, and the act of penance together make up the sacrament; it is not simply a 'speech act'.⁷⁸ Confession is a necessary sacrament for both religious and lay people, and is

⁷³ Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Chastity Testing in the Middle Ages* (New York: Routledge 2000).

⁷⁴ Cf. Lewis: 'considering virginity as a set of signs that can be performed by a man who is not a virgin in order to lend him certain kinds of specialness and authority.' Katherine J. Lewis, 'Becoming a virgin king: Richard II and Edward the Confessor', in *Gender and Holiness: Men, women and saints in late medieval Europe*, eds. Samantha J. E. Riches and Sarah Salih (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 86-100, (p. 89).

⁷⁵ Cf. Riches: 'I am using ideas taken from medieval literary studies, where virginity has been shown to be a performative state.' Samantha J. E. Riches, 'Saint George as a male virgin martyr', in *Gender and Holiness: Men, women and saints in late medieval Europe*, eds. Samantha J. E. Riches and Sarah Salih (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 65-85, (p. 71).

⁷⁶ Cf. Bernau: 'Virginity is ultimately shown to be a primarily linguistic – even textual – identity, "known" through repeated speech acts that demonstrate and "make visible" an "inner" core. "Doing" virginity is shown in this text to open up spaces through "hyperbole, dissonance, internal confusion, and proliferation", which have the potential to displace "the very constructs by which they are mobilised".' Anke Bernau, 'Virginal effects: Text and identity in *Ancrene Wisse*', in *Gender and Holiness: Men, women and saints in late medieval Europe*, eds. Samantha J.E. Riches and Sarah Salih (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 36-48, (p. 44), quoting Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 31.

⁷⁷ Cf. Foucault: 'This scheme for transforming sex into discourse had been devised long before in an ascetic and monastic setting. [...] An imperative was established: Not only will you confess to acts contravening the law, but you will seek to transform your desire, your every desire, into discourse. [...] The Christian pastoral prescribed as a fundamental duty the talk of passing everything having to do with sex through the endless mill of speech.' Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge. The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1998 [1976]), p. 20-1.

⁷⁸ In the absence of the fourth volume of Foucault's *History of Sex*, which would have examined patristic development, Elizabeth Clark makes some observations based on Foucault's interviews and some of the

necessary for the reception of the Eucharist and for the remission of sins committed post-baptism. It cannot, however, restore lost virginity and is certainly not ‘done’ as Bernau claims.

Salih argues for the construction of virginity through performative acts rather than through speech acts. According to her reading, virginity occupies a proto-feminist position by its rejection of the heterosexual economy of marriage. By stepping out of normative gender, she claims, virginity can instead be regarded as a third gender.⁷⁹ Her assertion that virginity can be categorised in this way is meant to challenge the patristic understanding of virginity as the dissolution of sex. In order to justify her theoretical position, Salih provides a specious definition of what constitutes a ‘woman’, which neither accords with patristic nor with medieval notions:⁸⁰

If a medieval woman is a person subject to the curse of Eve [...], are virgins who avoid both heterosexuality and childbirth, necessarily included within the category of ‘woman’?⁸¹

conclusions of his previous volumes. With regard to self-examination, she notes that some of the material from late antiquity would have contradicted his theoretical position that sexual activity had become transformed into sexual discourse. Cf. Elizabeth A. Clark, ‘Foucault, The Fathers, and Sex’, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 56, No. 4 (Winter, 1988), 619-641, (p. 629).

⁷⁹ Cf. Salih: ‘Theoretically, in a period which acknowledges gender to be a social category, virginity can quite easily be described as a third gender, and occasionally is. This study explores both the potential of virginity to imply that virgins might be differently gendered, and the ways in which this potentially disruptive effect is contained, and virgins reclaimed for the category of women. Questions of subjectivity and self-formation thus arise’; ‘I will be assuming throughout this study that virginity is not a denial or rejection of sexuality, but itself a sexuality, by which I mean a culturally specific organisation of desires.’ Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, p. 2; and p. 244. Riches also follows Salih’s assertion: ‘We can, perhaps, think of virginity as a third gender, one that is marked out as separate from maleness and femaleness by an insistence of spiritual purity as well as physical chastity.’ Riches, ‘St George as a male virgin martyr’, p. 71.

⁸⁰ Jerome speaks of the loss of womanhood through virginity with the dissolution of sex, but this does not presuppose that women cease to be thought of as biologically women, or that they attain a separate category altogether. If anything, they are posited as being more masculine: ‘Observe what the happiness of that state must be in which even the distinction of sex is lost. The virgin is no longer called a woman.’ Saint Jerome, *Adversus Helvidium*, xxii, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers. Jerome: Letters and Select Works*, Vol. 6, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995), pp. 334-345, (p. 344). Although critics get much mileage out of the ‘manliness’ of virginity, it is not over-emphasised in virginity treatises and even Jerome does not dwell that much on it in this genre.

⁸¹ Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, p. 1.

Salih misunderstands what the ‘curse of Eve’ entails. At no point does the Bible or the Church claim that ‘heterosexuality and childbirth’ are a consequence of Eve’s punishment. Salih’s use of Genesis as the source of understanding what defines a woman is not supported by the biblical narrative at all, for as soon as the female is created (at which point she is also a virgin) she is called a ‘woman’: ‘haec vocabitur virago quoniam de viro sumpta est’ (Genesis 2: 23).⁸² Thus the biblical understanding of woman is not ‘a person subject to the curse of Eve’, but that which was taken from man. The Latin of the Vulgate, in the use of *virago*, expresses the etymological derivation from *vir* to echo the woman’s derivation from man which Augustine notes is found in the Hebrew.⁸³ In the biblical narrative, then, Eve was understood to be a ‘woman’ before she was subject to the curse of Eve. It is only after the fall that the woman is named: ‘et vocavit Adam nomen uxoris suae Hava eo quod mater esset cunctorum viventium’ (Genesis 3: 20).⁸⁴ Eve receives her personal name after the fall, and it is this that specifically refers to her childbearing capacity, not the term ‘woman’. However, at no point does the Bible suggest that giving birth is part of the ‘curse of Eve’.

Salih’s theoretical position seems to stem from her reading of Tertullian’s treatise *De virginibus velandis* (*On the Veiling of Virgins*), from which she has appropriated the

⁸² ‘she shall be called woman, because she was taken out of man’. *Biblia Sacra: Iuxta Vulgatam Versionem* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994). All Latin biblical references are to this Vulgate edition. English biblical quotations are from, *The Holy Bible, translated from the Latin Vulgate* (Douay-Rheims translation), revised by Bishop Richard Challoner, A.D. 1749-1752 (London: Baronius Press, 2005).

⁸³ Cf. Augustine: ‘This derivation and interpretation of the name is not apparent in the Latin language. For we do not find any similarity between the word ‘woman’ (*mulier*), and the word ‘man’ (*vir*). But in the Hebrew language the expression is said to sound just as if one said “she is called a *virago* because she was taken from her *vir*”. For *virago* or rather *virgo* has some similarity with the word, *vir*, while *mulier* does not, but this is caused by the difference of languages.’ Saint Augustine, *On Genesis: Two Books on Genesis Against the Manichees and On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis: An Unfinished Book*, II.xiii, trans. Roland J. Teske (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2001), p. 114.

⁸⁴ ‘And Adam called the name of his wife Eve: because she was the mother of all the living.’

objection cited by the virgins in North Africa (it was by no means a universal objection) to veiling. Their protest was based on the Pauline injunction for women to be veiled:⁸⁵

But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God. Every man praying or prophesying with his head covered, disgraceth his head. But every woman praying or prophesying with her head not covered, disgraceth her head: for it is all one as if she were shaven. (I Corinthians 11. 3-5)

According to Tertullian's treatise, because Saint Paul does not specifically mention the need for virgins to be veiled as well, the virgins of the Church claimed that veiling was only applicable to married women, not to virgins. Veiling was culturally associated with marriage, but Tertullian argues that the virgins have misunderstood Paul's injunction. There are two nuances of woman (which remain in modern usage): that of the generic, biological idea of woman, which includes married women and virgins, and the use of the term to denote a sexually aware woman, associated with notions of maturity and experience. Tertullian argues that Saint Paul is using the generic meaning of woman and therefore virgins are not exempt from the requirement for all women to veil. In order to illustrate this point, Tertullian, following Saint Paul's comments in I Corinthians, notes with some distaste that if this were not the case:

If 'the man is the head of the *woman*,' of course (he is) of the *virgin* too, from whom comes the *woman* who has married; unless the *virgin* is a third generic class, some monstrosity with a head of its own.⁸⁶

Salih utilises Tertullian's comment, alongside her own definition of 'woman', to conclude that virginity can be classed as a third gender. Salih also claims that Tertullian uses the *sponsa Christi* metaphor to rein in the subversive possibilities that virginity

⁸⁵ For Salih's rendering of Tertullian, see Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, pp. 24-5.

⁸⁶ Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, vii, p. 31.

poses in its ‘third gender’ guise.⁸⁷ Like Salih, Bernau sees virginity as potentially subversive for patristic writers. She also cites Tertullian’s treatise as evidence that

The nature of virginity and its position within the male-female binary framework posed a problem for theologians from the time of the early patristic writers throughout the Middle Ages. Tertullian argues in his treatise *On the Veiling of Virgins* (c. 206) that, just as women are veiled, so too is it necessary for virgins to be veiled, in order to be recognised as women, because, he emphasises, both are women and to say that the virgin is not a woman would be to make her a third generic class, some monstrosity with a head of its own’.⁸⁸

This is not what Tertullian’s treatise says at all. The virgins in Carthage who were not veiled were not trying to claim that they were not gendered women, nor were they trying to step outside the authority of the Church. Instead, the problem was the understanding of the meaning of ‘woman’. At some points in biblical passages, ‘woman’ is used in reference to a sexually experienced woman, as opposed to a virgin. This then led to a misunderstanding of Paul’s command for women to veil as it appeared to suggest that just sexually experienced women needed to veil. The idea of a ‘third generic class’ is precisely not what the women are claiming to be; they did not claim that they are not (generically) women, but that they were not (sexually experienced) women. Tertullian’s point is that the very idea of a third gender is monstrous, not that the virgins are.

Maud Burnett McInerney sees nothing behind Tertullian’s use of analogy of the Pauline hierarchy between men and women, which reflects the relationship between mankind and God, except male domination:

Behind Tertullian’s verbal pyrotechnics lies what seems to be a very real fear that claiming one special honour might lead to more. If virgins could reject the veil,

⁸⁷ Cf. Salih: ‘Tertullian uses the topos to describe marriage to Christ as being essentially like marriage on earth, and virgins like wives. It is thus used to return virgins to a heterosexual economy, muting virginity’s potential to produce a reappraisal of gender distinction.’ Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, p. 29.

⁸⁸ Bernau, ‘Virginal Effects’, pp. 36-7. She also argues that the *Ancrene Wisse* ‘expresses similar anxieties to Tertullian’s, and makes similar attempts to circumscribe the virgin *against* – but simultaneously *within* – the category of “woman”.’ Bernau, ‘Virginal effects’, p. 43.

arguing that they were not subject to one of the Pauline injunctions, there was nothing to prevent them rejecting the rest and claiming, in the name of virginity, a greater role in the Church.⁸⁹

There is certainly a sense of hierarchy in Paul's placing of men as the head of women, and Tertullian appeals to this hierarchy in order to clarify the sense of Paul's injunction. However, it does not follow that there is an implicit rejection of Church authority by the virgins who had refused to veil. The virgins were not challenging Paul. Indeed, they argued that they were following him to the letter as he did not state that virgins should veil. It is a question of interpretation, not rejection of authority. It is Tertullian, instead, who informs the virgins that their behaviour rejects Paul's authority, and also challenges a higher authority, for 'the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God' (I Corinthians 11: 3). If the virgins were rejecting Paul's injunction for women to veil, they were also, by implication, 'reject[ing] the rest', but this does not mean that they were then 'claiming, in the name of virginity, a greater role in the Church'. On the contrary, in denying the authority of Christ through Saint Paul, they would place themselves outside the pale of the Church. Tertullian's words do not demonstrate a fear of female autonomy, but rather a fear that the virgins of the Church are becoming heretical.

v. Monstrous Virginity

The reductive treatment of Tertullian's treatise has become the accepted norm in virginity studies. Indeed, critics get a lot of mileage out of Tertullian's 'monstrosity' comment, claiming that virginity has had a long tradition of being conceived of as monstrous. For example, Salih *et al.* argue that:

⁸⁹ McNerney, *Eloquent Virgins*, p. 34.

The virgin is constructed with reference to the monster: according to Tertullian, the virgin woman who evades masculine control is 'a third generic class, some monstrosity with a head of its own'.⁹⁰

Virginity was certainly a novelty in the early centuries of Christianity and as perpetual virginity was unique to Christianity there were some contemporary objections to it.⁹¹ To claim that it was generally seen as monstrous, however, is a difficult, if not impossible, assertion to maintain, especially with regard to the Middle Ages. In the collection of essays *Medieval Virginites*, Juliette Dor, however, seeks to demonstrate the existence of the 'monstrous virgin' by discussing the sheela-na-gig, which is a fantastic carving of a woman displaying enlarged genitalia.⁹² Using Freud to argue that the grotesque 'haunts the idealised virgin body as an integral part of its cultural meaning, and not as a thing apart',⁹³ she goes on to assert that:

In line with the anti-feminism of the twelfth-century Church, with its patristically sanctioned misogyny and its emphasis upon biblical texts that fulminated against women, they [i.e. the sheela-na-gigs] embody the temptations, dangers and deceptions of sensuality. They are versions, perhaps, of Freud's fear-inducing virgins.⁹⁴

Once more, we return to the ubiquitous critical assumption that patristic literature is merely misogynistic, without attempting to look at it in any detail. Significantly, Dor's Freudian focus seems to be at odds with the very idea of virginity:

⁹⁰ Salih, Bernau and Evans, 'Introduction' to *Medieval Virginites*, p. 6.

⁹¹ Even in the fourth century, Saint Jerome had to defend virginity against Jovinian, who said that the Church had invented 'dogma against nature': 'I have given enough and more than enough illustrations from the divine writings of Christian chastity and angelic virginity. But as I understand that our opponent in his commentaries summons us to the tribunal of worldly wisdom, and we are told that views of this kind are never accepted in the world and that our religion has invented a dogma against nature, I will quickly run through Greek and Roman and Foreign History, and will show that virginity ever took the lead of chastity.' Saint Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I.xli, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers. Jerome: Letters and Select Works*, Vol. 6, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995), pp. 346-416, (p. 379).

⁹² Cf. Salih, Bernau and Evans: 'Dor and Hughes examine further examples of monstrous virginity, the sheela-na-gigg and the mercurial Melusine.' Salih, Bernau and Evans, 'Introduction to *Medieval Virginites*', p. 6.

⁹³ Juliette Dor, 'The Sheela-na-Gig: An incongruous Sign of Sexual Purity?', in *Medieval Virginites*, eds. Anke Bernau, Ruth Evans and Sarah Salih (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), pp. 33-55, (p. 35).

⁹⁴ Dor, 'The Sheela-na-Gig: An incongruous Sign of Sexual Purity?', p. 35.

By pulling open their vaginas they show the object of the mythic fear that women might devour their partner's penis during sex, the dreadful *vagina dentata*. This may also be what Tertullian meant when he accused women of being the devil's gateway.⁹⁵

In defence of Tertullian, he is much more likely to assign the epithet of 'devil's gateway' to women because the devil gained access to Adam through Eve. He would not have been thinking of the *vagina dentata*; indeed, he does not mention such a thing in his writings. The highly sexual nature of the sheela-na-gig carvings means that it is incongruous, if not perverse, to read them as representative of virginity in any way. Dor justifies this anomaly partly by relying on Salih's reading of the virgins in the Katherine group:

Salih argues that in the Katherine group the lack of mention of the virgins' breasts serves to distinguish them from other women. While the sheela were definitely not asexual beings, they too lacked conspicuous breasts, and could simultaneously reflect old age and virginity.⁹⁶

This seems like chop logic. With or without breasts, the ostentatious display of enlarged genitalia appears to suggest coition rather than virginity.⁹⁷ Dor seems to be arguing that sexualised figures can be read as types of virginity, but by eliding the fundamental physical difference between the virgin and the sexual woman she renders virginity all but meaningless.

⁹⁵ Dor, 'The Sheela-na-Gig: An incongruous Sign of Sexual Purity?', p. 47. McNamara says of this quotation: 'Tertullian, like a Christian Juvenal, condemned women in one of his heterodox tracts as "the devil's gateway".' Jo Ann McNamara, *A New Song: Celibate Women in the First Three Christian Centuries* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1985), p. 101. Cf. Tertullian, *De cultu feminarum (On the Apparel of Women)*, 1. 1.

⁹⁶ Dor, 'The Sheela-na-Gig: An incongruous Sign of Sexual Purity?', p. 48.

⁹⁷ The medical treatise *The Trotula*, which Jonathan Hughes mentions in his essay discussed below, notes that 'The vagina of women sometimes swells in coitus' and recommends a sitz bath as a remedy. Medically, then, the sheela-na-gig would presumably suggest vigorous coitus resulting in swelling of the genitals, rather than virginity. *The Trotula: An English Translation of the Medieval Compendium of Women's Medicine*, 196, ed. and trans. Monica H. Green (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), p. 104.

Jonathan Hughes's essay, which is also categorised as exploring the 'monstrous virgin' in the same collection of essays, discusses virginity in light of alchemical and medical texts.⁹⁸ He argues that:

Alchemical and medical conceptions of sexuality were largely heteronormative, assuming reproduction to be the inevitable goal of sexual activity. The female principle was valued for its generative power, which could then be appropriated by the male alchemist. [...] there is no room for the virgin in this paradigm, and women perceived as post-sexual could be regarded with suspicion.⁹⁹

Despite his recognition of the innate incompatibility of virgins with alchemical and medical literature, Hughes makes the unlikely claim that these writings demonstrate that 'virginity may coexist with sexual pleasure'.¹⁰⁰ He goes on to discuss the content of two medical tracts which, he argues, recommend masturbatory practices for women, even virginal women, for health reasons.¹⁰¹ He also denies that there are any religious prohibitions of female masturbation because the biblical texts do not specifically mention it, and so he claims that this practice was acceptable in convents.¹⁰² In the same collection of essays, however, Bernau observes that the author of the *Ancrene Wisse* 'acknowledges the existence of various types of sexual acts, including masturbation, by telling the anchoress to confess them'.¹⁰³ This suggests that, far from accepting female

⁹⁸ Cf. Salih, Bernau and Evans, 'Introduction' to *Medieval Virginites*, p. 6.

⁹⁹ Jonathan Hughes, 'Alchemy and the Exploration of Late Medieval Sexuality', in *Medieval Virginites*, eds. Anke Bernau, Ruth Evans and Sarah Salih (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), pp. 140-166, (pp. 140-1).

¹⁰⁰ Hughes, 'Alchemy and the Exploration of Late Medieval Sexuality', p. 141.

¹⁰¹ Cf. Hughes: 'From an alchemical perspective chastity or virginity could be extolled if allowance was made for the expression of sexual identity and the achievement of sexual relief in the interests of the health of body and soul or the political equivalent.' Hughes, 'Alchemy and the Exploration of Late Medieval Sexuality', p. 149.

¹⁰² Cf. Hughes: 'Biblical proscriptions against masturbation only applied to men: women, if they practised masturbation by themselves or with the help of midwives (or other women within the context of a convent), could choose a life of relative good health and sexual satisfaction outside the traditional role of wife and child bearer.' Hughes, 'Alchemy and the Exploration of Late Medieval Sexuality', p. 150.

¹⁰³ Bernau, 'Virginal effects', p. 41. It is also worth noting that patristic writers were exceedingly suspicious of midwives attending virgins, not because they expected perverse sexual practices to result, but because inspection can damage physical virginity and the presence of midwives usually implies pregnancy

masturbation, it was considered to be a sin. Hughes also ignores any reference to the unacceptability of the practice in religious texts.¹⁰⁴ He cites *The 'Sekenesse of wymmen'* and *The Trotula* as medieval medical treatises which explicitly recommend female masturbation, but does not provide any references to corroborate his claims. Indeed, his vivid imaginings of institutionally authorised masturbatory practices for nuns diverge wildly from the advice given in these two tracts. In *The Trotula*, there is only one passage which refers specifically to consecrated women.¹⁰⁵ The administration of anointed cotton wool for unsatisfied sexual desires, however, is a far cry from Hughes's lurid claims that 'the midwife was required to rub the genitals'.¹⁰⁶ Hughes claims that pessaries were used by nuns auto-erotically,¹⁰⁷ but *The Trotula* explicitly states that pessaries should not be used for consecrated women in case it damaged their physical virginity.¹⁰⁸

– not a suitable companion for a consecrated virgin. In addition, the fate of Salome in *The Protevangelium of James* who had refused to believe in the Virgin Birth and had sought to examine the Blessed Virgin creates a certain divine precedent that midwives should not attend consecrated virgins.

¹⁰⁴ Gillian Cloke, for example, notes that, 'Basil of Ancyra is noteworthy for being the only theologian to talk realistically about the practical problems of celibacy, by virtue of being a doctor as well as a bishop. He described the state with accuracy and in a way addressed to female needs, teaching women that all their senses are potential media through which they may expect desire; how sight can be more seductive than touch and last longer in the memory; and accurately describes female masturbation, the better to fight it.' Gillian Cloke, *This Female Man of God: Women and Spiritual Power in the Patristic Age, AD 350-400* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 61. Cloke, however, does not provide references to specific passages in this treatise, but alludes to the whole treatise. One, therefore, wonders how she can claim that Basil 'accurately' describes such things as the lack of detailed leads one to suspect a lack of familiarity with the treatise; it is currently not translated into English, but is available in Latin and Greek in the *Patrologia Graeca*.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. *Trotula*: 'There are some women to whom carnal intercourse is not permitted, sometimes because they are bound by a vow, sometimes because they are bound by religion, sometimes because they are widows, because to some women it is not permitted to take fruitful vows.' *The Trotula*, 141, p. 91.

¹⁰⁶ Hughes, 'Alchemy and the Exploration of Late Medieval Sexuality', p. 149. Hughes relies on Jacqueline Murray, 'Twice marginalised and twice invisible: lesbians in the Middle Ages', in Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage (eds), *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality* (New York: Garland, 1996), pp. 191-222, (p. 200-1).

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Hughes: 'pessaries were also medically prescribed and inserted into the vagina until release was obtained. The erotically charged circumstances (some the length of a finger were made of silk, and soaked in oil and honey) imply that they served as penis substitutes.' Hughes, 'Alchemy and the Exploration of Late Medieval Sexuality', p. 149. There is something innately distasteful in Hughes' confident assertion that any gynaecological treatment for illness is automatically autoerotic.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. *Trotula*: 'These women, when they have a desire to copulate and do not do so, incur grave illness. For such women, therefore, let there be made this remedy. Take some cotton and musk or pennyroyal oil

The other medical text that Hughes cites is *The 'Sekenesse of wymmen'*. It is a gynecological treatise that deals with the health of the matrix (womb), and generally is concerned with the provocation of the menses or the expulsion of a dead child; thus most of its remedies are emmenagogues. It recommends fumigation,¹⁰⁹ phlebotomy,¹¹⁰ good cheer and meat and drink if the woman's ailment derives from 'sorowe or angre',¹¹¹ pessaries, and even plaisters of 'snayles with honey and whete mele',¹¹² but certainly not masturbation. It does recommend coitus for some forms of sickness in women, but qualifies this prescription: it specifies coitus with one's husband and so this is irrelevant for nuns.¹¹³ The treatise does at one point deal with amenorrhoea caused by 'much fastyng or myche wakyng', which may refer to religious fasting and vigils, but the remedy for this is 'gode metes and drinkys' which will 'make hyre mery and glad, and lefe heuynesse and heuy thouthes'.¹¹⁴ There is no evidence in either treatise that 'virginity may coexist with sexual pleasure'. As with the other critics discussed above, a deliberate ignoring of the religious understanding of virginity leads to misreading of religious texts in general.¹¹⁵

and anoint it and put it in the vagina. And if you do not have such an oil, take *trifera magna* and dissolve it in a little warm wine, and with cotton or damp wool place it in the vagina. This both dissipates the desire and dulls the pain. Note that a pessary ought not to be made lest the womb be damaged, for the mouth of the womb is joined to the vagina, like the lips to the mouth, unless, of course, conception occurs, for then the womb withdraws.' *The Trotula*, 141, , p. 91.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. *The 'Sekenesse of Women': A Middle English Treatise on Diseases in Women (Yale Medical Library, Ms. 47 fols.60r-71v)*, ed. M. R. Halleart (Brussels: Omirel, 1982), l. 358, p. 47.

¹¹⁰ 'Sekenesse of Women', l. 248, p.41; ll. 296-299, p. 45; ll. 304-5, p. 45; l. 462, p. 53; l. 510, p. 57.

¹¹¹ *Sekenesse of Women*, ll. 195-6, p. 33.

¹¹² *Sekenesse of Women*, ll. 636-7, p. 65.

¹¹³ Cf. *Sekenesse of wymmen*: 'if it be in þe fourþe maner yt is for þem to comyn / with man in lawful maner as with þer husbondes and elles nat.' *The 'Sekenesse of Women'*, ll. 421-2, p. 51.

¹¹⁴ *Sekenesse of Women*, ll. 197-99, p. 39.

¹¹⁵ Jacqueline Murray's discussion of male embodiment is symptomatic of the perspective of gender studies critics on religious issues: 'Among the platitudes and conventional affirmations about the body as the temple of the lord, that believers are the body of Christ, and the admonitions to keep the body chaste, there is minimal discussion about a body that is specifically sexed male and explicitly differentiated from either human or female bodies.' Jacqueline Murray, "'The law of sin that is in my members": the problem of male embodiment', in *Gender and Holiness: Men, women and saints in medieval Europe*, eds. Samantha J. E.

vi. Patristic Scholarship

The evident side-lining of a religious appreciation of virginity can also be discerned in patristic scholarship. The academic discipline altered radically in its methodological approaches in the twentieth century. Like medieval studies, patristic scholarship, too, has been heavily influenced by feminist concerns. Elizabeth A. Clark observes that

there has been of late an interest in topics and approaches that some would claim are stimulated by recent political and social concerns, especially as those have been manifested in America. Women's studies is a case in point. To be sure, there have been in decades past studies pertaining to women in the early Christian era. The difference between past and present lies in the desire to move the subject from the periphery to a more central place in the scholarship on the early Christian era.¹¹⁶

Often patristic studies which focus on virginity do so from a perspective of the social, 'lived history' of female asceticism. Gillian Cloke, for instance, states that her 'book attempts to convey something of the lives and nature of certain women at a certain point in history'.¹¹⁷ Many patristic studies on virginity focus mainly on the flowering of asceticism in the fourth century as there is much more historical information on the ascetic movement from this time period. In the search for an early Christian female voice,

Riches and Sarah Salih (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 9-22, (p. 11). Profound theological ideas, which are bound up in images of the body, sacrifice and salvation, are consistently trivialised by critics, so much so that Murray can assert with impunity that they are mere platitudes and conventions.

¹¹⁶ Elizabeth A. Clark, 'Introduction' to *Ascetic Piety and Women's Faith: Essays on Late Ancient Christianity* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1986), pp. 3-19, (p. 10). Susanna Elm also details this movement: 'With the advent of twentieth-century feminism, an additional dimension was added to the scholarly discourse. Women certainly had been discussed in earlier scholarly work, but while they had remained a somewhat marginal concern, they were now beginning to become the focus of study. Virginity, misogyny, aspects specific to female asceticism, the position of women in the Church, and the theological and social underpinnings of these issues became central to the discourse which was, however, often dominated by the notion that women were mere victims of patriarchal discourse.' Susanna Elm *Virgins of God: The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), pp. 6-7.

¹¹⁷ Cloke, *This Female Man of God*, p. ix. Cf. Clark: 'Following a pattern we now recognise as typical in feminist scholarship, they first raised up for inspection the misogyny so prevalent in the writings of the church fathers. Although this project is by no means complete, given the enormous corpus of patristic literature, a second task soon took precedence: to uncover the lives of actual women in early Christianity.' Elizabeth A. Clark, 'Devil's Gateway and Bride of Christ: Women in the Early Christian World', in *Ascetic Piety and Women's Faith: Essays on Late Ancient Christianity* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1986), pp. 23-60, (p. 24).

patristic texts are frequently gutted for incidental references to women.¹¹⁸ Similarly, as with medieval literary criticism, the tradition of virginity is either condemned by patristic scholars as misogynistic, or, conversely, seen as tantamount to a proto-feminist movement.¹¹⁹ As Cameron notes:

We have therefore a seemingly strange situation – one in which a debate about the ‘position’ of women is carried on the basis of texts that are in the main highly misogynistic, and yet in which it has also been thought possible to argue for a kind of early Christian feminism.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Cf. Cameron: ‘Much work is done [by feminists], for instance, to collect references to the participation of women in early Christianity, usually, it must be said, with a view to showing that there is both Scriptural and historical precedent for a significant female role in the Church. At the same time, feminist writers are at pains to expose the extent of actual hostility to women in the early Christian texts, whether in the New Testament itself or in the works of the early Fathers.’ Cameron, ‘Virginity as Metaphor’, p. 186. For instance, Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (London: SCM Press, 1999 [1983]). For a critique of Fiorenza’s works, see Esther Yue L. Ng, *Reconstructing Christian Origins? The Feminist Theology of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza: An Evaluation* (Carlisle, Cumbria and GA: Paternoster Press, 2002). Ruether argues in favour for such reconstructions: ‘The patriarchal theology that has prevailed throughout most of Christian history in most Christian traditions has rigidly barred women from ministry. The arguments for this exclusion are identical with the arguments of patriarchal anthropology. [...] Recent feminist scholarship has pointed to the existence of an alternative tradition in the Jesus movement and early Christianity. This alternative Christianity could have suggested a very different construction of Christian theology.’ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Towards a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993 [1983]), pp. 194-5.

¹¹⁹ McNamara, for instance, argues that the rhetoric that reads virtuous women as masculine provided a level of sexual equality: ‘The manliness of the virgin woman was a transcendence of the sexual nature itself. [...] But in essence the equality of which the Christian fathers wrote was a celestial condition, not a temporal one. [...] They sought to bring women and men alike to that state of grace in which there would be neither bond nor free, neither male nor female.’ Jo Ann McNamara, ‘Sexual Equality and the Cult of Virginity in Early Christian Thought’, *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 3/4 (Spring – Summer, 1976), 145-158, (pp. 154-5). Such an argument is a world away from McInerney’s assertion that ‘to imagine virginity as an asexual ideal in a world in which sexuality itself is gendered feminine, as was the body itself, is to make the asexual functionally masculine.’ McInerney, *Eloquent Virgins*, p. 5.

¹²⁰ Cameron, ‘Virginity as Metaphor’, p. 184. Cf. Cameron: ‘Not only Celsus, but also modern histories of the early church, commonly say, for instance, that the Christian faith spread first among outsiders to Roman society – slaves, the lower classes and women; this was a view which suited early Christian writers themselves – they could claim that it was one of Christianity’s great advantages that it was made for everyone, even the uneducated, and most women in the ancient world fell by definition into that category. And now it is seductive again for different reasons: feminist theologians can use it to claim that whatever the Christian texts themselves might imply, there was once a golden age of early Christianity in which women played a role they were scarcely to enjoy again until the rise of the feminist movement.’ Cameron, ‘Virginity as Metaphor’, p. 184.

One such study is Jo Ann McNamara's *A New Song: Celibate Women in the First Three Christian Centuries*. Quite apart from the book's contradictory title,¹²¹ McNamara attempts to assert a female origin for the tradition of asceticism. Although asceticism may well have been a lay movement, the claim that it was solely a female movement is purely speculative as there is no evidence to support such an assertion; McNamara merely gives her personal *credo* on the subject.¹²² She also claims that the Bible does not contain any endorsements for the celibate life:

Nothing in the Gospels suggests the desirability of a celibate life (if we discount the prophetic words of Jesus in his last agony that the daughters of Jerusalem would one day wish that they had been barren and that their breasts had never given suck).¹²³

McNamara tacitly ignores the recommendation of the celibate life in Matthew 19: 12, Apocalypse 14: 4, and, discounting, as she does, Luke 23: 39, presumably she would also discount similar sentiments expressed in Matthew 24: 19 and Mark 13: 17 and Luke 21: 23. Her assertion is expressly contradicted by patristic sources which emphasise the biblical authorisation of virginity.

McNamara also rejects any claim that Saint Paul was the originator of the virginal tradition. Her thesis turns on the premise that Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians was written in reaction to the celibate practices of women; his letter, she says, does not initiate but rather confirms the practice of virgins in Corinth.¹²⁴

some members of the community were apparently experimenting with a variety of new life-styles which lent unexpected latitude to Paul's concept of Christian

¹²¹ The quotation 'a new song' is taken from the Apocalypse of John and refers specifically to male virgins, who have not been defiled with women.

¹²² Cf. McNamara: 'I believe that the development of a cult of virginity and a structured celibate way of life was the work of women who, for a variety of reasons, could not be content with the conditions of married life in the early Roman Empire.' McNamara, *A New Song*, p. 44.

¹²³ McNamara, *A New Song*, p. 38.

¹²⁴ Cf. McNamara: 'His advice to the unmarried, however, was radical and innovative and has the tone of consent to an existing condition rather than a new commandment.' McNamara, *A New Song*, p. 38.

liberty. Confronted with these innovations and the arguments that they engendered, a woman named Chloe sent some of “her people” to Paul with a report and questions which have been lost to us. Paul’s answer provides us with the first indication that perpetual virginity was being promulgated as a possibility among the believers in Corinth. [...] In this context I want to stress that Paul did not invent the idea and attempt to impose it on his congregation. The idea came from the Corinthian community.¹²⁵

It is impossible to know what the letter sent to Saint Paul from Corinth contained.

However, Saint Paul notes at the opening of his epistle some of the circumstances that had resulted in his receipt of the missive. The letter was sent to him because there had been some contentious debates in the Corinthian Church. He notes that each faction claimed authority in accordance with the various teachers which they followed.¹²⁶ The divergent practices that had sprung up in Corinth appear to have been reactions to the preaching of holy men: Paul, Apollo, and Cephas. Also, as Paul states, and even McNamara concedes, the community at Corinth was established by Paul himself:

I have planted, Apollo watered, but God gave the increase. Therefore, neither he that planteth is any thing, nor he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase. Now he that planteth, and he that watereth, are one. And every man shall receive his own reward, according to his own labour. For we are God's coadjutors: you are God's husbandry; you are God's building. According to the grace of God that is given to me, as a wise architect, I have laid the foundation; and another buildeth thereon. But let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon. For other foundation no man can lay, but that which is laid; which is Christ Jesus. (I Corinthians 3: 6-11).

Paul tries to unify the community by drawing attention to the ultimate authority of Christ; the various teachings of the preachers must, first and foremost, accord with Christ’s message. McNamara’s thesis is thus a little illogical, because even if the question posed

¹²⁵ McNamara, *A New Song*, p. 36; p. 39.

¹²⁶ Cf. Paul: ‘For it hath been signified unto me, my brethren, of you, by them that are of the house of Chloe, that there are contentions among you. Now this I say, that every one of you saith: I indeed am of Paul; and I am of Apollo; and I am of Cephas; and I of Christ. Is Christ divided? Was Paul then crucified for you? or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I give God thanks, that I baptized none of you but Crispus and Caius; Lest any should say that you were baptized in my name’ (I Corinthians 1: 11-15).

to Paul about female celibacy was in response to an existing practice that had developed in Corinth, this itself would have originated from the preaching of male teachers, and ultimately from Christ.¹²⁷

Alongside the above studies there are some patristic studies which focus on the idea of the virgin and its rhetorical importance. Mary F. Fossett in *A Virgin Conceived. Mary and Classical Representations of Virginit*y looks at ‘what virginity connotes [...] and adds to the portrayal of Mary in two Christian narratives’.¹²⁸ Her study considers the classical representation of virginity in second-century novels and in the Gospel narratives. Kate Cooper’s *The Virgin and the Bride. Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity* seeks to answer the question of ‘why [...] early Christians alight[ed] on the ideal of virginity, and why [...] the Romans c[a]me to adopt it as they own’.¹²⁹ Although Cooper does consider some of the writings of the Church Fathers, mostly she passes over these and the figure of the Virgin Mary, in favour of less obvious sources. She says: ‘I have tried resolutely to cleave to the unfamiliar as a starting point, and to the perspective of the kind of ancient person who [...] was not given to religious enthusiasms.’¹³⁰ Fossett’s study is restricted to Mary in particular and virginity in early novels, whereas Cooper, demonstrating the general tendency to avoid a religious approach, is inclined to

¹²⁷ McNamara, however, seems unwilling to credit the masculine origin of the biblical narrative. In a discussion on ‘the development of the Gospel message’, she states: ‘More broadly, I would like to suggest that the literary representation of Jesus’ personality owes a great deal to the perceptions of his female followers. The sympathy and compassion of the literary Jesus validated a set of virtues which could be positively opposed to the traditional manliness so admired in the ancient world.’ McNamara, *A New Song*, p. 27. Elsewhere, however, McNamara does indicate that she is aware of the male authorship of the New Testament, but does not miss the slightest chance to continue to claim the presence of a female hand in the *Bible*: ‘With the possible exception of the *Epistle to the Hebrews*, the New Testament was wholly recorded by men.’ McNamara, *A New Song*, p. 51.

¹²⁸ Mary F. Fossett, *A Virgin Conceived. Mary and Classical Representations of Virginit*y (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002), p. vii.

¹²⁹ Kate Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride. Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity* (Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. ix.

¹³⁰ Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride*, p. x.

opt for alternative sources. Neither, therefore, engages with the tradition espoused by the Church Fathers in any depth. Indeed, in many studies of virginity the question of whether to use patristic texts at all is one that is often brought up. Clark, for instance, describes the patristic sources of her paper thus:

The materials out of which this paper is constructed might well promote despair among many feminist scholars. In the first place, the sources are exclusively literary – and to make matters worse, the literature is written *by men about women*. The literature, moreover, is so propagandistic and rhetorical that the attempt to extract historical information from it might seem futile.¹³¹

Susanna Elm also warns about the male, orthodox, and rhetorical nature of patristic treatises.¹³² In *The Body and Society*, Peter Brown, too, cautions the reader about the male-dominated sources in his study:¹³³

The necessary word of caution is briefly stated: from one end of the book to the other, we shall be dealing with evidence of an overwhelmingly prescriptive and theoretical nature, written exclusively by male authors. How, and indeed whether, such evidence can be used is a matter of prolonged academic debate.¹³⁴

Whether virginity treatises offer sources for a social history of women is a moot point.

However, they are clearly important for understanding the doctrinal development of

¹³¹ Clark, 'Devil's Gateway and Bride of Christ: Women in the Early Christian World', p. 23.

¹³² Cf. Elm: 'First, most of our sources were preserved only because they fit the orthodox canon. Secondly, all our texts were written by men and are for the most part addressed to men. Almost all these belong to the same social class [...]. These notions underlie the Church Fathers' understanding and thus their shaping of Christianity, and influence much of what they considered the appropriate ascetic life. Thus, when these Fathers describe and attempt to regulate the ascetic life of women or those they call heretics, their writings reflect their own preoccupations and fears.' Elm, *Virgins of God*, p. 10.

¹³³ Perhaps an obvious extension of this concern is the hostility of feminists to male critics on the subject. For instance, Brown and Bugge have been criticised for being seduced by the misogynistic discourse of the Church Fathers: 'Both of these scholars have allowed themselves to be seduced by the anti-sex rhetoric (often confused with but never identical to pro-feminist rhetoric) of the great patristic writers like Paul and Augustine; explicit statements in the writings of the fathers in which sexual equality appears to be promised in the next world if not in this one permits them to overlook if not to excuse the powerful misogyny that informs much of early Christian writing. Thus they fail to recognise that to imagine virginity as an asexual ideal in a world in which sexuality itself is gendered feminine, as was the body itself, is to make the asexual functionally masculine.' McInerney, *Eloquent Virgins*, p. 5. Also, when Bloch published his book, *Medieval Misogyny*, he was lambasted as 'some feminist readers of his work suspected him of being fundamentally a medieval misogynist himself, and argued that his critique of the essentialising misogyny of patristic writers merely reinscribed the ideology it professed to deconstruct.' McInerney, *Eloquent Virgins*, p. 6; Cf. *Representations* 20 (1987); *Medieval Feminist Newsletter* 7 (1989): 2-16., p. 6n. 12.

¹³⁴ Brown, *The Body and Society*, p. xvi.

virginity in the Catholic Church. It is precisely this appreciation of orthodoxy that patristic scholars and medievalists appear to be trying to avoid.

Just like medieval and Renaissance literary critics, patristic scholars appear to be more interested in ideas of gender and the body than in the theological conception of virginity. Elm highlights the emergence and popularity of these areas which have been spawned largely from a feminist approach:

in part as a direct result of feminist concerns, but mainly under the influence of new theoretical approaches, in particular those of Paul Veyne and Michel Foucault, much of early Christianity has been reconceptualised once more, now in terms of the body and sexuality.¹³⁵

One such study that has been very influential, not only in patristic studies but also in providing a reference point for literary studies, is Peter Brown's *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*. Like much feminist criticism, however, it too focuses on social history rather than theology. Brown views Early Christian history through the lens of humanism, with the effect that his methodology obscures the theological meaning of sexual renunciation.¹³⁶ Consequently, the birth and growth of Christianity is explained by socio-economic factors, along with psychological profiles of the personal peculiarities of religious figures. The rhetoric used by Brown to describe the advocates of virginity in early Christianity is openly negative and implies that they were abnormal characters: Saint Paul, he says, was the 'most startlingly idiosyncratic of all the followers of Jesus',¹³⁷ an 'eccentric',¹³⁸ and a 'radical

¹³⁵ Elm, *Virgins of God*, p. 7.

¹³⁶ Cf. Brown: 'My principal concern has been to make clear the notions of the human person and of society implied in such renunciations, and to follow in detail the reflection and controversy which these notions generated, among Christian writers, on such topics as the nature of sexuality, the relation of men and women, and the structure and meaning of society.' Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), p. xiii.

¹³⁷ Brown, *The Body and Society*, p. 44.

¹³⁸ Brown, *The Body and Society*, p. 50.

Jew’;¹³⁹ Justin Martyr was an ‘eccentric intellectual’;¹⁴⁰ Tertullian was ‘a man of robust idiosyncrasy’,¹⁴¹ who held ‘extremist’ views¹⁴² and was misogynistic;¹⁴³ and the sermons of John Chrysostom, he says, are ‘elegant misogyny’.¹⁴⁴ Brown thus creates the impression that the growth of sexual renunciation in early Christianity was nothing more than a sociological phenomenon fostered mainly by bizarre individuals.

As well as its critical focus on the body, Brown’s methodological approach is also symptomatic of another shift which has taken place in patristic studies over the last few decades. Elizabeth A. Clark, in the ‘Introduction’ to her collection of essays *Ascetic Piety and Women’s Faith: Essays on Late Ancient Christianity*, discusses this shift, initiated by Harnack,¹⁴⁵ and which naturally followed the move from the seminary to the university:

What is the present state and probable future of historical theology in the field of patristics? The question can be succinctly answered: less theology, more history. The past two decades have witnessed a shift away from the inclusion of patristics as a sub-field of theology, and all signs point to a continuation of this trend. [...] Thus patristics is no longer a discipline devoted primarily to the investigation of dogmatic developments in and for themselves; rather, it finds its new home amidst studies of the late ancient world, commanding attention as one among many cultural phenomena of late antiquity.¹⁴⁶

¹³⁹ Brown, *The Body and Society*, p. 44.

¹⁴⁰ Brown, *The Body and Society*, p. 64.

¹⁴¹ Brown, *The Body and Society*, p. 76.

¹⁴² Brown, *The Body and Society*, p. 76.

¹⁴³ Brown, *The Body and Society*, p. 81. Tertullian is always criticised for being a misogynist. McNamara refers to Tertullian as a ‘mighty misogynist’. McNamara, *A New Song*, p. 72. Cameron refers to Tertullian as ‘one of the foremost of Christian misogynist writers.’ Cameron, ‘Virginity as Metaphor’, p. 190. For a defence of Tertullian, attempting to save him from being consigned to the misogynist heap, and an argument against the habit of quoting Tertullian out of context, see F. Forrester Church, ‘Sex and Salvation in Tertullian’, *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 68, No. 2 (Apr., 1975), 83-101.

¹⁴⁴ Brown, *The Body and Society*, p. 324.

¹⁴⁵ Cf. Clark: ‘Political, social, economic influences could not be discounted in the formation of Christian dogma, Harnack insisted, over against others of his time.’ Elizabeth A. Clark, ‘Introduction’ to *Ascetic Piety and Women’s Faith*, p. 6.

¹⁴⁶ Clark, ‘Introduction’ to *Ascetic Piety and Women’s Faith*, pp. 3-4.

In addition, this shift from theology to history has led to more studies which are based on geographical location rather than following a chronological development.¹⁴⁷ Although Clark lauds the ideological shift in perspective, the change, in disassociating itself from theology, now has a tendency to ignore it completely. Clark also observes the growing hostility in scholarship to the orthodox Fathers, which is so evident in modern criticism, both literary and patristic:

Also perhaps sparked by social events of our time is the changed approach to the study of the Fathers: there is a noticeable tendency toward ‘debunking’. In recent discussions of heresy, for example, we find a manifest sympathy with the supposed heretics and a suspicion of the orthodox Fathers.¹⁴⁸

The emergent trend for the rehabilitation of heresiarchs, Clark notes, is also part of the increasing secularisation of the discipline.¹⁴⁹ This critical position, or ‘debunking’, if you will, automatically presupposes that there is fundamentally no difference between orthodoxy and heterodoxy; they are seen merely as competing versions of Christian intellectualism. It is this collapsing of difference that is so evident, for example, in Bugge’s essay.

Such a modern, atheistic attitude, however, does not convey the vital importance – to the heretics as well as the orthodox – of the theological disputes throughout the history of Christianity. The battle for orthodoxy was not merely a competition for intellectual superiority by equally valid groups; it was a battle for Christian Truth. This is why orthodox Christian tradition traces its descent through the Apostolic Churches which

¹⁴⁷ Elm’s *Virgins of God* looks at women’s asceticism in Asia Minor and Egypt in the fourth century. For a detailed discussion of Saint Athanasius and his utilisation of asceticism as a political tool against Arianism within fourth-century ascetic communities, see David Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

¹⁴⁸ Clark, ‘Introduction’ to *Ascetic Piety and Women’s Faith*, p. 11.

¹⁴⁹ Cf. Clark: ‘Although we may feel sympathy for the heretics because they were the “underdogs,” the shift in attitude is also attributable to the new secular environment in which patristic studies flourish.’ Clark, ‘Introduction’ to *Ascetic Piety and Women’s Faith*, pp. 11-2.

were founded by Christ's apostles. Although a modern, secularised, humanist history may be a valid narrative, it has little to do with the theological ideas that need to be examined in order to appreciate the complexities of the patristic tradition. This is nowhere more so than in the case of virginity which lies at the very heart of Christian belief and understanding. Such an examination is the concern of Part I of this thesis.

I. Tertullian

One of the earliest theologians to write about virginity was the Carthaginian Quintus Septimus Florens Tertullianus (c. A.D. 155- 220). Tertullian's works are often used to glean information about early Christian Carthage,¹ although some question the value of his evidence alone.² The biographical information that we possess about Tertullian is scant and largely derived from Jerome's short biography in *De viris illustribus*, and references in Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*. In addition, Tertullian's own works provide some clues to his life. According to Jerome, he was the son of a *centurio proconsularis*; he was a priest but then lapsed into the Montanist heresy when he was middle aged.³ Eusebius asserts that Tertullian was knowledgeable about Roman law,⁴ and it has often been assumed that Tertullian and the pagan jurist Tertullianus are one and the

¹ There is very little information about early Christianity in North Africa. All histories of Christianity in Africa begin with the martyrdom of twelve Christians: 'We know nothing of the beginning of the Church in Africa [...] She emerged on a sudden from the twilight in 180. On the 17th July, 180, twelve Christians of the town of Scillium (possibly in the pro-consulate of Numidia, but the exact spot has not been located), seven men and five women appeared before the pro-consul Vigellius Saturninus. They remained steadfast in their wish to continue Christians; [...] and heard their sentence to perish by the sword.' Pierre De Labriolle, *History and Literature of Christianity from Tertullian to Boethius*, trans. Herbert Wilson (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., 1924), p. 55. Also, see Timothy David Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), pp. 60-84; Geoffrey Dunn, *Tertullian* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 13-18. There are two main theories about the spread of Christianity to Carthage: the first is that it came from Rome via Christians with a non-Jewish background; the other claims that it came from the East with Christians with Jewish converts (Cf. Dunn, *Tertullian*, p. 13). There appears to be little concrete evidence either way, and it is likely that there is no single source for the Christianisation of Africa. Dunn says: 'I think the most insightful comment comes from Telfer who suggested that "African Christianity knew no single paternity, having resulted from the joining up of Christian groups with different origins" (Telfer 1961: 516). In a cosmopolitan trade centre like Carthage, it would not be a surprise to discover (if that were still possible) that both Christian Jews and Christian Gentiles arrived in Carthage from any number of other locations, sought converts from people from their own homelands and established quite a number of small and independent Christian communities that were language-based or based upon a city of origin.' Dunn, *Tertullian*, pp. 14-5.

² Cf. Dunn, *Tertullian*, p. 14.

³ Cf. Jerome, 'LIII. Tertullian the presbyter', in *On Illustrious Men (De viris illustribus)*, trans. Thomas P. Halton (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1999), p. 74.

⁴ Cf. Eusebius: 'Tertullian [...] had an accurate knowledge of the laws of the Romans, [and was] of high repute in other respects and one of the most brilliant men at Rome.' Eusebius Pamphili, *Ecclesiastical History*, Books 1-5, Vol. I, trans. Roy J. Deferrari (New York: Fathers of the Church inc., 1953), II. ii, p. 89.

same.⁵ Timothy Barnes' watershed study, however, challenged the accepted biography of Tertullian. He states that Jerome's information in *De viris illustribus* was based solely on 'Eusebius and from his own reading of the authors' and that '[t]hese sources he supplements from personal recollections'.⁶ Eusebius, he says, was 'almost completely ignorant of Tertullian',⁷ and therefore an unreliable historical source.⁸ Barnes refutes the biographical claims of both Jerome and Eusebius and then reconstructs his own chronological framework of Tertullian's life based mainly on Tertullian's works and extraneous historical information.⁹ Since Barnes, there have been a series of revisionist critiques on the life of Tertullian,¹⁰ but there seems to be no scholarly consensus regarding his biographical history.¹¹ What is not in doubt, however, is Tertullian's influence on the thinking of Latin (i.e., Western) Christianity; part of his contribution can be seen in the development of the tradition of consecrated virginity.

⁵ Cf. Barnes, *Tertullian*, pp. 22-9. Barnes notes that 'Four plausible and relevant arguments can be adduced in support [of the connection between the jurist and the Christian writer]. First, homonymity might seem to create a presumption of identity, since the name Tertullianus is far from common. Secondly, the Christian displays a thorough and (it is claimed) profound knowledge of Roman law. Third, the two may have been exact contemporaries. And, finally, Eusebius might be thought to make the identification when he calls Tertullian a man skilled in Roman law and among the most illustrious at Rome.' Barnes, *Tertullian*, pp. 23-4.

⁶ Barnes, *Tertullian*, p. 5.

⁷ Barnes, *Tertullian*, p. 2.

⁸ Deferrari seems to corroborate this statement: 'Eusebius' knowledge of Latin was very limited. This is confirmed by the fact that he shows little acquaintance with the works of Latin writers in general. He actually does not show any personal acquaintance with any of the important Latin works produced before his time, except such as existed in Greek translations. The only work of Tertullian which he quotes is the *Apology*, and this from a very poor Greek translation.' Deferrari, in Eusebius Pamphili, *Ecclesiastical History Books 1-5*, Vol. I, trans. Roy J. Deferrari (New York: Fathers of the Church inc., 1953), p. 90n. 7.

⁹ Cf. Barnes: 'Jerome's sources are identifiable. Almost everything comes from Eusebius where he is relevant, or from the works of the writers discussed. The only items which come from elsewhere derive from memory or a hagiographical source. There is a strong presumption, therefore, that the whole of the chapter on Tertullian, excepting only the story heard from Paul of Concordia, derives from Tertullian's writings.' Barnes, *Tertullian*, p. 10.

¹⁰ Dunn notes that 'Some scholars [...] have also questioned his legal background (Fredouille 1972; Bray 1977; Rankin 1997) and even whether his Montanism meant that he became a schismatic (Powell 1975; Rankin 1986, 1995; Trevett 1996: 69; Tabbernee 1997: 54-4)'. Dunn, *Tertullian*, p. 4.

¹¹ Cf. Dunn: 'Others, though, have not been convinced by all these arguments. A number of other writers, often not specialists on Tertullian, seem to have ignored this revision entirely.' Dunn, *Tertullian*, p. 4.

Although the virginity of Mary does not become a focus for the tradition of virginity until the fourth century, Tertullian's writings do have some bearing on Mariology. His *De carne Christi* (c. 207) indicates an early awareness of the Eve-Mary parallel in the West,¹² but some of his comments on Mary's virginity in that tract are highly unorthodox in light of later Marian doctrine.¹³ In *De carne Christi*, Tertullian was concerned with emphasising the truth of the birth of Christ against four heresies, which all claimed that Christ was not human but solely a deity.¹⁴ In his zeal to emphasise the reality of the birth of Christ, Tertullian dwells on the opening of Mary's womb, an understanding which prejudices her virginity *in partu*.¹⁵ In another tract, *Adversus Marcionem*, Tertullian again refutes the claim of the Marcion sect that Christ was not

¹² Gambero notes that Tertullian's treatise *De Carne Christi* XVII. v 'confirms that the Eve-Mary parallel was known in the West during the first Christian centuries'. Luigi Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church: The Blessed Virgin Mary in Patristic Thought*, trans. Thomas Buffer (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999 [1991]), p. 66.

¹³ Especially the declaration of Mary as *Aeiparthenos*, Ever-Virgin, at the Council of Chalcedon in A.D. 451. *The Tome of Saint Leo*, read out and ratified by the Council spoke of Mary thus: 'For, in fact, he was "conceived of the Holy Ghost" within the womb of a Virgin Mother, who bore Him as she had conceived him, without loss of virginity'; 'the angel who was sent to the blessed and ever Virgin Mary said, "The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee, and therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.' *The Tome of Saint Leo*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. XIV, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church: Their Canons and dogmatic decrees* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1900]), pp. 254; p. 255. Mary's perpetual virginity was then accepted at the Second Council of Constantinople. Evidence of early Christian acceptance of Mary's perpetual virginity can be seen in *The Protevangelium of James* (c. mid-second century A.D.). Cf. Gambero: 'The bitter water test confirms Mary's virginity before giving birth. The absence of labour pains and the sometimes crudely realistic examinations carried out by the midwife and a woman named Salome, who was then punished for her unbelief, confirms Mary's virginity in the act of giving birth. At the same time, the realism with which the Lord's birth is described leads one to think that the apocryphal gospel means to oppose the error of gnostic Docetism, which considered Christ's body to be a mere appearance or phantasm. [...] The *Protevangelium*'s author, as a collector of different stories and traditions, can be considered a very early and quite valid witness to the Christian people's faith in the complete holiness and virginity of the Mother of the Lord.' Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church*, pp. 40-41.

¹⁴ The four heresies that Tertullian was particularly refuting were those of Marcion, Apolles, Basilides and Valentius.

¹⁵ Cf. Tertullian: 'She who bare (really) bare [sic]; and although she was a virgin when she conceived, she was a wife when she brought forth her son. Now, as a wife, she was under the very law of "opening the womb," wherein it was quite immaterial whether the birth of the male was by virtue of a husband's co-operation or not; it was the same sex that opened the womb'. Tertullian, *De Carne Christi (On the Flesh of Christ)*, XXIII, in *Ante Nicene Fathers*, Vol. III, *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian. I. Apologetic; II. Anti-Marcion; III. Ethical*, trans. Dr. Holmes, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995), pp. 521-544, (p. 541).

born naturally.¹⁶ To support their belief, the Marcionists had cited the scriptural evidence of Christ's question found in the synoptic Gospels: 'Who is my mother and who are my brethren?'¹⁷ This, they claimed, evinced Christ's own disavowal of a biological family. Tertullian contests this conclusion by insisting that Christ's question indicates that His 'brethren' are Mary's natural children, but in doing so denies Mary's virginity *post partum*.¹⁸ Thus, in trying to fight one heretical position by defending the truth of Christ's natural birth, Tertullian unwittingly falls into another.

Over a century and a half later, Helvidius would cite Tertullian as an authority in his attack on Mary's perpetual virginity, which solicited Jerome's strident reply in *Adversus Helvidium* (c. before 385). Jerome contemptuously denies Tertullian's authority on such matters: 'Of Tertullian I say no more than that he did not belong to the Church.'¹⁹

¹⁶ Cf. Tertullian: 'They say that He testifies Himself to His not having been born, when He asks, "Who is my mother and who are my brethren?"' Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem IV (Against Marcion, Book IV)*, 19, in *Ante Nicene Fathers*, Vol. III, *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian. I. Apologetic; II. Anti-Marcion; III. Ethical*, trans. Dr. Holmes, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995), pp. 345-428, (p. 377).

¹⁷ Cf. Matthew: 'And one said unto him: Behold thy mother and thy brethren stand without, seeking thee. But he answering him that told him said: Who is my mother, and who are my brethren? And stretching forth his hand towards his disciples, he said: Behold my mother and my brethren. For whosoever shall do the will of my Father, that is in heaven, he is my brother, and sister, and mother.' (Matthew 12: 47-50); Cf. Mark: 'And answering them, he said: Who is my mother and my brethren?' (Mark 3: 33); Cf. Luke: 'Who answering, said to them: My mother and my brethren are they who hear the word of God, and do it' (Luke 8: 21).

¹⁸ Cf. Tertullian: 'We for our part, say in reply, first, that it could not possibly have been told Him that His mother and brethren stood without, desiring to see Him, if He had had no mother and no brethren'. Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem IV*, 19, p. 377.

¹⁹ Saint Jerome, *Adversus Helvidium (Against Helvidius)*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers. Jerome: Letters and Select Works*, Vol. VI, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1893]), pp. 334-345, (p. 343). Conversely, Barnes says that Jerome's admiration for Tertullian affected his biographical treatment of the man: 'Jerome himself will have wished to believe that a writer whom he so much admired was a priest' (Barnes, *Tertullian*, p. 11). Brown comments that Jerome 'savoured [Tertullian] as a Latin stylist and frequently consulted him as a theological dictionary.' Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990 [1988]), p. 382. On Tertullian's ambiguous authority in expressing an ascetic ideal McNamara comments that his treatise *Ad Uxorum* 2.8 'is the first full-scale argument in favour of virginity and chaste widowhood made by a patristic writer. But it was written by a man well on his way to excommunication, one who was far from expressing an orthodox ideal to be imposed on female communicants.' Jo Ann McNamara, *A New Song: Celibate Women in the First Three Christian Centuries* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1985), p. 100.

Jerome's scornful dismissal of Tertullian's authority is owing to the latter's lapse into Montanism.²⁰ In *De viris illustribus*, Jerome blames the Roman clergy for Tertullian's desertion of Catholicism,²¹ but it appears that Tertullian's own ascetic zeal lured him towards the more rigorous ascetic regimes offered by Montanism.²² Many modern scholars, in a revisionist spirit, debate whether Tertullian's Montanism (or New Prophecy, as Tertullian knew it) meant that he actually left the Church.²³ Montanism, as Deferrari makes clear, 'is not a heresy in the usual sense of the term, since the movement had reference to life and discipline rather than theology'.²⁴ Jerome, however, writing to Marcella in *Epistle XLI*, asserts that Montanists do differ from Catholics on some theological points, although it must be noted that he was writing more than a century and a half after Tertullian and mentions a heretic of the Montanist sect who preached unorthodox Trinitarian doctrine in the early third century.²⁵ Tertullian, therefore, may not

²⁰ Tertullian's defection, however, proved to be an unhappy one: 'The ideal Tertullian sought outside the Church proved to be a mirage. He died a disillusioned and embittered man.' Roy. J Deferrari, 'Introduction' to *Tertullian: Disciplinary, Moral and Ascetical Works*, ed. Roy. J Deferrari (New York: Fathers of the Church Inc., 1959), p. 10.

²¹ Jerome states: 'This one [Tertullian] was a presbyter of the church until his middle years, but later, because of the envy and reproaches of the clerics of the Roman church, he had lapsed into Montanism, and he makes mention of the new prophecy in many books'. Jerome, 'LIII. Tertullian the presbyter', p. 74.

²² The asceticism of Montanism that appealed to Tertullian ran thus: 'Second marriages were forbidden, and virginity strongly recommended; longer and stricter fasts were made obligatory, and only dry foods permitted; flight from persecution disapproved, and the joyful acceptance of martyrdom advocated; reconciliation was denied to all those who had committed capital sins.' Deferrari, 'Introduction', p. 10. Pierre De Labriolle sees Tertullian's defection as out of character: 'The great event of his life as a Christian was his going over to Montanism. How could such a man, with a mind so positive, so staunch a promoter of organised regulations, in full possession of his intellectual maturity and his *prestige* amongst his brethren, have allowed himself to become mixed up with an Oriental sect whose more or less frenzied external aspects were so little calculated to attract him?' Labriolle, *History and Literature of Christianity from Tertullian to Boethius*, p. 62. Apropos of nothing, Brown flippantly asserts that 'If the "New Prophecy" had not existed, one suspects that Tertullian would have had to invent it.' Brown, *The Body and Society*, p. 76.

²³ Cf. Dunn: 'The notion that Tertullian's Montanism meant that he ever left the Church is one that does not seem sustainable today. [...] By the end of his literary career, however, he certainly did not see himself as having anything in common with Christians who did not hold to his Montanist convictions (*On Modesty*, 1. 10), even if no group actually had been declared schismatic.' Dunn, *Tertullian*, pp. 6-7.

²⁴ Deferrari, Note to Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*, Vol. I, p. 311n. 1.

²⁵ Cf. Jerome: 'In the first place we differ from the Montanists regarding the rule of faith. We distinguish the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as three persons, but unite them as one substance. They, on the

necessarily be associated with these later doctrinal differences. The Montanist sect was excommunicated in Asia Minor before the end of the second century and this action was later approved and confirmed in Rome and North Africa.²⁶ So, although modern scholars debate the exact nature of the Tertullian's rejection of Catholicism, it seems that Jerome, Eusebius,²⁷ Epiphanius,²⁸ and the wider Catholic Church saw Montanism, or the New Prophecy, as a schismatic group and this is how history has viewed it.

other hand, following the doctrine of Sabellius, force the Trinity into the narrow limits of a single personality. We, while we do not encourage them, yet allow second marriages, since Paul bids the younger widows to marry. They suppose a repetition of marriage a sin so awful that he who has committed it is to be regarded as an adulterer. We, according to the apostolic tradition (in which the whole world is at one with us), fast through one Lent yearly; whereas they keep three in the year as though three saviours had suffered. I do not mean that it is unlawful to fast at other times through the year – always excepting Pentecost – only that while in Lent it is a duty of obligation, at other seasons a matter of choice. With us, again, the bishops occupy the place of the apostles, but with them a bishop ranks not first but third. For while they put first the patriarchs of Pepusa in Phrygia, and place next to these the ministers called stewards, the bishops are regulated to the third or almost the lowest rank. No doubt their object is to make their religion more pretentious by putting that last which we put first. Again they close the doors of the Church to almost every fault, whilst we read daily, “I desire the repentance of a sinner rather than his death” [...]. Their strictness does not prevent them from themselves committing grave sins, far from it; but there is this difference between us and them, that, whereas they in their self-righteousness blush to confess their faults, we do penance for ours, and so more readily gain pardon for them.’ Saint Jerome, *Epistle XLI. To Marcella*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, Vol. VI, *St. Jerome: Letters and Select Works*, trans. W. H. Freemantle (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1893]), pp. 55-6.

²⁶ Cf. Eusebius: ‘when the arrogant spirit taught to blaspheme the entire Catholic Church in the whole world, because the spirit of false prophecy received neither honour from it nor entrance into it, and when the faithful in Asia had gathered together for this purpose and had examined the recent utterances and pronounced them profane and rejected the heresy, then at last they [the Montanists] were expelled from the Church and were excommunicated.’ Deferrari explains: ‘The entire sect was excommunicated in Asia Minor before the end of the second century. Later, the condemnation was approved in Rome as well as in North Africa. Gradually, Montanism degenerated, and finally, after two or three centuries, disappeared entirely.’ Deferrari, Note to Eusebius’ *Ecclesiastical History*, Vol. I, p. 313n. 1.

²⁷ Cf. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, v, pp. 311-27.

²⁸ Cf. Epiphanius: ‘These Phrygians [Montanists] too, as we call them, accept every scripture of the Old and New Testaments and affirm the resurrection of the dead as well. But they boast of having Montanus for a prophet and Priscilla and Maximilla for prophetesses, and have lost their wits by paying heed to them. They agree with the holy Catholic Church about the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, but have separated themselves by “giving heed to seducing spirits and doctrines of devils” and saying, “We must receive the gifts of grace as well.” [...] Plainly, none who have estranged themselves from truth have retained any soundness of reason. Like babes bitten by the perennial deceiver, the serpent, they have surrendered themselves to destruction and to being caught outside the fold and dragged off to be the wolf’s meat <and> thus perish. [...] Most of these sects forbid marriage and prescribe abstinence from foods, though they do not enjoin these things for disciplines sake or for greater virtue with its rewards and crowns, but because they regard these creatures of the Lord as abominations.’ Epiphanius of Salamis, *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis*, Books II and III (Sects 47-80, *De Fide*), trans. Frank Williams (Leiden, New York, Köln: E. J. Brill, 1994) XLVIII.I, pp. 6-7; XLVIII.II, viii, p. 8; XLVIII.VIII, vi, p. 14.

Regardless of the paucity of information, or perhaps misinformation, about Tertullian's life and lapse, he remains an important figure in Christian history. Luigi Gambero argues that Tertullian's importance lies in the fact that he was 'the first Christian author of the Latin language'.²⁹ Ronald E. Heine is more cautious about Tertullian's role as the Father of Latin Christianity, although he admits that there is little doubt over his influence because of the volume of extant material.³⁰ Jerome mentions two other Latin writers who preceded Tertullian in *De viris illustribus*, Victor and Apollonius,³¹ but Barnes points out that these two Latins wrote in Greek, not in Latin.³² Dunn stresses the significance of Tertullian as the first Christian Latin writer, for as such

He was responsible for much of the theological vocabulary of Western Christianity. Even if we cannot be sure that he was the first to use terms like *sacramentum*, *trinitas*, *persona*, *substantia* and *satisfactio* in their theological sense, it is to him that later Latin-writing theologians turned.³³

Despite his involvement with controversy and heresy, Tertullian's works are of immense importance for the development of Christianity in general, and were formative for particular aspects of Christian doctrine.³⁴ Additionally, his ascetic and moral writings provide a key starting point for tracing the development of the Christian ideal of

²⁹ Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church*, p. 59.

³⁰ Cf. Ronald E. Heine: 'The precise date and exact provenance of the emergence of Latin Christian literature are obscure. It seems to have appeared first in North Africa. Roman Christian literature is in Greek up to the time of Hippolytus in the mid-third century. Tertullian dominates the discussion because of the number of his extant treatises. He did not, however, like Athene, spring forth fully grown from the head of Zeus, armed and shouting his battle cry. There was Latin Christian literature before him. Unfortunately, we cannot say how extensive this literature was, because it remains so meagre.' Ronald E. Heine, 'The Beginnings of Latin Christian literature' in *The Cambridge History of Early Christian Literature*, eds. Frances Young, Lewis Ayres, and Andrew Louth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 131-141, (p. 131).

³¹ Cf. Saint Jerome, 'LIII. Tertullian the presbyter', p. 74.

³² Cf. Barnes, *Tertullian*, pp. 6-7.

³³ Dunn, *Tertullian*, p. 10.

³⁴ Cf. Gambero: 'His numerous writings exercised a determining influence in the formation and development of Christian doctrine in the West, especially Trinitarian theology and Christology.' Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church*, p. 60.

virginity, and contain in them the seeds of many of the fundamental ideas which permeate the tradition.³⁵

i. Ascetic Writings: *De virginibus velandis*

Tertullian wrote several treatises which addressed issues concerning virginity, chastity and marriage: *De virginibus velandis* (*On the Veiling of Virgins*, c. AD 204); *De exhortatione castitatis* (*On Exhortation to Chastity*, c. AD 204); *De cultu feminarum* (*On the Apparel of Women* c. 202 AD; book I of which is often referred to as *De habitu mulieri*); *Ad uxorem* (*To his Wife* c. AD 207); *De monogamia* (*On Monogamy* c. AD 208); and *De pudicitia* (*On Modesty* c. AD 208).³⁶ Of these ascetical works, *De*

³⁵ *De exhortatione castitatis* does not deal primarily with virginity but instead is concerned with advising against a second marriage, a subject which he addresses again in *Ad uxorem*, *De pudicitia*, and *De monogamia*. Nevertheless, the opening chapter provides a useful definition of the several species of chastity. Tertullian creates a model for chastity: ‘The first species is, virginity from one’s birth: the second, virginity from one’s *second* birth, that is, from the font; which (second virginity) either in the marriage state keeps (its subject) pure by mutual compact, or else perseveres in widowhood from choice: a third grade remains, monogamy, when, after the interception of a marriage once contracted, there is thereafter a renunciation of sexual connection.’ Tertullian, *De exhortatione castitatis* (*On exhortation to chastity*), I, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers: Fathers of the Third Century. Tertullian, Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Parts First and Second*, (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1885]), pp. 50-58, (p. 50). Tertullian’s distinction of the three species of chastity remains within the tradition, but by the fourth century, these become defined as virginity, widowhood (chastity after marriage), and chaste marriage. Saint Aldhelm’s seventh-century treatise, *De virginitate*, however, differs slightly as he promotes the renunciation of marital relations rather than marital chastity. It is thought that this is due to the audience that he was addressing. Michael Lapidge comments: ‘The new feature is ‘chastity,’ the state attained by someone who has once been married but who has rejected this marriage for the religious life. This newly devised category allowed Aldhelm to praise by implication these Barking nuns such as Cuthburg who had spurned their marriages; at the same time it allowed him to praise ‘pure’ virginity in traditional terms.’ Michael Lapidge, ‘Introduction to *De virginitate*’, in *Aldhelm: The Prose Works*, trans. Michael Lapidge and Michael Herren (Ipswich and Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1979), pp. 51-58, (p. 56).

³⁶ With regard to the difficulty of dating Tertullian’s works, A. Cleveland Coxe, in his ‘Introductory note’, quotes Thelwell, a translator of Tertullian, who says: ‘To arrange chronologically the works (especially if numerous) of an author whose own date is known with tolerable precision, is not always or necessarily easy: witness the controversies as to the succession of St. Paul’s epistles. To do so in the case of an author whose own date is itself a matter of controversy may therefore be reasonably expected to still less so; and such is the predicament of him who attempts to perform this task for Tertullian’. Thelwell, quoted by A. Cleveland Coxe, ‘Introductory note’ to *Ante Nicene Fathers*, Vol. III, *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian. I. Apologetic; II. Anti-Marcion; III. Ethical*, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995), pp. 1-16, (p. 8). Saint Jerome considers two of the treatises especially heretical: ‘In particular, he composed against the church the works *On Modesty*; *On Persecution*; *On Fasting*; *On Monogamy*; six books *On Ecstasy* and a seventh [added] which he composed *Against Apollonius*.’ Jerome, ‘LIII. Tertullian the presbyter’, p. 74.

virginibus velandis in particular is of interest for the subject of virginity.³⁷ Although many of Tertullian's later ascetic works express Montanist attitudes,³⁸ in *De virginibus velandis* (which may date from his Montanist period)³⁹ he appears very concerned about the adherence to religious orthodoxy.⁴⁰ To that effect, he makes a statement concerning the *regula fidei*:

The rule of faith, indeed is altogether one, alone immoveable and irreformable; the rule, to wit, of believing in one only God omnipotent, the Creator of the universe, and His Son Jesus Christ, born of the Virgin Mary, crucified under Pontius Pilate, raised again the third day from the dead, received in the heavens, sitting now at the right (hand) of the Father, destined to judge quick and dead through the resurrection of the flesh as well (as of the spirit).⁴¹

This statement of faith reads like the Nicene Creed, but pre-empts it by more than a century.⁴² Tertullian asserts that only the religious truths encapsulated in this *credo*, the

³⁷ For an interpretation of *De virginibus velandis* from a rhetorical viewpoint, see: Geoffrey D. Dunn, 'Rhetoric and Tertullian's "De virginibus velandis"', *Vigiliae Christianae*, Vol. 59, No. 1 (Feb., 2005), pp. 1-30. He says: 'My argument is that *de virginibus velandis* should not be termed simply an ascetic treatise but a rhetorical treatise about asceticism' (Dunn, 'Rhetoric and Tertullian's "De virginibus velandis"', p. 5) and that 'Tertullian did have a theology of ascetical living. It was shaped by his interpretation of the Scriptures, Christian tradition, and natural law. These were the building blocks that provided material for rhetorical presentation' (Dunn, 'Rhetoric and Tertullian's "De virginibus velandis"', p. 8).

³⁸ Tertullian's Montanist writings are identified by certain characteristically Montanist references: 'Those features are: the naming of the three Montanist founders or their oracles, references to the New Prophecy, promotion of ecstasy, reference to special spiritual gifts, reference to the Holy Spirit as Paraclete, first-person references to Montanists, second-person references to Catholics and abuse of Catholics as 'psychici'. This draws in a catch of the following treatises: *Against Marcion* (particularly books four and five), *Against the Valentiniens*, *On the Soul*, *On the Resurrection of the Dead*, *On the Military Crown*, *On Exhortation to Chastity*, *On Flight in Time of Persecution*, *On the Veiling of Virgins*, *Against Praxeas*, *On Fasting*, *On Monogamy*, and *On Modesty*.' Dunn, *Tertullian*, pp. 7-8.

³⁹ There is some debate concerning the dating of Tertullian's treatises and also which were written in his Montanist phase. Whereas Dunn believes that *De virginibus velandis* exhibits Montanist characteristics (cf. Dunn, *Tertullian*, pp. 7-8), F.L Cross claims that it was written 'before his lapse to Montanism, i.e. before 207'. F. L. Cross, *The Early Christian Writers*, (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co., 1960), p. 145.

⁴⁰ Cf. Benson: 'Tertullian seems to have effected the restoration of the usual dress. Cyprian has no complaint against departures from the rule. And if this be so we may remark here one of the instances in which Tertullian's Montanism was no bar to his Catholic influence.' Edward White Benson, *Cyprian: His Life. His Times. His Works* (New York: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1897), pp. 53-4.

⁴¹ Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis* (*On the Veiling of Virgins*), I. iv, in *Ante Nicene Fathers*, Vol. IV. *Tertullian, Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Parts First and Second*, trans. S. Thewell, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1885]), pp. 27-38, (p. 27).

⁴² Tertullian's works seem to be the earliest testament to the wording which appears in the Nicene and Apostles' Creed. Other works of his which provide similar wording to the *Credo* are *Against Praxeas* 2 and *De Praeceptis* 13 and 26. For a discussion of the Apostles' Creed and its development in relation to the

fundamental aspects of the faith, cannot be questioned, but any other religious custom can be queried and corrected, especially if it contradicts the one ‘immoveable and irreformable’ rule of faith. The custom which he is looking to reform in the treatise is not the practice of ritual celibacy itself; it is notable that at no point does Tertullian question the validity of virginity, and so it appears that by the early third century Christian virginity was already an accomplished fact even if it was not fully regulated.⁴³ The custom that Tertullian challenges in *De virginibus velandis* is the freedom, apparently sanctioned by the bishop, allowed to virgins over the choice of whether to veil in church or not.⁴⁴ Such freedom, Tertullian concedes, did once accord with truth, because it allowed virgins the exercise of their free will, which is vital in choosing the state of

struggle between Adoptionist and Logos-Christology, see Kirsopp Lake, ‘The Apostles’ Creed’, *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (Apr., 1924), 173-183. Arnold Ehrhardt’s essay on ‘Christianity before the Apostles’ Creed’ discusses the origin of the Apostles’ Creed: how far it can be traced back, the possibility of its developing as part of a baptismal catechesis and whether it was used as a touchstone for orthodoxy, and whether, without the formulated creed, there was any consensus among Christians as to the content of the faith. Cf. Arnold Ehrhardt, ‘Christianity before the Apostles’ Creed’, *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 55, No. 2 (Apr., 1962), 73-119.

⁴³ In other treatises, Tertullian, like later writers, perceived the justification of virginity in scripture, most notably Christ’s allusion to the three types of Eunuchs in Matthew 19: 12, and Saint Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians. The words of Christ and Saint Paul which commend virginity as the perfect way of life are underlined by their own personal adherence to the lifestyle, and it is this dual authority that is recognised as the basis for the pre-eminence of the virginal life: ‘The Lord Himself opens ‘the kingdoms of the heavens’ to ‘eunuchs’ as being Himself, withal, a virgin; to whom looking, the apostle also – himself too for this reason abstinent – gives the preference to continence.’ Tertullian, *De monogamia (On Monogamy)*, III, in *Ante Nicene Fathers*, Vol. IV. *Tertullian, Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Parts First and Second*, trans. S. Thewell, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1885]), pp. 59-73, (p. 60); Also see *De pudicitia (On Modesty)*, VI, in *Ante Nicene Fathers*, Vol. IV. *Tertullian, Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Parts First and Second*, trans. S. Thewell, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1885]), pp. 74-101, (p. 79).

⁴⁴ Dunn describes the type of veil that Tertullian is referring to: ‘The Roman mantle worn by all post-pubescent women outdoors perhaps was more of a shawl that was draped around the body, a little like a male toga, which could be pulled up over the head when needed (when out of one’s home) thus leaving the face exposed (Croom 2000: 87-8). It was the distinctive sign of the married woman and her modesty. Yet we do not know what adult unmarried women wore when in public. It may be that the push for not wearing the veil among unmarried females who had left childhood behind was not restricted only to the Christians, although there is no evidence to suggest this.’ Dunn, *Tertullian*, p. 141.

virginity over marriage.⁴⁵ Despite this concession, Tertullian asserts that the ‘adversary of good things’ has destroyed the connection between truth and this particular custom. Not only does the freedom of choice encourage a diversity of practice⁴⁶ - and he implies, the unity of the Church partly rests on a unity of practice⁴⁷ - but also the custom has been abused:

The virgins of men go about, in contrast to the virgins of God, with the[ir] front completely exposed, roused into impudent boldness; and virgins are seen who are able to seek something from men, not only a deed so that, doubtless, their rivals – with so much more freedom as the handmaids of Christ alone – may be surrendered to those women.⁴⁸

Tertullian is concerned with the difference between the ‘virgins of God’ (*virgines dei*), who demonstrate their modesty through veiling, and the ‘virgins of men’ (*virgines hominum*), who not only expose themselves in Church but also use this freedom to fraternise with men. Tertullian had already written a short objection to the practice of allowing virgins to remain unveiled in his treatise *De Oratione (On Prayer)*,⁴⁹ but *De virginibus velandis* has a more urgent tone. The faction in the Church who supported the unveiling of virgins appears, like Tertullian, to have been seeking a unity of practice

⁴⁵ Cf. Tertullian: ‘The matter has been left to choice, for each virgin to veil herself or expose herself, as she might have chosen, just as (she had equal liberty) as to marrying, which itself withal is neither enforced nor prohibited.’ Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, III.i, p. 28.

⁴⁶ Tertullian does allude to some churches in which virgins veiled: ‘Throughout Greece, and certain of its barbaric provinces, the majority of Churches keep their virgins covered. There are places, too, beneath this (African) sky, where this practice obtains; lest any ascribe the custom to Greek or Barbarian Gentilehood.’ Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, II.i, p. 28.

⁴⁷ Cf. Tertullian: ‘They and we have one faith, one God, the same Christ, the same hope, the same baptismal sacraments; let me say it once for all, we are one Church. Thus, whatever belongs to our brethren is ours: only, the body divides us.’ Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, II.iii, p. 28.

⁴⁸ (My translation). *Ambiunt virgines hominum adversus virgines dei, nuda plane fronte temerarie in audaciam excitatae, et virgines videntur, quae aliquid a viris petere possunt, nedum tale factum, ut scilicet aemulae earum, tanto magis liberae quanto christi solius ancillae, dedantur illis.* Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, III.iii, PL 2. 892.

⁴⁹ Cf. Tertullian, *De Oratione (On Prayer)*, XXI-XXII, in *Ante Nicene Fathers*, Vol. III, *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian. I. Apologetic; II. Anti-Marcion; III. Ethical*, trans. Dr. Holmes, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995), pp. 681-692, (pp. 687-9).

among virgins, but they demanded the universal unveiling of virgins.⁵⁰ In the treatise, Tertullian interrogates which of these two customs is more in line with the truth and discipline of God.⁵¹

Geoffrey Dunn questions who the virgins to whom the tract is addressed were.⁵² The question is an important one since the answer has a bearing on the place of *De virginibus velandis* in the tradition of virginity. Dunn notes that in late second-century Carthage there were groups of consecrated virgins,⁵³ but his conclusion on the identity of the virgins errs on the side of caution:

My conclusion, based on *On the Veiling of Virgins* 11.4⁵⁴ is that Tertullian was writing about Christian girls who had reached puberty and were not yet married as well as with those who had taken a vow of virginity (*continentiae uotum*) who could have been adolescent or adult (although such a distinction did not operate at this time).⁵⁵

⁵⁰ In *De Oratione*, Tertullian seems to accept the divergence of practice, as long as the modest virgins are allowed to choose to veil: ‘Granted that *virgins* be not *compelled* to be veiled, at all events such as *voluntarily* are so should not be prohibited; who, likewise, cannot deny themselves to be virgins, content, in the security, of a good conscience before God, to damage their own fame.’ Tertullian, *De Oratione*, XXII, p. 689. In *De virginibus velandis*, he notes that the unveiled virgins have been complaining about those who veil: “‘We are scandalized,” they say, “because others walk otherwise (than we do);” and they prefer being “scandalized” to being provoked (to modesty). A “scandal,” if I mistake not, is an example of a bad, tending to sinful edification. Good things scandalize none but an evil mind. If modesty, if bashfulness, if contempt of glory, anxious to please God alone, are good things, let women who are “scandalized” by such good learn to acknowledge their own evil.’ Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, III.iv-v, pp. 28-9.

⁵¹ Cf. Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, II, p. 28.

⁵² Cf. Dunn: ‘Just who were these virgins whom Tertullian was addressing? Were they merely rebellious and unruly unmarried teenage girls or was it a group of consecrated virgins?’ Dunn, *Tertullian*, p. 140.

⁵³ Cf. Dunn: ‘We know that in Carthage in Tertullian’s time there were women and men who were each constituted as an *ordo* of virgins (*On Exhortation to Chastity* 13.4), just as there was an *ordo* of widows (*On the Veiling of Virgins* 16.4).’ Dunn, *Tertullian*, p. 140. Tertullian’s evidence in *De exhortatione castitatis* is as follows: ‘How many men, therefore, and how many women, in Ecclesiastical Orders, owe their position to continence, who have preferred to be wedded to God; who have restored the honour of their flesh, and who have already dedicated themselves as sons of that (future) age, by slaying in themselves the concupiscence of lust, and that whole (propensity) which could not be admitted within Paradise!’ Tertullian, *De exhortatione castitatis*, XIII, p. 58. See also Dunn, *Tertullian*, p. 140.

⁵⁴ The passage to which Dunn is referring runs thus: ‘But even if it is “on account of the angels” that she is to be veiled, doubtless the age from which the law of the veil will come into operation will be that from which “the daughters of men” were able to invite concupiscence of their persons, and to experience marriage. For a *virgin* ceases to be a *virgin* from the time that it becomes possible for her *not* to be one.’ Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, XI.iv, p. 34.

⁵⁵ Dunn, *Tertullian*, pp. 140-1.

Certainly, as Dunn points out, there are parts of the treatise which appear to be addressing pre-marital virgins.⁵⁶ Likewise, in *De Oratione*, Tertullian makes a clear appeal to virgins who are anticipating marriage to veil.⁵⁷ In other parts of *De Oratione* Tertullian evidently addresses consecrated virgins and this is also true of *De virginibus velandis*.⁵⁸ For instance, the recognition of the freedom to choose virginity over marriage indicates a choice of perpetual virginity, and at times he refers to virginity as a state dedicated to God.⁵⁹ Tertullian also uses the metaphor of the *sponsa Christi*, the Bride of Christ, in the treatise, and although Dunn concedes that this implies consecration, he does so cautiously.⁶⁰

Tertullian states at the start of the treatise that his purpose is to ‘show in Latin also that it behoves our virgins to be veiled from the time that they have passed the turning-point of their age’.⁶¹ Tertullian’s treatise, then, purports to argue for a universal veiling of virgins. However, throughout the treatise the real anxiety seems to concern the consecrated virgins whose outward appearance belies their vocation. Tertullian consistently questions the assertion that unveiling is a symbol of virginity, and demonstrates instead that unveiling can never bear witness to a woman’s sexual purity. In

⁵⁶ Chapters XI-XII (Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, pp. 34-5) seem particularly to relate to unmarried women who are nevertheless anticipating marriage.

⁵⁷ Cf. Tertullian: ‘Touching such, however, as are betrothed, I can with constancy “above my small measure” pronounce and attest that they are to be veiled from that day forth on which they shuddered at the first bodily touch of a man by kiss and hand. For in them everything has been forewedded: their age, through maturity; their flesh, through age; their spirit, through consciousness; their modesty, through the experience of the kiss; their hope, through expectation; their mind, through volition.’ Tertullian, *De Oratione*, XXII, p. 689.

⁵⁸ Cf. Tertullian: ‘But some particular virgin has devoted herself to God. From that very moment she both changes the fashion of her hair, and converts all her garb into that of a “woman.” Let her, then, maintain the character wholly, and perform the whole function of a “virgin:” what she conceals for the sake of God, let her cover quite over.’ Tertullian, *De Oratione*, XXII, p. 688.

⁵⁹ Cf. Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, III, p. 29.

⁶⁰ Cf. Dunn: ‘At the end of our treatise Tertullian refers to the virgins as being married to Christ (*On the Veiling of Virgins* 16.4). Unless we are reading this with too modern an understanding, one may conclude that there were virgins who dedicated themselves to remain as virgins for the rest of their lives (or perhaps only for a period of years, although there is no evidence to suggest this).’ Dunn, *Tertullian*, p. 140.

⁶¹ Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, I.i, p. 27.

fact, the insistence on exposure, he argues, suggests that these so-called virgins are not sexually pure at all. Unveiling is a false signifier: it demonstrates that the virgins are immodest and either guilty of concupiscence, in desiring to solicit male attention, or they are guilty of pride and vainglory, in desiring to gain a mark of distinction in the Church. The disturbing implication of Tertullian's objection is that virgins dedicated to God, in whom the Church rejoices, are not virgins at all and that the Church encourages the adoption of false virginity.

ii. Types of Virgin

It is unclear in the treatise whether the virgins who had decided to veil and those who remained unveiled were consecrated virgins or not. One of the difficulties in understanding the treatise is Tertullian's use of the term *virgo*, which he utilises indiscriminately throughout. This seems to be purposive, as it highlights the problem of the term. There are several nuances of 'virgin': natural virginity, which is attendant on the state of childish innocence; a purely physical virginity, which is secular and may already anticipate the marriage state (betrothed virgins and unmarried women); and consecrated virginity, a religious identity dedicated to Christ. Tertullian sometimes uses *virgo* in an ironic manner to indicate women who claim to be 'virgins' by exposing their head, but who he argues are already corrupt – in mind if not in spirit; such women may remain unmarried and even physically intact but they have no claim to virginity. Often Tertullian will use an adjective which appears to distinguish true virginity, such as '*virginis sanctae*', or '*virginis bonae*' (the former particularly seems to imply a state of consecrated virginity).⁶² Another problem with the identification of the types of virgins

⁶² '*virginis bonae*' (cf. III.vii) '*virginis sanctae*' (cf. II.v). Both Dunn's translation (2004) and that of the Rev. S. Thelwall (1885) minimise the allusions to a state of consecrated virginity. For instance, Dunn

referred to in the treatise is perhaps owing to the nature of consecrated virginity in the early third century. Women took private vows and practised virginity in the domestic sphere;⁶³ they were not, therefore, the distinct group that characterises the communal living of later centuries. Thus avowed virgins were not a publicly visible group, and in Tertullian's treatise it appears that at this time they do not as yet have their own designated place to sit in the church.⁶⁴ Hence there is a real tension, which Tertullian draws out in the treatise, between what ought to be the private, concealed nature of the virgin of God, a virgin 'known to herself alone and to God,'⁶⁵ and the public display of the virginal body through the practice of unveiling.⁶⁶

In order to demonstrate the error of his opponents' call for a universal unveiling, Tertullian uses strong language to explain how destructive exposure is to the state of true

translates '*virginis sanctae*' as 'of a pure virgin' (the Latin adjective for pure is *purus, a, um*, and is used by Tertullian at other points in the treatise: cf. 'pura virginitas' XV.i) and Thelwall translates '*virginis sanctae*' as 'of a chaste virgin' (the Latin adjective for chaste is *castus, a, um*). A more obvious translation, which points towards a state of consecration is 'holy virgins', or even 'sacred virgins'.

⁶³ Cf. Elm: 'There was, in fact, only one place for a young and financially dependent woman to cultivate a religious life apart: paradoxically, in her own family.' Susanna Elm, '*Virgins of God*' *The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 35. Elm's study is, however, restricted to the fourth-century development of monasticism as we have very little information on early ascetic practices in Christianity. Benson notes: 'They entered on the life by private resolution. Not by public vow.' Benson, *Cyprian*, p. 53. Tertullian does, however, appear to allude to a system of charitable support of virgins, as he states in *De virginibus velandis* that 'the brotherhood readily undertakes the maintenance of virgins' (*De virginibus velandis*, XIV, p. 36). This may allude to the charitable provision of financial support, enabling women to pursue the religious life. It may, however, be a sarcastic comment and allude to a sexual maintenance.

⁶⁴ Tertullian acknowledges that there is a designated place for the order of widows to sit in church, but there does not appear to be the same privilege accorded to virgins. He says: 'nothing in the way of public honour is permitted to a virgin.' (Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, IX.vi, p. 33). Charlotte Methuen discusses the order of widows in the Early Church and suggests that the term 'widow' is ambiguous and can refer to women who have left their husbands. She also draws parallels between the order of widows and consecrated virgins, and suggests that these terms can be used interchangeably in early writings. She says: 'the terms *virgin* and *widow* thus carried a shared connotation: that of living a sexually chaste life.' Charlotte Methuen, 'The "virgin widow": A problematic Social Role for the Early Church?', *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 90, No. 3 (July, 1997), 285-298, (p. 287).

⁶⁵ Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, XV.iii, p. 36. 'sibi soli et deo nota.'

⁶⁶ Benson states: 'Self-dedication to the unmarried state was considered a Christian 'Work' in the same sense in which Almsgiving was 'Work.' [...] The right conception of the 'work' was, says Tertullian, (and that it usually prevailed, he implies,) that it should be as secret as alms deeds and prayer.' Benson, *Cyprian*, p. 52.

virginity and to those virgins who have chosen to veil out of modesty but are under pressure to expose themselves:

Every public exposure of an honourable virgin is (to her) a suffering of rape: and yet the suffering of carnal violence is the less (evil), because it comes of natural office. But when the very spirit itself is violated in a virgin by the abstraction of her covering, she has learnt to lose what she used to keep. O sacrilegious hands, which have had the hardihood to drag off a dress dedicated to God! [...] You have denuded a maiden in regard of her head, and forthwith she wholly ceases to be a virgin to herself; she has undergone a change!⁶⁷

Tertullian's description of the spiritual rape (*stupri*) of the honourable virgin (*virginis bonae*) suggests that the type of virginity which he is describing here is consecrated virginity. He speaks of the veil as particularly associated with consecration: it is a garment dedicated to God (*dicatum deo habitum*). His outraged address to those 'sacrilegious hands' (*sacrilegae manus*) which would drag off the holy garment of the virgin implies that the act of unveiling is tantamount to the desecration of a religious object.⁶⁸ Tertullian's assertion that this figurative rape, through the removal of the veil, is even worse than physical rape indicates that he understands virginity to be more than simply located in physical intactness: he privileges spiritual virginity over the physical.

iii. Cultural Significance of the Veil

⁶⁷ Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, III.vii-viii, p. 29. Cf. Tertullian: 'Omnis publicatio virginis bonae stupri passio est. Et tamen vim carnis pati minus est, quia de officio naturae venit; sed cum spiritus ipse violatur in virgine sublato velamine, didicit amittere, quod tuebatur. O sacrilegae manus, quae dicatum deo habitum detrahare potuerunt! [...] Denudasti puellam a capite et nota iam sibi virgo non est, alia est facta.' *Patrologia Latina*, 2, 0887-0914A.

⁶⁸ The implication that anyone who has despoiled a virgin has committed an act of sacrilege is more pronounced in the later tradition. Cf. Pseudo-Ambrose: 'What, however, shall I say about you, son of the serpent, minister of the devil, violator of the Temple of God: you who in one sin perpetrated two crimes, adultery certainly and sacrilege? Sacrilege simply, when with insane rashness you defiled the vessel offered to Christ, dedicated to the Lord.' Pseudo-Ambrose, *De lapsu consecratae virginis*, IX.xxxix (My translation).

By reading it as a signifier of virginity itself, Tertullian offers a radical reinterpretation of the veil. It is clear from the arguments posed by Tertullian's opponents that the veil is culturally associated with marriage. The unveiled virgins did not wish to adopt the veil as it was a recognised signifier of marriage and thus its adoption appeared to them to be tantamount to an admission of the guilt of sexual experience; it would be unthinkable, they claimed, for a veiled virgin to look like a sexually experienced woman.⁶⁹ The association of the veil with marriage and sexual experience appears to derive from cultural marriage practices. In Judaic culture, when a girl reached puberty she would be married, and thus the point at which she ceased to be a 'virgin' coincided with her attainment of sexual maturity, the point at which she became a 'woman'.⁷⁰ The Roman age for women to be married was similar.⁷¹ Prior to the advent of Christianity and its

⁶⁹ Cf. Tertullian: 'they use the name of woman in such a way as to think it inapplicable save to her alone who has known a man.' Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, V.i, p. 30.

⁷⁰ Cf. Phipps: 'In the traditional Semitic culture marriage was covenanted near the age of puberty and intimate male-female association was not sanctioned prior to marriage.' William E. Phipps, 'The Plight of the Song of Songs', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (Mar., 1974), 82-100, (p. 83). Cf. Derret: 'Pious Jews in Paul's day gave their daughters in marriage at puberty or a little before. The Qumran sect, according to a great authority, required their male members not to marry until they were twenty (instead of the usual seventeen) and to marry girls who could distinguish between good and evil, which (as a reform) seems to insist on their actually having attained puberty.' J. Duncan M. Derrett, 'The Disposal of Virgins', *Man*, New Series, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Mar., 1974), 23-30, (p. 26). Cf. McNamara: 'In theory, there should have been no unmarried women among the followers of Jesus. Jewish females were expected to marry at puberty. Although ancient tradition reserved a young girl's right to refuse a marriage arranged by her parents before she matured, it did not give her the right to reject marriage itself, which was prescribed for all Jews.' McNamara, *A New Song*, p. 8.

⁷¹ Walsh notes: 'The [Roman] bride could legally be as young as twelve, and in senatorial families girls were frequently married by their early or middle teens to men considerably older, in order to cement close-knit relations between the families and dominant class.' P. G. Walsh, 'Introduction' to *De bono coniugali and De sancta virginitate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. xii-xiii. Also, Tertullian makes reference of heathenish marital practices: 'Time even the heathens observe, that, in obedience to the law of nature, they may render their own rights to the different ages. For their *females* they dispatch to their businesses from (the age of) twelve years, but the *male* from two years later; decreeing puberty (to consist) in years, not in espousals or nuptials.' Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, XI.x, p. 34. Cf. Alberici and Harlow: 'A period of female youth is often dismissed because of an apparently early age of marriage. This view fails to take into account that the legal minimum age of marriage for girls, which was twelve, was exactly that – an appropriate *minimum* age. Twelve might be considered a reasonable age for the end of childhood, but certainly not all girls married at that age. [...] A lower age of marriage, previously associated with girls from pagan families, was in fact a class distinction, indicating that the trend for an earlier age of marriage was common among elite families but not among the population as a whole. The

authorisation of perpetual virginity, the term ‘virgin’ would have indicated a young, unmarried girl. Culturally a child was not required to veil, and this seems to be used by Tertullian’s opponents to assert a past precedent for the custom of keeping all virgins unveiled.⁷² Tertullian declares that this particular type of virginity, that is, natural virginity, ceases at puberty with sexual awakening:

For a *virgin* ceases to be a *virgin* from the time that it becomes possible for her *not* to be one. And accordingly, among Israel, it is unlawful to deliver one to a husband except after the attestation by blood of her maturity; thus, before this indication, the nature is unripe. Therefore if she is a *virgin* so long as she is unripe, she ceases to be a *virgin* when she is perceived to be ripe; and, as *not-virgin*, is now subject to the law, just as she is to marriage.⁷³

Tertullian argued that the coincidence of marriage with puberty had obscured the real cultural reason for the adoption of the veil; it should not be read as signifying marriage, but rather sexual maturity. The sexual awakening attendant on puberty, Tertullian argued, can be seen as a form of marriage:

Another secret mother, Nature, and another hidden father, Time, have wedded their daughter to their own laws. Behold that *virgin-daughter* of yours already wedded – her soul by expectancy, her flesh by transformation – for whom you are preparing a second husband!⁷⁴

maintenance of wealth and property would have been much more of a concern for affluent families, who would therefore want to secure marriage alliances as soon as possible.’ Lisa A. Alberici and Mary Harlow, ‘Age and Innocence: Female Transitions to Adulthood in Late Antiquity’, *Hesperis Supplementa*, Vol. 41, *Constructions of Childhood in Ancient Greece and Italy* (2007), 193-203, (pp. 194-5).

⁷² Although Tertullian reinforces the cultural norm of allowing children to remain unveiled in the treatise (Cf. Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, XI, p. 34), he does not recognise this as justification for the unveiling of all virgins. The childish virgin should be veiled only ‘from the time when she begins to be self-conscious, and to awake to the sense of her own nature, and to emerge from the virgin’s (sense), and to experience that novel (sensation) which belongs to the succeeding age’. Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, XI.ii, p. 34. Tertullian likens the change in consciousness to that of Adam and Eve after the Fall: ‘For withal the founders of the race, Adam and Eve, so long as they were without intelligence, went “naked;” but after they tasted of “the tree of recognition,” they were first sensible of nothing more than the cause of their shame. Thus they each marked their intelligence of their own sex by a covering’. Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, XI.iii, p. 34. Cf. Benson: ‘as girls under the betrothal age of twelve years wore no veils, a claim had been made by certain dedicated virgins to continue the symbolic freedom of the age of innocence, and at least in church to lay aside the covering which elsewhere public opinion enforced.’ Benson, *Cyprian*, p. 53.

⁷³ Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, XI.iv-v, p. 34.

⁷⁴ Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, XI.vii-viii, p. 34.

Tertullian catches his opponents in a double-bind, using their understanding of the significance of the veil as well as his own to gain his point: if the veil indicates sexuality and marriage, as Tertullian's opponents claim, then virgins who anticipate marriage must veil because they have already lost the virginity of the mind. In support of this argument, Tertullian cites the scriptural example of Rebecca (Genesis 24: 64, 65), who veiled her head as soon as she learned that she was to be married.⁷⁵ Also, cultural practices support this reading: brides are brought to the groom veiled, as if they are already married in their heart.⁷⁶ Such an expectation of marriage comes with sexual maturity, and, therefore, all girls should veil when they reach puberty. If, on the other hand, the veil signifies modesty as Tertullian asserts, then yet again all virgins should veil from the age of puberty, for it is the time when women come of an age to invite concupiscence, as well as to anticipate it in themselves. The veil, therefore, seems to have several different meanings and Tertullian utilises them all to support his argument.

iv. Women and Virgins

In their argument, the unveiled virgins cited I Corinthians 7, in which Saint Paul makes a distinction between virgins and (married) women in order to claim a biblical sanction for the unveiling of virgins.⁷⁷ In this passage, they claimed that Paul uses the term 'woman' to mean 'married woman'.⁷⁸ Such an interpretation of the meaning of 'woman', they

⁷⁵ Cf. Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, XI.vii, p. 34.

⁷⁶ Cf. Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, XI, p. 34.

⁷⁷ Cf. Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, IV, p. 29. Cf. Paul: 'But he that is with a wife, is solicitous for the things of the world, how he may please his wife: and he is divided. And the unmarried woman and the virgin thinketh on the things of the Lord, that she may be holy in both in body and in spirit. But she that is married thinketh on the things of the world, how she may please her husband' (I Corinthians 7: 33-4).

⁷⁸ Tertullian also discusses this argument in *De Oratione*: 'For they who allow to virgins immunity from head covering, appear to rest on this; that the apostle has not defined "virgins" by name, but "women," as "to be veiled;" nor the sex generally, so as to say "females," but a *class* of the sex, by saying "women:" for if he had named the sex by saying "females," he would have made his limit absolute for *every* woman; but while he names one class of the sex, he separates another class by being silent. For, they say, he might

argue, exempts them from Saint Paul's requirement for women to veil in I Corinthians

11. He makes no such stipulation for the veiling of 'virgins':⁷⁹

Every man praying or prophesying with his head covered, disgraceth his head. But every woman praying or prophesying with her head not covered, disgraceth her head: for it is all one as if she were shaven. For if a woman be not covered, let her be shorn. But if it be a shame to a woman to be shorn or made bald, let her cover her head. (I Corinthians 11: 4-6)⁸⁰

The argument against veiling, then, pivots on the assumption that the term 'woman' always refers to a sexually experienced female, and thus assumes that 'virgin' is a diametrically opposed category to 'woman'. Although Tertullian does accept that sometimes in Scripture 'woman' does have this nuance,⁸¹ at other times, he says, it signifies the whole species of womankind. Saint Paul's injunction for women to veil expresses the latter nuance not least because he does not make a separate recommendation for virgins.⁸² Tertullian explains that Saint Paul separates 'virgins' and 'women' in I Corinthians 7 only insofar as (married) women are concerned for the things of their husbands, whereas the virgin is concerned with the things of the Lord. Saint Paul's passage in I Corinthians 11, he says, is not concerned with the distinction that he

either have named "virgins" specially; or generally, by a compendious term "females". Tertullian, *De Oratione*, XXI, p. 687.

⁷⁹ Cf. Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, IV, pp. 29-30.

⁸⁰ The full section runs as follows: 'But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God. Every man praying or prophesying with his head covered, disgraceth his head. But every woman praying or prophesying with her head not covered, disgraceth her head: for it is all one as if she were shaven. For if a woman be not covered, let her be shorn. But if it be a shame to a woman to be shorn or made bald, let her cover her head. The man indeed ought not to cover his head, because he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of the man. For the man is not of the woman, but the woman of the man. For the man was not created for the woman, but the woman for the man. Therefore ought the woman to have a power over her head, because of the angels' (I Corinthians 11: 3-10).

⁸¹ In *De Carne Christi*, Tertullian reads a biblical reference to 'woman' as referring to a sexually experienced woman; here 'woman' refers to 'the condition of the "opened womb" which ensues in marriage'. In the same treatise he says that the Apostle's reference to Mary as 'a woman' refers to her station as a wife rather than a virgin. Tertullian, *De Carne Christi*, XXIII, p. 541.

⁸² Cf. Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, IV, pp. 29-30. Tertullian also demonstrates that Paul's other recommendations for women's behaviour, such as not being permitted to speak in Church, and not to hold sacerdotal office, is likewise appropriate behaviour for virgins. Cf. Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, IX, p. 33.

makes in chapter 7, but groups virgins and wives into the general term ‘women’ as the command is applicable to both parties.⁸³ Tertullian clarifies the terms:

The word (expressing the) *natural* (distinction) is *female*. Of the natural word, the *general* word is *woman*. Of the *general*, again, the *special* is *virgin*, or *wife*, or *widow*, or whatever other names, even of the successive stages of life, are added hereto. Subject, therefore, the *special* is to the *general* (because the general is prior); and the *succedent* to the *antecedent*, and the *partial* to the *universal*: (each) is implied in the word itself to which it is subject; and is signified in it, because contained in it.⁸⁴

Tertullian’s explanation of the terms seems to be as follows: the *natural* expresses the distinction of the female from the male (this distinction applies to all creatures); the *general* distinguishes the female human (woman) from female creatures and also from the human male (man); and the *special* distinguishes between subcategories of ‘woman: the virgin, wife, and widow. In support of his understanding that virgins are included in a more generic category of women, Tertullian provides scriptural evidence that both Eve (pre-fall) and the Blessed Virgin Mary are referred to in the Bible as ‘virgins’ and ‘women’ although they are sexually inexperienced.⁸⁵ Tertullian is also quick to point out that the virgins in the Corinthian church, the descendants of the Christian community to whom Saint Paul addressed his letter, veil their virgins and so their practice supports his interpretation of the epistle’s meaning.⁸⁶

v. Exposed Virgins

The exposed virgins, apart from being reluctant to veil because it identified them as sexually experienced ‘women’, also rejected the veil because they wished to be visually

⁸³ Tertullian says: ‘in these (passages), in which he [Saint Paul] does *not* name a *virgin*, he points out (by not making the distinction) community of condition.’ Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, IV.ii, p. 29.

⁸⁴ Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, IV.vii-viii, pp. 29-30

⁸⁵ Cf. Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, V-VI, pp. 30-1.

⁸⁶ Tertullian states: ‘So, too, did the Corinthians themselves understand him. In fact, at this day the Corinthians do veil their *virgins*. What the apostle taught, their disciples approve.’ Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, VIII.viii, p. 33.

distinguishable from married women. Such a desire for attention seems to indicate vainglory and the fault of pride on the part of the virgins who have been consecrated. Tertullian exposes the arrogance of such a move by noting that the ‘*spadones voluntarii*’, apparently male virgins (an allusion to the voluntary eunuchs in Matthew’s Gospel which authorises virginity in Christ’s own words),⁸⁷ are not afforded a special privilege in church to increase their distinction, even though they deserve greater merit as it is harder for them to remain continent due to men’s natural ardour for women.⁸⁸ He takes the issue *ad absurdum* by stating that if virgins can claim a mark of distinction in the church by unveiling, then male virgins should claim a similar distinction by veiling: an utterly ridiculous proposition.⁸⁹ Tertullian also relates an anecdote of a virgin who, apparently for vainglory, had decided to sit in the space reserved for the community of widows in the church. Benson notes that the bishop had allowed the virgin to sit amongst the widows.⁹⁰ Tertullian exclaims at such a monstrosity as a virgin-widow, whose bare head belied the testimony of her seat:

⁸⁷ Cf. Matthew: ‘For there are eunuchs, who were born so from their mother’s womb: and there are eunuchs, who were made so by men: and there are eunuchs, who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven. He that can take it, let him take it’ (Matthew 19: 12).

⁸⁸ Cf. Tertullian: ‘The more their sex is eager and warm towards females, so much the more toil does the continence of (this) greater ardour involve; and therefore the worthier is it of all ostentation, if ostentation of virginity is dignity.’ Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, X.iii, p. 33.

⁸⁹ Tertullian states that unveiling is not permitted ‘on the ground of any distinction whatever. Otherwise, it were sufficiently discourteous, that while *females*, subjected as they are throughout to men, bear in their front the honourable mark of their virginity, whereby they may be looked up to and gazed at on all sides and magnified by the brethren, so many *men-virgins*, so many voluntary eunuchs, should carry their glory in secret, carrying no token to make *them*, too, illustrious. For *they*, too, will be bound to claim some distinction for themselves [...] let the opposite course be taken, and let them lurk in the churches with head *veiled*.’ Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, X.i-ii, p. 33. It appears from this discussion that neither male nor female virgins had a distinct place in the church.

⁹⁰ Cf. Benson: ‘The order of sexagenarian “Widows,” (who must have married but once and brought up children,) had a seat of honour in the Church, but in Tertullian’s time was first seen by permission of the then bishop “the monstrous marvel” of a maiden seated among them, and unlike them sitting unveiled.’ Benson, *Cyprian*, p. 53.

The more portentous indeed, that not even as a widow did she veil her head; denying herself either way; both as a virgin, in that she is counted a widow, and as widow, in that she is styled a virgin.⁹¹

Tertullian observes that widows have a seat of honour because they have travelled the 'whole course of probation whereby a *female* can be tested'.⁹² Such training, which the virgins lacked, equips widows to offer comfort to others in the Christian community. Tertullian's angry reaction against virgins sitting in the seat of widows, however, does not quite accord with his hierarchy of chastity which he provides in *De exhortatione castitatis*.⁹³ In this schema he places widows in the third order of chastity, below virgins. It must, therefore, be the wanton display of virginity in the Church that Tertullian objects to, and which belies their claim to any spiritual purity. Such a move, for Tertullian, is simply another version of unveiling, an attempt to solicit attention and not a sign of piety.

Throughout the treatise Tertullian suggests that the real intention behind the virgins' desire to remain unveiled, and that of their male supporters, is a mutual desire to see and be seen:

For that custom which belies virgins while it exhibits them, would never have been approved by any except by some men who must have been similar in character to the virgins themselves. Such eyes will wish that a virgin be seen as has the virgin who shall wish to be seen. The same kind of eyes reciprocally crave after each other. Seeing and being seen belong to the self-same lust. To blush if he see a virgin is as much a mark of a chaste man, as of a chaste virgin if seen by a man.⁹⁴

The demand for the universal unveiling of virgins, says Tertullian, is merely a pretext for lustful glances on the part of the male supporters, and for enticing lust on the part of the

⁹¹ Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, IX.v, p. 33.

⁹² Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, IX.vi, p. 33.

⁹³ Cf. Tertullian: 'The first species is, virginity from one's birth: the second, virginity from one's *second* birth, that is, from the font; which (second virginity) either in the marriage state keeps (its subject) pure by mutual compact, or else perseveres in widowhood from choice: a third grade remains, monogamy, when, after the interception of a marriage once contracted, there is thereafter a renunciation of sexual connection.' Tertullian, *De exhortatione castitatis*, I, p. 50.

⁹⁴ Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, II.iv-v, p. 28.

virgins. He does not absolve the virgins from the guilt of the masculine gaze because they have contributed to the men's spiritual demise by insisting on exhibiting their beauty and actively soliciting their attention. Their unveiling indicates that they are sexual creatures (or 'women', as Tertullian's opponents would define it) and, once unveiled, these licentious creatures give further evidence of their (sexual) 'womanhood' through adornment:

As soon as they have understood themselves to be *women*, withdraw themselves from *virgins*, laying aside (beginning with the head itself) their former selves: dye their hair; and fasten their hair with more wanton pin; professing manifest *womanhood* with their hair parted at the front. The next thing is, they consult the looking-glass to aid their beauty, and thin down their over-exacting face with washing, perhaps withal vamp it up with cosmetics, toss their mantle about them with an air, fit tightly the multiform shoe, carry down more ample appliances to the baths.⁹⁵

Tertullian utilises his opponents' understanding of the veil as an indicator of sexual experience. The masking of the face with cosmetics and adornments, Tertullian argues, is another type of covering, a perverse form of the 'veil'. This is that 'veil' which is indicative of sexual experience. In contrast, the garment that the unveiled virgins object to which hides female beauty is not a declaration of sexual experience but is, instead, an indicator of modesty. So, by adorning themselves, virgins express by means other than the veil worn by married women that they are truly women of the world and only 'play the *virgin*'.⁹⁶

Tertullian also takes the virgins to task for their objection to veiling on the grounds that they will look like sexually experienced women since unveiling similarly causes semiotic confusion. Bruce W. Winter observes that Augustan marriage law

⁹⁵ Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, XII.iii-iv, p. 35.

⁹⁶ Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, XII.v, p. 35.

stipulated that a matron convicted of adultery ‘were no longer eligible to wear the marriage veil’.⁹⁷ He further quotes McGinn, who says that

‘The *lex Iulia* specified certain articles of clothing – such as the *stola* and *vittae* – as peculiar to *matronae* and forbade these to be worn by prostitutes [...] Matrons were not compelled by law to wear the *stola* and the other “matronal” items of clothing’. The veil however was worn to signify the woman was married.⁹⁸

Therefore, the unveiled woman is disassociated from the matron, but as a consequence may be mistaken visually for an adulteress or prostitute. Tertullian’s language echoes this sumptuary distinction by explicitly connecting public exposure of virgins with prostitution:

Tamen tolerabilius apud nos ad usque proxime utrique consuetudini communicabatur; arbitrio commissa res erat, ut quaeque voluisset, aut tegi aut prostitui, sicut et nubere, quod et ipsum neque cogitur neque prohibetur.⁹⁹

Still, until very recently, among us, either custom was, with comparative indifference, admitted to communion. The matter had been left to choice, for each virgin to veil herself or expose herself, as she might have chosen, just as (she had equal liberty) as to marrying, which itself withal is neither enforced nor prohibited.¹⁰⁰

Tertullian deliberately uses the verb ‘*prostitui*’, which means ‘to prostitute’ or ‘dishonour’, to indicate the sexual nature of such exposure; the virgins declare themselves to be sexually available by exposure; it is not a declaration of virginity.

Tertullian further notes the discrepancy within the practice of the unveiled virgins, who insist on unveiling while in church, but veiled when they went about in public. Their concern to veil among the pagans implies a tacit acknowledgement that unveiling signifies sexual availability, or at the very least invites male attention:

⁹⁷ Bruce W. Winter, *Roman Wives, Roman Widows: The Appearance of New Women and the Pauline Communities* (Michigan and Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), p. 42.

⁹⁸ Winter, *Roman Wives, Roman Widows*, p. 43, quoting T. A. J. McGinn, *Prostitution, Sexuality and the Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 162.

⁹⁹ Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, III.i.

¹⁰⁰ Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, III.i, p. 28.

as they veil their head in presence of heathens, let them at all events *in the church* conceal their virginity, which they do veil outside the church. They fear strangers: let them stand in awe of the brethren too; or else let them have the consistent hardihood to appear as *virgins* in the streets as well, as they have the hardihood to do in the churches.¹⁰¹

The discrepancy between the virgins' veiling themselves before pagans and exposing themselves before the brethren indicates an inconsistency in their understanding of the veil. Either the unveiled virgins, when they veil in public are stating to the pagans that they are sexually experienced, but then declaring to the brethren that they are virginal by unveiling, or they are signalling to the pagans that they are sexually unavailable, in which case they are then indicating to the brethren that they are sexually available. Either way, there is no consistency in the signification of the veil which oscillates between indicating virginity and sexual experience. Tertullian continues to associate such virgins with prostitution by using mercantile language:

laudabo vigorem, si aliquid et apud ethnicos virginitatis nundinarint.

I will praise their vigour, if they succeed in selling aught of virginity among the heathens withal.¹⁰²

Tertullian's double entendre puns on the saleability of their particular type of virginity with the use of the verb 'nundinarint', which means to sell in the marketplace. The vigour, which he will praise, implies a certain amount of physical stamina in their transactions. It also suggests an impossible missionary activity, as heathens have no practice of ritual celibacy.

Not only does Tertullian expose the possibility of women masquerading as virgins who are spiritually polluted, but also of those who are bodily polluted as well:

¹⁰¹ Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, XIII.i, p. 35.

¹⁰² Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, XIII.i, p. 35.

Deservedly, therefore, while they do not cover their head, in order that they may be solicited for the sake of glory, they are forced to cover their bellies by the ruin resulting from infirmity. For it is emulation, not religion, which impels them. Sometimes it is that god – their belly – himself; because the brotherhood readily undertakes the maintenance of *virgins*. But, moreover, it is not merely that they are ruined, but they draw after them “a long rope of sins.” [Isaiah 5: 18]¹⁰³

Using the unveiled virgins’ understanding of the significance of exposure, Tertullian suggests that the fact that they cover their bodies is tantamount to an admission of sexual indiscretions. In the passage above, there also seems to be an implied financial motive for women to adopt virginity, as Tertullian alludes to the support that the Church gives to virgins. Tertullian suggests that such women who have a false vocation based on their devotion to their ‘bellies’ are likely to fall into sinfulness. The belly is also used punningly, as it suggests the burgeoning waistline through gluttony (which in his treatise *De jejuniis, On Fasting*, he links with Adam’s sin¹⁰⁴ and the inevitable progression towards sexual sins),¹⁰⁵ but also pregnancy:

What audacities, again, will (such an one) venture on with regard to her womb, for fear of being detected in being a *mother* as well! God knows how many infants He has helped to perfection and through gestation till they were born sound and whole, after being long fought against by their mothers! Such *virgins* ever conceive with the readiest facility, and have the happiest deliveries, and children indeed most like to their fathers! These crimes does a forced and unwilling *virginity* incur.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, XIV.ii-iii, pp. 35-6.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Tertullian: ‘Adam [...] yielded more readily to his belly than to God, heeded the meat rather than the mandate, and sold salvation for his gullet!’ Tertullian, *De jejuniis (On Fasting)*, III, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers: Fathers of the Third Century. Tertullian, Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Parts First and Second*, trans. Rev. S. Thelwall (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1885]), pp. 102-115, (p. 103).

¹⁰⁵ Cf. Tertullian: ‘Lust without voracity would certainly be considered a monstrous phenomenon; since these two are so united and concrete, that, had there been any possibility of disjoining them, the pudenda would not have been affixed to the belly itself rather than elsewhere. Look at the body: the region (of these members) is one and the same. In short, the order of the vices is proportionate to the arrangement of the members. First, the belly; and then immediately the materials of all other species of lasciviousness are laid subordinately to daintiness: through love of eating, love of impurity finds passage.’ Tertullian, *De jejuniis*, I, p. 102.

¹⁰⁶ Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, XIV.vii-ix, p. 36.

The crimes of these false virgins, who feign holiness to hide their sinfulness, keep mounting up. Not only do they use the Church to indulge in gluttony and concupiscence, but in order to conceal their crimes they try to destroy their babies, who belong to God and only survive by His grace. After such a fall from grace those so-called virgins still have the temerity to attend church with head uncovered; unveiling thus becomes a disguise for their infidelity:

If an uncovered head is a recognised mark of virginity, (then) if any *virgin* falls from the grace of *virginity*, she remains permanently with head uncovered, for fear of discovery, and walks about in a garb which then indeed is another's. Conscious of a now undoubted *womanhood*, they have the audacity to draw near to God with head bare.¹⁰⁷

Not only is Tertullian highlighting an objectional duplicity in those who falsely make claim to a state of holiness, but he also identifies a practical problem. Unveiling, because it draws attention to the state of virginity, would force fallen virgins to remain unveiled to avoid shame. They have no option because they are so visible; their sins therefore would also be laid bare if they suddenly began to veil themselves.

Tertullian's solution to the various intricate problems of virginal habit is, following Saint Paul, to recommend a universal veiling: betrothed virgins are spiritually married already, and, he argues, those who are unmarried but acting promiscuously are married in the flesh. Thus he declares:

Recognise the *woman*, aye, recognise the *wedded woman*, by the testimonies both of body and of spirit, which she experiences both in conscience and in flesh. These are the earlier tablets of *natural* espousals and nuptials. Impose a veil externally upon her who has (already) a covering internally. Let her whose lower parts are not bare have her upper likewise covered.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, XIV.iv, p. 36.

¹⁰⁸ Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, XII.i, pp. 34-5.

He points out, perhaps a little crudely, that the offending lower parts, the seat of their concupiscence, are veiled – and hence, according to his opponents’ definition, admitting fault – so likewise they should wear a veil on their head to fully acknowledge that they are (sexually aware) *women*. If virgins are spiritually impure (i.e. the type of virgin who would protest their right to unveil in church), then they ought to veil, too, because they are really sexually polluted in mind, due to their desire to attract male attention. Finally, if a woman is truly a virgin, then she ought to veil out of modesty. The veil, in other words, is appropriate for all categories of ‘woman’.

vi. *Sponsa Christi*

Tertullian’s masterstroke to defeat the recalcitrant virgins on their own territory is the image of the *sponsa Christi*, the bride of Christ.¹⁰⁹ The unveiled virgins refuse to veil because they do not want to seem to be brides, but, Tertullian declares, they are brides and, therefore, by their own admission, should veil:

For wedded you are to Christ: to Him you have surrendered your flesh; to Him you have espoused your maturity. Walk in accordance with the will of your Espoused. Christ is He who bids the espoused and wives of course to veil themselves; (and) of course, much more His own.¹¹⁰

Tertullian is, thus, an early witness to, and possible originator of, the tradition of virgins as the *sponsa Christi*.¹¹¹ The idea of Christ as the Bridegroom is one which ultimately

¹⁰⁹ Alberici and Harlow note that ‘[t]he pre-Christian Roman view of this part of the life course makes one thing quite clear: marriage was the socially significant ritual that denoted the end of childhood and transition to adulthood for women. [...] the association of the veiling of holy virgins with overtly bridal implications also reveal certain assumptions about when and how a girl became part of the adult world.’ Alberici and Harlow, ‘Age and Innocence’, p. 193.

¹¹⁰ Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, XVI.vi, p. 37.

¹¹¹ Cf. Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, III, p. 28. Cf. Tertullian: ‘You do well in falsely assuming the married character, if you veil your head; nay, you do not seem to assume it falsely, for you are wedded to Christ: to Him have you surrendered your body; act as becomes your Husband’s discipline. If He bids the brides of others to be veiled, His own, of course, much more.’ Tertullian, *De Oratione*, XXII, p. 689.

derives from the Bible.¹¹² However, the metaphor usually refers to the union of Christ with his bride, the Church. Saint John, for instance, refers to the heavenly Jerusalem as ‘the bride, the wife of the Lamb’.¹¹³ Also, Saint Paul explicitly uses marriage as a metaphor for Christ’s union with his people:

Because we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones. *For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife, and they shall be two in one flesh.* This is a great sacrament; but I speak in Christ and in the church. (Ephesians 5: 32)¹¹⁴

The use of marriage as a metaphor for expressing the union of God and His people has a long tradition in Judaic exegesis, especially in the interpretation of the Song of Songs.¹¹⁵ Origen (c. 184/5-253/4), who was a younger contemporary of Tertullian, produced a lengthy commentary on Canticles which not only explores the metaphor of marriage as expressing the union of God and the Church (formerly the synagogue), but also the union of God and the individual Christian soul.¹¹⁶ The fact that Tertullian exhorts virgins with

¹¹² Cf. Psalms 18: 6; Isaiah 61: 10; 62: 5; Jeremiah 7: 34; 16: 9; 25:10; 33: 11; Baruch 2: 23; Joel 2: 16; I Maccabees 1: 28; 9: 39; Matthew 9: 15; 25: 5-6; 25: 10; Mark 2: 19-20; Luke 5: 34-5; John 2: 9; 3: 29; Apocalypse 18: 23.

¹¹³ Cf. Apocalypse: ‘And there came on of the seven angels, who had the vials full of the seven last plagues, and spoke with me, saying: Come, and I will shew thee the bride, the wife of the Lamb’ (Apocalypse 21: 9).

¹¹⁴ Cf. Paul: ‘I am jealous of you with a jealousy of God. For I have espoused you to one husband that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ’ (II Corinthians 11: 2).

¹¹⁵ Cf. Lawson: ‘Already the Synagogue had identified the bride of this Song with Yahweh’s chosen people Israel; and so the thought quite readily suggested itself to the Fathers that the bride should be sought in God’s new people, in the mystery of its nuptial union with Christ, as is set forth by the Apostle in his Letter to the Ephesians (5: 32). As a matter of fact, all the Greek exegetes of the Cantic have been very partial to the ecclesiological interpretation, or at least have tolerated it.’ R. P. Lawson, ‘Introduction’ to Origen, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, I.i, in *Origen: The Song of Songs Commentary and Homilies* trans. R. P. Lawson (New York: Newman Press, [1956 – no date for reprint]) p. 7.

¹¹⁶ Cf. Origen: ‘the appellations of Bride and Bridegroom denote either the Church in her relation to Christ, or the soul in her union with the Word of God.’ Origen, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, I.i, in *Origen: The Song of Songs Commentary and Homilies* trans. R. P. Lawson (New York: Newman Press, [1956 – no date for reprint]) p. 58.

reference to their status as a *sponsa Christi* suggests that this epithet was applied quite early on to consecrated virgins.¹¹⁷

vii. Regulation and Definition of Virginité

De virginibus velandis indicates that there was some confusion in the Early Church about the definition of virginity, the expression of it and the nature of its role in the Church.

Tertullian's comments demonstrate that the role of virgins was conceptualised as different from widows, whose seem to have functioned in the Church in a charitable capacity. It is difficult, however, to decipher what the position of consecrated virgins was in the Church, as, unlike widows, they did not have a designated seat, yet the Church supported them financially, presumably to enable them to carry out their vocation. The allusion to a virgin sitting in the widows' place at mass with the permission of the bishop seems to suggest the beginnings of a formal space for virgins in the congregation, and therefore an attainment of the visual distinction which, it seems, some so desired.

Although precise historical details about early virgins are scarce in the treatise, it offers an insight into the development of the understanding of virginity. Not only does Tertullian prove instrumental in the reinscription of the veil to suit Christian virgins, but he delineates an understanding of virginity that is predicated on spiritual purity as well as physical purity. For him, the veil is not just a symbol of virginity, although it is this too, but a practical means by which virgins could protect their virginity:

¹¹⁷ With regard to the image of the *sponsa Christi*, Boniface Ramsey states: 'By the beginning of the third century, however, we see that concept being applied to virgins by Tertullian, when he admonishes them to wear the veil that married women were accustomed to wear'. Boniface Ramsey, *Beginning to Read the Fathers* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1986), pp. 142-3. McNamara implies that Tertullian came up with the epithet in order to suppress female agency: 'Almost by accident, judging from the off-handed tone of the passage, Tertullian had stumbled on what the clergy would come to regard as a perfect solution to the dilemma. [...] The idea of the virgin as the bride of Christ suggested a way of defining her position that freed the clergy to praise and admire her without fearing her competition.' McNamara, *A New Song*, p. 121.

Nay but true and absolute and pure *virginity* [...] betakes itself for refuge to the veil of the head as to a helmet, as to a shield, to protect its glory against the blows of temptations, against the darts of scandals, against suspicions and whispers and emulation; (against) envy also itself.¹¹⁸

Tertullian combines the image of the *sponsa Christi* with that of the *miles Christi* from Ephesians 6;¹¹⁹ the veil provides the spiritual armour necessary for the virgin to defend herself from temptation (both being tempted and being a temptation for others), from any doubts as to the veracity of her virginity, from slander and from envy through fascination. Tertullian's use of the *sponsa Christi* to virgins, rather than the more usual application of the image to the Christian Church or the Christian soul, is the beginning of one of the most enduring motifs in the tradition of virginity.

The insistence on the compulsory veiling of consecrated virgins is the beginning of the regulation of virginity and a series of outward signs which help to manifest the spiritual purity of virginity. Importantly, it was not an attempt by male authors to 'display' virginity, but rather the reverse; it was a group of unveiled virgins, and their supporters, who were in favour of the displaying of the virginal body, both in a figurative and literal way, whereas Tertullian insisted on veiling the glory of virginity. Veiling, he argues, at once exhibits piety and hides it. Tertullian is thus in no doubt about the need for veiling which unambiguously signals modesty, even as it hides the virginal body.¹²⁰

Tertullian's concern about false semblances of virginity is a recurring feature in the later

¹¹⁸ Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, XV.i, p. 36.

¹¹⁹ Cf. Paul: 'Put on your armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the deceits of the devil. For our wrestling is not against flesh and blood; but against principalities and powers, against rulers of the world of this darkness, against the spirits of wickedness in the high places. Therefore take unto you the armour of God, that you may be able to resist in the evil day, and to stand in all things perfect. Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of justice, and your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace: In all things taking the shield of faith, wherewith you may be able to extinguish all the fiery darts of the most wicked one. And take unto you the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit (which is the word of God)' (Ephesians 6: 11-17).

¹²⁰ Cf. Tertullian: 'She who conceals her *virginity*, by that fact denies even her *womanhood*.' Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, XV.iv, p. 36.

tradition, and, indeed, the false virgin is a figure who appears to be born alongside the ideal. Tertullian places the guilt for these false virgins who behave like harlots on a ‘forced and unwilling *virginity*’.¹²¹ He insists that the value of virginity lies in its free choice, and this also remains a constant feature throughout the tradition.¹²² He lays the blame for false vocations squarely on the Church, which encourages virginity indiscriminately because of the glory accrued by it.¹²³ The issue of veiling and the problems of false virgins caused Tertullian to seek a clearer definition of virginity and its role in the Church; the result is a reinforcement of the theological understanding of virginity as a combined spiritual and bodily state, an understanding that Paul had given in I Corinthians 7.

¹²¹ Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, XIV.ix, p. 36.

¹²² Cf. Saint Paul: ‘I think, therefore, that this is good for the present necessity, because it is good for a man so to be. [...] But more blessed shall she be, if she so remain, according to my counsel, and I think that I also have the Spirit of God’ (I Corinthians 7: 26; 40).

¹²³ Cf. Tertullian: ‘They report a saying uttered at one time by some one when first this question was mooted, “And how shall we invite the other (*virgins*) to similar conduct?” Forsooth, it is their numbers that make us happy, and not the grace of God and the merits of each individual! Is it *virgins* who (adorn or commend) the Church in the sight of God, or the Church which adorns or commends *virgins*? (Our objector) has therefore confessed that “glory” lies at the root of the matter. Well, where glory is, there is solicitation; where solicitation, there compulsion; where compulsion, there necessity; where necessity, there infirmity.’ Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, XIV.i-ii, p. 35.

II. Cyprian

The life of Thacius Caecilius Cyprianus (c. A.D. 202-258), the Bishop of Carthage (the most important See in North Africa) and a martyr, comes to us via several sources.

These include the *Life of Cyprian* by the deacon Pontius,¹ the *Consular Acts of Carthage*,² which includes an account of his martyrdom, some later information from Saint Jerome and Saint Augustine,³ and, most importantly, writings from Cyprian's own hand. Cyprian wrote several treatises and 81 letters of his correspondence are extant.⁴ It is generally assumed that he was born in Carthage,⁵ but Edward White Benson believed that as Cyprian was voluble in his praise for Carthage he would not have then failed to claim it for his native birthplace.⁶ Cyprian was a pagan convert, but, as Allen Brent points out,

¹ Cf. Deferrari: '[The] short memoir of [Cyprian's] life written by his deacon Pontius [...] is the first Christian biography that attained popularity. It is by no means a finished literary product, and it is important chiefly because of its originality in the field.' Roy J. Deferrari, 'Introduction' to *Saint Cyprian: Treatises*, ed. Roy J. Deferrari (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1981[1958]), pp. v-xii, (p. v).

² Cf. Deferrari: 'For the details leading to his martyrdom itself the proconsular acts of Saint Cyprian inform us rather fully. These are based on official reports put together with connecting phrases by an editor, and consist of three separate documents covering the following events: the first trial that sent Cyprian to Curubis in exile, the arrest and second trial, and the execution.' Deferrari, 'Introduction' to *Saint Cyprian: Treatises*, p. v.

³ Saint Jerome's biography is short. Of Cyprian's earlier life, Jerome says: 'at first he taught rhetoric with distinction.' Saint Jerome, 'LXVII. Cyprian the Bishop', in *On Illustrious Men (De viris illustribus)*, trans. Thomas P. Halton (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1999), p. 95. Halton notes that Jerome's source is Lactantius (p. 95n. 2). Cf. Lactantius: 'There was, however, one exceptional and brilliant one, Cyprian, because he had acquired great glory for himself in the profession of the art of oratory, and he write very many wonderful works in his own manner. For he had an ability in speaking, easy, fluent, pleasant, and, what is of prime importance in speech, it was clear, so that you cannot distinguish whether he was more successful in explanation, or more powerful in persuasion.' Lactantius, *The Divine Institutions*, V.iv, trans. Sister Mary Francis McDonald, ed. Roy J. Deferrari (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1964), p. 337.

⁴ Cf. Sister Rose Bernard Donna: 'Of these letters, fifty-nine were written by Cyprian himself and six more, emanating from Carthaginian Councils or Synods, were largely his work also. Sixteen letters were written by others; apparently eleven are lost.' Sister Rose Bernard Donna, 'Introduction' to *Saint Cyprian: Letters (I-18)*, trans. Sister Rose Bernard Donna (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1981 [1964]), pp. ix-xxv, (p. ix).

⁵ Cf. Brent: 'His ancestral country estate (*horti*) was in his birthplace, Carthage. Thus he owed both wealth and education to his family and not to a patron.' Allen Brent, 'Introduction' to *St Cyprian of Carthage: On the Church. Select Letters*, trans. Allen Brent (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2006), pp. 11-46, (p. 11).

⁶ Cf. Benson: 'Of his birthplace or family we know nothing. Both his names [Thascius Cyprianus] are almost unique in the nomenclature of antiquity and when he speaks affectionately of Carthage as the

we know very little of his early life because ‘Pontius ignores his pagan life prior to his conversion, but focuses upon his actions as a bishop and the details of his martyrdom’.⁷

The life of Cyprian as we have it is thus a life from the time of his birth into the Christian faith.⁸ After his conversion, c. A.D. 246, he embraced celibacy, in order, so Pontius tells us, that he could devote himself wholeheartedly to God;⁹ at the same time, he disposed all of his wealth charitably.¹⁰

Cyprian very quickly rose through the Church hierarchy and was made Bishop of Carthage just two years after his conversion, around A.D. 248, which Pontius evinces as a sign of his good works.¹¹ Even though Pontius relates how the ‘entire people by God’s inspiration leapt forward in his love and honour’ to offer him the Episcopal See,¹² there

happiest place on earth to him, – “where God had willed that he should believe and grow up (in the faith)” – he would scarcely have omitted to claim a native interest in the beloved home, had he possessed it.’ Edward White Benson, *Cyprian: His Life. His Times. His Work*, (London: Macmillan and Co., 1897), pp. 1-2.

⁷ Brent, ‘Introduction’ to *St Cyprian of Carthage*, p. 11.

⁸ Cf. Pontius the Deacon: ‘At what point, then, shall I begin, - from what direction shall I approach the description of his goodness except from the beginning of his faith and from his heavenly birth? Inasmuch as the doings of a man of God should not be reckoned from any point except from the time that he was born of God. He may have had pursuits previously, and liberal arts may have imbued his mind while engaged therein; but these things I pass over; for as yet they had nothing to do with anything but his secular advantage.’ Pontius the Deacon, *The Life and Passion of Cyprian, Bishop and Martyr*, ii, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers. Vol. V: Hippolytus, Cyprian, Caius, Novation, Appendix*, trans. Rev. Ernest Wallis, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1886]), p. 267.

⁹ Cf. Pontius: ‘While his faith was in its first rudiments, he believed that before God nothing was worthy in comparison of the observance of continency. For he thought that the heart might then become what it ought to be, and the mind attain to the full capacity of truth, if he trod under foot the lust of the flesh with the robust and healthy vigour of holiness.’ Pontius, *The Life and Passion of Cyprian, Bishop and Martyr*, ii, p. 267.

¹⁰ Cf. Pontius: ‘By distributing his means for the relief of the indigence of the poor, by dispensing the purchase-money of entire estates, he at once realized two benefits, - the contempt of this world’s ambition, than which nothing is more pernicious, and the observance of that mercy which God has preferred even to His sacrifices, and which even he did not maintain who said that he had kept all the commandments of the law; whereby with premature swiftness of piety he almost began to be perfect before he had learnt the way to be perfect.’ Pontius, *The Life and Passion of Cyprian, Bishop and Martyr*, ii, p. 268.

¹¹ Cf. Pontius: ‘For the proof of his good works I think that this one thing is enough, that by the judgement of God and the favour of the people, he was chosen to the office of the priesthood and the degree of the episcopate while still a neophyte, and, as it was considered, a novice.’ Pontius, *The Life and Passion of Cyprian, Bishop and Martyr*, v, p. 269.

¹² Cf. Pontius: ‘[...] when the entire people by God’s inspiration leapt forward in his love and honour, he humbly withdrew, giving place to men of older standing, and thinking himself unworthy of a claim to so

were objections to his swift elevation by ‘some of the elderly presbyters, including one Novatus’, who was later to challenge Cyprian’s Episcopal See.¹³ Brent suggests that the elderly presbyters may have resented Cyprian’s promotion because it resembled the older, classical model of upper-class patronage, and thus could be seen to compromise the purity of the Church:

To them Cyprian might have seemed too much like a secular, Roman *patronus* whose links of charity with his subservient clients lead to influence and votes for the magistracies that he chose to pursue.¹⁴

Cyprian’s elevation to the episcopate is almost contemporaneous with the onset of the Decian persecution (A.D. 249-50), from which stemmed the major Church controversies in Cyprian’s episcopate and led to the Novatian schism.¹⁵ During the persecution,

great honour, so that he thus became more worthy. For he is made more worthy who disposes with what he deserves.’ Pontius, *The Life and Passion of Cyprian, Bishop and Martyr*, v, p. 269.

¹³ Deferrari, ‘Introduction’ to *Saint Cyprian: Treatises*, p. vi.

¹⁴ Brent, ‘Introduction’ to *Saint Cyprian of Carthage*, p. 13.

¹⁵ The main problem for the Church during the Decian persecution was the issue of the readmission into communion with the Church of those who had lapsed from the faith. There were two main schools of thought, the rigorist, who did not countenance readmission except at death, and the laxists, who were prepared to readmit almost anyone. Brent notes that there various kinds of apostates: ‘we have two categories of apostates mentioned by Cyprian, namely the *sacrificati* (‘those who had sacrificed’) and *thurificati* (‘those who had offered incense’). A third category consisted of those who never went up to the Capitoline Temple on the summit of the Byrsa, but bribed the magistrate instead to issue a certificate saying that they had. These were known as the *libellatici*. For Cyprian all three groups had apostatised.’ Brent, ‘Introduction’ to *Saint Cyprian of Carthage*, p. 20. Cyprian, initially a rigorist, only allowed readmission into the Church at the point of death. His authority was complicated by confessors who, although had remained steadfast in their faith throughout the persecution, had not been made martyrs. These confessors claimed holy orders by virtue of their constancy under persecution and thus declared their right to absolve the fallen and readmit them into the Church. (Cf. Brent, ‘Introduction’ to *Saint Cyprian of Carthage*, pp. 21-22; For Cyprian’s response to this challenge to his authority, see: Cyprian, *On the Fallen; Epistles.*, 16; 27; See also Epistles, 17-20; 25-26). The Council of Carthage was held in A.D. 251 in order to resolve the problem of the readmission of the lapsed. Due to the ever-present threat of Christian persecution, both at a local level and at an international level (the eighth persecution – the Valerian Persecution – broke out in 257 A.D., during which Cyprian was martyred), the Council of Carthage decided to readmit the penitent fallen (Cf. Cyprian, *Epistle 57 and 58 (c. A.D. 252)*, p. 158. See also Brent, ‘Introduction’ to *St Cyprian of Carthage*, pp. 22-3). The decision of the Carthaginian Council over the admission of the fallen led to the Novatian schism. Novatian objected to what he saw as a laxist position and he contested Cornelius’ election to the Roman See, and became the first anti-Pope. Novatus, who had initially objected to Cyprian’s elevation, was set up as an anti-bishop in Carthage. Brent notes the doctrinal discrepancy in the alliance between Novatus and Novatian: ‘Novatus, the laxist Carthaginian presbyter, was now to join the newly consecrated, rigorist bishop Novatian in a marriage of convenience against Cyprian at Carthage and Cornelius at Rome.’ Brent, ‘Introduction’ to *Saint Cyprian of Carthage*, p. 23. Cornelius likewise called a Church Council in Rome. Brent says that ‘in both *fora* [the Councils of Carthage and

Cyprian escaped martyrdom only by going into hiding and was roundly criticised for doing so.¹⁶ His reasoning for avoiding martyrdom was the Carthaginian Church's continued need for his leadership, which he felt was more important than his achieving martyrdom at that time.¹⁷ He was, however, martyred nearly ten years later, and is credited as the first priestly martyr of Carthage.¹⁸

According to Saint Jerome, Cyprian was a great admirer of Tertullian.¹⁹ An anecdote in Jerome's *De viris illustribus* serves to illustrate Cyprian's high regard:

Rome] Novatian was condemned and excommunicated. The council decided that those who had bribed magistrates and not sacrificed (the *libellatici*) could be received back after examination of individual cases but not those who had actually sacrificed. Another dispute arose in the aftermath of the Novatian Schism, concerning the validity of the baptism of those who had been baptised by schismatics. After Cornelius' death (A.D. 253), Lucius was elected as pontiff. Lucius, however, died only eight months after being elevated to the Roman See and so was succeeded in A.D. 254 by Pope Stephen. Cyprian and Stephen disagreed about the issue of rebaptism of heretics and schismatics. Stephen maintained that if a certain formula had been used (if the neophyte had been baptised in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit), then their baptism was valid. Cyprian refused to acknowledge the authority of the schismatics, and therefore it was not for him a case of rebaptism, but rather he did not accept that the first baptism was in fact a baptism (Cf. Sister Rose Bernard Donna, 'Introduction', pp. xx-xi). Cyprian's refusal to conform to the Roman practices on the issue of the rebaptism of heretics is often interpreted by Protestants as a denial of the supremacy of the Roman See. Cf. Rev. Ernest Wallis, 'Introductory Note' to 'Cyprian', in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Vol. V: *Hippolytus, Cyprian, Caius, Novation, Appendix*, trans. Rev. Ernest Wallis, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1886]), pp. 263-266, (pp. 263-4). However, Catholics point to his strong sense of the unity of the Church and claim that his writings in every other aspect indicate deference to Rome (Cf. Donna, 'Introduction', p. xiv).

¹⁶ Cf. Deferrari: 'Cyprian withdrew to a safe place of hiding. For the rest of his life Cyprian had to defend himself against the charge of running away in cowardice from his responsibilities. But if he had remained in Carthage he would certainly have been put to death, and, just as at Rome, it would have been impossible to elect a new bishop. This would have left the Church at Carthage without a government and have caused great dangers to others.' Deferrari, 'Introduction' to *Saint Cyprian: Treatises*, p. vi.

¹⁷ Pontius notes: 'Fortunately it occurred then, and truly by the Spirit's direction, that the man who was needed for so many and so excellent purposes was withheld from the consummation of martyrdom.' Pontius, *The Life and Passion of Cyprian, Bishop and Martyr*, vii, p. 269. Cyprian's prudence in the Decian persecution is somewhat justified by the fact that in the Valerian persecution, during which he was martyred, 'the sees of Rome and Carthage were vacant for about eleven months.' Deferrari's 'Note' to Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*, Vol. II, vi. x, trans. Roy J. Deferrari (New York: Fathers of the Church Inc., 1953), p. 103 n.7.

¹⁸ Cf. Pontius: 'His passion being thus accomplished, it resulted that Cyprian, who had been an example to all good men, was also the first who in Africa imbued his priestly crown with *blood of martyrdom*, because he was the first who began to be such after the apostles. For from the time at which the Episcopal order is enumerated at Carthage, not one is ever recorded, even of good men and priests, to have come to suffering.' Pontius, *The Life and Passion of Cyprian, Bishop and Martyr*, xix, p. 274.

¹⁹ Wallis, however, states: 'But while Cyprian is the spiritual son and pupil of Tertullian, we must seek his characteristics and the key to his whole ministry in the far-off See and city where the disciples were first called Christians. Cyprian is the Ignatius of the West.' Wallis, 'Introductory Note' to 'Cyprian', p. 263.

At Concordia, a town in Italy, I saw an old man named Paul, who said that, when he was still a very young man, he had seen in Rome a very old man who had been secretary of blessed Cyprian and had reported to him that Cyprian was accustomed never to pass a day without reading Tertullian and would frequently say to him, 'Hand me the master,' meaning, of course, Tertullian.²⁰

The influence of Tertullian on Cyprian can be seen particularly in the case of the latter's treatise *De habitu virginum* (*On the Dress of Virgins*, c. A.D. 248),²¹ which is indebted to Tertullian's tracts on the appropriate clothes for Christian women, *De habitu mulierum* and *De cultu feminarum*. Critics tend to see Cyprian's treatise as an out and out plundering of Tertullian's material, but reformed in a more palatable style as Benson notes:

We have found already that the amplest plagiarism was permissible; and, this assumed, there is much literary interest in observing how master of style like Cyprian deals with the rocky genius of his own 'Master'. [...] The gain and loss of the Master in the disciple's hands are evident; the chief gain was that he became more readable.²²

Although Cyprian's treatise certainly owes a great deal to Tertullian's *De cultu feminarum*, Cyprian is writing specifically concerning virgins, rather than Christian women in general. *De habitu virginum* does more than just replicate Tertullian in more dulcet tones; it articulates a broader understanding of virginity and insists on a stricter regulation of its observance. The treatise is also of interest because it appears to provide

²⁰ Jerome, 'LIII. Tertullian the presbyter', in *On Illustrious Men*, p. 74.

²¹ Benson dates *De habitu virginum* to A.D. 248, which is soon after his elevation to the bishopric of Carthage. Cf. Benson, *Cyprian*, p. xxii. Sister Angela Elizabeth Keenan states that *De habitu virginum* is one of the earliest tracts for virgins along with Methodius' *Convivium decem virginum*, and the Pseudo-Clementine letters *Ad virgines*. She notes that 'the exact dates of those treatises are unknown. The general opinion seems to be that Cyprian wrote his work before 250 and that the remaining two belong to the latter part of the third century.' Sister Angela Elizabeth Keenan, 'Introduction to *The Dress of Virgins*', in *Saint Cyprian: Treatises*, trans. and ed. Roy J. Deferrari (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1981 [1958]), pp. 25-29, (p. 26).

²² Benson, *Cyprian*, pp. 57-8.

an early historical witness of the practice of consecrating virginity.²³ Although Tertullian's *De virginibus velandis* had hinted at the practice of consecrating virginity to God, Cyprian's treatise appears to indicate more definitively that there was a coherent system of consecrating virginity to God:²⁴

those who have consecrated their lives to Christ, and, renouncing the concupiscence of the flesh, have dedicated themselves to God in body as well as spirit.²⁵

De habitu virginum, dedicated as it is to the virgins of God, also demonstrates the growing need for there to be a more coherent set of directions in order to guide virgins in their pursuit of the perfection of virginity. Cyprian's treatise thus is the first of many which systematically justify the pre-eminence of virginity through scriptural references. It also defines the place of virginity in the Christian tradition, and prescribes behavioural norms for consecrated virgins. These norms are dictated by an understanding of virginity that goes beyond the body, and attempts to protect it from corrupting influences, both internal and external.

i. *Epistle IV*

'Discipline,' writes Cyprian, is the only way 'to attain to the heavenly promises and divine rewards.'²⁶ Immediately in the opening of *De habitu virginum* Cyprian provides the subject and focus of his treatise: he is writing to rectify the neglect of discipline in the

²³ Keenan argues that *De habitu virginum* is exceedingly important as in it 'are crystallized all the facts known through incidental references in earlier Church literature of the degree of development of the ascetical life for women in the first three centuries.' Keenan, 'Introduction to *De habitu virginum*', p. 26. The first chapter emphasises the importance of 'discipline' as a way of attaining salvation, and chapter two emphasises the importance of 'obedience and fear' and chastity.

²⁴ Cyprian's final exhortation to the virgins to strengthen each other in resolve, points to a large range of ages among the virgins: 'You who are advanced in years, give instruction to the younger; you who are younger, give an incentive to those of your own age. Stimulate one another by mutual words of encouragement; summon to glory by rival proof of virtue.' Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, xxiv, in *The Fathers of the Church: Saint Cyprian Treatises*, trans. Sister Angela Elizabeth Keenan, ed. Roy J. Deferrari (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1981), pp. 31-52, (p. 52).

²⁵ Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, iv, p. 34.

²⁶ Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, i, p. 31.

behaviour of the virgins of God.²⁷ It is perhaps no coincidence that Cyprian's fourth epistle (c. A.D. 249), which addresses the problem of, and suggests suitable punishment for, lapsed virgins, is written at a similar time to *De habitu virginum*.²⁸ The exact dating of the tract and *Epistle IV* is uncertain, but *De habitu virginum* seems to be of a piece with this disciplinary *Epistle*. Both texts are concerned with the discipline necessary to maintain the virginal state, but their focus differs. Whereas *De habitu virginum* is concerned with regulating the public behaviour of virgins and considers the damage that the lure of worldliness does to spiritual virginity, *Epistle IV* is punitive and deals with the private sins of virgins and addresses the question of suitable punishments for the physical loss of virginity.

The *Epistle* is in response to a letter from Pomponius²⁹ who had requested the advice of Cyprian and others, who appear to be members of a council,³⁰ over

what seems best to us about those virgins who, although they once determined to keep their state continuously and firmly, have afterwards been found to have remained together in the same bed with men, one of whom you say is a deacon, the same women, who have confessed plainly that they have slept with men, insist that they are chaste.³¹

²⁷ Cyprian provides ample scriptural proof of the necessity of discipline for the pursuit of a life of holiness.

²⁸ Cf. Heine: 'Cyprian's first writings as bishop were composed between his election (May 248/9) and the beginning of the Decian persecution (January 250). [...] The *De Habitu Virginum* was also composed in this period. It is addressed primarily to a group of wealthy virgins who insisted on the right to dress lavishly, attend immodest parties, and frequent the public baths. It shows the influence of Tertullian's *De Cultu Feminarum*. Letters 1-4 may also belong here, as they contain no reference to persecution. This, of course, does not necessarily mean that they preceded it.' Ronald E. Heine, 'Cyprian and Novatian' in *The Cambridge History of Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frances Young, Lewis Ayres, and Andrew Louth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 152-160, (pp. 153-4). Benson dates *De habitu virginum* to A.D. 249, whereas Keenan states that the exact date of the treatise is unknown but suggests a scholarly consensus of a date pre-A.D. 250. The epistle is conjecturally dated at A.D. 249, and so it is not improbable that the tract and the letter were written at a similar time, or that the receipt of the original letter from Pomponius asking advice about the punishment of lapsed virgins prompted the short tract on the acceptable behaviour of virgins.

²⁹ Bishop of Dionysiana in the province of Byzacena.

³⁰ These include four African bishops: Cecil, Bishop of Biltha; Victor; Sedatus (Bishop of Tuburbo?); and Tertullus; along with several unnamed priests. Cf. Cyprian, *Epistle IV*, in *Saint Cyprian: Letters (1-81)*, trans. Sister Rose Bernard Donna (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1981 [1964]), pp. 10-14, (p. 10n. 2-5).

³¹ Cyprian, *Epistle IV*.i, p. 10.

It is clear from the epistle that these virgins are consecrated virgins. It is possible, but by no means certain, that they are early examples of the practice of *syneisaktism*.³² The term appears to have been coined in Antioch,³³ and refers to the cohabitation of monks with consecrated virgins in so-called spiritual marriages. The virgins involved in these relationships are known by the pejorative term *syneisaktes*, *virgines subintroductae*, or *virgines agapethae*.³⁴ That the virgins in Cyprian's epistle are such virgins seems to be suggested by the readiness of the virgins to confess that, although they had slept with men in the same bed, this had not damaged their chastity; it is not, they claimed, a sexual partnership. The letter is unclear on the matter, however, and does not refer to a general practice of the cohabitation of male and female ascetics, nor does it state that the men were dedicated to the ascetic life. It appears that only the deacon has any claim to holy orders, and Pomponius mentions him particularly in order to solicit advice from Cyprian and the council regarding appropriate punishment for the man because of his orders. The reply from Cyprian is unambiguous:

³² Clark notes that '[o]ur earliest evidence is found in the *Similitudes of Hermas*. [...] Also from the second century we have the testimony of Irenaeus, who informs us that the Valentinians occasioned scandal by allowing "brothers" and "sisters" to live together – but it became evident that chastity had been violated when some of the "sisters" became mothers [Cf. Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 1, 6, 3].' Clark, 'John Chrysostom and the "Subintroductae"', p. 172.

³³ Cf. Clark: 'In Eusebius of Caesarea's *Church History*, we learn that one of the accusations made against Paul of Samosata was that he had scandalised the Church by living with young girls, a practice which apparently contributed to his condemnation by the Synod of Antioch in 267-268. The oriental bishops who had penned the condemning epistle concerning Paul reported that the Antiocheans had even coined a special name for these female companions: *gynaikes syneisaktoi*.' Clark, 'John Chrysostom and the "Subintroductae"', p. 173. [Cf. Eusebius, 7, 29-30.]

³⁴ Cf. Elm 'The Ancyran women, who lived with men as if they were their sisters were called *synerchomenai*, "those united with them"; in Nicaea they are described as *syneisaktes*, women who are "brought in or introduced into a house".' Susanna Elm, *Virgins of God: The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 49. In the fourth century, Epiphanius notes in his *Panarion* that Origenists, who apparently practised *syneisaktism*, also accused members of the Catholic Church of keeping 'adoptive wives': 'But they accuse the members of the church, if you please, who have beloved "adoptive wives," as they call them, of doing this too – but secretly from respect for public opinion, so as to engage in the wickedness <in fact>, but in pretence preen themselves on the name ["virgin"] from regard for the public.' Epiphanius of Salamis, *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis*, IV.43[63].2.ii, trans. Frank Williams (Leiden, New York, Köln: E. J. Brill, 1994), p. 129.

how can they be set over integrity and continence if from themselves begin to come forth corruptions and the teaching of vices? [...] And, therefore, you have acted wisely and vigorously, dearly beloved Brother, in excommunicating the deacon who has often remained with a virgin and also the others who had been accustomed to sleep with virgins.³⁵

The men had been excommunicated straight away – and the deacon singled out for special condemnation - but the question remained: what was to be done about the virgins? The crime appears to be different for the men and the women, which may suggest that the men are not vowed virgins. Later authors view the crime of seducing a virgin as sacrilege, the profanation of a holy object,³⁶ and even Tertullian in *De virginibus velandis* indicates that touching a virgin is sacrilegious. The automatic excommunication of the men may also suggest such an understanding of the virgin.

The implication that the women are *virgines subintroductae* is strengthened by Cyprian's insistence that the virgins are not only prohibited from sleeping with men, but even from living with them:

We should not allow our brethren to go astray and to live according to their free will and relish, but to consult faithfully for the life of each one, and not to allow virgins to live with men. I do not say sleep together, but not even to live together, since both their weak sex and still dangerous age ought to be restrained in all things and ruled by us lest opportunity to injure be given to the devil.³⁷

If living in close proximity is a temptation to sin, then sleeping in the same bed is an even greater provocation. The implication is that the act of sleeping together is not an isolated

³⁵ Cyprian, *Epistle IV*.iii-iv, p. 12.

³⁶ Cf. Pseudo-Ambrose: 'What, however, shall I say about you, son of the serpent, minister of the devil, violator of the Temple of God: you who in one sin perpetrated two crimes, adultery certainly and sacrilege? Sacrilege simply, when with insane rashness you defiled the vessel offered to Christ, dedicated to the Lord. Balthasar, that king of Persia, who, with his friends and concubines, used to drink in the vessels of the Lord which had been removed from the temple of Jerusalem by his father; on that same night he was struck down by the hand of the angel, he was punished with cruel death (Daniel 5: 30): what shall I say to the arbitrators about you, you, equally the destroyed and the destroyer, you who impiously defiled the vessel consecrated with reason to Christ, sanctified to the Holy Spirit, you defiled with sacrilege, and unmindful of your purpose, and despiser of divine judgement?' Pseudo-Ambrose, *De lapsu virginis consecratae*, IX.xxxix, (My Translation).

³⁷ Cyprian, *Epistle IV*.ii, p. 11.

incident but a regular occurrence, as Cyprian recommends that the only way to resolve the problem is by the total segregation of the sexes:

We must intervene quickly for such as these that they may be separated while as yet they can be separated guiltless since they cannot be parted afterwards by our protest after, with a very guilty conscience, they have been united.³⁸

As the virgins claimed that their sleeping with the men was innocent – and Cyprian does acknowledge that the relationships may not be sexual – the situation only makes sense in light of the practice of *syneisaktism*. The earliest Church canons against *virgines subintroductae* were in the early fourth century, just over fifty years after Cyprian wrote the *Epistle*.³⁹ Although Cyprian makes clear that living and sleeping with men is an unacceptable arrangement for a virgin to find herself in, the guilt of the virgins, and the subsequent punishment, rested on whether they were found to be physically damaged or not. Cyprian seems to suggest that there should be a winnowing-out of those who do not have a true vocation and are unable to keep their vows:

if they have consecrated themselves in good faith to Christ, let them remain virtuous and chaste without any rumour to the contrary; let them thus, courageous and unwavering, await the reward of virginity. But if they are unwilling or unable to persevere, let them marry rather than fall into hell for their transgressions.⁴⁰

This paragraph may indicate that Cyprian and the Council advocate the renunciation of the virginal vow and, therefore, following Paul's advice that 'it is better to marry than to

³⁸ Cyprian, *Epistle IV.ii*, p. 11.

³⁹ Susanna Elm notes that the earliest rulings against *virgines subintroductae* can be found in canons of the Council of Elvira (c. A.D. 306) and the Ancyra (c. A.D. 314). She says: 'The issue at stake, as to be expected from regulations, is violation of the principal precondition: the loss of virginity and its consequences. Those who renounced their profession, like the Ancyrans, or broke their contract, like the Elvirans, were to be punished accordingly. However, these violations were not judged with the same severity. The Fathers at Ancyra simply mentioned the offence and then pronounced their sentence, while the Elvirans took the possibility of repentance into consideration and varied their punishment accordingly.' Susanna Elm, *'Virgins of God': The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), pp. 25-6.

⁴⁰ Cyprian, *Epistle IV.ii*, p. 11.

burn', allowed virgins to marry even after consecration.⁴¹ This is certainly a possibility as, during the early third century, the avowal of perpetual virginity was still in its infancy, as was the Church and its doctrines in general. However, Cyprian's comments later in the epistle, in which he outlines the punishments for the virgins, do not at any point make allowances for the marriage of fallen consecrated virgins. This passage, then, may relate to the need for a more rigorous procedure in the acceptance of virgins into the Church, an area that Tertullian also seems to be concerned about.⁴²

Pomponius' lapsed virgins appear to have offered to be examined by midwives in order to prove their physical integrity. Cyprian warns against giving too much credence to the results of physical examination:

Both the hands and the eyes of the midwives are often deceived so that, even though she may have been found an incorrupt virgin in that part in which a woman can be, she may have sinned in some other part of the body which cannot be examined.⁴³

A virgin may be physically intact, but still guilty of sin. Cyprian enumerates the other types of sin which do not leave a physical testimony: kissing, embracing, conversing, and sleeping together, all of which prejudice the chastity of the virgins. The analogy that he uses to highlight the sins of the couple is important and telling:

If a husband, coming upon his wife, should see her lying with another man, is he not indignant and does he not storm about and, through grief of jealousy, does he not perhaps take a sword in his hands? What does Christ, our Lord and Judge, do when He sees His virgin, dedicated to Him and destined for His holiness,

⁴¹ Benson certainly reads the *Epistle* in this way: 'They entered on the life by private resolution, not by public vow; marriage might be looked on as a departure from holy purpose, but not as violating rule, and in some cases it was right.' Benson, *Cyprian*, p. 53.

⁴² Cf. Tertullian: 'Forsooth, it is their numbers that will make us happy, and not the grace of God and the merits of each individual! Is it virgins who (adorn or commend) the Church in the sight of God, or the Church which adorns or commends the virgins?'; 'These crimes does a forced and unwilling virginity incur.' Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, xiv, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers: Fathers of the Third Century. Tertullian, Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Parts First and Second*, (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1885]), pp. 27-38, (p. 35 and 36).

⁴³ Cyprian, *Epistle IV.iii*, p. 12.

reclining with another man? How indignant and angry He is and what punishments does He not threaten against such unchaste intimacies!⁴⁴

The depiction of Christ as an angry, jealous husband seeing His bride in the arms of another man demonstrates that, even if Tertullian uses the image for the first time at the end of the second century, the *sponsa Christi* motif has been adopted and was used mid-third century. The shocking image of the virgin as an adulteress against Christ emphasises the severity of the crime. The use of the Bride of Christ image, however, makes it difficult to reconcile with Cyprian's earlier statement that it were better for virgins to marry if they are 'unwilling or unable to persevere'. In the New Testament, Christ expressly forbade divorce⁴⁵ and if the consecrated virgin is imagined to have made a vow to God that is of equal solemnity to the vow of marriage, then there is no way that such a vow can be reneged.

Cyprian's recommendations for the readmission of the penitents into communion with the Church depend on the physical state of the virgin, her repentance and her desire to continue in a life of chastity. Despite warning Pomponius not to give too much credence to the physical reports of the midwives in guaranteeing the innocence of the virgins, Cyprian's punishments are dependent on whether the virgins are discovered to be corrupted or not:

let the virgins [...] be diligently examined by midwives, and, if they have been found to be virgins, let them, after having received Holy Communion, be admitted to the Church, yet with the admonition that, if they should afterwards return to the same men, or they should dwell together with the same men in one house and

⁴⁴ Cyprian, *Epistle IV.iii*, p. 12.

⁴⁵ Cf. Matthew: 'And it hath been said, Whosoever shall put away his wife, let him give her a bill of divorce. But I say to you, that whosoever shall put away his wife, excepting for the cause of fornication, maketh her to commit adultery: and he that shall marry her that is put away, committeth adultery' (Matthew 5: 31-2).

under the same roof, they should be cast out with graver censure; and such should not afterwards easily be received back into the Church.⁴⁶

Those virgins who were found to be corrupted had a much harder route back into the Church because, although the uncorrupted virgins had compromised their spiritual chastity, the corrupted virgins had lost both their physical and spiritual virginity. The crime is a particular affront to Christ:

But if anyone of them should be found corrupted, let her do full penance because she who has been guilty of this crime is an adulteress, not against a husband but against Christ, and, therefore, after a time considered just, when she has made a confession of sins, let her return to the Church.

In addition, the readmission into the Church of the lapsed virgins, regardless of whether they had been corrupted or not, is wholly dependent on their willingness to give up intimacy with men in whatever form. Failure to do so leads to complete excommunication:

But if they persevere obstinately and do not separate from each other, let them know that with this, their shameful obstinacy, they can never be admitted by us to the Church lest, because of their sins, they should begin to give an example to others for their destruction.⁴⁷

Cyprian comments that whereas in the past (i.e., in the Old Testament law) the punishment for such transgressions was physical death, now it is excommunication, which is far worse as it amounts to a 'spiritual death'.⁴⁸

The combination of the corrective *Epistle* and the regulatory *De habitu virginum* indicates that the Church, at least in Carthage, experienced difficulties in the regulation of virginity and that some of the adherents did not quite understand the dignity and

⁴⁶ Cyprian, *Epistle IV.iv*, pp. 12-13.

⁴⁷ Cyprian, *Epistle IV.iv*, pp. 12-13.

⁴⁸ Cyprian, *Epistle IV.iv*, p. 13.

significance of the life that they had chosen. In the *Epistle*, Cyprian alludes to a more general problem of the behaviour of virgins:

We see how grievous are the downfalls of many men from this course and we perceive, with the greatest sorrow of our mind, that very many virgins are corrupted by unlawful and dangerous intimacies of this kind.⁴⁹

The treatise also implies a wider problem of the behaviour of virgins, which causes the faithful to question the veracity of the virgins' vocations and whether the consecrated virgins are in fact still virgins. Cyprian laments:

The Church frequently bewails her virgins; hence, she groans over the notorious and detestable gossip about them; hence the flower of virginity is destroyed, the honour and modesty of continence are killed, all glory and dignity are profaned.⁵⁰

The *Epistle* deals with the problem of the physical loss of virginity through sexual profligacy, but also points to the dangers to spiritual virginity posed by close association with men. In contrast, *De habitu virginum* looks at the threats of worldliness to spiritual virginity; these may not necessarily lead to the destruction of a virgin's physical intactness, but they destroy the spirit of virginity and, as Saint Paul says, to be a virgin she must be 'holy both in body and in spirit'. As well as the difference in the threats posed to these two groups of virgins, there may be a class difference between the virgins of the letter and those of the treatise. If the virgins of the *Epistle* are *virgines subintroductae*, then their lifestyle may partly be prompted by penury – it was generally argued that the 'spiritual marriages' were entered into in order to provide mutual support; the males gained a housekeeper and the women gained financial security.⁵¹ The virgins of

⁴⁹ Cyprian, *Epistle IV.ii*, p. 11.

⁵⁰ Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, xx, p. 48.

⁵¹ Elm explains the 'motive that induced a woman to become a cleric's *syneisaktē*: plain economic need. A woman who wanted to lead a "virgin life", but did not come from a family which could afford to support a single girl, or a woman without any family at all, had in fact no means of supporting herself other than living with a man in a "pseudo-marriage". She became a "married virgin". For the men involved the advantages of the arrangement are equally obvious. Without forfeiting their bid for salvation, they could

the treatise, by contrast, are wealthy virgins, and the threat to their virginity comes from their conspicuous wealth. If such is the case, it is interesting that the threat to virginity on both accounts is fiscal: on the one hand too little money can destroy virginity, and on the other too much.

ii. *De habitu virginum*

It is clear from Cyprian's treatise that, in making a vow of perpetual virginity, virgins were not required to relinquish their patrimony as they were in later centuries. Sister Angela Elizabeth Keenan notes, however, that Cyprian's treatise goes some way towards the widening of the virginal sacrifice into a more complete sacrifice and an apostolic way of life: 'The ground was prepared even for [the surrender of property], however, in the exhortation to the wealthy to live simply, and to give generously to the poor.'⁵² Certainly Cyprian's own actions after his conversion – the disposal of his great wealth and the adoption of celibacy – indicate that he conceived of a more holistic personal sacrifice to God. Throughout the treatise, the continuation of worldly practices are conceived of as impeding spiritual growth and Cyprian even goes so far as to suggest that they prevent salvation. Wealthy virgins, who ostentatiously display their wealth, appear to argue that 'they ought to use the blessings that are theirs'.⁵³ Cyprian, however, prioritises spiritual

nevertheless enjoy almost all earthly comforts.' Elm, *Virgins of God*, p. 51. Elizabeth Clark, however, comments in her review of Elm's book: 'experts in various subspecialties will no doubt find points with which to take the issue (e.g., that the phenomenon of the *subintroductae* was strongly spurred by women's economic need.' Elizabeth A. Clark, 'Review of "*Virgins of God*": *The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* by Susanna Elm', *Journal of Religion*, Vol. 76, No. 3 (Jul., 1996), 466-68, (p. 467).

⁵² Keenan, 'Introduction to *De habitu virginum*, p. 27.

⁵³ Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, vii, p. 37.

wealth over worldly wealth.⁵⁴ Earthly goods are temporal and transient, and are an impediment to a perfect spiritual life:

The things that are earthly, that have been acquired in the world and will remain here with the world, should be despised just as the world itself is despised, whose pomps and pleasures we already renounced at the time that we came to God by passing to a better way.⁵⁵

By choosing to become a Christian, Cyprian says, one has already chosen the heavenly path over the worldly. The Christian, and even more so the Christian virgin, has chosen to follow a life in emulation of Christ, an *imitatio Christi*:

We who desire to be Christians ought to imitate what Christ has said. It has been written, it is read, and it is heard, and it is proclaimed for our instruction by the mouth of the Church: 'He that sayeth he abideth in Christ ought himself also to walk even as He has walked.' [1 John 2. 6] We must keep step with Him; we must strive to emulate His pace.⁵⁶

The life of virginity is not exempt from the apostolic life of poverty recommended by Christ; the one sacrifice does not mean that the path of poverty can be ignored. Instead, virginity, the rejection of the concupiscence of the flesh, is conceived of in a wider sense: it ought to be a rejection of all concupiscence, not just that of the flesh.

In the second chapter of *De habitu virginum*, Cyprian utilises Paul's image of the Church as the body of Christ and of individual bodies as temples of God⁵⁷ to draw attention to the pollution that bodily transgression brings, not only to the physical body, but to the mystical body of Christ. Cyprian's admonition to those who sin after they have

⁵⁴ Cf. Cyprian: 'she is wealthy who is wealthy in Christ; that those things are blessing which are spiritual, divine, heavenly, which lead us to God, which remain with us in everlasting possession with God.'

Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, vii, p. 37.

⁵⁵ Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, vii, p. 37.

⁵⁶ Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, vii, p. 38.

⁵⁷ Cf. Cyprian: 'Let us glorify God and bear Him in a pure and spotless body and with more perfect observance, and let us who have been redeemed by the blood of Christ submit to the rule of our redeemer with the absolute obedience of servants, and let us take care not to bring anything unclean or defiled into the temple of God, lest He be offended and leave the abode where He dwells.' Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, ii, pp. 32-33.

received baptism and ‘know God’ echoes the harsher punishments that he recommends in his *Epistle* to be meted out to those fallen virgins who return to sin. Cyprian warns

Christians in *De habitu virginum* that:

[God] threatens with greater severity the man who has delivered himself up to those very ills of which he has been cured, because without doubt it is less blameworthy to have transgressed before you have yet a knowledge of the discipline of God, but there is no excuse for further sin after you have begun to know God.⁵⁸

Cyprian emphasises the tangible change that baptism brings: it is not an empty gesture; it brings spiritual benefits and the commitment to Christianity involves turning away from the sins that are so prevalent in the pagan culture, and which they have rejected in choosing to become a Christian. Cyprian also provides a warning: if Christians refuse to turn away from sinfulness even after conversion, they are unlikely to receive God’s forgiveness. Cyprian’s recommendation of excommunication for those virgins who refuse to give up intimacy with men echoes this sentiment: persistence in sinning leads to spiritual death.

After the general enjoining of all Christians to discipline and the rejection of sin, Cyprian turns to the subject of virgins:

for whom our solicitude is even the greater inasmuch as their glory is the more exalted. They are the flower of the tree that is the Church, the beauty and adornment of spiritual grace, the illustrious part of Christ’s flock.⁵⁹

Keenan gleans from this passage the elevated position of consecrated virgins in the third century.⁶⁰ Undoubtedly it gives an indication of the high respect due to consecrated virginity, but, in light of the dire warning about the greater fall that is attendant on a

⁵⁸ Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, ii, p. 33.

⁵⁹ Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, iii, p. 33

⁶⁰ Cf. Keenan, ‘Introduction’ to *De habitu virginum*, p. 26.

higher spiritual position, the elevated status of the virgins involves a greater risk. Cyprian advises them that they must give thought to the way to salvation in order that

Those who have consecrated their lives to Christ, and, renouncing the concupiscence of the flesh, have dedicated themselves to God in body as well as in spirit, may perfect their work, destined as it is for a great reward, and may not be solicitous to adorn themselves nor to please anyone except their Lord, from whom in truth they await the reward of virginity.⁶¹

Cyprian explains that virginity is a life which aims at perfection through the renunciation of the concupiscence of the flesh. Although his treatise is thought to echo the concerns of Tertullian in *De cultu feminarum/ De habitu mulierum*, it also echoes some of the concerns that Tertullian expresses about the adornment of virgins in *De virginibus velandis*. Tertullian and Cyprian suggest that the only possible reason that virgins can have to adorn themselves is to attract men. Married women have some excuse because, they claim, they have a duty to make themselves beautiful for their husbands. Saint Paul and Saint Peter, however, denounced female adornments even for married women.⁶² If married women, who have something of an excuse for adorning themselves in order to please their husbands, are required to maintain a modest demeanour, then virgins, who have no need to please men, are required to demonstrate greater levels of modesty.⁶³ A virgin who has supposedly renounced the flesh but who beautifies herself through worldly adornments and cosmetics has belied herself:

⁶¹ Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, iv, p. 34.

⁶² Cf. Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, viii, p. 38. Cf. Paul: 'In like manner women also in decent apparel: adorning themselves with modesty and sobriety, not with plaited hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly attire, but as it becometh women professing godliness, with good works' (I Timothy 2: 9-10). Cf. Peter: 'Whose adorning [i.e. the adorning of wives] let it not be the outward plaiting of the hair, or the wearing of gold, or the putting on of apparel: But the hidden man of the heart in the incorruptibility of a quiet and a meek spirit, which is rich in the sight of God' (I Peter 3: 3-4).

⁶³ Cf. Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, viii, pp. 38-9.

You are discovered, O virgin, you are exposed; you boast of being one thing and you are striving to be another. You defile yourself with the stains of carnal concupiscence, although you are a candidate for innocence and modesty.⁶⁴

The only possible way that a virgin, or indeed any Christian, may glorify in the flesh is if they suffer torture and martyrdom for the sake of Christ.⁶⁵

Cyprian emphasises the necessity for virgins to retain purity of the body as well as the spirit, echoing Saint Paul in I Corinthians 7:

Continence and chastity consist not alone in the purity of the body, but also in the dignity as well as in the modesty of dress and adornment, so that, as the Apostle says. She who is unmarried may be holy both in body and in spirit.⁶⁶

Although adornment may not damage a woman's physical integrity, it does damage the purity of the spirit, which is a necessary part of virginity. Cyprian constantly returns to Paul's epistle, which is the seminal text for female virginity. In doing so, he demonstrates that by adorning and wearing cosmetics to please men, virgins are undermining the very purpose of virginity that was stipulated by Saint Paul: 'the unmarried woman and the virgin thinketh of the things of the Lord, so that she may be holy both in body and in spirit.'⁶⁷ If virginity does not accord with Saint Paul's definition, then it is no longer justifiable; virgins should not be attempting 'to please anyone except their Lord'.⁶⁸ Virginity looks towards heaven and so should reject worldly things:⁶⁹

⁶⁴ Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, vi, p. 36.

⁶⁵ Cf. Cyprian: 'Or if she must glory in the flesh, then truly let her glory when she suffers in the confession of the Name, when a woman is found stronger than the men who are inflicting the torture, when she endures fire, or the cross, or the sword, or beasts, that she may be crowned. These are the precious jewels of the flesh; these are the better ornaments of the body.' Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, vi, pp. 36-7.

⁶⁶ Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, v, p. 35.

⁶⁷ Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, v, p. 35. Cf. I Corinthians 7: 32-4.

⁶⁸ Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, iv, p. 34.

⁶⁹ Cf. Cyprian: 'Let her rather fear to be attractive, if she is a virgin, and not desire her own ruin who is keeping herself for higher and divine things.' Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, v, p. 35.

But if continence follows Christ, and virginity is destined for the kingdom of God, what have such maidens to do with worldly dress and adornments, whereby in striving to please men they offend God.⁷⁰

The third-century virgins that Cyprian admonishes in the letter and the tract seem to be unable to grasp the wider implications of the sacrifice of virginity. Physical integrity, though important, is not enough; virginity must first and foremost adorn the spirit. The clothing and behaviour, that is, the outward appearance of the virgin, serve to manifest her inward purity symbolically, even though clothing is an appendage of the body. Thus the appearance of virginity is important as it indicates the whole state of virginity:

A virgin should not only be a virgin, but she ought to be known and considered as such. No one on seeing a virgin should doubt whether she is one. Let her innocence manifest itself equally in all things, and her dress not dishonour the sanctity of her body.⁷¹

Cyprian's treatise takes a slightly different turn from that of Tertullian's. Although they both insist on certain regulations of dress which guarantee a virgin's modesty, Tertullian's insistence on the display of modesty through veiling actually served to hide the community of virgins within the anonymity of the universally veiled females. Cyprian, however, implies that modesty in dress, though hiding the virginal body, still serves to make virginity readable.

iii. Wealth and Adornment as a Threat to Virginity

Although virgins may be wealthy, they should not therefore use this wealth to beautify themselves as this leads to the destruction of the souls of others. Cyprian argues that virgins who seek to adorn their body destroy their virginity in several ways. Even if they do not wish to indulge in concupiscence themselves, enticing others to lust is destructive to virginity:

⁷⁰ Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, v, p. 35.

⁷¹ Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, v, p. 35.

if you adorn yourself too elaborately and appear conspicuous in public, if you attract to yourself the eyes of the youth, draw after you the signs of young men, foster the desire of concupiscence, enkindle the fire of hope, so that, without perhaps losing your own soul, you nevertheless ruin others and offer yourself a sword and poison as it were, to those who behold you, you cannot be excused on the ground that your mind is chaste and pure. Your shameless apparel and your immodest attire belie you, and you can no longer be numbered among the maidens and virgins of Christ, you who so live as to become the object of sensual love.⁷²

A virgin who goes out of her way to attract the attention of men, even though she may not be guilty of the lust herself, desires to kindle lust in others and so becomes responsible for that desire. She is also responsible for the destruction of the souls of the men whom she attracts. It seems almost to be a worse crime than if she were guilty of the lust herself because not only does she compromise her spiritual virginity by desiring to be desired, but she is also guilty of the moral danger that she exposes others to. The desires of others can be prejudicial to virginity only insofar as the virgin has herself solicited the attention; some moral failure on her part must be the root cause of the lust for it to damage her virginity.

Wealth is also spiritually damaging because it leads to pride.⁷³ Although Cyprian accepts that wealthy virgins can use their great wealth, which they argue is their right, he qualifies this by asserting that they should use it for their spiritual edification:

Use them, but for your salvation and for good works; use them for what God has ordained, for what the Lord has pointed out. Let the poor feel that you are rich; let the needy feel that you are wealthy; through your patrimony make God your debtor; feed Christ.⁷⁴

Cyprian demonstrates that the sacrifice of virginity is worthless if it simply involves renunciation of sex, and so recalls Saint Paul's words on the invalidity of any virtue if it

⁷² Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, ix, p. 39.

⁷³ Cf. Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, x, pp. 39-40.

⁷⁴ Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, xi, p. 40.

is not accompanied by charity. Wealthy virgins who appear to luxuriate in the things of the world but ignore the plight of their Christian brethren not only damage their spiritual virginity but have little claim to Christianity itself. The holiness of the sacrifice of virginity is hollow if the rest of Christ's precepts are ignored:

For you are offending God even in this very point, if you believe that wealth has been given to you by Him for the express purpose of enjoying it without thought of salvation. [...] Nay truly a large patrimony is a temptation unless the income is devoted to good purposes, so that through his fortune every wealthy man should atone for his faults rather than increase them.⁷⁵

Cyprian asserts that the blessings that God has given are to be used for charitable reasons. The holiness of the sacrifice of virginity is not only made manifest in the modesty of the garments that virgins wear, but also in the observance of their Christian duties. Although virginity represents Christian perfection, this must be founded on an adherence to the most fundamental Christian principle of charity.

The virgin who adorns herself resembles the wife and the woman looking for a husband; in addition, adornments are the badge of the harlot:

Showy adornments and clothing and the allurements of beauty are not becoming in any except prostitutes and shameless women, and of none, almost, is the dress more costly than those whose modesty is cheap.⁷⁶

It is unthinkable for a virgin to dress like a harlot if she is truly a virgin. Cyprian cites the Whore of Babylon and the haughty daughters of Sion⁷⁷ as examples from Scripture of the association of adornment with prostitution and unholiness.⁷⁸ Virgins should in no way resemble their opposite:

⁷⁵ Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, xi, pp. 40-1.

⁷⁶ Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, xii, p. 41.

⁷⁷ Cf. Cyprian: 'Having put on silk and purple, they cannot put on Christ; adorned with gold and pearls and necklaces, they have lost the adornments of heart and soul.' Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, xii, p. 41.

⁷⁸ Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, xii, pp. 41-2.

Let chaste and modest virgins shun the attire of the unchaste, the clothing of the immodest, the insignia of brothels, the adornment of harlots.⁷⁹

With such examples of spiritual destruction and its association with adornments, Cyprian cannot fathom why virgins would wish to adorn themselves and so desire their own ruination.⁸⁰ He explains the spiritually destructive nature of adornment and cosmetics by its demonic origin: ‘All these things the sinful and apostate angels brought into being by their own arts, when, having fallen into earthly contagion, they lost their heavenly power.’⁸¹ Here, Cyprian follows Tertullian’s explanation,⁸² which derives from *The Book of Enoch*, of the diabolical origin of cosmetics to emphasise their wickedness; nothing that originates with the adversary can ever be used for good.⁸³ The use of cosmetics, then, does not only indicate an unchaste mind and the desire to solicit the attention of men, but it also destroys the godliness of man. Cyprian’s warning about the use of cosmetics, however, is not just for virgins, but for all Christian women:

⁷⁹ Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, xii, p. 42.

⁸⁰ Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, xiii, p. 43.

⁸¹ Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, xiv, p. 43.

⁸² Cf. Tertullian: ‘For they, withal, who instituted them [female ornamentation] are assigned, under condemnation, to the penalty of death, - those angels, to wit, who rushed from heaven on the daughters of men; so that this ignominy also attaches to women.’ Tertullian, *De cultu feminarum (On the Apparel of Women)*, I.ii, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers: Fathers of the Third Century. Tertullian, Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Parts First and Second*, (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1885]), pp. 14-26, (p. 14).

⁸³ Cf. *The Book of Enoch*: ‘Asael taught men to make swords of iron and breast-plates of bronze and every weapon; and he showed them the metals of the earth, how to work gold, to fashion [adornments] and about silver, to make bracelets for women; and he instructed them about antimony, and eye-shadow, and all manner of precious stones and about dyes and varieties of adornments; and the children of men fashioned them for themselves and for their daughters and transgressed.’ *The Book of Enoch, or Enoch I*, VIII.i, trans. Matthew Black (Leiden: Brill, 1985), pp. 28-9. Tertullian admits that he is aware that the book is apocryphal, but argues in favour of some authenticity: ‘I am aware that the Scripture of Enoch, which has assigned this order (of action) to angels, is not received by some, because it is not admitted into the Jewish canon. I suppose they did not think that, having been published before the deluge, it could not have safely survived that world-wide calamity, the abolisher of all things. If that is the reason (for rejecting it), let them recall to their memory that Noah, the survivor of the deluge, was the great-grandson of Enoch himself.’ Tertullian, *De cultu feminarum*, I.iii, p. 15.

His creature and image should in no way be falsified by applying yellow colouring or black powder or rouge, or, finally, any cosmetic at all that spoils the natural features.⁸⁴

Because mankind is made in the image of God, the alteration of that image, through diabolically created cosmetics and adornments, becomes an act of desecration and an act against God Himself; cosmetics convert a holy image into a false and demonic one:

They are laying hands on God when they strive to remake what He has made, and to transform it, not knowing that everything that comes into existence is the work of God; that whatever is changed, is the work of the devil.⁸⁵

Painting the body also challenges God's workmanship and is an act of pride:

Although you may not be immodest towards men and unchaste through your alluring cosmetics, in corrupting and dishonouring the things that are God's, you are counted a worse adulteress! As for your thinking that you are adorned, that you are beautifully dressed, this is an assault upon the divine work, a violation of the truth.⁸⁶

Cyprian likens God's anger to that of an artist who, having painted a beautiful painting, sees that a lesser artist, thinking to improve it, has painted over the original work of art.⁸⁷

The false colouring that cosmetics give to the body indicates a more general tendency towards falsehood in the character of the painted woman:

You have defiled your skin with lying cosmetics; you have changed your hair with an adulterous colour; your face is overcome by falsehoods; your appearance is corrupted; your countenance is that of another.⁸⁸

In addition, Cyprian warns them that when they go to meet God, He may not recognise them as His own creatures. The adorned and painted virgin can no longer claim to be a virgin:

⁸⁴ Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, xv, p. 44.

⁸⁵ Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, xv, p. 44.

⁸⁶ Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, xv, pp. 44-5.

⁸⁷ Cf. Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, xv, p. 44.

⁸⁸ Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, xvii, p. 46.

Assuredly, virgins [...] who have adorned themselves by devices of this sort, should not be numbered among virgins, in my opinion, but, like tainted sheep and diseased cattle, they should be kept apart from the pure and holy flock of virgins, lest while they are together they corrupt others by their contact, lest they who have themselves perished ruin others.⁸⁹

Cyprian's earlier insistence that it is not enough for a virgin simply to be so, but also to be known and identifiable as one⁹⁰ does not allow virgins the possibility of adorning and beautifying themselves. If they do, they would resemble prostitutes as well as challenging God's creative powers and supporting the demonic powers of falsification. They also luxuriate in their wealth, without a thought for the poverty of their fellow Christians; they fail to 'feed Christ'. Cyprian thus paints a bleak picture of the behaviour and life of wealthy third-century virgins. He holds up a mirror to their excesses and abuses and reminds them that a vow of perpetual virginity is not enough for salvation: it must be bolstered by Christian charity and modesty behaviour. A virginity which pays no heed to its spiritual sustenance is no virginity at all – it is hollow and worthless. Cyprian admonishes the virgins to reject the 'golden fetters' of jewelry, not to inflict 'wounds' in their ears, nor falsify their beauty:⁹¹

Conquer your dress, you who are a virgin; conquer gold, you who conquer the flesh and the world. It is not natural for one to be invincible before greater things and to be found unequal to lesser.⁹²

Cyprian's exhortation is designed specifically to those who claim to be virgins, thus implying that those who are not virgins will not pay heed to his advice; those others will continue to be 'found unequal to lesser' things, and will continue to resemble prostitutes

⁸⁹ Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, xvii, p. 46.

⁹⁰ Cf. Cyprian: 'A virgin should not only be a virgin, but she ought to be known and considered as such. No one on seeing a virgin should doubt whether she is one. Let her innocence manifest itself equally in all things, and her dress not dishonour the sanctity of her body.' Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, v, p. 35.

⁹¹ Cf. Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, xx, pp. 48-9.

⁹² Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, xxi, p. 49.

in their elaborate dress, all of which will perhaps be led to the physical loss of their virginity alongside their spiritual loss. The maintenance of virginity is partially dependent on the rejection of extraneous earthly luxuries: true virginity is made manifest in the complete rejection of the world.

iv. Towards Enclosure

Cyprian's treatise, then, conceives of virginity in a wider sense. It is not merely a state of sexual renunciation, but it is a more complete renunciation of the world and its trappings. Cyprian exhorts virgins to avoid anything that may be prejudicial to their virginity.⁹³ It is not only immodesty in dress which virgins must beware, but also they must avoid weddings. Cyprian notes that

Some are not ashamed to attend weddings and, in the freedom of the wanton discourse there, to take part in the unchaste conversation, to hear what is unbecoming, to say what is not allowed, to look on and to be present in the midst of disgraceful talk and drunken feasts, by which the flame of passion is enkindled, and the bride is incited to tolerate and the bridegroom to become emboldened in lust.⁹⁴

Later Church Councils restrict the participation of ecclesiasts and even Christian laymen in wedding festivities, and it appears that immoral plays and dancing formed part of the celebrations, which were considered inappropriate for Christians.⁹⁵ In addition, virgins

⁹³ Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, xviii, p. 46.

⁹⁴ Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, xviii, pp. 46-7.

⁹⁵ Cf. *The Synod of Laodicea*: 'LIII. Christians, when they attend weddings must not join in wanton dances, but modestly dine or breakfast, as is becoming to Christians'; 'LIV. Members of the priesthood and of the clergy must not witness the plays at weddings or banquets; but before the players enter; they must rise and depart'. *The Canons of the Synod held in the City of Laodicea, A.D. 343-381*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. XIV, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church: Their Canons and dogmatic decrees* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1900]), pp. 125-133, (p. 156; p. 157). Cf. *The Council of Trullo*: 'XXIV. No one who is on the priestly catalogue nor any monk is allowed to take part in horse-races or to assist at theatrical representations. But if any clergyman be called to a marriage, as soon as the games begin let him rise up and go out, for so it is ordered by the doctrine of our fathers. And if any one shall be convicted of such an offence let him cease therefrom or be deposed.' *The Canons of the Council of Trullo often called the Quinsext Council, A.D. 692*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. XIV, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church: Their Canons and dogmatic decrees* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1900]), pp. 359-365, (p. 376). Cf. Van Espen's Note to *The Canons of the Council of*

would be subjected to the bawdiness that comes with the anticipation of the marriage act at weddings. Drunkenness fuels the lewdness of conversation:

What place is there at weddings for one who has no thought of marriage, or what can be pleasant and enjoyable in those occasions wherein desires and interests are so different? What is seen? To what degree does a virgin abandon her own purpose! How much more immodest does she go away who had gone there modest? She may remain a virgin in body and mind, but by her eyes, ears and tongue she has diminished the purity that she possessed.⁹⁶

Cyprian's sense of the total incompatibility of the celebration of a marriage with consecrated virginity implies that by the third century the vow is a permanent one; it cannot be dissolved in favour of marriage. By attending a marriage, the virgin learns about an area of life that she should not enquire into; she learns how to act immodestly with men; she listens to immodest talk about the marriage act and witnesses intimacy between men and women. Cyprian here suggests an interesting idea that the pollution of virginity can occur through the senses: although he says her mind and body are still virginal, her senses have experienced something that will slowly eat away at her virginity. Those sense perceptions may begin to destroy the purity of her mind and make a gateway for lewd thoughts that may even lead to the destruction of her physical virginity. 'Indecent weddings and wanton banquets,' Cyprian advises, must be completely avoided by virgins.⁹⁷

In addition to weddings, Cyprian warns against visiting the public baths.⁹⁸ The main problem with the baths is that they appear to be unisex:⁹⁹

Trullo: 'Scarcely ever were these plays exhibited without the introduction of something contrary to honesty and chastity. As Lupus here notes, the word "obscene" has its derivation from these "scenic" representations.' Van Espen, Note to *The Canons of the Council of Trullo*, pp. 376-7 n.xxiv.

⁹⁶ Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, xviii, p. 47.

⁹⁷ Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, xxi, p. 49.

⁹⁸ Later Church Canons placed restrictions and prohibitions on bathing. Thus, the Canons of Laodicea: 'XXX. None of the priesthood, nor clerics [of lower rank], nor ascetics, nor any Christian or layman shall wash in a bath with women; for this is the greatest reproach among the heathen.' *The Canons of the Synod*

But what is to be said of those who go to the common baths and who prostitute to eyes that are devoted to lust bodies consecrated to chastity and modesty? Do not those who, in the presence of men, and naked, with no sense of shame behold men and are seen by them, offer themselves an inducement to vice? Do they not excite and arouse the desire of those present to their own dishonour and harm?¹⁰⁰

Cyprian does not suggest that virgins go to the baths in order to act immodestly with men; the problem is that the virgin body is laid bare to the lustful eyes of men. Even if the virgin just goes to bathe, she can unwittingly become the object of lust. Thus, the baths do not serve their function to cleanse the body because they cause moral pollution: ‘Such a bath sullies; it does not purify and does not cleanse the limbs, but stains them.’¹⁰¹ There is certainly a suspicion surrounding virgins who, although consecrated to virginity, will happily strip off in front of men at the public baths without any sense of shame. One would assume, and Cyprian implies, that a true virgin would be too afraid to display her naked body and also to see the naked bodies of men:

There, all reserve is cast off; the honour and modesty of the body are laid aside together with the clothing; virginity is unveiled to be marked out and contaminated. Now then, consider whether, when she is clothed, such a one is modest among men who have grown in immodesty by the boldness of her nakedness.¹⁰²

Presumably, as with weddings, the sights that virgins are subjected to at the baths sully her senses:

held in the City of Laodicea, p. 149. The note to the canon clarifies: ‘Zonaras explains that the bathers were entirely nude and hence arose the objection which was also felt by the heathen.’ p. 149 n.xxx. Cf. *Council of Trullo*: ‘LXXVII. It is not right that those who are dedicated to religion, whether clerics or ascetics, should wash in the bath with women, nor should any Christian man or layman do so. For this is severely condemned by the heathens. But if any one is caught in this thing, if he is a cleric let him be deposed; if a layman, let him be cut off.’ *The Canons of the Council of Trullo*, p. 399.

⁹⁹ Cf. Ward: ‘The study of available sources suggests that mixed bathing began sometime in the first century CE, became widespread and popular in Roman society by the end of the century, [...] and it continued to be popular until at least the end of the fourth century. [...] the criticisms of Christians, beginning with those of Clement of Alexandria, show that the mixed bathing they decried was practised in various geographical areas and was popular among all classes.’ Roy Bowen Ward, ‘Women in Roman Baths’, *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 85, No. 2 (Apr., 1992), 125-147, (pp. 146-7).

¹⁰⁰ Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, xix, p. 47.

¹⁰¹ Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, xix, p. 48.

¹⁰² Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, xix, p. 48.

You do not corrupt your eyes with foul delight, but in delighting others you yourself are corrupted. You transform the bath into a public show; the places where you go are more shameful than the theatre.¹⁰³

The theatre was considered to be morally corrupting; both Cyprian and Tertullian wrote treatises against the brutality and moral repugnance of the theatre.¹⁰⁴ The implied likening of the virgin to a ‘public show’ intimates that here she becomes a morally polluting force and that there is an element of deliberate exposure and exhibitionism. Cyprian questions whether such a woman who ‘has grown in immodesty by the boldness of her nakedness’¹⁰⁵ can ever be considered to be modest when she is dressed; the two states are irreconcilable. Cyprian also gives advice to women regarding attendance at the baths: ‘Let the baths be attended with women whose bathing among you is modest.’¹⁰⁶ It is interesting that he does not forbid public bathing entirely, but, instead, seems to promote single-sex bathing. Although Roy Bowen Ward attests to the popularity of mixed bathing in late antiquity, for Cyprian to accept public bathing on the proviso that it

¹⁰³ Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, xix, p. 48.

¹⁰⁴ For Tertullian, the theatre is a mixture of idolatry and moral pollution. He states that the theatre is dedicated to Venus and Bacchus: ‘That immodesty of gesture and attire which so specially and peculiarly characterises the stage are consecrated to them [Venus and Bacchus] – the one deity wanton by her sex, the other by his drapery.’ Tertullian, *De spectaculis (On the Shows)*, x, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. III, *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian. I. Apologetic; II. Anti-Marcon; III. Ethical* trans. Rev. S. Thelwall, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1885]), pp. 79-92, (p. 84). Cyprian sees the theatre as an arena in which wicked morals are learned: ‘there is pleasure in the teaching of vile practices in these mimic productions. Either you recollect what has been done at home, or you hear what conduct could be done there, in the exhilaration of what you see. You learn to commit adultery while you are looking at it. Because the social influence of evil seduces people to commit vices, the matron, who perhaps had gone to the play chaste, returns from the play unchaste.’ Cyprian, *Ad Donatum (To Donatus)*, viii, in *Saint Cyprian of Carthage On the Church: Select Treatises*, trans. Allen Brent (New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2006), pp. 47-66, (p. 56). Cyprian’s *Epistle II* addresses the problem of whether an ex-actor, who has embraced Christianity, is allowed to teach his art to others. Cyprian replies with a definite negative: ‘Let no one excuse himself that he has withdrawn from the theatre when he is still teaching this to others [...] instructing them contrary to the plan of God and teaching how a man may be weakened into a woman, and sex may be changed by art, and the divine image may be pleasing to the devil, who stains it through the sin of the corrupt and effeminate body.’ Cyprian, *Epistle II in The Father of the Church: Saint Cyprian Letters (1-81)*, trans. Sister Rose Bernard Donna (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1981 [1964]), pp. 5-6, (p. 5).

¹⁰⁵ Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, xix, p. 48.

¹⁰⁶ Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, xxi, p. 49.

is with 'modest' women, there must have been some provision for single-sex bathing. If this were not the case, then surely Cyprian would have advised the avoidance of public baths altogether, just as he advised with weddings and banquets. If there were indeed such provision for single-sex bathing, then it places those virgins who chose mixed bathing over public bathing in a very poor light. Cyprian's insistence that virgins must be attended 'with women whose bathing among you is modest' indicates either that the virgins were not being attended by women, or that they were being attended by immodest women. As with weddings, there is the danger of the pollution of chastity from fallen women who may have a corrupting influence on virgins; the danger is not simply from the physical threat that men pose, but from the exposure to women whose life is antithetical to that of the virgin. Thus, the virgins who 'desir[e] to be adorned more elegantly' and 'to go about more freely, cease to be virgins, being corrupted by a hidden shame, widows before they are brides, adulteresses not to a husband but to Christ'.¹⁰⁷ As in his epistle, Cyprian addresses the implications of a worldly life for the Brides of Christ. They do not simply sin, but they become adulteresses to Christ. The repercussions of such a crime are enormous. Cyprian again reiterates the height of the fall that virgins, those 'flowers' of the Church and 'the more illustrious part of Christ's flock,' must experience because more was expected from them due to their lofty status.¹⁰⁸ The heavenly rewards that are promised to virgins must encourage them to persevere in their high calling.

It is generally assumed that the association of virginity with martyrdom occurs after the end of the Christian persecutions, at which point virginity takes over from

¹⁰⁷ Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, xx, p. 48.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Cyprian: 'Just as they had been destined as virgins for wonderful rewards, so now will they suffer great punishments for their lost virginity.' Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, xx, p. 48.

martyrdom as the highest expression of Christian sacrifice.¹⁰⁹ Cyprian, however, writing during the persecution, shows that this occurs prior to the end of the persecutions as he likens the endurance of the sacrifice of virgins to that of the martyrs:

The first fruit, that of a hundred-fold, belongs to the martyrs; the second, sixty-fold, is yours. Just as with the martyrs there is no thought of the flesh of the world, and no slight and trivial and dainty struggle, so also in you, whose rewards is second in the order of grace, let the power of endurance be next to theirs. [...] Immortality is given to the one who perseveres; everlasting life is offered; the Lord promises His Kingdom.¹¹⁰

Tertullian used the Parable of the Sowers in order to designate the three levels of chastity. Here, Cyprian provides a more general hierarchy of virtue. In ensuing centuries it was frequently debated which model more accurately expressed the Parable of the Sower.¹¹¹ For the advocates of virginity, the hundredfold was due to virginity, the sixtyfold to widows, and the thirtyfold to wives.

v. Contribution

The closing chapters of Cyprian's treatise are dedicated to the extolling of the virtue of virginity and the heavenly rewards that it can expect.¹¹² Cyprian states that the first command to increase and multiply has been superseded by the counselling of continence. The first commandment is associated with Adam, continence with Christ. Virginity bears the image of Christ:

Virginity bears this image, purity bears it, sanctity and truth bear it, those who are mindful of the discipline of God bear it, who observe justice scrupulously, who are steadfast in faith, humble in fear, brave in enduring all suffering, mild in sustaining injuries, ready in showing mercy, of one mind and heart in fraternal peace.¹¹³

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Ramsey: 'By the end of the third century [virginity] was being compared to martyrdom.' Boniface Ramsey, *Beginning to Read the Fathers* (London: Paulist Press, 1985), p. 136.

¹¹⁰ Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, xxi, p. 49.

¹¹¹ Cf. Matthew: 'And others [seed] fell upon good ground: and they brought forth fruit, some an hundredfold, some sixtyfold, and some thirtyfold' (Matthew 13: 8).

¹¹² Cf. Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, xxii, p. 50.

¹¹³ Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, xxiii, pp. 51-2.

Virginité must demonstrate all these Christian virtues.¹¹⁴ The praise of virginité in Cyprian's treatise both emphasises the value of the estate and also helps to define what it means to be a virgin. The understanding of its grandeur and its aim of spiritual perfection bolsters the recommended behavioural regulations that Cyprian advocates in his treatise, which in many ways follow the lead of his 'master' Tertullian, and the punitive measures that he sanctions in his epistle. Both Tertullian and Cyprian demonstrate a concern for the problem of false virgins, those who are either spiritually or physically unchaste. The use of the nuptial imagery and the understanding that these false virgins do not only destroy their own integrity, but are also adulteresses against their heavenly bridegroom increases the sense of the holiness of the virginal life and the sinfulness attendant on its rejection. Although, at moments, this appears to imply that in Cyprian's time the vow is considered to be permanent, the two sources are a little ambiguous on this point. They do, however, suggest a process of consecration, but whether this involved a ritual consecration in public or private is unknown. Nevertheless, Cyprian's concern for the virgins' interaction with the secular world, both through possible corrupting social contact or the disposal of wealth, represents a continuing movement towards an all-encompassing programme for the maintenance of virginité, which eventually culminates in the requirement to enclose virginité.

¹¹⁴ Cf. Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, xxiii, p. 52.

III. Clement of Rome

The two *Letters to Virgins* attributed to Clement of Rome are extant in Syriac.¹ They are generally considered to be spuriously attributed to him, although there is some debate among scholars regarding their authenticity.² Much of the argument is perhaps political, because the letters state that both good works and faith are necessary for salvation and, therefore, there are vested interests for Catholics to assert that they are written by Clement, and for Protestants to maintain the opposite position.³ Rev. B. L. Pratten argues that there is a chance that they are authentic:

While the great mass of early Christian literature bearing the name of Clement of Rome is undoubtedly spurious, the case is somewhat different with regard to the two following epistles. Not only have Roman Catholic writers maintained their genuineness with great ingenuity and learning, but Wetstein, who first edited them, argued powerfully for their being received as the authentic productions of Clement; and even Neander has admitted that they may possibly have been written by that friend and fellow labourer of the apostles.⁴

¹ Cf. J. B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers, Part I. Saint Clement of Rome*, Vol. I. (London and New York: Macmillan and Co., 1890), p. 407; Edward White Benson, *Cyprian: His Life. His Times. His Work* (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1897), p. 56 n.3. Pratten notes: 'It is generally admitted (and, of course, asserted by those that maintain their truly Clementine origin) that Greek was the original language of these epistles.' B. L. Pratten, 'The Epistles of Clement Concerning Virginité: Introductory Notice', in *Ante-Nicene Christian Library: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*. Vol. XIV. *The Writings of Methodius, Alexander of Lycopolis, Peter of Alexandria and Several Fragments*, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, MDCCCLXIX [1869]), pp. 365-366, (p. 366).

² Gustav Krüger asserts that the two epistles are falsely ascribed to Clement. Cf. Gustav Krüger, *Early Christian Literature*, trans. Charles R. Gillet (London and New York: Macmillan, 1897), p. 25.

³ Lightfoot notes: 'They were first published, as an appendix to his Greek Testament, by J. J. Wetstein (Lugd. Bat. 1752), who maintained their genuineness. They have found champions also in their two latest editors, Villecourt (Paris 1853) whose preface and translation are reprinted with the text in Migne's *Patrologia* I. p. 350 sq, and Beelen (Louvain 1856) whose edition is in all respects the most complete: and other Roman Catholic divines have in like manner held them to be genuine.' Lightfoot, *Saint Clement of Rome*, p. 407. Benson adds that: 'Freppel (*Pères Apostol.*, pp. 214 sqq.) holds these to be genuine, as do other Roman divinites.' Benson, *Cyprian*, p. 57 n. 3. Pratten states: 'Not only have Roman Catholic writers maintained their genuineness with great ingenuity and learning, but Wetstein, who first edited them, argued powerfully for their being received as the authentic productions of Clement; and even Neander admitted that they may possibly have been written by that friend and fellow-labourer of the apostles. [...] These epistles have been very carefully edited in recent times by the Roman Catholic scholars Villecourt (1853) and Beelen (1856). Both have argued strenuously for the genuineness of the letters, but it may be doubted if they have succeeded in repelling all the objections of Lardner and Venema. Beelen's work is a highly scholarly production, and his prolegomena are marked by great fullness and perspicuity.' Pratten, 'The Epistles of Clement Concerning Virginité: Introductory Notice', pp. 365-6.

⁴ B. L. Pratten, 'The Epistles of Clement Concerning Virginité: Introductory Notice', p. 365.

If the letters were written by Clement of Rome, then they have apostolic authority, as Clement is said to have been one of Saint Peter's disciples, and the third or fourth Roman Pope.⁵ Very little is known about Clement, although Jerome does provide a biography in *De viris illustribus*:

Clement, of whom the Apostle Paul in his Epistle to the Philippians wrote, 'with Clement and my other fellow-workers whose names are written in the book of life,'⁶ was the fourth bishop of Rome after Peter, in that Linus was the second and Anacletus, third,⁷ although the greater part of the Latins think that Clement was second after the apostle.⁸

Jerome makes reference to Clement's *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, which is considered his sole genuine work,⁹ and also notes some works that were considered

⁵ Cf. Gustav Krüger: 'Clement [...] appears in the tradition of the Roman Catholic church as the third or fourth bishop of Rome.' Krüger, *Early Christian Literature*, p. 23.

⁶ Cross notes that 'Both Origen and Eusebius, probably wrongly, equate him with the Clement mentioned as St. Paul's fellow-labourer in Phil. IV. iii. In more recent times he has sometimes been identified with the consul, Titus Flavius Clemens, one of Domitian's cousins, who was executed in 95 or 96. But this last identification is also improbable. If such a prominent personality had been head of the Church of Rome, the circumstance must have attracted much comment from pagans and Christians alike. Clement was a very common name and the plain fact is that our surest guide to Clement's person is the internal evidence of his Epistle. His intimate familiarity with the Old Testament supports the view that he came from Jewish stock. A fourth century legend asserts that he at last met his death by being tied to an anchor and cast into the Black Sea; but there is no early evidence for his martyrdom.' F. L. Cross, *The Early Christian Fathers* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 1960), pp. 11-12.

⁷ Cf. Eusebius: 'In the twelfth year of the same reign, Clement succeeded Anencletus, who had been Bishop of the Church at Rome for twelve years.' Eusebius Pamphili, *Ecclesiastical History*, III.xv, Vol. I, trans. Roy J. Deferrari (York: Fathers of the Church inc., 1953), p. 163. Deferrari notes: 'The order of the first three Bishops of Rome is greatly disputed. The order given here by Eusebius [III. ii], namely, Linus, Anencletus, and Clement, is that given by Irenaeus in *Adv. Haer.* 3.3.3, and is the oldest. Hippolytus gives four names in this order – Linus, Clement, Cletus, and Anacletus – which is followed by the Church.' Roy Deferrari, Note to Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*, III.ii, p. 139 n.1. Also, see Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, III.xxi, pp. 168-9 and V.vi, p. 295.

⁸ Saint Jerome, 'XV. Clement the Bishop', *On Illustrious Men (De viris illustribus)*, trans. Thomas P. Halton (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1999), p. 31.

⁹ Cf. Lightfoot, *Saint Clement of Rome*, p. 406. Clement's authentic letters provide important historical information about the Early Church. For instance, Boniface Ramsey states that: 'The mystery of the Church is identical with the further mystery of the unity of Christ's body, head and members. This Pauline notion occurs in Patristic literature already before the end of the first century, in a letter of Clement of Rome to the church at Corinth in which he complains of a schism that has arisen there.' He also notes that in Clement's work the hierarchy of the Church is already identifiable: 'Towards the beginning of the second century, however, a pattern similar to the one with which we are presently familiar begins to emerge. Both Clement of Rome, writing about the year 96, and Ignatius of Antioch, fifteen years later, speak of bishops, priests (or presbyters) and deacons, but make no mention of apostles, prophets and teachers. By the beginning of the third century this latter group, for all intents, disappeared from the orthodox Church, although prophecy, as a specific office, may have survived in a few isolated cases. The scheme of bishop, priest and deacon did

spurious even in his own time: a second letter to the Church in Corinth,¹⁰ and a *Disputation of Peter and Apion*.¹¹ Jerome does not mention the *Letters to Virgins*, but he alludes to them in *Adversus Jovinianum* and it is clear in that reference that he believes them to be genuine. Lightfoot states:

Though the fact as been questioned, there can be no reasonable doubt that these two epistles were known to Epiphanius and accepted by him as genuine.¹² [...] To Jerome also these epistles were known.¹³ [...] Throughout [*Adversus Jovinianum*] Jerome betrays a knowledge of these Clementine Epistles to Virgins, though he only refers to them this once.¹⁴

It is interesting to note that in the fourth century the letters were considered to be genuine by Jerome, who was evidently engaging in the debate of authenticity as he doubts the veracity of other works attributed to Clement.

Even the scholars who agree that the attribution of the epistles to Clement is spurious disagree over the dating of the *Letters to Virgins*. Benson asserts that they are ‘a

not suddenly spring up full-blown at the same time everywhere, yet by the year 200, if not earlier, we may rather be certain that it was pretty firmly established throughout the whole Christian community.’ Boniface Ramsey, *Beginning to Read the Fathers*, (London: Paulist Press, 1985), p. 102; p. 109.

¹⁰ Lightfoot says of this letter: ‘*The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, a very early work, perhaps written before the middle of the second century, but neither an Epistle nor written by Clement. [...] The two generally went together and had the widest circulation in the Greek Church to very later times.’ Lightfoot, *Saint Clement of Rome*, p. 406.

¹¹ Jerome says that this disputation is ‘written in a prolix style, which Eusebius rejects in the third book of his *Ecclesiastical History*.’ Jerome, *De viris illustribus*, p. 31. Cf. Eusebius: ‘But we must realise that there is said to be a second epistle of Clement; however, we are not certain that this was known as well as the former, since we learn that the ancients never made any use of it. Now, some have brought forward quite recently other wordy and lengthy compositions also as supposedly his, including dialogues with Peter and Apion, but no mention of these at all is made by the ancients, for they do not preserve the pure mark of apostolic orthodoxy.’ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, III. xxxix, p. 202.

¹² Cf. Epiphanius on the Ebionites: ‘But they use certain other books as well – supposedly the so-called Travels of Peter written by Clement, though they corrupt their contents while leaving a few genuine passages. Clement himself convicts them of this in every way in his general epistles which are read in the holy churches, because his faith and speech are of a different character than their spurious productions in his name in the Travels. He himself teaches celibacy, and they will not accept it. He extols Elijah, David, Samson and all the prophets, whom they abhor.’ Epiphanius, *The Panarion*, Book I (Sects 1-46), trans. Frank Williams (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009) XXX.xv.1-2, p. 143.

¹³ Cf. Jerome: ‘These [eunuchs] are they to whom Clement, who was the successor of the Apostle Peter, and of whom the Apostle Paul makes mention, wrote letters, directing almost the whole of his discourse to the subject of virgin purity.’ Saint Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*. I. xii, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, Vol. VI, *St. Jerome: Letters and Select Works*, trans. W. H. Freemantle (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1893]), pp. 346-416, (p. 356).

¹⁴ Lightfoot, *Saint Clement of Rome*, p. 409.

work of the second century, and probably the first half of it'.¹⁵ Lightfoot, however, states that they are likely to be later:

The Epistles to Virgins can hardly have been written before the middle of the second century. At the same time they bear the stamp of high antiquity, and in the opinion of some competent writers (e.g. Westcott *Canon* p. 162, Hefele in *Wetzer u. Welte's Kirchen-Lexicon* II. p. 586) cannot be placed much later than this date. Neander (*Church History* I. p. 408, Bohn's translation) places them 'in the last times of the second or in the third century'. As they seem to have emanated from Syria, and the Syrian Church changed less rapidly than the Greek or Western, it is safer to relax the limits of the possible date to the third century.¹⁶

The letters, then, may stem at the earliest from Tertullian's time, from around the time of Cyprian, or just after. Many modern critics accept the later, third-century dating.¹⁷

Keenan, places them chronologically after Cyprian's *De habitu virginum*.¹⁸ B. L. Pratten notes that

Many have argued that they [the epistles] contain plain references to the *subintroductae* spoken of in the literature of the third century, and that therefore they were probably composed in the Oriental Church about that period.¹⁹

Due to the uncertainty of authorship it is difficult to know where to place the *Letters*, not only in terms of their chronology, but also in terms of their position in the tradition of virginity. If the letters were not written by Clement, then they lack apostolic authority and so are of less importance. Yet, regardless of their authenticity, they remain early

¹⁵ Benson, *Cyprian*, p. 57 n.3.

¹⁶ Lightfoot, *Saint Clement of Rome*, p. 407.

¹⁷ Cf. Brown: 'The *Letter on Virginity*, ascribed to Clement of Rome, may have been written in the third century'. In a note about the dating he states: 'I would prefer a third-century date.' Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), p. 196; p. 196n. 32.

¹⁸ Cf. Keenan: 'the exact dates of those treatises [Cyprian's *De habitu virginum*, Methodius' *Convivium decem virginum*, and the Pseudo-Clementine letters *Ad virgines*] are unknown. The general opinion seems to be that Cyprian wrote his work before 250 and that the remaining two belong to the latter part of the third century.' Sister Angela Elizabeth Keenan, 'Introduction to *The Dress of Virgins*', in *Saint Cyprian: Treatises*, trans. and ed. Roy J. Deferrari (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1981 [1958]), pp. 25-29, (p. 26).

¹⁹ B. L. Pratten, 'The Epistles of Clement Concerning Virginity: Introductory Notice', p. 366.

discussions of virginity and as Jerome believed them to be authentic, they can be seen to have some influence on later writers, or at the very least on the great Jerome himself.

i. *First Epistle*

Clement, like both Tertullian and Cyprian, understands virginity as something more than the simple renunciation of sexual intercourse; the path of virginity is that of perfection.

This is clear in his *First Epistle*:

Of all virgins of either sex who have truly resolved to preserve virginity for the sake of the kingdom of heaven – of each and every one of them is required that he be worthy of the kingdom of heaven in every thing. [...] For it is required of the man of God, that in all his words and works he be perfect, and that in his life he be adorned with all exemplary and well-ordered behaviour, and do all his deeds in righteousness, as a man of God.²⁰

Clement describes the virginal life as one which fully realises the Christian ideal, by achieving perfect virtue, and he also recognises it to be available to ‘either sex’.²¹

Virgins, therefore, become an example for all Christians, ‘giving light to “those who sit in darkness” [Isaiah 9: 2; Matthew 4: 16]’.²² Clement repeatedly emphasises the need for virgins to be a paradigm of Christian perfection and in order to realise this they must achieve a combination of faith²³ and good works:

For virgins are a beautiful pattern for believers, and to those who shall believe. The name alone, indeed, without works, does not introduce into the kingdom of heaven; but if a man be truly a believer, such an one can be saved. [...] For, merely because a person is called a virgin, if he be destitute of works excellent and comely, and suitable to virginity, he cannot possibly be saved.²⁴

²⁰ Pseudo-Clement, *Two Epistles Concerning Virginity: The First Epistle*, II, in *Ante-Nicene Christian Library*, Vol. XIV. *The Writings of Methodius etc.* trans. B. L. Pratten eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, MDCCCLXIX [1869]), pp. 367-382, (pp. 367-8).

²¹ Cf. Pseudo-Clement: ‘for it is required of the man of God, that in all his words and works he be perfect, and that in his life he be adorned with all exemplary and well-ordered behaviour, and do all his deeds in righteousness as a man of God.’ Pseudo-Clement, *The First Epistle*, II, p. 368.

²² Pseudo-Clement, *The First Epistle*, II, p. 368.

²³ Cf. Pseudo-Clement: ‘the kingdom of God [...] is obtained by the power of faith, when a man exhibits the works of faith.’ Pseudo-Clement, *The First Epistle*, II, p. 368.

²⁴ Pseudo-Clement, *The First Epistle*, III, p. 369.

Virginity is not just a religious office, but a way of life, so one cannot be satisfied with being given the title of virgin; it must be lived. Clement thus accords with Cyprian: virginity is not just the renunciation of certain behaviours, but it also requires the active pursuit of Christian works. Virginity without good works, which attest to the purity of the state, is not worthy of salvation. Clement uses the Parable of the Ten Virgins (from Matthew 25: 1-13) to elucidate on the difference between true virgins, who uphold the perfection of Christianity, and ‘foolish virgins’ who, although virgins in name, fail in the essential aspects of faith which truly validates the state:

For our Lord called such virginity as that ‘foolish’ as He said in the Gospel; and because it had neither oil nor light, it was left outside of the kingdom of heaven, and was shut out from the joy of the bridegroom, and was reckoned with his enemies. For such persons as these ‘have the appearance only of the fear of God, but the power of it they deny.’ [II Timothy 3: 5] For they ‘think with themselves that they are something, whilst they are nothing, and are deceived. But let every one constantly try his works,’ [Galatians 6: 3, 4] and know himself; for empty worship does he offer, whosoever he be that makes profession of virginity and sanctity, ‘and denies its power.’ For virginity of such a kind is impure, and disowned by all good works.²⁵

As in Tertullian and Cyprian’s works, the idea of the ‘false’ virgin is apparent, although Clement’s discussion of such virgins is focused more on their self-deception rather than on a hypocritical attempt to deceive other Christians that Tertullian outlines.²⁶ The false virgins that Clement identifies are those who live as virgins, but do not achieve the ideal because they fail to realise the burden attendant on the sacrifice. Virginity entails the

²⁵ Pseudo-Clement, *The First Epistle*, III, p. 369.

²⁶ Cf. Tertullian: ‘Recognise the *woman*, aye, recognise the *wedded woman*, by the testimonies both of body and of spirit, which she experiences both in conscience and in flesh. These are the earlier tablets of *natural* espousals and nuptials. Impose a veil externally upon her who has (already) a covering internally. Let her whose lower parts are not bare have her upper likewise covered.’ Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis* (*On the Veiling of Virgins*), XII.i, in *Ante Nicene Fathers*, Vol. IV. *Tertullian, Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Parts First and Second*, trans. S. Thewell, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1885]), pp. 27-38 (pp. 34-5).

complete rejection of sexuality, sensuality and the temptations of the world;²⁷ the true virgin must ‘crucify his body’.²⁸

i. *Vita Angelica and Imitatio Christi*

Clement utilises the gospel association of virginity with the angelic life, and advises virgins that ‘[w]hilst thou walkest upon the earth, be zealous that thy work and thy business be in heaven’.²⁹ By severing himself from the allure of the world, the virgin ‘excuses himself’ from God’s first mandate in Genesis to procreate, which Clement seems to view as a command that is only avoidable by the greater sacrifice of virginity which conquers nature.³⁰ Clement, however, does not have unrealistic notions about the practical difficulties involved in maintaining virginity. He recognises that it is a demanding path which is not suitable for all to undertake:

Knowest thou what hardship and irksomeness there is in true virginity – that which stands constantly at all seasons before God, and does not withdraw [from His service], and “is anxious how it may please its Lord with a holy body, and with [its] spirit?” [Cf. I Corinthians 7: 34]³¹

Clement describes the choice of virginity as a ‘contest’³² involving the ‘conquest’ of earthly things;³³ it is a competition or battle against transience and ultimately against evil.³⁴ Virginity is a hard path to follow, but for that reason the rewards in heaven for true

²⁷ Cf. Pseudo-Clement: ‘[shun] all the display, and care, and sensuality, and fascination of this world, and its revelries and its drunkenness, and all its luxury and ease, and withdraws from the entire life of this world, and from its snares, and nets, and hindrances.’ Pseudo-Clement, *The First Epistle*, III, p. 370.

²⁸ Pseudo-Clement, *The First Epistle*, III, p. 369.

²⁹ Pseudo-Clement, *The First Epistle*, III, p. 370.

³⁰ Cf. Pseudo-Clement, *The First Epistle*, III- IV, p. 370.

³¹ Pseudo-Clement, *The First Epistle*, V, p. 371.

³² Pseudo-Clement, *The First Epistle*, V, p. 371.

³³ Pseudo-Clement, *The First Epistle*, V, p. 371.

³⁴ Cf. Pseudo-Clement: ‘conquer the body; conquer the appetites of the flesh; conquer the world in the Spirit of God; conquer these vain things of time, which pass away and grow old, and decay, and come to an end; conquer the dragon; conquer the lion; conquer the serpent; conquer Satan; - through Jesus Christ, who doth strengthen thee by the hearing of His words and the divine Eucharist.’ Pseudo-Clement, *The First Epistle*, V, p. 371.

virginity are great: virgins will be given a similar place in the kingdom as the angels.³⁵

Clement asks the virgins: ‘Dost thou understand and know how honourable a thing is sanctity? Dost thou understand how great and exalted and excellent is the glory of virginity?’³⁶ He then explains why virginity is such a glorious state: Christ lived in a virginal state and He derived his flesh from his virginal mother:

The womb of a holy virgin carried our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God; and the body which our Lord wore, and in which He carried on the conflict in this world, He put on from a holy virgin. From this, therefore, understand the greatness and dignity of virginity. Dost thou wish to be a Christian? Imitate Christ in every thing.³⁷

Clement here differs from the focus of Tertullian and Cyprian. Whereas the two latter Fathers were concerned mostly with the regulation of virginal behaviour, Clement draws out more explicitly the theological importance of virginity in its relation to the Incarnation and the Redemption. He uses this aspect to validate the adoption of virginity and express its grandeur. Christ not only took His flesh from a virgin, but he also dwelt in a virginal body and in this pure state ‘carried on the conflict in this world’. By extension, virgins continue Christ’s work more effectively through a complete imitation of what He was and what He did.

Even though Clement recognises that Christ took His virginal flesh from the virginal flesh of his mother, Mary is alluded to only very circumspectly as ‘a holy virgin’; as yet her example is not held up as a pattern for Christian life. It is Christ’s virginal example that is the main focus of Clement’s discussion and the main example for virgins to imitate:

³⁵ Cf. Pseudo-Clement: ‘For God will give to virgins the kingdom of heaven, as to the holy angels, by reason of this great and noble profession.’ Pseudo-Clement, *The First Epistle*, IV, p. 371.

³⁶ Pseudo-Clement, *The First Epistle*, V, p. 372.

³⁷ Pseudo-Clement, *The First Epistle*, V, p. 372. Pratten notes that these ‘last two sentences properly belong to chap. vi.’ p. 372n. 2.

Those, therefore, who imitate Christ, imitate Him earnestly. For those who have ‘put on Christ’ [Romans 13: 14] in truth, express His likeness in their thoughts, and in their whole life, and in all their behaviour: in word, and in deeds, and in patience, and in fortitude, and in knowledge, and in chastity, and in long-suffering, and in pure heart, and in faith, and in hope, and in full and perfect love towards God.³⁸

The true virgin is the ultimate *imitatio Christi*. Virginity is a quest for perfection and true unity with God: ‘those who are virgins rejoice at all times in becoming like God and His Christ, and are imitators of them.’³⁹ Virginity, imitating Christ as it does, achieves something of the divine. Although Clement does not seem to regard Mary’s virginity as a paradigm for virginity, he does encourage Christians to follow other examples of male virgins in scripture. He recommends the imitation of such New Testament figures as John the Baptist, ‘the ambassador of the Lord’;⁴⁰ John the Evangelist, ‘whom He greatly loved’;⁴¹ Paul, Barnabas and Timothy, all of whose ‘names are written in the book of life.’⁴² In addition to these, Clement also recommends the Old Testament figures of Elijah and Elisha, who ‘lived a holy and spotless life’.⁴³ Although Clement provides only examples of male virgins, the salutation of the letter makes clear that it is addressed to both sexes.⁴⁴

The failure to recognise Mary’s virginity as worthy of imitation may be for several reasons. Christology is more important than Mariology, and in the second and third centuries Christological dogma had not yet been codified, as the Church was still suffering persecution and was only unified after the Edict of Milan in A.D. 313. The male

³⁸ Pseudo-Clement, *The First Epistle*, VII, p. 373.

³⁹ Pseudo-Clement, *The First Epistle*, VIII, p. 373.

⁴⁰ Pseudo-Clement, *The First Epistle*, VI, p. 372.

⁴¹ Pseudo-Clement, *The First Epistle*, VI, p. 372.

⁴² Pseudo-Clement, *The First Epistle*, VI, p. 372.

⁴³ Pseudo-Clement, *The First Epistle*, VI, p. 372.

⁴⁴ Cf. Pseudo-Clement: ‘to the blessed [brother] virgins, who devote themselves to preserve virginity “for the sake of the kingdom of heaven;” and to the holy [sister] virgins: the peace which is in God.’ Pseudo-Clement, *The First Epistle*, I, p. 370.

virgins from the New Testament are examples of those who have imitated Christ's virginity, and so represent the establishment of the tradition of virginal imitation which stretches back to Christ.⁴⁵ The Old Testament figures can be seen typologically to foreshadow Christ's virginity. Mary's virginity is seen neither a type of Christ's nor as an imitation of Christ's virginity and it needed another century before it could be recognised on its own terms. In addition, male virginity is more prominent in the Gospels; Cyprian, for example, had to make a point of explaining that the reference to male virgins in the Apocalypse was also applicable to female virgins.⁴⁶

ii. Vice and Spiritual Virginity

Whereas imitating Christ's virginity achieves the highest holiness and a heavenly bearing, vice can only lead to the possession of a 'mind of flesh,' which is 'enmity towards God'.⁴⁷ Clement recounts a series of vices which are prejudicial to virginity. The first few relate to the more obvious vices which cause the loss of bodily integrity through 'fornication, uncleanness, [and] wantonness';⁴⁸ however, the list includes some surprising vices:

idolatry, sorcery; enmity, jealousy, rivalry, wrath, disputes, dissensions, ill-will; drunkenness, revelry; buffoonery, foolish talking, boisterous laughter; backbiting, insinuations; bitterness, rage; clamour, abuse, insolence of speech; malice, inventing of evil, falsehood; talkativeness, babbling; threatenings, gnashing of teeth, readiness to accuse, jarring, disdainings, blows; perversions [of the right], laxness [in judgment]; haughtiness, arrogance, ostentation, pompousness, [boasting] of family, of beauty, of position, of wealth, of an arm of flesh;

⁴⁵ Cf. Pseudo-Clement: 'For Scripture has said, "the elders who are among you, honour; and, seeing their manner of life and conduct, imitate their faith." And again it saith, "Imitate me, my brethren, as I [imitate] Christ."' Pseudo-Clement, *The First Epistle*, VI, pp. 372-3.

⁴⁶ Cf. Cyprian: And indeed not to men only does the Lord promise the grace of continence, disregarding women; but since woman is a part of man and was taken and formed from him, almost universally in Scriptures God addresses the first formed because they are two in one flesh, and in the man is signified likewise the woman.' Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, iv, in *Saint Cyprian: Treatises*, trans. and ed. Roy J. Deferrari (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1981 [1958]), pp. 31-52, (p. 34).

⁴⁷ Pseudo-Clement, *The First Epistle*, VIII, p. 373.

⁴⁸ Pseudo-Clement, *The First Epistle*, VIII, pp. 373-4.

quarrelsomeness, injustice, eagerness for victory; hatred, anger, envy, perfidy, retaliation; debauchery, gluttony, “overreaching (which is idolatry)”, “the love of money (which is the root of all evils);” love of display, vainglory, love of rule, assumption, pride (which is called death and which “God fights against”).⁴⁹

The list of vices follows Paul’s enumeration of ‘the works of the flesh’ in Galatians:

Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are fornication, uncleanness, immodesty, luxury, Idolatry, witchcrafts, enmities, contentions, emulations, wraths, quarrels, dissensions, sects, Envy, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like. Of the which I foretell you, as I have foretold to you, that they who do such things shall not obtain the kingdom of God. (Galatians 5: 19-21)

Virginity, which is supposed to be a rejection of the flesh, has no virtue if it is undermined by ‘works of the flesh’. A great many of the vices detailed by Clement relate to carelessness in speech, which possibly reflects Christ’s saying that it is ‘[n]ot that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man: but what cometh out of the mouth, this defileth a man’ (Matthew 15: 11). Clement also enumerates vices related to pride, and especially pride in earthly things, such as beauty, wealth and family. Those men and women who indulge in such vices mark themselves as being of the flesh, rather than of the spirit,⁵⁰ and as such God will not dwell in them.⁵¹ Clement recommends that the virgin should ‘mortify the deeds of the body.’⁵² By subjugating the body, the spirit can take full control.⁵³

⁴⁹ Pseudo-Clement, *The First Epistle*, VIII, p. 374.

⁵⁰ Cf. Pseudo-Clement: ‘Every man with whom are these and such like things – every such man is of the flesh.’ Pseudo-Clement, *The First Epistle*, VIII, pp. 374.

⁵¹ Cf. Pseudo-Clement: ‘For this justly does the Scripture say regarding such a generation as this: “My Spirit shall not dwell in men for ever, because they are flesh.”’ Pseudo-Clement, *The First Epistle*, VIII, pp. 374-5.

⁵² Pseudo-Clement, *The First Epistle*, IX, p. 375.

⁵³ Cf. Paul: ‘I say then, walk in the spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lusts of the flesh. For the flesh lusteth against the spirit: and the spirit against the flesh; for these are contrary one to another: so that you do not the things that you would. But if you are led by the spirit, you are not under the law’ (Galatians 5: 16-8).

iii. *Virgines Subintroductae*

From the description and exaltation of true virginity, Clement moves to the discussion of the scandal caused by virgins. The remainder of *The First Epistle* is taken up with the problem of *subintroductae* virginity:

But we speak thus in consequence of the evil rumours and reports concerning shameless men, who, under pretext of the fear of God, have their dwelling with maidens, and [so] expose themselves to danger, and walk with them along the road and in solitary places alone – a course which is full of dangers, and full of stumbling blocks and snares and pitfalls; nor is it in any respect right for Christians and those who fear God so to conduct themselves.⁵⁴

Some of the so-called ‘holy men’ seem to live with virgins, others eat and behave loosely with them,⁵⁵ others fraternise with them socially,⁵⁶ and others create pretexts to visit virgins in their homes.⁵⁷ Clement blames the idleness of the men for these gross abuses of the state of virginity.⁵⁸ Another danger to these male virgins seems to stem from vainglory; they wish to be teachers but many of them do not have the gift and so consequently end up perpetuating heterodox doctrine.⁵⁹ He stresses the danger of thoughtless speech and reminds the virgins that, ‘[i]f there is in thee understanding, give

⁵⁴ Pseudo-Clement, *The First Epistle*, X, p. 376.

⁵⁵ Cf. Pseudo-Clement: ‘Others, too, eat and drink with them at entertainments [allowing themselves] in loose behaviour and much uncleanness – such as ought not to be among believers, and especially among those who have chosen for themselves [a life of] holiness.’ Pseudo-Clement, *The First Epistle*, X, p. 376.

⁵⁶ Cf. Pseudo-Clement: ‘Others, again, meet together for vain and trifling conversation and merriment, and that they may speak evil of one another; and they hunt up tales against one another, and are idle: persons with whom we do not allow you even to eat bread.’ Pseudo-Clement, *The First Epistle*, X, p. 376.

⁵⁷ Cf. Pseudo-Clement: ‘Then, others gad about among the houses of virgin brethren or sisters, on pretence of visiting them, or reading the Scriptures [to them], or exorcising them.’ Pseudo-Clement, *The First Epistle*, X, p. 376.

⁵⁸ Cf. Pseudo-Clement: ‘Forasmuch as they are idle and do no work, they pry into those things which ought not to be inquired into, and by means of plausible words make merchandize of the name of Christ.’ Pseudo-Clement, *The First Epistle*, X, p. 376.

⁵⁹ Cf. Pseudo-Clement: ‘And besides all this, barefaced men as they are, under pretence of teaching, they set forth a variety of doctrines. And would that they taught the doctrines of truth! But it is this which is [so] disquieting, that they understand not what they mean, and assert that which is not [true]: because they wish to be teachers and to display themselves as skillful in speaking; because they traffic in iniquity in the name of Christ – which it is not right for the servants of God [to do].’ Pseudo-Clement, *The First Epistle*, XI, p. 377.

an answer to thy brother; but if not, put thy hand on thy mouth [Ecclesiasticus 5: 14]’.⁶⁰

These problems require regulatory solutions and so Clement lays out rules for visiting orphans, widows, the poor and the sick, and for performing exorcism, so that such occasions do not become a cause for scandal.⁶¹ He recommends fasting and prayer for the achievement of exorcism rather than ostentatious display and prolixity, which frightens those whom he is exorcising.⁶² Clement does not forbid reaching out to the faithful,⁶³ but he insists that this should be for reasons of holiness and not becomes an occasion for scandal.⁶⁴

iv. *Second Epistle*

Clement’s *Second Epistle* is directed specifically towards holy men.⁶⁵ He continues the theme that virgins should avoid scandals, and outlines his own ‘conduct in Christ’ as an example for them to follow.⁶⁶ He provides several scenarios and the correct behaviour to follow for male virgins during visits to Christian communities.⁶⁷ On all occasions they must be totally segregated from females:

⁶⁰ Pseudo-Clement, *The First Epistle*, XI, p. 377.

⁶¹ Cf. Pseudo-Clement, *The First Epistle*, XII, p. 379.

⁶² Cf. Pseudo-Clement, *The First Epistle*, XII, p. 380.

⁶³ Cf. Pseudo-Clement: ‘For this is comely before God and before man, that we should remember the poor, and be lovers of the brethren and of strangers, for the sake of God and for the sake of those who believe in God, as we have learnt from the laws and from the prophets, and from our Lord Jesus Christ.’ Pseudo-Clement, *The First Epistle*, XII, p. 380.

⁶⁴ Cf. Pseudo-Clement: ‘Let us, therefore, contemplate and imitate the faithful who have conducted themselves well in the Lord, as is becoming and suitable to our calling and profession. Thus let us do service before God in justice and righteousness, and without blemish, “occupying ourselves with things good and comely before God [and] also before men.” For this is comely, that God be glorified in us in all things.’ Pseudo-Clement, *The First Epistle*, XIII, p. 382.

⁶⁵ Cf. Brown: ‘These were called the “walking men.” They were committed to a life of holy vagrancy “for the kingdom.” Unattached males endowed with more “love and leisure” than was good for them, they formed a colourful crowd as they wandered from village to village.’ Brown, *The Body and Society*, p. 196.

⁶⁶ Pseudo-Clement, *The Second Epistle*, I, *Two Epistles Concerning Virginité: The First Epistle*, II, in *Ante-Nicene Christian Library*, Vol. XIV. *The Writings of Methodius etc.* trans. B. L. Pratten eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, MDCCCLXIX [1869]), pp. 382-395, (p. 382).

⁶⁷ Cf. Benson: ‘The second epistle is not to Virgins, but prescribing caution and decorum to travelling clerics (somewhat too minutely) exhibits the same dangers from another point of view.’ Benson, *Cyprian*, p. 57 n.3.

But with us may no female, whether young maiden or married woman, be there at that time; nor she that is aged, nor she that has taken the vow; not even a maid-servant, whether Christian or heathen; but there shall only be men with men.⁶⁸

If the virgins must stay the night, they should stay with a consecrated brother.⁶⁹ If there is no such person, then they should stay with married brethren, but only on the understanding that they cannot have women sleeping anywhere near them.⁷⁰ If there are no Christian men, but only women, then the brothers must ask ‘a woman who is aged and the most exemplary’ to provide them with lodgings ‘where no women enters’.⁷¹ The old women must provide for all their needs but sleep elsewhere. If, however, there is only one Christian woman in the community, then Clement’s advice is to ‘flee, as before the face of a serpent, and as from the face of sin.’⁷² He does qualify this advice; this course of action is not because women are thought to be innately sinful:

Not that we disdain the believing woman – far be it from us to be so minded towards our brethren in Christ! – but, because she is alone, we are afraid lest any one should make insinuations against us in words of falsehood.⁷³

It appears that the danger is not so much the sexual threat that the women pose, but more the possibility of scandal, which brings the profession into disrepute and provides stumbling-blocks to other Christians. Clement insists that all men, Christians and heathens alike, should realise that the virgins belong to God by virtue of their perfect conduct.⁷⁴ The sexual threat of women is acknowledged, however, as Clement cites instructive and admonitory examples from the Old Testament of men who were brought

⁶⁸ Pseudo-Clement, *The Second Epistle*, II, pp. 383-4.

⁶⁹ Cf. Pseudo-Clement, *The Second Epistle*, II, p. 383.

⁷⁰ Cf. Pseudo-Clement, *The Second Epistle*, III, p. 384.

⁷¹ Pseudo-Clement, *The Second Epistle*, IV, p. 385.

⁷² Pseudo-Clement, *The Second Epistle*, V, p. 386.

⁷³ Pseudo-Clement, *The Second Epistle*, V, p. 386.

⁷⁴ Cf. Pseudo-Clement: ‘Let “all those who see us acknowledge that we are a blessed seed,” “sons of the living God,” in every thing – in all [our] words, in shamefastness, in purity, in humility, forasmuch as we do not copy the heathen in any thing, nor are [as] believers like [other] men, but in every thing are estranged from the wicked.’ Pseudo-Clement, *The Second Epistle*, VI, p. 387.

to ruin by lust for women or who were ruined by women's lust for them, including Joseph,⁷⁵ Samson,⁷⁶ David,⁷⁷ Amnon,⁷⁸ Solomon,⁷⁹ and the Elders who lusted after Susanna.⁸⁰ He also provides laudatory examples of continent men – Moses, Aaron, Joshua, Elisha, Gehazi and Micah.⁸¹ Clement avers that the segregation of the sexes is scriptural: Christ only called male apostles, and he sent them out in pairs to avoid temptation.⁸² Christ also would not let Mary Magdalene touch Him after the resurrection;⁸³ likewise virgins should not allow themselves to be touched by women.⁸⁴ Of Christ's attitude towards women, he says:

To Jesus Christ our Lord women ministered of their substance; but they did not live with him; but chastely, and holily, and unblameably they behaved before the Lord, and finished their course, and received the crown in our Lord God Almighty.⁸⁵

Clement does not denigrate women or their place in Christian society. He acknowledges that women are part of Christ's kingdom and ministered to Him while He was on earth, but it is not acceptable for men who have taken a vow of virginity to fraternise with them. Clement calls for a unity of behaviour for virgins and the universal acceptance of these behavioural norms; those who desire to achieve true virginity will adhere to the precepts outlined in the letter.⁸⁶

⁷⁵ Cf. Pseudo-Clement, *The Second Epistle*, VIII, p. 389.

⁷⁶ Cf. Pseudo-Clement, *The Second Epistle*, IX, pp. 389-90.

⁷⁷ Cf. Pseudo-Clement, *The Second Epistle*, X, pp. 390-1.

⁷⁸ Cf. Pseudo-Clement, *The Second Epistle*, XI, p. 391.

⁷⁹ Cf. Pseudo-Clement, *The Second Epistle*, XII, p. 391.

⁸⁰ Cf. Pseudo-Clement, *The Second Epistle*, XIII, pp. 391-2.

⁸¹ Cf. Pseudo-Clement, *The Second Epistle*, XIV, pp. 392-3.

⁸² Cf. Pseudo-Clement, *The Second Epistle*, XV, p. 393.

⁸³ Cf. John: 'Jesus saith to her: Do not touch me, for I am not yet ascended to my Father. But go to my brethren, and say to them: I ascend to my Father and to your Father, to my God and your God' (John 20: 17).

⁸⁴ Cf. Pseudo-Clement, *The Second Epistle*, XV, p. 394.

⁸⁵ Pseudo-Clement, *The Second Epistle*, XV, p. 394.

⁸⁶ Cf. Pseudo-Clement: 'Therefore, we beseech you, our brethren in our Lord, that these things be observed with you, as with us, and that we may be of the same mind, that we may be one in you and ye may be one

The apparent allusions to the practice of *virgines subintroductae* in Clement's letters echo the problems that Cyprian addresses in his fourth epistle. Although the letters demonstrate a level of interest in regulatory issues, partly because of the problem of the practice of *syneisaktism*, Clement also goes some way towards a more esoteric expression of virginity. Like Tertullian and Cyprian, Clement expresses virginity as an intensely spiritual state which looks towards the complete perfection of the individual. Clement's use of the Parable of the Ten Virgins in relation to Christian virgins is a use of the parable which has a long currency in the tradition, as it serves as a scriptural warning for virgins that physical intactness is not enough to achieve glory. To this effect, he emphasises the necessity for the virgin to undertake Christian works and, thus, he envisions virginity as an active virtue that is hard won and must be involved in Christian service. He draws attention to its celestial associations; it is both the *vita angelica* and an *imitatio Christi*. His emphasis on imitation is not restricted to the *imitatio Christi* motif, but envisions this example to be evident in New Testament figures and for virgins to continue this imitative tradition both by imitating Christ and by becoming figures for imitation.

Tertullian, Cyprian and Clement all bring about a greater awareness of a wider understanding of virginity. Tertullian and Cyprian concentrate mainly on how immodest behaviour prejudices virginity, whereas Clement suggests that every conceivable sin is damaging to true virginity, because virginity is in essence an expression of the nature of Christ and thus must be holy in every way. One of the differences between Clement and Tertullian and Cyprian is the dissimilar focus on gender. Whereas Tertullian's and

in us, and that in everything we may be [of] one soul and one heart in our Lord. Whosoever knoweth the Lord heareth us; and everyone who is not of God heareth not us. He who desires truly to keep sanctity heareth us; but she who does not truly desire to keep virginity doth not hear us.' Pseudo-Clement, *The Second Epistle*, XVI, p. 395.

Cyprian's writings are directed towards female ascetics, Clement is more male-focused, although he does address both male and female virgins in the *First Epistle*. Together, however, the meditations of these early Fathers demonstrate a growing awareness that the only way in which to achieve a truly virginal life is in the complete rejection of the world; it is almost impossible for true virginity to exist whilst dwelling in the world, surrounded as it is by all its vices.

IV. Methodius of Olympus

Very little is known about Methodius of Olympus,¹ whom Epiphanius calls Eubulius (a character from his work *The Symposium of the Ten Virgins*, and apparently Methodius' literary alter ego).² Jerome's biography of Methodius in *De viris illustribus* is very short and mostly provides details of Methodius' literary oeuvre:

Methodius, Bishop of Olympus in Lycia, and later of Tyre, in a limpid and elegant style composed works *Against Porphyry* and *The Symposium of the Ten Virgins*, an important work, *On the Resurrection* against Origen, and another against the same author, *On the Pythoness*, a work, *On Freewill*, also a *Commentary on Genesis*; one *On the Song of Songs*, and many other works which are read eagerly by a wide public. Towards the end of the last persecution, or, as others assert, under Decius and Valerian, he received the crown of martyrdom in Chalcis in Greece.³

By Jerome's account, Methodius was a popular author and widely read.⁴ Some of the works that Jerome mentions are no longer extant, namely *On the Pythoness*, *Commentary on Genesis* and *On the Song of Songs*. Methodius' martyrdom is thought to have taken place around A.D. 312 (just before the end of the Christian persecution), although there is some debate about whether it took place in Greece, as Jerome asserts, or whether it was

¹ Cf. Krüger: 'Nothing further is known regarding the life of Methodius than that he was a bishop of Olympus in Lycia and became a martyr in 311 A.D., toward the close of the Diocletian persecution. We have only Jerome's testimony for the statement that he held the see of Tyre (Cyprus?) after his Olympian episcopate. The mention of Patara by later writers (cf. Leontius, *Byz., de sectis*, III, i.) is founded on a misunderstanding; and the designation of Methodius as bishop of Philippi (Philipus), in the superscription of the *De Leptra*, is due to the error of the scribe. Eusebius took no notice of this opponent of Origen.' Gustav Krüger, *Early Christian Literature*, trans. Charles R. Gillet (London and New York: Macmillan, 1897), p. 235.

² Cf. Epiphanius on Origen or Adamantius: 'This is the <selection> of consecutive passages <which I have made> <from> Methodius', or Eubulius', <comments> on Origen and the heresy which, with sophistical imposture, Origen puts forward in his treatise on resurrection.' Epiphanius of Salamis, *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis*, Books II and III (Sects 47-80, *De Fide*), trans. Frank Williams (Leiden, New York, Köln: E. J. Brill, 1994), LXIV.lxiii.i, p. 188.

³ Saint Jerome, 'LXXXIII. Methodius the Bishop', *On Illustrious Men (De viris illustribus)*, trans. Thomas P. Halton (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1999), p. 116.

⁴ Krüger is less voluble in his praise than Jerome. He says of Methodius' works: 'Almost all of his writings are in the form of dialogues, evidently in imitation of Plato, and they are written with more or less diffuseness and prolixity, though not without art and imagination.' Krüger, *Early Christian Literature*, p. 236.

more likely to have occurred in Chalcis in Syria.⁵ *The Symposium*, or *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, which Jerome describes as an ‘important work’, is the only complete work by Methodius that exists today and it is also the first sustained treatise devoted to the praise of virginity.⁶ William Clark notes that

Methodius is known chiefly as the antagonist of Origen; although, as has been pointed out, he was himself influenced in no small degree by the method of Origen, as may be seen by his tendency to allegorical interpretations of Scripture. [...] His antagonism to Origen, however, comes out less in this [*The Symposium*] than in his works *On Resurrection*, and *On Things Created*.⁷

Socrates in his *Ecclesiastical History* denounces Methodius’ opposition to Origen.⁸ *The Symposium* is written in the form of a dialogue between two characters, namely Gregorion and Euboulous.⁹ It recounts a banquet, attended by ten virgins, all of whom are required to ‘pronounce a discourse in praise of virginity’.¹⁰ It is modeled on Plato’s *Symposium*, but self-consciously inverts the theme; whereas Plato’s *Symposium* discusses

⁵ Cf. William R. Clark, ‘The Writings of Methodius: Introduction’, in *Ante-Nicene Christian Library: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*. Vol. XIV. *The Writings of Methodius, Alexander of Lycopolis, Peter of Alexandria and Several Fragments*, trans. William R. Clark, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, MDCCCLXIX [1869]), pp. ix-x, (p. ix).

⁶ Cf. Clark, ‘Introduction’ to ‘The Writings of Methodius’, p. ix.

⁷ Clark, ‘Introduction’ to ‘The Writings of Methodius’, pp. ix-x.

⁸ Cf. Socrates: ‘But since carping detractors have imposed upon many persons and have succeeded in deterring them from reading Origen, as though he were a blasphemous writer, I deem it not unreasonable to make a few observations respecting him. Worthless characters, and such as are destitute of ability to attain eminence themselves, often seek to get into notice by decrying those who excel them. And first Methodius, bishop of a city in Lycia named Olympos, laboured under this malady; next Eustathius, who for a short time presided over the Church at Antioch; after him Apollinaris; and lastly Theophilus.’ Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History*, VI.xiii, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. II, *Socrates, Sozomenus: Church Histories*, trans. E. Walford (revised by A. C. Zenos), eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1890]), pp. 1-178, (p. 147).

⁹ The name Gregorion is from the Greek ‘Γρηγορ-έω’ meaning ‘awake’, or ‘watchful’. Euboulous is from the Greek ‘Ευβουλ-εύς’, meaning ‘he of good counsel’, ‘soundness of judgement’ or ‘prudence’. Cf. *A Greek-English Lexicon*, compiled by Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, rev. Sir Henry Stuart James, Robert McKenzie et al. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968 [1843]), p. 360; p. 707.

¹⁰ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, in *Ante-Nicene Christian Library: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*. Vol. XIV. *The Writings of Methodius, Alexander of Lycopolis, Peter of Alexandria and Several Fragments*, trans. William R. Clark, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, MDCCCLXIX [1869]), pp. 1-119, (p. 4).

love in its various forms,¹¹ Methodius' instead lauds its opposites, virginity and chastity. Methodius, however, subtly alludes to Plato's *Symposium* throughout his work, and also follows Plato structurally. For instance, the events in Plato's *Symposium* are related by Apollodorus to an unnamed friend. Apollodorus had not been present at the symposium, but had himself received the information from Aristodemus who was present. Likewise in Methodius' *Symposium*, Gregorion is 'repeating the words of Theopatra',¹² one of the virgins at the banquet (the speaker of discourse IV), to Euboulion. In both cases, therefore, the information relayed in both works to the friend/Euboulion is second-hand.

The self-conscious homage to Plato is also important as it demonstrates the beginning of the Platonic influence in the tradition of virginity, which is particularly observable later in Gregory of Nyssa's treatise *On Virginity*.¹³ Despite retaining the structure of Plato's work, Methodius does make some alterations. For instance, he provides more discourses than Plato: whereas Plato's philosophers deliver six discourses on Love, with an additional encomium to Socrates delivered by Alcibiades,¹⁴ Methodius' ten virgins each provides a discourse, Arête adds an eleventh, and the virgins close the banquet with a nuptial hymn. Methodius' virgins implicitly pit the wisdom of Christian

¹¹ Cf. Cooper: 'Love (Greek *erôs*) covers sexual attraction and gratification between men and women and between men and teenage boys, but the focus here is also and especially on the adult male's role as ethical and intellectual educator of the adolescent that was traditional among the Athenians in the latter sort of relationship, whether accompanied by sex or not.' John M. Cooper, 'Introductory Note' to Plato's *Symposium*, in Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. J. M. Cooper (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), pp. 457-8, (p. 457).

¹² Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, p. 2.

¹³ Andrew Louth says that Gregory of Nyssa drew on Origen and Methodius and so 'presents the life of virginity as "a kind of door and entrance to a more august way of life"', and sees the life of the blessed Virgin as its archetype.' Andrew Louth, 'The Cappadocians', in *The Cambridge History of Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frances Young, Lewis Ayres, and Andrew Louth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 289-301, (p. 299).

¹⁴ Cf. Cooper: 'In his youth, Alcibiades had been one of Socrates' admiring followers and he now reports in gripping detail the fascinating reversal Socrates worked upon him in the erotic roles of the older and younger man usual among the Greeks in a relationship of "love".' Cooper, 'Introductory note' to Plato's *Symposium*, p. 457.

philosophy against Plato's pagan philosophers. The number of virgins is probably an allusion to the biblical Parable of the Ten Virgins (Matthew 25: 1-13),¹⁵ and indeed this parable is expounded by Agathe later in the *Symposium* (in Discourse VI). The virgins at the banquet, however, are not divided into 'foolish' and 'wise'. Indeed, Gregorion implies that they are all particularly associated with wisdom: 'it is said that they argued with such ability and power that there was nothing lacking to the full consideration of the subject.'¹⁶ In Greek and biblical tradition, Wisdom (*Sophia*) is always personified as female, and it seems likely that the figure of the Christian virgin is here conflated with an ancient feminine virtue, thus providing another link between Christian virginity and an older, more venerable, tradition.¹⁷

¹⁵ Cf. Matthew: 'Then shall the kingdom of heaven be like to ten virgins, who taking their lamps went out to meet the bridegroom and the bride. And five of them were foolish, and five wise. But the five foolish, having taken their lamps, did not take oil with them: But the five wise took oil in their vessels with the lamps. And the bridegroom tarrying, they all slumbered and slept. And at midnight there was a cry made: Behold the bridegroom cometh, go ye forth to meet him. Then all those virgins arose and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the wise: Give us of your oil, for our lamps are gone out. The wise answered, saying: Lest perchance there be not enough for us and for you, go ye rather to them that sell, and buy for yourselves. Now whilst they went to buy, the bridegroom came: and they that were ready, went in with him to the marriage, and the door was shut. But at last came also the other virgins, saying: Lord, Lord, open to us. But he answering said: Amen I say to you, I know you not. Watch ye therefore, because you know not the day nor the hour' (Matthew 25: 1-13).

¹⁶ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, p. 1.

¹⁷ Wisdom is associated with virginity throughout the *Symposium*. Marcella states: 'it is fitting, then, that a virgin should always love things which are foremost for wisdom, and addicted to nothing slothful or luxurious, but should excel, and set her mind upon things worthy of the state of virginity, always putting away, by the word, the foulness of luxury, lest in any way some slight hidden corruption should breed the worm of incontinence.' Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, I. i, p. 6. Thaleia commends the wisdom of Theophila: 'You seem to me, O Theophila, to excel all in action and in speech, and to be second to none in wisdom.' Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, III.i, p. 20. Agathe comments that: 'I should be unable to put forth in philosophizing anything that could compete with these things which have already been so variously and brilliantly worked out. For I shall seem to bear away the reproach of silliness, if I make an effort to match myself with my superiors in wisdom.' Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, VI.i, p. 52. Arête commends Thekla's wisdom: 'thou wilt yield to none in universal philosophy and instructed by Paul in what is fitting to say of evangelical and divine doctrine.' Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, p. 66. Thekla says: 'it is my turn after her to continue the contest; and I rejoice, since I too have the favouring wisdom of words, perceiving that I am like a harp, inwardly attuned, and prepared to speak with elegance and propriety.' Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, p. 66. Euboulous says of Thekla: 'how glorious she often appeared in meeting the chief conflicts of the martyrs, procuring for herself a zeal equal to her courage, and a strength of body equal to the wisdom of her counsels.' Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, p. 91. Gregorion says to Euboulous of Thekla: 'what, then, would you have said, if you had listened to herself, speaking fluently, and with easy expression, with much grace and

Arête, ‘the daughter of Philosophia’¹⁸ and a personification of virtue,¹⁹ presides over the proceedings of the symposium: it is she who judges and crowns the virgin who provides the best discourse. She lives in a pastoral landscape, which allegorically represents the heavenly home of virginity, reached by means of a difficult journey.

Gregorion repeats Theopatra’s description of how she reached the abode of Arête:

‘We went by invitation to a garden of hers with an eastern aspect, to enjoy the fruits of the season [...] We went, Gregorion, by a very rough, steep and arduous path.’ [Arête said:] ‘You have come by a way abounding with many frightful reptiles; for, as I looked, I saw you often stepping aside, and I was fearing lest you should turn back and slip over the precipice.’²⁰

The ‘arduous path’, an allusion to the biblical passage of the narrow road to holiness,²¹ represents the difficulty of virginity, and the reptiles and the precipice are the perils which seek to destroy virginity and try to turn the virgin from her chosen path. The sentiment echoes the recognition of the difficulties involved in pursuing virginity that are expressed in the Pseudo-Clementine letters and reinforces the exclusiveness of the state.²²

pleasure? So that she was admired by every one who attended, her language blossoming with words, as she set forth intelligently, and in fact picturesquely, the subjects on which she spoke, her countenance suffused with the blush of modesty; for she is altogether brilliant in body and soul.’ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, p. 91. Tusiane notes that ‘the tree of life is wisdom first begotten of all.’ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, IX.iii, p. 97. Domnina ‘invoked Wisdom to be her present helper.’ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, p. 101.

¹⁸ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, p. 2.

¹⁹ Arête features in the dialogues of Plato’s *Symposium*; however, there she is referred to as the moral character provided by Love. Cf. Plato: ‘After this we should speak of Love’s moral character [arête].’ Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff, in Plato, *Complete Works* ed. J. M. Cooper (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), pp. 457-505, (p. 479).

²⁰ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, p. 3.

²¹ Cf. Matthew: ‘Enter ye in at the narrow gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way that leadeth to destruction, and many there are who go in thereat. How narrow is the gate, and straight is the way that leadeth to life: and few there are that find it!’ (Matthew 7: 13-4).

²² Cf. Pseudo-Clement: ‘Knowest thou what hardship and irksomeness there is in true virginity – that which stands constantly at all seasons before God, and does not withdraw [from His service], and “is anxious how it may please its Lord with a holy body, and with [its] spirit?” [I Corinthians 7: 34].’ Pseudo-Clement, *Two Epistles Concerning Virginity: The First Epistle*, V, in *Ante-Nicene Christian Library*, Vol. XIV. *The Writings of Methodius etc.* trans. B. L. Pratten eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, MDCCCLXIX [1869]), pp. 367-382, (p. 371).

The pastoral haven which they reach underlines the sense of the heavenly nature of virginity:

The air was diffused in soft and regular currents, mingled with pure beams of light, and a stream flowing as gently as oil through the very middle of the garden, threw up a most delicious drink; and the water flowing from it, transparent and pure, formed itself into fountains, and these, overflowing like rivers watered all the garden with their abundant streams; and there were different kinds of trees there, full of fresh fruits, and the fruits that hung joyfully from their branches were of equal beauty; and there were ever-blooming meadows strewn with variegated and sweet-scented flowers, from which came a gentle breeze laden with sweetest odour. And the Agnos grew near, a lofty tree, under which we reposed, from its being exceedingly wide spreading and shady.²³

The depiction of Arête's idyllic setting echoes the fertility of the Garden of Eden in Genesis.²⁴ Indeed, Euboulous notes that the account of the garden seems like 'a revelation of a second paradise',²⁵ the truth of which description Gregorion readily agrees with. The garden also recalls the pastoral imagery of Canticles.²⁶ Methodius alludes to two biblical gardens in order to relate virginity typologically to the Old Testament biblical tradition. He continues to draw out the foreshadowing of virginity in Old Testament literature throughout the *Symposium*. The pastoral imagery also encapsulates some of the characteristics of virginity: the fruitfulness of the garden expresses the paradoxical fertility of virginity, a spiritual fecundity, which is fruitful and flowering with virtue. The pastoral landscape of virginity also reflects some of the names of the virgins

²³ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, pp. 3-4.

²⁴ Cf. Genesis: 'And the Lord God had planted a paradise of pleasure from the beginning: wherein he placed man whom he had formed. And the Lord God brought forth of the ground all manner of trees, fair to behold, and pleasant to eat of: the tree of life also in the midst of paradise: and the tree of knowledge of good and evil. And a river went out of the place of pleasure to water paradise, which from thence is divided into four heads' (Genesis 2: 8-10).

²⁵ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, pp. 3-4

²⁶ Cf. Canticles: 'My sister, my spouse, is a garden enclosed, a garden enclosed, a fountain sealed up. Thy plants are a paradise of pomegranates with the fruits of the orchard. Cypress with spikenard. Spikenard and saffron, sweet cane and cinnamon, with all the trees of Libanus, myrrh and aloes with all the chief perfumes. The fountain of gardens: the well of living waters which run with a strong stream from Libanus. Arise, O north wind, and come, O south wind, blow through my garden, and let the aromatical spices thereof flow' (Canticle of Canticles 4: 12-16).

who are at the banquet. For instance, Thaleia and Thallousa's names are both derived from a similar Greek word: Thaleia is from the Greek θάλια, meaning 'abundance' or 'good cheer',²⁷ and Thallousa is from the Greek θαλλός meaning 'young shoot', or 'young branch'.²⁸ Theopatra's name, from the Greek θεός (God) πάτρά (fatherland), meaning 'land of God', seems to associate virginity with a heavenly abode.²⁹ A paradisiacal landscape seems a fitting habitat for virginity since it recaptures the purity of prelapsarian man, a reclamation made possible through the triumph of the Second Adam, as explained in Discourse II.

That the banquet is attended only by female virgins perhaps implies that virginity, despite the masculine bias in the Bible, has some strong associations with feminine virtue.³⁰ This appears to be a feature of the tradition in the earlier treatises, with the possible exception of Pseudo-Clement, who addressed both male and female virgins in his letters.³¹ The exclusively female bias in Methodius' text is particularly notable

²⁷ *Greek-English Lexicon*, p. 782.

²⁸ *Greek-English Lexicon*, p. 782.

²⁹ 'Θεός', *Greek-English Lexicon*, p. 791; 'Πάτρά', *Greek-English Lexicon*, p. 1348.

³⁰ Contrast Bugge's assertion that feminisation of virginity occurs in the twelfth century as a consequence of Bernard of Clairvaux's resurrection of the bridal imagery from the Song of Songs. Cf. Bugge: 'During the hundred years between 1150 and 1250, the ancient mystery of marriage to God underwent a profound transformation, one that found expression in an unprecedented outpouring of devotional literature that was overtly "feminist" in nature'; 'it is only later in the Middle Ages that virginity becomes almost exclusively something female'; 'The most fundamental change which Bernadine mysticism wrought with respect to the perfect ideal of virginity was to make it permanently a female concern.' John Bugge, *Virginitas: An Essay in the History of a Medieval Ideal* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975), pp. 2-3; p. 4; and p. 110; See also p. 135. Katherine J. Lewis follows Bugge in asserting that 'By the later Middle Ages virginity was perceived not so much as a spiritual state which could apply equally to men and women, as it had been by early Church Fathers, but largely, although not exclusively, as a physical state which applied primarily to women. This is a feminisation of virginity which has been noted by several scholars.' Katherine J. Lewis, 'Becoming a virgin king: Richard II and Edward the Confessor' in *Gender and Holiness: Men, women and saints in medieval Europe*, eds. Samantha J.E. Riches and Sarah Salih (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 86-100, (p. 88).

³¹ Cf. Pseudo-Clement: 'Of all virgins of either sex who have truly resolved to preserve virginity for the sake of the kingdom of heaven – of each and every one of them is required that he be worthy of the kingdom of heaven in every thing. [...] For it is required of the man of God, that in all his words and works he be perfect, and that in his life he be adorned with all exemplary and well-ordered behaviour, and do all his deeds in righteousness, as a man of God.' Pseudo-Clement, *The First Epistle*, II, pp. 367-8.

because the Greek word for virgin, *παρθένος* (*parthenos*), was applicable to both sexes, yet he still gives pre-eminence to female virginity.³² Also in the *Symposium*, virtue itself is associated with femininity, as *Arête* is described as an unimaginably beautiful woman:

Her beauty was something altogether inconceivable and divine. Modesty blended with majesty, bloomed on her countenance [...] it was wholly unadorned by art, and had nothing counterfeit. She came up to us, and, like a mother who sees her daughters after a long separation, she embraced and kissed each one of us with great joy.³³

Arête's unadorned beauty conforms to Tertullian and Cyprian's requirements for female modesty, and contrasts with those false painted virgins, shackled with jewels, whom their tracts criticised. *Arête*'s beauty is artless; she does not adorn herself with dress or cosmetics, for virtue naturally adorns the body. Counterfeit beauty cannot compare with such divine splendour. *Arête*'s role as a spiritual mother of the virgins makes explicit the connection between virtue and virginity: they share consanguinity. This association is reinforced by her assertion that 'chastity is to be preferred and embraced first of all my pursuits.'³⁴ Methodius thus appears to be the first to assert that virginity represents the zenith of virtue. *Arête*'s sex and her spiritual beauty contrasts with the emphasis on the physical beauty of Plato's male host in the *Symposium*, which the other men (especially Socrates) lust after throughout.³⁵ *Arête*'s beauty is more desirable than a purely physical beauty.

³² Cf. Pratten: 'In later Greek *παρθένος* was used of both sexes.' B. L. Pratten, Note to Pseudo-Clement's *First Epistle*, p. 367n. 1.

³³ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, p. 3.

³⁴ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, p. 109.

³⁵ In Plato's *Symposium*, Socrates comments: 'I took great pains with my appearance: I'm going to the house of a good-looking man; I had to look my best.' Plato, *Symposium*, p. 459.

i. Marcella: Discourse I

Marcella is chosen by Arête to begin the discourses. Her name is derived from the Latin, and appears to be a false etymology from Mars, thus meaning ‘young warrior’. Such a meaning implies the merging of the identity of the virgin with the *miles Christi* metaphor, and evokes the military metaphors that Tertullian had previously associated with virginity.³⁶ She gives a lengthy dialogue asserting the excellence of virginity,³⁷ and establishes a biblical history of virginity in order to demonstrate the reason why virginity had not been available to mankind before the advent of Christ. Marcella’s discourse emphasises the authorisation of virginity in the Scriptures. She states:

If, however, any one should venture to find fault with our arguments as destitute of Scriptural proof, we will bring forward the writings of the prophets, and more fully demonstrate the truth of the statements already made.³⁸

Marcella paves the way for the more obscure exegesis later in the *Symposium*, but she herself cites the scriptural proofs which are most obviously associated with virginity. For instance, the excellence of virginity, and the certainty of its acceptance into heaven, is evinced by Christ’s authorisation in Matthew 19: 12.³⁹ The passage in the Apocalypse of Saint John in which Christ appears as the Lamb of God accompanied by a choir of

³⁶ Cf. Tertullian: ‘Nay but true and absolute and pure *virginity* [...] betakes itself for refuge to the veil of the head as to a helmet, as to a shield, to protect its glory against the blows of temptations, against the darts of scandals, against suspicions and whispers and emulation; (against) envy also itself.’ Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis (On the Veiling of Virgins)*, XV.i, in *Ante Nicene Fathers*, Vol. IV. *Tertullian, Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Parts First and Second*, trans. S. Thewell, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1885]), pp. 27-38, (p. 36).

³⁷ Cf. Methodius: ‘Virginity is something supernaturally great, wonderful, and glorious; and to speak plainly and in accordance with the Holy Scriptures, this best and noblest manner of life alone is the root of immortality, and also its flower and first fruits.’ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, I.i, p. 4.

³⁸ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, I.iii, p. 8.

³⁹ Cf. Methodius: ‘the Lord promises that those shall enter into the kingdom of heaven who have made themselves eunuchs, in that passage of the Gospels in which He lays down the various reasons for which men have made themselves eunuchs.’ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, I.i, p. 5. Cf. Matthew: ‘For there are eunuchs, who were born so from their mother’s womb: and there are eunuchs, who were made so by men: and there are eunuchs, who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven. He that can take, let him take it’ (Matthew 19: 12).

144,000 virgins (those who have not been ‘defiled with women’) likewise demonstrates the immortal rewards waiting for virgins.⁴⁰ These virgins are those who are closest to Christ and are the ‘first-fruits’ of man.⁴¹ Marcella declares that the account in the Apocalypse shows ‘that the Lord is the leader of the choir of virgins. And remark, in addition to this, how very great in the sight of God is the dignity of virginity’.⁴² Marcella’s exposition of the Scriptures differs from Origen’s exegetical account of Saint John’s apocalyptic vision of the 144,000 virgins.⁴³ Origen notably does not appear to read the ‘virgins’ mentioned in the Apocalypse 14: 1-5 as literal virgins. Instead, he associates them with the earlier 144,000 mentioned in Apocalypse 7: 4, who ‘were signed of every tribe of the children of Israel’.⁴⁴ Origen reasons that:

Now these taken from the tribes are, as we showed before, the same persons as the virgins. But the number of believers is small who belong to Israel according to the flesh; one might venture to assert that they would not nearly make up the number of a hundred and forty-four thousand. It is clear, therefore, that the hundred and forty-four thousand who have not defiled themselves with women must be made up of those who have come to the divine word out of the Gentiles world. In this way the truth of the statement may be upheld that the first fruits of each tribe are its virgins. [...] The statement about the hundred and forty-four thousand no doubt admits of mystical interpretation.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, I.v, p. 11.

⁴¹ Cf. Apocalypse: ‘These are they who were not defiled with women: for they are virgins. These follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth. These were purchased from among men, the firstfruits to God and to the Lamb’ (Apocalypse 14: 4).

⁴² Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, I.v. p. 11.

⁴³ Cf. Apocalypse of John: ‘And I beheld, and lo a lamb stood upon mount Sion, and with him an hundred forty-four thousand, having his name, and the name of his Father, written on their foreheads. And I heard a voice from heaven, as the noise of many waters, and as the voice of great thunder; and the voice which I heard, was as the voice of harpers, harping on their harps. And they sung as it were a new canticle, before the throne, and before the four living creatures, and the ancients; and no man could say the canticle, but those hundred and forty-four thousand, who were purchased from the earth. These are they who were not defiled with women: for they are virgins. These follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth. These were purchased from among men, the firstfruits to God and to the Lamb: And in their mouth there was found no lie; for they are without spot before the throne of God’ (Apocalypse 14: 1-5).

⁴⁴ Cf. Apocalypse: ‘And I heard the number of them that were signed, an hundred and forty-four thousand were signed, of every tribe of the children of Israel’ (Apocalypse 7: 4).

⁴⁵ Origen, *Commentary of the Gospel of John*, I.ii, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. IX: *The Gospel of Peter, The Diatessaron of Tatian, The Apocalypse of Peter, The Vision of Paul, The Apocalypses of the Virgin and Sedrach, The Testament of Abraham, The Acts of Xanthippe and Polyxena, The Narrative of Zosimus, The Apology of Aristides, The Epistles of Clement (complete text), Origen’s Commentary on John, Books 1-10,*

Whereas Origen interprets the biblical description of the virgins, who are also ‘the first-fruits to God’, as the first converts of the Gentiles, Methodius instead emphasises a more literal reading of the Apocalypse; the virgins are actual virgins. The pre-eminence of virginity is demonstrated by their restricted number, their closeness to Christ, and the fact that Christ personally leads the virgins; the Lamb is the pre-eminent virgin.

The supernatural quality of virginity guarantees that its practice is rare among men. This is also confirmed by the limited number related in the Apocalypse.⁴⁶ The exclusivity of virginity is also a warning to those who do not have a true vocation for it:

Some who have longed for it, [...] have come, by reason of coarseness of mind, ineffectually with unwashed feet, and have gone aside out of the way, from having conceived no worthy idea of the [virginal] manner of life.⁴⁷

These false virgins fail to understand the worth of virginity and so fall by the wayside. This sentiment echoes Pseudo-Clement, who identified false virgins, or fallen virgins, as those who did not understand the grandeur of virginity, rather than those who falsely adopted virginity by design.⁴⁸ Marcella’s failed virgins only comprehend virginity as a state of the body; they do not understand that if they do not keep their mind pure, they cannot reach the virginal ideal.⁴⁹ *The Symposium*, then, like the earlier treatises on

and Commentary on Matthew, Books 1, 2, and 10-14, ed. Alan Menzies (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1994 [1896]), pp. 297-408, p. 298.

⁴⁶ Cf. Methodius: ‘he clearly intends by this to teach us that the number of virgins was, from the beginning, restricted to so many, namely, a hundred and forty four and four thousand, while the multitude of other saints is innumerable.’ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, I.v, p. 11.

⁴⁷ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, I.i, p. 5.

⁴⁸ Cf. Pseudo-Clement: ‘For such persons as these “have the appearance only of the fear of God, but the power of it they deny”. [II Timothy 3: 5] For they “think with themselves that they are something, whilst they are nothing, and are deceived. But let every one constantly try his works,” [Galatians 6: 3, 4] and know himself; for empty worship does he offer, whosoever he be that makes profession of virginity and sanctity, “and denies its power”. For virginity of such a kind is impure, and disowned by all good works.’ Pseudo-Clement, *The First Epistle*, III, p. 369.

⁴⁹ Cf. Methodius: ‘For it is not enough to keep the body only undefiled, just as we should not show that we think more of the temple than of the image of God; but we should care for the souls of men as being the

virginity, affirms the pre-eminence of the spiritual side of virginity: the purity of the soul guarantees the purity of the body. Thus, a virgin must turn away from all aspects of the earthly:

It is fitting, then, that a virgin should always love things which are honourable, and be distinguished among the foremost for wisdom, and addicted to nothing slothful or luxurious, but should excel, and set her mind upon things worthy of the state of virginity, always putting away, by the word, the foulness of luxury, lest in any way some slight hidden corruption should breed the worm of incontinence.⁵⁰

This passage articulates the necessity for the virgin to reject the world in its entirety, and in doing so encapsulates many of the ideas which informed the work of the other Fathers in the tradition: Pseudo-Clement's warning of the dangers of idleness; Cyprian's warning of the danger of luxuries; and Tertullian and Cyprian's warning of the dangers of adornment.⁵¹ Marcella recommends that those who best care for their souls are those who, 'striving untiringly to hear divine discourses, [...] do not desist until, wearing the

divinities of their bodies, and adorn them with righteousness.' Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, I.i, p. 5.

⁵⁰ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, I.i, p. 6.

⁵¹ Cf. Cyprian: 'But if continence follows Christ, and virginity is destined for the kingdom of God, what have such maidens to do with worldly dress and adornments, whereby in striving to please men they offend God' (v, p. 35); 'if you adorn yourself too elaborately and appear conspicuous in public, if you attract to yourself the eyes of the youth, draw after you the signs of young men, foster the desire of concupiscence, enkindle the fire of hope, so that, without perhaps losing your own soul, you nevertheless ruin others and offer yourself a sword and poison as it were, to those who behold you, you cannot be excused on the ground that your mind is chaste and pure. Your shameless apparel and your immodest attire belie you, and you can no longer be numbered among the maidens and virgins of Christ, you who so live as to become the object of sensual love.' (ix, p. 39); 'Showy adornments and clothing and the allurements of beauty are not becoming in any except prostitutes and shameless women, and of none, almost, is the dress more costly than those whose modesty is cheap' (xii, p. 41); 'Assuredly, virgins [...] who have adorned themselves by devices of this sort, should not be numbered among virgins, in my opinion, but, like tainted sheep and diseased cattle, they should be kept apart from the pure and holy flock of virgins, lest while they are together they corrupt others by their contact, lest they who have themselves perished ruin others.' Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, xvii, in *The Fathers of the Church: Saint Cyprian Treatises*, trans. Sister Angela Elizabeth Keenan, ed. Roy J. Deferrari (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1981), pp. 31-52, (p. 46). Cf. Tertullian: 'As soon as they have understood themselves to be *women*, withdraw themselves from *virgins*, laying aside (beginning with the head itself) their former selves: dye their hair; and fasten their hair with more wanton pin; professing manifest *womanhood* with their hair parted at the front. The next thing is, they consult the looking-glass to aid their beauty, and thin down their over-exacting face with washing, perhaps withal vamp it up with cosmetics, toss their mantle about them with an air, fit tightly the multiform shoe, carry down more ample appliances to the baths.' Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, XII.iii-iv, p. 35.

doors of the wise, they attain to the knowledge of the truth'.⁵² Scripture not only authorises virginity, but inspires it; the hearing of scripture fortifies the virgin, imparts wisdom, and enables her to reject more fully the allurements of the world. Marcella explains that the Scriptures act like salt which purifies the wounds of corruption.⁵³ The saline imagery⁵⁴ is also pertinent to an understanding of virginity as a sacrifice: all sacrifices, including virginity, must be salted in order to be acceptable to God.⁵⁵ This sacrificial quality of virginity, first mentioned by Cyprian, is drawn out throughout the *Symposium*.

Virginity is a state which straddles the terrestrial and celestial worlds.⁵⁶ It has a divine origin; it did not spring from earth.⁵⁷ Marcella explains the reason why virginity was not ordained from the very creation of mankind, although notably she does mention that Adam and Eve were virginal whilst in paradise, but lost their state of virginity through the fall.⁵⁸ Drawing on Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians,⁵⁹ she states that in its infancy mankind was treated like a child by God:

⁵² Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, I. i, p. 5.

⁵³ Cf. Methodius: 'For as the putrid humours and matter of flesh, and all those things which corrupt it, are driven out by salt, in the same manner all the irrational appetites of a virgin are banished from the body by divine teaching. For it must needs be that the soul which is not sprinkled with the words of Christ, as with salt, should stink and breed worms, [...] Now the whole spiritual meditation of the Scriptures is given to us as salt which stings in order to benefit, and which disinfests, without which it is impossible for a soul, by means of reason, to be brought to the Almighty'. Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, I.i, p. 5-6.

⁵⁴ Apart from the allegorical significance of the salt in this passage, I wonder if the allusion to salt is also a comic reference to Plato's *Symposium*, in which Eryximachus quotes Phaedrus as saying, 'I've actually read a book by an accomplished author who saw fit to extol the usefulness of salt!' Plato, *Symposium*, p. 462.

⁵⁵ Cf. Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, I.i, p. 6.

⁵⁶ Cf. Methodius: '[virgins have] lightly bounded above the world, and taken their stand truly upon the vault of heaven, they purely contemplate the immortality itself as it leaps out from the bosom of the Almighty. [...] We must think of virginity as walking indeed upon the earth, but as also reaching up to heaven.' Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, I.i, p. 5.

⁵⁷ Cf. Methodius: 'the plant of virginity was sent down to men from heaven.' Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, I.ii, p. 7.

⁵⁸ Bugge asserts that the starting point of virginity is Genesis, and the gnostic view of Genesis: 'To understand virginity one must start at the Beginning. It is not just the logical place to begin, it is the only place, for the belief in the perfective character of virginity is intertwined with the mysteries of the creation,

For the world, while still unfilled with men, was like a child, and it was necessary that it should first be filled with these, and so grow to manhood. But when hereafter it was colonised from end to end, the race of man spreading to a boundless extent, God no longer allowed man to remain in the same ways, considering how they might now proceed from one point to another, and advance nearer to heaven.⁶⁰

The process of the perfection of mankind begins with the prohibition against incest,⁶¹ which was symbolised by the covenant of circumcision.⁶² The next was the proscription of polygamy,⁶³ which had taken place by the time of the prophets;⁶⁴ then the outlawing of adultery;⁶⁵ these were then followed by the promotion of continence,⁶⁶ which can be verified in the Book of Wisdom;⁶⁷ and lastly, mankind reached the perfection of virginity with the advent of Christ.⁶⁸

It was reserved for the Lord alone to be the first to teach this doctrine, since He alone, coming down to us, taught man to draw near to God; for it was fitting that

man's primal life in a garden of innocence, and an original transgression'; 'our attention must fix on the originally oriental, gnosticizing tradition: its fascinating veil of speculation over the status of sexuality in Eden is ultimately the source of the ideal of virginity in later western monasticism.' Bugge, *Virginitas*, p. 5; p. 6.

⁵⁹ Cf. Paul: 'And I, brethren, could not speak to you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal. As unto little ones in Christ. I gave you milk to drink, not meat; for you were not able as yet. But neither indeed are you now able; for you are yet carnal' (I Corinthians 3: 1-2).

⁶⁰ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, I.ii, p. 7.

⁶¹ Cf. Methodius: 'at first they should abandon the intermarriage of brothers and sisters, and marry wives from other families.' Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, I.ii, p. 7

⁶² Cf. Methodius: 'Now Abraham, when he first received the covenant of circumcision, seems to signify, by receiving circumcision in a member of his own body, nothing else than this, that one should no longer beget children with one born of the same parent; showing that everyone should abstain from intercourse with his own sister, as his own flesh.' Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, I.iii, p. 8.

⁶³ Cf. Methodius: 'then that they should no longer have many wives, like brute beasts as though born for the mere propagation of the species.' Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, I.ii, pp. 7-8.

⁶⁴ Cf. Methodius: 'from the time of the prophets the contracting of marriage with several wives has been done away with.' Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, I. iii, p. 8. Cf. Smith: 'Polygamy was common among upper-class Jewish men until the period of the Rabbis (c. first century B.C.E).' Kathryn A. Smith, 'Inventing Marital Chastity: The Iconography of Susanna and the Elders in Early Christian Art', *Oxford Art Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (1993), 3-24, (p. 4).

⁶⁵ Cf. Methodius: 'then that they should not be adulterers.' Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, I.ii, p. 8.

⁶⁶ Cf. Methodius: 'then again that they should go on to continence, and from continence to virginity.' Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, I.ii, p. 8.

⁶⁷ Wisdom 4: 1-2. Cf. Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, I.iii, p. 9.

⁶⁸ Cf. Methodius: 'Let us again point out how chastity succeeded to marriage with one wife, taking away by degrees the lusts of the flesh, until it removed entirely the inclination for sexual intercourse engendered by habit.' Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, I.iii, pp. 8-9.

He who was first and chief of priests, of prophets, and of angels, should also be saluted as first and chief of virgins.⁶⁹

For the reason that Christ Himself brought virginity to mankind, virginity is placed on an equal footing with the priesthood, prophets and angels. Marcella explains the importance of virginity in reference to its role in the wonder of the Incarnation:

For being made in the *Image* of God, he needed to receive that which was according to His *Likeness*; which the Word being sent down into the world to perfect, He took upon Him our form, disfigured as it was by many sins, in order that we, for whose sake He bore it, might be able again to receive the divine [form].⁷⁰

Virginity recaptures the Likeness of God that was lost in the fall. Christ's Incarnation redeems the fallen flesh and thus enables mankind to pursue the purity of virginity, which before he was unable to perfect because of sinfulness. Virginity represents that divine purity which can only be found in God and so unites the Image of God, which mankind continued to possess after the Fall, with the divine Likeness of God, which mankind had lost, 'disfigured as it was by many sins'.⁷¹ Thus, virginity allows man to grow closer to God by resembling Him, and so man becomes more like the prelapsarian creature that God first created in His Own Image and Likeness:

He, being God, was pleased to put on human flesh, so that we, beholding as on a tablet the divine Pattern of our life, should also be able to imitate Him who painted it. [...] He preserved the flesh which He had taken upon Him incorrupt in virginity, so that we also, if we would come to the likeness of God and Christ, should endeavour to honour virginity.⁷²

Christ is God Incarnate, and His way of life shows to mankind the true pattern of life which was originally ordained for him: virginity. Marcella recommends an *imitatio Christi* through the imitation of the purity in which Christ lived His life on earth.

⁶⁹ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, I.iv, p. 9.

⁷⁰ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, I.iv, pp. 9-10.

⁷¹ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, I.iv, p. 10.

⁷² Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, I.iv; I.v, p. 10.

Therefore, as virginity is an earthly manifestation of God's incorruptibility, virgins attain the true Likeness of God.⁷³

As the starting point for *The Symposium*, Marcella's discourse anchors the concept of virginity in a scriptural context: virginity is foreshadowed in the Old Testament, authorised in the New, and the rewards due to its practice are revealed in the Apocalypse. Marcella expresses some of the ideas enshrined in the tradition, such as the angelic nature of virginity, and the rejection of the world and its trappings. She begins to address some themes which other virgins pick up later in the *Symposium*, such as the beginnings of an Edenic association of virginity, the awareness of an underlying theological importance of virginity's role in the Incarnation, and the virgin as the *imitatio Christi*. Marcella also begins a series of exegetical exercises, which seek to demonstrate that virginity is not only a feature of, and authorised by, the New Testament, but it is foreshadowed in the Old Testament. In this way, although virginity was only brought to mankind with the advent of Christ, it can be seen to underpin much scriptural discourse.

ii. Theophila, Thaleia, Theopatra: Discourse II, III and IV

Theophila, from the Greek θεός (God) φίλος ('beloved', or 'dear') meaning 'beloved of God',⁷⁴ is called upon to provide the second discourse. Her speech, however, acts as a foil to Marcella's rapturous praise of virginity. Theophila argues that, although the highest honour is due to virginity, it does not diminish the honour nor reduce the necessity of marriage:

Now, the fact that man has advanced by degrees to virginity, God urging him on from time to time, seems to me to have been admirably proved; but I cannot say the same [as to the assertion] that from henceforth they should no longer beget

⁷³ Cf. Methodius: 'For the likeness of God is the avoiding of corruption.' Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, I.v, p. 10.

⁷⁴ 'Θεός', *Greek-English Lexicon*, p. 791. 'Φίλος', *Greek-English Lexicon*, p. 1939.

children. For I think I have perceived clearly from the Scriptures that, after He had brought in virginity, the Word did not altogether abolish the generation of children; for although the moon may be greater than the stars, the light of the other stars is not destroyed by the moonlight.⁷⁵

Theophila reminds the virgins that the begetting of children was God's first commandment in Genesis 1,⁷⁶ and that this command has not been revoked by the advent of virginity's superior way of life. She asserts the antiquity and supremacy of the book of Genesis, as it is the first book of the Bible, and reminds her companions that it continues to be a relevant biblical text for mankind because 'God [is] still fashioning man'.⁷⁷ Also, as all virgins have been created by human generation, they are unable to spurn it because, although it is not as laudable as virginity, it does give birth to it. Theophila's concern with the issue of generation indicates a more general concern over the detrimental effect that the praise of virginity could have on the understanding of the nature and holiness of marriage and procreation. Indeed, the issue of the relative merits of virginity and marriage becomes more prominent throughout the fourth century.

Theophila's discussions of the generation in Genesis are interesting because, unlike Marcella, she does not allude to Adam and Eve's virginal state or their virginal births in Eden. Instead, she prioritises a marital and procreative reading of Genesis and likens the 'trance' into which man falls when 'thirsting for children' to the sleep which God cast upon Adam in the creation of Eve.⁷⁸ She therefore equates God's first creation of mankind from another human being (the virginal birth of Eve) with the current generative process. Her recounting of the procreative process is quite explicit and she

⁷⁵ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, II.i, pp. 11-2.

⁷⁶ Cf. Genesis: 'And God blessed them, saying: Increase and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it, and rule over the fishes of the sea, and the fowls of the air, and all living creatures that move upon the earth' (Genesis 1: 28).

⁷⁷ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, II.i, p. 12.

⁷⁸ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, II.i, p. 13.

explains that she has gained this knowledge from those ‘who have experience of the marriage state’.⁷⁹ It seems perhaps a little odd even for a literary consecrated virgin to articulate details about the marriage act, especially in light of Cyprian’s advice in *De habitu virginum* to avoid marriage celebrations and lewd discussions with married persons.⁸⁰ Cyprian, then, would surely protest against a virgin explaining how in coition

All the marrow-like and generative part of the blood, like a kind of liquid bone, coming together from all the members, worked into foam and curdled, is projected through the organs of generation into the living body of the female.⁸¹

Theophila asserts that one should not be ashamed of the natural process which God was not ashamed to have created.⁸² She also draws attention to the fact that virgins will wish to have witnesses to the Faith after them and that this necessitates generation.⁸³

Nevertheless, as virgins reject marriage and intercourse it is a little incongruous for a virgin to be dwelling upon such things within a dialogue designed to praise virginity.

In the middle of the discourse, Theophila is challenged by Marcella, who requires her to explain how God wills to perfection children born of adulterous relationships, as such a claim implies that God approves of adultery. A flustered Theophila eventually answers with an allegory. She represents God as a potter, who indiscriminately moulds

⁷⁹ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, II.ii, p. 13.

⁸⁰ Cf. Cyprian: ‘Some are not ashamed to attend weddings and, in the freedom of the wanton discourse there, to take part in the unchaste conversation, to hear what is unbecoming, to say what is not allowed, to look on and to be present in the midst of disgraceful talk and drunken feasts, by which the flame of passion is enkindled, and the bride is incited to tolerate and the bridegroom to become emboldened in lust. [...] What place is there at weddings for one who has no thought of marriage, or what can be pleasant and enjoyable in those occasions wherein desires and interests are so different? What is seen? To what degree does a virgin abandon her own purpose! How much more immodest does she go away who had gone there modest? She may remain a virgin in body and mind, but by her eyes, ears and tongue she has diminished the purity that she possessed.’ Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, xviii, pp. 46-7.

⁸¹ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, II.ii, p. 13.

⁸² Cf. Methodius: ‘Wherefore, if God still forms man, shall we not be guilty of audacity if we think of the generation of children as something offensive, which the Almighty Himself is not ashamed to make use of in working with His undefiled hands.’ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, II.ii, p. 13.

⁸³ Cf. Methodius: ‘Would it not, then, be absurd to forbid marriage unions, seeing that we expect that after us there will be martyrs, and those who shall oppose the evil one, for whose sake also the Word promised that He would shorten the days?’ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, II.ii, pp. 13-14.

and brings to perfection every lump of clay that is thrown to him, regardless of its origin.⁸⁴ With reference to Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, in which he does not despise marriage but prefers virginity, Theophila demonstrates that although the latter is better than the former, marriage is not, therefore, repudiated.⁸⁵ God calls men to different vocations:

For there are some to whom it is not given to attain virginity; and there are others whom He no longer wills to be excited by procreations to lust, and to be defiled, but henceforth to meditate and to keep the mind upon the transformation of the body to the likeness of angels, when they 'neither marry nor are given in marriage' [Matthew 22: 30], according to the infallible words of the Lord; since it is not given to all to attain that undefiled state of being a eunuch for the sake of the kingdom of heaven, but manifestly to those only who are able to preserve the ever-blooming and unfading flower of virginity.⁸⁶

Unfortunately, even in Theophila's discourse in praise of marriage, the marital state is still tinged with negativity. The gift of virginity and chastity are contrasted to the state of those who remain 'excited by procreations to lust' and do not attain the likeness of angels. So, although she maintains that the Church is 'a flower-covered and variegated meadow, adorned and crowned not only with the flowers of virginity, but also with those of child-bearing and of continence,'⁸⁷ there remains an awareness in her speech that procreation is always tainted by lust and involves defilement; the better way is to become like the angels.

The third speaker in the contest is Thaleia. Her name derives from the Greek *θάλία* meaning 'abundance',⁸⁸ and fittingly her discourse follows Theophila's description

⁸⁴ Cf. Methodius: 'for the clay should not be blamed, but he who did this in violation of what is right.' Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, II.iv, p. 16.

⁸⁵ Cf. Saint Paul: 'Art thou bound to a wife? seek not to be loosed. Art thou loosed from a wife? seek not a wife. But if thou take a wife, thou hast not sinned. And if a virgin marry, she hath not sinned: nevertheless, such shall have tribulation of the flesh. But I spare you' (I Corinthians 7: 27-8).

⁸⁶ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, II.vii, pp. 19-20.

⁸⁷ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, II.vii, p. 20.

⁸⁸ It can also mean 'good cheer'. Cf. *Greek-English Lexicon*, p. 782.

of the flowers of virtue in the variegated meadow of Christ, and reflects the pastoral abundance of the location of the banquet. Thalia is the name of one of the daughters of Nereus,⁸⁹ and also the name of the Muse of comedy and pastoral poetry; the latter, perhaps, reiterates the pastoral associations of virginity articulated at the beginning of the *Symposium*.⁹⁰ The comic association of Thaleia may also be pertinent, as in Plato's *Symposium*, the comic writer Aristophanes is supposed to deliver the third oration; however, he is prevented from doing so by a fit of hiccoughs.⁹¹ Thaleia also shares her name with one of the Three Graces (or the three charities).⁹² She discusses the allegorical importance of the institution of marriage in Genesis, rather than looking at Genesis as simply the authorisation of sexual union. She takes care, however, not to disparage the more literal interpretation of Scripture that had been given by Theophila.⁹³

⁸⁹ Cf. Hesiod: 'And Nereus and Doris, lovely-haired / Daughter of Oceanus, circling stream / Begot and bore, in the unfruitful sea, / Their children, most beloved of goddesses: / Protho, Eukrante, Sao, Amphitrite, / Eudore, Thetis, Galene, Glauce, and / Cymothoe, Speio, and quick Thalia' (ll. 241-7). Hesiod, *Theogony*, in *Hesiod: Theogony. Works and Days; Theognis: Elegies*, trans. Dorothea Wender (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987 [1973]), pp. 23-57, (p. 31).

⁹⁰ Cf. Hesiod: 'So sang the Muses of Olympus, nine / Daughters begotten by almighty Zeus, / Cleio, Euterpe, and Melpomene, / Thalia, Erato and Terpsichore, / Polymnia, Urania, and most/ Important one of all, Calliope, / For she attends upon respected lords' (ll. 73-78). Hesiod, *Theogony*, p. 25. Cf. *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*: 'One of the Muses, who presided over comedy and pastoral poetry. She also favoured rural pursuits and is represented holding a comic mask and a shepherd's crook. By Apollo she was the mother of the Corybantes.' *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, revised by Adrian Room (London: Cassell, 1998 [1870]), p. 1064.

⁹¹ Cf. Plato: 'when Pausanias finally came to a pause (I've learned this sort of fine figure from our clever rhetoricians), it was Aristophanes' turn, according to Aristodemus. But he had such a bad case of the hiccups – he'd probably stuffed himself again, though, of course, it could have been anything – that making a speech was totally out of the question.' Plato, *Symposium*, p. 469.

⁹² Cf. Hesiod: 'The daughter of Ocean, fair Eurgnome, / Next bore to him three daughters, the fair-cheeked/ Graces, Agalaia and Euphrosyne, / and lovely Thalia. From their glancing eyes/ Flowed love that melts the strength of a man's limbs, / Their gaze, beneath their brows, is beautiful.' (ll. 906-11) Hesiod, *Theogony*, p. 52.

⁹³ Cf. Methodius: 'For you seem to me, O Theophila, to have discussed these words of the Scripture amply and clearly, and to have set them forth as they are without mistake. For it is a dangerous thing wholly to despise the literal meaning, as has been said, and especially of Genesis, where the unchangeable decrees of God for the constitution of the universe are set forth, in agreement with which, even until now, the world is perfectly ordered, most beautifully in accordance with a perfect rule, until the Lawgiver Himself, having re-arranged it, wishing to order it anew, shall break up the first laws of nature by a fresh disposition.' Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, III.ii, p. 22. Compare Origen: 'Let no one, however, entertain the suspicion that we do not believe any history in Scripture to be real because we suspect certain events

Let us bring forth the analogical sense, looking more deeply into the Scripture; for Paul is not to be despised when he passes over the literal meaning, and shows that the words extend to Christ and the Church.⁹⁴

Thaleia discusses Paul's passage in Ephesians 5: 31-2 in which he compares marriage to the mystical union between Christ and the Church.⁹⁵ In order to establish the veracity of Paul's interpretation of Genesis, she makes a comparison between the first man and Christ and demonstrates how Christ can be seen as the Second Adam through the doctrine of Recapitulation:⁹⁶

For it was fitting that the first-born of God, the first shoot, the only-begotten, even the wisdom of God, should be joined to the first-formed man, and first and first-born of mankind, and should become incarnate. And this was Christ, a man filled with the pure and perfect Godhead, and God received into man. [...] And thus, when renovating those things which were from the beginning, and forming them again of the Virgin by the Spirit, He frames the same [second Adam], just as at the beginning. When the earth was still virgin and untilled, God, without taking mould, formed the reasonable creature from without seed.⁹⁷

related in it not to have taken place; or that no precepts of the law are to be taken literally, because we consider certain of them, in which either the nature or possibility of the case so requires, incapable of being observed; or that we do not believe those predictions which were written of the Saviour to have been fulfilled in a manner palpable to the senses; or that His commandments are not to be literally obeyed.' Origen, *De Principiis*, IV. xix, trans. Frederick Crombie, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. IV, *Tertullian, Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Parts First and Second* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1885]), pp. 239-384, (p. 368).

⁹⁴ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, III.ii, p. 22.

⁹⁵ Cf. Saint Paul: 'For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife, and they shall be two in one flesh. This is a great sacrament; but I speak in Christ and in the church' (Ephesians 5: 31-2).

⁹⁶ Cf. Gambero: 'According to St. Paul. The Redeemer brought together or "recapitulated" in Himself all things and events that had happened since the first creation, reconciling everything with God. In this view the salvation of man appears as a second creation, which is essentially a kind of repetition of the first creation. Through this second creation, God rehabilitates His original plan of salvation, which had been interrupted by Adam's fall; he takes it up again and reorganises it in the person of His Son, Who becomes for us the second Adam.' Luigi Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church: The Blessed Virgin Mary in Patristic Thought*, trans. Thomas Buffer (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999 [1991]), p. 52. Cf. Methodius: 'And therefore God moistening him afresh and forming anew the same clay to His honour, having first hardened and fixed it in the Virgin's womb, and united and mixed it with the Word, brought it forth into life no longer soft and broken; lest, being overflowed again by streams of corruption without, it should become soft, and perish as the Lord in His teaching shows in the parable of the finding of the sheep.' Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, III.iv, p. 24.

⁹⁷ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, III.iv, pp. 23-4.

Thaleia's comparison of Genesis with Saint Paul's letter reiterates how Christ's creation recapitulates the creation of the first man; she not only echoes Marcella's earlier discourse, but provides a corresponding commentary on Saint Paul. By establishing this connection and demonstrating how mankind was remade and renovated by Christ in the Incarnation, she is able to show how Genesis can be interpreted analogically: 'It is evident, then, that the statement respecting Eve and Adam is to be referred to the Church and Christ. For this is truly a great mystery and a supernatural.'⁹⁸ Thaleia then discusses Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, in which he allows marriage 'by permission', that it, as an indulgence for those who are unable to remain continent.⁹⁹ Virginité, though, is preferable. The interpretation of some of Paul's words, however, is problematic in the same way as Cyprian's Fourth Epistle to Pomponius.¹⁰⁰ Thaleia states that:

'But if any man think that he behaveth himself uncomely towards his virgin,' he says, 'if she pass the flower of her age, and need so require, let him do what he will, he sinneth not: let him marry;' properly here preferring marriage to 'uncomeliness,' in the case of those who had chosen the state of virginity, but afterwards finding it intolerable and grievous, and in word boasting of their perseverance before men, out of shame, but indeed no longer having the power to persevere in the life of a eunuch.¹⁰¹

Thaleia, in maintaining that virginity is a gift from God and should not be undertaken for the sake of vainglory, seems to then imply that those who have chosen a life of virginity

⁹⁸ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, III.ix, p. 30.

⁹⁹ Cf. Paul: 'But I speak this by indulgence, not by commandment. For I would that all men were even as myself: but every one hath his proper gift from God; one after this manner, and another after that. But I say to the unmarried, and to the widows: It is good for them if they so continue, even as I. But if they do not contain themselves, let them marry. For it is better to marry than to be burnt' (I Corinthians 7: 6-9).

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Cyprian: 'if they have consecrated themselves in good faith to Christ, let them remain virtuous and chaste without any rumour to the contrary; let them thus, courageous and unwavering, await the reward of virginity. But if they are unwilling or unable to persevere, let them marry rather than fall into hell for their transgressions.' Cyprian, *Epistle IV.ii*, in *Saint Cyprian: Letters (1-81)*, trans. Sister Rose Bernard Donna (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1981 [1964]), pp. 10-14, (p. 11).

¹⁰¹ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, III.xiv, pp. 35-6.

without the proper vocation can later abandon it for marriage.¹⁰² It is unclear whether the virgins that Thaleia discusses are subject to a vow of virginity, or whether she is discussing those who merely boast about taking up the profession, but do not have a true vocation. Nevertheless, the main point of Thaleia's interpretation of the Pauline epistle is to affirm the voluntary nature of virginity; it is not commanded by Paul, but recommended. There is also a clear sense that virginity is a gift from God: there are those who have a predisposition towards it, but others who cannot aspire to such perfection. This raises interesting problems concerning virginity and its relation to free will and grace, but this is a question which Thaleia does not seek to resolve.

¹⁰² Later Church Councils demonstrate that the virginal vow is considered as binding as the marital vow: 'XIX. If any persons who profess virginity shall disregard their profession, let them fulfil the term of digamists. And, moreover, we prohibit women who are virgins from living with men as sisters.' *The Canons of the Council of Ancryra, A.D. 314*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Vol. XIV, The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church: Their Canons and dogmatic decrees* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1900]), pp. 63-76, (p. 71); 'XVI. It is not lawful for a virgin who has dedicated herself to the Lord God, nor for monks, to marry; and if they are found to have done this, let them be excommunicated. But we decree that in every place the bishop shall have the power of indulgence towards them.' *The XXX Canons of the Holy and Fourth Synods of Chalcedon, A.D. 451*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Vol. XIV, The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church: Their Canons and dogmatic decrees* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1900]), pp. 267-287, (p.280); 'IV. If any bishop, presbyter, deacon, sub-deacon, lector, cantor, or door-keeper has had intercourse with a woman dedicated to God, let him be deposed, as one who has corrupted a spouse of Christ, but if a layman let him be cut off.'; 'XLIV. A monk convicted of fornication, or who takes a wife for the communion of matrimony and for society, is to be subjected to the penalties of fornicators, according to the canons.' *The Canons of the Council of Trullo often called the Quinsext Council, A.D. 692*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Vol. XIV, The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church: Their Canons and dogmatic decrees* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1900]), pp. 359-365, (p. 364; p. 386). 'XVIII. That the ancients received a professed virgin that had married, as one guilty of digamy, viz., upon one year's penance; but they ought to be dealt with more severely than widows professing continence, and even as adulterers: But they ought not to be admitted to profess virginity till they are above sixteen or seventeen years of age, after trial, and at their own earnest request; whereas relations often offer them that are under age, for their own secular ends, but such ought not easily to be admitted.' Basil of Caesarea, *Second Canonical Epistle, c. post-370*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Vol. XIV, The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church: Their Canons and dogmatic decrees* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1900]) pp. 605-7, (p. 605). 'LX. Professed virgins and monks, if they fall from their profession, shall undergo the penalties of adulterers.' Basil of Caesarea, *Third Canonical Epistle, c. post-370*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Vol. XIV, The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church: Their Canons and dogmatic decrees* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1900]) pp. 605-7, (p. 608).

Discourse four, Theopatra's discourse, asserts that it is imperative for those who have been given gifts by God 'to adorn that which is honourable with words of praise'.¹⁰³ She therefore proceeds to provide an encomium to virginity, singing the praises of 'the brightest and most glorious star of Christ, which is chastity'.¹⁰⁴ Theopatra uses chastity synonymously with virginity. Chastity, she says, restores mankind to paradise:

Now I at least seem to perceive that nothing has been such a means of restoring men to paradise, and of the change to incorruption, and of reconciliation to God, and such a means of salvation to men, by guiding us to life, as chastity.¹⁰⁵

Theopatra's assertion that there is a connection between virginity and paradise harkens back to the doctrine of Recapitulation discussed by Thaleia, and is affirmed in her own person: her pure state and her name, derived from the Greek θεός (God) πατέρα (fatherland), meaning 'land of God',¹⁰⁶ indicate the power of virginity to enable mankind to become part of a recreation of the original state of man. Theopatra seeks to demonstrate virginity's ability to recapture paradise by developing a metaphor of man's existence post-Fall. She describes his falling into a stream of voluptuousness, which overwhelms his soul.¹⁰⁷ He is thus swept along in the stream of corruption without any ability to extricate himself. Virginity, she asserts, was sent by God so that 'we might tie our bodies fast, like ships, and have a calm, coming to an anchorage without damage, as also the Holy Spirit witnesses'.¹⁰⁸ Theopatra then uses the metaphor of the stream of corruption to provide an exegesis on Psalm 136.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰³ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, IV.i, p. 37.

¹⁰⁴ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, IV.i, p. 37.

¹⁰⁵ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, IV.ii, p. 37.

¹⁰⁶ 'Θεός', *Greek-English Lexicon*, p. 791; 'Πατέρα', *Greek-English Lexicon*, p. 1348.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, IV.ii, p. 38.

¹⁰⁸ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, IV.ii, p. 38.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Psalms: 'Upon the rivers of Babylon, there we sat and wept: when we remembered Sion: On the willows in the midst thereof we hung up our instruments. For there they that led us into captivity required

Theopatra interprets the Rivers of Babylon as ‘streams of voluptuousness’.¹¹⁰ The harps signify the flesh that is hung on the Agnos, that is, the willow of chastity:¹¹¹

If, then, the rivers of Babylon are the streams of voluptuousness, as wise men say, which confuse and disturb the soul, then the willows must be chastity, to which we may suspend and draw up the organs of lust which overbalance and weigh down the mind, so that they may not be borne down by the torrents of incontinence, and be drawn like worms to impurity and corruption.¹¹²

Virginité allows man to extricate himself from the corruption caused by the fall.

Theopatra then discusses why in the Psalm the ‘souls declare that they were asked by those who led them captive to sing the Lord’s song in a strange land’.¹¹³ The Gospel teaches ‘a holy and secret song’,¹¹⁴ which those who profess Christianity but act sinfully insult; so instead of accomplishing the will of God, they perform the will of ‘the Evil One’.¹¹⁵ Such people

while they were transgressing the commandments, and acting impiously towards God, they were pretentiously reading the law, as if, forsooth, they were piously observing its precepts; but they did not receive it in their souls, holding it firmly with faith, but rejected it, denying it by their works. And hence they sing the Lord’s song in a strange land, explaining the law by distorting and degrading it, expecting a sensual kingdom, and setting their hopes on this alien world.¹¹⁶

Those, however, who have adopted virginité and quelled the passions of the body are not guilty of such transgressions and can expect high rewards from God in accordance with the honours of their fidelity and sacrifice. Theopatra here utilises the *sponsa Christi* motif

of us the words of songs. And they that carried us away, said: Sing ye to us a hymn of the songs of Sion. How shall we sing the song of the Lord in a strange land?’ (Psalm 136: 1-4).

¹¹⁰ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, IV.iv, p. 40.

¹¹¹ Cf. Methodius: ‘For everywhere the divine writings take the willow as the type of chastity, because, when its flower is steeped in water, if it be drunk, it extinguishes whatever kindles sensual desires and passions within us, until it entirely renders barren, and makes every inclination to the begetting of children without effect, as also Homer indicated, for this reason calling the willows destructive of fruit.’ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, IV.iii, p. 39.

¹¹² Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, IV.iv, p. 40.

¹¹³ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, IV.iv, p. 40.

¹¹⁴ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, IV.iv, p. 40.

¹¹⁵ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, IV.iv, p. 40.

¹¹⁶ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, IV.iv, pp. 40-1.

to express the honour of virginity and its connection with God.¹¹⁷ She comments that the rewards of virginity are due to those

who are clothed in the most white robe of virginity in the pure dwelling of unapproachable light; because they had it not in mind to put off their wedding garment – that is, to relax their minds by wandering thoughts.¹¹⁸

Theopatra does not express the destruction of virginity as emanating from the loss of bodily integrity, but rather from a mental detachment from the state: it is ‘wandering thoughts’ that most imperil virginity. The loss of mental virginity signifies the removal of the ‘wedding garment’, and thus a rejection of the Bridegroom. This rejection of the role of the Bride of Christ is signified through the metaphor of the loosening of the bridal attire in Jeremiah; the virgin who is spiritually corrupt has fundamentally damaged her marriage to Christ.¹¹⁹

Theophila’s discourse is the first instance of a sustained defence of marriage in the virginal tradition. Her discourse answers Marcella’s introduction to a virginal reading of Genesis, and seeks to temper the possible extreme ascetical views that could be prompted by praises of virginity. Thaleia’s discourse also engages with a virginal interpretation of Genesis, but does so by providing an analogical reading in order to verify Saint Paul’s interpretation of Christ as the second Adam. She returns to an encomium of virginity, but still touches on the doctrine of Recapitulation, and so

¹¹⁷ Cf. Methodius: ‘these very undefiled and incorrupt souls, which, having with self-denial drawn in the pure draught of virginity with unpolluted lips, are ‘espoused to one husband,’ to be presented ‘as a chaste virgin to Christ’ in heaven [I Corinthians 11: 2], ‘having gotten the victory, striving for undefiled rewards [Wisdom 4: 2].’ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, IV.v, pp. 41-2.

¹¹⁸ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, IV.v, p. 42.

¹¹⁹ Cf. Methodius: ‘The expression in Jeremiah, “That a maid should not forget her ornaments, nor a bride her attire [*lit.* breast band],” [Jeremias 2: 32] shows that she should not give up or loosen the band of chastity through wiles and distractions. For by the heart are properly denoted out heart and mind. Now the breast band, the girdle which gathers together and keeps firm the purpose of the soul to chastity, is love to God, which our Captain and Shepherd, Jesus, who is also our Ruler and Bridegroom, O illustrious virgins, commands both you and me to hold fast unbroken and unsealed up even to the very end.’ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, IV.vi, p. 42.

represents virginity as a means by which mankind can escape the mire of corruption brought about by the fall. The nuptial imagery introduces the *sponsa Christi* motif into the *Symposium* and provides a starting point for later discourses.

iii. Thallousa, Agathe, and Procilla: Discourse V, VI, and VII

Discourses V, VI and VII move away from an interpretation of virginity in light of Genesis, but they continue along strong exegetical lines. Thallousa¹²⁰ argues in the fifth discourse that, ‘the greatest and most glorious offering and gift, to which there is nothing comparable, which men can offer to God, is the life of virginity’.¹²¹ This perhaps seems an extraordinary claim, considering that martyrdom remained a very real prospect in the late third and early fourth centuries, and indeed Methodius himself became a martyr. However, Thallousa draws out the sacrificial quality of virginity, which Marcella touched upon in the first discourse.¹²² Thallousa likens virginity to sacrificial acts in the Old Testament, such as Abraham’s sacrifice of the heifer, she-goat, ram, turtle-dove and pigeon in Genesis.¹²³ She additionally compares the vow of chastity to other vows that men make to God, which include the dedication of gold and silver vessels and tithes of fruits, property, or flocks.¹²⁴ Virginity is the most perfect sacrifice that man can make to God, as it is not simply a dedication of the part of one’s wealth or an animal sacrifice, but it is the complete sacrifice of the self:

¹²⁰ Thallousa is from the Greek θαλλός meaning ‘young shoot’, or ‘young branch’ (*Greek-English Lexicon*, p. 782).

¹²¹ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, V.i, p. 43.

¹²² Cf. Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, I.i, p. 6.

¹²³ Cf. Genesis: ‘And the Lord answered, and said: Take me a cow of three years old, and a she goat of three years, and a ram of three years, a turtle also, and a pigeon. And he took all these, and divided them in the midst, and laid the two pieces of each one against the other; but the birds he divided not’ (Genesis 15: 9-10).

¹²⁴ Cf. Methodius: ‘One vows to offer gold and silver vessels for the sanctuary when he comes, another to offer the tithes of his fruits, another of his property, another of the best of his flocks, another consecrates his being; and no one is able to vow a great vow to the Lord, but he who has offered himself entirely to God.’ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, V.i, p. 43.

We say that he offers himself perfectly to God who strives to keep the flesh undefiled from childhood, practising virginity; for it speedily brings great and much-desired gifts of hopes to those who strive for it, drying up the corrupting lusts and passions of the soul.¹²⁵

Although virginity was not recognised as a permanent identity in Judaic culture, Thallousa claims evidence for the vowing of chastity in Old Testament Scripture as she compares it to the vow of the Nazarite:

The process of vowing chastity is legitimated in Numbers 6: 1, 2, and ‘no one is able to vow a great vow to the Lord, but he who has offered himself entirely to God.’ [...] Now, he who watches over and restrains himself in part, and in part is distracted and wandering, is not wholly given up to the God. Hence it is necessary that the perfect man offer up all, both the things of the soul and those of the flesh, so that he may be complete and not lacking.¹²⁶

Virginity is a holistic offering, incorporating a sacrifice of the flesh and the soul. The sacrifice of virginity is not complete without the maintenance of mental integrity, echoing Theopatra’s warning about the destruction of virginity through ‘wandering thoughts’.¹²⁷ Thallousa thus acknowledges that virginity is not restricted to the integrity of the bodily part, but, following Saint Paul, shows that the virgin needs to be ‘holy both in body and in spirit’ (I Corinthians 7: 34):

I am plainly consecrated altogether to the Lord, when I not only strive to keep the flesh untouched by intercourse, but also unspotted by other kinds of unseemliness.¹²⁸

The spot of any sin disfigures virginity, and so a virgin must avoid everything that resembles sinfulness. The perfect consecration of the virgin involves keeping each part of the body free from sin: the tongue, the eyes, the ears, the hands, the feet and most of all

¹²⁵ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, V.iii, p. 46.

¹²⁶ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, V.i, p. 43; V.ii, p. 44.

¹²⁷ Cf. Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, IV.v, p. 42.

¹²⁸ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, V.iv, p. 46.

the heart.¹²⁹ The sensual dangers recall Cyprian's assertion of a virginity of the senses.¹³⁰

Virginity rejects the pleasures and sinfulness of the senses:

What, then, remains to me, if I also keep the heart pure, offering up all its thoughts to God; if I think no evil, if anger and wrath gain no rule over me, if I meditate on the law of the Lord day and night? And this is to preserve a great chastity, and to vow a great vow.¹³¹

Thallousa uses the Old Testament prohibition of wine for anyone making the vow of a Nazarite to illustrate that the vow of chastity ought to avoid anything intoxicating, lest it lead to sinfulness. Not only does wine make the mind vulnerable to sin, but it also acts as an analogy for those sinful things of the world which are intoxicating:

In order, therefore, that the virgin may not, when guarding against those sins which are in their own nature evil, be defiled by those which are like them and akin to them, conquering the one and being conquered by the other, that is, decorating herself with textures of different cloths, or with stones and gold, and other decorations of the body, things which intoxicate the soul; on this account it is ordered that she do not give herself up to womanish weakness and laughter, exciting herself to wiles and foolish talking, which whirl the mind around and confuse it.¹³²

Thallousa's recommendation to guard against the defilement of those things which resemble evil, although they may seem harmless to the state of virginity, such as luxury and bodily decoration, again harkens back to the earlier treatises on virginity which claim that adornment is prejudicial to virginity, and the sign of a harlot rather than of a virgin.¹³³ The warning against loose discourse also echoes Cyprian's warning against the

¹²⁹ Cf. Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, V.iv, pp. 46-7.

¹³⁰ Cf. Cyprian: 'She may remain a virgin in body and mind, but by her eyes, ears and tongue she has diminished the purity that she possessed.' Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, xviii, p. 47.

¹³¹ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, V.iv, p. 47.

¹³² Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, V.iv, p. 49.

¹³³ Cf. Cyprian: 'Showy adornments and clothing and the allurements of beauty are not becoming in any except prostitutes and shameless women, and of none, almost, is the dress more costly than those whose modesty is cheap.' Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, xii, p. 41; 'Let chaste and modest virgins shun the attire of the unchaste, the clothing of the immodest, the insignia of brothels, the adornment of harlots.' Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, xii, p. 42.

disgraceful speech that is attendant on wedding feasts.¹³⁴ In an image of a double-altar, Thallousa links the chastity of the virgin with that of the widow, but gives virginity the pre-eminent position of the golden altar. She states that a virgin should be like gold, which is 'suitably a symbol for virginity, [as it] does not admit any stain or spot, but ever shines forth with the light of the world.'¹³⁵ Although a virgin cannot wear golden trinkets, she should exhibit in her own self the untarnished virtue of the metal.

Agathe provides the sixth discourse. Her name derives from Greek ἀγαθός, meaning 'well-born' or 'gentle', and so suggests a 'good woman'.¹³⁶ Additionally, her name recalls that of the handsome host, Agathon (meaning good man), in Plato's *Symposium*.¹³⁷ Her discourse emphasises the excellence of virginity due to the fact that it reflects something of the divine image:

We have all come into this world, O virgins, endowed with singular beauty, which has a relationship and affinity to [divine] wisdom. For the souls of men do then most accurately resemble Him who begat and formed them, when, reflecting the unsullied representation of His likeness, and the features of that countenance, to which God looking formed them to have an immortal and indestructible shape, they remain such.¹³⁸

Divinity is incorruptible and, as virginity resembles this state of incorruption, it achieves the divine likeness. In many ways Agathe's discourse resembles the sentiments of Theopatra, who had asserted that virginity regained paradise. Agathe suggests that virginity can recapture the divine image in which man was first created, but which had been lost through the fall and the disfigurement caused by sinfulness. Mankind, due to his

¹³⁴ Cf. Cyprian: 'Some are not ashamed to attend weddings and, in the freedom of the wanton discourse there, to take part in the unchaste conversation, to hear what is unbecoming, to say what is not allowed, to look on and to be present in the midst of disgraceful talk and drunken feasts, by which the flame of passion is enkindled, and the bride is incited to tolerate and the bridegroom to become emboldened in lust.'

Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, xviii, pp. 46-7.

¹³⁵ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, V.viii, p. 52.

¹³⁶ *Greek-English Lexicon*, p. 4.

¹³⁷ Cf. Plato, *Symposium*, p. 460

¹³⁸ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, VI.i, pp. 52-3.

Likeness to God, is attacked by spirits who ever wish to defile those things that pertain to God.¹³⁹ Agathe describes the cleaving of mankind to evil spirits as a form of adultery, thus again recalling the nuptial imagery of the fidelity of the Bride of Christ, and also utilises the metaphor of adultery which is used in the Old Testament in relation to Israel's infidelity to God.¹⁴⁰

Agathe also provides an interpretation of the Parable of the Ten Virgins found in Matthew 25.¹⁴¹ The parable acknowledges that the ten women are all 'virgins', but differentiates between their virtue: five were wise and five were foolish. The foolish virgins were 'shut out from the divine courts',¹⁴² despite possessing the purity of virginity. The parable provides another marital metaphor connected with virginity, and so reinforces the *sponsa Christi* idea. However, it also provides a negative image of virginity, through the failure of the foolish virgins to achieve access to the bridegroom. Agathe states that the five foolish virgins failed to fill their lamps with oil and, therefore, represent

those who strive to come to the boundaries of virginity, and who strain every nerve to fulfill this love, acting virtuously and temperately, and who profess and boast that this is their aim; but who, making light of it, and being subdued by the changes of the world, come rather to be sketches of the shadowy image of virtue, than workers who represent the living truth itself.¹⁴³

¹³⁹ Cf. Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, VI.i, pp. 53.

¹⁴⁰ Cf. Jeremias: 'How can I be merciful to thee? Thy children have forsaken me, and swear by them that are not gods: I fed them to the full, and they committed adultery, and rioted in the harlot's house' (Jeremias 5: 7); Cf. Ezechiel: 'Because they have committed adultery, and blood is in their hands, and they have committed fornication with their idols: moreover also their children, whom they bore to me, they have offered to them to be devoured' (Ezechiel 23:37).

¹⁴¹ Cf. Matthew 25: 1-13.

¹⁴² Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, VI.iii, p. 55.

¹⁴³ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, VI.ii, p. 54.

Foolish virgins are those who have professed virginity, but have not achieved it because of vainglory.¹⁴⁴ So although the foolish virgins maintain the physical requirements of virginity, they lack spiritual virginity, which is necessary for the validation of the state. Their pride destroys their purity and they become, instead, a ‘shadowy image of virtue’.¹⁴⁵ Agathe draws a distinction between the ‘shadowy image’ of virginity and those who represent the ‘living truth’. Those virgins who do not embrace the spiritual as well as the physical undermine their bodily sacrifice and become false semblants of virginity.

Agathe also builds on Thallousa’s discussion of how the senses imperil virginity. She reads the five wise virgins in the Parable of the Ten Virgins as the spotless use of the five senses of the body, and the five foolish virgins as the incorrect use of the five senses which is then prejudicial to true virginity:

There is chastity of the eyes, and of the ears, and of the tongue, and so on of the other senses; so here she who keeps inviolate the faith of the five pathways of virtue – sight, taste, smell, touch, and hearing – is called by the name of the five virgins, because she has kept five forms of the sense pure to Christ, as a lamp, causing the light of holiness to shine forth from each of them. For the flesh is truly, as it were, our five-lighted lamp, which the soul will bear like a torch, when it stands before Christ the Bridegroom, on the day of the resurrection, showing her faith springing out clear and bright through all the senses.¹⁴⁶

The virginity of the senses also echoes Cyprian’s tract.¹⁴⁷ In this metaphorical reading of the Parable, the two groups of five virgins, by representing the senses of the body, seems to suggest the images of two persons: one who keeps the virginity of their senses pure, and the other who does not:

For the flesh is truly, as it were, our five-lighted lamp, which the soul will bear like a torch, when it stands before Christ the Bridegroom, on the day of the

¹⁴⁴ Cf. Methodius: ‘they chose the same profession; but they did not, for all that, go forth in the same way to meet the bridegroom.’ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, VI.iii, p. 54.

¹⁴⁵ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, VI.ii, p. 54.

¹⁴⁶ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, VI.iii, p. 55.

¹⁴⁷ Cf. Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, xviii, p. 47.

resurrection, showing her faith springing out clear and bright through all the senses.¹⁴⁸

The oil of good works provides wisdom and righteousness nourishes faith, and gives birth to the light of virtue.¹⁴⁹ Agathe additionally reads the light of the lamps in an apocalyptic manner. The lamps reflect the greater light of Christ, which need to be kept burning until He comes again to illuminate the world.¹⁵⁰ The apocalyptic reading merges with the pre-eminence of virginity and its rewards cited by Saint John in his Apocalypse:

I am betrothed to the Word, and receive as a reward the eternal crown of immortality and riches from the Father; and I triumph in eternity, crowned with the bright and unfading flowers of wisdom. I am one of the choir with Christ dispensing His rewards in heaven, around the unbeginning and never-ending King. I have become the torchbearer of the unapproachable lights, and I join with their company in the new song of the archangels, showing forth the new grace of the Church; for the Word says that the company of virgins always follow the Lord, and have fellowship with Him wherever He is. And this is what John signifies in the commemoration of the hundred and forty-four thousand.¹⁵¹

The elevated rewards promised to virginity - the union with the Word, admission to His inner sanctum and companionship with the angelic hosts - are signified in the Parable by the admission of the wise virgins to the wedding feast. Agathe closes her discourse with an exhortation to virgins to keep their oil lamps trimmed in anticipation of the Second Coming.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁸ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, VI.iii, p. 55.

¹⁴⁹ Cf. Methodius: 'Let us supply now the oil of good works abundantly, and of prudence, being purged from all corruption which would weigh us down; lest, while the Bridegroom tarries, our lamps may also in like manner be extinguished.' Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, VI.iv, p. 56.

¹⁵⁰ Cf. Methodius: 'Now the slumbering and sleeping of the virgins signifies the departure from life; and the midnight is the kingdom of antichrist, during which the destroying angel passes over the houses. But the cry which was made when it was said "Behold the bridegroom cometh, go ye out to meet him," is the voice which shall be heard from the heaven, and the trumpet, when the saints, all their bodies being raised, shall be caught up, and shall go on the clouds to meet the Lord.' Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, VI.iv, p. 56.

¹⁵¹ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, VI.v, p. 57.

¹⁵² Cf. Methodius: 'Go then, ye virgin bands of the new ages. Go, fill your vessels with righteousness, for the hour is coming when ye must rise and meet the bridegroom. Go, lightly leaving on one side the fascinations and the pleasures of life, which confuse and bewitch the soul; and thus shall ye attain the promises.' Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, VI.v, pp. 57-8.

Procilla provides the seventh discourse. The name Procillus/a is from Latin, perhaps deriving from the word ‘procella’ meaning ‘a violent wind, storm, hurricane [or] tempest’.¹⁵³ It can also mean ‘a charge [...], a sudden attack of cavalry’ and so be another *miles Christi* reference.¹⁵⁴ It may be likely that the name alludes to the mother of Gnaeus Julius Agricola, Julia Procilla, who is described by Tacitus in his *Agricola* as ‘a woman of exceptionally pure character’.¹⁵⁵ Procilla’s discourse begins with a demonstration of the praises due to virginity for the reason that Christ bears witness to its greatness:

And so I will not bring forward the praises of virginity from mere human report, but from Him who cares for us, and who has taken up the whole matter, showing that He is the husbandman of this grace, and a lover of its beauty, and a fitting witness.¹⁵⁶

In order to prove the pre-eminence of virginity, Procilla provides an exegesis of Canticles. In doing so, she follows in the Origenist interpretation, as Alfred C. Rush notes: ‘Origen [...] is the father and creator of bridal mysticism, especially by applying the spouse of the Canticle to the individual soul beloved by Christ.’¹⁵⁷ Ramsey, however, emphasises that there is a difference between Origen and Methodius’ interpretations of Canticles. He states that:

While the first commentators on the Song of Songs, Hippolytus and Origen, had understood this book of the Old Testament to be referring mystically to the marriage of Christ and the Church or to that of Christ and the soul of the Christian, by the end of the third century, with Methodius of Olympus, it is taken to have special reference to the virgin’s relationship with Christ. So we find it in the later Fathers.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵³ *A Latin-English Dictionary, based upon the works of Forcellini and Freund*, ed. William Smith (London: John Murray, 1855), p. 880.

¹⁵⁴ *Latin-English Dictionary*, p. 880.

¹⁵⁵ Tacitus, *Agricola and Germany*, 4.2, trans. Anthony R. Birley (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 5.

¹⁵⁶ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, VII.i, p. 59.

¹⁵⁷ Alfred C. Rush, ‘Death as Spiritual Marriage: Individual and Ecclesial Eschatology’, *Vigiliae Christianae*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (Jun., 1972), 81-101, (p. 82).

¹⁵⁸ Boniface Ramsey, *Beginning to Read the Fathers* (London: Paulist Press, 1985), p. 143.

Procilla's interpretation of Canticles expresses the wonder of virginity. Origen had already produced an interpretation of this mystical biblical text, which is a highly erotic epithalamion. Because of the nature of the text, Origen provides a warning that there may be some spiritual danger in the reading of the text by those who are not able to comprehend the mystical meaning:

If those we have called 'little ones' come to these places in Scripture, it can happen that they receive no profit at all from this book or even that they are badly injured either by reading what has been written or by examining what has been said to interpret it.¹⁵⁹

Origen advises that only those who are totally pure can be exposed to Canticles - those who can listen to it 'with chaste ears' and not read a sexual meaning into the text.¹⁶⁰ The Canticle of Canticles thus poses a spiritual threat to the man who has not turned away from the flesh to the spirit. He notes that the Jews, likewise, exercised censorship over this text.¹⁶¹ One may only approach the text when

he has been purged in morals and has learned the knowledge and distinction of corruptible and incorruptible things. By this preparation he is enabled to receive no harm from these figures by which the love of the bride for her heavenly bridegroom, that is, of the perfect soul for the Word of God, is described and fashioned.¹⁶²

The bridegroom of the poem is read as Christ, for Christ is referred to as the bridegroom in many parts of the New Testament.¹⁶³ The coming of the Bridegroom is also prefigured in the Old Testament.¹⁶⁴ Origen suggests two possible readings for the character of the

¹⁵⁹ Origen, *The Prologue to the Commentary on The Song of Songs*, trans. Rowan A. Greer, in *Origen* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1979), p. 218.

¹⁶⁰ Origen, *The Prologue to the Commentary on The Song of Songs*, p. 218.

¹⁶¹ Cf. Origen: 'Indeed, they say the Hebrews observe the rule that unless some one has attained a perfect and mature age, he is not even permitted to hold this book in his hands.' Origen, *The Prologue to the Commentary on The Song of Songs*, p. 218.

¹⁶² Origen, *The Prologue to the Commentary on The Song of Songs*, p. 234.

¹⁶³ Cf. Matthew 9: 15; Matthew 25; Mark 2: 19-20; Luke 5: 34-5; John 3: 29; Apocalypse 18: 23.

¹⁶⁴ Cf. Psalms 18: 6; Isaias 61: 10; Isaias 62: 5; Jeremias 7: 34; Jeremias 16: 9; Jeremias 25: 10; Jeremias 33: 11; Baruch 2: 23; Joel 2: 16; I Machabees 1: 28; I Machabees 9: 39.

bride, the psychic interpretation and the pneumatic, which is respectively ‘whether she is the soul made after His image or the Church’.¹⁶⁵ Procilla reads the spouse in Canticles in a traditional way: it signifies the Church, which is likewise considered to be a virgin.¹⁶⁶ The acceptance of the Church as the virginal Bride of Christ derives from Judaic tradition, which reads the Cantic as an expression of the union between God and His people (the synagogue).¹⁶⁷ In addition, Procilla expands on Origen’s psychic reading of the text; instead of reading the Bride as every Christian soul, she interprets it to mean the soul of the virgin. It is a logical merging of Origen’s interpretation of the Bride as the perfect soul, and the tradition of the virgin as the Bride of Christ, which is prevalent from Tertullian onwards. Nevertheless, in both readings the spouse (the Church and the virgin) represents some form of virginity. Procilla demonstrates that the floral metaphors used in the Cantic particularly indicate virginity:

And this is quite clear, in the Song of Songs, to anyone who is willing to see it, where Christ himself, praising those who are firmly established in virginity, says, ‘A lily among thorns, so is my love among the daughters;’ [Song of Songs 2: 2] comparing the grace of chastity to the lily, on account of its purity and fragrance, and sweetness and joyousness.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁵ Origen, *The Prologue to the Commentary on The Song of Songs*, p. 217.

¹⁶⁶ Cf. Methodius: ‘The Church, then, is the spouse. The queens are the royal souls before the deluge, who became well-pleasing to God, that is, those about Abel and Seth and Enoch. The concubines those after the flood, namely, those of the prophets, in whom, before the Church was betrothed to the Lord, being united to them after the manner of concubines, He sowed true words in an incorrupt and pure philosophy, so that, conceiving faith, they might bring forth to Him the spirit of salvation.’; ‘But of all these, neither the queens, nor the concubines, nor the virgins [n.b. νεάνιδες, not παρθένοι], are compared to the Church. For she is reckoned the perfect and chosen one beyond all these, consisting and composed of all the apostles, the Bride who surpasses all in the beauty of youth and virginity. Therefore, also, she is blessed and praised by all, because she saw and heard freely what those desired to see, even for a little time, and saw not, and to hear, but heard not.’ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, VII.iv, p. 62; VII.vii, pp. 64-5.

¹⁶⁷ Cf. Rush: ‘Beginning with Osee, Yahweh’s relationship with Israel is described in terms of marriage. The basic, underlying theme is the love of the husband that overcomes the infidelities of his spouse, his covenanted people. This marriage theme of love later finds many nuanced expressions in the Old Testament.’ Rush, ‘Death as Spiritual Marriage’, p. 81.

¹⁶⁸ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, VII.i, p. 59.

Procilla declares virginity to be a type of martyrdom, and indeed even greater than martyrdom as the sacrifice must be endured for the whole of life:

He announces that the order and holy choir of the virgins shall first enter in company with Him into the rest of the new dispensation, as into a bridal chamber. For they were martyrs, not as bearing the pains of the body for a little moment of time, but as enduring them through all their life, not shrinking from truly wrestling in an Olympian contest for the prize of chastity; but resisting the fierce torments of pleasures and fears and grief, and the other evils of the iniquity of men, they first of all carry off the prize, taking their place in the higher rank of those who receive the promise.¹⁶⁹

The tradition of virginity utilises the language of sacrifice, but it is often thought that the Edict of Milan promotes an uptake in Christian virginity as it becomes a substitute for martyrdom, a replacement option for the greatest sacrifice that a Christian was required to make.¹⁷⁰ Methodius' text, however, demonstrates that these two ideas are already beginning to emerge even before the end of the Christian persecution.¹⁷¹

Thallousa, Agathe and Procilla all provide biblical exegesis. Agathe's is from the New Testament, whereas Thallousa and Procilla's are both from the Old Testament. Agathe's exegesis of the Parable of the Ten Virgins is used to demonstrate the supremacy of spiritual virginity and how this higher form of virginity can be lost even if physical

¹⁶⁹ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, VII.iii, p. 61.

¹⁷⁰ Cf. Gambero: 'After the Edict of Milan (313), the official tolerance accorded by the emperor Constantine to the Christian religion effectively put an end to persecution. Consequently, martyrdom was no longer an eventuality for which the Christian had to prepare himself [...] there was a steady increase in the number of Christians who saw a life consecrated to God in perpetual virginity as a way to render the kind of witness previously manifested in the acceptance of martyrdom.' Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church*, p. 97-8.

¹⁷¹ The use of Canticles to depict the virgin soul is important in later Christian tradition, as Mary, the virgin soul *par excellence*, becomes associated with the bride: 'Peter Chrysologus [(ca. 380-ca. 450)] appears to have been the first Latin Father to call Blessed Virgin 'God's spouse'. [...] He] Refers to Mary in the words of the Song of Songs 4:12: 'My bride is an enclosed garden, a sealed fountain', which the Bridegroom built when he descended into her to realize the plan of the Incarnation.' Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church*, pp. 296-7. Mary is also equated with the Church; it is Ephrem the Syrian (ca. 306-373) who first perceives Mary as analogous to the Church (Cf. Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church*, p. 115.), and additionally 'is the first Christian author to call Mary the spouse of Christ' (Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church*, p. 117). The trope of the *hortus conclusus* is an enduring pastoral representation of Mary, which remains strong throughout both the Marian tradition and the tradition of virginity.

virginity remains intact. Thallousa uses the Old Testament vows to demonstrate the sacrificial quality of virginity and to assert its pre-eminence over martyrdom. Procilla's Old Testament exegesis, however, is probably the most important as it expands Origen's reading of Canticles to include the virgin; this association is an important and enduring motif throughout the tradition.

iv. Thekla and Tusiane: Discourses VIII and IX

Thekla¹⁷² is the virgin who is given the prize for the best discourse on virginity. Her name is not just an allusion to Saint Thecla; she is a literary representation of the famous virginal saint, who is famed in Christian legend for being a companion of Saint Paul. Arête acknowledges Thekla's supremacy because of her connection with Paul and her reputation for wisdom. Arête says to her: 'thou wilt yield to none in universal philosophy and instruction, instructed by Paul in what is fitting to say of evangelical and divine doctrine.'¹⁷³ Thekla's story is told in the Apocryphal narrative *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*,¹⁷⁴ in which she is so moved by Paul's preaching that she spurns her betrothed and joins Paul in the apostolic and virginal life.¹⁷⁵ Thekla's mother calls on the authorities to

¹⁷² Perhaps derived from the Greek θεός (God) and καλός (beautiful or moral beauty) meaning the 'beauty of God' (*Greek-English Lexicon*, p. 791; p. 870). For an essay on the development of Thecla from a heretical figure to her appropriation into orthodoxy by the Church, see Léonie Hayne, 'Thecla and the Church Fathers', *Virgiliae Christianae*, Vol. 48, No. 3 (Sep., 1994), 209-218.

¹⁷³ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, p. 66.

¹⁷⁴ Saint Jerome says of the work *Paul and Thecla*: 'the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* and the whole fable about the lion having been baptized by him we reckon among the apocryphal writings, for how is it possible that the inseparable companion of the Apostle [Luke the Evangelist] in his other affairs should have been ignorant of this thing alone.' Saint Jerome, 'VII. Luke the Evangelist', *On Illustrious Men (De viris illustribus)*, trans. Thomas P. Halton (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1999), p. 16.

¹⁷⁵ Cf. *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*: 'And while Paul was speaking in the midst of the church in the house of Onesiphorus a certain virgin named Thecla, the daughter of Theoclia, betrothed to a man named Thamyras, was sitting at the window close by and listened day and night to the discourse of virginity.' *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, vii, in *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian literature in an English Translation*, ed. J. K. Elliott (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 365.

burn her disobedient child,¹⁷⁶ but miraculously the flames do not harm her.¹⁷⁷ She follows Paul to Antioch,¹⁷⁸ and spurns the advances of an influential citizen there.¹⁷⁹ The unsuccessful seducer then arranges for her to be thrown to wild beasts. This happens twice: the first time a lioness licks her feet,¹⁸⁰ the second a lioness fights for her,¹⁸¹ but then more beasts are released. The women in the audience, however, throw perfumes into the arena which hypnotize the beasts.¹⁸² Angry bulls are also released to gore her, but she is afforded divine protection from them.¹⁸³ She is eventually released, seeks Paul in Myra,¹⁸⁴ and then returns to her home town of Iconium where she converts her mother.¹⁸⁵ In some manuscripts she is said to be buried near Paul in Rome.¹⁸⁶

In the *Symposium*, Thekla begins her discourse with an explanation of the etymology of the word παρθενία, the Greek word for virginity:

For virginity (παρθενία) is divine (παρθεΐα) by the change of one letter, as she alone makes him who has her, and is initiated by her incorruptible rites like unto God, than which it is impossible to find a greater good, removed as it is from pleasure and grief; and the wing of the soul sprinkled by it becomes stronger and lighter, accustomed daily to fly from human desires.¹⁸⁷

Thekla's linguistic association of virginity and divinity recalls the previous discourses of Marcella and Agathe, who both claimed that virginity was a reflection of the divine image. Thekla furthers virginity's claim to the celestial world by acknowledging its kinship with the angels. The language used to describe the state of virginity is that of

¹⁷⁶ Cf. *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, xx, p. 368.

¹⁷⁷ Cf. *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, xxi, p. 368.

¹⁷⁸ Cf. *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, xxv, p. 369.

¹⁷⁹ Cf. *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, xxvi, p. 369.

¹⁸⁰ Cf. *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, xxviii, p. 369.

¹⁸¹ Cf. *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, xxxiii, p. 370.

¹⁸² Cf. *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, xxxv, pp. 370-1.

¹⁸³ Cf. *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, xxxv, p. 371.

¹⁸⁴ Cf. *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, xl, p. 371.

¹⁸⁵ Cf. *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, xlii-xliiii, p. 372.

¹⁸⁶ Cf. *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, p. 372.

¹⁸⁷ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, VIII.i, p. 67.

ascendance, in contrast to the gravity of the sins which drag down the souls of those who ‘rave in the wild pleasures of unlawful lust’.¹⁸⁸ The virgins, whose purity enables them to soar heavenward, already partake in the *vita angelica* on earth. They are so wholly detached from the mundane world that they think nothing of relinquishing the flesh, even if this occurs through the violence of martyrdom:

if any of them should choose to give up their bodies to wild beasts or to fire, and be punished, they are ready to have no care for pains, for the desire of them or the fear of them; so that they seem, while in the world, not to be in the world, but to have already reached, in thought and in the tendency of their desires, the assembly of those who are in heaven.¹⁸⁹

Thekla’s commentary recalls her own trials, and the unsuccessful attempts to martyr her. Although Thekla was not martyred in *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, she demonstrated her willingness for martyrdom three times and her readiness to ‘give up [her] bod[y] to wild beasts or to fire’. Procilla’s earlier discourse claimed that virginity was a type of martyrdom, a sacrifice that stretched across the whole of the virgin’s life, and was not limited to the specific moment of martyrdom. Thekla’s story reflects this reading of virginity, not just because she is a virgin and, therefore, has sacrificed herself, but because her narrative involved repeated attempts at martyrdom. Thekla reiterates the connection between virginity and martyrdom by noting the heavenly nature of virginity; death is a coming home for virgins, and they are greeted by angels on their ascent to paradise.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁸ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, VIII.ii, p. 68.

¹⁸⁹ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, VIII.ii, p. 68.

¹⁹⁰ Cf. Methodius: ‘as soon as their souls have left the world, it is said that the angels meet them with much rejoicing, and conduct them to the very pastures already spoken of, to which they were longing to come, contemplating them in imagination from afar, when while they were yet dwelling in their bodies, they appeared to them divine.’ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, VIII.ii. pp. 68-9.

On reaching their heavenly home, virgins are able to witness the wonderful garden of virtues. Thekla's somewhat Platonic description of the garden in which grow the true forms of virtues, which we only experience as a shadowy image on earth, echoes the pastoral setting of the banquet and Theopatra's discussion of the power of virginity to regain the lost paradise of Adam. Indeed, the garden of virtue is likened to Adam's garden.¹⁹¹ However, it is now virginity that has the stewardship of the garden:

The virgins, having entered into the treasures of these things, gather the reasonable fruits of the virtues [...] And they sing harmoniously, giving glory to God.¹⁹²

Thekla's vision of a new paradise seems to merge the imagery of the Genesis text and the virgins' new song in Saint John's Apocalypse, the beginning and the end of salvic history. The majority of her discourse, however, is concerned with expounding the mysteries of Saint John's Apocalypse. She reads the vision of the woman crowned with the sun (Apocalypse 12: 1-6) as a figure of the Church.¹⁹³ In later Church Tradition, this image is associated with the Blessed Virgin Mary, too,¹⁹⁴ but in Methodius the woman represents the Church who labours and brings forth baptised Christians.¹⁹⁵ Indeed, Thekla

¹⁹¹ Cf. Methodius: 'For there is a tree of temperance itself, and of love, and of understanding, as there are plants of the fruits which grow here – as of grapes, the pomegranate, and of apples; and so, too, the fruits of those trees are gathered and eaten, and do not perish and wither, but those who gather them grow to immortality and a likeness to God. Just as he from whom all are descended, before the fall and the blinding of his eyes, being in paradise, enjoyed its fruits, God appointed man to dress and to keep the plants of wisdom. For it was entrusted to the first Adam to cultivate those fruits.' Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, VIII.iii, p. 69.

¹⁹² Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, VIII.iii, p. 70.

¹⁹³ Cf. Methodius: 'It is the Church whose children shall come to her with all speed after the resurrection, running to her from all quarters. She rejoices receiving the light which never goes down, and clothed with the brightness of the Word as with a robe. For with what other more precious or honourable ornament was it becoming that the queen should be adorned, to be led as a Bride to the Lord, when she had received a garment of light, and therefore was called by the Father?' Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, VIII.v. p. 72.

¹⁹⁴ The possible association of the woman crowned with the sun with Mary is first suggested by Epiphanius of Salamis (d. 403). Cf. Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church*, p. 126. Cf. Epiphanius, *Panarion*, VII. 58 [78], 11, p. 609.

¹⁹⁵ The apocalyptic image of the woman crowned with the sun becomes an obvious association with Mary as soon as the Church is seen as analogous to Mary.

condemns the interpretation of the child as Christ, which would then suggest that the woman is Mary.¹⁹⁶ The reason given is that John's apocalyptic vision is a prophecy and so it foretells the future; it does not retell past events.

Thekla continues to tackle the mysteries of the Apocalypse. The male child represents 'that the spiritual Zion might bear a masculine people, who should come back from the passions and weakness of women to the unity of the Lord, and grow strong in manly virtue'.¹⁹⁷ The image of the male child, she says, is particularly appropriate for God's people, because they bear the image of Christ,¹⁹⁸ a reiteration of the *imitatio Christi*, but this time centred on a masculine image.¹⁹⁹ This contradicts the usual feminine representation of the Church, such as that portrayed in Canticles and by Saint Paul. The dragon represents Satan, who attempts to destroy those who are baptised, whereas

the stars, which the dragon touched with the end of his tail, and drew down to earth, are the bodies of heresies; for we must say that the stars, which are dark, obscure, and falling, are the assemblies of the heterodox [...] As when they say, like Sabellios, that the Almighty Person of the Father Himself suffered; or as when they say, like Artemas, that the Person of the Son was born and manifested only in appearance; or when they contend, like the Ebionites, that the prophets spoke of the Person of the Spirit, of their own motion. For of Marcion and Valentinus, and those about Elkesaios and others, it is better not even to make mention.²⁰⁰

Virginity is here associated with orthodox theology. Not only does the dragon pose a danger to virginity through heterodoxy, but the beast from the Apocalypse represents vices which threaten chastity. Thekla states that virginity destroys the various heads of the beast: by destroying the head of incontinence and luxury, the virgins win the crown of

¹⁹⁶ Cf. Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, VIII.vii, p.74.

¹⁹⁷ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, VIII.vii, p. 74.

¹⁹⁸ Cf. Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, VIII.viii, pp. 74-5.

¹⁹⁹ Cf. Methodius: 'No man would be master of himself and good, unless selecting the human example of Christ, and bringing himself to the likeness of Him, he should imitate Him in his manner of life.'

Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, VIII.xiii, p. 82.

²⁰⁰ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, VIII.x, p. 77.

temperance; by destroying the head of cowardice and weakness, the virgin wins the crown of martyrdom; and by destroying the head of unbelief and folly, the virgin uproots the power of the dragon. The horns and stings of the beast are the ‘ten opposites to the Decalogue’ and thus represent the dangers of transgressing God’s law. Thekla also draws on the military imagery of the *miles Christi*:

Therefore, taking to you a masculine and sober mind, oppose your armour to the swelling beast, and do not at all give way, nor be troubled because of his fury.²⁰¹

The adherence to virginity is expressed as a constant battle against sin and evil. Thekla finishes her exegesis with the assertion that this battle is waged through the free will of the virgin. Virtue is only laudatory when accepted by the free choice of the individual. Thekla ends her discourse with a long encore (XIV-XVII), which rationally attempts to contradict those who cleave to the idea of destiny to the detriment of free will, such as Mathematicians and Astrologers.²⁰²

Tusiane provides the ninth discourse. Tusiane’s name may have both a Latin and a Greek etymology. It may derive from the Greek *θυσία*, meaning ‘sacrifice’, or ‘burnt offering’.²⁰³ Alternatively, it may derive from the Latin ‘thus’, meaning ‘incense’ or ‘frankincense’,²⁰⁴ which is described in association with Jewish sacrifice in Leviticus.²⁰⁵ Both etymological possibilities imply the sacrificial quality of virginity, and so resonate with the earlier discourses of Marcella and Thallousa, which equated the sacrifice of

²⁰¹ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, VIII.xiii, p. 81

²⁰² Cf. Methodius: ‘I must come to the end of my discourse; for I fear, and am ashamed, after these discourses on chastity, that I should be obliged to introduce the opinions of men who study the heavens, or rather who study nonsense, who waste their life with mere conceits, passing it in nothing but fabulous figments.’ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, VIII.xvii, p. 90.

²⁰³ *A Greek-English Lexicon*, p. 812.

²⁰⁴ *A Latin-English Dictionary*, p. 1151.

²⁰⁵ Cf. Leviticus: ‘The priest shall take a handful of the flour that is tempered with oil, and all the frankincense that is put upon the flour: and he shall burn it on the altar for a memorial of most sweet odour to the Lord’ (Leviticus 6: 15).

virginity with that of martyrdom. Tusiane's discourse, however, does not focus on sacrifice but rather expounds a passage from Leviticus relating to the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles.²⁰⁶ She traces the difference between the Jewish interpretation of this passage and the Christian interpretation. She disparages the more literal Jewish interpretation, which assumes that the passage is a simple command to observe the Feast of Tabernacles. The Jewish interpretation is held up as a demonstration of their spiritual blindness and lack of wisdom.²⁰⁷

Wherefore let it shame the Jews that they do not perceive the deep things of the Scriptures, thinking that nothing else than outward things are contained in the law and the prophets; for they, intent upon things earthly, have in greater esteem the riches of the world than the wealth which is of the soul.²⁰⁸

It is notable that Tusiane makes a connection between the interpretive failure of the Jews and the fact that her discourse, and indeed the argument running thorough the whole of the *Symposium*, is centred around the practice of virginity, a state which is not recognised as having spiritual worth by Judaism. In contrast to the literalism of the Jewish interpretation, Tusiane provides a Christian allegorical reading of the passage, and demonstrates that the passage in Leviticus is, in fact, a reference to Doomsday:

Then shall we celebrate truly to the Lord a glad festal-day, when we shall receive eternal tabernacles, no more to perish or be dissolved into the dust of the tomb. [...] Whence sin being dead and destroyed, again shall I rise immortal; and I praise God who by means of death frees His sons from death and I celebrate

²⁰⁶ Cf. Leviticus: 'So from the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you shall have gathered in all the fruits of your land, you shall celebrate the feast of the Lord seven days: on the first day and the eighth shall be a sabbath, that is a day of rest. And you shall take to you on the first day the fruits of the fairest tree, and branches of palm trees, and boughs of thick trees, and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God. And you shall keep the solemnity thereof seven days in the year. It shall be an everlasting ordinance in your generations. In the seventh month shall you celebrate this feast. And you shall dwell in bowers seven days: every one that is of the race of Israel shall dwell in tabernacles: That your posterity may know that I made the children of Israel to dwell in tabernacles, when I brought them out of the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God' (Leviticus 23: 39-43).

²⁰⁷ Compare Origen: 'The Jews, in fine, owing to the hardness of their heart, and from a desire to appear wise in their own eyes, have not believed in our Lord and Saviour, judging that these statements which were uttered respecting Him ought to be understood literally.' Origen, *De Principiis*, IV. viii, p. 356.

²⁰⁸ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, IX.i, p. 94.

lawfully to His honour a festal-day, adorning my tabernacles, that is my flesh, with good works, as there did the five virgins with the five-lighted lamps.²⁰⁹

The allegorical reading implies that in preparation for the final judgement, it is necessary to adorn one's tabernacle, that is one's flesh, with virtue.

The passage in Leviticus recommends various vegetative adornments for the tabernacles. These are likewise interpreted allegorically by Tusiane. The first is the necessity of the fruits of faith, which are acquired from the Church.²¹⁰ Of course, the necessity of true faith, that is, Christian faith, again exposes a wide gulf between Judaism and Christianity:

He that hath not believed in Christ, nor hath understood that He is the first principle and the tree of life, since he cannot show to God his tabernacle adorned with the most goodly of fruits, how shall he celebrate the feast?²¹¹

Faith in Christ, born from the 'tree of life', which Tusiane says is 'wisdom' is necessary for the celebration of the feast. Thus, Tusiane draws parallels with the lack of interpretive wisdom displayed by the literalism of the Jews, and their failure to acknowledge the divine truth of the coming of the Messiah. In addition to the fruits of faith, boughs of divine discipline are required. These ensure that the soul is cleansed, and the passions subdued:²¹²

Whoso, therefore, desires to come to the feast of the Tabernacles, to be numbered with the saints, let him first procure the goodly fruit of faith, then palm branches, that is, attentive meditation upon and study of the Scriptures, afterwards the far-spreading and thickly-leaved branches of charity, which He commands us to take after the palm branches. [...] Charity [...] is a tree the thickest and most fruitful of all, full and abounding, copiously abounding in graces.²¹³

²⁰⁹ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, IX.ii, p. 95.

²¹⁰ Cf. Methodius: 'The unwary [...] have not understood that the tree of life which Paradise once bore, now again the Church has produced for all, even the ripe and comely fruit of faith.' Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, IX.iii, p. 96.

²¹¹ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, IX.iii, p. 97.

²¹² Cf. Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, IX.iv, p. 97.

²¹³ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, IX.iv, p. 98.

Tusiane's high estimation of charity for the adornment of the tabernacles derives from Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, in which he notes that all virtue is rendered null and void unless the individual also has charity.²¹⁴ The final adornment of the tabernacle, its crowning glory, is the branches of the Agnos tree, the adornment of chastity:

It is commanded that the boughs of the Agnos tree be brought to decorate the Tabernacle, because it is by its very name the tree of chastity, by which those already named are adorned.²¹⁵

It is notable that Tusiane emphasises chastity, rather than virginity. She does note that virginity is the highest virtue of chastity, but she does not disparage the state of matrimony either. In order to achieve the boughs of the Agnos, one must either pursue the lofty path of virginity, or the lower rungs of chastity which can be achieved in the marriage state:

They also possess it who live chastely with their wives, and do, as it were about the trunk, yield its lowly branches bearing chastity, not being able like us to reach its lofty and mighty boughs, or even to touch them; yet they, too, offer no less truly, although in a less degree, the branches of chastity.²¹⁶

Tusiane allows some degree of chastity to be afforded to those who live in marital fidelity, but they are only able to put forth 'lowly branches' around the base of the trunk

²¹⁴ Cf. Paul: 'If I speak with the tongues of men, and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And if I should have prophecy and should know all mysteries, and all knowledge, and if I should have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. And if I should distribute all my goods to feed the poor, and if I should deliver my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing. Charity is patient, is kind: charity envieth not, dealeth not perversely; is not puffed up; Is not ambitious, seeketh not her own, is not provoked to anger, thinketh no evil; Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth with the truth; Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. Charity never falleth away: whether prophecies shall be made void, or tongues shall cease, or knowledge shall be destroyed. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, that which is in part shall be done away. When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child. But, when I became a man, I put away the things of a child. We see now through a glass in a dark manner; but then face to face. Now I know in part; but then I shall know even as I am known. And now there remain faith, hope, and charity, these three: but the greatest of these is charity' (I Corinthians 13: 1-13).

²¹⁵ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, IX.iv, p. 98.

²¹⁶ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, IX.iv, p. 99.

of the tree of chastity, as opposed to the lofty boughs produced by virginity. Even though a form of chastity can exist in marriage, she notes that there can be a problem of concupiscence within the marriage state:

But those who are goaded by their lusts, although they do not commit fornication, yet who, even in the things which are permitted with a lawful wife, through the heat of unsubdued concupiscence are excessive in embraces, how shall they celebrate the feast? How shall they rejoice, who have not adorned their tabernacle, that is their flesh, with the boughs of the Agnos, nor have listened to that which has been said, that ‘they that have wives be as though they had none?’ [I Corinthians 7: 29]²¹⁷

Although the sexual act is licit within marriage, and indeed, the second discourse in the *Symposium* detailed the dignity of the procreative function, intercourse within marriage can still be troubled by lust. If that lustfulness is excessive, married couples could be acting unchastely within their marriage. Tusiane explains that the danger of lustfulness in marriage is that it will mar the adornment of the tabernacle:

For in the new and indissoluble creation, whoever shall not be found decorated with the boughs of chastity shall neither obtain rest, because he has not fulfilled the commandment of God according to the law, nor shall he enter into the land of promise, because he has not previously celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles.²¹⁸

Presumably, then, virginity is the only way one can be certain of achieving a state of perfect chastity and the rewards of possessing a fully adorned tabernacle. Although both Thekla and Tusiane emphasise the eschatological associations of virginity, Thekla’s discourse focused on an exegesis on John’s apocalyptic vision, whereas Tusiane’s reads the Old Testament in terms of the foreshadowing of the Apocalypse, and the need for mankind to prepare his soul for Doomsday.

²¹⁷ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, IX.iv, p. 99.

²¹⁸ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, IX.v, p. 99.

v. Domnina and Arête: Discourse X and the Nuptial Hymn

The final discourse is that of Domnina. Like Tusiane, her discourse is concerned with demonstrating the typological associations between the Old and New Testaments.

However, she asserts that the Old Law was insufficient to save mankind from corruption, and that this was only achieved through virginity, the New Law brought by Christ.²¹⁹ In order to demonstrate that the ‘future reign of chastity was already clearly foretold’ in the Old Testament,²²⁰ Domnina expounds the meaning of prophetic verses in Judges 9: 8-15.²²¹ This passage relates the allegory of the trees, who demand a king.²²² The olive, fig and vine all refused to rule and so finally the bramble agrees to reign over the trees.

Domnina asserts that the trees which refused the crown are the previous laws given to the Jewish people, which have all been transgressed: the fig tree is the law given to Adam;

²¹⁹ Cf. Methodius: ‘the law was not sufficient to free the human race from corruption, until virginity, succeeding the law, governed men by the precepts of Christ.’; ‘from the time when Christ was incarnate, and armed and adorned His flesh with virginity, the savage tyrant who was master of incontinence was taken away, and peace and faith have dominion, men no longer turning so much as before to idolatry.’ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, X.i, p. 101; X.i, p. 102.

²²⁰ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, X.ii, p. 102.

²²¹ Cf. Judges: ‘The trees went to anoint a king over them: and they said to the olive tree: Reign thou over us. And it answered: Can I leave my fatness, which both gods and men make use of, to come to be promoted among the trees? And the trees said to the fig tree: Come thou and reign over us. And it answered them: Can I leave my sweetness, and my delicious fruits, and go to be promoted among the other trees? And the trees said to the vine: Come thou and reign over us. And it answered them: Can I forsake my wine, that cheereth God and men, and be promoted among the other trees? And all the trees said to the bramble: Come thou and reign over us. And it answered them: If indeed you mean to make me king, come ye and rest under my shadow: but if you mean it not, let fire come out from the bramble, and devour the cedars of Libanus’ (Judges 9: 8-15).

²²² This story is also related in Aesop’s Fables: ‘Once the logs were consulting among themselves to elect a king. They asked the olive: “Reign over us.” The olive tree replied: “What? Give up my oily liquor which is so highly prized by god and man to go and reign over the logs?” And so the logs asked the fig: “Come and reign over us.” But the fig replied similarly: “What? Relinquish the sweetness of my delicious fruit to go and reign over the logs?” So the logs urged the thornbush: “Come and reign over us.” And the thorn replied: “If you were really to anoint me king over you, you would have to take shelter beneath me. Otherwise the flames from my brushwood [a usual timber] would escape and devour the cedars of Lebanon.”’ Aesop, ‘252. The Logs and the Olive’, in *The Complete Fables*, trans. Olivia and Robert Temple (London: Penguin, 1998), p. 187.

the vine is the law given to Noah; and the olive is the law given to Moses. The bramble, which is finally chosen to be king, represents the triumph of the new law of chastity:²²³

Now the bramble commends chastity, for the bramble and the agnos is the same tree: by some it is called bramble, by others agnos. Perhaps it is because the plant is akin to virginity that it is called bramble and agnos; bramble, because of its strength and firmness against pleasures; agnos, because it always continues chaste.²²⁴

The former laws, Domnina explains, have all been counterfeited by the devil and thus have led men into evil ways.²²⁵ These counterfeits are also expressed allegorically. For instance, the fig leaves, which hid Adam's nakedness in Eden, 'by their friction [the devil] excited him to sexual pleasure'.²²⁶ Likewise the vine was perverted in its use and became a drink through which mankind was intoxicated 'and again he [the devil] mocked them, having stripped them of virtue'.²²⁷ Lastly, the holy oil of prophetic grace ceased when the Israelites broke the Law of Moses by turning to idolatry.²²⁸ Chastity, however, is the one law that cannot be counterfeited by the devil:

Lastly, the bramble not inaptly refers to the law which was given to the apostles for the salvation of the world; because by their instruction we have been taught virginity, of which alone the devil has not been able to make a deceptive image

²²³ Cf. Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, X. ii, p. 103. The association of the bramble with chastity is furthered by the protection it provided to Elijah, when fleeing from Jezebel, who is here read as female lust even though in the biblical account she wishes to kill Elias: 'Hence the Scripture relates that Elijah, fleeing from the face of the woman Jezebel, at first came under a bramble, and there, having been heard, received strength and took food; signifying that to him who flies from the incitements of lust, and from a woman – that is, from pleasure – the tree of chastity is a refuge and a shade, ruling men from the coming of Christ, the chief of virgins.' Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, X.iii, p. 104. Cf. III Kings: 'And he went forward, one day's journey into the desert. And when he was there, and sat under a juniper tree, he requested that he might die, and said: It is enough for me, Lord, take away my soul: for I am no better than my fathers. And he cast himself down, and slept in the shadow of the juniper tree: and behold an angel of the Lord touched him, and said to him: Arise and eat. He looked, and behold there was at his head a hearth cake, and a vessel of water: and he ate and drank, and he fell asleep again' (III Kings 19: 4-6).

²²⁴ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, X.iii, p. 104.

²²⁵ Cf. Methodius: 'The enemy, by his power, always imitates the forms of virtue and righteousness, not for the purpose of truly promoting its exercise, but for deception and hypocrisy.' Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, X.v, p. 106.

²²⁶ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, X.v, p. 106.

²²⁷ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, X.v, p. 106.

²²⁸ Cf. Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, X.iv, p.105.

[...] her alone was the devil unable to forge an imitation to lead men astray, as it the case with the other precepts.²²⁹

Presumably, Domnina states that the devil cannot assume virginity because it is a state of such absolute purity that it is impossible to counterfeit; the imitation of virginity is always an *imitatio Christi* and therefore a course of action that is unavailable for the devil. However, throughout the *Symposium*, and also in the earlier tradition, there is an awareness of the dangers of false virginity; counterfeit virginity haunts the tradition at least as early as Tertullian.

Arête, whose discourse follows that of all ten virgins, takes up this theme, enumerating various types of false virginity and chastity. She reiterates that is impossible for one to achieve chastity by bodily purity alone; true virginity resides in the purity of mind:

it is not one who has studied to restrain his flesh from the pleasures of carnal delight that cultivates chastity, if he do not keep in check the rest of the desires; but rather he dishonours it, and that in no small degree, by base lusts, exchanging pleasures for pleasures.²³⁰

Along with the failure to ‘keep in check the rest of the desires’ comes the sin of vainglory due to taking inordinate pride in the pre-eminence of virginity. In addition, the acquisition of wealth and worldly luxury corrupts virginity. A fourth instance of false chastity that Arête raises is the virgin who, though physically inviolate, ‘pollutes the soul by evil deeds and lust’ and indulges in vices.²³¹ Arête’s definition of chastity and virginity echoes past treatises which insist that virginity is not reliant on the bodily purity of the sexual members alone:

²²⁹ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, X.ii, p. 103; X.iv, p. 106.

²³⁰ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, XI.i, p. 109.

²³¹ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, XI.i, p. 110.

But all the members are to be preserved intact and free from corruption; not only those which are sexual, but those members also which minister to the services of lust. For it would be ridiculous to preserve the organs of generation pure, but not the tongue; or to preserve the tongue, but neither the eyesight, the ears, nor the hands; or lastly, to preserve these pure, but not the mind, defiling it with pride and anger.²³²

Arête envisages a holistic virginity that permeates the whole body, not one merely located in the genitals, and which also exists in the purity of the mind. A simplistic understanding of virginity, focusing merely on physical integrity, inevitably leads to failure:

For many who thought that to repress vehement lascivious desires constituted chastity, neglecting other duties connected with it, failed also in this, and have brought blame upon those endeavouring after it by the right way, as you have proved who are a model in everything, leading a virgin life in deed and word.²³³

As virgins are models for each other as well as imitators of Christ, the failure to lead a ‘virgin life in deed and word’ can lead others down the wrong path.

vi. The Most Laudable Virginity?

Unlike the earlier treatises, Methodius’ *Symposium* does not appear to be concerned with the subject of the regulation of virginity, but instead is solely an epideictic work.²³⁴ It is important because it is the first sustained treatise which praises virginity, and because it contributes much in its extension of biblical exegesis beyond the usual passages adduced to demonstrate the scriptural authority for virginity; especially important are the explorations of the application of Canticles and Genesis narratives to ideas and imagery associated with virginity. Methodius also connects virginity with many theological ideas,

²³² Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, XI.i, p. 110.

²³³ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, XI.i, pp. 110-1.

²³⁴ Cf. Rush: ‘The aim of the *Symposium* is to eulogize virginity, to show that virginity is of the perfection of Christ’s brideship, and to insist that the consecrated virgin is the bride of Christ. It is only these souls that the Word calls His true and chosen bride. There are many daughters of the Church; one alone is most precious and honoured about all others in her eyes, namely the order of virgins.’ Rush, ‘Death as Spiritual Marriage’, p. 92.

such as the doctrine of Recapitulation and draws out some of the links with the Incarnation. It is worth noting, however, that in the eleven discourses praising virginity, during which many obscure Old Testament passages are expounded, Mary is mentioned only briefly in Thaleia's discourse, referred to simply as 'the Virgin',²³⁵ and then again only in the closing hymn. In the latter reference, she is cited at the end of a list of biblical characters who are notable for their chastity.²³⁶

The parent of Thy life, that unspotted Grace and undefiled Virgin, bearing in her womb without the ministry of man, by an immaculate conception, and who thus became suspected of having betrayed the marriage-bed.²³⁷

Oddly, the hymn focuses on her virginal pregnancy and the troubling image that her pregnancy out-of-wedlock portrayed.²³⁸ There is no elaboration in the hymn on the wonder of the Virgin Birth; the reader is left with a problematic image of a woman whom the reader knows is virginal, but who also looks like an adulteress.

The Symposium closes with a discussion between Euboulous and Gregorion about which type of chastity is better, 'those who without lust govern concupiscence, or those who under the assaults of concupiscence continue pure?'²³⁹ Gregorion asserts that the former is more laudable because they are completely pure, for their minds are totally

²³⁵ Cf. Methodius: 'And therefore God moistening him afresh and forming anew the same clay to His honour, having first hardened and fixed it in the Virgin's womb, and united and mixed it with the Word, brought it forth into life no longer soft and broken; lest, being overflowed again by streams of corruption without, it should become soft, and perish as the Lord in His teaching shows in the parable of the finding of the sheep.' Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, III.iv, p. 24.

²³⁶ The others which are given precedence are Abel, Joseph, Jephthah's daughter, Judith, Susanna, and John the Baptist. It is unusual that Elijah and Elisha are not mentioned, as these are often cited as evidence for the existence of virginity in Judaism.

²³⁷ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, XI.ii, p. 112.

²³⁸ Cf. Matthew: 'When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child, of the Holy Ghost. Whereupon Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing publicly to expose her, was minded to put her away privately. But while he thought on these things, behold the angel of the Lord appeared to him in his sleep, saying: Joseph, son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife, for that which is conceived in her, is of the Holy Ghost' (Matthew 1: 18-20).

²³⁹ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, p. 116.

without any taint of sin. Euboulios, however, convinces her of the reverse. He asks her which the better pilot is:

he that saves his vessel in great and perplexing storms, or is it he who does so in a breathless calm? [...] Therefore it is clear that he whose soul contends against the impulses of lust, and is not borne down by it, but draws back and sets himself in array against it, appears stronger than he who does not lust.²⁴⁰

The discussion between the two highlights another problem with the ideal of virginity. If virginity can be tainted by mere thoughts, how does a virgin remain in a state of purity if she is subjected to lustful impulses? Also, how can chastity which struggles against concupiscence be more laudable than pure and unspotted virginity?²⁴¹ Thus the *Symposium* ends on a several discordant notes: Euboulios and Gregorion question the very nature of virtue itself, and the final images of virginity that the reader is left with are ambiguous – a heightened awareness of the false semblants of virginity, and anxieties surrounding the Virgin Birth.

²⁴⁰ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, pp. 117; p. 119.

²⁴¹ Kate Cooper's treatment of Methodius' work exposes her lack of familiarity with it, as in a mistaken reading of it she states that this final problem, discussed between Gregorion and Euboulios, forms the basis of the theme of the virgins' discussions at the banquet: 'Methodius stages a dialogue among unmarried women, who debate whether a virgin's claim to self-control is superior if she experiences no sexual desire whatsoever, or if she does experience sexual desire and perseveres in abstaining from its consummation.' Kate Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride. Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity* (Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 27.

V. Athanasius

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of Saint Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, in the fourth-century battle for Catholic Christianity.¹ William A. Clebsch observes that Athanasius is known as “the Father of Orthodoxy” to the Greek ecclesiastical tradition, and [is] unquestionably one of the great and formidable² actors on the stage of early Christian history’.³ This assessment of Athanasius’ importance was also recognised in his own time: Gregory Nazianzen, in his panegyric oration on Athanasius, describes him as ‘the pillar of the Church’.⁴ He says:

In praising Athanasius, I shall be praising virtue. To speak of him and to praise virtue are identical, because he had, or, to speak more truly, has embraced virtue in its entirety.⁵

Not only does Gregory of Nazianzus praise Athanasius’ personal virtue, but also his Christian upbringing and faithfulness, and his classical and Christian education.⁶

¹ Cf. Robert W. Thomson: ‘[Athanasius] came to enjoy an almost mythical reputation as the champion of Nicaea and the sole obstacle to an Arian empire.’ Robert W. Thomson ‘Introduction’ to Athanasius, *Contra Gentes and De Incarnatione*, ed. and trans. Robert W. Thomson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), pp. xi-xxxvi, (p. xi).

² Athanasius’ formidability is often emphasised by his detractors. Thomson describes Athanasius’ character as ‘violent and fiery, uncompromising on the faith, and quick to brand his opponents as enemies of God, yet willing to overlook differences of language where the essential was agreed. He was unphilosophic and repetitive in argument, but had a profound grasp of scriptural exegesis. And, as a solid foundation to all, he showed a deep concern for the spiritual development of his flock, with a strong sympathy for the ascetic tendencies of the age.’ Thomson, ‘Introduction’ to *Contra Gentes and De Incarnatione*, p. xvi. Gregory Nazianzen paints a positive picture of the man: ‘he was sublime in action; lowly in mind; inaccessible in virtue; most accessible in intercourse; gentle, free from anger, sympathetic, sweet in words, sweeter in disposition; angelic in appearance, more angelic in mind; calm in rebuke, persuasive in praise, without spoiling the good effect of either by excess, but rebuking with the tenderness of a father, praising with the dignity of a ruler, his tenderness was not dissipated, nor his severity sour; for the one was reasonable, the other prudent, and both truly wise; his disposition sufficed for the training of his spiritual children, with very little need of words; his words with very little need of the rod, and his moderate use of the rod with still less for the knife.’ Gregory Nazianzen, *Oration XXI: On the Great Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria*, ix, trans. Charles Gordon Browne and James Edward Swallow, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. VII, *Cyril of Jerusalem, Gregory Nazianzen*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1894]), pp. 269-283, (pp. 271-2).

³ William A. Clebsch, ‘Forward’ to *Athanasius: The Life of Antony and The Letter to Marcellinus*, trans. and Introduction by Robert C. Gregg, Preface by William A. Clebsch (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1980), pp. xi-xii, (p. xii).

⁴ Gregory Nazianzen, *Oration XXI*, xxvi, p. 276.

⁵ Gregory Nazianzen, *Oration XXI*, i, p. 269.

Athanasius was born into a Christian family, c. A.D. 295, was well-educated and became the private secretary of Alexander, the then Bishop of Alexandria. Athanasius came to the fore at the Council of Nicaea as a staunch defender of orthodoxy against the Arian heresy:

In the year 325 we find him, as Archdeacon of Alexandria, accompanying his Bishop to the great Council of Nicaea. In the deliberations of this Council S[t] Athanasius took a prominent part, and thereby incurred the fierce displeasure of the Arian faction. The Council, composed of three hundred and eighteen Bishops, besides priests and deacons, and presided over by Hosius, Bishop of Cordova, was assembled to combat the Arian heresy, which denied the Eternal Divinity of the Second Person of the Holy Trinity.⁷

There were several heresies in the early Church that contested the understanding of the nature of the Son. For instance, the sects of Marcion, Apolles, Basilides and Valentius, whom Tertullian took to task in *De Carne Christi*, denied Christ's humanity and claimed that he was solely Divine. In contrast, the Arian heresy,⁸ which threatened to overwhelm the whole of the Christian world,⁹ taught a doctrine which compromised the divine nature of the Son.¹⁰

Arius, a senior priest of Alexandria, had begun preaching that Christ, the Son of God, was not co-eternal with the uncreated Father. As Son he was created an

⁶ Cf. Gregory: 'He was brought up, from the first, in religious habits and practices, after a brief study of literature and philosophy, so that he might not be utterly unskilled in such subjects, or ignorant in matters which he had determined to despise.' Gregory Nazianzen, *Oration XXI*, vi, p. 270.

⁷ W. C. L. 'Preface' to *Orations of S. Athanasius. Against the Arians* (London: Griffith, Farran, Okeden & Welsh, 1889?), p. 5.

⁸ William P. Haugaard discusses the Christology of Arius and notes that although he is often thought to have developed the heretical doctrine 'that the Logos took the place of a human soul in the Incarnate Christ.' William P. Haugaard, 'Twice a Heretic? Arius and the Human Soul of Jesus Christ', *Church History*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (Sep., 1960), 251-263, (p. 251). He concludes, however, that, 'The anomoeans indeed held such a doctrine, but this is no more proves that Arius held it, than the fact of Apollinaris' teachings and his affinity to Athanasius proves that Athanasius explicitly taught that the Word replaced the human soul. Arius' heresy on the deity of Christ is well proven and well attested. Need we prove him a heretic twice over?' Haugaard, 'Twice a Heretic?', p. 261.

⁹ Cf. W. C. L.: 'At one time he was well-nigh alone in his championship of the orthodox Faith, and at all times his efforts were unceasing in its defence.' W. C. L. 'Preface' to *Orations of S. Athanasius*, p. 8.

¹⁰ Gregory Nazianzen describes the spread of Arian heresy, and its flawed theology: 'Then others, catching the infection, organized an art of impiety, and, confining Deity to the Unbegotten, expelled from Deity not only the Begotten, but also the Proceeding one, and honoured the Trinity with communion in name alone, or even refused to retain this for it.' Gregory Nazianzen, *Oration XXI*, xiii, p. 273.

inferior deity, who had a beginning, because he was begotten. Only God the Father was unbegotten. Therefore, Christ had a middle role between God and the world.¹¹

At the Council of Nicaea, Athanasius and Bishop Alexander were instrumental in refuting Arianism¹² which had sprung up in the district of the Alexandrian Episcopal See. The Council condemned Arius and his teachings,¹³ and clarified the nature of the Son by developing the Nicene Creed,¹⁴ which stated that the Son was consubstantial (*homoousios*)¹⁵ with the Father.¹⁶ The difference between Arianism and Catholicism is not merely theological hair-splitting, but has significant repercussions for the understanding of the Incarnation, the nature of Christ's sacrifice, and the efficacy of the Redemption:

The emphasis in Athanasius' teaching is [...] on the doctrine of redemption, to which a right understanding of the divinity and humanity of Christ is essential. Arian notions struck at the very root of the true significance of redemption – if Christ is not truly God in the same sense as the Father (of the same substance, οὐσία), then he cannot save redeemed men from sin and death.¹⁷

Not long after the Council of Nicaea, Alexander died and Athanasius was elected to the bishopric on 8th June 328, in accordance with Alexander's dying wish and the general

¹¹ Thomson, 'Introduction' to *Contra Gentes and De Incarnatione*, p. xii.

¹² Gregory says of Athanasius' role in the Council: 'Though not yet ranked among the Bishops, he held the first rank among the members of the Council, for preference was given to virtue just as much as to office.' Gregory Nazianzen, *Oration XXI*, xiv, p. 273.

¹³ Cf. Thomson: 'At Nicaea Arius was condemned, and expression of faith expressly anathematizing his teaching approved.' Thomson, 'Introduction' to *Contra Gentes and De Incarnatione*, p. xiii.

¹⁴ Cf. W. C. L.: 'The immediate result of the session of this, the first General Council of the Church, was the putting forth of the Nicene Symbol, which is substantially the same as our present "Nicene Creed," although the articles after the clause "I believe in the Holy Ghost" were subsequently added. The Creed proper was followed by an anathema against the Arian heresy.' W. C. L. 'Preface' to *Orations of S. Athanasius*, p. 5.

¹⁵ The word '*homoousios*' has a complicated pre-Christian history. For a detailed account of the problems concerned with its use by gnostic and heretical sects, and its insertion into the Creed, see Pier Franco Beatrice, 'The Word "Homoousios" from Hellenism to Christianity', in *Church History*, Vol. 71, No. 2 (Jun., 2002), 243-272.

¹⁶ Cf. Thomson: 'In this creed was included the term 'consubstantial, *homoousios*', to define the relationship between the Father and the Son; it was later to be a stumbling-block for many.' Thomson, 'Introduction' to *Contra Gentes and De Incarnatione*, p. xiii.

¹⁷ Thomson, 'Introduction' to *Contra Gentes and De Incarnatione*, p. xix.

consensus of the Catholic populace.¹⁸ Despite the anathematizing of Arius and Arianism, the Council of Nicaea did not completely crush the Arian heresy. The Arians opposed Athanasius' election, as did the Melitians, a schismatic group operative from A.D. 305 until the mid-fourth century, who objected to the Catholic policy on the readmission of those who lapsed during the Christian persecution. The Melitian objection to Catholicism, then, was based on ecclesiastical regulation, whereas the Arian heresy was a theological opposition. The Arians were very powerful at the court of the Empire,¹⁹ and thus Athanasius' fortunes fluctuated depending on the religious leaning of the current Emperor. During the course of his episcopate, he was exiled five times and suffered persecution.²⁰ His final period of exile ended with the death of Julian 'the apostate', and

¹⁸ Cf. W. C. L., 'Preface' to *Orations of S. Athanasius*, pp. 5-6.

¹⁹ Cf. David Hugh Farmer: 'Some emperors were unfavourable to him and his cause as the Arians were well entrenched at court; but the papacy and the Western Church firmly supported him.' David Hugh Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979 [1978]), p. 24.

²⁰ Cf. Farmer: 'to Trier (356-7), to Rome (359-46), to the country districts near Alexandria (356-61, 362-3, 365-6). Other sufferings included long lawsuits, misunderstandings, and persecution, throughout which he showed inflexible courage.' Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, p. 24. Cf. W. C. L.: 'In the year 336 he was falsely accused before the Emperor Constantine of treason, and was banished to Treves. It was in this year that Arius suddenly died, on the eve of an attempt to compel the Patriarch of Constantinople to admit him into communion with the Church. Upon the death of Constantine in 337 S. Athanasius was recalled from exile, after an absence of about two years and a half, but a new attack upon him was commenced before long. In 342 a Council was held in Antioch, from which all the orthodox Bishops had withdrawn, and the Arian party proceeded to deprive S. Athanasius of his see, and to elect in his room Gregory, a native of Cappadocia. A second time an exile, Athanasius took refuge at Rome, where he was solemnly declared innocent, in a synod of fifty Bishops, of the charges laid against him. Strange to say, the Emperor Constantius, who favoured Arianism, after a time became eager for reconciliation with Athanasius, and invited him to resume his see. He did so, returning after an absence of nearly five years to Alexandria, where the people welcomed him most thankfully. [...] But there was not peace for long. After Councils held at Arles and Milan, in which the Arian party was dominant, S. Athanasius was obliged to flee for his life. This was in A.D. 356. Three years later four hundred and fifty Bishops assembled at Rimini, and an Arian profession of faith was put forth. In S. Jerome's words, "The world was thunderstruck with astonishment at suddenly finding itself Arian." The position now was "Athanasius *contra mundus*." After an exile of six years, the tidings reached Athanasius of the death of Constantius, and setting out for Alexandria, he was received there with the greatest enthusiasm. However, the new Emperor, Julian ("the Apostate"), who knew and feared his character, ordered him once more into banishment. He remained in concealment until the death of Julian in 363. Henceforward the great ecclesiastic was allowed to pass his days in comparative tranquillity, and he remained peacefully at Alexandria till his death, at upwards of seventy-six years of age in A.D. 373.' W. C. L., 'Preface' to *Orations of S. Athanasius*, pp. 6-7.

²⁰ David Brakke, 'Introduction' to *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium: Pseudo-Athanasius on Virginitas*, ed. David Brakke (Louvain: Peeters, 2002), pp. vii-xvii, (p. vii).

‘for the last seven years of his life Athanasius lived in peace in Alexandria.’²¹ Athanasius died on 2nd May 373, around seventy-six years of age. Apart from his ceaseless defence of orthodoxy, Athanasius’ other major contribution to theology is thought to be his diverting it away from speculative theology.²² Athanasius insisted on the importance of the revelation received through the Scriptures.

Surprisingly, considering that Athanasius was a great defender of Catholic orthodoxy and an important figure in the Council of Nicaea, Jerome provides very little historical information about him:

Athanasius, Bishop of the city of Alexandria, having endured many sufferings as a result of the intrigues of the Arians, sought refuge with Constans, the governor of Gaul, from where he returned with a letter of commendation, and again, after the death of Constans, he was put to flight and stayed in hiding until the reign of Jovian, who restored him to his church; he died under Valens. Two books of his, *Against the Pagans*, are known; and one, *Against Valens and Ursacius*; a work, *On Virginity*; and many *On the Persecutions of the Arians*; *On the Titles of the Psalms*; a history containing *The Life of Anthony the Monk*; also ἑορταστικάι, *Festal Letters*; and many other works which it would take too long to enumerate.²³

Amongst Athanasius’ literary output, Jerome mentions a treatise *On Virginity*. There appear, in fact, to be two extant treatises entitled *On Virginity* attributed to Athanasius,²⁴ although there remains some controversy over their authenticity. David Brakke edited a Syriac version of the treatise in 2002, extant in three ninth-century manuscripts,²⁵

²¹ Thomson, ‘Introduction’ to *Contra Gentes and De Incarnatione*, p. xvii.

²² Cf. Thomson: ‘In the field of theology, Athanasius brought controversy away from philosophic speculation to the problem of elucidating a faith already imparted to the Church, where principles rather than specific words were all-important.’ Thomson, ‘Introduction’ to *Contra Gentes and De Incarnatione*, p. xi; ‘The importance of Athanasius’ dogmatic theology does not lie in his originality, but in his subordination of reason to faith. He was concerned with the exposition of a given tradition, not with speculative metaphysics.’ Thomson, ‘Introduction’ to *Contra Gentes and De Incarnatione*, p. xix.

²³ Saint Jerome, ‘LXXXVII. Athanasius the Bishop’, *On Illustrious Men (De viris illustribus)*, trans. Thomas P. Halton (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1999), pp. 120-21.

²⁴ Thomson notes that ‘He wrote several treatises on virginity, which had a wide circulation in Coptic, Syriac, and Armenian versions.’ Thomson, ‘Introduction’ to *Contra Gentes and De Incarnatione*, p. xviii.

²⁵ The three ninth-century manuscripts are: (A) B.L.Add.14,649/ no. 950 in Wright’s catalogue; (B) B.L.Add.14,650/ no. 949 in Wright’s catalogue; (C) B.L.Add.14,601/ no. 795 in Wright’s catalogue. Cf.

although this was not accompanied by an English translation. Although Brakke thinks that it is likely that these manuscripts were translation from a Greek original,²⁶ he does not accept that the treatise is an authentic work of Athanasius.²⁷ Brakke argues that it does not contain any of the features of more authentic Athanasian works,²⁸ and that it appears to be the product of a later century,²⁹ which attempts to harness the authority associated with the important Bishop of Alexandria. The more authentic works to which Brakke alludes, and with which he compares the spurious treatise, are two *Letters to Virgins* (the *First Letter* is preserved in Coptic, whereas the *Second Letter* is preserved in Syriac) and another treatise entitled *On Virginité*, which is preserved in Syriac and Armenian. He translated all three of these ascetical works into English in 1994.³⁰ There

David Brakke, 'Introduction' to *Pseudo-Athanasius on Virginité*, pp. vii-viii. For the relationship between the manuscripts see, Brakke, 'Introduction' to *Pseudo-Athanasius on Virginité*, pp. viii-ix.

²⁶ Cf. Brakke: 'The contents of the treatise find their parallels in Greek treatises on virginity from Late Antiquity and in general do not exhibit the characteristic themes and motifs of Syriac-speaking Christianity. Thus, it is highly probable that our Syriac text is a translation from an original Greek.' David Brakke, 'Introduction' to *Pseudo-Athanasius on Virginité*, p. xi.

²⁷ Cf. Brakke: 'The text is preserved in Syriac in three ninth-century manuscripts now in the British Library in London. [...] it is impossible to accept the manuscripts' attribution of the work to Athanasius. Rather, the treatise is a remarkable example of an exhortation aimed at female virgins, which appears to draw on other originally independent works addressed to different and more diverse audiences.' David Brakke, 'Introduction' to *Pseudo-Athanasius on Virginité*, p. vii.

²⁸ Cf. Brakke: 'It is almost certain that the Greek-speaking author of the treatise is not Athanasius of Alexandria. The lifestyle of the virgins addressed does not match that found in the authentic writings of Athanasius addressed to virgins. Unlike Athanasius, the author does not know home-based virgins: he invokes desert-based ascetics as models for his addressees (¶44) and uses Matt. 19: 29 par. to encourage them to "leave father and mother" (¶48). The argument in ¶29 presupposes a ceremony of consecrating the virgin that is more advanced than any found in sources from Athanasius' time. Thus, the work originates in a period later than that of Athanasius, when the home-based model had been finally abandoned and more formal procedures for enrolment of virgins had been developed. In addition, the treatise does not exhibit any of the themes that are distinctive of Athanasius' writings on virginity, which include the following: the role of the incarnate Word in making virginity (hitherto rare) prevalent; the freedom of choice embedded in virginity, in comparison to the obligation represented by marriage, which is yet not to be disparaged; condemnation of celibate partnerships between men and women (*virgines subintroductae*); warnings against specific heretical teachers and teachings (Hieracas, Arianism). It appears, then, that the attribution to Athanasius is false and was added either to lend the work authority greater than that which the actual author possessed or as an educated guess.' David Brakke, 'Introduction' to *Pseudo-Athanasius on Virginité*, p. xi.

²⁹ Cf. Brakke: 'Any date between the fifth century and the copying of the manuscripts in the ninth seems possible.' David Brakke, 'Introduction' to *Pseudo-Athanasius on Virginité*, p. xii.

³⁰ Cf. Brakke: 'Baumstark evidently wrongly identified this treatise with yet another Athanasian *On Virginité* preserved in B.L.Add.14,607. This latter work was published by Lebon five years later, and in 1935 Casey published an Armenian version of it found in two manuscripts. This Syriac-Armenian *On*

is, however, still some doubt over the authenticity of these other works as well, but Brakke makes a spirited defence of their authenticity. The *First Letter to Virgins* is more interesting than either the *Second Letter to Virgins* or the treatise *On Virginité*. The *First Letter* provides a more theological perspective on virginity, and demonstrates the rise in interest in Mariology, and the effect that this has on the virginal tradition. In contrast, the *Second Letter* is more concerned with the regulation of virginity, although it does this in reference to the issues discussed in the *First Letter*. The treatise *On Virginité* largely reiterates many of the themes found in the *First* and *Second Letters*.³¹

i. *The First Letter to Virgins*

The First Letter to Virgins (c. 337-9) is not extant in its entirety – both the beginning and the end of the treatise are lost, and there are pages missing at four points in the text.

Nevertheless, the remainder of the letter demonstrates Athanasius' utilisation and development of themes already existing within the tradition of virginity, but it also

Virginité of Athanasius has, then, been known to scholars for over seventy years and, for the most part, has been accepted as authentic, although often with reservations [Aubineau 1955; Roldanus 1968, 396-401; Brakke 1994, 27-30]. An English translation of the Syriac text was published in 1995 [Brakke].' David Brakke, 'Introduction' to *Pseudo-Athanasius on Virginité*, pp. ix-x.

³¹ The authority of Christ as the bridegroom of the virgins is emphasised, and indeed they owe a greater level of obedience to their divine husband than wives do to their earthly husbands (I). He warns them that their Bridegroom examines their thoughts and insists on the necessity for orthodoxy in thought, as well as purity (II). Athanasius warns them of the necessity to remain vigilant of their virginity, because they will be given no credit for their earlier struggles if they relinquish their virginity at any point (IV). The Parable of the Ten Virgins provides a picture of those virgins whose virginity has not profited them, as they were not vigilant (XIII). Thieves try to steal their virginity, which is a precious pearl (VII). There are men who will try to use religion to seduce them, for the devil mixes honey with gall in order to deceive, proceeding incognito (V). Athanasius provides a pathetic picture of a ruined virgin, all of whose good is transformed into misery (VI). He emphasises the necessity to avoid sins other than sexual sins, such as anger and the desire for revenge (IX); ascetic acts alone are not enough to ensure the maintenance of virginity (VIII). A virgin must never condemn marriage (X), and must be single-minded in acts of prayer, ignoring thoughts concerning the world which may try and intrude (XI). They must keep the beatitudes and the purity of their bodies in order to receive great rewards (XIV). They must cultivate wisdom, strength, holiness, love, and also cover their bodies (XV). All these virtues contribute to the variegated clothes prefigured in Psalm 44 (45) (XVI). Athanasius expresses these rewards in the language of the Cantic of Canticles (XVII), and, utilising the athletic imagery to describe the virgin, acknowledges the impossibility of language to describe the sublime. Cf. Athanasius, Saint. *On Virginité*, trans. David Brakke, in David Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 303-309.

indicates new departures. The *Letter*, as we have it, opens with the validation of the nuptial imagery of the virgin, and a comparative look at the difference between earthly marriages and the celestial marriage of the virgin and Christ:

if human marriage has this law, which is the written word, ‘What God has joined together let no person separate’ (Matt. 19: 6), how much more if the Word joins with the virgins, it is necessary for the union of this sort to be indivisible and immortal!³²

Whereas Cyprian’s *Epistle IV* and Thaleia’s discourse in Methodius’ *Symposium* seem to allude to the possibility of the dissolution of the virginal vow in order to marry, Athanasius forcefully declares that this is not an option. If the earthly marriage vow was declared to be eternally binding by Christ, then the celestial vow of the spiritual marriage must be even more permanent. Athanasius draws attention to the differences between marriage and virginity in light of the commandment to procreate in Genesis and Saint Paul’s recommendation of virginity, in order to demonstrate their relative virtues:

people who neglect the law have in their accusation and condemnation that they have neglected it. But virginity has ascended higher and has no law; rather it has transcended it (the law). It has its testimony in and of itself. Its honour as well comes from the Word.³³

Athanasius illustrates this point later in the treatise as he utilises the Parable of the Sowers to articulate the different levels of virtue achieved by virginity and marriage.³⁴

³² Athanasius, *First Letter to Virgins*, i, trans. David Brakke, in David Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 274-291, (p. 275).

³³ Athanasius, *First Letter to Virgins*, ii, p. 274.

³⁴ Cf. Athanasius: ‘But someone will say this: ‘Why did the same seed produce a hundredfold and sixty and thirty? Is it not the Word who is the sower?’ (Matt. 13: 3-8) The reason for the hundredfold, the sixty, and the thirty, why they differ from one another, is that human beings have chosen for themselves. We will bear fruit to the Lord who sowed’; ‘If nature has a single kind, why does that earth bear fruit a hundredfold and sixty and thirty? Because it was appropriate for it to produce a hundredfold or to produce sixty or to produce thirty so that the ignorant might have a reason. Now, it produces fruit that differ from one another so as to make manifest the zeal of free will and progress. Wherever there is free will, there is inferiority. And this is nothing other than a revelation that humanity is free and under its own power, having the capacity to choose for itself what it wants. Moreover, the virgin reveals that she exists not by nature, but by free will, when she heeds the opinion of Paul and becomes a bride of Christ, and justly they will receive the crown of purity in heaven.’ Athanasius, *First Letter to Virgins*, xx, p. 280; xxiii, p. 281.

Brakke appears to misread Athanasius' assertion that virginity 'has no law'. He notes that Athanasius refers frequently to the perpetuity of the virginal vow throughout his *First Letter*, but says

Such a vow probably did not have much legal or canonical definition since Athanasius emphasized that virginity 'has no law' and lacks the precise regulations of ordinary marriage.³⁵

The 'law' to which Athanasius refers, however, is the divine law articulated by God in Genesis with regards to marriage and procreation: 'Increase and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it' (Genesis 1: 28). This imperative to procreate contrasts with Saint Paul's recommendation which is described as a counsel, rather than a command:

Now concerning virgins, I have no commandment of the Lord; but I give counsel, as having obtained mercy of the Lord, to be faithful. I think therefore that this is good for the present necessity, that it is good for a man to be so.
(I Corinthians 7: 25-6)

Virginity, because it is recommended by Saint Paul and not commanded, 'has no law'. Therefore, it is demonstrative of a higher level of virtue; it is undertaken through one's own free will rather than by necessity: 'the virgin reveals that she exists not by nature, but by free will, when she heeds the opinion of Paul and becomes a bride of Christ, and justly they will receive the crown of purity in heaven.'³⁶ The emphasis of the connection between virginity and free will reverberates throughout the whole virginal tradition.³⁷

Athanasius pre-empts the detractors of virginity by describing it as having 'transcended' the law, rather than rejecting God's first and most fundamental

³⁵ Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, p. 25.

³⁶ Athanasius, *First Letter to Virgins*, xxiii, p. 281

³⁷ Cf. Tertullian: 'The matter has been left to choice, for each virgin to veil herself or expose herself, as she might have chosen, just as (she had equal liberty) as to marrying, which itself withal is neither enforced nor prohibited.' Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis (On the Veiling of Virgins)*, III. i, in *Ante Nicene Fathers*, Vol. IV. *Tertullian, Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Parts First and Second*, trans. S. Thewell, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1885]), pp. 27-38, (p. 28).

commandment.³⁸ The *sponsa Christi* motif enables Athanasius to justify virginity through nuptial terms.³⁹ So although virginity might appear to transgress God's commandment, in actuality it fulfils the commandment, but in a spiritual sense. Whereas earthly marriage seeks the union of the bodies,⁴⁰

virginity, having surpassed human nature and imitating the angels, hastens to the Lord, so that, as the Apostle said, they might 'become one spirit with him' (2 Cor. 6: 17). [...] Likewise, from this kind of blessed union, true and immortal thoughts come forth, bearing salvation.⁴¹

The virgin-bride does not only form a spiritual union with God, but her spiritual marriage is fecund and produces spiritual offspring. Athanasius uses the shared nuptial imagery to reiterate the continued holiness of the marriage state, but at the same time demonstrates the greater excellence of virginity. Virginity represents a transcendent sacrifice, whereas marriage follows the law.⁴²

ii. Non-Christian virginity

Athanasius scrutinises the pagan and Jewish observance of virginity in order to demonstrate the uniqueness of Christianity's perpetual virginity. Of pagan pretensions to the attainment of the state of virginity, Athanasius declares that

nothing has ever been heard among the Greeks or the non-Greeks about virginity, nor has it ever been possible for such virtue to exist among them. Indeed, they are

³⁸ Cf. Athanasius, *First Letter to Virgins*, ii, p. 274.

³⁹ Brakke suggests that Athanasius produces a Marian model in order to bring virgins under Church control: 'Essentially, Athanasius wanted every Christian woman to take on the social role of wife: either as an ordinary wife dominated by her earthly husband or as a supernatural wife dominated by her divine bridegroom, the Word of God, through his agents, Athanasius and his fellow clergy.' Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, p. 78.

⁴⁰ Cf. Genesis: 'Wherefore a man shall leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they shall be two in one flesh' (Genesis 2: 24).

⁴¹ Athanasius, *First Letter to Virgins*, iii, p. 275.

⁴² Cf. Athanasius: 'So if the virgin is exceptional and first among them, yet marriage follows after her and has its own boast. And the virgin makes manifest the vow of her intention to be a whole and burnt-offering, but marriage makes manifest its practice in the law and the leisure it takes for prayer many times, as Paul said to married people (I Corinthians 7: 5). Therefore, marriage is not rejected, and moreover virginity is greater with God.' Athanasius, *First Letter to Virgins*, xix, p. 280.

completely ignorant of God, who has given grace to those who believe in him righteously.⁴³

Athanasius' claim that virginity was unknown to the ancient world seems to be extraordinary considering that there are several classical examples of the sacred religious virginity.⁴⁴ Athanasius, of course, is aware of paganism's claim to ritualised virginity, but he argues that the virginity which they practise is utterly fallacious. The first proof that Athanasius brings to corroborate his claim is their ignorance of God, which prohibits them from achieving the spiritual side of virginity that is attendant on the true state: it is due to their spiritual blindness that it has not 'ever been possible for such virtue to exist among them'. The second proof is that these so-called virgins are unable to remain continent; they break whatever vows they profess to make, so that even the claim of virginity on purely physical terms is not upheld by pagan virgins:

Among those called Pythagoreans, many women have been prophesying priestesses, exercising self-control so as not to speak, but none of them has truly practised virginity. Rather, those among them who say that they are in virginity have been discovered to be pregnant by the tyrant of that time. Thus, one of them was able to cut off her own tongue so that we could not force her to reveal her mysteries, but she was later found to be pregnant, because she was unable to be a virgin. Therefore, those women are admired because they control themselves so as not to speak, but they are put to shame because they were not able to maintain their virginity.⁴⁵

Athanasius draws attention to the contradictory behaviour of the Pythagorean priestess who, although able to exercise self-control with regards to speech, was unable to control her libido. She took the trouble to master the lesser virtue, but ignored that which was more important. The actions of the priestess, who could only master her tongue through self-mutilation, demonstrates that she did not have the capacity to remain silent due to her

⁴³ Athanasius, *First Letter to Virgins*, iv, p. 275.

⁴⁴ For a discussion of Vestal Virgins, see Mary Beard, 'The Sexual Status of Vestal Virgins', *The Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol. 70 (1980), 12-27.

⁴⁵ Athanasius, *First Letter to Virgins*, iv, p. 275.

own self-control, but rather the silence was enforced. Her pregnant body, however, articulated her shame, and thus belied her claim to the possession of true physical integrity. The example of the Pythagorean priestess demonstrates that not only is pagan virginity unable to make claim to physical integrity, but that any self-control that they do possess is predicated on enforcement. Athanasius asks:

What kind of virginity exists hypocritically for a time and later gets married? Or what kind of virtue is there in virginity when it exists for some without their free will, but rather they have others to watch over them, who teach them by force to choose for themselves against their will? In this way they are compelled forcibly by others.⁴⁶

Pagan virgins, notably, are not given agency in their choice of virginity. Such necessity removes the freedom of will which validates true virginity and virtue. Also, pagan virginity tends to be limited to a certain period of time; it is a term of office and not a perpetual state.⁴⁷ Thus, the virginity of the pagan is always anticipating its end. True virginity is adopted for its own sake, of the virgin's own free will, and adopted in perpetuity.

Athanasius continues to demonstrate the failure of the religious priestesses in classical antiquity to achieve virginity. Of Egyptian priestesses he says that 'it has not been written about a single one that she was a virgin'.⁴⁸ The Egyptian religion therefore does not appear to recognise the religious value of virginity as all, as it does not desire its priestesses to be furnished with virginity. Plutarch does mention chaste male priests of Isis, but the insistence on chastity appears to be during a time of consecration and it is

⁴⁶ Athanasius, *First Letter to Virgins*, vi, p. 276.

⁴⁷ Cf. Walsh: 'Recent studies confirm the claim [...] that the six Vestal virgins at Rome were not necessarily virgins.' Walsh, P. G. 'Introduction' to *De bono coniugali* and *De sancta virginitate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. ix-xxxii, (p. xii).

⁴⁸ Athanasius, *First Letter to Virgins*, v, p. 275.

unclear whether it refers to perpetual virginity or not.⁴⁹ The Greek and Roman

observance of virginity, Athanasius states, is prompted by the machinations of the devil:

If the devil, taking forms and being deceitful, has compelled some of the Greeks to feign virginity – just as the only ones called virgins among the Romans are those who belong to her who is called Pallas, a virgin by their reckoning – then their virginity is not genuine. For how can virginity exist among the Greeks, whom the mysteries of Aphrodite, whose origin came from prostitution, defile?⁵⁰

The Romans and Greek are credited with recognising the religious value of virginity, in contrast to the Egyptians, but it is false and has a demonic origin. The idea of a diabolical attempt to feign virginity bring to mind Methodius' discussions in Discourse X in which Domnina states that the devil attempts to imitate and falsify good things, but that he cannot imitate virginity.⁵¹ Athanasius questions the Roman claims of Pallas Athene's virginity, contemptuously referring to her as 'a virgin, by their reckoning'. Such a dubious role model invalidates any virginity inspired by and dedicated to her, and indeed Athanasius goes on to expose their 'hypocrisy' and 'wantonness'.⁵² It is not only the physical indiscretions which destroy the claim of pagans to a virginal state. Athanasius accuses them of failing to achieve a state of mental purity:

How indeed can they at all be virgins when they have not prepared and strengthened their heart for it inasmuch as thoughts come forth from the heart as

⁴⁹ Cf. Plutarch: 'the process of consecration in the meantime, by means of a continuous and temperate regimen and abstinence from many foods and the pleasures of love.' Plutarch, *De Iside et Osiride*, trans. John Gwyn Griffiths (Cambridge: University of Wales Press, 1970), p. 121.

⁵⁰ Athanasius, *First Letter to Virgins*, v, p. 275.

⁵¹ Cf. Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, X.ii and X.iv, in *Ante-Nicene Christian Library: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*. Vol. XIV. *The Writings of Methodius, Alexander of Lycopolis, Peter of Alexandria and Several Fragments*, trans. William R. Clark, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, MDCCCLXIX [1869]), pp. 1-119, (p. 103 and p. 106).

⁵² Cf. Athanasius: 'Further, the other who are called virgins who belong to Athena are not really virgins, but (virgins only) with respect to acquiring possessions and managing what is theirs. Hence, their hypocrisy remains, because after some time they go to drunken dinner parties and give themselves to great wantonness with men. For this is to them a great honour for their priesthood, just as the things that they do in secret are shameful even to say. After a time, they are permitted to sit with men openly, and, moreover, in place of those (priestesses) other women are taken in to perform this type of "service".' Athanasius, *First Letter to Virgins*, v, pp. 275-6.

from a spring and reveal the intention behind the deeds? For these women pretend on the outside that they consider themselves virgins, but in their heart they fantasize and take shape in evil, fantasizing in it that they do not remain in virginity.⁵³

True virginity, Athanasius reiterates, requires a series of prerequisites to be acknowledged as a virtuous state. The free will of the individual in choosing to adopt the life of virginity, which, according to Athanasius, is denied in pagan religions, is paramount. The virgin, if she has freely chosen the estate, would then take the trouble to gird herself for the bombardment of temptations that may attack her. If a woman does not choose virginity, however, it is unlikely that she would take the trouble to protect either her mind or her body. If virgins are ‘fantasizing in [their heart] that they do not remain in virginity’, then it will not be long before they commit in action the deed that has already been committed in their hearts.

Athanasius asserts that the wider moral turpitude which characterises Greek religious observance also precludes any possibility of attaining the virtue of virginity. The Greeks are morally defiled through practising the unholy ‘mysteries of Aphrodite’, which are akin to prostitution.⁵⁴ The ‘mysteries of Hecate’ are performed by ‘effeminate men’, whose religious observance is characterised by adultery and ‘impurity of another

⁵³ Athanasius, *First Letter to Virgins*, vi, p. 276.

⁵⁴ In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Venus is indirectly credited with the invention of prostitution: ‘But the lewd Propoetides went as far as asserting that Venus / wasn’t a goddess at all. Because of the deity’s anger, / it’s said that they were the first to offer their bodies and beauty / for sale.’ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 10. 238-41, p. 393. Ovid’s text, however, suggests that prostitution was a punishment for the sins committed by the Propoetides, the lewd women of Amathus. In later tradition, however, Boccaccio, in *Concerning Famous Women*, suggests that Venus invented it to hide her lewdness: ‘Finally, they say that to remove some shame from her own immodest face and give herself more ample license in her lasciviousness, she thought of an abominable foulness. That is, she was the first to establish public prostitution by instituting brothels and forcing women to enter them.’ Giovanni Boccaccio, *Concerning Famous Women*, trans. Guido A. Guarino (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1964), p. 17.

kind', which perhaps is an oblique allusion to sodomy.⁵⁵ In addition, Athanasius also exposes the failure of pagan marriages to achieve a state of chastity, because of sexual permissiveness:

Indeed, there is no marriage among them without the woman being given to the groom having first committed adultery. And the groom does not discover his bride to be a virgin when he receives her; rather, he receives her from adultery, and he does not know whether the child that is born is his seed.⁵⁶

Apparently, virginity is respected neither as a prerequisite in contracting marriage nor in ritualised virginity. As the Greeks appear to be unable to achieve an undefiled marriage-bed, or an undefiled religious observance, Athanasius marks them out as demonstrably unchaste and thus unable to achieve virtue. He observes that their virginity is as false as the idols that they worship.⁵⁷

Alongside the discussions of the pagan failure to achieve virginity, Athanasius examines evidence of the Jewish observance of virginity. While admitting the lack of regard that the Jews felt for virginity, he attempts to trace the 'shadow' of virginity in Old Testament Scripture:

But we have heard about virginity existing among the people who lived under the law and the prophets, because they were prophesying since that time about the Lord and because the shadow of his coming was at work. But likewise the virtue of virginity was not great at that time; rather, good like this was scarcely testified to because it existed in so few people.⁵⁸

Athanasius points to Elijah's celibacy as evidence of the recognition of virginity's praiseworthiness before the coming of Christ. Likewise John the Baptist, although a New Testament figure, is generally cited as a pre-Christian figurehead of virginity. In Judaic

⁵⁵ Cf. Athanasius: 'Indeed, as for her who is called the great Hecate, whom they worship, her mysteries are performed by effeminate men, and their adulteries and their impurity of another kind make clear that there is no sign of virginity among them.' Athanasius, *First Letter to Virgins*, v, p. 275.

⁵⁶ Athanasius, *First Letter to Virgins*, v, p. 275.

⁵⁷ Cf. Athanasius: 'But just like their idols, which they falsely call gods, so too the virginity they say exists among them is false.' Athanasius, *First Letter to Virgins*, vi, p. 276.

⁵⁸ Athanasius, *First Letter to Virgins*, vii, p. 276.

culture it was motherhood that revealed God's blessing on woman, and barren women were only laudable if they subsequently became the site of one of God's miracles.⁵⁹

Athanasius recognises, however, that although virginity can be seen to be foreshadowed by a few exceptional figures in the Old Testament, it did not blossom on the earth until the advent of the Messiah:

But when the Lord came into the world, having taken flesh from a virgin and become human, at that time what used to be difficult became easy for people, and what was impossible became possible.⁶⁰

Athanasius' explanation of the gradual integration of virginity in the world echoes the gradual perfection of mankind that Methodius describes in Discourse I of the *Symposium*.

Athanasius emphasises Christ's 'having taken flesh from a virgin' and so continues to draw out the importance of virginity in Incarnational theology: Christ was born of a virgin, took flesh from a virgin, and manifested the life of virginity in His own being.⁶¹

iii. The Rise of Mariology

Athanasius' major contribution to the virginal tradition is the insertion of Mary. Whereas previously it was Christ who is held up as the sole figure who sanctions virginity and ought to be imitated, Athanasius provides women with a female figure, whose role in the Incarnation is crucially important in understanding the nature of Christ. Athanasius avers that 'His body alone came from Mary: so that when He alone came forth from the virgin,

⁵⁹ Cf. Smith: 'Judaism considered matrimony to be the natural condition of man and woman; marriage and procreation in order to produce legitimate offspring were the religious obligation of every adult Jewish male.' Kathryn A. Smith, 'Inventing Marital Chastity: The Iconography of Susanna and the Elders in Early Christian Art', *Oxford Art Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (1993), 3-24, (p. 4). Cf. Taylor: 'In much of the ancient world [...] a woman's status in a given community was connected with her being a mother. This was the case also in the Jewish community in antiquity, in which the status of a mother in family and community appears to have been quite high.' Joan E. Taylor, 'Virgin Mothers: Philo on Women Therapeutae', in *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha*, Vol. 12.1.2001, 37-63. (p. 51).

⁶⁰ Athanasius, *First Letter to Virgins*, viii, p. 276.

⁶¹ Unfortunately, there are missing pages at this point.

it might be believed that it was the body of God'.⁶² Athanasius appeals to the evidence of the Virgin Birth, related in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, to underline Christ's divinity and, by implication, Nicene orthodoxy. By so doing, virginity begins to acquire a new dimension as its theological importance to orthodoxy is realised. Not only does Athanasius allude to the importance of the Virgin Birth, but he also acknowledges Mary's perpetual virginity:

The Saviour is instructing us about this plainly when he teaches that his mother Mary remained in virginity forever. For when he ascended the cross, he gave his mother to John (John 19: 26-7). For he said to her, 'Behold, your son', and he said to the disciple, 'Behold, your mother.' From that day the disciple took her into his house. By saying this he is instructing us that Mary did not bear another child except the Saviour alone. If she had other children, the Saviour would not have abandoned them and given her to other people, nor would she have been mother to other people: she would not have [abandoned her own children] and chosen for herself strangers to live with, knowing that it is not fitting for her to abandon her husband and her children. Rather, inasmuch as she was a virgin and had served him as a mother, he gives her to his disciple as mother [...] on account of the great purity of her intelligence and the undefiled character of her virginity.⁶³

The compelling exchange between Christ, His mother, and His beloved disciple at the foot of the cross is later used by Jerome in his defence of Mary's perpetual virginity.

Athanasius utilises the Christological truths of Nicene theology in order to further the understanding of His mother. Athanasius refers to Mary as 'the bearer of God'⁶⁴ in his *First Letter to Virgins*, and also asserts her perpetual virginity. These are the two first and most fundamental Marian doctrines accepted by the Church. Her title of *Theotokos*, 'God-bearer', declared at the Council of Ephesus in 431,⁶⁵ acknowledges that she carried

⁶² Athanasius, *First Letter to Virgins*, ix, p. 277.

⁶³ Athanasius, *First Letter to Virgins*, x, p. 277.

⁶⁴ Athanasius, *First Letter to Virgins*, xxxv, p. 286.

⁶⁵ Cf. Cyril: 'they ventured to call the holy Virgin the Mother of God, not as if the nature of the Word or His divinity had its beginnings from the holy Virgin, but because of her was born that holy body with a rational soul, to which the Word being personally united is said to be born according to the flesh.' *Epistle of Cyril to Nestorius, The Council of Ephesus, A.D. 431*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. XIV, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church: Their Canons and dogmatic decrees* (Massachusetts:

God within her womb and she is given this title because of the acceptance of the hypostatic union.⁶⁶ Mary's perpetual virginity, and her title of *Aeiparthenos*, 'Ever-virgin', was stated in *The Tome of Leo*, read out and ratified by the Council of Chalcedon in 451,⁶⁷ and later endorsed at the Second Council of Constantinople in A.D. 553.⁶⁸ This title acknowledges the implications of the scriptural exchange at the foot of the cross, and bears witness to the continued purity that Mary – a woman whose exceptional purity called down such a great favour from God that He condescended to dwell within her –

Hendrickson, 1995 [1900]), pp. (p. 198). Cf. *The Council of Ephesus*: 'I. If anyone will not confess that the Emmanuel is very God, and that therefore the Holy Virgin is the Mother of God (Θεοτόκος), inasmuch as in the flesh she bore the Word of God made flesh [as it is written, "The Word was made flesh"]: let him be anathema.' from 'The XII. Anathematisms of St. Cyril against Nestorius', *The Council of Ephesus, A.D. 431*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. XIV, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church: Their Canons and dogmatic decrees* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1900]), pp. 191-242. (p. 206).

⁶⁶ Cf. *The Council of Ephesus*: 'II. If anyone shall not confess that the Word of God the father is united hypostatically to flesh, and that with that flesh of his own, he is one only Christ both God and man at the same time: let him be anathema.' from 'The XII. Anathematisms of St. Cyril against Nestorius', *The Council of Ephesus, A.D. 431*, p. 210.

⁶⁷ Cf. *The Council of Chalcedon*: 'For, in fact, he was "conceived of the Holy Ghost" within the womb of a Virgin Mother, who bore Him as she had conceived him, without loss of virginity'; 'the angel who was sent to the blessed and ever Virgin Mary said, "The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee, and therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.' *The Tome of Saint Leo*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. XIV, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church: Their Canons and dogmatic decrees* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1900]), pp. 254-258, (p. 254; p. 255).

⁶⁸ Cf. *The Second Council of Constantinople*: 'II. If anyone shall not confess that the Word of God has two nativities, the one from all eternity of the Father, without time and without body; the other in these last days, coming down from heaven and being made flesh of the holy and glorious Mary, Mother of God and always a virgin, and born of her: let him be anathema'; 'VI. If anyone shall not call in a true acceptance, but only in a false acceptance, the holy, glorious, and ever-virgin Mary, the Mother of God, or shall call her so only in a relative sense, believing that she bare only a simple man and that God the word was not incarnate of her, but that the incarnation of God the Word resulted only from the fact that he united himself to that man who was born [of her]; if he shall calumniate the Holy Synod of Chalcedon as though it had asserted the Virgin to be Mother of God according to the impious sense of Theodore; or if anyone shall call her the mother of a man (ἀνδρωποτόκου) or the Mother of Christ (Χριστοτόκου), as if Christ were not God, and shall not confess that she is exactly and truly the Mother of God, because that God the Word who before all ages was begotten of the Father was in these last days made flesh and born of her, and if anyone shall not confess that in this sense the holy Synod of Chalcedon acknowledged her to be the Mother of God: let him be anathema'; 'XIV. If anyone shall defend that letter which Ibas is said to have written to Maris the Persian, in which he denies that the Word of God incarnate of Mary, the Holy Mother of God and ever-virgin, was made man, but says that a mere man was born of her, whom he styles a Temple, as though the Word of God was one Person and the man another person; [...]: let him be anathema.' *The Second Council of Constantinople in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. XIV, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church: Their Canons and dogmatic decrees* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1900]), pp. 162-190, (p. 312; p. 313; pp. 315-16).

could only desire to remain free from taint as she had experienced the wonder of the Incarnation.

Athanasius is not the first to suggest that Mary observed perpetual virginity.

Origen also accepts Mary's untainted virginity:

For if Mary, as those declare who with sound mind extol her, had no other son but Jesus, and yet Jesus says to His mother, 'Woman, behold thy son,' and not 'Behold you have this son also,' then he virtually said to her, 'Lo, this is Jesus, whom thou didst bear.'⁶⁹

Perhaps one of the earliest assertions of the belief can be found in *The Protoevangelium of James*, which was written in the mid-second century. In this text Mary is born miraculously from barren parents, thus foreshadowing her own miraculous pregnancy and providing a typological link between the Virgin Birth and the miraculous births littered throughout the Old Testament. Mary is consecrated to the Temple at the age of three years: 'Mary was in the temple of the Lord nurtured like a dove and received food from the hand of an angel.'⁷⁰ However, when she reaches puberty the priests require her to leave lest she pollute the Temple. Joseph, an old widower, is chosen to take Mary as a wife in order to be her guardian.⁷¹ Her pregnancy causes consternation in the Jewish community, as it was understood that she was to remain a consecrated virgin even though

⁶⁹ Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, I.vi, trans. Alan Menzies, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. IX, *The Gospel of Peter, The Diatessaron of Tatian, The Apocalypse of Peter, The Vision of Paul, The Apocalypse of the Virgin and Sedrach, The Testament of Abraham, The Acts of Xanthippe and Polyxena, The Narrative of Zosimus, The Apology of Aristides, The Epistles of Clement (complete text), Origen's Commentary on John, Books 1-10, and Commentary on Matthew, Book 1, 2, and 10-14*, ed. Allan Menzies (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1896]), pp. 279-408, (p. 300).

⁷⁰ *The Protevangelium of James*, 8.1, in *The Apocryphal New Testament*, ed. and trans. J. K. Elliott (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 48-67, (p. 60).

⁷¹ Cf. *The Protevangelium of James*: 'And the priest said to Joseph, "You have been chosen by lot to receive the virgin of the Lord as your ward." But Joseph answered him, 'I have sons and am old; she is but a girl. I object lest I should become a laughing-stock to the sons of Israel.' *The Protevangelium of James*, 9.1-2, p. 61.

she was married to Joseph.⁷² Mary and Joseph are forced to undergo the bitter water test, outlined in the Old Testament, and, when they both prove their chastity by this means, they are allowed to go unpunished.⁷³

The Protevangelium of James not only bears witness to Mary's virginity *pre partum*, and her perpetual virginity *post partum*, but it also recognises her virginity *in partu*. Two midwives corroborate her intact physical virginity. The second midwife, Salome, however, initially refuses to believe. In a presage of the 'doubting Thomas' episode from the Gospel of John,⁷⁴ Salome subjects the Blessed Virgin to a manual examination. The hand, with which she had the temerity to approach the Blessed Virgin,

⁷² Cf. *The Protevangelium of James*: 'And Annas turned and saw that Mary was pregnant. And he went running to the priest and said to him, "Joseph, for whom you are a witness, has grievously transgressed. [...] The virgin, whom he received from the temple of the Lord, he has defiled, and has secretly consummated his marriage with her, and has not disclosed it to the children of Israel.'" *The Protevangelium of James*, 15.1-2, pp. 62-3.

⁷³ Cf. Numbers: 'The man whose wife shall have gone astray, and contemning her husband, Shall have slept with another man, and her husband cannot discover it, but the adultery is secret, and cannot be proved by witnesses, because she was not found in the adultery: If the spirit of jealousy stir up the husband against his wife, who either is defiled, or is charged with false suspicion, He shall bring her to the priest, and shall offer an oblation for her, the tenth part of a measure of barley meal: he shall not pour oil thereon, nor put frankincense upon it: because it is a sacrifice of jealousy, and an oblation searching out adultery. The priest therefore shall offer it, and set it before the Lord. And he shall take holy water in an earthen vessel, and he shall cast a little earth of the pavement of the tabernacle into it. And when the woman shall stand before the Lord, he shall uncover her head, and shall put on her hands the sacrifice of remembrance, and the oblation of jealousy: and he himself shall hold the most bitter waters, whereon he hath heaped curses with execration. And he shall adjure her, and shall say: If another man hath not slept with thee, and if thou be not defiled by forsaking thy husband's bed, these most bitter waters, on which I have heaped curses, shall not hurt thee. But if thou hast gone aside from thy husband, and art defiled, and hast lain with another man: These curses shall light upon thee: The Lord make thee a curse, and an example for all among his people: may he make thy thigh to rot, and may thy belly swell and burst asunder. Let the cursed waters enter into thy belly, and may thy womb swell and thy thigh rot. And the woman shall answer, Amen, amen. [...] And when she hath drunk them, if she be defiled, and having despised her husband be guilty of adultery, the malediction shall go through her, and her belly swelling, her thigh shall rot: and the woman shall be a curse, and an example to all the people. But if she be not defiled, she shall not be hurt, and shall bear children' (Numbers 5: 12-28).

⁷⁴ Cf. John: 'Now Thomas, one of the twelve, who is called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples therefore said to him: We have seen the Lord. But he said to them: Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe. And after eight days again his disciples were within, and Thomas with them. Jesus cometh, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said: Peace be to you. Then he saith to Thomas: Put in thy finger hither, and see my hands; and bring hither thy hand, and put it into my side; and be not faithless, but believing. Thomas answered, and said to him: My Lord, and my God. Jesus saith to him: Because thou hast seen me, Thomas, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and have believed' (John 20: 24-29).

withers as if burnt by fire in punishment for her unbelief.⁷⁵ Her hand is miraculously restored by the Christ-child, however, once she testifies to the truth of Mary's virginity.

Origen also demonstrates that he knows of *The Protevangelium*, for he applauds the apocryphal narrative's explanation of the identity of the brothers of Christ:

But some say, basing it on a tradition in the Gospel according to Peter, as it is entitled, or 'The Book of James,' that the brethren of Jesus were sons of Joseph by a former wife, whom he married before Mary. Now those who say so wish to preserve the honour of Mary in virginity to the end, so that that body of hers which was appointed to minister to the Word which said 'The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Most High shall overshadow thee,' might not know intercourse with a man after that the Holy Ghost came into her and the power from on high overshadowed her. And I think it in harmony with reason that Jesus was the first-fruits among men of the purity which consists in chastity, and Mary among women; for it were not pious to ascribe to any other than to her the first-fruit of virginity.⁷⁶

Mary's virginity came under attack by Jewish detractors. In *Contra Celsum*, Origen takes Celsus to task for his assault on Mary's virginity, amongst other things.⁷⁷ Likewise, in his

⁷⁵ Cf. *The Protevangelium of James*: 'And the midwife went in and said to Mary, "Make yourself ready for there is small contention concerning you." And Salome inserted her finger to test her condition. And she cried out saying, "Woe is my wickedness and unbelief; for I have tempted the living God; and behold my hand falls away from me, consumed by fire!"' *The Protevangelium of James*, 20.1, p. 65.

⁷⁶ Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, X.xvii, trans. John Patrick, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. IX, *The Gospel of Peter, The Diatessaron of Tatian, The Apocalypse of Peter, The Vision of Paul, The Apocalypse of the Virgin and Sedrach, The Testament of Abraham, The Acts of Xanthippe and Polyxena, The Narrative of Zosimus, The Apology of Aristides, The Epistles of Clement (complete text), Origen's Commentary on John, Books 1-10, and Commentary on Matthew, Book 1, 2, and 10-14*, ed. Allan Menzies (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1896]), pp. 411-512, (p. 424).

⁷⁷ Cf. Origen: 'After this he [Celsus] represents the Jew as having a conversation with Jesus himself and refuting him on many charges, as he thinks: first, because *he fabricated the story of his birth from a virgin*. [...] He says that *she was driven out by her husband, who was a carpenter by trade, as she was convicted of adultery*. Then he says that *after she had been driven out by her husband and while she was wandering about in a disgraceful way she secretly gave birth to Jesus*.' Origen, *Contra Celsum*, I. xxviii, trans. and ed. Henry Chadwick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), p. 28; 'Let us return, however, to the words put into the mouth of the Jew, where *the mother of Jesus* is described as having been *turned out by the carpenter who was betrothed to her, as she had been conceived of adultery and had a child by a certain soldier named Panthera*.' Origen, *Contra Celsum*, I. xxxii, p. 31. Chadwick notes that 'L. Patterson, in *J.T.S.* xix (1917), pp. 79-80, thinks that some Jewish controversialist seized on the name perhaps because of its similarity to *parthenos*.' Henry Chadwick, Note to *Contra Celsum*, p. 31n. 3. Cf. Voorst: 'These charges of illegitimacy are the earliest datable statement of the Jewish charge that Jesus was conceived as the result of adultery, and that his true father was a Roman soldier named Panthera. Panthera was a common name among Roman soldiers of that period, but most interpreters hold that this name was used by some Jews because of its similarity to *parthenos*, "virgin". If this is the case, it would mean that this is a Jewish reaction to the Christian doctrine of the Virgin Birth, which does not become a leading Christian

First Letter to Virgins, Athanasius condemns the impiety of those who suggest that Mary was anything other than a perpetual virgin:

[There are people who] say lawless [words] against the bearer of God, saying that she got married, in order to create an excuse for themselves, just like the Pharisees, to increase the pleasures of marriage, lest virginity become manifest and put to shame their profitable choice. But Mary, the bearer of God, remains a virgin [so that she might be a pattern for] everyone coming after her. If a woman desires to remain a virgin and bride of Christ, she can look to her (Mary's) life and imitate it, and the edification of her (Mary's) destiny will suffice for establishing her own virginity.⁷⁸

Athanasius is the first to use Mary as a role model for virgins. Earlier treatises had suggested that older virgins should provide a model for the younger to imitate, and the ubiquitous *imitatio Christi* was always available to inspire virgins. It perhaps seems strange that Mary's virginity was passed over until Athanasius, but from hereon she becomes the most perfect model of virginity. Athanasius says:

Therefore, let the life of Mary, the bearer of God, be for all of you, as it is written an [image and likeness of] her virginity. For it is best for you to recognise yourselves in her as in a mirror and so govern yourselves. Complete the good deeds you have forgotten, and increase the things you have done well, so that your life too might serve for a time as an image for others; continually look to the instruction of others.⁷⁹

Mary becomes the mirror of virginity. She provides the template for virginity, which her heirs then perpetuate in a cycle of imitation and instruction. Athanasius recommends that younger virgins imitate those who are more experienced, and who already exhibit Mary's way of life in their manner of living.⁸⁰

theme until the end of the first century.' Robert E. Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament: An Introduction to the Ancient Evidence* (Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), p. 67.

⁷⁸ Athanasius, *First Letter to Virgins*, xi, p. 277.

⁷⁹ Athanasius, *First Letter to Virgins*, xii, p. 277.

⁸⁰ Cf. Athanasius: 'Moreover, you have a great share in this because you have the signs of her way of life and her image near to you: that is, the women among you who have grown old in virginity inspire with their beauty. For it is possible for you [...] to look to the perfection of the discipline of these women, imitate their way of life and establish virginity.' Athanasius, *First Letter to Virgins*, xxxv, p. 286.

iv. The Life of Mary

The account of Mary's life that Athanasius provides accords with the perfect virginal model that the preceding Fathers sketched. She is modest and humble, respectful to her parents, silent and prayerful, does not shout or talk idly and does not display her body in any way;⁸¹ she ate and fasted moderately,⁸² diligently attended the temple,⁸³ and was respectful towards her parents.⁸⁴ Athanasius cites Mary's fear at the greeting of Gabriel as evidence of her holiness, as she 'was not familiar with the male voice'.⁸⁵ The *Second Letter to Virgins* appears to provide regulatory advice for virgins, based on the Marian model outlined in the *First Letter*.⁸⁶ The virgins are encouraged not only to imitate those

⁸¹ Cf. Athanasius: 'For she desired good works, doing what is proper, having true thoughts in faith and purity. And she did not desire to be seen by people; rather she prayed that God would be her judge. Nor did she have eagerness to leave her house, nor was she at all acquainted with the streets; rather, she spent the excess of her manual labour on the poor. And she did not acquire eagerness to look out of the window, rather to look at the Scriptures. And she would pray to God privately, taking care about these two things: that she not let evil thoughts dwell in her heart, and also that she not acquire curiosity or learn hardness of heart. And she did not permit anyone near her body unless it was covered, and she controlled her anger and extinguished the wrath in her inmost thoughts. Her words were calm; her voice, moderate; she did not cry out. And, being glad in her heart, she did not slander anyone, nor did she willingly listen to slander. She did not grow weary in her heart or become envious in her soul. She was not a braggart, but completely humble. There was no evil in her heart not contentiousness with those related to her, except concerning the civic life [...] She forgot her good works and her merciful deeds: she did them secretly. But she remembered the Lord, struggling to add to what she had done before, and the works of this age she removed from her heart.' Athanasius, *First Letter to Virgins*, xiii, pp. 277-8.

⁸² Cf. Athanasius: 'The desire for the belly did not overcome her, only up to the measure of the body's necessity. For she ate and drank, not luxuriously, but so that she might not neglect her body and it die contrary to its time. [...] Fasting was gladsome for her as feasting is for other people.' Athanasius, *First Letter to Virgins*, xiv, p. 278.

⁸³ Cf. Athanasius: 'For she did not neglect it (the temple); rather, she went with her parents, walking in a good manner, reverent in her dress and in the gaze of her eyes as well, so that those who saw her thought that she had someone watching over her, making her remember and edifying her in everything she would do.' Athanasius, *First Letter to Virgins*, xv, p. 278.

⁸⁴ Cf. Athanasius: 'And her parents, when they saw these things, gave thanks to God, not only because he had given them a daughter, but because he had given them a blessing like this for them to have. And she, for her part, knew what was fitting: first she would pray to God, and afterwards she would submit to her parents. But as for fighting with her father or mother, she considered it an abomination to God.' Athanasius, *First Letter to Virgins*, xvi, p. 278.

⁸⁵ Athanasius, *First Letter to Virgins*, xvii, p. 279.

⁸⁶ Virgins are required to be obedient, to regulate their speech, and to honour their elders. Cf. Saint Athanasius, *Second Letter to Virgins*, viii, trans. David Brakke, in David Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 292-302 (pp. 294-5). They are to remain respectful and solemn in God's house (Athanasius, *Second Letter to Virgins*, x, p. 295), and to moderate their laughter (Athanasius, *Second Letter to Virgins*, xi, p. 295). They should '[b]e neither a whisperer nor a

who are worthy to be imitated, but to strive also to be worthy of being imitated by others.⁸⁷ Athanasius' delineation of a true virginal lifestyle is merely a crystallisation of previous ideas on the subject; for instance, Cyprian's treatise indicates the need for virgins to withdraw from certain corrupt and worldly practices. In addition, the pattern of Mary's life rejects all those vices which Clement lists as prejudicial to virginity, which include seemingly innocuous activities such as laughing and garrulousness.⁸⁸ Athanasius even asserts that Paul's recommendation of virginity in I Corinthians 7 was perhaps learned 'from the life of Mary'.⁸⁹ Such a suggestion draws the origin of the tradition towards Mary and the Incarnational theology of virginity, rather than tracing its roots from Paul's scriptural recommendation or using Christ as the first example. Mary, thus, becomes a starting point for a Christian understanding of virginity; just as she bore Christ in her body, so she gives birth to the practice of virginity, too.

v. Nicene Orthodoxy and Heretical Virgins

As may be expected, Athanasius' works reflect his concern with the perpetuation and consolidation of Nicene theology, and his works on virginity are no exception. His insistence on the theological importance of virginity brings him on to the problem of heretical teachings on virginity and Christianity. Athanasius explains to virgins that they should shun the false teachings of Hieracas, an ascetic teacher who lived in a community

slanderer.' Athanasius, *Second Letter to Virgins*, xiii, p. 296. The virgin ought to observe decorum in every aspect of her being and to restrict her society to that of her parents (Cf. Athanasius, *Second Letter to Virgins*, xiv, p. 297).

⁸⁷ Cf. Athanasius: 'Toward those of our own age and our equals, it is good to show honour, as the Scripture says: "Outdo one another in showing honour" (Rom. 12: 10). And from the excellent take a pattern of virtue; but to the imperfect give a pattern of your own excellent way of life – "Be a pattern for the believers" (I Tim. 4: 11) – so there might be benefit on every side, as we first receive blessing and then in return give virtue.' Athanasius, *Second Letter to Virgins*, ix, p. 295.

⁸⁸ Cf. Pseudo-Clement, *The First Epistle*, viii, in *Ante-Nicene Christian Library*, Vol. XIV. *The Writings of Methodius etc.* trans. B. L. Pratten eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, MDCCCLXIX [1869]), pp. 367-382, (p. 374).

⁸⁹ Athanasius, *First Letter to Virgins*, xviii, p. 279.

of celibate men and women in Leontopolis. Although Hieracas purported to value the ascetic life, he did so by denigrating marriage. Athanasius tells virgins to

take courage and condemn Hieracas, who says that marriage is evil inasmuch as virginity is good. In this manner it should be said that the sun is evil because the angel is more excellent and that the human being is evil because the sun is more excellent.⁹⁰

Hieracas' denial of the continued value of marriage thus makes the observance of virginity a necessity and so removes the agency of the individual's free will, which validates the sacrifice of virginity. Athanasius' argument feeds back into his earlier denigration of pagan virginity on similar grounds. Heterodox teachings and pagan teachings both destroy the virtue that comes with a freely chosen vocation. In addition, Hieracas' denigration of marriage is also a denigration of virginity,⁹¹ because, as the Parable of the Sower demonstrates, 'both are from the same seed: one is great; the other is greater'.⁹² Athanasius, whom Gregory describes as the 'patron of the wedded and virgin state alike',⁹³ always ensures that the dignity of marriage is defended. Indeed, the use of the nuptial imagery in the virginal tradition, and the Parable of Sowers, not only allows for a comparison in favour of the virtue of virginity, but it also safeguards the value of marriage.

Hieracas' argument against marriage is that 'this institution was given to humanity at first, but now it has been taken away and forbidden'.⁹⁴ Athanasius points out

⁹⁰ Athanasius, *First Letter to Virgins*, xxiv, p. 282.

⁹¹ Cf. Athanasius: 'He does not know into what impiety he has fallen in his hypocrisy. If he condemns marriage, it is necessary for him to condemn the hundredfold fruit, that is, your way of life, and then fall into the sin of godlessness. For just as the fruit of that which produced hundredfold, sixty, and thirty belongs to the same seed, so the Lord is one who has legislated concerning marriage and speaks symbolically about virginity, so that the one who condemns one of them does nothing other than commit impiety against the Lord of this twofold grace.' Athanasius, *First Letter to Virgins*, p. 283.

⁹² Athanasius, *First Letter to Virgins*, xxiv, p. 282.

⁹³ Gregory Nazianzen, *Oration XXI*, xxxvi, p. 280.

⁹⁴ Athanasius, *First Letter to Virgins*, xxvi, p. 282.

that this assertion of Hieracas' has no scriptural basis. On the contrary, Scripture demonstrates that Christ approved of marriage, as He attended the marriage at Cana,⁹⁵ and also because He forbade divorce.⁹⁶ In addition, Athanasius says that Christ's own teaching concerning virginity is somewhat circumspect:

When he spoke about virginity, he taught about it off to the side, because no one could bear it, and said, 'There are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven' (Matt. 19: 10-12). And here the Lord was not commanding that people become virgins by force of law, but rather giving it to the free will of those who desire it.⁹⁷

Even though the authorisation of virginity comes from Christ Himself, it is not commanded by Him. Athanasius contrasts Hieracas' heretical teachings to those of his mentor, Alexander. The latter had recommended a regimen of unceasing prayer, which is the cultivation of conversation with the Bridegroom. This both protects against devilish temptations, and reaffirms and strengthens the vow of virginity.⁹⁸ Virgins are particularly susceptible to the machinations of the devil because Satan delights in trying to corrupt those who are closest to God.⁹⁹ Alexander also advised that virgins should constantly hear the Scriptures in order to acquaint themselves with their Bridegroom.¹⁰⁰ He schooled them on the divine (manifested in the Virgin Birth¹⁰¹ and His miracles)¹⁰² and the human natures of Christ,¹⁰³ and on the necessity of the presence of these two natures in the

⁹⁵ Cf. Athanasius, *First Letter to Virgins*, xxvi, p. 282. Cf. John 2: 1-11.

⁹⁶ Cf. Athanasius, *First Letter to Virgins*, xxvi, p. 282. Cf. Matt. 19: 3-9.

⁹⁷ Athanasius, *First Letter to Virgins*, xxvi, p. 282.

⁹⁸ Cf. Athanasius: 'through your prayers, and through him the hope of your vow will be confirmed.' Athanasius, *First Letter to Virgins*, xxxii, p. 284.

⁹⁹ Cf. Athanasius: 'he performs many tricks against the people who are entering heaven, because he is shameless.' Athanasius, *First Letter to Virgins*, xxxii, p. 285.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Athanasius: 'it is necessary for you to become acquainted with him not through simply anyone, but through people who speak about God just as the Scriptures do.' Athanasius, *First Letter to Virgins*, xxxvii, p. 286.

¹⁰¹ Cf. Athanasius, *First Letter to Virgins*, xl, p. 287.

¹⁰² Cf. Athanasius, *First Letter to Virgins*, xliii, p. 288.

¹⁰³ Cf. Athanasius, *First Letter to Virgins*, xxxviii, p. 286.

Incarnation.¹⁰⁴ The emphasis on orthodox theology not only validates the sacrifice of virginity, as it recognises that it is a freely chosen sacrifice and not a necessity, but also enables them to develop a closer relationship with their heavenly Spouse.

Athanasius, in the guise of Alexander's teaching, hammers home the fundamental relationship between virginity and Nicene orthodoxy by likening virginity to the Incarnation:

If the Word had not become flesh, how would you now be joined with him and cling to him? But when the Lord bore the body of humanity, the body became acceptable to the Word. Therefore, you have now become virgins and brides of Christ.¹⁰⁵

This is an extraordinary assertion. The marriage between Christ and His bride, between the Word and virgin, echoes the uniting of the Word with virginal flesh which occurred in the Incarnation. Consecrated virginity, therefore, constitutes a remarkable mystical union, and is a reflection and verification of orthodox theology. Brakke notes that

Virgins, then, were powerful, multivalent religious symbols for Athanasius: their union with Christ, understood as a kind of marriage, manifested in a heightened manner the union with the Word of God required of every Christian and imitated the Word's incarnation; moreover, their exceptional control of the passions demonstrated Christianity's superiority to other religions.¹⁰⁶

Athanasius' likening of virginity to the Incarnation while simultaneously linking it to the union of the sexes in marriage results in a profound reading of marriage as well. Both Clement and Methodius discussed how virginity could be lost due to the failure of the virgin to understand the lofty nature of virginity; if they did not appreciate its worth and its nature, how could they achieve it? In a similar way, Athanasius demonstrates that not only a right understanding of virginity is necessary to its maintenance, but this

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Athanasius, *First Letter to Virgins*, xxxix, p. 287.

¹⁰⁵ Athanasius, *First Letter to Virgins*, xliii, p. 288.

¹⁰⁶ Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, p. 18.

understanding needs firm foundations: virginity is predicated on a true understanding of religion and, therefore, orthodoxy is necessary for the achievement of true virginity. The denigration of pagan virginity serves as an example of the failure of virginity due to spiritual blindness; such a fate also awaits those who pursue virginity in a heretical spirit.

vi. *Virgines Subintroductae*

Athanasius describes the ascetic life as a way to extinguish the flames of passion.

Virgines subintroductae, however,

because of regular conversation with men and toilsome custom, the flame burns greatly within them, just as when someone, by giving a lot of fuel to a small fire, will change a flame into a great roaring blaze.¹⁰⁷

Athanasius disregards the arguments in favour of *syneisaktism*, by demonstrating that, far from offering a support for an ascetic life, it actually puts it in danger. He emphasises that a monk would not have the temerity to approach his neighbour's wife, and so he should not presume to approach the bride of Christ:

So, if he who goes in to his neighbour's wife is not pardoned, what will he who goes in to and touches the bride of Christ endure from the heavenly King? Hence, 'it is good for a man not to touch a woman' (I Cor. 7: 1) – even more the bride of Christ! Or are you ignorant of how jealous a bridegroom he is, both avenging sins swiftly and establishing tortures for a great variety of crimes?¹⁰⁸

Athanasius uses the image, also used by Cyprian, of Christ as a jealous bridegroom. The motif of the jealous husband is perhaps an obvious one considering the use of the *sponsa Christi* image and in the event of the despoiling of brides of Christ.¹⁰⁹ Athanasius exhorts virgins to keep themselves wholly for God, reiterating the necessity for a complete

¹⁰⁷ Athanasius, *Second Letter to Virgins*, xx, p. 298.

¹⁰⁸ Athanasius, *Second Letter to Virgins*, xxi, p. 299.

¹⁰⁹ The imagery of the jealous husband perhaps originates from Saint Paul: 'For I am jealous of you with the jealousy of God. For I have espoused you to one husband that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ' (II Corinthians 11: 2).

offering of their virginity to God, not merely a small portion of it. He reminds them that their sacrifice was given of their own free will, and therefore

This kind of sin is unforgivable; this offence, without excuse; this lifestyle, unacceptable. 'It is better not to make a vow than to make a vow and not accomplish it' (Eccles. 5: 4). For it is better not to promise virginity than, when you have promised, not to accomplish it perfectly. For just as it is impossible for two men in the world to have one wife, so too one soul cannot perfectly be with God and humanity.¹¹⁰

Athanasius reminds the *virgines subintroductae* that although they may claim physical purity, they forget that the sins of the mind are as destructive to virginity. Additionally, even if he believes that they are free from such sin and sinful thoughts, what about the monks with whom they live?¹¹¹ He admonishes the monks in similar terms, and warns them against trying to corrupt the brides of Christ.¹¹² His recommendation to those virgins who refuse to give up *syneisaktism* is an ironic reversal of the careful instructions that he has hitherto given to virgins:

Therefore, put on adornment, and strip off virginity, for the adorned class claims you. Therefore, occupy yourself with baths and myrrh, and take care of yourself with cleansings, so that you might please him who is with you. For she who is like this is anxious how to please men, and she is divided. But she who is dedicated to God alone thinks night and day about how to please the Lord.¹¹³

Athanasius' scornful tones echoes those of Tertullian in his exposé of the false Carthaginian virgins who dress and behave like prostitutes, and yet falsely make claim to the state of virginity. In contrast to the *virgines subintroduce*, who are stripped of their virginity, Athanasius' description of perfect virginal behaviour is imagined as a shrouding:

¹¹⁰ Athanasius, *Second Letter to Virgins*, xxiv, p. 299.

¹¹¹ Cf. Athanasius, *Second Letter to Virgins*, xxvi, p. 300.

¹¹² Cf. Athanasius, *Second Letter to Virgins*, xxvii-xxviii, pp. 300-1.

¹¹³ Athanasius, *Second Letter to Virgins*, xxix, p. 301.

it behoves virgins to be enshrouded, separated, set apart, and withdrawn in every way, with a steadfast will, and to be sealed up, just as you were sealed by the Lord at the beginning as a servant.¹¹⁴

This demonstrates a movement towards the monastic model, and the merging of the conceptual virginal tradition, represented in the treatises, and the monastic way of life which was growing in Egypt. Indeed, Gregory Nazianzen attributes to Athanasius the setting forth ‘in the form of a narrative, the laws of the monastic life’.¹¹⁵ Thus, Athanasius’ concerns with the regulation of the virginal life can be seen in terms of a wider programme of monastic regulation. He describes the enclosed virginal state in the rhetorical terms of Canticles: ‘virginity is like an enclosed garden that is not trodden upon by anyone, except its gardener alone.’¹¹⁶ The imagery demonstrates that Methodius’ association of the bride of Canticles with the *sponsa Christi* has by the mid-fourth century been fully integrated into the tradition.

vii. Contribution

Like Tertullian, Cyprian and Clement, Athanasius demonstrates a concern with the regulation of virginity.¹¹⁷ Brakke asserts that Athanasius’ recommendation of a stricter regulation of the virginal life was a political move to prevent virgins from allying with unorthodox religious groups.¹¹⁸ While this may be true, it is also indicative of a movement towards a greater articulation and definition of virginity and highlights debates about its preservation. Athanasius’ great contribution to the tradition of virginity, however, must be his introduction of the importance of Mary’s virginity, both in the

¹¹⁴ Athanasius, *Second Letter to Virgins*, xxx, p. 301.

¹¹⁵ Gregory Nazianzen, *Oration XXI*, v, p. 270.

¹¹⁶ Athanasius, *Second Letter to Virgins*, xxx, p. 301.

¹¹⁷ Many of Athanasius’ assertions follow those of the Clement, in his recommendation of guarding against idleness (Cf. Athanasius, *First Letter to Virgins*, xxxiv, p. 285), and Tertullian and Cyprian, in his recommendation to reject adornment and wealth (Cf. Athanasius, *First Letter to Virgins*, xxxiii, p. 285).

¹¹⁸ Cf. Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, p. 11.

implications it has for the Incarnation, and his assertion that she is the originator of virginity. Athanasius represents the beginning of a shift away from the focus on Christ's virginity and more towards Mary's virginity. The latter also provides a specifically female role model, based on her life and behaviour. Perhaps more so than earlier writers, Athanasius' use of the nuptial imagery leads him to conclude that the virginal vow is permanent; again, this is reiterated by the understanding that Mary was a perpetual virgin. Athanasius' emphasis on the uniqueness of Christian, perpetual virginity, and his linking of true virginity to orthodox belief suggests that, for him, virginity becomes an emblem not only of Christian virtue and perfection, but also of Nicene orthodoxy.

VI. Gregory of Nyssa

Gregory of Nyssa (c. A.D. 335/6 – post-394)¹ was one of the three ‘Cappadocian Fathers’,² along with his brother, Basil of Caesarea (Basil the Great), and his friend and namesake, Gregory of Nazianzus. The Cappadocian Fathers were strong defenders of Nicene orthodoxy in the East, and are renowned for their work on Trinitarian theology.³

William Moore and Austin Wilson claim high honours for Gregory of Nyssa:

In the roll of the Nicene Fathers there is no more honoured name than that of Gregory of Nyssa. Besides the praises of his great brother Basil and of his equally great friend Gregory Nazianzen, the sanctity of his life, his theological learning, and his strenuous advocacy of the faith embodied in the Nicene clauses, have received the praises of Jerome, Socrates, Theodoret, and many other Christian writers. Indeed, such was the estimation in which he was held that some did not hesitate to call him ‘the Father of Fathers’ as well as ‘the Star of Nyssa.’⁴

¹ Cf. Moore and Wilson: ‘Scarcely anything is known of the latter years of Gregory of Nyssa’s life. The last record we have of him is that he was present at a Synod of Constantinople, summoned in A.D. 394, by Rufinus, the powerful praefect of the East, under the presidency of Nectorius.’ William Moore and Henry Austin Wilson, ‘Prolegomena’, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. V, *Select Writings and Letters of Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic treatises etc.*, trans. William Moore and Henry Austin Wilson, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1893]), pp. 1-32, (p. 7).

² Cf. Srawley: ‘It is in their attempt to realize this dream of a “league between faith and science” that the importance of the Cappadocian Fathers largely consists.’ James Herbert Srawley, *The Catechetical Orations of Gregory of Nyssa*, ed. James Herbert Srawley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903), p. x. Cf. *The Catholic Encyclopædia*: ‘He belongs to a group known as the “Cappadocian Fathers”, a title which reveals at once his birthplace in Asia Minor and his intellectual characteristics.’ *The Catholic Encyclopædia: An International Work of Reference on the Constitution, Doctrine, Discipline, and History of the Catholic Church*, Vol. VII, ed. Charles G. Herbermann, Edward A. Pace, Condé B. Pallen, Thomas J. Shahan, and John J. Wynne (London: Caxton Publishing Company, 1910), p. 16.

³ Young discusses the difference between Basil and Gregory Nazianzen’s thoughts and the implications of the Council of Constantinople: ‘Discussion about the Holy Spirit raised serious questions about the relationship between tradition and innovation. Could doctrine develop? After all, scripture did not provide clear teaching on the divine nature of the Spirit. Gregory Nazianzen admitted that the Spirit’s divinity was only becoming clear in the life of the church, and that therefore doctrine was not a static entity revealed once and for all. Revelation was progressive, and still continuing. The Old Testament revealed the Father, the New Testament revealed the Son. There were stages of illumination depending upon the capacity of the recipients. [...] Basil had not been so daring; he maintained the over-riding importance of scripture and tradition, and therefore had to find a way of arguing that the divinity of the Holy Spirit was an apostolic doctrine.’ Frances M. Young, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon: A Guide to the Literature and its Background* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1983), p. 109.

⁴ Moore and Wilson, ‘Prolegomena’, p. 1.

Maurice Wiles also calls him the ‘ablest of the Cappadocian Fathers as philosopher and theologian’.⁵ In spite of such praise, however, Gregory of Nyssa tends to be eclipsed by Gregory of Nazianzus. In part, this is because of the latter’s greater orthodoxy. Anthony Meredith observes that

[Gregory of Nyssa’s] writings were never regarded with quite the same degree of reverence as were those of his namesake, Gregory of Nazianzus, who, because of his universal orthodoxy, was surnamed ‘The Theologian’. Gregory of Nyssa’s own views on universal salvation, both in his *Catechetical Oration* (sections 26 and 32) and the *On the Life of Moses*, caused considerable embarrassment to the later editors, who [...] did their best to edit the offending passages out of his writings, above all in the *On the Life of Moses* 2. 82.⁶

In addition to being unfavourably compared to Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa also has to contend with the sanctity of his own family.⁷ Gregory was one of ten children from a large Christian family.⁸ His father died fairly young, and so the family was raised by his mother, Emmelia, and grandmother, Macrina. Many of the children pursued the religious life: two of Gregory’s brothers, Peter and Basil, became bishops; another brother, Naucratus, was a magnificent rhetor, but, at the peak of his success, he gave up the secular life in favour of the life of a hermit;⁹ his sister, Macrina,¹⁰ about whom

⁵ Maurice Wiles, *The Christian Fathers* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1966), p.183.

⁶ Meredith, *Gregory of Nyssa* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 138-9.

⁷ Cf. Moore and Wilson: ‘The family of Gregory of Nyssa was one of considerable wealth and distinction and one also conspicuously Christian.’ Moore and Wilson, ‘Prolegomena’, p. 1.

⁸ Cf. Pfister: ‘some authors, in writing the life of the Bishop of Nyssa, count nine and, at times, ten as the total number of children born to Gregory’s parents, the elder Basil and Emmelia. [...] Gregory has clearly stated that his mother, Emmelia, had ten children. Yet, in [another] passage from the *De vita Macrinae* [...] it was stated that the inheritance, after the death of the father, was divided among nine children, “four sons and five daughters”. This certainly suggests that, of the ten children to whom Emmelia had given birth, only nine were surviving at the time of their father’s death. One of the children, a son, it would seem, must have died at an early age.’ J. Emeile Pfister, ‘A Biographical Note: The Brothers and Sisters of St. Gregory of Nyssa’, *Vigiliae Christianae*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Jun., 1964), 108-113, (p. 108; p. 112).

⁹ Cf. Susanna Elm, ‘*Virgins of God*’: *The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 80. Cf. Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1990 [1988]), p. 287.

¹⁰ Cf. Elm: ‘At the age of 12, she considered herself to be a widow without ever having been married’; ‘By declaring herself a widow and by renouncing marriage Macrina was the first to adopt an ascetic lifestyle. Naucratus followed suit by turning his back upon the world in 352. In 356 or 357 Emmelia renounced her personal luxuries and freed all her slaves; in 357 or early 358 Basil renounced his worldly possessions,

Gregory wrote a spiritual biography, was a model of Christian piety and is recognised as a saint.¹¹ In contrast, Gregory was the only brother who married;¹² his wife was a woman named Theosebia.¹³ He took a job as a rhetorician, but later relinquished the secular life in favour of the priesthood. He was ordained a priest in around A.D. 362, and eventually became a monk.¹⁴ Gregory was made Bishop of Nyssa in A.D. 370/71 by his brother Basil. However, Gregory's faithful adherence to Nicene orthodoxy led to his suffering persecution while in office and to his exile from his See at the hands of Arian Emperors.¹⁵

Gregory appears to have received much of his education at the hand of his older brother Basil,¹⁶ and, indeed, Basil seems to have been a strong influence on Gregory throughout his life. Basil the Great is regarded as a Doctor of the Church and ranks

taking his cue from Naucratus' example.' Elm, *Virgins of God*, p. 87; p. 91. Cf. Peter Brown, *The Body and Society*, pp. 277-9.

¹¹ Cf. Moore and Wilson: 'The daughter, called Macrina, from her grandmother, was the angel in the house of this illustrious family.' Moore and Wilson, 'Prolegomena', p. 1.

¹² Cf. Brown, *The Body and Society*, p. 292.

¹³ Cf. Meredith: 'The name of his wife is a matter of uncertain conjecture from a letter of Gregory Nazianzus. She may have been called Theosebeia.' Anthony Meredith, *The Cappadocians* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1995), p. 52. Cf. *Catholic Encyclopædia*: 'There exists a letter addressed to him by Gregory of Nazianzus condoling with him on the loss of one Theosebia, who must have been his wife, and with whom he continued to live, as with a sister, even after he became a bishop.' *The Catholic Encyclopædia*, Vol. VII, p. 17.

¹⁴ Cf. Farmer: 'After some disillusionment with his post of professor of rhetoric, he was ordained priest (c.362). It is not certain when he became a monk, whether his wife died or became a nun.' David Hugh Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979 [1978]), p. 182.

¹⁵ Cf. Moore and Wilson: 'The enthusiasm of his faith on the subject of the Trinity and the Incarnation brought upon him the full weight of Arian and Sabellian hostility, aggravated as it was by the patronage of the Emperor. In fact his whole life at Nyssa was a series of persecutions.' Moore and Wilson, 'The Prolegomena', p. 5; Cf. Daniélou: 'Gregory was accused of squandering funds. The validity of his Episcopal election was called into question, and he was banished from his See.' Jean Daniélou, 'Introduction' to *From Glory to Glory. Texts from Gregory of Nyssa's Mystical Writings*, selected and with an Introduction by Jean Daniélou, trans. and ed. Herbert Musurillo (London: John Murray, 1962), pp. 3-71, (p. 4); Meredith notes that he was 'exiled in 375 by the Arians, he was allowed to return in 378 in virtue of an imperial decree of that year.' Meredith, *The Cappadocians*, p. 53.

¹⁶ Cf. Moore and Wilson: 'Gregory's father, Basil [...] died at a comparatively early age, leaving a family of ten children, five of whom were boys and five girls, under the care of their grandmother Macrina and mother Emmelia. Both of these illustrious ladies were distinguished for the earnestness and strictness of their Christian principles, to which the latter added the charm of great personal beauty. [...] Gregory of Nyssa was the third son, and one of the youngest of the family.' Moore and Wilson, 'Prolegomena', pp. 1-2.

second after Athanasius as a defender of the Church against heresy. Basil is also considered to be ‘the Father of Oriental Monasticism, [and] the forerunner of Saint Benedict’.¹⁷ Gregory’s works are often evaluated in conjunction with those of his older brother Basil; Meredith writes that, ‘[m]uch of what he wrote was composed in direct response to the suggestion and memory of Basil’.¹⁸ Similarly, Moore and Wilson emphasise the influence of Basil, observing that Gregory’s theological contribution to Trinitarian doctrine is inseparable from his brother’s.¹⁹ Some commentators, however, are anxious to establish Gregory’s importance as an individual; they claim that, although he was heavily influenced by Basil, as well as Origen and Plato, he still demonstrates in his writings that he was a free thinker.²⁰ When Basil died (A.D. 379), Gregory took over from him as the defender of the doctrines of Nicaea.²¹ This is perhaps most notable in his role in the Council of Constantinople.

¹⁷ *The Catholic Encyclopædia: An International Work of Reference on the Constitution, Doctrine, Discipline, and History of the Catholic Church*, Vol. II, ed. Charles G. Herbermann, Edward A. Pace, Condé B. Pallen, Thomas J. Shahan, and John J. Wynne (London: Caxton Publishing Company, 1907), p. 331. Cf. Elm: ‘It is the same Basil of Caesarea, who – in the eyes of his contemporaries and followers – became the founder of monasticism in Asia Minor; who brought order into chaos of experimentation by creating “communities of ascetics and written precepts” that were to set the standards for generations to come.’ Elm, *Virgins of God*, p. 61.

¹⁸ Meredith, *The Cappadocians*, p. 53.

¹⁹ Cf. Moore and Wilson: ‘To estimate the exact value of the work done by S. Gregory in the establishment of the doctrine of the Trinity and in the determination, so far as Eastern Christendom is concerned, of the terminology employed for the expression of that doctrine, is a task which can hardly be satisfactorily carried out. His teaching on the subject is so closely bound up with that of his brother, S. Basil of Caesarea, - his ‘master’, to use his own phrase – that the two can hardly be separated with any certainty.’ Moore and Wilson, ‘Prolegomena’, p. 23.

²⁰ Cf. Meredith: ‘Gregory will on occasion use the arguments of Origen and Basil. Even so, he is not merely a slavish copier of their views; he modifies and will either silently distance himself from them or openly dissent from them. He is a traditionalist in his respect for the great Christian figures of the past, but he has also a mind of his own. In this respect, if in no other, his relationship to Origen is not unlike Plotinus’ relationship to Plato. A respectful admirer, but with a mind of his own.’ Meredith, *Gregory of Nyssa*, p. 133. Cf. Young: ‘That Gregory was no mere eclectic compiler of ideas but a Christian Neo-Platonist who expressed his mystical experience through scriptural symbols allegorically interpreted, has become the standard judgement. Yet some recent studies have called this consensus in question – for after all, the validity of this estimate does depend upon the definition of philosopher or mystic which is operative.’ Young, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon*, p. 116.

²¹ Cf. Srawley: ‘It was the death of Basil in 379 which brought him prominently forward, and placed him in the position of the champion of Catholicism in Cappadocia. The time was rich in opportunities. The year

Jerome's sparse biography of Gregory initially appears to say very little, but it does mention an important work of Gregory's:

Gregory, Bishop of Nyssa, brother of Basil of Caesarea,²² a few years ago read to me and to Gregory of Nazianzus²³ his book, *Against Eunomius*, and he is said to have written and to continue writing many other works.²⁴

The work *Against Eunomius*, to which Jerome so casually refers, was written in defence of Saint Basil's Trinitarian theology and read out at the Council of Constantinople in refutation of the Eunonian heresy.²⁵ Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus were both present at the Council of Constantinople in A.D. 381. Gregory of Nazianzus, however, was thoroughly disappointed with the outcome of the Council, which he felt did

which preceded the death of Basil had witnessed the fall of Arianism and the triumph of the Nicene cause, for which Gregory had borne his witness not only in teaching, but by submitting to banishment at the hands of an Arian governor.' Srawley, *The Catechetical Orations of Gregory of Nyssa*, p. ix.

²² Of Basil the Great, Jerome says: 'Basil, Bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia, which was formerly called Mazaca, composed excellent works: *Against Eunomius*, a work, *On the Holy Spirit*, nine *Homilies on the Hexameron*, an *Ἀσκητικόν*; and other various short works. He died in the reign of the emperor Gratian.' Saint Jerome, 'CXVI. Basil, Another Bishop', *On Illustrious Men (De viris illustribus)*, trans. Thomas P. Halton (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1999), p. 150.

²³ Of Gregory of Nazianzus, Jerome says: 'Gregory of Nazianzus, a bishop, a man of outstanding eloquence, was my teacher, and I learned the Scriptures at his school. He composed all his works in about thirty thousand verses and they include the following: *On the death of his brother, Caesarius*, Περὶ Φιλοπτώχιας, *On the Love of Poverty*, *In Praise of the Maccabees*; *In Praise of Cyprian*; *The Praises of Athanasius*; *The Praises of Maximus the Philosopher* upon his return from exile, to whom some gave the pseudonym Hero, because there is another satirical book by the same Maximus, as if it were not permissible to praise and criticize the same person, depending on the circumstances; and a book in hexameter verse, *On Virginity and Marriage*, in which the pair debate each other; two books, *Against Eunomius*; one book, *On the Holy Spirit*; one book, *Against Julian the Emperor*. He followed the oratorical style of Polemon and ordained another bishop in his own place while he was still alive. He embarked on the monastic life and died almost three years ago, in the reign of the emperor Theodosius.' Saint Jerome, 'CXVII. Gregory, Another Bishop', *On Illustrious Men (De viris illustribus)*, trans. Thomas P. Halton (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1999), p. 151.

²⁴ Saint Jerome, 'CXXVIII. Gregory, Another Bishop', *On Illustrious Men (De viris illustribus)*, trans. Thomas P. Halton (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1999), p. 161.

²⁵ Cf. Moore and Wilson: 'He is one of the hundred and fifty Bishops summoned by Theodosius to the second Ecumenical Council, that of Constantinople, A.D. 381. To the assembled fathers he brings an instalment of his treatise, *Against the Eunomian Heresy*, which he had written in defence of his brother Basil's positions, on the subject of the Trinity and the Incarnation. This he first read to his friend Gregory Nazianzen, Jerome, and others. Such was the influence he exercised in the Council that it is said, though this is very doubtful, that the explanatory clauses added to the Nicene Creed are due to him.' Moore and Wilson, 'The Prolegomena', p. 7.

not go far enough in defining the Holy Spirit's divinity.²⁶ Although Gregory of Nyssa was heavily involved in the battle for Trinitarian orthodoxy, Meredith claims that his main importance is as a writer who exhibits the external influences of his time.²⁷ Certainly, his writings on virginity bear out claims to his importance in this way.

i. *De virginitate (On Virginity)*

De virginitate (On Virginity) is one of Gregory's earliest works, having been written c. A.D. 370/1, around the time of his elevation to the Episcopal See of Nyssa.²⁸ The work is noted for its reliance on Plato's *Symposium*,²⁹ and Moore and Austin claim that '[h]ere is done what students of Plato had doubtless long been asking for, i.e. that his 'love of the Beautiful' should be spiritualized'.³⁰ This implies that Methodius' earlier work had not succeeded in its goal of producing a Christianised version of Plato's *Symposium*.

²⁶ Cf. McGuckin: 'It is the theological vagueness about the divine Spirit that is still present in the words of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, which probably represents, substantively, the doctrinal settlement agreed on in the synod of 381. It is, in Gregory [Nazianzen]'s eyes, fatally compromised for being silent on two issues he had prioritized as necessary for complete orthodox confession: the ascription of the title of God to the Holy Spirit; and the admission that he is consubstantial with the Father and Son.' John McGuckin, *Saint Gregory Nazianzus: An Intellectual Biography* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001), p. 355.

²⁷ Cf. Meredith: 'Gregory's importance for posterity [...] is not to be sought in his ecclesiastico-political addresses and activities. It is as a writer, and above all as one whose views change importantly under certain external influences, that he claims our attention.' Meredith, *The Cappadocians*, p. 53.

²⁸ Cf. Barnes: 'Gregory's earliest writings are typically described as being 'ascetic' in genre, but it would be more accurate (and more helpful) to say that Gregory wrote moral psychology – or even, just 'psychology'. To speak of these writings as ones of 'psychology' cues us instantly to the continuity between Gregory's psychology and other psychologies of the day. Gregory's earliest writing, *On Virginity* (371?), is certainly an 'ascetic' work, but the true subject of the piece is the repair of the soul which Gregory draws significantly from the moral psychologies of his time, especially the Stoic.' Michel René Barnes, 'Divine Unity and the Divided Self: Gregory of Nyssa's Trinitarian Theology and its Psychological Context', in *Re-thinking Gregory of Nyssa*, ed. Sarah Coakley (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004 [2003]), 45-66, (p. 46).

²⁹ Cf. Meredith: 'His greater speculative boldness and his greater indebtedness to Platonic tradition have made him a subject of great fascination to many. His undoubted formal indebtedness to Plato in his *On the Making of Man* and in *On the Soul and Resurrection*, to the *Timaeus* and *Phaedo* of Plato respectively, and his material dependence on Plato's *Symposium* in his *On Virginity* and *Commentary on the Song*, far outweigh anything of the sort in the writings of either Basil or Nazianzen, of Athanasius or Chrysostom.' Meredith, *Gregory of Nyssa*, p. 129.

³⁰ William Moore and Henry Austin Wilson, 'Preface' to *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. V, *Select Writings and Letters of Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic treatises etc.*, trans. William Moore and Henry Austin Wilson, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1893]), pp. vii-ix, (p. viii).

Anthony Meredith discusses the similarities between the sentiments of Plato and

Gregory:

Underlying and enabling the upward movement of the soul in Plato's *Symposium* is the unsatisfied desire to behold ultimate beauty. [...] Part of the purpose of the treatise *On Virginity* is to displace physical love by spiritual love.³¹

This is perhaps how Gregory's work differs from Methodius's treatment of Plato's *Symposium*. Methodius tends to emphasise virginity's opposition to physical love, whereas Gregory conceives of virginity as a means by which man can achieve 'the true object of desire'.³² Whereas Methodius' *Symposium* follows Plato more closely in structure, Gregory's seems to achieve a greater faithfulness to its sentiment by providing a Christian answer to Socrates' celebrated dialogue. It is wrong to assume that Gregory's work does not owe a debt to Methodius' *Symposium*, however. The influence of Methodius' work can be seen throughout his treatise. Gregory was also heavily influenced by Origen, though their attitudes towards the body and philosophy differed.³³ For Origen, philosophy was almost synonymous with theology, but Gregory sees it as a tool for remedying the ailments of the soul.³⁴ Gregory articulates his attitude towards philosophy thus: 'It is also with that medicine of the soul, philosophy, from which we

³¹ Meredith, *The Cappadocians*, p. 55.

³² Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, trans. William Moore and Henry Austin Wilson, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. V, *Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic Treatises, etc.*, ed. Philip Schaff (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995), pp. 343-371, (p. 343).

³³ Cf. Brown, *The Body and Society*, p. 299.

³⁴ Moore and Wilson note that Gregory's works mark 'a transition from Ante-Nicene times. Then, at all events in the hands of Origen, philosophy was identical with theology. Now that there is a "complex of orthodox doctrines" to defend, philosophy becomes the handmaid of theology. Gregory, in this respect, has done the most important service of any of the writers of the Church in the fourth century. He treats each single philosophical view only as a help to grasp the formulae of faith; and the truth of that view consists with him only in its adaptability to that end. Notwithstanding strong speculative leanings he does not defend orthodoxy either in the fashion of the Alexandrian school, or in the fashion of some in modern times, who put forth a system of philosophy to which the dogmas of the faith are to be accommodated.' Moore and Wilson, 'Prolegomena', p. 8.

learn the remedy for every weakness that can touch the soul.’³⁵ It is no surprise that Gregory’s work, though influenced by Origen, also departs from him as the Origenistic speculative approach to theology had been checked by the triumph of Nicene theology. Athanasius’ work and the Council of Nicaea represent a watershed in Christian theology, as it signalled the triumph of scriptural authority over speculative theology. Robert

Thompson notes:

In the field of theology, Athanasius brought controversy away from philosophic speculation to the problem of elucidating a faith already imparted to the Church, where principles rather than specific words were all-important; ‘The importance of Athanasius’ dogmatic theology does not lie in his originality, but in his subordination of reason to faith. He was concerned with the exposition of a given tradition, not with speculative metaphysics.’³⁶

Part of the interest of Gregory of Nyssa’s work, then, is his attempt to mediate between the philosophy of the classical world and the doctrinal and scriptural import of Christian theology.³⁷

In addition to the Origenistic and Platonic tone of the work, the historical milieu of the treatise is important. Meredith suggests that in *On Virginity*, ‘Gregory undertook the important task of giving a theoretical justification to the monastic life, for which his brother had composed his two sets of *Rules*’.³⁸ Likewise, Jean Daniélou claims that *On Virginity* was a means by which Gregory aided Basil in the establishment of oriental monasticism.³⁹ This historical context implies that Gregory’s treatise approaches the ideal

³⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, xxiii, p. 368.

³⁶ Robert W. Thomson ‘Introduction’ to Athanasius, *Contra Gentes and De Incarnatione*, ed. and trans. Robert W. Thomson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), p. xi; p. xix.

³⁷ Cf. Meredith: ‘The value of ancient wisdom, above all the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle, was something that called for discussion. How much of it could be incorporated into the Christian scheme of things without endangering the centre of the faith?’ Meredith, *Gregory of Nyssa*, p. 130.

³⁸ Meredith, *Gregory of Nyssa*, p. 5; Cf. Meredith, *The Cappadocians*, p. 53.

³⁹ Cf. Daniélou: ‘He began to help Basil in the work of establishing monasticism in Cappadocia, and it was to this end that he composed his first work, *The Treatise on Virginity*.’ Daniélou, ‘Introduction’ to *From Glory to Glory*, p. 4.

of virginity from a purely monastic perspective. Gregory does acknowledge that there are rules involved in maintaining virginity, which probably refer to Basil's own *Rules*, but he makes it clear that he has no intention of reproducing them in his treatise, and that such an omission is justified by his desire 'to avoid prolixity'.⁴⁰ He says that

the details of the life of him who has chosen to live in such a philosophy as this, the things to be avoided, the exercises to be engaged in, the rules of temperance, the whole method of the training, and all the daily regiment which contributes towards this great end, has been dealt with in certain written manuals of instruction for the benefit of those who love details.⁴¹

Although *On Virginity* is accepted as a companion piece to Basil's *Rules*, the tone Gregory uses in reference to written rules for virginity is almost dismissive; the rules are typified by 'prolixity' and suitable for those 'who love detail'. Gregory establishes that his treatise is not characterised by such features, and so in this way he can be seen to distance himself from Basil's *Rules*. Gregory says that 'there is a plainer guide to be found than verbal instruction; and that is found in practice'.⁴² In preference to written rules, he advocates the instruction of virginity via three means: by actively living the virginal life,⁴³ by following scriptural *exempla*,⁴⁴ and by imitating living examples of

⁴⁰ Cf. Gregory of Nyssa: 'All the particular rules obeyed by the followers of this high calling will, to avoid prolixity, be omitted here.' Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, p. 343.

⁴¹ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, xxiii, p. 368.

⁴² Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, xxiii, p. 368.

⁴³ Cf. Gregory: 'whether men are silent or whether they speak, there is a large opportunity for being instructed in this heavenly citizenship through the actual practice of it.' Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, xxiii, p. 368.

⁴⁴ Cf. Gregory: 'Well, the Divine books are full of such instruction for our guidance; and besides that many of the Saints cast the refulgence of their own lives, like lamps, upon the path for those who are "walking with God".' Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, xi, p. 357. Gregory also emphasises the need for younger adherents to have an older guide to keep them on the straight and narrow: 'Therefore, since most embrace virginity while still young and unformed in understanding, this before anything else should be their employment, to search out a fitting guide and master of this way, lest, in their present ignorance, they should wander from the direct route, and strike out new paths of their own in trackless wilds.' Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, xxiii, p. 369.

virginity.⁴⁵ In his exhortation to follow contemporary examples, Gregory obliquely alludes to his brother, whom he proffers as the best living example of virginity.⁴⁶

Even though it is agreed that Gregory's work addresses virginity from a monastic standpoint, there is some debate about the nature of the virginity that Gregory advocates. Critics question whether Gregory's virginity refers to a physical state or to a transcendent purity of the soul that is not necessarily predicated on physical virginity. Meredith argues that

Part of the strength and complexity of this fascinating work results from the fact that it is never quite clear for whom precisely it was meant. Nor is it clear whether by virginity Gregory means the physical condition of being a virgin, or the state of interior disposition of purity of heart and self mastery as Gregory, on occasions, suggests, for example in chapters 7 and 15. In the former case it is restricted to the religious, in the latter it is potentially open to everyone.⁴⁷

Considering the monastic context of the work, it seems likely that Gregory is concerned to an extent with physical virginity. However, part of the confusion is due to the problem of the meaning of *παρθενία* (*parthenia*), the Greek word for virginity. Moore and Wilson suggest that there had been a shift in the meaning of this term:

Rupp asserts that more and more towards the end of the century this word [*παρθενία*] acquired a technical meaning derived from the purely ideal side, i.e., virginity of soul and that Gregory is alluding to the same thing that his friend had not long before blamed him for, the keeping of a school for rhetoric, where his object had been merely worldly reputation, and the truly ascetic career had been marred (at the time he wrote).⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Cf. Gregory: 'examples of holy lives are not wanting in the living generation.' Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, xxiv, p. 369.

⁴⁶ Cf. Gregory: 'the examples we have in biographies cannot stimulate to the attainment of excellence, so much as a living voice and an example which is still working for good; and so we have alluded to working for good; and so we have alluded to that most godly bishop, our father in God, who himself alone could be the master in such instruction.' Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, p. 343.

⁴⁷ Meredith, *Gregory of Nyssa*, pp. 5-6.

⁴⁸ Moore and Wilson, 'Prolegomena', p. 3.

Moore and Wilson assert a past precedent for the term's meaning; they maintain that Basil had already used the term to describe a spiritual state of the soul, and that he regarded celibacy as a type of *parthenia* (*παρθενία του σώματος*) which led to a higher *παρθενία*.⁴⁹ Such a dual meaning of virginity does not necessarily indicate a departure from earlier patristic conceptualisations of virginity, however. Indeed, all of the earlier patristic writers conceived of a spiritual and physical virginity, which share a symbiotic relationship, even though the two terms have a different emphasis. Gregory's definition, then, can be seen to echo a pre-existent patristic tradition, which portrays virginity as a state that avoids the whole gamut of sins: 'True virginity,' as Gregory says, 'is free from any stain of sin'.⁵⁰ Thus, Gregory's *parthenia* still recalls that necessary purity of the body and spirit that is articulated in the Scriptures by Saint Paul: 'the unmarried woman and the virgin thinketh on the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and in spirit' (I Corinthians 7: 34). The difference between Gregory's *parthenia* and the understanding of virginity in earlier traditions perhaps lies in a more subtle distinction: whereas earlier Fathers perceived true virginity as a union of bodily and spiritual virginity, Gregory envisages bodily virginity as a vehicle for, or a stepping stone towards, the achievement of the true virginity of the soul.

ii. Marriage

Gregory explains in his introductory remarks that his treatise does not aim simply to praise virginity, but instead, '[t]he object of th[e] treatise is to create in its readers a

⁴⁹ Cf. Moore and Wilson, 'Prolegomena', p. 3.

⁵⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, p. 343.

passion for the life according to [its] excellence'.⁵¹ In order to achieve this end, Gregory outlines the progression of his treatise, which will

begin with the praises of Virginité; the exhortation will come at the end; moreover, as the beauty of anything gains lustre by the contrast with its opposite, it is requisite that some mention should be made of the vexations of everyday life. Then it will be quite in the plan of this work to introduce a sketch of the contemplative life, and to prove the impossibility of any one attaining it who feels the world's anxieties.⁵²

The 'opposite' of virginité, 'the vexations of everyday life', is what Gregory terms as the 'secular life'. This type of life, he asserts, distracts the soul from a full contemplation of God. In order to back up this contention, Gregory cites the words of the 'Divine Apostle' (Saint Paul) as evidence of this truth.⁵³ The passage to which he probably alludes is from I Corinthians 7:

He that is without a wife is solicitous for the things that belong to the Lord, how he may please God. But he that is with a wife, is solicitous for the things of the world, how he may please his wife: and he is divided. And the unmarried woman and the virgin thinketh on the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and in spirit. But she that is married thinketh on the things of the world, how she may please her husband (I Corinthians 7: 32-4).⁵⁴

In this particular passage, Paul specifically associates marriage with the concerns of the world. By extension, Gregory's understanding of the 'secular life' is also synonymous with marriage, and this association is confirmed throughout the treatise.

⁵¹ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginité*, p. 343. Brown says of the work: 'Gregory's *On Virginité* was a *virtuoso* composition that aimed to drench the reader in a fine golden rain of words.' Brown, *The Body and Society*, p. 291.

⁵² Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginité*, p. 343.

⁵³ Cf. Gregory: 'There are many distractions, to use the word of the Divine Apostle, incident to the secular life [...] it is not easy in the entanglements of this secular life to find quiet for that of Divine contemplation.' Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginité*, p. 343.

⁵⁴ Cf. Paul: 'But if thou take a wife, thou hast not sinned. And if a virgin marry, she hath not sinned: nevertheless, such shall have tribulations of the flesh. But I spare you. This therefore I say, brethren; the time is short; it remaineth, that they also who have wives, be as if they had none; And they that weep, as though they wept not; and they that rejoice, as if they rejoiced not; and they that buy, as though they possessed not; And they that use this world, as if they used it not: for the fashion of this world passeth away. But I would have you without solicitude' (I Corinthians 7: 28-32).

Gregory's treatment of marriage begins with a lament for his own unhappy foray into the estate, and articulates an ardent desire for the purity of virginity, from which he is forever debarred:

Happy they who have not debarred themselves from it by engagements of the secular life, as we have, whom a gulf now divides from glorious virginity: no one can climb up to that who has once planted his foot upon the secular life. [...] What a blessing if it had been otherwise, if we had not to learn the good by after-regrets! [...] The more exactly we understand the riches of virginity, the more we must bewail the other life; for we realise by this contrast with the better things, how poor it [the secular life] is.⁵⁵

The 'gulf' which divides Gregory from 'glorious virginity' must refer to his marriage.⁵⁶

The state of virginity, both physical and spiritual, seems to be unattainable to the person who has once 'planted his foot upon the secular life'. Gregory's words articulate the impossibility of retrieving an earlier state of innocence, and so imply that he understands physical virginity to be a necessary prerequisite of 'true virginity'. Moore and Wilson, while acknowledging the remorseful tone of the opening, note that the attitude of the treatise alters as it progresses:

Beginning with a bitter accusation of marriage, Gregory leaves the reader doubtful in the end whether celibacy is necessary or not for the contemplative life, so absorbed he becomes in the task of showing the blessedness of those who look to the source of all visible beauty.⁵⁷

This seeming ambiguity of the treatise is taken up by other critics. In a re-reading of *On Virginity*, Mark D. Hart argues that Gregory's treatise does not articulate a simplistic

⁵⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, iii, p. 345.

⁵⁶ Gregory's wife did not die until A.D. 385. However, as a bishop he would have been expected to refrain from conjugal relations with her.

⁵⁷ Moore and Wilson, 'Preface' *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. V, p. viii.

dichotomy of celibacy *versus* marriage, but instead provides a subtle and ironic approach towards the question of marriage and celibacy.⁵⁸ He says:

To interpret this treatise adequately, one must reconcile [Gregory's] negative comments on marriage with the ideal he also sets forth of combining marriage with a life of contemplation.⁵⁹

Hart argues that Gregory's negative portrayal of the pains of marriage is not anti-marriage *per se*, but shows the problem of placing one's hopes in impermanent things; in such a situation, the soul's happiness and desire is misdirected towards the earthly realm rather than towards God.⁶⁰

The pleasure in marriage which Gregory sees instead to be of greatest danger for the health of the soul is that bittersweet pleasure of companionship (*symbiōsis*). *Symbiōsis* is seen in the mother who feels her children's injuries as her own. The desire for it leads some people to find life intolerable and to commit suicide on the death of a spouse [...] The extreme to which the desire for *symbiōsis* can lead reveals in turn the element of delusion in this desire which Gregory says is 'innate to the unthinking'. The delusion lies in believing that one can 'live' in the minds and bodies of others and find therein a certain permanence, security and even immortality.⁶¹

Hart declares that Gregory does not envision detachment from such earthly concerns in terms of a complete withdrawal from society, such as is afforded in a monastic setting, but rather he promotes a state of emotional detachment. This definition thus allows for marriage to be seen to achieve a type of *παρθενία* (*parthenia*, virginity) in certain

⁵⁸ Cf. Hart: 'Interpreters of this treatise have failed to recognise, however, the irony with which Gregory writes about marriage and celibacy in this treatise, not always stating directly his full opinion.' Mark D. Hart, 'Reconciliation of the Body and Soul: Gregory of Nyssa's Deeper Theology of Marriage', *Theological Studies*, 51 (1990), 450-478, (p. 451).

⁵⁹ Hart, 'Reconciliation of the Body and Soul', p. 451. See also: Martin Laird, 'Under Solomon's Tutelage: The Education of Desire in the Homilies on the Song of Songs', in *Re-thinking Gregory of Nyssa*, ed. Sarah Coakley (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004 [2003]), pp. 77-95, (pp. 77-8).

⁶⁰ Cf. Hart: 'The true object of his rhetorical venom is not marriage *per se* but the desire for pleasure and misguided expectations of happiness which are the basis of most marriages.' Hart, 'Reconciliation of the Body and Soul', p. 455.

⁶¹ Hart, 'Reconciliation of the Body and Soul', p. 455.

contexts.⁶² It is in this sense, Hart argues, that Gregory ‘considers marriage under the aspect of *leitourgia*, public service, rather than the search for gratifying companionship’.⁶³ Hart thus avers that Gregory believes that a marriage contracted and used simply for the purpose of public service can achieve the higher state of *παρθενία*.

Hart not only argues that such an emotionless marriage is proffered by Gregory as a version of *parthenia*, but that

In addition to its conventional meaning, marriage comes to be a metaphor for passionate attachment in general, just as virginity, in addition to its conventional meaning of celibacy, refers also to a general attitude of non-attachment possible also in marriage.⁶⁴

Hart seems to suggest that Gregory only disparages marriage in its metaphorical guise.⁶⁵ He also dismisses the initial regret that Gregory articulates early on in the treatise as an ironic comment.⁶⁶ Hart’s argument, however, is difficult to maintain fully. First of all, it disregards the monastic context in which Gregory is writing, and also implies that Gregory had a radically different outlook from his older brother Basil.⁶⁷ Some of Gregory’s comments concerning the necessity of monastic rule perhaps can be read as slightly subversive, but if Gregory was suggesting that virginity and marriage were equally valid, and could reach the transcendental *parthenia*, then he would be contradicting everything that Saint Paul says in his First Letter to the Corinthians, and

⁶² Cf. Hart, ‘Reconciliation of the Body and Soul’, p. 456. Cf. Hart: ‘the soul’s desire for union with God may in fact be reconciled with the needs of family and community life that arise from the body, once the truer nature of spiritual development is understood.’ Hart, ‘Reconciliation of the Body and Soul’, p. 451.

⁶³ Hart, ‘Reconciliation of the Body and Soul’, p. 456.

⁶⁴ Hart, ‘Reconciliation of the Body and Soul’, p. 458.

⁶⁵ Cf. Hart: ‘Gregory thus calls marriage “the common starting point of error” concerning what is truly valuable. “Marriage” now has become a metaphor for *the wrong way of joining oneself to what is*.’ Hart, ‘Reconciliation of the Body and Soul’, p. 461 (Hart’s emphasis).

⁶⁶ Cf. Hart: ‘His complaint in chapter 3 that his own marriage separates him from the benefits of celibate life is thus to be read as ironic.’ Hart, ‘Reconciliation of the Body and Soul’, p. 477.

⁶⁷ Cf. Hart: ‘This separation does not mean literal withdrawal from marriage and the world, as it seems to have meant for Gregory’s brother Basil, but is an intra-psychic separation. For those who are able to attend to their experience and learn from it, the lessons of separation and detachment from the world are in fact present in marriage as well.’ Hart, ‘Reconciliation of the Body and Soul’, p. 465.

would have earned himself a place alongside the fourth-century heresiarch Jovinian. Although Gregory certainly identifies a distinction between spiritual and physical virginity, and also states that a physical virgin does not guarantee possession of the higher *parthenia*, physical virginity seems to be an essential step on the path to the achievement of spiritual virginity.

This is not to say, however, that Gregory regards marriage as an absolute barrier to the achievement of some form of contemplative life; indeed, at one point in the text, Gregory seems to concede that it may be possible to combine the married and contemplative life:

What, then, were we saying? That in the cases where it is possible at once to be true to the diviner love, and to embrace wedlock, there is no reason for setting aside the dispensation of nature and misrepresenting as abominable that which is honourable.⁶⁸

This passage does not state, however, that marriage can achieve the transcendental perfection of *parthenia*. Indeed, it does not even make a clear statement that it is possible to ‘at once be true to the diviner love, and to embrace wedlock’. Instead, Gregory suggests that an ideal marriage would pay little heed to the desires of the body and treat them as if they were like any other bland physical need:

About the details of paying these trifling debts of nature he will not be over-calculating, but the long hours of his prayers will secure the purity which the keynote of his life.⁶⁹

Gregory uses the metaphor of a stream to illustrate his vision of the type of temperate marriage which can combine the love of God with the emotional requirements of an earthly union: if a husbandman needed to leak out a little bit of water into a small outlet

⁶⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, viii, p. 353.

⁶⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, viii, p. 353.

from a stream to irrigate some land, he would only take as much as he needed and then seal the leak.⁷⁰ In an ideal marriage, a man must use marital intercourse in the same way:

In the same way, if [...] a man so treats this need as to give spiritual things the first thought, and because of the shortness of the time indulges but sparingly the sexual passion and keeps it under restraint, that man would realise the character of the prudent husbandman. [...] He will always fear lest by this kind of indulgence he may become nothing but flesh and blood; for in them God's Spirit does not dwell.⁷¹

Although Gregory can envision a situation in which a man can combine the physical side of marriage and remain close to God, he still recognises that there may be danger in the use of sexual intercourse in marriage. Such 'indulgence' can distract man away from God and cause him to revel instead in the needs of the flesh. Sexual passions are dangerous as they threaten to turn man into 'a Pleasure-lover, not a God-lover'.⁷² Elsewhere in the treatise, Gregory uses the image of the divided stream to express the impossibility of such a divided mind reaching the contemplative life: 'It is impossible,' he says, 'for the mind which is poured into many channels to win its way to the knowledge and the love of God.'⁷³ Gregory also speaks of marriage and procreation as harbingers of death; they provide fodder for death through the creation of more humans, whom Gregory describes as the 'victims for this executioner [death]'.⁷⁴ Marriage, he says, is like a sword: beautiful in its workmanship and its shining polish, but death-bringing in its action.⁷⁵ In contrast, through virginity mankind can wean himself from a life of death to one of immortality. By joining oneself to the spirit, rather than to the flesh, 'immortality instead of children

⁷⁰ Cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, viii, p. 353.

⁷¹ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, viii, p. 353.

⁷² Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, viii, p. 353.

⁷³ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, vi, p. 351.

⁷⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, xiii, p. 360.

⁷⁵ Cf. Gregory: 'The hilt of a sword is smooth and handy, and polished and glittering outside; it seems to grow to the outline of the hand; but the other part is steel and the instrument of death, formidable to look at, more formidable still to come across. Such a thing is marriage.' Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, XIII, p. 360.

are produced'.⁷⁶ Gregory proffers Mary's virginity as an example of this, as it was the means by which death was destroyed; he claims further that virginity continues to realise this victory over death.⁷⁷

Although Gregory accepts the possibility of a level of purity in marriage and affirms that it is admirable for Christians, he does not suggest that the happy combination of 'diviner love' and 'purity' that can be achieved in marriage is equivalent to the spiritual perfection of true *parthenia*. Can a husband reconcile the demands of a marriage and 'the long hours of prayers' necessary to realise a way of life that gives God His due? It is not certain that dispassion in marriage is possible to achieve, or even that it is desirable for married couples. Certainly, Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians explicitly states that these two aspirations are mutually exclusive because marriage diverts attention away from God. Gregory does, however, accept another version of chastity where a man can exist in chaste wedlock and devote himself to God; this is only achieved once the necessity of nature has been satisfied:

But our view of marriage is this; that while the pursuit of heavenly things should be a man's first care, yet if he can use the advantages of marriage with sobriety and moderation, he need not despise this way of serving the state.⁷⁸

Gregory gives the example of Isaac, who, he says, only cohabited with Rebecca until their children were born, after which he 'lived wholly for the Unseen'.⁷⁹ Gregory's sanctioning of the marriage state, then, seems to be on the proviso that, after the

⁷⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, xiii, p. 359.

⁷⁷ Cf. Gregory: '[death] found in virginity a barrier, to pass which was an impossible feat. Just as, in the age of Mary the mother of God, he who had reigned from Adam to her time found, when he came to her and dashed his forces against the fruit of her virginity as against a rock, that he was shattered to pieces upon her, so in every soul which passes through this life in the flesh under the protection of virginity, the strength of death is in a manner broken and annulled, for he does not find the places upon which he may fix his sting.' Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, xiii, pp. 359-60.

⁷⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, viii, p. 353.

⁷⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, viii, p. 353.

fulfillment of the natural impulses of man, conjugal relations cease in order to enable a closer relationship with God. He condemns the man who opts for remarriage, likening him to a slave who has returned to an old master.⁸⁰ Like Saint Paul, Gregory states throughout his treatise that marriage, the embroilment in the secular life, irrevocably destroys *parthenia*. Gregory's recognition of his own inability to reclaim virginity at the start of the treatise is reiterated towards the end. He says that, whereas the man who has lost his patrimony can hope for its return in some way, 'the man who has ejected himself from this calling, deprives himself as well of all hope of a return to better things'.⁸¹ If virginity only referred to a contemplative state which was still attainable after marriage, then Gregory would not represent it as irretrievable once lost.

Gregory demonstrates the spiritual rewards of maintaining physical virginity through the examples of two virginal prophets, Elias and John the Baptist, who found favour with God because they were unmarried. Gregory explains that they

dedicated their hearts to the Lord that they were unsullied by any earthly passion; because the love of wife or child, or any other human call, did not intrude upon them, and they did not even think their daily sustenance worthy of an anxious thought; because they showed themselves above any magnificence of dress, and made shift with that which chance offered them, one clothing himself in goat-skins, the other with camel's hair. It is my belief that they would not have reached to this loftiness of spirit, if marriage had softened them.⁸²

The claim that John and Elias were closer to God because neither of them was shackled by the cares of marriage and the concomitant cares of the world echoes the words of

⁸⁰ Cf. Gregory: 'Once slaves are freed they do not return to their former masters. In the same way, men who have been freed from marriage should not be "bound again [...] with the fetters of marriage".' Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, xviii, p. 364.

⁸¹ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, xxiii, p. 369.

⁸² Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, vi, p. 351.

Christ when he said that mankind must reject all earthly connections in order to be worthy of God:⁸³

He that loveth father or mother more than me, is not worthy of me; and he that loveth son or daughter more than me, is not worthy of me. (Matthew 10: 37)

If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14: 26)

Gregory concludes that John and Elias' virginity provided them with a spiritual clarity, enabling them to become the conduits of prophecy;⁸⁴ because their souls were unfettered by mundane concerns, they could perceive a truer spiritual awareness.⁸⁵ Their lives also had a didactic function:

The great prophets, then, whom we have mentioned seem to teach this lesson, viz. to entangle ourselves with none of the objects of this world's effort; marriage is one of these, or rather it is the primal root of all striving after vanities.⁸⁶

Gregory is very clear about the detrimental effect of marriage; it is barrier to the achievement of an absolutely contemplative life. He consistently asserts throughout the treatise that all the evils of the world - ambition, luxury, and pride - stem from entering into the marriage state: 'Pride', he says, 'is the seed-root of all the thorns of sin; but it is

⁸³ Cf. Mark: 'Jesus answering, said: Amen I say to you, there is no man who hath left house or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or children, or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who shall not receive an hundred times as much, now in this time; houses and brethren, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands, with persecutions: and in the world to come life everlasting.' (Mark 10: 29-30); Cf. Matthew: 'And every one that hath left house, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands for my name's sake, shall receive an hundredfold, and shall possess life everlasting' (Matthew 19: 29).

⁸⁴ Cf. Gregory: 'Thus they attained a cloudless calm of soul, and were raised to the heights of Divine favour which Scripture records of each. Elias, for instance, became the dispenser of God's earthly gifts; he had authority to close at will the uses of the sky against the sinners and to open them to the penitent. John is not said indeed to have done any miracle; but the gift in him was pronounced by Him Who sees the secrets of a man greater than any prophets.' Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, vi, p. 351.

⁸⁵ Cf. Gregory: 'The man whose thoughts are fixed upon the invisible is necessarily separated from all the ordinary events of life; his judgements as to the True Good cannot be confused and led astray by the deceits arising from the senses.' Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, vi, p. 351.

⁸⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, vii, p. 352.

from reasons connected with marriage that this pride mostly begins.⁸⁷ The remedy is to avoid marriage, which allows one to escape pride and sinfulness and progress towards God:

But if his thoughts are above, walking as it were with God, he will be lifted out of the maze of all these errors; for the predisposing cause of them all, marriage, has not touched him. [...] One way to escape is open: it is to be attached to none of these things, and to get as far away as possible from the society of this emotional and sensual world; or rather, for a man to go outside the feelings which his own body gives rise to.⁸⁸

The only solution that ensures the avoidance of becoming embroiled in secular concerns is to reject everything that connects mankind with the world. Rejecting marriage, the ‘predisposing cause’ of ‘the maze of all these errors’, is the first step on the road to achieving the contemplative life. Not only does marriage entangle man in a life of sinfulness, but it does not bring many pleasures in exchange. Following the classical commonplace of *molestiae nuptiarum*, the annoyance of marriage, Gregory enumerates all the trials of marriage.⁸⁹ These he contrasts with the ‘choicest sweets’ of life, ‘the sum total of all that is hoped for in marriage’.⁹⁰ He argues that even the best of marriages is thwarted by the shadow of mutability, which mars all its sweetness: death in childbirth,⁹¹ the pains of motherhood,⁹² and the early death of spouses.⁹³ If anyone doubts Gregory’s words, he advises them to seek the testimony of ‘those women who actually know it.’⁹⁴ The trials of marriage are a universal experience.

⁸⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, iv, p. 349.

⁸⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, iv, p. 349; p. 351.

⁸⁹ Gregory also provides some classical *exempla* from dramatic poets. Cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, iii, p. 348.

⁹⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, iii, p. 345.

⁹¹ Cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, iii, p. 346.

⁹² Cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, iii, p. 347.

⁹³ Cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, iii, p. 347.

⁹⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, iii, p. 347.

Although Gregory's assessment of marriage often appears to be bleak, he disclaims that he is depreciating marriage and acknowledges that it is a blessing given by God.⁹⁵ Gregory alludes to the biblical condemnation of those who do malign marriage, and seeks to distance himself from such irreligious ideas.⁹⁶ Indeed, the Canons of the Council of Gangra (c. 325-381) indicate that there was an increasing awareness in the Church for the need to restrict more extreme forms of asceticism, which not only sought to praise the virginal life, but did so to the detriment of marriage.⁹⁷ As a Christian Gregory cannot discredit marriage as a viable lifestyle, and he is keen to demonstrate that, although he prefers virginity, he does not denigrate marriage. He also counsels

⁹⁵ The reason why he does not provide a discourse encouraging marriage is, he says, because 'the common instincts of mankind can plead sufficiently on its behalf, instincts which prompt by a spontaneous bias to take the high road of marriage for the procreating of children, whereas virginity in a way thwarts this natural impulse, it is a superfluous task to compose formally an Exhortation to marriage.' Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, viii, p. 352.

⁹⁶ Cf. Paul: 'Now the Spirit manifestly saith, that in the last times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to spirits of error, and doctrines of devils, speaking lies in hypocrisy, and having their conscience seared, forbidding to marry, to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving by the faithful, and by them that have known the truth' (I Timothy 4: 1-3).

⁹⁷ Cf. *The Council of Gangra*: 'I. If any one shall condemn marriage, or abominate and condemn a woman who is a believer and devout, and sleeps with her husband, as though she could not enter the Kingdom [of heaven] let him be anathema' (p. 92); 'IX. If any one shall remain a virgin, or observe continence, abstaining from marriage because he abhors it, and not on account of the beauty and holiness of virginity itself, let him be anathema' (p. 95); 'X. If any one of those who are living a virgin life for the Lord's sake shall treat arrogantly the married, let him be anathema' (p. 96); 'XIII. If any woman, under pretence of asceticism, shall change her apparel and, instead of a woman's accustomed clothing, shall put on that of a man, let her be anathema' (p. 97); 'XIV. If any woman shall forsake her husband, and resolve to depart from him because she abhors marriage, let her be anathema' (p. 98); 'XV. If anyone shall forsake his own children and shall not nurture them, nor so far as in him lies, rear them in becoming piety, but shall neglect them, under pretence of asceticism, let him be anathema' (p. 98); 'XVI. If, under any pretence of piety, any children shall forsake their parents, particularly [if the parents are] believers, and shall withhold becoming reverence from their parents, on the plea that they honour piety more than them, let them be anathema' (p. 99); 'XVII. If any woman from pretended asceticism shall cut off her hair, which God gave her as the reminder of her subjection, thus annulling as it were the ordinance of her subjection, let her be anathema' (p. 99). *The Canons of the Holy Fathers assembled at Gangra, which were set forth after the Council of Nice [Nicaea]*, A.D. 325-381, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. XIV, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church: Their Canons and dogmatic decrees* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1900]), pp. 92-103.

mankind to follow the middle course in his attitude towards the merits of virginity and marriage: he should not adopt an extreme position on either estate.⁹⁸

Gregory does accept that married persons can develop a more spiritual relationship with God, although this appears to require them to pursue a continent or passionless marriage. A fertile marriage, however, brings forth children and so diverts man from the cares of God to the cares of one's own family. Therefore, even if a couple indulge in intercourse only until they have had their family and then live in continence, they would still be troubled with the cares of the world which attend earthly love. Human relations, then, always dilute the ardour which ought to be directed primarily towards God,⁹⁹ but this is true regardless of whether such relationships are sexual or platonic.

iii. The Virtue of Virginity and Trinitarian Orthodoxy

Gregory describes virginity as the highest form of virtue. This, he says, is because 'among the many results of virtuous endeavour this alone has been honoured with the title of the thing that is uncorrupted'.¹⁰⁰ Thus virginity is pre-eminent because it has divine characteristics:

Now if the achievement of this saintly virtue consists in making one 'without blemish and holy' and these epithets are adopted in their first and fullest force to glorify the incorruptible Deity, what greater praise of virginity can there be than thus to be shown in a manner *deifying* those who share in her pure mysteries, so that they become partakers of His glory Who is in actual truth the only Holy and

⁹⁸ Cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, viii, pp. 352-3. This recommendation of temperance reverberates throughout the treatise. Gregory counsels moderation and temperance in all things; he says that 'temperance's highest aim [is that] it looks not to the afflicting of the body, but to the peaceful action of the soul's function' (*On Virginity*, xxii, p. 368). Gregory condemns eating and drinking to excess (Cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, xxi, p. 366), and excessive asceticism: those who are 'too bent upon regulations which merely affect the body, that they can no longer walk in their heavenly freedom and gaze above' (*On Virginity*, xxii, p. 367). Gregory gives a medical explanation of the balance of the four humours and recommends the advancement towards a state of bodily harmony, avoiding both 'excess' and 'defect' (*On Virginity*, xxii, p. 367).

⁹⁹ Gregory avers that a man who is 'poured into many channels' cannot effectively serve God as well. Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, vi, p. 351.

¹⁰⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, i, p. 344.

Blameless One; their purity and their incorruptibility being the means of bringing them into relationship with Him?¹⁰¹

His argument is reminiscent of Methodius' portrayal of virginity as a means through which mankind can regain the Likeness of God, and Thekla's etymological association of virginity with divinity.¹⁰² Gregory's thesis turns on the idea that the Godhead is pure and uncorrupt, and so therefore everything which is a manifestation of purity and incorruption must reflect God. Gregory asserts that virginity is a means by which one becomes like God, because God alone is Uncorrupted. Virgins are, in effect, deified because they partake in this aspect of His nature: to live as a virgin is to live a divine life. This feature of virginity then leads Gregory into a discussion of the way that virginity supports the theological idea of the Triune Godhead. In discussing the 'surpassing excellence of this grace', he states that

It is comprehended in the idea of the Father incorrupt; and here at the outset is a paradox, viz. that virginity is found in Him, Who has a Son and yet without passion has begotten Him. It is included too in the nature of this Only-begotten God, Who struck the first note of all this moral innocence; it shines forth equally in His pure and passionless generation. Again a paradox; that the Son should be known to us by virginity. It is seen, too, in the inherent and incorruptible purity of the Holy Spirit; for when you have named the pure and incorruptible you have named virginity.¹⁰³

Gregory follows Athanasius in the use of virginity as an emblem of orthodoxy.¹⁰⁴

Whereas previous treatises had associated virginity only with Christ, Gregory's *On*

¹⁰¹ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, ii, p. 344.

¹⁰² Cf. Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, I.iv; v, p. 10. Cf. Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, VIII.i, p. 67.

¹⁰³ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, ii, p. 344.

¹⁰⁴ Moore and Wilson, however, claim that Gregory is less concerned with demonstrating the concurrence of virginity with orthodoxy than with the spiritual development of the human: 'Gregory deals with the celibate life in a different way from other Catholic writers upon this theme. Athanasius and Basil both saw in it the means of exhibiting to the world the Christian life definitely founded on the orthodox faith; and, for each celibate himself, this visible imitation of Christ would be more concentrated when secular distractions and dissipations had been put aside for ever. Their aims were entirely moral and ecclesiastical. But Gregory deals with the entire human development in things spiritual.' William Moore and Henry

Virginity reflects his own interest in Trinitarian orthodoxy by demonstrating that virginity is apparent in all three Persons of the Trinity, not just in the physical condition of the Son. The Holy Spirit is pure and incorrupt, and virginity reveals some of the wondrous paradoxes of Christianity: virginity is manifested in God the Father, Who begot the Son without passion. Also, it is the virginal generation of the Son which makes His Godhead known. Gregory, like Athanasius, acknowledges the important link between the state of virginity and the Incarnation:

This, I think, was the reason why our Master, Jesus Christ Himself, the Fountain of all innocence, did not come into the world by wedlock. It was to divulge by manner of His Incarnation this great secret; that purity is the only complete indication of the presence of God and of His coming, and that no one can in reality secure this for himself, unless he has altogether estranged himself from the passions of the flesh.¹⁰⁵

Virginity identifies the divinity of the Son through the wonder of the Virgin Birth and this is confirmed by the virginity of His flesh and the virginal purity of His life on earth. Because virginity manifests Christ's divinity, its presence in mankind also reveals God's indwelling presence in the one who exhibits it. So, while imitating Mary's pure estate, virginity has the ability to call down God's grace and in a sense restage the Incarnation, but in a spiritual manner:

What happened in the stainless Mary when the fullness of the Godhead which was in Christ shone out through her, that happens in every soul that leads by rule of the virgin life. No longer indeed does the Master come with bodily presence; 'we know Christ no longer according to the flesh'; but, spiritually, He dwells in us and brings His Father with Him, as the Gospel somewhere tells. [John 14: 23]¹⁰⁶

Austin Wilson, 'Preface' to Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, in *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, Vol. V, *Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic Treatises, etc.*, ed. Philip Schaff (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995), p. 342.

¹⁰⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, ii, p. 344.

¹⁰⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, ii, pp. 344-5.

Gregory affirms that virginity facilitated the Incarnation, in which God reached down to earth and dwelt with man,¹⁰⁷ and that it continues this process, enabling God to dwell in the souls of men and allowing mankind to reach back towards heaven:¹⁰⁸

while [virginity] remains in Heaven with the Father of spirits, and moves in the dance of the celestial powers, it nevertheless stretches out hands for man's salvation; that while it is the channel which draws down the Deity to share man's estate, it keeps wings for man's desires to rise to heavenly things, and is a bond of union between the Divine and human, by its mediation bringing into harmony these existences so widely divided.¹⁰⁹

Virginity is a way by which man can extricate himself from the baseness of his passionate nature.¹¹⁰ Virginity acts as a bridge between the Divine and the human, those two 'widely divided' states, because it possesses elements of both; it mediates between God and mankind.

iv. Neo-Platonism

As well as drawing out ways that virginity accords with Nicene and Trinitarian orthodoxy, Gregory exploits the classical heritage of the Christian world by creating a Neo-Platonic vision of virginity.¹¹¹ He states that the goal of humanity is 'the intellectual

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, I.iv, p. 9.

¹⁰⁸ The conception of virginity as a re-enactment of the Incarnation echoes Athanasius. Cf. Athanasius, *First Letter to Virgins*, xliii, p. 288.

¹⁰⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, ii, p. 345.

¹¹⁰ Cf. Gregory: 'By the love of God it has been bestowed on those who have received their life from the will of flesh and from blood; that, when human nature has been debased by passionate inclinations, it stretches out its offer of purity like a hand to raise it up again and make it look above.' Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, ii, p. 344.

¹¹¹ Young argues that Gregory's Platonic vision is different from Plato's: 'it is clear that in certain respects Gregory breaks with traditional Platonic presuppositions. One was the universal presupposition that perfection is static, an ultimate to be reached by philosophical assent. [...] But Gregory saw perfection in terms of constant progress. There is no limit to virtue; so perfection cannot be grasped or possessed. The race goes on forever; the ascent is never-ending. To gain a vision of God, it is necessary to follow Him. There is no danger of the soul becoming satiated and therefore being distracted from the pursuit of God, for every summit reached is a revelation of greater heights above.' Young, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon*, p. 117.

contemplation of immaterial beauty'.¹¹² This cannot be achieved by those who live a mundane life:

The constant endeavour in such a course is to prevent the nobility of the soul from being lowered by these sensual outbreaks, in which the mind no longer maintains its heavenly thoughts and upward gaze, but sinks down to the emotions belonging to the flesh and blood.¹¹³

Gregory suggests that an appreciation of God cannot be achieved by an attachment to earthly things; the two are incompatible.¹¹⁴ The love of the mundane constantly drags men's souls away from God: how is a soul that is 'busied with merely the pleasures of the flesh', he asks, able to gaze upon 'its kindred intellectual light'?¹¹⁵ Such a bestial soul resembles swine, whose eyes are trained always on the ground.¹¹⁶ It is only through the rejection of earthly things, through virginity, that mankind can begin to achieve harmony with God:

Virginity of the body is devised to further such a disposition of the soul; it aims at creating in it complete forgetfulness of natural emotions; it would prevent the necessity of ever descending to the call of fleshly needs. Once freed from such, the soul runs no risk of becoming, through a growing habit of indulging in that which seems to a certain extent conceded by nature's law, inattentive and ignorant of Divine and undefiled delights. Purity of the heart, that master of our lives, alone can capture them.¹¹⁷

Gregory draws a distinction between the virginity of the body and virginity of the soul; the former enables the individual to achieve the latter. Although 'nature's law', that is,

¹¹² Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, v, p. 351.

¹¹³ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, v, p. 351.

¹¹⁴ Cf. Gregory: 'To look with a free devoted gaze upon heavenly delights, the soul will turn itself from earth; it will not even partake of the recognized indulgences of the secular life; it will transfer all its powers of affection from material objects to the intellectual contemplation of immaterial beauty.' Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, v, p. 351.

¹¹⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, v, p. 351.

¹¹⁶ Cf. Gregory: 'The eyes of swine, turning naturally downwards, have no glimpse of the wonders of the sky; no more can the soul whose body drags it down look any longer upon the beauty above; it must pore perforce upon the things which though natural are low and animal.' Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, v, p. 351.

¹¹⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, v, p. 351.

marriage and childbearing, is allowable as a concession to mankind, it has a negative effect as it leads to forgetfulness of God in the soul. Virginity, in contrast, enables the forgetfulness of the body's fleshly needs and facilitates a complete commitment to God.¹¹⁸ By discarding the heaviness of the body, the soul is able to soar upwards to God. 'Virginity,' Gregory says, 'is the practical method in the science of the Divine life, furnishing men with the power of assimilating themselves with spiritual nature.'¹¹⁹ As explained by Gregory, virginity of the body is a way of life which imitates the divine, and in doing so is able to become like the divine and so achieve the uncorrupted state of virginity of the soul. Gregory's view of a transcendent virginal truth appears to follow the Platonic course, articulated in Plato's allegory of the cave: bodily virginity is an image of true (spiritual) virginity, which is a reflection of the divine (a reflection of a reflection of an Ideal).¹²⁰ In this sense, physical integrity is a necessary prerequisite for transcendental *parthenia*.

¹¹⁸ Wiles identifies a problem with the single-mindedness of the ascetic life: '[Asceticism's] underlying conviction that God is most fully to be known by escape from the phenomenal world rather than through the sacramental use of it is Greek rather than biblical in origin. Moreover, where that full knowledge of God is believed to require a detachment not only from material things but also from people, it gives rise to a subtle form of self-centredness. The man whose sole concern is to lose himself in God may seem to have reached the highest pinnacle of spirituality, but he may in fact be guilty of a too exclusive concern with self. This danger was fully realised by those who in the fourth century initiated and guided the development of the monastic system. They stressed the importance of belonging to a community, and often also of practical service to the wider community outside, as an antidote to the self-concern which could so easily be engendered in those who aspired to the purely solitary life.' Wiles, *The Christian Fathers*, p.171.

¹¹⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, v, p. 351.

¹²⁰ Cf. Plato: 'Imagine human beings living in an underground, cave-like dwelling, with an entrance a long way up, which is both open to the light and as wide as the cave itself. They've been there since childhood, fixed in the same place, with their necks and legs fettered, able to see only in front of them, because their bonds prevent them from turning their heads around. Light is provided by a fire burning far above and behind them. Also behind them, but on higher ground, there is a path stretching between them and the fire. Imagine that along this path a low wall has been built, like the screen in front of puppeteers above which they show their puppets. [...] Then also imagine that there are several people along the wall, carrying all kinds of artefacts that project above it – statues of people and other animals, made out of stone, wood, and every material. And, as you'd expect, some of the carriers are talking, and some are silent. [...] This whole image, Glaucon, must be fitted together with what we said before. The visible realm should be likened to the prison dwelling, and the light of the fire inside it to the power of the sun. And if you interpret the upward journey and the study of things above as the upward journey of the soul to the intelligible realm,

Gregory waxes lyrical on the ineffability of the Divine: ‘We have not learnt,’ he says, ‘the peculiar language expressive of this beauty.’¹²¹ It can only be reached by transcending the earthly realm:

The Beauty which is invisible and formless, which is destitute of qualities and far removed from everything which we recognize in bodies by the eye, can never be made known by the traits which require nothing but the perceptions of our senses in order to be grasped. Not that we despair of winning this object of our love, though it does seem too high for our comprehension. The more reason shows the greatness of this thing which we are seeking, the higher we must lift our thoughts and excite them with the greatness of that object; and we must fear to lose our share in that transcendent Good.¹²²

Gregory recommends achieving this through stages; his instruction recalls Socrates’ dialogue in Plato’s *Symposium*. In this text, Socrates relates a discourse, which he says was taught to him by Diotima of Mantinea, on the true nature of love and the means by which man can reach a contemplation of transcendent Beauty. According to her, ‘what love wants is not beauty as you think it is [but...] reproduction and birth in beauty’.¹²³ In order to achieve this end, a lover must progress through various stages; the first stage is that a lover must ‘devote himself to beautiful bodies’.¹²⁴ This begins with loving the beauty of one body, and then progressing to a more universal appreciation of bodies.¹²⁵

you’ll grasp what I hope to convey, since that is what you wanted to hear about. Whether it is true or not, only the god knows. But this is how I see it. In the knowable realm, the term of the good is the last thing to be seen, and it is reached only with difficulty. Once one has seen it, however, one must conclude that it is the cause of all that is correct and beautiful in anything, that it produces both light and its source in the visible realm, and that in the intelligible realm it controls and provides truth and understanding, so that anyone who is to act sensibly in private or public must see it.’ Plato, *The Republic*, VII, trans. G. M. A. Grube, rev. by C. D. C. Reeve, in Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. John M Cooper (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), pp. 971-1223, (p. 1132; p. 1135).

¹²¹ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginit*y, x, p. 354.

¹²² Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginit*y, x, p. 355.

¹²³ Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff, in Plato, *Complete Works* (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), pp. 457-505, (p. 490).

¹²⁴ Plato, *Symposium*, p. 492.

¹²⁵ Cf. Plato: ‘First, if the leader leads aright, he should love one body and beget beautiful ideas there; then he should realize that the beauty of one body is brother to the beauty of any other and that if he is to pursue beauty of form he’d be very foolish not to think that the beauty of all bodies is one and the same. When he

From there, the lover can begin to appreciate the beauty of men's souls.¹²⁶ Socrates' progression towards a transcendent beauty is very much rooted in classical pederasty, and even the appreciation of the beautiful souls of men has a sexual outlet, as it is supposed to prompt the lover to love him even if his body is repugnant. After the appreciation of men's souls, the lover is able to progress to a wider sense of beauty, which is beyond the body: he must appreciate the beauty of activities and laws.¹²⁷ The man who can see the beauty in laws and activities can then progress to the beauty of knowledge,¹²⁸ and to a more contemplative appreciation of Beauty itself.¹²⁹

Although Gregory's Platonic vision of virginity follows Socrates' explanation of a progressive movement towards a transcendent state, this process does not begin with the appreciation of outward things. Gregory draws a distinction between the superficial soul, which looks only to the outer man for comprehension, whereas the penetrating and

grasps this, he must become a lover of all beautiful bodies, and he must think that this wild gaping after one body is a small thing and despise it.' Plato, *Symposium*, p. 492.

¹²⁶ Cf. Plato: 'After this he must think that the beauty of people's souls is more valuable than the beauty of their bodies, so that if someone is decent in his soul, even though he is scarcely blooming in his body, our lover must be content to love and care for him and seek to give birth to such ideas as will make young men better.' Plato, *Symposium*, pp. 492-3.

¹²⁷ Cf. Plato: 'The result is that our lover will be forced to gaze at the beauty of activities and laws and to see that all this is akin to itself, with the result that he will think that the beauty of bodies is a thing of no importance.' Plato, *Symposium*, p. 493.

¹²⁸ Cf. Plato: 'After customs he must move on to various kinds of knowledge. The result is that he will see the beauty of knowledge and be looking mainly not at beauty in a single example – as a servant would who favoured the beauty of a little boy or a man or a single custom (being a slave, of course, he's low and small-minded) – but the lover is turned to the great sea of beauty, and gazing upon this, he gives birth to many gloriously beautiful ideas and theories, in unstinting love of wisdom, until, having grown and been strengthened there, he catches sight of such knowledge, and it is the knowledge of such beauty.' Plato, *Symposium*, p. 493.

¹²⁹ Cf. Plato: 'This is what it is to go aright, or be led by another, into the mystery of Love: one goes always upwards for the sake of this Beauty, starting out from beautiful things and using them like rising stairs: from one body to two and from two to all beautiful bodies, then from beautiful bodies to beautiful customs, and from customs to learning beautiful things, and from these lessons he arrives in the end at this lesson, which is learning of this very Beauty, so that in the end he comes to know just what it is to be beautiful.' Plato, *Symposium*, p. 493.

scientific mind ‘inquires into the qualities of the man’s soul’.¹³⁰ The former, who is described as a man of ‘half-grown intelligence’, looks only to the beauty of objects, while

the other, whose mind is clear, and who can inspect such appearances, will neglect those elements which are the material only upon which the Form of Beauty works; to him they will be but the ladder by which he climbs to the prospect of that Intellectual Beauty, in accordance with their share in which all other beauties get their existence and their name.¹³¹

Although the beauty of earthly things is a reflection of Divine Beauty, Gregory traces the source of false beauty to those whose minds are unable to lift their thoughts to an appreciation of a higher ‘Intellectual Beauty’. These individuals embrace sensuality, avarice, worldly honours, fame, power, knowledge, and gluttony, because they are unable to differentiate between various types of desire.¹³² Virginity, however, enables mankind to avoid all the distractions of the false semblants of beauty and to transcend earthly snares; in doing so, he achieves true virginity. The senses cannot reach so high, so they must be sloughed off in order to reach towards the Divine:

He therefore who keeps away from all bitterness and all the noisome effluvia of the flesh, and raises himself on the aforesaid wings above all low earthly ambitions, or, more than that, above the whole universe itself, will be the man to find that which is alone worth loving, and to become himself as beautiful as the Beauty which he has touched and entered, and to be made bright and luminous himself in the communion of the real Light.¹³³

The Divine Beauty touches the virgins, so that they too become infused with Divine Beauty.¹³⁴ Thus, ultimately, the wonder of virginity is that it is a reflection of the Beauty of God:

In like manner, then, as this air round the earth is forced upwards by some blast and changes into the pure splendour of the ether, so the mind of man leaves this

¹³⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, xi, p. 355.

¹³¹ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, xi, p. 355.

¹³² Cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, xi, p. 355.

¹³³ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, xi, p. 356.

¹³⁴ Cf. Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, VI.i, pp. 52-3.

miry world, and under the stress of the spirit becomes pure and luminous in contact with the true and supernal Purity; in such an atmosphere it even itself emits light, and is filled with radiance, that it becomes itself a Light [...] We see this even here, in the case of a mirror, or a sheet of water, or any smooth surface that can reflect the light; when they receive the sunbeam they beam themselves; but they would not do this if any stain marred their pure and shining surface.¹³⁵

Virginity acts like a mirrored surface which catches and reflects the beauty of Divinity. It cannot shine if it is sullied with sin, nor could it shine without the Divine Light shining upon it. In this way, Gregory affirms the assertions of previous virginal treatises: virginity requires perfection of all behaviour and also must be consecrated to and directed towards God:

We can be changed into something better than ourselves; and it has been proved as well that this union of the soul with the incorruptible Deity can be accomplished in no other way but by herself attaining by her virgin state to the utmost purity possible.¹³⁶

Gregory expresses the movement towards unity with God as a passionate desire: ‘Such a character will feel as a passionate lover only towards that Beauty which has no source but Itself.’¹³⁷ Gregory here appears to be expressing a contradiction in describing virginity. It is at once the negation of passion and an ardent overwhelming passion directed towards God.¹³⁸ The outcome of virginity is that it leads to revelation: ‘The real virginity, the real zeal for chastity, ends in no other goal than this, viz. the power thereby of seeing God.’¹³⁹ Gregory’s treatise ends with an acknowledgement of the sacrificial nature of virginity and, like Methodius, links it to the rules for sacrifice outlined in Leviticus. He echoes Saint Paul’s exhortation on the necessity to be ‘crucified with Christ’, and how this is

¹³⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, xi, p. 356.

¹³⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, xi, p. 356.

¹³⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, xi, p. 356.

¹³⁸ Cf. Gregory: ‘It accompanies the whole supra-mundane existence; because of its passionlessness it is always present with the powers above; never separated from aught that is Divine, it never touches the opposite of this.’ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, ii, p. 344.

¹³⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, xi, p. 357.

most perfectly achieved through virginity and the deadening of the bodily passions. The rewards of such a sacrifice are the glorification of the subject, who will reign with Christ, and the achievement of the *vita angelica*.

v. Body and Soul

Virginity is not confined to the subjugation of the body, but is ‘a right condition of the soul’.¹⁴⁰ Gregory reiterates throughout the treatise that true, transcendental virginity is not solely dependent upon abstention from the marriage state:

But I must return here to what I said at first; that the perfection of this liberty does not consist only in that one point of abstaining from marriage. Let no one suppose that the prize of virginity is so insignificant and so easily won as that; as if one little observance of the flesh could settle so vital a matter. [...] it behoves a man who grasps at the transcendent aim of all virginity to be true to himself in every respect, and to manifest his purity equally in every relation of his life.¹⁴¹

Although Gregory does not value physical virginity without virtue, at no point does he suggest that physical virginity is not necessary to the achievement of the higher form of virginity. He describes it as a foundational part of the process towards higher enlightenment. He uses an analogy of a building to discredit the man who merely focuses on the foundations without attempting to build higher. He does, however, still recognise the necessity of the foundational state of physical virginity on which perfect virtue must be built:

Let the virtuous life have for its substructure the love of virginity; but upon this let every result of virtue be reared. If virginity is believed to be a vastly precious thing and to have a divine look (as indeed is the case, as well as men believe of it), yet, if the whole life does not harmonise with this perfect note, and it be marred by the succeeding discord of the soul, this thing becomes but ‘the jewel of gold in the swine’s snout’, or ‘the pearl that is trodden under the swine’s feet.’¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, xiv, p. 360.

¹⁴¹ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, xviii, p. 364.

¹⁴² Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, xvii, p. 363.

Gregory demonstrates that those who reject ‘baser pleasures’ but still seek ‘worldly honour and positions’ cannot achieve a state of virginity.¹⁴³ He likens them to slaves, who have merely changed their masters. For such people ‘emotion, rather than virtuous reason, controls the course of a life.’¹⁴⁴ Gregory develops the nuptial imagery of virginity to describe the symbiotic relationship between bodily virginity and true virginity, the first of which expresses the virginity of the ‘outer man’, and the latter that of the ‘inner man’:

There is no absurdity in supposing a double marriage which answers in every detail to either man; and, maybe, if one was to assert boldly that the body’s virginity was the co-operator and the agent of the inward marriage, this assertion would not be much beside the probable fact.¹⁴⁵

Like Methodius, Gregory utilises the *sponsa Christi* motif to express the unity of the soul with God; it ‘cleaves to her Master so as to become with Him one spirit’.¹⁴⁶ Such a soul will not commit sins which would rupture that special bond, such as fornication or any other sin which could mar that mirror-like perfection. Every sin has the potentiality to destroy man’s relationship with God, since, Gregory states, ‘between all sins there is a single kinship of impurity, and if she were to defile herself with but one, she would no longer retain her spotlessness’.¹⁴⁷ He uses an analogy of a pool’s unruffled surface which, once disturbed, ripples across the whole surface no matter what it was that disturbed it.¹⁴⁸ Gregory, then, enumerates all the sins which ‘plot in the adulterer’s fashion’ to destroy the heavenly marriage. He considers every sin committed, regardless of whether it is a

¹⁴³ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, xvi, p. 362.

¹⁴⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, xvi, p. 362.

¹⁴⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, xix, p. 365.

¹⁴⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, xiv, p. 360.

¹⁴⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, xiv, p. 361.

¹⁴⁸ Cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, xiv, p. 361.

sexual sin or not, to be an act of adultery because it destroys the heavenly marriage between the soul and God.¹⁴⁹

Gregory's use of a military metaphor portrays virginity as part of the armour which a man must have in order to protect his perfect purity:

A soldier does not arm himself only on some points, leaving the rest of his body to take its chance unprotected. If he were to receive his death-wound upon that, what would have been the advantage of this partial armour? Again, who would call that feature faultless, which from some accident had lost one of those requisites which go to make up the sum of beauty? The disfigurement of the mutilated part mars the grace of the part untouched.¹⁵⁰

Gregory calls for universal armour; although physical virginity supplies part of the armour, it cannot provide full protection. Conversely, one's armour is not complete without physical virginity either. The image of the fatal wounding, however, does suggest an irrevocable loss of purity: just as the disfigurement of part of a body destroys all hope of future beauty in that body, the destruction of purity prevents the attainment of true virginity. Gregory continues the military metaphor, moving from the danger posed by the partial arming of a soldier to the danger of arming incorrectly:

If we could imagine any one putting his armour on all the wrong way, reversing the helmet so as to cover his face while the plume nodded backward, putting his feet into the cuirass, and fitting the greaves on to his breast, changing to the right side all that ought to go on the left and *vice versa*, and how such a hoplite would be likely to fare in battle, then we should have an idea of the fate in life which is sure to await him whose confused judgement makes him reverse the proper use of his soul's faculties.¹⁵¹

Not only can virgins forget to arm themselves with physical and spiritual virginity, but they can possess the armour, but fail to safeguard themselves because they use it

¹⁴⁹ Cf. Gregory: 'The chaste and thoughtful virgin must sever herself from any affection which can in any way impart contagion to her soul; she must keep herself pure for the Husband Who has married her, not having spot or blemish or any such thing.' Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, xv, p. 361.

¹⁵⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, xvii, p. 362.

¹⁵¹ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, xviii, pp. 363-4.

incorrectly. When properly used, the soul's faculties are designed to protect the holiness of mankind, but if they are used incorrectly, they are worthless. Gregory specifies some of the various forms of such a false virginity. These include those who are tainted by pride and idleness; the 'dreamers' who 'put more faith in the illusions of their dreams than in the Gospel'; those who 'suppose virtue consists in savage bearishness and have never known the fruits of long-suffering and humility of the spirit'; and those whose extreme asceticism has led to their deaths.¹⁵² Gregory makes a special mention of the false virginity of the *virgines subintroductae*:

practising celibacy in name only and leading a life in no way different from the secular; for they not only indulge in the pleasures of the table, but are openly known to have a woman in their houses; and they call such a friendship a brotherly affection, as if, forsooth, they could veil their own thought, which is inclined to evil, under a sacred term. It is owing to them that this pure and holy profession of virginity is 'blasphemed amongst the Gentiles' [Rom 2: 24].¹⁵³

The practice of *syneisaktism* demonstrates a subtle failure in the understanding of those virgins who practise it. They only seem to recognise a physical virginity and do not appreciate the higher ideal towards which they should be striving. For this reason, they fail to see that continuing to live in the mode of a secular life is antithetical to the state of virginity. Gregory's terminology blurs the boundaries between physical and spiritual virginity, and recommends a better understanding of Saint Paul's exhortation to virginity: its purpose is to devote oneself entirely to God. *Syneisaktism*, while perhaps preserving physical virginity (although this is often a point of doubt for contemporary commentators), it undermines virginity because it recreates the marriage environment, thus exposing the couple to the cares of the world and distracting them from dedicating themselves wholly to God.

¹⁵² Cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, xxiii, p. 369.

¹⁵³ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, xxiii, p. 369.

vi. Contribution

The implications of Gregory's treatise for the tradition of virginity are multifaceted. The monastic background of Gregory's work is important for the development of virginity, as it represents the beginning of the gradual reform of ascetic practices which culminate in an exclusively monastic expression of virginity.¹⁵⁴ There appears to be a more masculine bias to Gregory's treatise, although there are times when he refers to females. This trend may be because of the monastic context of the tract. In terms of personal contribution to the virginal tradition, Gregory's input can be seen as partly developmental, and partly innovative. He develops the Platonic tradition, introduced more overtly by Methodius, but he remains truer to the Platonic vision and so augments the classical, philosophical

¹⁵⁴ The merging of the monastic and virginal traditions is observable in the writings of such figures as Evagrius Ponticus, whom A. M. Casiday describes as 'the teacher of prayer par excellence for the Greek tradition' [A. M. Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 3]. Evagrius produced an ascetic work entitled *To the Virgin*. Evagrius lived a monastic life in the Egyptian desert, and Elm argues that *To the Virgin* reflects this monastic interest, providing a monastic rule for a female community [Cf. Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus*, p. 166. See also, Susanna Elm, 'The *Sententiae ad Virginem* by Evagrius Ponticus and the Problem of Early Monastic Rules', *Augustinianum* 30: 393-404 (1990), and Susanna Elm, 'Evagrius Ponticus' *Sententiae ad Virginem*', *Dunbarton Oaks Papers* 45: 97-120 (1991)]. Casiday, however, is not convinced by Elm's argument that it is a complete rule; he states that 'Although Evagrius' instruction is addressed to a virgin in a community, it is not at all clear that he aimed to *direct* a community of virgins' [Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus*, p. 166]. Evagrius' work presents a concise set of suggestions in order to regulate the behaviour of virgins. It reflects the concerns of earlier writers on virginity. For instance, Tertullian and Cyprian's concerns on adornment and luxury feature [Cf. Evagrius Ponticus, *To the Virgin*, trans. A. M. Casiday, in A. M. Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), xxiii, p. 169; xxxvi, p. 169]; and Cyprian's concerns over attending weddings [Cf. Evagrius, *To the Virgin*, xiv, p. 168]. It appears to draw heavily on Athanasius' Marian model, advising virgins to: honour their parents [Cf. Evagrius, *To the Virgin*, ii, p. 167]; read and work [Cf. Evagrius, *To the Virgin*, iv, p. 168.]; pray ceaselessly [Cf. Evagrius, *To the Virgin*, v, p.168.]; avoid men [Cf. Evagrius, *To the Virgin*, vi, p. 168]; avoid irascibility [Cf. Evagrius, *To the Virgin*, viii, p. 168], revenge [Cf. Evagrius, *To the Virgin*, xii, p. 168], idle talk [Cf. Evagrius, *To the Virgin*, xiii, p. 168], and slander [Cf. Evagrius, *To the Virgin*, xliii, p. 170]; speak God's word, but otherwise embrace silence [Cf. Evagrius, *To the Virgin*, xv, p. 168]; be respectful in church [Cf. Evagrius, *To the Virgin*, xxxiii, p. 169]. At the close of the work, Evagrius reminds the virgins of orthodoxy, by telling them 'Do not forget the venerable Trinity' [Evagrius Ponticus, *To the Virgin*, lvi, p. 171]. Although Evagrius does not provide any innovations to the virginal tradition in his short work, he does demonstrate the appropriation of the tradition for female monastics. In the fourth century, the tradition of virginity and the monastic tradition grew together. Henceforth virginity became expressed most appropriately in communal monastic living. It is to be remembered, however, that the validation of virginity did not have its origin in monasticism, but it had a scriptural precedent and also, as Athanasius emphasises, a theological importance. The pre-monastic development of virginity is important to keep in mind when assessing the Protestant attitude towards virginity, which only partly recognises that virginity comprises two different traditions.

dimension of virginity. In addition, he develops the associations between virginity and Nicene theology, which are evident pre-Nicaea but more explicitly articulated by Athanasius. Although like Athanasius he does look at virginity in light of Christology, particularly in light of the doctrine of the Incarnation, he also departs from Athanasius, as he is also concerned to show how virginity has an inherent connection with Trinitarian theology. With Gregory, virginity treatises have moved from a regulatory dimension to a meditation on its profound connection with theology and its symbiotic relationship with Nicene orthodoxy: it at once manifests religious truths and is authorised by them.

VII. Ambrose

The details about the life of Saint Ambrose, the famous fourth-century Bishop of Milan, come to us not only from his own writings, but also from the pen of Paulinus, who was his friend and earliest biographer. Ambrose was born at Trier either in A.D. 334 or 340.¹ He was from a Christian family, which, as Ambrose himself notes in his treatise *De virginibus*, boasted the martyr Sotheris as an ancestor.² Paulinus' biography was undertaken at the request of Saint Augustine,³ and was compiled, according to Paulinus, from his own memories of Ambrose, those of Ambrose's sister Marcellina, and also from a number of other people with whom he had spoken.⁴ Paulinus relates a couple of anecdotes from Ambrose's childhood which foreshadowed his future eminence. The first is a famous incident in which the baby Ambrose, having been left in the cradle, had fallen asleep with his mouth wide open. Suddenly a swarm of bees alighted on his face and began to dart in and out of his open mouth. His father, noticing the problem, was

¹ Cf. Dudden: 'The date depends mainly on the interpretation of a passage in a letter written by Ambrose to Severus, Bishop of Naples, in which he mentions that he is in his fifty-fourth year, and refers to the disturbed condition of affairs in his neighbourhood; [...] If the allusion is to the invasion of Italy by Maximus in A.D. 387, Ambrose must have been born in A.D. 334 (or possibly 333); if, on the other hand, the occupation of Italy by Eugenius in A.D. 393 is referred to, the birth must be dated A.D. 340. But the arguments adduced in support of each of these two theories are by no means convincing.' F. Homes Dudden, *The Life and Times of St. Ambrose*, Vol. I (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935), p. 2 n.2.

² Cf. Ambrose: 'For how could it come to pass that holy Sotheris should not have been the originator of your purpose, who is an ancestor of your race?' Ambrose, *De virginibus*, III. VII. xxxix, in *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, Vol. X, *Ambrose: Select Works and Letters*, trans. Rev. H. De Romestin, Rev. E. De Romestin and Rev. H. T. F. Duckworth, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1896]), pp. 361-390, (p. 387).

³ Cf. Paulinus: 'You exhort, venerable father Augustine, that, as the blessed men Athanasius the bishop and Jerome the priest have adorned their pen the lives of the saints, Paul and Anthony, who lived in the desert, as, also, Severus the servant of God eulogized the life of the venerable Martin, Bishop of the Church at Tours, that I in like manner adorn by my pen the life of blessed Ambrose, Bishop of the Church at Milan.' Paulinus, *The Life of St. Ambrose, Bishop of Milan*, I.i, trans. John A. Lacy, in *Early Christian Biographies* ed. Roy J. Deferrari (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001 [1952]), p. 33.

⁴ Cf. Paulinus: 'those things which I have learned from the most trustworthy men who were with him before me, and especially from his own venerable sister, Marcellina, or what things I myself saw when I was with him, or what I learned from those who have related that they had seen him in widely separated provinces after his death, or when his death was still unknown, I, aided by your prayers and by the worth of so great a man, shall write down, even though in simple language, briefly and to the point, so that, even if my writing offend the mind of the reader, its brevity may provoke a reading.' Paulinus, *The Life of St. Ambrose*, I.i, p. 33.

interested to see what such a strange phenomenon would portend, and so he prevented the nurse from trying to beat them off. He was also afraid that if the nurse interfered and angered the bees, they would harm the baby. The bees, however, left the baby unscathed, and so Ambrose's father interpreted the incident as an indication of Ambrose's promising future, saying: 'If this child lives, he will be something great.'⁵ Paulinus provides a further elucidation on the episode with the bees:

even then, the Lord was acting during the infancy of his servant in order that what was written might be fulfilled: 'Well-ordered words are as a honeycomb.'
[Proverbs 16: 24] For that swarm of bees was planting the honey-combs of his later works, which would proclaim the heavenly gifts and direct the minds of men from earthly to heavenly things.⁶

The second episode which Paulinus relates is demonstrative of Ambrose's destined Episcopal position. As a child, Ambrose observed the reverence that was given to bishops by his mother and sister, and so decided to emulate them:

upon seeing the hands of bishops being kissed by someone of the household, his sister or his mother, he jokingly used to offer his right hand [to a professed virgin, who was one of his sister's companion], saying that she ought to do this for him, also, since he probably would become a bishop.⁷

These two events from Ambrose's childhood are used by Paulinus to indicate Ambrose's God-given grace, to show that he was marked out for an ecclesiastical position early on, and to explain the origin of his mellifluous preaching, which was seemingly given to Ambrose as a gift of nature.

Ambrose was educated at Rome and, as David Hunter notes, 'he began his career as an advocate at the court of the praetorian prefect in Sirmium'.⁸ In c. A.D. 372-3, he

⁵ Paulinus, *The Life of St. Ambrose*, II.iii, p. 35.

⁶ Paulinus, *The Life of St. Ambrose*, II.iii, p. 35.

⁷ Paulinus, *The Life of St. Ambrose*, II.iv, p. 35.

⁸ David G. Hunter, 'Fourth-century Latin writers: Hilary, Victorinus, Ambrosiaster, Ambrose', in *The Cambridge History of Early Christian Literature*, eds. Frances Young, Lewis Ayres and Andrew Louth

was made *consularis* of the provinces of Aemilia and Liguria, and so moved to Milan.⁹ When Auxentius, the Arian Bishop of Milan, died, Milan was split between Arian and Catholic factions; the two parties could not come to an agreement over who should succeed to the bishopric. According to Paulinus, Ambrose was asked to control the mob, which appeared to be on the point of revolt. Thus, he went to the church in which the meeting to choose a successor was being held. It was during this meeting that a miraculous event occurred, after which Ambrose was elected to the Episcopal See of Milan by common assent:

When he was addressing the people, the voice of a child among the people is said to have called out suddenly: ‘Ambrose bishop.’ At the sound of this voice, the mouths of all the people joined in the cry: ‘Ambrose bishop.’ Thus, those who a while before were disagreeing most violently, because both the Arians and the Catholics wished the other side to be defeated and their own candidate to be consecrated bishop suddenly agreed on this one with miraculous and unbelievable harmony.¹⁰

Ambrose, however, was not even baptized at this time and tried to refuse the appointment due to this technicality, and also because of his lack of theological education. He attempted many things to escape the position, as Paulinus tells us: ‘he ordered tortures to be inflicted on the people’ to no avail;¹¹ he declared himself a philosopher;¹² he tried to escape twice, but failed.¹³ Unable to avoid the Episcopal office, he finally submitted, and ‘when he was baptized, he is said to have fulfilled all the ecclesiastical offices, so that he was consecrated bishop on the eighth day’.¹⁴ Paulinus relates that Ambrose, a few years later, went to visit his sister and met with the same virginal companion whom he knew in

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 302-317, (p. 309). [Cf. Paulinus, *The Life of St. Ambrose*, II.v, p. 36.

⁹ Cf. Paulinus, *The Life of St. Ambrose*, II.v, p. 36.

¹⁰ Paulinus, *The Life of St. Ambrose*, III.vi, p. 36.

¹¹ Paulinus, *The Life of St. Ambrose*, III.vii, p. 36.

¹² Cf. Paulinus, *The Life of St. Ambrose*, III.vii, p. 36.

¹³ Paulinus, *The Life of St. Ambrose*, III.viii, p. 37; III.ix, p. 38.

¹⁴ Paulinus, *The Life of St. Ambrose*, III.ix, p. 38.

his youth. When she kissed his hand, he teasingly reminded her of the time in his childhood, when he used to urge her to show reverence to him because he would become a bishop.¹⁵

Having been made bishop, Ambrose began his theological training in earnest under the tutelage of the priest Simplician. William Rusch remarks on the importance of Simplician's influence on Ambrose:

One of the most interesting features of recent Ambrosian studies has been the discovery of a deep vein of Christian Neo-Platonism in his writings, derived not so much from his reading of the Greek Fathers as from his instruction by Simplician, who was himself in turn influenced by the Neo-Platonic circle at Milan and the writings of C. Marius Victorinus.¹⁶

Although Ambrose was a Latin writer, he mainly looked towards Eastern Greek theologians. There is some dispute about whether he knew the works of Tertullian or Cyprian; Hunter claims that he was influenced by both Latin writers,¹⁷ but Labriolle asserts that he was acquainted with neither.¹⁸ Although he was well regarded as a biblical exegete in his own age, not all his contemporaries looked on him with favour. Jerome's biography of Ambrose is short and indicates his own ambivalent attitude towards the bishop:

¹⁵ Cf. Paulinus: 'Some years after his consecration he went to Rome, to his own estate, and there found the holy maiden mentioned above, to whom he used to offer his hand, in the home with his sister, just as he had left, for now his mother was dead. And when she had kissed his hand, he smilingly said to her: "See, as I used to say to you, you are kissing the hand of a bishop."' Paulinus, *The Life of St. Ambrose*, III, ix, p. 38.

¹⁶ William G. Rusch, *The Later Latin Fathers* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 1977), p. 48.

¹⁷ Cf. Hunter: 'He became familiar with the Scriptures, the Greek Fathers, especially Origen and the Cappadocians, and Latin writers such as Tertullian and Cyprian. He also steeped himself in the writings of Philo and Plotinus, from whom he often borrows *verbatim*.' Hunter, 'Fourth-century Latin writers', p. 309.

¹⁸ Cf. Labriolle: 'The curious thing is, that in spite of his practical and realistic mind which should have brought him in touch with the West, he almost entirely neglected their writings. He was unacquainted apparently with Tertullian and Saint Cyprian. [...] It was to Eastern writers that his sympathies and curiosity went out.' Pierre De Labriolle, *History and Literature of Christianity: from Tertullian to Boethius*, trans. Herbert Wilson (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co. Ltd., 1924), p. 268.

Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, continues writing down to the present day. Concerning him I postpone judgement in that he is still alive lest I get blamed for flattery, on the one hand, or, on the other, for telling the truth.¹⁹

Jerome objected to some of Ambrose's works in which he borrowed freely from other theologians; he referred to Ambrose as a 'black crow who adorned himself with coloured feathers taken from other birds'.²⁰ Despite Jerome's lukewarm assessment, Ambrose's eloquent preaching and exegetical skill was instrumental in the conversion of perhaps the greatest genius of the Christian world, Saint Augustine. Augustine describes the impact that Ambrose had on him in his *Confessions*:

On arrival [in Milan], I went to Ambrose, the bishop, known throughout the world as one of the great, a pious worshipper of yours, who by the eloquence he then possessed administered to the populace *the finest wheat, the oil of rejoicing, and the wine that makes men merry and sober*. It was by you that I was brought to him without my knowing, so that through him I might be brought knowing to you.²¹

It was through Ambrose that Augustine learned how to interpret the Bible allegorically. Augustine says: 'he took away the mystic veil and exposed the spiritual meaning of things which, taken literally, had seemed to me perverse in their doctrine.'²² Augustine also provides an interesting anecdote about Ambrose:

When he read, his eyes ran over the page and his heart sought out the sense, while his voice and tongue were resting. [...] I saw him reading in this way, silently; never otherwise. I would sit in silence for a long time – for who would venture to impose himself on one so intent on his reading? – then go away, trying to guess why he read in this way.²³

¹⁹ Saint Jerome, 'CXXIV. Ambrose the Bishop', *On Illustrious Men (De viris illustribus)*, trans. Thomas P. Halton (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1999), p. 158.

²⁰ Hunter, 'Fourth-century Latin writers', p. 310. The remark was made in criticism of Ambrose's Commentary on Luke. Labriolle also details Ambrose's limitations: 'Ambrose had neither the depth and gift of verbal creation of a St Augustine, nor the ardent imagination, the impassioned fire, and scientific aptitude of a St Jerome.' Labriolle, *History and Literature of Christianity*, pp. 276-7.

²¹ Saint Augustine, *The Confessions*, V.xiii. trans. Philip Burton (London: Everyman, 2001), pp. 103-4

²² Augustine, *Confessions*, VI.iv, p. 114.

²³ Augustine, *Confessions*, VI.iii, p. 112.

Augustine's account of Ambrose's reading habit is perhaps the earliest account of silent reading that we have. It was obviously not a common practice, as Augustine puzzles over this peculiar habit of Ambrose's, wondering whether he read in this way so as not to distract himself with external noise, or to avoid having to explain obscure points to others who may be listening, or simply to save his voice.²⁴

Ambrose was not only an able bishop and a gifted preacher with an enormous literary output, but he was also a key player on the fourth-century politico-religious stage. He championed the Nicene cause against the Arians, and was also instrumental in the fall of paganism. His influence over the Emperor Gratian may have led to the latter's issuing of anti-pagan edicts, which culminated in the removal of the statue to Victory from the Chamber of the Curia.²⁵ Gratian died soon after these measures, however, and Ambrose had to step in to prevent the new Emperor, the young Valentinian II, who was only twelve years old and had been eloquently petitioned by the pagan party, from reversing Gratian's policies. Ambrose wielded a great deal of influence over the emperors, as Labriolle notes:

Ambrose, during nearly twenty years, from 378-397, was the adviser of Gratian, Valentinian II and Theodosius, and the dispenser of imperial favours, and on more than one occasion gave them the assistance of his diplomacy when their authority was in need of it.²⁶

Ambrose, however, was not always in accord with the emperors. In A.D. 388 he rebuked Theodosius for a hasty decision against a bishop, at whose instigation a Jewish

²⁴ Cf. Augustine, *Confessions*, VI.iii, p. 112.

²⁵ Cf. Labriolle: 'By an edict he [Gratian] deprived the colleges of their priests and the vestals of their revenues. The allocations allotted to the exercising of their religion were suppressed for the benefit of the public treasury, and the same thing happened to the foundations bequeathed to these colleges by legacy. Finally, as the crowning point of these vexations, Gratian ordered the removal from the Chamber of the Curia of the famous statue to Victory, which from the time of Augustus had stood upon an altar, as the symbol to the Senators in their Assembly of the glorious Roman past.' Labriolle, *History and Literature of Christianity: from Tertullian to Boethius*, p. 269.

²⁶ Labriolle, *History and Literature of Christianity: from Tertullian to Boethius*, pp. 264-5.

synagogue had been burnt down. Theodosius, without waiting for a report from the bishop involved, had ordered him to rebuild it at his own cost.²⁷ Ambrose was angry that 'the emperor had given such unjust orders against the Church',²⁸ presumably because there had been no investigation into the matter. He petitioned the Emperor publicly during mass and refused to perform the consecration until Theodosius had promised to amend his decision.²⁹ Ambrose later rebuked the Emperor for the Massacre of Thessalonica in A.D. 390, which was an imperial reprisal for a public uprising in which several functionaries had perished.³⁰ Ambrose excommunicated Theodosius for this act and refused to allow him to enter the Church until he had made a public show of penance, which the emperor duly agreed to.³¹ Labriolle discusses the importance of Ambrose's political agenda:

Taken as a whole, we can say that the religious policy of Ambrose had a triple object in view: first, the protection of the Church against all violence or indiscretion on the part of the state. [...] Next, to make the civil power respect the moral law, even in acts deprived of any religious character, under pain of the censure of the Church. And lastly, to seal a close union between Church and State of such a kind that, far from placing the different religions on the same level, the

²⁷ Cf. Paulinus: '[He] straightway ordered that the synagogue be rebuilt by the bishop of the region and that fitting punishment be meted out to the monks.' Paulinus, *The Life of St. Ambrose*, VII.xxii, p. 46.

²⁸ Paulinus, *The Life of St. Ambrose*, VII.xxiii, p. 47.

²⁹ Cf. Paulinus: 'And so he secured the recall of those orders which had been issued, but not until he declared that he was unwilling to approach the altar unless the emperor gave assurance that he ought to go on.' Paulinus, *The Life of St. Ambrose*, VII.xxiii, p. 47.

³⁰ Cf. Paulinus: 'the city was put to the sword for more than an hour and very many innocent persons were slain.' Paulinus, *The Life of St. Ambrose*, VII.xxiv, p. 48. Cf. Labriolle: 'A large part of the people of Thessalonica, who were assembled in the circus under the pretext of a display, were massacred by soldiers let loose upon them.' Labriolle, *History and Literature of Christianity*, p. 271.

³¹ Cf. Paulinus: 'When the bishop learned that this had been done, he denied the emperor the privilege of entering the church, and he deemed him unworthy of the fellowship of the Church and of partaking in the sacraments, until he should do public penance. [...] When the most recipient emperor heard these words, he so took it to heart that he did not shudder at public penance, and the progress of this correction prepared him for a favourable victory.' Paulinus, *The Life of St. Ambrose*, VII.xxiv, p. 48. Cf. Labriolle: '[the historian Theodoret relates that] when the Emperor wished to enter the Church Ambrose stepped in front of him and forbade him to set foot within the sacred precincts. Even to this day, in Milan, an ancient column marks the spot where tradition states the Bishop and Emperor met.' Labriolle, *History and Literature of Christianity: from Tertullian to Boethius*, p. 275.

state should unfailingly show its special and single favour to the Catholic religion, and discourage all others.³²

Ambrose, then, was not only an ecclesiast, but an important politician who used his position to further consolidate the position of the Church within the framework of the Empire.

Dudden notes that Ambrose's proficiency as a theologian has been eclipsed by his more brilliant protégé, Augustine.³³ 'Yet', he says,

this Doctor may claim a distinguished place in the history of Western theology. He was the mediator between Eastern and Western theological speculations; he was the ancestor of medieval Catholicism.³⁴

Although Dudden does argue that some of Ambrose's virtues have been neglected, he also states that perhaps his greatest significance to Christianity was to feed the genius of Saint Augustine.³⁵ Though he appears to have had the sacerdotal life thrust upon him, he earnestly undertook the task which had been given to him. His political agenda demonstrates his strong commitment to the Church. On a personal level, he not only lived an ascetic life himself,³⁶ but was committed to the promotion of the virginity.³⁷

Importantly, Gambero notes that his own interest in asceticism fuelled his other most important contribution to Christianity: 'his extraordinary interest in the Mother of the

³² Labriolle, *History and Literature of Christianity: from Tertullian to Boethius*, p. 275.

³³ Cf. Dudden: 'The importance of Ambrose as a theologian has not hitherto been adequately realized. He has been thrown into the shade by Augustine. The lesser genius has been absorbed by the greater.' F. Homes Dudden, *The Life and Times of St. Ambrose*, Vol. II (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935), p. 676.

³⁴ Dudden, *The Life and Times of St. Ambrose*, Volume II, p. 676.

³⁵ Cf. Dudden: 'He was also, more especially as concerns the doctrine of sin and grace, an Augustine before Augustine. Possibly his significance in the history of theology lies principally in this, that he was by far the richest and greatest of the tributaries which fed that mighty river of Augustinian thought and teaching which for so many centuries fertilized the intellect of the Western world.' Dudden, *The Life and Times of St. Ambrose*, Vol. II, p. 676.

³⁶ Cf. Paulinus: 'the venerable bishop himself was a man of much fasting, of many vigils, and of deeds, also, chastising his body by daily denials.' Paulinus, *The Life of St. Ambrose*, IX.xxxviii, p. 56.

³⁷ Hunter: 'Promoting the virginal and ascetical lives remained a lifelong preoccupation of Ambrose, as evidence by his later treatises *De institutione virginis* (c. 391) and *Exhortatio virginitatis* (c. 393).' Hunter, 'Fourth-century Latin writers', p. 309.

Lord stemmed from his unbound admiration for the virginal life consecrated to God.³⁸

Ambrose is renowned for being one of the foremost Mariologists of the fourth century, which is in itself celebrated for being the great Mariological century.³⁹

i. Ascetical Works

Saint Ambrose wrote several treatises on asceticism. *De virginibus ad Marcellinam sororem suam* (*On Virgins to Marcellina his Sister*, c. A.D. 377), *De virginitate* (*On Virginity*, c. A.D. 377/8), and *De Viduis* (*On Widows*, c. A.D. 377/8) are among his earliest writings.⁴⁰ *De institutione virginis et sanctae mariae virginitate perpetua* (*On the Education of a Virgin and the Perpetual Virginity of the Blessed Mary*, A.D. 391)⁴¹ and *Exhortatio virginitatis* (*An Exhortation to Virginity*, A.D. 393)⁴² were written well over a decade later. *De lapsu virginis consecratae* (*On the Fall of a Consecrated Virgin*) is a treatise which was once attributed to Ambrose, but is now generally considered to be spuriously attributed to him.⁴³ Although F. Homes Dudden acknowledges the likelihood

³⁸ Luigi Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church: The Blessed Virgin in Patristic Thought*, trans. Thomas Buffer (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999) p. 190.

³⁹ Dudden: 'It may be noted that during the latter part of the fourth century the Virgin Mary was regarded and referred to with ever increasing veneration. Of the movement Ambrose was one of the leaders. His intense reverence for Mary was based on two grounds: (a) she was the ideal virgin, the *imago* or *magista virginitatis*, exhibiting all the virtues that are appropriate to the virgin state; and (b) she was the Mother of God, endued with special grace.' Dudden, *The Life and Times of St. Ambrose*, Vol. II, p. 600.

⁴⁰ Cf. Labriolle: 'Shortly afterwards, the *De virginitate* appeared (in which Ambrose refutes objections raised by the *De virginibus*), and the *De viduis*, in which the Bishop addressed himself exclusively to widows.' Labriolle, *History and Literature of Christianity: from Tertullian to Boethius*, p. 279.

⁴¹ Labriolle notes that *De institutione virginis* was written 'on the occasion of the taking of the veil by Ambrosia, a young girl who had been entrusted to his ministrations.' Labriolle, *History and Literature of Christianity: from Tertullian to Boethius*, p. 279.

⁴² Cf. Labriolle: 'The *Exhortatio Virginitatis*, published in 393, is nothing else than a sermon preached by Ambrose at Florence on the occasion of the commemoration of the martyrs Vitalis and Agricola.' Labriolle, *History and Literature of Christianity: from Tertullian to Boethius*, p. 279. Cf. Rusch: '*Exhortatio virginitatis* is the publication of a sermon delivered in Florence by Ambrose at the consecration of the Basilica of St Lawrence. It dates from 393 or 394. Ambrose used the opportunity to pronounce an encomium on virginity. He encourages the children of the widowed Empress Juliana who were present to choose the celibate life.' Rusch, *The Later Latin Fathers*, p. 57.

⁴³ Cf. Dudden: 'The tractate, which differs considerably in style from the acknowledged writings of Ambrose, may probably be identified with a work – *ad lapsam virginem libellum, paene omnibus*

that it is attributable to Niceta of Remesiana, he also notes that Dom Morin has suggested that the treatise ‘embodies a discourse of Ambrose, though it was cast in its present form, not by Ambrose himself, but by someone who used notes taken of Ambrose’s oration’.⁴⁴ Regardless of whether the tract is genuine or not, it is nonetheless interesting because it demonstrates the sanctified status of the consecrated virgin in the late-fourth century, and the severe repercussions for those who broke their vows.⁴⁵ Henry Lea notes that the first legislation forbidding the marriage of consecrated virgins, on penalty of capital punishment, was passed in 364.⁴⁶

Ambrose’s first treatise on virginity, *De virginibus ad Marcellinam sororem suam*, was written, as the title indicates, to his sister Marcellina, who was herself a consecrated virgin.⁴⁷ It comprises three short books: the first book is an encomium on

labentibus emendationis incentivum – mentioned by Gennadius among the writings of Niceta of Remesiana.’ Dudden, *The Life and Times of St. Ambrose*, Vol. II, p. 707.

⁴⁴ Dudden, *The Life and Times of St. Ambrose*, Vol. II, p. 708.

⁴⁵ Cf. Dudden: ‘Concerning the punishment of virgins proved guilty of very grave offences, detailed information is furnished in a discourse entitled *De Lapsu Virginis*, which was formerly ascribed to Ambrose, but which should probably be attributed to Niceta of Remesiana. A young lady of good family, named Susanna, against the wishes of her parents, and on the pretence of having been the recipient of Divine revelations, made solemn profession of virginity and entered a convent. Here she became entangled in a love affair, and gave birth to a child, whom she secretly destroyed. In spite of her precautions, however, the crime became known, and an information was lodged against her. The bishop tried her, and found her guilty. She was then conducted to the church, where, in the presence of a great congregation, the Episcopal judge addressed to her a vehement, and even savage rebuke. After expatiating on the heinousness of her sin, he sentenced her to the severest form of penance. [...] The penance was to be continued throughout the whole remainder of her life, for so outrageous a sinner could never receive pardon in this world. If, however she persevered in it to the end, she might venture to hope, not certainly for glory, but for remission of punishment, in the world to come.’ Dudden, *The Life and Times of St. Ambrose*, Vol. I, pp. 155-6.

⁴⁶ Cf. Lea: ‘in 364, we find a law of Jovian forbidding, under pain of actual or civil death, any attempt to marry a sacred virgin, the extreme severity of which is the best indication of morals that could justify a resort to penalties so exaggerated [Cf. Lib. IX. Cod. Theod. Tit. XXV. 1. 2].’ Henry C. Lea, *History of Sacerdotal Celibacy in the Christian Church*, Vol. I (London: Williams and Norgate, 1907), p. 109.

⁴⁷ Cf. Labriolle: ‘[Marcellina] had herself made her profession of virginity, and who, associating herself in all the works of her brother, had become the spiritual directress of some young girls who had resolved to live in the same state.’ Labriolle, *History and Literature of Christianity: from Tertullian to Boethius*, pp. 278-9.

virginity, the second provides instruction through *exempla*,⁴⁸ and the third book relates the consecration ceremony of his sister and the address that Liberius gave on that occasion. Traditional elements from earlier virginal treatises are evident in the acceptance that the virgin lives a heavenly life, akin to the angels,⁴⁹ and in the image of the virgin as *sponsa Christi*.⁵⁰ Hunter notes that Ambrose carries over the ascetical reading of the virgin in Canticles as the Bride of Christ into Western literature for the first time.⁵¹ However, Ambrose still recognises the ecclesial interpretation of the bride as the Church,⁵² which is fecund by producing spiritual virgins without procreation.⁵³ Ambrose's interpretation of Canticles echoes Methodius and Gregory of Nyssa's image of the virgin as a mirror reflecting God's image,⁵⁴ and he uses the fountain image from

⁴⁸ Cf. Ambrose: 'In the former book I wished (though I was not able) to set forth how great is the gift of virginity, that the grace of the heavenly gift might of itself invite the reader. In the second book it is fitting that the virgin should be instructed and, as it were, be educated by the teaching of suitable precepts.' Ambrose, *De virginibus*, II.i.1, p. 374.

⁴⁹ Cf. Ambrose: 'First, let us settle where is its country. Now, if one's country be there where is the home of one's birth, without doubt heaven is the native country of chastity. And so she is a stranger here, but a denizen there'; 'And for you, holy virgins, there is a special guardianship, for you who with unspotted chastity keep the couch of the Lord holy. And no wonder if the angels fight for you who war with the mode of life of angels. Virginal chastity merits their guardianship whose life it attains to.' Ambrose, *De virginibus*, I.v.20, p. 366; I.ix.51, p. 371.

⁵⁰ Cf. Ambrose: 'Christ is the spouse of the Virgin, and if one may say so of virginal chastity, for virginity is of Christ, not Christ of virginity. He is, then, the Virgin Who was espoused, the Virgin Who bare us, Who fed us with her own milk.' Ambrose, *De virginibus*, I.v.22, p. 366.

⁵¹ Cf. Hunter: 'In *De virginibus* Ambrose borrowed extensively from a letter to virgins attributed to Athanasius, developing for the first time in the West the ascetical interpretation of the Song of Songs and the image of Mary the mother of Jesus as a model for the consecrated virgin.' Hunter, 'Fourth-century Latin writers', p. 309.

⁵² Cf. Ambrose: 'She has not an husband, but she has a Bridegroom, inasmuch as she, whether as the Church amongst nations, or as the soul in individuals, without any loss of modesty, she weds the Word of God as her eternal Spouse, free from all injury, full of reason.' Ambrose, *De virginibus*, I.vi.31, p. 368.

⁵³ Cf. Ambrose: 'So the holy Church, ignorant of wedlock, but fertile in bearing, is in chastity a virgin, yet a mother in offspring. She, a virgin, bears us her children, not by a human father, but by the Spirit. She bears us not with pain, but with the rejoicings of the angels. She, a virgin, feeds us, not with the milk of the body, but with that of the Apostle.' Ambrose, *De virginibus*, I.vi.31, p. 368.

⁵⁴ Compare Methodius: 'We have all come into this world, O virgins, endowed with singular beauty, which has a relationship and affinity to [divine] wisdom. For the souls of men do then most accurately resemble Him who begat and formed them, when, reflecting the unsullied representation of His likeness, and the features of that countenance, to which God looking formed them to have an immortal and indestructible shape, they remain such.' Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, VI.i, in *Ante-Nicene Christian Library: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*. Vol. XIV. *The Writings of Methodius, Alexander of Lycopolis, Peter of Alexandria and Several Fragments*, trans. William R. Clark,

Canticles, whose waters, when unclouded, reflect God's image, to emphasise the connection.⁵⁵ The behavioural advice in *Liber III* echoes that given by Cyprian regarding cosmetics and adornments,⁵⁶ the avoidance of banquets and overeating,⁵⁷ and visiting among the young which destroys modesty.⁵⁸ He also advises against attending dances,⁵⁹ citing the fate of John the Baptist as evidence of their potential for iniquitous acts.⁶⁰

eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, MDCCCLXIX [1869]), pp. 1-119, pp. 52-3; Also compare Gregory: 'In like manner, then, as this air round the earth is forced upwards by some blast and changes into the pure splendour of the ether, so the mind of man leaves this miry world, and under the stress of the spirit becomes pure and luminous in contact with the true and supernal Purity; in such an atmosphere it even itself emits light, and is filled with radiance, that it becomes itself a Light [...] We see this even here, in the case of a mirror, or a sheet of water, or any smooth surface that can reflect the light; when they receive the sunbeam they beam themselves; but they would not do this if any stain marred their pure and shining surface.' Gregory, *On Virginity*, xi, trans. William Moore and Henry Austin Wilson, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. V, *Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic Treatises, etc.*, ed. Philip Schaff (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995), pp. 343-371, p. 356.

⁵⁵ Cf. Ambrose: 'But what is meant by the gardens He Himself points out saying: "A garden enclosed is My sister, My spouse, a garden enclosed, a fountain sealed"; because in gardens of this kind the water of the pure fountain shines, reflecting the features of the image of God, lest its streams mingled with mud from the wallowing places of spiritual wild beasts should be polluted. For this reason, too, that modesty of virgins fenced in by the wall of the Spirit is enclosed lest it should lie open to be plundered. And so as a garden inaccessible from without smells of the violet, is scented with the olive, and is resplendent with the rose, that religion may increase in the vine, peace in the olive, and the modesty of consecrated virginity in the rose.' Ambrose, *De virginibus*, I.ix.45, p. 370.

⁵⁶ Cf. Ambrose: 'they paint their faces with various colours, fearing not to please their husbands; and from staining their faces, come to think of staining their chastity'; 'But you, O happy virgins, who know not such torments, rather than ornaments, whose holy modesty, beaming in your bashful cheeks, and sweet chastity are a beauty, ye do not, intent upon the eyes of men, consider as merits what is gained by the errors of others. You, too, have indeed your own beauty, furnished by the comeliness of virtue, not of the body, to which age puts not an end, which death cannot take away, nor any sickness injure.' Ambrose, *De virginibus*, I.vi.28, p. 367; I.vi.30, p. 368.

⁵⁷ Cf. Ambrose: 'And I think that one should sparingly eat all kinds of food which causes heat to the limbs, for flesh drags down even eagles as they fly. [...] be ignorant of the desire for unnecessary food. The gathering of banquets and salutations must be avoided'; 'But sometimes even when faith is to be relied upon, youth is not trusted. Use wine, therefore, sparingly, in order that the weakness of the body may not increase, not for pleasurable excitement, for each alike kindles a flame, both wine and youth. Let fasts also put a bridle on tender age, and spare diet restrain the unsubdued appetites with a kind of rein. Let reason check, hope subdue, and fear curb them. For he who knows not how to govern his desires, is overthrown, bruised, torn, and injured.' Ambrose, *De virginibus*, III.ii.8, p. 382; III.ii.5, p. 382.

⁵⁸ Cf. Ambrose: 'For modesty is worn away by intercourse, and boldness breaks forth, laughter creeps in, and bashfulness is lessened, while politeness is studied. I should prefer, therefore, that conversation should rather be wanting to a virgin, than abound. For if women are bidden to keep silence in churches, even about divine things, and to ask their husbands at home, what do we think should be the caution of virgins, in whom modesty adorns their age, and silence commands modesty.' Ambrose, *De virginibus*, III.iii.9, p. 382.

⁵⁹ Cf. Ambrose: 'There ought then to be the joy of the mind, conscious of right, not excited by unrestrained feasts, or nuptial concerts, for in such modesty is not safe, and temptation may be suspected where excessive dancing accompanies festivities. I desire that the virgins of God should be far from this.' Ambrose, *De virginibus*, III.v.25, p. 385.

⁶⁰ Cf. Ambrose, *De virginibus*, III.vi.26-31.

Ambrose is moderate in his advice about fasting, however, suggesting that once the passions of the body have been broken the virgin should eat better so that her life is prolonged for the edification of younger virgins.⁶¹ His temperate attitude reflects Gregory's emphasis on temperance in all things, and perhaps reflects the fourth-century criticisms of extreme asceticism.⁶²

ii. Ambrose's Response to the Fourth-Century Anti-Ascetic Voice

Ambrose's ascetical tracts reveal that there were some strong objections to the Church's advocacy of virginity, and, indeed, to Ambrose's personal commitment to its promotion. These objections are evident not only in *De virginibus*, but also in *De virginitate*. In *De virginitate*, the later of the two tracts, Ambrose uses the Old Testament story of the immolation of Jephthah's daughter to raise the issue of the nature of sacrifice.⁶³ He contrasts the willingness of Jephthah to sacrifice his virginal child to God, notwithstanding the rashness of his vow and the inhumanity of the nature of the sacrifice, with the lack of willingness of contemporary Christian parents to offer their daughters to God as a holy oblation:

⁶¹ Cf. Ambrose: 'but when a virgin has gained the triumph over her subdued body, she should lessen her toil, that she may be preserved as a teacher for a younger age.'; 'Do you too, a veteran in virginity, at least sow the fields of your breast with different seeds, at one time with moderate sustenance, at another with sparing fasts, with reading, work, and prayer, that change of toil may be as a truce for rest.' Ambrose, *De virginibus*, III.iv.16, p. 383; III.iv.16, pp. 383-4.

⁶² Cf. Canons I, IX, X, XIII, XIV, XV, XVI, XVII of the Council of Gangra, in the Gregory of Nyssa chapter above, p. 230 note 97.

⁶³ Cf. Judges: 'He made a vow to the Lord, saying: If thou wilt deliver the children of Ammon into my hands, Whosoever shall first come forth out of the doors of my house, and shall meet me when I return in peace from the children of Ammon, the same will I offer a holocaust to the Lord. [...] And when Jephthe returned into Maspha to his house, his only daughter met him with timbrels and with dances: for he had no other children. And when he saw her, he rent his garments, and said: Alas! my daughter, thou hast deceived me, and thou thyself art deceived: for I have opened my mouth to the Lord, and I can do no other thing. And she answered him: My father, if thou hast opened thy mouth to the Lord, do unto me whatsoever thou hast promised, since the victory hath been granted to thee, and revenge of thy enemies. And she said to her father: Grant me only this which I desire: Let me go, that I may go about the mountains for two months and bewail my virginity with my companions. [...] And the two months being expired, she returned to her father, and he did to her as he had vowed, and she knew no man' (Judges 11: 30-31; 11: 34-7; 11: 39).

And so that bloody sacrifice was immolated and no one objected. But when another sort of sacrifice, one of chastity is offered, will there again be no objections? The father who had promised to slay his daughter fulfilled his vow. But had he vowed the virginity of his daughter to God, would not his commitment to this pious oblation be much resisted? In the one case, a sorrowing daughter offers her life because of her father's oath; in the other, a holy promise is broken, and no offering is made, neither by the parent nor the child.⁶⁴

The story of Jephthah's daughter provides a prototype for the sacrifice of virginity, which feeds into the sacrificial imagery used by earlier patristic authors. Ambrose implies that not only does the Christian populace complain about consecrating the virginity of its daughters to God, but that, as a consequence, these prevailing objections caused virgins to break their vows. The comparison with Jephthah's daughter perhaps suggests that the instances to which Ambrose alludes were a result of parents offering their children, rather than the child professing a vow of her own volition. Certainly, Canon XVIII of the Canons of Basil attempts to curb the problem of parents' vowing underage girls to the Church as oblates:

XVIII. [Girls] ought not to be admitted to profess virginity till they are above sixteen or seventeen years of age, after trial, and at their own earnest request; whereas relations often offer them that are under age, for their own secular ends, but such ought not easily to be admitted.⁶⁵

The canon highlights two issues: the problem of a family's decision to dedicate a virgin, and the age at which the Church should accept virgins. Alberici and Harlow note that the recommendation of a later age for the acceptance of female oblates reflects the Roman legal coming of age for woman, rather than the marital coming of age.⁶⁶ Ambrose does

⁶⁴ Saint Ambrose, *De virginitate (On Virginity)*, III.x, trans. Daniel Callam (Saskatchewan: Peregrina Publishing Co., 1987), p. 11.

⁶⁵ Basil of Caesarea, *The First Canonical Epistle of Our Holy Father Basil, Archbishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia to Amphilochius, Bishop of Iconium*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. XIV, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church: Their Canons and dogmatic decrees* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1900]), p. 605. See also Basil's *Epistle* 199.18.

⁶⁶ Cf. Alberici and Harlow: 'In legal texts, the age of eighteen was considered an appropriate time for a female to be responsible for property transactions. Such an age corresponds with the normal age at

not take quite the same line as Basil on the minimum age for the profession of virginity.

He notes with approval that the age restriction is an attempt to prevent anyone making a rash decision, and agrees that the bishop ought to carefully consider each case.⁶⁷

However, the bishop's discretion, Ambrose argues, should enable him to accept younger candidates as well as reject unsuitable ones:

He should investigate thoroughly, considering her age, yes, but also her faith and modesty. He should examine what we may call her maturity in refined sensibility, her grey hairs of seriousness, the old age of good behaviour, her long years of modesty, her commitment to chastity, and, finally, the dependable protection of her mother and the sober zeal of her companions.⁶⁸

Ambrose favours maturity of mind and virtue over maturity in age.⁶⁹ His zeal for the uptake of the veil, however, does not appear to have been shared by the Milanese

Christian community. He relates the allegations made against him:

marriage for girls (outside the elite), and is similar to some of the recommended ages at which it was considered appropriate to make a commitment to perpetual virginity. Among the elites this decision could be taken at an earlier age.' Lisa A. Alberici and Mary Harlow, 'Age and Innocence: Female Transitions to Adulthood in Late Antiquity', *Hesperis Supplements*, Vol. 41, *Constructions of Childhood in Ancient Greece and Italy* (2007), 193-203, (p. 203).

⁶⁷ Augustine's *Epistle 254*, concerning his opinion about the proposed marriage of a parentless Christian girl to a pagan man, counsels caution with regard to the girl's wish to become a nun instead: 'The girl about whom your Holiness [Benatus] wrote to me is so disposed that, if she were old enough to choose, she would not marry anyone. [...] I do not know whether she will marry, because she is of such an age where her expressed wish to become a nun might be the light whim of a chatterer rather than a solemn undertaking of religious profession.' Saint Augustine, *254. Augustine and the brethren who are with give greeting in the Lord to the holy and revered lord, Benatus, his cherished brother and fellow priest and the brethren who are with you*, in *The Fathers of the Church: Saint Augustine Letters*, Vol. V (204-270), trans. Sister Wilfrid Parsons (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1981 [1956]), pp. 245-246, (pp. 245-6). Alberici and Harlow observe that there are many examples of the early admission of young women into the rank of virgins, which 'reinforce the fact that elite families were in the habit of arranging early marriages for their offspring. This tendency accounts for the examples of aristocratic girls choosing an ascetic life at a particularly early age, as they would have needed to abstain from marriage while still quite young.' Alberici and Mary Harlow, 'Age and Innocence', p. 201.

⁶⁸ Ambrose, *De virginitate*, VII.xxxix, pp. 23-4.

⁶⁹ The canons of the later Council of Carthage (c. 418) allowed bishops to be exempt from adhering to the canons which insisted on an older age limit for admission into the profession. This exemption, however, was not on consideration of the maturity of candidate, but in case of exterior forces compelling a swift consecration: 'it seemed good that whatever bishop, by the necessity of the dangers of virginal purity, when either a powerful suitor or some ravisher is feared, or if she shall be pricked with some scruple of death that she might die unveiled, at the demand either of her parents or of those to whose care she has been entrusted, shall give the veil to a virgin, or shall have given it while she was under twenty-five years of age, the council which has appointed that number of years shall not oppose him.' *Canon XVIII of The Code of*

What are we blamed for in this matter? What evil thing are we supposed to have done? Is it because we have prohibited illicit marriage? If so, John the Baptist may be indicted for the same fault. [...] 'It is not lawful,' he said, 'for you to have her as a wife.' If this was said of the wife of a man, how much more of a virgin consecrated to God?⁷⁰

Ambrose's comparison emphasises the importance placed on the virginal vow, as he asserts that the marriage of a consecrated virgin is a much greater crime than the illicit marriage of Herod to his sister-in-law, Herodias,⁷¹ a depraved figure from biblical history who caused the death of John the Baptist.⁷² The punishments, however, for fallen consecrated virgins recommended by Church canons vary; Basil's canons note that in the past virgins who have married have undergone the same punishment as if for digamy (marrying a second time after the first spouse dies) but he recommends instead that it should be the same as that of an adulterer.⁷³ In both punitive measures, the idea of the virginal vow as a marriage to Christ is evident.

the Canons of the African Church, A.D. 419, in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Vol. XIV, The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church: Their Canons and dogmatic decrees (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1900]), pp. 441-510, (p. 503).

⁷⁰ Ambrose, *De virginitate*, III. xii, p. 12.

⁷¹ Cf. Matthew: 'For Herod had apprehended John and bound him, and put him into prison, because of Herodias, his brother's wife. For John had said to him: It is not lawful for thee to have her' (Matthew 14: 3-4); Cf. Mark: 'For Herod himself had sent and apprehended John, and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias the wife of Philip his brother, because he had married her. For John said to Herod: It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother's wife' (Mark 6: 17-8).

⁷² Cf. Matthew: 'But on Herod's birthday, the daughter of Herodias danced before them: and pleased Herod. Whereupon he promised with an oath, to give her whatsoever she would ask of him. But she being instructed before by her mother, said: Give me here in a dish the head of John the Baptist' (Matthew 14: 6-8) Cf. Mark: 'Now Herodias laid snares for him [John the Baptist]: and was desirous to put him to death, and could not. For Herod feared John, knowing him to be a just and holy man: and kept him, and when he heard him, did many things: and he heard him willingly. [...] And when the daughter of the same Herodias had come in, and had danced, and pleased Herod, and them that were at table with him, the king said to the damsel: Ask of me what thou wilt, and I will give it thee. [...] Who when she was gone out, said to her mother, What shall I ask? But she said: The head of John the Baptist' (Mark 6: 19-20; 6: 22; 6: 24).

⁷³ Cf. Basil: 'XVIII. That the ancients received a professed virgin that had married as one guilty of digamy, viz., upon one year's penance; but they ought to be dealt with more severely than widows professing continence, and even as adulterers.'; 'LX. Professed virgins and monks, if they fall from their profession, shall undergo the penance of adulterers.' Basil of Caesarea, *The First Canonical Epistle*, p. 605; p. 608.

Ambrose continues to refute the accusations levelled at him. He says: 'Here is what has produced my unpopularity, my "crime": that I recommend virginity.'⁷⁴ One of his detractors complains that he 'advocate[s] virginity, and successfully.'⁷⁵ Ambrose jokes that he wishes that this accusation was well founded so that he could see the fruits of his 'crime'.⁷⁶ Another accusation harkens back to his earlier discussion of the crime of consecrated virgins who seek to marry:

Another says, 'You forbid maidens to marry who have solemnly consecrated their virginity to God.' I only wish I could appeal to those who are going to be married, that I could change their bridal veils for the holy veils that symbolise the unmarried state. To some it seems almost shameful that virgins who have consecrated their lives to God were not snatched back from the very altar and forced to marry. Why can a maiden, who may choose a husband, not be allowed to choose God instead?⁷⁷

The objections of the community may indicate that the Church had begun to tighten up regulations on virginity, if the comments in Cyprian's fourth epistle does indeed suggest that consecrated virgins could still marry. Nevertheless, Ambrose appears to be suggesting that families are removing girls who desire to be consecrated and forcing them into marriage. He asks the Milanese community whether his activities in the promotion of virginity are criticised because 'they are reprehensible, because they are unprecedented, or because they are useless'.⁷⁸ The anti-ascetic voice leads Ambrose to return to the biblical origins of virginity in order to justify its place in the Church. To refute the charge

⁷⁴ Ambrose, *De virginitate*, V. xxiv, p. 17.

⁷⁵ Ambrose, *De virginitate*, V. xxv, pp. 17-8.

⁷⁶ Cf. Ambrose: 'I wish this were so; I wish the effects of this "crime" could be demonstrated. I would not fear your grudge if I could see some signs of this success. In fact, I wish you who criticise my words could accuse me of particular instances instead. But, alas, my detractors err when they blame me for accomplishments that others would praise.' Ambrose, *De virginitate*, V. xxv, pp. 17-8. Cf. Ambrose: 'Some one may say, you are always singing the praises of virgins. What shall I do who am always singing them and have no success? But this is not my fault. Then, too, virgins come from Placentia to be consecrated, or from Bononia, and Mauritania, in order to receive the veil here. You see a striking thing here. I treat the matter here, and persuade those who are elsewhere. If this be so, let me treat the subject elsewhere, that I may persuade you.' Ambrose, *De virginibus*, I.XI.lvii, p. 372.

⁷⁷ Ambrose, *De virginitate*, V. xxvi, p. 18.

⁷⁸ Ambrose, *De virginitate*, VI. xxvii, p. 18.

that virginity is reprehensible, he alludes to Christ's words related in Matthew 22: 30 and Mark 12: 25, in which He compared the unmarried state of the resurrection to the angelic life:⁷⁹

‘They neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like the angels in heaven.’ Whoever condemns virginity condemns the promise of the resurrection. What has been established as a reward can hardly be called reprehensible. There can be nothing offensive in a way of life which actually anticipates our final state.⁸⁰

Ambrose denies the possibility that virginity is unprecedented by citing another scriptural passage (Matthew 19: 12), which establishes Christ's endorsement of the virginal state:

‘There are,’ he said, ‘eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.’ Consecrated virginity, then, may be described as a brilliant militia waging war for the kingdom of heaven. And so the Lord taught us that a zeal for chastity ought to be uncontaminated.⁸¹

By returning to the foundational scriptural passages which justify and authorise virginity, Ambrose demonstrates that virginity is not a novelty, but is actually taught by Christ and presages the state of the body in heaven. In addition to demonstrating Christ's own authorisation of virginity, Ambrose illustrates the Apostles' recognition of its supremacy: ‘even the Apostles recognised its pre-eminence when they said, “If this is the case of a man with his wife, it is not expedient to marry”’.⁸² Ambrose avers that Christ's reply to this comment was to convey the extraordinary strength that was needed in order to achieve this state for ‘no half-hearted effort could succeed’.⁸³ Ambrose goes on to show that virginity cannot be called useless because it enabled the Redemption of mankind: ‘it was through the Virgin that salvation came, bringing new life to the Roman

⁷⁹ Cf. Matthew: ‘For in the resurrection they shall neither marry nor be married; but shall be as the angels of God in heaven’ (Matthew 22: 30); Cf. Mark: ‘For when they shall rise again from the dead, they shall neither marry, nor be married, but are as the angels in heaven’ (Mark 12: 25).

⁸⁰ Ambrose, *De virginitate*, VI. xxvii, p. 18.

⁸¹ Ambrose, *De virginitate*, VI. xxviii, p. 19.

⁸² Ambrose, *De virginitate*, VI. xxix, p. 19.

⁸³ Ambrose, *De virginitate*, VI. xxix, p. 19.

world'.⁸⁴ Ambrose reiterates, then, that virginity was sanctioned by the Redeemer; it enabled the Redemption; and it is the state in which mankind will dwell in his resurrected form. Thus, virginity is not only eminently suitable for a Christian to adopt, but anticipates the very reward to which all Christians aspire.

The objections of the populace to virginity which Ambrose examines seem chiefly to be due to the suspicion that a preference for virginity carries with it an implied criticism of marriage.⁸⁵ Ambrose explains in *De virginibus* that such an anti-matrimonial charge has been levelled against him:

Some one may say, Do you, then, discourage marriage? Nay, I encourage it, and condemn those who are wont to discourage it [...] For he who condemns marriage, condemns the birth of children, and condemns the fellowship of the human race, continued by a series of successive generations. [...] I do not then discourage marriage, but recapitulate the advantages of holy virginity. This is the gift of a few only, that is of all. And virginity itself cannot exist, unless it have some mode of coming into existence. I am comparing good things with good things, that it may be clear which is the more excellent.⁸⁶

Ambrose enumerates the reasons why the heavenly marriage of virginity is more excellent than earthly marriage: the spouse of the virgin is not an earthly man, but God Himself;⁸⁷ the virgin does not gain earthly domains, but the heavenly kingdom;⁸⁸ the

⁸⁴ Ambrose, *De virginitate*, VII. xxxvi, p. 22.

⁸⁵ Ambrose's writings on marriage do, however, feed into the *molestiae nuptiarum* tradition. For instance, he compares marriage to a form of slavery, which is due to punishment for woman's role in the fall: 'Why should I further speak of the painful ministrations and services due to their husbands from wives, to whom before slaves God gave the command to serve?' Ambrose, *De virginibus*, I.vi.27, p. 367. He also emphasises its mercantile nature and the anxiety experienced by the girl who waits to know how she will be disposed of: 'But how wretched a position, that she who is marriageable is in a species of sale put up as it were to auction to be bid for, so that he who offers the highest price purchases her. Slaves are sold on more tolerable conditions, for they often choose their masters; if a maiden chooses it is an offence, if not it is an insult. And she, though she be beautiful and comely, both fears and wishes to be seen; she wishes it that she may sell herself for a better price; she fears lest the fact of her being seen should itself be unbecoming. But what absurdities of wishes and fears and suspicions are there as to how the suitors will turn out, lest a poor man may beguile her, or a rich one condemn her, lest a handsome suitor mock her, lest a noble one despise her.' Ambrose, *De virginibus*, I.x.56, p. 372.

⁸⁶ Ambrose, *De virginibus*, I.vii.34, p. 368; I.vii.35, p. 369.

⁸⁷ Cf. Ambrose, *De virginibus*, I. VII. xxxvi, p. 369.

⁸⁸ Cf. Ambrose, *De virginibus*, I. VII. xxxvii, p. 369.

virgin does not have to possess a beautiful body in order to attract her spouse, but instead relies on the excellence of her soul.⁸⁹ Ambrose states that he does not object to marriage itself, but he does object to the interference of parents who wish their daughters to marry and, in doing so, thwart their religious vocations. He tries to convince parents that their daughter's vocation is beneficial to the family by saving the cost of the dowry. In addition, the girl remains dutifully with her parents and, on the spiritual side, her sacrifice aids the redemption of her family.⁹⁰ Ambrose reiterates the right for girls to make a free choice between marriage and consecrating their virginity to God:

For if your daughters desired to love a man, they could, by law, choose whom they would. Are they, then, who are allowed to choose a man not allowed to choose God?⁹¹

Ambrose suggests that there are many women who would choose virginity, but for the fear of being disinherited:

But suppose that the loss of your patrimony awaits you; are not the future realms of heaven a compensation for perishable and frail possessions? For if we believe the heavenly message, 'there is no one who has forsaken house, or parents, or brethren, or wife, or children, for the kingdom of God's sake, who shall not receive sevenfold more in this present time, and in the world to come shall have everlasting life. [Luke 18: 29-30]⁹²

Ambrose suggests that family objections to consecration are rarely very severe, and that although they will often pressurise the girl with terrible threats, they will eventually

⁸⁹ Cf. Ambrose, *De virginibus*, I. VII. xxxviii, p. 369.

⁹⁰ Cf. Ambrose: 'A virgin is the inseparable pledge of her parents, who neither troubles them for a dowry, nor forsakes them, nor injures them in word or deed'; 'And if they ought to benefit not themselves only, who lived not for themselves alone, one virgin may redeem her parents, another her brothers.' Ambrose, *De virginibus*, I.vii.32, p. 368; II.ii.16, p. 376. Romestin notes that Ambrose's claim that the daughters will not forsake their parents if they take a vow of virginity indicates that the older custom of women's adopting private vows and remaining in the family home is still prevalent in Milan in the late-fourth century. Cf. Romestin: 'from this passage it is clear that in the days of St. Ambrose it was not yet the rule at Milan, though it was in other places, for the consecrated virgins to live together, but the older custom still continued.' Romestin, Note to *De virginibus*, p. 368 n.1.

⁹¹ Ambrose, *De virginibus*, I.xi.58, p. 372.

⁹² Ambrose, *De virginibus*, I. XII. lxiv, p. 373. Saint Jerome also discusses the problem of parents who object to their daughters choosing a life of virginity. Cf. Jerome, *Epistle XXII. To Eustochium*, xx, p. 30.

relent.⁹³ However, sometimes families do intend to carry through their threats and so, in order to quash the fears of potential virgins on that account, he relates an anecdote about a ‘virgin [who] had desired to consecrate herself to God, but had been prevented by her family’.⁹⁴ One day she fled to the Church in desperation, placing her head under the altar cloth and begged the priest to consecrate her there and then.⁹⁵ Her family was not impressed by her actions. One of her relatives said to her that if her father were alive he would not suffer her to remain unmarried, to which she replied: ‘perchance he is gone that no one may be able to hinder me.’⁹⁶ The relative who had tried to hinder her swiftly departed this life and so the rest of the family prudently decided not to interfere with God’s Will.⁹⁷ The woman in question was able to become a consecrated virgin and retain her inheritance, but her father was not alive and, as the ill-fated relative suggested, had he been he would, perhaps, have had more influence over her vocational choice and the disposal of her patrimony. Ambrose dismisses the fear of penury as a reason for women to relinquish the virginal life:

⁹³ Cf. Ambrose: ‘And yet of whom have you heard as ever, because of her desire for chastity, having been deprived of her lawful inheritance? Parents speak against her, but are willing to be overcome. They resist at first because they are afraid to believe; they often are angry that one may learn to overcome; they threaten to disinherit to try whether one is able not to fear temporal loss; they caress with exquisite allurements to see if one cannot be softened by the inducement of various pleasure.’ Ambrose, *De virginibus*, I. XII. lxiii, p. 373.

⁹⁴ Ambrose, *De virginibus*, I.xii.66, p. 373.

⁹⁵ Cf. Ambrose: ‘Within my memory a girl once noble in the world, now more noble in the sight of God, being urged to a marriage by her parents and kinsfolk, took refuge at the holy altar. Whither could a virgin better flee, than thither where the Virgin Sacrifice is offered? Nor was even that the limit of her boldness. She, the oblation of modesty, the victim of chastity, was standing at the altar of God, now placing upon her head the right hand of the priest, asking his prayers, and now impatient at the righteous delay, placing the top of her head under the altar. ‘Can any better veil,’ she said, ‘cover me better than the altar which consecrates the veils themselves? Such a bridal veil is most suitable on which Christ, the Head of all, is daily consecrated.’ Ambrose, *De virginibus*, I.xii.65, p. 373.

⁹⁶ Ambrose, *De virginibus*, I.xii.66, p. 373.

⁹⁷ Cf. Ambrose: ‘So the others, each of them, fearing the same for himself, began to assist and not to hinder her as before, and her virginity involved not the loss of the property due to her, but also received the reward for her integrity. You see, maidens, the rewards of devotion, and do you, parents, be warned by the example of transgression.’ Ambrose, *De virginibus*, I. XII. lxvi, p. 373.

Parents will refuse a dowry, but you have a wealthy Spouse, satisfied with Whose treasures you will not miss the revenue of a father's inheritance. How much is poverty to chastity superior to bridal gifts!⁹⁸

Ambrose is not really interested in the financial issues and focuses more on the spiritual rewards of virginity, which outweigh the problem of disinheritance. He does, however, try to convince parents that rather than thwart a daughter's desire for consecration, they should train their children in the practice of virginity, and encourage them to take up the profession.⁹⁹

iii. Imitating Virginity: Mary and the Saints

As Saint Paul had 'no commandment' regarding virginity,¹⁰⁰ Ambrose, in *De virginibus* (A.D. 377), 'thought it better to instruct by examples than by precepts'.¹⁰¹ Ambrose's treatise, therefore, discusses virginal examples: Saint Agnes; Saint Mary, the Mother of God; Saint Thecla, the Apostle's virgin; an unnamed virgin martyr of Antioch; his own sister; Saint Pelagia, who committed suicide rather than lose her bodily virginity; and the blessed Sotheris, one of Ambrose and Marcellina's martyred ancestors. Throughout his treatise, Ambrose demonstrates the increasing importance of the cult of saints as imitative possibilities in the tradition of virginity.¹⁰² Indeed, the treatise takes for its starting point

⁹⁸ Ambrose, *De virginibus*, I.xii.62, p. 373.

⁹⁹ Cf. Ambrose: 'It is a good thing, then, that the zeal of parents, like favouring gales, should aid a virgin; but it is even more glorious if the fire of tender age even without the incitement of those older of its own self burst forth into the flame of chastity. Parents will refuse a dowry, but you have a wealthy Spouse, satisfied with Whose treasures you will not miss the revenue of a father's inheritance.' Ambrose, *De virginibus*, I. XII. lxii, pp. 372-3.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Ambrose: 'And in truth he [Paul] had no commandment, but he had an example. For virginity cannot be commanded, but must be wished for, for things which are above us are matters for prayer rather than under mastery.' Ambrose, *De virginibus*, I.v.23, p. 367.

¹⁰¹ Ambrose, *De virginibus*, II.i.2, p. 374.

¹⁰² Cf. Louth: 'the nature of the saint's *Life*, from its beginnings, was more deeply affected by the emerging Christian cult of the saint, of which the *Life* soon came to form a part. The cult of the saint was originally the cult of the martyr, a cult that can be traced back at least to the second century, as the *Martyrdom of St. Polycarp* shows. [...] There is a] close affinity between hagiography and monastic literature, for the ascetic, too, saw himself as a successor to the martyr, and engaged in the same struggle.' Andrew Louth,

the example of Saint Agnes, on whose anniversary of martyrdom Ambrose's treatise was delivered.¹⁰³ Agnes' martyrdom is held up as a marvellous example, not only because of her willingness to die for the Faith, but because of her conviction despite her youth:

In devotion beyond her age, in virtue above nature, she seems to me to have borne not so much a human name, as a token of martyrdom whereby she showed what she was to be. [...] She is said to have suffered martyrdom when twelve years old. The more hateful was the cruelty, which spared not so tender an age, the greater in truth was the power of faith which found evidence even in that age.¹⁰⁴

Agnes was able to choose martyrdom at twelve years of age, when she was on the cusp of womanhood and not quite of marital age:¹⁰⁵

Every one was astounded that there was to bear witness to the Godhead, who as yet could not, because of her age, dispose of herself. [...] What threats the executioner used to make her fear him, what allurements to persuade her, how many desired that she would come to them in marriage! But she answered: 'It would be an injury to my spouse to look on any one as likely to please me. He who chose me first for Himself shall receive me.'¹⁰⁶

Despite Agnes' tender age, she confidently rejects an earthly marriage and already sees herself as a perpetual virgin, a bride of Christ, consecrated to Him alone. After this

'Hagiography' in *The Cambridge History of Early Christian Literature*, eds. Frances Young, Lewis Ayres, Andrew Louth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 358-361, (p. 385; p. 359).

¹⁰³ Cf. Ambrose: 'And my task begins favourably, that since today is the birthday of a virgin, I have to speak of virgins and the treatise has its beginning from this discourse.' Ambrose, *De virginibus*, I. II. v, p. 364.

¹⁰⁴ Ambrose, *De virginibus*, I. II. v. p. 364; I. II. vii. p. 364..

¹⁰⁵ Cf. Elm: 'In accordance with fourth-century mores, at the age of 12, "when the flower of youth begins to flourish in particular splendour of beauty", Macrina was engaged to a young man, then approximately 25 years of age, "who had just completed his studies", and was selected by her father because of his excellent family background and character. During the engagement – Macrina had to wait two years to reach the legal age for marriage – the young man suddenly died.' Susanna Elm, 'Virgins of God'. *The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 43. Compare Walsh: 'The [Roman] bride could legally be as young as twelve, and in senatorial families girls were frequently married by their early or middle teens to men considerably older, in order to cement close-knit relations between the families and dominant class.' P. G. Walsh, 'Introduction to *De bono coniugali* and *De sancta virginitate*' (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. ix-xxxii, (pp. xii-xiii). Compare also with Tertullian's reference to heathenish marital practices: 'Time even the heathens observe, that, in obedience to the law of nature, they may render their own rights to the different ages. For their *females* they dispatch to their businesses from (the age of) twelve years, but the *male* from two years later; decreeing puberty (to consist) in years, not in espousals or nuptials.' Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, XI.x, in *Ante Nicene Fathers*, Vol. IV. *Tertullian, Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Parts First and Second*, trans. S. Thewell, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1885]), pp. 27-38, (p. 34).

¹⁰⁶ Ambrose, *De virginibus*, I. II. viii-ix. p. 364.

pronouncement, Ambrose says, she invited the executioner to fulfil his office. Agnes thus obtained two crowns: those of martyrdom and virginity. Ambrose describes these as a ‘twofold martyrdom’, and so draws on the understanding exhibited in earlier treatises of virginity as a type of martyrdom.¹⁰⁷ In her spiritual precociousness, Agnes realises Ambrose’s argument from *De virginitate* concerning the need for bishops to consider each individual case of underage virgins who wish to take the veil.

In addition to Agnes’ youthful devotion, Ambrose promotes the life of Mary as providing the perfect model of Christian virginity:

Let, then, the life of Mary be as it were virginity itself, set forth in a likeness, from which, as from a mirror, the appearance of chastity and the form of virtue is reflected. From this you may take your pattern of life, showing, as an example, the clear rules of virtue: what you have to correct, to effect, and to hold fast.¹⁰⁸

Ambrose’s treatise demonstrates a clear debt to the *First Letter to Virgins* attributed to Athanasius in its promotion of Mary’s life and behaviour as the most worthy paradigm for virginity.¹⁰⁹ This is evident not just in her physical state, but also in her bearing witness to Christ’s ministry. These physical and spiritual attributes combine to present Mary not just as the perfect virgin, but also as the perfect Christian:

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Ambrose: ‘You have then in one victim a twofold martyrdom, of modesty and of religion. She both remained a virgin and she obtained martyrdom.’ Ambrose, *De virginibus*, I. II. ix. pp. 364-5.

¹⁰⁸ Ambrose, *De virginibus*, II.ii.6, p. 374. Compare Athanasius: ‘Therefore, let the life of Mary, the bearer of God, be for all of you, as it is written an [image and likeness of] her virginity. For it is best for you to recognise yourselves in her as in a mirror and so govern yourselves. Complete the good deeds you have forgotten, and increase the things you have done well, so that your life too might serve for a time as an image for others; continually look to the instruction of others.’ Athanasius, *First Letter to Virgins*, xii, trans. David Brakke, in David Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 274-291, (p. 277).

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Brakke: ‘It is tantalizing to think that the exiled Athanasius brought the Greek original of this letter with him when he moved from Rome to Milan in May 342. Some thirty years later Bishop Ambrose of Milan used a copy of Athanasius’ letter when he wrote his influential book, *On Virgins*; thus Athanasius’ ideas about proper virginity, like his Christological doctrines, passed into the literature of the Western Church, while in Egypt his letter survived only in Coptic.’ David Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 269. Cf. Hunter: ‘Athanasius’ letter circulated in the West; by 377 it was available to Ambrose, who borrowed extensively from it in his three books *De Virginibus*.’ David Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity: The Jovinianist Controversy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009 [2007]), p. 188.

This is the likeness of virginity. For Mary was such that her example alone is a lesson for all. If, then, the author displeases us not, let us make trial of the production, that whoever desires its rewards for herself may imitate the pattern. How many kinds of virtues shine forth in one Virgin! The secret of modesty, the banner of faith, the service of devotion, the Virgin within the house, the companion for the ministry, the mother at the temple.¹¹⁰

It is evident that Ambrose is interested in Mariology as he composed a treatise *De institutione virginis et sanctae mariae virginitate perpetua* (c. A.D. 391). This treatise, written after Jerome's famous treatise *Contra Helvidium*, answers the Bishop Bonosus of Sardica's rejection of Mary's perpetual virginity.¹¹¹ In this treatise, Ambrose combines his interest in Mary and asceticism.¹¹² Like Athanasius, he utilises the growing Mariological tradition to fuel the tradition of virginity, and *vice versa*.

Alongside the example of Mary and Agnes, Ambrose casts the net of imitation out further to include other Christian virgins:

Let, then, holy Mary instruct you in the discipline of life, and Thecla teach you how to be offered, for she, avoiding nuptials, and condemned through her husband's rage, changed even the disposition of wild beasts by their reverence for virginity.¹¹³

Thecla, the patron saint of Milan, provides an example of a betrothed woman who rejects marriage in favour of a life of virginity. She is perhaps slightly problematic in light of the Christian community's accusations that Ambrose desires to snatch women away from marriage to take up the veil instead. In citing examples, Ambrose does not only want to

¹¹⁰ Ambrose, *De virginibus*, II.ii.15, p. 375.

¹¹¹ Cf. Rusch: '[*De institutione virginis*] is ostensibly a speech for Ambrosia on her calling as a virgin, but a large portion of it is an attack upon Bishop Bonosus of Sardica, who rejected the perpetual virginity of Mary.' Rusch, *The Later Latin Fathers*, p. 57.

¹¹² Cf. Gambero: 'In the writings of Saint Ambrose, we find the first important Marian doctrine within western Christianity, in terms not only of quantity but also of quality, as we encounter rare heights of illuminating reflection.' Gambero, *Mary and the Church Fathers*, p. 189. Cf. Dudden: 'It is clear that Ambrose contributed not a little to elevate Mary, in the estimation of Christendom, to a pre-eminent position among the saints. Yet he did not maintain (as Augustine afterwards was disposed to maintain) that Mary was without actual sin, and he distinctly denied that she ought to be worshipped.' Dudden, *The Life and Times of St. Ambrose*, Vol. II, p. 601.

¹¹³ Ambrose, *De virginibus*, II.iii.19, p. 376.

cite Mary and other saints, whose lives and overwhelming virtue may seem beyond the reach of ordinary mortals.¹¹⁴ He, therefore, also provides examples from closer to home in the person of an unnamed virgin-martyr of Antioch.¹¹⁵ This virgin refused to sacrifice to idols and, in punishment, the authorities decided that they would wound her in her most precious possession, her chastity.¹¹⁶ The virgin debates with herself whether she ought to perjure herself and thus preserve her virginity unspotted, or whether she should lose her physical integrity but retain her religious fidelity.¹¹⁷ She chose to be true to God and to trust in Him, and so she was sent to be defiled at a brothel.¹¹⁸ Her chastity was miraculously protected, however, by a soldier, who had entered the brothel on the pretext of defiling her. He persuades her to change clothing with him, so that she can leave dressed as a man. The other defilers marvelled that the virgin of God had seemed to have

¹¹⁴ Cf. Ambrose: ‘What is greater than the Mother of God? What is more glorious than she whom Glory Itself chose? What more chaste than she who bore a body without contact with another body? For why should I speak of her other virtues? She was a virgin not only in body but also in mind, who stained the sincerity of its disposition by no guile, who was humble in heart, grave in speech, prudent in mind, sparing of words, studious in reading, resting her hope not on uncertain riches, but on the prayer of the poor, intent on work, modest in discourse; wont to seek not man but God as the judge of her thoughts, to injure no one, to have goodwill towards all, to rise up before her elders, not to envy her equals, to avoid boastfulness, to follow reason, to love virtue.’ Ambrose, *De virginibus*, II.ii.7, p. 374.

¹¹⁵ Cf. Ambrose: ‘Some one will say: “Why have you brought forward the example of Mary, as if any one could be found to imitate the Lord’s mother? And why that of Thecla, whom the Apostle of the Gentiles trained? Give us a teacher of our own sort if you wish for disciples.” I will, therefore, set before you a recent example of this sort, that you may understand that the Apostle is the teacher, not of one, but of all.’ Ambrose, *De virginibus*, II.iii.21, p. 376.

¹¹⁶ Cf. Ambrose: ‘But when they saw the constancy of her profession, her fear for her modesty, her readiness for tortures, and her blushes at being looked on, they began to consider how they might overcome her religion by setting chastity before her, so that, having deprived her of that which was the greatest, they might also deprive her of that which they had left. So the sentence was that she should either sacrifice, or be sent to a house of ill-fame.’ Ambrose, *De virginibus*, II.iv.23, p. 377.

¹¹⁷ Cf. Ambrose: ‘Each crown, that of martyrdom and that of virginity, is grudged me today. But the name of virgin is not acknowledged where the Author of virginity is denied. How can one be a virgin who cherishes a harlot? How can one be a virgin who loves adulterers? How a virgin if she seeks for a lover? It is preferable to have a virgin mind than a virgin body. Each is good if each be possible; if it be not possible, let me be chaste, not to man but to God. [...] perhaps I, by preserving my religion, shall also preserve my chastity.’ Ambrose, *De virginibus*, II.iv.24, p. 377.

¹¹⁸ Cf. Ambrose: ‘she wept and was silent, that the adulterer might not even hear her speaking, and she did not choose the wrong done to her modesty, but rejected wrong done to Christ. Consider whether it was possible for her to suffer her body to be unchaste, who guarded even her speech.’ Ambrose, *De virginibus*, II.iv.25, p. 377.

changed into a man. The plan worked well, but the soldier was then sentenced to death. The virgin, not wishing for him to receive martyrdom in her stead, joined him and they received the palm together. So, by choosing to trust in God, the virgin was rewarded by retaining both her bodily integrity and faithfulness and by winning the double crown of virginity and martyrdom. Ambrose claims that he does not want to portray virginity as mythical state, but rather as an achievable goal which has been attained by real people, sanctioned by Christ and His mother and continuing within the Christian tradition. The virgin of Antioch is, however, another example of heroic virginity, but he emphasises that these examples are not reproduced by him necessarily to provide precepts for virgins to follow.¹¹⁹ Instead, they are supposed to act as an illustration of the lengths to which true virgins will go in order to retain their chastity. A Milanese virgin, in contrast, may only have to defy her parents and undergo some slight discomfort necessitated by the loss of the pecuniary advantages afforded by her family.

There is, then, a definite widening out of the imitational possibilities of virginity in the treatise. The earliest treatises emphasised virginity exclusively as an *imitatio Christi*, whereas Athanasius encouraged virgins to imitate the life and behaviour of Mary, and later fourth-century treatises demonstrate a wider appreciation of the imitation of virginity in the lives of Christian saints. Gregory of Nyssa emphasised this aspect by stressing the importance of living examples of *parthenia*, which other virgins can use as a model for the virginal life, but Ambrose appears to harness the hagiographical, as well as

¹¹⁹ Cf. Ambrose: 'I [...] have prepared this offering for you, holy virgins, although untaught by my own experience, yet having learnt much from your mode of life. [...] If you find any flowers herein, gather them together in the bosom of your lives. These are not precepts for virgins, but instances taken from virgins. My words have sketched the likeness of your virtue, you may see the reflection of your gravity, as it were, in the mirror of this discourse. If you have received any pleasure from my ability, all the fragrance of this book is yours.' Ambrose, *De virginibus*, II.vi.39, p. 380.

the Mariological, tradition to the concept of virginity. It is notable that Ambrose draws out the sacrificial quality of virginity throughout all of his virginal tracts; for example, his saintly *exempla* in *De virginibus* are predominantly virgin-martyrs, apart from the Blessed Virgin Mary and Thecla (although there were three attempts to martyr Thecla).¹²⁰ Additionally, his discussion of the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter in *De virginitate* likens that particular female sacrifice with the sacrifice of virginity. This underlying connection perhaps reflects the increasing importance of virginity as an alternative sacrifice to martyrdom, and continues the existent connection of virginity as a form of sacrifice.¹²¹

iv. The Consecration of Virginity

Liber III of *De virginibus* is particularly interesting in terms of evidence for the consecration ritual of virgins. In this treatise, written for his sister Marcellina, Ambrose describes the ritual of consecration in detail and provides evidence that the vow of virginity had progressed to a ceremonial, public profession, rather than a domestic, private vow. Ambrose looks back to the day on which Marcellina took the veil:

¹²⁰ Ambrose reads Saint Pelagia's suicide as a form of martyrdom: 'I should touch upon what we ought to think of those who have cast themselves down from a height, or have drowned themselves in a river, lest they should fall into the hands of persecutors, seeing that holy Scripture forbids a Christian to lay hands on himself. And indeed as regards virgins placed in the necessity of preserving their purity, we have a plain answer, seeing that there exists an instance of martyrdom.' Ambrose, *De virginibus*, III.vii.32, p. 386. Pelagia's narrative plays on the image of the *sponsa Christi*, as she decks herself in bridal attire because she is going to see the bridegroom (III.vii.34, p. 387) and, as she drowns herself, the water becomes seen another baptism (III.vii.34, p. 387).

¹²¹ Cf. Methodius: 'He announces that the order and holy choir of the virgins shall first enter in company with Him into the rest of the new dispensation, as into a bridal chamber. For they were martyrs, not as bearing the pains of the body for a little moment of time, but as enduring them through all their life, not shrinking from truly wrestling in an Olympian contest for the prize of chastity; but resisting the fierce torments of pleasures and fears and griefs, and the other evils of the iniquity of men, they first of all carry off the prize, taking their place in the higher rank of those who receive the promise.' Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, VII.iii, p. 61.

on the Nativity of the Saviour¹²² in the Church of St. Peter you signified your profession of virginity by your change of attire (and what day could be better than that on which the Virgin received her child?) whilst many virgins were standing round and vying with each other for your companionship.¹²³

Marcellina's consecration on the day of Christ's nativity is poignant. Like Athanasius and Gregory's treatises, *De virginitate* equates the adoption of virginity, the conception of Christ within the soul, with His Incarnation, which reiterates the connection between orthodox theology and virginity.¹²⁴ In connection with this discussion of incarnational orthodoxy, Ambrose takes the opportunity to reassure those who are troubled by the necessity of Christ's humanity.¹²⁵ The reference to Marcellina's change of attire, which symbolises the virgin's consecration, testifies to the victory of Tertullian in the struggle for the universal veiling of virgins; by the fourth century it has become the outward symbol of consecration.¹²⁶ Linked to this outward signifier of the grace of virginity, Ambrose refers to its sacramental quality:

¹²² Dudden notes that the consecration took place 'on the Festival of the Epiphany, 6th January A.D. 353, Marcellina took the veil from the hands of Pope Liberius.' Dudden, *The Life and Times of St. Ambrose*, Vol. I, p. 3. Kelly observes that Jerome celebrates the Saviour's birth on 25th December, 'the date favoured at Rome and increasingly in the west since the beginning of the [fifth] century, rather than at Epiphany, 6 January, still the preferred date in Jerusalem and much of the east.' J. N. D. Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 1975), p. 133.

¹²³ Ambrose, *De virginibus*, III.i.1, p. 381.

¹²⁴ Cf. Ambrose: 'He was born after the manner of men, of a Virgin, but was begotten of the Father before all things, resembling His mother in body, His Father in power. Only-begotten on earth, and Only-begotten in heaven. God of God, born of a Virgin.' Ambrose, *De virginibus*, III.i.2, p. 381.

¹²⁵ Cf. Ambrose: 'And since I have inserted a clause in which mention is made of the Lord's Body, lest any one should be troubled at reading that the Lord took a body of pain, let him remember that the Lord grieved and wept over the death of Lazarus, and was wounded in His passion, and that from the wound there went forth blood and water, and that He gave up His Spirit. Water for washing, Blood for drink, the Spirit for His rising again. For Christ alone is to us hope, faith, and love – hope in His resurrection, faith in the laver, and love in the sacrament'; 'And as He took a body of pain, so too He turned His bed in His weakness, for He converted it to the benefit of human flesh. For by His Passion weakness was ended, and death by His resurrection.' Ambrose, *De virginibus*, III.v.22, pp. 384-5; III.v.23, p. 385.

¹²⁶ Cf. Elm on Gregory of Nyssa's sister Macrina's ascetic community: 'The decision to join Macrina's community was, in each case, personal. No public ceremony, vow, or proclamation is mentioned. Acceptance seems to have been based solely on Macrina's consent. Yet the decision to become a virgin was clearly marked by a new external appearance. Macrina, Emmelia, and consequently all virgins wore a distinctive dress, consisting of "a coat, a veil, and shoes", the coat being "of sombre colour".' Elm, *Virgins of God*, p. 98.

This is He, Who, when invited to the marriage feast, changed water into wine. He, too, will confer the pure sacrament of virginity on you who before were subject to the vile elements of material nature. [...] And now He has called many to your espousal, but it is not now barley bread, but the Body from heaven which is supplied.¹²⁷

Ambrose compares the sacrament of virginity to the miracle performed by Christ at the Marriage of Cana. Traditionally, the miracle at the Marriage of Cana is the first miracle that Christ performed and as such represents the beginning of His ministry. It is used as an argument in favour of marriage, because Christ was in attendance at the marriage and it was the site of the first miracle. It also has significance in the changing of the substance of the water into wine, which reflects on the alteration of the consecrated elements of the Eucharist. Thus, Ambrose's comparison of the sacramental change experienced by Marcellina with the miracle at the Marriage of Cana brings with it a series of complicated references, which augment the dignity of virginity. The reference to virginity as a sacrament is important in terms of the value of virginity as a religious identity, and the recognition of the elevated position of virginity in the estimation of the Church. Virginity, however, was not formally recognised as a Sacrament, but is classed instead as a Solemn Vow. The allusion to the marriage of Cana also demonstrates a self-conscious attempt to appropriate the nuptial imagery of a marriage rite and use it in service to the *sponsa Christi* motif. Virginity does not simply adopt the nuptial imagery of marriage, but it also appropriates part of its ritual element.

Although Ambrose's ascetical treatises, like much of his work, demonstrates assimilation rather than innovation, they do bear witness to an increasingly hostile element in society towards the ascetic life. Mostly, this is due to the extreme ascetic factions who denigrate marriage in their zeal to promote the virginal life. The anti-

¹²⁷ Ambrose, *De virginibus*, III.i.1, p. 381.

asceticism that this fanaticism seemed to have prompted, necessitated a return to scriptural authorisations of the virginal life, and Ambrose's works demonstrate this move. Because of this hostility, there is more of an awareness in the treatise, also demonstrated by Gregory, of the need to interrupt encomiums to virginity in order to emphasise the continued relevance of marriage to Christianity. Such a method is necessary for reiterating the orthodoxy of the treatises. Ambrose's interest in Mariology, and his association of Mary's life with virginity, bears witness to the merging of Mariology and asceticism in the fourth century. Ambrose's description of Marcellina's consecration is not only interesting in terms of the liturgical rite of virginity, but also show the increasing integration of virginity into the public sphere of the Church and attempts to understand this in a sacramental way, whereas in the past it seems to have been confined to the domestic sphere. Although a domestic form of virginity is still an option for women, due to the ascetical reform in the form of the drive towards the coenobitic life, there is an increasing association of virginity with monasticism. For this reason, Ambrose's imitative examples become important as they provide regulatory models, for, as all the Fathers are keen to reiterate, virginity has 'no law' but it can be recommended and conveyed through examples.

VIII. John Chrysostom

Saint John Chrysostom was born to Christian parents, named Anthusa and Secundus,¹ sometime between A.D. 344 and 354 in Antioch, Syria. He is renowned as the greatest orator in Christian history,² whom J. F. D'Alton describes as 'the brightest ornament of the Church, though he made his influence felt more in the sphere of practical homiletics than in that of speculative theology'.³ John's proficiency in oratory earned him the name 'Chrysostom', which means 'golden mouth', and Theodoret in his *Ecclesiastical History* calls him 'the great luminary of the world'.⁴ Even in modern times, he is considered to be an exemplar of Christian preaching.⁵ Additionally, John's literary output is enormous, as Robert Hill notes:

¹ Cf. Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History*, VI.iii, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. II, *Socrates, Sozomenus: Church Histories*, trans. E. Walford (revised by A. C. Zenos), eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1890]), pp. 1-178, (p. 138). Cf. Goggin: 'His father was a *magister militum Orientalis*.' Sister Thomas Aquinas Goggin, 'Introduction' to *Saint John Chrysostom: Commentary on Saint John the Apostle and Evangelist. Homilies 1-47* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2000 [1957]), pp. vii-xix, (p. viii).

² Cf. Riddle: 'The pre-eminence of Chrysostom as a preacher remains undisputed, [...] no voice has been raised against the popular verdict, repeated in every age, that awards to him the first place among pulpit orators in the Eastern Church. Nor has there been any serious difference of opinion in regard to his personal character. His intense moral earnestness has always been recognised, and the man has been honoured because it was distinctly felt that the man gave power to the oration. "Golden mouth" avails very little, unless it belongs to a golden man. The rhetorical training of his earlier years doubtless contributed much to his skill as a preacher, but his exegetical method was perhaps a still more important factor.' M. B. Riddle, 'Introductory Essay on St. Chrysostom as an Exegete,' in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. X, *Chrysostom: Homilies on The Gospel of Saint Matthew* ed. Philip Schaff (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1888]), pp. xv-xxii, (p. xvii). D'Alton describes Chrysostom as 'amongst the foremost of Christian orators.' Rev. J. F. D'Alton, *Selections from St John Chrysostom: The Greek Text edited with Introduction and Commentary* (London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne Ltd., 1940), p. 7.

³ D'Alton, *Selections*, pp. 1-2.

⁴ Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History*, V.xxvii, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. III, *Theodoret, Jerome, Gennadius, Rufinus: Historical Writings, etc.* trans. Rev. Blomfield Jackson, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1892]) p. 151.

⁵ Cf. Schaff: 'The crowning merit of Chrysostom is his excellency as a preacher. He is generally and justly regarded as the greatest pulpit orator of the Greek Church. Nor has he any superior or equal among the Latin Fathers. He remains to this day a model for preachers in large cities.' Philip Schaff, 'Prolegomena: The Life and Work of St. John Chrysostom', in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. IX, *Chrysostom: On the Priesthood, Ascetic Treatises, Select Homilies and Letters, Homilies on the Statues*, ed. Philip Schaff (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1889]), pp. 3-23, (p. 22). Cf. Young: 'In spite of the fact that he unavoidably speaks the language of the past and his works read as topical for an age long gone, his vivid imagery, together with his love and understanding of the Bible and of the erring hearts of men, gives his work an abiding quality and relevance. Christianity is not simply a set of disputed doctrines, but a way of

Chrysostom's extant works outnumber those of any other Father of the East; in the West, Augustine alone is his peer. Predictably for such a zealous preacher and pastor, most of these works are oratorical, even if his treatises on priesthood and other states of life in the Church are well known and much translated.⁶

Because of his oratorical skill, many of his biographers focus on his educational influences, which took the form of the study of rhetoric after his basic elementary education.⁷ In his *Ecclesiastical History*, Socrates notes that '[h]e studied rhetoric under Libanius the sophist and philosophy under Andragathius the philosopher'.⁸ Sozomen relates that Libanius' opinion of John's skill was so high that, when was on his deathbed and asked who was to be his successor: "It would have been John", replied he, "had not the Christians taken him from us."⁹ Most critics, following Sozomen and Socrates' *Ecclesiastical Histories*, assume that John was destined for a legal career.¹⁰ A. H. M.

life, and Chrysostom never lets this be forgotten.' Frances M. Young, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon: A Guide to the Literature and its Background* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1996 [1983]), pp. 158-9.

⁶ Robert C. Hill, 'Introduction' to *Saint John Chrysostom: Homilies on Genesis 1-17*, trans. Robert C. Hill (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1999), pp. 1-19. (p. 3).

⁷ Cf. Jones: 'John received a liberal education, studying rhetoric under Libanius and philosophy under Andragathius according to Socrates. Andragathius is otherwise unknown. There is no reason to believe that John was not taught by Libanius, who was at the time the official professor of rhetoric at Antioch, though the letter quoted by Isidore of Pelusium (Epp. II, 42) from Libanius to John, is either spurious or addressed to another John.' A. H. M. Jones, 'St. John Chrysostom's Parentage and Education', *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (Jul., 1953), 171-173, (p. 171). Cf. Mayer and Allen: 'Little is known about the earliest stage of John's childhood and the twelve or so years during which he passed through the various phases of his schooling. What is certain is that he finished his training under the tutelage of a professional orator – probably the renowned pagan rhetorician Libanius, a prominent citizen of Antioch – graduating in c.367 when he was eighteen.' Wendy Mayer and Pauline Allen, 'Introduction' to *John Chrysostom* (London and New York; Routledge, 2000), pp. 3-54, (p. 5). Cf. D'Alton: 'On the completion of his elementary training, he pursued the customary studies in history and literature under the grammarians, and then passed on to a course in rhetoric. In those days his thoughts were evidently fixed on the legal profession.' D'Alton, *Selections*, p. 1.

⁸ Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History*, VI.iii, p. 138. Cf. Sozomen: 'He learned rhetoric from Libanius, and philosophy from Andragathius.' Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*, VIII.ii, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. II, *Socrates, Sozomenus: Church Histories*, (revised by Chester D. Hartranft), eds. Philip Scaff and Henry Wace (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1890]), pp. 179-427, (p. 399).

⁹ Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*, VIII.ii, p. 399.

¹⁰ Cf. Socrates: 'Being on the point of entering the practice of civil law, and reflecting on the restless and unjust course of those who devote themselves to the practice of the forensic courts, he was turned to the more tranquil mode of life, which he adopted, following the example of Evagrius.' Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History*, VI.iii, p. 138 Cf. Jones: 'For what career was this secular education to fit him? Both Socrates and Sozomen (*Hist. Eccl.*, VII.4) say for the bar [...] and the letter of Libanius cited by Isidore and a remark of John himself in *de Sacerdotio* [...] has been held to confirm this statement. The letter, however, spurious or

Jones, however, believes that John's projected career would have been as a clerk of the *sacra scrinia*. Such clerks

assisted the *magistri memoriae, epistolarum* and *libellorum* in drafting rescripts and letters, and might be promoted to draft laws under the *quaestor sacri palatii* [...]. This was a service highly appropriate to a young man of John's talents and position. [...] The *sacra scrinia* were then a very superior service to the *officium* of a *magister militum*, to which John's father had belonged. Furthermore they were one of the few branches of the civil service where a first class literary education were indispensable; for the emperor's pronouncements had to be clad in correct rhetorical garb.¹¹

Whatever Chrysostom's secular ambitions may have been, these were relinquished in favour of the religious life. Jerome mentions that Chrysostom was 'a disciple of Eusebius of Emesa and of Diodore'.¹² It is Diodorus whose teaching is considered to have been the determining influence on him:

For Chrysostom the teaching of Diodorus was one of the most important of the formative influences in his life. This master was remarkable both for his lofty spirituality and profound erudition. He was recognised as the leader of the Antiochene school of Scriptural exegesis which espoused the literal as opposed to the allegorical interpretation favoured by the Alexandrian scholars. In those years Chrysostom must have laid the foundation of that marvellous knowledge of Sacred Writ which illuminates every page he wrote, and makes of his works a treasure house for the Scripture scholar no less than for the pulpit orator.¹³

Socrates says of Diodorus that he 'wrote many treatises, in which he limited his attention to the literal sense of scripture, avoiding that which was mystical'.¹⁴ Chrysostom's

irrelevant, and John's own words are not decisive; for an ambitious young man learning rhetoric would naturally hang about the law courts to listen to real orators, and this activity may have been no more professional than going to the theatre. It may well be that the statements of Socrates and Sozomen are in fact based on these passages and have no independent value.' Jones, 'Chrysostom's Parentage and Education', p. 171.

¹¹ Jones, 'Chrysostom's Parentage and Education', p. 172.

¹² Saint Jerome, 'CXXIX. John the Presbyter', *On Illustrious Men (De viris illustribus)*, trans. Thomas P. Halton (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1999), p. 162.

¹³ D'Alton, *Selections*, p. 3.

¹⁴ Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History*, VI.iii, p. 139.

Antiochene education, which prioritised literal rather than allegorical exegesis, was very different from many of the earlier patristic writers who discussed virginity.¹⁵

Alongside Chrysostom's own extensive writings, there are a variety of sources documenting his life, including the *Dialogus de vita Chrysostomi* by Palladius, Bishop of Hellenopolis,¹⁶ and three ecclesiastical histories by Sozomen, Socrates, and Theodoret.¹⁷ John was baptized in 368, and became a lector in the Church at Antioch at the age of 22, but left in order to pursue the eremitic life in A.D. 372. As a hermit, he subjected his body to rigorous ascetic discipline, which 'severely affected the functioning of his gastric organs, and the extreme cold temperature impaired the operation of his kidneys'.¹⁸ His failing health forced him to return to Antioch, where he resumed his position as a lector. At the age of 31 (c. 380/1), Chrysostom was ordained a deacon by Bishop Meletius and was later ordained a priest by Meletius' successor, Bishop Flavian of Antioch:

[Chrysostom] was marked out by Flavian for the high honour of the priesthood, and ordained probably in the early part of the year 386. How highly Chrysostom thought of the dignity is clear from his own work *On the Priesthood*. This, the most precious and perhaps the best known of his writings, may have been composed when he was still fresh from his anointing at the hands of Flavian. At

¹⁵ Cf. Louth: 'John's exegesis is straightforward, intended to elucidate difficulties of grammar, syntax, linguistic meaning, or historical sequence: he does not use difficulties as an excuse for (or a sign of the need for) allegorical exegesis.' Andrew Louth, 'John Chrysostom and the Antiochene School to Theodoret of Cyrillus', in *The Cambridge History of Early Christian Literature*, eds. Frances Young, Lewis Ayres, and Andrew Louth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 342-352, (p. 345).

¹⁶ Cf. Goggin: 'St. John Chrysostom's life is one of the most completely documented of the lives of the fourth-century Church Fathers. Biographical sources include reliable witnesses close to his own time, and some information may, of course, be obtained from his own works. Probably the most important ancient biographical source is the *Dialogus de vita Chrysostomi* written shortly after St. John's death by Palladius, Bishop of Hellenopolis, in about 408. With Plato's *Phaedo* as a model, the bishop used the device of an imaginary conversation between an anonymous Eastern bishop and Theodore, a deacon.' Goggin, 'Introduction' to *Saint John Chrysostom*, pp. vii-viii.

¹⁷ Cf. Goggin: 'The *Ecclesiastical Histories* of Sozomen, Socrates, and Theodoret are also ancient biographical sources for St. John, ranking as such in the order named.' Goggin, 'Introduction' to *Saint John Chrysostom*, p. viii.

¹⁸ Gus George Christo, 'Introduction' to *St. John Chrysostom On Repentance and Almsgiving*, ed. Thomas P. Halton (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005), p. xi. Cf. Sozomen: 'John had, by rigorous asceticism, rendered himself liable to pain in the head and stomach, and was thus prevented from being present at some of the choicest symposia.' Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*, VIII.ix, p. 405.

any rate it is a guarantee that he entered the sacred ministry inspired by the purest motives and the highest ideals.¹⁹

Chrysostom's treatise *On the Priesthood* is the only work that Jerome mentions his having read in *De viris illustribus*.²⁰ John remained in Antioch as a priest for twelve years and, although Mayer and Allen note that '[w]e know surprisingly little about the twelve years (A.D. 386-97) during which John served the dominant Christian faction at Antioch as a presbyter',²¹ they acknowledge that the majority of his works must originate from this period.²² D'Alton conjectures that these twelve years at Antioch were where John was at his happiest:

Though those twelve years of his priesthood may have been chequered by shadows, they must have been on the whole the happiest period of his life. He had not to shoulder the responsibility of the chief pastor, while he was free to dispense ungrudgingly the choicest gifts of his genius, and labour increasingly for the realisation of his high ideals and the establishment of Christ's Kingdom upon earth.²³

Certainly, the years following John's priesthood in Antioch must have been an unpleasant trial; Socrates comments that 'mischief [...] threatened him at the very commencement of his episcopate'.²⁴ In 397, Nectarius, the Bishop of Constantinople, died and John was chosen by the Emperor Arcadius to be Nectarius' successor.²⁵ So it was that in A.D. 398, at the age of 49, he was consecrated Bishop of Constantinople (the second most

¹⁹ D'Alton, *Selections*, p. 6.

²⁰ Cf. Jerome: 'John, a priest of the Church of Antioch, a disciple of Eusebius of Emesa and of Diodore, is said to have composed many works; the only one of which I have read is Περὶ ἱερωσύνης, *On the Priesthood*.' Jerome, *De viris illustribus*, p. 162.

²¹ Mayer and Allen, 'Introduction', p. 6.

²² Cf. Mayer and Allen: 'We know that John preached a great deal because of the over nine hundred sermons which survive (by no means the original total). The majority of these can be presumed to stem from the period of his priesthood at Antioch.' Mayer and Allen, 'Introduction', p. 7.

²³ D'Alton, *Selections*, p. 10.

²⁴ Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History*, VI.v, p. 140.

²⁵ Cf. Theodoret: 'Arcadius, who had succeeded to the Eastern empire, summoned John [...] He had heard that he was numbered in the ranks of the presbyterate, and now issued orders to the assembled bishops to confer on him divine grace and appoint him shepherd of that mighty city.' Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History*, V.xxvii, p. 151.

important See in the Empire) at the hands of Theophilus, Bishop of Alexandria.

Theophilus, however, had not wanted John to accede to the bishopric, preferring ‘Isidore, a presbyter of his own church’,²⁶ and henceforth viewed John’s occupation of the See with displeasure.²⁷

Chrysostom perceived that the See of Constantinople had fallen into corrupt practices and, in accordance with his uncompromising personality,²⁸ his appointment was accompanied by zealous reform. He cut down on the bishop’s personal expenditure and used the added revenue to fund almsgiving.²⁹ Additionally, he set about implementing clerical reform:³⁰

Some of [the clergy], who had been guilty of serious offences, he straightway degraded from the clerical ranks. He endeavoured to curb luxurious living

²⁶ Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History*, VI.ii, p. 138. Socrates later comments that ‘it was not so much the boldness with which John lashed whatever was obnoxious to him, that affected Theophilus, as his own failure to place his favourite presbyter Isidore in the Episcopal chair of Constantinople.’ Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History*, VI.v, p. 140. Cf. Sozomen: ‘When John had arrived at Constantinople, and when the priests were assembled together, Theophilus opposed his ordination; and proposed as a candidate in his stead, a presbyter of his church named Isidore, who took charge of strangers and of the poor at Alexandria.’ Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*, VIII.ii, p. 400.

²⁷ Cf. D’Alton: ‘Theophilus, much to his chagrin, was compelled to consecrate John on the 26th of February, 398, but his pride was deeply wounded, and thenceforth he nursed a grievance that gradually transformed his feelings towards the new Patriarch into malignant hatred.’ D’Alton, *Selections*, p. 12.

²⁸ Cf. Socrates: ‘It is said that on account of his zeal for temperance he was stern and severe; and one of his friends has said “that in his youth he manifested a proneness to irritability, rather than to modesty.” Because of the rectitude of his life, he was free from anxiety about the future, and his simplicity of character rendered him open and ingenuous; nevertheless the liberty of speech he allowed himself was offensive to very many. In public teaching he was powerful in reforming the morals of auditors; but in private conversation he was frequently thought haughty and assuming by those who did not know him.’ Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History*, VI.iii, p. 139. D’Alton discusses the ‘characteristics of the man and his eloquence – a fearless independence that refused to compromise with vice and injustice, a constant solicitude for the poor, an eagerness to champion the oppressed, and a burning zeal for the moral betterment of all committed to his care.’ D’Alton, *Selections*, p. 14.

²⁹ Cf. D’Alton: ‘The Patriarch generously endowed the existing hospital, had new ones erected, and provided in other ways for the needs of the inhabitants and of strangers visiting the city.’ D’Alton, *Selections*, p. 13.

³⁰ Cf. Sozomen: ‘As soon as John was raised to the Episcopal dignity, he devoted his attention first to the reformation of the lives of his clergy; he reproved and amended their ways and diet and every procedure of their manifold transactions.’ Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*, VIII.iii, p. 400. Cf. Theodoret: ‘When the great John had received the tiller of the Church, he boldly convicted certain wrongdoers, made seasonable exhortations to the emperor and empress, and admonished the clergy to live according to the laws laid down. Transgressors against these laws he forbade to approach the churches, urging that they who shewed no desire to live the life of true priests ought not to enjoy priestly honour.’ Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History*, V.xxviii, p. 152.

amongst his priests, and deal with the problem of the 'Syneisactae'. He found, moreover, that numerous monks and virgins were in the habit of frequenting the Capital, often oblivious of the spirit of their state. It was his aim to compel them to live within the confines of the cloister.³¹

Chrysostom wrote two treatises on the abuses of *syneisaktism*, which may date from this period of reforming fervour; the ancient sources, however, are contradictory on the dating of these tracts.³² Naturally, Chrysostom's zeal for clerical reform won him many dangerous enemies,³³ as Socrates explains:

Being such in disposition and manners, and promoted to the episcopacy, John was led to conduct himself towards the clergy with more than proper superciliousness, designing to correct the morals of the clergy under him. Having thus chafed the temper of the ecclesiastics, he was disliked by them; and so many of them stood aloof from him as a passionate man, and other became his bitter enemies.³⁴

Among those whom Chrysostom upset were the Empress Eudoxia, who was offended after Chrysostom 'pronounced a public invective against women in general',³⁵ and Theophilus, the Bishop of Alexandria, who had consecrated him. In A.D. 403, five years after Chrysostom became Bishop, Chrysostom's enemies summoned him to the Synod of

³¹ D'Alton, *Selections*, p. 13.

³² Cf. Clark: 'at least one of Chrysostom's two treatises against "spiritual marriage" (the practice of ascetic men and women living together) may have been composed during the 380s in Antioch.' Clark, Elizabeth A. Clark, 'Introduction' to *John Chrysostom: On Virginity. Against Remarriage* (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1982), pp. vii-xxvii, (p. x). Cf. Clark: 'According to Socrates, *Historia ecclesiastica* VI, 3 (P[atrolgia] G[raeca] 67, 669), one of the treatises was written in Antioch. Palladius, on the other hand, says the problem arose during Chrysostom's time in Constantinople (*Dialogus* V, 19 [Coleman-Norton p. 31]). It has been suggested by Jean Dumortier, "La Date des deux traités de Sainte Jean Chrysostome aux moines et aux vierges," *Melanges de Science Religieuse* 6 (1949), 251-252, that the two treatises were originally written in Antioch and re-issued in Constantinople.' Clark, Note to 'Introduction' to *John Chrysostom: On Virginity. Against Remarriage*, p. xxxiin. 34.

³³ Cf. D'Alton: 'Chrysostom thus had many friends, but his enemies, if less numerous, were more powerful and more resourceful.' D'Alton, *Selections*, p. 16.

³⁴ Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History*, VI.iv, p. 139. Cf. Christo: 'His fiery temperament for the reform of the clergy and laity was offensive to high-ranking court officials, and his loving, faithful, and uncompromising adherence to the teachings of Christ and His Church united all hostile forces against him.' Christo, 'Introduction', p. xii. Cf. Sozomen: 'he was hated by the clergy and the powerful on account of his free boldness, for he never failed to rebuke the clergy when he detected them in acts of injustice, nor to exhort the powerful to return to the practice of virtue when they abused their wealth, committed impiety, or yielded to voluptuousness.' Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*, VIII.viii, p. 404.

³⁵ Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History*, VI.xv, p. 148.

the Oak,³⁶ where he was accused of various misdemeanours, including favouring

Origenism.³⁷ D'Alton describes some of the trumped-up charges brought against him:

Among other accusations, Chrysostom was arraigned for his harshness towards the clergy, for his sale of Church property, and his contumelious treatment of brother bishops. Many of the charges brought against him were trivial and fantastic. For instance, one of the counts of the indictment was that the Patriarch ate alone and lived like a Cyclops. Every action of his life was placed under the microscope, and his motives were misconstrued with a perverse ingenuity.³⁸

At the Synod, Chrysostom was deposed and exiled to Hieron.³⁹ An earthquake struck on the night of his expulsion, which frightened the Empress and forced her to reconsider her

actions.⁴⁰ In addition, his enemies had not counted on the angry reaction of his

congregation.⁴¹ Socrates relates that when he was exiled:

the people then became intolerably tumultuous; and [...] many who before were adversely disposed against him, now changed their hostility into compassion. [...] By this means therefore they became very numerous who exclaimed against both

³⁶ Cf. Christo: '[The Empress Eudoxia], together with Chrysostom's Episcopal comrades Severian of Gabala, Acacius of Beroea, Antiochus of Ptolemais, and especially his most dangerous enemy, Theophilus of Alexandria, summoned Chrysostom in 403 to the Synod of the Oak, a suburb of Chalcedon.' Christo, 'Introduction' to *St. John Chrysostom On Repentance and Almsgiving*, p. xii. Cf. Sozomen: '[Theophilus] soon perceived that many people of the city were strongly prejudiced against John, and ready to bring accusations against him; and taking his measures accordingly, he repaired to a place called "The Oak," in the suburbs of Chalcedon. This place now bears the name of Rufinus.' Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*, VIII.xvii, pp. 409-10.

³⁷ Cf. Socrates: 'all were intent on urging a variety of criminations, many of which were ridiculous. Preliminary matters being thus settled, the bishops were convened in one of the suburbs of Chalcedon, a place called "The Oak," and immediately cited John to answer the charges which were brought against him.' Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History*, VI.xv, p. 149. Theodoret attempts to relate the history without causing offence to those who condemned him: 'At this part of my history I know not what sentiments to entertain; wishful as I am to relate the wrong inflicted on Chrysostom, I yet regard in other respects the high character of those who wronged him. I shall therefore do my best to conceal even their names. These persons had different reasons for their hostility, and were unwilling to contemplate his brilliant virtue. They found certain wretches who accused him, and, perceiving the openness of the calumny, held a meeting at a distance from the city and pronounced their sentence.' Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History*, V.xxxiv, p. 153

³⁸ D'Alton, *Selections*, pp. 23-4.

³⁹ Cf. Theodoret: 'Hieron at the mouth of the Euxine.' Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History*, V.xxxiv, p. 154.

⁴⁰ Cf. Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History*, V.xxxiv, p. 154.

⁴¹ Cf. Socrates: 'This decision on being announced towards evening, incited the people to a most alarming sedition; insomuch that they kept watch all night, and would by no means suffer him to be removed from the church, but cried out that his cause ought to be determined in a larger assembly.' Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History*, VI.xv, p. 149.

the emperor and the Synod of bishops; but the origin of the intrigue they more particularly referred to Theophilus.⁴²

Although Chrysostom was recalled, he again fell foul of the Empress a year later, in A.D. 404. Chrysostom upset Eudoxia by complaining about the public games which were held in celebration of a silver statue of the Empress which had been erected.⁴³ John regarded these games 'as an insult offered to the Church, and having regained his ordinary freedom and keenness of tongue, he employed his tongue against those who tolerated them'.⁴⁴ Not surprisingly, she took this as a personal affront, which was then compounded by Chrysostom, as D'Alton explains:

his impetuosity betrayed him into a fatal indiscretion, when (as tradition has it) in a sermon delivered on the Feast of St. John the Baptist he likened Eudoxia to Herodias.⁴⁵ Her enmity was now implacable.⁴⁶

This time Eudoxia ensured that Chrysostom was exiled permanently; Theodoret comments that 'he was not merely banished, but relegated to a petty and lonely town in

⁴² Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History*, VI.xvi, p. 149. Cf. Sozomen: 'The people of Constantinople were made acquainted with the decree of the council towards the evening; and they immediately rose up in sedition. [...] When the people became aware that he had gone into exile, the sedition became serious, and many insulting speeches were uttered against the emperor and the council; and particularly against Theophilus and Severian, who were regarded as the originators of the plot.' Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*, VIII.xviii, p. 410. Cf. D'Alton. 'The people in their fury indulged in the fiercest recriminations against the Emperor and the Synod, and directed their anger especially against Theophilus and Severian as the chief instigators of this act of injustice. The danger of a popular uprising was very real, and to increase the panic an earthquake took place which filled the Empress with the gloomiest forebodings. A messenger was despatched in all haste to recall Chrysostom to his See.' D'Alton, *Selections*, p. 24.

⁴³ Cf. Sozomen: 'a silver statue of the empress, which is still to be seen to the south of the church opposite the grand council-chamber, was placed upon a column of porphyry on a high platform, and the event was celebrated there with applause and popular spectacles of dances and mimes, as was then customary.' Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*, VIII.xx, p. 412.

⁴⁴ Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History*, VI.xviii, p. 150. Cf. Sozomen: 'In a public discourse to the people John charged that these proceedings reflected dishonour to the Church.' Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*, VIII.xx, p. 412.

⁴⁵ Cf. Sozomen: '[John] added fuel to her indignation by still more openly declaiming against her in the church; and it was at this period that he pronounced the memorable discourse commencing with the words, "Herodias is again enraged; again she dances; again she seeks to have the head of John in a basin."' Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*, VIII.xx, p. 412.

⁴⁶ D'Alton, *Selections*, p. 25.

Armenia of the name of Cucusus'.⁴⁷ The populace again reacted angrily by setting fire to the cathedral.⁴⁸ However, it has never been clarified whether this act was undertaken in defiance of the Empress, or as an act against the Bishop,⁴⁹ although Socrates attributes the arson to the Johannite party.⁵⁰ Certainly, it appears that many of John's friends were put to death on account of the conflagration.⁵¹

John continued to gain celebrity during his exile,⁵² and so it was then arranged for him to be removed from Armenia, and banished to a more remote region: 'Pityus, a place at the extremity of the Empire'.⁵³ On this, his final journey, Chrysostom was subjected to great hardship at the hands of his gaolers, and his death is often viewed as a martyrdom.

⁴⁷ Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History*, V.xxxiv, p. 154.

⁴⁸ Sozomen describes the general chaos and public uprising following the John's expulsion, of which the cathedral fire was a part: 'Meanwhile the church was suddenly consumed on all sides with fire. The flames extended in all directions, and the grand house of the senatorial council, adjacent to the church on the south, was doomed.' Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*, VIII.xxii, p. 413.

⁴⁹ Cf. Sozomen: 'The two parties mutually accused each other of incendiarism. The enemies of John asserted that his partisans had been guilty of the deed from revenge, on account of the vote that had been passed against him by the council. These latter, on the other hand, maintained that they had been calumniated, and that the deed was perpetrated by their enemies, with the intention of burning them in the church.' Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*, VIII.xxii, p. 413. Cf. D'Alton: 'Scarcely had he departed when it was discovered that a fire had broken out in the Cathedral, which quickly consumed not only that stately building [built by Constantine in 360] with its many precious works of art, but also the Senate House situated nearby. Though both parties accused each other of being the incendiaries, the origin of the fire always remained a mystery.' D'Alton, *Selections*, pp. 27-8.

⁵⁰ Cf. Socrates: 'some of the Johannites set fire to the church, which by means of a strong easterly wind, communicated with the senate-house.' Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History*, VI.xviii, p. 150.

⁵¹ Cf. Socrates: 'The severities which Optatus, the prefect of Constantinople, a pagan in religion and a hater of the Christians, inflicted on John's friends, and how he put many of them to death on account of this act of incendiarism, I ought, I believe, to pass by in silence.' Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History*, VI.xviii, p. 151. Cf. Sozomen: 'Eutropius, a reader, was required to name the persons who had set fire to the church; but although he was scourged severely, although his sides and cheeks were torn with iron nails, and although lighted torches were applied to the most sensitive parts of his body, no confession could be extorted from him, notwithstanding his youth and delicacy of constitution. After having been subjected to these tortures, he was cast into a dungeon, where he soon afterwards expired.' Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*, VIII.xxiv, p. 414.

⁵² Cf. Sozomen: 'John acquired great celebrity even in his exile. He possessed ample pecuniary resources, and being besides liberally supplied with money by Olympias, the deaconess, and others, he purchased liberty of many captives from the Isaurian robbers, and restored them to their families. He also administered to the necessities of many who were in want; and by his kind words comforted those who did not stand in need of money. Hence he was exceedingly beloved not only in Armenia, where he dwelt, but by all the people of the neighbouring countries, and the inhabitants of Antioch and of the other parts of Syria, and of Cilicia, who frequently sought his society.' Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*, VIII.xxvii, p. 417.

⁵³ Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History*, V.xxxiv, p. 154.

He died in A.D. 407 on the 14th September at ‘Comana on the Euxine’,⁵⁴ where, at the Church of the Martyr Basiliscus, he received his viaticum and ‘stated with his final breath, “Glory to God for all things. Amen”’.⁵⁵ Thirty-one years after his death, Chrysostom’s remains were translated to Constantinople on 27th January 438, by order of Eudoxia’s son, Theodosius II.⁵⁶ He is said to have thrown himself on the coffin and begged John’s forgiveness for his parents’ actions. Goggin observes that Chrysostom’s authority on Church matters was recognised early on:

Almost from the time of his death St. John Chrysostom was regarded by both East and West not only as an outstanding preacher and exegete, but as an authoritative voice in matters of faith. Strangely enough, both the orthodox and heterodox have wished to claim him, beginning as early as Pelagius, only eight years after his death. Yet, in no case where he is cited can anything positive against the true faith be found, and at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 he was pronounced a Doctor of the Universal Church.⁵⁷

Riddle also attests to his orthodoxy, but notes that he does not load his exegesis with dogmatic interpretations.⁵⁸ Chrysostom’s Pauline exegesis is considered to demonstrate the height of his exegetical power.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History*, VI.xxi, p. 150.

⁵⁵ Christo, ‘Introduction’ to *St. John Chrysostom On Repentance and Almsgiving*, p. xii.

⁵⁶ Cf. Theodoret: ‘At a later time the actual remains of the great doctor were conveyed to the imperial city, and once again the faithful crowd turning the sea as it were into land by their close packed boats, covered the mouth of the Bosphorus towards the Propontis with their torches. The precious possession was brought into Constantinople by the present emperor, who received the name of his grandfather and preserved his piety undefiled. After first gazing upon the bier he laid his head against it, and prayed for his parents and for pardon on them who had ignorantly sinned, for his parents had long ago been dead, leaving him an orphan in extreme youth.’ Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History*, V.xxxvi, p. 155. Cf. Socrates: ‘Proclus [...] having obtained the emperor’s permission, [...] removed the body of John from Comana, where it was buried, to Constantinople, in the thirty-fifth year after his deposition.’ Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History*, VI.xlv, p. 177.

⁵⁷ Goggin, ‘Introduction’ to *Saint John Chrysostom*, p. xviii. Cf. Louth: ‘[John Chrysostom] came to be ranked with St Basil the Great and St Gregory the Theologian as one of the ‘universal teachers’ of the Church.’ Louth, ‘John Chrysostom and the Antiochene School’, p. 344.

⁵⁸ Cf. Riddle: ‘The doctrinal views of Chrysostom were positive and usually well defined. He does not fail to oppose heretical opinions. So great a preacher could not be without a theology. Yet, [...] the dogmatic principle of interpretation does not dominate his exegesis to any great extent.’ Riddle, ‘St. Chrysostom as an Exegete’, p. xix.

⁵⁹ Cf. Riddle: ‘From an exegetical point of view the Homilies on the Old Testament rank lowest, those on the Pauline Epistles highest.’ Riddle, ‘St. Chrysostom as an Exegete’, p. xx.

Chrysostom wrote several ascetic treatises:⁶⁰ one *On Virginit*y (c. A.D. 380s or early 390s), which demonstrates his exegetical interest as he includes an explanation of Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians; a treatise *Against Remarriage* (A.D. 383-386), which argues against the remarriage of widows;⁶¹ and two treatises on the abuses of the practice of *syneisaktism* (so-called 'spiritual marriages'), entitled *Instruction and Refutation Directed Against those Men Cohabiting with Virgins* and *On the Necessity of Guarding Virginit*y (A.D. late 380s/early 390s or post-397).⁶²

i. *On Virginit*y:⁶³ Heretical Virgins

The first twelve chapters of Saint John Chrysostom's treatise *On Virginit*y are devoted to the condemnation of the practice of virginity among the heretics, and explain why they are unable to achieve the state of virginity. Like Athanasius, Chrysostom describes true virginity as a uniquely Christian identity, from which both Jews and pagans are debarred:

⁶⁰ Cf. Clark: 'Later in Chrysostom's career, his numerous commentaries and homilies on Genesis and the New Testament books, as well as his homilies praising female saints and martyrs, all resound with ascetic themes.' Clark, 'Introduction' to *John Chrysostom: On Virginit*y. *Against Remarriage*, p. x.

⁶¹ Cf. Clark: 'he advocated in his *Letter to a Young Widow*, composed in A.D. 380 or 381, that widows not remarry'; 'On the point of second marriage, Chrysostom, like other Christian writers, follows the classical ideal of the *univira*, the once-married woman. Despite changes in the legislation and mores during the Empire that granted more freedom to women, especially freedom of divorce, the traditional ideal of the monogamous woman was enshrined in literature as well as life.' Clark, 'Introduction' to *John Chrysostom: On Virginit*y. *Against Remarriage*, p. ix; p. xxv. Marjorie Lightman and William Zeisel discuss the changing meaning of the term from the early Roman period through to late antiquity: 'At first limited to the Roman elite, the term was applied at first to living women with living husbands. During the late Republic and Empire it became an epithet given by socially aspiring or elite husbands to their deceased wives. By the Christian period use of the word had spread to all social levels, and the epithet became a social commonplace. Christians adopted the word and expanded its use to include celibate widowhood, a condition to which the newly Christianised society gave "an almost religious significance."' Marjorie Lightman and William Zeisel, '*Univira*: An Example of Continuity and Change in Roman Society', *Church History*, Vol. 46, No. 1 (Mar., 1977), 19-32, (p. 32).

⁶² Cf. Socrates: 'Meletius having not long after conferred on him the rank of deacon, he produced his work *On the Priesthood*, and those *Against Stagirus*; and moreover those also *On the Incompatibility of the Divine Nature*, and *On the Women who lived with the Ecclesiastics*.' Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History*, VI.iii, p. 139. Cf. Clark: 'scholars debate whether they were composed during his diaconate in Antioch in the 380s or early 390s, or after he ascended the Episcopal chair of Constantinople.' Elizabeth A. Clark, 'John Chrysostom and the "Subintroductae"', *Church History*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (Jun., 1977), 171-185, (p. 175).

⁶³ Cf. Clark: 'Scholars think that his [John Chrysostom's] treatise *On Virginit*y borrowed themes from similar works composed a few years earlier by Basil of Ancyra, Eusebius of Emesa, and Gregory of Nyssa.' Clark, 'Introduction' to *John Chrysostom: On Virginit*y. *Against Remarriage*, p. x.

The Jews disdain the beauty of virginity, and this is not astonishing because they have dishonoured Christ himself, born of a virgin. The Greeks admire it in amazement, but only the Church of God praises it.⁶⁴

Chrysostom equates the Jews' failure to recognise the Messiah with their failure to perceive the value of virginity. Greeks, on the other hand, do recognise it in part as they promote a physical virginity, but as they have no conception of Christian virginity, they can only reproduce a pale version of it. The third group that cannot achieve virginity are the heretics. Sally Rieger Shore identifies the Encratites as the heretical group that are being attacked in *On Virginity*.⁶⁵ Chrysostom, however, specifically identifies the heresiarchs Marcion, Valentinus and Mani in the treatise as figureheads of heretical groups who denounce marriage.⁶⁶ Indeed, there were several heretical sects operating in the fourth century. Alongside the Manichaeans, who were renowned for condemning marriage, but advocating sexual proclivities as long as these did not result in procreation, Epiphanius, the renowned heresiologist and bishop of Salamis, identified the Encratites,⁶⁷ the Apostolics,⁶⁸ Apotactics,⁶⁹ Origenists,⁷⁰ and Hieracites⁷¹ as sects who erroneously

⁶⁴ John Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, I.i, in *John Chrysostom: On Virginity. Against Remarriage*, trans. Sally Rieger Shore (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1982), pp. 1-128, (p. 1).

⁶⁵ Sally Rieger Shore, Note to *On Virginity*, p. 147n. 1.

⁶⁶ Cf. Chrysostom: 'But neither Marcion nor Valentinus nor Mani maintained this moderate view. They did not have speaking in themselves the Christ who spares his own sheep and who lays down his life for them but instead the father of falsehood, the destroyer of the human race. Consequently, they have destroyed all their followers by oppressing them in this world with meaningless and unbearable tasks and by dragging them down in their wake into the fire prepared for them in the next world.' *On Virginity*, III, p. 5.

⁶⁷ Cf. Epiphanius: 'Encratites, who are an outgrowth of Tatian, reject marriage and say that it is of Satan, and forbid the eating of any sort of meat' (p. 1); 'They declare that marriage is plainly the work of the devil. And they regard meat as an abomination – though they do not prohibit it for the sake of continence or as a pious practice, but from fear and for appearance' sake, and in order not to be condemned for eating flesh' (IV.47[67].1.vi); 'They take pride in a pretended continence, but all their conduct is risky. For they are surrounded by women, deceive women in every way, travel and eat with women and are served by them' (IV.47[67].3.i); 'Now the holy Catholic Church reveres virginity, the single life and purity, commends widowhood and honours and accepts lawful wedlock; but it forbids fornication, adultery and unchastity' (IV.47[67].9.i). Epiphanius of Salamis, *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis, Books II and III*, trans. Frank Williams (New York, Leiden and Köln: E. J. Brill, 1994).

⁶⁸ Cf. Epiphanius: '[But they [the Apostolics] are wrong]; for if marriage is abomination, all <who> are born of marriage are unclean. And if God's holy Church is composed only of those who have renounced marriage, marriage cannot be of God. And if it is not, the whole business of procreation is ungodly. And if

condemned marriage. Chrysostom's assessment of the failings of heretical virgins is not too dissimilar to the accusations presented by Epiphanius. They seem to be guilty of two major faults: hypocrisy and heresy. Chrysostom says:

The heretical virgins I could never call chaste, first of all because they are not chaste; they have not been betrothed to one man as the apostle of Christ. [...] How could they be chaste who unsatisfied with one husband introduces another who is not God? [...] The second is that they have dishonoured marriage and in this way have come to the abstention from it.⁷²

Chrysostom's first objection implies that they fail to keep their vows of chastity; such false virgins, although they claim the honour of virginity, cannot even maintain possession of a physical virginity. Their virginity is mere artifice.

The second reason for the heretics' failure to achieve virginity is due to their heterodox belief: they have only embraced virginity because they erroneously believe that marriage is bad. Adopting virginity for this reason is not simply a failure to recognise

this business of procreation is ungodly so are they, since they have been begotten by such behaviour.' Epiphanius, *Panarion*, IV.41[61]: i.6-7, p. 115.

⁶⁹ Cf. Epiphanius: "'Let them marry, bear children, guide the house" [I Tim 5:14] is a concise and temperate retort to those who think evil of every subject of the church's preaching. It is the repudiation of those who call themselves Apostolics, Apotactics and Encratites; also of the soft-headed churchmen who persuade women to shirk the running of the full courser, and to refuse to finish the race because of its length. And whoever spurns virginity for God's sake and dishonours the contest is a sinner and liable to judgement. If an athlete cheats in a game he is flogged and put out of the contest; and anyone who cheats on virginity is banished from a race, crown and prize of such importance.' Epiphanius, *Panarion*, IV. 41 [61]. 7.i-iii.

⁷⁰ Cf. Epiphanius: 'Their heresy might have been modelled on the heresy of Epiphanes, whom I described earlier in the Gnostic sects. But these people read various scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. And they reject marriage, although their sexual activity is incessant. [...] They soil their bodies, minds and souls with unchastity. Some of them masquerade as monastics, and their woman companions as female monastics. But they are physically ensnared because they satisfy their appetite but, to put it politely, by the act of Onan the son of Judah. For as Onan satisfied his appetite with Tamar, but did not finish the act by planting his seed for the God-given [purpose of] procreation and did himself harm instead, thus, as <he> did the vile thins, so these people commit this infamy when they use their supposed <female monastics>. They strive, not for purity, but for a hypocritical purity in name. But their effort is merely to make sure that the woman the seeming <ascetic> has seduced does not get pregnant.' Epiphanius, *Panarion*, IV. 43 [63]. 1.iii-vi.

⁷¹ Cf. Epiphanius: 'But he [Hieracas] was awesome in his asceticism, and capable of winning souls over to him; for example, many Egyptian ascetics were led astray by him [...] He does not allow matrimony, and claims that this is an Old Testament institution. [...] He says that marriage is allowed in the Old Testament, but that after Christ's coming marriage is no longer accept<able>, and cannot inherit the kingdom of heaven.' Epiphanius, *Panarion*, V. 47 [67]. 1.vi-ix.

⁷² Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, I. i-ii, p. 1.

the truth, says Chrysostom, but has several grave repercussions. Virginity is less glorious if marriage is considered to be unholy:

The detractor of marriage also reduces the glory of virginity, whereas one who praises marriage increases admiration for it and makes it more magnificent. [...] even as the detractors of marriage tarnish the eulogies for virginity, so he who removes marriage from censure has not recommended it over virginity.⁷³

In addition, by dishonouring marriage, the heretics are then compelled to practise virginity; thus it ceases to be an act of free will.⁷⁴ It is the element of free will, evident in Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians by virtue of its being recommended rather than commanded by the apostle, which gives virginity its virtue.⁷⁵ Chrysostom is keen to ensure that no one misconstrues Paul's comments about virginity as a God-given gift,⁷⁶ and therefore assume that it is not an act of free will, but divine providence:

Whenever you hear Paul say: 'Each one has his own gift,' you do not lose heart or tell yourself: there is no need for my own effort, for Paul has called it a divine gift. He says this out of modesty, and not because he wants to number continence among divine gifts. [...] Why does Paul continually advise the same conduct if the ability to do it did not live within us, and if after the intervention of God, there were no need of our own effort?⁷⁷

The emphasis on virginity as an act of free will, and the virtue which then attends the act, is a prominent part of the virginity tradition. By denying the free choice in the practice of virginity, the heretics achieve no more virtue from chastity than would a eunuch:

⁷³ Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, X.i, p. 13.

⁷⁴ Cf. Chrysostom: 'He has not forced the issue by laying a command but has entrusted the choice to our souls.' Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, II.ii, p. 4; 'You did not enter marriage? This is not the only criterion for virginity. For I would call the woman who has the power to marry but chooses not to a virgin. By saying that marriage is forbidden, virtuous action becomes no longer a matter of deliberate choice but an obligation to obey the law.' Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, VIII.iii, p. 11.

⁷⁵ Cf. Chrysostom: 'It has been shown that there is no gift in store for the mere avoidance of wickedness, but they eschew marriage on the grounds that it is bad; and so, how could they demand a wage for their withdrawal from it?' (I. iv, p. 3); 'Perfect virtue does not consist of not doing those things for which we would think ourselves wicked before everyone. It consists of excelling in what does not entail reproach for those who do not choose it.' Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, VIII.iv, p. 11.

⁷⁶ Cf. Saint Paul: 'For I would that all men were even as myself: but every one hath his proper gift from God; one after this manner, and another after that' (I Corinthians 7: 7).

⁷⁷ Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, XXXVI.ii-iii, pp. 51-2.

Just as no one would praise eunuchs for virginity because they do not marry, so no one would praise you. What has been for them a natural constraint is for you a stratagem of your perverted conscience. And just as the mutilation of their bodies deprives eunuchs of distinction in this virtue, so the devil by cutting off your upright thoughts (although you remain intact outwardly) compels you not to marry, thereby causing you pain but allowing you no honours.⁷⁸

Chrysostom demonstrates that there is no reward simply in the avoidance of sin, but rather the active promotion of good; the heretical practice of virginity aims at the former, whereas the Catholic practice exemplifies the latter.⁷⁹

Chrysostom further asserts that not only do the heretical virgins gain no virtue for their virginal life, but they will actually be punished for it in the after life.⁸⁰ This is because they dishonour marriage out of a disgust for the body,⁸¹ which by implication, is a denunciation of the whole of God's creation.⁸² Chrysostom observes the difference between heretical and Catholic practices: 'they have chosen virginity to oppose the law of God, whereas we practise it to accomplish His will'.⁸³ Thus heretical virginity becomes a blasphemy. He appears to be referring to the Manichaean sect, which condemned matter, claiming that the material world was not created by God, but by an archon.⁸⁴ There is

⁷⁸ Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, VIII.v, p. 11.

⁷⁹ Cf. Chrysostom: 'commendation and admiration belong to those who successfully bring about good and not those who avoid evil [...] It has been shown that there is no gift in store for the mere avoidance of wickedness, but they eschew marriage on the grounds that it is bad; and so, how could they demand a wage for their withdrawal from it?' Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, I.ii, p. 2; I.iv, p. 3.

⁸⁰ Cf. Chrysostom: 'Yet I will state a more serious possibility: that many who lived a virginal life will obtain neither that bosom of Abraham nor a lesser reward but will go to hell itself. The virgins barred from the bridal chamber make this clear.' Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, LXXXII.iii, p. 123.

⁸¹ Cf. Chrysostom: 'They have dishonoured marriage and in this way have come to the abstention from it. By decreeing that marriage is bad, they have robbed themselves of the prizes of virginity in advance, for it would be only just, not that those who refrain from evil win a crown for this, but rather that they not be punished.' Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, I.iii, p. 1.

⁸² Cf. Chrysostom: 'By treating marriage with excessive contempt and acting insolently towards God's wisdom, you have slandered all his creation. For if marriage is impure, all living things begotten by it are impure – not to mention human nature. How, then, can an impure maiden be a virgin?' Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, VIII.i, p. 10.

⁸³ Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, II.ii, p. 4.

⁸⁴ Cf. Epiphanius: 'Why does Mani, speaking blasphemy and ignoring the truth, suppose that God's creatures are abominable and God's truth, and <say that they were made> by an archon?' Epiphanius, *Panarion*, V. 46 [66]. 56.vii.

much more at stake, therefore, in the question of the heretics' adherence to ascetic practices than just sexual morality; it is tied up in theological questions about God as Creator. Chrysostom likens their crime to the adoption of a different religion, because they do not accept that all things come from God:

because you fight with God and slander the objects of His creation, not only will you go unrewarded, you will even be punished. You will be ranked with the pagans for your opinions since you have denied as they do the true God and have introduced polytheism.⁸⁵

Chrysostom declares that the heretics' denial of God's goodness makes their virginity more sinful than sexual profligacy.⁸⁶ Moreover, they not only resemble pagans because of their lack of true faith, but they are even worse:

Oh, you are more wretched than the pagans! For even if the horrors of hell await them, nevertheless the pagans here and now at least enjoy the pleasures of life; they marry, enjoy what money buys and indulge themselves in other ways. Yet for you there is torture and hardship in both worlds: in this one when you are willing, in the next when you are not. No one will reward the pagans for fasting and practising virginity, but neither is punishment in store for them. You, on the other hand, instead of receiving the multitude of praises you were expecting will pay the supreme penalty. With the other sinners you will hear: 'Out of my sight...into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels,' because you fasted and practised virginity.⁸⁷

Chrysostom does not associate the heretics with the Greeks and Jews who also cannot achieve virginity, because these two groups do not dishonour marriage, but instead he consigns the heretics to the company of the devils, who, although they know that marriage is good, seek to deceive men.⁸⁸ Pagans are better off than heretics because, although both groups are damned, the pagans do not torment themselves with a futile

⁸⁵ Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, IV.ii, p. 6.

⁸⁶ Cf. Chrysostom: 'Indeed the chastity of the heretics is worse than all profligacy, which limits its wrongs to injuries against men; their chastity however quarrels with God and insults his boundless wisdom.'

Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, V.i, p. 7-8.

⁸⁷ Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, IV.i, pp. 5-6.

⁸⁸ Cf. Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, VIII.ii, p. 10.

asceticism. Heretics will, however, receive ‘penalties in exchange for [their] work and sweat’.⁸⁹ Also, pagans who practise virginity will not be punished on account of their ascetic regime because they do not practise it in spite of marriage. Chrysostom anticipates the horror of the heretics’ realisation that the highest mode of religious living will purchase perdition for them instead of the expected heavenly rewards.⁹⁰ Chrysostom cites the Parable of the Ten Virgins as scriptural proof of the damnation of false virgins.⁹¹

This punishment, Chrysostom says, is an inevitable consequence of their heterodoxy, even if their ascetic practices surpass those of the true Christian virgins:

For the effort required by virginity is the same for us and the heretics, and perhaps it is much greater for them. The fruit of the efforts, however, is not the same. For them it means fetters, tears, lamentations and unending punishment; for us it is the destiny of the angels, bright torches, and the sum total of all goodness: life with the bridegroom.⁹²

Chrysostom not only draws attention to the unreliability of the semblance of virginity seen in heretics, but also the unreliability of ascetic practices alone without the correct state of mind. Chrysostom says of a heretical virgin that, ‘even if her body should remain inviolate, the better part of her soul has been ruined: her thoughts’.⁹³ A heretical virgin who provides a testimony to her ascetic practices through her wasted body still cannot claim to possess Christian virginity because her thoughts are heterodox and undermine the virtue that ought to have been won by her. Chrysostom warns against the assumption that an outward show of asceticism reflects an inward state of purity, so even though a heretical virgin’s ‘clothes are shabby’, one must remember that, ‘virginity resides not in

⁸⁹ Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, IV.v, p. 6.

⁹⁰ Cf. Chrysostom: ‘He is tormented when he realises that, although he has spent his life devoted to chastity, he suffers harsher punishments than the dissolute and lascivious.’ Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, IV.iii, p. 7.

⁹¹ Cf. Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, LXXXII.iii, p. 123.

⁹² Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, II.i, p. 4.

⁹³ Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, VI.i, p. 8.

clothing nor in one's complexion but in the body and soul'.⁹⁴ The impurity of one's thoughts eventually destroys the purity of the body as well, because the mouth articulates the thoughts and then the ears receive them back again into the body.⁹⁵ Thus, even bodily integrity cannot be claimed by an ostensibly inviolate heretical virgin, because she has not maintained the virginity of her senses incorrupt.⁹⁶ Chrysostom asks:

If, then, virginity is defined by the holiness of body and soul, but a woman is unholy and impure in each respect, how could she be a virgin? – But she shows me a pale face, wasted limbs, a shabby garment, and a gentle glance. [...] 'All the glory of the daughter of the king is within' [Psalms 45: 14]. The heretical virgin has reversed the meaning of this expression by wearing the glory on the exterior but being entirely dishonoured within. It is criminal to display before man extreme modesty but to employ with God, who created her, great folly.⁹⁷

Chrysostom notes that, although mankind may be taken in by false demonstrations of virtue, God is omniscient and so requires a closer scrutiny of the hearts of man: 'He orders that those who have entered not be judged by their clothing but by the convictions of their souls.'⁹⁸ Chrysostom's insistence that physical virginity alone,⁹⁹ or even the ascetic practices associated with virginity, is not productive of a state of virginity directly contradicts modern literary criticism which claims that virginity is simply a performative identity, constructed through behavioural acts.¹⁰⁰ Chrysostom, instead, forcefully argues

⁹⁴ Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, VII.i, p. 9.

⁹⁵ Cf. Chrysostom: 'Blasphemy and evil words are produced within but they do not stay there; they defile the tongue when uttered by the mouth, and one's hearing, which received them.' Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, VI.i, p. 8.

⁹⁶ The idea of the virginity of the senses follows earlier patristic tradition. Cf.

⁹⁷ Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, VI.i-ii, p. 8.

⁹⁸ Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, VII.ii, p. 9.

⁹⁹ Cf. Chrysostom: 'It is not enough to be unmarried and to be a virgin. There must be spiritual chastity, and I mean by chastity not only the absence of wicked and shameful desire, the absence of ornaments and superfluous cares, but also being unspoiled by life's cares. Without that, what good is there in physical purity?' Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, LXXVII, p. 116.

¹⁰⁰ Compare Riches: 'virginity has been shown to be a performative state.' Samantha J. E. Riches, 'Saint George as a male virgin martyr', in *Gender and Holiness: Men, women and saints in medieval Europe*, eds. Samantha J. E. Riches and Sarah Salih (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 65-85, (p. 71). See also, Anke Bernau, 'Virginal effects: Text and identity in *Ancrene Wisse*', in *Gender and Holiness: Men, women and saints in late medieval Europe*, eds. Samantha J.E. Riches and Sarah Salih (London and

that virginity is primarily a state of the soul that is predicated on bodily purity, so a heretical virgin may well ‘perform’ virginity more rigorously than a Christian virgin, and yet fail to achieve it.

Chrysostom, while warning against giving too much credence to a simple reading of outward signifiers as demonstrative of the possession of an inner virginity,¹⁰¹ does acknowledge that true virginity results in a certain outward expression, as the outward body is forced to accord with the purity of the soul:

As a handmaid waiting on a discreet mistress must follow her example, even if she does not wish to, so the body of a soul so practised in virtue must harmonize its own impulses with the movement of that soul. For her glance, her language, her demeanor, her walk, in short, everything is defined by the discipline within. It is like a costly perfume: although enclosed in a vial, it penetrates the air with its own sweet smell and suffuses with pleasure those inside and nearby, and even all those outside.¹⁰²

Thus Chrysostom makes an important distinction: the outward show of virginity does not construct the identity, but it serves to manifest its presence as the body follows the dictates of the soul. Therefore, as pure virginity permeates the whole body, ‘performance’ becomes a consequence of the attainment of virginity of the soul. He suggests that the manifestation of virginity can provide a certain amount of evidence of the existence of virginity: ‘So the fragrance of the virginal soul flowing round the sense gives proof of the excellence stored within.’¹⁰³ Such ‘proof’, however, is nebulous and difficult to verify, for even the physical integrity of the body is not enough to prove the possession of virginity. Nevertheless, although there are certain behavioural norms which virgins are

New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 36-48, (p. 44), quoting Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 31.

¹⁰¹ Cf. Chrysostom: ‘We will not judge the philosopher by his hair or his staff or his tunic [...] yet the virgin, who represents a state so admirable and superior to all others, we will simply and off-handedly assume practises her virtue because of the squalor of her hair, her dejected look and grey cloak. We do not strip her soul bare and scrutinize closely its inner state.’ Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, VII.i, p. 9.

¹⁰² Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, LXIII.ii, pp. 99-100.

¹⁰³ Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, LXIII.iii, p. 100.

expected to adhere to, Chrysostom's treatise demonstrates that virginity is not simply attained by performance but rests on orthodox belief.¹⁰⁴

ii. Anti-Asceticism and an Ascetic Reading of the Fall

Like Ambrose, Chrysostom battles against contemporary hostility towards asceticism, as well. After his defence of marriage, Chrysostom addresses those who question the holiness of virginity, and insist that marriage is superior. Because Catholicism promotes virginity above marriage, he defends the Catholic position against anti-matrimonial charges similar to those which he had brought against the heretics.¹⁰⁵ There is, he says, a world of difference between the two attitudes. It is 'as great a difference as that between necessity and choice'.¹⁰⁶ He clarifies his own attitude towards marriage:

I believe virginity is much more honourable than marriage. I do not of course count marriage among the evil things, rather I praise it exceedingly. It is the harbour of chastity for those who desire to use it well, and it does not allow one's nature to become wild.¹⁰⁷

Following Saint Paul, Chrysostom articulates the orthodox position on marriage and virginity: marriage is good, but virginity is better.¹⁰⁸ Those who object to virginity claim that they do so for fear that it will cause the depopulation of the world. Chrysostom counters that prior to the fall God created Adam and Eve without intercourse:¹⁰⁹ 'Could He not, then,' he asks, 'have created many more men without marriage? Just as He

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Chrysostom: 'What advantage is there in the walls having stood firm when the temple has been destroyed? Or what good is it that the place where the throne stood is pure when the throne itself is defiled?' Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, VI.i, p. 8.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. Young: 'In his works on virginity, it is clear that idealization of chastity did not mean total disparagement of marriage – that was to despise God's good creation and was the way of the heretic; it was because marriage was good that virginity was the greater attainment.' Young, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon*, p. 147.

¹⁰⁶ Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, IX.ii, p. 12.

¹⁰⁷ Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, IX.i, p. 12.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Saint Paul: 'Therefore, both he that giveth his virgin in marriage, doth well; and he that giveth her not, doth better' (I Corinthians 7: 38).

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Chrysostom: 'Tell me, what sort of marriage produced Adam? What kind of birth pains produced Eve?' Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, XIV.vi, p. 22.

created the first two from whom all men descend.’¹¹⁰ He also notes that the greatest destruction of the human race in biblical history was due to sin, that is, God’s destruction of the wickedness of humanity by means of the deluge (Genesis 5-10). He concludes that ‘marriage will not be able to produce many men if God is unwilling, nor will virginity destroy their number if He wishes there to be many of them’.¹¹¹ The increase of the human race is not reliant on marriage, but on the will of God.

Chrysostom argues that virginity was the state in which Adam and Eve lived before the fall,¹¹² when mankind was pure and virginal, and thus reads marriage as a fallen state:

When they did not obey God and became earth and dust, they destroyed along with that blessed way of life the beauty of virginity, which together with God abandoned them and withdrew. As long as they were uncorrupted by the devil and stood in awe of their master, virginity abided with them.¹¹³

Chrysostom provides an overtly ascetic reading of the fall. This contemplation on the role of virginity within Eden is perhaps one of the most innovative things that Chrysostom brings to the tradition. Although there has been some mention of the Genesis text in previous patristic treatises, they did not explicitly consider Adam and Eve in the way that Chrysostom does.¹¹⁴ Methodius certainly represented virginity as a way in which mankind can recreate his innocent, pre-fallen state, but Chrysostom, following this idea through, arrives at a more negative reading of sexuality and marriage:

¹¹⁰ Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, XIV.vi, p. 22.

¹¹¹ Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, XV.ii, p. 23.

¹¹² Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, XIV.iii, p. 21.

¹¹³ Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, XIV.v, pp. 21-2.

¹¹⁴ Cf. Clark: ‘in a neat inversion of his own argument, he posits that virginity is the true *human* condition in which Adam and Eve were created and in which God had intended that they remain. By adopting virginity, we not only become more godly, we are also recalled to our true human nature.’ Clark, ‘Introduction’ to *John Chrysostom: On Virginity. Against Remarriage*, p. xiv.

Why did marriage not appear before the treachery? Why was there no intercourse in paradise? Why not the pains of childbirth before the curse? Because at that time these things were superfluous.¹¹⁵

Biblically, Adam and Eve do not appear to have marital congress until after they are ejected from Eden (Genesis 4:1). Chrysostom appears to associate the beginning of their marriage with the conjugal act, rather than at the point of Eve's creation:¹¹⁶

When they shed the princely raiment of virginity and laid aside their heavenly attire, they accepted the decay of death, ruin, pain, and a toilsome life. In their wake came marriage: marriage, a garment befitting mortals and slaves. [...] Do you perceive the origin of marriage? Why it seems to be necessary? It springs from disobedience, from a curse, from death.¹¹⁷

Although he identifies marriage as a consequence of the fall, Chrysostom is careful not to suggest that procreation is a feature of post-fallen life as well. On the contrary, God demonstrated through His creative power that procreation can be accomplished in a pure, virginal manner. As neither Adam nor Eve were conceived through intercourse, it is possible that God may have had a different method of procreation in mind for pre-fallen man:

Adam would not have needed [marriage] if he had remained obedient. You will ask if all men were to be created in this manner. Yes, either in this way or in another that I cannot say. The point is that God did not need marriage for the creation of a multitude of men upon the earth.¹¹⁸

Marriage, then, is a feature of our fallen life, whereas virginity is a means by which mankind can forge a path back towards God and a more innocent age of man.

¹¹⁵ Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, XV.ii, p. 23.

¹¹⁶ There is an implied unity after Eve's creation: 'And Adam said: This now is bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called woman, because she was taken out of man. Wherefore a man shall leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they shall be two in one flesh' (Genesis 2: 23-4). Post-fall Adam and Eve procreate: 'And Adam knew Eve his wife: who conceived and brought forth Cain, saying: I have gotten a man through God. And again she brought forth his brother Abel' (Genesis 4: 1).

¹¹⁷ Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, XIV.v, p. 22; XIV.vi, p. 22.

¹¹⁸ Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, XVII.v, pp. 26-7.

Chrysostom states that ‘marriage is a concession, but God has provided us with the path of virginity so we can reach perfection’.¹¹⁹

iii. Commentary on Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians

The first twenty-four chapters of Chrysostom’s treatise, which denounce heretical virgins, defend marriage, and then address those who denigrate virginity, act as a preface for the main body of the treatise: an exegesis on the seventh chapter of Saint Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians. In refutation of those who question the holiness of either marriage or virginity, Chrysostom refers to Saint Paul’s comments on the pre-eminence of virginity over marriage:

Let both those who denigrate marriage and those who exalt it unduly now feel ashamed, for Paul curbs both of them. [...] Let us turn our attention entirely to sensible men and return once again to Saint Paul.¹²⁰

Chrysostom establishes Saint Paul’s authority on the subject, saying that ‘Christ has given us some laws and dogmas himself and others through His apostles’.¹²¹ He distinguishes between those precepts which Paul gives that have been authorised by Christ and are observable in Scripture, and those that are given by Christ through Paul;¹²² either way, Paul acts as a mouthpiece for Christ. Chrysostom seeks to elucidate on Saint Paul’s attitude towards virginity and marriage in I Corinthians 7.

Following Methodius’ explanation of the gradual perfecting of mankind,¹²³

Chrysostom likens this developing virtue to nestlings that are learning to fly. Marriage is

¹¹⁹ Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, XVI.i, p. 23.

¹²⁰ Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, XXIV.iv, p. 34.

¹²¹ Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, XII.ii, p. 16.

¹²² Cf. Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, XII.iii, p. 16.

¹²³ Cf. Methodius: ‘For the world, while still unfilled with men, was like a child, and it was necessary that it should first be filled with these, and so grow to manhood. But when hereafter it was colonized from end to end, the race of man spreading to a boundless extent, God no longer allowed man to remain in the same ways, considering how they might now proceed from one point to another, and advance nearer to heaven.’ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, I.ii, in *Ante-Nicene Christian Library: Translations of the*

like the nest, which provides safety, but God wants us to progress and learn how to fly; virginity provides the means by which we can fly towards God.¹²⁴ Both Methodius and Chrysostom's articulation of the gradual perfection of mankind explicate Saint Paul's conception of mankind as a developing child.¹²⁵ Chrysostom alludes to Paul's imagery, likening marriage to the 'milk' which man must be weaned on before he can accept the more life-sustaining 'meat' of virginity:

If children who need only milk were removed from the nurture proper for man and were forced to alter their diet, nothing would keep them from dying at once, so grievous is the untimeliness of that action. For this reason, virginity was not granted from the beginning. No, rather, virginity did appear at the beginning and was prior to marriage.¹²⁶

Chrysostom seems to contradict himself here, but he is saying two things: that virginity was created and ordained at the very beginning, but after the fall marriage became necessary. There then followed a process of weaning mankind towards virginity again. It is, thus, both prior to marriage and the end of a process of perfection. Chrysostom notes that marriage was instituted by God for two reasons: 'for the sake of procreation, but an even greater reason was to quench the fiery passion of our nature'.¹²⁷ Because the earth is now full, argues Chrysostom, the first reason is now obsolete and so the latter become the sole justification for marriage.¹²⁸ He notes that Saint Paul does not acknowledge

Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325. Vol. XIV. The Writings of Methodius, Alexander of Lycopolis, Peter of Alexandria and Several Fragments, trans. William R. Clark, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, MDCCCLXIX [1869]), pp. 1-119, (p. 7).

¹²⁴ Cf. Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, XVII.i-ii, p. 25.

¹²⁵ Cf. Saint Paul: 'And I, brethren, could not speak to you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal. As unto little ones in Christ. I gave you milk to drink, not meat; for you were not able as yet. But neither indeed are you now able; for you are yet carnal' (I Corinthians 3: 1-2).

¹²⁶ Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, XVII.v, p. 26.

¹²⁷ Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, XIX.i, p. 27.

¹²⁸ Cf. Chrysostom: 'At the beginning, as I said, marriage had these two purposes, but now, after the earth and seas and all the world has been inhabited, only one reason remains for it: the suppression of licentiousness and debauchery.' Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, XIX.i, p. 27. Brown makes a somewhat foolish observation concerning that passage, saying: 'John even fell back on an ancient rhetorical argument in favour of homosexual love: pederasty, a rhetor had once insisted, represented the final refinement in love-

procreation as a reason for marriage, but only advocates marriage as a remedy for lust.¹²⁹

Thus, there is an implied censure in Paul's allowance of marriage as it suggests that those who marry are tacitly admitting to having an uncontrollably lustful nature.¹³⁰ For those who are troubled in this way, however, marriage is highly beneficial:

Marriage is of much use to those who are still caught up in their passions, who desire to live the life of swine and be mired in brothels. It rescues them from that impure compulsion and keeps them holy and chaste.¹³¹

Chrysostom is here expanding on the implications of Saint Paul's statement: 'It is better to marry than to be burnt' (I Corinthians 7). Marriage is therefore a good, because it not only keeps mankind from falling into the sins of fornication, but it also keeps Christ's limbs free from pollution.¹³² Marriage, however, is no longer of use for one who does not have a lustful nature; as a consequence, it becomes 'an impediment to virtue' for those who could embrace virginity but choose marriage instead.¹³³

Elizabeth A. Clark argues that *On Virginity* does not replicate the Pauline text but instead provides a very different interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7,¹³⁴ which she says

making, in a society delivered, by its populousness, from the need for exclusively heterosexual relations!' Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), p. 308. Chrysostom does not, however, deny the continued need for heterosexual relations, rather he says that marriage remains useful for the 'suppression of licentiousness and debauchery'. John would have categorised pederasty into one of these two categories. Indeed, Clark notes that 'In *Against the Opponents of the Monastic Life*, Chrysostom warns against those who succumb to the love of riches and to sexual desire (pederasty receives special condemnation) [cf. *Adversus oppugnatores* III, 8 (PG 47, 360-363)].' Clark, 'Introduction' to *John Chrysostom: On Virginity. Against Remarriage*, p. ix.

¹²⁹ Cf. Chrysostom: 'Nowhere has he [Paul] mentioned the procreation of children, the specious and grand reason for marriage; instead he cites being "on fire", incontinence, fornication, temptations of the devil – to avoid them he agrees to marriage.' Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, XXXIX.iii, p. 59.

¹³⁰ Cf. Chrysostom: 'for the man who learns that marriage is advised not because it is the height of virtue, but because Paul has condemned him for having so much lust that without marriage he is incapable of restraining it, this man blushing with shame will hastily pursue virginity and be anxious to divest himself of such ill repute.' Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, XXVII.iv, p. 38.

¹³¹ Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, XIX.ii, p. 28.

¹³² Cf. Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, XXV, p. 34.

¹³³ Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, XXV, p. 34.

¹³⁴ Cf. Clark: 'Although it has been posited that Chrysostom's treatise *On Virginity* can be read as an extended commentary on 1 Corinthians 7, it is immediately apparent to the contemporary reader that it

would ‘have startled its author [Saint Paul] in several ways’.¹³⁵ This is partly because in Paul’s time perpetual virginity was neither common nor thought desirable, but by the late-fourth century when Chrysostom was writing it had become a vowed profession.¹³⁶ In addition, there was no longer an imminent expectation of the end of the world. Clark argues:

Although Chrysostom agreed with Paul that celibacy was preferable to marriage, their reasons differed: Paul’s view that virginity should be favoured because of the imminence of the eschaton was re-interpreted by Chrysostom to fit a late fourth-century context. [...] So removed from Paul’s eschatological expectation is Chrysostom that he cannot comprehend the plain meaning of the text.¹³⁷

Clark is correct that Chrysostom does not simply provide an exegesis of the Pauline text.¹³⁸ The treatise, however, does adhere closely to Paul’s epistle, but draws on wider biblical material and an ascetic reading of the fall. At some points, Chrysostom seems to feel that Saint Paul is not explicit enough in his recommendation of virginity, as he draws attention to Paul’s use of rhetoric. He argues that Paul ‘subtly praises virginity when he speaks about marriage’,¹³⁹ and so conveys the superiority of virginity indirectly so that it can appear more palatable to his audience.¹⁴⁰ Chrysostom avers that ‘Paul hesitates to

constitutes no simple explication of the Pauline text.’ Clark, ‘Introduction’ to *John Chrysostom: On Virginity. Against Remarriage*, pp. x-xi.

¹³⁵ Clark, ‘Introduction’ to *John Chrysostom: On Virginity. Against Remarriage*, p. xi.

¹³⁶ Clark lists several factors which contribute to a very different reading of Saint Paul’s original intention: ‘Christianity’s entrance to the world of “high” classical culture, its abandonment of an immediate eschatological expectation, its struggle against Gnosticising heretics, its reflection on the origin and consequences of the Fall, its acceptance of graduation in moral standards for Christian proportioned to their varying degrees of religion commitment, all contributed to make Chrysostom’s commentary upon the Pauline chapter as much an *eisegesis* as an *exegesis*.’ Clark, ‘Introduction’ to *John Chrysostom: On Virginity. Against Remarriage*, p. xxvii.

¹³⁷ Clark, ‘Introduction’ to *John Chrysostom: On Virginity. Against Remarriage*, p. xiii.

¹³⁸ Cf. Clark: ‘In so describing the trials of marriage and the glories of virginity, Chrysostom has gone far beyond his Pauline source. The two treatises of Chrysostom that follow [*On Virginity* and *Against Remarriage*] are therefore no straightforward retelling of I Corinthians 7. [...] Chrysostom’s commentary upon the Pauline chapter [is] as much an *eisegesis* as an *exegesis*.’ Clark, ‘Introduction’ to *John Chrysostom: On Virginity. Against Remarriage*, p. xxvii.

¹³⁹ Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, XXXIII, p. 45.

¹⁴⁰ Cf. Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, XIII.i-iv, pp. 18-9. Cf. Chrysostom: ‘[Paul] continued to speak about marriage with the desire of turning them gradually away from it, then keeping his discussion of continence

recommend [virginity] too forcefully because he is afraid to lead men to the heights of virginity in case it is too much and they fall into fornication'.¹⁴¹ Virginity requires an iron will, constant vigilance and divine help:

How will we obtain this help? By giving all of ourselves: by reasoning soundly, by enduring the strain of fasting and sleeplessness, by adhering strictly to the rules of conduct and observing the precepts, and above all, by not being overconfident in ourselves.¹⁴²

In addition to the necessary possession of orthodoxy that Chrysostom insisted upon in the early part of his thesis, the virgin must achieve virginity through reason, asceticism, adhering to behavioural rules, and help from God.

Chrysostom describes the hardships of virginity as a battle, from which the virgins have no reprieve. In contrast, marriage has plenty of respite, although Paul does recommend that married couples should abandon intercourse for short periods of time, in order to make time for prayer.¹⁴³ Because Paul recommends the withdrawal from intercourse for prayer, Chrysostom states that it is as if he were saying that 'intercourse

brief, he interspersed in it many words on marriage, thereby not allowing them to be struck by the harshness of his exhortations.' (XXVII.iii, p. 37); '[Paul makes] his speech agreeable and not tiresome' Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, XLI.viii, p. 64; Cf. Chrysostom: 'Saint Paul, too, does not weave his advice on virginity without a pause as a whole piece with each point in succession. Instead, he continually interrupts it with words on marriage and by depriving virginity of its extreme aspects renders his speech soothing and acceptable. The intricate mixture of his words has come about for this reason. Do not fear. He has not made a flat declaration or legislated a law. For his words about marriage stand nearby again.' Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, XLVII.iv, pp. 74-5; 'In fact, although the audience is unaware of it, [Saint Paul] praises continence while giving pretexts for marriage.' (XXVII.iv, p. 37); 'Paul has woven his theme of virginity briefly and in passing into his recommendation to marry. By this excellent method he prepares his audience by smoothing the way for their understanding and providing the best introduction to his discussion.' (XLI.v, p. 63); 'Having demonstrated in this way the preeminence of virginity and having extolled it to heaven itself, he changes the subject back to his acquiescence to marriage, since he always fears that someone will think of virginity as a precept' (LXXV.iv, p. 114).

¹⁴¹ Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, XXVI, p. 35.

¹⁴² Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, XXVII.ii, p. 36.

¹⁴³ Cf. Chrysostom: 'He who prays and fasts as he ought must renounce every human desire, every care, every kind of wasteful occupation, and in this way with perfect concentration approach God. This is why fasting is a fine act: it trims care away from the soul, and by keeping neglect of duty from overrunning the mind turns the intellect entirely towards itself.' Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, XXX.ii, p. 42.

with a woman does not lead to impurity, but to a waste of time’;¹⁴⁴ it diverts man’s attention from his devotional exercises.¹⁴⁵ After these recommended periods of abstinence, Paul encourages couples to return to each other. Chrysostom explains why Paul allows married couples this concession, and why he has not commanded all men to be virgins:¹⁴⁶

Saint Paul does not allow them [married couples] to sail out too far but advises them to turn round whenever they tire and to renew the communal life. The virgin, on the other hand, is of necessity entirely at sea and sails a harbourless ocean.¹⁴⁷

Because the virgin is sailing alone on the high seas, she is liable to be attacked by the devil, ‘that dread pirate’, and by storms and surging seas.¹⁴⁸ Against all this the virgin must wrestle entirely by herself and ‘battle against the spirits of evil until she puts into a truly calm harbour’.¹⁴⁹ The nautical imagery that Chrysostom uses echoes the closing of Methodius’ *Symposium*, in which Euboulios represents the most laudable virgin as the one who is troubled by temptation, but resists it.¹⁵⁰ Chrysostom makes the same observation: ‘the virgin has the provocative fire [of passion] roaring [...] within herself,

¹⁴⁴ Chrysostom, *On Virginité*, XXX.ii, p. 42.

¹⁴⁵ Cf. Chrysostom: ‘The unmarried man is busy with the Lord’s affairs...but the married man is busy with this world’s demands.’ But one passes away, the other abides. Is this not by itself sufficient to demonstrate the value of virginité? For this concern is superior to the other, just as there is a difference between God and the world. – Why then do you consent to marriage, which pins us down to these cares and diverts us from the spiritual? Chrysostom, *On Virginité*, LXXIV.i-ii, pp. 111-2.

¹⁴⁶ Cf. Chrysostom: ‘I do not order you to live as virgins, he says; for I fear the difficulty of the task. I do not order you to continually have relations with your wife; for I do not wish to be the legislator of incontinence. I have said, ‘return to one another’ with the intention of keeping you from sinking lower, not to check your willingness to advance higher.’ Chrysostom, *On Virginité*, XXXIV.vii, p. 48.

¹⁴⁷ Chrysostom, *On Virginité*, XXXIV.i, p. 45.

¹⁴⁸ Chrysostom, *On Virginité*, XXXIV.ii, p. 46.

¹⁴⁹ Chrysostom, *On Virginité*, XXXIV.ii, p. 46.

¹⁵⁰ Euboulios asks Gregorion which is the better pilot: ‘he that saves his vessel in great and perplexing storms, or is it he who does so in a breathless calm? [...] Therefore it is clear that he whose soul contends against the impulses of lust, and is not borne down by it, but draws back and sets himself in array against it, appears stronger than he who does not lust.’ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, p. 117; p. 119.

yet she sustains and endures the flames.¹⁵¹ Chrysostom's violent imagery of the containment of aggressive desire is arresting.¹⁵² The virgin is constantly on fire:

the virgin [...] has no remedy to extinguish the fire. She sees it rising to a crescendo and coming to a peak, but she lacks the power to put it out. [...] Is there, then, anything more extraordinary than carrying within one all of this fire and not being burnt? To collect in the inner chambers of the soul this fire but to keep one's thoughts untouched by it?¹⁵³

This image of the virgin seems extraordinary; she is full of passion but is somehow able to contain them and remain pure. She contradicts the passage in the Proverbs to which Chrysostom alludes in order to demonstrate the virgin's moral strength: 'Can a man hide fire in his bosom, and his garments not burnt? Or can he walk upon hot coals, and his feet not be burnt?' (Proverbs 6: 23-28). The passage from Proverbs discusses the inevitable damage done to the soul through fornication and adultery. The allusion is somewhat problematic as it does not quite fit the sense that Chrysostom is using it for; he adapts the imagery, so that the fire symbolises lustful temptations instead of sexual indiscretions. Thus, the virgin's soul is able to contain the fire of lust so that her thoughts remain untouched by them. Chrysostom may also be thinking of the burning bush that 'was on fire and was not burnt' (Exodus 3: 2), in which God appeared to Moses. This image was interpreted by Gregory of Nyssa to prefigure the God-bearing body of the Virgin Mary.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵¹ Chrysostom, *On Virginité*, XXXIV.iv, p. 47.

¹⁵² Cf. Chrysostom: 'I know the violence attendant upon this state. I know the strain of these deeds. I know the burden of the fight. You need a soul fond of strife, one forceful and reckless against the passions. You must walk over coals without being burned, and walk over swords without being slashed.' Chrysostom, *On Virginité*, XXVII.i, p. 36.

¹⁵³ Chrysostom, *On Virginité*, XXXIV. iv, p. 46-7.

¹⁵⁴ Cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Birth of Christ*. Quoted in Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church*, p. 155.

As well as the nautical and fire imagery, Chrysostom utilises the image of the virgin as a *miles Christi*.¹⁵⁵ The virgin is a lone fighter who is left struggling against adversaries with no hope of relief:

Paul shuts the virgin outside the walls like a brave soldier and he does not permit opening the gates to her, even if the enemy rages against her, even if the enemy becomes more violent precisely because his adversary has no means of ending the action.¹⁵⁶

The other striking image that Chrysostom uses is that of an athlete grappling with the devil in a theatre watched by God and the whole of the heavenly host:

When the theatre has been filled and the angels are watching from above, when Christ is presiding and the devil in a rage gnashes his teeth and, grasping her about the waist, is locked in combat with her, who will dare go into the centre and cry out: run from your enemy, give up your efforts, withdraw from his grip, do not throw your rival down or upset him but concede victory to him?¹⁵⁷

The images represent both internal and external threats to virginity. The fire of desire burns within the soul of the virgin; meanwhile, demonic enemies grapple with the athlete or battle with the soldier. Like the soldier, once the virgin has entered into the arena she cannot back out of the contest.¹⁵⁸ Chrysostom asks: ‘Why has [Paul] not said to her too: if you cannot exercise self-control, get married?’¹⁵⁹ The virgin, he says, has a free choice to decide whether or not to marry and, once she has made that choice, she is bound by that

¹⁵⁵ Cf. Chrysostom: ‘Virgins are like soldiers: nothing could be more disgraceful for a soldier than to throw aside his arms and spend his time in taverns; and nothing could be more indecorous for a virgin than to be embroiled in earthly affairs.’ Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, LXXVII, p. 116.

¹⁵⁶ Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, XXXIV. iii, p. 46.

¹⁵⁷ Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, XXXVIII. ii, p.57.

¹⁵⁸ Cf. Chrysostom: ‘you could no more say to the champion after he has cast aside his clothes and been anointed with oil, once he has entered the stadium and been spattered with dust: withdraw, run from your rival. Instead, the champion is faced with two choices: either to leave with a crown or having fallen to retire with dishonour.’ Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, XXXVIII. i, p. 56.

¹⁵⁹ Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, XXXVIII.i, p. 56. Chrysostom also discusses this passage in *On Virginity*, LXXVIII,i, pp. 116-7.

decision.¹⁶⁰ Chrysostom understands the virginal vow as one which cannot be broken in favour of marriage; however, notably he does not utilise the *sponsa Christi* motif to emphasise his point.¹⁶¹ It is not due to a lack of familiarity with the tradition: Chrysostom does mention Christ as a spouse at the start of the treatise. Also, in one of his letters, Chrysostom uses the bridal imagery to emphasise the permanent vow of a virgin, in order to persuade a male friend to reconsider his decision to reject the virginal life in favour of marriage.¹⁶² Such an application of the *sponsa Christi* motif would be relevant in *On Virginité*, but Chrysostom appears to be stripping back the imagery of the tradition in order to adhere more closely to Paul's epistle. Instead, he discusses the section in the Pauline text which refers to virgins marrying.¹⁶³ He warns Christians that Paul 'is not speaking of a girl who has renounced marriage, for it is apparent to all that she had sinned in an unforgivable way'.¹⁶⁴ Some scholars, reading against the patristic interpretation of I

¹⁶⁰ Cf. Chrysostom: 'as long as she [the virgin] deliberates beforehand whether she ought to marry or not, marriage poses no threat. When she has made her choice and is enrolled, she has brought herself into the stadium.' Chrysostom, *On Virginité*, XXXVIII.ii, p. 56.

¹⁶¹ There does not seem to be universal consensus yet concerning whether it is permissible for a consecrated virgin to marry. For instance, Epiphanius says: 'If one drops out of the race it is better to take a wife openly, and in place of virginité do penance for a long time, and be readmitted to the church as one who has strayed and wept, and is in need of reinstatement – and not be wounded every day by the secret darts of wickedness which the devil launches at him.' Epiphanius, *Panarion*, IV. 41 [61].7.vi, p. 120.

¹⁶² Cf. Chrysostom: 'it is no longer possible for thee to observe the right conditions of marriage. For if he who has been attached to a heavenly bridegroom deserts him, and joins himself to a wife the act is adultery, even if you call it marriage ten thousand times over; or rather it is worse than adultery in proportion as God is greater than man. [...] He has not forbidden to marry, but He has forbidden to commit adultery, which is what thou art wishing to do; and may you be preserved from ever engaging thyself in marriage. And why dost thou marvel if marriage is judged as if it were adultery, when God is disregarded?' John Chrysostom. *An Exhortation to Theodore After his Fall: Letter II*, trans. Rev. W. R. W. Stephens, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. IX, *Chrysostom: On the Priesthood, Ascetic Treatises, Select Homilies and Letters, Homilies on the Statues*, ed. Philip Schaff (Massachusetts: Hendrickson), pp. 111-116, (p. 113).

¹⁶³ Cf. Paul: 'But if any man think that he seemeth dishonoured, with regard to his virgin, for that she is above the age, and it must so be: let him do what he will; he sinneth not, if she marry. For he that hath determined being steadfast in his heart, having no necessity, but having power of his own will; and hath judged this in his heart, to keep his virgin, doth well. Therefore, both he that giveth his virgin in marriage, doth well; and he that giveth her not, doth better. A woman is bound by the law as long as her husband liveth; but if her husband die, she is at liberty: let her marry to whom she will; only in the Lord. But more blessed shall she be, if she so remain, according to my counsel; and I think that I also have the spirit of God' (I Corinthians 7: 36-40).

¹⁶⁴ Chrysostom, *On Virginité*, XXXIX.i, p. 57.

Corinthians 7, have interpreted this passage from Paul as relating to an early practice of *syneisaktism*.¹⁶⁵ J. Duncan Derrett has also provided a reading based on an understanding of Jewish marital rites; he sees the virgin as a betrothed virgin who is below the age of consent.¹⁶⁶ Neither reading, however, can convincingly explain why from the earliest times Saint Paul's letter has been read as an authorisation of the celibate life.¹⁶⁷

Chrysostom summarises Paul's argument and at the same time answers possible objections and misunderstandings arising from a misreading of the text:

If you wish to learn the will of Paul, hear what it is: 'I should like you to be as I am,' that is, continent – So, if you want all men to be continent, you want no one to marry. – No not at all: I do not prevent those who want to marry, nor do I reproach them, but I pray and long for all men to be as I myself am. However, I give my consent to marriage because of fornication. Therefore, I said at the beginning: 'A man is better off having no relations with woman.'¹⁶⁸

Elizabeth Clark sees Chrysostom's defence of marriage as stemming primarily from a wish to distance himself from Gnostic heresies.¹⁶⁹ Indeed, in his Pauline exegesis Chrysostom's initial defence of marriage seems to give way to a demonstration of all the ills of marriage. Whereas virginity frees the soul from care and enable it to fly free from

¹⁶⁵ Clark notes that 'Achelis, adopting the thesis of Eduard Grafe (1899) [...] popularised the view that I Corinthians 7:36-38 is the first reference in Christian history to *syneisaktism* [Cf. Hans Achelis *Virgines Subintroductae: Ein Beitrag zum VII Kapitel des I. Korintherbriefs* (Leipzig, 1902), pp. 29-31].' Clark, 'John Chrysostom and the "Subintroductae"', pp. 173-4. Cf. Derret: 'The traditional interpretation has always been that Paul deals with a parent's or guardian's situation [...] Protestant critics, however, propounded the new popular view that the predicament was that of spouses who had taken a vow of celibacy.' J. Duncan Derrett, 'The Disposal of Virgins', *Man*, New Series, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Mar., 1974), 23-30, (p. 24).

¹⁶⁶ Cf. Derrett: 'The present article provides a revised translation, showing that the "he" in the first line of the translation above is the father or legal guardian of the unmarried girl, and that the "them" of "let them marry" refers most probably to the male fiancés.' Derrett, 'The Disposal of Virgins', p. 24.

¹⁶⁷ Cf. Clark: 'One answer is that the fathers could not imagine their hero Paul sanctioning a practice which, by their time, had brought trouble and disrepute to the Church. [...] Chrysostom did not pause to inquire whether Paul might have been describing "virginal marriage"; since he was to write two treatises condemning the *subintroductae*, he was not likely to admit that Paul had permitted men and women to live together in chastity.' Clark, John Chrysostom and the "Subintroductae", p. 175.

¹⁶⁸ Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, XXXIV.viii, p. 49.

¹⁶⁹ Cf. Clark: 'Chrysostom's eagerness to defend marriage as a relative good despite its disadvantages stems in large part from the battle the orthodox church had waged in earlier years against the Gnostics' depreciation of the created world; in Chrysostom's time, the struggle persisted against the Manichean ascetics.' Clark, 'Introduction' to *John Chrysostom: On Virginity. Against Remarriage*, p. xvi.

the mundane,¹⁷⁰ marriage shackles mankind to the earth and leads to his becoming embroiled in the world to a greater degree. Chrysostom represents it as a kind of slavery, not only because it ties man to the cares of the world, but also because each spouse must submit to the other:

For marriage truly is a chain, not only because of the multitude of its anxieties and daily worries, but also because it forces spouses to submit to one another, which is harsher than every other kind of servitude.¹⁷¹

In marriage one ceases to have control over one's own body, and thus if a woman is desirous to practise continence against her husband's wishes, she is prohibited from doing so.¹⁷²

Marriage can also be an impediment to virtue because, by being engaged with the secular world, it is easy to become caught up in sinfulness.¹⁷³ Following Gregory of Nyssa, Chrysostom identifies the secular, public life as particularly open to sinfulness.¹⁷⁴ He says: 'Today it is not possible to be perfect without selling everything, without renouncing everything, not just possessions and a house, but even one's own life.'¹⁷⁵ Virginitly is the most perfect expression of the apostolic life as it represents a complete renunciation not only of the world, but also the self. He equates the submission to the

¹⁷⁰ Cf. Chrysostom: 'Clipping away all their chains, it permits them to fly to heaven with unimpeded and nimble feet, as if they were winged creatures.' Chrysostom, *On Virginitly*, LXXX.ii, p. 121.

¹⁷¹ Chrysostom, *On Virginitly*, XLI.i, p. 61. Cf. Chrysostom: 'Because we chose this slavery to begin with not in ignorance but knowing full well its claims and laws. We willingly put ourselves under its yoke'; 'For when you hear that you will not be your own master after marriage but be subject to the will of your wife, you will quickly aspire not to pass under the yoke at all, since once you have entered into this state, you must a slave henceforth, so long as it pleases your wife' Chrysostom, *On Virginitly*, XLI.iv, p. 62; XXVIII.i, p. 38.

¹⁷² Cf. Chrysostom: 'The wife practising continence against her husband's wishes is deprived of the rewards for continence. She also has to give an account for his adultery and is more responsible than he. Why? Because she pushed him to the abyss of debauchery by depriving him of legitimate intercourse.' Chrysostom, *On Virginitly*, XLVIII.i, p. 76.

¹⁷³ Chrysostom does assert that a woman, by living an apostolic life in the home, can reclaim a role as man's spiritual helper: Cf. Chrysostom, *On Virginitly*, XLVII.i, p. 73.

¹⁷⁴ Cf. Chrysostom, *On Virginitly*, XLIV.ii, pp. 68-9.

¹⁷⁵ Chrysostom, *On Virginitly*, LXXXIII.i, p. 124.

flesh, implied in the marriage state, with a more general acquiescence to fleshly needs: ‘married persons minister to the flesh and provide it with much luxury!’¹⁷⁶ Chrysostom reminds his audience that marriage does not sanction a complete immersion into a secular life. He says: ‘Marriage customarily provides us with freedom for intercourse only and not for a life of luxury.’¹⁷⁷ As well as the descent into secular concerns, marriage also presents the couple with earthly trials. Chrysostom outlines the tribulations that accompany marriage, which Clark notes are very much in the classical tradition.¹⁷⁸ These include pre-marital anxieties, from which a virgin is happily exempt, including:¹⁷⁹ a woman’s inability to choose her spouse;¹⁸⁰ the fear that she will not be pleasing to her husband;¹⁸¹ unpleasantness concerning the dowry;¹⁸² and problems ensuing from a disparity in wealth.¹⁸³ Chrysostom notes that such pre-marital concerns are more acute for women,¹⁸⁴ but also that men suffer discomfort throughout these transactions.¹⁸⁵ Once the marriage has been entered into, the trials continue: the fear of childlessness or even of extreme fertility;¹⁸⁶ the pain of birth pangs;¹⁸⁷ the fear of losing a baby in childbirth and

¹⁷⁶ Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, XLIX. ix, p. 81.

¹⁷⁷ Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, L. i, p. 81.

¹⁷⁸ Cf. Clark, ‘Introduction’ to *John Chrysostom: On Virginity. Against Remarriage*, pp. xxii-xxiii.

¹⁷⁹ Cf. Chrysostom: ‘The virgin need not make inquiries about her bridegroom, nor fear any deception. For he is God not man, a master not a fellow-slave. [...] The wedding gifts of this bride are not bondage, parcels of land and just so many talents of gold, but the heavens and its advantages. [...] The virgin, however, both yearns for death and is oppressed for life, anxious as she is to see her groom face to face and to enjoy that glory.’ Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, LIX, p. 96.

¹⁸⁰ Cf. Chrysostom: ‘it is not yet clear who will be picked as her husband [...] and the family hands the young girl over to an unexpected suitor.’ Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, LVII. i, p. 91; LVII. ii, p. 92.

¹⁸¹ Cf. Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, LVII.ii, p. 92.

¹⁸² Cf. Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, LVII.iii, p. 92.

¹⁸³ Cf. Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, LIII-LV, pp. 87-9.

¹⁸⁴ Cf. Chrysostom: ‘even if men rush into marriage, women should not pursue it, for they could not claim that the tyranny of desire is so predominant in them, and they reap the greater share of hardship from it, as we have shown.’ Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, LII. vii, p. 87.

¹⁸⁵ Cf. Chrysostom: ‘women are not alone in this plight, men have painful worries too: yet it is possible for them to make inquires but for a woman continually shut indoors, how could she find out about her suitor’s habits and appearance?’ Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, LVII.ii, p. 92.

¹⁸⁶ Cf. Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, LVII.iv, pp. 92-3.

concern for its upbringing should it survive;¹⁸⁸ a husband's jealousy,¹⁸⁹ which leads to discord between the spouses,¹⁹⁰ and promotes insolence in servants;¹⁹¹ and even the wife's jealousy, the misery of which, caused by a husband's infidelity, is compounded by her impotence in law.¹⁹²

Chrysostom claims that his recounting of the horrors of marriage are not due to a hatred of marriage like the heretics, but serve to warn the unmarried what they are letting themselves in for, because marriage, once embarked upon, cannot be dissolved except in death. Despite Chrysostom's concession, his view of marriage can still be construed as quite negative. Young suggests that some scholars see Chrysostom's negativity towards marriage as a feature of his youthful zeal, which softens in later treatises.¹⁹³

Chrysostom's use of the *molestiae nuptiarum*, however, which are classical commonplaces, represents the traditional complaints of marriage rather than providing particular insight into Chrysostom's personal views of marriage. The reason why he emphasises the earthly trials of married life is partly because he is seeking to elucidate Saint Paul's epistle. Paul, he notes, is silent on the spiritual rewards of virginity; these can be found in other scriptural passages. In I Corinthians 7, however, Paul states that a virgin

¹⁸⁷ Cf. Chrysostom: 'Labour pains, childbirth and children [are the troubles of marriage]'; 'God has imposed this upon woman in place of punishment and a curse – I do not mean birth itself but birth accompanied in this way by labour and pain: '...in pain shall you bring forth children,' it says. The virgin, on the other hand, stands above this travail and curse, since he who has rescinded the curse of the Law has rescinded this curse too.' Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, LVII. i, p. 91; LXV, p. 101.

¹⁸⁸ Cf. Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, LVII.iv-v, pp. 93-4.

¹⁸⁹ Cf. Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, LII.i-ii, pp. 83-4.

¹⁹⁰ Cf. Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, LII.iii, pp. 84-5.

¹⁹¹ Cf. Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, LII.iv, p. 85.

¹⁹² Cf. Chrysostom: 'When the awful suspicion [of jealousy] happens to be true, no one will rescue the woman from the hands of the outraged husband. With the law on his side, he leads her whom he loved the most to the court and has her executed. But the man avoids punishment by the law, although there is punishment in heaven that is reserved for God's judgement.' Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, LII. vii, p. 86.

¹⁹³ Cf. Young: 'There have been some who have suggested that Chrysostom softened his standards when he became involved in pastoral work, and certainly there is a difference in atmosphere between his negative descriptions of marriage in the early work *De Virginitate* and his more positive preaching to his largely married congregations.' Young, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon*, p. 146.

who marries ‘shall have tribulation of the flesh’ (I Corinthians 7: 28). Virginité is thus a way in which one can avoid such ‘tribulation’. Chrysostom’s enumeration of the ills of marriage can, therefore, be viewed as an attempt to clarify what Paul means by this phrase.

iv. *Virgines Subintroductae*

Chrysostom wrote two treatises attacking the practice of *syneisaktism*. The practice of was condemned by the fourth-century councils of Ancyra (A.D. 314) and Nicaea (A.D. 325).¹⁹⁴ However, it appears to have continued well into the Middle Ages,¹⁹⁵ which is attested by the need to condemn the practice in seventh-century Church Councils.¹⁹⁶

Syneisaktism attracted the inevitable accusation that these couples were using virginité to cloak their secret fornication. These accusations were in themselves problematic, because, as Chrysostom complains, they brought the good name of the Church and the

¹⁹⁴ Cf. Council of Ancyra: ‘XIX. [...] we prohibit women who are virgins from living with men as sisters.’ *The Canons of the Council of Ancyra*, A.D. 314, in Henry R. Percival, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. XIV, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church: Their Canons and Dogmatic Decrees* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1900]), p. 71. Cf. Council of Nicaea: ‘III. The great Synod has stringently forbidden any bishop, presbyter, deacon, or any one of the clergy whatever, to have a *subintroducta* dwelling with him, except only a mother, or sister, or aunt, or such persons only as are beyond all suspicion.’ *The Canons of the 318 Holy Fathers assembled in the city of Nice [Nicaea], in Bithynia*, A.D. 325, p.11. *The Canons of the Council of Trullo often called the Quinsext Council*, A.D. 692, in Henry R. Percival, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. XIV, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church: Their Canons and Dogmatic Decrees* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1900]), p. 364.

¹⁹⁵ For a discussion of the continued practice of *syneisaktism* in Irish Celtic Christianity see: Roger E. Reynolds, ‘*Virgines Subintroductae* in Celtic Christianity’, *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 61, No. 4 (Oct., 1968), pp. 547-566.

¹⁹⁶ Cf. *The Council of Trullo*: ‘IV. If any bishop, presbyter, deacon, sub-deacon, lector, cantor, or door-keeper has had intercourse with a woman dedicated to God, let him be deposed, as one who has corrupted a spouse of Christ, but if a layman let him be cut off.’; ‘V. Let none of those who are on the priestly list possess any woman or maid servant, beyond those who are enumerated in the canon as being persons free from suspicion, preserving himself hereby from being implicated in any blame. But if anyone transgress our decree let him be deposed. And let eunuchs also observe the same rule, that by foresight they may be free from censure. But those who transgress, let them be deposed, if indeed they are clerics; but if laymen let them be excommunicated.’ *The Canons of the Council of Trullo often called the Quinsext Council*, A.D. 692, in Henry R. Percival, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. XIV, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church: Their Canons and Dogmatic Decrees* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1900]), p. 364.

practice of virginity into disrepute.¹⁹⁷ In addition, Chrysostom notes two other negative effects: the practice provokes the anger of God, for ‘nothing makes God angrier than when his name is blasphemed’,¹⁹⁸ and it also causes scandal for those in the Church who take offence. Chrysostom reminds them that Paul demands that, ‘[i]f somebody were scandalised without just motivation because of weakness, he commanded us to help him’.¹⁹⁹ Thus, argues Chrysostom, the onus is on the spiritual couples to abandon their way of life in order to aid weaker members of the Church.

Chrysostom addressed one treatise on *syneisaktism* entitled *Adversus eos qui apud se habent subintroductas virgines*,²⁰⁰ or *Instruction and Refutation Directed Against Those Men Cohabiting with Virgins*, to male ‘monks’, and the other treatise, *Quod regulares feminae viris cohabitare non debeant*,²⁰¹ or *On the Necessity of Guarding Virginity*, to the *virgines subintroductae*. Chrysostom describes the abuses of the practice in *Instruction and Refutation*:

There are certain men who apart from marriage and sexual intercourse take girls inexperienced with matrimony, establish them permanently in their homes, and keep them sequestered until ripe old age, not for the purpose of bearing children (for they deny that they have sexual relations with the women), nor out of licentiousness (for they claim that they preserve them inviolate).²⁰²

¹⁹⁷ Cf. Chrysostom: ‘The honourable, great, and holy name of God is blasphemed among the heathen because of you, and that his glory is profaned, that such a dignified and important matter is slandered, that many souls fall because of these scandals, that even the healthy section of the virginal choir is infected by the blemish of your reputation, that an unquenchable fire is kindled both for yourselves and for those who live with you?’ Chrysostom, *On the Necessity of Guarding Virginity*, III, p. 218.

¹⁹⁸ Chrysostom, *Instruction and Refutation*, VIII, p. 188.

¹⁹⁹ Chrysostom, *Instruction and Refutation*, III, p. 171.

²⁰⁰ A literal rendering of the title is: *Against Those Men Who Have Subintroducta Virgins Among Them*.

²⁰¹ A literal rendering of the title is: *That Female Regulars Ought Not to Cohabit with Men*.

²⁰² John Chrysostom, *Instruction and Refutation Directed Against Those Men Cohabiting with Virgins*, I, in Elizabeth A. Clark, *Jerome, Chrysostom and Friends: Essays and Translations* (New York and Toronto: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1979), pp. 164-5. Cf. Jerome: ‘How comes this plague of the agapetae to be in the church? Whence come these unwedded wives, these novel concubines, these harlots, so I will call them, though they cling to a single partner? One house holds them and one chamber. They often occupy the same bed, and yet they call us suspicious if we fancy anything amiss. A brother leaves his virgin sister; a virgin, slighting her unmarried brother, seeks a brother in a stranger. Both alike profess to have but one object, to

Although Chrysostom seems to lay the blame at the monks' door for this malpractice,²⁰³ he equally apportions blame to the *virgines subintroductae* as the co-originators, but reserves this accusation for the treatise addressed to the women.²⁰⁴ In Chrysostom's treatise to the monks, he accuses them of agreeing to *syneisaktism* out of concupiscence, rather than for the practical considerations which they claimed.²⁰⁵ He refuses to give credence to the argument that the monks take in members of the weaker sex in order to enable them to live the virginal life instead of getting married.²⁰⁶ He notes that, under such pretexts, the men become involved in their virgin's business transactions and 'increase her riches'.²⁰⁷ Such a way of life is inappropriate for a man who has withdrawn from the secular world in order to pursue virginity,²⁰⁸ and although the monk may well

find spiritual consolation from those not of their kin; but their real aim is to indulge in sexual intercourse.' Jerome, *Epistle XXII. To Eustochium*, xiv, p. 27.

²⁰³ Cf. Clark: 'The man – who may or may not have been a cleric – usually took the woman into his house, although occasionally the female might invite the man to share her residence, especially if she were a widow with private means.' Clark, 'John Chrysostom and the "Subintroductae"', p. 171.

²⁰⁴ Cf. Chrysostom: 'these women fasten upon certain men who are in no way related to them, shut them in, and live perpetually with them, as though they were trying to prove by these deeds and by the ones already discussed that they have been dragged into virginity against their will, had been subjected to the utmost violence, and were consoling themselves in this manner for the violence and compulsion.' John Chrysostom, *On the Necessity of Guarding Virginity*, II, in Elizabeth A. Clark, *Jerome, Chrysostom and Friends: Essays and Translations* (New York and Toronto: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1979), p. 213. Clark claims the contrary that, 'Both the monks and the virgins are guilty in this regard, but Chrysostom assigned the greater blame to the women; they, like prostitutes and adulteresses, were responsible for the man's madness.' Clark, 'John Chrysostom and the "Subintroductae"', p. 177. Chrysostom assigns the greater blame to women in the treatise directed to women, but blames the men in the treatise addressed to men.

²⁰⁵ Cf. Clark: 'In an age when convents were rare and in some areas unknown, spiritual marriage might be one solution to the virgin's quest for suitable domestic arrangements.' Clark, 'John Chrysostom and the "Subintroductae"', p. 182. Elm notes that 'Both Eusebius' account of Paul of Samosata's young women and Basil of Ancyra's words indicate the motive that induced a woman to become a cleric's *syneisaktē*: plain economic need. A woman who wanted to lead a "virginal life", but did not come from a family which could afford to support a single girl, or a woman without any family at all, had in fact no means of supporting herself other than living with a man in a "pseudo-marriage.'" Elm, *Virgins of God*, p. 51.

²⁰⁶ Cf. Chrysostom: "'The virgin", he replies, "is unprotected, without a husband or in-laws; often she does not have even a father or a brother. She needs someone to lend her a hand, to comfort her solitude, to come to her defence on all occasions, and to establish her in a haven of considerable security.'" Chrysostom, *Instruction and Refutation*, VI, p. 179.

²⁰⁷ Chrysostom, *Instruction and Refutation*, VI, p. 180.

²⁰⁸ Cf. Chrysostom: 'He who has been forbidden even to approach worldly affairs not only immerses himself in them, but also in those which concern women.'; 'Just as the men who wish to please the virgins

‘facilitate her earthly affairs’, he does so at the cost of ‘cast[ing] her out of heaven’.²⁰⁹ It would have been much better for the monks to have considered their virgins’ spiritual preservation rather than their earthly provision, by not taking them in and allowing them to marry instead.²¹⁰

Chrysostom also does not accept the argument that the monks take virgins into their home as an act of charity. He observes that the monks are drawn to certain types of virgin who are young and nubile,²¹¹ whereas there are many men who are more in need of support ‘because of their advanced age, sickly condition, bodily mutilation, severe illness, and other reasons’.²¹² Additionally, if the monks prefer to aid the weaker sex, there are many desperately needy women who are ‘disabled by age, whose hands have been cut off, whose eyes are dead, who suffer from numerous and diverse diseases and from poverty’.²¹³ Such persons, says Chrysostom, have greater need of support than the beautiful, youthful companions which the monks choose to cohabit with, and, if the monks provided aid to the needy members of Christ’s flock instead, then they would receive the commendation rather than the condemnation of the populace.

recklessly abandon the way of life to which they have pledged themselves, so also the women fall from their proper modesty on account of the men, exhibiting to them this wicked and dangerous exchange of proclivities.’ Chrysostom, *Instruction and Refutation*, IX, p. 192; XI, p. 198.

²⁰⁹ Chrysostom, *Instruction and Refutation*, VII, p. 184.

²¹⁰ Cf. Chrysostom: ‘How much better it would have been for her to marry and live with a man who could attend to the management of these matters than to have remained unwed, yet trampled upon the compact she made with God, treated an exceedingly dignified and formidable matter with insolence, and in addition drawn others along into the shipwreck of her sins.’ Chrysostom, *Instruction and Refutation*, VI, p. 181. Cf. Chrysostom: ‘If you want to have men live with you, then you ought not to choose virginity but proceed on to matrimony, for it is far better to marry in that fashion than to be a virgin in this.’ Chrysostom, *On the Necessity of Guarding Virginity*, IV, p. 219.

²¹¹ Cf. Chrysostom: ‘If you do not want to see these [old and infirm] women even in your dreams, if you scout around hunting for the nubile and pretty ones, if this disgraceful chase has no other plausible excuse, and if you pretend that you are proposing the woman’s protection as a reason when in fact you are imperiled by their good looks, then you may mislead men but you will not deceive the incorruptible court of judgement when you act out of one motivation but put forward another as a defence.’ Chrysostom, *Instruction and Refutation*, VII, pp. 185-6.

²¹² Chrysostom, *Instruction and Refutation*, VII, p. 184.

²¹³ Chrysostom, *Instruction and Refutation*, VII, p. 184.

Although Chrysostom admits the probability that some of these couples lived together in sin, he claims that he does not credit that accusation in general.²¹⁴ Despite his acceptance of the possible physical innocence of the couples, he does assert that the monks' main motive for becoming involved in such a relationship is because of the pleasure it affords them, for 'the man can feast his eyes on the sight of the virgins'.²¹⁵ In *On Necessity*, he reminds the *virgines subintroductae* that such pleasure, although non-physical, nevertheless constitutes an adulterous act:

The practice exists for no other reason than to satisfy an unnatural pleasure, both his and yours. I am not talking about sexual intercourse, for what would be its advantage when even the communion of the eyes accomplishes the very same thing? If this is not the case, if you do not commit adultery, why do you keep this man at home?²¹⁶

Chrysostom throughout emphasises the spiritual nature of virginity and the heightened moral injunctions placed on Christians by Christ: adultery is no longer just the physical act, but lustful thoughts also attain punishment.²¹⁷ Not only do the monks sin through ocular means, but cohabitation fosters their already potent desire. Chrysostom criticises the virgins' luxurious way of life, which recalls Tertullian's horror of virgins whose meticulous attention to their toilette belies their claim to virginity. Their behaviour, far

²¹⁴ Cf. Chrysostom: 'I myself would not maintain such a thing, that the men of whom we are talking kiss and caress their female companions, and if certain other people spread around such accusations, I will seek to show that by their dealing with the matter in this way, they bring harsher torture upon themselves than the first group do.' John Chrysostom, *Instruction and Refutation*, II, p. 168. Also: 'it is not, then, because you need comfort that you drag the men inside. "Why is it, then?" someone asks. "For the sake of fornication and debauchery?" I for my part would not support that view. God forbid! Rather, I do not cease to reproach those who hold it. If only it were also possible to convince them! "Then what is the reason which makes the practice agreeable to us?" The love of vanity. Just as the men were motivated by a bleak and wretched pleasure, so also for those women this household companionship is inspired by a desire for esteem.' Chrysostom, *On the Necessity of Guarding Virginity*, VII, pp. 228-9.

²¹⁵ Chrysostom, *Instruction and Refutation*, XII, p. 199.

²¹⁶ Chrysostom, *On the Necessity of Guarding Virginity*, IV, pp. 220-1.

²¹⁷ Cf. Chrysostom: 'Christ also made clear the magnitude of the problem. He did not permit a man even to look into the eyes of a woman, but threatened those who did with the penalty laid on adulterers [Cf. Matthew 5: 28].' Chrysostom, *Instruction and Refutation*, V, p. 177.

from displaying maidenly modesty, seems calculated to excite the lust of their spiritual ‘husbands’:

And there is no account taken for suitable clothing for these virgins, nor for the quiet which is proper to them, nor for contrition, nor for anything else of this sort. Rather they are prone to bellow forth about everything, laugh at the wrong time, break hearts, and play the coquette more than women softened up in a brothel.²¹⁸

The shameless behaviour of the virgins renders them indistinguishable from prostitutes.²¹⁹ Despite Chrysostom’s denial of giving credence to the accusations of sexual immorality against the *subintroductae*, his equation of *subintroductae* with prostitutes implies that there is a sexual transaction between the monks and the virgins. However, because the men do not enjoy sexual intercourse with the *virgines subintroductae*, their desire becomes all the more acute.²²⁰ Chrysostom uses classical and biblical analogues to describe the desire, likening it to the classical myth of Tantalus, and also to the Adam’s expulsion from Eden, which he continued to be able to see but never enter.²²¹ Thus, by Chrysostom’s reckoning the practice of *syneisaktism* is nothing short of a torture and punishment for those couples living together. Their inability to flee from such destructive desire, says Chrysostom, ‘is the plainest proof of their dire illness’.²²²

²¹⁸ Chrysostom, *On the Necessity of Guarding Virginity*, I, p. 210.

²¹⁹ Cf. Chrysostom: ‘how in the future shall we be able to single out such a virgin from the ranks and society of those prostitutes when she behaves the same as they do, inflaming the hearts of young men, when she is flighty and debauched, when she grinds the same poisons, mixes the same cups, prepares the same hemlock?’ Chrysostom, *On the Necessity of Guarding Virginity*, I, p. 210.

²²⁰ Cf. Chrysostom: ‘they are not permitted to satisfy their passion through sexual intercourse, yet the basis for their desire remains intensely potent for a long time.’ Chrysostom, *Instruction and Refutation*, I, p. 166.

²²¹ Cf. Chrysostom on Tantalus: ‘They set a bountiful supply of food before him and showed him running water, but did not allow him to enjoy any of those things. Rather, when he stretched out his hand, everything which he saw disappeared – a process which continued without cessation. This is a method of punishment, according to the pagan fable.’ Chrysostom, *Instruction and Refutation*, II, p. 168. Cf. Chrysostom on Adam’s expulsion: ‘when He [God] wished to punish Adam, He did not place him far from Paradise; instead, he put him next to it, in order that he might have a more constant punishment. He had a view of the place he yearned for and was always able to contemplate it, but was not permitted to enjoy it.’ Chrysostom, *Instruction and Refutation*, II, p. 169.

²²² Chrysostom, *Instruction and Refutation*, II, p. 169.

Chrysostom seeks to apply the spiritual remedy by convincing those mired in this sinful life to relinquish it for a more laudable ascetic life.

Sexual accusations haunted the *virgines subintroductae* and in order to prove their physical intactness, midwives were engaged to periodically examine the virgins.

Chrysostom is aghast at such a necessity:

Further, there is the daily running of midwives to the virgins' houses, as if they were rushing to women in the throes of labour, not to deliver the one giving birth (although even this has occurred on some occasions), but in order to discern who is violated and who is untouched, just as people do with the slaves they purchase. One virgin readily consents to the examination but another resists it and by her very refusal goes out disgraced even if she has not been deflowered.²²³

Chrysostom has several objections to this practice of examination of virgins. Midwives are ambivalent figures, and so their presence in the houses of virgins suggests that they could be there to deliver babies. Thus, their presence can be seen to bear witness to a virgin's defloration rather than confirming her virginity. Chrysostom also mentions that there are virgins who accept the examination by midwives and others who refuse. The populace inevitably thinks the virgins who have refused must not be physically intact. However, both the virgin who refused and the virgin who accepted the ministrations of the midwife can be viewed in a pejorative light, because the former's refusal points to her guilt, whereas the latter's acceptance demonstrates that her integrity is in doubt and requires examination to attest to her inviolability.²²⁴ Also, Chrysostom notes that physical examination cannot prove whether the virgin has been corrupted in other ways:

For the wisdom and skill of the midwife can see only such things as whether the body has experienced intercourse with a man. But whether it has also fled the

²²³ Chrysostom, *On the Necessity of Guarding Virginity*, II, p. 213.

²²⁴ Cf. Chrysostom: 'The one was convicted, the other not, but she for her part is shamed no less than the first, insofar as she was unable to demonstrate her trustworthiness by her character but required the testimony afforded by minute examination.' Chrysostom, *On the Necessity of Guarding Virginity*, II, p. 213.

rude touch, the adultery of kisses and embraces and their defilement, that day will then reveal, when the living Word of God, who is aware of what happens in secret, sets their lives naked and exposed before the eyes of men and brings the hidden thoughts of human hearts into the open.²²⁵

As with the heretical virgins, physical integrity is not confined to refraining from intercourse itself, but requires a wider abjuring of everything that can pollute the body or the senses.²²⁶

Chrysostom tells the monks that *syneisaktism* is not only spiritually damaging because of the sexual dangers that they expose themselves to, but it also destroys their masculinity because their officious attendance on their *virgines subintroductae* renders them servile and effeminate.²²⁷ He describes the monks rushing around buying perfumes and other fripperies for the virgins.²²⁸ He even suggests that the men take up womanish pursuits such as weaving.²²⁹ Far from being needed to support the consecrated women, the men are mollified and become like women themselves:²³⁰ ‘If he says anything, his talk will entirely concern weaving and wool; his language will be tainted with the characteristics of women’s speech.’²³¹ Chrysostom is perhaps thinking of the classical

²²⁵ Chrysostom, *On the Necessity of Guarding Virginit*y, III, p. 218.

²²⁶ Most modern critics are interested in the issue of obtaining physical proof of virginity. For discussions of this topic see: Anke Bernau, *Virgins: A Cultural History* (London: Granta, 2007), especially pp. 1-10; and Cf. Kathleen Coyne Kelly, *Performing Virginit*y and *Testing Chastit*y in the Middle Ages (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), especially the chapter on ‘Hymenologies: The multiple signs of virginity’, pp. 17-39.

²²⁷ Cf. Chrysostom: ‘For in your present condition, you are no different from a slave and although you seek rest, you have found the most arduous servitude.’ Chrysostom, *Instruction and Refutation*, XII, p. 199.

²²⁸ Cf. Chrysostom: ‘he runs again to the perfume maker to discuss aromatics for his mistress and often he will not hesitate in his abundant zeal to insult the poor fellow. (Yes indeed, even virgins use a variety of expensive perfumes!) From the perfumer he goes on to the linen merchant and from him to the umbrella maker.’ Chrysostom, *Instruction and Refutation*, X, p. 193.

²²⁹ Cf. Chrysostom, *Instruction and Refutation*, X, p. 195; XI, p. 197. Cf. Chrysostom: ‘they find him seated beside a woman who is weaving and grasping the distaff.’ Chrysostom, *On the Necessity of Guarding Virginit*y, XI, p. 242.

²³⁰ Cf. Chrysostom: ‘we do not realise how we are being unnerved and made softer than wax. [...] They render them softer, more hot-headed, shameful, mindless, irascible, insolent, importunate, ignoble, crude, servile, niggardly, reckless, nonsensical, and, to sum it up, the women take all their corrupting feminine customs and stamp them into the souls of these men.’ Chrysostom, *Instruction and Refutation*, XI, p. 197.

²³¹ Chrysostom, *Instruction and Refutation*, XI, p. 197.

myths of Hercules and Achilles who were brought to shame and humiliation through uxoriousness. Like them, men who should be Christian heroes, supposed *miles Christi*, have laid down their weapons in order to weave baskets!²³² Not only does the monks' overfastidious attention to their virginal charges cause them to forget their manhood, but it also causes them to forget God and profane the Eucharistic mysteries:

Even in this holy and formidable spot, they proclaim their lack of self-restraint to everyone and what is still worse, they show off about things which ought to make them blush. [...] even at the most awesome hour of the mysteries, they are much occupied with waiting on the virgins' pleasure, providing many of the spectators with an occasion for offense.²³³

By dwelling with women, the monks lose all sense of self and duty. The mundane concerns that *syneisaktism* entails leads the men to prioritise the needs of their 'spiritual wives' over their devotion to God; they would rather offend God through the desecration the holy mysteries, than incur the wrath of their partners. *Syneisaktism* thus eradicates the reasons cited by Paul for the adoption of virginity: virginity is only useful insofar as the rejection of earthly concerns enables a complete devotion to God:

Have you not heard what sort of law Paul gave her, or rather Christ through him, that the wife and the virgin are to be differentiated? 'The unmarried woman cares for the things of the Lord, in order that she may be holy both in body and in spirit.' But you do not allow that, since you yield to all their desires more readily than do slaves purchased with silver.²³⁴

The grotesque pseudo-marital situation in which the monks and their *virgines subintroductae* live merges elements from the ascetic life and marriage, but renders both states spiritually redundant. Marriage, according to Paul, was instituted to save mankind from concupiscence, but *syneisaktism* promotes concupiscence. Virginity, on the other

²³² Cf. Chrysostom: 'Men who have been commanded to carry the cross and follow Christ have discarded it, resembling effeminate soldiers who have thrown away their shields and sit down with a spindle and a basket.' Chrysostom, *Instruction and Refutation*, VI, p. 180.

²³³ Chrysostom, *Instruction and Refutation*, X, p. 194.

²³⁴ Chrysostom, *Instruction and Refutation*, VII, p. 183.

hand, was ordained to enable total devotion to God, but the devotion that the monks and the *virgines subintroductae* exhibit towards their partners causes them to neglect God.

Syneisaktism thus destroys the holiness of both states:

A matter so important and full of such wisdom as virginity is despitefully treated, the veil which separates it from marriage has been destroyed, torn asunder by shameful hands, the holy of holies is trod under foot, and that which is august and full of terror has become impure, exposed to all.²³⁵

Chrysostom utilises Tertullian's metaphor of the tearing of the veil by sacrilegious hands, which symbolises a defilement of virginity;²³⁶ however, rather than simply suggesting the spiritual rape that Tertullian describes, Chrysostom's account implies a defilement of virginity, but due to the destruction of boundaries. *Syneisaktism* blurs the distinction between marriage and virginity; between the active and the contemplative life; and even between women and men.²³⁷

v. Conclusion

Chrysostom's treatises *On Virginity* and the two tracts against *syneisaktism* point to two very different types of false virginity. The first type of virgin pretends to a state of physical inviolability, but who carry on their fornications in secret; these are neither in possession of physical nor spiritual virginity, but seek to delude the wider world. The second type are those who rigorously observe ascetic practices and maintain physical

²³⁵ Chrysostom, *On the Necessity of Guarding Virginity*, I, p. 209.

²³⁶ Compare Tertullian: 'Every public exposure of an honourable virgin is (to her) a suffering of rape: and yet the suffering of carnal violence is the less (evil), because it comes of natural office. But when the very spirit itself is violated in a virgin by the abstraction of her covering, she has learnt to lose what she used to keep. O sacrilegious hands, which have had the hardihood to drag off a dress dedicated to God! [...] You have denuded a maiden in regard of her head, and forthwith she wholly ceases to be a virgin to herself; she has undergone a change! Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis (On the Veiling of Virgins)*, III. vii-viii, in *Ante Nicene Fathers*, Vol. IV. *Tertullian, Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Parts First and Second*, trans. S. Thewell, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1885]), pp. 27-38, (p. 29).

²³⁷ Clark notes Chrysostom's attitude towards women adopting characteristics unnatural to their sex: 'They adopted lordly ways and thought it laudable that they ruled over men.' Clark, 'John Chrysostom and the "Subintroductae"', p. 181.

virginity, but do not maintain spiritual integrity; physical integrity of such virgins is meaningless, and they delude themselves that they are still in possession of virginity. Some heretical virgins and the *virgines subintroductae* can fit the former category, although mostly Chrysostom seems to reflect upon the problems attendant on the latter, the loss of spiritual virginity. The *virgines subintroductae*, like the heterodox virgins, reduce virginity merely to a bodily condition:

For the cause of all the evil is that virginity remains in name only and that everything is defined by the bodily condition – the very thing which is the least part of virginity - but that which is more necessary and is its greater proof is neglected.²³⁸

Chrysostom's understanding of the 'right belief' needed for virginity appears to be a combination of the theological requirements, articulated by Athanasius, and the emphasis on the recognition of its spiritual value and an understanding of virginity; a solely bodily understanding demonstrates an ignorance of the virtue. Virginity is not a state attainable by heretics, no matter how extreme their ascetic practices, nor to those who, by misinterpreting the state, live in an unorthodox manner. So even if the virgins are orthodox in belief, if they fail to understand the nature and value of virginity and the reasons for which it was instituted, they will be debarred from achieving virginity. Chrysostom's treatises are important for reiterating that the location of virginity is found neither in bodily integrity, nor in the performance of ascetic acts which seek to support the state of virginity; it is not a performative gender. Instead, virginity is achieved through orthodoxy: virginity is a building block on which orthodox belief is founded and conversely it requires adherence to orthodoxy in order to achieve it. The *virgines*

²³⁸ Chrysostom, *On the Necessity of Guarding Virginity*, I, p. 210.

subintroductae and heretical virgins also represent internal and external threats to the state of virginity.

Chrysostom, like Ambrose, appears to have been faced with the challenge of justifying the continued promotion of virginity to the Catholic populace, even though the *virgines subintroductae* were bringing the state of virginity into disrepute, and the extremist heretics were denigrating marriage, both of which reflected negatively on the Church's policy. Chrysostom's extended exegesis on I Corinthians 7 in *On Virginity*, perhaps demonstrates the necessity to return to the central texts of the Bible which authorise virginity, damaged though it may be in the eyes of the hostile public due to malpractices. Although Chrysostom's Pauline exegesis may seem to portray marriage in a negative light, his primary intention is to promote virginity and to discuss Paul's attitude towards virginity and marriage. The growing tension between these two estates, evident in Ambrose and Chrysostom's treatises, develops into an ingrained problem within the tradition, and becomes one of the battlegrounds on which Catholics and Protestants waged war in the Reformation.

IX. Jerome

Saint Jerome is famed for being a renowned scholar,¹ an ascetic,² an exegete,³ a copious letter-writer,⁴ a polemicist, an hagiographer,⁵ a linguist,⁶ and above all, the translator of the Latin Vulgate Bible.⁷ Pierre De Labriolle observes that:

as a writer [Jerome] has enriched the entire domain of classical literature – exegesis, literary history, biography, polemic and even the funeral oration, for certain letters of his on his friends who have died are nothing else. He was thus assured of the greatest influence upon the literature of the Middle Ages in the West. And by an exceptional fate his gifts as a man of letters and as a scholar, and the brilliancy of his style closely resembling the classics which he imitated even

¹ Cf. Wand: ‘Jerome was a great man and a great scholar, perhaps the greatest scholar of his period and the one who most deserves the title of Doctor. He made a profound impression upon the thought of his time and was one of the leading influences in moulding Christian doctrine in its transition from the ancient to the medieval world.’ J. W. C. Wand, *The Latin Doctors* (London: The Faith Press, 1948), p. 45.

² Cf. Leigh-Bennett: ‘The fame, in fact, of Jerome and his influence on the Western Church may be traced to two causes; his translation into Latin of the whole Bible, which, under the name of the Vulgate, is in use to the present day; and the great impetus that he gave to monasticism.’ Ernest Leigh-Bennett, *Handbook of the Early Christian Fathers* (London: Williams & Northgate, 1920), pp. 275-6.

³ Cf. Labriolle: ‘Let us at least recognise St Jerome’s great merit and his truly scholarly concern to make comprehensible the texts he was endeavouring to explain, by surrounding them with all positive information capable of elucidating them. With rare exceptions this was not at all the form of exegesis in favour in his time. They much preferred allegorical exegesis, which, starting from the principle that the sacred text hid a mysterious meaning which the letter veiled far more than it explained, endeavoured to extract it even by means of the most fantastic interpretations.’ Pierre De Labriolle, *History and Literature of Christianity from Tertullian to Boethius*, trans. Herbert Wilson (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co. Ltd., 1924), p. 361.

⁴ Cf. Vessy: ‘Yet even after committing himself to his main task [the revision of the Bible], Jerome continued to be an extraordinarily versatile writer. During the 380s he discovered that one literary form, the published ‘familiar’ letter, was particularly well suited to his purposes as a freelance scholar, moralist and occasional dogmatist. His extant correspondence (over 150 items) includes matter of every kind: exhortation, instruction, consolation; satire, complaint, polemic; biography, panegyric – and more.’ Mark Vessy, ‘Jerome and Rufinus’, in *The Cambridge History of Early Christian Literature*, eds. Frances Young, Lewis Ayres, Andrew Louth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 318-327, (p. 322).

⁵ Cf. Labriolle: ‘He had already inaugurated with his *Life of Paul* that series of biographies of monks which he was to continue a little later with his *Life of Malchus* and his *Life of Hilarion* (published between the years 386-391). [...] We may say that through these lives of solitaries, the success of which was considerable, Jerome gave a fresh character to hagiographic literature.’ Labriolle, *History and Literature of Christianity from Tertullian to Boethius*, p. 340; p. 342.

⁶ Cf. Rebenich: ‘Thanks to his linguistic competence, Jerome was able to adopt eclectically the works of Greek Christian writers and to endow the Latin west with new literary genres.’ Stefan Rebenich, *Jerome* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 30.

⁷ Cf. Leigh-Bennett: ‘by far the greatest work that Jerome accomplished was to give to the Western Church the Bible correctly translated into the vulgar tongue (the Vulgate). For not only was Latin at that time the general language of the West, but right through the Middle Ages it was the language of the educated, so that any one who could read at all could probably read Latin.’ Leigh-Bennett, *Handbook of the Early Christian Fathers*, p. 285.

in their methods, preserved for him a like admiration among the men of the Renaissance.⁸

Labriolle comments that pagans often jeered ‘at the intellectual mediocrity of the Catholics’,⁹ and that Jerome’s enormous intellectual exertion seems to have been in response to this ridicule. The desire to demonstrate Catholic intellectual achievement is notable in Jerome’s *De viris illustribus*, written in ‘the fourteenth year of the reign of Theodosius’ (c. A.D. 392/3),¹⁰ in which he catalogues the history of Christian literary production. Jerome includes himself in this roll-call of Christian intelligentsia: his is the concluding chapter, which self-consciously provides information about his own considerable contribution to Christian scholarship.¹¹ He records his achievements for posterity by providing an extensive list of his completed works, and even alludes to those he is yet to finish.¹² In addition, he provides a single autobiographical detail: ‘Jerome, son

⁸ Labriolle, *History and Literature of Christianity from Tertullian to Boethius*, p. 373.

⁹ Labriolle, *History and Literature of Christianity from Tertullian to Boethius*, p. 362.

¹⁰ Saint Jerome, ‘CXXXV. Jerome the Presbyter’, *On Illustrious Men (De viris illustribus)*, trans. Thomas P. Halton (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1999), p. 167.

¹¹ Cf. Vessy: ‘Since the underlying structure of the list [in *De Viris Illustribus*] is chronological, by combining its details with other autobiographical information we can make out the course of a literary career. In doing so, however, we risk overestimating the ease with which this author took his place in literary history.’ Vessy, ‘Jerome and Rufinus’, pp. 318-9.

¹² Cf. Jerome: ‘The Life of Paul the Monk; Letters to Various Recipients, one book; A Letter of consolation to Heliodorus; The Disputation between a follower of Lucifer and an Orthodox; The Chronicle of Universal History; twenty-eight Homilies of Origen on Jeremiah and Ezekiel, which I have translated from Greek into Latin; On the Seraphim; On the Hosanna; On the two sons, the frugal and the prodigal; On Three Questions of the Old Law; two Homilies on the Canticle of Canticles; Against Helvidius, on the Perpetual Virginity of Mary; To Eustochium, on the Preservation of Virginity; To Marcella, one book of letters; A Letter of Consolation to Paula on the death of her daughter; Commentary on Paul’s epistle, To the Galatians, three books; Commentary on Paul’s epistle, To the Ephesians, three books; On the Epistle To Titus, one book; Commentaries on Ecclesiastes; Hebrew Questions on Genesis, one book; On Places, one book; On Hebrew Names; one book; On the Holy Spirit by Didymus, one book, which I have translated into Latin; thirty-nine Homilies on Luke; On the Psalms, from the Tenth to the Sixteenth, seven treatises; On a Captive Monk [Malchus]; On the Life of blessed Hilarion. I have translated the New Testament, faithful to the Greek; I have translated the Old Testament in accordance with the Hebrew; however, the number of letters to Paula and Eustochium, because they are written daily, is uncertain. I have written, besides, Explanations of Micah, two books; On Nahum, one book; On Habakkuk, two books; On Zephaniah, one book; On Haggai, one book; and many others on the work of the Prophets which I have on hand, and are not yet finished.’ Jerome, ‘CXXXV. Jerome the Presbyter’, *On Illustrious Men (De viris illustribus)*, pp. 167-8.

of Eusebius, born in the town of Stridon¹³ which, overrun by the Goths, was once a border town between Dalmatia and Pannonia.¹⁴ The seeming indifference to the provision of a life history demonstrates that Jerome's intention was to provide a scholarly, not a personal autobiography. Therefore, the details of the life of Saint Jerome, or Eusebius Hieronymus, must be pieced together from his prolific correspondence (over 150 letters), with additional information gleaned from comments in his other works.¹⁵ Scholars frequently observe how Jerome's unique personality is forcefully present in all his writings.¹⁶ He appears to have been a man of extremes, capable of inspiring strong devotion or vehement disapprobation; his irascibility is legendary.¹⁷

Although Jerome's birthplace is known from *De viris illustribus*, the date of his birth is a point of contention. J. N. D. Kelly observes that

Jerome was born at Stridon, in Dalmatia, almost certainly in the year 331. We have this date from Prosper of Aquitaine, lay theologian and chronicler, whose life (c. 390-c. 455) overlapped with his. Because of certain difficulties it has been thought to raise, most recent biographers have postulated a rather later date,

¹³ Kelly notes that Jerome's reference to Stridon is the only mention of the town, so 'but for Jerome we should never have heard of it'. J. N. D. Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 1975), p. 3.

¹⁴ Saint Jerome, 'CXXXV. Jerome the Presbyter', *On Illustrious Men (De viris illustribus)*, p. 167.

¹⁵ Cf. Leigh-Bennett: 'The main interest lies in his 150 Letters and his translation of the Bible into Latin, known ever since as the Vulgate. The letters, with the exception of those that were controversial or exegetic, form really an autobiography, and practically everything we know of the personal incidents of his life comes from them, especially his relation to his various friends and enemies.' Ernest Leigh-Bennett, *Handbook of the Early Christian Fathers* (London: Williams & Northgate, 1920), p. 283. Vessy says that '[a]lthough few of the facts of this autobiographical narrative can now be independently checked, there is no reason to doubt its general reliability.' Mark Vessy, 'Jerome and Rufinus', p. 319.

¹⁶ Cf. Labriolle: 'there was not one [Church Father] more vigorous, nor one whose life, expression, and fire, we can better grasp through the dead letter after the lapse of so many centuries.' Labriolle, *History and Literature of Christianity from Tertullian to Boethius*, p. 373.

¹⁷ Cf. Wand: 'He was an irascible person, and as he was also very vain both of his learning and of his reputation, he had many occasions for showing anger. [...] there was a certain strain of coarseness, appearing only too often in his writings.' Wand, *The Latin Doctors*, p. 44. Cf. Rebenich: 'he has frequently been described as ill-tempered and attacked as the spiritual seducer of noble ladies.' Rebenich, *Jerome*, p. ix. Cf. Hritzu: 'Jerome [...] was by nature irascible and impulsive, and sensitive to criticism and contradictions.' John N. Hritzu, 'General Introduction' to *Saint Jerome: Dogmatic and Polemical Works*, trans. John N. Hritzu (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1981 [1965]), pp. vii-xix, (p. viii).

usually in the middle forties of the fourth century. On inspection, however, most, if not all, of these supposed difficulties disappear, and there seem no solid grounds for discarding Prosper's testimony.¹⁸

Those who disagree with Prosper's account tend to opt for *c.* A.D. 347 as the most likely date for Jerome's birth.¹⁹ We know little of his parents beyond the name of his father; however, he seems to have come from a wealthy Catholic family.²⁰ Jerome would have undertaken his elementary education in his home town of Stridon,²¹ but he completed his education in Rome, studying

grammar, the humanities, rhetoric, and dialectics. He also took a passionate interest in the Greek and Latin classic, in the philosophers and poets, and, especially, in the satirists and comic poets.²²

The influence of this diverse educational background is observable in his writings.²³ In Rome, Jerome was taught by Donatus, a famous professor of grammar who remained

¹⁸ Kelly, *Jerome*, p. 1. Early sources, and Jerome's correspondence with Augustine, imply that Jerome was a great deal older than his younger contemporary who was born in 354. Prosper of Aquitaine records his birthdate at A.D. 330/1 and notes that he was about 91 when he died. One of Jerome's anecdotes implies that he was still a boy in A.D. 363, when Julian the Apostate died. For a full account of the debate concerning Jerome's birth date, and an argument for the acceptance of the earlier date, see Kelly, *Jerome*, pp. 337-339.

¹⁹ Labriolle notes: 'The exact date of the birth of Jerome (*Eusebius Hieronymus*) is unknown. Plausible calculations place it between the years 340 and 350.' Labriolle, *History and Literature of Christianity from Tertullian to Boethius*, p. 335. Cf. Leigh-Bennett: 'Born probably about 346.' Leigh-Bennett, *Handbook of the Early Christian Fathers*, p. 272. Cf. Rebenich: 'Jerome was born in 347.' Rebenich, *Jerome*, p. 4.

²⁰ Cf. Jerome: 'From my very cradle, I may say, I have been reared on Catholic milk.' Jerome, *Epistola LXXII. To Theophilus, Bishop of Alexandria*, ii, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers. Jerome: Letters and Select Works*, Vol. VI, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1893]), pp. 170-75, (p. 171).

²¹ Kelly notes that 'some have conjectured, without any solid grounds, that at this stage he must have been taught by a tutor at home, but this is on balance improbable. Private instruction of that kind was in the fourth century restricted to extremely rich aristocratic families.' Kelly, *Jerome*, pp. 7-8.

²² Hritz, 'General Introduction' to *Saint Jerome: Dogmatic and Polemical Works*, p. viii.

²³ Cf. Hritz: 'The reading in the satirists and comic poets developed in him a taste for caricature and a penchant for making damaging allusions. Moreover, the trials before the Roman tribunes, which he attended eagerly, and wherein the advocates indulged in mutual personal invective, further developed in him the art and science of polemics which he was to employ so effectively and skillfully in the controversies which were to engage his attentions seriously.' Hritz, 'General Introduction' to *Saint Jerome: Dogmatic and Polemical Works*, p. viii.

influential in the subject right the way through till the ninth or tenth century.²⁴ After finishing his education at Rome, Jerome studied theology at Trier and became a monk.²⁵ He remained in Aquileia, which was near to his birthplace, for seven years. In A.D. 373/74 he travelled to the East in order to pursue the eremitic life of seclusion in the desert in Chalcis. It was here that he learned Hebrew from a Jewish convert; he relates that he was inspired to learn the language of the Jews in an attempt to subdue the promptings of the flesh.²⁶ Jerome quarrelled with his fellow hermits, however, and so was forced to leave the desert. In a letter to Marcus, who seems to have been a pre-eminent monk in the desert, Jerome complains about the treatment he had received from the monks because of his refusal to become embroiled in the disputes over Trinitarian doctrine:

I am called a heretic, although I preach the consubstantial trinity. I am accused of the Sabellian impiety, although I proclaim with unwearied voice that in the Godhead there are three distinct, real, whole, and perfect persons. The Arians do right to accuse me, but the orthodox forfeit their orthodoxy when they assail a faith like mine. They may, if they like, condemn me as a heretic; but if they do

²⁴ Cf. Labriolle: 'He there had for his professor in grammar the famous Donatus, the commentator on Terence and Virgil, and the author of the manuals *Ars Major* and *Ars Minor*, on which from the end of the IVth century to beyond the IXth the interpretation of grammarians was to base itself.' Labriolle, *History and Literature of Christianity from Tertullian to Boethius*, p. 336.

²⁵ Cf. Kelly, *Jerome*, pp. 25-30.

²⁶ Cf. Jerome: 'In my youth when the desert walled me in with its solitude I was still unable to endure the promptings of sin and the natural heat of my blood; and, although I tried by frequent fasts to break the force of both, my mind still surged with [evil] thoughts. To subdue its turbulence I betook myself to a brother who before his conversion had been a Jew and asked him to teach me Hebrew.' Jerome, *Epistola CXXV. To Rusticus*, xii, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers. Jerome: Letters and Select Works*, Vol. VI, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1893]), pp. 244-252, (p. 248). Cf. Wand: 'He was anxious to be able to study the Old Testament in its original language; an unusual desire for the period, because most scholars were content to read the Scriptures in the Greek version of the Septuagint.' Wand, *The Latin Doctors*, p. 47. Cf. Leigh-Bennet: 'It is curious to contemplate that, living into the fifth century, Jerome was the first Latin Father and after Origen the second Father of the whole Church that knew Hebrew.' Leigh-Bennett, *Handbook of the Early Christian Fathers*, p. 289.

they must also condemn Egypt and the West, Damasus and Peter. Why do they fasten the guilt on one and leave his companions uncensured?²⁷

Jerome had previously written to Pope Damasus in *Epistola XVI* (c. 377/8) concerning the religious factions that were vying for his support, and in the letter he appealed to the See of Peter for instruction on which view of the Trinity was orthodox.²⁸ Although Jerome identifies a clash over Trinitarian doctrine as the cause of his disagreement with his fellow anchorites, Kelly postulates that Jerome's arguments had arisen mostly because the hermits instinctively disliked Jerome.²⁹ Following Kelly, Stefan Rebenich throws doubt on Jerome's own description of his sojourn in the desert of Chalcis:³⁰

An unbiased examination of Jerome's contemporary evidence about his brief period in the desert of Chalcis shows that he did not live the life of a heroic hermit incessantly struggling against vices and sensuality. He did not take up residence in the most inaccessible wilderness, but in a place where he could maintain Italian friends and establish contacts.³¹

²⁷ Jerome, *Epistola XVII. To the Presbyter Marcus*, ii, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers. Jerome: Letters and Select Works*, Vol. VI, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1893]), pp. 20-1, (p. 21).

²⁸ Cf. Jerome: 'I implore your blessedness, by our Lord's cross and passion, those necessary glories of our faith, as you hold an apostolic office to give an apostolic decision.' Jerome, *Epistola XVI. To Pope Damasus*, ii, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers. Jerome: Letters and Select Works*, Vol. VI, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1893]), p. 20, (p. 20). Hritzu notes how these letters show that 'Jerome stressed the fact that the Church must always be regarded as the supreme rule and decisive standard of Christian faith; and that the church gives the true sense of the Scriptures, and is representative of tradition. It was owing to this firm conviction on the part of St Jerome that the years of his later life were consumed in endless conflicts with the enemies of the Church. St Jerome never spared heretics, but also saw to it that the enemies of the Church were also his own enemies [...] he stood ready to attack any and all heresies that raised their head against the Catholic faith.' Hritzu, 'General Introduction' to *Saint Jerome: Dogmatic and Polemical Works*, pp. viii-ix.

²⁹ Cf. Kelly: 'He was different – a Latin, a highly educated intellectual who attracted an elite group around him, maintained close relations with rich grandees in Antioch, and even in his cavern was surrounded by an extraordinary team of copyists. He was also Jerome – self-willed and sharp-tongued, irascible to the point of morbidity, inordinately proud of his Roman links and contemptuous of his uncultivated, ill-mannered, Syriac-speaking neighbours.' Kelly, *Jerome*, p. 55.

³⁰ Cf. Kelly, *Jerome*, p. 48.

³¹ Rebenich, *Jerome*, p. 16.

In *Epistola XXII Ad Eustochium*, Jerome alludes to his period of residence in the desert in order to lend authority to his advice on ascetic matters.³² Rebenich argues that because Jerome's solitary experience forms the basis for his ascetic programme,³³ and because Jerome's experience of the desert life does not seem to have been one of complete deprivation, 'Jerome had to rewrite the story of his limited ascetic self-experience'.³⁴ Rebenich observes that in *Epistola XXII*, Jerome carefully creates an identity for himself as a Christian *litteratus* and an ascetic champion, and that he succeeded so well in this aim that this construct, that of the scholar-monk, remains history's enduring image of Jerome.³⁵

After Jerome left the desert, he went to Antioch where he studied Greek and exegesis. He was ordained a presbyter by Paulinus, but only on the proviso that he was not obliged to give up his life of freedom.³⁶ From A.D. 379-82, Jerome lived in

³² Cf. Jerome: 'if experience gives me a right to advise, or clothes my words with credit, I would begin by urging you and warning you as Christ's spouse to avoid wine as you would avoid poison.' Jerome, *Epistola XXII. Ad Eustochium*, viii, ii, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers. Jerome: Letters and Select Works*, Vol. VI, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1893]), pp. 22-41, (p. 25).

³³ Cf. Rebenich: 'Jerome carefully integrated his limited ascetic experience in the desert of Chalcis into the radical ascetic concept that had spread among aristocratic Roman ladies. These women had established what were virtually domestic nunneries in their palaces on the Aventine, where the small communities of noble ladies and their household slaves vowed themselves to chastity and biblical study, fasted, and neglected their clothing. Jerome was determined not merely to theorize about the ascetic life, but to give practical advice about the protection of virtue.' Rebenich, *Jerome*, p. 18.

³⁴ Rebenich, *Jerome*, p. 33. Cf. Vessy: 'No Latin writer before Petrarch had a finer sense than Jerome of his own life as a work of art. By obvious design, his many letters, prefaces and personal digressions present a strikingly consistent profile of the character, formation and activity of a Christian *litteratus*.' Vessy, 'Jerome and Rufinus', p. 319.

³⁵ Cf. Rebenich: 'His brilliant showmanship as an ascetic champion who had started his impressive career in the wilderness of Chalcis had been so successful that, for more than 1,600 years, scholars have been deceived by the picture of the learned ascetic in his barren cell in the *solitudo Syriae Chalcidis*.' Rebenich, *Jerome*, p. 20.

³⁶ Cf. Labriolle: 'Rome had just recognised Paulinus as an orthodox Bishop. He conferred, or rather imposed, the priesthood on Jerome. It was understood that he was to remain free from any pastoral or liturgical obligation.' Labriolle, *History and Literature of Christianity from Tertullian to Boethius*, p. 339.

Constantinople where he studied under Gregory of Nazianzus;³⁷ he would have been in Constantinople at the time of the second Œcumenical Council, but he never alludes to the event.³⁸ In A.D. 382, he returned to Rome and was asked by Pope Damasus to remain there in a capacity of a private secretary.³⁹ Jerome used his position to promote the ascetic ideal and also to attack the corrupt morals of the Roman clergy. As a consequence, he became very unpopular in Rome,⁴⁰ but was afforded protection by virtue of his friendship with the Pope. Whilst in Rome, Jerome became the spiritual advisor of a small *coterie* of aristocratic ladies who desired to live a life of chastity.⁴¹ These women

³⁷ Cf. Hritz: 'St Jerome went to Constantinople, where he was instructed by St Gregory of Nazianzen in the science of biblical exegesis. While at Constantinople, he also met St Gregory of Nyssa and other famous Greek theologians of the East; and he threw himself with unbounded enthusiasm into the study of the earlier Greek Fathers, especially Origen and Eusebius.' Hritz, 'General Introduction' to *Saint Jerome: Dogmatic and Polemical Works*, p. x.

³⁸ Cf. Kelly: 'It is not surprising, however, that he nowhere makes the least mention of the famous council. Presided over by Meletius and packed with bishops of the Meletian party, it must have been a profoundly distasteful gathering to him.' Kelly, *Jerome*, pp. 69-70. Wand: 'While at Constantinople Jerome cultivated the acquaintance of some of the greatest Greek fathers of the day, including Gregory Nazianzen, but it is extraordinary that he never mentions the Council which, one would have thought, must have occupied a very large part of his thoughts and attention.' Wand, *The Latin Doctors*, p. 48.

³⁹ Cf. Jerome: 'I was helping Damasus bishop of Rome with his ecclesiastical correspondence, and writing his answers to the questions referred to him by the councils of the east and west.' Jerome, *Epistola CXXIII. To Ageruchia*, x, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers. Jerome: Letters and Select Works*, Vol. VI, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1893]), pp. 230-238, (p. 233). Cf. Rebenich: 'Jerome is likely to have worked in the ecclesiastical archive, which was reorganised and housed in a new building under Damasus. He may have been responsible for drafting official correspondence with the Greek churches, and perhaps Damasus asked him to comment upon synodal interpellations and inquiries from the eastern part of the Empire. Later generations have therefore depicted him as the bishop's secretary.' Rebenich, *Jerome*, p. 32.

⁴⁰ Cf. Hritz: 'his ascetical propaganda and his outspoken criticism of the conduct of lukewarm Christians, and even relaxed clergy, was soon to involve him in a heated controversy over the celibate and married states of life; and, ultimately over the doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary.' Hritz, 'General Introduction' to *Saint Jerome: Dogmatic and Polemical Works*, p. xi.

⁴¹ Cf. Hritz: 'St Jerome found favourable soil at Rome for the preaching of asceticism. The promoters of the ascetic life and many Roman ladies who had been meeting in the palace of the saintly Marcella on Mount Aventine, where they convened to discourse on holy matters and read the Scripture and sing psalms, found in St Jerome their champion and accepted him as their guide and counsellor. St Jerome's acceptance of their invitation and open espousal of the cause of the celibate and virgin life was soon to involve him in a serious controversy. Angry opposition was organised against him; for, in the expository letters [i.e. XXII] which he wrote for those ascetic women, St Jerome reprehended the conduct of lukewarm laymen, as well as clerics.' John N. Hritz, 'Introduction to *Liber Adversus Helvidium*' in *Saint Jerome: Dogmatic and Polemical Works*, (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1981 [1965]), pp. 3-9, (pp. 3-4). Cf. Labriolle: 'These women of quite superior education were passionately interested in Biblical

included his life-long friend Paula and her daughter Eustochium, both of whom had embraced the celibate life, the former as a widow, and the latter as ‘the first virgin of noble birth in Rome’.⁴² Jerome’s relationship with these women caused controversy, however: he was accused of conducting an inappropriate relationship with Paula,⁴³ also, when Blaesilla, Paula’s widowed daughter, died three months after her conversion (October/November 384), it was rumoured that her death had been caused by the extreme ascetic practices recommended by Jerome.⁴⁴

Towards the end of A.D. 384, soon after Blaesilla’s untimely death, Pope Damasus died and so the protection afforded to Jerome by the Pope suddenly ceased. Thus, the ill-feeling that had built up against him was unleashed.⁴⁵ The hostility of his

studies. Many of them, Marcella, Paula, Blaesilla and Eustochium, already knew Hebrew, or learnt it in order to study the Scriptures and sing the Psalms in the same language in which they had been written.’ Labriolle, *History and Literature of Christianity from Tertullian to Boethius*, p. 347.

⁴² Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, xv, p. 27.

⁴³ Cf. Jerome: ‘my sex is my one crime, and even on this score I am not assailed, save where there is a talk of Paula going to Jerusalem.’ Saint Jerome, *Epistola XLV. To Asella*, ii, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers. Jerome: Letters and Select Works*, Vol. VI, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1893]), pp. 58-60, (p. 59).

⁴⁴ Cf. Jerome: ‘I cannot say what I am going to say without a groan. When you were carried fainting out of the funeral procession, whispers such as these were audible in the crowd. “Is not this what we have often said. She weeps for her daughter, killed with fasting. She wanted her to marry again, that she might have grandchildren. How long must we refrain from driving these detestable monks out of Rome? Why do we not stone them or hurl them into the Tiber? They have misled this unhappy lady; that she is not a nun from choice is clear. No heathen mother ever wept for her children as she does for Blaesilla.”’ Jerome, *Epistola XXXIX. To Paula*, vi, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers. Jerome: Letters and Select Works*, Vol. VI, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1893]), pp. 49-54, (p. 53). Cf. Labriolle: ‘When Blaesilla, the daughter of Paula, died, they accused Jerome of having killed her with fasts.’ Labriolle, *History and Literature of Christianity from Tertullian to Boethius*, p. 349. Cf. Rebenich: ‘When Blaesilla, Paula’s eldest daughter, who was persuaded to live a life of abstinence after her husband’s death, died three months after her conversion, it was murmured that the young widow had died from fasting.’ Rebenich, *Jerome*, p. 39.

⁴⁵ Cf. Jerome: ‘I am said to be an infamous turncoat, a slippery knave, one who lies and deceives others by Satanic arts. [...] One would attack my gait or my way of laughing; another would find something amiss in my looks; another would suspect the simplicity of my manner.’ Jerome, *Epistola XLV. To Asella*, ii, p. 59; ‘Men call me a mischief-maker, and I take the title as a recognition of my faith. For I am but a servant, and the Jews still call my master a magician. The apostle, likewise, is spoken of as a deceiver. [...] Men have laid to my charge a crime of which I am not guilty; but I know that I must enter the kingdom of heaven through evil report as well as through good.’ Jerome, *Epistola XLV. To Asella*, vi, p. 60. Cf. Labriolle: ‘after the death of his protector all support was withdrawn from him and he had no other recourse but to

enemies forced Jerome to leave Rome, and so, with his brother Paulinian, he left for Antioch in A.D. 385. He eventually settled in Palestine in A.D. 386 where he was joined by Paula and Eustochium. Here, Paula financed the establishment of four monastic communities in Bethlehem (one monastery and three convents),⁴⁶ and Jerome founded a little school in which he taught boys classics and grammar.⁴⁷ Rebenich again warns that Jerome's monastic seclusion in Bethlehem was not a life of absolute isolation:

The withdrawal to Bethlehem did not imply renunciation of the world. The decision to settle at the birthplace of Christ and to build Paula's convent next to the Church of the Nativity promised a lively exchange with wealthy western visitors from the east and the west, who received a warm welcome at the hospice.⁴⁸

Jerome's scholarly activity and involvement in controversy continued throughout his years in Bethlehem. In the 390s he was embroiled in the Jovinian controversy, during

leave that 'Babylon' where it was not permitted to be a saint with impunity.' Labriolle, *History and Literature of Christianity from Tertullian to Boethius*, p. 349.

⁴⁶ Cf. Jerome: 'Besides establishing a monastery for men, the charge of which she left to me, she divided into three companies and monasteries the numerous virgins whom she had gathered out of different provinces, some of whom are of noble birth while others belonged to the middle or lower classes. But, although they worked and had their meals separately from each other, these three companies met together for psalm-singing and prayer.' Jerome, *Epistola CVIII. To Eustochium*, xx, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers. Jerome: Letters and Select Works*, Vol. VI, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1893]), pp. 195-212, (p. 206). Cf. Rebenich: 'Having left Rome in August 385, Jerome set out for the east again and, after an edifying tour of the holy places, established himself in Bethlehem in 386. During the following three years, Jerome, sponsored by the Roman aristocrats Paula and Eustochium, who had followed him into exile, founded a monastery, a convent, and a hospice for pious travellers.' Rebenich, *Jerome*, p. 41. Cf. Leigh-Bennett: 'Paula [...] though she followed mainly the Rule of Pachomius, was practically the founder of nunneries and her convent served as a model for all time.' Leigh-Bennett, *Handbook of the Early Christian Fathers*, p. 279.

⁴⁷ Cf. Labriolle: 'he opened a school for young boys whom he instructed in grammar, and commented upon the classic authors. But the best part of his time was absorbed by the monastery; he showed his monks how to copy manuscripts, thus giving the model to those laborious communities who in the Middle Ages saved so much of the *débris* of the old civilisation.' Labriolle, *History and Literature of Christianity from Tertullian to Boethius*, p. 354.

⁴⁸ Rebenich, *Jerome*, p. 41.

which he published an attack on Jovinian in A.D. 393; he later attacked Vigilantius in A.D. 407.⁴⁹

Jerome's later life was over-shadowed by the Origenist controversy. Origen had been an inspiration for Jerome in his youth, but, under pressure from the great heresiologist Epiphanius, Bishop of Salamis in Cyprus, Jerome performed a *volte face* and condemned his spiritual mentor. His friend Rufinus, with whom Jerome had forged a friendship as a young monk in Aquileia, refused to deny Origen and their friendship soured into a bitter rivalry that ended only with Rufinus' death in A.D. 410.⁵⁰ The final controversy in which Jerome was involved was against the Pelagians, who championed a belief in justification by free will alone.⁵¹ He joined forces with Saint Augustine, who formed the main vanguard, and the heresy was denounced in A.D. 418. Jerome died on 30th September 419/20.⁵²

⁴⁹ Cf. Hritz: 'Jerome's work [*Adversus Vigilantium*] is an apology for the ecclesiastical cult of saints and relics, full of irony and invective, and is one of the most violent of his controversial writings. It scored unquestionably a success upon its opponent.' Hritz, 'General Introduction' to *Saint Jerome: Dogmatic and Polemical Works*, p. xv. Cf. Leigh-Bennett: '[Vigilantius] whom Milman calls a "premature Protestant," attacked prevalent Catholic customs – veneration of relics, prayers to the dead, vigils at martyrs tombs, lighting of candles in church, alleged miracles, and also the ascetic life.' Leigh-Bennett, *Handbook of the Early Christian Fathers*, pp. 281-2.

⁵⁰ For a discussion on the Origenist controversy see, Kelly, *Jerome*, pp. 195-209.

⁵¹ Cf. Hritz: 'The basic principle of Pelagianism consists in the affirmation of the moral strength and self-sufficiency of man's free will. The Pelagians maintained that man, relying entirely on his own power, can always will and do the good; that there is no such thing as original sin; that baptism is not essentially necessary for salvation; and that sanctifying grace is not the necessary foundation of supernatural activity, but only a remedy for actual sins.' Hritz, 'General Introduction' to *Saint Jerome: Dogmatic and Polemical Works*, pp. xv-xvi. Hritz also notes that Jerome's *Dialogus Adversus Pelagianos* 'is noteworthy for its demonstration of Catholic doctrine by means of the scriptures.' Hritz, 'General Introduction' to *Saint Jerome: Dogmatic and Polemical Works*, p. xvi.

⁵² Cf. Rebenich: 'When Jerome died on the 30th September 419 or – more likely – 420, he had produced an immense oeuvre. Next to Augustine, he was the most prolific of all Christian Latin authors in the ancient world.' Rebenich, *Jerome*, p. 59.

It was while Jerome was living in Rome in the early 380s that Damasus asked him to revise the then current Latin Bible. Ernest Leigh-Bennett notes that the time was ripe for such a revision:

The earliest Latin translation seems to have come, like all other beginnings of Latin Christianity, in the middle of the second century from Africa; but owing to its provincialism, a new version of at any rate the Gospels was issued by authority in North Italy in the fourth century, and known as the *Itala*. Many minor revisions were also made without authority, so that in the time of Jerome there was great confusion in the MSS. And now that the East and West were drifting apart both in Church and State, it was of the utmost importance that a correct Bible should be secured for the West in time. [...] Finally the East profited also, as Sophronius translated the Vulgate into Greek.⁵³

Jerome's translation of the Vulgate is considered to be his greatest legacy to Christianity, as it became the authoritative Bible of the medieval world. Originally, Damasus had asked Jerome to correct the distortions that had crept into the Latin Bible with reference to the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament.⁵⁴ Jerome began the task in earnest, but, after consulting the *Hexaples* of Origen,⁵⁵ became increasingly aware of the limitations of the Septuagint⁵⁶ and ever more convinced that the Christian West needed a completely new translation of the Bible using the Hebrew originals of the Old

⁵³ Leigh-Bennett, *Handbook of the Early Christian Fathers*, p. 285.

⁵⁴ The Septuagint was so named because it was the product of the combined talents of around 70 Jewish scholars, who had translated the Scriptures (Old Testament and Apocrypha) in the third century B.C.

⁵⁵ Cf. Labriolle: 'Arranged in six columns, the *Hexaples* (the original manuscript of which was in fifty large rolls) preserved synoptically the Hebrew text of the Old Testament in Hebrew characters, the Hebrew text in Greek characters, the Greek translation of Aquila, the Jew, contemporary with Hadrian, the Greek translation of Symmachus, the Jew, in the time of Septimus Severus, the Greek translation of the Septuagint, and lastly that of the Jew Theodotian (about 180 A.D.).' Labriolle, *History and Literature of Christianity from Tertullian to Boethius*, pp. 354-5.

⁵⁶ Cf. Labriolle: 'The Septuagint had sufficed to establish the authority of the Old Testament in a world in which the Greek language predominated. But Jerome possessed the critical capability which drove him to go back to the sources, for he knew how many deformations a text must inevitably undergo when it is transposed into another language.' Labriolle, *History and Literature of Christianity from Tertullian to Boethius*, p. 354.

Testament.⁵⁷ As Jerome was one of the only scholars in the West who knew Hebrew, he was uniquely placed to provide this service for Latin Christianity. His *magnum opus*, however, was treated with suspicion by his contemporaries, as Labriolle remarks:

How was this enterprise, so honourable to Catholic scholarship, received by St Jerome's contemporaries? With great distrust and even hostility outside the group of his faithful friends. He was doing nothing less than relegating to a second place the translation of the Septuagint: this was the delicate point.⁵⁸

Even Saint Augustine was wary of Jerome's translation. He was reluctant for Jerome's new translation to be used in churches because it was different from the Latin texts that were familiar and loved by the populace. Augustine warned of the chaos that such seemingly insignificant changes could cause. When translating the Book of Jonah, for instance, Jerome had come across a plant that did not translate into Latin and so had opted for the nearest equivalent, which was 'ivy',⁵⁹ this had caused chaos in churches, because in the Septuagint it had been translated as a 'gourd'.⁶⁰ Jerome's translation,

⁵⁷ Cf. Labriolle: 'more and more one thing became obvious to his mind. Any critical investigation of the Old Testament should be based neither on the Latin texts which we were often faulty, nor on the Greek of the Septuagint, which was not sufficiently close, but on the original text wherein God Himself had spoken, the *Hebraica veritas*.' Labriolle, *History and Literature of Christianity from Tertullian to Boethius*, p. 356. Cf. Leigh-Bennett: 'The final work, the Vulgate itself, came from his recognition of the insufficiency of all the translations from the Greek; and in order to carry it out he perfected his previous moderate knowledge of Hebrew. He also learnt Aramaic, and translated from that language Tobit and Judith in spite of his repudiation of the Apocrypha from the Canon.' Leigh-Bennett, *Handbook of the Early Christian Fathers*, p. 284.

⁵⁸ Labriolle, *History and Literature of Christianity from Tertullian to Boethius*, p. 356. Cf. Rebenich: 'The recourse to *Hebraica veritas* was firmly rejected by those who [...] recognised the Septuagint as the only true and legitimate, divinely inspired version of the Old Testament. [...] There is no doubt that Jerome himself considered his translation of the Old Testament from the Hebrew superior to the Septuagint, since his rendering followed the original more closely.' Rebenich, *Jerome*, p. 54; p. 58.

⁵⁹ Cf. Jonah: 'And the Lord God prepared an ivy, and it came up over the head of Jonas, to be a shadow over his head, and to cover him (for he was fatigued), and Jonas was exceeding glad of the ivy' (Jonah 4: 6).

⁶⁰ Cf. Augustine: 'As for those who think that I am envious of your valuable work, let them at length understand for a little while, if that can be, that I do not wish your translation from the Hebrew to be read in the churches, for fear of upsetting the flock of Christ with a great scandal, by publishing something new, something seeming contrary to the authority of the Septuagint, which version their ears and hearts are accustomed to hear, and which was accepted even by the Apostles. And if that shrub in Jonas is neither an ivy nor a gourd, but some other sort of thing which springs up, supporting itself with its own trunk, without

therefore, was almost universally regarded as a dangerous innovation.⁶¹ Rebenich notes that although the Vulgate is now known as the Bible of the Middle Ages, it was not finally accepted as authoritative until the ninth century.⁶²

In addition to his many intellectual talents, Jerome is particularly known for his commitment to the promotion of the ascetic life in the fourth century. According to W. H. Freemantle, Jerome 'bore the chief part in introducing the ascetic life into Western Europe'.⁶³ As part of his ascetic programme, Jerome promoted the virginal life through his hagiographic writings of the lives of the Desert Fathers.⁶⁴ These eremitic saints' lives not only sought to provide historical biographies of some of the early hermits, but also to demonstrate the origins of monasticism and endorse virginity.⁶⁵ In addition, three of his

needing to be supported by any props, I would still rather have "gourd" read in the Latin versions, for I think the Seventy put that there because they knew it was like one.' Saint Augustine, 82. *Augustine gives greeting in the Lord to his holy brother and fellow priest, Jerome, beloved lord, honoured in the bowels of Christ*, in *Fathers of the Church: Saint Augustine. Letters*, Vol. I (Letters 1-82), trans. Sister Wilfrid Parsons, eds. Ludwig Schopp, Roy J. Deferrari, Bernard M. Peebles (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1981 [1951]), pp. 390-420, (p. 419).

⁶¹ Kelly notes that 'a limited circle of friends – Paula and Eustochium, of course, Sophronius, Chromatius of Aquileia, a few others – understood his motives, applauded his principles, encouraged his efforts.' Kelly, *Jerome*, p. 168.

⁶² Cf. Rebenich: 'Not until the ninth century was his work [Vulgate Bible] accepted, and, even then, up until the thirteenth century, monks and priests were still copying and reading the Old Latin versions of the Scripture.' Rebenich, *Jerome*, p. 52.

⁶³ W. H. Freemantle, 'Prolegomena to Jerome' in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers. Jerome: Letters and Select Works*, Vol. VI, trans. W.H. Freemantle, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1893]), pp. xi-xxxiii, (p. xi).

⁶⁴ Cf. Coleiro: 'the basic quality on which Jerome builds their personality is one and the same: his own idea of a hermit, his own experiences of monastic life. The will-power developed by deep faith in an ideal which makes Malchus pursue his vocation in the desert even at the risk of quarrelling with his parents who were averse to the idea of monastic life is Jerome's own story. The perfect contempt of the world, the craving for solitude, prayer, asceticism, are not only common to the three heroes but they correspond perfectly to the injunctions which Jerome gives in his Letters. Indeed, they are the reflections of Jerome's own life. Even the study of the Scriptures, so intimately connected with Jerome's activities as a monk and as a writer, is one of the occupations of his heroes.' E. Coleiro, 'St. Jerome's Lives of the Hermits', *Vigiliae Christianae*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (Sep., 1957), 161-178, (p. 171).

⁶⁵ Cf. Coleiro: '*Vita Pauli* is meant to illustrate the beginnings of monasticism and to idealise the personality of Paul as its founder; *Vita Malachi* is meant to show how virginity can be cherished and guarded even in the most difficult circumstances. [...] In *Vita Hilarion* [...] biography is subordinated to a higher theme, which is devotional rather than biographical: asceticism as impersonated in Hilarion.' Coleiro, 'St. Jerome's Lives of the Hermits', p. 162.

writings in particular are notable for their place in the virginal tradition: *Adversus Helvidium*, a polemic defending Mary's perpetual virginity; *Epistola XXII*, a treatise in the form of a letter written to Eustochium on the preservation of virginity;⁶⁶ and *Adversus Jovinianum*, a controversial polemic which defends the supremacy of the celibate over the married life.⁶⁷

i. *Liber Adversus Helvidium de Perpetua Virginitate Beatae Mariae*

Adversus Helvidium was written around A.D. 383. The circumstances of its production appear to have been part of an on-going debate about the nature of Mary's virginity.

Hritzu explains:

In the year 380, a certain Craterius had published at Rome a book on virginity and asceticism, drawing his main argument from his contention of Mary's absolute and perpetual virginity. A certain Helvidius, the leader of the adversaries of

⁶⁶ Neil Adkin observes that, in the letter, Jerome has appropriated a phrase from Cyprian: '*Oras: loqueris ad sponsam; Legis: ille tibi loquitur*'. He asserts that such appropriation 'provide[s] a perfect illustration of Jerome's plagiaristic and patchwork method, his consummate sense of style, and his prurient imagination.' Neil Adkin, 'Oras: loqueris ad sponsam; Legis: ille tibi loquitur' (Jerome, Epist. 22,25,1), *Vigiliae Christianae*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (Jun., 1992), 141-150, (p. 145). Neil Adkin's book *Jerome On Virginity; A Commentary on the 'Libellus De Virginitate Servanda' (Letter 22)* also claims that Jerome's letter is shamelessly plagiaristic: 'Jerome's borrowings are not restricted to the stock-in-trade of the literature of virginity. As well as an omnivorous appetite for books Jerome also possessed a magpie mind and a vast memory. [...] Flashy formulations or clever conceits that Jerome encountered in his voracious reading of other authors could accordingly be remembered and reproduced in the *Libellus*, where they are passed off as his own: hence Jerome's brilliance often turns out to be no more than the glitter of pilfered tinsel.' Neil Adkin's book *Jerome On Virginity; A Commentary on the 'Libellus De Virginitate Servanda' (Letter 22)* (Cambridge: Francis Cairns, 2003) p. 2. Cain notes, in a review of Adkin's book that, although 'A[dkin]'s Jerome is plagiaristic, beyond even the lax standards of the ancient world, for two basic reasons: to compensate for his own lack of originality, and to stay afloat in an extremely competitive market of Christian ascetic writing. But, as A[dkin] emphasises, in his skillful adaption of others' material Jerome shows off his talent as a brilliant stylist and weaver of elegant textual mosaics'; A[dkin] is commendably aware of how heavily classical subtexts saturate *Letter 22*.' Cain, 'Review: *De Virginitate: Jerome on Virginity. A Commentary on the "Libellus De Virginitate Servanda" (Letter 22)* by Neil Adkin', *The Classical Review*, New Series, Vol. 55, No. 1 (Mar., 2005), 158-160, (p. 158; p. 160).

⁶⁷ Cf. Rebenich: 'Jerome unleashed his venom against the monk Jovinian, who denied the superiority of virginity and widowhood to marriage and maintained that extreme abstinence did not make an ascetic champion holier than those baptized Christians who lived a normal life. Like Helvidius, he questioned the perpetual virginity of Mary. 'The Epicurus of Christians' was attacked in two books (*Against Jovinian*), which caused some annoyance at Rome, not only among Jovinian's adherents but also in the ascetic circles that were shocked by the violence of Jerome's polemic.' Rebenich, *Jerome*, p. 42.

virginity and the monastic way of life, replied to Craterius with a book of his own.⁶⁸

Jerome refers to Craterius briefly in *Adversus Helvidium*.⁶⁹ Craterius' treatise appears to have utilised the doctrine of Mary's perpetual virginity in order to justify Christian virginity and asceticism. The premise of Craterius' treatise shows that, by the late-fourth century, Athanasius' use of Mary's life as a prototype of Christian virginity and a paradigm for virgins to imitate was viewed, by some at least, as the main justification for the Christian practice of perpetual virginity.⁷⁰ Thus, Craterius' treatise provides a testimony to the growing importance of a Mariological perspective on the development of the tradition of virginity. Helvidius' treatise, which denied Mary's perpetual virginity, drawing evidence from Scripture, also attests to this trend as it sought to demonstrate that virginity was not superior to marriage through an extended attack on Mary's perpetual virginity.⁷¹ Both Craterius and Helvidius' treatises, therefore, rely on a reading of the state of Mary's *virginitas post partum* to reach a conclusion about the validity of Christian virginity. Mariology and asceticism thus had become irrevocably intertwined.⁷²

⁶⁸ Hritzu, 'Introduction to *Liber Adversus Helvidium*', pp. 4-5.

⁶⁹ Cf. Jerome: 'I do not ask for eloquence, since, having none yourself, you applied for a supply of it to your brother Craterius.' Jerome, *Adversus Helvidium* (*Against Helvidius. The Perpetual virginity of the blessed Mary*), xviii, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers. Jerome: Letters and Select Works*, Vol. VI, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1893]), pp. 334-345, (p. 343).

⁷⁰ Cf. Athanasius: 'let the life of Mary, the bearer of God, be for all of you, as it is written an [image and likeness of] her virginity. For it is best for you to recognise yourselves in her as in a mirror and so govern yourselves. Complete the good deeds you have forgotten, and increase the things you have done well, so that your life too might serve for a time as an image for others; continually look to the instruction of others.' Saint Athanasius, *First Letter to Virgins*, xii, trans. David Brakke, in David Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 274-291, (p. 277).

⁷¹ Cf. Leigh-Bennet: 'In 383, Jerome replied to a pamphlet by one Helvidius, claiming that the brethren of Jesus were really his brothers, and that the Virgin did not always remain so; arguing that the state of virginity was therefore less blessed than that of marriage. Jerome replied at great length that the brethren were cousins or kinsfolk, and that virginity was the highest state.' Leigh-Bennet, *Handbook of the Early Christian Fathers*, p. 281.

⁷² Gambero notes that 'in Jerome's day, there was a strict connection between the phenomenon of the extraordinary increase in the monastic life and communities of virgins, and the growth of faith in Mary's

Jerome's treatise defends Mary's perpetual virginity by demonstrating that Helvidius' interpretations of Scripture are by no means unambiguous; he then reasserts the supremacy of Christian virginity over Christian marriage. Many modern critics, however, do not find Jerome's arguments convincing.⁷³ Nevertheless, *Adversus Helvidium* was exceedingly influential in its day. Kelly comments on its legacy:

Jerome's treatment enormously helped to shape both the Mariology of the Latin church and the Christian sexual ethic that was to dominate western civilisation until the Renaissance at least.⁷⁴

On a theological level, Labriolle observes that '[t]he *Adversus Helvidium* is the first treatise by a Latin [writer] specifically devoted to Mariology, and this realm of ecclesiastical knowledge is largely due to Jerome'.⁷⁵ Because it is the first Mariological treatise in the West, it has an important place in the development of fourth-century Mariology. Hritzu describes the treatise as a 'classic in Catholic theology',⁷⁶ and, indeed, most of Jerome's assertions have become accepted Mariological doctrine in the Catholic Church.⁷⁷

Helvidius denied that Mary retained her *virginitas post partum*, that is, he believed that she had conjugal relations with her husband Joseph after the birth of Christ. Jerome asserts at the beginning of his treatise that he will refute Helvidius with the words of Scripture, rather than rhetorical flourishes:

perpetual virginity.' Luigi Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church: The Blessed Virgin Mary in Patristic Thought*, trans. Thomas Buffer (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999 [1991]), p. 208.

⁷³ Cf. Kelly, *Jerome*, pp. 106-7; David G. Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity: The Jovinianist Controversy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009 [2007]), p. 189.

⁷⁴ Kelly, *Jerome*, p. 106.

⁷⁵ Labriolle, *History and Literature of Christianity from Tertullian to Boethius*, p. 351.

⁷⁶ Hritzu, 'Introduction to *Liber Adversus Helvidium*', p. 5.

⁷⁷ Cf. Labriolle: 'he takes particular exception to the passages from the Gospel on which Helvidius had set store. He discusses them with power and precision, and most of the solutions which he favours, for instance the question of the "brethren" of Jesus have become traditional in the bosom of the Catholic Church.' Labriolle, *History and Literature of Christianity from Tertullian to Boethius*, pp. 350-1.

We shall adduce the actual words of Scripture. Let him be refuted by the same proofs which he employed against us, so that he may see that it was possible for him to read what is written, and yet to be unable to discern the established conclusion of a sound faith.⁷⁸

Jerome's structure mirrors that of Helvidius, as he refutes Helvidius' erroneous reading and corrects it with his own. *Adversus Helvidium*, then, is an exercise in Jerome's superior skills of exegesis. He also appeals to Christian tradition, which has always accepted Mary's perpetual virginity in both the Eastern and Western Church, to validate the veracity of his exegesis over the novelty of Helvidius.⁷⁹ Helvidius' arguments are based partly on biblical passages and grammatical technicalities. He argues that Scripture insists that Mary was Joseph's true wife, with everything that implies, and that the phrase used in Scripture 'before they came together' (Matthew 1: 18) proves that Mary and Joseph had marital congress after the birth of Christ.⁸⁰ Jerome refutes this supposition by noting that the preposition 'before' does not necessitate a subsequent action,⁸¹ and gives a variety of examples, from both Scripture and common parlance, to prove his point.⁸² Jerome then provides reasons why it was necessary for Mary to appear to be married to Joseph:

First, that by the genealogy of Joseph, whose kinswoman Mary was, Mary's origin might also be shown. Secondly that she might not in accordance with the law of Moses be stoned as an adulteress. Thirdly, that in her flight to Egypt she

⁷⁸ Jerome, *Adversus Helvidium*, ii, p. 335.

⁷⁹ Cf. Jerome: 'yet you with marvellous effrontery contend that the reading of the Greek manuscripts is corrupt, although it is that which nearly all the Greek writers have left us in their books, and not only so, but several of the Latin writers have taken the words the same way.' Jerome, *Adversus Helvidium*, viii, p. 338.

⁸⁰ Cf. Jerome quotes Helvidius: 'The Evangelist would not have said *before they came together* if they were not to come together, for no man would use the phrase *before he dined* of a man who was not going to dine.' Jerome, *Adversus Helvidium*, iii, p. 335.

⁸¹ Cf. Jerome: 'Must we not rather understand that the preposition *before*, although it frequently denotes order in time, yet sometimes refers only to order in thought? So that there is no necessity, if sufficient cause intervened to prevent it, for our thoughts to be realized.' Jerome, *Adversus Helvidium*, iv, pp. 335-6.

⁸² Jerome, *Adversus Helvidium*, iv, p. 335-6.

might have solace, though it was that of a guardian rather than a husband. For who at that time would have believed the Virgin's word that she had conceived of the Holy Ghost, and that the angel Gabriel had come and announced the purpose of God?⁸³

Jerome's reading, therefore, indicates that Mary was only putatively Joseph's wife, and not his actual wife. The marriage of Mary and Joseph, then, has several functions independent of sex. It provided companionship for Mary and was a necessary precaution to safeguard her from being suspected as an adulteress,⁸⁴ because she was betrothed to Joseph and yet conceived out of wedlock, the penalty for which was stoning according to Deuteronomy.⁸⁵ In addition, it was necessary to demonstrate the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies. Both the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, the two synoptic Gospels which detail the events of the Virgin Birth, provide genealogies but they do so through Joseph's line.⁸⁶ They both demonstrate clearly that Joseph is not the biological father of Christ, and so these genealogies only make sense if it is understood that there was a kinship between Mary and Joseph; thus, Mary's genealogy is the same as Joseph's, and so their marriage was necessary for it to be recorded. A knowledge of Mary's genealogy is important because Christ derives His flesh from Mary alone, so it is through her that He derives His Davidic descent,⁸⁷ which is a requirement for the fulfilment of scriptural

⁸³ Jerome, *Adversus Helvidium*, iv, p. 336.

⁸⁴ Jerome: 'would not all have given their opinion against her as an adulteress, like Susanna?' Jerome, *Adversus Helvidium*, iv, p. 336.

⁸⁵ Cf. Deuteronomy: 'If a man have espoused a damsel that is a virgin, and some one find her in the city, and lie with her, Thou shalt bring them both out to the gate of that city, and they shall be stoned: the damsel, because she cried not out, being in the city: the man, because he hath humbled his neighbour's wife. And thou shalt take away the evil from the midst of thee' (Deuteronomy 22: 23-4).

⁸⁶ Cf. Matthew 1: 1-16 and Luke 3: 23-38. The genealogical lists also provide a sense of continuity between the Old and New Testaments.

⁸⁷ Cf. St Justin Martyr (*Adv. Tryph.* 100) and St. Ignatius (*Letter to the Ephesians* 18).

prophecies.⁸⁸ Matthew is particularly concerned in his Gospel to demonstrate how Christ's birth is in accordance with Old Testament prophecies which detail the coming of the Messiah. After his narration of the miracle of the Virgin Birth, Matthew states:⁸⁹

Now all this was done that it might be fulfilled which the Lord spoke by the prophet, saying: *Behold a virgin shall be with child, and bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel*, which being interpreted is, *God with us*.
(Matthew 1: 22-23)

The Jews denied the legitimacy of Matthew's claim, however, by arguing that the translation of the words of Isaiah 7: 14 cited by Matthew was incorrect: they claimed that the Hebrew word 'alma' did not mean 'virgin', as Matthew and the Septuagint translated, but 'young woman'.⁹⁰ Jerome briefly acknowledges the Jewish objection,⁹¹ but treats the matter more fully in *Adversus Jovinianum*.⁹²

⁸⁸ Cf. Samuel: 'From the day that I appointed judges over my people Israel: and I will give thee rest from all thy enemies. And the Lord foretelleth to thee, that the Lord will make thee a house. And when thy days shall be fulfilled, and thou shalt sleep with thy fathers, I will raise up thy seed after thee, which shall proceed out of thy bowels, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house to my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever. I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son: and if he commit any iniquity, I will correct him with the rod of men, and with the stripes of the children of men. But my mercy I will not take away from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I removed from before my face. And thy house shall be faithful, and thy kingdom for ever before thy face, and thy throne shall be firm for ever' (II Samuel 7: 11-16).

⁸⁹ Miri Ruben ignores Matthew's association of the Isaiah prophecy with the Virgin Birth and seems to imply that it was Jerome that made the connection between the Virgin Birth and Isaiah's prophecy: 'His [Jerome's] translation secured the useful – and misleading – translation of Isaiah's prophecy (Isaiah 7:14): "Behold a virgin [Hebrew *alma*] shall conceive, and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel.'" This became, therefore, a prophecy about a virgin, not simply about a young woman, the usual sense of the Hebrew *alma*. Jerome appropriated the Bible, and the Holy Land itself, as texts to be rewritten in a language that was Christian, and which conveyed truths that were manifest and clear.' Miri Rubin, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* (London: Penguin, 2010 [2009]), p. 30.

⁹⁰ The Septuagint translates 'alma' from Isaiah 7: 14 as *παρθένος*, meaning 'virgin': 'δια τουτο δώσει κύριος αυτος υμιν σημειον ιδου ή παρθένος εν γαστρι λήμψεται και τέξεται υιόν, και καλεσεις το όνομα αυτου Έμμανουήλ. (Ησαιας 7: 14) *The Old Testament in Greek according to the Septuagint*, Vol. III. Hosea-4 Maccabees, ed. Henry Barclay Swete (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1912), p. 113. Matthew appears to quote from the Septuagint; certainly he uses the term *παρθένος* in reference to Isaiah's prophecy: 'Τουτο δε όλον γέγονεν ίνα πληρωθη το ρηθεν ύπο του κυρίου δια του προφήτου λέγοντος. Ίδού, ή παρθένος εν γαστρι ιξει, και τέξεται υιόν, και καλέσουσι τό όνομα αυτου Έμμανουήλ. Ό έστι μεθερμ ηνευόμενον Μεθ ημων ό Θεός.' (Κατα Ματθαιον 1: 22-23) *Novum Testamentum Graece*, ed. Alexander Souter (Oxonii: Clarendoniano, 1962 [1910]), p. 2.

⁹¹ Cf. Jerome: 'at the present day, now that the whole world has embraced the faith, the Jews argue that when Isaiah says, "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son", the Hebrew word denotes a young

From Matthew's statement that Joseph 'knew her not till she brought forth her firstborn son' (Matthew 1:25), Helvidius construes that the 'till' implies that Joseph must have known Mary carnally after she had given birth 'and that that knowledge was only delayed by her engendering a son'.⁹³ Jerome objects to such an assumption; he says: 'therefore, he [Helvidius] wishes to show that until (*donec*) or the adverb until (*usque*) indicates a fixed time'.⁹⁴ Again Jerome refutes Helvidius by citing evidence from Scripture of the indefinite usage of 'till'.⁹⁵ He takes Helvidius' literal reading of the grammatical construction *ad absurdum* by suggesting that, by Helvidius' account, Joseph would have known his wife carnally as soon as she gave birth, that is, immediately after the delivery. If Joseph, however, were such a lascivious man that he would not allow Mary the period of purification required by Judaic law, what stopped him from demanding his conjugal rights before the birth? Jerome asks:

what I want to know is why Joseph refrained until the day of her delivery?
Helvidius will of course reply, because he heard that angel say, 'that which is

woman, not a virgin, that is to say, the word is ALMAH, not BETHULAH, a position which, father on, we shall dispute more in detail.' Jerome, *Adversus Helvidium*, iv, p. 336. Origen notes that Celsus's attack on Mary's virginity does not mention the association with the prophecy of Isaiah: 'That it was out of wickedness that Celsus did not quote the prophecy is made clear to me from the fact that although he has quoted several things from the gospel according to Matthew, such as *the star that arose at the birth of Jesus* and other miracles, yet he has not even mentioned this at all. But if a Jew should ingeniously explain it away by saying that it is not written "Behold a virgin" but, instead of that, "behold a young woman", we should say to him that the word *Aalma*, which the Septuagint translated by "parthenos" (virgin) and others by "neanis" (young woman), also occurs, so they say, in Deuteronomy applied to a virgin' Origen, *Adversus Celsum*, I.xxxiv, trans. and ed. Henry Chadwick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), pp. 33-4.

⁹² Cf. Jerome: 'I know that the Jews are accustomed to meet us with the objection that in Hebrew the word *Almah* does not mean a virgin, but a young woman. And, to speak truth, a virgin is properly called *Bethulah*, but a young woman, or a girl, is not *Almah*, but *Naarah*! What then is the meaning of *Almah*? A hidden virgin, that is, not merely virgin, but a virgin and something more, because not every virgin is hidden, shut off from the occasional sight of men.' Saint Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum (Against Jovinian)*, I. xxxii, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers. Jerome: Letters and Select Works*, Vol. VI, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1893]), pp. 346-416 (p. 370).

⁹³ Jerome, *Adversus Helvidium*, v, p. 337.

⁹⁴ (My translation) *Deinde vult docere, quod donec sive usque, adverbium, certum tempus significet.* Jerome, *Adversus Helvidium*, v, PL 23, 198.

⁹⁵ Jerome, *Adversus Helvidium*, vi-vii, pp. 337-8.

conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost.' [...] And could the just man dare, he says, to think of approaching her, when he heard that the Son of God was in her womb? Excellent! We are to believe then that the same man who gave so much credit to a dream that he did not dare to touch his wife, yet afterwards, [...] Helvidius, I say, would have us believe that Joseph, though well acquainted with such surprising wonders, dared to touch the Temple of God, the abode of the Holy Ghost, the Mother of the Lord?⁹⁶

Helvidius' suggestion that Mary did not maintain her virginity *post partum* not only diminishes the honour due to Mary, but it also casts Joseph in a poor light;⁹⁷ it is impossible to believe that Mary, who carried God within her body, and Joseph, who witnessed such divine wonders, could have carried on normal conjugal relations after being granted such grace. In many ways, the belief in Mary's *virginitas post partum* is a natural consequence of a belief in the Virgin Birth: her body was sanctified through that divine act – her body is like a divine temple in which God had dwelt, and so any profanation of it must be considered to be an act of sacrilege. Indeed, Jerome contends that Helvidius' attack on Mary's virginity constitutes such sacrilege:

You have set on fire the temple of the Lord's body, you have defiled the sanctuary of the Holy Spirit from which you are determined to make a team of four brethren and a heap of sisters come forth.⁹⁸

As a belief in Mary's perpetual virginity is entwined with the belief in the miracle of the Virgin Birth, the Incarnation and Christ's divinity, Helvidius' claims were not simply an attack on Mary's perpetual virginity and Christian asceticism, but may have had repercussions for orthodox Christology.

⁹⁶ Jerome, *Adversus Helvidium*, viii, p. 338.

⁹⁷ Cf. Jerome: 'God forbid that we should think thus of the Saviour's mother and of a just man. No midwife assisted at His birth; no woman's officiousness intervened.' Jerome, *Adversus Helvidium*, xi, p. 339.

⁹⁸ Jerome, *Adversus Helvidium*, xviii, p. 343.

Helvidius presents other proofs that Mary did not retain her virginity perpetually. The scriptural designations of Christ as Mary's 'firstborn' (Luke 2: 7), Helvidius says, implies that there were subsequent births.⁹⁹ Jerome denies this by demonstrating two uses of the term: 'By first-born we understand not only one who is succeeded by others, but one who has had no predecessor.'¹⁰⁰ Helvidius, however, further supports his claim that there were others to succeed the firstborn by drawing attention to the brethren of Christ mentioned in the Bible.¹⁰¹ Jerome admits that the 'brethren' are some form of close relation, but states that

In Holy Scripture there are four kinds of brethren – by nature, race, kindred, love. [...] The only alternative is to adopt the previous explanation and understand them to be called brethren in virtue of the bond of kindred, not of love and sympathy, nor by prerogative of race, nor yet by nature.¹⁰²

Jerome links together all Christ's putative familial relationships described in the Gospels. Whereas Mary is definitely shown to be Christ's mother, Joseph is exposed as a guardian, rather than His father.¹⁰³ However, as Jerome points out, 'even the Evangelists, expressing the prevailing opinion, which is the correct rule for a historian, call [Joseph] the father of the Saviour'.¹⁰⁴ As Joseph is sometimes referred to as Christ's father in the Bible even though he is shown not to be Christ's biological father, by extension, the use of the word 'brethren' of Christ is somewhat ambiguous. Consequently, Jerome

⁹⁹ Cf. Jerome: 'he endeavours to show that the term *first-born* is applicable except to a person who has brothers, just as he is called *only-begotten* who is the only son of his parents.' Jerome, *Adversus Helvidium*, xi, p. 339.

¹⁰⁰ Jerome, *Adversus Helvidium*, xii, p. 339.

¹⁰¹ Cf. Jerome: 'The last proposition of Helvidius is this, and it is what he wished to show when he treated of the first-born, that brethren of the Lord are mentioned in the Gospels.' Jerome, *Adversus Helvidium*, xiii, p. 340. Cf. Matthew 12: 46, 47, 49; Matthew 13: 55; Mark 3: 31, 32; Luke 8: 19, 20; John 2: 12; Acts 1: 14.

¹⁰² Jerome, *Adversus Helvidium*, xvi-xvii, p. 341-2.

¹⁰³ Cf. Jerome: 'The Evangelists call Joseph father: Mary confesses he was father. Not (as I said before) that Joseph was really the father of the Saviour: but that to preserve the reputation of Mary, he was regarded by all as his father.' Jerome, *Adversus Helvidium*, iv, p. 336.

¹⁰⁴ Jerome, *Adversus Helvidium*, iv, p. 336.

concludes that, '[i]t is clear that our Lord's brethren bore the name in the same way that Joseph was called His father'.¹⁰⁵ The scriptural proof that Jerome uses to prove that Mary definitely did not have any other children is the evidence, also utilised by Epiphanius and Hilary of Poitiers,¹⁰⁶ provided by Christ himself when he was on the cross:

You say that the mother of the Lord was present at the cross, you say that she was entrusted to the disciple John on account of her widowhood and solitary condition: as if upon your own showing, she had not four sons and numerous daughters, with whose solace she might comfort herself?¹⁰⁷

Here, Jerome exposes the contradictions in Helvidius' argument. Helvidius had accepted the exchange at the foot of the cross. However, if Mary had many children, then there would have been no reason for Christ to entrust her to Saint John's care.

The apocryphal *Protevangelium of James*, an early testament to the belief in Mary's perpetual virginity, had resolved the problem of Christ's 'brethren' by claiming that they were Joseph's children from a previous marriage.¹⁰⁸ Both Hilary of Poitiers and Epiphanius accept the *Protevangelium's* explanation that Joseph was an elderly widower.¹⁰⁹ Epiphanius exclaims that an 'old man of over eighty did not take a virgin as a sexual partner'.¹¹⁰ Jerome, however, concedes neither to Helvidius' proposal that they

¹⁰⁵ Jerome, *Adversus Helvidium*, xviii, p. 343.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Epiphanius: 'If Mary had children and her husband was alive, why did he entrust Mary to John and John to Mary? [...] he entrusted her to John because of virginity.' Epiphanius, *Panarion* VII. 58 [78], 10.10, Frank Williams (Leiden, New York, Köln: E. J. Brill, 1994) p. 608. Cf. Gambero: '[Hilary] observes that if Mary had had other children, it would have been more logical for the Lord to entrust her to them instead of to John.' Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church*, p. 185. Cf. Hilary of Poitiers, *In Matthaeum* 1, 4; *Patrologia Latina* 9, 922.

¹⁰⁷ Jerome, *Adversus Helvidium*, xv, p. 340.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. *The Protevangelium of James*: 'And the priest said to Joseph, "You have been chosen by lot to receive the virgin of the Lord as your ward." But Joseph answered him, "I have sons and am old; she is but a girl. I object lest I should become a laughing-stock to the sons of Israel.'" *The Protevangelium of James*, 9.1-2, in *The Apocryphal New Testament*, ed. and trans. J. K. Elliott (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 48-69, (p. 61).

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Gambero: 'Following the *Protevangelium of James*, Hilary explains that the brothers of Jesus were sons of Joseph from his first marriage.' Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church*, p. 185.

¹¹⁰ Epiphanius, *Panarion*, Vol. II (Books II and III), VII. 58 [78]. 8.4, p. 606.

are half-brothers nor to the *Protevangelium*'s suggestion that they are step-brothers. He insists on returning to the evidence of Scripture, which he observes 'calls them neither sons of Mary, nor of Joseph'.¹¹¹ Instead, Jerome interprets the brethren of Christ as cousins.¹¹² Jerome is insistent on the testimony of scriptural evidence regarding this issue: 'We believe that God was born of the Virgin, because we read it. That Mary was married after she was brought forth, we do not believe, because we do not read it.'¹¹³ Jerome disregards any suggestion that Joseph had had a previous marriage, as he deems it to be disrespectful to the man who was considered holy enough to protect the Blessed Virgin:

You say that Mary did not continue a virgin: I claim still more, that Joseph himself on account of Mary was a virgin, so that from a virgin wedlock a virgin son was born. [...] For if as a holy man he does not come under the imputation of fornication, and it is nowhere written that he had another wife, but was the guardian of Mary whom he was supposed to have to wife rather than her husband, the conclusion is that he who was thought worthy to be called father of the Lord, remained a virgin.¹¹⁴

Apart from the lack of scriptural evidence for Joseph's having a previous marriage, Jerome's insistence on Joseph's virginity may partly be due to the understanding that it is harder to refrain from the conjugal act once it has been experienced.¹¹⁵ Thus, for Joseph

¹¹¹ Jerome, *Adversus Helvidium*, xvii, p. 342.

¹¹² Cf. Jerome: 'here we have the explanation of what I am endeavouring to show, how it is that the sons of Mary, the sister of our Lord's mother, who though not formerly believers afterwards did believe, can be called brethren of the Lord.' Jerome, *Adversus Helvidium*, xvi, p. 341.

¹¹³ Jerome, *Adversus Helvidium*, xxi, p. 344.

¹¹⁴ Jerome, *Adversus Helvidium*, xxi, p. 344.

¹¹⁵ Jerome articulates this idea in *Epistola XLVIII*: 'it is extremely trying when one has once tasted pleasure to abstain from its enticements.' Jerome, *Epistola XLVIII Ad Pammachium*, iii, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers. Jerome: Letters and Select Works*, Vol. VI, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1893]), pp. 66-79, (p. 67).

to be relied upon as a guardian of the Blessed Virgin, then he must also have been a virgin himself.¹¹⁶

After defending Mary's virginity, Jerome, following the structure of Helvidius' own argument, seeks to 'institute a comparison between virginity and marriage'.¹¹⁷ Jerome begins by asserting that in elevating the virgin, he does not aim to discredit the wife, nor, indeed, does he wish to imply that the Old Testament prophets were less holy than the saints of the New Testament:

I beseech my readers not to suppose that in praising virginity I have in the least disparaged marriage, and separated the saints of the Old Testament from those of the New, that is to say, those who had wives and those who altogether refrained from the embraces of women: I rather think that in accordance with the difference in time and circumstance one rule applied to the former, another to us upon whom the ends of the world have come.¹¹⁸

Jerome compares the command to 'be fruitful and multiply',¹¹⁹ given to mankind at creation, with Paul's recommendation that, due to the shortness of time, 'henceforth those that have wives may be as though they had none'.¹²⁰ He also points out that Paul makes a clear distinction between the wife and the virgin:¹²¹

Do you think there is no difference between one who spends her time in prayer and fasting, and one who must, at her husband's approach, make up her countenance, walk with a mincing gait, and feign a shew of endearment?¹²²

¹¹⁶ This idea is expressed more forcefully in the *Adversus Jovinianum*, in which Jerome suggests that Christ entrusts His virginal mother to His virginal disciple. A virgin is needed to protect virginity: 'The virgin writer [Saint John the Evangelist] expounded mysteries which the married could not, and to briefly sum up all and show how great was the privilege of John, or rather of virginity in John, the Virgin Mother was entrusted by the Virgin Lord to the Virgin Disciple.' Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I.xxvi, p. 366.

¹¹⁷ Jerome, *Adversus Helvidium*, xxii, p. 344.

¹¹⁸ Jerome, *Adversus Helvidium*, xxii, p. 344.

¹¹⁹ Jerome, *Adversus Helvidium*, xxii, p. 344 (cf. Genesis 1: 28).

¹²⁰ Jerome, *Adversus Helvidium*, xxii, p. 344 (cf. I Corinthians 7: 29).

¹²¹ Cf. Jerome citing Saint Paul: 'She that is unmarried is careful for the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and in spirit: but she that is married is careful of the things of the world, how she may please her husband.' Jerome, *Adversus Helvidium*, xxii, p. 344 (cf. I Corinthians 7: 34).

¹²² Jerome, *Adversus Helvidium*, xxii, p. 344.

Jerome presents marriage as antithetical to a life of holiness. He then enumerates the various *molestiae nuptiarum* that take up a married woman's time, and may even compromise her chastity if her husband is the sort of man who enjoys bringing half-naked dancers into her home.¹²³ Jerome, however, does accept that married couples can be devout, but that they only begin to have time for prayer once marital congress ceases:¹²⁴ 'For so long as the debt of marriage is paid, earnest prayer is neglected.'¹²⁵ Jerome also admits that there are Christian wives and widows who surpass so-called virgins in holiness and virtue:

I do not deny that holy women are found both among widows and those who have husbands; but they are such as have ceased to be wives, or such as, even in the close bond of marriage, imitate virgin chastity.¹²⁶

Jerome's concession to the superior virtue of wives and widows, however, is made on the understanding that they achieve such virtue through the imitation of 'virgin[al] chastity'. Jerome suggests that marital chastity cannot be achieved without sexual renunciation, either the total renunciation of the widow or adopting abstinence within marriage. For Jerome, then, marital chastity consists of the cessation of conjugal relations, not the correct use of marital relations.

Jerome maintains the importance of Paul's recommendation of virginity, rather than insisting that it become a law:

¹²³ Cf. Jerome, *Adversus Helvidium*, xxii, p. 345.

¹²⁴ Cf. Jerome: 'She who was not subject to the anxiety and pain of child-bearing and having passed the change of life has ceased to perform the functions of a woman, is freed from the curse of God: nor is her desire to her husband, but on the contrary her husband becomes subject to her.' Jerome, *Adversus Helvidium*, xxii, p. 345.

¹²⁵ Jerome, *Adversus Helvidium*, xxii, p. 345.

¹²⁶ Jerome, *Adversus Helvidium*, xxiii, p. 345.

He leaves us the free exercise of our reason in the matter. He lays no necessity upon anyone nor leads anyone into a snare: he only persuades to that which is proper when he wishes all men to be as himself.¹²⁷

Although Saint Paul may have wished for all men to be chaste like himself, he did not reasonably expect them all to be so, and so did not place an unattainable burden on humanity. Insisting on virginity would have meant that men were expected to change their nature and become like the angels instead.¹²⁸ As the state of virginity is recommended rather than commanded, Jerome maintains that this makes it even more virtuous because it is a willing sacrifice. Helvidius seems to have complained that many of the virgins in the Church are, in fact, not virgins at all, but simply hypocrites who feign virginity. Jerome agrees with Helvidius that such a situation is shameful, but says that the abuse of virginity by such false virgins does not discredit the practice of virginity:

I agree with you, when you say, that some virgins are nothing but tavern women; I say still more, that even adulteresses may be found among them, and, you will no doubt be still more surprised to hear, that some of the clergy are inn-keepers and some monks unchaste. Who does not at once understand that a tavern woman cannot be a virgin, nor an adulterer a monk, nor a clergyman a tavern-keeper? Are we to blame virginity if its counterfeit is at fault? For my part, to pass over other persons and come to the virgin, I maintain that she who is engaged in huckstering, though for anything I know she may be a virgin in body, is no longer one in spirit.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Jerome, *Adversus Helvidium*, xxiii, p. 345. Cf. Jerome: 'God created us with free will, and we are not forced by necessity either to virtue or to vice. Otherwise, if there be necessity, there is no crown. As in good works it is God who brings them to perfection, for it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that pitieth and gives us help that we may be able to reach the goal: so in things wicked and sinful, the seeds within us give the impulse, and these are brought to maturity by the devil.' Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, II. iii, pp. 389-90.

¹²⁸ Cf. Jerome: 'He has not, it is true, a commandment from the Lord respecting virginity, for that grace surpasses the unassisted power of man, and it would have worn an air of immodesty to force men to fly in the face of nature, and to say in other words, I want you to be what the angels are. It is this angelic purity which secures to virginity its highest reward, and the Apostle might have seemed to despise a course of life which involves no guilt.' Jerome, *Adversus Helvidium*, xxiii, p. 345. Celibacy as the *vita angelica* is suggested in Matthew 22: 30.

¹²⁹ Jerome, *Adversus Helvidium*, xxiii, p. 345.

Jerome goes even further than Helvidius. He not only denounces false virgins, but also any virgin that is engaged in immoral activity, regardless of whether her physical virginity remains intact or not. Such a one can no longer be considered to be a virgin, for it is the purity of the mind that validates the virginity of the body.

Jerome's comparison of virginity and marriage is extremely short, and only picks up on some of the more salient points of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. His main advocacy of perpetual virginity is in his defence of Mary's virginity. Helvidius' claims pivot on an assertion that Mary and Joseph's marriage was a true marriage, and that marriage is understood to be based on a necessary sexual element. One of the questions that the debate raises is: what constitutes a valid marriage? Jerome also appears to regard consummation as the act which seals a marriage, and hence why Mary is considered by him to be Joseph's wife only putatively. The understanding that Mary and Joseph's marriage was reputed rather than actual – based on the guardianship of virginity rather than a procreative imperative – also raised some other problems. The paradigm of Mary's 'spiritual marriage' appears to have been appropriated by some *virgines subintroductae* who claimed it as a prototype of their own lifestyle. Epiphanius, in an aside in his affirmation of Mary's perpetual virginity against the Antidicomarians (literally, those who speak against Mary), denies that the sexless marriage of Mary and Joseph justifies the practice of *virgines subintroductae*. Because Mary and Joseph's marriage was unique and accomplished a necessary role in the salvific economy, Epiphanius asserts, it was granted a special dispensation from God.¹³⁰ Nevertheless, such questions needed to be

¹³⁰ Cf. Epiphanius: 'this must not be twisted to the harm of any who suppose that, by a clumsy conjecture, they can find an excuse here to invent their so-called 'adoptive wives' and 'beloved friends'. The things

addressed more fully in order to define the parameters of a Christian understanding of marriage. Interestingly, it was Jerome's tactless treatment of marriage in *Adversus Jovinianum* that afforded the catalyst needed for these questions of marriage to be resolved.

ii. *Epistola XXII Ad Eustochium*: On the Preservation of Virginity

Jerome's famous *Epistola XXII Ad Eustochium* is considered to be an extensive tract on virginity in its own right.¹³¹ Indeed, Jerome himself appears to have considered it to be so, as he includes it in his enumeration of his works in *De viris illustribus*, in which he catalogues its title as 'To Eustochium, on the Preservation of Virginity'.¹³² Additionally, in *Adversus Jovinianum*, he refers to it as 'the book which I addressed to Eustochium'.¹³³

Kelly notes that

this letter should be set in the context of an ascetic campaign which Jerome was carrying on in 383-384, with the pope's approval, not only among his circles of devout ladies but in Rome at large. His letters, like those of other contemporaries, were copied and handed around, and thus attained wide publicity.¹³⁴

done there were done by dispensation, and the case is different from all the other godly stringent rules that ought to be observed.' Epiphanius, *Panarion*, Vol. II, (Books II and III) VII. 58 [78], 11.1, p. 609.

¹³¹ Cf. Cain: 'This was Jerome's most famous (or infamous?) letter during his own lifetime and throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance, as its staggeringly complex manuscript tradition attests.' Andrew Cain, 'Review: *De Virginitate: Jerome on Virginity. A Commentary on the "Libellus de virginitate servanda" (Letter 22)* by Neil Adkin', *The Classical Review*, New Series, Vol. 55, No. 1 (Mar., 2005), 158-160, (p. 158).

¹³² Jerome, 'CXXXV. Jerome the Presbyter', in *On Illustrious Men (De viris illustribus)*, pp. 167-8. Cf. Rebenich: 'the most famous of all his letters, *de virginitate servanda*, addressed to the young Roman aristocrat Julia Eustochium. In fact, a fairly large treatise, this *Epistola* lays down the motives that should inspire those who devote themselves to a life of virginity, and also the rules by which they ought to regulate their daily conduct.' Rebenich, *Jerome*, p. 19.

¹³³ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I.xiii, p. 357.

¹³⁴ Kelly, Jerome, p. 101. Rebenich repeats Kelly almost *verbatim*, but without acknowledgement: 'The letter must be read in the context of the ascetic campaign that Jerome was carrying on in 383 and 384, with the approval of the Roman bishop, not only among his circles of devout ladies but in Rome at large.' Rebenich, *Jerome*, pp. 19-20.

The epistle was written at Rome A.D. 384, a few months after *Adversus Helvidium*, and deals primarily with the motivations for virginity and the rules for its preservation and regulation.

Jerome begins the treatise with a passage from the forty-fourth psalm, in which God tells the human soul to ‘forget [...] thine own people and thy father’s house’.¹³⁵ Although Jerome opens his interpretation of this psalm with a discussion of the marriage between God and the human soul, he moves seamlessly into a more ascetic interpretation. Jerome tells Eustochium that it is not enough for her to forget her people and father’s house, but that she must also ‘scorn the flesh and cling to the bridegroom in a close embrace’.¹³⁶ Jerome interprets ‘thine own people and thy father’s house’ as a metaphor for the abandonment of earthly concerns, rather than a rejection of immediate familial relationships. By turning her back on the mundane and opting for the more elevated life of virginity, Eustochium has exchanged an earthly marriage for a spiritual one. Jerome utilises Paul’s metaphor of marriage in Ephesians, which expresses the union between Christ and His Church:¹³⁷

But you will say to me; ‘I have left the home of my father, I am born anew in Christ. What reward do I receive for this?’ The context shows – ‘The King shall desire thy beauty.’ This, then, is the great mystery. ‘For this cause shall a man leave his father and his mother and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be’ not as is there said, ‘of one flesh’, but ‘of one spirit’.¹³⁸

¹³⁵ Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, i, p. 22. Cf. Psalms: ‘Hearken, O daughter, and see, and incline thy ear: and forget thy people and thy father’s house. And the king shall greatly desire thy beauty; for he is the Lord thy God, and him they shall adore. And the daughters of Tyre with gifts, yea, all the rich among the people, shall entreat thy countenance. All the glory of the king’s daughter is within in golden borders, Clothed round about with varieties. After her shall virgins be brought to the king: her neighbours shall be brought to thee’ (Psalm 44. 11-15).

¹³⁶ Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, i, p. 22.

¹³⁷ Cf. Paul: ‘For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife, and they shall be two in one flesh. This is a great sacrament; but I speak in Christ and in the church’ (Ephesians 5: 31-2).

¹³⁸ Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, i, pp. 22-3.

Thus, Jerome unites the pneumatic and psychic readings of the mystical marriage, and appropriates them both to express the mystery of the union of the virginal soul and the heavenly bridegroom. Already, the importance that Jerome places on marriage is in its ability to signify the wonder of virginity through metaphor, rather than on its own terms. He later admits its usefulness, but for the sole reason that it produces more virgins.¹³⁹

Jerome, however, is careful to emphasise that he does not wish to

recount the drawbacks of marriage, such as pregnancy, the crying of infants, the torture caused by a rival, the cares of household management, and all these fancied blessings which death at least cuts short.¹⁴⁰

Of course, in saying this, Jerome manages to recount the drawbacks of marriage even as he denies doing so.¹⁴¹ Jerome refers Eustochium to the earlier Latin tradition of virginity treatises if she wishes to know in greater detail the annoyances of marriage that she has escaped:

If you want to know from how many vexations a virgin is free and by how many a wife is fettered you should read Tertullian ‘to a philosophic friend’, and his other treatises on virginity, the blessed Cyprian’s noble volume, the writings of Pope Damasus in prose and verse, and the treatises recently written for his sister by our own Ambrose.¹⁴²

¹³⁹ Cf. Jerome: ‘I praise wedlock, I praise marriage, but it is only because they give me virgins.’ Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, xx, p. 30.

¹⁴⁰ Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, ii, p. 23.

¹⁴¹ In discussing the various trials of wedlock, Jerome notes Blaesilla’s early widowhood. She is particularly unhappy as she was widowed young and therefore does not have the comfort of marriage to compensate for the loss of her virginity and can only achieve the second degree of chastity. Cf. Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, xv, p. 27. Also, Jerome appears to contradict himself in *Adversus Jovinianum*, as he claims that: ‘This is not the place to describe the difficulties of marriage, and to revel in rhetorical commonplaces. I think I delivered myself fully as regards this point in my argument against Helvidius, and in the book which I addressed to Eustochium.’ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. xiii, p. 357.

¹⁴² Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, xxii, p. 31.

Here, Jerome seems to be positioning himself in a specifically Western tradition of virginity. It is notable that he does not refer to the Greek tradition, which perhaps seems strange as the epistle was written only two years after his return from Constantinople.

Although Jerome alludes to the Latin tradition of virginity, he also seeks to distinguish himself from it by claiming that, unlike previous patristic authors, his ‘purpose is not the praise of virginity but its preservation’.¹⁴³ He warns Eustochium that, having once achieved the high ideal of virginity, she should not attempt to return to that which she has left behind. If she does, her chastity would be irredeemably lost:

See to it that God say not some day of you: ‘The virgin of Israel is fallen and there is none to raise her up’ [Amos. 5: 2]. I will say it boldly, though God can do all things He cannot raise up a virgin when once she has fallen. He may indeed relieve one who is defiled from the penalty of her sin, but He will not give her a crown.¹⁴⁴

Although his warning seems to place limitations on the power of God, Jerome is not commenting on God’s power to restore physical virginity, but rather the impossibility of the virgin achieving a crown in heaven after she had fallen. For, although God is infinitely merciful and may forgive the crime and even waive punishment, in all justice, He cannot reward a virgin who has turned her back on her vocation. This fear of loss is palpable throughout the life of a virgin, as ‘many veteran virgins, of a chastity never called in question, have, on the very threshold of death, let their crowns fall from their hands’.¹⁴⁵ Jerome draws attention to the constant threats which lie in wait for the virgin, and reiterates the fragility of the virginal state;¹⁴⁶ she is constantly in danger of falling

¹⁴³ Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, xxiii, p. 31.

¹⁴⁴ Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, v, p. 24.

¹⁴⁵ Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, xxix, p. 34.

¹⁴⁶ Cf. Jerome: ‘I would have you draw from your monastic vow not pride but fear. You walk laden with gold; you must keep out of the robber’s way. To us men this life is a racecourse: we contend here, we are

until the very moment of death.¹⁴⁷ Jerome seems to imply that the two most dangerous threats to virginity are pride,¹⁴⁸ which impugns the integrity of the mind, and the passions of the body, which can lead to physical defilement.¹⁴⁹ The Parable of the Ten Virgins serves to illustrate the possibility of different types of virgins, and the insufficiency of physical intactness as a guarantor of sanctity:

Notice that it is good virgins who are spoken of [Amos 8: 13], for there are bad ones as well. ‘Whosoever looketh on a woman,’ the Lord says, ‘to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart’ [Matthew 5: 28]. So that virginity may be lost even by a thought. Such are evil virgins, virgins in the flesh, not in the spirit; foolish virgins, who, having no oil, are shut out by the Bridegroom [Matthew 25: 3, 10].¹⁵⁰

Christ’s stress on the sinful potential of thoughts draws attention to the dual sites of sinning: the mind and the body. A virgin who sins in the mind ‘hath committed adultery’ in her heart, and so, despite retaining bodily purity, she cannot make claim to true virginity. The virgin, therefore, must remain vigilant, watching over both body and soul; she cannot be secure in her victory until death.¹⁵¹

Jerome tells Eustochium that his ‘purpose is to show you that you are fleeing from Sodom and should take warning by Lot’s wife’.¹⁵² In Genesis, God saved Lot, his wife and two daughters from the destruction that He wreaked on Sodom and Gomorrah, two

crowned elsewhere. No man can lay aside fear while serpents and scorpions beset his path.’ Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, iii, p. 23.

¹⁴⁷ Cf. Jerome: ‘So long as we are held down by this frail body, so long as we have our treasure in earthen vessels; so long as the flesh lusteth against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh, there can be no sure victory.’ Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, iv, p. 23.

¹⁴⁸ Cf. Jerome: ‘I would have you draw from your monastic vow not pride but fear.’ Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, iii, p. 23. Jerome cites examples of those who have fallen through pride, such as Satan (Cf. Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, iii, pp. 23-4).

¹⁴⁹ Cf. Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, iii, p. 23.

¹⁵⁰ Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, v, p. 24.

¹⁵¹ Cf. Jerome: ‘The weak flesh will soon be ashes: one against tremendous odds. Not till it has been dissolved, not till the Prince of this world has come and found no sin therein, not till then may you listen to the prophet’s words.’ Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, iii, p. 23.

¹⁵² Saint Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, ii, p. 23.

cities which were so full of vice and perversion that He could no longer suffer their existence. They were warned by angels to flee the cities, and cautioned not to look back.¹⁵³ Lot's wife, however, did not pay heed to the warning:

The Lord rained upon Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven. And he destroyed these cities, and all the country about, all the inhabitants of the cities, and all things that spring from the earth. And his wife looking behind her, was turned into a statue of salt. (Genesis 19: 24-26)

The fate of Lot's wife acts as a warning of the consequences of succumbing to the allure of sinfulness. Eustochium, then, having been saved from a carnal life, must resist the desire to look back towards sexual corruption. It is unclear whether Jerome is implying that 'Sodom' represents the conjugality that accompanies marriage, or whether it refers specifically to the sin of fornication. Presumably, as Jerome is writing to a consecrated virgin, Sodom should be equated with the sacrilege attendant on the breaking of monastic vows. Indeed, pseudo-Ambrose utilises the same analogy in his treatise *De lapsu virginis consecratae* in reference to such behaviour.¹⁵⁴ Nevertheless, the analogy remains

¹⁵³ Cf. Genesis: 'Save thy life: look not back, neither stay thou in all the country about: but save thyself in the mountain, lest thou be also consumed' (Genesis 19: 17).

¹⁵⁴ Compare Pseudo-Ambrose: 'Woe is me, because I became consumed like Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. XIX: 24), who will bewail my ashes? I offended worse than Sodom, because that city had offended the law unknowingly. I, however, having received grace, sinned against the Lord. If a man sinned against a man, he may get Him [to intercede]: I sinned against the Lord, whom may I get as propitiator (I Kings. II, 25)? I conceived sorrow, and I bore iniquity: I opened the chasm and dug it, and carved into the pit which I had produced. On that account, my sorrow was turned onto my head, and my iniquity descended onto my crown. My uncleanness before my feet, I was not mindful of the newest, and I fell miserably (Psal. VII, 15 et seq.)' Pseudo-Ambrose, *De Lapsu Virginis Consecratae*, X. 45 (My translation). Additionally, Jerome alludes to the Old Testament story of Belshazzar drinking from sacred vessels (Daniel v. 1-3) to indicate the defilement of sacred virginity: 'We find Belshazzar at his feast and among concubines (vice always glories in defiling what is noble) drinking out of these sacred cups.' Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, xxii, p. 31. This analogy is also used by pseudo-Ambrose in *De lapsu virginis consecratae* to indicate the defilement of a consecrated virgin: 'What, however, shall I say about you, son of the serpent, minister of the devil, violator of the Temple of God: you who in one sin perpetrated two crimes, adultery certainly and sacrilege? Sacrilege simply, when you defiled the vessel offered to Christ, dedicated to the Lord with insane rashness. Balthasar, that king of Persia, who, with his friends and concubines, used to drink in the vessels of the Lord which had been removed from the temple of Jerusalem by his father; on that same night he was struck down by the hand of the angel, he was punished with cruel death (Dan. V, 30): what shall I say to the arbitrators about you, you, equally the destroyed and the destroyer, you who impiously defiled

troubling as it seems to imply that all those who have not chosen the virginal life are dwelling metaphorically in Sodom and Gomorrah. Later in the treatise, Jerome advises Eustochium not to ‘court the company of married ladies or visit the houses of the high-born. Do not look too often on the life which you despised to become a virgin’.¹⁵⁵ Such an injunction echoes his earlier Sodom analogy. Nevertheless, the association of the breaking of the vow with a return to Sodom demonstrates the growing opinion in the fourth century that the virginal vow is indissoluble. There is no longer the option of reneging on a monastic vow and adopting a married life, as seemed to be suggested by Cyprian and Methodius.¹⁵⁶ Jerome makes no distinction between the breaking of a monastic vow to marry or to commit fornication; for a consecrated virgin, every sexual act carries with it the fate of Lot’s wife.¹⁵⁷

the vessel consecrated with reason to Christ, sanctified to the Holy Spirit, you defiled with sacrilege, and unmindful of your purpose, and despiser of divine judgement?’ Pseudo-Ambrose, *De Lapsu Virginis Consecratae*, IX. 39 (My translation).

¹⁵⁵ Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, xvi, p. 27. Instead Jerome tells her only to associate with other virgins whose ascetic practices reveal the truth of their vocation: ‘Let your companions be women pale and thin with fasting, and approved by their years and conduct.’ Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, xvii, p. 28.

¹⁵⁶ Cf. Cyprian: ‘if they have consecrated themselves in good faith to Christ, let them remain virtuous and chaste without any rumour to the contrary; let them thus, courageous and unwavering, await the reward of virginity. But if they are unwilling or unable to persevere, let them marry rather than fall into hell for their transgressions.’ Cyprian, *Epistola IV.ii*, in *The Father of the Church: Saint Cyprian Letters (1-81)*, trans. Sister Rose Bernard Donna (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1981 [1964]), pp. 10-14, (p. 11). Cf. Methodius: “‘But if any man think that he behaveth himself uncomely towards his virgin”, he says, “if she pass the flower of her age, and need so require, let him do what he will, he sinneth not: let him marry”’; properly here preferring marriage to “uncomliness”, in the case of those who had chosen the state of virginity, but afterwards finding it intolerable and grievous, and in word boasting of their perseverance before men, out of shame, but indeed no longer having the power to persevere in the life of a eunuch.’ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, III.xiv, pp. 35-6.

¹⁵⁷ Cf. Jerome: ‘But if even real virgins, when they have other failings, are not saved by their physical virginity, what shall become of those who have prostituted the members of Christ, and have changed the temple of the Holy Ghost into a brothel? [...] Better had it been for her to have submitted to the yoke of marriage, to have walked in level places, than thus, aspiring to loftier heights, to fall into the deep of hell.’ Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, v-vi p. 24.

In order to avoid such a fate, Jerome recommends the preservation of virginity through the avoidance of wine,¹⁵⁸ and a regime involving fasting in order to help control the body.¹⁵⁹ He provides *exempla* from the Old Testament to demonstrate the efficacy of fasting and to validate the practice through its provenance;¹⁶⁰ he sees the Old Testament food laws as a precursor to Christian fasting.¹⁶¹ In addition, Jerome shows how often the body is tempted through the stomach, and claims that the close proximity of the genitals to the stomach implies a kinship between them.¹⁶² He further draws out the link between gluttony and sin through an ascetic reading of the Fall:

By them [the *exempla*] you will understand why the first man, obeying his belly and not God, was cast down from paradise into this vale of tears; and why Satan used hunger to tempt the Lord Himself in the wilderness; and why the apostle cries: ‘Meats for the belly and the belly for meats, but God shall destroy both it and them;’ and why he speaks of the self-indulgent as men ‘whose God is their belly.’¹⁶³

Like Chrysostom, Jerome also reads the Fall in terms of the loss of virginity.¹⁶⁴ Virginity accompanied by fasting, then, becomes a means of recapturing the prelapsarian state.¹⁶⁵

¹⁵⁸ Cf. Jerome: ‘avoid wine as you would avoid poison. For wine is the first weapon used by demons against the young. [...] wine and youth between them kindle the fire of sensual pleasure’. Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, viii, p. 25.

¹⁵⁹ Cf. Jerome: ‘You must never let suggestions of evil grow on you, or a babel of disorder win strength in your breast. Slay the enemy while he is small; and, that you may not have a crop of tares, nip the evil in the bud’; ‘Because natural heat inevitably kindles in a man sensual passion, he is praised and accounted happy who, when foul suggestions arise in his mind, gives them no quarter, but dashes them instantly against the rock.’ Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, vi, p. 24; vi, p. 24.

¹⁶⁰ Cf. Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, ix, pp. 25-6.

¹⁶¹ Cf. Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, II.xv, p. 399.

¹⁶² Cf. Jerome: ‘In his assaults on men, therefore, the devil’s strength is in the loins; in his attacks on women his force is in the navel.’ Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, xi, p. 26. Jerome provides many examples of Old Testament figures who have fallen due to lust. Cf. Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, xii, p. 26.

¹⁶³ Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, x, p. 26.

¹⁶⁴ Cf. Jerome: ‘In paradise Eve was a virgin, and it was only after the coats of skin that she began her married life. Now paradise is your home too. Keep therefore your birthright.’ Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, xix, p. 29.

¹⁶⁵ Cf. Jerome: ‘Care must be taken, therefore, that abstinence may bring back to Paradise those whom satiety once drove out.’ Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, x, p. 26.

Even though fasting is a useful exercise for mortifying the body and controlling its voluptuousness, Jerome cautions Eustochium that fasting is not good in itself:

Not that the Creator and Lord of all takes pleasure in a rumbling and empty stomach, or in fevered lungs; but that these are indispensable as means to the preservation of chastity.¹⁶⁶

Fasting is only useful for the preservation of virginity. Nevertheless, even though virgins choose a life of prelapsarian perfection, Jerome warns that the spectre of the threat of temptation and fall continually haunts this life.¹⁶⁷ He proffers himself as an example of one who, even though he was emaciated with fasting, could not control his lascivious thoughts. He relates his personal experience in perhaps the most famous passage from the letter: the description of a mirage which haunted him during his torturous sojourn in the desert as an anchoritic monk:¹⁶⁸

Now, although in my fear of hell I had consigned myself to this prison, where I had no companions but scorpions and wild beasts, I often found myself amid bevvies of girls. My face was pale and my frame chilled with fasting, yet my mind was burning with desire, and the fires of lust kept bubbling up before me when my flesh was as good as dead.¹⁶⁹

Jerome reasons that if solitary men, who have been systematically mortifying their bodies for months in the desert, are still susceptible to the temptations of the body, what chance do women, living in a worldly environment, have?¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁶ Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, xi, p. 26

¹⁶⁷ Cf. Jerome: 'Yet, should we not weep and groan when the serpent invites us, as he invited our first parents, to eat forbidden fruit, and when after expelling us from the paradise of virginity he desires to clothe us with mantles of skins such as that which Elijah, on his return to paradise, left behind him on earth?' Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, xviii, p. 29.

¹⁶⁸ Cf. Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, vii, pp. 24-5.

¹⁶⁹ Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, vii, p. 25.

¹⁷⁰ Cf. Jerome: 'Now, if such are the temptations of men, who, since their bodies are emaciated with fasting, have only their evil thoughts to fear, how must it fare with a girl whose surroundings are those of luxury and ease?' Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, viii, p. 25.

The model that Jerome provides for virgins to preserve their virginity closely follows Athanasius' account of Mary's life.¹⁷¹ A virgin should associate only with other virgins; be respectful towards her parents; remain in the home; be moderate in eating; and be prayerful and studious.¹⁷² Jerome suggests that virginity is another type of desire: 'The love of the flesh is overcome by the love of the spirit. Desire is quenched by desire.'¹⁷³ Drawing on the traditional nuptial imagery of virginity, he characterises Christ as a jealous husband Who requires His bride to behave in a modest way.¹⁷⁴ Jerome recommends that virgins should remain enclosed and veiled, in order not to be subject to the public gaze;¹⁷⁵ they should not listen to 'words of mischief';¹⁷⁶ they should avoid public places;¹⁷⁷ they should 'avoid the snare of vainglory',¹⁷⁸ neither trying to gain renown for their ascetic holiness, nor trying to appear too cultured.¹⁷⁹ Jerome does not state that he is providing a Marian model as such, but he does later exhort virgins to imitate Mary: 'Set before you the blessed Mary, whose surpassing purity made her meet to be the mother of the Lord.'¹⁸⁰ Again following Athanasius, Jerome suggests that a virgin is able to imitate the mother of God in a more profound way by conceiving Christ

¹⁷¹ Cf. Athanasius: 'Therefore, let the life of Mary, the bearer of God, be for all of you, as it is written an [image and likeness of] her virginity. For it is best for you to recognise yourselves in her as in a mirror and so govern yourselves. Complete the good deeds you have forgotten, and increase the things you have done well, so that your life too might serve for a time as an image for others; continually look to the instruction of others.' Athanasius, *First Letter to Virgins*, xii, p. 277.

¹⁷² Cf. Jerome: 'Read often, learn all that you can.' Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, xvii, p. 28.

¹⁷³ Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, vii, p. 28.

¹⁷⁴ Cf. Jerome: 'Jesus is jealous. He does not choose that your face should be seen of others.' Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, xxv, p. 32.

¹⁷⁵ Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, xxiii, p. 31. Jerome utilises the image of the *hortus conclusus* to describe the enclosed body of the virgin (cf. Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, xxv, p. 32).

¹⁷⁶ Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, xxiv, p. 31.

¹⁷⁷ Cf. Jerome: 'Let foolish virgins stray abroad, but for your part stay at home with the bridegroom.' Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, xxvi, p. 33.

¹⁷⁸ Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, xxvii, p. 33.

¹⁷⁹ Cf. Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, xxix, p. 34.

¹⁸⁰ Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, xxxviii, p. 39.

in her heart and by so doing a virgin ‘may become the Lord’s mother’.¹⁸¹ A virgin can, therefore, partake in the mystery of the Incarnation.

As a foil to his model of the perfect virgin, Jerome sets forth paradigms of fallen virgins. Like his contemporary John Chrysostom, Jerome criticises heretical virgins. He reiterates the necessity of orthodoxy for the validation of virginity. He says that ‘[a]ll such efforts are only of use when they are made within the Church’s pale’.¹⁸² Therefore, the heretical virgin ‘may be a virgin in body [but] not in spirit’.¹⁸³ Jerome says of heretical virgins:

Such virgins as there are said to be among the followers of the infamous Manes must be considered, not virgins, but prostitutes. For if – as they allege – the devil is the author of the body, how can they honour that which is fashioned by their foe? No; it is because they know that the name virgin brings glory with it, that they go about as wolves in sheep’s clothing. As antichrist pretends to be Christ, such virgins assume an honourable name, that they may the better cloak a discreditable life. Rejoice, my sister; rejoice, my daughter; rejoice, my virgin; for you have resolved to be, in reality, that which others insincerely feign.¹⁸⁴

By claiming the devil is the author of the body, the dualist/Manichaean view of the body erroneously lends God’s creative powers to the devil. Jerome attacks the virginity of the heretics which is based on illogical beliefs: they cannot honour the body with virginity if they consider the body to be intrinsically evil. Thus, he says, they embrace virginity merely for false glory. For the reason that they are, by their very nature, false, ‘they must be considered’ the opposite of what they pretend to be, ‘not virgins, but prostitutes’. They

¹⁸¹ Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, xxxviii, p. 39.

¹⁸² Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, xxxviii, p. 39. Cf. also Jerome: ‘For we are not commending virgins of the world so much as those who are virgins for Christ’s sake.’ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I.xxiii, p. 363.

¹⁸³ Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, xxxviii, p. 39. ‘But he immediately points out the contents of her thought – that she may be holy both in body and spirit. For there are virgins in the flesh, not in the spirit, whose body is intact, their soul corrupt. But that virgin is a sacrifice to Christ, whose mind has not been defiled by thought, nor her flesh by lust.’ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. xiii, p. 357.

¹⁸⁴ Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, xxxviii, p. 39.

are like the antichrist who, by feigning holiness, brings those who follow him into perdition.

It is not only the heretical virgins who exhibit a false virginity, however. Jerome rails against other false virgins in the Church itself. He denounces the *virgines subintroductae*, who he terms *agapetae*. Unlike Chrysostom, Jerome does not give them the benefit of the doubt.¹⁸⁵ He says: '[they] profess to have but one object, to find spiritual consolation from those not of their kin, but their real aim is to indulge in sexual intercourse.'¹⁸⁶ Additionally, echoing Tertullian's *De velandis virginibus*, Jerome draws attention to the countless number of fallen virgins. These seek attention from men and generally behave like prostitutes. In addition, the loss of their virginity leads to other monstrous crimes:

When they find themselves with child through their sin, use drugs to procure abortion, and when (as often happens) they die with their own offspring, they enter the lower world laden with the guilt not only of adultery against Christ, but also of suicide and child murder.¹⁸⁷

Along with such crimes, these women, who refuse to practise asceticism themselves, criticise others who do: 'when they see another pale or sad they call her "wretch" or "manichaeon;" quite logically, indeed, for on their principles fasting involves heresy.'¹⁸⁸

Although the false virgins accuse their holier counterparts in order to hide their own ascetic failures, their accusations suggest a *soupeçon* of anti-ascetic sentiment in the

¹⁸⁵ Cf. Jerome: 'How comes this plague of the agapetae to be in the church? Whence come these unwedded wives, these novel concubines, these harlots, so I will call them, though they cling to a single partner? One house holds them and one chamber. They often occupy the same bed, and yet they call us suspicious if we fancy anything amiss. A brother leaves his virgin sister; a virgin, slighting her unmarried brother, seeks a brother in a stranger. Both alike profess to have but one object, to find spiritual consolation from those not of their kin; but their real aim is to indulge in sexual intercourse.' Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, xiii, p. 27

¹⁸⁶ Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, xiv, p. 27.

¹⁸⁷ Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, xiii, p. 27.

¹⁸⁸ Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, xiii, p. 27.

treatise. Indeed, Jerome also addresses Christian mothers who attempt to thwart their daughters' virginal aspirations:

Why, mother, do you grudge your daughter her virginity? [...] Are you angry with her because she chooses to be a king's wife and not a soldier's? She has conferred on you a high privilege; you are now the mother-in-law of God.¹⁸⁹

This image reflects a similar cultural hostility to that which Ambrose experienced and related in his treatises. Jerome exhorts virgins never to let their families prevail in preventing their vocation.¹⁹⁰ They should imitate Mary Magdalene, who, ignoring her sister's criticism, chose the 'better part', the contemplative life.¹⁹¹

Jerome also condemns women who seek to win fame by pretending to live a life of virginity and extreme asceticism:

Some women, it is true, disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. As soon as they catch sight of any one they groan, they look down; they cover up their faces, all but one eye, which they keep free to see with. Their dress is sombre, their girdles are of sackcloth, their hands and feet are dirty; only their stomachs – which cannot be seen – are hot with food.¹⁹²

To all intents and purposes, such virgins appear to be models of holiness. These false virgins demonstrate the danger of giving too much credence to the outward appearance when judging holiness. Although there are norms of behaviour that a virgin should follow, this is open to abuse. There are other virgins, too, who act in an unseemly manner and so contradict their claims to holiness: women who cut off their hair and so resemble

¹⁸⁹ Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, xx, p. 30.

¹⁹⁰ Cf. Jerome: 'Let no one dare to forbid you, neither mother nor sister nor kinswoman nor brother.'

Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, xxiv, p. 32.

¹⁹¹ Cf. Luke: 'Now it came to pass as they went, that he entered into a certain town: and a certain woman named Martha, received him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sitting also at the Lord's feet, heard his word. But Martha was busy about much serving. Who stood and said: Lord, hast thou no care that my sister hath left me alone to serve? speak to her therefore, that she help me. And the Lord answering, said to her: Martha, Martha, thou art careful, and art troubled about many things: But one thing is necessary. Mary hath chosen the best part, which shall not be taken away from her' (Luke 10: 38-42).

¹⁹² Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, xxvii, p. 34.

eunuchs,¹⁹³ and women who by wearing hoods ‘think to become children again by making themselves look like so many owls’.¹⁹⁴ The false ascetic, the female eunuch and the childish ‘owls’ all try to make themselves notable by peculiar or ostentatious behaviour. In contrast, a true virgin does not look for the approbation of men, but is content with God’s approval alone. There are other women, however, who also pretend to have a true vocation, but merely choose virginity for self-serving reasons: ‘if a girl pretends to have a vocation simply because she desires to escape from service, read aloud to her the words of the apostle: “It is better to marry than to burn”’.¹⁹⁵ Jerome emphasises that it is the intention behind the vocation that determines the achievement of virginity. Virginity aims for a total devotion to God; if one adopts virginity simply for selfish reasons, then it cannot be true virginity. Jerome denounces the whole gamut of false virgins who pollute the Church: ‘We cast out, then, and banish from our sight those who only wish to seem and not to be virgins.’¹⁹⁶ In addition to false virgins, Jerome denounces widows who do not behave in a chaste manner, but instead luxuriate in worldliness,¹⁹⁷ and warns virgins to be on their guard against ecclesiasts who seek preferment in order to meet women more easily. Such men are identifiable by their luxurious living; they are effeminate and ‘feign a sad mien and pretend to make long fasts while at night they feast

¹⁹³ Cf. Jerome: ‘Others change their garb and assume the mien of men, being ashamed of being what they were born to be – women. They cut off their hair and are not ashamed to look like eunuchs.’ Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, xxvii, p. 34.

¹⁹⁴ Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, xxvii, p. 34.

¹⁹⁵ Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, xxix, p. 35. Jerome does confess his own inability to forego pagan literature and describes it as undoing the work of his fasting: ‘I would fast only that I might afterwards read Cicero.’ Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, xxx, p. 35.

¹⁹⁶ Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, xv, p. 27.

¹⁹⁷ Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, xvi, p. 28.

in secret'.¹⁹⁸ Such ecclesiastical caricatures were part of the reason why Jerome became so unpopular with the Roman clergy.

Epistola XXII is especially interesting in terms of Jerome's personal anecdotes, but with regards to the ascetic tradition it provides fairly stock images in favour of virginity. The concern over hypocritical and heretical virgins resonates throughout the whole of the tradition from Tertullian onwards, and highlights the problem of 'outward man', which can demonstrate the state of the 'inner man' but also can be manipulated to provide a false witness to interior purity. The ascetic reading of the fall echoes Chrysostom's discussion and is probably a consequence of parallel growth of biblical exegesis on Genesis and asceticism. The treatise draws heavily on nuptial imagery to praise the elevated state of virginity, and to demonstrate how it is superior to earthly marriage. Jerome's tendency towards a negative representation of marriage is discernable in the treatise, but does not yet reach those dizzy heights that he achieves in *Adversus Jovinianum*.

iii. *Adversus Jovinianum*

Jerome composed his *Adversus Jovinianum* (c. 393) about ten years after *Adversus Helvidium* and *Epistola XXII* in reply to a pamphlet published by the monk Jovinian, which denied the superiority of virginity over marriage.¹⁹⁹ Jovinian's treatise appears to have had a startling effect in Rome. Both Jerome and Augustine relate that his teachings

¹⁹⁸ Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, xxviii, p. 34. Also, see Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, xxvii, pp. 33-4.

¹⁹⁹ Jerome comments that Jovinian still regards himself as a monk, but he represents his behaviour as expressive of the loss of that state: 'although he [Jovinian] still boasts of being a monk, he has exchanged his dirty tunic, bare feet, common bread, and drink of water, for a snowy dress, sleek skin, honey-wine and dainty dishes, for the sauces of Apicius and Paxamus, for baths and rubbings, and for the cook-shops.' Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I.xl, p. 378.

had caused consecrated virgins to give up their profession.²⁰⁰ By this time Jerome was living in Bethlehem, but he had been asked by some ‘holy brethren of Rome’²⁰¹ to compose a thorough refutation of Jovinian’s propositions. David Hunter notes that ‘Pope Siricius, Ambrose, and Jerome [were] the three authors who were the first to respond to Jovinian’.²⁰² Jovinian’s ideas were condemned by Pope Siricius at a synod held in Rome.²⁰³ Jovinian then fled to Milan where he was condemned at yet another synod, but this time presided over by Saint Ambrose.²⁰⁴ There is some debate over the exact dating of these two synods. Some critics favour a date of 390,²⁰⁵ but others, noting Jerome’s failure to mention the condemnation in *Adversus Jovinianum*, suggest that Jerome could not have known about them.²⁰⁶ Indeed, Jerome’s parting shot in Book II of *Adversus Jovinianum* is an exhortation to the See of Rome to condemn Jovinian and cleanse the

²⁰⁰ Cf. Jerome: ‘Your virgins whom, with a depth of wisdom never found before in speech or writing, you have taught the apostle’s maxim that it is better to marry than to burn, have turned secret adulterers into acknowledged husbands.’ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, II. xxxvi, pp. 414-5. Cf. Augustine: ‘The heresy of Jovinian, in equating the merit of consecrated virgins with conjugal chastity, gained such wide currency in the city of Rome that it was said that quite a number of nuns whose chastity had earlier been under no suspicion had withdrawn into marriages.’ Augustine, *Retractationes* 2. 22 in *Augustine: De bono coniugali and De sancta virginitate*, trans. P. G. Walsh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 149. Cf. Hunter: ‘Augustine, though writing at some distance from the controversy, reported that Jovinian’s arguments had caused many professed ascetics at Rome, male and female alike, to abandon celibacy and to marry. Augustine even pointed out that some of these converts to Jovinian’s teaching were ascetics of advanced age, “about whose chastity there had previously been no suspicion”.’ Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity*, p. 18.

²⁰¹ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I.i, p. 346.

²⁰² Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity*, p. 15.

²⁰³ Cf. Jerome: ‘if a virgin and a wife are to be looked on as the same, how comes it that Rome has refused to listen to this impious doctrine?’ Saint Jerome, *Epistola XLVIII Ad Pammachium*, ii, p. 66.

²⁰⁴ Cf. Ambrose: ‘these very persons have paid a price befitting their disloyalty, having even come here so that there might be no place where they were not condemned. [...] May your Holiness know that those whom you condemned – Jovinian, Auxentius, Germinator, Felix, Plotinus, Genial, Martian, Januarius and Ingeniosus – have also been condemned by us in accord with your judgement.’ Saint Ambrose, *Epistola 44 (42). To our lord, dearly beloved Brother Pope Siricius in Saint Ambrose. Letters*, trans. Sister Mary Melchior Beyenka (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001 [1954]), pp. 225-230, (p. 229-30).

²⁰⁵ Cf. Hritz: ‘These errors which were denounced to Pope Siricius by Pammachius, an intimate friend of St Jerome, were condemned in a synod held at Rome in the year 390.’ Hritz, ‘General Introduction’ to *Saint Jerome: Dogmatic and Polemical Works*, p. xii.

²⁰⁶ Cf. Kelly: ‘Jerome would certainly have made the most of Jovinian’s disgrace in his diatribe against him [...] had he the least inkling of it.’ Kelly, *Jerome*, p. 182.

city of his polluting influence.²⁰⁷ It seems probable, then, that the synods were held at the same time Jerome was writing his treatise.²⁰⁸

Jerome begins by enumerating Jovinian's heretical propositions, with a view to refuting them in the same order:²⁰⁹

[Jovinian] says that 'virgins, widows, and married women, who have been once passed through the laver of Christ, if they are on a par in other respects, are of equal merit.' He endeavours to show that 'they who with full assurance of faith have been born again in baptism, cannot be overthrown by the devil.' His third point is 'that there is no difference between abstinence from food, and its reception with thanksgiving.' The fourth and last is that there is one reward in the kingdom of heaven for all who have kept their baptismal vow.²¹⁰

Jerome contests each of Jovinian's assertions in two books.²¹¹ Jerome's ascetic interests dominate the denunciation of Jovinian: the first book deals entirely with Jovinian's first proposition that there is no difference in virtue between virginity, widowhood and marriage, whereas the second book refutes the other three theses. Hritzu notes that

The errors [of Jovinian] were far more serious than they seemed at first. The whole Christian system of morality was at stake; for Jovinian was preaching salvation by faith alone, and the uselessness of good works for salvation.²¹²

²⁰⁷ Cf. Jerome: 'But I will now address myself to you, great Rome, who with the confession of Christ have blotted out the blasphemy written on your forehead. Mighty city, mistress-city of the world, city of the Apostle's praises, shew the meaning of your name. *Rome* is either *strength* in Greek, or *height* in Hebrew. Lose not the excellence your name implies: let virtue lift you up on high, let not voluptuousness bring you low. By repentance, as the history of Nineveh proves, you may escape the curse wherewith the Saviour threatened you in the Apocalypse. Beware of the name of Jovinianus. It is derived from that of an idol [i.e., Jove]. The Capitol is in ruins: the temples of Jove with their ceremonies have perished. Why should his name and vices flourish now in the midst of you, when even in the time of Numa Pompilius, even under the sway of kings, your ancestors gave a heartier welcome to the self-restraint of Pythagoras than they did under the consuls to the debauchery of Epicurus?' Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, II.xxxviii, pp. 415-6.

²⁰⁸ Cf. Hunter: 'the most likely date for the synods at Rome and Milan is approximately the same as the date of the composition of *Adversus Jovinianum*, that is, the spring of 393.' Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity*, p. 17.

²⁰⁹ For speculations on the structure and content of Jovinian's tract see, Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity*, pp. 26-7.

²¹⁰ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I.iii, p. 348.

²¹¹ Cf. Leigh-Bennett: '[Jerome's] reply, which runs into two books, displays a great mass of learning; for he cites in endless detail the Old and New Testaments, Greek and Roman history, philosophy, mythology, poetry, and even Buddhism.' Leigh-Bennett, *Handbook of the Early Christian Fathers*, p. 281.

²¹² Hritzu, 'General Introduction' to *Saint Jerome: Dogmatic and Polemical Works*, p. xii. Cf. Leigh-Bennett: 'Jovinian (393) also attacked virginity, saying that it was no better in God's sight than marriage;

Although Jerome devotes the most attention to the question of the supremacy of virginity over marriage, the other three propositions do have an effect on the evaluation of the relative merits of virginity and marriage, and Jerome does not ignore these implications.²¹³ For instance, Jovinian's assertions that those who have been baptized cannot be overthrown by the devil and that there is only 'one reward in the kingdom of heaven for all who have kept their baptismal vow' denies the efficacy of virtue and good works. Jerome uses evidence from Scripture which demonstrates a difference of reward, such as the Parable of the Sowers.²¹⁴ This is a particularly apt metaphor for Jerome's purpose, as it has always been interpreted as describing the three levels of chastity:

If virgins are first-fruits, it follows that widows and the continent in marriage, come after the first fruits, that is, are in the second and third rank: nor can a lost people be saved unless it offer such sacrifices of chastity to God, and with pure victims reconcile the spotless lamb.²¹⁵

Because the Parable of the Sowers was used traditionally to articulate the different merits due to virginity, widowhood and marital chastity, it was already laden with ascetic values. It also provides a connection between the three levels of chastity, and so, although

but he extended his attack much further, denouncing fasting as well; declaring also that no sin was possible after a true baptism of the spirit, and that there would only be one class of rewards and punishments hereafter.' Leigh-Bennett, *Handbook of the Early Christian Fathers*, p. 281.

²¹³ Cf. Jerome: 'If there is no difference between a virgin and a widow, both being baptized, because baptism makes a new man, upon the same principle harlots and prostitutes, if they are baptized, will be equal to virgins.' Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I.xxxiii, p. 370; 'For he who maintains all to be of equal merit, does no less injury to virginity in comparing it to marriage than he does to marriage, when he allows it to be lawful, but to the same extent as second and third marriages. But to digamists and trigamists he does wrong, for he places on a level with them whoremongers and the most licentious persons as soon as they have repented; but perhaps those who have been married twice or thrice ought not to complain, for the same whoremonger if penitent is made equal in the kingdom of heaven even to virgins.' Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I.iv, p. 348.

²¹⁴ Cf. Jerome: 'The Parable of Sowers demonstrates that there is proportional reward depending on what goods you bring forth.' Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, II. xix, p. 403.

²¹⁵ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. xl, p. 378.

marriage enjoys the lesser reward, it is still spiritually productive.²¹⁶ All three states, therefore, partake in chastity, but to different degrees.²¹⁷

Jovinian's assertion that there is 'no difference between abstinence from food, and its reception with thanksgiving' can also be seen to constitute an attack on virginity. In *Epistola XXII*, Jerome had underscored the connection between fasting and virginity, and claimed that fasting is an indispensable ascetic exercise for the preservation of virginity. Throughout *Adversus Jovinianum*, Jerome portrays Jovinian as 'the Epicurus of Christianity'²¹⁸ and links this depiction with an excessive lustfulness; if fasting promotes virginity, then gluttony must excite lust. Jerome asserts that Jovinian's treatise is prompted by the self-interest of a man possessing a voluptuous and insatiable nature; even his barbarous writing style reflects his voracity.²¹⁹ He accuses Jovinian of the basest perversions, 'wantoning in his gardens with his favourites of both sexes', and claims that he has 'set his mark of approval on baths in which the sexes bathe together'.²²⁰ It is perhaps no coincidence that Jerome mentions the unisex bathing, which had been proscribed for virgins by Cyprian due to its immodesty and its incompatibility with virginity.²²¹ The allusion, hearkening back as it does to Cyprian's injunctions,

²¹⁶ Cf. Jerome: 'But since in the Church there is a diversity of gifts, I acquiesce in marriage, lest I should seem to condemn nature. [...] I grant that even marriage is a gift of God, but between gift and gift there is great diversity.' Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. viii, p. 352.

²¹⁷ Cf. Jerome: 'Virginity is to marriage what fruit is to the tree, or grain to the straw. Although the hundred-fold, the sixty-fold, and the thirty-fold spring from one earth and from one sowing, yet there is a great difference in respect of number.' Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. iii, p. 347.

²¹⁸ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. i, p. 346.

²¹⁹ Cf. Jerome: 'he has discharged himself like a sot after a night's debauch.' Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. i, p. 347.

²²⁰ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, II. xxxvi, p. 414.

²²¹ Cf. Cyprian: 'But what is to be said of those who go to the common baths and who prostitute to eyes that are devoted to lust bodies consecrated to chastity and modesty? Do not those who, in the presence of men, and naked, with no sense of shame behold men and are seen by them, offer themselves an inducement to vice? Do they not excite and arouse the desire of those present to their own dishonour and harm?'

demonstrates that Jovinian champions anything that constitutes an affront to virginity.

Taking his cue from an ascetic reading of the fall,²²² Jerome casts Jovinian as the serpent in Eden; his words are the ‘hissing of the old serpent’²²³ and he is leading those who were once virginal, like Adam and Eve, to perdition.²²⁴ Jerome states that Jovinian has ‘a following of pigs, whom [he] is feeding to make pork for hell’.²²⁵ While Jovinian has succeeded in winning ex-professed virgins to his cause, Jerome assures him that he has not won converts, but rather exposed the hypocrites lurking unbeknownst in the Church.²²⁶

In *Adversus Jovinianum*, Jerome follows the same methodological approach as he does in *Adversus Helvidium* – the systematic refutation of the scriptural proofs adduced by his opponent.²²⁷ In doing so, Jerome mirror’s Jovinian’s own argument and also preserves much of Jovinian’s treatise through extensive quotations.²²⁸ Jerome provides the reason why he chooses to refute Jovinian with evidence from Scripture:

Cyprian, *De habitu virginum (On the Dress of Virgins)*, xix, in *Saint Cyprian: Treatises*, trans. and ed. Roy J. Deferrari (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1981 [1958]), pp. 31-52, (p. 47).

²²² David Hunter states that: ‘It was commonly held, for example by Ambrose and Jerome, that in paradise Adam and Eve were virgins and that sexual relations occurred only after the Fall.’ David Hunter, ‘“On the Sin of Adam and Eve”: A Little-Known Defence of Marriage and Childbearing by Ambrosiaster’, *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 82, No. 3 (Jul., 1989), 283-299, (p. 288).

²²³ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I.iii, p. 347.

²²⁴ Cf. Jerome: ‘while he [Jovinian] promises they shall be as gods, he drives them from paradise, with the result that they who, while naked and unhampered, and as virgins unspotted enjoyed the fellowship of the Lord, were cast down into the vale of tears and sewed skins together to clothe themselves withal.’ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I.iv, p. 348.

²²⁵ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, II.xxxvi, p. 414.

²²⁶ Cf. Jerome: ‘You have revealed your disciples, such as they are, not made them.’ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, II.xxxvi, p. 414.

²²⁷ Cf. Jerome: ‘I will therefore explain more clearly and in proper sequence the arguments he employs and the illustrations he adduces respecting marriage, and will treat them in the order in which he states them.’ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I.iv, p. 348.

²²⁸ Cf. Hunter: ‘Virtually all of the sources connected with the Jovinianist controversy speak of Jovinian’s extensive use of Scripture, and it is reasonable to assume that biblical citations figured prominently in Jovinian’s defence of his four theses.’ Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity*, p. 27.

I [...] will rely chiefly on the evidence of Scripture to refute them, for fear he may chatter and complain that he was overcome by rhetorical skill rather than the force of truth. If I succeed in this and with the aid of a cloud of witnesses from both Testaments prove too strong for him, I will accept his challenge, and adduce illustrations from secular literature.²²⁹

Indeed, Jerome begins by listing all the scriptural proofs that Jovinian uses in an attempt to prove that marriage was preferred in the Old Testament.²³⁰ These include the deluge, in which Noah and his family but no virgins were saved, and after which God reiterated His first command.²³¹ Additionally, Jovinian notes, the Old Testament nowhere praises virginity: the patriarchs were married men and whereas barrenness was considered a reproach,²³² the childbearing of Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel are shown to be blessed.²³³ Jerome, however, does not deny that the Old Testament prefers marriage or that the Jewish emphasis was on marriage and childbirth, rather than virginity. In addition, he accepts the holiness of the married Old Testament prophets, who abided by God's first mandate to increase and multiply.²³⁴ Despite this acknowledgement, Jerome draws a distinction between the (marriage) Law of the Old Testament and the New Covenant that Christ brought, which supersedes that of the Old.²³⁵

²²⁹ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I.iv, p. 348.

²³⁰ Cf. Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I.v, pp. 348-50.

²³¹ Cf. Genesis: 'And God blessed Noe and his sons. And he said to them: Increase and multiply, and fill the earth.' (Genesis 9: 1).

²³² Cf. Jerome: 'The Jews gloried in children and child-bearing; and the barren woman, who had not offspring in Israel, was accursed'. Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. xxii, p. 362.

²³³ Cf. Jerome: 'Sarah, typifying the Church, when it had ceased to be with her after the manner of women, exchanged the curse of barrenness for the blessing of childbearing.' Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. v, p. 349.

²³⁴ Cf. Jerome: 'And seeing that they [Old Testament priests] had wives, they would be rightly brought against us, if, led away by the error of the Encratites, we were to maintain that marriage deserved censure.' Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. xxiii, p. 363; 'But who does not know that under the other dispensation of God all the saints of past times were of equal merit with Christians at the present day? As Abraham in days gone by pleased God in wedlock, so virgins now please Him in perpetual virginity.' Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, II. iv, p. 390.

²³⁵ Cf. Jerome: 'Let us who served marriage under the law, serve virginity under the Gospel.' Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. xxix, p. 368.

I do not disparage our predecessors under the law, but am well aware that they served their generation according to their circumstances, and fulfilled the Lord's command to increase and multiply and replenish the earth. And what is more they were figure of those that were to come. But we to whom it is said, 'The time is shortened, that henceforth these that have wives may be as though they had none,' have a different command, and for us virginity is consecrated by the virgin Saviour.²³⁶

Although there is increased interest in Mary's perpetual virginity in the fourth century, as attested by *Adversus Helvidium*, it is still Christ's virginity that Jerome holds up as the primary example of the perfect Christian life. This, most likely, is because of Jerome's insistence on a very strict adherence to Scripture.

Although Jerome diligently sifts Jovinian's Old Testament *exempla* and provides alternative exegetical interpretations for them, his main argument for the supremacy of virginity is drawn from the New Testament. He locates the main scriptural authorisation of virginity in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, which forms the vanguard in Jerome's main attack: 'In the front rank I will set the Apostle Paul, and, since he is the bravest of generals, will arm him with his own weapons, that is to say, his own statements.'²³⁷ As with Chrysostom's *On Virginity*, Jerome's treatise provides an extended exegesis of I Corinthians 7, but his exposition of Saint Paul's epistle tends to emphasise the disadvantages of marriage. Jerome emphasises that Saint Paul's authorisation of marriage is primarily for the avoidance of fornication:

If it is good not to touch a woman, it is bad to touch one: for there is no opposition to goodness but badness. But if it be bad and the evil is pardoned, the reason for the concession is to prevent worse evil. But surely a thing which is only allowed because there may be something worse has only a slight degree of goodness.²³⁸

²³⁶ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. xiv, p. 364.

²³⁷ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I.vi, p. 350.

²³⁸ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I.vii, p. 350.

Here, Jerome is discussing the goodness of sexual contact in general.²³⁹ He articulates an understanding, based on Paul's assertion that it is 'good not to touch a woman', that intercourse is bad since touch implies the acquisition of sexual knowledge: 'As then he who touches fire is instantly burned, so by the mere touch the peculiar nature of man and woman is perceived, and the difference of sex is understood.'²⁴⁰ Even in marital congress, lust is always present. The 'evil' of intercourse, however, is pardoned when it takes place in marriage; thus, sex in marriage is a venial sin. Marriage is a concession for the prevention of fornication:

The reason why it is better to marry is that it is worse to burn. Let burning lust be absent, and he will not say it is better to marry. The word *better* always implies a comparison with something worse, not a thing absolutely good and incapable of comparison.²⁴¹

Although marriage pardons the sinfulness of intercourse, the marital state inevitably involves lust in intercourse and so there is an implication that matrimony is not wholly good in itself. Jerome argues that Paul presents a negative picture of marriage, not only because he concedes to marriage only on account of fornication, but also because of the imagery that he uses:

²³⁹ Cf. Jerome: 'I am not expounding the law as to husbands and wives, but simply discussing the general question of sexual intercourse.' Jerome, *Epistola XLVIII Ad Pammachium*, xiv, p. 73.

²⁴⁰ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. vii, p. 350. Jerome uses the image from Proverbs 6: 23-28 of a man carrying fire in his clothes to represent the danger of touching a woman, which inevitably leads to burning: "'Can a man take fire in his bosom, and his clothes not be burned? Or can one walk upon hot coals, and his feet not be scorched?'" As then he who touches fire is instantly burned, so by the mere touch the peculiar nature of man and woman is perceived, and the difference of sex understood.' Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I.vii, p. 350. The same image was utilised by Chrysostom in order to represent the moral strength of virginity, which can carry burning coals (desire) within its clothes (body) and not be burned: 'the virgin [...] has no remedy to extinguish the fire. She sees it rising to a crescendo and coming to a peak, but she lacks the power to put it out. [...] Is there, then, anything more extraordinary than carrying within one all of this fire and not being burnt? To collect in the inner chambers of the soul this fire but to keep one's thoughts untouched by it?' Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, XXXIV.iv, in *John Chrysostom: On Virginity. Against Remarriage*, trans. Sally Rieger Shore (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1982), pp. 1-128, (p. 46-7).

²⁴¹ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. ix, p. 352.

If marriage in itself be good, do not compare it with fire, but simply say 'It is good to marry'. I suspect the goodness of that thing which is forced into the position of being only the lesser of two evils. What I want is not a smaller evil, but a thing absolutely good.²⁴²

The presence of lust, albeit in the licit state of marriage, creates barriers to a life of holiness, especially if lust is allowed to gain the upper hand. For those that would be perfect, therefore, a life of virginity is the only option. Thus, Paul demonstrates the supremacy of the virginal life through his own choice of celibacy, which is in itself an *imitatio Christi*:

Happy is the man who is like Paul! Fortunate is he who attends to the Apostle's commands, not to his concession. This says he, I wish, this I desire, that you be imitators of me, as I also am of Christ, who was a Virgin born of a Virgin, uncorrupt of her who was uncorrupt. We, because we are men, cannot imitate our Lord's nativity; but we may at least imitate His life. The former was the blessed prerogative of divinity, the latter belongs to our human condition and is part of human effort.²⁴³

Following Gregory of Nyssa, Jerome claims that by imitating Christ, the virgin is also partaking in the divine nature.²⁴⁴ Jerome evokes the image of the sacrificed Lamb of God to remind Christians of their obligation as Christians to live a better life.²⁴⁵ A Christian life is one that should embrace purity.²⁴⁶

²⁴² Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. ix, p. 352.

²⁴³ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. viii, p. 352.

²⁴⁴ Cf. Jerome: 'Great and precious are the promises attaching to virginity which He has given us, that through it we may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world through lust.' Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. xxxix, p. 377.

²⁴⁵ Cf. Jerome: 'For we were not redeemed with contemptible things, with silver or gold; but with the precious blood of a lamb without spot, Jesus Christ, that we might purify our souls in obedience to the truth, having been begotten again not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, through the word of God, who liveth and abideth.' Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. xxxix, p. 377.

²⁴⁶ Cf. Jerome: 'Christ died for us in the flesh. Let us arm ourselves with the same conversation as did Christ; for he that hath suffered in the flesh hath ceased from sin; that we should no longer live the rest of our time in the flesh to the lusts of men, but to the will of God.' Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. xxxix, p. 377.

In addition to the dubious sexual element, marriage cannot be considered to be wholly good because Paul tells married couples to abstain from intercourse in order to pray. Jerome declares:

What, I pray you, is the quality of that good thing which hinders prayer? Which does not allow the body of Christ to be received? So long as I do the husband's part, I fail in continency. The same Apostle in another place commands us to pray always. If we are to pray always, it follows that we must never be in the bondage of wedlock, for as often as I render my wife her due, I cannot pray.²⁴⁷

Saint Peter also, Jerome notes, states that 'prayers are hindered by the performance of marriage duty'.²⁴⁸ Marriage, then, while it saves those who are likely to fall prey to lust from plummeting to their damnation because it prevents them from committing fornication, at the same time prevents the achievement of higher virtue. Jerome continues to argue that sexual intercourse must have some innate sinfulness attached to it, because Scripture shows that sexual congress precludes partaking in religious rituals. For instance, Jerome states that Old Testament priests were required to avoid intercourse if they were to make sacrifices; similarly, for Christians, sexual intercourse prohibits the reception of the Eucharist: 'For the shew-bread, like the body of Christ, might not be eaten by those who rose from the marriage bed.'²⁴⁹ Christian priests also are required to abstain from their wives when they are to make the sacrifice of the mass:

Now a priest must always offer sacrifices for the people: he must therefore always pray. And if he must always pray, he must always be released from the duties of marriage.²⁵⁰

As sexual intercourse proscribes religious activity, Jerome concludes that it must be innately polluting. As well as making a case for mandatory sacerdotal celibacy, Jerome

²⁴⁷ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I.vii, p. 351.

²⁴⁸ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I.vii, p. 351.

²⁴⁹ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. xx, p. 361.

²⁵⁰ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. xxxiv, pp. 371-2.

concludes that ‘in view of the purity of the body of Christ, all sexual intercourse is unclean’.²⁵¹ He glosses the words of ‘Christ’s rock’:

In effect he says this: Since your outer man is corrupt, and you have ceased to possess the blessing of incorruption characteristic of virgins, at least imitate the incorruption of the spirit by subsequent abstinence, and what you cannot show in the body exhibit in the mind.²⁵²

Married couples, although they have lost the ability to achieve complete purity because of the loss of bodily integrity, by imitating virginal chastity through sexual abstinence, they can still achieve a level of spiritual purity. Such was the problem that Gregory of Nyssa was wrestling with: can married couples achieve chastity while still partaking in the marriage act, or must they agree to be celibate in order to achieve chastity? Jerome clearly opts for latter proposition, for the reason that the sexual act distracts from prayer and it is the total commitment to religious devotion that primarily justifies the virginal state. He concludes unequivocally: ‘If corruption attaches to all intercourse, and incorruption is characteristic of chastity, the rewards of chastity cannot belong to marriage.’²⁵³

Apart from the demerits of intercourse, Jerome observes that, although the Church condones second marriages, it frowns upon them. With regard to the question of digamy (second marriages) Jerome makes it clear that he prefers monogamy, following Saint Paul and the example of Genesis.²⁵⁴ In addition, he also points out that even the pagans valued women who were *univira*, women who were the wives of one husband, and such

²⁵¹ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. xx, p. 361.

²⁵² Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I.vii, p. 351.

²⁵³ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I.xxxvii, p. 375.

²⁵⁴ Cf. Jerome: ‘At the beginning one rib was turned into one wife “And they two,” he says, “shall be one flesh”’: not three, or four; otherwise, how can they be any longer two, if they are several.’ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I.xiv, p. 358.

examples of pagan virtue should put Christians to shame.²⁵⁵ Jerome notes that Paul's instructions in his epistle to Timothy states that the Church should only financially support widows who are sexagenarians and *univira*.²⁵⁶

If she be deprived of the bread of charity, how much more is she deprived of that bread which cometh down from heaven, and of which if a man eat unworthily he shall be guilty of outrage offered to the body and blood of Christ.²⁵⁷

Although Jerome emphasises the Church's preference for *univira*, he does not, however, deny the acceptability of contracting another marriage after the death of a spouse; indeed, Saint Paul made this concession. Paul also, however, said:

‘All things are lawful, but not all things are expedient.’ I do not condemn second, nor third, nor, pardon the expression, eighth marriages: I will go still further and say that I welcome even a penitent whoremonger. Things that are equally lawful must be weighed in an even balance.²⁵⁸

So, although second marriages are allowable, they are undesirable. Jerome makes his own feelings on this point very clear and, in so doing, flies pretty close to the wind:

For as on account of the danger of fornication he allows virgins to marry, and makes that excusable which in itself is not desirable, so to avoid this same fornication, he allows second marriages to widows. For it is better to know a single husband, though he be a second or third, than to have many paramours: that is, it is more tolerable for a woman to prostitute herself to one man than to many.²⁵⁹

²⁵⁵ Cf. Jerome: ‘what am I to do when the women of our time press me with apostolic authority and before the first husband is buried, repeat from morning to night the precepts which allow a second marriage? Seeing they despise the fidelity which Christian purity dictates, let them at least learn chastity from the heathen.’ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. xlvii, p. 383; ‘When they find the Apostle conceding second marriages to depraved women, they will read that before the light of our religion shone upon the world wives of one husband ever held high rank among matrons.’ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. xli, p. 386. Jerome also shames Christian matrons by pagan women's commitment to chastity: ‘Let matrons, Christian matrons at all events, imitate the fidelity of concubines, and I exhibit in them freedom what she in her captivity preserved.’ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. xlv, p. 382.

²⁵⁶ Cf. Paul: ‘Let a widow be chosen of no less than threescore years of age, who hath been the wife of one husband’ (I Timothy 5: 9).

²⁵⁷ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. xiv, p. 359.

²⁵⁸ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. xv, p. 359.

²⁵⁹ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. xiv, p. 358.

This passage in particular caused outrage when *Adversus Jovinianum* was circulated.

Jerome was forced to defend himself as his words were taken to mean that he condemned first marriages as little more than legalised prostitution. Jerome asserted that the ‘single husband’ does not refer to the husband of a first marriage, but rather to a marriage contracted after the death of a spouse, and that, as the context shows, the whole passage has no relation to first marriages whatsoever.²⁶⁰ Jerome says that it is better for a woman to join herself to one man in marriage after being widowed, than to bestow herself indiscriminately in an orgy of unbridled lust; he accepts digamy and trigamy only to prevent fornication. Therefore, this strongly-worded passage is a version, albeit a tactless one, of Paul’s maxim ‘it is better to marry than to burn’.

During his exegesis on Paul, Jerome introduces the image of circumcision as a metaphor.²⁶¹ He says:

We must conclude, therefore, that a higher meaning should be given to circumcision and uncircumcision, bond and free, and that those words must be taken in close connection with what has gone before.²⁶²

Jerome equates circumcision with the state of being unmarried, and uncircumcision with marriage.²⁶³ By reading circumcision as a metaphor for virginity, the passage from Paul

²⁶⁰ Cf. Jerome: ‘Can anyone, moreover, be so unfair in his criticism of my poor treatise as to allege that I condemn first marriages, when he reads my opinion on second ones? [...] Calumny may do its worst. We have spoken here not of a first marriage, but of a second, or of a third, or (if you like) a fourth. But lest anyone should apply my words (that it is better for a woman to prostitute herself to one man than several) to a first marriage when my whole argument dealt with digamy and trigamy, I marked my own view of those practices with the words: “All things are lawful, but all things are not expedient” [I Corinthians 7: 12]. [...] My calumniator should blush at his assertion that I condemn first marriages when he reads my words just now quoted.’ Jerome, *Epistola XLVIII Ad Pammachium*, viii-ix, p. 70.

²⁶¹ Cf. Jerome: ‘The Apostle [...] suddenly introduces the metaphors of circumcision and uncircumcision, of bond and free, and under those metaphors treats of the married and unmarried.’ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I.xi, p. 353.

²⁶² Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. xi, p. 354.

²⁶³ Cf. Jerome: ‘if I say, you were called being circumcised from a wife, that is, unmarried, do not marry a wife, that is, do not become uncircumcised, lest you lay upon the freedom of circumcision and chastity the burden of marriage. Again, if anyone was called in uncircumcision, let him not be circumcised.’ Jerome,

could be construed as supporting Jovinian's contention that there is no difference between virginity and marriage: 'Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing; but the keeping of the commandments of God' (I Corinthians 7. 19). Jerome anticipates the possible objection by interpreting Saint Paul's words as an exhortation to support faith with good works, and thus refutes another of Jovinian's propositions that faith alone is enough to secure salvation:

For neither celibacy nor marriage availeth anything without works, since even faith, which is specifically characteristic of Christians, if we have not works, is said to be dead, and vestal virgins and Juno's widows might upon these terms be numbered with the saints.²⁶⁴

Jerome states that it does not avail any Christian to live in the estate of marriage or the splendour of virginity unless they also undertake God's work; neither is of any value if it is not supported by faith and good works. He refers to the Parable of the Ten Virgins to illustrate this point:

It would be endless work to explain the Gospel mystery of the ten virgins, five of whom were wise and five foolish. All I say now is, that as mere virginity without other works does not save, so all works without virginity, purity, continence, chastity, are imperfect.²⁶⁵

Good works and chastity justify each other. It is for this reason that Christians do not recognise the chastity of the 'vestal virgins and Juno's widows'. Such chastity is false because it is operative outside the Church and also because it does not supplement the estate with good works; it is an empty act.

Adversus Jovinianum, I. xi, p. 354; 'He who has a wife is regarded as a debtor, and is said to be uncircumcised, to be the servant of his wife, and like bad servants to be *bound*. But he who has no wife, in the first place owes no man anything, then is circumcised, thirdly is free, lastly, is loosed.' Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. xii, p. 356.

²⁶⁴ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. xi, p. 354.

²⁶⁵ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. xl, p. 379.

Jerome says that when it comes to Paul's admission that he has 'no commandment from the Lord', Jovinian 'goes utterly wild with exultation'.²⁶⁶ Jerome, however, demonstrates that Jovinian has misread Scripture: Paul does not say that it has no value, but only that it is not commanded, and there are cogent reasons why Paul did not command virginity. If he had done so, then he would be denying the validity of a divine precept.²⁶⁷ Also, the burden of virginity is too heavy for all mankind to accept and it is unreasonable for all men to be expected to strive beyond their nature and achieve the angelic life;²⁶⁸ indeed, Christ had already said that only few could accept this burden.²⁶⁹ Finally, it is more virtuous for one to live a virginal life when it is not commanded '[a]nd therefore Christ loves virgins more than others, because they willingly give what was not commanded them'.²⁷⁰ Jerome also argues that Jovinian misreads Paul's admission that: 'if a virgin marry, she hath not sinned' (I Corinthians 7: 28). Jerome avers that this allowance is for virgins in the flesh, not virgins who have 'dedicated herself to the service of God: for should one of these marry, she will have damnation, because she has made no account of her first faith'.²⁷¹ The profession of a consecrated virgin is sacrosanct; she is bound by the same bonds as those who have married as the sacrament is indissoluble. Contravention of the vow of virginity constitutes an act of infidelity. Jerome perhaps is drawing on the biblical connection between adultery and idolatry when he says a married

²⁶⁶ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I.xii, p. 355.

²⁶⁷ Cf. Jerome: 'If the Lord had commanded virginity He would have seemed to condemn marriage, and to do away with the seed-plot of mankind, of which virginity itself is a growth.' Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I.xii, p. 355. Cf. Genesis: 'And God blessed them, saying: Increase and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it, and rule over the fishes of the sea, and the fowls of the air, and all living creatures that move upon the earth' (Genesis 1: 28).

²⁶⁸ Cf. Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I.xii, p. 355.

²⁶⁹ Cf. Matthew: 'He that can take, let him take it' (Matthew 19: 12).

²⁷⁰ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I.xii, p. 355.

²⁷¹ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. xiii, p. 356.

virgin has disregarded her 'first faith'. Jerome continues to proffer the usual scriptural evidence to demonstrate the biblical authorisation of virginity such as the *vita angelica* of the resurrection,²⁷² given in Matthew 22,²⁷³ and the 144,000 virgins mentioned in the Apocalypse.²⁷⁴ The Virgin Birth, likewise, demonstrates that virginity is preferable to God as it was the state that was chosen for His Son to be born from.²⁷⁵ The supremacy of virginity is also shown in Saint John's life and works: he is the most beloved disciple in the Bible, and his is the most sublime out of the four Gospels.²⁷⁶

After listing the scriptural proofs for giving the preference to virginity, Jerome cites pagan authorities in order to demonstrate that virginity and monogamy was always considered to be pre-eminent, even before Christianity. Jovinian had claimed that virginity had 'never been accepted in the world, and that our religion has invented a dogma against nature',²⁷⁷ and so, to silence the calumniators of virginity, Jerome rattles through classical literature enumerating all the instances of laudable virgins. For instance,

²⁷² Cf. Jerome: 'If likeness to the angels is promised us (and there is no difference of sex among the angels), we shall either be of no sex as are the angels, or at all events, which is clearly proved, though we rise from the dead in our own sex, we shall not perform the functions of sex.' Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I.xxxvi, p. 374.

²⁷³ Cf. Matthew: 'And Jesus answering, said to them: You err, not knowing the Scriptures, nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they shall neither marry nor be married; but shall be as the angels of God in heaven' (Matthew 22: 29-30).

²⁷⁴ Cf. Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I.xi, p. 378. Cf. Apocalypse: 'And I heard a voice from heaven, as the noise of many waters, and as the voice of great thunder; and the voice which I heard, was as the voice of harpers, harping on their harps. And they sung as it were a new canticle, before the throne, and before the four living creatures, and the ancients; and no man could say the canticle, but those hundred forty-four thousand, who were purchased from the earth. These are they who were not defiled with women: for they are virgins. These follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth. These were purchased from among men, the firstfruits to God and to the Lamb: And in their mouth there was found no lie; for they are without spot before the throne of God' (Apocalypse 14: 2-5).

²⁷⁵ Cf. Jerome: 'If virginity be not preferred to marriage, why did not the Holy Spirit choose a married woman, or a widow?' Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I.xxxii, p. 370.

²⁷⁶ Cf. Jerome: 'John like an eagle soars aloft and reaches the Father Himself, and says, 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God', and so on. The virgin writer expounded mysteries which the married could not.' Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I.xxvi, p. 366.

²⁷⁷ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I.xli, p. 379.

he notes that pagan myths abound with virgin goddesses, that prophetesses were always required to be virginal and also recounts the story of Claudia, who proved her chastity by pulling a ship with her girdle.²⁷⁸ He observes that some pagan religions even have traditions of gods born from virgins.²⁷⁹ Jerome seeks to prove that not only is virginity held in high esteem by pagans, but also to show that '[b]efore the light of our religion shone upon the world wives of one husband ever held high rank among matrons'.²⁸⁰ He provides countless examples of *univira*, who preferred to embrace death rather than re-marry,²⁸¹ and matrons, such as Lucretia, who would rather kill themselves than compromise their chastity.²⁸²

In addition to citing classical examples of virgins and faithful wives, Jerome utilises the classical commonplaces of the *molestiae nuptiarum*.²⁸³ In recounting the drawbacks of marriage, however, Jerome falls back on anti-matrimonial discourses and his treatise strays dangerously close to an anti-marriage polemic. These begin with his infamous account of Theophrastus' *Book on Marriage*, which Jerome describes as 'worth its weight in gold'.²⁸⁴ The contents of the book is considered to be notoriously misogynistic, and is used extensively by Chaucer in 'The Wife of Bath's Prologue'.²⁸⁵

²⁷⁸ Cf. Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I.xli, p. 379.

²⁷⁹ Cf. Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I.xlii, pp. 380-1.

²⁸⁰ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I.xlix, p. 386.

²⁸¹ Cf. Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I.xliii, p. 381.

²⁸² Cf. Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I.xlv, p. 382.

²⁸³ Cf. Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. xxviii, p. 367;

²⁸⁴ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I.xlvii, p. 383.

²⁸⁵ Cf. Chaucer: 'He hadde a book that gladly, nyght and day, / For his desport he wolde rede always; / He cleped it Valerie and Theofraste, / At which book he lough always ful faste. / And eek ther was somtyme a clerk at Rome, / A cardinal, that highte Seint Jerome, / That made a book agayn Jovinian; / In which book eek ther was Tertulan, / Crisippus, Trotula, and Helowys, / That was abbesse nat fer fro Parys, / And eek the Parables of Salomon, / Ovides Art, and bookes many on, / And alle these were bounden in o volume. / And every nyght and day was his custume, / Whan he hadde leyser and vacacioun/ From oother worldly occupacioun, / To reden on this book of wikked wyves.' Chaucer, 'The Wife of Bath's Prologue' from *The*

Jerome also stresses the incompatibility of philosophy and marriage, and provides classical examples of men who have been ill-treated and humiliated by their wives.²⁸⁶ He also recites countless bad wives from antiquity,²⁸⁷ and refers the reader to Aristotle, Plutarch and Seneca who have written treatises on the annoyances of marriage.²⁸⁸ In addition, Jerome warns against the dangers of uxoriousness in marriage. He also notes the sentiments of Xystus who argued that men who love their wives too ardently commit adultery with their own wives.²⁸⁹ Love can be a curse, driven as it is by frenzy and not reason:

The course of love is laid bare in Plato's *Phaedrus* from beginning to end, and Lysias explains all its drawbacks – how it is led not by reason, but by frenzy, and in particular it is a harsh gaoler over lovely wives.²⁹⁰

Jerome, with the weight of scriptural and classical authority behind him, asserts that: virginity and chastity are the preferable states for women; marriage is particularly irksome for men, especially if they plan to devote themselves to religion or philosophy, or if they are saddled with bothersome wives; and intercourse is a symptom of man's voluptuous nature, and contrary to reason.

Canterbury Tales, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 114.

²⁸⁶ Cf. Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I.xlviii, p. 384.

²⁸⁷ Cf. Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, xlviii, pp. 384-5. Cf. Jerome: 'Why should I refer to Pasiphaë, Clytemnestra, and Eriphyle, the first of whom, the wife of a king and swimming in pleasure, is said to have lusted after a bull, the second to have killed her husband for the sake of an adulterer, the third to have betrayed Amphiaraus, and to have preferred a gold necklace to the welfare of her husband.' Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I.xlviii, p. 384.

²⁸⁸ Cf. Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, xlix, p. 385.

²⁸⁹ Cf. Jerome: 'Their love was of a honourable birth, but it grew out of all proportion. And it makes no difference how honourable may be the cause of a man's insanity. Hence Xystus [or Sextus] in his sentences tells us that 'He who too ardently loves his own wife is an adulterer'. It is disgraceful to love another man's wife at all, or one's own too much. A wise man ought to love his wife with judgement, not with passion. [...] 'Let a man govern his voluptuous impulses, and not rush headlong into intercourse. There is nothing blacker than to love a wife as if she were an adulteress.' Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I.xli, p. 386.

²⁹⁰ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. xlix, p. 385.

Jerome's treatise caused furor in the West. His friend Pammachius desperately tried to take it out of circulation,²⁹¹ but it was too late. Jerome was too famous an author for his treatise to have slipped by unnoticed,²⁹² and controversy always guarantees a wide readership, even for an author of lesser repute than a man like Jerome. His apology for the work, *Epistola XLVIII Ad Pammachium*, is unrepentant. He takes the criticism as an indictment against his exegetical skill,²⁹³ and asserts that his critics, rather than just criticising, ought to point out where he has mistaken the meaning of scriptural passages and correct him.²⁹⁴ He was criticised for several reasons. The first was his extreme preference for the ascetic life:

Certain persons find fault with me because in the books which I have written against Jovinian I have been excessive (so they say) in praise of virginity and in depreciation of marriage and they affirm that to preach up chastity till no comparison is left between a wife and a virgin is equivalent to a condemnation of matrimony.²⁹⁵

Just as Jerome had suspected that Jovinian was praising marriage to denigrate virginity, Jerome's critics complained that he sought to condemn marriage through the praise of

²⁹¹ Cf. Jerome: 'I quite recognise the kindness and forethought which have induced you to withdraw from circulation some copies of my work against Jovinian. Your diligence, however, has been of no avail, for several people coming from the city have repeatedly read aloud to me passages which they have come across in Rome.' Jerome, *Epistola XLIX Ad Pammachium*, ii, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers. Jerome: Letters and Select Works*, Vol. VI, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1893]), pp. 79-80, (p. 79).

²⁹² Cf. Jerome: 'I am not so fortunate as are most of the writers of the day – able, that is, to correct my trifles whenever I like. When once I have written anything, either my admirers or my ill-wishers – from different motives, but with equal zeal – sow my work broadcast among the public; and their language, whether it is that of eulogy or of criticism is apt to run to excess.' Jerome, *Epistola XLIX Ad Pammachium*, ii, p. 79.

²⁹³ Cf. Jerome: 'Am I then a mere novice in the Scriptures, reading the sacred volumes for the first time? And is the line there drawn between virginity and marriage so fine that I have been unable to observe it?' Jerome, *Epistola XLVIII Ad Pammachium*, ii, p. 67.

²⁹⁴ Cf. Jerome: 'Such men should answer their opponent. They ought to keep within the limits of debate, and not wield the schoolmaster's rod. Their books should aim at showing in what my statements have fallen short of the truth, and in what they have exceeded it. For although I will not listen to fault-finders, I will follow the advice of teachers.' Jerome, *Epistola XLVIII Ad Pammachium*, xii, p. 72.

²⁹⁵ Jerome, *Epistola XLVIII Ad Pammachium*, ii, p. 66.

virginity. Jerome tried to correct this by saying that his motivation in praising virginity was in no way self-serving (unlike those of Jovinian):²⁹⁶

I extol virginity to the skies, not because I myself possess it, but because, not possessing it, I admire it all the more. Surely it is a modest and ingenuous confession to praise in others that which you lack yourself?²⁹⁷

Jerome's detractors accused him not only of denigrating marriage indirectly by praising virginity, but also of directly reviling marriage: 'Another charge brought against me is simply intolerable! [...] Do I condemn marriage if I enumerate its troubles?'²⁹⁸ In some ways, Jerome's chagrin is justified, as the *molestiae nuptiarum* are commonplaces which had been a fairly formulaic part of virginity treatises; perhaps his ran a little to excess, however. Nevertheless, Jerome claimed that he has been more lenient than many writers,²⁹⁹ and even notes that he had been more condemnatory of marriage in his earlier treatises *Adversus Helvidium* and *Ad Eustochium*, but no one had complained.³⁰⁰

Jerome declares that his calumniators had misunderstood, perhaps wilfully, his meanings, and he reiterates that he had spoken well of marriage many times in his treatise:

Does a man who speaks thus, I would ask you, condemn marriage? If I have called virginity gold, I have spoken of marriage as silver. I have set forth that the yields an hundredfold, sixtyfold, and thirtyfold – all spring from one soil and from

²⁹⁶ Cf. Jerome: 'I suspect that [Jovinian's] object in proclaiming the excellence of marriage was only to disparage virginity.' Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I.iii, p. 347.

²⁹⁷ Jerome, *Epistola XLVIII Ad Pammachium*, xx, p. 78.

²⁹⁸ Jerome, *Epistola XLVIII Ad Pammachium*, xviii, p. 77.

²⁹⁹ Cf. Jerome: 'At any rate, I have dealt more gently with marriage than most Latin and Greek writers; who, by referring the hundredfold yield to martyrs, the sixtyfold to widows, show that in their opinion married persons are excluded from the good ground and from the seed of the great Father.' Jerome, *Epistola XLVIII Ad Pammachium*, iii, p. 67.

³⁰⁰ Cf. Jerome: 'I wrote a book against Helvidius "On the Perpetual Virgin of the Blessed Mary", in which, duly to extol the bliss of virginity, I was forced to say much of the troubles of marriage. Did [Damasus] find anything to censure in my discourse? Moreover, in the treatise which I addressed to Eustochium I used much harsher language regarding marriage, and yet no one was offended at it. Nay every lover of chastity strained his ears to catch my eulogy of continence.' Jerome, *Epistola XLVIII Ad Pammachium*, xviii, p. 77.

one sowing, although in amount they differ widely. Will any of my readers be so unfair as to judge me, not by my words, but by his own opinion?³⁰¹

He tells his critics that he would not be so stupid to try to condemn something that he had already accepted as a good. Indeed, in *Adversus Jovinianum*, he makes clear before he launches into his main offensive, that the Church and he himself accepts and approves marriage, but that it is an inferior state to virginity. Jerome reiterates in *Epistola XLVIII* that he has not said anything contrary to the Church's teaching on marriage and virginity: 'The Church, I say, does not condemn wedlock, but it subordinates it. Whether you like it or not, marriage is subordinated to virginity and widowhood.'³⁰² Jerome restates that his treatment of marriage in *Adversus Jovinianum* is simply an exposition on Paul,³⁰³ and that everything he has said originates from Scripture.³⁰⁴ Furthermore, he claims that he has said no more than any other Christian author. He tells his detractors to: 'Read Tertullian, read Cyprian, read Ambrose, and either accuse me with them or acquit me with them.'³⁰⁵ By emphasising that his treatise is an exposition of biblical material, and that his attitudes reflect other Christian authorities, Jerome avers that any criticism of him is also an implied criticism of Saint Paul, Holy Scripture, the Church and its saints. Jerome's

³⁰¹ Jerome, *Epistola XLVIII Ad Pammachium*, iii, p. 67. Cf. Jerome: 'I ask my detractors to open their ears and to realize the fact that I have allowed second and third marriages "in the Lord". If then, I have not condemned second and third marriages, how can I have proscribed a first?' Jerome, *Epistola XLVIII Ad Pammachium*, vi, p. 69.

³⁰² Jerome, *Epistola XLVIII Ad Pammachium*, xi, p. 71.

³⁰³ Cf. Jerome: 'I have been an exponent of the apostle rather than a dogmatist on my own account; and my function has been simply that of a commentator. Anything, therefore, which seems a hard saying should be imputed to the writer expounded by me rather than to me, the expounder; unless, indeed, he spoke otherwise than he is represented to have done, and I have by an unfair interpretation wrested the plain meaning of his words. Of any one charges me with this disingenuousness let him prove his charge from the Scriptures themselves.' Jerome, *Epistola XLVIII Ad Pammachium*, xiv, p. 73.

³⁰⁴ Cf. Jerome: 'When, then, anything in my little work seems to you harsh, have regard not to my works, but to the Scripture, whence they are taken.' Jerome, *Epistola XLVIII Ad Pammachium*, xx, p. 78.

³⁰⁵ Jerome, *Epistola XLVIII Ad Pammachium*, xviii, p. 77. Cf. Jerome: 'it is clear that I have said nothing at all new concerning virginity and marriage, but have followed in all respects the judgement of older writers – of Ambrose, that is to say, and others who have discussed the doctrines of the Church.' Jerome, *Epistola XLVIII Ad Pammachium*, xv, p. 75.

treatise, thus, stands for orthodoxy: ‘There can be no middle course. Either my view of the matter must be embraced, or else that of Jovinian.’³⁰⁶

One of the controversies surrounding the production of *Adversus Jovinianum* is that Jovinian apparently claimed that ‘Mary lost her virginity by true parturition in the birth of Our Lord’.³⁰⁷ The *Protevangelium of James* provides an early testament to the belief in Mary’s *virginitas in partu*.³⁰⁸ Ambrose responded energetically to this aspect of Jovinian’s teaching,³⁰⁹ but in *Adversus Jovinianum*, however, Jerome remained mute on the subject.³¹⁰ There is much speculation regarding the reasons for his silence. Some critics suggest that Jovinian’s earliest writings did not include this challenge to Marian doctrine and so Jerome did not know about it.³¹¹ They conjecture that Jovinian’s objection may have been a reaction against Ambrose’s teaching after he fled to Milan; after all, ‘it was Ambrose himself who had pioneered in the West the notion of Mary’s *virginitas in partu*’.³¹² Others suggest that Jerome did not support the Marian doctrine of

³⁰⁶ Jerome, *Epistola XLVIII Ad Pammachium*, ii, p. 66.

³⁰⁷ Hritz, ‘General Introduction’ to *Saint Jerome: Dogmatic and Polemical Works*, p. xii.

³⁰⁸ Cf. *Protevangelium*: ‘And the midwife came out of the cave, and Salome met her. And she said to her, “Salome, Salome, I have a new sight to tell you about; a virgin has brought forth, a thing which her condition does not allow.” And Salome said, “As the Lord my God lives, unless I insert my finger and test her condition, I will not believe that a virgin has given birth.” And the midwife went in and said to Mary, “Make yourself ready for there is no small contention concerning you.” And Salome inserted her finger to test her condition. And she cried out, saying, “Woe for my wickedness and my unbelief; for I have tempted the living God; and behold my hand falls away from me, consumed by fire!”’ *The Protevangelium of James*, 19.3-20.1, pp. 64-5.

³⁰⁹ Hunter: ‘According to Ambrose, Jovinian taught that although Mary had conceived the child Jesus while still a virgin she had not remained physically intact during Jesus’ birth [...] For Ambrose, Jovinian’s rejection of the doctrine of Mary’s *virginitas in partu* was one of the primary features of his heresy.’ Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity*, p. 22.

³¹⁰ For a discussion of the origins and development of the doctrine of Mary’s *virginitas in partu*, see Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity*, pp. 171-204.

³¹¹ Cf. Walsh: ‘it appears that [Jerome] had no knowledge of Jovinian’s observations on Mary’s virginity, or he chose to ignore them.’ P. G. Walsh, ‘Introduction’ to Augustine’s *De bono coniugali* and *De sancta virginitate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. ix-xxxii, (p. xx).

³¹² Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity*, p. 23. Hunter suggests that ‘if Jovinian did not speak of the *virginitas in partu* in his written work, then he may have developed his polemic against the doctrine only when he went to Milan. In this case he would have been responding directly to the

virginitas in partu, or was unsure of its orthodoxy.³¹³ If Jovinian had subsequently attacked Mary's *virginitas in partu*, Jerome would have heard about this further attack on virginity by the time he wrote his apology to Pammachius. Indeed, at the close of his apologetic letter, Jerome appears to allude to the issue of Mary's *virginitas in partu*. He says:

Christ himself is a virgin; and His mother is also a virgin; yea, though she is His mother, she is a virgin still. For Jesus has entered in through the closed doors, and in His sepulchre – a new one hewn out of the hardest rock – no man is laid either before Him or after Him. Mary is a 'garden enclosed... a fountain sealed' [Canticles 4: 12], [...] she is the east gate of Ezechiel [Ezechiel 44: 1-2],³¹⁴ always shut and always shining, and either concealing or revealing the Holy of Holies.³¹⁵

As the statements in his apology still seem reluctant to address the issue of Mary's *virginitas in partu* directly, critics tend to see Jerome's attitude towards it as fairly lukewarm.³¹⁶ If Jerome had avoided addressing the issue because he was not enamoured of the doctrine, he may well have been criticised by his contemporaries for not addressing the attack on Mary's *virginitas in partu*. This perhaps may be implied by the following passage:

Let my critics explain to me how Jesus can have entered in through closed doors when He allowed His hands and His side to be handled, and showed that He had bones and flesh, thus proving that His body was a true body and no mere phantom

teaching of Ambrose, and Siricius and Jerome would have been unaware of Jovinian's rejection of Ambrose's Mariology' Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity*, p. 24.

³¹³ Cf. Hunter: 'if Jovinian's rejection of Mary's *virginitas in partu* was present in his original writings, then Siricius and Jerome may not have mentioned it simply because the doctrine was not significant to them; perhaps they even shared Jovinian's doubts on the subject.' Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity*, p. 24.

³¹⁴ Cf. Ezechiel: 'And he brought me back to the way of the gate of the outward sanctuary, which looked towards the east: and it was shut. And the Lord said to me: This gate shall be shut, it shall not be opened, and no man shall pass through it: because the Lord the God of Israel hath entered in by it, and it shall be shut' (Ezechiel 44: 1-2).

³¹⁵ Jerome, *Epistola XLVIII Ad Pammachium*, xxi, p. 78.

³¹⁶ Cf. Gambero: 'Jerome remained somewhat hesitant in confronting the theme of virginity *in partu*.' Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church*, p. 209.

of one and I will explain how the holy Mary can be at once a mother and a virgin. a mother before she was wedded, she remained a virgin after bearing her son.³¹⁷

As Jerome's methodological statements in both *Adversus Helvidium* and *Adversus Jovinianum* suggest, he is constrained by his scholarship to stay within the bounds of definitive scriptural evidence. Mary's *virginitas in partu*, while perhaps a logical extension of the doctrine of her perpetual virginity, was controversial because of the heretics who claimed that Christ did not take on a human body, but was solely divine. Jerome's assertion that Christ's body was 'no mere phantom' implies that he is thinking about the debate and its theological repercussions. Nevertheless, while Jerome cannot assert incontrovertible biblical evidence for Mary's *virginitas in partu*, he does provide a series of biblical types and analogues which imply its truth: the enclosed garden and sealed fountain of Canticles, the closed east gate of Ezechieel,³¹⁸ and Christ's miraculous exit from the sealed tomb. These he has also referred to in *Adversus Jovinianum*, seeming to implicitly associate Mary with the *hortus conclusus* and the sealed tomb.³¹⁹ He also reaffirms that the truth of Christ's risen body is not compromised by the exit from the sealed tomb; by association, such a conclusion can be reflected onto Mary's *virginitas in partu*.³²⁰

³¹⁷ Jerome, *Epistola XLVIII Ad Pammachium*, xxi, pp. 78-9.

³¹⁸ Ambrose himself adduced the image of Ezechieel's gate to prove Mary's *virginitas in partu*: 'Is not Mary the gate through whom the Redeemer entered this world? [...] Holy Mary is the gate of which it is written: "The Lord will pass through it, and it will be shut", after birth, for as a virgin she conceived and gave birth? [...] Why is it hard to believe that Mary gave birth contrary to the law of natural birth and remained a virgin?' Ambrose, *Letter 44 (42)*, p. 227.

³¹⁹ Cf. Jerome: 'That which is shut up and sealed reminds us of the mother of our Lord who was a mother and a virgin. Hence it was that no one before or after our Saviour was laid in his new tomb, hewn in the solid rock.' Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. xxxi, p. 370.

³²⁰ Cf. Jerome: 'If we deny the identity of His body because He entered though the doors were shut, and this is the property of human bodies, we must deny also that Peter and the Lord had real bodies because they walked upon the water, which is contrary to nature.' Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. xxxvi. p. 374.

Despite Jerome's attempts to rehabilitate his treatise in his apology, the damage had already been done. His assertion that his attitudes were only a reflection of those of the Church was perhaps just as inflammatory as it implied a fundamental hostility towards marriage in Christianity itself. Saint Augustine, therefore, was called upon to write a treatise on marriage in order to articulate the positive role that marriage played in Christianity. In doing so, Augustine produced an enduring model for the understanding of Christian marriage.

X. Augustine

Saint Augustine is acknowledged in the Western world as one of the greatest geniuses of the last two millennia.¹ Labriolle lists his qualities:

Theologian, philosopher, moralist, and tireless champion; it is really through his exquisite sensibility that St Augustine has remained the contemporary of successive generations.²

Not only has Augustine been influential for ‘successive generations’, but he was highly regarded in his own time.³ For instance, in A.D. 418 Jerome wrote to Augustine, saying:

Your fame is world-wide; Catholics revere you and accept you as a second founder of the ancient faith, and – which is a mark of greater fame – all the heretics hate you, and pursue me, too, with equal hatred; they plan our death by desire if they cannot achieve it by the sword.⁴

Jerome here conceives of Augustine as a fellow champion of orthodoxy. Augustine differed from Jerome, however. Whereas Jerome was a scholar, Augustine was a philosopher and theologian.⁵ Jerome does not miss the mark in describing him as ‘a

¹ Cf. Gambero: ‘St. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, was not only a true giant of Western theology; he was undoubtedly one of the greatest geniuses of all time.’ Luigi Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church: The Blessed Virgin Mary in Patristic Thought*, trans. Thomas Buffer (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999 [1991]), p. 216. Cf. Farrar: ‘He was at one and the same moment the greatest preacher, the greatest writer, the greatest theologian, the greatest bishop, and the most commanding personality in the churches of the West, while he was constantly preaching simple sermons and performing simple duties among the poor artisans and fishermen of Hippo.’ F. W. Farrar, *The Life of St. Augustine*, ed. Robert Backhouse (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1984 [1899]), p. 145.

² Pierre De Labriolle, *History and Literature of Christianity from Tertullian to Boethius*, trans. Herbert Wilson (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co. Ltd., 1924), p. 392.

³ Cf. Rusch: ‘Even within his own lifetime Augustine’s influence was immeasurable. In every sense of the word he was a genius, a peer of Plato and Aristotle. He was one of the greatest minds of the western world. his place is secure as both a philosopher and a theologian. Of all the Church Fathers Augustine alone has remained alive to every subsequent age.’ William G. Rusch, *The Later Latin Fathers* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co Ltd., 1977), pp. 108-9. Cf. Chadwick: ‘Augustine came to enjoy far-reaching influence during his lifetime as a result of his writings, which circulated wherever Latin was read.’ Henry Chadwick, *Augustine*, (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 117.

⁴ Jerome, (195) *Jerome to the saintly lord and blessed father, Augustine*, in *The Fathers of the Church: Saint Augustine. Letters*, Vol. IV, (165-203), trans. Sister Wilfrid Parsons, eds. Ludwig Schopp, Roy J. Deferrari, Bernard M. Peebles (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1981 [1955]), pp. 332-333, (p. 333).

⁵ Cf. Labriolle: ‘his interest in scholarship was moderate. From this point of view he differed profoundly from St Jerome, whom he little understood, and whose efforts in the domain of Scripture he appeared to discourage.’ Labriolle, *History and Literature of Christianity from Tertullian to Boethius*, p. 393. Cf. Labriolle: ‘He was the most philosophic of the Fathers of the Primitive Church. We will say more: among

second founder of the ancient faith'. Augustine's legacy is unquestionable for Christianity;⁶ he is one of the foremost authorities of the Church and his importance in the codifying of doctrine is incalculable.⁷ William Rusch says of his legacy:

Western theology has been indelibly marked by him. Thomas Aquinas quoted him. Even today he is a quotable authority. There is no area of theology where his hand cannot be seen. The doctrines of the Church, Sacraments, grace, original sin, the fall and predestination were developed and articulated by his fertile mind. It is practically impossible to conceive of western theology without Augustine.⁸

Augustine dominates the theology of the Middle Ages and he was instrumental in articulating much Church doctrine. He has also had a considerable impact outside Christianity.⁹ The major sources for details about Augustine's life are primarily his numerous correspondence (amounting to 270 letters),¹⁰ an early life by Possidius, Bishop of Calama, composed thirty years after Augustine's death,¹¹ and Augustine's

the Latin Fathers he is the only one who really possessed speculative genius and the gifts of a close thinker.' Labriolle, *History and Literature of Christianity from Tertullian to Boethius*, p. 421.

⁶ Cf. Leigh-Bennet: 'St Augustine is generally admitted, by Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Protestants and Rationalists alike, to have been the greatest of all the Church Fathers.' 'The authority of Augustine is claimed by both Catholics and Protestants in defence of their Eucharistic views. He occasionally gives a symbolic view of the elements. [...] Yet over and over again he expresses the strongest belief in a Real Presence.' Ernest Leigh-Bennett, *Handbook of the Early Christian Fathers* (London: Williams & Northgate, 1920), p. 304; p. 324.

⁷ Cf. Leigh-Bennett: 'There has been hardly any phase of subsequent Christian thought which does not refer for its sanction to Saint Augustine. Catholics claim that he was not only the Doctor of Grace but the Doctor of the Church, on account of his strong support of Church authority and his devotion to the Sacraments. The Scholastic Theologians inherited his acuteness, his subtlety of intellect, his dialectical skills.' Leigh-Bennett, *Handbook of the Early Christian Fathers*, p. 333. Cf. Labriolle: 'his thoughts have become as it were the substance of Christian literature; they have been present in the thick of all the battles of the spirit during the centuries past.' Labriolle, *History and Literature of Christianity from Tertullian to Boethius*, p. 422.

⁸ Rusch, *The Later Latin Fathers*, p. 109.

⁹ Cf. Leigh-Bennet: 'To the learned outside the Christian community he appears not merely as a doctor of the Church, but as holding a prominent position in the History of Philosophy, as a deep and original thinker for all time.' Leigh-Bennett, *Handbook of the Early Christian Fathers*, p. 304.

¹⁰ Labriolle comments that, 'his letters do not possess the literary and brilliant turn of those of St. Jerome. There are no animated scenes, and no biting satires. He only rarely betrays himself or becomes expansive.' Labriolle, *History and Literature of Christianity from Tertullian to Boethius*, pp. 418-9.

¹¹ Possidius self-consciously places his *Life of St. Augustine* in the hagiographical genre: 'Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, yet using their own language and style, they likewise spoke and wrote accounts for the instruction of those men who wished to be informed. In this way they brought to the notice of the zealous the character and greatness of men who, by the grace of the Lord which is given to all men in this world, merited to live and to persevere until the end of their course.' Possidius, *Life of St. Augustine*,

Confessions, an autobiographical account written between A.D. 396-400.¹² Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, however, is not an ordinary autobiography;¹³ indeed, it is often referred to as a spiritual autobiography.¹⁴ *The Confessions* is at once a penitential act and a profession of faith. Philip Burton explains the significance of the title:

To the English reader, the title of the *Confessions* suggests a catalogue of indiscretions. To the average Latin-speaker, the title *Confessions* would suggest something similar. But to understand the term correctly, we have to go back to the Septuagint, in which the Hebrew word meaning 'praise' is rendered *homologesis*, from a verb normally meaning 'to agree, acknowledge'. This in turn is rendered into the Latin as *confessio*, which thus gains (in Christian usage) the sense 'praise' alongside its inherited meaning. Augustine himself explains in his *Commentary on the Psalms* 141. 19: "Confessions" can be understood in two ways: with reference to our sins, or as praise of God. But the word is generally familiar to the populace at large that at soon as the word "confession" is heard in the course of a reading, whether with reference to praise or to sins, the fists fly to the breast.¹⁵

Often, the nature of the *Confessions* as a 'catalogue of indiscretions' is seen to be the most interesting aspect of it.¹⁶ Critics warn against taking Augustine's own severity towards his youthful peccadilloes too seriously, and suggest that his behaviour was

Preface, trans. Sister Mary Magdaleine Muller and Roy J. Deferrari in *Early Christian Biographies* ed. Roy J. Deferrari (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001 [1952]), pp. 65-124, (p. 73). Possidius' credentials for writing Augustine's life rest on his long acquaintance with the saint: 'I lived intimately and pleasantly without any bitter disagreement for almost forty years.' Possidius, *Life of St. Augustine*, xxxi, p. 124.

¹² Cf. Fox: 'The first nine books describe Augustine's life until his thirty-third year, from 354 to 387, the same span coincidentally, as was lived by Alexander the Great.' Robin Lane Fox, 'Introduction' to Augustine, *The Confessions* (London: Everyman, 2001), pp. xiii-xxx, (p. xv). It seems more pertinent that Augustine's autobiography coincides with the number of years of Christ's life span. Cf. Leigh-Bennett: 'With the Ninth Book ends the *Confessions* proper, and the last words refer to his mother. At a later date he was asked to give an account of what he then was, and so he wrote the Tenth, Eleventh, Twelfth and Thirteenth Books.' Leigh-Bennett, *Handbook of the Early Christian Fathers*, p. 316.

¹³ Cf. Chadwick: 'The *Confessions* is not simple autobiography. The autobiographical matter, fascinating as it is, does not pretend to present a complete narrative.' Henry Chadwick, 'Augustine', in *The Cambridge History of Early Christian Literature*, eds. Frances Young, Lewis Ayres, Andrew Louth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 328-341, (p. 331).

¹⁴ Cf. Labriolle: 'the *Confessions*, so highly valued since their first appearance, [...] stand out as the most moving book of antiquity on the interior history of a soul.' Labriolle, *History and Literature of Christianity from Tertullian to Boethius*, p. 394.

¹⁵ Philip Burton, 'On Translating Augustine', in Augustine, *The Confessions*, trans. Philip Burton (London: Everyman, 2001), pp. 357-370, (pp. 361-2).

¹⁶ Cf. Brown: 'This book enables us to glimpse a little of the idiosyncrasy of Augustine's experience of sex as a young man.' Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), p. 388.

typical of an adolescent Roman of late antiquity.¹⁷ This does not, however, lessen the regret with which Augustine seems to view the dissoluteness of his former life. Although *The Confessions* does contain valuable biographical details, it also includes much philosophical discussion.¹⁸ Augustine provides interesting anecdotes from his own life, and often these formative moments serve as focal points around which questions about the nature of man and the nature of God pivot; he scrutinises his own existence in this context. *The Confessions* not only charts Augustine's mental and spiritual development,¹⁹ but also serves a didactic purpose. His life follows the pattern of fall and redemption; he is the returning prodigal son, and thus reflects the life of every man.²⁰ In *The Confessions* readers confront their own sinfulness and failure to turn to God.²¹

¹⁷ Cf. Farrar: 'In reviewing these confessions we must, as in other cases, beware of being misled into thinking that Augustine was worse than multitudes of other young men of his day.' Farrar, *The Life of St. Augustine*, p. 19.

¹⁸ Cf. Chadwick: 'After Monica's death and burial at the end of book 9, book 10 [...] analyses memory and the subconscious. Book 11 examines eternity and time. [...] Book 12 offers a synthesis of Platonic and Christian ideas of divine creation. Book 13 discovers in Genesis 1 an allegory of the Church and sacraments and a symbolic mirror of pastoral care.' Chadwick, 'Augustine', p. 332. Cf. Labriolle: 'the last three books of the *Confessions* consist of little more than mysticism and philosophy.' Labriolle, *History and Literature of Christianity from Tertullian to Boethius*, p. 403.

¹⁹ Leigh-Bennet: 'The interest of Augustine's life lies almost entirely in the education of his mind and the development of his philosophical and theological position.' Leigh-Bennett, *Handbook of the Early Christian Fathers*, p. 305.

²⁰ Cf. Augustine: 'You are this Good, nor do we fear that we have no where to return to, for it is from this Good that we have fallen; but not so does our home fall down while we are away, and that home is your eternity.' Augustine, *The Confessions*, IV.xvi.31, p. 84. Cf. Labriolle: 'In considering from what an abyss Augustine had been rescued every sinner was to feel heartened to deserve his own redemption through his own efforts.' Labriolle, *History and Literature of Christianity from Tertullian to Boethius*, p. 395.

²¹ Cf. Augustine: 'What business, then, do I have with men, that they should hear my confessions, as if they were the ones who would *heal all my infirmities* (Ps. 103. [Ps. 102: 3], Matt. 4: 23)? They are an inquisitive breed, eager to learn of other people's lives, full of idleness when it comes to amending their own. Why do they seek to hear from me what I am, when they refuse to hear from you what they are? And when they hear me speaking of myself, how do they know whether what I say is true, seeing as *no man knows what goes on in a man, except the man's spirit that is within him* (I Cor. 2: 11)? [...] But since *love belies all things* (I Cor. 13: 4,7), at least among those whom it makes one, joined together to itself, I too, O Lord, confess even so to you, that men, to whom I cannot show whether I am telling the truth, may hear me. Those who have ears have been opened to me by love will believe me.' Augustine, *The Confessions*, X.iii.3, p. 216.

Augustine was born on 13th November 354 in Thagaste, Numidia,²² to Monica and Patricius, whom Possidius describes as ‘honourable parents’.²³ Augustine had a brother and sister, although these do not feature in his childhood memories.²⁴ His father was a pagan, whom his mother constantly tried to convert.²⁵ Patricius eventually accepted the faith shortly before his death.²⁶ Augustine notes that although his father was ‘a citizen of Thagaste, he was not a wealthy man’.²⁷ Nevertheless, he was concerned that Augustine receive a good education:

Everyone heaped praise upon my father because he spent beyond our family’s resources to ensure that his son had everything he would need when he was pursuing his studies far from home. There were many citizens far wealthier than we were who took no such trouble on behalf of their children.²⁸

Augustine laments the fact that his family was more concerned with his education than his spiritual development.²⁹ His mother, however, ever had his spiritual interests at heart.

Augustine comments that ‘she travailed for my eternal even more than my temporal well-

²² Cf. Wand: ‘The eastern half [of North Africa] with the great church at Alexandria is always reckoned as part of the Eastern Church. But the western half, with its centre at Carthage, is looked upon as an integral part of the Western Church. Indeed, it is something more than an integral part; it is actually, in a sense, the parent of Latin Christianity. [...] Western theology was not developed in Rome or in any part of Italy, but in North Africa.’ J. W. C. Wand, *The Latin Doctors* (London: The Faith Press, 1948), p. 24.

²³ Possidius, *Life of Saint Augustine*, i, p. 74.

²⁴ Augustine refers to his brother’s presence at his mother’s death, but only to demonstrate his inferior spiritual awareness in his clumsy attempt to comfort his dying parent: ‘My brother, however, said something or other, encouraging her to believe that she would die in her homeland and not abroad, as if that were a happier way to die. On hearing this, her face was filled with anxiety, pushing him aside with her eyes for thinking in this way.’ Augustine, *The Confessions*, IX.xi.27, p. 205. Wand notes that ‘Communities of women were also established in the neighbourhood, Augustine’s sister becoming abbess.’ Wand, *The Latin Doctors*, p. 33.

²⁵ Cf. Augustine: ‘Only my father did not believe in Christ, but he did not succeed in overthrowing the rule my mother’s piety held over me, and in making me an unbeliever, as he still was himself. For her part, my mother was anxious that you, my God, rather than he, should be my father; and you helped her, and saw that her influence prevailed over her husband’s.’ Augustine, *The Confessions*, I.xi.17, p. 17.

²⁶ In Book II of the Confessions, Augustine notes that in his sixteenth year, c. 370, which was to be the last year of Patricius’ life, his ‘father was still under instruction in the faith, and indeed had only recently begun it.’ Augustine, *The Confessions*, II.iii.6, p. 34.

²⁷ Augustine, *The Confessions*, II.iii.5, p. 33.

²⁸ Augustine, *The Confessions*, II.iii.5, p. 33.

²⁹ Cf. Augustine: ‘My father, for his part, was not so worried about what sort of man I was growing up to be in your sight, or how I kept my chastity. He was interested only to see that my rhetorical powers bore fruit, while instead I grew rank and untended by you, O God, the one and true and good *Lord of your field* (Matt.13.24-30), my heart.’ Augustine, *The Confessions*, II.iii.5, p. 33.

being'.³⁰ His mother is evidently one of the most important figures in *The Confessions*.³¹ Alongside the inspired preaching of Ambrose, Augustine portrays his mother as an instrument of the will of God in the matter of his conversion. She was subject to visions concerning Augustine's acceptance of Catholicism and she constantly prayed for his salvation.³² Interestingly, he does not name her in his memoirs until the close of Book IX, after he reports her death and eulogises her virtues.³³

Augustine received a liberal education, the early part of which he probably received in Thagaste, but later he studied literature and rhetoric at Madaura, a nearby town.³⁴ He admits to disliking Greek and to being a poor Greek scholar, although he did love Latin.³⁵ He refers a few times to the threat of the corporal punishment, endemic to the schooling of late antiquity, meted out to those who did not apply themselves to their studies. He was recalled from Madaura in A.D. 370 when he was in his sixteenth year

³⁰ Augustine, *The Confessions*, I.xi.17, p. 16.

³¹ Cf. Leigh-Bennet: 'The relation of Augustine to his mother runs all through his *Confessions*, and is one of the most moving features of that great classic.' Leigh-Bennett, *Handbook of the Early Christian Fathers*, p. 306.

³² Augustine: 'You heard her prayer. For what was the source of that dream with which you consoled her, telling her that she would go and live with me, and have one table in her house with me?' (III.xi.19, p. 59); 'Meanwhile you gave one more prophetic utterance [...]. This second oracle, then, you gave through a priest of yours. [...] "Leave me alone", he said, "As you live, it is impossible that the son of those tears should perish." In her conversations with me, she would often recall how she had welcomed these words as they had been spoken from heaven.' Augustine, *The Confessions*, III.xii.21, p. 60-1.

³³ Cf. Augustine: 'Inspire, O Lord my God, your servants, my brothers, your children, my masters, whom I serve with heart and voice and pen; inspire them, that all who read these words of mine might remember at your altar your handmaid Monica, with Patricius, her sometime spouse, thorough whose flesh you brought me into this life; how, I do not know. [...] And let my mother's last request of me be granted to her more abundantly through the prayers and confessions of many than through my prayers alone.' Augustine, *The Confessions*, IX.xiii.37, p. 211.

³⁴ Cf. Augustine, *The Confessions*, II.iii.5, p. 33.

³⁵ Cf. Augustine: 'As for the reason why I hated the Greek literature in which I was steeped as a boy – for that I have still found no satisfactory explanation. I had fallen in love with Latin literature – not, that is, with the texts taught by my earliest teachers, but the literature taught by the so-called "grammarians".' Augustine, *The Confessions*, I.xiii.20, p. 18. Cf. Wand: 'Augustine began to receive the usual elementary education and found an immediate delight in Latin literature, particularly Virgil. However, he could not put up with any drudgery, such as that of acquiring a mastery of Greek, or of imbibing the elements of Mathematics. He was obviously destined to be a thinker rather than a scholar and his love was always for good literature rather than for anything scientific.' Wand, *The Latin Doctors*, p. 25.

while his father tried to raise funds to send him to study in Carthage.³⁶ He notes later in Book III, that at the age of 18 his father had been dead for two years,³⁷ so his father must have died sometime in A.D. 371, when Augustine was sixteen.³⁸ It is strange that whereas his mother receives a long eulogy in Book IX, Patricius' death is only obliquely alluded to in Book III. Instead, Book II closes with the famous incident of Augustine's adolescent theft of the pears, which leads him to consider man's tendency to choose evil for its own sake.³⁹

The enforced period of leisure in Thagaste while funds were raised for Augustine's Carthaginian schooling resulted in his descent into immorality, spurred on by the adolescent boasting of his fellows. Monica was reluctant to arrange a marriage for Augustine, because it would have inhibited his literary career; his mother had also thought that his career might culminate in a religious conversion.⁴⁰ He set out for Carthage the next year, and not only partook of the superior education it offered, but also the manifold vices.⁴¹ For instance, it seems that he took up with his concubine, whom he never names in *The Confessions*, at the age of eighteen.⁴² Not surprisingly, Augustine

³⁶ Cf. Augustine, *The Confessions*, II.iii.5, p. 33.

³⁷ Cf. Augustine: 'I was now eighteen years old, and my father had been dead for two years.' Augustine, *The Confessions*, III.iv.7, p. 49.

³⁸ Augustine's birthday is in November, so unless his father died very late in A.D. 370, it is most likely that he died in A.D. 371. Peter Brown is often cited as the foremost authority on Augustine; however, his timeline does not appear to accord with the ages that Augustine gives in connection with various incidents in *The Confessions*. Cf. Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: a biography* (London: Faber & Faber, 1966), p. 16. Brown makes no comment on the apparent inconsistencies in Augustine's chronology.

³⁹ Augustine, *The Confessions*, II.iv.9, p. 36.

⁴⁰ Cf. Augustine, *The Confessions*, II.iii.8, pp. 34-5.

⁴¹ Cf. Labriolle: 'Thanks to the munificence of Romanianus, a rich inhabitant of Thagaste, he was able at last to set out for Carthage, a seat of learning, but also a seat of pleasure.' Labriolle, *History and Literature of Christianity from Tertullian to Boethius*, p. 396.

⁴² In Book IV Augustine states: 'Throughout that period of nine years, from the age of eighteen to the age of twenty-seven, I was seduced, and seduced others. I was misled, and misled others, through all manner of desires: both openly, through my teaching of the so-called 'liberal arts', and in secret, through what was falsely called religion.' Augustine, *The Confessions*, IV.i.1, p. 65. In the next chapter he comments: 'Throughout those years I had one woman; not joined to her by the bond that is called lawful wedlock, but hunted out by my roving ardour, bereft of wisdom.' Augustine, *The Confessions*, IV.ii.2, p. 66. Cf. Wand:

excelled educationally in Carthage; he became the ‘senior pupil in the school of [his] teacher of rhetoric’.⁴³ While in Carthage, Augustine happened to read Cicero’s *Hortensius*.⁴⁴ This was a momentous moment in his life, and began his spiritual renewal: ‘It was this book that changed my outlook, that changed my prayers and turned them to you, O Lord, and made my aspirations and desires other than they had been.’⁴⁵ It is probable that around the same time that he discovered the *Hortensius* that Augustine’s son, Adeodatus (meaning ‘given by God’), was born.⁴⁶ Augustine does not mention this event, however. After being moved by Cicero’s treatise on philosophy, Augustine began to study Scripture, but he was not impressed by its simplicity of style; it seemed a meagre work compared to the rhetorical grandeur of Cicero.⁴⁷ Augustine, therefore, turned away once again from the Church and towards the Manichaean sect instead, to which he adhered for almost a decade.⁴⁸

‘what we actually know is that at the age of eighteen he took a mistress, that this mistress was apparently faithful to him for thirteen years and he to her, and that they had a son of their union whom they called Adeodatus, meaning “given by God”.’ Wand, *The Latin Doctors*, p. 26.

⁴³ Augustine, *The Confessions*, III.iii.6, p. 48.

⁴⁴ Cf. Labriolle: ‘In this dialogue, of which we only possess fragments, Cicero replied to the criticisms of Hortensius against philosophy with a magnificent eulogy of this form of intellectual activity, more capable than any other of setting a man in the way of real happiness, which consisted, not in deceptive material enjoyments, but in the life of the mind.’ Labriolle, *History and Literature of Christianity from Tertullian to Boethius*, pp. 396-7.

⁴⁵ Augustine, *The Confessions*, III.iv.7, p. 49.

⁴⁶ There is some doubt over the birth and death dates of Adeodatus. He died some time in the three years after Augustine returned to Thagaste, that is, between A.D. 389 and 391. His death is generally placed at A.D. 390, which provides a birth year of A.D. 373. However, if Augustine’s comment in his *Confessions*, IV.ii.2 is a definite statement that he took up with his concubine at the age of eighteen, then Adeodatus could not have been born in A.D. 373, as Augustine would have been eighteen during this year (it was his nineteenth year). Adeodatus, therefore, must have been born during the next year in A.D. 374. He is known to have died at the age of seventeen and, therefore, he must have died in A.D. 391, just before Augustine was made a presbyter in Hippo.

⁴⁷ Cf. Augustine: ‘when I first turned my mind to the Scriptures, I did not think what I am saying now; they seemed to me unworthy of comparison with the majesty of Ciceronian rhetoric. My pride shunned their modest style, and my eyes could not penetrate their inner secrets. It was the same Scripture which grows up with the little children; but I disclaimed to be a little child, and, swollen with my pride, fancied myself an adult.’ Augustine, *The Confessions*, III.v.9, p. 50.

⁴⁸ Cf. Augustine: ‘For some nine years followed, in which I wallowed in *the mire of the abyss* (Ps. 69: 2 [Ps. 68: 3]) and darkness of falsehood, often attempting to rise up only to be struck down deeper than before.’ Augustine, *The Confessions*, III.xi.20, p. 60; ‘So it was that throughout the time (some nine years

He returned to Thagaste c. A.D. 374 to teach as a professor of rhetoric. Here he rejuvenated a childhood acquaintance which blossomed into a strong friendship. This friend, who is unnamed in *The Confessions*, had also turned his back on the Catholic faith, but he fell dangerously ill and was baptized without his knowing. Once the friend regained consciousness, Augustine teased him about his enforced baptism and, to his surprise, the friend recoiled from him. Augustine determined to win back the soul of his friend once he had recovered, but the friend died a few days after. This event deeply affected Augustine, and soon after he accepted a post as a rhetorician in Carthage c. 376. He remained in Carthage for eight years, and, during that time, he began to notice that the Manichaean sect seemed to be anti-intellectual as they replaced known scientific explanations of celestial phenomena with myth and superstition. He also began to have grave doubts about the truth of the Manichaean scripture.⁴⁹ When Augustine was twenty-nine (c. A.D. 383/4),⁵⁰ Faustus of Milevis, a renowned Manichaean bishop,⁵¹ came to Carthage. Augustine put his theological questions to him, confident that Faustus would be able to resolve his doubts. Faustus, however, was a great disappointment. Augustine comments that, 'he was a novice in the arts in which I had thought him a master'.⁵²

Shortly after meeting Faustus, Augustine was lured to Rome where he was told the students were less unruly than those in Carthage.⁵³ Although they acted with more

in all) that I was a Hearer of that sect and a wanderer in my spirit.' Augustine, *The Confessions*, V.vi.10, p. 93.

⁴⁹ Cf. Augustine, *The Confessions*, V.vii.12, p. 95.

⁵⁰ Cf. Augustine: 'In the presence of God I shall unfold what happened that year when I was twenty-nine. A Manichee bishop, Faustus by name, had come to Carthage.' Augustine, *The Confessions*, V.iii.3, p. 88.

⁵¹ Cf. Labriolle: 'The principal promoter of Manichaeism in Africa since 383 was Faustus of Milevis, a Bishop of the sect, one of the most skilful sophists but a man of very superficial learning.' Labriolle, *History and Literature of Christianity from Tertullian to Boethius*, p. 405

⁵² Augustine, *The Confessions*, V.vii.12, p. 94.

⁵³ Cf. Augustine: 'The main, almost sole reason [I went to Rome] was that I had heard that the young students at Rome were quieter and better-disciplined. If they were not studying under a particular teacher, they did not constantly invade his lecture rooms and indulge in wild antics; they were allowed in only by

decorum than their Carthaginian contemporaries, unfortunately they had a bad habit of attending a certain number of classes and then decamping to a new professor without paying.⁵⁴ While in Rome Augustine heard that the City Prefect had been told to provide someone for the post of professor of rhetoric in Milan. Augustine applied for and achieved the position, mainly through the nepotism of Manichaean friends.⁵⁵ At Milan he presented himself to Ambrose, the famous Bishop of Milan. Augustine was first impressed by his kindness, as Ambrose welcomed him to the city as a father. He later discovered, as he attended the public debates, that Ambrose's allegorical exegesis resolved the difficulties of certain Old Testament passages which had troubled Augustine:

Ambrose solved one riddle after another from the Old Testament, which, as long as I had interpreted to the letter, had been fatal to me (cf. 2 Cor. 3: 6). But when Ambrose had expounded many passages from the Law and the Prophets in their spiritual sense, I began to rebuke myself for the despair in believing that those books were incapable of withstanding the anathemas and mockeries heaped on them by the Manichees.⁵⁶

The Manichaeans were particularly scathing about the Old Testament. Once Ambrose had swept away the Manichaean objections to the Old Testament, however, Augustine began to reassess the sect. He realised that he preferred the philosophers to the Manichaeans, but he was unhappy to throw in his lot with the former 'because they lacked the saving name of Christ'.⁵⁷ Augustine, therefore, decided to become a

his permission. At Carthage the students enjoyed a licence that knew no bounds; it was a disgrace.' Augustine, *The Confessions*, V.viii.14, p. 96.

⁵⁴ Cf. Augustine: 'My friends confirmed that there were no young hooligans who indulged in wrecking activities, as there were at Carthage; "but", they told me, "a whole group of students will contrive to avoid paying one teacher by transferring to another. They will renege on their contract, and count honest dealing as nothing compared to their love of money." My heart hated these students, too.' Augustine, *The Confessions*, V.xii.22, p. 103.

⁵⁵ Cf. Augustine, *The Confessions*, V.xiii.23, p. 103.

⁵⁶ Augustine, *The Confessions*, V.xiv.24, p. 105.

⁵⁷ Augustine, *The Confessions*, V.xiv.25, p. 105.

catechumen of the Catholic Church. He was still not wholly convinced, but nevertheless he decided to embark on this route ‘until some definite landmark emerged, towards which I could steer my course’.⁵⁸

Monica joined Augustine in Milan in A.D. 385, and threw herself into religious life there. Augustine slowly progressed towards an acceptance of the Catholic faith. He finally decided to embrace Catholicism, but there was still the problem of his concubine. Monica began to search for a suitable bride for Augustine at his own request. She also wanted Augustine to marry, because this would enable him to be baptized sooner. A suitable girl was soon found, but she was two years under marriageable age and so there ensued a two-year hiatus. Augustine’s concubine was then sent away:

My familiar bedfellow was torn from my side as being an impediment to my marriage; and my heart, to which she had fixed herself, was torn and wounded and left a trail of blood. She returned to Africa, vowing to you that she would never know another man, and leaving behind the natural son she had borne me.⁵⁹

Augustine, although genuinely fond of his concubine of thirteen or fourteen years, found to his chagrin that he was even fonder of lust itself and he took another concubine in the interim while he waited for his bride-to-be to reach marriageable age.⁶⁰ Partly in the hope that he would be cured of his lustfulness, Augustine sought out the priest Simplician, who had himself been an important influence on Ambrose. Simplician was part of the Neo-Platonic circle in Milan. Augustine had already read some Platonic philosophy, which pleased Simplician as he said that ‘Platonist literature hinted in every way at God and His

⁵⁸ Augustine, *The Confessions*, V.xiv.25, p. 105.

⁵⁹ Augustine, *The Confessions*, VI.xv.25, pp. 129-30.

⁶⁰ Cf. Augustine: ‘being not a lover of marriage but a slave to lust, I got myself another – and not a wife – so as to maintain my soul’s sickness as it was, or if possible to make it worse, and convey it, with an escort of enduring habit, into the realm of matrimony. Nor did I find any healing for the wound caused by the severance from my previous partner, but after the inflammation and the grievous pain, gangrene set in; it was as if the wound were numbered, but that it was even more incurably painful.’ Augustine, *The Confessions*, VI.xv.25, p. 130.

Word'.⁶¹ Simplician then told Augustine about the conversion of Victorinus, a City Orator at Rome. The story inspired Augustine: 'by the time your servant Simplicianus told me this story of Victorianus, I was all ablaze to follow his example. It was, indeed, for this that he had told me.'⁶² Despite this new-found zeal, Augustine admits that 'the new will which had sprung up within me [...] was not yet capable of overcoming the former one'.⁶³ Augustine, therefore, was pulled in two directions: the desire to commit himself whole-heartedly to God, and the lingering, habitual lust, which he could not yet slough off.

The final scene in the process of Augustine's conversion was played out in a garden in Milan in A.D. 386. He and his faithful friend Alypius had been discussing St. Athanasius' *Life of Saint Anthony* with Ponticianus, who related a story of how two of his friends had been inspired to take up the monastic life on reading that text. Augustine was moved by the devotion of the two men and was troubled in his soul, half of which desired to embrace continence, while the other half resisted. He moved to the garden in order to pursue his thoughts in solitude:

I wept, my heart crushed with very bitterness. And behold, suddenly I heard a voice from the house next door; the sound, as it might be, of a boy or a girl, repeating in a sing-song voice a refrain unknown to me; 'Pick it up and read it, pick it up and read it'.⁶⁴

Aware that such a chant was not one of the usual ones used in children's games, Augustine took the imperative to be a command from God. He opened the Bible at random and read the first line that his eye fell on, which happened to be Romans 13: 13-4: 'Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in lewdness and wantonness, not in strife and

⁶¹ Augustine, *The Confessions*, VIII.ii.3, p. 163.

⁶² Augustine, *The Confessions*, VIII.v.10, p. 168.

⁶³ Augustine, *The Confessions*, VIII.v.10, p. 169.

⁶⁴ Augustine, *The Confessions*, VIII.xii.29, p. 182.

rivalry; but put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh and its lusts.’⁶⁵ At that point, Augustine’s fears fled away. His friend Alypius, joining him, read the following line, which said ‘welcome the weak in faith’ (Romans 14: 1), which he took that to be in reference to himself. They both, therefore, resolved to follow the religious life. Monica was overjoyed.⁶⁶ Augustine, his friend Alypius and his son Adeodatus were all baptized by Ambrose a year later in A.D. 387. That year, too, they decided to return to Africa, but while en route Monica died at Ostia-on-Tibur.⁶⁷ Their journey home was further delayed,⁶⁸ and so Augustine spent the next eighteen months in Rome where he composed many anti-Manichaean tracts. He reached Africa in c. A.D. 388/9 and decided, in keeping with his intention to pursue a chaste life, to set up a quasi-monastic community in Thagaste.⁶⁹ Augustine is credited with the introduction of communal monasticism to Latin Africa.⁷⁰ His son, Adeodatus, lived with him in the community there,⁷¹ but died within the next two years at the tender age of seventeen.⁷²

⁶⁵ Augustine, *The Confessions*, VIII.xii.29, p. 183.

⁶⁶ Cf. Augustine: ‘You had turned me back to yourself; I would seek neither a wife nor any worldly ambition, but stand fast in the rule of faith, where you had revealed to her all these years before that I would be. You *turned her grief into gladness* (Ps. 30: 11 [Ps. 29: 12]) a gladness much more fruitful than the one she had wanted, and much more full of true love and chastity than she had hoped to gain from any grandchildren, the offspring of my flesh.’ Augustine, *The Confessions*, VIII.xii.30, p. 184.

⁶⁷ Cf. Augustine, *The Confessions*, IX.viii.17, p. 198.

⁶⁸ Cf. Chadwick, ‘Augustine’, p. 330.

⁶⁹ Cf. Possidius: ‘Having reached his native land, he lived there for nearly three years, but then renounced his property and joined those faithful who, constantly meditating on the law of God, served Him by fasting, prayers, and good works.’ Possidius, *Life of Saint Augustine*, iii, p. 76. Cf. Chadwick: ‘The Thagaste community was not called a monastery. The ‘Society of Brothers’, as they were called, shared property, lived in frugal simplicity, but had no formal vows, no identical clothing, no fixed rule and requirement of obedience. They were far more intellectual than most later monasteries. Nevertheless, the community had the thing, if not the name, and was in practice the first monastic community in Latin Africa.’ Chadwick, *Augustine*, p. 44.

⁷⁰ For a discussion of the growth of monasticism in Latin Africa, see, R. Pierce Beaver, ‘The Rise of Monasticism in the Church of Africa’, *Church History*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (Dec., 1937), 350-372.

⁷¹ Cf. Chadwick: ‘“The Teacher” [*de magistro*] was written as a memorial to his clever natural son Adeodatus, in conversation with whom the ideas were worked out. It concerns how human beings can communicate truth.’ Chadwick, *Augustine*, p. 47.

⁷² Cf. Augustine, *The Confessions*, IX.vi.14, p. 196.

In A.D. 391 Augustine went to Hippo, as a resident there had expressed some interest in renouncing the secular life.⁷³ While Augustine was there, the current Bishop of Hippo, Valerius, announced to the congregation that he needed a new presbyter.⁷⁴ On seeing Augustine in the crowd, the congregation ‘seized him and, as is customary in such cases, brought him to the bishop for ordination, since this was what all wished’.⁷⁵ Bishop Valerius was of Greek origin, and, because his Latin was not very fluent, he gave Augustine full responsibility for preaching.⁷⁶ Valerius was criticised for this move, but paid no heed to his detractors because it was a common practice in the East and Augustine was a gifted man and could accomplish what the Bishop himself could not. Indeed, Augustine did so well in his position, that the practice became more common throughout Africa. Valerius, however, was afraid that another city would attempt to poach his brilliant presbyter; his fears were confirmed as he unravelled a plot which had planned to do just that.⁷⁷ After thwarting the plot, Valerius proceeded to take steps that would ensure that Augustine was permanently stationed at Hippo by arranging for him to

⁷³ Cf. Possidius: ‘This man earnestly desired to see him, promising to renounce all the passions and allurements of the world if at some time he might deserve to hear the word of God from the renowned man’s lips.’ Possidius, *Life of Saint Augustine*, iii, p. 77.

⁷⁴ Cf. Possidius: ‘because of the pressing duties of his ecclesiastical office, this man addressed the people of God, encouraging them to provide and ordain a presbyter for the city.’ Possidius, *Life of Saint Augustine*, iv, p. 77.

⁷⁵ Possidius, *Life of Saint Augustine*, iv, p. 77

⁷⁶ Cf. Possidius: ‘Since Valerius was a Greek by birth and less versed in the Latin language and literature, he realized his limitations in that respect. Therefore, he gave his presbyter the right to preach the Gospel in his presence in church and to hold frequent public discussions – a procedure contrary to that usually practised in African churches.’ Possidius, *Life of Saint Augustine*, v, pp. 78-9. Cf. Wand: ‘[Valerius], recognizing the outstanding qualities of his assistant, admitted him to duties which were usually reserved for the bishop himself.’ Wand, *The Latin Doctors*, p. 32.

⁷⁷ Cf. Possidius: ‘[Valerius] began to fear, however, for such is human nature, that some other church which lacked a bishop might seek Augustine for the Episcopal office and so take him away. Indeed, that would have happened if the bishop himself, upon discovering the plan, had not taken precautions. He arranged that Augustine should go to a secret place and be hidden so that he could not be found by those who were seeking him.’ Possidius, *Life of Saint Augustine*, viii, p. 81.

be made coadjutor of Hippo.⁷⁸ Such an act was highly controversial as it was explicitly against canon law.⁷⁹ Augustine objected on this score, but was tricked into prematurely assuming the bishopric of Hippo.⁸⁰ Valerius died a year later, however, and Augustine then fully assumed the episcopal position.

Valerius had allowed Augustine to set up another monastic community at Hippo,⁸¹ and eventually the ascetics there gained such a reputation for holiness that Augustine was often petitioned to send them to Episcopal positions in the Church.⁸² Augustine's monastic communities, however, also drew criticism because they were a novelty in Latin Africa. His former affiliations with the Manichaean sect also came back to haunt him as his monastic institutions were criticised as crypto-Manichaean.⁸³ Henry Chadwick notes that part of the motive for Augustine's writing the *Confessions* was 'to

⁷⁸ Cf. Leigh-Bennet: 'In that capacity he spent two hours every day in adjusting differences between members of his flock as an arbitrator; and this is supposed to have been the origin of ecclesiastical courts.' Leigh-Bennet, *Handbook of the Early Christian Fathers*, p. 319.

⁷⁹ Cf. Labriolle: 'The practical unanimity of the African Bishops approved his initiative, in spite of the canonical difficulty created by the 8th canon of Nicaea, which forbade the duality of Bishops in the same city.' Labriolle, *History and Literature of Christianity from Tertullian to Boethius*, p. 404.

⁸⁰ Cf. Possidius: 'The presbyter, however, refused to accept the episcopacy, as being contrary to ecclesiastical practice, since his bishop was still alive. Then, everyone tried to convince him that this was common usage by citing examples of its existence in churches across the sea and in Africa, and, although Augustine had not heard of it before, he yielded under compulsion and constraint, consenting to ordination to the higher office.' Possidius, *Life of Saint Augustine*, viii, p. 82.

⁸¹ Cf. Possidius: 'Augustine founded a monastery within the Church, and began to live there among the servants of God according to the rule and custom established by the holy Apostles.' Possidius, *Life of Saint Augustine*, v, p. 78. Cf. Wand: 'Augustine had removed his monastic foundation to the neighbourhood of the cathedral. There he continued to live and conduct the monastic life along those lines which, long after his death, were developed into what was known as the Augustinian rule.' Wand, *The Latin Doctors*, p. 32. The monastic community in Hippo appears to have been more formal than that in Thagaste as 'on entry they were formally vested in a monastic habit, and wore a distinction cap so that they were at once identifiable in the street.' Chadwick, *Augustine*, p. 57.

⁸² Cf. Possidius: 'the Church eagerly began to demand bishops and priests from the monastery that had been founded and strengthened by the zealous Augustine. Later, the request was fulfilled. The most blessed founder gave about ten men, holy and venerable, chaste, and learned, to various churches, some of them being quite prominent.' Possidius, *Life of Saint Augustine*, xi, p. 85.

⁸³ Cf. Chadwick: 'The most serious charge was that his monastic foundations, new in Africa, were cells for crypto-Manichees. Hence the importance of Augustine's numerous anti-Manichee writings, intended not only to win to orthodoxy the numerous friends he had carried with him to the Manichee conventicle, but also to indicate his own renunciation of dualist heresy.' Chadwick, 'Augustine', p. 331.

disavow his association with the sect'.⁸⁴ His anger at the anti-intellectualism of the sect comes across strongly in the work; he notes his own sorry role in damning souls by winning them for the Manichaeans, and his confutation of their claims seeks in some way to amend this fault. The rebuttal of Manichaeism was a feature of Augustine's early episcopacy, although he had begun writing against the Manichaeans as soon as he had converted to Catholicism.⁸⁵ As well as writing against them, Augustine was forced to engage with the Manichaeans in public debate in order to demonstrate the mendacity of their religious claims.⁸⁶ Not only did he convincingly confound the Manichaeans, but, as Labriolle observes,

from these debates he drew positive conclusions in the philosophic and theological order on the relationship between knowledge and faith, on the origin and nature of evil, on free will, and on the economy of Revelation whether shown in the Old or the New Testament.⁸⁷

The debates with the Manichaeans were important because they forced discussion on difficult theological issues and prompted Augustine to articulate the Catholic doctrinal positions on them.

Two other great controversies overshadowed Augustine's episcopate: the Donatist schism, and the Pelagian controversy. The Donatist schism, which had surfaced after the end of the persecution, remained popular in North Africa. Indeed, in Hippo the adherents of Donatism were in the vast majority.⁸⁸ The schism was not a peaceful one, however.

⁸⁴ Chadwick, 'Augustine', p. 331.

⁸⁵ Cf. Chadwick: 'Return to North Africa was delayed by civil war between rival emperors. He used the time, living in Rome, to begin a series of anti-Manichee works: *Freedom of Choice (De libero arbitrio)* in three books partly directed also at sceptics who denied its existence; *On the Morals of the Church and the Manichees*, vindicating the place of the ascetic life within the orthodox community, with some debt to Jerome's *Ep[istle]* 22.' Chadwick, 'Augustine', p. 330.

⁸⁶ Cf. Possidius, *Life of Saint Augustine*, vi, pp. 79-80.

⁸⁷ Labriolle, *History and Literature of Christianity from Tertullian to Boethius*, p. 405.

⁸⁸ Cf. Wand: 'Augustine found that even in his own see town the Donatists were so strong that he and his Catholic congregation were actually in the minority.' Wand, *The Latin Doctors*, p. 34.

Attached to that Church were a group of fanatics who called themselves *Agnostici*, or *Milites Christi*,⁸⁹ but were known to the Catholic community as Circumcellions.⁹⁰ This group launched a savage campaign of terror against the Catholics, especially the Catholic clergy. Possidius elucidates on some of their atrocities:

By day as well as by night, Catholic priests and ministers were attacked; they were robbed of all their possessions; many servants of God were even crippled by torture. Some had lime mixed with vinegar thrown in their eyes, and others were killed. As a result these baptizing Donatists came to be hated even by their own people.⁹¹

Augustine initially set out to win the Donatists back to the Catholic Church peaceably. He wrote extensively defending the Catholic position and also conducted public debates with Donatist bishops. Augustine fared best in these discussions, and, as with the Manichaean debates, the debates in the Donatist controversy were fundamental in the articulation of Church doctrine.⁹² This time, however, the debates ‘drew him to define with wonderful penetration the essence of the Church, without ever losing sight of the sentiment of her vitality in the subtle investigation’.⁹³ In addition, Augustine’s thoughts shaped aspects of sacramental theology. The Donatists envisioned a ‘purer’ Church, which did not commune with those who had lapsed in the face of persecution. They believed in the necessity of re-baptism after lapsing, which implied that sacraments were

⁸⁹ Cf. Augustine’s Letter 108.18.

⁹⁰ Cf. Possidius: ‘Now, these Donatists had in almost all their churches a strange group of men, perverse and violent, who professed continency and were called Circumcellions. They were very numerous and were organized in bands throughout almost all the regions of Africa.’ Possidius, *Life of Saint Augustine*, x, p. 84. Beaver notes that: ‘They were dubbed *Circumcellions* by the Catholics because of their nomadic life in the rural districts where they found shelter in the peasant huts.’ R. Pierce Beaver, ‘The Donatist Circumcellions’, *Church History*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Jun., 1935), 123-133, (p. 126). Beaver provides an in-depth discussion of the intricate religio-political nature of the group, which not only sought for a ‘purer’ church, but was also inspired by a desire for African independence from Rome.

⁹¹ Possidius, *Life of Saint Augustine*, x, p. 84.

⁹² Cf. Wand: ‘His episcopate was marked by two great difficulties. They are especially important in the history of Christian thought, not merely for their own sake, but because in dealing with them Augustine had to thrash out his theology on two most important points. The one affects his view of Church and sacraments and the other his doctrine of grace.’ Wand, *The Latin Doctors*, p. 33.

⁹³ Labriolle, *History and Literature of Christianity from Tertullian to Boethius*, p. 406.

rendered null and void by moral failure. Augustine, however, explained that a sacrament was a permanent sign;⁹⁴ it did not degrade with the morals of the recipient:

he enunciated a doctrine of the Sacraments which asserted that their validity did not depend upon the moral character of the celebrant. This is sometimes called the mechanical or *ex opere operato*⁹⁵ view of the Sacraments, and it is very often condemned on that ground. [...] The point of this argument was to show that ordinations were not invalidated by a moral lapse on the part of the celebrant.⁹⁶

If, as the Donatists argued, the personal morals of a priest affected the efficacy of the sacrament which he administered, no one could be sure of ever truly receiving a sacrament. Gradually, Augustine succeeded in persuading many wavering Donatists to rejoin the Church. These converts, however, suffered reprisals at the hands of the Circumcellions. Augustine himself also became a target and they plotted his death.

Possidius notes: ‘They preached that, in order to defend their flock, the wolf had to be killed.’⁹⁷ One day an ambush was laid for Augustine as he went about Hippo visiting his congregation:

These armed Circumcellions frequently blocked the roads even against the servant of God, Augustine, when, upon request, he chanced to visit the Catholics whom he frequently instructed and exhorted. It once happened that, although the heretics were out in full force, they still failed to capture him. Through his guide’s mistake, but actually by the providence of God, the bishop happened to arrive at his destination by a different road. He learned later that, because of this error, he had escaped impious hands.⁹⁸

The violence of the Circumcellions became so out of control that not even Donatist bishops could restrain them. In the end, the state authorities were brought in to control the

⁹⁴ Cf. Blackney and Tindall: ‘There is an “indelible character” conferred [by sacraments] which is never lost – a view first adumbrated by Augustine’. E. H. Blakeney and Rev. F. C. Tindall, ‘Saint Augustine’, in *History of Christian Thought*, ed. Edward Gordon Selwyn (London: Unicorn Press, 1937), pp. 50-72, (p. 63).

⁹⁵ The term *ex opere operato* means ‘on the basis of the action performed; the objective efficacy and fruitfulness of the sacrament.’ Leo F. Stelton, *Dictionary of Ecclesiastical Latin* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995), p. 306.

⁹⁶ Wand, *The Latin Doctors*, pp. 34-5.

⁹⁷ Possidius, *Life of St. Augustine*, ix, p. 83.

⁹⁸ Possidius, *Life of St. Augustine*, xii, p. 86.

problem. Augustine reluctantly had to come to terms with the use of force to suppress the Donatists. His comments on the matter, however, had a sorry legacy in later centuries, as they were used to justify the use of force against heresy.⁹⁹

In the last three decades of his life, Augustine became embroiled in the Pelagian controversy.¹⁰⁰ This heresy originated from a British monk named Pelagius who had asserted that man achieved salvation solely through his own free will.¹⁰¹ Possidius described them as ‘new heretics in our day and skilful debaters’.¹⁰² The root of the theological problem of Pelagianism was that, by insisting on the sole efficacy of the will, it denied the necessity of the Redemption. Farrar suggests that Pelagius himself was not so zealous in the defence of his doctrine:

Perhaps the Pelagian controversy would never have arisen at all if the views of Pelagius had not been pushed into extremes by his friend and follower C[a]elestius [...]. [Pelagius’] heresy was in him hardly a heresy at all, for he approached it only on the practical side, and never pushed his dubious premises into inferential extremes. He saw that many excused their vices on the plea of human weakness; and this seemed to him a dangerous error.¹⁰³

⁹⁹ Cf. Chadwick: ‘[Augustine] did not deny that coercion to restrain acts of criminal violence was legitimate, but to put pressure on the Donatists to join the Catholic Church under threat of fines or of a being deprived of the right to bequeath property seemed to Augustine highly inexpedient. It would produce either hypocritical conversions or a great increase in unstoppable acts of terror, or even Donatist suicides. Under strong government pressure, the Numidian zealots used to throw themselves over cliffs, and their deaths hugely increased the odium with which Donatists regarded the Catholic community who were held responsible.’ Chadwick, *Augustine*, p. 79. Cf. Labriolle, *History and Literature of Christianity from Tertullian to Boethius*, pp. 406-7.

¹⁰⁰ Brown notes: ‘The emergence of Pelagianism as a threat to [Augustine’s] ideas, marks the end of a period in Augustine’s intellectual life.’ Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, p. 353.

¹⁰¹ Cf. Brown: ‘We know very little about Pelagius. Like Augustine, he was a provincial: he had come from Britain to Rome at much the same time as Augustine had first arrived in Italy to seek his fortune. But while Augustine had returned to his native land after only four years, Pelagius had remained in Rome.’ Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, p. 341.

¹⁰² Possidius, *Life of St. Augustine*, xviii, p. 94. Cf. Brown: ‘For Augustine, Pelagianism was always a body of ideas, of *disputationes*, ‘arguments’. He was in no doubt as to the intellectual quality of these arguments. For the first time in his career as a bishop, he was confronted by opponents of the same calibre as himself.’ Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, p. 345.

¹⁰³ Farrar, *The Life of Saint Augustine*, p. 132.

Caelestius' writings came under scrutiny by the Church and seven propositions, either explicitly stated or inferred, were condemned.¹⁰⁴ He denied the existence of original sin, a doctrine which Augustine strongly championed,¹⁰⁵ but confirmed the necessity of infant baptism. In A.D. 418 both Caelestius and Pelagius were denounced by Emperor Honorius after riots broke out. Brown explains the nature of the edict: 'Pelagius and Caelestius were to be expelled from Rome; anyone who spoke in their favour was to be brought before the authorities.'¹⁰⁶ The death of the Pope Zosimus in A.D. 418, however, resulted in a resurgence of Pelagianism, but under a new champion: Julian of Eclanum. Pelagius and Caelestius gradually faded into the background, but Julian continued to challenge Augustine. Indeed, Augustine was still refuting Julian's writings when he died.

Some critics suggest that the vehemence with which Augustine refuted Pelagianism and its emphasis on the efficacy of free will alone ran to extremes because of the violence of the debate with Julian.¹⁰⁷ Augustine had in the past championed the existence of man's free will against the Manichaeans; Christopher Kirwan explains the doctrinal necessity to recognise free will: 'human freedom has to be defended in order to

¹⁰⁴ The propositions were the following: '1. That Adam would have died even if he had not sinned. 2. His fall affected himself alone. 3. New-born children are in the same position as Adam. 4. Mankind neither dies through Adam's death nor is raised by Christ's resurrection. 5. Children even if they die unbaptized, have eternal life. 6. The law, as well as the gospel, can lead to holiness. 7. Even before Christ came there were men without sin.' Farrar, *The Life of St. Augustine*, p. 133.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. Clark: 'Against the Pelagians, Augustine developed a doctrine of Original Sin that was to remain long influential in Christian theology, even when later modified to provide stronger encouragement for moral effort.' Elizabeth Clark, 'Introduction' to *Saint Augustine on Marriage and Sexuality* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996), pp. 1-12, (p. 9).

¹⁰⁶ Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, p. 361.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Kirwan: 'The Pelagians gained in [Julian] a clever and pertinacious disputant, but not the astute politician they needed. The tone of his controversy with Augustine shows both parties aware of these facts of power: Julian strident in his hatred of the new provincial barbarism which he discerned in western Christianity, with its Jewish sense of despondency before the crimes and inadequacies of men, its dark self-abasement; Augustine harsh and contemptuous, unwilling to offer the courtesies of sober debate which he had used even against pagans in the *City of God* and always against his antagonists nearer home, but demolishing Julian like a house in the path of road improvements. It is a sorry episode.' Christopher Kirwan, *Augustine* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 129.

vindicate God as a just punisher.’¹⁰⁸ Augustine’s increasing insistence on grace resulted in a move towards the doctrine of predestination. In this, Julian accused Augustine of continuing to adhere to a Manichaean doctrine. There is some debate over whether these accusations are legitimate, or merely characteristic polemical mud-slinging.¹⁰⁹ Some critics assert that Augustine’s position on free will had radically altered from his earlier anti-Manichaean defence of the doctrine.¹¹⁰ Kirwan, however, argues:

From the defence of [free will], begun in the *De libero Arbitrio*, Augustine never finally retreated in his long life. Belief in ‘free decision of the will’ is the main philosophical difference between him and the Protestant reformers. Luther and Calvin were deeply influenced by him; it was from his own later writings that they drew the materials from which they, unlike him, concluded to what Luther called the bondage of the will.¹¹¹

The debate over free will and grace involved many difficult problems,¹¹² including: the necessity of baptism; the nature of the atonement; the nature of man;¹¹³ original sin; the transmission of original sin;¹¹⁴ the nature of virtue. In the following centuries, the

¹⁰⁸ Kirwan, *Augustine*, p. 82.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Gillian R. Evans. ‘Neither a Pelagian nor a Manichee’, *Vigiliae Christianae*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (Sep., 1981), 232-244.

¹¹⁰ Cf. Clark: ‘If in his early years as a Christian [...] Augustine had championed the freedom of the will to choose and perform the good, as he matured he became progressively less eager to advance this point. It was probably through his study of Paul’s Epistola to the Romans in the middle and later 390s that he began to adopt a more sceptical view of the will’s ability to extricate itself from sinful thoughts and behaviour: humans (even baptized Christians) throughout their lives struggle against the “desires of the flesh.” There was a mystery to human sinfulness that was not explainable on rational grounds. Sin was not just the effect of inadequate teaching or bad habits that could swiftly be remedied with instruction and virtuous practice; some dark spot remained in the human heart and will, even after the cleansing provided by Christian Baptism.’ Clark, ‘Introduction’ to *Saint Augustine on Marriage and Sexuality*, p. 7.

¹¹¹ Kirwan, *Augustine*, p. 82.

¹¹² Cf. Chadwick: ‘Two questions were thrust in to the foreground: could one say that God predestines the non-elect to hell, in particular unbaptized babies not yet capable of repentance and faith or of freely chosen act? And could one say that the transmission of original sin from Adam is passed on through heredity, i.e. through the reproductive process, and does this mean that sexual acts carry with them a taint of impurity even in Christian partners?’ Chadwick, ‘Augustine’, p. 335.

¹¹³ Cf. Blakeney and Tindall: ‘Augustine’s last great controversy was with *Pelagianism*. This centred round the nature of man and the doctrine of grace, and herein lay his greatest influence on subsequent thought, easily traceable through the Middle Ages and the Reformation period down to our own day.’ Blakeney and Tindall, ‘Saint Augustine’, p. 63.

¹¹⁴ Cf. Clark: ‘Against Pelagius and his followers, Augustine increasingly emphasized the will’s bondage to sin that has been the human condition since the first trespass in Eden. According to Augustine, the guilt of that sin was transmitted to all foetuses through the mechanism of the sinful lust that now spurs and

Catholic Church retreated from Augustine's doctrine of predestination.¹¹⁵ Leigh-Bennet notes that the Council of Orange (A.D. 529) modified Augustinian doctrine and affirmed the necessity of both free will and grace, which the Council of Trent later reaffirmed.¹¹⁶ He also notes that the Church of England appears to subscribe to predestination, but with the caveat that it is spiritually injurious for one to make assumptions about predestination.¹¹⁷

The early fifth century not only witnessed the problems of the Pelagian heresy, but also the ravaging of the Empire by the pagans. The Fall of Rome to Alaric in A.D. 410 shocked the whole of the Christian world. The pagans declared that Rome's downfall was a punishment for Christianity because it had caused the neglect of the old gods. Such assertions prompted Augustine to write his *Civitas Dei*. The Vandals, Alans and Goths,

accompanies sexual intercourse – whether those sex acts are performed inside or outside of marriage, whether procreation is intended or not.' Elizabeth Clark, 'Introductory note' to 'Augustine's Mature Position in the Anti-Pelagian Writings' in *Saint Augustine on Marriage and Sexuality* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996), pp. 71-105, (p. 71).

¹¹⁵ Cf. Wand: 'there are certain points in Augustine's teaching that the Catholic Church has never accepted. The belief in the total depravity of human nature, the affirmation of a divine predestination of each individual to eternal life or eternal death, and the denial of any freedom to the human will; these are points that were developed from Augustine by Calvin, not by the theologians of the historic Church. It must be recognized that like many of the greatest thinkers Augustine is the parent of more than one school of thought. If Catholicism inherited Augustine's doctrine of the Church, it is sometimes alleged that the Reformation inherited his doctrine of grace.' Wand, *The Latin Doctors*, p. 38. Cf. Labriolle: 'the Roman Church displayed much reserve on the theories of Augustine [on Predestination]. The ardent controversies of that period were to revive many centuries later with a virulence which is well known.' Labriolle, *History and Literature of Christianity from Tertullian to Boethius*, p. 432.

¹¹⁶ Cf. Leigh-Bennett: 'In 529 the Council of Orange modified Augustinian teaching by a series of general statements. Original sin is universal: Free Grace is offered to all: Justification is by that grace, and not by our own merit, but proceeding through Christ's death; Man's love to God is a gift of God: No one is predestined by God to evil. The Council of Trent reaffirmed original sin and the necessity of grace; but proclaimed the freedom of man and both his power of resisting grace (as opposed to the doctrine of irresistible grace for the elect), and of choosing between good and evil.' Leigh-Bennett, *Handbook of the Early Christian Fathers*, p. 329.

¹¹⁷ Cf. Leigh-Bennett: 'The Church of England, in Article 17, while admitting that Predestination to Life is "full of sweet, pleasant and unspeakable comfort to godly persons," declares that "to have continually before the eyes the sentence of God's predestination is a most dangerous downfall, whereby the Devil doth thrust them either into desperation or into wretchedness of most unclean living, no less perilous than desperation.'" Leigh-Bennett, *Handbook of the Early Christian Fathers*, p. 329.

however, descended upon Northern Africa, too.¹¹⁸ Possidius describes the Siege of Hippo-Regius.¹¹⁹ In the third month of the siege, Augustine was struck down with a fever, his last illness.¹²⁰ Nevertheless, he continued his correspondence from his sick bed, exhorting the African clergy to remain in their position as long as there remained a flock to minister to; the flight of priests should only be for the good of the living, not out of fear of dying.¹²¹ Augustine did not live to see the fall of Hippo; he died on August 28th A.D. 430.¹²² The African Church did not long survive her greatest son.¹²³

i. *De bono coniugali*

The persistence of Jovinian's ideas even after their condemnation by the Church and Jerome's strident refutation prompted Saint Augustine to write *De bono coniugali* (*On the Good of Marriage*) in c. A.D. 401, a good seven or eight years after *Adversus Jovinianum* was published.¹²⁴ Augustine himself cites the lingering influence of

¹¹⁸ Cf. Possidius, *Life of St. Augustine*, xxviii, pp. 108-9.

¹¹⁹ Cf. Possidius, *Life of St. Augustine*, xxviii, p. 110.

¹²⁰ Cf. Possidius, *Life of St. Augustine*, xxviii, p. 111.

¹²¹ Possidius reproduces Augustine's letter to the African clergy. Cf. Possidius, *Life of St. Augustine*, pp. 113-4.

¹²² Cf. Possidius, *Life of St. Augustine*, xxxi, pp. 122-3. Cf. Leigh-Bennett: 'he died at his post, and continued his correspondence to the end; giving his views to the neighbouring bishops as to the duty of awaiting martyrdom.' Leigh-Bennett, *Handbook of the Early Christian Fathers*, p. 334.

¹²³ Cf. Leigh-Bennett: 'Shortly before Augustine's death, the province of Africa was overrun by the Vandals under Genseric, who had been foolishly called in by Count Boniface, himself a well-meaning Catholic, to help him in his revolt against Rome; and with their coming commenced the downfall of the great African Church. At Augustine's death she had 500 Bishops; twenty years later only eighteen.' Leigh-Bennett, *Handbook of the Early Christian Fathers*, p. 334. Beaver also notes that the invasion of Africa also hindered the embryonic Augustinian monasticism: 'The growth of monastic institutions in Africa under Saint Augustine's influence appears to have been remarkably rapid, but the movement never came to full bloom. Very few of these establishments escaped destruction at the hands of the Arian Vandals. However, the support which this great doctor of the Church gave to the monastic movement in Africa and the weight of his reputation gave impetus and encouragement to it in other provinces, and certain contributions of Africa to western monachism, especially the institution of the canon regular, were to bear abundant fruit in later ages.' Beaver, 'The Rise of Monasticism in the Church of Africa', p. 372.

¹²⁴ Walsh notes that: 'Though the date of 401 for our two treatises is not absolutely secure and has been challenged, it remains the most probable option.' Walsh, 'Introduction' to *De bono coniugali* and *De sancta virginitate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. ix-xxxii, (p. ix).

Jovinian's ideas as the primary motive behind the production of *De bono coniugali* in his *Retractationes*:¹²⁵

The holy Church at Rome most faithfully and most resolutely opposed this outrage, but these arguments had survived in petty discussions and whisperings, though no one dared to urge them openly. Though these poisonous claims of Jovinian creeping in below the surface, they had to be confronted with such abilities as the Lord granted, most of all because it was being commonly claimed that a response to Jovinian had been possible only by denigration rather than the praise of marriage.¹²⁶

Augustine's treatise seeks to silence the commonly held claim that Jovinian's ideas could be challenged only by denigrating marriage; thus, the tract endeavours to provide a rebuttal of Jovinian's propositions (primarily, his assertion that virginity and marriage are of equal merit) without falling into the trap of criticising marriage, which Jerome's treatise was widely held to have done.¹²⁷ *De bono coniugali*, which asserts the inherent dignity and goodness of marriage, can, therefore, be seen as an attempt to rehabilitate the reputation of marriage that Jerome, in his ascetic zeal, had inadvertently left in tatters.¹²⁸

David Hunter comments that Augustine's

own treatises, *De bono coniugali* and *De sancta virginitate*, were written as an attempt to find a middle ground between Jovinian's equation of marriage and celibacy and Jerome's excessive depreciation of marriage.¹²⁹

¹²⁵ Cf. Labriolle: 'The *Retractations*, taken as a whole amount to a theological *erratum*, and form a very valuable descriptive list.' Labriolle, *History and Literature of Christianity from Tertullian to Boethius*, p. 394.

¹²⁶ Augustine, *Retractationes*, II. xxii, in Augustine, *De bono coniugali* and *De sancta virginitate*, ed. and trans. P. G. Walsh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 148-149, (p. 149).

¹²⁷ Leigh-Bennet sees Augustine's treatise as a reaction against extreme asceticism in general: 'The treatises in favour of virginity were considered by Augustine as so extravagant that he toned things down by writing one in praise of marriage.' Leigh-Bennett, *Handbook of the Early Christian Fathers*, p. 282.

¹²⁸ Cf. Chadwick: 'To avert the consequences of Jerome's grosser indiscretions, Augustine wrote in 401 a treatise *On the Good of Marriage*.' Chadwick, *Augustine*, p. 114. Cf. Burton: 'Augustine's two treatises, while aimed primarily at Jovinian, were also implicit rebuttals of his fellow-doctor's more colourful language. At the same time he was also concerned to rebut the views of the Manichees on marriage in general, and in particular on the Hebrew Patriarch's inveterate habit of begetting.' Philip Burton, 'Review: Augustine. *De Bono Coniugali. De Sancta Virginitate* by P. G. Walsh', *The Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol. 93 (2003), 411-412, (p. 411).

¹²⁹ David Hunter, 'The Virgin, the Bride, and the Church: Reading Psalm 45 in Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine', *Church History*, Vol. 69, No. 2 (Jun., 2000), 281-303, (p. 299). Elizabeth Clark likewise asserts that this is Augustine's intention. She notes that 'he tried to stake a middle ground between the

At first glance, this adoption of the ‘middle ground’ between Jovinian and Jerome appears to be the case. Indeed, Augustine professes to refute both the views that marriage is equal to virginity, and that marriage is bad. In *De sancta virginitate* he states:

Both views are erroneous, making marriage equal to sacred virginity and condemning it; the two errors in their excessive eagerness to avoid each other end up by locking horns with each other through their unwillingness to hold the middle path of truth. That middle way enables us both by sure reason and by the authority of holy scripture to establish that marriage is not a sin, yet also to refuse to rank it as equal to the good of continence exercised by virgins and by widows too.¹³⁰

Although Augustine speaks here of a ‘middle path of truth’ and the ‘middle way’ between two extremes, Hunter’s claim that Augustine treads a path between the extremist views of Jerome and Jovinian presupposes that Augustine accepted the interpretation of Jerome’s treatise as an outright condemnation of marriage. Indeed, Hunter even goes so far as to claim that Augustine might have been suspicious about Jerome’s orthodoxy.¹³¹ It is worth remembering, however, that there were several fourth-century sects that did outrightly condemn marriage,¹³² most notably, the Manichaeans,¹³³ to whom Augustine

claims of resolutely ascetic writers who hinted that marriage and reproduction were unworthy experiences for Christians, and those, in contrast, who made out that no preference was to be given to ascetic living.’ Clark, ‘Introduction’ to *Saint Augustine on Marriage and Sexuality*, p. 8.

¹³⁰ Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, xix, ed. and trans. P. G. Walsh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 66-147, (pp. 87-9).

¹³¹ Cf. Hunter: ‘Augustine’s response to the Jovinianist controversy was similar in many ways to that of Pelagius and the author of the *Consultationes Zacchaei et Apollonii*. All three authors appear to have deliberately distanced themselves from the positions of both Jovinian and Jerome. While upholding some of the ascetic hierarchy and acknowledging the superiority of celibacy over marriage (against Jovinian), each maintained that marriage was something genuinely good (against Jerome). If, on some level, they all regarded Jovinian as a “heretic”, it does not appear that they would have considered Jerome to be purely “orthodox”.’ David G. Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity: The Jovinianist Controversy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009 [2007]), p. 283.

¹³² For Epiphanius’ discussion of the anti-matrimonial position of the Encratites, the Apostolics, the Apotactics, the Origenists and the Hieracites see section of John Chrysostom above pp. 289-90 notes 67-71. Cf. Chrysostom: ‘But neither Marcion nor Valentinus nor Mani maintained this moderate view. They did not have speaking in themselves the Christ who spares his own sheep and who lays down his life for them but instead the father of falsehood, the destroyer of the human race. Consequently, they have destroyed all their followers by oppressing them in this world with meaningless and unbearable tasks and by dragging them down in their wake into the fire prepared for them in the next world.’ *On Virginity*, III, in *John*

makes explicit reference in *De bono coniugali*.¹³⁴ Jerome was careful to distance himself from such extremist sects in *Adversus Jovinianum*,¹³⁵ although this did not save him from accusations of heresy from Jovinian¹³⁶ and his sympathisers in Jerome's own time,¹³⁷ or, indeed, from modern critics in our own.¹³⁸ Jerome exhibits some consternation that he had been criticised by his own side as well as the heretics,¹³⁹ but insisted on his rigid

Chrysostom: On Virginity. Against Remarriage, trans. Sally Rieger Shore (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1982), pp. 1-128, (p. 5).

¹³³ Cf. Walsh: 'The fundamental belief of the Manichees was that there are two eternal first principles, God and Satan, holding dominion over the worlds of light and darkness. Satan had invaded and appropriated a part of the kingdom of light, and had established in it Adam and Eve whom he had endowed with diabolical powers. The marriage which they established is therefore a monstrous mélange of light and darkness. The sensuality which draws men and women together is a weapon forged by Satan to overcome the power of good. God did not establish marriage; the account in Genesis is a fiction. In the dualism which emerges, the soul is from God and the body from Satan. All believers must accordingly renounce the flesh and preserve their virginity. Only the Elect or inner circle, however, were bound by such renunciation, which demanded strict control over mouth, hand, and genitals; the Auditors for their part during the period of purification were permitted relations with women. But they were not to father children, for procreation is the work of the devil. It is a pardonable fault to seek sexual relations provided that sensual pleasure is the sole aim; it is preferable to exploit a concubine than to take a wife.' Walsh, 'Introduction' to *De bono coniugali* and *De sancta virginitate*, pp. xviii.

¹³⁴ Elizabeth Clark notes that in Augustine's anti-Manichaean works 'he contrasted the ascetic view of some Manichaeans, supposedly motivated by a hatred of the tainted body, with those of ascetic Catholics who restrained themselves from love of God.' Clark, 'Introduction' to *Saint Augustine on Marriage and Sexuality*, p. 5. Walsh states that, '*The Good of Marriage* was directed in part against the Manichees, who denied the validity of that title. [...] in composing the two treatises on marriage and virginity he is [...] able to draw not only on his *De Genesi contra Manichaeos* (c. 389), *De moribus Manichaeorum* (388-9), *Contra Fortunatum* (392), *Contra Epistolam (Manichaei) quam uocant fundamenti* (397), and *Contra Faustum* (c. 400).' Walsh, 'Introduction' to *De bono coniugali* and *De sancta virginitate*, p. xviii.

¹³⁵ Cf. Jerome: 'For ourselves, we do not follow the views of Marcion and Manichaeus, and disparage marriage; nor, deceived by the error of Tatian, the leader of the Encratites, do we think all intercourse impure; he condemns and rejects not only marriage but also food which God created for the use of man.' Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I, iii, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers. Jerome: Letters and Select Works*, Vol. VI, trans. W.H. Freemantle, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1893]), pp. 346-416, (p. 347).

¹³⁶ Jerome quotes Jovinian: 'All this makes it clear that in forbidding to marry, and to eat food which God created for use, you have consciences seared as with a hot iron, and are followers of the Manichaeans.' Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I, v, p. 349.

¹³⁷ Cf. Jerome: 'Here I blame Tatian, the chief of the Encratites, for his rejection of marriage, and yet I myself am said to condemn it!' Jerome, *Epistola XLVIII Ad Pammachium*, ix, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers. Jerome: Letters and Select Works*, Vol. VI, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1893]), pp. 66-79, (p. 71).

¹³⁸ Cf. Chadwick: 'When about 390 a critic of asceticism named Jovinian (himself a monk) denied that virginity as such is morally superior to marriage, Jerome's onslaught upon him became such a hymn of hate against sex and marriage that the charges of Manichaeism came to look uncommonly plausible.' Chadwick, *Augustine*, p. 114.

¹³⁹ Cf. Jerome: 'I have merely answered an opponent without any fear that they of my own party would lay snares for me.' Jerome, *Epistola XLVIII Ad Pammachium*, xx, p. 78

orthodoxy in *Epistola XLVIII Ad Pammachium*;¹⁴⁰ the treatise, he asserts, was written with the sole intention of combating Jovinian's heresy.¹⁴¹ Although Jerome states that there is no *via media* between his view and that of Jovinian,¹⁴² in his letter he refers to the desirability of a middle ground which praises virginity, but does not condemn marriage: 'we keep to the King's highway if we aspire to virginity yet refrain from condemning marriage.'¹⁴³ Perhaps Augustine's 'middle ground' also seeks Jerome's 'King's highway', treading between the extremes of Jovinian and heretical sects such as the Manichaeans, rather than between Jovinian and Jerome.¹⁴⁴ It is also important to realise that Jerome's treatise had a particular purpose – to crush Jovinian – whereas Augustine had a slightly different brief, which was deliberately conciliatory.

Although Augustine does obliquely allude to the problems caused by Jerome's treatise, he does not directly criticise Jerome or *Adversus Jovinianum* in the *Retractationes*. Augustine was not afraid to contradict Jerome in areas in which they disagreed;¹⁴⁵ however, he does not condemn Jerome's attitude towards marriage or,

¹⁴⁰ Cf. Jerome: 'With my last breath, then, I protest that neither now nor at any former time have I condemned marriage.' Jerome, *Epistola XLVIII Ad Pammachium*, xx, p. 78.

¹⁴¹ Cf. Jerome: 'If I remember aright the point of the dispute, the question at issue between myself and Jovinian is that he puts marriage on a level with virginity, while I make it inferior; he declares that there is little or no difference between the two states, I assert that there is a great deal. [...] If I am blamed for putting wedlock below virginity, he must be praised for putting the two states on a level. If, on the other hand, he is condemned for supposing them equal, his condemnation must be taken as testimony in favour of my treatise.' Jerome, *Epistola XLVIII Ad Pammachium*, ii-iii, pp. 66-7.

¹⁴² Cf. Jerome: 'There can be no middle course. Either my view of the matter must be embraced, or else that of Jovinian.' Jerome, *Epistola XLVIII Ad Pammachium*, i, p. 66.

¹⁴³ Jerome, *Epistola XLVIII Ad Pammachium*, viii, p. 70.

¹⁴⁴ Augustine states in *De sancta virginitate*: 'Some indeed in espousing virginity have believed that we should stigmatize marriage as adultery; others in defending marriage would have it that the pre-eminence of perpetual continence deserves no greater honour than marital chastity. This is to argue that the good of Susanna demeans Mary, or that the greater good of Mary must spell condemnation for Susanna.' Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, xix, p. 89.

¹⁴⁵ Augustine, for instance, wrote to Jerome disagreeing with his exegesis of 'some difficulties in Galatians' in letter XXII. Augustine says: 'I came across a passage where the Apostle Peter is rescued from a dangerous dissimulation. I confess that I regretted very keenly that lying should be defended either by such a man as you or by someone else, if someone else wrote it; and I shall go on feeling this way until it is refuted – if what disturbs me can be refuted. I think it is extremely dangerous to admit that anything in the

indeed, his Catholic orthodoxy. Shortly after composing *De bono coniugali*, Augustine wrote to Jerome (A.D. 402) regarding a previous letter which he had sent that had mistakenly been made public rather than delivered to Jerome. Augustine states: ‘If some chance statements are found in some of my writings, in which I am found to have views different from yours, that is nothing against you.’¹⁴⁶ Also, in another letter to Jerome, written in A.D. 415, Augustine refers to Jerome’s refutation of Jovinian whilst asserting his strong belief in Jerome’s orthodoxy:

You are not one of these who have begun to babble new doctrines, saying that there is no guilt inherited from Adam, which has to be remitted in the infant by baptism. If I knew that you approved of this view, or, rather, if I did not know that you do not approve of it, I would never ask this of you nor think it something to be asked. But I do believe that your opinion on this point is consonant with the foundations of Catholic faith, as you proved by refuting the idle prating of Jovinian.¹⁴⁷

Hunter’s claim that Augustine thought that Jerome was unorthodox, therefore, seems a little misplaced when Augustine himself uses Jerome’s orthodoxy in refuting Jovinian to assess his orthodoxy on original sin and the necessity of infant baptism. In the same year, Augustine again wrote to Jerome, and refers to *Adversus Jovinianum* in glowing terms:

Sacred Books should be a lie.’ Augustine, 28. *Augustine to Jerome, his brother and fellow priest, most beloved lord, most worthy of being received and embrace in the bonds of sincere affection*, in *The Fathers of the Church: Saint Augustine. Letters*, Vol. I (1-82), trans. Sister Wilfrid Parsons, eds. Ludwig Schopp, Roy J. Deferrari, Bernard M. Peebles (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1981 [1951], pp. 93-98, (p. 95). The letter, however, did not reach Jerome nor was it returned to Augustine, but found its way into the public domain. Jerome was particularly angry about what he felt had been a personal attack. Augustine wrote again apologising for the mistake. Augustine, although seeking to ameliorate the situation (Letter LXVII), did not waver in his opposition to Jerome’s exegetical explanations as he repeats his objections in *Epistola 82* and seeks to debate the same passages with Jerome.

¹⁴⁶ Augustine, 67. *Augustine gives greeting in the Lord to Jerome, most dear lord, most cherished and honoured brother and fellow priest* (402), in *The Fathers of the Church: Saint Augustine. Letters*, Vol. I (1-82), trans. Sister Wilfrid Parsons, eds. Ludwig Schopp, Roy J. Deferrari, Bernard M. Peebles (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1981 [1951], pp. 316-317, (pp. 316-7). Augustine adds: ‘And this also I will say, that not only am I most ready to receive in a brotherly spirit any contrary opinion you may have to anything in my writings to which you take exception, but I ask and insist that you do so, and I will take pleasure in my own correction and your goodness.’ Augustine, 67. *Augustine to Jerome*, p. 317.

¹⁴⁷ Augustine, 166. *To Jerome [On the Origin of the Soul]*, in *The Fathers of the Church: Saint Augustine. Letters*, Vol. IV, (165-203), trans. Sister Wilfrid Parsons, eds. Ludwig Schopp, Roy J. Deferrari, Bernard M. Peebles (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1981 [1955], pp. 6-31, (p. 12).

But the Stoics are the only ones who dared to argue for the equality of sins and this they did against all human experience. Your adversary, Jovinian, was a Stoic in following that opinion, but an Epicurean in grasping at and constantly defending pleasure, and you refuted him brilliantly from the holy Scriptures. In that most delightful and most luminous work of yours, it is quite clear that neither the authors on our side, nor the truth Itself which spoke through them, accepted the view that all sins are equal.¹⁴⁸

Augustine refers to *Adversus Jovinianum* a second time in the same letter and describes it as a ‘brilliant work against Jovinian’.¹⁴⁹ It seems unlikely that Augustine would be so vociferous in his praise of the tract if he were convinced of its and Jerome’s unorthodoxy. Furthermore, by the time Augustine wrote the *Retractationes*, Jerome had been dead for six or seven years, and so Augustine no longer had any cause to placate him. Of course, in the latter years of his life Jerome had supported Augustine against the Pelagian heresy, but, even so, Augustine’s decision not to condemn Jerome’s treatise directly in the *Retractationes* implies a continued respect for Jerome after his death.

This is not to say that Augustine accepted Jerome’s refutation of Jovinian without question. In *De bono coniugali*, Augustine does correct Jerome’s treatise when it errs.¹⁵⁰ For instance, in *Adversus Jovinianum* Jerome had held marriage in suspicion because Paul seems to be saying that it was only considered to be a good comparatively on account of fornication.¹⁵¹ Augustine, however, asserts that marriage is a good in itself:

¹⁴⁸ Augustine, 167. *Augustine to Jerome*, iv, in *The Fathers of the Church: Saint Augustine. Letters*, Vol. IV, (165-203), trans. Sister Wilfrid Parsons, eds. Ludwig Schopp, Roy J. Deferrari, Bernard M. Peebles (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1981 [1955]), pp. 32-49, (p. 36).

¹⁴⁹ Augustine, 167. *Augustine to Jerome*, x, p. 40.

¹⁵⁰ Jerome himself, however, had accepted that perhaps he had gone too far in some of his comments. He notes that there was a rhetorical reason for this: ‘there are different ways of speaking; and we know, among other things, that he who writes for display uses one style, and he who writes to convince another. [...] Sometimes, it is true, they are compelled to say not what they think but what is needful; and for this reason they [Origen, Eusebius and Apollinaris] employ against their opponents the assertion of the Gentiles themselves. [...] To teach a disciple is one thing; to vanquish an opponent, another.’ Jerome, *Epistola XLVIII Ad Pammachium*, xiii, p. 72-3.

¹⁵¹ Cf. Jerome: ‘If it is good not to touch a woman, it is bad to touch one: for there is no opposition to goodness but badness. But if it be bad and the evil is pardoned, the reason for the concession is to prevent worse evil. But surely a thing which is only allowed because there may be something worse has only a

We do not declare it a good by calling it a good by comparison with fornication; otherwise there will be two evils, of which the second is the worse. Or fornication will also be a good, because adultery is worse – for it is worse to damage another’s marriage than to consort with a prostitute. And adultery will be good because incest is worse – for it is worse to have intercourse with your mother than with someone else’s wife. [...] Marriage and fornication are not two evils, of which the second is the better; rather, marriage and continence are two goods, of which the second is better.¹⁵²

Augustine demonstrates the danger of viewing marriage as a good only in comparison with fornication: ‘Everything will be good in comparison with what is worse.’¹⁵³ The implication of Jerome’s suspicion of marriage is bleak, as it could be utilised to justify any form of vice.¹⁵⁴ Nevertheless, Augustine’s central argument does confirm Jerome’s. The two treatises are, in fact, a firm reiteration of the mainstream attitude of the Catholic Church towards marriage and virginity;¹⁵⁵ in this way, although Augustine’s tone is more measured than Jerome’s, he echoes the essential position of *Adversus Jovinianum*: marriage is good, but virginity is better.¹⁵⁶

ii. The Marriage Goods. The First Good: *Proles*

De bono coniugali opens with a discussion of the unity of the sexes in Eden, and uses the Genesis narrative as evidence that God’s plan for mankind had always intended the union

slight degree of goodness.’ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum (Against Jovinian)*, I.vii, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers. Jerome: Letters and Select Works*, Vol. VI, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1893]), pp. 346-416, (p. 350); ‘The reason why it is better to marry is that it is worse to burn. Let burning lust be absent, and he will not say it is better to marry. The word *better* always implies a comparison with something worse, not a thing absolutely good and incapable of comparison. [...] If marriage in itself be good, do not compare it with fire, but simply say ‘It is good to marry’. I suspect the goodness of that thing which is forced into the position of being only the lesser of two evils. What I want is not a smaller evil, but a thing absolutely good.’ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. ix, p. 352.

¹⁵² Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, viii, p. 19.

¹⁵³ Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, viii, p. 19.

¹⁵⁴ Jerome defends his comparison of fornication and marriage: ‘While virginity is related to marriage as better is to good, marriage is related to fornication as good is to bad. How, I should like to know, have I sinned in this explanation?’ Jerome, *Epistola XLVIII Ad Pammachium*, xvii, p. 76.

¹⁵⁵ Compare Jerome: ‘Even when marriage continues to fulfil its function, the Church does not reject it, but only regulates it.’ Jerome, *Epistola XLVIII Ad Pammachium*, xi, p. 71.

¹⁵⁶ Cf. Augustine: ‘So if we compare the issues themselves, we can be in no doubt whatever that the chastity of continence is better than the chastity of marriage, though both are good.’ Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, xxviii, p. 53.

of the sexes. Augustine considers the implications of the first commandment for man to ‘Increase and multiply and fill the earth’ (Genesis 1: 28) and the nature of prelapsarian procreation, and explores some of the then current theoretical models which had been proposed to explain God’s original intention for reproduction.¹⁵⁷ Augustine ultimately dismisses these speculative theories; they are a moot point and not directly relevant to the subject of his current treatise.¹⁵⁸ Instead, he states:

What we now assert is that in our present situation of birth and death, which we experience and in which we were created, marriage between male and female is something good.¹⁵⁹

Walsh avers that Augustine’s seemingly irrelevant discussion of Adam and Eve and the nature of prelapsarian procreation actually ‘point[s] to procreation as the first of God’s

¹⁵⁷ Cf. Augustine: ‘There have been several different theories on this matter, and if we had to investigate which of them most closely accords with the truth of the divine scriptures, it would involve lengthy discussion.’ Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, ii, p. 3; ‘One possibility is that if they had not sinned they would have had children in some way other than sexual intercourse through the gift of the Almighty Creator, for he was able to create Adam and Eve themselves without the aid of parents, He was able to fashion Christ in the flesh in the virgin’s womb, and – I cite this example for the unbelievers – He was able to furnish bees with offspring without sexual intercourse.’ Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, ii, pp. 3-5; ‘A second possibility is that in scripture many statements are mystical and metaphorical, and so we must interpret in a different sense the words “Fill the earth, and subdue it”.’ Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, ii, p. 5; ‘A third possibility is that the bodies of our first parents were initially not spiritual but animal creations, to enable them to become spiritual later through the merit of obedience. They would thus have attained immortality not after death, which entered the world through the devil’s malice and became punishment for sin, but through the transformation to which the Apostle points when he says: “Then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet Christ in the air”.’ Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, ii, p. 5.

¹⁵⁸ Cf. Augustine: ‘It would involve long investigation and discussion to establish which of these suggestions is true, or whether one or more different explanations can even now be derived from these words of scripture.’ Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, ii, p. 7. Cf. Augustine: ‘I published a book entitled *The Good of Marriage*, in which the important question concerning the begetting of children before mankind incurred death by sinning – for intercourse seems to be an activity of mortal bodies – was post posted; but in my view it is sufficiently explained later in other books of mine.’ Augustine, *Retractationes* II. xxii, p. 149. For a discussion on Augustine’s various interpretations of Genesis, see John O’Meara, ‘Saint Augustine’s Understanding of the Creation and Fall’, *The Maynooth Review*, Vol. 10 (May, 1984), 52-62. For a discussion of Augustine’s mature exegesis on Genesis which shaped, or perhaps were shaped by, his anti-Pelagian attitudes, see Elaine Pagels, ‘The Politics of Paradise: Augustine’s Exegesis of Genesis 1-3 versus That of John Chrysostom’, *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 78, No. 1/2 (Jan. – Apr., 1985), 67-99.

¹⁵⁹ Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, iii, p. 7.

purposes in establishing the married state in Paradise'.¹⁶⁰ Although Augustine does establish procreation as a major factor in justifying the institution of marriage, he implies that friendship and a desire for social cohesion are the primary roots of marriage.

Augustine views marriage as the fundamental building block of a good society; the wider friendship of the human race, consequently, rests on domestic union:

Every individual belongs to the human race, and by virtue of his humanity he is a social being. In addition, he possesses the great and natural blessing of a capacity for friendship. It was with these purposes that God decided to create all humanity from one man, so that all would be kept in community with each other not only by similarity of species but also by the bond of kinship. Hence the first natural link in human society is that between man and wife.¹⁶¹

Even though such friendly companionship can exist without the desire for children, the inclination to augment the human race through procreation is a natural extension of the desire for society. Reproduction thus adds a further social justification for marriage:

The next link in the chain of community is children, the sole worthy outcome not of the union between male and female, but of sexual intercourse; for even without such sexual association there could exist a true union of friendship between the two sexes, with the one governing and the other obeying.¹⁶²

Augustine makes a subtle distinction between children as the 'sole worthy outcome' of marriage (the union between male and female), and as the 'sole worthy outcome' of sexual intercourse. The emphasis on the latter stresses that procreation is the natural function of intercourse and its primary purpose.¹⁶³ It also acknowledges that children can be conceived outside the marriage state, and so marriage cannot be accused of being the cause of intercourse.¹⁶⁴ As marriage is not simply synonymous with intercourse, it could

¹⁶⁰ Walsh, 'Introduction' to *De bono coniugali* and *De sancta virginitate*, p. xxi.

¹⁶¹ Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, i, p. 3.

¹⁶² Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, i, p. 3.

¹⁶³ Cf. Kirwan: 'Augustine thinks procreation a part of the justification for marriage; he thinks it the *only* justification for sexual intercourse.' Kirwan, *Augustine*, p. 194.

¹⁶⁴ Augustine later addresses the issue of children born outside wedlock and their equal opportunity to achieve virtue and salvation: 'But whatever the source from which individuals are born, so long as they do

legitimately exist without sexual intercourse as it would still satisfy the root need of friendship and companionship.¹⁶⁵

So, regardless of what prelapsarian procreation may have involved, Augustine asserts that the institution of marriage which legitimises the production of children is a good in its current form. The question of the place of concupiscence, an unavoidable adjunct to the marriage act, is, however, less easy to justify. Augustine circumvents the problem by formulating a theoretical framework of the three marriage goods, which serves to explain and pardon the lust that appears to mar the holiness of marriage. The first marriage good is *proles*, the begetting of children:

Marriage promotes this further good: carnal or youthful incontinence, which is admittedly a defect, is applied to the honourable task of begetting children, and so intercourse within marriage engenders something good from the evil of lust.¹⁶⁶

Marriage thus converts something bad into a spiritually productive good. As children are the ‘sole worthy outcome’ of intercourse and a consequence of its natural function, if sexual intercourse is undertaken with no other intention than to produce children, then, Augustine argues, the sexual act can be performed with no sinful remnant attached to it. Using sex for procreative means is the correct use of it, and so ‘if restrained and confined

not imitate the vices of their parents and observe due worship of God, they will gain both honour and salvation. For the human seed which comes from each and every man is God’s creation.’ Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, xviii, p. 35. Augustine may be following Methodius’ explanation of why illegitimate births do not affect the goodness of the child that is born from them. Methodius uses an analogy of God as the potter who moulds and brings to perfection every lump of clay that is thrown to him: ‘for the clay should not be blamed, but he who did this in violation of what is right.’ Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, II.iv, in *Ante-Nicene Christian Library: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*. Vol. XIV. *The Writings of Methodius, Alexander of Lycopolis, Peter of Alexandria and Several Fragments*, trans. William R. Clark, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, MDCCCLXIX [1869]), pp. 1-119, (p. 16).

¹⁶⁵ Cf. Augustine: ‘The explanation why marriage is a good lies, I think, not merely in the procreation of children, but also in the natural compact itself between the sexes.’ Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, iii, p. 7.

¹⁶⁶ Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, iii, p. 7; ‘The fact is that intercourse necessary for begetting children carries no blame, and it alone is proper to marriage. But the intercourse which goes beyond this necessity is no longer subject to reason, but to lust.’ Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, xi, p. 25.

to natural use by the controlling reins of temperance, it cannot be lust'.¹⁶⁷ Augustine's understanding of the marriage act, therefore, differs from Jerome's, which had assumed that every act of intercourse in marriage incurred venial sin.¹⁶⁸ Augustine also suggests that procreative intercourse subjects and orders the flesh, and that the subsequent responsibilities of parenthood alter the nature of bodily lusts. Hence, not only is procreation the correct use of intercourse, but it also acts as a corrective for intemperate passions.¹⁶⁹

iii. The Second Good: *Fides*

The marriage act, however, is not always undertaken for the sole reason of begetting children, and marital intercourse may even become intemperate and unrestrained. Such immoderation moves the intent of marital intercourse away from the good of *proles*, but, according to Augustine, this is still allowable because it taps into the second good of marriage, that is, *fides*. Saint Augustine observes that

married couples owe fidelity to each other not merely in performance of the sexual act to bring forth children – and this is the primary compact between the human species in this mortal life of ours – but also in ministering, so to say, to each other, to shoulder each other's weakness, enabling each other to avoid illicit sexual intercourse.¹⁷⁰

Marital intercourse that is indulged in solely for lustful reasons still maintains marital fidelity, which is, as Paul himself says, one of the major reasons for matrimony: the avoidance of fornication and adultery.¹⁷¹ Augustine asserts that immoderately demanding

¹⁶⁷ Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, xviii, p. 35.

¹⁶⁸ For Jerome's comments see footnote 151 above.

¹⁶⁹ Cf. Augustine: 'the lustful tendencies of the flesh are kept in subjection, and their hot passion becomes more seemly, for parental love constrains it. This is because a sense of responsibility obtrudes into the heat of pleasure, for as they cleave together as man and wife, they reflect on their roles as father and mother.' Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, iii, pp. 7-9.

¹⁷⁰ Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, vi, p. 15.

¹⁷¹ Cf. Paul: 'It is good for a man not to touch a woman. But for fear of fornication, let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband' (I Corinthians 7: 1-2).

the marriage debt from one's spouse is allowable because, although it points to an intemperate and incontinent nature, it still retains fidelity as it prevents the lustful partner from seeking sexual gratification outside the marriage bed.¹⁷² Nevertheless, even though it is permissible to demand one's marriage rights, Augustine reminds couples, and seemingly women in particular, that a temperate attitude towards intercourse is a feature of Christian marriage:

intrinsic to the character of marriage is the refusal to demand it oneself, but also a willingness to grant it to one's spouse, so that he may not sin mortally through fornication.¹⁷³

Jerome, following classical mores, had suggested in his treatise that a too ardent desire for one's spouse could make a man an adulterer with his own wife.¹⁷⁴ Augustine dismisses the suggestion that intemperance in marriage can stray into the realms of adulterous activity with one's own spouse, although he does insist that sexual temperance is desirable in a marriage.¹⁷⁵ He makes it clear that the definition of adultery is unlawful

¹⁷² Cf. Augustine: 'In the very act in which married partners pay the debt they owe to each other, even if they demand this too passionately and too lustfully, they owe equal fidelity to each other.' Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, iv, p. 9; 'Even when such physical debts are demanded intemperately (which the Apostle permits in married couples as pardonable, allowing them to indulge in sex beyond the purpose of procreation, rather than laying down the law as command), and though debased habits impel partners to such intercourse, marriage is none the less a safeguard against adultery and fornication.' Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, vi, p. 13; 'if the partner of either sex makes too importunate advances in demanding the marriage-debt, this is permitted to married couples as pardonable.' Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, xii, p. 27.

¹⁷³ Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, xi, p. 25.

¹⁷⁴ Cf. Jerome: 'Their love was of a honourable birth, but it grew out of all proportion. And it makes no difference how honourable may be the cause of a man's insanity. Hence Xystus [or Sextus] in his sentences tells us that 'He who too ardently loves his own wife is an adulterer'. It is disgraceful to love another man's wife at all, or one's own too much. A wise man ought to love his wife with judgement, not with passion. [...] 'Let a man govern his voluptuous impulses, and not rush headlong into intercourse. There is nothing blacker than to love a wife as if she were an adulteress.' Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. ixl, p. 386.

¹⁷⁵ Walsh notes that in *De bono coniugali* Augustine 'repeatedly stresses that lustful behaviour within marriage is 'pardonable', implicitly rejecting the insulting claim made by Jerome and others that a husband or wife can be an adulterer in marriage, by laying greater stress on fidelity as the mark of Christian commitment in marriage.' Walsh, 'Introduction' to *De bono coniugali* and *De sancta virginitate*, p. xxi.

intercourse with someone other than your married partner, not behaving lustfully with one's own spouse.¹⁷⁶

In spite of Augustine's apparently more liberal attitude towards intercourse for pleasure rather than procreation, he notes that such unbridled desire within a marriage is not only undesirable but brings with it the taint of sinfulness. This is because the use of intercourse has gone beyond its original intention:

The fact is that intercourse necessary for begetting children carries no blame and it alone is proper to marriage. But intercourse which goes beyond this necessity is no longer subject to reason, but to lust.¹⁷⁷

This sin, however, because it is contained within the sphere of marriage and prevents fornication and adultery, is permissible, and thus accrues only a venial (pardonable) sin.¹⁷⁸ However, not all forms of lustfulness are allowable in marriage:

But their marriage excuses rather than encourages this fault [i.e. the use of intercourse for pleasure] – excuses it so long as they do not brush aside God's mercy from them, either by failing to abstain from sex on certain days so as to be free for prayer, and to use such abstinence as a mode of fasting to win approval for their prayers, or by having recourse not to natural practices but to unnatural ones, which are mortally sinful in a partner in marriage.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁶ Cf. Augustine: 'Betrayal of this fidelity is called adultery, when through the prompting of one's own lust, or through acceding to the lust of another, sexual intercourse takes place with another man or woman contrary to the marriage-pact.' Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, iv, p. 9.

¹⁷⁷ Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, xi, p. 25. Cf. Augustine: 'For the proper use of marriage is such that if sexual intercourse in marriage seeks something more than what is necessary for procreation, defilement is involved though the sin is venial. For if such trespass does not defile at all, what does the forgiveness expiate? It would be surprising if the boys who follow the Lamb were free of such defilement, if they did not remain virgins.' Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, xxxi, p. 57.

¹⁷⁸ Cf. Augustine: 'Nor is marriage the cause of such behaviour, but marriage makes it pardonable.' Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, vi, pp. 13-15; 'For men today, because of the honourable status of marriage, are allowed as pardonable indulgence (though it is not of the essence of marriage) that extended use of sex which goes beyond the necessity to beget children, an indulgence which the men of old did not have.' Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, xix, p. 37. Chadwick notes that: 'Venial sins were to be cleansed by daily use of the Lord's prayer and by almsgiving.' Chadwick, *Augustine*, p. 85.

¹⁷⁹ Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, xi, p. 25; 'However, if in their intercourse they love what is honourable more than what is not, in other words what is proper to marriage more than what is not, the Apostle's authority concedes that their behaviour is pardonable.' Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, xi, p. 25.

Augustine equates sexual abstinence with fasting, and so, by promoting sexual abstinence and abstinence from food, refutes the first and third of Jovinian's proposition.¹⁸⁰ In addition, he articulates a similar concern to Jerome about the effect of lust on religious devotions:¹⁸¹ lust which runs to excess can turn couples away from God if they neglect their religious duties in favour of unbridled intercourse. Virginity is considered better, according to Saint Paul, because it enables the virgin to think only on the things of the Lord, whereas marriage diverts some of this devotion away from God.¹⁸² If excessive lust turns the couple away from God completely, then the pardon obtained by marriage becomes null and void because their use of intercourse severs them from God. This, however, is not the fault of the institution of marriage, but of intemperance.

In addition to the maintenance of necessary religious observances, Augustine stipulates that to retain God's pardon for intemperate lust, couples must not hinder procreation, for this detaches intercourse completely from the purpose for which it was ordained. Augustine is even willing to recognise cohabiting couples as living in a form of marriage, as long as they intend life-long fidelity to each other and do not attempt to

¹⁸⁰ Cf. Jerome: '[Jovinian] says that "virgins, widows, and married women, who have been once passed through the laver of Christ, if they are on a par in other respects, are of equal merit." He endeavours to show that "they who with full assurance of faith have been born again in baptism, cannot be overthrown by the devil." His third point is "that there is no difference between abstinence from food, and its reception with thanksgiving." The fourth and last is that there is one reward in the kingdom of heaven for all who have kept their baptismal vow.' Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I.iii, p. 348.

¹⁸¹ Compare with Jerome: 'What, I pray you, is the quality of that good thing which hinders prayer? Which does not allow the body of Christ to be received? So long as I do the husband's part, I fail in continency. The same Apostle in another place commands us to pray always. If we are to pray always, it follows that we must never be in the bondage of wedlock, for as often as I render my wife her due, I cannot pray.' Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I.vii, p. 351.

¹⁸² Cf. Paul: 'But he that is with a wife, is solicitous for the things of the world, how he may please his wife: and he is divided. And the unmarried woman and the virgins thinketh on the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and spirit. but she that is married thinketh on the things of the world, and how she may please her husband' (1 Corinthians 7: 33-4).

prevent childbirth through contraceptive or abortive methods.¹⁸³ In addition, if the lust of a married couple runs to unnatural practices, then the couple commit mortal sins through their sexual behaviour. Augustine's concerns are a direct refutation of Manichaean practices, which allowed intercourse for the lower echelons of the sect, but at the same time insisted on impeding or terminating pregnancy through abortion and contraception.¹⁸⁴ Elizabeth Clark notes that not allowing for the possibility of procreation is fundamental in Augustine's view of unnatural sins:

Augustine emphasised that any form of sexual activity which automatically ruled out the possibility of conception, such as anal or oral sex or same-sex relations, was to be condemned as 'against nature'.¹⁸⁵

Thus, the marriage goods do not justify all sexual practices, even if they take place with the marriage partner.¹⁸⁶ Augustine even advises a wife that it would be right for her to refuse to accede to her husband's lust if he requires her to perform unnatural acts:

¹⁸³ Cf. Augustine: 'Doubtless without absurdity it can indeed be labelled a marriage, provided that they agree to maintain the relationship until one of them dies; provided, too, that they do not avoid having children, even if they did not cohabit for this purpose, and provided that they do not ensure that none are born either through reluctance to have children born to them or through taking some evil means to frustrate such births.' Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, v, p. 11.

¹⁸⁴ Cf. Clark: 'Manicheans [...] condemned reproduction out of their belief that physical bodies were the product of an evil deity who used the "trick" of procreation to further entrap in materiality the particles of Light defeated in an original cosmic battle.' (p. 3). She notes that 'The anti-reproductive stance of the Manicheans was one that Augustine came to combat strongly to the end of his days: indeed, for Augustine, the major purpose of sexual relations in marriage was the procreation of children.' Clark, 'Introduction' to *Saint Augustine on Marriage and Sexuality*, p. 5. Abortion and contraception, however, have always been forbidden within the Catholic tradition. Walsh notes that 'So far as abortion is concerned, it had been condemned at the Council of Elvira (canon 61. c. A.D. 306), and Augustine like Ambrose (*Hexam.* 5.58) stigmatizes it as murder (*De nuptiis et concupiscentia* I. 13. 15; I. 15. 17).' Walsh, Note to *De bono coniugali*, p. 11n. 24.

¹⁸⁵ Clark, 'Introduction' to *Saint Augustine on Marriage and Sexuality*, p. 6.

¹⁸⁶ Cf. Augustine: 'So the Apostle does not permit marriage as something pardonable (for who could doubt the utter absurdity of claiming that persons granted pardon have not sinned?) rather, what he permits as pardonable is sexual intercourse indulged through incontinence, without the sole purpose of begetting a child and sometimes without any intention of having one. Marriage does not force this to happen, but it obtains pardon for it, so long as it is not so excessive that it occupies times to be set aside for prayer, or degenerates into unnatural practices; the Apostle could not remain silent about these when he spoke of the corrupt behaviour of unclean and impious men.' Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, xi, p. 25.

When a man seeks to exploit a woman's sexual parts beyond what is granted in this way, a wife behaves more basely if she allows herself rather than another to be used in this way.¹⁸⁷

As with the neglecting of religious duties, the dissipation of unnatural sin involves a turning away from God and directs intercourse away from its natural function and its 'sole worthy' purpose. In this case, *fides* cannot pardon such lust because unnatural practices are even more sinful than adultery and fornication, which at least utilise intercourse in a natural way.

So, Augustine's hierarchy of sexual mores with regards to the use of intercourse in marriage stands thus: the marriage good of *proles* allows sinless intercourse to take place; the marriage good of *fides* pardons excessive intercourse in marriage, as long as it does not thwart procreation through contraception or abortion, or descend into unnatural practices, or lead to the neglect of religious duties.¹⁸⁸

iv. Marital Chastity

Even though Augustine assures Christians that intercourse is acceptable in marriage, he also asserts that 'abstention from all sexual intercourse is better even than intercourse in marriage undertaken to beget children'.¹⁸⁹ Augustine, then, despite outlining the

¹⁸⁷ Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, xii, p. 27.

¹⁸⁸ Cf. Augustine: 'it is no sin to meet the obligation owed to a spouse; but to demand that debt beyond the requirement to beget children is a venial sin. Beyond that, fornication and adultery are serious sins deserving of punishment.' Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, vi, p. 15; 'Intercourse in marriage, then, when undertaken to beget children, carries no blame. When indulged to satisfy lust, so long as it is with a married partner, it bears only venial blame because it preserves fidelity to the marriage-bed. Adultery or fornication, however, is mortally sinful.' Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, vi, p. 15.

¹⁸⁹ Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, vi, p. 15.

acceptability of intercourse in marriage, like Jerome¹⁹⁰ still encourages permanent sexual abstinence within the marriage state because it ‘gains greater merit’:¹⁹¹

The better the couple are, the earlier they have begun by mutual consent to abstain from sexual intercourse – not because it has become physically impossible for them to carry out their wishes, but so that they could merit praise by prior refusal to do what they were capable of doing.¹⁹²

The exhortation to embrace voluntary celibacy within marriage raises interesting questions about the definition of ‘marital chastity’. Does the term simply refer to the maintenance of the marriage goods,¹⁹³ or does it refer instead to the complete renunciation of sex within marriage? Jerome had implied that chastity in marriage could only be obtained by the cessation of marital relations.¹⁹⁴ Whereas Augustine does acknowledge that a celibate marriage or chaste widowhood is the superior and preferable form of marital chastity,¹⁹⁵ he also envisions a level of chastity which includes marital intercourse:

Therefore the glory of marriage consists in chaste procreation and fidelity in granting the debts of the flesh. [...] So the bodies of married couples who preserve fidelity to each other and to the Lord are also holy.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁰ Compare Jerome: ‘In effect [Paul] says this: Since your outer man is corrupt, and you have ceased to possess the blessing of incorruption characteristic of virgins, at least imitate the incorruption of the spirit by subsequent abstinence, and what you cannot show in the body exhibit in the mind.’ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I.vii, p. 351.

¹⁹¹ Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, vi, p. 15.

¹⁹² Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, iii, p. 7.

¹⁹³ Cf. Paul: ‘Remember them that are in bands, as if you were bound with them; and them that labour, as being yourselves also in the body. Marriage honourable in all, and the bed undefiled. For fornicators and adulterers God will judge’ (Hebrews 13: 3-4).

¹⁹⁴ Cf. Jerome: ‘I do not deny that holy women are found both among widows and those who have husbands; but they are such as have ceased to be wives, or such as, even in the close bond of marriage, imitate virgin chastity.’ Jerome, *Adversus Helvidium* (*Against Helvidius. The Perpetual virginity of the blessed Mary*), xxiii, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers. Jerome: Letters and Select Works*, Vol. VI, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1893]), pp. 334-345, (p. 345).

¹⁹⁵ Cf. Augustine: ‘those who are continent (whether men whose wives have died, or women whose husbands have died, or couples who by mutual agreement have vowed their continence to God) are to realise that a greater reward is indeed owed to them than the chastity of marriage demands.’ Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, xxxiv, p. 61.

¹⁹⁶ Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, xiii, p. 27.

‘Chaste procreation and fidelity’ seems to refer to the proper use of the sexual act in marriage; it is this temperate usage which sanctifies the bodies of the married couples and makes them holy. Augustine, however, asserts that only those who abstain from intercourse are able to use it correctly; a certain amount of willed abstinence, therefore, is required in order to achieve any level of marital chastity.¹⁹⁷ Such a good use of intercourse recognises the devotional necessity of abstinence and demonstrates personal constraint. Augustine, however, does warn couples that once they have bound themselves to their spouse, they no longer have a free choice over their bodies:

But once the lusting of the flesh comes over them and they marry, suppose they subsequently control that urge; since they have not the option of dissolving the marriage as they had the option of not marrying, they become what the status of marriage proclaims them to be. Thus they either by mutual agreement attain a higher level of holiness, or if both are not of this persuasion, the one who is will not demand the debt of marriage, but will grant it, preserving throughout a chaste and devoted harmony with the other.¹⁹⁸

The pursuit of marital celibacy, although pertaining to greater merit, must nevertheless be subjugated to the good of *fides*. If one spouse decides to pursue chastity against the wishes of their spouse, then this may force the one who still struggles with lust to seek gratification in adultery.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁷ Cf. Augustine: ‘No one uses these good well except the person who can readily practise abstinence by non-use rather than show restraint by good use, but no one can use them wisely except the person who can also exercise self-control to refrain from using them.’ Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, xxv, p. 47.

¹⁹⁸ Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, xv, p. 31.

¹⁹⁹ Cf. Augustine: ‘If, after making a vow of chastity to God and carrying it out in act and in disposition, he had returned to carnal intercourse with his wife, he would have been a source of grief, but how much more is he to be grieved over now that he had plunged headlong into a deeper destruction by breaking every bond and committing adultery in his rage at you, ruinous to himself, as if his perdition were a more savage blow at you! This great evil arose from your not treating him in his state of mind with the moderation you should have shown, because, although you were refraining by mutual consent from carnal intercourse, as his wife you should have been subject to your husband in other things according to the marriage bond. [...] I say nothing of the fact that I know you undertook this state of continence, contrary to the sound doctrine, before he gave consent. He should not have been defrauded of the debt you owed him of your body before his will joined yours in seeking that good which surpasses conjugal chastity.’ Augustine, 262. *Augustine gives greeting in the Lord to his daughter, the devout lady, Ecdicia in Saint Augustine. Letters*, Vol. V

v. The Third Good: *Sacramentum*

The third and final marriage good is the *sacramentum*. This marriage good separates Christian marriages from pagan marriages:

Therefore the good of marriage in every nation and throughout mankind lies in the purpose of procreation and in the fidelity of chastity; but so far as the people of God are concerned, it lies also in the sanctity of the sacrament.²⁰⁰

Marriage can be understood as a sacrament, Augustine explains, because, as well as being instituted by God at man's creation,²⁰¹ it is also authorised by Christ in the Gospels:

The Lord himself ratified this in the Gospel, not merely by forbidding a man to dismiss his wife except for fornication, but also by his presence at a marriage when invited to it.²⁰²

There are, therefore, two instances of Christ's blessing on marriage. Christ's presence at the marriage of Cana is taken as tacit approval for marriage, especially because it was while He was there that He performed His first miracle.²⁰³ Also, in the passage from the Gospel of Matthew, when Christ is asked by the Pharisees whether it is lawful to put

(204-270), trans. Sister Wilfrid Parsons, eds. Ludwig Schopp, Roy J. Deferrari, Bernard M. Peebles (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1981 [1956]), pp. 261-269, (pp. 261-2).

²⁰⁰ Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, xxxii, p. 57. Cf. Walsh: 'Augustine [...] makes a distinction between Christian and secular marriage. Christian marriage embodies a *sacramentum*, an oath of lifelong allegiance to a single partner which holds good even if the partners are sterile.' Walsh, 'Introduction' to *De bono coniugali* and *De sancta virginitate*, p. xxii.

²⁰¹ Cf. Genesis: 'Wherefore a man shall leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they shall be two in one flesh' (Genesis 2: 24).

²⁰² Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, iii, p. 7.

²⁰³ Cf. John: 'And the third day, there was a marriage in Cana of Galilee: and the mother of Jesus was there. And Jesus also was invited, and his disciples, to the marriage. And the wine failing, the mother of Jesus saith to him: They have no wine. And Jesus saith to her: Woman, what is that to me and to thee? My hour is not yet come. His mother saith to the waiters: Whatsoever he shall say to you, do ye. Now there were set there six waterpots of stone, according to the manner of the purifying of the Jews, containing two or three measures apiece. Jesus saith to them: Fill the water pots with water. And they filled them up to the brim. And Jesus saith to them: Draw out now, and carry to the chief steward of the feast. And they carried it. And when the chief steward had tasted the water made wine, and knew not whence it was, but the waiters knew who had drawn the water; the chief steward called the bridegroom, And saith to him: Every man at first setteth forth good wine, and when men have well drunk, then that which is worse. But thou hast kept the good wine until now. This beginning of miracles did Jesus in Cana of Galilee; and manifested his glory, and his disciples believed in him' (John 2: 1-11).

away a wife, He repeats the biblical passage in Genesis in which God institutes marriage in Eden after the creation of Eve.²⁰⁴ He then speaks more specifically on divorce:

And I say to you, that whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and he that shall marry her that is put away committeth adultery. (Matthew 19: 9)

The indissolubility of marriage is affirmed by Christ a second time in Matthew's Gospel in the Sermon on the Mount.²⁰⁵ The passage from Matthew 19: 9 also occurs in Mark²⁰⁶ and Luke,²⁰⁷ although neither recognises the allowance of divorce in the case of fornication. In addition, Saint Paul recognises the permanence of the marriage bond in his First Letter to the Corinthians, which, he says, is destroyed only in death.²⁰⁸

Walsh draws attention to the fact that in *De adulterinis coniugiis*, a treatise written twenty years later,²⁰⁹ 'Augustine cites the combined authority of Mark, Luke, and Paul against Matthew'.²¹⁰ Even in *De bono coniugali*, however, Augustine focuses more on the permanent bond of marriage, rather than the possibility of the divorce because of fornication (understood to mean adultery). The passage in Matthew, however, does solicit a question on the problem of remarriage after divorce. Thus, Augustine:

²⁰⁴ Cf. Matthew: 'Who answering, said to them: Have ye not read, that he who made man from the beginning, *Made them male and female?* And he said: *For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife, and they two shall be in one flesh.* Therefore now they are not two, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let no man put asunder' (Matthew 19: 4-6).

²⁰⁵ Cf. Matthew: 'But I say to you, that whosoever shall put away his wife, excepting for the cause of fornication, maketh her to commit adultery: and he that shall marry her that is put away, committeth adultery' (Matthew 5: 32).

²⁰⁶ Cf. Mark: 'And he saith to them: Whosoever shall put away his wife and marry another, committeth adultery against her. And if the wife shall put away her husband, and be married to another, she committeth adultery' (Mark 10: 11-12).

²⁰⁷ Cf. Luke: 'Every one that putteth away his wife, and marrieth another, committeth adultery: and he that marrieth her that is put away from her husband, committeth adultery' (Luke 16: 18).

²⁰⁸ Cf. Paul: 'A woman is bound by the law as long as her husband liveth; but if her husband die, she is at liberty: let her marry to whom she will; only in the Lord' (I Corinthians 7: 39).

²⁰⁹ Walsh notes that this treatise is 'in response to Pollentius' defence of Matthew that adultery provides justification for putting away a wife, Augustine argues that the combined evidence of Mark 10: 11f., Luke 16: 18, and I Cor. 7: 39, in which no such exception is made, overrides the testimony of Matthew.' Walsh, Note to *De bono coniugali*, p. 6n. 16.

²¹⁰ Walsh, 'Introduction' to *De bono coniugali* and *De sancta virginitate*, p. xv.

I wonder, however, since it is lawful to renounce an adulterous wife, whether it is permitted to marry another after renouncing her. Holy scripture poses a difficult problem here.²¹¹

Augustine observes that the practice of divorce is acceptable to pagans, and was also allowed to Jews, but notes that Christ is critical of the reason that forced Moses to allow Israel to practise divorce: ‘because of the hardness of your heart’ (Matthew 19: 8 and Mark 10: 5). From Christ’s words, Augustine says, it is evident that ‘censure rather than approval of divorce is manifest’.²¹² Augustine registers the inconsistency of the single exception for divorce in Matthew’s Gospel, which appears to allow husbands to put away their adulterous wives, but does not extend the same courtesy to wives with adulterous husbands. He ponders the problem that this poses:

But how a man can possibly be free to marry another after leaving a wife who is an adulteress, when a woman does not have such freedom to marry another after she has parted from an adulterer, I do not see.²¹³

Augustine’s sense of equality leads him to assume that if a woman is not allowed to remarry after she has left an adulterous husband, then a man who has left an adulterous wife must also be forbidden to marry. Consequently, even if a couple were to separate, their marriage bond remains strong enough that it prevents them from remarrying.

Augustine’s deliberation on the inseparability of the couple in marriage leads him to adduce the *sacramentum* as the reason why Christ forbids its dissolution:²¹⁴

²¹¹ Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, vii, p. 15.

²¹² Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, vii, p. 17.

²¹³ Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, vii, p. 17.

²¹⁴ Cf. Augustine: ‘My belief is that the bond would certainly not have been so strong had not some sacred symbol of something more profound than this feeble mortality of ours become attached to it, and when people abandoned it and were keen to dissolve it, it remained unshaken to punish them; for the marriage-alliance is not rescinded by the divorce which comes between them, and so they remain wedded to each other even when separated; and they commit adultery with those to whom they are attached even after their divorce, whether the wife associates with a man, or the husband with a woman.’ Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, vii, p. 17.

The sealing of the marriage compact is so clearly governed by a kind of sacrament that it is not made void even by the act of separation; for if a wife marries another while her husband is still alive, she commits adultery even if he has abandoned her, and he is the cause of this evil for having left her.²¹⁵

Although Walsh notes that in different treatises Augustine does not seem to be able to decide which position *fides* and *proles* should take,²¹⁶ it is the *sacramentum* of marriage which takes precedence over all considerations: ‘In the marriages of our Christian women the sanctity of the sacrament takes precedence over the fertility of the womb.’²¹⁷ Even if it does not contain all of the marriage goods, the marriage still remains valid because of the importance of its sacramental quality. Augustine further emphasises the elevated nature of the sacrament by comparing it to the ordination of ecclesiasts.²¹⁸

The development of the idea of the marriage goods, and the emphasis on the *sacramentum* as the most fundamental of the three, is important for understanding and validating the virginal marriage of Mary and Joseph.²¹⁹ Saint Augustine moved towards

²¹⁵ Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, vi, p. 15.

²¹⁶ Cf. Walsh: ‘Interestingly in this account [*De Genesi ad litteram* 9. 7] the order of the three varies from that in *De bono coniugali*, where *proles* takes precedence over *fides*. The two works were being composed about the same time, and there is a certain amount of ambivalence in Augustine’s notion of the relative importance of *proles* and *fides*. He makes it clear that procreation is the purpose for which God established the sexual act, but throughout *De bono coniugali* he insists that sexual intercourse indulged by couples committed to lifelong *fides* without that intention is pardonable, especially as it lessens the danger of adultery or fornication.’ Walsh, ‘Introduction’ to *De bono coniugali* and *De sancta virginitate*, p. xxiv.

²¹⁷ Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, xxi, p. 41. Cf. Augustine: ‘Though procreation is the sole purpose of marriage, even if this does not ensue and is the only reason why it takes place, the nuptial bond is loosed only by the death of a spouse.’ Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, xxxii, p. 57.

²¹⁸ Cf. Augustine: ‘There is a parallel in the ordination of the clergy to assemble a congregation; even if no such congregation is later established, the sacrament of ordination remains implanted in those ordained. Even if an individual were relieved of his office because of some defect, he will not forfeit the sacrament of the Lord once it is bestowed, but it will continue with him until the Judgement.’ Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, xxxii, p. 57.

²¹⁹ Clark notes this emphasis on the institution of marriage as separate from the sexual aspect: ‘insofar as Augustine held that the essence of marriage lay in the “consent” that the spouses gave to each other, not in the sexual act itself (as some other Christian thinkers believed), he pointed the way to an understanding of marriage that rested less on physical relationship and more on the acts of the mind and will that brought the couple together. Augustine used the example of Joseph and Mary to demonstrate that “consent” was the essence of marriage: Mary and Joseph were truly a married couple, he argued, even though they never had sexual relations.’ Clark, ‘Introduction’ to *Saint Augustine on Marriage and Sexuality*, pp. 6-7. In another essay, Clark notes that: ‘In *De nuptiis* I, he had reaffirmed the threefold goods, and had used his interpretation of them to argue that Joseph and Mary had a genuine marriage. [...] A sexless marriage is

an idea of marriage based on consent rather than consummation,²²⁰ the understanding accepted by Jerome and others.²²¹ Clark observes: ‘Augustine was gradually abandoning a sexual understanding of marriage and stressing more centrally the bond between partners.’²²² *De bono coniugali* is important for its place in the development of sacramental theology as it is the first reference to marriage as a sacrament. However, Augustine, like Ambrose, also speaks of virginity as a sacrament.²²³ Virginity, or the profession of a vow of virginity, was never, however, recognised as one of the Seven Sacraments. Holy Orders pertains solely to the sacerdotal classes, whereas regulars take a Solemn Vow.

vi. The Chastity of the Old Testament Patriarchs

After arguing in favour of the holiness of marriage, Augustine turns his attention to an exposition of the marriages of the Old Testament patriarchs. In *Adversus Jovinianum*, Jerome’s discussion of the patriarchs was in response to Jovinian’s use of Old Testament material to claim that marriage was always pre-eminent. Jerome’s task, then, was to prove the opposite:²²⁴ that those who exercised greater continence in the Old Testament

sanctioned for those with sufficient fortitude.’ Elizabeth A. Clark, ‘Vitiating Seeds and Holy Vessels: Augustine’s Manichean Past in *Ascetic Piety and Women’s Faith: Essays on Late Ancient Christianity* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1986), pp. 291-349, (p. 304).

²²⁰ Cf. Chadwick: ‘Marriage, Augustine taught, was constituted by the consent of the couple rather than by physical consummation. (he accepted the view dominant in Roman law).’ Chadwick, *Augustine*, p. 114.

²²¹ Cf. Clark: “‘Marriage consists of nothing else than the union of bodies”, Julian [of Eclanum] wrote. Since Joseph and Mary never engaged in sexual intercourse, they cannot be considered married. On Augustine’s view of their relationship, we might infer that Adam and Eve could have been “married” in Eden without sexual union.’ Clark, ‘Vitiating Seeds and Holy Vessels’, p. 305.

²²² Clark, ‘Vitiating Seeds and Holy Vessels’, p. 305.

²²³ Cf. Augustine: ‘Now to ensure the sacred nature of the sacrament, a woman who has lost her virginity, even if she is a catechumen, cannot after baptism be consecrated among the virgins of God.’ Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, xxi, p. 41.

²²⁴ Cf. Jerome: ‘We are therefore bound to traverse the same course of argument and show that chastity was always preferred to the condition of marriage.’ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. xvi, p. 359.

reaped greater rewards.²²⁵ Jerome also challenged Jovinian's use of certain Old Testament figures as exemplars of marriage, who were actually reputed to be virginal, or even those known for their sexual profligacy.²²⁶ Augustine's approach differed from Jerome's as he was primarily refuting the Manichaean criticism of the marriages of the Old Testament patriarchs, which had been derided by the Manichaeans because some of them had been irregular.²²⁷ Augustine, therefore, addresses the issue of the state of marriage in the Old Testament:

They [Manichaeans] make false charges against the fathers of the Old Testament because of their having several wives. They believe that this constitutes proof by which to convict them of incontinence.²²⁸

In order to combat the Manichaean criticism of the patriarchs, Augustine reads polygamy metaphorically.²²⁹ The biological order which dictates that a man can have many wives,

²²⁵ Jerome, for instance provides a comparison between Moses, who was married, and Joshua, who was chaste: 'Moses, moreover, only saw the lands of promise; he could not enter [...] Let us compare the burial of the two: Moses died in the lands of Moab, Joshua in the lands of Judaea. The former was buried in a valley over against the houses of Phogor, which is being interpreted, *reproach* (for the Hebrew of Phogor corresponds to Priapus); the latter in Mount Ephraim on the north of Mount Gaash. [...] When Moses dies, the people of Israel mourned for him; but Joshua like one on his way to victory was unmourned. For marriage ends at death; virginity thereafter begins to wear the crown.' Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. xxii, p. 362-3. Jerome on Abraham: 'What shall I say of Abraham who had three wives, as Jovinianus says, and received circumcision as a sign of his faith? If we follow him in the number of his wives, let us also follow him in circumcision.' Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. xix, p. 360.

²²⁶ Cf. Jerome: 'it is one thing to draw up a list of military commanders in historical sequence, another to indicate certain figures of marriage which cannot be found in them.' Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. xxiii, p. 363; 'What folly it was to include Elijah and Elisha in a list of married men, is plain without a word from me.' Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. xxv, p. 364.

²²⁷ Walsh notes that: 'Augustine idealises the sexual behaviour of the patriarchs and their wives, partly to counter the arguments of Jovinian and partly to defend them against the taunts of the Manichaeans'. Walsh, Note to *De bono coniugali*, p. 30n. 66.

²²⁸ Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, xxxiii, p. 59.

²²⁹ Augustine also interprets the purification laws in Leviticus metaphorically: 'Again, the fact that the Law orders a man to be purified after intercourse even with his wife does not pronounce it to be a sin, unless it is intercourse allowed as pardonable, and which when excessive hinders prayers. But like many things which the Law denotes as sacred symbols foreshadowing future events, any absence of material shape in the seed, which when lent shape will form a human body, is made to signify a life lacking form and schooling. From this formless state man must be cleansed by the shape and education imparted by learning, and so to indicate this, that purification was prescribed after the emission of seed. That emission does not become sinful in sleep either, yet purification is prescribed in those circumstances as well. But should anyone regard this too as sinful, in the belief that it occurs only following a voluntary impulse of this kind (a belief

but a woman cannot have many husbands reflects the spiritual relationship between God and his people: there is only one God, but he is married to a myriad of souls.²³⁰ Not only does Augustine use the metaphor as an expression of the union of many souls with God, but he also sees polygamy as expressing the numerous nations that God calls unto Himself.²³¹ Augustine, however, recognises that the Gospels indicate a new departure in the attitudes towards marriage:

But ever since the fullness of time came to bring forth the words ‘Let this be accepted by one who can’ [Matthew 19: 12] from then until now, and from now until the world’s end, he who possesses it practises it.²³²

Whereas under the Old Law marriage was the only option for mankind, after the advent of Christ the virtue of continence was recommended. The shift in morality, therefore, also expresses a series of shifts in the metaphorical understanding of marriage, so now monogamy expresses the unity of the Christian Church.²³³

Augustine utilises the difference between the Old Law and the New Covenant to explain how the marriages of the patriarchs can be seen as holy. Methodius had explained the differences between the attitudes under the Old Law as a combination of the need for procreation and the lower level of perfectibility of the people of the Old Testament. God had gradually perfected mankind by insisting on ever-increasing levels of continence, of

undoubtedly mistaken), are then the regular monthly periods of women also sins?’ Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, xxiii, pp. 43-5.

²³⁰ Cf. Augustine: ‘Several women can be made pregnant by one man, but one woman cannot become plurally pregnant by a number of men [...] Similarly, many souls are properly subject to the one God. This is why souls have only one true God; a soul can indeed commit fornication with many false gods, but it cannot be made fruitful.’ Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, xx, p. 39.

²³¹ Cf. Augustine: ‘Thus just as the plurality of wives of the fathers of old was a sign that there would be churches drawn from all nations made subject to their one husband Christ, so our bishop as husband of one wife signifies the unity of all nations made subject to Christ as their one husband.’ Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, xxi, p. 41.

²³² Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, xxvii, p. 51.

²³³ Cf. Augustine: ‘So just as the sacrament of marriage with more than one wife in those earlier days was a sign of the great number who would be subject to God in all the nations of the earth, so the sacrament of marriage with one spouse in our own day is a sign of the unity of all of us which is to be made subject to God in the one city of heaven.’ Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, xxi, p. 41.

which virginity represents its zenith.²³⁴ Augustine, however, addresses the problem from a different perspective. He accepts the original necessity for the increase of the human race,²³⁵ but also states that not only were the Old Testament prophets following God's commandment to reproduce in a physical sense, but this was combined with a spiritual necessity:

in the early days of the human race it was the duty of the saints to exploit the good of marriage to multiply the people of God, so that through them the Prince and Saviour of all peoples would be predicted in prophecy and then born. It was not to be sought for its own sake, but was necessary for that other purpose.²³⁶

Augustine identifies a different intention in the Old Testament prophets' desire for children from that of contemporary Christians. Procreation was necessary in order to 'multiply the people of God'; such a requirement, however, has ceased to be a necessity now that Christianity is open to all nations through baptism:

But now, since there is a teeming abundance of spiritual kindred from all nations on every side to enter upon our holy and pure fellowship, even these zealous to be joined in marriage solely to beget children should be urged to embrace the more honourable good of continence instead.²³⁷

In addition, the Old Testament prophets reproduced in anticipation of the coming of the Messiah.²³⁸ Thus, Augustine interprets the marriages of patriarchs as acts of devotion, rather than motivated by the self-interest of lust. He states: 'it was with a sense of obligation and not lust impelling holy men of that time to have sexual intercourse with

²³⁴ Cf. Methodius: 'For the world, while still unfilled with men, was like a child, and it was necessary that it should first be filled with these, and so grow to manhood. But when hereafter it was colonized from end to end, the race of man spreading to a boundless extent, God no longer allowed man to remain in the same ways, considering how they might now proceed from one point to another, and advance nearer to heaven.' Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, I.ii, p. 7.

²³⁵ Cf. Augustine: 'At that time, even when wives bore children, it was permissible to marry others as well to ensure a greater number of descendants, but this is certainly not licit today.' Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, xvii, p. 35.

²³⁶ Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, ix, p. 23.

²³⁷ Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, ix, p. 23.

²³⁸ Cf. Augustine: 'For those men of old sought children from their marriages for Christ's sake, in order to differentiate his fleshly stock from all nations.' Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, xxii, p. 43.

women within the lawful bond of marriage.²³⁹ As these obligations have been superseded by the advent of Christ, Christians no longer have the same spiritual imperatives to marry. Therefore, Christian marriages are less laudable in comparison with the Old Testament patriarchs:

Yet even the men of today (if any chance to be found) who in marriage seek and desire only that end for which marriage was instituted cannot be equated with these men of old; for in modern man the very desire for children lies in the flesh, whereas in those earlier men it lay in the spirit, for it accorded with the sacred mystery of that time. Whereas today no one of exemplary devotion seeks to have children except spiritually, in those days the role of that very devotion was to beget children physically, for the procreation of that people was the harbinger of the future, relating to the dispensation which was prophesied.²⁴⁰

As the requirement for exemplary devotion has shifted from marriage to continence, the marriages of the patriarchs are not comparable with contemporary marriages. Instead, they are comparable to the devotion of Christian celibates,²⁴¹ as both marriage in the Old Testament and virginity in the New have the same object, that is, spiritual offspring.²⁴² In contrast, contemporary Christians who marry in order to procreate are not motivated by spiritual reasons. Instead, the desire to produce children stems from a yearning to retain a fleshly form of immortality. Therefore, Augustine's treatise ends up agreeing with

²³⁹ Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, xvii, p. 35.

²⁴⁰ Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, xix, pp. 37-9.

²⁴¹ Cf. Augustine: 'As for the marriages of the holy fathers, what I look for is not marriage but continence comparable with theirs. Or rather, I am not seeking to compare marriage with marriage (for marriage is a gift bestowed on the mortal nature of man which is equal in all cases), but since I do not find men embracing marriage who are comparable with those who embraced it in a far different spirit, I must investigate what persons who practise continence can be compared with the married couples of old.' Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, xxiv, p. 45.

²⁴² Cf. Augustine: 'So the merit of continence in John who had no experience of marriage and that of Abraham who fathered offspring was much the same; for the celibacy of the one and the marriage of the other both campaigned for Christ according to the allocation of the times. But whereas John demonstrated his continence in action as well, Abraham maintained his solely in his disposition.' Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, xxvi, p. 49. Cf. Augustine: "'So are you better than Abraham?' When the Christian hears this, he should not be discomfited, but he must not presume to say, 'Yes, better.'" Nor must he abandon his purpose (for such a claim is untrue, but such action is misguided), but his response should be: "I am certainly not better than Abraham, but the chastity of celibates is better than the chastity of marriage; Abraham practised one of these, but his disposition embraced both.'" Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, xxvii, p. 51.

Jerome and following Saint Paul,²⁴³ that the only reason for marriage after the advent of Christ is because of incontinence.²⁴⁴ Nevertheless, although the motivations for procreation are less laudable than those of the patriarchs, Augustine maintains that the creative process still remains a good as it continues to demonstrate God's creative power and all of God's creation is good.²⁴⁵

Augustine also seeks to insist on the superior virtue of the Old Testament patriarchs by considering the nature of virtue itself. Following earlier patristic writers, he focuses on the importance of the continence of the mind, rather than the body. Nevertheless, the two are connected because mental continence is expressed in outward behaviour:

For continence is a virtue not of the body but of the mind. Now virtues of mind are sometimes displayed in action, but sometimes lie hidden in everyday behaviour.²⁴⁶ [...] the virtue of continence must always reside in the disposition of the mind, and be visible in action according as the circumstances and times allow. This was how the virtue of patience shown by the martyrs was made manifest in action, while that of the rest, equally holy persons, lay in their disposition.²⁴⁷

The intention of the mind is instrumental in the understanding of virtue. Augustine claims superior virtue for the Old Testament prophets by suggesting that the possession of virtue is only evident when it is tested. Hence, someone who has the potentiality to be a martyr

²⁴³ Cf. Paul: 'But I say to the unmarried, and to the widows: It is good for them if they so continue, even as I. But if they do not contain themselves, let them marry. For it is better to marry than to be burnt' (I Corinthians 7: 8-9).

²⁴⁴ Cf. Augustine: 'So it seems to me that at this time only those who cannot practise continence should marry, in accordance with the dictum of the same Apostle: "If they do not possess self-control, let them marry, for it is better to marry than to burn."' Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, x, p. 23.

²⁴⁵ Cf. Augustine: 'those [Old Testament] men did not seek children from marriage with the sense of obligation which motivates men today, an obligation arising from a recognition of their mortal nature which demands that some succession will follow their departure. Whoever says that this is not a good has no knowledge of God, the creator of all goods from those in heaven to these on earth, from things immortal to things mortal.' Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, xxii, p. 43.

²⁴⁶ Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, xxv, p. 47.

²⁴⁷ Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, xxvi, p. 49.

will only be recognised as such if they are put to the test.²⁴⁸ The same person, however, if they are not martyred, still has the potentiality of that virtue even though it has not yet been made manifest. Some people may be mentally ready for martyrdom, but it may not be required for them to display such a sacrifice during their lifetime. Because it is not displayed, however, does not mean that the virtue required for such a sacrifice is lacking. In the same way, Abraham possessed the virtue of continence, but because such a sacrifice was not asked of him, it was not made manifest. Abraham, however, demonstrated his fidelity to God in his willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac. If God had asked him to sacrifice his married life as well, Abraham would easily have been able to make such a sacrifice, which, after all, is a lesser requirement than the sacrifice of his only son.²⁴⁹

But perhaps Abraham could not discipline himself to forgo marriage for the sake of the kingdom of heaven, though he fearlessly steeled himself to sacrifice his sole dear offspring whose existence made marriage dear to him, for the sake of the kingdom of heaven!²⁵⁰

Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac, then, represents his willingness to sacrifice all that marriage represents.²⁵¹ In addition, it demonstrates his obedience to God, which, Augustine avers, is 'the root virtue, or as it is often termed, the matrix; it is clearly of

²⁴⁸ Cf. Augustine: 'In that trial [martyrdom] what is visible to God advances also before men's eyes; it does not originate at that time, but only then makes itself known.' Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, xxv, p. 47.

²⁴⁹ Cf. Augustine: 'Think of Abraham; when bidden to sacrifice his son, in fearless devotion he was not for sparing his only child, obtained after such great despair; only when God vetoed it did he lower the hand raised at His command.' Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, xxii, p. 41; 'It was by virtue of this obedience that the patriarch, not without a wife, was ready to dispense with his only son and to kill him with his own hand. [...] How much more readily, then, would he have heard that he was also to be without a wife, if this had been enjoined on him!' Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, xxxi, pp. 55-7; 'How much more readily could they have renounced sexual intercourse at God's command or urging, when in obedience they braced themselves to sacrifice the child for whose begetting alone they made themselves slaves to intercourse?' Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, xxxii, p. 59.

²⁵⁰ Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, xxiv, p. 45.

²⁵¹ Cf. Augustine: 'As for continence, the fathers preserved it as an attitude of mind. Even if commanded to abstain from all intercourse, they would certainly have managed this through obedience, for they were just and holy people, always ready to perform every good work.' Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, xxxii, p. 59.

universal application'.²⁵² He also asserts that obedience is necessary for the maintenance of virginity,²⁵³ and contrasts the obedience of the patriarchs with the disobedience so often exhibited by virgins:

We are often surprised, and not without good reason, that a number of persons of both sexes abstain from all sexual intercourse but are slothful at obeying the commandments, in spite of having so zealously embraced abstinence from things permitted.²⁵⁴

Following earlier patristic writers, Augustine insists on the necessity of maintaining all virtues in order to achieve virginity. The contemporary virgins who display many vices cannot claim to possess virginity, nor can they claim to be superior to matrons who are obedient.²⁵⁵ Augustine not only declares that disobedient virgins are inferior to obedient matrons,²⁵⁶ but the treatise on marriage closes with a comment on the importance of humility to virginity,²⁵⁷ a theme which he takes up with more vigour in its sister treatise, *De sancta virginitate*.

²⁵² Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, xxxii, p. 59.

²⁵³ Cf. Augustine: 'obedience is in a sense the mother of all virtues. So for this reason there can be obedience without virginity, because virginity falls under counsel and not under commandment. By obedience I mean compliance with the commandments. So obedience can exist without virginity, but not without chastity. The reason for this is that chastity forbids fornication, adultery, or defilement by unlawful intercourse.' Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, xxx, p. 55.

²⁵⁴ Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, xxxi, p. 57.

²⁵⁵ Cf. Augustine: 'We know many consecrated virgins who exemplify this, for they are garrulous, inquisitive, drunken, argumentative, greedy, and arrogant. All these faults contravene the commandments and impose death through the sin of disobedience as they did on the person of Eve. So not only is the obedient person to be preferred to the disobedient, but the matron who is more obedient is to be preferred to the virgin who is less so.' Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, xxx, p. 55.

²⁵⁶ Cf. Augustine: 'For example, the good of obedience is more important than the good of continence [...] So if confronted by one who intends to remain a virgin but is disobedient and a married woman who cannot retain her virginity but is obedient, which are we to pronounce the better, the one who is less praiseworthy than if she were a virgin, or the one who merits condemnation in her life as a virgin?' Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, xxix, p. 53.

²⁵⁷ Cf. Augustine: 'Further, and much more pressingly of all, we urge the boys and maidens who dedicate their virginity to God to realize that their transitory lives on earth must be invested with a humility in keeping with the more heavenly vows which they have taken.' Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, xxxv, p. 61.

vii. *De sancta virginitate*

De sancta virginitate (*On Holy Virginity*), the companion treatise to *De bono coniugali*, begins with a résumé of the earlier treatise:

I recently issued a book on the good of marriage. In it I have also reminded and warned the virgins of Christ not to hold up the eminence of that higher gift conferred on them by heaven as a reason for disparaging the fathers and mothers of the people of God by comparison with themselves. Nor should they, because by divine law continence is preferred to marriage and holy virginity to wedlock, regard those persons as inferior in merit.²⁵⁸

Augustine identifies his earlier treatise as a tract promoting the good of marriage but also as a warning to ascetics who adopt extremist, and therefore heretical, positions on marriage – mostly in connection with attitudes towards the marriages of Old Testament patriarchs.²⁵⁹ Augustine also asserts that his current treatise, although seeking to praise virginity, is a warning against pride as well: ‘So virginity is not only to be praised that it may be loved, but also counselled not to be puffed up.’²⁶⁰ In some ways, then, Augustine’s treatise is comparable to Jerome’s *Epistola XXII* which likewise sought to praise virginity subtly, but emphasised the need for vigilance for its conservation.

²⁵⁸ Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, i, p. 67.

²⁵⁹ Augustine reiterates his idealised interpretation by highlighting the prophetic nature of the marriages. He follows Jerome’s reasoning with regards to the prophetic role of the marriages of Old Testament Prophets: ‘But as for the holy fathers whose marriages performed a prophetic role, who sought nothing from sexual intercourse except offspring, and from their offspring only what was of service to Christ who was to come in the flesh, not only should our continent contemporaries not despise their marriages by unfavourable comparison with their own commitment, but they should not hesitate to rank them higher than their own commitment to virginity.’ Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, xxxiv, p. 61. Cf. Augustine: ‘Their married life too was prophetic; so it was that in some of them their fecundity deserved to win honour, and in others barrenness deserved to become fruitful, not in the usual way through human aspirations and pleasures, but by the most profound of God’s designs.’ Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, i, p. 67. Compare Jerome: ‘I do not disparage our predecessors under the law, but am well aware that they served their generation according to their circumstances, and fulfilled the Lord’s command to increase and multiply and replenish the earth. And what is more they were figure of those that were to come. [...] But we to whom it is said, “The time is shortened, that henceforth these that have wives may be as though they had none”, have a different command, and for us virginity is consecrated by the virgin Saviour.’ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I, xiv, p. 364. Walsh says Augustine ‘argues that their marriages presaged the union of Christ and His Church, and that their children were forerunners of the Christian offspring which result from that union’. Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, i, p. 66n. 2.

²⁶⁰ Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, I, p. 67.

Augustine petitions Christ to aid him in the task of honouring that state which He manifests in His own being:

I pray that Christ, son of a virgin and bridegroom of virgins, born in the flesh of a virgin's womb and wedded in the spirit in a virgin marriage, may come to my aid. So since the whole Church, as the Apostle has it, is herself a virgin espoused to Christ her only husband, how great is the distinction which her members deserve who maintain in their very flesh what the whole Church maintains in faith, in imitation of the mother of her husband and her lord? For the Church too is both mother and virgin.²⁶¹

The rhetorical repetition of Christ's association with virginity serves to reiterate the very intimate connection that Christ has with the ideal of virginity. Christ's connection with Mary is underscored as He is born of a virgin and received His flesh from a virgin. Also, His status as the Bridegroom is reiterated: He is married to the virgins of Christ, the *sponsa Christi*, and to the virginal Church. By drawing on a combination of these two nuptial images, Augustine stresses the holiness of virgins who are at once His brides, and who also 'maintain in their very flesh what the whole Church maintains in faith'. In some ways, then, holy virginity embodies the ideal of spiritual marriage most completely. The complex set of images highlights the glory due to virginity: it imitates the virginal Christ, His virginal mother, and the virginal Church. In many ways, then, virginity at once represents complex theological truths and is an emblem of the Church as a whole.

Augustine focuses on the theological importance of Mary's virginity, which was essential for manifesting the miracle of the Incarnation, for 'Virginity could fittingly bring forth only Him who in His birth could have no peer'.²⁶² The miracle of the Virgin Birth was necessary in order to identify Christ as the Messiah and the Son of God. Nevertheless, Augustine says, 'there is accordingly no reason for God's virgins to be

²⁶¹ Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, ii, p. 67.

²⁶² Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, v, p. 71.

despondent because they cannot like Mary become mothers in the flesh while preserving their virginity'.²⁶³ Augustine suggests that all virgins of the Church can share in Mary's divine motherhood through faith:

None the less, the parturition of that holy virgin alone is the glory of all holy virgins; they too in company with Mary are mothers of Christ as long as they do the will of the Father.²⁶⁴

This spiritual motherhood is also open to all Christians who 'carry out the will of the Father'.²⁶⁵ Virgins, however, in a more profound sense, participate in the glory of Mary's virginal motherhood 'as long as they do the will of the Father', because they likewise share in her purity. While discussing the passage in Matthew in which Christ prioritises his spiritual family over his biological family,²⁶⁶ Augustine emphasises the pre-eminence of spiritual kindred.²⁶⁷ Notably, considering Jerome's lengthy refutation in *Adversus Helvidium*, Augustine does not even attempt to address the problem of the 'brethren' of Christ in the passage. Instead, he discusses the importance of Mary's spiritual kinship to Christ:

Mary was more blessed by her grasp of faith in Christ than by conceiving Christ in the flesh; [...] Mary's kinship as mother would have been of no benefit to her if she had not borne Christ more blessedly in her heart than in the flesh.²⁶⁸

²⁶³ Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, v, p. 71.

²⁶⁴ Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, v, p. 71.

²⁶⁵ Cf. Augustine: 'Again, every devoted soul is his mother, when they carry out the will of the Father with a love most fruitful in those they bring to birth until Christ himself can be fashioned in them. So Mary in doing God's will is physically merely Christ's mother, whereas spiritually she is both sister and mother.' Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, v, p. 71.

²⁶⁶ Cf. Matthew: 'As he was yet speaking to the multitudes, behold his mother and his brethren stood without, seeking to speak to him. And one said unto him: Behold thy mother and thy brethren stand without, seeking thee. But he answering him that told him, said: Who is my mother, and who are my brethren? And stretching forth his hand towards his disciples, he said: Behold my mother and my brethren. For whosoever shall do the will of my father, that is in heaven, he is my brother, and sister, and mother' (Matthew 12: 46-50).

²⁶⁷ Cf. Augustine: 'What was he teaching us but to rank our spiritual kindred above relations in the flesh.' Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, iii, p. 69.

²⁶⁸ Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, iii, p. 69.

Just as patristic writers always insist on the superiority of spiritual virginity over physical virginity, Augustine places greater importance on Mary's spiritual motherhood, achieved through faith, than her physical motherhood.²⁶⁹ In addition to being the spiritual mother of Christ, Mary is also the spiritual mother of all Christians:

But she is clearly the mother of his members (which is what we are) because in love she co-operated so that the faithful children who are members of that Head could be born within the Church; whereas in the flesh she is the mother of the Head himself. For it was necessary that our Head by a striking miracle should be born of the flesh of a virgin, to indicate that his members would be born spiritually of the virgin Church.²⁷⁰

All Christians are reborn through their virginal mother, the Church.²⁷¹ Hence, just as Mary gave birth to Christ, the Head of the Church, in a sense, she enabled the faithful to be born into the Church. Following Ambrose, who was 'the first Christian author to call Mary the type and image of the Church',²⁷² Augustine draws out the parallels between Mary and the Church:

Mary brought forth the head of this body in the flesh; the Church brings forth the members of that head in the spirit. In both, virginity is no obstacle to fecundity; in both, fecundity does not dispense with virginity.²⁷³

Both Mary and the Church are images of chaste fecundity. Consecrated virgins are able to participate in this spiritual birth through the glory of Mary and also their own role in serving as examples of holiness, which encourages conversion. Augustine reiterates his earlier suggestion that consecrated virgins are the holiest members of the Church,

²⁶⁹ Cf. Luke: 'And it came to pass, as he spoke these things, a certain woman from the crowd, lifting up her voice, said to him: Blessed is the womb that bore thee, and the paps that gave thee suck. But he said: Yea, rather, blessed are they who hear the word of God, and keep it' (Luke 11: 27-28).

²⁷⁰ Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, vi, pp. 71-3.

²⁷¹ Cf. Augustine: 'those born of the flesh are not Christians, but they become so later, when the Church gives birth to them.' Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, vii, p. 73.

²⁷² Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church*, p. 198.

²⁷³ Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, ii, pp. 67-9.

because they retain in body and spirit what the Church can only achieve in spirit as all its members are not virginal.²⁷⁴

viii. Mary's Vow of Virginity

Augustine accepts that Mary's words in Luke's Gospel account of the Annunciation indicate that she had taken a vow of virginity before she was approached by the angel.

Recognising this pre-existent vow, Augustine says, is significant for understanding what mankind's attitude towards the adoption of virginity should be:

Her virginity itself was also the more pleasing and acceptable because after Christ was conceived he did not himself first arrogate it in order to preserve it from violation by man, but before his conception he chose it, when it was already dedicated to God, from which to be born. This is shown in the words which Mary used to answer the angel when he told her of the child she was to bear. 'How can that be', she asked, 'since I know no man?' [Luke 1: 34] She would certainly not have said this if she had not already vowed her virginity to God.²⁷⁵

The earliest attestation to the belief that Mary had already vowed her virginity to God before the Annunciation is in the *Protevangelium of James*. In this text, Mary's parents dedicated her to God when she was a child; she dwelt in the temple from the age of three until twelve, the time of her coming of age.²⁷⁶ Gambero observes that '[i]n the West, Augustine appears to be the first Father of the Church to have expressed the conviction

²⁷⁴ Cf. Augustine: 'So since the Church as a whole is both body and spirit, whereas she is not wholly virgin in body but in spirit, how much holier she is in these members in which she is virgin in both body and spirit.' Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, ii, p. 69.

²⁷⁵ Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, iv, p. 69.

²⁷⁶ Cf. *Protevangelium*: 'And behold an angel of the Lord appeared to her and said, "Anna, Anna, the Lord has heard your prayer. You shall conceive and bear, and your offspring shall be spoken of in the whole world." And Anna said, "As the Lord my God lives, if I bear a child, whether male or female, I will bring it as a gift to the Lord my God, and it shall serve him all the days of its life."' (4.1, p. 59); 'And her parents returned marvelling, praising the Lord God because the child did not turn back. And Mary was in the temple of the Lord nurtured like a dove and received food from the hand of an angel. When she was twelve years old, there took place a council of the priests saying, "Behold Mary has become twelve years old in the temple of the Lord. What shall we do with her lest she defile the temple of the Lord?" And they said to the high priest, "You stand at the altar of the Lord; enter the sanctuary and pray concerning her, and that which the Lord shall reveal to you we will indeed do."' (8.1-2, p. 60) *The Protevangelium of James, in The Apocryphal New Testament*, ed. and trans. J. K. Elliott (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 48-67.

that Mary made a vow of virginity'.²⁷⁷ Eastern fathers, however, such as Gregory of Nyssa, had already accepted the idea that Mary had dedicated her virginity to God before the Annunciation. Gregory subscribed to the idea because he accepted that the apocryphal tradition was borne out by the Gospel text.²⁷⁸ He, like Augustine, argued that Mary's question to the angel makes no sense unless viewed in the context of a pre-existing vow of virginity.²⁷⁹ Augustine further explains that her marriage to Joseph was a necessary safeguard, because a vow of virginity was alien to Judaism.²⁸⁰ Although there is an earlier Eastern precedence for the awareness of Mary's profession of virginity, Augustine's interpretation of the relevance of the vow appears to be unique:

her intention was to serve as an example for holy virgins; and so to avoid giving the impression that she alone ought to be a virgin as one who had deserved to

²⁷⁷ Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church*, p. 221.

²⁷⁸ Cf. Gregory of Nyssa: 'What, however, did Mary say? Hear the modest voice of the Virgin. The angel announces the birth; yet she clings to virginity and judges integrity to be preferred to the angelic oration. She neither refuses to have faith in the angel, nor retreats from the resolution [of virginity] itself. She says: "I have forbidden myself from the intimacy of men. How will that happen to me since I do not know a man?" These things the voice of Mary makes clear; I pronounce that these things from the historical narrative of a doubtful author are not deeply absurd. For if the cause of children were to be drawn from Joseph, why ask how she would be delivered of a child from the foretelling angel, itself a new thing and strange to hear, because she herself would have to bear, since she herself had been bound also by the law of nature, namely, that sometime she might become a mother. However, because it is proper to guarantee the flesh consecrated to God inviolate and intact as something sacred, an offered gift, for this reason, she said, even if you are an angel, if you have come from heaven, if it is above human nature, yet it is a sin for me to know a man. How will I be a mother without a man? Joseph, certainly, is newly pledged, but I know not man.' (My translation) 'Quid autem Maria? Audi pudicam Virginis vocem. Angelus partum nuntiat; at illa virginitati inhaeret, et integritatem angelicae demonstrationi antependendam iudicat, nec angelo fidem non habet, nec a proposito recedit suo. Interdixit, inquit, mihi consuetudine viri. *Quomodo istud erit mihi, quoniam virum non cognosco?* Haec Mariae vox declarat, ea quae ex historia incerti auctoris commemoravi, non esse penitus absurda. Si enim liberorum causa ducta fuisset a Joseph, quomodo parituram angelo praenuntianti, se rem novam et alienam audire prae se tulisset, cum ipsa quoque sese obstrinxisset naturae lege, ut aliquando mater esset? Verum quia carnem Deo consecratam, tanquam sanctum aliquod oblatum munus oportet intactam integramque praestare, idcirco, licet, inquit, angelus sis, licet e coelo venias, licet id quod ostenditur, naturam superet humanam, tamen me virum cognoscere nefas est. Quomodo sine viro mater ero? Joseph enim sponsum novi, sed virum non cognosco.' Gregory of Nyssa, *In diem natalem Christi, Patrologia Graeca* 46, 1139-1142.

²⁷⁹ Cf. Luke: 'And Mary said to the angel: How shall this be done, because I know not man?' (Luke 1: 34). Augustine: 'if she had married intending to indulge in sexual intercourse, she would not have enquired expressly how as a woman she would bear the son promised her.' Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, iv, p. 69.

²⁸⁰ Cf. Augustine: 'But because the customs of the Israelites were at that time still opposed to this, she was espoused to a righteous man, not one who would forcibly deprive her of what she had already vowed to God, but rather would safeguard it against men of violence.' Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, iv, p. 69.

conceive a child even without sexual intercourse, she dedicated her virginity to God while as yet unaware of what she was to conceive. This was so that the imitation of heavenly life in an earthly and mortal body would be fulfilled by vow and not under command, by eagerness to choose rather than by compulsion to serve. So Christ, by being born of a virgin who had decided to remain such before becoming aware who was to be born of her, chose to approve rather than to impose her holy virginity.²⁸¹

Mary's virginity was her own personal sacrifice; God did not command it of her, even though it was necessary for the Incarnation. Christ's Incarnation in a virgin flesh, then, also serves to authorise and sanctify that way of life rather than its simply being chosen as a vehicle for the Incarnation with no wider relevance for humanity. Augustine argues that Mary's pre-existing vow, which was ratified by God through the Incarnation, universalises the virginal way of life. Her vow of virginity was prompted not by the promise of a miracle, even though her virginity did partake in a miraculous occurrence, but by personal choice, and so it stands as a model for imitation. Walsh asserts that Augustine's Mariological position owes much to Ambrose's influence.²⁸² Walsh, however, ignores the debt that is also owed to Jerome, who, after all, produced *Adversus Helvidium* (A.D. 383), the first Mariological treatise in the West; Ambrose's Mariological treatise in defence of Mary's perpetual virginity, *De institutione virginis et sanctae mariae virginitate perpetua* (A.D. 391) was published almost a decade after Jerome's treatise. Walsh also ignores the wider debt that Augustine owes to the virginal

²⁸¹ Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, iv, p. 71.

²⁸² Cf. Walsh: 'Undoubtedly, however, Ambrose places greater emphasis on virginity, as the various titles of his works composed between AD 377 and 385 (*De virginibus*, *De virginitate*, *De institutione virginis*, *Exhortatio virginis*) indicate. Of these works, the first of the three books of *De virginibus* has a particularly close bearing on Augustine's two treatises; the echoes are too frequent to be coincidental. The most striking feature of Ambrose's discussions is the glorification of Mary as perfect virgin and perfect mother; we find here the most comprehensive teaching of Marian theology up to his day, and Augustine's extended account in *De sancta virginitate* echoes Ambrose at many points.' Walsh, 'Introduction' to *De bono coniugali* and *De sancta virginitate*, p. xvii.

tradition in general in *De sancta virginitate*,²⁸³ including ideas which originate from the Eastern authors.²⁸⁴

ix. Maternity and Virginité

Although Augustine had spent much time in *De bono coniugali* exhorting virgins not to succumb to pride by counting themselves higher than married women, he now urges married women not to presume that their blessing of physical fecundity is equivalent to virginité. He warns that

the fruitfulness of marriage may not perhaps presume to vie with virgin chastity, instancing Mary herself and saying to God's virgins: 'She had two things in the flesh worthy of honour, virginité and fecundity, for she both remained inviolate and bore a child. Since each of the two of us could not enjoy this blessing in its entirety, we have divided it out, so that you are virgins and we are mothers. Your preservation of virginité is to be a consolation for lack of offspring, whereas our loss of virginité is to be set against our gain of children'.²⁸⁵

As the virginal motherhood of Mary cannot be physically replicated either by virgins or mothers,²⁸⁶ there is a danger of interpreting virginité and maternity as equal halves of the miracle of the Virgin Birth. Augustine warns against such misreading of Mary's virginal maternity. He restates his earlier observations that in Old Testament times childbearing was a devotional act, because it sought to augment the people of God and looked forward to the birth of the Messiah; as it no longer serves this purpose, however, childbearing is

²⁸³ Cf. Walsh: 'Many of the Greek Fathers offered widely-ranging interpretations of the scriptural exhortations on marriage and virginité, but Augustine at this stage of his life did not read Greek fluently so such influence as they exercised upon him came obliquely through the mediation of others. More relevant to his treatise are the earlier African apologists Tertullian and Cyprian, and above all his mentor at Milan Ambrose.' Walsh, 'Introduction' to *De bono coniugali* and *De sancta virginitate*, p. xvi.

²⁸⁴ Philip Burton observes that Walsh's limitations in recognising Augustine's sources: 'W[alsh] generally passes over Greek authors on the grounds that Augustine did not read Greek; a pity only for the loss of any reference to Methodius.' Burton, 'Review: Augustine. *De Bono Coniugali. De Sancta Virginitate* by P. G. Walsh', p. 411. Walsh tends to rely heavily on Dudden's study of Ambrose for information on Augustine's sources for the two treatises and provides little consideration of earlier treatises on virginité. Cf. F. Homes Dudden, *The Life and Times of St. Ambrose*, (2 vols), (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935).

²⁸⁵ Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, vii, p. 73.

²⁸⁶ Of virgins Augustine says: 'because unlike Mary she could not conceive him in the flesh, her purpose is to conceive him in her heart, and also to keep her body virgin for him.' Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, ix, p. 77.

recommended only for those who cannot contain themselves.²⁸⁷ In addition, childbearing cannot argue that it is a compensation for the loss of virginity by claiming that it produces virgins, because it only gives birth to virgins in the flesh:

Married couples ought not to equate their merits with those of celibates, even on the grounds that virgins are born from them, for this is a good of nature not of marriage.²⁸⁸ [...] no woman except a virgin is born. Yet none is born a consecrated virgin; accordingly a virgin is born even from fornication, whereas no consecrated virgin is born even from marriage.²⁸⁹

Augustine explains that there is a difference between holy virginity and natural virginity: 'in discussing virgins we do not praise their being virgins, but rather that they are virgins dedicated by devoted continence to God.'²⁹⁰ Childbearing is not exclusive to marriage; it can also take place illicitly outside of wedlock. Augustine implies that if married women can claim that their childbearing is equal to virginity simply on the grounds of maternity, then a woman who has given birth as a result of fornication or adultery could also claim that her actions are as laudable as those of virgins. Marriage, therefore, does not produce consecrated virgins, nor even Christians.²⁹¹ Only the Church can give birth to consecrated virgins and Christians, as Augustine explains:²⁹²

²⁸⁷ Cf. Augustine: 'It is true that in earlier days, when Christ was still to come in the flesh, offspring of the flesh were essential in a populous and prophetic nation. but today, since Christ's members can be gathered from every race of men and from all nations to form the people of God and the city of the heaven's kingdom, the person who can embrace virginity should embrace it, and only the woman who does not contain herself should marry.' Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, ix, p. 75.

²⁸⁸ Compare Jerome: 'While we allow marriage, we prefer the virginity which springs from it.' Jerome, *Epistola XLVIII Ad Pammachium*, ii, p. 67.

²⁸⁹ Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, x, p. 77. Cf. Augustine: 'It follows, then, that the physical fruitfulness even of women who at this time seek nothing from marriage except offspring to commit to Christ cannot possibly be thought to compensate for loss of virginity.' Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, ix, p. 75.

²⁹⁰ Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, xi, p. 77.

²⁹¹ Cf. Augustine: 'those who in married life bear children in the flesh are mothers not of Christ, but of Adam. They make haste to ensure that their offspring are steeped in the sacraments and become Christ's members, for they are well aware of the nature of what they have brought forth.' Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, vi, p. 73.

²⁹² Cf. Augustine: 'those born of the flesh are not Christians, but they become so later, when the Church gives birth to them. This is because the Church is the mother of Christ's members spiritually, as she is also the virgin of Christ spiritually.' Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, vii, p. 73; 'No fertility of body brought forth this species of virgins; it is no offspring of flesh and blood. If we seek out their mother, it is the

no fruitfulness of the flesh can be compared with the holy virginity even of the flesh, for this is not honoured in itself as virginity, but because it is consecrated to God; and though preserved in the flesh, it is maintained by scrupulousness and devotion of the spirit. In this sense even physical virginity is spiritual, for devoted continence vows and preserves it. Just as no one abuses his body unless such evil behaviour has first been entertained in the spirit, so no one preserves chaste behaviour in the body unless chastity is implanted earlier in the spirit.²⁹³

Virginity is more laudable than marriage because it is consecrated to God, whereas marriage is a vow that preserves a bond between two human partners.²⁹⁴ Although Augustine asserts the importance of the consecrated flesh, he makes an interesting suggestion when comparing the fruitfulness of the flesh to physical virginity. Throughout virginity treatises, earlier Fathers had distinguished between physical virginity and spiritual virginity and had been aware that spiritual integrity superseded carnal integrity; they emphasised that even physical virginity consecrated to God was of no use if the virgin was not in possession of spiritual virginity. Augustine, however, suggests that physical virginity is in itself spiritual because its preservation indicates a spiritual devotion to God. Because carnal integrity is consecrated and maintained, physical virginity becomes spiritual.

x. Tribulation of the Flesh and Spiritual Rewards

Augustine condemns those who misunderstand Saint Paul's assertion that celibacy was desirable because of the 'present necessity' and 'the tribulation of the flesh'.²⁹⁵ Augustine

Church. Only a sacred virgin [i.e. The Church] brings forth sacred virgins, one who is espoused to the one husband, to be preserved a chaste virgin to Christ. From her who is not only wholly virgin in body but is wholly virgin in spirit, are born sacred virgins in both body and spirit.' Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, xi, p. 77.

²⁹³ Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, viii, p. 75.

²⁹⁴ Cf. Augustine: 'All these, however, are duties of human obligation, whereas unsullied virginity and abstention from all intercourse by devoted continence is role assigned to angels, the intention to preserve enduring incorruption while in the corruptible flesh.' Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, xii, p. 79.

²⁹⁵ Cf. Paul: 'I think therefore that this is good for the present necessity, that it is good for a man so to be [i.e. remain celibate]. [...] And if a virgin marry, she hath not sinned: nevertheless, such shall have tribulation of the flesh. But I spare you. This therefore I say, brethren; the time is short; it remaineth, that they also who have wives, be as if they had none' (I Corinthians 7: 26-30).

challenges those who ‘make false charges against marriage’ by ‘arguing that this [Paul’s] statement implicitly condemns it’.²⁹⁶ Augustine singles out for censure the use of the classical motif of the *molestiae nuptiarum* in order to over-emphasise the earthly benefits of virginity in comparison with the manifold annoyances which accompany the marriage state:

So those who believe that the efficacy of this continence is essential not for life in the kingdom of heaven but for that in the present world are strangely misguided. They argue that marriages are a source of tension, because of the quite numerous and constricting earthly cares, and that virgins are those who practise continence are free of such troubles.²⁹⁷

Although this seems like a implicit condemnation of Jerome, whose use of the *molestiae nuptiarum* ran to excess in *Adversus Jovinianum*,²⁹⁸ Augustine is talking about those who use the irritations of marriage in order to claim that the worth of virginity is only located in the avoidance of earthly trials, rather than the achievement of heavenly rewards:

Observe they say, that the Apostle here reveals that this is a good for the present necessity, not for the eternity to come. As if the Apostle was taking stock of the present necessity without foresight and though for the future, whereas the entire ordering of his thought summons us solely to eternal life.²⁹⁹

Such an attitude, Augustine argues, although it may seem to try to promote the good of virginity by denigrating marriage, actually undermines virginity because it implies that there are no heavenly rewards attendant on the estate. This failure to recognise the heavenly rewards of virginity strays into the heresies of Jovinian by implying that

²⁹⁶ Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, xvii, p. 85.

²⁹⁷ Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, xiii, p. 79.

²⁹⁸ Jerome complains: ‘Do I condemn marriage if I enumerate its troubles, such as the crying of infants, the death of children, the chance of abortion, domestic losses, and so forth?’ Jerome, *Epistola XLVIII Ad Pammachium*, xviii, p. 77.

²⁹⁹ Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, xiii, p. 79.

marriage and virginity have an equal status in heaven.³⁰⁰ Such a view, Augustine says, goes explicitly against Christ's own reasoning for the promotion of virginity:

Finally, let us listen to the Lord himself as he delivers this clearest of judgements. [...] Christ states, Truth states, the Power and Wisdom of God states that those who with devoted resolve have refrained from taking a wife castrate themselves for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. By contrast, the empty minds of men with a rashness which is sacrilegious maintain that those who act in this way are merely avoiding 'the present necessity' of marital difficulties, and that in the kingdom of heaven they do not obtain any greater honour than the rest.³⁰¹

Christ specifically says that celibacy is undertaken 'for the sake of the kingdom of heaven', not for respite from earthly ordeals. Augustine does accept, however, that Paul's referral to the 'tribulations of the flesh' alludes to the irksome trials of marriage.

However, instead of condemning marriage, Augustine argues that Paul is suggesting that the troubles inherent in marriage detract from the time that should be devoted to God:

What he is saying is: [...] 'For I know that the needs of the present time, to which marriage-partners are subject, compel them to devote less thought to the things of God than is enough to attain that glory not attained by all who will abide in eternal life and salvation.'³⁰²

However, although virginity may well provide an escape from such earthly trials, it should not be the sole reason why anyone chooses the virginal life:

In this way [Paul] was urging virginity and lasting continence, with the additional intention of expressing slight discouragement of marriage, quite mildly, as from something burdensome and troublesome, not from something evil and forbidden. For it is one thing to perform disgraceful acts of the flesh, and another to experience tribulation of the flesh; the first is sinful behaviour, whereas the second is endurance of hardship which people for the most part do not refuse to undertake when they also shoulder the most honourable obligations.³⁰³

³⁰⁰ Cf. Augustine: 'I did not however want anyone to think that there will be equal rewards for the two modes of life, the good and the better.' Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, xix, p. 87.

³⁰¹ Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, xxiii, p. 95. Cf. Augustine: 'Should the Christian argue against Christ when he praises those who have castrated themselves not for this world but for the kingdom of heaven, and maintain that such a course is useful for the present and not the future life.' Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, xiv, p. 97.

³⁰² Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, xiv, p. 81.

³⁰³ Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, xvi, p. 83.

Augustine does not outrightly condemn using *molestiae nuptiarum*. Indeed, he also enumerates them when he discusses what the ‘tribulations of the flesh’ involve; however, he does recommend caution in doing so, because placing excessive weight on the annoyances of marriage can damage the reputation of marriage.³⁰⁴ Also, he emphasises that marriage and its tribulations are no hindrance to entering the kingdom of heaven, but they do preclude the attainment of the crown due to virginity.³⁰⁵

Augustine asserts the pre-eminence of the virginal state over marriage, and so rejects definitely Jovinian’s claims that marriage and virginity can be considered as deserving equal rewards:

And to maintain that those who with devoted resolve remain continent, disciplining their bodies to the point of spurning marriage, castrating themselves not physically but at the very root of concupiscence, pondering the life of heaven and of angels in their mortal life on earth, are merely equal to the merits of married people?³⁰⁶

The sacrifice that is made in choosing the virginal life demands a fitting heavenly reward.

Indeed, the heavenly reward of virginity is demonstrated by Saint John in the Apocalypse; virgins are destined to become part of Christ’s *inner sanctum*:³⁰⁷

³⁰⁴ Cf. Augustine: ‘[Paul] means suspicions aroused by marital jealousy, problems in bearing and nurturing children, and the fears and pains of childlessness. For how very few of those who bind themselves in the chains of marriage are not tugged and troubled by such emotions? But we must not overemphasise those in case we fail to spare those who the Apostle considered should be spared.’ Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, xvi, pp. 83-5.

³⁰⁵ Cf. Augustine: ‘We also say that ‘the present necessity’ of married people is an obstacle not indeed to their attaining eternal life, but to gaining that pre-eminent glory and honour reserved for lifelong continence; and further, that in this day and age marriage is a useful course only for those who lack self control; and that the Apostle, in his forewarning of the truth, sought neither to be reticent about the tribulations of the flesh (which results from the bodily emotions which are an essential feature of marriages between partners lacking self-control), nor in his concern for human weakness to explain it more fully.’ Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, xxi, p. 93.

³⁰⁶ Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, xxiv, p. 97.

³⁰⁷ Cf. Augustine: ‘The man saw you, twelve times twelve thousand blessed harpists, your virginity of body undefiled, your truth of heart inviolate, and he wrote these words about you because you follow the Lamb wherever he goes.’ Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, xxvii, p. 101.

You will bring to the marriage of the Lamb a new song to play on your harps – not indeed one such as the whole earth sings when it is bidden ‘Sing a new song to the Lord, the whole earth’, but one such as none but you will be able to sing.³⁰⁸

In Saint John’s Apocalypse, the virgins are described as those who follow the Lamb wherever He goes. Augustine interprets this phrase as referring to the necessity for virgins to imitate Christ. Although all Christians should imitate Christ’s virtue, virgins accomplish this in the most complete sense through their virginity:

Advance towards them, follow the Lamb, for the Lamb in the flesh is assuredly virginal as well; for this he preserved for himself when he was full-grown, and he did not deprive his mother of it when he was conceived and born. Follow him as you deserve, because of your virginity in heart and flesh, wherever he goes, for what does ‘follow’ mean but ‘imitate’?³⁰⁹

Although only virgins will be able to sing the ‘new song’, Augustine asserts that all Christians will be able to hear it.³¹⁰ Virgins can follow Christ wherever he goes because of their greater gift of virginity, but married Christians will be able to follow Christ to an extent, if they follow the beatitudes given by Christ:³¹¹

So the rest of the faithful, who have lost their virginity, must follow the Lamb not wherever he goes, but so far as they themselves can go. They can in fact follow everywhere except where he has advanced into the glory of virginity.³¹²

The one difference which allows virgins to follow Christ everywhere is their virginity.³¹³

In all other things, married Christians can match virgins in virtue.³¹⁴ Augustine envisions

³⁰⁸ Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, xxvii, p. 101.

³⁰⁹ Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, xxvii, pp. 101-3.

³¹⁰ Cf. Augustine: ‘They will not be able to sing that new song which belongs to you alone, but they will be able to hear it and to take delight in that good of yours which is so surpassing. But you who are virgins will both sing and hear it, for you will also hear it from your own lips as you sing it; your joy will be the more blessed and your dominion sweeter.’ Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, xxix, p. 105. Augustine seems to follow Cyprian’s understanding that although the Apocalypse refers specifically to ‘male virgins’, this is in a general sense of ‘mankind’ rather than debarring women from the Lamb’s inner sanctum. Cyprian says: ‘And indeed not to men only does the Lord promise the grace of continence, disregarding women; but since woman is a part of man and was taken and formed from him, almost universally in Scriptures God addresses the first formed because they are two in one flesh, and in the man is signified likewise the woman.’ Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, iv, in *Saint Cyprian: Treatises*, trans. and ed. Roy J. Deferrari (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1981 [1958]), pp. 31-52, (p. 34).

³¹¹ Cf. Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, xxviii, p. 103.

³¹² Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, xxviii, p. 103.

a situation where the married and those who have not retained the honour of virginity rejoice in the greater gifts of the virgins:

Those who will possess less will not turn in disgust from you, for where there is no envy, distinction is shared. Have confidence, then; show trust, be strong, endure as you swear and keep vows of lifelong continence of your Lord, for the sake not of the present world but of the kingdom of heaven.³¹⁵

Augustine's ideal is perhaps designed to contrast sharply with the context of the age which necessitated his writing *De bono coniugali* and *De sancta virginitate*, in order to quell the squabbling over which of the two states, if any, was the pre-eminent.

xi. *Imitatio Christi*

Like Jerome in *Epistola XXII*, Augustine identifies pride as the greatest threat to the preservation of virginity,³¹⁶ and turns from discussing the superiority of virginity to a lengthy discussion of humility,³¹⁷ which, he asserts, is necessary for a virgin's achievement of a true *imitatio Christi*:

‘The greater you are, the more you must humble yourself in all things, and you will obtain favour before God.’ [Ecclus. 3: 20]. The measure of a person's humility is dictated by the measure of his greatness. [...] Christian teaching in its entirety was above all on pride, the mother of envy, for that discipline seeks humility as the means of obtaining and preserving charity.³¹⁸

³¹³ Cf. Augustine: ‘So you who are his virgins, you must follow him on that path as well, for it is on this score alone that you follow him wherever he goes. We can encourage those who are married to advance towards any other gifts of sanctity to which they can follow him, except to this, which they have lost beyond hope of recovery.’ Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, xxix, p. 103.

³¹⁴ Cf. Augustine: ‘Each of us follow him in as much as we imitate him, not as the son of God through whom alone all things were made, but as the son of man who revealed in himself all that we must imitate. Many things in him are revealed for all to imitate, but bodily virginity is not set forth for all, for those who have already lost their virginity have not the means of being virgins.’ Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, xxvii, p. 103.

³¹⁵ Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, xxix, p. 105.

³¹⁶ Cf. Augustine: ‘So in our modest way we have discoursed sufficiently on both the holiness which gives you the distinctive title of ‘holy nuns’, and the humility by which such a claim to greatness as is accorded you is preserved.’ Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, lvii, p. 145; ‘So love is the guardian of virginity, and the residence of this guardian is in humility; for in that place dwells he who said that his spirit rests in the humble and peaceable person who trembles at his words.’ Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, lii, p. 141.

³¹⁷ Cf. Augustine: ‘At this point someone will say: ‘This is no longer a treatise on virginity, but on humility – as if it were any kind of virginity which we have undertaken to proclaim, and not that which God approves!’ Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, lii, p. 139.

³¹⁸ Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, xxxi, p. 107.

Augustine evinces his argument by providing numerous scriptural *exempla* of Christ's humility. He asserts that all Christians must embrace humility, because it is the feature of Christ's nature which He asked to be imitated.³¹⁹ However, it behoves virgins most especially to do so because of their greater merit and because they must imitate Christ in everything if they wish to 'follow the Lamb wherever he goes'. Augustine, however, explains that his insistence that virgins embrace humility does not apply to those who pretend to practise continence. Such women are marked out by Saint Paul for condemnation:

The apostle Paul marks down as wicked unmarried women who pry and prattle; this fault is the outcome of idleness. [...] Earlier he had said of these women: 'Avoid younger widows, for once they involve themselves in sensual pleasures, they wish to marry in Christ, and incur damnation for having violated their earlier pledge' [1 Timothy 5: 11-13], in other words they have not abided by the vow which they had first taken.³²⁰

The widows of whom Saint Paul speaks are those who have made a pledge in haste having been widowed early in life, but later find that their lust is too great for them to abide by their vow. Augustine condemns such women for choosing the vow under pretence, rather than having a true vocation:

These women, then, would like to marry, and the reason why they do not marry is because they cannot do so with impunity. They would do better to marry rather than to burn, that is than to be ravaged in their inmost hearts by the hidden flame of lust; they regret the pledge they have made but are ashamed to admit it. Unless they amend and control their attitude, and once more overcome their lust with fear of God, they are to be numbered among the dead, whether they devote themselves to pleasures [...] or to labours and fasting, for these are pointless without any correction of the heart, ministering to empty display rather than to improvement.³²¹

³¹⁹ Cf. Augustine: 'All Christians, then, should hold fast to humility because they derive their name Christians from Christ; and no person who studies his gospel carefully fails to find him to be the teacher of humility.' Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, xxxiii, p. 111.

³²⁰ Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, xxxiv, pp. 111-3.

³²¹ Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, xxxiv, p. 113.

Although such women ought to have married rather than make a vow, Augustine does not allow that they are able to marry having once made the vow. Indeed, Augustine states that '[t]o such as these I do not recommend great eagerness for humility, for their very pride is confused and blood-stained with the wound to their conscience'.³²² Like Chrysostom, Ambrose, and Jerome, Augustine understands the solemn vow of chastity as a life-long dedication and one that cannot be reneged. As well as those who take a vow without a true vocation, Augustine cannot commend humility to 'those who are drunkards or misers or who lie prostrate under any other kind of disease which brings damnation'.³²³ The latter includes those who claim virginity, but who behave like its opposite:

Though they lay claim to bodily continence, their shameful behaviour is not in keeping with the title they bear. But perhaps they will even have the gall to flaunt themselves in these evil activities, not being content to have the punishment for them postponed. Nor am I concerned with those who seek to please, either with dress more elegant than the needs of their high calling demand, or with a bandeau conspicuous whether with protruding knots of hair or with veils so thin that the hair-nets lying below become visible.³²⁴

Such virgins resemble those who flaunted themselves across the pages of Tertullian and Cyprian's treatises over a century and a half earlier.³²⁵ The problem of false virgins, then,

³²² Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, xxxiv, p. 113.

³²³ Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, xxxiv, p. 113.

³²⁴ Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, xxxiv, p. 113. Cf. Walsh: 'Augustine, *Ep.* 211.10 (AD 423) uses virtually the same phrase on hair as here: "Let not the covering of your heads be so thin that the nets are visible under it." The "covering" refers to the white veil, which with the black over garment was the habit of the consecrated virgin (Ambrose, *De virginibus* 3.1; Jerome *Ep.* 147.6).' Walsh, Note to *De sancta virginitate*, pp. 112-4 n.84.

³²⁵ Walsh comments that the Fathers obsessively comment on the wickedness of female adornment: 'Condemnation of women's elegant clothing and jewellery was an obsessive motif in the Fathers. Tertullian's *De cultu feminarum* 2.6 (attacking such ornamentation as the work of the devil), Cyprian's *De habitu virginum* 16, Jerome's *Epp.* 22 and 107.5, and above all Ambrose's *De virginibus* I. 6. 28f., and other texts cited by Homes Dudden, *Saint Ambrose*, 153f., were familiar to Augustine. Ambrose attacks also attractive hair-styles (*De virginibus* 71; *Exhort. virg.* 64; *De inst. virg.* 109).' Walsh, Note to *De sancta virginitate*, pp. 112-4n. 84. This is an exaggeration because they did not solely focus on female dress; Tertullian, for instance, dedicated a whole treatise to the discussion of the wearing of the pallium. The

appears to be a constant problem. Augustine asserts that those who make claim to a life of continence, but who belie that life through lustful thoughts, behaviour or dress, or through committing other sins 'are not yet to be instructed on humility, but on chastity itself, or on virgin purity'.³²⁶ Instead, it is the virgin who lives the true life of virginity who can advance to learning the lesson of humility.³²⁷

True virgins are in danger of pride, not because they are particularly sinful, but because, if they are living a life of virginity, they will be aware of the greatness that they are attaining. Augustine draws attention to the biblical passage which states that the one who has been forgiven most, loves more. By that reckoning, virgins will love less because they have less to be forgiven. However, Augustine reminds them that no one, not even a virgin, is free from sin:

True, holy virginity is undefiled from the mother's womb, but 'No one', says scripture, 'is pure in your sight, not even a child who has lived a single day upon the earth.' A kind of virginal chastity is preserved inviolate also in the realm of faith, in which the Church is joined as a chaste virgin to one husband.³²⁸

Augustine notes that Saint John says that he who presumes that he is without sin is a liar, but humble confession cleanses us of all our wickedness.³²⁹ Virgins, although they form

Fathers legislated on female dress because it was, and remains, an outward indicator of modesty. The Fathers suggest that those who dress like prostitutes, usually are. For virgins, it is even more important that they dress correctly in order to demonstrate their inner purity.

³²⁶ Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, xxxiv, pp. 113-5.

³²⁷ Cf. Augustine: 'Give me one who proclaims lifelong continence, and who is free of these and all such vices and blemishes of behaviour. It is in one such as this that I fear pride, it is the great good which she possesses that makes me fearful of swollen conceit.' Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, xxxiv, p. 115.

³²⁸ Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, xlviii, p. 137.

³²⁹ Cf. John: 'If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, to forgive us our sin, and to cleanse us from all iniquity. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.' (I John 1: 8-10). Cf. Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, xlix, p. 137.

the choir of those who are blameless, should not presume to be free of sin, but instead seek humble confession for whatever incidental sins they may have committed:³³⁰

So even God's virgins who are blameless do indeed follow the Lamb wherever he goes, but after they have attained cleansing of their sins and have maintained that virginity which once lost could not be regained. But because that very Apocalypse, which was a revelation of like to like [i.e. of virgins to a virgin], praises them also because no lie was found in their mouths, they must remember to be truthful as well in not presuming to claim that they are free from sin.³³¹

Virgins, he says, do not have an easy path to humility because, unlike the repentant tax-collector or harlot, they do not have a shady past life to regret:

I acknowledge the high rank of your virginity; I do not set before you for your imitation the tax-collector humbly censuring his own faults, but I fear for the Pharisee in you proudly boasting of his merits. [...] I fear that in believing that you have little to be forgiven, you may love only little.³³²

Instead of holding up sinners to the virgin to teach them humility, Augustine returns to a discussion of the humility of Christ.³³³ In an attempt to humble them, Augustine points out that although virgins share His virginity, they cannot achieve His greatness.³³⁴ Also, virgins must remember that life on earth is a constant trial; like Jerome, he reiterates that the victory is not secure.³³⁵ Indeed, many virgins fall before they achieve their crown.

³³⁰ Cf. Augustine: 'So no one must abandon sins with the intention of returning to them, nor make a compact of alliance, as it were, with wickedness to take pleasure in confessing sins rather than eschewing them. But even when people try hard and keep watch against sinning, sins somehow creep up on us out of our human weakness; though small and few, they are none the less of some account, and they become great and grievous if pride lends them increase and weight.' Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, I, p. 139. Cf. Augustine: 'And by this means, for so long as they do not yet attain perfection in the heights of heaven, their humble confession renders them without blame.' Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, xlix, p. 139.

³³¹ Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, xlix, p. 137.

³³² Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, xxxviii, p. 119.

³³³ Cf. Augustine: 'Yet they are to learn not from those whose sins you forgive, but from you yourself, the Lamb of God, "You who take away the sins of the world", for you are meek and humble of heart.' Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, xxxvii, p. 119.

³³⁴ Cf. Augustine: 'They are just, but surely they do not make the sinner righteous, as you do? They are chaste, but their mothers nurtured them in their wombs in sins. They are holy, but you are more, the Holy of holies. They are virgins, but they are not also born of virgins. They are unsullied in both spirit and flesh, but they are not the Word made flesh.' Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, xxxvii, p. 119.

³³⁵ Cf. Augustine: 'Your life is already just and devoted, chaste and holy, lived in virginal chastity; yet you are still living here on earth, and you are not humbled when you hear, "Is not this life on earth a trial?"' Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, xl, p. 123.

These serve as an abject lesson, and help to save the virgin from succumbing to pride, and thus losing her virginal purity:³³⁶

What, are we to believe that God allows many men and women who are sure to fall to intermingle with the ranks of your profession for any reason other than that by their fall your fear may be increased, and consequently your pride may be repressed? That pride God so hates that from his great height he humbled himself so much to oppose it.³³⁷

A proud virgin cannot presume to follow the Lamb by imitation without humbling herself. This is not to say that a virgin cannot assume that virginity is a greater good than marriage, but in doing so she must not presume that she is greater than any of her fellow Christians.³³⁸

Augustine proffers a means by which a virgin can realistically maintain humility, for he notes that, ‘She must certainly not feign humility, but demonstrate it, for pretence of humility is a greater form of pride’.³³⁹ He places before them the martyrs, whose crown, he says, is undeniably greater than that those of the virgins;³⁴⁰ this is shown by the Parable of the Sowers, the hundredfold fruit of which had often been interpreted as

³³⁶ Cf. Augustine: ‘Encompassed by these divine warnings and human perils, do we still find it difficult to persuade consecrated virgins to embrace humility?’ Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, xl, p. 122. Cf. Augustine: ‘Those of your company who remain steadfast must be your model; those who fall must increase your fear. Love the first example to imitate it; lament over the second, to avoid arrogance. Do not vaunt your righteousness, but submit to the God who makes you righteous. Grant pardon to the sins of others, and pray for your own; avoid sins in future by vigilance, and expunge those of the past by confessing them.’ Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, liii, p. 143.

³³⁷ Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, xli, pp. 123-5.

³³⁸ Cf. Augustine: ‘So what are we to say? Is there any consideration which a virgin of God may truthfully entertain which causes her not to presume to rank herself above a woman of faith – not merely a widow, but also a married woman? I do not refer here to the unworthy virgin, for who could be unaware that an obedient laywoman is to be ranked above a disobedient virgin? But when both are obedient to God’s commands, will the virgin then be fearful of promoting sacred virginity above marriage however chaste, and continence above the married state, so that fruit a hundredfold ranks above that which is thirtyfold? Indeed not; she should not hesitate to put the first before the second. But the individual virgin who is obedient and fears God should not presume to raise herself above one laywoman or another who is obedient and fears God.’ Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, xlv, p. 131.

³³⁹ Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, xlv, p. 129.

³⁴⁰ Cf. Augustine: ‘in my opinion no one will presume to rank virginity above martyrdom, and no one will doubt that martyrdom is a gift that lies hidden, should there be no testing trial.’ Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, xlvii, p. 135.

referring to martyrdom.³⁴¹ Not unlike his argument about the potentiality for the practice of continence that the Old Testament patriarchs possessed which was not required of them, Augustine contends that the potentiality of martyrdom lies dormant within an individual. Unless this potentiality is put to the trial, a virgin cannot know whether she possesses the readiness to die for Christ more than a married woman. Indeed, Augustine posits that a matron may be more ready than a virgin to receive martyrdom; so, although virginity is better than marriage, no one can be assured of their superiority over anyone else.³⁴²

A virgin therefore has a point of reference to aid her to maintain humility and to prevent her from doing violence to chastity, which transcends all gifts and without which – whatever her other gifts, few or more numerous, great or small – she is clearly nothing.³⁴³

Hunter claims that Augustine's insistence on the importance of obedience and humility in the maintenance of virginity, and the superiority of martyrdom, destabilises virginity:

By introducing virtues that were superior to sexual continence (e.g., readiness to martyrdom) and by emphasising that it was impossible to know if one possessed such virtues, Augustine had introduced a note of radical instability into the discussion of marriage and celibacy.³⁴⁴

In many ways, Augustine's treatment of the wider virtues needed to maintain virginity reflect an earlier aspect of the tradition of virginity. Indeed, just as Jerome, while praising the virginal state, warned Eustochium of the danger that pride posed to the virgin, Augustine insists that 'it is for us to touch upon their [the virgins'] greatness, but for them

³⁴¹ Cf. Augustine: 'But this gift of martyrdom is so great that some regard it as the fruit a hundredfold, for the authority of the Church provides clearest witness. Through it the faithful are made aware of the order in which martyrs and nuns who have died are cited during sacrifices at the altar.' Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, xlvi pp. 131.

³⁴² Cf. Augustine: 'to claim that virginity is a good much greater and better than the good of marriage, but with the rider that she does not know whether a particular married woman can already suffer for Christ while she herself cannot, and that she is spared this knowledge because her weakness is not put into question by trial.' Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, xlvii, p. 135.

³⁴³ Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, xlvii, p. 135.

³⁴⁴ Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity*, p. 283.

to ponder the greatness of humility'.³⁴⁵ Also, the discussion about the merits of virginity in comparison to martyrdom is not revolutionary by any means, but had long been debated. The use of the Parable of the Sowers to designate the hundredfold rewards to martyrdom does not challenge the use of the Parable to designate the hundredfold to virginity; the two readings had existed side by side. Indeed, Augustine provides several variant interpretations of the Parable.³⁴⁶ As the threat of martyrdom receded, the Parable of the Sowers was used more for an exclusively ascetic reading, but this did not obliterate the use of the martyrological reading.

xii. Conclusion

In many ways Augustine's discussion of virginity confirms aspects of earlier treatises: the need for a wider pursuit of virtue to complement virginity; the perennial problem of false virgins; the importance of intentions in choosing the virginal life; and virginity as the ultimate *imitatio Christi*. His discussion of Mary's vow is significant as it universalises virginity by removing its origin from the immediacy of the Incarnation; although Mary's virginity remains of fundamental importance to the Incarnation, that her vow becomes seen to pre-date the Annunciation adds an additional level of sanctity to her virginity.

Augustine does, however, retain Athanasius' suggestion that virgins partake in the Incarnation in a special way, but he also opens up that possibility to the wider Christian community as well. In Augustine's treatise, Mary's virginity begins to be important in

³⁴⁵ Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, xxxv, p. 61

³⁴⁶ Cf. Augustine: 'But let those who understand these matters better than we ourselves attend to the significance of this variation in fruitfulness; whether a virgin's life represents fruit a hundredfold, the widow's life sixtyfold, and married life thirtyfold. Or alternatively, whether fruitfulness a hundredfold is to be assigned rather to martyrdom, the sixtyfold to continence, and the thirtyfold to marriage; or again, whether virginity and martyrdom combined make up the hundredfold, while virginity alone occupies the sixtyfold, and married people who possess the thirtyfold advance to sixtyfold if they become martyrs. Or what seems to me more likely, since the gifts of divine grace are many, and one is greater and better than another (hence the words of the Apostle, 'Strive for the greater gifts'), we are to realise that there are more gifts than can be allocated to these different categories.' Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, xlvi pp. 131-3.

itself rather than being considered as an extension of the Incarnation. Slowly, virginity is seen to originate from Mary, rather than as in the more traditional understanding which saw the justification of virginity in Christ's own Person. Thus, virginity begins to be expressed as an *imitatio Mariae* as well as an *imitatio Christi*.

The medieval Church's debt to the Church Fathers can be seen in the flowering of the cult of virginity. Texts such as *Ancrene Wisse* and *Hali Meidhad* show a very obvious relationship to the earlier material as they derive much of their substance from patristic sources. Hagiography also draws heavily on the ideology and the imagery associated with the tradition of virginity and, indeed, complements and enriches the cult of virginity. Likewise, the cult of Mary that dominated medieval piety enjoyed a symbiotic relationship with the cult of virginity.³⁴⁷ The question of clerical celibacy was debated as early as the Council of Nicaea (A.D. 325),³⁴⁸ and there were many attempts throughout the Middle Ages to make it mandatory. However, it was not until the eleventh century, largely due to the efforts of Peter Damian, that reform was forcefully enacted.³⁴⁹

³⁴⁷ There are many studies of the Marian cult. For a discussion of the ideas about Mary in medieval Fathers, see Luigi Gambero, *Mary in the Middle Ages: The Blessed Virgin Mary in the Thought of Medieval Latin Theologians*, trans. Thomas Buffer (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005). For a study of Mary, see Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983).

³⁴⁸ An anchorite named Paphnutius, however, is said to have convinced the bishops at the council that the burden of chastity was too heavy for the sacerdotal classes. The warning was considered to be especially convincing, coming as it did from a man who practised celibacy himself. Henry R. Percival quotes Hefele: 'Paphnutius declared with a loud voice, "that too heavy a yoke ought not to be laid upon the clergy; that marriage and married intercourse are of themselves honourable and undefiled [...]"' This discourse of Paphnutius made so much the more impression, because he had never lived in matrimony himself, and had had no conjugal intercourse. Paphnutius, indeed, had been brought up in a monastery, and his great purity of manners had rendered him especially celebrated.' Henry R. Percival, 'Proposed Action on Clerical Celibacy' *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. XIV, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church: Their Canons and dogmatic decrees* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1900]), pp. 51-52, (p. 51).

³⁴⁹ For studies of the history of clerical celibacy, see C. N. L. Brooke, 'Gregorian Reform in Action: Clerical Marriage in England, 1050-1200', *Cambridge Historical Journal*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (1956), 1-21. Also, see Henry Lea, *History of Sacerdotal Celibacy in the Christian Church*, 2 vols (London: Williams and Norgate, 1907).

In the earliest patristic treatises, the nature of marriage is something of an addendum, when it is discussed at all. However, marriage is always in the background in virginity treatises for, after all, marriage and virginity are discussed simultaneously by Saint Paul in I Corinthians 7. The general increase in ascetic fervour in the fourth century, and the emergence of heretical sects which sought to praise virginity whilst denigrating marriage, prompted more urgent debates about the holiness of marriage and its merit in relation to virginity. In late fourth-century tracts, this debate begins to take centre stage, as is evident in Gregory of Nyssa and John Chrysostom's treatises, although both of these have other interests as well. Jerome's *Adversus Jovinianum*, however, is the most famous treatise that interrogates the relative merits and demerits of marriage in relation to virginity and which the Protestant reformers sought most earnestly to challenge, seeing in Jerome the most powerful and controversial advocate of Catholic chastity.

Augustine's treatise *De bono coniugali* is important for several reasons: it creates a lasting theological framework for understanding the status of marriage, including its claim to holiness, primarily articulated in the sacramental theology, and its relationship to virginity. Although beyond the fourth century there was still much discussion over whether consent or consummation formed the basis of marriage, it was Augustine's understanding which triumphed. From the basis of consent developed the medieval, and, indeed, modern, conception of the contracting of a valid marriage.³⁵⁰ By the twelfth

³⁵⁰ Cf. Leushuis: 'Peter Lombard's *Sententiae* (ca. 1150) laid down the official legal terminology that remained valid until the council of Trent. Lombard introduced the distinction between *verba de futuro* (words in the future tense) with which the betrothed (*sponsi*) promise to marry, and the *verba de praesenti* (words spoken in the present tense) exchanged between spouses to ratify a factual marriage. Lombard considered a marriage indissoluble as soon as the words in the present [...] were exchanged, even if these preceded the sexual act. Like most canonists, he would prefer that a marriage be contracted within the sphere of the Church (*in facie Ecclesie*), but in theory he retained all ceremony or outside intervention, such

century, marriage was accepted as a sacrament and Peter Lombard in his *Sententiae* relies heavily on Augustine in his discussion of the sacramental nature of marriage.³⁵¹ Thomas Aquinas, following Lombard, also cites Augustine in the *Summa Theologica* with additional references to the fifth- or sixth- century author Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite.³⁵² It was Augustine, too, who was used to provide evidence for all seven sacraments, and whose influence and theology became the authority for both Catholics and Protestant reformers in the urgent debates of the Reformation.³⁵³

as the presence of witnesses, as legally dispensable: the latter could render marriage more solemn (*ad solemnitatem*), but not more valid (*ad validitatem*).’ Reinier Leushuis, ‘The Mimesis of Marriage: Dialogue and Intimacy in Erasmus’s Matrimonial Writings’, *Renaissance Quarterly*, Vol. 57, No. 4 (Winter, 2004), 1278-1307, (p. 1282).

³⁵¹ For Lombard’s discussion of the sacrament of marriage, see Peter Lombard, *Sentences, Book 4: On the Doctrine of Signs*, XXVI-XLII, trans. Giulio Silano (Toronto: Pontifical Institute for Medieval Studies, 2010), pp. 157-233.

³⁵² Aquinas refers to Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite’s *The Celestial Hierarchy* and *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* throughout his discussion on sacraments. Cf. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Vol. IV, Pt. III, Q. 60- Q. 70, pp. 2339-2432; Pt. III, Q. 74-90 (pp. 2433-2560); Pt. III. Suppl., Vol. V. Q. 1-68, pp. 2561-2816. *Summa Theologica. Complete English Edition in Five Volumes*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 1981 [1948])

³⁵³ Cf. Bernardin: ‘Augustine has left comments upon all but one of the present seven sacraments, no reference to unction being found. However, the term *sacramentum* is used by him in connection with Baptism, Penance, Holy Communion, Orders and Matrimony.’ He also notes that ‘Some think that the practice of [Extreme Unction] is referred to by Possidius: “Yet whenever it happened that he was requested by the sick to come in person and pray to the Lord for them and lay his hands upon them, he went without delay.”’ Joseph B. Bernardin, ‘St. Augustine as Pastor’, in *A Companion to the Study of St. Augustine*, ed. Roy W. Battenhouse (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969 [1955]), pp. 57-89, (p. 60; p. 86 n.10).

XI. Renaissance Humanism and Reformation

Renaissance Humanism not only looked back to the classical age but also reinvigorated biblical and patristic scholarship. The Church Fathers at once represented the writings of theologians who were closer to the age of Christ and also provided a bridge between the classical and Christian worlds.¹ In the Reformation, to bypass the corruption of the medieval Church, Protestant reformers turned first and foremost to the Bible for religious authorisation;² however, they also looked to patristic writings in order to prove that their position was not a novelty, but instead an attempt to recover a purer form of Christianity.³ Armed with Scripture and patristic texts, Protestants accused the Roman Church of innovation and of moving away from scriptural truth.⁴ In response, Catholic scholars insisted that the doctrine of the Church had always been rooted in biblical and patristic traditions.

¹ Cf. Pabel: 'Perhaps most significantly, the Fathers, as products of the ancient world, functioned as impressive mediators between the two cultures that informed humanism: pagan antiquity and Christianity.' Hilmar M. Pabel, 'Reading Jerome in the Renaissance: Erasmus' reception of the *Adversus Jovinianum*', *Renaissance Quarterly*, Vol. 55, No. 2 (Summer, 2002), 470-497, (p. 470).

² Cf. Collinson: 'Truth was all and truth for Protestants was plain truth, sufficiently contained in the Bible. All non-scriptural doctrine and practice, all non-scriptural art, amounted to lies, false religion.' Patrick Collinson, 'Protestant Culture and the Cultural Revolution', in *Reformation and Revolution: Politics and Religion in Early Modern England*, ed. Margo Todd (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 35. Cf. Bergvall: 'Like the humanist return *ad fontes*, the Protestant reformers saw their undertaking as a revival of the sources of Christianity: first and foremost the Scriptures themselves, but secondarily the early Church Fathers. Of these Saint Augustine played the leading role in lending legitimacy and support to the views of both Luther and Calvin.' Ake Bergvall, 'Reason in Luther, Calvin, and Sidney', *Sixteenth Century Journal*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (Spring, 1992), 115-127, (p. 117).

³ Cf. Parker: 'Accused of innovating and novelty, the Reformers were driven back to a study of the past, which could alone disprove the charge.' T. H. L. Parker, 'Introduction to John Foxe's *To the True and Faithful Congregation of Christ's Universal Church*', in *The Library of Christian Classics*, Vol. XXVI, *English Reformers*, ed. T. H. L. Parker (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1966), pp. 61-68, (p. 61). F. M. Padelford, however, notes that 'the Puritan protested against the tradition of and reliance upon the Church Fathers, because he believed that the Scriptures offer the only sure revelation of God, and because therein God spoke directly and clearly to every man.' F. M. Padelford, 'Spenser and Puritan Propaganda', *Modern Philology*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Jul., 1913), 85-106, (p. 87).

⁴ John Foxe's comments are typical: 'the Bishops of Rome, under colour of antiquity, have brought such new found devices of strange doctrine and religion as in the former age of the Church were never heard of before, and all through the ignorance of time and for lack of true history.' John Foxe, *To the True and Faithful Congregation of Christ's Universal Church*, in *The Library of Christian Classics*, Vol. XXVI, *English Reformers*, ed. T. H. L. Parker (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1966), pp. 72-88, (p. 76).

Not only did the Renaissance and Reformation witness the vivification of patristic scholarship,⁵ but with it came the re-emergence of theological debates from the patristic age. The doctrinal controversy over free will and grace, which so dominated the latter part of Augustine's life in the early fifth century, was one of the defining theological battlegrounds of the Reformation.⁶ A secondary confrontation, but one that also became a significant feature of the Reformation, was the dispute over the validity of mandatory sacerdotal celibacy and monasticism.⁷ In many ways, this reflected the fourth-century controversy between Jovinian and Jerome concerning the superiority of virginity over marriage.⁸ In connection with this was the reformers' questioning of the sacramental

⁵ Robert G. Kleinmans explains the scholarly focus of these two movements: 'Generally, the discussion of the influence of these two movements upon one another has centred on two facets of their relationship: first, the influence of the Renaissance in creating an intellectual atmosphere which fostered certain Reformation movements such as a revival of biblical studies, the rejection of scholasticism, and the undermining of the ecclesiastical authority of the Roman church; and secondly, the Reformation's rejection of Renaissance humanism because of its optimistic view of human nature. [...] While the question of the Reformation's dependence on Renaissance intellectual movements is usually conceded (after all Luther did use Erasmus' edition of the Greek New Testament as the basis for his German translation), there has been little evaluation of the corresponding influence of the Reformation on Renaissance humanism.' Robert G. Kleinmans, 'Luther and Erasmus, Another Perspective', *Church History*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (Dec., 1970), 459-469, (p. 459).

⁶ Cf. Chadwick: 'The bitter wrangles of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation [...] had largely been disputes between different interpretations of Augustine's doctrine of the Church and grace.' Henry Chadwick, *Augustine* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 118. Cf. Chadwick: 'The sixteenth-century controversy about justification by grace alone [...] was conducted within an Augustinian medieval framework of ideas, and was a further chapter in the dispute about the relation between nature and grace. In the sixteenth century both sides made great appeal to Augustine.' Chadwick, *Augustine*, p. 118.

⁷ Cf. Yost: 'The abolition of monastic vows and mandatory clerical celibacy and the exaltation of marriage and the family were among the most revolutionary changes in religion and ethics produced by the Reformation. Although scholars have given it too little attention, the controversy over the relative merits of marriage and celibacy, and particularly the campaign for clerical marriage, played a major role in the development of the Reformation. The law of celibacy and vows of chastity became principal topics of discussion when the reformers strove to break down the old order of medieval Christianity.' John K. Yost, 'The Reformation Defence of Clerical Marriage in the Reigns of Henry VIII and Edward VI', *Church History*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (Jun., 1981), 152-165, (p. 152).

⁸ John Opper notes that the problems of virginity and marriage had already surfaced: 'In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries all the problems which, it had been thought, had been resolved by Augustine and Jerome, were reopened. "Jovinian", the apologist for marriage and, by implication, the advocate of a less strenuous moral regimen vis-à-vis the body, reappeared, resurfaced. The question was really reopened, however, structurally, by the shift to conjugality as the most important of the familial relationships and by the alteration of sexual roles that this involved.' John Opper, 'Saint Jerome and the History of Sex', *Viator: Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, Vol. 24 (1993), 1-22, (p. 4).

nature of marriage and the more general movement towards matrimonial reform,⁹ which crossed both Catholic and Protestant lines.¹⁰

i. Luther's Attack on Clerical Celibacy and Monasticism

Martin Luther formed the main vanguard against sacerdotal celibacy and monasticism, even though he himself was an Augustinian monk.¹¹ He initially attacked clerical celibacy in his treatise *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate* (1520), citing the ubiquitous problem of concubinage,

⁹ The Catholic Church did recognise the problem of clandestine marriage, but it could not deny the validity of privately conducted marriages. At the Council of Trent (1545-1563) it put regulations in place to ensure that marriages took place in front of witnesses and a priest. 'Decree Concerning the Reform of Matrimony', *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, trans. H. J. Schroeder (North Carolina: TAN Books, 2011 [1941]), pp. 185-6. In Britain, it was not until the Hardwick Marriage Act in 1753 that marriage was finally regulated by law (Carolyne Larrington, *Women and Writing in Medieval Europe: A Sourcebook* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 11). Cf. Luther: 'because marriage is a public estate which is to be entered into and recognized publicly before the church, it is fitting that it should also be established and begun publicly with witnesses who can testify to it.' Martin Luther, *On Marriage Matters* (1530), in *Luther's Works*, Vol. XLVI, *The Christian in Society III*, ed. Robert C. Schultz, General ed. Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), pp. 259-320, (p. 268). Cf. Cressy: 'Pre-Reformation weddings customarily began at the church porch, on the threshold of God's building, rather than at the altar, in the centre of the sacred space. This was the point of entry where the sacred and secular domains intersected, an especially appropriate place to inaugurate the spiritual and social conditions of holy matrimony. [...] Protestant England, by contrast, placed marriage indoors at the devotional centre of the church.' David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life-cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.336.

¹⁰ Luther was not keen to intervene with the problem of marriage law. He insisted that it was a civil, not an ecclesiastical matter: 'No one can deny that marriage is an external, worldly matter, like clothing and food, house and property, subject to temporal authority, as the many imperial laws enacted on the subject prove.' Martin Luther, *On Marriage Matters*, p. 265. He also criticised the papacy for muddling the two: 'The papacy has so jumbled these two [realms] together and confused them with each other that neither one has kept to its power or force or rights and no one can disentangle them.' Luther, *On Marriage Matters*, p. 266. Cf. Fudge: 'According to Luther and his colleagues, marriage constituted a social estate of the material kingdom rather than a sacred institution related to the spiritual kingdom of salvation. This 'social model of marriage' desecralised matrimony, replacing ecclesiastical courts with civil ceremonies, canon law with civil statutes. The state took precedence over the church.' Thomas A. Fudge, 'Incest and Lust in Luther's Marriage: Theology and Morality in Reformation Polemics', *The Sixteenth century Journal*, Vol. 34, No. 2, Marriage in Early Modern Europe (Summer, 2003), 319-345, (p. 326). However, Luther did provide his opinion on basic articles that should be in place in his treatise *On Marriage Matters* (1530): '*The First Article*. Secret engagements should not be the basis of any marriage whatsoever. *The Second Article*. A secret engagement should yield to a public one. *The Third Article*. Of two public engagements the second should yield to the first and be punished. *The Fourth Article*. If anyone touches another woman after a public engagement so to marry her in order thereby to break the first engagement, this action is to be regarded as adultery. *The Fifth Article*. Forced engagements should not be valid.' Luther, *On Marriage Matters*, pp. 267-8.

¹¹ Cf. Luther: 'I have taken vows to keep the entire rule of Augustine.' Martin Luther, *The Judgement of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows* (1521), trans. James Atkinson, in *Luther's Works*, Vol. XLIV, *The Christian in Society I*, ed. James Atkinson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), pp. 243-400, (p. 342).

and, following Erasmus, suggests that the moral aberrations of the priesthood could be regularised by allowing clerical marriage.¹² He also objected to clerical celibacy on the grounds that it was not undertaken freely by priests and that it was an unscriptural papist innovation.¹³ On the subject of monasticism, Luther attacked abuses and recommended reform of corrupt practices; however, he was reluctant to deny the validity of monastic vows at this stage as he accepted that the *regulares* had voluntarily chosen the life of perpetual celibacy.¹⁴ Nevertheless, shortly after the publication of this treatise, Luther

¹² Cf. Luther: 'We also see how the priesthood has fallen, and how many a poor priest is overburdened with wife and child, his conscience troubled. Yet no one does anything to help him, though he could easily be helped. [...] this priest should not be compelled to live without a wedded wife, but should be permitted to have one, as St. Paul writes in I Timothy 3 [: 2, 4] and Titus I [:6-7]'; 'I will not conceal my real opinion or withhold comfort from that pitiful band who with wives and children have fallen into disgrace and whose consciences are burned because people call them priests' whores and their children priests' children.' Martin Luther, *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate* (1520), trans. Charles M. Jacobs, rev. James Atkinson, in *Luther's Works*, Vol. XLIV, *The Christian in Society I*, ed. James Atkinson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), pp. 115-219, (p. 175; p. 177). Cf. Erasmus: 'In my view it would not be ill advised for the interest and morals of mankind if the right of wedlock were also conceded to priests and monks, if circumstances required it, especially in view of the fact that there is such a great throng of priests everywhere, so few of whom live a chaste life. How much better it would be to turn concubines into wives, so that the woman they now keep dishonourably and with troubled conscience might be retained openly with honourable reputation.' Desiderius Erasmus, *Encomium Matromonii*, trans. Charles Fantazzi, in *Erasmus on Women* ed. Erika Rummel (London and Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), pp. 57-77, (p. 67).

¹³ Cf. Luther: 'I want to speak only of the ministry which God has instituted, the responsibility of which is to minister word and sacrament to a congregation, among whom they reside. Such ministers should be given liberty by a Christian council to marry to avoid temptation and sin. For since God has not bound them, no one else ought to bind them or can bind them, even if he were an angel from heaven, let alone a pope. Everything that canon law decrees to the contrary is mere fable and idle talk.' Martin Luther, *To the Christian Nobility*, pp. 176-7. In addition, Luther claims in *The Judgement of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows* that the scriptural evidence of I Tim. 4:1-3 demonstrates that neither clerical nor monastic celibacy is permissible: 'On the authority of this text alone (since it is a word of the Holy Spirit, who is our God and blessed forever, Amen), I am bold enough to declare that all monks be absolved from their vows, and I pronounce with confidence that their vows are unacceptable and worthless in the sight of God. Before this I used to absolve only priests from celibacy on the strength of this text, but as I looked at the matter more closely and considered the words of Paul more carefully, it occurred to me that his teaching is quite general and applies to all celibates, monks as well as priests.' Luther, *The Judgement of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows*, p. 382. For a history of clerical celibacy in the Church, see Henry Lea, *History of Sacerdotal Celibacy in the Christian Church*, 2 vols (London: Williams and Norgate, 1907 [1867]).

¹⁴ Cf. Luther: 'My advice is, restore freedom to everybody and leave every man free to marry or not to marry. [...] I am not referring here to popes, bishops, canons, and monks. God has not instituted these offices. They have taken the burden upon themselves, so they will have to bear them themselves.' Martin Luther, *To the Christian Nobility*, p. 176. Luther's argument is not so far removed from medieval theology, as Aquinas affirms that the papacy had the power to free priests from vows of chastity, because it is an institutional requirement, but that it did not have the power to free monks, because that was a condition of their vow.

was forced to adopt a more definite position on monasticism, as Bernhard Lohse observes:

The question of monasticism turned volatile because many monks and nuns were leaving the cloisters under the influence of Reformation criticism. These incidents grew more and more numerous, especially in 1521.¹⁵

Whereas some of the other Protestant reformers had argued that breaking monastic vows was justifiable if monks were suffering with desire,¹⁶ Luther realised that such an argument could be used to justify breaking any religious law or commandment, and so he argued against monasticism from a different perspective. In 1521, he published *The Judgement of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows* (1521), which, Lohse asserts, ‘contributed essentially to bringing monasticism to an end on Reformation soil’.¹⁷

In *The Judgement*, Luther briefly addresses the central biblical texts that were adduced by patristic writers and the Catholic Church to demonstrate the biblical roots of virginity.¹⁸ He challenges the traditional ascetic interpretations of Matthew 19 and I Corinthians 7 and insists instead that in these texts neither Christ nor Saint Paul advocates the virginal life. He even claims that the biblical passages pertain more to the discouragement of virginity rather than an exhortation to the virginal or celibate life:

‘But virginity and celibacy is a counsel’, [they say]. Clearly Christ did not counsel it but rather discouraged it. It was only when eunuchs had been mentioned that he referred to it and praised it by saying ‘He who is able to receive this precept, let him receive it’ [Matt. 19: 12]. And again, ‘Not all can receive this precept’ [Matt. 19: 11]. Are these not the words of someone who prefers to advise against

¹⁵ Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, trans. and ed. Roy A. Harrisville (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999 [1995]), p. 139.

¹⁶ Cf. Lohse: ‘On June 20, 1521, Karlstadt published theses on monasticism for a disputation to be held at Wittenberg on June 28. In these theses, among other things, he stated that a monk suffering from desire had the right to break the vow of chastity and marry. In doing so, of course, he sinned, but such a sin was milder than the sin of desire. Melancthon, who had already dealt with the problem somewhat earlier, found no fault with Karlstadt’s argument.’ Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, p. 139.

¹⁷ Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, p. 143.

¹⁸ Matthew 19: 12 and I Corinthians 7.

virginity and celibacy and discourage their application? He neither invites anyone to take up celibacy, nor calls men to it. He simply refers to it.¹⁹

Luther skates over the context of the passage from Matthew in order to read it as a disinterested reference to celibacy at best, or a discouragement at worst. Similarly, he interprets chapter 7 of Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians as a neutral discussion of virginity, which tends towards the dissuasion of Christians from attempting to pursue virginity or celibacy:

Paul, however, says, 'I give this counsel...' [I Cor. 7: 25], but he does not invite anyone to take up celibacy either; rather, he discourages them and deters them when he says, 'But each has his own special gift from God' [I Cor. 7: 7]. Paul neither persuades nor dissuades; he leaves the matter open.²⁰

Luther's interpretations are, perhaps, a little strained here. Nevertheless, by refuting the two passages which had always been considered to provide a testimony to the divine recommendation for virginity,²¹ Luther was able to conclude that, 'It was not God who commanded chastity, nor did he counsel or recommend it. It was introduced by human temerity and ignorance'.²² Thus, far from being the highest human virtue recommended by and reflecting the divine as patristic tradition had always claimed, Luther denied that Scripture provided virginity with any such accolade and claimed instead that the practice was actually contrary to the will of God.²³

In connection with his rejection of the scriptural authorisations of celibacy, Luther also refused to acknowledge any authority that might be established for monasticism by

¹⁹ Luther, *The Judgement of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows*, p. 261.

²⁰ Luther, *The Judgement of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows*, pp. 261-2.

²¹ Christ is divine and Saint Paul claimed his recommendation was inspired by the Spirit. Cf. Paul: 'But more blessed shall she be, if she so remain, according to my counsel; and I think I have the spirit of God' (I Corinthians 7: 40).

²² Luther, *The Judgement of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows*, p. 376.

²³ Cf. Luther: 'We see then that the monastic institution not only has no divine authority, but that it is actually contrary to the Christian faith and evangelical freedom. Proof that it has no divine authority lies in the fact that monasticism has no testimony from Scripture.' Luther, *The Judgement of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows*, p. 317.

virtue of its venerable history. In order to support his assertions, he offered a spurious history of the development of monasticism. He claimed that monasteries developed from educational institutions, which had at first allowed scholars who enjoyed learning to lodge there freely, but later these institutions invented vows in order to ensnare the young who wished to leave.²⁴ He had previously provided a similar false history in *To the Christian Nobility*.²⁵ Andrew Louth notes that there was a political motivation for the failure of Protestant writers to interrogate the early ascetic roots of monasticism with the same scholarly rigour as they subjected other areas of Catholic doctrine and tradition:

The traditional story of the rise of monasticism as a fourth-century phenomenon, associated *par excellence* with the Egyptian desert [i.e., St. Athanasius' *Life of Saint Anthony*], is a Catholic legend, which, unlike many others, was reinforced, rather than questioned, by Protestant Scholarship, happy to regard monasticism as a late, and therefore spurious development. The monastic movement should perhaps be seen rather as a reform movement of an already existing, and flourishing, ascetic tradition.²⁶

Luther's false history of the origins of monasteries, then, is perhaps a self-conscious attempt to detach the institution of monasticism from any association it had with the ascetic movements of the Early Church attested to by Ante-Nicene Fathers such as Tertullian, Cyprian, Clement and Methodius. Such a connection would have accorded the

²⁴ Cf. Luther: 'The first Christian schools arose from this practice. Even girls were educated in them, as the story of St. Agnes shows. Colleges and monasteries eventually developed from these early beginnings for the benefit of those who of their own volition wanted to remain in these schools for life. [...] when the young people had grown more rebellious, they invented the snares of vows.' Luther, *The Judgement of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows*, pp. 312-3.

²⁵ Luther: 'To my way of thinking it would be a necessary measure, especially in our perilous times, to regulate convents and monasteries in the same way they were regulated in the beginning, in the days of the apostles, and for a long time afterward. In those days convents and monasteries were all open to everyone to stay in them as long as he pleased. What else were the convents and monasteries but Christian schools where Scripture and the Christian life were taught, and where people were trained to rule and preach? [...] And in truth all monasteries and convents ought to be so free that God is served freely and not under compulsion. Later on, however, they became tied up with the vow and became an eternal prison. Consequently, these monastic vows are more highly regarded than the vows of baptism.' Luther, *To the Christian Nobility*, p. 174.

²⁶ Andrew Louth, 'The Literature of the Monastic Movement', in *The Cambridge History of Early Christian Literature*, eds. Frances Young, Lewis Ayres, Andrew Louth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 373-381, (p. 373).

tradition a more ancient and venerable history, acknowledged a more profound connection with scriptural exhortations to celibacy, and consequently lent greater weight to monasticism's claim to authority.

There appears to have been some objection to Luther's scriptural exegesis in *The Judgement*, however, as a few years later he was required to produce another tract, *An Answer to Several Questions on Monastic Vows* (1526), which briefly dealt with a series of biblical passages that justified the ascetic life.²⁷ In this shorter treatise, Luther provides a slightly different commentary on Christ's encouragement of 'eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven' from the Gospel of Matthew. Instead of claiming that the text did not encourage asceticism, he denied that monks were eunuchs and said it would be easy to prove that they were not castrated.²⁸ Hence, rather than repudiating the biblical authorisation of virginity,²⁹ Luther attacked the failure of the monks to fulfil the scriptural prerogative.³⁰ It is notable that Luther appears to take the passage to refer to literal castration, whereas it had always understood in a spiritual sense. In this, he follows

²⁷ Cf. Luther: 'Since, however, objections have been raised on the basis of specific passages of Scripture, I offer my answer in Christian love.' Martin Luther, *An Answer to Several Questions on Monastic Vows* (1526), in *Luther's Works*, Vol. XLVI, *The Christian in Society III*, trans. Robert C. Schultz, ed. Robert C. Schultz, gen. ed. Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981 [1967]), pp. 139-154, (p. 145).

²⁸ Cf. Luther: 'First they have to prove that the people in the monasteries are those who have been made eunuchs. It is not enough that they simply assert it. [...] It is unfortunately easy to prove – and if they are willing to admit it, they would certainly also agree how the monasteries have been castrated! Would to God that they did what they boast of having done. No one would prevent them.' Luther, *An Answer to Several Questions on Monastic Vows*, p. 149.

²⁹ Cf. Luther: 'We are well aware that voluntary chastity is a precious thing. But at the same place it also says, "He who is able to receive this, let him receive it" [Matt. 19: 12].' Luther, *An Answer to Several Questions on Monastic Vows*, p. 149.

³⁰ Cf. Luther: 'Living in a monastery is really a lazy, secure, and good life. They however boast that they are chastising themselves. I have seen and tried it for myself, to a degree that almost no one else had. But just let them engage in productive and creative work as the people outside have to do, and they will find that the situation is quite different. The monasteries are full of good living and not holy life – one's skin prickles at the thought – and they try to cover this up by quoting Scriptures.' Luther, *An Answer to Several Questions on Monastic Vows*, p. 149.

Erasmus' comments in *Encomium Matrimonii* (1518).³¹ As further proof of the lack of biblical support for monasticism, Luther claims that neither Christ, nor the apostles, nor even early Christian bishops and martyrs were monks.³² There are some inconsistencies in this assessment, however, as the apostolic life had been seen as a prototype for monasticism; Augustine's monastery, for instance, took the apostolic life as its model.³³ In addition, Luther conveniently ignored the many fourth-century bishops who did embrace monasticism, or those bishops who were drawn from monasteries.³⁴ Christ, of course, was not a monk, but His virginity has always been cited as evidence of His own preference for the virginal life and He has always been considered to be the model of Christian virginity *par excellence*.³⁵

³¹ Cf. Erasmus: 'I only wish those who conceal their vices behind the high-sounding name of castration, and under pretence of chastity gratify worse lusts, were truly castrated. I do not think that it becomes my sense of modesty to describe the disgraceful actions that those who oppose nature fall into.' Erasmus, *Encomium Matrimonii*, p. 67.

³² Cf. Luther: 'Why didn't Christ, the apostles, the many holy bishops and martyrs not move into monasteries and become monks? Or didn't they castrate themselves?' Luther, *An Answer to Several Questions on Monastic Vows*, p. 149.

³³ Cf. Possidius: 'Augustine founded a monastery within the Church, and began to live there among the servants of God according to the rule and custom established by the holy Apostles.' Possidius, *Life of Saint Augustine*, v, trans. Sister Mary Magdaleine Muller and Roy J. Deferrari in *Early Christian Biographies* ed. Roy J. Deferrari (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001 [1952]), pp. 65-124, (p. 78).

³⁴ Since Luther was an Augustinian monk, he was well aware of Augustine's monastic existence.

³⁵ Cf. Cyprian: 'We who desire to be Christians ought to imitate what Christ has said. It has been written, it is read, and it is heard, and it is proclaimed for our instruction by the mouth of the Church: 'He that sayeth he abideth in Christ ought himself also to walk even as He has walked.' [1 John 2. 6] We must keep step with Him; we must strive to emulate His pace.' Cyprian, *De habitu virginum (On the Dress of Virgins)*, vii, in *Saint Cyprian: Treatises*, trans. and ed. Roy J. Deferrari (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1981 [1958]), pp. 31-52, (p. 38). Cf. Pseudo-Clement: 'The womb of a holy virgin carried our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God; and the body which our Lord wore, and in which He carried on the conflict in this world, He put on from a holy virgin. From this, therefore, understand the greatness and dignity of virginity. Dost thou wish to be a Christian? Imitate Christ in every thing.' Pseudo-Clement, *The First Epistle*, V, in *Ante-Nicene Christian Library*, Vol. XIV. *The Writings of Methodius etc.* trans. B. L. Pratten eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, MDCCCLXIX [1869]), pp. 367-382, (p. 372). Cf. Methodius: 'He, being God, was pleased to put on human flesh, so that we, beholding as on a tablet the divine Pattern of our life, should also be able to imitate Him who painted it. [...] He preserved the flesh which He had taken upon Him incorrupt in virginity, so that we also, if we would come to the likeness of God and Christ, should endeavour to honour virginity.' Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, I. iv; I. v, in *Ante-Nicene Christian Library: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*. Vol. XIV. *The Writings of Methodius, Alexander of Lycopolis, Peter of Alexandria and Several Fragments*, trans. William R. Clark, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson

In a letter to Hans Luther in 1521, Luther accepts the veracity of Christ's virginity, but he denies that it can be used as a paradigm for Christian practices:

Virginity and chastity are to be praised, but in such a way that by their very greatness men are frightened off from them rather than led to them. This was Christ's way.³⁶

Just as Erasmus does in *Encomium Matrimonii*,³⁷ Luther associates Christ's virginity with his divinity, rather than recognising it as a laudable aspect of His humanity. In another tract entitled *That Jesus Christ was born a Jew* (1523), he also dismisses the imitative possibilities of the Marian model by relating her virginity solely to its role in the Incarnation:

But Scripture does not praise this virginity at all for the sake of the mother; neither was she saved on account of her virginity. [...] The Spirit extols this virginity, however, because it was needful for the conceiving and bearing of this

(Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, MDCCCLXIX [1869]), pp. 1-119, (p. 10). Cf. Gregory of Nyssa: 'This, I think, was the reason why our Master, Jesus Christ Himself, the Fountain of all innocence, did not come into the world by wedlock. It was to divulge by manner of His Incarnation this great secret; that purity is the only complete indication of the presence of God and of His coming, and that no one can in reality secure this for himself, unless he has altogether estranged himself from the passions of the flesh.' Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, ii, trans. William Moore and Henry Austin Wilson, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. V, *Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic Treatises, etc.*, ed. Philip Schaff (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995), pp. 343-371, (p. 344). Cf. Jerome: 'Happy is the man who is like Paul! Fortunate is he who attends to the Apostle's commands, not to his concession. This says he, I wish, this I desire, that you be imitators of me, as I also am of Christ, who was a Virgin born of a Virgin, uncorrupt of her who was uncorrupt. We, because we are men, cannot imitate our Lord's nativity; but we may at least imitate His life. The former was the blessed prerogative of divinity, the latter belongs to our human condition and is part of human effort.' Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, (*Against Jovinian*), I. viii in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers. Jerome: Letters and Select Works*, Vol. VI, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1893]), pp. 346-416, (p. 352). Cf. Augustine: 'Advance towards them, follow the Lamb, for the Lamb in the flesh is assuredly virginal as well; for this he preserved for himself when he was full-grown, and he did not deprive his mother of it when he was conceived and born. Follow him as you deserve, because of your virginity in heart and flesh, wherever he goes, for what does "follow" mean but "imitate"?' Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, xxvii, ed. and trans. P. G. Walsh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 66-147, (pp. 101-3).

³⁶ Martin Luther, 'To Hans Luther, November 21, 1521', in *Luther's Works*, Vol. XLVIII, *Letters I*, trans. and ed. Gottfried G. Krodel, gen. ed. Helmut T. Lehman (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), pp. 329-336, (p. 334).

³⁷ Compare Erasmus: 'Why then', you will say, 'did Christ himself abstain from wedlock?' As if there were not very many aspects of Christ's life that should excite our wonder rather than our imitation. He was born without a father, was given birth without pain to his mother, and came forth from a sealed sepulchre. / What is there in him that is not above nature? Such attributes belong to him alone. Let us who live under the law of nature look up to those things that are above nature, but emulate what is within our capacity.' Erasmus, *Encomium Matrimonii*, p. 60.

blessed fruit. Because of the corruption of our flesh, such blessed fruit could not come, except through a virgin.³⁸

Whereas from the fourth century onwards Mary's virginity had been considered to provide further evidence for the value of pursuing a life of virginity, Luther argues instead that it indicates the impossibility of imitation and demonstrates the futility of such an attempt; there will never be another incarnation and so there is no need to adopt a virginal life. In arguing that virginity is no longer of relevance for this reason, Luther inverts the patristic argument that marriage is no longer mandatory because the Messiah has already arrived. He reverses the theological trend that began after the settling of Christological issues in the fourth century, which looked towards a Mariological perspective of the Incarnation.³⁹ Luther thus dismisses any emphasis on Mary's virginity;

³⁸ Martin Luther, *That Jesus Christ was born a Jew* (1523), in *Luther's Works*, Vol. XLV, *The Christian in Society II*, trans. and ed. Walther I. Brandt, gen. ed. Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1962), pp. 195-230, (p. 205).

³⁹ Cf. Athanasius: '[There are people who] say lawless [words] against the bearer of God, saying that she got married, in order to create an excuse for themselves, just like the Pharisees, to increase the pleasures of marriage, lest virginity become manifest and put to shame their profitable choice. But Mary, the bearer of God, remains a virgin [so that she might be a pattern for] everyone coming after her. If a woman desires to remain a virgin and bride of Christ, she can look to her (Mary's) life and imitate it, and the edification of her (Mary's) destiny will suffice for establishing her own virginity'; 'Therefore, let the life of Mary, the bearer of God, be for all of you, as it is written an [image and likeness of] her virginity. For it is best for you to recognise yourselves in her as in a mirror and so govern yourselves. Complete the good deeds you have forgotten, and increase the things you have done well, so that your life too might serve for a time as an image for others; continually look to the instruction of others.' Athanasius, *First Letter to Virgins*, xi, xii, trans. David Brakke, in David Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 274-291, (p. 277). Cf. Ambrose: 'This is the likeness of virginity. For Mary was such that her example alone is a lesson for all. If, then, the author displeases us not, let us make trial of the production, that whoever desires its rewards for herself may imitate the pattern. How many kinds of virtues shine forth in one Virgin! The secret of modesty, the banner of faith, the service of devotion, the Virgin within the house, the companion for the ministry, the mother at the temple.' Ambrose, *De virginibus*, II.ii.15, in *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers: Ambrose, Select Works and Letters*, Vol. X, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995), pp. 365-66, (p. 375). Cf. Jerome: 'Set before you the blessed Mary, whose surpassing purity made her meet to be the mother of the Lord.' Jerome, *Epistola XXII. Ad Eustochium*, xxxviii, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers. Jerome: Letters and Select Works*, Vol. VI, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1893]), pp. 22-41, (p. 39). Cf. Augustine: 'her intention was to serve as an example for holy virgins; and so to avoid giving the impression that she alone ought to be a virgin as one who had deserved to conceive a child even without sexual intercourse, she dedicated her virginity to God while as yet unaware of what she was to conceive. This was so that the imitation of heavenly life in an earthly and mortal body would be fulfilled by vow and not under command, by eagerness to choose rather than by compulsion to serve. So Christ, by being born of a virgin

it is only important for the Incarnation in itself, and so neither she nor her virginity has any wider importance beyond facilitating that event.⁴⁰

ii. Monastic Vows

Although Luther's denial of the legitimacy of monasticism did challenge aspects of the patristic tradition of virginity, his main refutation of monasticism was from the perspective of the validity of the vows themselves. These, he says, have no scriptural grounds whatsoever.⁴¹

There is no doubt that the monastic vow is in itself a most dangerous thing because it is without the authority and example of Scripture. Neither the early Church nor the New Testament knows anything at all of the taking of this kind of vow, much less do they approve of a lifelong vow of very rare and remarkable chastity.⁴²

In both *The Judgement* and *An Answer to Several Questions on Monastic Vows*, Luther denies that monastic vows could be justified by reference to Old Testament *exempla*, as the Gospel had superseded the Old Law.⁴³ In contrast to this argument, in *The Estate of Marriage* (1522) Luther reasserts the authority of God's original command to increase and multiply, which patristic writers had often said had been superseded by the Gospel's

who had decided to remain such before becoming aware who was to be born of her, chose to approve rather than to impose her holy virginity.' Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, iv, p. 71.

⁴⁰ The Protestant reassessment of Mary's role in the Incarnation had some fairly radical repercussions. Mary E. Fissell recounts some of the Lollard attitudes to Mary expressed in England: 'In 1511, Simon Piers, who may have been a Dutchman, asserted that Christ took no humanity from Mary. In 1520, one John Morress said that the Virgin was but a sack. In Yorkshire in 1534, a priest stated that the Virgin was like a pudding when the meat was taken out. Two years later, a preacher in Kent employed a related image, maintaining that the Virgin was not the queen of heaven, "but the mother of Christ; and that she could do no more for us than any other woman, liking her to a saffron bag". This image, of the Virgin as a saffron bag, must have had wide circulation, for it was one of the specific heresies forbidden by the church in 1536.' Mary E. Fissell, 'The Politics of Reproduction in the English Reformation', *Representations*, No. 87 (Summer, 2004), 43-81, (pp. 54-5).

⁴¹ In *To the Christian Nobility*, Luther likewise asserts that, 'This vow had become universal in these monasteries and yet it was never commanded by Christ'. Luther, *To the Christian Nobility*, p. 175.

⁴² Luther, *The Judgement of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows*, p. 252.

⁴³ Cf. Luther: 'Vows and the works of vows are but law and works. They are not faith, nor do they issue from faith, for what else is a vow but some kind of law? [...] they attribute to their laws and good works what properly belongs to faith alone.' Luther, *The Judgement of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows*, p. 280. Cf. Luther, *An Answer to Several Questions on Monastic Vows*, pp. 145-6.

promotion of virginity. Luther does not, however, acknowledge here that the Gospel has overturned the commandment of God in Paradise. Instead, he maintains that monastic vows cannot be good because they are an affront to the natural procreative impulse that God had placed in mankind from the very beginning:

No vow of any youth or maiden is valid before God, except that of a person in one of the three categories which God alone has himself excepted. Therefore priests, monks, and nuns are duty-bound to forsake their vows whenever they find that God's ordinance to produce seed and to multiply is strong within them. They have no power by any authority, law, command, or vow to hinder this which God has created within them. If they do hinder it, however, you may be sure that they will not remain pure but inevitably besmirch themselves with secret sins or fornication.⁴⁴

Though Luther's assertion that monks and nuns should break their vows when they 'find that God's ordinance to produce seed and to multiply is strong within them' seems to follow the early argument of his co-reformers,⁴⁵ his argument does differ slightly. First, he asserts that the monastic vow is not valid, and so it has not been broken. Next, he invokes the supreme mandate from God to procreate, which, he asserts, supersedes any other command which thwarts it.⁴⁶ The 'secret sins and fornications' which he believes are attendant upon any attempt to avoid procreation litter Luther's tracts as he continually attacks the morals of the *regulares*. According to Luther, the pursuit of a virginity which is not subject to the special grace of those 'three categories that God alone has himself

⁴⁴ Martin Luther, *The Estate of Marriage* (1522), in *Luther's Works*, Vol. XLV, *The Christian in Society II*, trans. and ed. Walther I. Brandt, Gen ed. Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1962), pp. 11-50, (p. 19).

⁴⁵ See footnote 16.

⁴⁶ Luther also makes this assertion in *The Estate of Marriage*: 'For this word which God speaks, 'Be fruitful and multiply', is not a command. It is more than a command, namely, a divine ordinance [werck] which is not our prerogative to hinder or ignore. Rather, it is just as necessary as the fact that I am a man, and more necessary than sleeping and waking, eating and drinking, and emptying the bowels and bladder.' Luther, *The Estate of Marriage*, p. 18. He also asserts that the desire to take vows has demonic origin: 'The devil working through men has been smarter than God, and found more people whom he has withdrawn from the divine and natural ordinance, namely, those who are enmeshed in a spider web of human commands and vows and are locked up behind a mass of iron bolts and bars. This is a fourth way of resisting nature so that contrary to God's implanted ordinance and disposition, it does not produce seed and multiply.' Luther, *The Estate of Marriage*, pp. 21-22.

exempted', must inevitably lead to sin.⁴⁷ He portrays monasteries as hotbeds of iniquity, and appears to suggest that enforced chastity leads monks and nuns to succumb to stranger and more demonic forms of lust.⁴⁸

The three categories which Luther accepts as 'exempted by God' from the mandate to 'increase and multiply' are presumably the eunuchs mentioned by Christ in Matthew 19: 12. Luther appears to accept that some can achieve a life of celibacy, but only those who are given the gift of celibacy by God. There is some basis for Luther's interpretation of the passage in this way, for when Christ forbids divorce, the disciples comment that under such strictures it is better not to marry. Christ replies: 'All men take not this word, but they to whom it is given' (Matthew 19: 11). Such an answer can be taken to imply that celibacy is a gift of grace, rather than an act of will. However, the final category of eunuch implies a level of self-determinacy: 'There are eunuchs, who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven. He that can take, let him take it' (Matthew 19: 12). The passage, then, is ambivalent with regard to whether celibacy is 'given' by God or whether one is able to 'ma[ke] themselves' spiritual eunuchs. The debate about celibacy thus strays into the wider theological Reformation debate about free will and grace. Luther's doctrine of justification by grace alone on condition of faith

⁴⁷ Luther reiterates this in *The Estate of Marriage*: 'Wherever men try to resist this, it remains irresistible nonetheless and goes its way through fornication, adultery and secret sins, for this is a matter of nature and not of choice.' Luther, *The Estate of Marriage*, p. 19. Elsewhere, Luther again asserts that vows of virginity result in unchastity: 'I believe that unchastity would not have become so prevalent and spread in such a terrible way, if it had not been for this rule and vow of chastity.' Martin Luther, *The Gospel for the Festival of the Epiphany, Matt 2[:1-12]*, trans. S. P. Herbert, in *Luther's Works*, Vol. LII, *Sermons II*, trans. John G. Kunstmann, ed. Hans J. Hillerbrand, gen. ed. Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), pp. 159-286, (p. 273).

⁴⁸ Cf. Luther: 'Satan turned his thoughts to another really worthy fiction. Not content with defiling the vow of chastity with prostitution, debauchery, and adultery, he hit upon the lust that besets the monk, the nun, the hermit: he devised the lust of the solitary.' Luther, *The Judgement of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows*, p. 370.

leads him to admit that chastity is possible, but it is only open to those who have been elected by God to live in that manner:

The monastic vow is only without harm to those who are spiritually minded, who practise it to good purpose. But this is possible only for the elect, whom neither errors nor sins can harm in the long run'; 'It is impossible to make vows with a conscience of this kind unless you are led inwardly and wondrously by the Spirit of Christ and are already saved.⁴⁹

The voluntary acceptance of perpetual virginity had always been a feature that was emphasised throughout the patristic tradition, especially in the writings of Athanasius,⁵⁰ Chrysostom⁵¹ and Jerome.⁵² Luther denies such an association, but instead says that the taking of vows is ungodly because it demonstrates a belief in one's own ability to achieve salvation:

The doctrine of God teaches faith; these men under vows boast that they teach something more than faith. And that something more is nothing but a work, and can be nothing else but a work. But you cannot teach works unless you hurt faith, since faith and works stand at opposite extremes in the matter of justification. And

⁴⁹ Luther, *The Judgement of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows*, p. 262; p. 304. Cf. Luther: those spiritually rich and exalted persons, bridled by the grace of God, who are equipped for marriage by nature and physically capacity and nevertheless voluntarily remain celibate. [...] Such persons are rare, not one in a thousand, for they are a special miracle of God. No one should venture on such a life unless he be especially called by God, like Jeremiah [16: 2].' Luther, *The Estate of Marriage*, p. 21.

⁵⁰ Cf. Athanasius: 'What kind of virginity exists hypocritically for a time and later gets married? Or what kind of virtue is there in virginity when it exists for some without their free will, but rather they have others to watch over them, who teach them by force to choose for themselves against their will? In this way they are compelled forcibly by others.' Athanasius, *First Letter to Virgins*, vi, p. 276.

⁵¹ Cf. Chrysostom: 'He has not forced the issue by laying a command but has entrusted the choice to our souls.' (II. ii, p. 4); 'You did not enter marriage? This is not the only criterion for virginity. For I would call the woman who has the power to marry but chooses not to a virgin. By saying that marriage is forbidden, virtuous action becomes no longer a matter of deliberate choice but an obligation to obey the law.' Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, VIII. iii, in *John Chrysostom: On Virginity. Against Remarriage*, trans. Sally Rieger Shore (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1982), pp. 1-128, (p. 11).

⁵² Cf. Jerome: 'He leaves us the free exercise of our reason in the matter. He lays no necessity upon anyone nor leads anyone into a snare: he only persuades to that which is proper when he wishes all men to be as himself.' Jerome, *Adversus Helvidium (Against Helvidius. The Perpetual virginity of the blessed Mary)*, xxiii, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers. Jerome: Letters and Select Works*, Vol. VI, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1893]), pp. 334-345, (p. 345). Cf. Jerome: 'God created us with free will, and we are not forced by necessity either to virtue or to vice. Otherwise, if there be necessity, there is no crown. As in good works it is God who brings them to perfection, for it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that piteith and gives us help that we may be able to reach the goal: so in things wicked and sinful, the seeds within us give the impulse, and these are brought to maturity by the devil.' Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, II. iii, pp. 389-90.

so it comes about that the teaching of works so necessarily a doctrine of devils and a departure from faith.⁵³

Monasticism, with its emphasis on achieving merit through the personal sacrifice of virginity, is accused by Luther of perpetuating a heretical belief in justification through free will alone, rather than through faith and thus a return to the Pelagian heresy. This is a wider criticism of the Catholic Church, which believes in justification by faith and good works. Throughout, Luther draws a distinction between Catholics, who believe that perpetual virginity and celibacy is the highest state of human perfection, and Protestants who see it as an act of human arrogance, which is not only doomed to failure, but offends God. As a result, for Protestants, monasticism and perpetual virginity become emblems of Catholic faithlessness and heresy.⁵⁴

iii. Luther as a second Jovinian

Luther was conscious that in his challenge to monasticism he opposed the position of the Church Fathers in what could be seen as a continuation of the fourth-century ascetic controversy between Jerome and Jovinian. He was also aware that he was taking up the mantle of an arch-heretic. In *The Judgement*, Luther attempts to pre-empt the connection:

⁵³ Luther, *The Judgement of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows*, p. 289. Cf. Luther: ‘They teach justification and salvation by works, and depart from faith. They not only think obedience, poverty and chastity certain roads to salvation but that their ways are more perfect and better than these of the rest of the faithful. This is an open, obvious lie, and an error and sin against faith. All they have is hypocrisy and a branded conscience’; ‘They teach that this kind of life, and all that goes to make it up, is the good life, and that by practising it men become good and are saved. This is sacrilege, godlessness, and blasphemy. It is lies they have trumped up. It is delusion, hypocrisy, and satanic invention’; ‘Monastic vows and works, then, cannot be seriously taught and learned without those who teach them and those who learn them becoming apostates from Christ and falling from faith.’ Luther, *The Judgement of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows*, p. 285; p. 291; pp. 292-3.

⁵⁴ Roland Mushat Frye observes that Puritans understood the Catholic promotion of virginity to be anti-matrimonial: ‘sacerdotal celibacy was understood by the Puritans to mean that marriage was involved in lust, even when celibacy was presented by Rome as being an expedient for maintaining single-minded devotion.’ Roland Mushat Frye, ‘The Teachings of Classical Puritanism on Conjugal Love’, *Studies in the Renaissance*, Vol. 2 (1955), 148-159, (p. 151).

Indeed, just as one disputation gives rise to another, these ungodly people will shout that I am a Jovinian and they will bring Jerome's arguments against Jovinian, in which he defended celibacy, to bear against me.⁵⁵

In anticipation of being refuted by Jerome, Luther sets out to challenge the Church's great bastion of perpetual virginity and attacks the *Adversus Jovinianum* and those who accept Jerome's tract uncritically.⁵⁶ Luther denies Jerome's victory over Jovinian, asserting, instead, that '[h]e overpowers Jovinian more by the weight of his authority than by the weight of learning'.⁵⁷ Luther says:

I myself do not know what Jovinian really meant. Perhaps he did not handle the argument properly. What I do know, however, is that Jerome has not handled it properly. He treats virginity as a thing in its own right. He neither relates it to faith nor uses it to build faith.⁵⁸

Luther's assessment of Jerome's denial of the role of faith in virginity is not strictly true, as Jerome, like the other Church Fathers, emphasised the necessity of the consecration of virginity to God; biological virginity alone has no spiritual function.⁵⁹ Luther takes particular exception to Jerome's assertion that not even God can restore a virgin;⁶⁰ he appears to read the restoration of virginity in physical,⁶¹ as well as spiritual, terms.⁶² Additionally, he accuses Jerome of perverting Scripture:

⁵⁵ Luther, *The Judgement of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows*, pp. 305-6.

⁵⁶ Cf. Luther: 'They will think that I have never read Jerome. They will think that it is enough just to have read him; they never think it necessary to form some opinion about what they have read. Whatever they read is an article of faith.' Luther, *The Judgement of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows*, p. 306.

⁵⁷ Luther, *The Judgement of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows*, p. 306.

⁵⁸ Luther, *The Judgement of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows*, p. 306.

⁵⁹ Cf. Luther: 'The vow of chastity is a purely bodily affair that concerns absolutely nothing but the flesh. Therefore, it can be abolished with absolute confidence. In fact, it was never binding, or could it ever be binding where it imperilled soul or body. A vow never demanded that you lose your soul or body.' Luther, *The Judgement of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows*, p. 390.

⁶⁰ Cf. Jerome: 'I will say it boldly, though God can do all things He cannot raise up a virgin when once she has fallen. He may indeed relieve one who is defiled from the penalty of her sin, but He will not give her a crown.' Saint Jerome, *Epistola XXII. To Eustochium*, v, p. 24.

⁶¹ Cf. Luther: 'Jerome says that he will confidently declare that God cannot restore a virgin after a fall. [...] Where is your proof that a virgin cannot be restored after a fall, not even by God? [...] For God can even restore the flesh whole. He can, in fact, raise a virgin who has died, and utterly replace the flesh in its entirety and give it a new life.' Luther, *The Judgement of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows*, pp. 346-7.

These very texts which Jerome holds out as the most important and which he thinks are the cardinal points of victory he manipulates – no, I would even go further and say he perverts them. For when Paul says, ‘He who takes a virgin does well, but he who does not does better’ [I Cor. 7: 38], he clearly reads into it the idea that this doing well and doing better is related to the idea of merits in the sight of God. [...] it is abundantly clear that Paul is talking about what is good and better in this life, saying that a young woman not encumbered by any responsibilities is more free to serve God.⁶³

Luther’s interpretation of I Corinthians 7 is very different from accepted patristic interpretations. For although not one of them would deny that Paul is stating that virginity is better because one can devote more time to God,⁶⁴ they would see this in connection with virtue as it is more meritorious to be wholly devoted to God.

Although in *The Judgement of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows* Luther tends to focus on the lack of scriptural basis of monastic vows and the tradition of monasticism rather than on virginity in general, in his letter to Hans Luther, he challenges the wider concept of virginity:

In a word, although the Scriptures do not laud virginity but only approve it, these men, who are so ready to inflame men’s souls to lives that endanger their salvation, dress it up in borrowed plumes, so to speak, by applying to it the praises that Scriptures bestow on chaste marriage.⁶⁵

Luther seems to be suggesting that the accepted values of virginity and marriage are topsy turvy. The patristic tradition had certainly utilised marital metaphors to discuss virginity. Luther, however, is not just suggesting that virginity and marriage are of equal

⁶² Cf. Luther: ‘If a man believes that a virgin cannot be restored because God lacks the power to do so, that, in other words, what has been done cannot be undone, he will have the same audacity to declare that no virtue and no grace which had once been corrupted can ever again be restored by God.’ Luther, *The Judgement of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows*, p. 347.

⁶³ Luther, *The Judgement of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows*, p. 306.

⁶⁴ Cf. Luther: ‘What does it mean ‘to be concerned for the things of the Lord’? [...] It means to meditate, to serve the word of God, to preach, bear witness, to be ready to risk one’s life for the word – what is more alien and further removed from this purpose of chastity than these monks? Of all men they are the most ignorant of this use of chastity, for they are chaste for nobody but themselves. They serve in the temples with noise and murmuring, promising themselves halos in heaven for a faith that is dead.’ Luther, *The Judgement of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows*, p. 265.

⁶⁵ Martin Luther, *To Hans Luther* (November 21, 1521), p. 334.

merit, but rather that marriage should be recognised as superior to virginity and that those praises erroneously taken from marriage and attributed to virginity ought to be restored to their proper place. Indeed, Fudge suggests that Luther's writings in general suggest this:

He [Luther] may well have demoted marriage from sacramental status but he elevated it to a place of equality and perhaps even superiority in relation to the celibacy of the religious.⁶⁶

Despite claiming that marriage was superior to virginity, and despite his challenge to Jerome's position in *Adversus Jovinianum*, Luther echoes Jerome's attitude towards sexual intercourse. Luther accepts that marital intercourse inevitably incurs sin:

With all this extolling of married life, however, I have not meant to ascribe to nature a condition of sinlessness. On the contrary, I say that flesh and blood, corrupted through Adam, is conceived and born in sin, as Psalm 51[: 5] says. Intercourse is never without sin; but God excuses it by His grace because the estate of marriage is His work, and He preserves in and through the sin all that good which He has implanted and blessed in marriage.⁶⁷

In this way, Luther appears to reject the Augustinian model, which allows for the possibility of sinless intercourse as long it is undertaken solely for the procreation of children. Of course, he also rejects Augustine's recognition of the sacrament of marriage,⁶⁸ but accepts *proles* (children)⁶⁹ and *fides* (faith)⁷⁰ as goods of marriage.

Luther's continual criticism of monasticism is that it relies on the virtue of virginity to the detriment of basic Christian values. He claims that the *regulares* keep

⁶⁶ Fudge, 'Incest and Lust in Luther's Marriage', p. 345.

⁶⁷ Luther, *The Estate of Marriage*, p. 49.

⁶⁸ Cf. Augustine: 'Therefore the good of marriage in every nation and throughout mankind lies in the purpose of procreation and in the fidelity of chastity; but so far as the people of God are concerned, it lies also in the sanctity if the sacrament.' Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, xxxii, ed. and trans. P. G. Walsh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 2-64, (p. 57).

⁶⁹ Cf. Luther: 'the greatest good in married life, that which makes all suffering and labour worth while, is that God grants offspring and commands that they be brought up to worship and serve him. In all the world this is the noblest and most precious work, because to God there can be nothing dearer than the salvation of souls.' Luther, *The Estate of Marriage*, p. 46.

⁷⁰ Cf. Luther: 'It is no slight boon that in wedlock fornication and unchastity are checked and eliminated. This in itself is so great a good that it alone should be enough to induce men to marry forthwith, and for many reasons.' Luther, *The Estate of Marriage*, p. 43.

their vows of poverty, chastity and obedience at the expense of the basic Christian commandments.⁷¹ Luther was perhaps objecting to praise of virginity which leads to a kind of fetishisation, where it is praised for itself rather than for its spiritual merit. Nevertheless, the effect of his criticism was a denial of the worth of any form of religiously consecrated virginity. Luther, however, lost some credibility when he himself married, despite always protesting that he had no plans to marry. His marriage was particularly controversial, as he married a nun,⁷² such an act constituted incest under Canon Law.⁷³ Nevertheless, his tracts went a long way to shaping Protestant views on chastity and creating a counter discourse to the Catholic tradition of virginity, one which replaces virginity with chaste marriage as the Christian ideal.

iv. Erasmus

Erasmus and Luther are the two figureheads of Renaissance Humanism and the Protestant Reformation respectively.⁷⁴ Although both men recognised the need for the reform of the medieval Church, Erasmus sought internal reform, whereas Luther took to the path of the schismatic.⁷⁵ There is an oft-cited adage that Erasmus laid the egg that Luther hatched.

⁷¹ Cf. Luther: 'And what is even more scandalous, they have selected only three out of all these many things just obedience, poverty and chastity. The rest of the counsels they neither vow nor keep.' Luther, *The Judgement of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows*, p. 265.

⁷² Cf. Fudge: 'The sexual consummation, witnessed by an observer, was regarded in some quarters as open and defiant incest, because both bride and groom had been under holy orders and were thus spiritual siblings.' Fudge, 'Incest and Lust in Luther's Marriage', p. 319.

⁷³ This understanding of monks and nuns as spiritual siblings can be seen as early as the fourth century in Jerome's treatise *Adversus Jovinianum*, in which he denounces those *regulares* who had left the cloister during the Jovinian controversy and had inter-married: 'For virgins who marry after consecration are rather incestuous than adulterous.' Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. xiii, p. 356.

⁷⁴ Cf. Pabel: 'Erasmus of Rotterdam [was] one of the most outstanding of Renaissance editors of patristic texts.' Pabel, 'Reading Jerome in the Renaissance', p. 471.

⁷⁵ Cf. Thompson: 'Erasmus was quick to point out that what Luther attacked deserved attack and that he himself had been calling attention to abuses for many years. [...] But after the Leipzig debates of 1519, Luther's treatise of 1520, and the excommunication of Luther by the bull *Decet Romanum Pontificem* of January 1521, which pronounced the sentence threatened in *Exsurge Domine* of June 1520, Erasmus' position became increasingly difficult. He was under pressure to take a definite public stand on Luther.' Craig R. Thompson, 'Introduction' to *The Colloquies of Erasmus* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1965), pp. xiii-xxxiii, (p. xix).

Certainly, the influence of Erasmus' writings is evident in Luther's attack on monasticism. Erasmus' own engagement with the ascetic debate can be seen most clearly in his early writings on matrimony.⁷⁶ Although ostensibly written in praise of marriage, His *Encomium Matrimonii*, printed in 1518,⁷⁷ was highly controversial as it was seen as a veiled attack on celibacy and virginity.⁷⁸ It was written in the form of a declamation;⁷⁹ *declamatio* in Latin simply means 'to practise speaking in public, to declaim'.⁸⁰ The humanist Agrippa von Nettesheim explains the highly ambiguous nature of the *declamatio* in an apologia entitled *Declamatio de incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum et artium*.⁸¹ He says:

⁷⁶ Cf. Leushuis: 'Erasmus's writings on marriage should be seen against the major opposition that had dominated the institution of marriage in previous centuries. On one side were ecclesiastical and theological ideals of marriage, which canon law tried to put in practice; on the other were the demands of a society in which marriage fulfilled essential economic functions, a point of view reflected in customary law and aristocratic ideals.' Leushuis, 'The Mimesis of Marriage', p. 1281.

⁷⁷ Thompson, however, notes that there is some difficulty with the dating of the *Encomium Matrimonii*: '[The] *Encomium Matrimonii* [was] composed in 1498 or 1499 (EE, III, 17.10n.) but not printed until 1518; we do not know whether the text was revised or rewritten in the interval.' Craig R. Thompson, 'Introduction' to *A Girl with No Interest in Marriage*, in *The Colloquies of Erasmus* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1965), pp. 99-103, (p. 99).

⁷⁸ Leushuis: '*The Praise of Marriage* is a text with a tumultuous afterlife of criticism and polemics, as we can see in Erasmus' 1519 and 1526 quarrels with fellow theologians Briart and Clichtove. These quarrels in themselves are sufficient proof that the question of marriage in this text is much more than a pretext for showcasing rhetorical dexterity.' Leushuis, 'The Mimesis of Marriage', p. 1286. Cf. Rummel: 'The work was formally condemned by the theologians of Paris. Lousi de Berquin, who translated it into French in 1525, was likewise condemned and executed for heresy.' Erika Rummel, 'Introductory note to *In Praise of Marriage*' in *Erasmus on Women* ed. Erika Rummel (London and Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), p. 57, (p. 57).

⁷⁹ Cf. Leushuis: '[It was] first published in March 1518 under the title *Declamatio in genere suaserio de laude matrimonii*, the text combines the elements of a declamation (*declamatio*) and of a praising (*laus*). [...] Even before its inclusion in *De conscribendis epistolis* in the diptych with its meagre dissuasive counterpart, and only a few months after its initial publication as a *declamatio* (in March of 1518), the *laus* defending marriage was published separately under its alternative title *Encomium Matrimonii*.' Leushuis, 'The Mimesis of Marriage', p. 1287.

⁸⁰ *A Latin-English Dictionary, based upon the works of Forcellini and Freund*, ed. William Smith (London: John Murray, 1855), p. 284. Cf. Poel: 'the *declamatio* is not a plain text in which abstract truths are formulated for an audience expected to absorb the text uncritically, but a complicated text, in which the writer puts forward and discusses, in the tradition of rhetorical theses, more than one point of view.' Marc van der Poel, 'The Latin *Declamatio* in Renaissance Humanism', *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (Autumn, 1989), 471-8, (p. 478).

⁸¹ Henrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettersheim (1486-1535) was a humanist theologian who had a strong interest in the study of the arcane arts. For an in-depth study on him, see Marc van der Poel, *Cornelius Agrippa the Humanist Theologian and his Declamations* (Leiden: Brill, 1997).

Sometimes it voices my own opinion, sometimes those of others, some things it declares to be true, others to be false, still others to be dubious. Sometimes it takes the form of straightforward reasoning, at other times of admonishing talk. It does not continually condemn, nor instruct, nor assert. It does not at all places declare my own ideas and it brings to the fore many invalid arguments, so that he who takes the counterpart will have something to reject and to refute.⁸²

Following such an understanding of the nature of the declamation, some critics accept that the *Encomium Matrimonii* was a rhetorical set-piece, and so does not provide any indication of Erasmus' personal views on the subject of celibacy and marriage. Indeed, Erasmus himself had utilised this argument in defence of his work.⁸³ Other critics, however, have assumed that the piece does provide an insight into Erasmus' opinions, but that he chose the declamation deliberately to hide his viewpoint behind ambiguous rhetoric.⁸⁴ Leushuis observes:

Choosing the genre of the declamation meant for Erasmus being able to move as cautiously as possible in a minefield of criticism and debates while at the same time taking advantage of the genre's capacity for sincere praise of and authentic commitment to, the institution of matrimony.⁸⁵

⁸² Henrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettersheim, *Apologia adversus calumnias propter declamationem de vanitate scientiarum, & excellentia verbi Dei, sibi per aliquos Lovanienses Theologistas intentatas; Querela super calumnia, ob eandem declamationem sibi...illata* (Cologne, 1533), quoted in Marc van der Poel, 'The Latin *Declamatio* in Renaissance Humanism', pp. 477-8.

⁸³ Cf. Rummel: 'It is indicative that *In Praise of Marriage* was eventually included as a sample in a letter-writing manual where it was complemented by an epistle advocating the opposite view. Clearly such pieces were meant to provide a collection of commonplaces, rather than an expression of the author's views. The rhetorical nature of such works was pointed out by Erasmus himself. He noted that his *In Praise of Marriage* belonged to the genre of declamations, which "deal with imaginary subjects for the purpose of exercising one's ingenuity...., the nature of those exercises is to treat of the argument from both sides". An author who labels his composition a declamation 'disclaims all responsibility for the opinions stated' [Cf. *Collected Works of Erasmus*, Vol. LXXI: 91-2]. Although the thrust of the argument may betray the author's sympathies, the rhetorical purpose of such texts prevents us from pinpointing his view with certainty.' Erika Rummel, 'Introduction' to *Erasmus on Women* ed. Erika Rummel (London and Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), pp. 3-14, (p. 4).

⁸⁴ Cf. Poel: 'That these writings are called *declamatio* by their authors seems at first sight an important reason to consider them as rhetorical exercises. However, the fact that some of these *declamationes* were defended rigorously by their authors (and by fellow humanists) after they had been attacked, suggests that they were intended as more than composition exercises.' Poel, 'The Latin *Declamatio* in Renaissance Humanism', p. 472.

⁸⁵ Leushuis, 'The Mimesis of Marriage', p. 1289.

Leushuis argues that Erasmus used rhetoric not only to portray an idealised vision of marriage, but also to effect a mimetic process in the reader by creating a certain level of intimacy.⁸⁶ The epistolary character of the *Encomium Matrimonii*, which purports to be written to ‘a beloved kinsman’, perhaps implies a personal touch; however, the highly intricate relationship with its patristic sources lends itself more to an understanding of the text as a highly literary exercise, albeit with an ambiguous relationship to the Church’s tradition of virginity. It is also possible that the epistolary mode of the *declamatio* seeks to parody Jerome’s *Epistola XXII Ad Eustochium*, which had been written to encourage Eustochium to persevere in her choice of virginity.⁸⁷ In contrast, Erasmus’ letter seeks to dissuade a young man from pursuing a life of celibacy, a route that he had decided upon after the death of his mother and the consecration of his grief-stricken sister.⁸⁸ It seems to be no accident that Erasmus’ letter is a direct challenge to Jerome’s most famous treatise on virginity: whereas Jerome’s letter is entitled *Libellus de virginitate servanda*, Erasmus’ could easily have been entitled *Libellus de virginitate non servanda*.

Throughout the *Encomium Matrimonii* Erasmus refers to traditional arguments in favour of virginity, especially the works of Saint Jerome and Saint Augustine. An awareness of the patristic tradition is explicitly stated in the text, as he says:

⁸⁶ Leushuis argues for the ‘existence of a mimetic discourse which exploits the (re)formative capacities of an effective rhetoric of intimacy in combination with the characteristics of literary dialogues; these capacities will convey models of matrimonial life that are to be imitated by future readers.’ He concludes that, ‘Erasmus’s reader-oriented mimesis which consists of a rhetoric of intimacy and the capacities of dialogue to include, and transform, the voice and the mind of the Other, whether that Other is a represented voice within the fiction of the dialogue, or a reader outside that fictional world.’ Leushuis, ‘The Mimesis of Marriage’, p. 1279; p. 1304.

⁸⁷ Cf. Jerome: ‘My purpose is not the praise of virginity but its preservation.’ Jerome, *Epistola XXII. Ad Eustochium*, xxiii, p. 31.

⁸⁸ Cf. Erasmus: ‘He told me to our great mutual sorrow [...] that your sister, overcome with grief and loneliness [after the death of your mother], had joined a group of women vowed to virginity.’ Erasmus, *Encomium Matrimonii*, p. 58.

I am not unaware that the praise of virginity has repeatedly been sung in huge volumes by the early fathers, among whom Jerome admires it so much that he all but abuses marriage, and was summoned to recant by some orthodox bishops. However, let us make allowance for the fervour of the times.⁸⁹

The work appears to engage particularly with Jerome's *Adversus Jovinianum*. Hilmar M. Pabel asserts that Jerome was Erasmus' 'favourite among the Latin Fathers',⁹⁰ and in 1516, two years prior to the publication of the *Encomium Matrimonii*, Erasmus had produced a 'nine-volume edition of the Church Father's [i.e., Jerome's] *opera* [which was] the first undertaking to print Jerome's *opera omnia*'.⁹¹ In his biography of Jerome, Erasmus is often thought to have associated himself with him.⁹² Yet, Pabel suggests that, while Erasmus admired Jerome as a scholar and rhetor, he was ambivalent towards some of his works, most especially the *Adversus Jovinianum*.⁹³ He draws attention to the diametrically opposed views of the two men:

In the *Adversus Jovinianum*, Erasmus, a great apologist for the dignity of marriage, confronted one of the most strident and best known briefs for the superiority of virginity to marriage in the western Christian tradition.⁹⁴

In some ways, the *Encomium Matrimonii* can be seen as a critique of Jerome's *Adversus Jovinianum* as well as engaging with Jerome's *Epistola XXII Ad Eustochium*. Just as the

⁸⁹ Erasmus, *Encomium Matrimonii*, p. 68.

⁹⁰ Pabel, 'Reading Jerome in the Renaissance', p. 471.

⁹¹ Pabel, 'Reading Jerome in the Renaissance', p. 474.

⁹² Cf. Pabel: 'While scholars readily acknowledge Erasmus' powers of historical criticism in the *Vita*, they are also well aware that the Jerome of the humanist biography conspicuously melds with the ideals of humanist scholarship espoused by the humanist biographer: Jerome emerges in the *Vita* as Erasmus' *alter ego*. [...] Jardine contends that Erasmus constructed his own scholarly identity upon a reconfigured version of Jerome in order to create for himself the authority of the consummate scholar in a world of learning that was supposedly predominantly secular. [...] Mark Vessey disagrees with Jardine. He argues that the Jerome that Erasmus appropriated was the Christian editor and author par excellence.' Pabel, 'Reading Jerome in the Renaissance', p. 472.

⁹³ Cf. Pabel: 'An examination of the *scholia* that bear directly on the controversy between Jerome and his opponent, Jovinian, reveals that Erasmus seconds the Church Father's attack on Jovinian's rhetoric without coming down on one side of the theological debate between them. Only rarely does Erasmus incline towards Jerome's position on marriage; more frequently he disapproves of the way in which Jerome manipulates Scripture to his advantage.' Pabel, 'Reading Jerome in the Renaissance', p. 475.

⁹⁴ Pabel, 'Reading Jerome in the Renaissance', p. 475.

debate about the superiority of virginity over marriage was polarised in the fourth-century debate, the Reformation controversy on virginity was also seen in polarised terms: if one did not agree whole-heartedly with Jerome's position on the supremacy of virginity, then one must be siding with Jovinian. Indeed, this polarisation creeps into twentieth-century criticism. John Oppel, for instance, asserts that Erasmus is self-consciously setting himself up as a Jovinian figure.⁹⁵ Such a polarisation was and is always an oversimplification, in the fourth century as well as in the sixteenth and twentieth centuries.

The *Encomium Matrimonii*, then, has a complicated relationship to the patristic tradition of virginity. Many of its earlier arguments in favour of marriage are fairly orthodox. For instance, the reader is reminded that the condemnation of marriage is heretical,⁹⁶ and so, by implication, the praise of marriage is orthodox and laudable:

What is more worthy of praise, when those who find fault with it are condemned for heresy? Marriage is as honourable as the name of heretics is infamous. [...] What is more ill-advised than in the pursuit of sanctity to shun as unholy what God himself, the source and father of all holiness, wished to be held most holy?⁹⁷

It is unclear whether, like Jovinian,⁹⁸ the *Encomium Matrimonii* suggests that the praise of virginity typical in ecclesiastical circles constitutes a tacit condemnation of marriage. Alternatively, the *Encomium* may relate only to the young man's own hatred of marriage which has prompted his choice of celibacy; this may be inferred as the young man to

⁹⁵ Cf. Oppel: 'it is impossible, thus, to read Erasmus's *In Praise of Marriage* – moving forward a little in time – in view of the earlier literature without recognizing that Erasmus is setting himself up as "Jovinian" reincarnated – that is, as a heretic.' Oppel, 'Saint Jerome and the History of Sex', p. 5.

⁹⁶ Cf. Jerome: 'But now when heretics are condemning wedlock, and despise the ordinance of God, we gladly hear anything he may say in praise of marriage.' Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. xl, p. 379. Cf. Canons I, IX, X, XIII, XIV, XV, XVI, XVII of *The Canons of the Holy Fathers assembled at Gangra, which were set forth after the Council of Nice [Nicaea], A.D. 325-381*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. XIV, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church: Their Canons and dogmatic decrees* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1900]), pp. 92-99.

⁹⁷ Erasmus, *Encomium Matrimonii*, pp. 58-9.

⁹⁸ Compare Jerome's quotation of Jovinian: 'All this makes it clear that in forbidding to marry, and to eat food which God has created for use, you have consciences seared as with a hot iron, and are followers of the Manichaeans.' Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. v, p. 349.

whom the letter is addressed has shunned a girl who represents all that is desirable in a marriage partner.⁹⁹ Erasmus implies at several points in the letter that the celibacy which his kinsman is proposing to adopt is not a true religious vocation,¹⁰⁰ although he does accept that ‘religious scruples’ may be a possible motive.¹⁰¹ Indeed, at times it appears that the young man’s choice of celibacy is merely a bid for independence,¹⁰² which is not a valid reason for choosing a life of celibacy, as Jerome’s comments in *Epistola XXII* on serving girls who choose virginity as a means of obtaining freedom demonstrate. Jerome asserts that such false vocations inevitably lead to disaster.¹⁰³ From the comparison between the praise of the bride that the young man has refused and the uncertain vocation that he has chosen instead, it is clear that Erasmus is not so much comparing the virginal life with the married life, but rather a promising marriage with a false celibacy. In such a case, Erasmus’ argument is on safer ground as it has a patristic precedent. In *De sancta virginitate*, Augustine praised virtuous wives over proud, arrogant or immoral virgins.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁹ Cf. Erasmus: ‘He also informed me that your friends were of one accord in recommending to you, with the offer of a large dowry, a girl of noble birth, exceptional beauty and excellent character and who was very much in love with you’; ‘[she is] pure, modest, respectful, divinely beautiful, with an abundant dowry.’ Erasmus, *Encomium Matromonii*, p. 58; p. 75.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Erasmus: ‘Let that be the prerogative of priests and monks, who evidently have succeeded to the regimen of the Essenes. Your situation is quite different.’ Erasmus, *Encomium Matromonii*, p. 66.

¹⁰¹ Cf. Erasmus: ‘you, whether from inability to master your grief or from religious scruples, were so set on remaining celibate that neither devotion to your family, nor desire for offspring, nor the advice, prayers, and tears of your friends could induce you to abandon your resolve.’ Erasmus, *Encomium Matromonii*, p. 58.

¹⁰² Cf. Erasmus: ‘In all other respects one who follows the law of nature and procreates children is to be preferred to one who perseveres in the single state simply in order to have a more independent life. We read that men who are truly chaste and virgin are praised, but celibacy in itself receives no praise.’ Erasmus, *Encomium Matromonii*, pp. 60-1.

¹⁰³ Cf. Jerome: ‘if a girl pretends to have a vocation simply because she desires to escape from service, read aloud to her the words of the apostle: “It is better to marry than to burn”.’ Jerome, *Epistola XXII. Ad Eustochium*, xxix, p. 35.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Augustine: ‘So if confronted by one who intends to remain a virgin but is disobedient and a married woman who cannot retain her virginity but is obedient, which are we to pronounce the better, the one who is less praiseworthy than if she were a virgin, or the one who merits condemnation in her life as a virgin?’ Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, xxix, p. 53.

However, Augustine does make clear that this is a false comparison, and has no bearing on the more general question of the superiority of virginity over marriage.¹⁰⁵

Erasmus draws attention to matrimony's sacramental status in order to confirm its holiness. In some ways this attests to the orthodoxy of the *Encomium*, as it accepts the inclusion of matrimony as one of the Seven Sacraments:¹⁰⁶

Now if the other sacraments, which are the chief support of the Church of Christ, are observed with scrupulous respect, who cannot see that much reverence is due this one, which was instituted by God before all the others? The rest were instituted on earth, but this in paradise; the rest for a remedy, this for partnership in happiness.¹⁰⁷

The conclusions drawn from the allusion to the sacramentality of marriage, however, are problematic, as the assertion that marriage, because it was instituted in Paradise, is the pre-eminent sacrament is a misguided inference.¹⁰⁸ Such a statement is a clear indication of the ambiguity of the *declamatio* as it cannot reflect the views of Erasmus himself; he

¹⁰⁵ Cf. Augustine: 'Clearly the right question is not whether a totally disobedient virgin is to be compared with an obedient matron, but the less obedient woman with the more obedient, for nuptial chastity also exists and is a good, but a lesser good than that of a virgin.' Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, xxx, p. 55.

¹⁰⁶ John Calvin had asserted that there were five 'false sacraments' (penance, confirmation, marriage, holy orders, and extreme unction). [Cf. Calvin: 'The last [false sacrament] one is marriage. All men admit that it was instituted by God [Gen. 2:21-24; Matt. 19:4ff]; but no man had ever seen it administered as a sacrament until the time of Gregory.' John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion: Embracing almost the whole sum of piety, & whatever is necessary to know of the doctrine of Salvation: A work most worthy to be read by all persons zealous for piety, and recently published* (Basel: MDXXXVI [1536]), trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), p. 172]. Luther had accepted that there were three true sacraments (baptism, penance, and the Eucharist). The Church of England accepted the Calvinist approach to sacramental theology, as Bergvall notes: 'Even if Luther was the fountainhead of the Reformation, it was Calvin, in the *Institutions of the Christian Religion*, who systematized the new doctrines. And it was in contact with Calvinism (and Zwinglianism) that the Elizabethan puritans consolidated the Reformation.' Bergvall, 'Reason in Luther, Calvin, and Sidney', p. 118.

¹⁰⁷ Erasmus, *Encomium Matromonii*, p. 59. Cf. Erasmus: 'What could be holier than that which the father of all creation founded, enjoined, and sanctified, and which nature herself consecrated?'; 'Will not the law of wedlock have the most sanctity of all, because we have received it from the giver of life, and because it alone came into existence almost simultaneously with the human race?' Erasmus, *Encomium Matromonii*, p. 58; p. 60.

¹⁰⁸ The Council of Trent affirmed the sacramental supremacy of the Eucharist: 'The most holy Eucharist has indeed this in common with the other sacraments, that it is a symbol of a sacred thing and a visible form of an invisible grace; but there is in it this excellent and peculiar characteristic, that the other sacraments then first have the power of sanctifying when one uses them, while in the Eucharist there is the Author Himself of sanctity before it is used.' 'Thirteenth Session (1551), chapter III: The Excellence of the Most Holy Eucharist Over the Other Sacraments', *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent* trans. H. J. Schroeder (North Carolina: TAN Books, 1978 [1941]), p. 74.

would not suggest that marriage was a greater sacrament than the Eucharist or Baptism. Additionally, Erasmus cannot have been unaware that, although marriage is the oldest sacrament in terms of the longevity of the institution, it was the last to be accorded sacramental status in the Church. Erasmus' sacramental argument in favour of marriage, therefore, is not without its flaws and ambiguities.

Despite the late acceptance of marriage as a sacrament, the assertion in the *Encomium Matrimonii* that God instituted marriage before all the others is an orthodox idea. Peter Lombard (c.1100-1160) affirms the dual establishment of marriage: first by God in Paradise, and then by Jesus in the Gospels.¹⁰⁹ Erasmus cites Christ's presence at the marriage feast of Cana, and the miracle performed there, as evidence of His sanctification of marriage:

What is more honourable than marriage, which was honoured by Christ himself, who not only thought it fit to be present at a wedding together with his mother, but also sanctified the wedding feast with the first fruits of his miracles.¹¹⁰

Although Augustine also refers to the marriage feast at Cana as evidence of Christ's blessing on matrimony,¹¹¹ his main argument for the sacramental status of marriage is Christ's forbidding of divorce.¹¹² It is also notable that, although Erasmus accepts

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Lombard: 'The institution of marriage is twofold. The first was done for function before sin in paradise, where there would be a *spotless marriage-bed* and honourable nuptials, from which they [the first human beings] would conceive without ardour and bear without pain; the second was after sin, as a remedy, and outside paradise, for the sake of avoiding illicit stirrings; the first, so that nature might be multiplied, and the second so that nature might be rescued and vice curbed.' Peter Lombard, *Sententiae IV: On the Doctrine of Signs*, Dist. XXVI.ii, trans. Giulio Silano (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2010), p. 157.

¹¹⁰ Erasmus, *Encomium Matrimonii*, p. 58. Cf. Erasmus: 'He attended [the marriage feast at Cana] willingly with his mother; and not only did he attend, but he honoured it by an extraordinary favour, choosing no other occasion to inaugurate his miracles.' Erasmus, *Encomium Matrimonii*, p. 60.

¹¹¹ Cf. Augustine: 'The Lord himself ratified this in the Gospel, not merely by forbidding a man to dismiss his wife except for fornication, but also by his presence at a marriage when invited to it.' Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, iii, p. 7.

¹¹² Cf. Augustine: 'The sealing of the marriage compact is so clearly governed by a kind of sacrament that it is not made void even by the act of separation; for if a wife marries another while her husband is still

Augustine's contention that marriage is only dissolved in death,¹¹³ he does not attribute this to the sacramental bond.¹¹⁴ Christ's ratification of marriage in the Gospels is used by Erasmus to demonstrate its holiness, and also to show that marriage is relevant 'not only in the time of Judaism but also during the Christian era'.¹¹⁵ Although such an assertion is not contrary to the patristic tradition, it perhaps challenges Jerome's explanation that the Gospels carry a new commandment from Christ which supersedes God's command in paradise.¹¹⁶ Erasmus not only reiterates the continued relevance of marriage by virtue of the first commandment in paradise, but he also queries Augustine's claim in *De bono coniugali* that marriage is no longer really necessary because God's Church can be swelled through baptism, rather than procreation.¹¹⁷ Erasmus highlights the perverse use that Augustine's line of reasoning has been put to:

The same people [who approve of virginity and warring with the Turks] approve of slaying heathen parents by the sword, so that it may be possible to baptize their children, who are unaware of their newly acquired religion. If that is true, how much more civilised it would be to obtain the same result by the office of wedlock!¹¹⁸

alive, she commits adultery even if he has abandoned her, and he is the cause of this evil for having left her.' Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, vi, p. 15.

¹¹³ Cf. Erasmus: 'Death alone dissolves wedlock, if indeed it does dissolve it. It is only dissolved in the case of those who seek another marriage. As long as wedded love persists, the marriage is not considered to be dissolved.' Erasmus, *Encomium Matromonii*, p. 59.

¹¹⁴ Leushuis suggests that Erasmus is ambivalent towards matrimony: 'The marital sacrament remains a thorny point in Erasmus' thought: he recognises that its symbolic value is an efficient tool in raising the status of matrimony in society, yet he refuses to see the sacrament as a legal basis for the indissolubility of marriage.' Leushuis, 'The Mimesis of Marriage', p. 1285.

¹¹⁵ Erasmus, *Encomium Matromonii*, p. 59.

¹¹⁶ Cf. Jerome: 'I do not disparage our predecessors under the law, but am well aware that they served their generation according to their circumstances, and fulfilled the Lord's command to increase and multiply and replenish the earth. And what is more they were figure of those that were to come. But we to whom it is said, 'The time is shortened, that henceforth these that have wives may be as though they had none,' have a different command, and for us virginity is consecrated by the virgin Saviour.' Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. xiv, p. 364.

¹¹⁷ Cf. Augustine: 'But now, since there is a teeming abundance of spiritual kindred from all nations on every side to enter upon our holy and pure fellowship, even these zealous to be joined in marriage solely to beget children should be urged to embrace the more honourable good of continence instead.' Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, ix, p. 23.

¹¹⁸ Erasmus, *Encomium Matromonii*, p. 68.

Here, Erasmus demonstrates the spiritual blindness of those who defend the holiness of a virtue like virginity, which is not essential to achieving eternal life, but do not balk at committing atrocities, thus ignoring the most basic Christian precepts which are necessary for salvation. Such comments may have shaped Luther's ideas on the problem of fixating on virginity to the detriment of more fundamental Christian virtues.

The *Encomium Matrimonii*, however, especially challenges the patristic tradition when it denies the claim that Christ had sanctioned virginity in His own person, and thus provided an imitative example for mankind:¹¹⁹

‘Why then’, you will say, ‘did Christ himself abstain from wedlock?’ As if there were not very many aspects of Christ's life that should excite our wonder rather than our imitation. He was born without a father, was given birth without pain to his mother, and came forth from a sealed sepulchre.

What is there in him that is not above nature? Such attributes belong to him alone. Let us who live under the law of nature look up to those things that are above nature, but emulate what is within our capacity.¹²⁰

Erasmus here negates the idea of the *imitatio Christi*, which Christ Himself had promoted in relation to His humility,¹²¹ and which Saint Paul had encouraged in his exhortation to Christians to imitate his own chastity, just as he imitated Christ's.¹²² In addition, Erasmus also queries the relevance of God's choice of a virginal mother as proof of the superiority of the virginal life:

‘But he chose to be born of a virgin’. Yes, of a virgin, but of a married virgin. A virgin mother befitted God; the fact that she was married signified the path that we should follow. The state of virginity befitted the woman who by the

¹¹⁹ Jerome: ‘He who was a virgin, consecrated the firstfruits of His virgins in His own virgin self.’ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. xxxix, p. 377; ‘Let us then who believe in Christ follow His example.’ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. xxxvi, p. 374.

¹²⁰ Erasmus, *Encomium Matrimonii*, p. 60.

¹²¹ Cf. Matthew: ‘Take up my yoke upon you, and learn of me, because I am meek, and humble of heart: and you shall find rest to your souls’ (Matthew 11: 29).

¹²² Saint Jerome had read Paul's exhortation specifically in regard to virginity: ‘This, says he, I wish, this I desire, that ye be imitators of me, as I also am of Christ, who was a Virgin born of a virgin, uncorrupt of her who was uncorrupt.’ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. viii, p. 352. Cf. Paul: ‘I would that all men were even as myself’ (I Corinthians 7: 7).

inspiration of the heavenly spirit was to bear, herself immaculate, an immaculate child. Yet Joseph, her spouse, commends to us the laws of chaste wedlock.¹²³

Erasmus' acceptance of the true marriage of Mary and Joseph indicates that he subscribes to the consent theory of marriage and, therefore, to Augustine's understanding of the marriage of Mary and Joseph. However, the *Encomium* contravenes Augustine position in other ways. Erasmus uses the uniqueness of Mary's position to argue that it is not relevant for mortal man; it was only necessary to reveal Christ's Godhead in the Incarnation. In addition, the assertion that Mary's marriage provides a more acceptable model for mankind is problematic, as Augustine had argued in *De sancta virginitate* that married women who evoked Mary's marriage and maternity to claim equality with virgins had no right to promote themselves in this way.¹²⁴ Furthermore, the explanation of the significance of the marriage of Mary and Joseph in the *Encomium Matrimonii* conflicts with the reasons for their marriage adduced by Jerome in *Adversus Helvidium*.¹²⁵ Finally, by changing the imitative figure from Mary to Joseph, the *declamatio* undermines the Mariological focus emphasised in patristic tracts.

¹²³ Erasmus, *Encomium Matrimonii*, p. 60.

¹²⁴ Cf. Augustine: 'the fruitfulness of marriage may not perhaps presume to vie with virgin chastity, instancing Mary herself and saying to God's virgins: "She had two things in the flesh worthy of honour, virginity and fecundity, for she both remained inviolate and bore a child. Since each of the two of us could not enjoy this blessing in its entirety, we have divided it out, so that you are virgins and we are mothers. Your preservation of virginity is to be a consolation for lack of offspring, whereas our loss of virginity is to be set against our gain of children.'" Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, vii, p. 73.

¹²⁵ Compare Jerome: 'If anyone feels a doubt as to why the Virgin conceived after she was betrothed rather than when she had no one betrothed to her, or, to use the Scripture phrase, no husband, let me explain that there were three reasons. First, that by the genealogy of Joseph, whose kinswoman Mary was, Mary's origin might also be shown. Secondly that she might not in accordance with the law of Moses be stoned as an adulteress. Thirdly, that in her flight to Egypt she might have solace, though it was that of a guardian rather than a husband. For who at that time would have believed the Virgin's word that she had conceived of the Holy Ghost, and that the angel Gabriel had come and announced the purpose of God?' Jerome, *Adversus Helvidium*, iv, p. 336.

The *Encomium Matrimonii* on occasions comes close to a total denunciation of perpetual virginity. It is referred to as ‘vile celibacy’,¹²⁶ and ‘a barren way of life hardly becoming to a man’.¹²⁷ In addition, the arguments of heresiarchs in favour of marriage over celibacy are adopted at times. For instance, like Jovinian, Erasmus argues that,

There is very little distinction between the praises due to virginity and that due to the man who keeps the laws of wedlock unsullied, who keeps a wife for bearing offspring, not for the purpose of lust.¹²⁸

Jovinian’s assertion that virginity and marriage were equal formed the main basis of his argument, and the main topic of Jerome’s reply. In addition to this inflammatory position, Erasmus appropriates the argument from Jovinian that certain bodily members had been created with a specific purpose in mind. God had not erred in their creation:

For if what the ancient philosophers said was correct, if it was approved with good reason by our theologians, and if it was deservedly repeated everywhere in the form of a saying that neither God nor nature does anything without purpose, then why did nature assign us these members and add these incitements and this power of reproduction, if celibacy is to be considered praiseworthy?¹²⁹

Erasmus must have been aware that Jerome’s answer to this particular objection was that such an argument could be used to excuse all lust.¹³⁰ An even more weighty defence of virginity given by Jerome against this argument was the example of Christ’s true masculinity which existed alongside His perpetual virginity.¹³¹

As well as expressing the views of Jovinian, Erasmus also adopts the position of Julian of Eclanum to challenge Augustine’s position on the sinfulness of venereal

¹²⁶ Erasmus, *Encomium Matrimonii*, p. 74.

¹²⁷ Erasmus, *Encomium Matrimonii*, p. 58.

¹²⁸ Erasmus, *Encomium Matrimonii*, pp. 67-8.

¹²⁹ Erasmus, *Encomium Matrimonii*, p. 65.

¹³⁰ Cf. Jerome: ‘Are we never then to forego lust, for fear that we may have members of this kind for nothing?’ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. xxxvi, p. 373.

¹³¹ Cf. Jerome: ‘Our Lord and Saviour, Who though He was in the form of a servant, and became obedient to the Father even unto death, yea the death of the cross – what necessity was there for Him to be born with members which he was not going to use? He certainly was circumcised to manifest His sex.’ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. xxxvi, p. 374.

stimuli.¹³² He argues against Augustine that sexual desire is not an indication of sinfulness, but merely a feature of human nature which is there to prompt a procreative impulse.¹³³

I have no patience with those who say that sexual excitement is shameful and that venereal stimuli have their origin not in nature, but in sin. Nothing is so far from the truth. As if marriage, whose function cannot be fulfilled without these incitements, did not rise above blame.¹³⁴

In addition, Erasmus refuses to consider that there may have been a different pre-fallen procreative form;¹³⁵ the method of procreation, he says, is natural and obeying the law of nature is another good reason to marry.¹³⁶ Erasmus cites the praise of fertility in the Old

¹³² Cf. Clark: ‘Pelagian critics such as Julian of Eclanum alleged that Augustine’s theory of original sin, transmitted through the sex act and corrupting the offspring conceived, was a throwback to the Manichean notion of “natural evil” that Augustine had accepted in his youth. According to Julian, both Augustine’s “Manichean” (i.e., overly-ascetic) view of marriage and his “Manichean” (i.e., Docetic and Apollinarian) Christology stemmed in part from his deficient understanding of human biology.’ Elizabeth A Clark, ‘Vitiating Seeds and Holy Vessels: Augustine’s Manichean Past’, in Elizabeth A. Clark, *Ascetic Piety and Women’s Faith: Essays on Late Ancient Christianity* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1986), pp. 291-349, (p. 291). Cf. Brown: ‘Like death, the onset and culmination of sexual sensation mocked the will. Its random movements spoke of a primal dislocation. It betrayed a *discordiosum malum*, an abiding principle of discord lodged in the human person since the fall’; ‘[Julian] realised that Augustine’s notion of the abiding corruption of human nature since the fall was intimately linked to his conviction that this corruption was made explicit by a permanent derangement of the sexual urge. [...] He said] it was both irrational and impious to suggest that the sexual urge, as now used in married intercourse, was in any way different from that which God had first placed in Adam and Eve.’ Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), p. 408; p. 412. Cf. Clark: ‘[Augustine thought that] [a]lthough Adam and Eve would have engaged in sexual intercourse in order to reproduce, their sexual organs would have moved at the command of their wills, tranquillity would have prevailed, defloration and labour pains would have been unknown.’ Clark, ‘Vitiating Seeds and Holy Vessels: Augustine’s Manichean Past’, p. 293.

¹³³ Cf. Clark: ‘Augustine, who considers concupiscence a moral category, is annoyed that Julian censures only the excess of concupiscence, not the thing itself; he must imagine that concupiscence constitutes an original endowment of humankind, present even in Paradise. Julian indeed *does* believe this: according to him, concupiscence was one of the original senses humans received, a point he will further develop.’ Clark, ‘Vitiating Seeds and Holy Vessels: Augustine’s Manichean Past’, p. 301.

¹³⁴ Erasmus, *Encomium Matromonii*, p. 66.

¹³⁵ Cf. Erasmus: ‘For nature has willed that there should be this single method of propagation, that by the co-operation of husband and wife the race of mortals should be saved from destruction.’ Erasmus, *Encomium Matromonii*, p. 73.

¹³⁶ Cf. Erasmus: ‘What is more just than to return to posterity what we ourselves have received from our forebears? [...] What is more inhuman than to shrink from the laws of the human condition?’; ‘Nothing has been so firmly planted by nature, not only in mankind but in all living things, as the instinct in each of them to preserve its own species from destruction and render it in some way immortal by the propagation of offspring. Everyone must know that this cannot come about without the bond of wedlock.’ Erasmus, *Encomium Matromonii*, p. 58-9; p. 63.

Testament to attest to its goodness,¹³⁷ and uses metaphors of the fruitfulness of sowing seeds in arable land, and the sinfulness of leaving fertile land fallow.¹³⁸ Such images may parody the Parable of the Sowers, and so implicitly question the traditional imagery of virginity's production of the hundredfold seed: how can it produce the most seed if it does not in fact sow any seeds? On virginity's lack of fruitfulness of virginity, Erasmus asserts that if the whole of the human race chose celibacy, it would spell disaster.¹³⁹ This fourth-century argument against virginity is one that was explicitly refuted by patristic writers. Jerome's answer, that there is no danger of the destruction of the human race because so few people persevere in virginity,¹⁴⁰ fits the perspective of Erasmus:

It has received praise, but in a given period of time and in few individuals. For God wished to show man a kind of picture and likeness of that life in heaven where no women marry or are given in marriage. But for an example a small number is suitable, a large one useless.¹⁴¹

Erasmus' argument against virginity and celibacy is not so much that it has no value, but that very few people are truly called to such a vocation. His main objection to the state of virginity is that it is adopted by some who take vows rashly and then find themselves trapped in a situation which cannot be resolved. His message is much like Jerome's use of the biblical quotation: 'Many are called, but few are chosen' (Matthew 20: 16; 22: 14).

¹³⁷ Cf. Erasmus, *Encomium Matromonii*, p. 61.

¹³⁸ Cf. Erasmus, *Encomium Matromonii*, pp. 68-9; p. 74.

¹³⁹ Cf. Erasmus: 'Virginity is certainly worthy of praise, but on the condition that this praise is not transferred to the majority of mankind. If it were to become a general practice, what could be mentioned or imagined more destructive than virginity?'; 'Let us go then and pay homage to celibacy, since it is destined to visit eternal destruction on our race! What plague or pestilence sent by the gods above or below could be more pernicious?' Erasmus, *Encomium Matromonii*, p. 67; p. 73.

¹⁴⁰ Cf. Jerome: 'But you will say: "If everybody were a virgin, what would become of the human race?" [...] Be not afraid that all will become virgins: virginity is a hard matter, and therefore rare, because it is hard: "Many are called, few chosen." Many begin, few persevere. And so the reward is great for those who have persevered.' Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. xxxvi, p. 373.

¹⁴¹ Erasmus, *Encomium Matromonii*, p. 73.

Erasmus, echoing but also reversing Jerome's long list of *exempla* of bad wives from non-Christian sources,¹⁴² provides classical *exempla* of good wives.¹⁴³ He cites myths and fables which demonstrate the good of marriage,¹⁴⁴ and, in asserting the place of marriage in natural law, he even goes so far as to suggest that trees and stones are married,¹⁴⁵ which perhaps implies a certain playfulness rather than a serious argument. Bad wives, he says, are the 'faults of human nature, not of wedlock', and he also asserts that bad husbands usually get bad wives.¹⁴⁶ Additionally, he cites the Hebrew and Roman laws which gave privileges to marriage,¹⁴⁷ and demanded the penalty of capital punishments for adultery that were meted out by ancient authorities.¹⁴⁸ In addition to the promotion of the holiness of marriage, celibacy comes under attack because of the arrogance of the *regulares*,¹⁴⁹ and the moral turpitude that has crept into monastic institutions:

¹⁴² Cf. Jerome: 'I have given enough and more than enough illustrations from the divine writings of Christian chastity and angelic virginity. But as I understand that our opponent in his commentaries summons us to the tribunal of worldly wisdom, and we are told that news of this kind are never accepted in the world, and that our religion has invented a dogma against nature, I will quickly run through Greek and Roman and Foreign History, and will show that virginity ever took the lead of chastity.' Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. xli, p. 379.

¹⁴³ Erasmus, *Encomium Matromonii*, p. 72.

¹⁴⁴ Erasmus, *Encomium Matromonii*, p. 64.

¹⁴⁵ Erasmus, *Encomium Matromonii*, p. 63.

¹⁴⁶ Erasmus, *Encomium Matromonii*, p. 71.

¹⁴⁷ Erasmus, *Encomium Matromonii*, pp. 61-2.

¹⁴⁸ Cf. Erasmus: 'if you want to know the value placed on marriage, consider the penalty for a violated marriage. The Greeks once decreed that the violation of the rights of marriage had to be vindicated by a ten years' war. In addition, not only Roman law but the laws of the Hebrews and the barbarian nations prescribed capital punishment for adulterers.[...] Certainly wedlock must be considered an institution of the greatest sanctity if its violation must be expiated by human blood, and the avenging of it need not await laws or judgement, a right that does not exist even in the case of parricide.' Erasmus, *Encomium Matromonii*, p. 62-3. Jerome refers to the extreme punishment meted out to adulterers; he also implies it has no effect on curbing lust: 'Every day the blood of adulterers is shed, adulterers are condemned, and lust is raging and rampant in the very presence of the laws and the symbols of authority and the courts of justice.' Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. xxxvi, p. 373.

¹⁴⁹ Cf. Erasmus: 'Let the swarms of monks and virgins exalt their own rule of life as they will, let them boast as much as they like of their liturgical functions and their acts of worship, in which they excel all others; the holiest kind of life is wedlock, purely and chastely observed.' Erasmus, *Encomium Matromonii*, p. 67.

I only wish those who conceal their vices behind the high-sounding name of castration, and under pretence of chastity gratify worse lusts, were truly castrated. I do not think that it becomes my sense of modesty to describe the disgraceful actions that those who oppose nature fall into.¹⁵⁰

In the fourth century, Helvidius had cited the poor morals of some virgins to make a similar claim. Although Jerome agreed with Helvidius' assessment of the immorality of some virgins,¹⁵¹ he did not agree that this destroyed the ideal: 'Are we to blame virginity if its counterfeit is at fault?'¹⁵² Jerome was famous for his satirical attacks on the corruption of the Roman clergy; yet he differs from the conclusions reached in the *Encomium Matrimonii*, as he never sees human failure as invalidating the ideal of virginity. In the case of the moral turpitude of the clergy, Erasmus advocates the allowance of clerical marriage on the grounds that it would resolve the problem of concubinage:

In my view it would not be ill advised for the interest and morals of mankind if the right of wedlock were also conceded to priests and monks, if circumstances required it, especially in view of the fact that there is such a great throng of priests everywhere, so few of whom live a chaste life. How much better it would be to turn concubines into wives, so that the woman they now keep dishonourably and with troubled conscience might be retained openly with honourable reputation.¹⁵³

Although the issue was inflammatory in the sixteenth century, it is not wholly incompatible with the patristic tradition. Even Jerome, who no doubt would have

¹⁵⁰ Erasmus, *Encomium Matrimonii*, p. 67.

¹⁵¹ Cf. Jerome: 'I agree with you, when you say, that some virgins are nothing but tavern women; I say still more, that even adulteresses may be found among them, and, you will no doubt be still more surprised to hear, that some of the clergy are inn-keepers and some monks unchaste. Who does not at once understand that a tavern woman cannot be a virgin, nor an adulterer a monk, nor a clergyman a tavern-keeper? [...] For my part, to pass over other persons and come to the virgin, I maintain that she who is engaged in huckstering, though for anything I know she may be a virgin in body, is no longer one in spirit.' Jerome, *Adversus Helvidium*, xxiii, p. 345.

¹⁵² Jerome, *Adversus Helvidium*, xxiii, p. 345.

¹⁵³ Erasmus, *Encomium Matrimonii*, p. 67.

preferred a completely celibate sacerdotal class, recognises a certain practicality in married priests.¹⁵⁴

v. *Colloquies*

Erasmus later wrote about monasticism and marriage in his *Colloquies* (published between 1523 and 1529), eight of which discuss marital issues.¹⁵⁵ The first *Colloquies* were published shortly after Luther's attack on clerical celibacy and monasticism. The material in the *Colloquies* was explosive, as some of the marital colloquies contained dialogues contrasting the merits of marriage with those of monasticism; others comment on some of the monastic orders. Not all of these commentaries presented a negative portrayal of monasticism, however. *The Soldier and the Carthusian* (*Militis et Carthusiani*, 1523), for instance, shows a monk who has taken his vows after long and careful deliberation. In *The Well-to-do Beggars* (*Πτωχοπλούσιοι*, 1524) Erasmus depicts two Franciscans. The friars are turned away by the parochial priest in the area, thus exposing the hostility towards mendicant orders. The friars depicted in the colloquy, however, are laudable Franciscans, although there is a suggestion that such men are a rarity. The friars also provide a sensible explanation of the monastic habit, explaining that it is neither particular holy or unholy in itself, but simply appropriate garb for a monk.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁴ Cf. Jerome: 'That married men are elected to the priesthood, I do not deny: the number of virgins is not so great as that of the priests required. Does it follow that because all the strongest men are chosen for the army, weaker men should not be taken as well? All cannot be strong.' Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, I. xxxiv, p. 372.

¹⁵⁵ These include: *Courtship* (*Proci et Puellae*), 1523; *The Girl with No Interest in Marriage* (*Virgo μισόγαμος*), 1523; *The Repentant Girl* (*Virgo Poenitens*), 1523; *Marriage* (*Coniugium*), 1523; *The Young Man and the Harlot* (*Adolescens et Scorti*), 1523; *The New Mother* (*Puerpera*), 1526; *A Marriage in Name Only, or The Unequal Match* ('Αγάμος γάμος, sive *Coniugium imparis*), 1529; *The Lower House, or The Council of Women* (*Senatulus, sive Γυναικοσυνέδριον*), 1529. Leushuis again argues that, like the *Encomium Matrimonii*, the *Colloquies* have a didactic and mimetic function: 'The fundamental pedagogical structure of the Erasmus colloquy makes it a perfect genre with which to operate a mimetic transformation of the Christian reader.' Leushuis, 'The Mimesis of Marriage', p. 1294.

¹⁵⁶ Cf. Erasmus: '*The Well-to-do Beggars*, how many things are there by which country pastors – crude and unlettered, and anything but shepherds – may amend their lives! How much, in addition, to help get rid of

In contrast, *The Abbot and the Learned Lady* (*Abbatis et eruditiae*, 1524) exposes the ignorance of some monks, which is especially notable in comparison to the education of the lady, who is well-versed in Latin and Greek. She offers the example of other learned ladies from history, such as those in Jerome's *coterie*, as precedents of well-educated women to justify her own interest in learning.¹⁵⁷

Erasmus' *Colloquies* were criticised because they were thought to denigrate virginity.¹⁵⁸ Certainly he was no less critical than Luther of the corruption and unchastity which existed within some of the monasteries and convents. In *The Girl with No Interest in Marriage* (*Virgo μισόγαμος*, 1523) Eubulus¹⁵⁹ attempts to dissuade Catharine from fulfilling her ambition to enter a community of nuns:¹⁶⁰

I've nothing to say against a chaste community, but I wouldn't want you to be deceived by vain fancies. When you've spent some time there and have seen it at closer range, perhaps everything won't dazzle in quite the same fashion it seemed to earlier. All the veiled aren't virgins, believe me.¹⁶¹

foolish pride in clothes; again, for checking the extravagance of those who condemn the monastic garb, as if the dress in itself were bad. And incidentally a pattern for the conduct of itinerant monks is described. There aren't many of the sort I picture here.' Desiderius Erasmus, *De utilitate Colloquiorum*, 'Desiderius Erasmus Roterodamus to the Reader', in *The Colloquies of Erasmus*, trans. Craig R. Thompson (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1965), pp. 623-637, (p. 630).

¹⁵⁷ Cf. Erasmus: 'In *The Learned Lady*, I revive at one stroke the ancient example of Paula, Eustochium, and Marcella, who combined devotion to learning with purity of morals; and by the example of the young wife I goad monks and abbots – haters of sacred studies, men given over to gluttony, idleness, hunting, and dicing – to pursuits of a different, and, for them, more appropriate kind.' Erasmus, *De utilitate Colloquiorum*, p. 630.

¹⁵⁸ Erasmus enumerates the reasons why his *Colloquies* were criticised: 'that fasts and abstinences of the Church are belittled; that intercession of the Blessed Virgin and the saints is held up to ridicule; that virginity, if compared with marriage, is regarded as of little or no importance; that everyone is dissuaded from entering religion; that in this book hard and troublesome questions of theology are propounded to beginners, in violation of the oath sworn by Masters of Arts. You recognise, dear reader, the Attic eloquence!' Erasmus, *De utilitate Colloquiorum*, p. 634.

¹⁵⁹ Note that this was Methodius' pseudonym in his *Symposium*, or *The Banquet of Ten Virgins*. Euboulios is from the Greek 'Ευβουλ-εὐς', meaning 'he of good counsel', 'soundness of judgement' or 'prudence'. Cf. *A Greek-English Lexicon*, compiled by Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, rev. Sir Henry Stuart James, Robert McKenzie *et al.* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968 [1843]), p. 707.

¹⁶⁰ Cf. Leushuis: 'We have to realise, however, that *The Girl with No Interest in Marriage* pertains more to the debate between Erasmus and his contemporary Church critics – in particular with regard to the question of monasticism – than to the social reform of marriage through the inner experience of the reader.' Leushuis, 'The Mimesis of Marriage', pp. 1295-6.

¹⁶¹ Desiderius Erasmus, *The Girl with No Interest in Marriage* (1523), in *The Colloquies of Erasmus*, trans. Craig R. Thompson (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 107.

Not only does Eubulus accuse the nuns of not maintaining their virginity but also suggests to an uncomprehending Catharine that ‘there are more who copy Sappho’s behaviour than share her talent’.¹⁶² The truth of Eubulus’ insinuation appears to be borne out in the sequel to this colloquy, *The Repentant Girl (Virgo Poenitens, 1523)*, in which Catharine has managed to escape from the convent but is reluctant to divulge the horrendous experiences which she encountered there.¹⁶³ Erasmus defended these two colloquies by explaining that in them he represents a girl who has left the monastery before she had taken vows, and hence he was not encouraging young people to renege on the Solemn Vows that they had taken.¹⁶⁴ He also explained that the two colloquies denounced those who try to trap young people into taking monastic vows.¹⁶⁵ Such people Erasmus was not in any humour to cosset.

Erasmus was aware of the shortfalls of both marriage and virginity if they were not used properly and the necessity for the Church to adjudicate justly in both areas. A *Marriage in Name Only, or The Unequal Match* (‘Αγαμος γάμος, sive Coniugium imparis, 1529) highlights some of the abuses and horrors of marriage. In the colloquy, a

¹⁶² Erasmus, *The Girl with No Interest in Marriage*, p. 108.

¹⁶³ Cf. Erasmus: ‘Eub. But what changed that stubborn mind of yours?/ Cath. I won’t say what, but something very important. [...] Eub. But I’ve still to hear what changed your mind so suddenly. / Cath. Nobody has yet learned that from me, nor will you. / Eub. What if I guess it? / Cath. You won’t, I’m sure of that. And if you should, I wouldn’t say so. / Eub. All the same, I do guess it.’ Desiderius Erasmus, *The Repentant Girl (1523)*, in *The Colloquies of Erasmus*, trans. Craig R. Thompson (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1965), pp. 113-4.

¹⁶⁴ Cf. Erasmus: ‘In the next colloquy I present, not a girl who has abandoned the monastic life after taking vows, but one who has returned to her beloved parents before taking vows.’ Erasmus, *De utilitate Colloquiorum*, p. 629.

¹⁶⁵ Cf. Erasmus: ‘In *The Girl with No Interest in Marriage*, I denounce those who, despite the opposition of parents, lure boys and girls into a monastery, playing upon their innocence or their superstitiousness, persuading them there is no hope of salvation outside a monastery. If the world is not full of such fishermen; if countless happy natures, which had been chosen vessels of the Lord had they sensibly taken up a career suited to their natural talents, are not most miserably buried alive by these creatures – then I have been wrong in my warning. But if ever I am compelled to speak my mind plainly on this topic, I will give such a description of those kidnappers, and the magnitude of their mischief, that all will agree I have plenty of reason to utter these warnings.’ Erasmus, *De utilitate Colloquiorum*, p. 629.

young beautiful girl is married off to a man who is ‘notorious in this city for two things: ‘lies and the pox’.¹⁶⁶ The ‘scabby wedding’, although authorised by the girl’s parents and friends, is denounced by the two commentators Petronius and Gabriel, who criticise the family for yoking ‘so lovely a girl to a corpse’.¹⁶⁷ They also speculate about her fear and disgust in having to pay the marriage debt to her venereally diseased spouse. Such an unequal match, they protest, should not be considered valid in the eyes of the Church ‘even if it had been made with six hundred marriage contracts’.¹⁶⁸ In his explanation of the colloquy, Erasmus claims that marrying one’s daughter to a pox-ridden suitor is common practice.¹⁶⁹ The colloquy exposes the incompatibility of the fiscal side of marriage with its sacramental status.

In the colloquy entitled *Courtship (Proci et Puellae, 1523)*, Erasmus stages a debate about the relative merits of marriage and celibacy. The former is championed by Pamphilus who attempts to persuade the seemingly reluctant Maria that marriage to him would be a better option than retaining her virginity. Maria makes a fairly feeble case for the maintenance of virginity, but the tone of the colloquy conveys a sense that Maria has no real objection to marrying Pamphilus and that her arguing is only to tease her suitor. The colloquy echoes aspects of *Encomium Matrimonii* in that the match is one that is eminently suitable, and so virginity seems as inappropriate choice for the girl. Maria is the embodiment of all that is desirable in a spouse, and Pamphilus enumerates the various

¹⁶⁶ Desiderius Erasmus, *A Marriage in Name Only, or The Unequal Match* (1529), in *The Colloquies of Erasmus*, trans. Craig R. Thompson (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 405.

¹⁶⁷ Erasmus, *A Marriage in Name Only, or The Unequal Match*, p. 405.

¹⁶⁸ Erasmus, *A Marriage in Name Only, or The Unequal Match*, p. 409.

¹⁶⁹ Cf. Erasmus: ‘In *The Unequal Match*, I demonstrate the folly of those numerous people who, in betrothals, count up only the dowry and take no account of the groom’s pox –something worse than leprosy. And this is so commonplace nowadays that nobody wonders, despite the fact that nothing could be more cruel for children.’ Erasmus, *De utilitate Colloquiorum*, p. 633.

reasons for their compatibility.¹⁷⁰ The colloquy is quite light-hearted as Pamphilus trots out the usual commonplaces of lovers: that he will die if she will not requite his love, and threatens her with a judgement from the court of Venus. The punishment that he claims will be meted out to her is that of being married to a pox-ridden man, who does not love her, echoing the fate of the poor unfortunate in *An Unequal Match*.¹⁷¹ There are, however, some serious issues raised, as Pamphilus attempts to trick Maria into accepting him by making a statement to that effect in the present tense, which would contract a marriage there and then.¹⁷² Maria is too clever to be duped in such a way; however, this may be a criticism of contracting of marriage simply on a grammatical technicality. Luther later criticised the grammatical niceties which differentiated between the

¹⁷⁰ Cf. Erasmus: 'the integrity of your parents has been known to me for years now. In the first place, good birth is far from a bad sign. Nor am I unaware of the wholesome instruction and godly examples by which you've been reared; and good education is better than good birth. That's another sign. In addition, between my family - not an altogether contemptible one, I believe - and yours there has long been intimate friendship. In fact, you and I have known each other to our fingertips, as they say, since childhood, and our temperaments are pretty much the same. We're nearly equal in age; our parents in wealth, reputation, and rank. Finally - and this is the special mark of friendship, since excellence by itself is no guarantee of compatibility - your tastes seem to fit my temperament not at all badly. [...] Obviously, darling, these omens assure me that we shall have a blessed, lasting, happy marriage, provided you don't intend to sing a song of woe for our prospects.' Erasmus, *Courtship* (1523), in *The Colloquies of Erasmus*, trans. Craig R. Thompson (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 94.

¹⁷¹ Cf. Erasmus: 'If you reject this lover - who, unless I'm mistaken, is not altogether unworthy of having his love returned - the boy may, at his mother's bidding, shoot you with a dreadfully poisonous dart. As a result you'd fall desperately in love with some low creature who wouldn't return your love. [...] There was recently a much publicized example of this misfortune, involving a certain girl. [...] she fell desperately in love with one who was more like an ape than a man. [...] He had a peaked head, thin hair - and that torn and unkempt, full of scurf and lice. The mange had laid bare most of his scalp; he was cross-eyed, had flat, wide-open nostrils like an ape's, thin mouth, rotten teeth, a stuttering tongue, pocky chin; he was hunchbacked, potbellied, and had crooked shanks.' Erasmus, *Courtship*, pp. 92-3.

¹⁷² Cf. Erasmus: 'Pamph. I'll play "I am yours"; you chime in with "I am yours."/ Maria. A short song, all right, but it has a long finale.'; 'Pamph. But meanwhile say just three words. / Maria. Nothing easier, but once words have flown out they don't fly back. I'll give better advice for us both: confer with your parents and mine, to get the consent of both sides' Erasmus, *Courtship*, p. 94; p. 97. Cf. Leushuis: 'The oscillating dynamics between an intimate speech of inner transformation and the potential risk of clandestinity by speaking too lightly creates the suspense of the entire colloquy and thus effectively mirrors Erasmus's twofold effort to raise the status of matrimony in people's minds and combat clandestine marriages.' Leushuis, 'The Mimesis of Marriage', p. 1299.

contracting a marriage in the present and future tense, on the grounds that common people ‘know nothing of such nimble grammar’.¹⁷³

Pamphilus also engages with some of the patristic debates in *Courtship*. He argues for the holiness of marriage by associating it with virginity. He claims that the loss of Maria’s virginity is justified because it will produce more virgins; this argument was accepted by Jerome,¹⁷⁴ but disregarded by Saint Augustine.¹⁷⁵ He also makes what seems to be a very contradictory statement:

I want to marry a chaste girl, to live chastely with her. It will be more a marriage of minds than of bodies. We’ll reproduce for the state; we’ll reproduce for Christ. By how little will this marriage fall short of virginity! And perhaps some day we’ll live as Joseph and Mary did. But meantime we’ll learn virginity; for one does not reach the summit all at once.¹⁷⁶

The argument in favour of marriage echoes Augustine’s encouragement of the eventual cessation of marital intercourse in *De bono coniugali*, and it seems likely that Erasmus was self-consciously engaging with this patristic text. Indeed, he refers to it in his apologetic letter in defence of *Courtship*.¹⁷⁷ Pamphilus asserts a spiritual motive for embarking on marriage, the same motive that Augustine had argued reflects the devotional quality that characterised the Old Testament marriages; they were contracted in order to reproduce for Christ. Augustine, however, had also asserted that such a

¹⁷³ Luther, *On Marriage Matters*, p. 274.

¹⁷⁴ Cf. Jerome: ‘I praise wedlock, I praise marriage, but it is only because they give me virgins.’ Jerome, *Epistola XXII. Ad Eustochium*, xx, p. 30.

¹⁷⁵ Cf. Augustine: ‘Therefore no fruitfulness of the flesh can be compared with the holy virginity even of the flesh, for this is not honoured in itself as virginity, but because it is consecrated to God; and though preserved in the flesh, it is maintained by scrupulousness and devotion of the spirit. In this sense even physical virginity is spiritual, for devoted continence vows and preserves it. Just as no one abuses his body unless such evil behaviour has first been entertained in the spirit, so no one preserves chaste behaviour in the body unless chastity is implanted earlier in the spirit’; ‘Married couples ought not to equate their merits with those of celibates, even on the grounds that virgins are born from them, for this is a good of nature not of marriage’. Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, pp. 74-5; pp. 76-7

¹⁷⁶ Erasmus, *Courtship*, p. 95.

¹⁷⁷ Cf. Erasmus: ‘It is surprising indeed that a suitor, a man in love, praises marriage and says that a chaste marriage is not far short of virginity in worth, when Augustine prefers the polygamy of the patriarchs to our celibacy!’ Erasmus, *De utilitate Colloquiorum*, p. 635.

devotional motive could no longer be claimed in Christian marriage.¹⁷⁸ In addition, Augustine also argued that even those who wished to marry solely for the purpose of reproducing for Christ ought to be exhorted to remain celibate.¹⁷⁹ Pamphilus appears to refer to the two types of marital chastity. He wishes to ‘live chastely’ with Maria in marital fidelity, but also suggests that their marriage may move towards a celibate marriage. The latter, according to both Augustine and Jerome, was the most laudable form of marital chastity as it imitated virginity.¹⁸⁰ Maria, however, challenges this ideal by noting the absurdity of his suggestion: ‘What’s this I hear? Virginity to be violated in order to be learned?’¹⁸¹ Such marital chastity, advocated by patristic writers, appears to be a contradiction in terms.

As opposed to Luther’s outright condemnation of religious celibacy, Erasmus’ works demonstrate a deep ambivalence towards the Reformation debates on marriage and virginity. Even though Erasmus was careful to couch his discussions on the subject in ambiguous genres, he did not escape censure for his works which appeared to communicate Protestant arguments against perpetual virginity. Many of his works were

¹⁷⁸ Cf. Augustine: ‘Yet even the men of today (if any chance to be found) who in marriage seek and desire only that end for which marriage was instituted cannot be equated with these men of old; for in modern man the very desire for children lies in the flesh, whereas in those earlier men it lay in the spirit, for it accorded with the sacred mystery of that time. Whereas today no one of exemplary devotion seeks to have children except spiritually, in those days the role of that very devotion was to beget children physically, for the procreation of that people was the harbinger of the future, relating to the dispensation which was prophesied.’ Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, xix, pp. 37-9.

¹⁷⁹ Cf. Augustine: ‘But now, since there is a teeming abundance of spiritual kindred from all nations on every side to enter upon our holy and pure fellowship, even these zealous to be joined in marriage solely to beget children should be urged to embrace the more honourable good of continence instead.’ Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, ix, p. 23.

¹⁸⁰ Cf. Jerome: ‘I do not deny that holy women are found both among widows and those who have husbands; but they are such as have ceased to be wives, or such as, even in the close bond of marriage, imitate virgin chastity.’ Jerome, *Adversus Helvidium*, xxiii, p. 345. Cf. Augustine: ‘The better the couple are, the earlier they have begun by mutual consent to abstain from sexual intercourse – not because it has become physically impossible for them to carry out their wishes, but so that they could merit praise by prior refusal to do what they were capable of doing.’ Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, iii, p. 7.

¹⁸¹ Erasmus, *Courtship*, p. 96.

condemned and were placed on the Index of Prohibited Books. The issue was so politicised and polarised that he was unable to maintain a neutral position.¹⁸² Like Luther, Erasmus' works were influential in England, even though the Reformation there developed in a very different way.¹⁸³ Together their sustained criticism of religious celibacy, though not directly responsible for the dissolution of the monasteries, doubtless provided a certain sanction for that action.

vi. The Dissolution of the Monasteries and the Anglican Church

The Reformation and Renaissance in England are marked by issues of marriage and virginity. Henry's desire for an annulment of his marriage to Catharine of Aragon was the catalyst for the English Reformation,¹⁸⁴ and Elizabeth's virginity dominated the English Renaissance. Between the years of 1531 and 1533, Henry implemented a series of acts which paved the way for England's break with Rome. *The Act of Restraint of Appeals* (1533) provided the legal underpinning for this move, as it brought all legal disputes under the jurisdiction of the king; after this, the king cut off all financial tribute to Rome.¹⁸⁵ The schism finally came in 1534 when Henry VIII passed the Act of

¹⁸² Erasmus was increasingly under pressure to pin his colours to the mast and condemn Luther. His stand against Lutheranism in 1524 took the form of a refutation of their central doctrine of the bondage of the will: 'His own efforts to stay out of direct involvement in the controversies finally yielded to insistence by popes, prelates, and friends that he write something against Luther. He did not attack Luther personally but wrote an essay (*De libero arbitrio*, 1524) opposing Luther's doctrine of the will, a fundamental point in Lutheran teaching, as Luther himself emphasized in his reply (*De servo arbitrio*, 1525).' Thompson, 'Introduction', p. xix.

¹⁸³ Cf. Smith: 'On some of the English Reformers Luther exercised a decisive influence, notably on Cranmer. Tyndale was apparently more of a Zwinglian, at least in his Eucharistic doctrine.' Smith, 'English Opinion of Luther', p. 134.

¹⁸⁴ Cf. Warner: 'technically Henry neither sought nor, with Bishop Cranmer's eventual solution to the crisis, secured a divorce (which is the dissolution of a valid marriage) but an annulment (a decision that his marriage had been void from the beginning). This annulment was declared on the grounds that the pope could not dispense against the prohibitions in Leviticus 18: 16 and 20: 21 against a man marrying the wife of his brother (as Pope Julius II had done for Henry so that he could marry Catharine after the death of Prince Arthur).' J. Christopher Warner, *Henry VIII's Divorce: Literature and the Politics of the Printing Press* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1998), p. 5n. 7.

¹⁸⁵ An earlier *Act for the Conditional Restraint of Annates* in 1532 (23 Henry VIII, c.20) restricted the payment of annates to Rome, but this was made obsolete by the 1534 *Act Restraining the Payments of*

Supremacy, declaring himself the Supreme Head of the Anglican Church.¹⁸⁶ In 1536, for financial and political motives rather than religious conviction, the monasteries of Britain were dissolved:

The seven or eight hundred monastic communities in England possessed nearly half of the ecclesiastical wealth in the realm and had become therefore one of the mainstays of the economy. But the monastic houses, however venerable, had suffered a grievous decline in personnel – sometimes as few as four to a house. Henry VIII began dissolving the monasteries in 1536, with the money from the sale of the lands going to the crown. Their wealth tempted such an outcome; their weakness made it possible.¹⁸⁷

The suppression of the monasteries was a gradual process, which occurred over a period of about four years.¹⁸⁸ G. W. O. Woodward notes that the 1536 act was fairly restrained as it only dissolved the smaller monasteries.¹⁸⁹ He argues that the moderation of the original act seems to suggest that it was an attempt to streamline the monasteries and that it appears that at this stage the government had not yet resolved to move decisively against the monasteries. This all changed within a couple of years. Some of the larger monasteries were seized and forfeited to the crown, after which began a process of the surrendering of monasteries.¹⁹⁰ Although there is evidence of some voluntary

Annates and Concerning the Election of Bishops (25 Henry VIII, c.20), which cut off all financial payments to Rome.

¹⁸⁶ Cf. Act of Supremacy: ‘the King our Sovereign Lord, his heirs and successors, kings of this realm, shall be taken, accepted, and reputed the only Supreme Head on earth of the Church of England, called *Anglicana Ecclesia*, and shall have and enjoy, annexed and united to the imperial crown of this realm, as well the style and title thereof, as all honours, dignities, pre-eminences, jurisdictions, privileges, authorities, immunities, profits, and commodities, to the said dignity of Supreme Head of the same Church belonging and appertaining.’ *The Act of Supremacy, 1534 (26 Henry VIII c.1)*, in *Documents of the English Reformation*, ed. Gerald Bray (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co. Ltd., 1994), pp. 113-5, (pp. 113-4).

¹⁸⁷ Bard Thompson, *Humanists and Reformers: A History of the Renaissance and Reformation* (Cambridge and Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), p. 545.

¹⁸⁸ Cf. Woodward: ‘By the spring of 1540 the religious order in England and Wales were no more, and their lands, buildings, farmstock and furnishings had all passed into the hands of the crown.’ G. W. O. Woodward, *The Dissolution of the Monasteries* (London: Blandford Press, 1969 [1966]), p. 122.

¹⁸⁹ Cf. Woodward: ‘The total number of priories actually suppressed in 1536 was therefore only 243, or approximately three out of every ten religious houses throughout the country.’ Woodward, *The Dissolution of the Monasteries*, p. 68.

¹⁹⁰ Cf. Woodward: ‘In November 1537 the process of dissolution began again. The year 1536 had seen the smaller abbeys suppressed by statute. The spring of 1537 had witnessed the seizure and forfeiture of a few

submissions to the crown, the process seems mostly to have been one of coercion.

Woodward draws attention to the difference in tone between the initial reasons given for suppression of monastic foundations by statute and the arguments given for the surrender of monasteries:

The suppression act of 1536 had not attacked the monastic ideal itself, but had complained only of the failure of some of the monks and nuns to live up to the standards established by their own rules. The language of the surrender deeds went very much further when it asserted that the religious life, even when ‘right well kept and observed’ was but a vain show and ‘doth principally consist in certain dumb ceremonies’ and so should be abandoned by all right-thinking men. No mere reform of the religious orders could hope to satisfy this sort of criticism. Total abolition alone would suffice.¹⁹¹

The dissolution of the monasteries, then, although initially undertaken for different reasons, in a practical sense placed the English Reformation on an equal footing with the Continental Reformation:¹⁹² no longer was the ascetic life part of the cultural reality of England.¹⁹³ Nevertheless, despite Henry’s hostility to the Roman Church, his religious views remained deeply conservative. He accepted the Protestant programme only so far as it suited his own interests.¹⁹⁴ Therefore, even though Henry had dissolved the monasteries, this did not constitute a statement of his Protestant convictions in regard to

of the larger houses. Then, on 11 November, some seven months after the surrender of Furness, the precedent there set was repeated at Lewes in Sussex.’ Woodward, *The Dissolution of the Monasteries*, p. 107.

¹⁹¹ Woodward, *The Dissolution of the Monasteries*, p. 108.

¹⁹² Cf. Fudge: ‘The transformation or the dissolution of religious orders and convents in the wake of the Reformation was a significant social consequence of the reforms enacted by Luther and his colleagues in Germany and elsewhere.’ Fudge, ‘Incest and Lust in Luther’s Marriage’, p. 329.

¹⁹³ Cf. Woodward: ‘by turning against the religious orders, the government, whatever its real intentions may have been, appeared to be taking sides with the reformers against these particular aspects of contemporary orthodoxy. The Henrican church was not merely “Catholicism without the Pope” but also “Catholicism without pilgrimages, relics or religious orders”, and so had taken more than one significant step in the direction of Lutheranism. [...] The suppression of the religious houses, and of the practices so intimately associated with them, significantly altered the accepted pattern for subsequent changes of a much more radical nature.’ Woodward, *The Dissolution of the Monasteries*, p. 172.

¹⁹⁴ Cf. Smith: ‘Henry’s attitudes towards reform were largely influenced, though of course not entirely decided, by his position in regard to Luther – the first change, in favour of the protestants, by his desire to get the reformer’s support for his divorce from Catharine; the second, against the Lutherans, by the failure of this effort.’ Preserved Smith, ‘Luther and Henry VIII’, *The English Historical Review*, Vol. 25, No. 100 (Oct., 1910), 656-669, (p. 656).

the debate on virginity and marriage. Some priests, anticipating that Henry would legalise Nicolaitism, married.¹⁹⁵ Such men were to be disappointed, for *The Act of the Six Articles* (1539) was a clear demonstration of the king's conservatism.¹⁹⁶ These articles declared the truth of transubstantiation; that it was unnecessary for communion to be received in both kinds, i.e. the body and the blood; that priests may not marry; that vows of chastity ought to be kept; that private masses were acceptable and holy; and that auricular confession was necessary for salvation. Denial of transubstantiation was considered to be a heresy and punishable with death by burning.¹⁹⁷ Furthermore, those who still believed that communion should be taken in both kinds, or that priests or any religious persons who had taken vows of chastity ought to marry, were judged to be felons and, if sentenced, could be punished with death.¹⁹⁸

The reign of Edward VI (1547-1553) saw a greater movement towards Protestantism. In 1549 *The Act of Uniformity* made moves towards a unified liturgy with the publication of *The Book of Common Prayer*. It did not go as far as the staunch

¹⁹⁵ Cf. Bjorklund: 'Parker and others who may have hoped for the legalisation of clerical marriage during the 1530s were to be disappointed. After Henry VIII severed England's ties with papal authority and married Anne Boleyn, a growing number of clergymen anticipated the end of the Roman rule of celibacy and took wives for themselves, perhaps inspired by the example of the married Thomas Cranmer, appointed Archbishop of Canterbury in 1533.' Nancy Basler Bjorklund, "'A Godly Wyfe Is an Helper": Matthew Parker and the Defence of Clerical Marriage', *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, Vol. 34, No. 2, *Marriage in Early Modern Europe* (Summer, 2003), 347-365, (p. 350).

¹⁹⁶ Cf. Carlson: 'According to this standard view, it was Henry VIII, acting out of his own personal conservatism, who retained and defended mandatory celibacy in the first stage of the English Reformation.' Eric Josef Carlson, 'Clerical Marriage and the English Reformation', *Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (Jan., 1992), 1-31, (p. 1).

¹⁹⁷ 'Anyone persons who denied that doctrine of transubstantiation were to be 'deemed and judged heretics, and that every such offence shall be judged manifest heresy, and that every such offender and offenders shall therefore have and suffer judgement, execution, pain and pains of death by way of burning, without any abjuration, clergy or sanctuary to be therefore permitted, had, allowed, admitted, or suffered.' *The Act of the Six Articles, 1539*, in *Documents of the English Reformation*, ed. Gerald Bray (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co. Ltd., 1994), pp. 222-232, (p. 225).

¹⁹⁸ Cf. *Six Articles*: 'every offender in the same being duly convicted or attainted by the laws underwritten, shall therefore suffer pains of death as in cases of felony without any benefit of the clergy or privilege of Church or sanctuary to him or her to be allowed in that behalf, and shall forfeit all his or her lands and goods as in cases of felony.' *The Act of the Six Articles*, p. 226.

Protestants had wished, however, and so a second *Act of Uniformity* with a more overtly Protestant prayer book was introduced in 1552. The long-anticipated legislation on clerical marriage eventually came in 1549, for although clerical marriage had been approved by Convocation and the House of Commons at the end of 1547, the Lords had opposed it. The *Act to Take Away All Positive Laws Against the Marriage of Priests* (1549), however, did not whole-heartedly embrace clerical marriage in preference to celibacy. It begins with a statement which reinforces the desirability of a celibate clergy, but allowed sacerdotal marriage on the grounds that it was necessary as a remedy for fornication for those clerics who could not maintain a celibate life.¹⁹⁹ This statute, however, ignored the legal status of children born from such marriages.²⁰⁰ Yost notes that ‘another statute in 1552 removed any stigma still attached to clerical marriage and legitimised their children’,²⁰¹ but also observes that the laity were at that time hostile towards married priests.²⁰² The Edwardian reform legislation was repealed by Mary in 1553, and so Nicolaitism was again outlawed.²⁰³

¹⁹⁹ Cf. *Act to Take Away All Positive Laws*: ‘Although it were better for the estimation of priests and other ministers in the Church of God, to live chaste, sole and separate from the company of women and the bond of marriage, but also thereby they might the better attend to the administration of the Gospel, and be less intricated and troubled with the charge of household, being free and unburdened from the care and cost of finding a wife and children, and that it were most to be wished that they would willingly and of themselves endeavour themselves to a perpetual chastity and abstinence from the use of women: Yet forasmuch as the contrary has rather been seen, and such uncleanness of living and other great inconveniences not meet to be rehearsed, have followed of compelled chastity, and of such laws as have prohibited those (such persons) the godly use of marriage; it were rather to be suffered in the commonwealth that those which could not contain, should after the counsel of Scripture, live in holy marriage, than feignedly abuse with worse enormity outward chastity or single life.’ *Act to Take Away All Positive Laws Against the Marriage of Priests* (2-3 Edward VI, c.21), in *Documents of the English Reformation*, ed. Gerald Bray (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co. Ltd., 1994), pp. 279-80, (pp. 279-80). Cf. Yost: ‘Not until 1549 did Parliament finally enact a statute granting the clergy permission to marry. Yet the preamble of this statute had a conservative tone.’ Yost, ‘The Reformation Defence of Clerical Marriage’, p. 164.

²⁰⁰ Cf. Bjorklund: ‘The bill that finally legalised such marriages failed to mention the children, who now faced an uncertain legal status and questionable right to inherit property. Many people considered such offspring bastards.’ Bjorklund, ‘Matthew Parker and the Defence of Clerical Marriage’, p. 352.

²⁰¹ Yost, ‘The Reformation Defence of Clerical Marriage’, p. 164.

²⁰² Cf. Yost: ‘Nor did the popular opposition to clerical marriage disappear after its establishment in 1549. No act provoked more controversy, and the many priests, at least one fifth, who then took wives did so in

With Elizabeth's accession to the throne and consolidation of the Church of England, clerical marriage was again anticipated. Elizabeth, however, appears to have been ambivalent towards this issue. She did not reinstate the Edwardian *Act to Take Away All Positive Laws Against the Marriage of Priests*.²⁰⁴ The traditional interpretation of her reluctant acceptance of sacerdotal marriage is that she was generally hostile towards marriage. Eric Josef Carlson, however, argues that her reticence was due to problem of priests' wives who were frequently an embarrassment to the Church.²⁰⁵ He argues that:

Elizabeth I's attitude towards the marriage of the clergy is far more complex than has been recognised. Specific regulations of such unions developed from her desire to establish an ordered church worthy of popular respect and cannot simply be ascribed to a general, almost pathological distaste for marriage or quirky personal religious views.²⁰⁶

Carlson also claims that the conservatism of the clergy themselves was partly accountable for the slow progress in the acceptance of sacerdotal marriage.²⁰⁷ Elizabeth, and perhaps the more conservative clergy, was not the only one who was unconvinced about the legalisation of Nicolaitism. Most of England appears to have been conservative in its

spite of widespread popular opposition. Although ecclesiastical law had sanctioned clerical marriage, the deeply rooted conviction of the laity that it was morally and religiously improper continued to trouble the consciences of married priests.' Yost, 'The Reformation Defence of Clerical Marriage', pp. 164-5.

²⁰³ Cf. Bjorklund: 'The 1553 coronation of Mary brought transformation of status for [...] married clergy. The Edwardian laws permitting marriage of clergy having been repealed, the queen decreed on 4 March 1554 that all clergy who had married or used women as their wives were to be deprived of their benefices. Priests who again promised chastity could do penance and receive a new appointment, but first they were to be both deprived and divorced.' Bjorklund, 'Matthew Parker and the Defence of Clerical Marriage', p. 355.

²⁰⁴ Cf. Bjorklund: 'Early in her reign Elizabeth showed no eagerness to approve the status of married clergy or to reinstate the Edwardian laws legalising their marriages. Parker and his married colleagues waited in vain through the winter and spring of 1558-59.' Bjorklund, 'Matthew Parker and the Defence of Clerical Marriage', p. 357.

²⁰⁵ Cf. Eric Josef Carlson, 'Clerical Marriage and the English Reformation', *Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (Jan., 1992), 1-31.

²⁰⁶ Carlson, 'Clerical Marriage and the English Reformation', p. 2.

²⁰⁷ Bjorklund disagrees with Carlson's thesis: 'Carlson's argument is important, but his picture of the clergy's reluctance and Elizabeth's willingness to accept clerical marriage needs modification in light of contrary evidence.' Bjorklund, 'Matthew Parker and the Defence of Clerical Marriage', p. 348.

attitudes towards clerical marriage, and was deeply hostile to married priests.²⁰⁸

Nevertheless, clerical marriage was accepted by the 1559 Parliament, but the queen removed the provision from the bill.²⁰⁹ The final acceptance of clerical marriage was in 1571, when ‘the queen did accept the bill for subscription to the article and thus gave clerical marriage, again and finally, a foundation in statutory law’.²¹⁰ There were, however, restrictions placed on the priest’s choice of wife; a prospective bride was to be examined and approved by the authorities.²¹¹ The Elizabethan cultural milieu, therefore, no longer advocated religious, perpetual virginity, although priests could, of course, remain single if they wished.²¹² *The Forty-Two Articles* (1553) *The Thirty-Eight Articles* (1563) *The Thirty-Nine Articles* (1571) all make a statement that the Scriptures do not

²⁰⁸ Cf. Carlson: ‘the English people were often hostile to clerical marriage and clergy wives and children. In spite of its relatively last acceptance in England, by the early sixteenth century popular enthusiasm for clerical celibacy was unmistakable. Clerical wives were derided in ballads, and support of clerical married was tainted by its association with Lollardy.’ Carlson, ‘Clerical Marriage and the English Reformation’, p. 7. Cf. Bjorklund: ‘The status of clerical matrimony remained sufficiently insecure during Elizabeth’s reign that Parker had his hands full defending it. Not only did the queen disapprove, but also many rank-and-file parishioners, whose approbrious remarks targeted married clerics and their wives.’ Bjorklund, ‘Matthew Parker and the Defence of Clerical Marriage’, p. 360.

²⁰⁹ Cf. Carlson, ‘Clerical Marriage and the English Reformation’, p. 12.

²¹⁰ Carlson, ‘Clerical Marriage and the English Reformation’, p. 29.

²¹¹ Cf. *Injunctions*: ‘although there be no prohibition by the word of God, nor any example of the primitive church but that the priests and ministers of the church may lawfully, for the avoiding of fornication, have an honest and sober wife, and that for the same purpose the same was by act of parliament in the time of our dear brother, King Edward VI, made lawful, whereupon a great number of the clergy of this realm were then married and so yet continue: yet, because there hath grown offence and some slander to the church by lack of discreet and sober behaviour in many ministers of the church, both in choosing of their wives and in indiscreet living with them, the remedy whereof is necessary to be sought: it is thought therefore very necessary that no manner of priest or deacon shall hereafter take to his wife any manner of woman without the advice and allowance first had upon good examination by the bishop of the same diocese and two justices of the peace of the same shire [...] nor without the goodwill of the parents of the said woman if she have any living, or two of the next of her kinfolds, or for lack of knowledge of such, of her master or mistress where she serveth.’ *Announcing Injunctions for Religion*, in *Tudor Royal Proclamations*, Vol. II, ed. Paul L. Hughes and James F. Larkin (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1969), pp. 117-132, p. 125. Cf. Carlson: ‘Injunction 29 of the Royal Visitation of 1559 explicitly affirmed the lawfulness of clerical marriage’ Carlson, ‘Clerical Marriage and the English Reformation’, p. 13. See also Bjorklund, ‘Matthew Parker and the Defence of Clerical Marriage’, p. 358.

²¹² Compare Luther: ‘In saying this I do not wish to disparage virginity, or entice anyone away from virginity into marriage. Let each one act as he is able, and as he feels it has been given to him by God. I simply wanted to check those scandalmongers who place marriage so far beneath virginity.’ Luther, *The Estate of Marriage*, pp. 46-7. Cf. Luther: ‘I will advise neither for nor against marrying or remaining single. I leave that to common Christian order and to everyone’s better judgement.’ Luther, *To the Christian Nobility*, p. 177.

command anyone to abstain from matrimony, and, therefore, clerical marriage is acceptable.²¹³ The 1563 *Thirty-Nine* and the 1571 *Thirty-Eight Articles* additionally state:

Bishops, priests and deacons are not commanded by God's law to vow the estate of single life, or to abstain from marriage. Therefore it is lawful also for them, as for all other Christian men, to marry at their own discretion, as they shall judge the same to serve better to godliness.²¹⁴

Bjorklund argues that Matthew Parker was responsible for the more positive wording of the 1563 articles.²¹⁵ In addition, Carlson argues that by the mid 1560s, clerical marriage was considered to be much more acceptable. He observes:

By 1563, Foxe wrote without defensiveness, for by that date clerical marriage was securely established in the English church and was a clear sign that the *Ecclesia Anglicana* was faithful to the Gospel and the apostolic tradition.²¹⁶

Whereas at the beginning of the Reformation in England, the lay population were suspicious and hostile towards married priests, this appears to have changed during Elizabeth's reign. In fact, according to Eric Josef Carlson, there is evidence of a complete reversal in attitudes:

Not only had the laity come to tolerate clerical marriage, in some parishes they associated celibacy with heterodoxy. Hugh Tunckes of Winchester diocese

²¹³ Cf. *The Forty-Two Articles, 1553; The Thirty-eight Articles, 1563; The Thirty-nine Articles, 1571* in *Documents of the English Reformation*, ed. Gerald Bray (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co. Ltd., 1994), pp. 284-311, (pp. 303-4).

²¹⁴ *The Thirty-nine Articles, 1571* in *Documents of the English Reformation*, ed. Gerald Bray (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co. Ltd., 1994), pp. 284-311, (p. 304).

²¹⁵ Cf. Bjorklund: 'Parker used his archiepiscopal authority to install clerical marriage formally into church creed and practice. Presiding over the Convocation of 1563, he played a major role in preparing the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, which stated not only the right of clerics to be married but also the positive benefits of that choice. In these articles the negative wording of the Edwardian articles of 1553 were repeated, that no divine commandment compelled bishops, priests, and deacons to vow celibacy or abstain from marriage; the new version added the positive statement that clerics "may marry at their own discretion, as they shall judge the same to serve better to godliness". This emphatic wording implied that marriage could be preferable to the single life and placed clerical marriage on firmer ground.' Bjorklund, 'Matthew Parker and the Defence of Clerical Marriage', p. 361.

²¹⁶ Carlson, 'Clerical Marriage and the English Reformation', p. 12.

lamented in 1571, 'I am called papist and so hooted at that now I am disposed to marry'.²¹⁷

According to Carlson, lay attitudes to clerical marriage altered dramatically from the first Edwardian legislation that legalised it, to the final acceptance of it under Elizabeth. With the lay acceptance of sacerdotal marriage came the final expression of a Protestant cultural position on the subject and, therefore, celibacy was considered to be undeniably associated with Catholicism. This, however, raises an obvious problem. If from the 1570s celibacy is increasingly considered to be heretical, Elizabeth's own celibate state looks increasingly controversial. The contradictory appearance of her bodily state is compounded by the fact that the flowering of her cult of virginity did not occur until the collapse of the marriage negotiations with the Duke of Anjou in the early 1580s, and this followed a troubled decade of the 1570s after she had been excommunicated by the Catholic Church.²¹⁸ Roy Strong suggests that the intensification of Elizabeth's virginity cult at this juncture is a direct statement against the marriage match,²¹⁹ which was

²¹⁷ Eric Josef Carlson, 'Clerical Marriage and the English Reformation', *Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (Jan., 1992), 1-31, (p. 27). [cf. A. J. Willis, ed., *Winchester Consistory Court Depositions, 1561-1602* (Lyminge, Kent, 1960), pp. 4-11]

²¹⁸ David Lee Miller says of the publication of Spenser's *Shepherd's Calender*: 'The *Calender's* publication also rounds out a decade in which Elizabeth lived under the constant threat of rebellion and assassination, having been excommunicated in 1570; it was precisely during this period of heightened vulnerability that Elizabeth began to consolidate the popular ideology that made her an icon of England's divine preservation.' David Lee Miller, *The Poem's Two Bodies: The Poetics of the 1590 'Faerie Queene'* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 42.

²¹⁹ Cf. Strong: 'What is curious, however, is that this sudden celebration of the Queen's chastity as a sacred asset coincides exactly with the negotiations for the match with Anjou. The 'sieve' portraits in both formats cover precisely those years, 1579-1583, and must be seen as a statement against the marriage by means of a deliberate intensification of the mystique of chastity as an attribute essential to the success of her rule. [...] In these portraits of the years 1579-1583 we actually see the creation of the Elizabeth cult which is nothing more than tentative until the close of the 1570s.' Roy Strong, *Gloriana: The Portraits of Queen Elizabeth I* (Germany: Thames and Hudson, 1987), p. 97; p. 101. Susan Doran also argues that the virginal imagery first used to praise the queen was an attack on her marriage, but uses evidence from plays and entertainments rather than Tudor portraiture. In the 1960s, she observes, the queen was praised in marital terms instead. She argues that 'The cult [...] was an image imposed on her by writers, painters and their patrons during the Anjou marriage negotiations.' Susan Doran, 'Juno versus Diana: The Treatment of Elizabeth I's Marriage in Plays and Entertainments', *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (Jun., 1995), 257-274, (p. 274).

exceedingly unpopular because it was with a foreign Catholic.²²⁰ Paradoxically, her very virginity seems at moments to have been a symbol of Protestant resistance to Catholicism.

vii. English Treatises

Alongside translations of the treatises of Continental reformers which circulated widely from quite early on in the English Reformation,²²¹ English tracts on clerical marriage began to appear in Henry's reign. John Yost describes these as 'original English treatises devoted especially to the problem of clerical marriage'.²²² Some of these treatises demonstrate that the polarisation of the debate, which is observable on the Continent, was in evidence in England, too. Yost argues that George Joye in his *Defence of the Mariage of Preistes* (1541), written in response to *The Six Articles*,

pointed to clerical celibacy as a crucial question that involved the fundamental nature of the English Reformation. If the church in England had divorced itself from the papal church, 'why keepest thou still thy whores laws? Why so cruelly

²²⁰ Cf. Duncan Jones: 'In August 1579 the Puritan Stubbs published his fierce attack on the marriage, *The Discovery of a Gaping Gulf*. Though Sidney's *Letter* is far more restrained, there are parallels in argument and phrasing which indicate that he had read Stubbs carefully.' Katherine Duncan Jones, 'Introduction' to *A Letter Written by Sir Phillip Sidney to Queen Elizabeth, Touching her Marriage with Monsieur*, in *Miscellaneous Prose of Sir Philip Sidney*, eds. Katherine Duncan-Jones and Jan Van Dorsten (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), pp. 33-43, (pp. 33-34).

²²¹ Cf. Euler: 'Heinrich Bullinger's *Der Christlich Eestand* (1540) is the most extensive vernacular book on marriage published by a major continental Protestant reformer in the first half of the sixteenth century and was the most frequently published continental Protestant work in England during the reign of Henry VIII and Edward VI. [...] During the later sixteenth century and early seventeenth centuries, *The Christen State of Matrimonye* remained important as a major source for English domestic conduct literature.' Carrie Euler, 'Heinrich Bullinger, Marriage, and the English Reformation: "The Christen State of Matrimonye" in England, 1540-53', *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, Vol. 34, No. 2, *Marriage in Early Modern Europe* (Summer, 2003), 367-393, (pp. 367-8). Cf. Smith: 'Early in 1519 Froben exported many of Luther's writings to Britain. On May 30 of that year Erasmus wrote to Luther, 'In England there are men who think well of your writings, and they are the very greatest'. Precisely what persons Erasmus had in mind is uncertain, but quite probably he referred to John Colet, who early in 1518 had sent him the Ninety-five Theses. In 1520 we know that there were already Lutherans in London, and they continued to be a growing party until the ultimate triumph of Protestantism under Elizabeth. At an early date some students of Cambridge, among them Bilney, Arthur Ridley, Latimer, and Coverdale met at the White Horse Inn to form a Lutheran organization.' Smith, 'English Opinion of Luther', p. 133.

²²² Yost, 'The Reformation Defence of Clerical Marriage', p. 153.

fightest thou for her ceremonies, rites and this her devilish doctrine forbidding priests to marry?'²²³

For those staunch early Protestants who tried to force through a more thoroughly Protestant programme in England, continued mandatory clerical celibacy, and indeed the prioritising of celibacy over marriage, was evidence of residual papism in the country. Yost argues that out of all the English treatises, that of Robert Barnes, an influential Protestant propagandist of the 1530s and ex-Austin friar, was particularly significant:

Barnes' treatise on the right of clerical marriage published in his 1534 *Supplication* set the standard in structure and content and became the model for subsequent attacks on sacerdotal celibacy and defence of priestly marriage by English Protestants.²²⁴

Although these English treatises may well have been as influential as Yost suggests, the claim to originality seems a little thin as they appear merely to repeat Continental arguments against clerical celibacy.²²⁵ Rarely do they go beyond the arguments found in Erasmus and Luther. However, one comment of Barnes' in particular is noteworthy. Yost relates:

Barnes argued, if all persons could become chaste through prayer, the ideal would be for everyone to live a celibate life since pure chastity, from a worldly perspective, constitutes a higher estate than matrimony. In reality, however, it would be disastrous to the commonwealth for all people to strive to please God by avoiding the burdens of married life in order to become chaste through prayer and fasting. Only a traitor would try to persuade people to devote their lives to prayer and fasting. Such a teaching would destroy the royal succession, and ultimately, all subjects.²²⁶

²²³ Yost, 'The Reformation Defence of Clerical Marriage, pp. 162. Cf. George Joye, *The Defence of the Mariage of Preistes* (Auryk, 1541).

²²⁴ Yost, 'The Reformation Defence of Clerical Marriage, p. 155

²²⁵ Yost describes the arguments set forth in Barnes' treatise: 'First, he pointed out that the pope wrongly used Mosaic law to uphold clerical celibacy. [...] Second, Barnes urged the pope to grant clergy the liberty that Paul had given them. [...] Third, Barnes reiterated his strong belief in marriage primarily as a remedy for fornication. [...] Fourth, Barnes claimed that the papacy had no basis in Scripture for teaching that God was bound to grant priests the gift of chastity in response to their fasting and praying.' Yost, 'The Reformation Defence of Clerical Marriage, pp. 157-8.

²²⁶ Yost, 'The Reformation Defence of Clerical Marriage, p. 159. Cf. Barnes, *Whole Works*, pp. 338-9.

The argument that celibacy is disastrous to the human race is a stock anti-ascetic argument, stemming from the fourth-century debates. Barnes' suggestion that the urging of celibacy is a treacherous act, however, is more intriguing. The observation that celibacy is deleterious to the state because it undermines the procreative requirement needed for the royal succession strikes a chord with the concerns expressed by Parliament to Elizabeth soon after her accession to the throne. Parliament increasingly feared that if Elizabeth did not provide an heir to the throne, England could be torn apart once more by religious strife and that a Catholic monarch may rise to the English throne and throw the country back into the religious turmoil characteristic of the preceding Marian reign. Such sentiments are explicitly stated in a later petition by the Commons to Elizabeth in January 1563:

They cannot (I say) but acknowledge how your majesty hath most graciously considered the great dangers, the unspeakable miseries of civil wars: the perilous intermeddlings of foreign princes with seditions, ambitions, and factious subjects at home; the waste of noble houses; the slaughter of people; subversion of towns; intermission of all things pertaining to the maintenance of the realm; unsurety of all men's possessions, lives, and estates; daily interchange of attainders and treasons.

All these mischiefs, and infinite other, most like and evident if your majesty should be taken away from us without known heir.²²⁷

The Parliamentary letter demonstrates that they feared that her obstinate cleaving to virginity would not only presage the demise of the Tudor dynasty, but may also bring about the spiritual death of the country through a return to Catholicism. Elizabeth's virginity was not simply a personal choice, but had wide-reaching, public repercussions.

In February 1563 Elizabeth was yet again petitioned on the subject of her virginity and exhorted to marry, this time by the House of Lords. Their petition suggests

²²⁷ 'The Commons' Petition to the Queen at Whitehall, January 28, 1563', in *Elizabeth I: Collected Works*, eds. Leah S. Marcus, Janel Mueller, and Mary Beth Rose (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), pp. 72-77, (pp. 73-74).

that they believed that she had taken a vow of virginity, and therefore they attempted to discourage her from such a decision for the sake of the succession by drawing attention to past situations which they thought reflected her own spiritual dilemma:

it appeareth by histories how in times past, persons inheritable to crowns being votaries and religious, to avoid such dangers as might have happened for want of succession to kingdoms, have left their vows and monasteries and taken themselves to marriage.²²⁸

Interestingly, Parliament proffered earlier historical precedents of the breaking of monastic vows, rather than citing Protestant arguments that challenged the validity of perpetual vows. Such a move might suggest an uncertainty about Elizabeth's religious persuasions. Certainly, her perpetual chastity appeared to place her on the Catholic side of the polarised debate over marriage and virginity. Elizabeth's response to the suggestion that she had taken some form of pseudo-monastic vow, however, was terse:

And yet, by the way of one due doubt – that I am, as it were, by vow or determination bent never to trade that kind of life – pull out that heresy, for your belief is awry. For though I can think it best for a private woman, yet I do strive with myself to think it not meet for a prince. And if I can bend my liking to your need I will not resist such a mind.²²⁹

Elizabeth's language is deliberately provocative. Although she does concede that she would be willing to marry if possible, she denounces the Lords' mistaken belief that she had taken a vow of virginity as heretical. A vowed virgin is symptomatic of Catholicism, so that their suggestion has unpleasant nuances for the Protestant Queen. Nevertheless, the Lords' interpretation of Elizabeth's continued virginity indicates the problem that

²²⁸ 'The Lords' Petition to the Queen, circa February 1, 1563', in *Elizabeth I: Collected Works*, eds. Leah S. Marcus, Janel Mueller, and Mary Beth Rose (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), pp. 81-86, (pp. 82-83).

²²⁹ Elizabeth I, 'Queen Elizabeth's Answer to the Lords' Petition that She Marry, April 10, 1563, Delivered by Lord Keeper Nicholas Bacon', in *Elizabeth I: Collected Works*, eds. Leah S. Marcus, Janel Mueller, and Mary Beth Rose (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), pp.79-80, (p. 79).

Elizabeth was seen to be a troublingly Catholic figure by her apparent hostility to marriage and seeming commitment to virginity.

viii. Conclusion

The works of Erasmus and Luther not only demonstrate the challenges to the Roman Church's elevation of virginity, but also reveal the intensity of the Reformation debate on the subject. The polarisation of the Continental debate is seen increasingly in England as the dissolution of the monasteries and the legalisation of Nicolaitism fostered a cultural assumption, regardless of whether it was a true reflection of the position of the *Ecclesia Anglicana* or not,²³⁰ that the preference for perpetual celibacy and virginity was peculiar to Catholicism (and therefore heretical) and that marriage was esteemed and promoted by the Church of England in its stead. Indeed, the Council of Trent gave a clear articulation of the Catholic Church's position as it reasserted the supremacy of virginity over marriage,²³¹ and also the mandatory celibacy of priests.²³² With the increasing perception that celibacy was evidence of Catholic heresy, Elizabeth's adoption of perpetual virginity could have been misconstrued as crypto-Catholicism, and, indeed, the letter from the

²³⁰ In his *Sermon on the Lord's Prayer*, Hugh Latimer saw fit to clarify the church's position on marriage and celibacy, as it appears that there was a belief that the Anglican church out rightly condemned celibacy: 'And this is St. Paul's saying on the one as well as of the other. Therefore I will wish you not to condemn single life, but take one with the other; like as St. Paul teacheth us; not so extol the one, that we should condemn the other. For St. Paul praiseth as well single life as marriage; yea, and more too. For these that be single have more liberties to pray and serve God than the other: for they that be married have much trouble and afflictions in their bodies. This I speak, because I hear that some there be which condemn single life.' Hugh Latimer, *A Sermon on the Lord's Prayer*, in *The Library of Christian Classics*, Vol. XXVI, *English Reformers*, ed. T. H. L. Parker (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1966), pp. 331-348, (p. 335).

²³¹ Cf. Canon 10: 'If anyone says that the married state excels the state of virginity or celibacy, and that it is better and happier to be united in matrimony than to remain in virginity and celibacy, let him be anathema.' *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, p. 184.

²³² Cf. Canon 9: 'If anyone says that clerics constituted in sacred orders or regulars who have made solemn profession of chastity can contract marriage, and that the one contracted is valid notwithstanding the ecclesiastical laws or the vow and that the contrary is nothing else than a condemnation of marriage, and that all who feel that they have not the gift of chastity, even though they have made such a vow, can contract marriage, let him be anathema, since God does not refuse that gift to those who ask for it rightly, neither does he suffer us to be tempted above that which we are able [cf. I Cor. 10: 13].' *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, p. 184.

House of Lords which understood it to signify a personal vow suggests just it was read this way by some. It is worth considering, then, that her apparent ambivalence towards the legalisation of Nicolaitism may have been motivated not by an irrational hatred of marriage, but rather out of self-interest: her position may have become precarious had she facilitated such a cultural shift that left her as the sole figure of celibacy.

Elizabeth is a complex figure. On the one hand, she was the Head of the Church of England and so embodied the values of the Protestant Church in England, but at the same time physically embodied a way of life which, ideologically, was intensely associated with Catholicism. While the Church of England, and even Luther himself, did not outrightly condemn virginity, Elizabeth's virginity flew in the face of the more overt Protestant ideology which prioritised marriage over virginity. Even though Luther did allow a space for those whom God had elected to be chaste, so that Elizabeth could – and did – claim a providential aspect to her virginal chastity,²³³ her cult always looks suspiciously papist; this anxiety is evident even in Spenser's Protestant *Faerie Queene*.

²³³ Cf. Elizabeth I: 'And albeit it might please Almighty God to continue me still in this mind to live out of the state of marriage, yet it is not to be feared but He will so work in my heart and in your wisdoms as good provision by His help may be made in convenient time, whereby the realm shall not remain destitute of an heir that may be a fit governor, and peradventure more beneficial to the realm than such offspring as may come of me. For though I be never so careful of your well-doings and mind ever so to be, yet may my issue grow out of kind and become, perhaps, ungracious.' Elizabeth I, 'Queen Elizabeth's First Speech Before Parliament, February 10, 1559', in *Elizabeth I: Collected Works*, eds. Leah S. Marcus, Janel Mueller, and Mary Beth Rose (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), pp. 56-8, (p. 58).

XII. Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*

It is generally accepted that *The Faerie Queene* is an epideictic poem celebrating the virtues of Elizabeth I, especially her chastity, and that the queen is central to it.¹ Philippa Berry, for example, observes that '[t]he poem's title leads the reader to expect that Elizabeth, in her persona of the faery queen, is both the poem's chief protagonist and its principal theme'.² Spenser evokes Elizabeth at several points in the poem,³ and in the prefatory 'Letter of the Authors' he explains to Sir Walter Raleigh that

In that Faery Queene I mean glory in my generall intention, but in my particular I conceiue the most excellent and glorious person of our soueraine the Queene, and her kingdome in Faery land. And yet in some places els, I do otherwise shadow her.⁴

Spenser explicitly states in the letter that as well as in the figure of Gloriana, the faerie queene herself, Elizabeth's likeness can be found in Belphoebe, the immaculately conceived daughter of Chrysogone and foster-daughter of Diana. The two women are imagined as representations of the queen's two bodies, the public and the private.⁵

¹ David Lee Miller speaks of 'Elizabeth's crucial role in *The Faerie Queene* – where she is not just the poet's principal addressee but his principal mimetic object as well.' David Lee Miller, *The Poem's Two Bodies: The Poetics of the 1590 'Faerie Queene'* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 19.

² Philippa Berry, *Of Chastity and Power: Elizabethan Literature and the Unmarried Queen* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 155. Berry, however, continues: '[This] is difficult to reconcile, however, with the critical perspective offered in an explanatory letter addressed to Sir Walter Raleigh.' Berry, *Of Chastity and Power*, p. 155. Cf. Spenser: 'The generall end therefore of all the booke is to fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline.' Sir Edmund Spenser, 'A Letter of the Authors', in Sir Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A. C. Hamilton (Essex: Longman, 1997), pp. 737-8, (p. 737).

³ Cf. Spenser: I.Proem.2.1-9; I. Proem.4.1-9; II.Proem.4.6-9; II.Proem.5.1-5. Sir Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A. C. Hamilton (Essex: Longman, 1997). All further references to *The Faerie Queene* are to this edition and are given parenthetically in the text.

⁴ Spenser, 'A Letter of the Authors', p. 737.

⁵ For a discussion on the idea of the two bodies of the monarch in Tudor drama, see Marie Axton, *The Queen's Two Bodies: Drama and the Elizabethan Succession* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1977). A. L. Rowse queries Axton's argument that drama was suited 'to question the validity of the conceptual explanation of human behaviour'. He observes: 'So far as this relates to the question of the succession this is dubious: this, the *arcana imperii*, constituted a very sensitive area and any questioning was risky and highly restricted.' A. L. Rowse, 'Review of *The Queen's Two Bodies. Drama and the Elizabethan Succession* by Marie Axton, *The English Historical Review*, Vol. 94, No. 372 (Jul., 1979), 635-6, (p. 635).

For considering she beareth two persons, the one of a most royall Queene or Emperesse, the other of a most vertuous and beautifull Lady, this latter part in some places I doe expresse in Belpheobe.⁶

Spenser's identification of these two images of Elizabeth is explicitly repeated in the proem to Book III.⁷ Although he does not directly identify any other characters who mirror Elizabeth, his vague assertion that 'in some places els, I do otherwise shadow her' and his request that Cynthia (Elizabeth) see herself '[i]n mirrours more than one' (III.Proem.5.6) allows for the possibility of perceiving representations of the queen in other guises. Indeed, most critics accept that Elizabeth is recognisable in numerous female figures in *The Faerie Queene*,⁸ especially Una in Book I; Britomart, Elizabeth's fictional ancestor, in Books III, IV and V;⁹ and Mercilla in Book V.¹⁰

⁶ Spenser, 'A Letter of the Authors', p. 737.

⁷ Cf. Spenser: 'But either *Gloriana* let her chuse, / Or in *Belphebe* fashioned to bee: / In th'one her rule, in th'other her rare chastitie' (III. Proem.5.7-9).

⁸ Cf. Walker: 'Naming Gloriana and Belpheobe as two of these mirrors, Spenser leaves unnamed his major representation of Elizabeth – unnamed in the proem, that is, but named in the title of the book: Britomart. Neither the perpetually deferred Gloriana nor the fatherless Belpheobe with her twin sister Amoret offers as accurate a reflection of Elizabeth as does Britomart the heir of her father's kingdom and a figure of female power – not in Faerieland or on the lower slopes of Olympus, but in a male-dominated society.' Julia M. Walker, 'Spenser's Elizabeth Portrait and the Fiction of Dynastic Epic', *Modern Philology*, Vol. 90, No. 2 (Nov., 1992), 172-199, (p. 176). Cf. Lockerd: 'Spenser certainly does not offer what we would call a "rounded" character: Belpheobe is only one aspect of Elizabeth's self, Gloriana another. [...] In fact, there will be more mirrors reflecting her than the poet had told her; if she reads as he had instructed her, she may see parts of herself in Britomart and Amoret and (as Blissett has pointed out) in Astraea and the not-so-flattering image of Cynthia in the *Mutabilitie Cantos* – or even in *Mutabilitie* herself.' Benjamin G. Lockerd Jr., *The Sacred Marriage: Psychic Integration in 'The Faerie Queene'* (London and Toronto: Associated University Press, 1987), p. 66. Cf. Freeman: 'What the Queen meant to her subjects is reflected in "mirrors more than one". Gloriana and Belpheobe represent her royalty and her virginity; Mercilla recalls her hesitation over the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots; and when we remember how she rode through the troop at Tilbury "like some Amazonian Empress", the descriptions of Britomart and Radigund gain renewed point.' Rosemary Freeman, *Edmund Spenser* (London, New York and Toronto: Longmans, Green & Co., 1957), pp. 30-1.

⁹ Cf. Spenser III.iv.3.1-9. Cf. Quilligan: 'Spenser's direct addresses to female readers are far more numerous in Book III than elsewhere throughout the poem. Here, too, he addresses the queen directly within the body of the narrative rather more often than in other books, because Britomart is presented as the founder of Elizabeth's line, the one in whom she is to see the warlike puissance of antique women, while, Spenser tells her directly, "of all wisdom be thou the precedent".' Maureen Quilligan, 'The Gender of the Reader and the Problem of Sexuality [in Books III and IV]', in *Critical Essays on Edmund Spenser*, ed. Mihoko Suzuki (New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1996), pp. 133-151, (p. 135). Cf. Villeponteaux: 'It is Britomart who is the hero of book 3, and she has traditionally been regarded as a reflection of Elizabeth I. However, to present Britomart as representative of the queen and her chastity is awkward since Britomart, unlike Elizabeth, is only a temporary virgin; Britomart is destined to marry, and in history her importance

The tendency to distinguish several versions of the queen is partly due to the seeming incongruity between the centrality of Elizabeth to the poem and the absence of Gloriana.¹¹ The point at which Gloriana is most visible in the poem is in Arthur's erotic dream, a spectral and somewhat dubious appearance.¹² Likewise, Belphoebe's role in *The Faerie Queene* is limited. She is more visible than Gloriana, but she occupies only side narratives in Books II, III and IV; she is not the central figure despite apparently symbolising Elizabeth's main virtue of virginal chastity.¹³ Significantly, as well as identifying figures of Elizabeth in the proem of Book III, Spenser conveys his inability to articulate an adequate representation of the queen in the poem:

But liuing art may not least part expresse,
Nor life-resembling pencill it can paint,
All were it *Zeuxis* or *Praxiteles*:
His *dædale* hand would faile, and greatly faint,
And her perfections with his error taint:
Ne Poets wit, that passeth Painter farre

will lie not so much in her martial prowess as in her "wombe's burden", since according to Merlin she will bear a child who will be the first in a long line of British monarchs culminating in Elizabeth I herself.' Mary Villeponteaux, 'Displacing Feminine Authority in *The Faerie Queene*', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 35, No. 1, *The English Renaissance* (Winter, 1995), 53-67, (p. 54). Cf. Walker: 'Spenser [...] produced perhaps the greatest portrait of Elizabeth's reign: Britomart in *The Faerie Queene*. Spenser's Elizabeth portrait surpasses all the painted panels, however richly encoded with meanings, because through the force of the epic narrative it can present a changing image, one confronted by physical and political realities and altered by these confrontations.' Walker, 'Spenser's Elizabeth Portrait and the Fiction of Dynastic Epic', pp. 172-4.

¹⁰ Contemporary readings saw the shadow of Elizabeth in Mercilla. James I interpreted the scene of the condemnation and execution of Duessa as an allegorical allusion to the execution of his mother: 'In November, 1596, Robert Bowes, the English ambassador in Scotland, wrote to Burleigh on behalf of King James, protesting against the public affront offered against the memory of Queen Mary in *The Faerie Queene* and demanding the prosecution of its author, despite the privilege under which his book had been published.' B. E. C. Davis, *Edmund Spenser: A Critical Study* (New York: Russell and Russell inc., 1962), p. 52.

¹¹ Cf. Davis: 'Gloriana is too obscure a figure to stand as the sole representation of her original, the reigning monarch whose several attributes, accordingly fall to others – truth to Una, virginity to Belphoebe, benevolent justice to Mercilla, commanding sword and sabre yet willing to show mercy to her fallen foe.' Davis, *Edmund Spenser: A Critical Study*, p. 71.

¹² Cf. Spenser, I.ix.14.1-9 and I.ix.16.1-4.

¹³ Cf. Horton: 'As virginal chastity Belphoebe images a concept less comprehensive than that of the moral character of the Queen. Indeed, her significance is more limited than Britomart's for it requires the complementation of married chastity, shown in Amoret, to fill out the idea of chastity imagined in Britomart.' Ronald Arthur Horton, *The Unity of 'The Faerie Queene'* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1978), p. 159.

In picturing the parts of beautie daint,
 So hard a workmanship aduenture darre,
 For fear through want of words her excellence to marre. (III.Proem.2.1-9)

Painting cannot sufficiently represent the ‘excellence’ of the queen, nor indeed can poetry, which surpasses the art of the painter. Because the most accomplished poets fail to articulate the perfection of the queen adequately, she must be content with the faulty shadows created by Spenser, a mere ‘Apprentice of the skill’ (III.Proem.3.1):

sith that choicest wit
 Cannot your glorious pourtraict figure plaine
 That I in colourd showes may shadow it,
 And antique praises vnto present persons fit. (III.Proem.3.6-9)

Judith H. Anderson claims that there is a shift in expression here, compared with that of earlier proems.¹⁴ However, Spenser’s use of the phrase ‘antique praises’ recalls the ‘antique Image’ that mirrors Elizabeth’s ‘great auncestry’ in the proem of Book II (II.Proem.4.9). Also, the ‘colourd showes’ which cannot figure Elizabeth’s portrait plainly echoes Spenser’s plea for the sovereign’s pardon because he had hidden her glory ‘in couert vele, and wrap[ped it] in shadowes light’ (II.Proem.5.2). Proem III, however, does dwell more on the poem’s failure to picture Elizabeth because it is the book which contains the most versions of her.

With regard to Spenser’s claim to be unable to represent the queen, Elizabeth J. Bellamy, in a Derridian reading of *The Faerie Queene*, argues that the poem’s ‘ultimate quest is the poet’s unsuccessful effort to nominate Elizabeth’.¹⁵ This assertion, however,

¹⁴ Cf. Anderson: ‘The poem here [in Proem III] becomes a slightly compromised “coloured show” that can only shadow the Queen’s “glorious pourtraict” and tailor antique praises to present persons, a “fit” that sounds neither so natural nor so close as the continuity of bright reflections in Proems I and II. The Poem becomes the glass through which the living sovereign’s true portrait is somewhat obscurely seen.’ Judith H. Anderson, “‘In liuing colours and right hew’: The Queen of Spenser’s Central Books’, in *Critical Essays on Edmund Spenser*, ed. Mihoko Suzuki (New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1996), pp. 168-182, (pp. 170-1).

¹⁵ Elizabeth J. Bellamy, ‘The Vocative and the Vocational: The Unreadability of Elizabeth in *The Faerie Queene*’, *ELH*, Vol. 54, No. 1 (Spring, 1987), 1-30, (p. 1).

assumes that Derrida's theory is a universal truth about the very nature of writing.

Bellamy avers:

If, as Derrida claims, every written text has its origin in the vocative, in the writer's desire to achieve the perfect union of Speaking and Being, then the process of continued writing is testimony to the writer's failure to close off the equivocality of language.¹⁶

No writer, least of all Renaissance writers who were intrigued by art and artifice, would be under the illusion that it were possible to 'achieve the perfect union of Speaking and Being' through writing, and certainly no one could confuse *The Faerie Queene* with a realist text. Bellamy's premise also assumes that closing off the equivocality of language is desirable, and that the aim of the writer is always to achieve a certain transparency of meaning. *The Faerie Queene*, however, is deeply, and deliberately, ambiguous. Far from demonstrating a failure in Spenser's writing, or in the act of writing itself, the articulation of Elizabeth's ineffability is at once a rhetorical commonplace,¹⁷ but also provides an excuse for the politically expedient elusiveness necessary in representing a monarch such as Elizabeth. The poem's ambiguity is seen most clearly in the figures of Belphoebe and Britomart in the third book of *The Faerie Queene*, the book in which Spenser ostensibly praises Elizabeth's most prominent virtue; in the chastity-testing emblems of the Squire

¹⁶ Bellamy, 'The Vocative and the Vocational', p. 1.

¹⁷ Spenser, for instance, uses the rhetoric of the ineffability of the divine when he describes the heavenly Jerusalem in Book I: 'From thence, far off he vnto him did shew / A litle path, that was both steepe and long, / Which to a goodly Citie led his vew; / Whose wals and towres were builded high and strong / Or perle and precious stone, that earthly tong / Cannot describe, nor wit of man can tell; / Too high a ditty for my simple song; / The Citie of the great king hight it well, / Wherein eternall peace and happinesse doth dwell' (I.x.55.1-9). Lockerd suggests that 'Along with flattery and self-abasement, Spenser is asserting here that poetry should not attempt to "picture" the world in a straightforward realistic way at all. At first glance, he is simply putting himself below other poets but a closer reading reveals that he is making a distinction between two kinds of poetry – that which would attempt to "figure plaine" Elizabeth's "glorious pourtraict" on the one hand and his "coloured shewes" that will "shadow it" on the other.' Lockerd, *The Sacred Marriage*, p. 65. Lewis emphasised that one should not mistake Spenser's self-deprecation for a deprecation of the poetic form: 'Spenser is no dilettante, and has a low opinion of the painter's art as compared with his own.' C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1958[1932]), p. 314.

of Dames and the Girdle of Venus in Book IV, both of which prove to be unreliable indicators of chastity; and in Britomart's visionary experience at the Temple of Isis in the fifth book. All three books are caught up in the problem of redefining and representing a Protestant chastity distinct from its Catholic counterpart.

i. Book III: The Legend of Chastity and Belphoebe

According to patristic tradition, there are three types of chastity: virginal chastity, chaste widowhood and marital chastity.¹⁸ Virginitie is the highest virtue, widowhood the second most laudable and marital chastity the lowest.¹⁹ At the outset, the type of chastity depicted in Book III appears to be self-evident. Spenser himself writes in the Proem that

It falls me here to write of Chastity,
That fairest vertue, farre aboue the rest;
For which what needs me fetch from *Faery*
Forreine ensamples, it to haue exprest?
Sith it is shrined in my Soueraines brest. (III. Proem.1.1-5)

By specifically associating the chastity explored in Book III with the virtue that is 'shrined' in the person of Queen Elizabeth, Spenser appears to be identifying virginitie as the type of chastity that he is writing about. The allocation of chastity as 'the fairest vertue, farr aboue the rest', conforming as it does to a traditional, Catholic rhetoric of virginitie, appears to confirm this assumption.²⁰ It is notable that Spenser relies on the Catholic tradition, rather than following the Protestant reformers, who challenged the

¹⁸ Hankins notes a two-fold understanding of chastity in a sixteenth-century text: 'In *A Treatise of Morall Philosophie* [1549], William Baldwin defines chastity: "Chastitie and puritie of lyfe, consisteth eyther in sincere virginitie, or in faithfull matrimonie. The first degree of chastity is pure virginitie; ye second faithful matrimonye.'" John Erskine Hankins, *Source and Meaning in Spenser's Allegory: A Study of 'The Faerie Queene'* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 148.

¹⁹ Chaste widowhood is not discussed in the book. William Baldwin's *A Treatise of Morall Philosophie* (see footnote 18 above), also does not appear to recognise this level of chastity.

²⁰ Saint Aldhelm's seventh-century treatise, for example, is an English medieval treatise on virginitie which continues to express the pre-eminence of virginitie as the highest virtue and also associates it with monarchic symbols: 'among the other ranks of the virtue it is singled out to wield the sceptre of the highest sovereignty and the sway of government.' Saint Aldhelm, *De virginitate*, VII, in *Aldhelm: The Prose Works*, trans. Michael Lapidge and Michael Herren (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, Rowman and Littlefield, 1979), pp. 59-135, (p. 63).

belief in the pre-eminence of virginity, both in its superiority to marriage and its claim to be the highest virtue.²¹ The Diana-like figure of Belpheobe, whom Spenser had identified with Elizabeth's private body in the 'Letter' and the proem of Book III, represents virginal chastity in the book.²² Her twin sister, Amoret, whose plight at the Castle of Busyrane in canto xii forms the finale of the book,²³ is generally considered to stand for some form of chaste love.²⁴ C. S. Lewis, for instance, comments that 'the twins Amoret

²¹ Cf. Luther: 'And what is even more scandalous, they have selected only three out of all these many things just obedience, poverty and chastity. The rest of the counsels they neither vow nor keep.' Martin Luther, *The Judgement of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows* (1521), trans. James Atkinson, in *Luther's Works*, Vol. XLIV, *The Christian in Society I*, ed. James Atkinson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), pp. 243-400, (p. 265).

²² Cf. Hankins: 'In her representation of virginity, Belpheobe represents the "highest stayre" or first degree of chastity and womanhood. Yet Spenser must not be taken as urging all ladies to remain virgins for ever; he is urging them to remain virgins until they have married. Their chastity is then that of the second degree, or "faithful matrimonie". Those who undertake the "maiden pilgrimage" for religious or patriotic or idealistic reasons are deserving of special honour; and foremost among these was Queen Elizabeth. Her continued virginity seems to have inspired a secular cult of virginity paralleling the religious adoration of the Virgin Mary.' Hankins, *Source and Meaning in Spenser's Allegory*, p. 148.

²³ In accordance with the scheme of Books I and II, which have a climactic ending in a final battle with a vice that opposes the titular virtue, critics have attempted to read Britomart through her final confrontation with Busyrane. In *The Allegory of Love*, Lewis interpreted Busyrane as courtly love, which stood in opposition to married love [Cf. Lewis, *Allegory of Love*, p. 298]. Silberman has suggested that Amoret's problem is that she does not conform to the Petrarchan conventions and argues that Amoret is being punished because she will not deny Scudamour her sexual favours; she does not conform to the Petrarchan 'cruel mistress' [Silberman, 'Singing Unsung Heroines', pp. 140-1]: Critics frequently interpret Amoret's problem as fear of marriage or even unbridled sexuality, but it makes more sense to see her as the lady who says yes and thereby incurs the animosity of the Petrarchan Busirane' (Silberman, *Transforming Desire*, p. 63). For many years, Thomas Roche provided the most accepted interpretation of Amoret's fault. He suggested that 'Amoret is afraid of the physical surrender which her marriage to Scudamour must entail.' (Thomas P. Roche, Jr., 'The Challenge to Chastity: Britomart at the House of Busyrane', *PMLA*, Vol. 76, No. 4 (Sep., 1961), 340-344, p. 342). Roche's interpretation, therefore, suggests a negative attitude towards extreme chastity or a misplaced virginity, and prioritising marriage and fertility above sexual renunciation. Tonkin seems to follow Roche's interpretation: 'At the conclusion of Book III, Britomart does battle against the fears associated with sexual love, converting the definition of chastity from mere resistance to sex to an awareness of the power of generation.' Tonkin, *The Faerie Queene*, p. 143. Rufus Wood reads the episode as a rejection of unproductive virginity: 'the end of Book III thus envisages the freeing of fertile love from a sterile perversion of chastity.' Rufus Wood, *Metaphor and Belief in 'The Faerie Queene'* (Hampshire and London: Macmillan, 1997), p. 100. Conversely, John Erskin Hankins suggested that Amoret's torture represented the sexual perversions which dwell in a woman's soul, which chastity must overcome [Cf. Hankins, p. 157, p. 159, and pp. 162-3]. Hough's argues: 'There is no question of Amoret's being disloyal to Scudamour or being possessed by another love. [...] Scudamour and Amoret are true lovers, but they are by nature purely erotic lovers, and Eros in itself, besides its sweetness, contains an element of threat and fear.' Hough, *A Preface to 'The Faerie Queene'*, p. 175.

²⁴ Cf. Hankins: 'Amoret is womanhood, sister of Belpheobe, or maidenhood. As Belpheobe represents love without coition, Amoret represents love with coition, the physical side of wedded love.' Hankins, *Source and Meaning in Spenser's Allegory*, p. 155. Cf. Padelford: 'Amoret is made the special embodiment of

and Belpheobe represent Spenser's view that there are two kinds of chastity, both heaven-born'.²⁵ Lewis' observation implies that the book gives equal weight to these two types of chastity. However, this is not the case.

Belpheobe features in a total of five cantos of *The Faerie Queene*. She suddenly emerges from the forest in Book II, and disappears just as suddenly as Braggadocchio, consumed with 'filthy lust', attempts to rape her while she is speaking to him.²⁶ She is not named in this first encounter, but it is here that the fullest physical description of her is given, even though Spenser yet again declares his inability to portray her adequately.²⁷

She appears to be

A goodly Ladie clad in hunters weed,
That seemd to be a woman of great worth,
And by her stately portance, borne of heauenly birth. (II.iii.21.7-9)

The description of Belpheobe is partly based on classical descriptions of Diana, which is not surprising considering that in *The Faerie Queene* she is the foster-daughter of Diana and appears in the guise of one of her nymphs. As Lotspeich notes,²⁸ the references to her 'sharpe bore-speare' (II.iii.29.1), 'bow and quiuer' (II.iii.29.2), 'gilden buskins' (II.iii.27.3) and 'yellow lockes crisped, like golden wyre' (II.iii.30.1) derive from the description of Diana when she is undressing for her bath in the Actaeon episode in Ovid's

grace and charm, Belpheobe, of chastity, and Florimell, of beauty.' F. M. Padelford, 'The Women in Spenser's Allegory of Love' *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Jan., 1917), 70-83, (p. 72).

²⁵ Lewis, *The Allegory of Love*, pp. 345-6.

²⁶ Cf. Spenser: 'the foolish man, filld with delight / Of her sweet words, that all his sence dismayd, / And with her wondrous beautie rauisht quight, / Gan burne in filthy lust, and leaping light, / Thought in his bastard armes her to embrace' (II.iii.42.2-6).

²⁷ Cf. Spenser: 'How shall frail pen describe her heauenly face, / For feare through want of skill her beautie to disgrace?' (II.iii.25.8-9).

²⁸ Cf. Henry Gibbons Lotspeich, *Classical Mythology in the Poetry of Edmund Spenser* (New York: Gordian Press, 1965), pp. 53-4.

Metamorphoses.²⁹ Focusing as they do on parts of the female body, the descriptions also have Petrarchan overtones:³⁰

And in her cheekes the vermeill red did shew
 Like roses in a bed of lillies shed,
 The which ambrosiall odours from them threw,
 And gazers sense with double pleasure fed,
 Hable to heale the sicke, and to reuiue the ded. (II.iii.22.5-9)

Alongside the classical and Petrarchan allusions in the description of Belphoebe sit more traditional, religious associations of virginity. The roses and lilies, for instance, which describe Belphoebe's blushing cheeks, are not just Petrarchan commonplaces, but are also flowers traditionally associated with the Blessed Virgin Mary. Although, Belphoebe's powers 'to heale the sicke' and 'reuiue the ded' seem more to echo Christ's divine powers, they still add to a religious sense of virginity. In the text, virginity is explicitly said to have descended from heaven,³¹ and Belphoebe's heavenly purity is described in terms which suggest the immaculate purity of the Blessed Virgin and the traditional association of the consecrated virgin with the *vita angelica*:

Her face so faire as flesh it seemed not,

²⁹ Cf. Ovid: 'On this occasion she made her entrance and handed her javelin, quiver and slackened bow to the chosen nymph who carried her weapons. Another put out her arms to receive her dress as she stripped it off. Two more were removing her boots, while Crocale, more of an expert, gathered the locks that were billowing over her mistress' neck in a knot, though her own stayed floating and free.' Publius Ovidius Naso, *Metamorphoses*, 3.163-170, trans. David Raeburn (London: Penguin, 2004).

³⁰ Cf. Williams: 'Belphoebe has her connections, clearly, with that exaggerated adoration and idealisation which was one aspect of the literary tradition which has come to be called Petrarchan.' Kathleen Williams, *Spenser's 'Faerie Queene: A World of Glass* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), p. 102. The verse 'A Vision vpon this concept of the *Faery Queene*' suggests that Spenser has outstripped Petrarch: 'Me thought I saw the graue, where *Laura* lay, / [...] And suddenly I saw the Faery Queene: / At whose approach the soule of *Petrarke* wept, / And from thenceforth those graces were not seene. / For they this Queene attended, in whose steed / Obluion laid him downe on *Lauras* herse: hereat the hardest stones were seene to bleed, / And grones of buried ghostes the heauens did perse. / Where *Homers* spright did tremble all for grieffe, / And curst th'accesse of that celestiall theife.' 'A Vision vpon this concept of the *Faery Queene*', in Sir Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A. C. Hamilton (Essex: Longman, 1997), p. 739.

³¹ Cf. Spenser: 'Eternall God in his almighty powre, / To make ensample of his heauenly grace, / In Paradize whilome did plant this flowre, / Whence he it fetcht out of her natiue place, / And did in stocke of earthly flesh enrace, / That mortall men her glory should admire: / In gentle Ladies brest, and bounteous race / Of woman kind it fairest flowre doth spire, / And beareth fruit of honour and all chast desire' (III.v.52.1-9).

But heauenly pourtraict of bright Angels hew,
 Cleare as the skie, withouten blame or blot,
 Through goodly mixture of complexions dew; (II.iii.22.1-4)

Not only does Belphoebe's spotlessness carry a reminder of Mary, but it also draws on the imagery of the spouse in the Cantic of Canticles.³² Lockerd suggests that the simile describing her 'daintie paps' which are 'like young fruit in May / Now little gan to swell' (II.iii.29.7-8) implies that she is on the cusp of womanhood.³³ His suggestion would categorise Belphoebe as a natural virgin, the definition of the virgin of the classical rather than Christian world, and thus may disassociate her from the more overt religious implications of virginity. The description, however, may also be another allusion to Canticles.³⁴ Kathleen Williams comments on this mingling of the Petrarchan and biblical imagery:

She is described partly in a literary style, sonneteer's language, the kind of hyperbolic imagery identified with 'Petrarchism', interwoven with memories of the sensuous cadences of the Song of Songs.³⁵

This rich blend of images continues in the description of Belphoebe's speech: her 'Sweet words, like dropping honny' (II.iii.24.7) recalls the honied speech of the spouse in Canticles.³⁶ Williams' understanding that the images from Canticles provide an erotic tinge to the portrayal of Belphoebe is not incompatible with descriptions of virginal purity. The traditional understanding of Canticles is as an allegory of the spiritual marriage between Christ and His Church (ecclesial or pneumatic interpretation), or Christ and the Christian soul (psychic interpretation), but it was also used to describe the

³² Cf. Canticles: 'Thou art fair, O my love, and there is not a spot in thee' (Canticles 4: 7).

³³ Cf. Lockerd: 'Belphoebe as a personification of Elizabeth's "rare chastity" (3.Pr.5), is fixed (perhaps forever) at a moment between childhood and puberty.' Lockerd, *The Sacred Marriage*, p. 128.

³⁴ Cf. Canticles: 'How beautiful art thy breasts, my sister, my spouse! Thy breasts are more beautiful than wine, and the sweet smell of thy ointments above all aromatical spices' (Canticles 4: 10).

³⁵ Williams, *Spenser's Faerie Queene: A World of Glass*, p. 48.

³⁶ Cf. Canticles: 'Thy lips, my spouse, are as a dropping honeycomb, honey and milk are under thy tongue' (Canticles 4:11).

marriage of Christ and His consecrated virgin (ascetic interpretation).³⁷ This association of Belphoebe with an ascetic interpretation of Canticles is perhaps notable as, although the traditional ecclesial and psychic interpretations of Canticles continued to be acceptable to Protestant exegetes, there was a hostility towards any monastic interpretations.³⁸

Belphoebe as a 'glorious mirrhour of celestially grace' (II.iii.25.6) reflects the Neo-Platonic strain in the virginity tradition, which originates in Gregory of Nyssa's *De Virginitate* and describes virginity as a mirror reflecting the perfection of God.³⁹ The text also describes Belphoebe's virginity as the 'soueraine moniment of mortall vowes' (II.iii.25.7), which appears to be an allusion to the vowing of virginity. Such an implication creates an uneasy tension between Belphoebe and the queen, particularly in the context of the Protestant attitude towards the taking of vows, especially vows of

³⁷ Jerome's *Epistola XXII. Ad Eustochium* in particular is known for its use of the erotic imagery from Canticles, which, to a modern audience, can seem incongruous to his theme.

³⁸ Cf. Scheper: 'Martin Luther devised the completely unique allegorical interpretation that the Song was Solomon's praise of and thanksgiving for a happy and peaceful realm. But most Protestants rejected such unconventional allegorisation in favour of the traditional reading that saw the Song as a dialogue between Christ and the Church or the faithful soul. [...] To be sure, the Protestant commentaries almost uniformly adopt a primarily ecclesial allegory, with the tropological dimension as a valid application. [...] Nevertheless, the Protestant commentaries are distinctly Protestant in opposing what they called papist and monkish interpretations, that is, allegorisations that reflect the ecclesiastical structures of the Catholic Church or the monastic milieu (e.g., the enclosed garden as the monastic cloister), replacing them with allegorisations reflecting Protestant ecclesiastical structure, vocabulary, and doctrine (such as justification by faith or the imputed righteousness of Christ).' George C. Scheper, 'Reformation Attitudes towards Allegory and the Song of Songs', *PMLA*, Vol. 89, No. 3 (May, 1974), 551-562, (p. 557).

³⁹ Cf. Gregory of Nyssa: 'In like manner, then, as this air round the earth is forced upwards by some blast and changes into the pure splendour of the ether, so the mind of man leaves this miry world, and under the stress of the spirit becomes pure and luminous in contact with the true and supernal Purity; in such an atmosphere it even itself emits light, and is filled with radiance, that it becomes itself a Light [...] We see this even here, in the case of a mirror, or a sheet of water, or any smooth surface that can reflect the light; when they receive the sunbeam they beam themselves; but they would not do this if any stain marred their pure and shining surface.' Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginitate*, xi, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. V, *Select Writings and Letters of Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic treatises etc.*, trans. William Moore and Henry Austin Wilson, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995 [1893]), p. 356.

virginity.⁴⁰ Although Spenser uses traditional, or antique (as he might describe it) imagery in his description of Belphoebe, his emphasis on the classical form of virginity in the person of Diana further unsettles the representation of virginity in the poem. Whereas the Church Fathers had attempted to disassociate Christian virginity from classical virginity,⁴¹ the combination of the two in Elizabeth's virgin cult, seen here in Belphoebe, collapses the difference so as to undermine the patristic ideal of Christian virginity.⁴²

The merging of Christian and classical imagery is evident, too, in the birth of Belphoebe and her twin sister Amoret. They are born from a virgin birth and, furthermore, their mother bore without birth pangs:

⁴⁰ Cf. Luther: 'There is no doubt that the monastic vow is in itself a most dangerous thing because it is without the authority and example of Scripture. Neither the early Church nor the New Testament knows anything at all of the taking of this kind of vow, much less do they approve of a lifelong vow of very rare and remarkable chastity.' Luther, *The Judgement of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows*, p. 252. Cf. Luther: 'No vow of any youth or maiden is valid before God, except that of a person in one of the three categories which God alone has himself excepted. Therefore priests, monks, and nuns are duty-bound to forsake their vows whenever they find that God's ordinance to produce seed and to multiply is strong within them. They have no power by any authority, law, command, or vow to hinder this which God has created within them. If they do hinder it, however, you may be sure that they will not remain pure but inevitably besmirch themselves with secret sins or fornication.' Martin Luther, *The Estate of Marriage* (1522), in *Luther's Works*, Vol. XLV, *The Christian in Society II*, trans. and ed. Walther I. Brandt, Gen ed. Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1962), pp. 11-50, (p. 19).

⁴¹ Cf. Chrysostom: 'The Jews disdain the beauty of virginity and this is not astonishing because they have dishonoured Christ himself, born of a virgin. The Greeks admire it in amazement, but only the Church of God praises it.' John Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, in *On Virginity; Against Remarriage*, trans. Sally Rieger Shore (Lomsten, Lampeter and Queenston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1983), pp. 1-128, (p. 1). Cf. Athanasius: 'nothing has ever been heard among the Greeks or the non-Greeks about virginity, nor has it ever been possible for such virtue to exist among them. Indeed, they are completely ignorant of God, who has given grace to those who believe in him righteously.' Athanasius, *First Letter to Virgins*, iv, trans. David Brakke, in David Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 274-291, (p. 275).

⁴² Berleth notes the confusion of images that cluster around Belphoebe: 'Associated with Diana, Venus, the Virgin, and Gloriana, it is little wonder that Belphoebe has been thought a political gesture, a true type of Christian virginity, a stage in Britomart's growth to Womanhood, a platonic Venus, and most remarkably of late "a surrogate of the moon-goddess, Phoebe".' Richard J. Berleth, 'Heavens Favourable and Free: Belphoebe's Nativity in *The Faerie Queene*', *ELH*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (Winter, 1973), 479-500, (p. 480). Montrose asserts that, 'The history of the Elizabethan cult of royal virginity is almost coterminous with Spenser's career as a poet; and Spenser's poetry was, of course, a part of that history, simultaneously elaborating its tropes and destabilising them.' Louis Montrose, 'Spenser and the Elizabethan Political Imaginary', *EHL*, Vol. 69, No. 4 (Winter, 2002), 907-946, p. 917.

[Chrysogone] Who in her sleepe (a wondrous thing to say)
 Vnwares had borne two babes, as faire as springing day. (III.vi.26.8-9)
 Vnwares she them conceiu'd, vnwares she bore:
 She bore withouten paine, that she conceived
 Withouten pleasure. (III.vi.27.1-3)

The allusion to the Virgin Birth and Mary's freedom from the pain of childbirth is unmistakable,⁴³ even though the story of the immaculate conception of the twins is taken from the classical myth of the rape of Danaë:⁴⁴

The sunne-beames bright vpon her body playd,
 Being through former bathing mollifide,
 And pierst into her wombe, where they embayd
 With so sweet sense and secret power vnspide,
 That in her pregnant flesh they shortly fructifide. (III.vi.7.1-9)

If Amoret represents Christian marriage, which is born alongside Christian virginity, then Chrysogone's virgin birth can be seen to have associations with the tradition of virginity, as the advent of Christ ushers in both of these estates and they both spring from the same seed. Spenser's syncretic approach to religious imagery, however, constantly troubles the meaning of the text; in the case of the Danaë myth, this is even more problematic as in Book III Spenser includes the myth in the 'Tapets' of the Castle of Busyrane,⁴⁵ which depict 'love' and 'lusty-hed' (III.xi.29.3) and '*Cupids warres*' and '*cruell battels*' (III.xi.29.5-6). Such associations undermine the chaste associations of Chrysogone's

⁴³ Cf. Berleth: 'While few now deny that Belphoebe is in part Elizabeth, a simple identification at this point in the poem raises more questions than it answers, for in Canto vi, where Chysogonee's miraculous impregnation is recounted, the historical identification becomes impossible, if not blasphemous, to maintain.'; 'Her conception and advent parody the Christian mystery, and could easily offend were they not transformed into metaphor by the vehicle of judicial astrology, the science of nativities familiar to many sixteenth-century readers.' Berleth, 'Heavens Favourable and Free', pp. 479-80; p. 481. Cf. Weatherby: 'Such symbolism suggests that even as Spenser was writing a legend of married chastity, he was not only countenancing but perhaps giving spiritual superiority to a chastity which knows nothing of marriage and to a mode of procreation innocent of *eros*.' Weatherby, *Mirrors of Celestial Grace*, p. 199.

⁴⁴ Cf. Ovid: 'he stole fair Danaë's love in a shower of gold.' Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 6.113.

⁴⁵ Cf. Spenser: 'Soone after that into a golden showre / Him selfe he chaun'd faire *Danaë* to vew, / And through the roofe of her strong brasen towre / Did raine into her lap an hony dew, / The whiles her foolish garde, that little knew / Of such deceit, kept th'yron dore fast bard, / And watcht, that none should enter nor issew; / Vaine was the watch, and bootlesse all the ward, / Whenas the God to golden hew him selfe transfard' (III.xi.31.1-9).

parturition and the symbolism of the twin sisters. Hankins also notes that nowhere in Book III does Spenser associate Amoret with marriage. It is only in Book IV that Amoret is said to have been ravished from her wedding. In this edition, which was printed in 1596, Spenser had excised the more erotic ending of Book III, and Book IV begins with a lament that his 'looser rhymes' in the 1590 edition had been criticised.⁴⁶ This insistence on Amoret's marital status, Hankin argues, appears to be an attempt to correct the apparent sexual looseness of the earlier edition. In both editions, however, Amoret is only identified with 'womanhood' as opposed to Belphoebe's 'maidenhood',⁴⁷ so that whatever links they have with a religiously defined chastity are tempered by their nomenclature.

Belphoebe's association with Elizabeth is made explicit in the Timias Episode in Book III, which is a clear historical allegory concerned with the queen's dealings with Raleigh.⁴⁸ Certain details, such as the reference to the tobacco plant in Book III,⁴⁹ confirm the allegory, as does the conclusion of the story in Book IV's narration of Raleigh's fall

⁴⁶ Cf. Hankins: 'That the original ending of Book III was in fact the target of criticism by Burleigh and others seems to be indicated by the fact that Spenser omitted it in the second edition (1596). Instead of being reunited with Scudamour, Amoret finds that he has disappeared. Furthermore, Spenser retells the story of Amoret to assure the reader that she and Scudamour had been *married* after he brought her out of Venus' temple (IV.1-2). But the marriage was unconsummated because she was stolen away by Busyrane from the wedding festival.' Hankins, *Source and Meaning in Spenser's Allegory*, p. 159.

⁴⁷ Cf. Spenser: 'Vp they them tooke, each one a babe vptooke, / And with them carried, to be fostered; / Dame *Phoebe* to a Nymph her babe betooke, / To be vpbrought in perfect maydenhed, / And of herself her name *Belphoebe* red; / But *Venus* hers thence farre away conuayd, / To be vpbrought in goodly womanhed, / And in her little loues stead, which was strayd, / Her *Amoretta* cald, to comfort her dismayd' (III.vi.28.1-9).

⁴⁸ Allan H. Gilbert looks at the inconsistencies in the historical allegory and views the episode in terms of its value for literary criticism as well as its historical value. Allan H. Gilbert, 'Belphoebe's misdeeming of Timias', *PMLA*, Vol. 62, No. 3 (Sep., 1947), 622-643.

⁴⁹ Cf. Spenser: 'Into the woods thenceforth in hast she went, / To seeke for hearbes, that mote him remedy; [...] There, whether it diuine *Tobacco* were, / Or *Panachea*, or *Polygony*, / She found, and brought it to her patient deare / Who all this while lay bleeding out his hart-bloud neare.' (III.v.32.1-9). Anderson notes the allusion to tobacco, but misreads the passage. The text is ambiguous about whether tobacco is used or whether it is some other herb. Anderson understands it to say that the healing herb used by Belphoebe is definitely tobacco: 'Belphoebe's use of tobacco (v.32) to heal Timias' wounds signals an obvious allusion to Raleigh.' Anderson, "'In liuing colours and right hew": The Queen of Spenser's Central Books', p. 173.

from favour because of his secret marriage to one of the queen's maids, Elizabeth Throckmorton.⁵⁰ The 'Ruby [...] Shap'd like a heart' (IV.viii.6.7-8), which paves the way towards the reconciliation of Belphoebe and Timias, also contains an historical allusion to the affair.⁵¹ Some critics suggest that Belphoebe's behaviour towards Timias is shown to be cold and unlovely, and so, far from praising the queen's chastity, the poem seems to give an unfavourable impression of her untouchable virginity.⁵² Spenser may indeed be adopting a more critical stance on virginity in his representation of Belphoebe, as the fifth canto of Book III ends on a discordant note and betrays a complex approach towards the portrayal of virginity in what is supposed to be the final compliment to

⁵⁰ Cf. Bennet: 'the Timias-Belphoebe affair (vii.23-viii-18) was either entirely written or thoroughly adapted to Raleigh's situation after the scandal over his marriage to Elizabeth Throckmorton occurred in the summer of 1592.' Josephine Waters Bennet, *The Evolution of 'The Faerie Queene'* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1960), p. 168.

⁵¹ Brink draws attention to 'a letter from Arthur Throckmorton to Robert Cecil describing Throckmorton's plans to present Queen Elizabeth with a jewel during a masque of the nine muses at the Stanley-Vere wedding on 26 January 1594/5. [...] As his part of the masque, he planned to present the Queen with a heart-shaped ruby to soften her displeasure over his sister's marriage to Sir Walter Raleigh.' J. R. Brink, 'The Masque of the Nine Muses: Sir John Davies's Unpublished "Epithalamion" and the "Belphoebe-Ruby" Episode in *The Faerie Queene*', *The Review of English Studies*, New Series, Vol. 23, No. 92 (Nov., 1972), 445-447, (pp. 445-6). Brink quotes Arthur Throckmorton's letter: 'The song, [...] myself, whilst the singing, to lie prostrate at her Majesty's feet till she says she will save me. Upon my resurrection the song shall be delivered by one of the muses, with a ring made for a wedding ring set around with diamonds, and with a ruby like a heart placed in a coronet, with the inscription *Elizabetha potest*.' From *Calendar of Manuscripts of the Marquis of Salisbury at Hatfield House* (Historical Manuscripts Commission, London 1894), v.99, quoted in Brink, 'The Masque of the Nine Muses', p. 466.

⁵² Cf. Padelford: 'Opposed to Amoret, thus carried away with the shows of love, thus ardent, thus helpful, thus prompting passion in men, is Belphoebe; Belphoebe in whom chastity is combined with austerity and aloofness, an austerity and aloofness that mar the completeness and harmony of her character. [...] Thus did Belphoebe learn that austere virtue is itself unlovely and wrong, and that chastity must be softened by mercy.' Padelford, 'The Women in Spenser's Allegory of Love', pp. 76-7. Cf. Dasenbrock: 'Belphoebe's handling of Timias is impeccably chaste. Belphoebe represents a type of chastity widely admired in Spenser's society and embodied in the most powerful person in the realm. But the reappearance of Belphoebe and Timias in Book IV should enable us to see that Belphoebe is much less persuasive and winning as an embodiment of friendship, the virtue of Book IV, than of chastity.' Reed Way Dasenbrock, 'Escaping the Squires' Double Bind in Books III and IV of *The Faerie Queene*', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 26, No. 1, *The English Renaissance* (Winter, 1986), 25-45, (p. 32). Cf. Anderson: 'Belphoebe not only denies [Timias] a reciprocal love but also fails to comprehend or even to recognise the nature of his response to her. More than once the poet criticises her failure as a "Madness" that saves "a part, and lose[s] the whole".' Anderson, "'In living colours and right hew": The Queen of Spenser's Central Books', p. 172.

Elizabeth. At this point Spenser suggests that chastity can be used not only as an adornment of beauty and as a heavenly attribute, but also as a means of conquest:

Faire ympes of beautie, whose bright shining beames
 Adorne the world with like to heauenly light,
 And to your willes both royalties and Realmes
 Subdew, through conquest of your wondrous might,
 With this faire flowre your goodly girlonds dight,
 Of chastity and vertue virginall,
 That shall embellish more your beautie bright,
 And crowne your heades with heauenly coronall,
 Such as the Angels weare before God's tribunall. (III.v.53.1-9)

The idea of using the 'faire flowre [...] Of chastity and vertue virginall' to subdue 'royalties and Realmes' sounds like a direct allusion to Elizabeth and her political use of virginity.

It seems unlikely, however, that Spenser would recommend that women in general should embrace perpetual virginity. Indeed, Maureen Quilligan sees something insincere in Spenser's exhortation to adopt virginity.⁵³ The use of the conquest motif may thus suggest the more commonplace idea that women should use chastity, because it is attractive, to subdue and conquer the hearts of men, just as Belphoebe had conquered Timias' heart. The idea of conquest in this context is used later on in Book III in Spenser's exhortation for ladies to follow the example of Britomart:

And ye faire Ladies, that your kingdomes make
 In th'harts of men, them gouerne wisely well,
 And of faire *Britomart* ensample take,
 That was as trew in loue, as Turtle to her make. (III.xi.2.6-9)

⁵³ Cf. Quilligan: 'Spenser may counsel his female readers to follow Belphoebe's example of virginity, but the chastity he truly extols is Amoret's: it is the chastity not of a virgin queen, but of a wedded wife.' Quilligan, 'The Gender of the Reader and the Problem of Sexuality [in Books 3 and 4]', p. 141.

Both passages suggest female government: the one through chastity and so imitating the chastity of Belphoebe, and the other through chaste love, thus imitating Britomart.

Spenser ends the canto on an equivocal note:

To your faire selues a faire ensample frame,
 Of this faire virgin, this *Belphoebe* faire,
 To whom in perfect loue, and spotlesse fame
 Of chastitie, none liuing may compaire:
 Ne poysonous Enuy iustly can empaire:
 The prayse of her fresh flowring Maidenhead;
 For thy she standeth on the highest staire
 Of th'honorable stage of womanhead,
 That Ladies all may follow her ensample dead. (III.v.54.1-9)

Spenser at once exhorts ladies to imitate the chastity of Belphoebe, but also suggests that none can attain it. The problem of representing the queen's virginity through shadowy allegories is here all too evident as the poem implies that 'none liuing can compare' to the literary figure of Belphoebe; this can even include the monarch who is ostensibly being portrayed. Spenser also describes the example of Belphoebe's chastity as 'dead'. This term can mean 'perfect',⁵⁴ a nuance which is supported by the recognition that Belphoebe's maidenhead stands on 'the highest staire'. However, it obviously has other meanings; it suggests that virginal chastity is no longer practised, or that chastity itself is dead.

While the Proem indicates that the theme of Book III is praise of the virtue of Elizabeth's virginity, the limited role of the Belphoebe and the choice of Britomart as the titular knight of Book III⁵⁵ suggests that the book is not really concerned with virginal

⁵⁴ Cf. Quilligan: 'It is true that Spenser often distinguishes the degeneracy of his time from the purity of the ancient past, but Belphoebe, in the sense announced in the Letter, Elizabeth herself, to preserve the compliment to Elizabeth – dead meaning "perfect" – is also to see the simultaneous criticism of such perfection.' Quilligan, 'The Gender of the Reader and the Problem of Sexuality', p. 136.

⁵⁵ Cf. Berry: 'This suggested that Belphoebe was to be book III's chief protagonist; but significantly, this role was accorded to another female figure, the woman warrior Britomart. While the fairy Belphoebe only played a minor part in the events of the book, Spenser used the quasi-historical heroine Britomart to

chastity, or perhaps that Spenser has some reservations about praising virginal chastity as the pre-eminent virtue.⁵⁶ Critics have often reached this conclusion.⁵⁷ While Belphoebe is treated in conventional terms and in such a way that reinforces her association with the queen, the poem remains ambivalent about the value of that particular form of chastity, linking it at times with the classical figures associated with Elizabeth's cult as well as with traditional Catholic images of the consecrated virgin and with Mariology, and even suggesting that it is 'dead' and no longer exists. It may be for the uncomfortable religious associations in particular that Belphoebe is kept in the margins of Book III, while Britomart's chastity comes to dominate. The problem of chastity in a post-Reformation, Protestant text, however, does not become appreciably clearer in the figure of Britomart, the book's titular knight. Indeed, the central question of Book III appears to be that of Britomart's significance, for, although she is the titular knight of chastity, the nature of her chastity is not easy to quantify.⁵⁸

ii. The Legend of Britomartis

articulate a definition of chastity which evidently in his view was more suited to the historical needs of the patriarchy than the version privileged by Elizabeth's cult.' Berry, *Of Chastity and Power*, p. 158.

⁵⁶ Cf. King: 'Although Belphoebe is a strong woman who conquers enemies and hunts, Spenser passes her over to make the female knight, Britomart, his chief personification of chastity. Her commitment to heterosexual love contrasts sharply with Belphoebe's chastity.' John N. King, 'Queene Elizabeth I: Representations of the Virgin Queen', *Renaissance Quarterly*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (Spring, 1990), 30-74, (p. 64).

⁵⁷ H. S. V. Jones comments that "'Chastity", the subject of the third book, is obviously not understood by Spenser in an ascetic sense – as a virtue of the cloister'. H. S. V. Jones, *A Spenser Handbook* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, inc., 1930), p. 213. Davis, likewise, highlights the passionate nature of Britomart and concludes that '[h]er chastity is not the negative "Holy Maidenhood" of the medieval ascetic but an active enthusiasm for the noble and beautiful, inspiring its possessor to deeds of praise'. Davis, *Edmund Spenser: A Critical Study*, p. 117.

⁵⁸ Cf. Hough: 'Britomart, conceived primarily as an individual woman, spirited and brave, passionate yet controlled, warm-hearted and faithful, becomes the type of chastity – but chastity not as abstinence, chastity as active, honest and devoted love.' Graham Hough, *A Preface to 'The Faerie Queene'* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 1962), p. 170. Cf. Wood: 'In addition to her inherent importance, Britomart takes on a centrality that is largely fortuitous. Her extensive presence in three books would not dominate a work of twelve. As a central figure in almost half of *The Faerie Queene*, however, she is involved in much of its intellectual content. The nature of Britomart's presence in Books III-V prevents the partitioning of the virtues we find in I, II, and VI'. Robert E. Wood, 'Britomart at the House of Busyrane', *South Atlantic Bulletin*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (May, 1978), 5-11, (p. 6).

It has long been recognised that, if the chastity praised in Book III is understood to mean virginity, Britomart's quest is antithetical to that virtue: she seeks for a husband, Artegall, whom she saw in a magic mirror, and so the achievement of her quest will result in the loss of her virginity.⁵⁹ The centrality of Britomart in Book III leads Lewis to conclude that:

The subjects of these two books [i.e. III and IV] are respectively Chastity and Friendship, but we are justified in reading them as a single book on the subject of love. Chastity in the person of Britomart, turns out to mean not virginity, but virtuous love.⁶⁰

The view that Book III represents chaste love and not virginity is accepted by most critics.⁶¹ However, despite the prevailing opinion that the book is about the theme of 'love' rather than 'virginity', many still argue that the avowed theme is virginity, even if

⁵⁹ Cf. Leslie: 'Britomart's sexuality is directed towards marriage and the future father of a great dynasty. But her aim is sexual; and Spenser seems to see this paradoxical sexuality in chastity generally.' Michael Leslie, *Spenser's 'Fierce Warres and Faithfull Loves': Martial and Chivalric Symbolism in 'The Faerie Queene'* (Cambridge: B. S. Brewer, 1983), p. 83.

⁶⁰ Lewis, *The Allegory of Love*, pp. 338-339.

⁶¹ Jones, too, comments that 'the third book is wholly concerned with love'. Jones, *A Spenser Handbook*, p. 210. Likewise, Fowler comments: 'Whatever Britomart may signify in the moral allegory, it is some form of love.' Alastair Fowler, *Spenser and the Numbers of Time* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964), p. 124. Alpers refers to 'Spenser's conception of chastity as marriage rather than virginity.' Paul J. Alpers, *The Poetry of 'The Faerie Queene'* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1969 [1967]), p. 18. Roger Sale also sees the book's theme to be about 'the morality of sexual love'. Roger Sale, *Reading Spenser: An Introduction to 'The Faerie Queene'* (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 63. Susanna L. Wofford sees Book III as 'a book about love, faithfulness and the body, especially the female body'. Susanne L. Wofford, 'The Faerie Queene, Book I-III', in *The Cambridge Companion to Spenser*, ed. Andrew Hadfield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 106-123, (p. 120). M. Pauline Parker asserts that, in the books where Britomart features, 'the main theme throughout is chastity in love'. M. Pauline Parker, *The Allegory of 'The Faerie Queene'* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960), p. 163. Nevertheless, Parker sees a discrepancy between Spenser's theme and content as she posits the question of why Spenser 'start[s] with a heroine standing for chastity, if his real subject is human love in all its manifestations?' Parker, *The Allegory of 'The Faerie Queene'*, p. 166. Cf. Silberman: 'Book III develops an ideal of love, of understanding, and of the relationship between the individual and world figured by the Hermaphrodite image with which the original version concludes.' Lauren Silberman, *Transforming Desire: Erotic Knowledge in Books III and IV of 'The Faerie Queene'* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1995), p. 4. A. C. Hamilton, although accepting the general theme of love, interprets this in terms of its discussing the relationship between the sexes and the problem of 'maistrie'. He says: 'Spenser is treating the relation between the sexes, that problem of "maisterie" which forms the unifying subject of the marriage group in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. The "lovers deare debate" of Books III and IV expands into a marriage debate in Book V, and it is resolved in the central episodes which treat of Radigund.' A. C. Hamilton, *The Structure of Allegory in 'The Faerie Queene'* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), p. 180.

the book does not deliver on that theme. Josephine Waters Bennett, for instance, takes this view. She observes that Spenser

has much to say of chastity, by which he evidently means virginity, in the Timias-Belphoebe episode, which he seems to have written when he was giving the book its final form. But Spenser shows himself to have been uneasily aware that much of the book had been written with other ends in view than the illustration of chastity.⁶²

John N. King likewise accepts that Belphoebe's virginity is identified as the type of chastity that Book III represents, and that it is her presence that causes problems in interpreting the book:

Belphoebe personifies Elizabeth's private capacity as a woman according to the 'Letter to Raleigh'. Her portrayal is problematic, however, because it tends to identify chastity with perpetual virginity, even though Spenser characteristically associates that virtue [i.e. chastity] with the consummation of love in marriage.⁶³

Conversely, Harold L. Weatherby suggests that Britomart, although regarded as a symbol of chaste love, often reflects Belphoebe and so argues that, 'Spenser even while ostensibly celebrating marriage is imaginatively more engaged by virginity'.⁶⁴ It is perhaps more the question of the acknowledged portrayals of the queen in the narrative, rather than Belphoebe in particular, which causes the textual uncertainty. Robin Headlam Wells draws attention to the political dimension of the representations:

canto IV [of Book III] claims that Elizabeth is the 'matter', or subject, of his song. If Spenser means what he says here and in his [P]roem, this makes Book III not merely tactless, but illogical. For to address an epideictic poem celebrating the ideal of married love to a virgin queen who is on record as highly commending the single life is nonsensical.⁶⁵

⁶² Bennet, *The Evolution of 'The Faerie Queene'*, p. 144.

⁶³ King, 'Queene Elizabeth I: Representations of the Virgin Queen', pp. 63-4.

⁶⁴ Harold L. Weatherby, *Mirrors of Celestial Grace: Patristic Theology in Spenser's Allegory* (Toronto and London: University of Toronto Press, 1994), p. 197. Weatherby argues that the descriptions of Britomart often echo those of Belphoebe; see, Weatherby, *Mirrors of Celestial Grace*, p. 196.

⁶⁵ Robin Headlam Wells, *Spenser's 'Faerie Queene' and the Cult of Elizabeth* (London and Canberra: Croom Helm, 1983), p. 74

Wells suggests that paying lip-service to the virginity of the queen while covertly praising marriage instead is both impolitic and illogical if Book III is intended as a compliment to Elizabeth. Indeed, Andrew Hadfield has even suggested that, far from praising the queen's virginity, 'Spenser was actually sticking his neck out in aggressively criticising Elizabeth's cult of virginity in the poem'.⁶⁶ The only certainty, it seems, is that Spenser's representation of chastity has an ambivalent attitude towards the queen's premier virtue, which is itself uneasily ambiguous.

Despite such ambivalence, critics often attempt to reconcile the apparent contradictions of Book III. John D. Bernard, for instance, suggests that the various female figures in the book all represent an aspect of chastity.⁶⁷ Tonkin makes a similar suggestion, but specifically states that the female figures are aspects of Britomart's chastity, without recognising that there are fundamental differences between chastity in marriage and perpetual virginity.⁶⁸ Donald Cheney also attempts to reconcile the problem of chastity through the figure of Britomart. He claims that she represents a half-way-house between Belphoebe and Amoret,⁶⁹ and sees her quest as a progression from virginal chastity to marital chastity.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Andrew Hadfield, 'Introduction' to *Edmund Spenser*, ed. Andrew Hadfield (New York and London: Longman, 1996), p. 14.

⁶⁷ Cf. Bernard: 'Despite the important differences among the paradigmatic heroines, all three exist on the same platonic level and are equally part of the ideological super-structure of Spenser's anatomy of chastity.' John D. Bernard, 'Pastoral and Comedy in Book III of *The Faerie Queene*', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 23, No. 1, *The English Renaissance* (Winter, 1983), 5-20, (p. 6).

⁶⁸ Cf. Tonkin: 'The female figures in the book can be regarded, in their various ways, as reflections of the personality of Britomart, and the male figures are largely obstacles or opportunities along the way to self-fulfilment.' Humphrey Tonkin, *The Faerie Queene* (London, Boston, Sydney and Wellington: Unwin Hyman, 1989), p. 110.

⁶⁹ Cf. Cheney: 'Repeatedly, in the course of Book III, we are reminded of the frailty of Britomart's position, for she stands between the two extremes of Diana and Venus as seen in the characters of Belphoebe and Amoret.' Donald Cheney, 'Spenser's Hermaphrodite and the 1590 *Faerie Queene*', *PMLA*, Vol. 87, No. 2 (Mar., 1972), 192-200, (p. 197). Similarly, Tonkin suggests that 'Britomart herself is composed of elements of Venus and Diana, "unpacked" for us on the contrasting figures of Belphoebe, strong but unloving, and Amoret, loving but defenceless.' Tonkin, *The Faerie Queene*, p. 112. Weatherby

If we are aware of Britomart's own progress towards marriage, predicted by Merlin but left unfulfilled at the end of Book III, we see her chastity (or better, the virginity which is the palpable image of her chastity) not as an end in itself, or a definition of her total identity, but as a means to survival until the time is right for her to submit to a larger, dynastic role.⁷¹

Cheney's reading seems plausible since, by reconciling virginal and marital chastity, it suggests that the ambivalence in the book is due to its representing a union of these two disparate types of chastity. However, the virginity that Cheney claims that Britomart represents is not the same type of virginity that Elizabeth embodies; Britomart's is transitory, whereas Elizabeth's is perpetual. In patristic terms, a virginity which anticipates its own loss cannot make claim to the perfection of this virtue.⁷² Embracing virginity for a set period of time, and, therefore, appointing an occasion at which to relinquish that purity compromises the virginity of the mind. This understanding of the importance of spiritual virginity as the root of the virtue appears to be borne out in *The*

argues for a continued association of Britomart with virginity: 'Though she is supposed to unite affection with chastity, enfolding the (supposedly) nubile Amoret and the virginal Belpheobe, she resembles the latter so much more strikingly than the former that we tend to forget that she is not simply a symbol of virginity.' Weatherby, *Mirrors of Celestial Grace*, p. 195.

⁷⁰ Similarly, Lockerd expresses this movement: 'Spenser's chastity (as it is represented in Britomart) is, in addition to the control of desire, the direction of desire towards marriage and procreation.' Lockerd, *The Sacred Marriage*, p. 16. Cf. Evans: 'Britomart must first learn to be a woman, and her progress towards this goal provides the theme of book III. She is a woman growing into the knowledge of her own sexual nature, and in preparing to be the mother of a line of kings she has first to discover the true, fruitful purpose of sex.' Maurice Evans, *Spenser's Anatomy of Heroism: A Commentary on 'The Faerie Queene'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 152. Cf. Tonkin: 'We move from the conventional chastity which Britomart displays in Malecasta's castle – total rejection of love – to the defeat of the fears of sexual love in the House of Busirane, in canto 12. The image of the hermaphrodite with which Book III originally ended is traditionally associated with complete physical and spiritual union – the oneness of marital chastity.' Tonkin, *The Faerie Queene*, p. 116.

⁷¹ Cheney, 'Spenser's Hermaphrodite and the 1590 *Faerie Queene*', pp. 197-8.

⁷² Cf. Athanasius: 'What kind of virginity exists hypocritically for a time and later gets married? Or what kind of virtue is there in virginity when it exists for some without their free will, but rather they have others to watch over them, who teach them by force to choose for themselves against their will? In this way they are compelled forcibly by others.' Athanasius, *First Letter to Virgins*, vi, p. 276. Cf. Ambrose: 'What sort of chastity is that which is not of morals, but of years, which is appointed not for ever, but for a term! Such purity is all the more wanton of which the corruption is put off for a later age. They teach that their virgins ought not to persevere, and are unable to do so, who have set a term to virginity. What sort of religion is that in which modest maidens are bidden to be immodest old women?' Saint Ambrose, *Concerning Virgins, to Marcellina, his sister*, in *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers: Ambrose, Select Works and Letters*, Vol. X, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995), pp. 365-66.

Faerie Queene for, from the moment in the text at which Britomart sees her destined husband in Merlin's 'glassy globe' (III.ii.21.1), there follows a textual uncertainty over the presence of her virginal chastity, an uncertainty highlighted by Spenser's punning on the word 'dismayd', which runs throughout Book III.

The doubt over Britomart's possession of virginal chastity in its spiritual sense is played out in Malecasta's Castle Joyous. The name of the Lady of Pleasure, Malecasta, means evil chastity, or unchaste, and so she is immediately positioned allegorically as Britomart's foe.⁷³ Like the other titular knights of virtue in Books I and II, Britomart is dressed in armour while she embarks on her quest.⁷⁴ Far from indicating that women are exempt from virtue, as Sheila Cavanagh has suggested,⁷⁵ or Lesley Brill's suggestion that it lends Britomart and her virtue a bisexual quality,⁷⁶ this is a biblical allusion to the image of the *miles Christi*, the soldier of Christ, from Saint Paul's Letter to the Ephesians.⁷⁷ This motif had been used in reference to female virgins as early as

⁷³ Harry Berger, Jr. notes the variety of meanings that can be gleaned from Malecasta's nomenclature: 'in the name *Malecasta* we hear not only *unchastity* and an echo of *evil castle* but also an echo of *male castle*. This is a man's, not a woman's, image of the ideal courtly life for women.' Harry Berger Jr., *Revisionary Play: Studies in the Spenserian Dynamics* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1990), p. 107.

⁷⁴ Fowler reads this as a subtle compliment to Elizabeth: 'Britomart's warlike qualities give the poet several opportunities to compliment Elizabeth upon her recently demonstrated prowess as a war-leader, and to place her in a tradition of valiant female warriors.' Fowler, *Spenser and the Numbers of Time*, p. 123. Villeponteaux, however, sees the use of militaristic associations to be incompatible with praise for Elizabeth: 'Spenser depicts Elizabeth's signature virtue, chastity, as originating in a warrior's force and culminating in a wife's fruitfulness, and both roles make uneasy vehicles for praise of Elizabeth.' Villeponteaux, 'Displacing Feminine Authority in *The Faerie Queene*', p. 60.

⁷⁵ Sheila T. Cavanagh, *Wanton Eyes and Chaste Desires: Female Sexuality in 'The Faerie Queene'* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), pp. 8-10.

⁷⁶ Cf. Brill: 'Her almost bisexual figure is an appropriate emblem of chastity precisely because that virtue pertains to human sexuality generally rather than to female prudence particularly.' Lesley W. Brill, 'Chastity as Ideal Sexuality in the Third Book of *The Faerie Queene*', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 11, No. 1, *The English Renaissance* (Winter, 1971), 15-26, p. 16. Brill, however, ignores the fact that Spenser continually associates chastity with femininity and his exhortations for women to imitate chastity.

⁷⁷ Cf. Paul: 'Put on your armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the deceits of the devil. For our wrestling is not against flesh and blood; but against principalities and powers, against rulers of the world of this darkness, against the spirits of wickedness in the high places. Therefore take unto you the

Tertullian's third-century treatise *De virginibus velandis* and can still be found in circulation four centuries later in Saint Aldhelm's seventh-century English tract *De virginitate*.⁷⁸

At Castle Joyous, Britomart saves Redcrosse from Malecasta's knights, who had demanded that he engage in battle with them: if he loses, he must give his love to the mistress of the castle, but if he wins, he will gain her love. It hardly needs saying that Britomart's battle to rescue Redcrosse, the knight of Holiness, is primarily a spiritual allegory and that we miss much by ignoring its religious significance. Britomart easily overcomes these figures of lust, manages to escape their double-bind, and then both she and Redcrosse accept the doubtful hospitality of the Castle. There Britomart refuses to disarm, but she raises her visor. Mistaking her for a male knight, Malecasta is overcome with desire for this mysterious and beautiful stranger and proceeds to woo her. Britomart is aware that Malecasta loves her, though in vain, but also recognises a peculiar affinity with her:

Full easie was for her to haue beliefe,
 Who by self-feeling of her feeble sexe,
 And by long triall of the inward grieffe,
 Wherewith imperious loue her hart did vexe,
 Could iudge what paines do louing harts perplexe. (III.i.54.1-5)
 [...] nath'lesse she inly deemd

armour of God, that you may be able to resist in the evil day, and to stand in all things perfect. Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of justice, and your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace: In all things taking the shield of faith, wherewith you may be able to extinguish all the fiery darts of the most wicked one. And take unto you the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit (which is the word of God)' (Ephesians 6: 11-17).

⁷⁸ Cf. Tertullian: 'It betakes itself for refuge to the veil of the head as to a helmet, as to a shield.' Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. IV (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), p. 36. Cf. Aldhelm: 'as combatants in the monastic army, boldly offering our foreheads armed with the banner of the Cross among the ranks of our competitors, and carrying tightly the warlike instruments of armament – which the distinguished warrior [St Paul] enumerates, that is to say, the sword of the Holy Word and the impenetrable breast-plate of faith [Eph. VI. 17] – and protected by the secure shield against the thousand harmful tricks of spiritual wickedness. [...] strive to conquer the eight leaders of the principal vices [...] who never cease from struggling indefatigably against the throngs of Christ's recruits and the warlike squadrons of virgins.' *De virginitate*, XI-XII, p. 68.

Her loue too light, to woee a wandring guest:
Which she misconstruing, thereby esteemd
That from like inward fire that outward smoke had steemd. (III.i.55.6-9)

Britomart sympathises with Malecasta because she assumes that their desire is of the same origin, and also because they both love an unattainable object.⁷⁹ This implied connection exposes the central problem of Britomart's chastity, and also the central problem that haunts married chastity: whether lust and desire are reconcilable with an idea of chastity in marriage, and whether marital lust differs significantly from other forms of sexual love.⁸⁰ The affinity between the two women is also suggested by the garments that Malecasta wears:

Her with a scarlot mantle couered,
That was with gold and Ermines faire eneloped. (III.i.59.8-9)

As Hamilton notes, ermine was traditionally associated with chastity but, paradoxically, was also a symbol of lust.⁸¹ The use of ambiguous images of chastity to describe Malecasta is also troubling as her 'scarlot mantle' and 'ermine' appear to allude to

⁷⁹ Cf. Tonkin: '[Malecasta] is the first example of unchastity in a series extending through the entire book: the witch and her son, the churl in the boat, the Squire of Dames, Proteus, Hellenore, Busyrane. Chastity is defined by its various opponents in a kind of catalogue of perversions of love.' Tonkin, *The Faerie Queene*, p. 116. Cf. Lockerd: 'Even Malecasta must be seen as a presence in Britomart's mind. [...] Spenser is insisting that chaste love and lewd love do proceed from the same desire.' Lockerd, *The Sacred Marriage*, pp. 70-1.

⁸⁰ Cf. Hill: 'Britomart finds that the hard, steep road to virtue also leads to erotic pleasure, but her hunt for Artegall is honourable and heroic and could never bring "Death with infamie", that last straggler in Cupid's Mask (III.xii.25).' Iris Tillman Hill, 'Britomart and Be Bold, Be Not Too Bold', *ELH*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (Jun., 1971), 173-187, (p. 187).

⁸¹ Cf. Hamilton: 'The ermine, a traditional emblem of chastity, was also associated with lust.' Hamilton's note to III.i.59.7-9, p. 316. Cf. Alciati: 'Emblema LXXIX. Lascivia: Delicias et mollitiem mus creditur albus / Arguere, at ratio non sat aperta mihi est. / An quod ei natura salax et multa libido est? / Ornat Romanas an quia pelle nurus? / sarmaticum murem vocitant plerique Zibellum, / Et celebris suavi est inguine muscus Arabs.' 'Emblem 79. Lewdness: It is believed that the ermine (a sort of white mouse) denotes sensual pleasures and voluptuousness, but the reason remains unclear to me. Could it be because the animal is salacious by nature and full of lust? Or is it because its fur adorns Roman matrons? Many call the Sarmatian mouse a Zibellan [sable], and Arabic musk is famed for being the perfume to apply to the crotch.' Andrea Alciati (1492-1550), *A Book of Emblems: The Emblematum Liber in Latin and English*, trans. and ed. John F. Moffit (North Carolina and London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2004), p. 98.

Spenser's description of Elizabeth in the April Eclogue in the *Shepherd's Calendar*, so that Malecasta is associated with Elizabeth as well as with Britomart.⁸²

Although *The Faerie Queene* implies similarities between Britomart and Malecasta, it also draws differences. Malecasta's lustful behaviour is excessive. At night, once Britomart has disarmed and gone to sleep, Malecasta slips into bed with her.⁸³ As soon as Britomart notices that there is another body lying beside her, she leaps out and grabs her sword 'in minde to gride / The loathed leachour' (III.i.62.3-4). Malecasta, however, screams and her six knights come to find Britomart, resplendent 'in her snow-white smock, with locks vnbownd' (III.i.63.7), standing over Malecasta like an avenging angel and ready to run her through. In the ensuing fight with the six knights whom she had defeated earlier, Britomart is wounded:

But one of those sixe knights, *Gardante* hight,
Drew out a deadly bow and arrow keene,
Which forth he sent with felonous despight,
And fell intent against the virgin sheene:
The mortall steele stayd not, till it was seene
To gore her side, yet was the wound not deepe,
But lightly rased her soft silken skin,
That drops of purple bloud thereout did weepe,
Which did her lilly smock with staines of vermeil steepe. (III.i.65.1-9)

The language here implies a certain violence and danger in *Gardante's* attack: the arrow head is described as 'mortall steele' which 'gore[s] her side'. Such a wound is used as a motif throughout *The Faerie Queene* to signify lust.⁸⁴ However, as the wound was 'not

⁸² Cf. Spenser: 'See where she sits vpon the grassie greene, / (O seemely sight) / Yclad in Scarlot like a mayden Queene, / And Ermines white.' Edmund Spenser, 'Aprill – Ægloga Quarta', *Shepherd's Calendar*, ll. 55-8, ed. W. L. Renwick (London: Scholartis Press, 1930), p. 51.

⁸³ Cf. Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, III.i. 60.1-9 and III.i.61.1-7.

⁸⁴ Cf. Florimell loses her girdle, a symbol of chastity: 'found her golden girdle cast astray, / Distaynd with durt and bloud, as relique of the pray' (III.viii.49.8-9). Although she is unwounded, Amoret is covered with blood after she has been abducted by Lust (IV.vii.27.5-9; IV.vii.35.8-9). Amoret is later wounded by Busirane in his castle (III.xii.31.4-5), and Britomart is likewise wounded by Busirane (III.xii.33.4-5). All these wounds echo the wounding of Adonis (III.i.38.1-2).

deepe', the text suggests that, although the attack threatened danger, Britomart's lust is not a serious misdemeanor. Silberman, though, comments on the uncertain significance of the shocking image of Britomart's blood-smattered smock:

The final image of Britomart, with drops of purple blood staining her lily white smock, is morally indeterminate. The imagery suggests vulnerability, the beginnings of passion, the loss of virginity; it mirrors Britomart's enrapturement at the sight of Artegall and foreshadows her own wounding by the evil Busirane.⁸⁵

When Britomart is about to be wounded the text reiterates that she is a 'virgin sheene', and so, although the wounding seems to imply a loss of virginity, this can only be in a spiritual sense. The weeping of the wound reinforces the sense of loss, as it implies a state of mourning. The name of the felonious knight, Gardante, who wounded her, and the type of weapon that he used, are both significant. As Hamilton notes, Gardante signifies 'loving glances upon beauty' and he and his five companions represent the various stages of desire.⁸⁶ This is reinforced by the use of the bow and arrow which echoes Cupid's own weaponry. Even though Britomart resists the unchastity of Castle Joyous and the advances of her host, her own desire for her destined husband, Artegall, is manifested in the wound she receives from Gardante,⁸⁷ a wound that she has already received from 'the false Archer' (III.ii.26.7).

⁸⁵ Silberman, *Transforming Desire*, p. 33.

⁸⁶ See Hamilton's note to III.i.45.1-2, in *The Faerie Queene*, p. 313.

⁸⁷ Cf. Tonkin: 'Britomart's wound by Gardante, the first of the six (the others are Parlante, Jocante, Basciante, Bacchante, and Nocante), symbolises the beginning of sexual passion.' Tonkin, *The Faerie Queene*, p. 116. Cf. Lockerd: 'In the end, Britomart does get a wound from Gardante, in something like the way she has already gotten one from the shadow knight in Merlin's glass.' Lockerd, *The Sacred Marriage*, p. 70. Cf. Brill: 'The events which lead up to her wounding by Malecasta's knight suggest that Britomart's vulnerability results from a temporary displacement of her sexual energies towards lust, a slight wavering of her chastity.' Brill, 'Chastity as Ideal Sexuality', p. 20. Cf. Dunseath: 'the test presented to Britomart in *Castle Joyeous* is a test of true vision. It certainly is not a test of her chastity, except perhaps indirectly since the very nature of the [...] encounter [...] eliminates it as a major factor.' T. K. Dunseath, *Spenser's Allegory of Justice in Book Five of 'The Faerie Queene'* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 163.

The origin of that wound, that is, the point at which she falls in love with Artegall, is discussed in canto ii, which effectively acts as a gloss on the Malecasta episode.

Apparently led by fortune, Britomart wanders into her father's closet and views herself in the mirror. She initially cannot see anything in the glass, but then remembers its 'vertues rare' (III.ii.22.7).⁸⁸ The mirror is said

to show in perfect sight,
What euer thing was in the world contayd
Betwixt the lowest earth and heauens hight,
So that it to the looker appertayned; (III.ii.19.1-4)

As it turns out, the 'thing' that most appertains to Britomart is a husband:

But as it falleth, in the gentlest harts
Imperious Loue hath highest set his throne,
And tyrannizeth in the bitter smarts
Of them, that to him buxome are and prone:
So thought this Mayd (as maydens vse to done)
Whom fortune for her husband would allot,
Not that she lusted after any one;
For she was pure from blame of sinfull blot,
Yet wist her life at last must lincke in that same knot. (III.ii.23.1-9)

There is a general implication in these lines that those who seek marriage do so out of desire. However, the text goes to great lengths to emphasise that Britomart's desire is not a result of her own agency, but due to the workings of fate. Fortune leads her to the mirror and fortune decides her husband. At the same time, the text also notes that Love tyrannises those who have a predilection towards it and that Britomart is receptive to the workings of love. Her susceptibility to love suggests that Britomart had never been destined to be a perpetually virginal character; her destiny has always been to be a wife.

⁸⁸ Cf. Spenser: 'One day it fortun'd, faire Britomart / Into her fathers closet to repayre; / [...] Where when she espied that mirrhour fayre, / Her selfe a while therein she vewed in vaine; / Tho her auizing of the vertues rare, / Which thereof spoken were, she gan againe / Her to bethinke of, that mote to her selfe pertaine' (III.ii.22.1-9).

Although there is a denial that Britomart's desire is caused by lust, the fact that she is subject to desire remains a troubling aspect of the narrative. Love-sick, Britomart languishes and becomes '[s]ad, solemne, sowre, and full of fancies fraile' (III.ii.27.5). Glauce, her old nurse, noticing the change in her, asks what 'vncouth fit' or 'euill plight' (III.ii.30.7) has caused her dejection. After Britomart's hesitant explanation, Glauce seeks to reassure her about the nature of her ailment:

Daughter (said she) what need ye be dismayd,
Or why make ye such a Monster of your mind?
Of much more vncouth thing I was affrayd;
Of filthy lust, contrarie vnto kind:
But this affection nothing strange I find; (III.ii.40.1-5)

Glauce's words reinforce the guiltlessness of Britomart. Her desire is natural and good; it is not an 'vncouth thing' nor 'filthy lust'. By way of contrast, Glauce then recounts classical *exempla* of monstrous forms of lust:

Not so th' *Arabian Myrrhe* did set her mind;
Nor so did *Biblis* spend her pining hart,
But lou'd their natiue flesh against all kind,
[...] Yet playd *Pasiphaë* a more mostrous part,
That lou'd a Bull, and learnd a beast to bee; (III.ii.41.1-6)

Although these monstrous figures are used by Glauce as a comparison to Britomart's natural desire, they also draw attention to how desire and lust can become perverted and monstrous.⁸⁹ Instead of drawing comfort from her difference from Myrrha, Biblis and Pasiphäe, however, Britomart envies them their happiness as they were able to satisfy their lusts, whereas there is no remedy for hers:

For they, how euer shamefull and vnkind,
Yet did possess their horrible intent:

⁸⁹ Cf. Weatherby: 'the danger of a perverted and perverting sexuality impinges as forcefully on Spenser's imagination as his belief in the goodness of "wedded love".' Harold L. Weatherby, *Mirrors of Celestial Grace: Patristic Theology in Spenser's Allegory* (Toronto and London: University of Toronto Press, 1994), p. 194.

[...] So was their fortune good, though wicked were their mind. (III.ii.43.6-9)
 But wicked fortune mine, though mind be good,
 Can haue no end, not hope of my desire,
 But feed on shadowes, while I die for food (III.ii.44.1-3)

Some critics have seen Britomart's reply to indicate a moral lapse.⁹⁰ Silberman suggests that, '[w]hen Britomart high-mindedly condemns herself as worse than Myrrha, Biblis and Pasiphæe, she tacitly asserts that incest and bestiality are better than nothing'.⁹¹

Although Britomart's response seems strange, she is not tacitly approving the satisfaction of monstrous forms of desire. She recognises the fundamental difference in the goodness of mind which prompts different forms of lust, but asserts that the achievement of desire is not dependent on its goodness, or its naturalness, but on the workings of fortune.

Britomart does, however, liken herself to Narcissus, another figure of perverted desire, who, like her, loves nothing but a shadowy reflection in a mirror.⁹² As in the Malecasta episode, Britomart is tainted by comparison with lustful figures. In both episodes she is shown to contrast with them, but this is always accompanied by recognition of a certain kinship born of a commonality in desire, a desire that runs counter to chastity.

Monstrous images of lust, such as Myrrha, Biblis and Pasiphæe, are replicated in Book III in the figures of Argante and Ollyphant, who are giant twins. Argante and her twin brother Ollyphant were begotten from an incestuous union, and they, too, are tainted

⁹⁰ In contrast, Paul Alpers emphasises the role of the passage in convincing the reader of the goodness of Britomart's desire: 'The main reason we feel that Britomart's love pangs are natural and good is that Spenser treats them in a benign and comic manner. Britomart feels her torments to be horrible because she feels only them.' [...] The canto is full of comic moments; one of the finest is the beginning of the speech in which Glauce encouragingly tells Britomart that she is not like Myrrha, Byblis, and Pasiphæe. She replies to a speech in which Britomart characterises her love in terms that remind us of Malecasta.' Alpers, *The Poetry of 'The Faerie Queene'*, p. 183.

⁹¹ Silberman, *Transforming Desire*, p. 26.

⁹² Cf. Spenser: 'I fonder, then *Cephisus* foolish child, / Who hauing vewed in a fountaine shere / His face, was with the loue thereof beguild; I fonder loue a shade, the bodie farre exild' (III.ii.44.6-9).

with the self-same sin.⁹³ They are so mired in sin that they even committed incest before birth:

These twinnes, men say, (a thing far passing thought)
Whiles in their mothers wombe enclosed they were,
Ere they into the lightsome world were brought,
In fleshly lust were mingled both yfere,
And in that monstrous wise did to the world appere. (III.vii.48.5-9)

The twins are actually born locked in a carnal embrace. Not only do they commit incest *in utero*, *in partu* and *post partum*,⁹⁴ but Argante is also shown to have a predilection for even more monstrously lascivious activities:

But greatest shame was to that maiden twin,
Who not content so foully to deuoure
Her natue flesh, and staine her brothers bowre,
Did wallow in all other fleshly myre,
And suffred beasts her body to deflowre:
So whot she burned in that lustfull fyre,
Yet all that might not slake her sensuall desyre. (III.vii.49.3-9)

Ollyphant is later shown to be subject to the sin of sodomy, as he chases a young man apparently to slake his lust,⁹⁵ but Argante is said to be even more sinful than her brother, as to her is imputed the ‘greatest shame’ of bestiality. The sins of these two monstrous twins are categorised theologically as ‘unnatural vice’,⁹⁶ which Aquinas classifies as the

⁹³ Cf. Spenser: ‘Her sire *Typhæus* was, who mad through merth, / And drunk with bloud of men, slaine by his might, / Through incest, her of his owne mother Earth / Whilome begot, being but halfe twin of that berth’ (III.vii.47.6-9).

⁹⁴ This seems to be an implicit inversion of the virginity of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Virgin Birth.

⁹⁵ Cf. Spenser: ‘Far off aspyde a young man, the which fled / From an huge Geaunt, that with hideous / And hatefull outrage long him chaced thus; / It was that *Ollyphant*, the brother deare / Of that *Argante* vile and vitious’ (III.xi.3.3-7).

⁹⁶ Cf. Aquinas: ‘Wherever there occurs a special kind of deformity whereby the venereal act is rendered unbecoming, there is a determinate species of lust. This may occur in two ways: First, through being contrary to right reason, and this is common to all lustful vices; secondly, because, in addition, it is contrary to the natural order of the venereal act as becoming to the human race: and this is called *the unnatural vice*. This may happen in several ways. First, by procuring pollution, without any copulation, for the sake of venereal pleasure: this pertains to the sin of *uncleanness* which some call *effeminacy*. Secondly, by copulation with a thing of undue species, and this is called *bestiality*. Thirdly, by copulation with an undue sex, male with male, or female with female, as the Apostle states (Rom.i.27): and this is called the *vice of sodomy*. Fourthly, by not observing the natural manner of copulation, either as to undue means, or as to

‘gravest sin of all’, with incest following it in sinfulness.⁹⁷ Britomart is shown to be an opponent of Ollyphant in particular, although notably she is never pitted against Argante, even though Argante mirrors those classical figures that Glauce had contrasted to Britomart. Considering the inventory of Argante’s sexual sins, there is an interesting contradiction in the language used to describe her and her increasing descent into deviancy. Argante is referred to as ‘that maiden twin’, which punningly implies an affinity with virginity.⁹⁸ In addition to being ironically referred to as a ‘maiden’, Argante’s predilection for bestiality is described as a defloration (III.vii.49.7). So, even though her monstrous lustfulness has denied her even the natural virginity that mankind is born with and she is shown to be the complete opposite of chastity, disturbingly, it is still possible for her to be described through the language of chastity, just as it was with Malecasta.

This troubled linguistic association of unchastity and bestiality with chastity, however, is perhaps understandable in light of Michael Leslie’s observation that Britomart is shown to parallel many of the unchaste characters in *The Faerie Queene*:

Britomart is the fitting heroine for a book containing Argante, Ollyphant, and Paridell, not because she is their polar opposite, but because she is so like them. Comparing her to Argante is not merely facetious: both are energetically pursuing men for frankly sexual purposes, and Spenser deliberately points to Britomart’s similarity with Paridell in their titanic clash before Malbecco’s castle. The

other monstrous and bestial manners of copulation.’ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Vol. IV, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 1981 [1948]), Q.154, A. 11, p. 1819.

⁹⁷ Cf. Aquinas: ‘since by the unnatural vice man transgresses that which has been determined by nature with regard to the use of venereal actions, it follows that in this matter this sin is gravest of all. After it comes incest, which [...] is contrary to the natural respect which we owe persons related to us.’ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* Vol. IV, Q. 154, A. 12, p. 1820.

⁹⁸ The term ‘maiden’, as *The Oxford English Dictionary* indicates, not only more generally defines a ‘girl; a young (unmarried) woman’ but is also used to designate a ‘virgin’. ‘Maiden’, *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Vol. IX, prepared by J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 208. The affinity of the term ‘maiden’ with ‘virgin’ is also evident in the term ‘maidenhead’ which is ‘[t]he state or condition of a maiden; virginity’ and is also an equivalent term for the hymen. ‘Maidenhead’, *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Vol. IX, p. 210.

differences between Britomart and these figures are also clear to us, all the more so because of the implied comparison.⁹⁹

If Britomart can be read in such a negative light, compared both with the sexually perverse Argante and the adulterous Paridell who shares a Trojan ancestry with Britomart,¹⁰⁰ a problem arises in discerning the difference between them. The questioning of Britomart's chastity, both through references to her own desire and by partial association with lustful characters, is not, however, evidence of the misogynistic discourse of the text, as critics such as Cavanagh would assert. Instead, it articulates a long-held concern, evident in patristic sources, about the very nature of love and its relationship to lust, and the problem of whether the presence of lust or desire in marriage can be described as chastity. As a result, the text finds itself constantly entangled in ambiguity and contradiction: Britomart's chastity becomes at once a sign of unnatural lust and a desire for marital love, and her loss of virginity is foreshadowed as a violent wounding, even as a dark shadow hangs over her motives. Instead of accepting the patristic resolution that virginity is superior to chaste love in marriage, and that chastity involves a total rejection of lust, Spenser's seems to attempt to seek resolution through recourse to a more overt Protestant doctrine. Whenever Britomart's chastity is called into question, the text seeks to re-emphasise that her desire is not due to her own agency or free will, but to divine providence or fortune directing her actions.

⁹⁹ Leslie, *Spenser's 'Fierce Warres and Faithfull Loves'*, p. 83.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Cheney: 'Our surprise at discovering a common ancestry in such dissimilar characters as Paridell and Britomart is compounded in the succeeding canto, when Paridell's rape of Hellenore is presented in terms of a fabliau which suggests not a rape but a comic liberation.' Cheney, 'Spenser's Hermaphrodite and the 1590 *Faerie Queene*', p. 198.

iii. Squire of Dames

Britomart's narrative is not the only place where chastity comes under scrutiny. An episode in the seventh canto of Book III asks questions about the existence of female chastity in general. Sir Satyrane, who is a knight of the Order of Maidenhead but also at times a morally indeterminate character,¹⁰¹ helps to liberate the newly introduced Squire of Dames (merely a morally dubious character) from the lustful giantess Argante (the twin of Ollyphant),¹⁰² after which they discuss female chastity. As the Squire had been in thrall to Argante/monstrous lust, he does not emerge well from the allegorical associations of his plight. Sure enough, after the Squire has been rescued and recounts his own tale to Sir Satyrane, it is clear that he, too, has been embroiled in lustful activities. His lady had sent him on a quest to test his fidelity, although, ironically, she did this by granting him sexual licence. She ordered him to wander for twelve months serving ladies - with the implied sexual sense - after which he was to return bringing with him their names and pledges, 'the spoiles of [his] victorious games' (III.vii.54.9).¹⁰³ The Squire followed her instructions to the letter and so presented his beloved with three hundred pledges. On receiving these trophies, she was highly displeased with his infidelity and devised a suitable punishment for him. The Squire tells Satyrane that he is now doomed

¹⁰¹ Cf. Cheney: 'It is significant of the ambiguity of Satyrane's role – and of the ambiguity of pastoral motifs as Spenser employs them – that he is alternatively described as wearing the emblems of both a satyr's head (III.vii.30) and of the Order of Maidenhead (IV.iv.17)'. Donald Cheney, *Spenser's Image of Nature: Wild Man and Shepherd in 'The Faerie Queene'* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), p. 65.

¹⁰² Cf. Spenser: 'She bore before her lap a dolefull Squire, / Lying athwart her horse in great distresse, / Fast bounden hand and foote with cords of wire, / Whom she did meane to make the thrall of her desire' (III.vii.37.6-9).

¹⁰³ Roche takes a negative view of the Squire's Lady, imputing to her also the vice of unchastity: 'What perversions Argante and Ollyphant do not think of, the Squire's anti-social Lady will [...] only the unified spirit of Satyrane can see through the hypocritical, false chastity of the Squire's Lady.' Thomas P. Roche, Jr., *The Kindly Flame: A Study of the Third and Fourth Books of Spenser's Faerie Queene* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1964), p. 158.

to return to his wanderings and never to enter into his beloved's presence again until he has found an equal number of women who

Would me refuse their pledges to afford,
But did abide for euer chaste and sound. (III.vii.56.6-7)

The Squire's punishment is, in effect, to seek out chastity. This proves to be more difficult than it sounds because of one major dilemma, which the Squire soon discovers: there are very few chaste women around. Indeed, he has found only three women who refused his suit:

The first which then refused me (said hee)
Certes was but a common Courtisane.
Yet flat refusd to haue a do with mee,
Because I could not giue her many a Iane.
[...] The second was an holy Nunne to chose,
Which would not let me be her Chappellane,
Because she knew, she said, I would disclose
Her counsell, if she should her trust in me repose. (III.vii.58.1-9)

The first two women are an amusing parody of chastity. The courtesan refuses 'to haue a do' with the Squire because he does not have the money to pay her and so for this reason she is falsely accounted 'chaste'. The nun, who ought to be chaste, refused to 'let [him] be her Chappellane' for fear that he would not remain silent; the implication is that she will only admit her favours to ecclesiasts who are bound by their office to keep confessions private. The paralleling of the sexual licence of a nun and a prostitute reads like a Lutheran commentary on the failure of monastic chastity, and even includes a negative comment on the Sacrament of Penance. Clearly, the chastity of the nun and courtesan is meant to be a comic undermining of reader expectations as the women from diametrically opposed professions become linked with both chastity and promiscuity. The Squire's inclusion of these women in his record of chaste women, however, raises the

problem of defining and interpreting chastity.¹⁰⁴ By contrast, the third woman whom the Squire discovered to be chaste was a country damsel who really does appear to have embraced chastity for its own sake.¹⁰⁵

Cavanagh is irritated by the exchange between Satyrane and the Squire of Dames as, although the Squire identifies only one truly chaste woman, she points out that the two men who are laughing at the lack of chastity in women seem to have forgotten the female knight who saved them both from the dreadful lust of Argante:¹⁰⁶

The ready dismissal of [Palladine] the chaste woman who has just saved the skins of the two less than exemplary male knights takes place while they are humorously noting how few chaste women exist. This juxtaposition reinforces the reader's awareness that chastity is not really honoured very highly in this realm.¹⁰⁷

Palladine is a female knight and readily mirrors Britomart.¹⁰⁸ Their affinity can also be seen in the paralleling of their roles: both women are seen chasing the monstrous twins,

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Dasenbrock: 'The Squire of Dames is a troubling figure because his cynicism undercuts the idealistic assumptions about the nature of women and love so prominent in *The Faerie Queene*. Book III celebrates the virtue of chastity, yet in his sample unchaste women outnumber the chaste by at least one hundred to one. And it is entirely appropriate that the last we see of the Squire of Dames is at the tourney for Florimell's girdle, the symbol of chastity he has so much difficulty finding. There he mocks the discrepancy between the ideal and the reality of love.' Dasenbrock, 'Escaping the Squires' Double Bind', p. 30.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. Spenser: 'The third a Damzell was of low degree, / Whom I in cuntry cottage found by chaunce; / Full little weened I, that chastitee / Had lodging in so meane a maintenaunce, / Yet was she faire, and in her countenance / Dwelt simple truth in seemely fashion' (III.vii.59.1-6). Cf. Padelford: 'The Squire of Dames does indeed testify that the only woman to be chaste for chastity's sake was a damsel of low degree whom he had discovered by chance in a rural cottage, a maiden who was fair, and in whose countenance dwelt simple truth, but the Squire of Dames is a blasé man of the world, a jester and breaker of idols, a captious cynic. Among the lowly, then, only vulgar love exists, but in the gentle heart love breeds desire of honour and even brings forth bounteous deeds.' F. M. Padelford, 'The Women in Spenser's Allegory of Love', *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Jan., 1917), 70-83, (p. 70).

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Spenser: 'She Palladine is hight; / She you from death, you me from dread redeemed. / Ne any may that Monster match in a fight, / But she, or such as she, that is so chaste a wight.' (III.vii.52.6-9)

¹⁰⁷ Cavanagh, *Wanton Eyes and Chaste Desires*, p. 159.

¹⁰⁸ She perhaps recalls Marfisa in *Orlando Furioso*, Spenser's main source text for Book III of *The Faerie Queene*. Cf. Ludovico Aristo, *Orlando Furioso*, trans. Guido Waldman (London, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 205. For studies of the influence of Aristo on Spenser, see Lewis, *The Allegory of Love*, pp. 305. Also, see R. E. Neil Dodge, 'Spenser's Imitations from Aristo', *PMLA*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (1897), 151-204.

and Ollyphant and Argante are both said to fear the chastity of the two female knights.¹⁰⁹

It may seem strange, then, for a character who reflects the martial chastity of the main character of the book to be passed over in the Squire and Satyrane's conversation about chastity. However, although it is the Squire who identifies Palladine, his failure to recognise her true chastity and include her in his list of chaste women does not necessarily indicate a lack of honour towards chastity in Faeryland, as Cavanagh suggests. Rather, the omission functions to highlight the unreliability of the Squire as a commentator on chastity. Even though the Squire's inability to 'match the chaste with the vnchaste Ladies' (III.vii.60.9) is a damning indictment of the chastity of the female population, Spenser later makes the point that the Squire's

long discourse of his aduentures vaine,
The which himselfe, then Ladies more defames (III.viii.44.2-3)

The Squire defames himself not only for his lack of courtesy, but also because he exposes his own lack of virtue by making trial of female chastity. His definition of chastity is also shown to be limited: he defines it merely as a refusal of his sexual offers, although he acknowledges that it is really the intention behind the refusal which marks true chastity, as with the chastity of the country damsel who 'chastity did for it selfe embrace' (III.vii.60.2).¹¹⁰ It is perhaps more than ironic that the Squire's exposition on chastity is the only place where *The Faerie Queene* seems to state that chastity is a quality of the soul, and even here it is not that clear.

¹⁰⁹ For Ollyphant's fear of Britomart's chastity, see III.xi.6.1-4. For Argante's fear of Palladine's chastity, see III.vii.52.6-9.

¹¹⁰ Cf. Spenser: 'Safe her [the country damsel], I neuer any woman found, / That chastity did for it selfe embrace, / But were for other causes firme and sound; / Either for want of handsome time or place, / Or else for feare of shame and foule disgrace. (III.vii.60.1-5)

iv. The Girdle

If the Squire of Dames episode proves unenlightening or at best limited in its discussion of chastity, Florimell's girdle, which is introduced in Book III, is a fitting metaphor for the ambiguous treatment of chastity in *The Faerie Queene* as a whole. From its very first appearance in the narrative, it proves to be an unreliable indicator of the virtue.¹¹¹

Satyrane's discovery of the girdle, which has fallen from the waist of the apparently chaste Florimell after a skirmish with a Hyena, another figure of lust, leads to a tournament in Book IV for the possession of the precious artifact.¹¹² Satyrane does not simply call the tournament as a consequence of finding the girdle, but rather proceeds to wear it himself:

It lately so befell,
That *Satyrane* a girdle did vptake,
Well knowne to appertaine to *Florimell*,
Which for her sake he wore, as him beseemed well. (IV.ii.25.6-9)

Satyrane seems to wear the girdle as a favour. However, it seems odd that Satyrane puts on a piece of women's clothing. By fastening the girdle to himself, Satyrane also incurs

¹¹¹ Silberman argues that the 'girdle functions as a fetish in almost textbook Freudian terms of absence and presence: it represents female genitalia and signals the presence of the hymen as it substitutes for the absent woman. [...] Spenser subjects his culture's fetishisation of female virginity to scrutiny and quite irreverent critique, but he uses that critique to approach intellectual habits that underlie making such a fetish of virginity.' Silberman, *Transforming Desire*, p. 101. Cf. Silberman: 'Since the girdle falls off the unchaste, it makes manifest the state of the female body it encloses, however temporarily, in such a way as to abstract the signification of absence or presence of the hymen from active heterosexual relations. Making a fetish of the hymen affords but a negative sort of carnal knowledge – the knowledge of lost virginity – and excludes post-hymeneal, married chastity from the universe of discourse.' Silberman, *Transforming Desire*, pp. 102-3.

¹¹² Satyrane states that he 'found her golden girdle cast astray, / Distaynd with durt and bloud, as relique of the pray' (III.viii.49.8-9). Such a description harkens back to the other episodes in *The Faerie Queene* in which female garments are soiled with blood, which are generally read as indicating defloration. Roche, however, champions Florimell's chastity, arguing that: '[Florimell] does not lose her chastity when she loses the girdle; she loses the outward sign of her chastity, a sign known and respected at the Court but no longer operative in the world to which she has fled.' Roche, *The Kindly Flame*, p. 157. Brill argues that Spenser does not consider Florimell truly chaste at all: 'Spenser discredits the idea that chastity is a negative virtue, that it involves no more than a steadfast refusal to be seduced. In Spenser's terms Florimell is unchaste. She is as untouched by the sacred sexual fires of Britomart as she is by Busyrane's demonism. If she preserves her maidenhead for Marinell, [...] it is largely because of the ludicrous incompetence of her assailants.' Brill, 'Chastity as Ideal Sexuality in the Third Book of *The Faerie Queene*', p. 25.

the resentment of his contemporaries and it is this ill feeling that forces him to declare a tournament:

But when as she her selfe was lost and gone,
Full many knights, that loued her like deare,
Thereat did greatly grudge, that he alone
That lost faire Ladies ornament should weare,
And gan therefore close spight to him to beare:
Which he to shun, and stop vile enuies sting,
Hath lately caus'd to be proclaim'd each where
A solemne feast, with publike turneyng,
To which all knights with them their Ladies are to bring. (IV.ii.26.1-9)

It is again strange that the knights begrudge that Satyrane 'alone' should wear the 'ornament', as this implies that the other knights also wish to wear it, too.¹¹³ However, when the 'publike turneyng' takes place it is not for the honour of wearing the girdle that the knights compete. In fact, the tournament becomes a two-fold contest: the first is a feat of arms, fought between the men, and the second is a beauty competition fought between the women. The girdle becomes the prize for the most beautiful lady, and the winner of the girdle becomes the prize for the winner of the feat of arms.¹¹⁴

Britomart wins the feat of arms for the Knights of Maidenhead and, at the beauty pageant, Amoret initially appears to be victorious (IV.v.13.2-6), but then is outshone by the late appearance of the False Florimell (IV.v.13.8-9) who is unanimously awarded the

¹¹³ The bizarre wish for the knights to wear Florimell's girdle is convincingly explained by Michael Leslie, who sees the Order of Maidenhead to be analogous to the Order of the Garter. The garter is similarly a female garment, which is appropriated as a military symbol. Cf. Leslie, *Spenser's 'Fierce Warres and Faithfull Loves'*, pp. 138-46.

¹¹⁴ Cf. Goldberg: 'the belt of Florimell is a fitting symbol for the deeply ambivalent vision of Elizabethan culture that *The Faerie Queene* offers. Although it is the chastity belt that Venus puts off when she abandoned her husband in order to commit adultery with Mars, it is meant by the Knights of Maidenhead to symbolise the union of "the praise of armes and chivalrie" with "the prize of beautie" (V.i.2-3). The tournament thus seeks, as does the proem to *The Faerie Queene*, to marry a latter-day Mars to a new Venus, not to recapitulate the marriage of Vulcan and Venus, and it intends to legitimate them with the prize.' Jonathan Goldberg, *Endlesse Worke: Spenser and the Structures of Discourse* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), p. 149. Leslie points out that the premise for the tournament is fairly dubious, for 'the tournament [is] effectively for the possession of the false Florimell's body'. Leslie, *Spenser's 'Fierce Warres and Faithfull Loves'*, p. 75.

prize for beauty. She appears to be so lovely that even '*Florimell* her selfe in all mens view / She seem'd to passe: so forged things do fairest shew' (IV.v.15.8-9). However, although the False Florimell appears to be even more beautiful than her counterpart, she is nowhere near as chaste. She, therefore, is unable to claim her prize because the girdle tests chastity and will not be fastened to her waist:

But by no meanes they could it thereto frame.
For euer as they fastned it, it loos'd
And fell away, as feeling secret blame.
Full oft about her wast she it enclos'd;
And it as oft was from about her wast disclos'd. (IV.v.16.1-9)

The girdle is said to feel the 'secret blame' of the False Florimell, and so appears to possess a mysterious power. However, the False Florimell's 'blame' is hardly 'secret' as, even before the trial of the girdle, the reader is already aware that her chastity is specious. Nevertheless, the power of the girdle to expose unchastity is taken as a given, for it has proved its efficacy on a known imposter. The trial then descends into farce as the False Florimell frantically tries 'full oft' to affix the girdle with no success. Her failure prompts other women to make trial of the girdle. It becomes a bone of contention for them, too, for all those who attempt to fasten the girdle in order to prove their chastity are disappointed (as, no doubt, are their lovers):

Then many other Ladies likewise tride,
About their tender loynes to knit the same;
But it would not on none of them abide,
But when they thought it fast, eftsoones it was vntide. (IV.v.17.6-9)

As it appears to bear witness to the failure of women to achieve the virtue of chastity, the girdle seems to confirm the pejorative view of the Squire, and, indeed, Spenser's assessment at the end of III.v that chastity is 'dead'. Amoret alone is able to affix the

girdle about her waist; notably, Britomart does not attempt to do so, perhaps because she is still under arms and incognito at this point.

The girdle reflects the ambiguity of the type of chastity extolled in Book III, not least because the poem seems unclear whether the girdle is purporting to make trial of marital or virginal chastity. On the first introduction of the power of the girdle, the text explains the nature of its virtue:

That girdle gaue the vertue of chast loue,
And wiuehood true, to all that did it beare;
But whosoeuer contrarie doth proue,
Might not the same about her middle weare,
But it would loose, or else a sunder teare. (IV.v.3.1-5)

It is clearly stated here that the girdle relates to ‘chast loue’ and ‘wiuehood true’; that is, the girdle is concerned with marital chastity and, in addition, it implies fidelity to a lover as it distinguishes ‘chast loue’ from ‘wiuehood true’. The dual association is often ignored by critics such as Elizabeth Harvey who states that the girdle ‘which was fashioned by Vulcan for Venus, symbolised chaste married love’.¹¹⁵ If it does, then neither the real Florimell, nor the False Florimell could wear it as neither is married. That the girdle distinguishes between ‘chast loue’ and ‘wiuehood true’ is significant because it appears to elevate chaste extra-marital love to the same level as marital chastity. Here, Spenser seems to have gone beyond the Jovinian debate, which argued that marital chastity was equivalent in virtue to virginity. At this point in the text, virginity appears to have no place in the understanding or trial of chastity.

The name of the girdle is interesting. Spenser says that it ‘*Cestus* hight by name’ (IV.v.6.1); ‘cestus’ is simply the Latin word for girdle. *The Oxford English Dictionary*

¹¹⁵ Elizabeth D. Harvey, ‘Spenser, Virginity, and Sexuality’, in *Early Modern English Poetry: A Critical Companion*, eds. Patrick Cheney, Andrew Hadfield and Garrett A Sullivan, Jr. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 102-112, (p. 106).

indicates that ‘cestus’ refers specifically to a girdle worn by a bride. Its name refers to its own materiality and also specifically associates it with marriage. However, the name also feeds into the intricacies of Spenser’s allegory. In Latin there is no antonym for chastity, *castitas*; one might assume it could be *incastitas* but this word does not exist. Its opposite noun is *incestum*¹¹⁶ and the adjectival form is *incestus*,¹¹⁷ both of which are the negative of *cestus*. The word *incestus* has a variety of nuances, but it is from this word that ‘incest’ derives. It is quite clear that throughout Book III Spenser pits figures of incest against figures of chastity, rather than against virginity itself. In doing so he seems to accord with Aquinas’ etymological definition of chastity, which, he says, ‘takes its name from *chastisement* of the contrary vices’.¹¹⁸

Although the girdle purports to be making a trial of the chastity of the wearer, it is also said to ‘g[i]ue the vertue’ of chastity. Thus, importantly, it seems that to a certain extent it is the girdle which endows the virtue rather than the wearer possessing the quality innately. The mythic history of the origins of the girdle and how it came into Florimell’s possession, however, indicates that the lofty claims for its power are highly questionable. The girdle was originally wrought by the god Vulcan in order to safeguard the often dubious chastity of his wife Venus:

And afterwards did for her loues first hire,
Giue it to her, for euer to remaine,
Therewith to bind lasciuious desire,
And loose affections streightly to restraine;
Which vertue it for euer after did retaine. (IV.v.4.5-9)

¹¹⁶ Cf. ‘unchastity, lewdness, esp. incest.’ *A Latin-English Dictionary, based upon the works of Forcellini and Freund*, ed. William Smith (London: John Murray, 1855), p. 546.

¹¹⁷ Cf. ‘unclean: hence impure, polluted, defiled, sinful, criminal. [...] Esp. unchaste, lewd.’ *A Latin-English Dictionary*, p. 546.

¹¹⁸ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Vol. IV, Q. 151, A. 3, pp. 1797-8.

Vulcan's intentions in making the girdle were an attempt to promote the virtue of chastity in his wife by 'bind[ing her] lasciuious desire' and 'loose affections'. The necessity for Vulcan to produce such a garment tends to indicate that Venus' behaviour required restraint. Venus' adulterous activities, despite the power of the girdle, reveal that it does not have the ability to control desire:

Whilome it was (as Faeries wont report)
 Dame *Venus* girdle, by her steemed deare,
 What time she vsd to liue in wiuely sort;
 But layd aside, when so she vsd her looser sport. (IV.v.3.6-9)

The narrative suggests that Venus valued chastity when she was living in 'wiuely sort', engaging in licit marital activities, but that she tired of the girdle and chastity, when she used 'looser sport', when she was pursuing her numerous adulterous amours. Venus is an indifferent figure of marital chastity at the best of times, but the story shows that the girdle did not 'bind [her] lasciuious desire'; she was able to unbind it from herself in order to commit adultery with Mars:

The same one day, when she her selfe disposd
 To visite her beloued Paramoure,
 The God of warre, she from her middle loosd,
 And left behind her in her secret bowre,
 On *Acidalian* mount, where many an howre
 She with the pleasant *Graces* wont to play. (IV.v.5.1-6)

Venus does not commit infidelity because she has unbound the girdle and therefore is left vulnerable to lust, but rather her unchaste intentions lead her to unfasten it in order to satisfy her adulterous desire. The girdle's association with chastity is thus doubly dubious, for it does not give 'the vertue of chast loue, / And wiuehood true', nor does it test it. In refusing to adorn the waist of the False Florimell the girdle appears to be functioning in one of the ways that it is claimed to operate. However, in Book V, it again

fails in this function, too, for when the False Florimell is unmasked by the true Florimell and melts away to nothing, all that remains is ‘th’emptie girdle, which about her wast was wrought’ (V.iii.24.9). This suggests that ultimately the False Florimell had been successful in attaching the girdle to her waist. Far from being a means of discerning chaste love, the girdle, instead, corroborates her false claim to chastity.

Although the text at first appears to assert that the girdle’s virtue is in testing marital fidelity, in Book V, when the true Florimell returns and exposes the False Florimell, the text restates the unique power of the girdle:

Full many Ladies often had assayd,
 About their middles that faire belt to knit;
 And many a one suppos’d to be a mayd:
 Yet it to none of all their loynes would fit,
 Till *Florimell* about her fastned it.
 Such power it had, that to no womans wast
 By any skill or labour it would sit,
 Vnlesse that she were continent and chast,
 But it would lose or breake, that many had disgrast. (V.iii.28.1-9)

According to this passage, the girdle has a different function from that claimed in Book IV. It now appears that it does not expose marital infidelity at all, but is instead a test of virginity as it unmasks those who are not ‘mayd[s]’, a word which is used for virgins. The girdle thus seems to undergo a considerable shift in significance between Books IV and V. It is perhaps fitting, then, that Amoret is the only one in Book IV who can wear the girdle, as she is a virgin bride, and so simultaneously a figure of virginity and chaste marriage.

The girdle episode suggests several things. The uncertainty about the type of chastity that the girdle tests seems to sum up the ambiguity of the virtue that is celebrated in Book III. Both the book and the girdle oscillate between an understanding of chastity

as marital chastity and virginal chastity, but also as chaste love. This reflects the prevalent opinion of scholars that Book III praises chaste love rather than either marital chastity or virginity. Indeed, as Britomart is neither fully a figure of marital chastity, although anticipating marriage, nor virginity, despite being physically intact, chaste love would seem to be the most obvious type of ‘chastity’ that she represents. However, this is not a traditional form of chastity. The shifting symbolism of the girdle draws attention to the pitfalls associated with attempting to make trial of chastity in a post-Reformation world where there is no stable definition of the spiritual value and the understanding of chastity is no longer predicated on the ideal of an absolute renunciation of lust and desire. The fault lines that haunt post-Reformation virginity and chastity reach their symbolic climax in the Temple of Isis episode in Book V.

v. Temple of Isis

Britomart’s night-long sojourn in the Temple of Isis in Book V emblematically sums up the problem of the interpretation of her chastity and, by implication, Elizabeth’s virginity in *The Faerie Queene*. The idol of Isis with a crocodile under its feet not only recalls the various idols and altars throughout the poem,¹¹⁹ but also echoes traditional representations of the Blessed Virgin Mary, who is depicted in iconography with her foot placed on a serpent.¹²⁰ As Isis is associated with a moon-cult, she seems to echo

¹¹⁹ There are five different altars in *The Faerie Queene*. The altar in Book I, however, does not possess an Idol, but is adorned with the blood of the martyrs (I.viii.36); the idol of Cupid on the altar in Book III depicts Cupid standing on a wounded dragon (III.xi.47-8); the idol of Venus which stands on the altar in the Temple of Venus in Book IV is shown standing on a snake (IV.x.39-41); the idol of Isis in Book V is standing on a crocodile (V.vii.6-7). There is also an idol in the Chapel in Geryoneo’s Castle; a monster is contained beneath the altar (V.x.28-9; V.xi.19-22). Ronald Arthur Horton recognises a connection between the two altars in Book V: ‘Geryoneo’s shrine (V.x) is linked by similarity of embodiment with the Temple of Isis (V.vii). The idol above the altar with the monstrous reptile underneath recalls the status of Isis with the crocodile under her feet.’ Horton, *The Unity of ‘The Faerie Queene’*, p. 148.

¹²⁰ This imagery is an allusion to Genesis, as God warns the serpent after the Fall: ‘I will put enmities between thee and the woman, and thy seed and her seed: she shall crush thy head, and thou shalt lie in wait

Elizabeth.¹²¹ Isis, however, is not an idol of chastity, but a fertility goddess.¹²²

Nevertheless, the priests that serve in her temple are celibate:

All clad in linnen robes with siluer hemd;
 And on their heads with long locks comely kemd,
 They wore rich Mitres shaped like the moone, (V.vii.4.4-6)
 [...] by the vow of their religion
 They tied were to stedfast chastity,
 And continence of life, that all forgon,
 They mote the better tend to their deuotion. (V.vii.9.6-9)

The description of Isis' priests, taken mostly from Plutarch's *De Iside et Osiride*,¹²³

appears to echo that of Catholic priests, especially in their ecclesiastical vestments and

the requirement of mandatory celibacy.¹²⁴ This has not gone unnoticed by scholars;

however, they do not see much of a reason for interpreting the episode as an allusion to

Catholicism. Such a reading is contradicted by the priests' long hair, a detail that is

for her heel' (Genesis 3: 15). Alan MacColl associates the Marian imagery with the idol of Venus: 'As second Eve, the Virgin is often depicted trampling on a snake or dragon, a topos which represents immaculate womanhood trampling over original sin, and transcending the sexual.' Alan MacColl, 'The Temple of Venus, the Wedding of the Thames and Medway, and the End of *The Faerie Queene*, Book IV', *The Review of English Studies*, New Series, Vol. 40, No. 157 (Feb., 1989), 26-47, (p. 34). Cf. Williams: 'That Elizabeth in a sense replaced the virgin as an object of devotion in Protestant England is well known.' Williams, *Spenser's 'Faerie Queene': The World of Glass*, p. 170n. 20.

¹²¹ John King draws other parallels between Isis and Elizabeth: 'The Egyptian fertility goddess shares the queen's androgynous nature, and the history of her search for the dead Osyris, whom Typhon had dismembered, makes her look like a type for Elizabeth in her restless quest for a spouse. Although Isis receives the rest of her husband's body, she never finds his phallus, a lost member that forever eludes her.' King, 'Queene Elizabeth I: Representations of the Virgin Queen', p. 63. Cf. King: 'It was not until the 1580s and 1590s that the "moon cult" of Elizabeth as a perpetually virgin goddess emerged and took root after the failure of her last effort at marriage.' King, 'Queene Elizabeth I: Representations of the Virgin Queen', p. 43.

¹²² Cf. Hankins: 'Just before her great battle with Radigund, Britomart visits the Temple of Isis, which is to be her place of perfecting the virtue of chastity. Isis is normally regarded as a goddess of fertility, though Spenser here lists Osiris and Isis as representing justice and equity.' Hankins, *Source and Meaning in Spenser's Allegory*, p. 153. Cf. Williams: 'In this book [V] Britomart is closely associated with Isis, who is the mother goddess in one of her aspects and is also by tradition truth and (with Osiris) justice.' Williams, *The World of Glass*, p. 169.

¹²³ Plutarch states that the priests of Isis keep 'a continuous and temperate regimen and abst[ain] from many foods and the pleasures of love' [Plutarch, *De Iside et Osiride*, ed. and trans. By J. Gwyn Griffiths (Cambridge: University of Wales Press, 1970), p. 121]. Spenser does not follow Plutarch exactly in his descriptions of the priests of Isis, as he depicts them with long hair whereas Plutarch states that they 'cut off their hair and wear linen clothes.' Plutarch, *De Iside et Osiride*, p. 123.

¹²⁴ Davis, however, comments that 'the "mass" at the Temple of Isis is as pagan as the rites that conclude *The Broken Heart*.' B. E. C. Davis, *Edmund Spenser: A Critical Study* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1962), p. 66.

absent from Plutarch's account. Rene Graziani, for instance, who accepts that Britomart stands for Elizabeth but not in relation to the genealogical focus of the episode,¹²⁵ reads the events in the Temple of Isis as a political allegory on the condemnation of Mary Queen of Scots.¹²⁶ She argues that

Spenser's change is deliberate. It allows his priests to carry a topical application and prevents them from being mistaken for Papists. Spenser implies a pointed contrast between a plain, sober, long-haired, self-denying Protestant laity in Parliament and the priests of an earlier, bibulous, gaudy, self-indulgent, and tonsured Popish dispensation who had once occupied the St. Stephen's Chapel.¹²⁷

Graziani's interpretation rejects the mythological explanation of the priests' hair given by Henry Gibbons Lotspeich, who had accounted for the anomaly by suggesting that Spenser 'may be remembering N[atale] C[onti]'s remark [...] that, in commemoration of his triumphs, Osiris commanded that men's hair should be worn long'.¹²⁸ Following Graziani, D. Douglas Waters argues that '[t]he long hair of Spenser's priests of Isis indicates a deliberate Protestant emphasis rather than a failure to remember his

¹²⁵ Graziani: 'Although Britomart's association with Queen Elizabeth had been reaffirmed two stanzas before, this marital forecast cannot possibly fit Elizabeth, who was in her sixties when Book V was published.' René Graziani, 'Elizabeth at Isis Church', *PMLA*, Vol. 79, No. 4 (Sep., 1964), 376-389, (p. 376).

¹²⁶ Graziani: 'My contention is that the action at Isis Church reveals Elizabeth's dilemma [about Mary Queene of Scots] resolved in a particular way through Parliament and that (subject to common-sense limits) Isis Church is Parliament.' Graziani, 'Elizabeth at Isis Church', p. 377.

¹²⁷ Graziani, 'Elizabeth at Isis Church', p. 387. Cf. Horton: 'The Temple with its long-haired priests depicts an English court of law (Lerch, p. 102), yet one in which, strangely, Talus as the law has no place. Rene Graziani and Frank Kermode have suggested that the Temple represents the courts of royal prerogative – especially the chancery – known as Court of equity and possessing the function of mitigating the rigour of the common law in cases where the provisions of the common law were unduly severe for the particular circumstances.' Horton, *The Unity of 'The Faerie Queene'*, p. 114.

¹²⁸ Henry Gibbons Lotspeich, *Classical Mythology in the Poetry of Edmund Spenser* (New York: Gordian Press, 1965), p. 73. Cf. Conti: 'Osiris went off on his travels, and decided to leave his hair uncut until he got back home. His decision created a custom among other travellers to do the same, letting their hair grow until they made their return trips.' Natale Conti, *Mythologiae*, trans. John Mulryan and Steven Brown (Arizona: Arizona Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2006), V.xiii, p. 419.

Plutarch'.¹²⁹ His reading of the episode is a little different from Graziani's political allegory, however. He argues, instead, that:

The priests of the Temple of Isis, their 'holy things for morrow Mas,' their 'rites and daily sacrifice' (V.vii.4), and their altar with its 'holy fire', 'embers', and 'flames' (V.vii.14) - if taken literally out of the context of the poem - might seem to imply parallels with the Roman Mass, but they cannot imply the poet's approval of sacrifice based on the concept of transubstantiation of the substance of the Eucharistic bread and wine into the substance of the body and blood of Christ. These rites and ceremonies however could easily signify those of a Protestant 'mass' and the concept of Eucharist as a 'sacrifice of laud and praise' offered upon the altar of the individual Christian heart as Cranmer, Guest, Jewel, and countless other Protestants phrased it.¹³⁰

Waters is quite right that the apparent echoes of the Catholic mass in no way imply that Spenser has any crypto-Catholic tendencies, or subscribes to the doctrine of Transubstantiation. Indeed, Spenser's attitude towards Catholicism is abundantly clear throughout *The Faerie Queene*.¹³¹ However, this does not then mean that the ritual, or 'mas' that is taking place, definitely represents an Anglican mass either. Indeed, the presence of a female deity begs the question of whether any Christian ritual at all is implied, although, of course, one of the types of idolatry that Protestants accused Catholics of was that of Marian worship and the Idol, standing as it does on a reptile, does echo the traditional stance of Marian statuary.¹³² As many critics associate the idol

¹²⁹ D. Douglas Waters, 'Spenser and the "Mas" at the Temple of Isis', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 19, No. 1, *The English Renaissance* (Winter, 1979), 43-53, (p. 44).

¹³⁰ Waters, 'Spenser and the "Mas" at the Temple of Isis', p. 50.

¹³¹ Jones observes the anti-Catholic atmosphere of Book V: 'The political allegory of the fifth book is more transparent than that of any other in the *Faerie Queene*. Touched lightly in earlier cantos, it develops in great detail from canto vi to the end. Its main themes present the different aspects of the Catholic danger in England, France, the Low Countries and Ireland.' Jones, *A Spenser Handbook*, p. 261. Cf. Lewis: '[Spenser's] anti-papal allegories strike the very note of popular, even of rustic, Protestant aversion; they can be understood and even enjoyed by the modern reader (whatever his religion) only if he remembers that Roman Catholicism was in Spenser's day simply the most potent contemporary symbol for something much more primitive - the sheer Bogey, who often changes his name but never wholly retires from the popular mind.' Lewis, *Allegory of Love*, p. 311.

¹³² Graziani draws parallels between the statue in the temple and a statue of Mary known to have been in the royal chapel at Westminster palace: 'At Westminster beside the St. Stephen's chapel was a smaller one called Our Lady of the Piew, which during the building's use as a palace had been the king's private

of Isis with Queen Elizabeth herself,¹³³ such an association would not only suggest that the rite is associated with Protestantism, presided over by the Protestant Queen, but it would additionally highlight the troubled nature of Elizabeth's virgin cult, which in appearance recalls what Protestants understood to be the repugnant Mariolatry of Catholicism.¹³⁴

Regardless of whether the 'mas' is supposed to imply Catholic practices or not, the interpretive problem of the episode seems to stem from the fact that the supposedly reformed mass of the English Church does uncomfortably resemble the mass of the Catholic Church. Elizabeth, too, is a troubled figure in religious terms as she embodies the Catholic preference of perpetual virginity even as there are Mariological echoes in her personal cult. Virgil K. Whitaker draws attention to the tensions embedded in the compromise of the *Ecclesia Anglicana*:

The Anglican position was a compromise, in which theology was largely Protestant while ritual was largely Catholic, and theology, in turn, was a blend of elements from Lutheranism and Calvinism with indigenous ideas.¹³⁵

The continued existence of much of the Catholic rite which accompanied the reformed theology was not universally accepted by English Protestants.¹³⁶ The predicament caused

chapel, and which had then held a very rich statue of the Virgin. Where Spenser's Isis trod upon a crocodile, the Virgin traditionally trod upon a Serpent.' Graziani, 'Elizabeth at Isis Church', p. 386.

¹³³ Cf. King: 'The 'rich Mitres shaped like the Moone' worn by the priests of Isis correspond to the moon devices that appear in the queen's portraiture during her last decade.' King, 'Queene Elizabeth I: Representations of the Virgin Queen', p. 63.

¹³⁴ Louis Montrose draws attention to the problem of the similarities between religious icons/idols and Tudor portraiture: 'Adherents of the state church found themselves in the position of having to defend the imagery and pageantry of state against those who denounced, as a form of idolatry, the reverence shown by Elizabethan subjects towards royal symbols and holidays.' Louis A. Montrose, 'Idols of the Queen: Policy, Gender, and the Picturing of Elizabeth I', *Representations*, No. 68 (Autumn, 1999), 108-161, p. 111.

¹³⁵ Virgil K. Whitaker, *The Religious Basis of Spenser's Thought* (New York: Gordian Press, 1966 [1950]) p. 31.

¹³⁶ Cf. Padelford: '[The Puritan] protested against ceremonialism because he felt that it hindered rather than helped direct communion with God. Away with the altar that smacked of Roman idolatry! Away with cape and surplice and amice that ministered to the vanity of priests, increased reverence for sinful man, and obstructed the vision of God! Away with organs and canticles that soothed the sinful ear! Away with

by the imposition of a Protestant interpretation on surviving Catholic ritual is evident in John Knox's insistence on the insertion of the 'Black Rubric' into *The Book of Common Prayer* in the revised edition of 1552.¹³⁷ This rubric attempted to control the meaning of the continued practice of kneeling at communion by stating that the reception of the Eucharist in this manner did not signify an adherence to the Catholic doctrine of Transubstantiation.¹³⁸ The Black Rubric was removed from the Elizabethan edition of the Book of Common Prayer in 1559, which perhaps implies that the clergy and the laity were offered greater freedom of interpretation. It was not only the ritualistic elements of the mass, however, which caused consternation to more hard-line Protestants.¹³⁹ The

candles and deckings that pleased the sinful eye! Away with incense and flowers that captivated with sweet odour! Away with fair houses of worship, since the soul of a righteous man is the living temple of God!' F. M. Padelford, 'Spenser and Puritan Propaganda', *Modern Philology*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Jul., 1913), 85-106, (p. 86).

¹³⁷ Cf. Cummings: 'It was this second *Book of Common Prayer*, even more than the first, which attempted to eradicate Catholic England for good. Something of the controversial passion attached to physical actions can be seen in the 'Black Rubric', an addendum to the Communion introduced late to some copies of the revised version, allowing kneeling (which some wished to ban altogether) but attempting to control the emotions worshippers felt while kneeling, forbidding any adoration of the bread and wine. [...] There were many cuts of material now considered as smacking of old ritual, such as in the radical dismantling of any residual form of the Canon of the Mass which Cranmer had allowed in 1549.' Brian Cummings, 'Introduction' to *The Book of Common Prayer: The Texts of 1549, 1559, and 1662*, ed. Brian Cummings (Oxford and New York; Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. ix-lii, (pp. xxxii-xxxiii).

¹³⁸ Cf. *Book of Common Prayer*: 'Although no ordre can be so perfectlye devised, but it may be of some, eyther for theyr ignoraunce and infermitie, or els of malice and obstinacie, misconstrued, depraved, and interpreted in a wrong part: And yet because brotherly charitie willeth, that so much as conveniently may be, offences should be taken away: therefore we willing to doe the same. Whereas it is ordeyned in the book of common prayer, in the administracion of the Lordes Supper, that the Communicants knelyng shoulde receyve the holye Communion: whiche thyng beyng well mente, for a sygnificacion of the humble and gratefull acknowledgyng of the benefites of Chryst, geven unto the woorthye receyver, and to avoyde the prophanacion and dysordre, which about the holy Communion myght else ensue: Leste yet the same kneelyng myght be thought or taken otherwise, we dooe declare that it is not ment thereby, that any adoracion is doone, or oughte to bee doone, eyther unto the Sacramentall bread or wyne there bodily receyved, or unto anye reall and essencial presence there beeyng of Christes naturall fleshe and bloude. For as concernyng the Sacramentall bread and wyne, they remayne styll in theyr verye naturall substaunces, and therefore may not be adored, for that were Idolatrye to be abhorred of all faythfull christians. And as concernyng the naturall body and blood of our saviour Christ, they are in heaven and not here. For it is agaynst the trueth of Christes true natural bodye, to be in moe places then in one, at one tyme.' 'The Black Rubric' from *The Book of Common Prayer (1552)* in *The Book of Common Prayer: The Texts of 1549, 1559, and 1662*, ed. Brian Cummings (Oxford and New York; Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 667.

¹³⁹ Cf. Foster: 'At the root of many Puritan concerns for the Church lay doubts about its continued "Catholic" traditions – that is, aspects of Church government like the retention of bishops and deans; the use of clerical vestments; continued use of ceremonies like that of the sign of the cross in baptism; and the

maintenance of elaborate priests' vestments was also considered to be overtly papist and thus highly questionable.¹⁴⁰ Padelford draws attention to Spenser's own exposure to the issue of the ceremonial remnants of Catholicism during his time at Cambridge:

When Spenser went up to Cambridge in 1569, he entered the very storm centre of the agitation against the vestments, and his seven years of residence there were coincident with the most heated period of the struggle. No Cambridge student could have remained indifferent to the controversy. Indeed, at this very time did not the anti-vestiary party in Trinity College take advantage of the temporary absence of the master to preach against the habits and did not all but three of the members of the college appear at service without the surplice!¹⁴¹

Padelford also notes that Spenser had satirised the Anglican concerns over the retaining of Catholic vestments in *Mother Hubbard's Tale*, which demonstrates that Spenser was interested in the controversy.¹⁴²

Such ambiguities concerning the interpretation of the ritualistic significance of the priests in the Temple of Isis are amplified by the dream that Britomart has there. While at the Temple, she falls into a visionary sleep:

There did the warlike maide her selfe repose,
Vnder the wings of *Isis* all that night,
And with sweete rest her heauy eyes did close,
After that long daies toile and weary plight.

persistence of an apparatus of Church courts still operating within a system of canon law.' Andrew Foster, *The Church of England 1570-1640* (London and New York: Longman, 1994), p. 3.

¹⁴⁰ Cf. Sheils: 'The chief bone of contention in the early years of the reign centred on the requirement of the 1559 Injunctions that clergy should wear the surplice at service and a distinctive clerical dress at other times. To the radicals this smacked of popery [...]. The problem was that the bishops saw vestments as an "indifferent" rather than a necessary part of the church order, but nevertheless they required that, for the sake of decency and uniformity, clergy should wear them. To the radicals, vestments were either anti-Christian and should therefore be rejected, or they were "matters indifferent" and as such should certainly not be enforced.' W. J. Sheils, *The English Reformation 1530-1570* (London and New York: Longman, 1989), pp. 62-3.

¹⁴¹ Padelford, 'Spenser and Puritan Propaganda', p. 88. Andrew Zurcher also makes a brief allusion to the radical Puritanism that Spenser was exposed to at Cambridge: 'Spenser's immersion in this heated dispute only months after his initial arrival at university, must have occupied him body and mind and traces of its influence are obvious in his major work, *The Shepheardes Calender* (1579) and *The Faerie Queene* (1590, 1596).' Andrew Zurcher, *Edmund Spenser's 'The Faerie Queene': A Reader's Guide* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), p. 3.

¹⁴² Cf. Sir Edmund Spenser, *Mother Hubbard's Tale*, (ll. 342-574). Cf. Padelford, 'Spenser and Puritan Propaganda', pp. 91-3.

Where whilst her earthly parts with soft delight
 Of sencelesse sleepe did deeply drowned lie,
 There did appeare vnto her heauenly spright
 A wondrous vision, which did close implie
 The course of all her fortune and posteritie. (V.vii.12.1-9)

Spenser here delves into the classical associations of virginity and its relationship to prophecy, as Britomart's chaste state appears to be connected to her reception of divine knowledge.¹⁴³ Indeed, Joan E. Taylor notes that 'in the cult of Isis abstinence from carnal pleasure is essential for the reception of the sacred word'.¹⁴⁴ The content of Britomart's 'wondrous vision' is the fulfilment of her quest: the 'fortune and posteritie' which is linked with her marriage to Artegall. The genealogical focus of the episode recalls the masque of Merlin, in Book III, canto iii. Although these genealogical prophecies are sometimes seen as part of the book's wider compliment to Elizabeth in *The Faerie Queene*,¹⁴⁵ they also draw attention to the disjunction between the political necessity for dynasties to procreate and Elizabeth's barren chastity which was ostensibly being praised in the poem.

Although Cavanagh claims that '[t]he priest's chastity obviously differs substantially from Britomart's',¹⁴⁶ this cannot be so as during Britomart's dream vision she is explicitly associated with the priests:

Her seem'd, as she was doing sacrifice

¹⁴³ Cf. Foskett: 'Throughout the early Empire, prophecy functioned as a phenomenon that was central to a variety of religious practices. [...] Interpreters of the first and second centuries have noted a relationship between sexual continence and prophecy. [...] although prophecy was limited neither to women not to those who practised sexual continence, there is a strand of discourse that relates prophecy particularly to female sexual status, and most notably, to virginity.' Mary F. Foskett, *A Virgin Conceived. Mary and Classical Representations of Virginity* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002), pp. 36-7.

¹⁴⁴ Joan E. Taylor, 'Virgin Mothers: Philo on the Women Therapeutae', *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha*, Vol. 12, No.1 (April, 2001), 37-63, (pp. 59-60).

¹⁴⁵ Cf. Horton: 'The representation of the Tudor Myth in the Briton genealogy (from Brut to Arthur in the Briton Chronicle, II.x.1-68, and from Arthur to Elizabeth in Merlin's prophecy, III.iii.26-50) is part of the poem's homage to Elizabeth.' Horton, *The Unity of 'The Faerie Queene'*, p. 33.

¹⁴⁶ Cavanagh, *Wanton Eyes and Chaste Desires*, p. 160.

To *Isis*, deckt with Mitre on her hed,
 And linnen stole after those Priestes guize
 All sodainely she saw transfigured
 Her linnen stole to robe of scarlet red,
 And Moone-like Mitre to a Crowne of gold,
 That even she her selfe much wondered
 At such a chaunge, and ioyed to behold
 Her selfe, adorn'd with gems and iewels manifold. (V.vii.13.1-9)

The ambiguities of whether the vestments and rituals echo Catholicism or not become more of an issue as Britomart, the titular knight of chastity and a shadow of Elizabeth, assumes the position of a priest. The association seems to imply that any form of virginity has residual overtones of religious consecrated virginity. Britomart's ecclesiastical garb, however, is then miraculously changed into sumptuous robes. Padelford suggests that Britomart's transformation is from a virgin into a bride,¹⁴⁷ whereas, Hamilton, in his reading of Britomart's story as an articulation of the war of the sexes, suggests that

When Britomart sees herself changed from a priest into Isis, her moon-like mitre changes to a crown of gold which signifies 'that she had powre in things diuine' (V.vii.6). In terms of the allegory she changes from her role as Radigund – one who occasions Artegall's fall – to one who restores his part.¹⁴⁸

In some ways, Britomart's transformation appears to indicate a merging with Isis herself. Certainly, the use of the term 'transfigured' to describe Britomart's transformation has strong religious overtones: the transfiguration of Christ was a revelation of his divinity.¹⁴⁹ Thus, the dream envisages Britomart's apotheosis as she appears to be transformed from a worshipper into the thing worshipped:

The which was framed all of siluer fine,
 So well as could with cunning hand be wrought,

¹⁴⁷ Cf. Padelford, 'The Women in Spenser's Allegory of Love', p.

¹⁴⁸ Hamilton, *The Structure of Allegory in 'The Faerie Queene'*, p. 189.

¹⁴⁹ Cf. Matthew: 'And after six days Jesus taketh unto him Peter and James, and John his brother, and bringeth them up into a high mountain apart: And he was transfigured before them. And his face did shine as the sun: and his garments became white as snow' (Matthew 17: 1-2); Cf. Mark 9: 2, Luke 9: 28-29, and II Peter 1: 16-18.

And clothed all in garments made of line,
 Hemd all about with fringe of siluer twine.
 Vppon her head she wore a Crowne of gold,
 To show that she had powre in things diuine; (V.vii.6.2-7)

Both Britomart and Isis wear a crown, a symbol of monarchy and power, and the text explicitly links the crown with divine power, rather than earthly power, as does the use of the word 'transfigured'. However, despite some similarities, the description of the Idol does not quite accord with Britomart's. The latter's robe of 'scarlet red' and the adornment of 'gems and iewels' do not mirror the dress of the idol exactly. They do, however, recall the 'scarlot mantle' of Malecasta,¹⁵⁰ and, indeed, the royal garb of Elizabeth in the *Shepherd's Calender*. In addition, the description evokes that of Duessa in Book I, who is both crowned and associated with royal imagery:

He gaue her gold and purple pall to weare,
 And triple crowne set on her head full hie,
 And her endowd with royall maiesty: (I.vii.16.3-5)

The 'triple crowne' refers to the papal tiara, and so Duessa is explicitly associated with Catholicism. The purple colour of the garments that Orgoglio gives to Duessa to wear does not correspond with the scarlet robe that Britomart wears. Duessa is, however, clad in a scarlet gown when she first appears in Book I accompanied by Sans Foy:

He had a fair companion of his way,
 A goodly Lady clad in scarlot red,
 Purfled with gold and pearle of rich assay,
 And like a Persian mitre on her hed,
 She wore, with crownes and owches garnished, (I.ii.13.1-5)

The description of Britomart's transfiguration does, therefore, suggest parallels with Duessa, whose portrayal derives from the description of the Whore of Babylon in the

¹⁵⁰ Cf. Spenser: 'Her with a scarlot mantle couered, / That was with gold and Ermines faire enueloped' (III.i.59.8-9).

Apocalypse of Saint John,¹⁵¹ which was a pejorative image used by Protestants to represent the Pope. Waters, however, rejects such an association between Britomart and Duessa:

An obvious question arises about Britomart's "scarlet" robe: would this not trigger associations with the whore of Babylon in a context of the polemics of worship? Not necessarily, for Spenser showed that Britomart's outward transformation not only resembles but also contrasts with the liturgical apparel of the whore of Babylon and Duessa and Radigund [...] the "scarlet red" of Britomart and the "purple" and "siluer" of Radigund, the one bearing favourable and the other unfavourable connotations, seem to indicate that the poet neither necessarily divorced the reality of true worship from rich liturgical colours *per se* nor necessarily tied this reality to these particular appearances.¹⁵²

Although Waters dismisses the parallels between Britomart and the more negative figures, he focuses on the dissimilarities of Britomart and Radigund, but does not actually dismiss the parallels between Britomart and Duessa's dress. The resemblance between the two women, however, does not necessarily create an incongruous similitude, especially considering that Duessa doubles as a false version of Una (allegorically either, or both True Faith, or the True Church) in Book I.¹⁵³

The apparent confusion in discerning the correct interpretation of the priests who seem in their ritual practices and garments to echo Catholic priests, and of the similarities between the sumptuous garb of Britomart and Duessa – allegorically a version of Elizabeth and the Whore of Babylon (i.e., the Catholic Church) – does not, however, necessitate a choice between possible Protestant and Catholic meanings in the text.

Rather, the unstable images underline the problem of interpreting a queen whose private

¹⁵¹ Cf. Apocalypse: 'And a woman was clothed round about with purple and scarlet, and gilt with gold, and precious stones and pearls' (Apocalypse 17: 4).

¹⁵² Waters, 'Spenser and the "Mas" at the Temple of Isis', pp. 52-3.

¹⁵³ Cf. Horton: 'The arch-counterfeit, the essence of falsehood itself, is of course, Duessa, who could "forge all colours, save the trew" (IV.i.18), just as the arch-counterfeiter is Archimago, whose name and character identify him as the father of reflection not only of Cicero's scheme of representing the virtues and vices but also of the commonplaces of traditional moral philosophy that evil must win its adherents by impersonating good.' Horton, *The Unity of 'The Faerie Queene'*, pp. 148-9.

body seems Catholic, but whose public body is Protestant, and her Church, whose ritual practices remain Catholic, but its reformed theology is Protestant. Britomart in the Temple of Isis comes to symbolise and embody exactly these problems of doubleness.

A secondary problem of interpretation in the Isis episode is the conclusion of the dream after Britomart's apotheosis. The crocodile that sleeps under the feet of Isis comes to life and threatens Britomart. The goddess then beats back the crocodile, and it becomes more pliable.¹⁵⁴ Then,

turning all his pride to humblesse meeke,
Him selfe before her feete he lowly threw,
And gan for grace and loue of her to seeke:
Which she accepting, he so neare her drew,
That of his game she soone enwombed grew,
And forth did bring a Lion of great might;
That shortly did all other beasts subdew. (V.vii.16.1-7)

Critics differ in their reading of the dream: most think that it is Britomart who receives the advances of the crocodile;¹⁵⁵ others think that it is Isis who accepts the crocodile's

¹⁵⁴ Cf. Spenser: 'With that the Crocodile, which sleeping lay / Vnder the Idols feete in fearelesse bowre, / Seem'd to awake in horrible dismay, / As being troubled with that stormy stowre; / And gaping greedy wide, did streight deuoure, / Both flames and tempest: with which growen great, / And swolne with pride of his owne peerelesse powre, / He gan to threaten her likewise to eat; / But that the Goddess with her rod him backe did beat' (V.vii.15.1-9).

¹⁵⁵ Cf. Hankins: 'Britomart falls asleep by the altar and dreams that the crocodile begs to have coition with her, that she consents, and that she afterwards gives birth to a lion.' Hankins, *Source and Meaning in Spenser's Allegory*, p. 154. Cf. Goldberg: 'the vision in the Church of Isis reveals [Britomart] "enwombed" of the "game" of a crocodile, bringing forth "a lion of great might".' Goldberg, *Endlesse Worke*, p. 168. Cf. McKeown: 'The crocodile [...] menaces Britomart, woos her, and wins her consent.' Adam McKeown, 'Looking at Britomart Looking at Pictures', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 45, No. 1, *The English Renaissance*, (Winter, 2005), 43-63, (p. 51). Cf. Graziani: 'we find Britomart (somewhat in the role of Isis' neophyte) one moment rescued by the crocodile, the next menaced by it as it is "swolne with pride", and then, after its correction by Isis ("clemence" or equity), overwhelmed by its amorous "game" to give birth to a "lion of great might".' Graziani, 'Elizabeth at Isis Church', p. 376. Cf. Walker, 'Spenser's Elizabeth Portrait and the Fiction of Dynastic Epic', pp. 192-3. Davis: 'throwing himself at Britomart's feet he [the crocodile] offers her his embraces.' Davis, *Edmund Spenser: A Critical Study*, p. 222. Cf. Benson: 'The encounter between Britomart and the crocodile figures the union between feminine equity and masculine tough justice that has produced the (Protestant) lion of England that brings peace when it fights.' Pamela Joseph Benson, 'Praise and Defence of the Queen in *The Faerie Queene*, Book V', in *Edmund Spenser*, ed. Andrew Hadfield (London and New York: Longman, 1996), pp. 161-176, (p. 168).

amorous overtures;¹⁵⁶ some pass the whole episode over in silence,¹⁵⁷ and, occasionally, critics misread the scene entirely.¹⁵⁸ Hamilton's note is perhaps the most pertinent, as he observes that the pronoun 'her', which causes the confusion, 'refers both to Isis and Britomart as the two merge in the dream'.¹⁵⁹ As Adam McKeown suggests, however, '[t]he episode is difficult to reconcile with the idea of Britomart as a symbol of chastity'.¹⁶⁰ Indeed, Britomart is uneasy when she wakes as once again she finds herself 'dismayd':

With that she waked, full of fearefull fright.
And doubtfully dismayd through that so vncouth sight. (V.vii.16.8-9)

The dream is troubling because it is not a straightforward erotic dream like those in other parts of *The Faerie Queene*, but has overtones of bestiality. The description of the dream as an 'vncouth sight' recalls the 'vncouth lusts' of the classical *exempla* of monstrous lust that Glauce uses to distinguish Britomart's desire from perversion. The bestial nature of the dream also, once again, associates her with Pasiphaë and Argante, both of whom are known for their unnatural acts with beasts.

Another, more subtle, association with Argante can be drawn from this episode because of the mythic associations of Isis and Osiris, who were also twins who copulated

¹⁵⁶ Cf. King: 'In Britomart's vision the Crocodile, that is Osiris or the sun, submits as a consort to Isis, "who dith the Moone portend".' King, 'Queene Elizabeth I: Representations of the Virgin Queen', p. 63.

¹⁵⁷ Cf. Humphrey Tonkin, *The Faerie Queene* (London, Boston, Sydney and Wellington: Unwin Hyman, 1989), p. 162. Cf. Cavanagh, *Wanton Eyes and Chaste Desires*, p. 160. Cf. Ronald Arthur Horton, *The Unity of 'The Faerie Queene'* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1978), p. 167. Cf. Williams, *The World of Glass*, p. 174.

¹⁵⁸ Cf. Burrows: 'In the Temple of Isis (V.vii) Britomart witnesses the fusion of male and female principles through a dream of the union between a lion and a crocodile.' Colin Burrows, *Edmund Spenser* (Plymouth: Northcote House Publishers Ltd., 1996), pp. 66-7.

¹⁵⁹ Hamilton's note to V.viii.14.1, in Sir Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A. C. Hamilton (Essex: Longman, 1997), p. 576. Cf. Williams: 'That Britomart should worship Isis and serve her, in vision, as priest, should be favoured by her and assimilated to her, is a wholly convincing and satisfying consummation, for Britomart reconciles within herself the partial truths of other characters just as Isis reconciled all divinities and can be invoked as Minerva, Venus, Diana, Dictynna, the Mother.' Williams, *The World of Glass*, p. 175.

¹⁶⁰ McKeown, 'Looking at Britomart Looking at Pictures', p. 51.

in utero, just as Argante and Ollyphant.¹⁶¹ These troubling associations, however, are brought up short as a priest in the Temple interprets Britomart's dream allegorically:¹⁶² what appears at first glance to be an indication of a perverse and unchaste mind is, in fact, an allegorical vision of her marital chastity and pre-destined motherhood. Once again what could be construed as evidence of Britomart's unchastity is laid at the door of providence. Britomart has not compromised her virtue through her own free will, but is shown to be accepting the workings of Fortune. Chastity in Book V, as in Book III, has become a peculiarly Protestant virtue, crowding out any operation of free will.

As the dominant figure of chastity in *The Faerie Queene*, many of the cultural concerns about virginity and chastity cluster around the figure of Britomart in Book III and its narrative continuations in Books IV and V. The quest to find her destined husband at once appears to privilege marital chastity, while exposing concerns about the compatibility of marriage and desire with a state of chastity. In this sense the text is fundamentally part of the same debate that Jerome and Augustine were engaged in during the fourth century. The Squire of Dames and the girdle episodes, however, seem to suggest that the debate has shifted ground, so that it is no longer simply a question of the superiority of virginity over marriage, or vice versa, but a wider debate about whether chastity can exist outside marriage or whether it is now 'dead'. Britomart again provides

¹⁶¹ Cf. Plutarch: 'They say that [...] Isis and Osiris, being in love with each other even before they were born, were united in the darkness of the womb.' Plutarch, *De Iside et Osiride*, p. 137. James Nohrnberg also notices that there is a mythic similarity between the two sets of twins: 'the mythic prototype of this pair [Argante and Ollyphant] may be Isis and Osiris – both have shared an incestuous womb.' Nohrnberg, however, reads incest as 'a paradoxical form of chastity': 'It could be argued that we are no longer talking about the varieties of chastity, but perhaps incest has some claim to being a kind of intentional chastity, or at least an inversion of promiscuity.' James Nohrnberg, *The Analogy of 'The Faerie Queene'* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 432.

¹⁶² Cf. Tonkin: 'When the priest interprets Britomart's dream in terms of the importance of her union with Artegall and the line it will produce, he passes over the immediately disturbing psychological and sexual aspects of the dream, perhaps because he realises that she must still continue her progress on the historical plane for one last battle before she can realise her sexual and generative role.' Tonkin, *The Faerie Queene*, p. 162.

the main figure for trying to resolve this problem, but this is done through a promotion of a providential chastity, which by its denial of free will, suggests that only an elect can aspire to that virtue. Perhaps, though, the most troubled aspects of the narrative's portrayal of chastity are those moments where it glances at Elizabeth's virginity which, like the *Ecclesia Anglicana*, undermines Protestant ideology even as it seeks to represent it. Far from providing a coherent treatment of chastity, *The Faerie Queene* is left confronted by a series of theological contradictions that it cannot possibly reconcile.

Afterword

The current thesis has attempted to provide a view of the development of the theological significance of virginity and some of the consequences and implications of the break with Rome occasioned by the reformers which are evident in Spenser's epic poem.

The earliest treatises on virginity were anxious about the regulation of virginity prompted by concerns about malpractice, such as unveiling in Carthage and, as the third century moved on, *syneisaktism*. To this practical concern were added an interest in the biblical authorisation of virginity, which also provided an indication of the religious significance of virginity and its aims. Methodius' fourth-century text, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, however, represents a water-shed in the tradition, as it mainly serves an epideictic function and draws out a wealth of images which are not restricted to the few scriptural passages usually adduced to demonstrate the biblical sanction of virginity. In that sense it marks the beginning of a new understanding of virginity.

The fourth-century treatises written after the end of the persecution show an increased interest in identifying virginity with orthodoxy, both Christological orthodoxy in Athanasius' treatise, and Trinitarian orthodoxy in Gregory of Nyssa's. Gregory and Methodius also represent the influence of Neo-Platonist ideas on virginity. The fourth century, too, is important for the insertion of Mariological ideas into the tradition, evident especially in the works of Athanasius, Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine. Ambrose's *De virginibus* demonstrates as well the connections between the increasing interest in hagiography and virginity. The ascetic reform of monasticism in the fourth century also begins to filter into the tradition, as increasingly virginity is understood to be carried out in a communal atmosphere, rather than a domestic setting.

The Reformation sees a resurgence of the patristic debate but especially a concern with the theology of virginity. The reformers' objection to virginity, predominantly in the form of monasticism and clerical celibacy, served to ally virginity with Catholicism and marriage with Protestantism. The Protestant rejection of virginity also can be seen to have unsettled the understanding of sexual morality. Though not a treatise on virginity like those of the Church Fathers, nor yet a polemic like those of the reformers, *The Faerie Queene* nevertheless engages with the tradition of virginity and the complexities which continue to haunt the estate post-Reformation.

The troubled meaning of Spenser's 'Legend of Britomartis, or Of Chastity', stems from the basic problem that confronted Spenser in representing a virtue that is at once anathema to Protestantism and yet embodied in the Head of the Protestant Church in England. In this way Book III can be seen as a metaphor for the uneasy reception of Elizabeth's virginity and her compromised Church. Whereas the reformers, led by Luther, had effectively alienated virginity from any identification with Protestant theology or values, Elizabeth's anomalous and pervading presence, not only as Queen of England but also the Head of the *Ecclesia Anglicana*, disrupted the simple dichotomy created and utilised by Protestant reformers. Spenser, a Protestant poet with a queen whose personal identity appears to sanction Catholic values, was faced with the difficult problem of how to represent the queen's predominant virtue. To praise virginity outright might be impolitic considering the loaded religious values which had become attached to marriage and virginity, yet to deny the perfection of the queen would similarly be unwise. Therefore, Spenser attempts to avoid the implications of religious partisanship which would be involved in praising either marriage or virginity as the pre-eminent type of

chastity by oscillating between the praise of virginity and marital chastity, and a questioning of the virtue of chastity in all its forms.

The Faerie Queene is necessarily entangled in both the patristic tradition and the Reformation debate. In many ways *The Faerie Queene* reflects the ambiguities of Erasmus' work in its treatment of virginity, rather than the condemnatory polemic attacks on Catholic virginity, which were typical of Luther's approach. Without an understanding of the theology behind those writings, Spenser's great poem is likely to continue to be seen as a simple Protestant text rather than a product of a long theological debate, a debate the Church Fathers had sought to close off only for Spenser to reweave its threads into his 'dark conceit'.

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