SACRIFICE, SALVATION AND SEX: THE FEMALE BODY AND THE SHAPING OF CHRISTIAN ANTIQUITY

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**Abbreviations**

*Acta Pauli et Theclae*  
*Thec.*

Alexander of Alexandria, *Epistula ad Alexandrum Constantinopoleos*  
*Ep. Alex. Const.*

Ambrose, *De virginibus ad Marcellinam suorem sua*  
*Virg.*

Ambrose, *De virginitate*  
*Virginit.*

Athanasius, *Apolo gia ad Constantium*  
*Apol. Const.*

Athanasius, *Apolo gia contra Arianos*  
*Apol. sec.*

Athanasius, *Epistula ad virgines (Coptice)*  
*Ep. virg. (Copt).*

Athanasius, *Epistula ad virgines (Syriace)*  
*Ep. virg. (Syr.)*

Athanasius, *Epistula encyclica*  
*Ep. encycl.*

Athanasius, *Orationes contra Arianos*  
*C. Ar.*

Augustine, *De civitate Dei*  
*Civ.*

Augustine, *De nuptiis et concupiscentia*  
*Nupt.*

Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*  
*Virg.*

Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*  
*Hab. virg.*

Epiphanius, *Panarion (Adversus haereses)*  
*Pan.*

Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*  
*Haer.*

Jerome, *Vita S. Pauli pri mi eremita*  
*Vit. Paul.*

John Chrysostom, *Homilia in Sanctum Martyrem Ignatium Deiferum*  
*Hom. Ign.*

John Chrysostom, *Homiliae in epistulam i ad Timotheum*  
*Hom. 1 Tim.*

Methodius, *Symposium (Convivium decem virginum)*  
*Symp.*

Optatus, *Contra Parmenianum Donat istam*  
*Contra Parm.*

Origen, *Exhortatio ad martyrium*  
*Mart.*
Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis
Salvian, De gubernatione Dei
Tertullian Apologeticus
Tertullian De baptismo
Tertullian De carne Christi
Tertullian De cultu feminarum
Tertullian, De exhortatione castitatis
Tertullian De oratione
Tertullian, De praescriptione haereticorum
Tertullian De virginibus velandis

Passio Perpetuae
Gub. Dei
Apol.
Bapt.
Carn. Chr.
Cult. fem.
Exh. cast.
Or.
Praescr.
Virg.
Abstract

This thesis examines the manner in which the textual female body functioned within the Christian communities of Late Antiquity, with a view toward establishing the centrality of the female body within the ideological constructions of social borders and boundaries. The role of women in early Christian societies has been examined extensively within previous scholarship; this thesis aims to demonstrate that the literary construction of the female body holds great worth with regards to gaining an understanding of the philosophies of Late Antique Christianity, and the significance of women to the establishment of Christian identity. Through a close analysis of a range of texts which span the first to the seventh centuries, this thesis will illustrate the evolution of ideologies regarding identity, community and the body, and the manner in which texts from differing cultural and literary backgrounds intersect with one another, and inherit the ideologies of their predecessors. Beginning with pre-fourth century texts concerning martyrdom, this thesis will move on to consider texts regarding consecrated virginity and the relationship of the virgin with the church. Following on from this, post-fourth century martyrdom literature and texts which integrate sexuality with asceticism will be explored, before turning to a discussion of illegitimate sexual relations, and representations of heretical women and heresy. Concluding this thesis will be an analysis of writings which address the position of women in the desert, firstly the tempting women who appear to ascetic monks, and secondly the repentant harlots of the sixth and seventh centuries. Through a close analysis of the Vitae of these women, this thesis will demonstrate the manner in which the multiplicity of ideologies rooted in identity, the body and the community, analysed throughout this thesis, culminate within the body of one individual woman, who has been raised from the depths of sin to sainthood.
Declaration

No portion of the work referred to in this thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

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Introduction

‘Please die I said
So I can write about it.’

Margaret Atwood, *Their Attitudes Differ*

‘Keep to the lives of the Saints,
These are the gossip of Heaven.’

John Heath-Stubbs, *Epitaph for Thaïs*

At some time during the late fourth or early fifth centuries, a woman named Pelagia died in a cell on the Mount of Olives, her emaciated body bearing witness to the crucifixion of Christ and the presence of his grace, demonstrated through the enduring penitence of a woman who had once engaged with the most licentious of sexual sins. Her bones, wrote her hagiographer, were holy, visible as they were under skin which had withered away through endless fasting and clothes made of sackcloth. It is unlikely that the Pelagia of this tale existed, her story designed to provide evidence for the power of penance, the sanctity that could be found in the desert and the presence of the enduring legacy of Christ within those who lived centuries after his death. The ideologies espoused within Pelagia’s *Vita* were inherited from those which had developed in the preceding eras, through centuries of persecution, political strife and conflict within a fractured church. Whilst Pelagia may be a fiction, many of the women who formed the basis of the philosophies she inherited were not, from early martyrs such as Blandina and Perpetua to virgins such as Macrina and Eustochium, whose lives and deaths formed the basis of texts which sought to understand discord within Christian communities, and to repair damages enacted upon the church. The bodies of these women lie at the heart of this thesis, which will explore the ideological and

\[1\] *Vita Pelagiae* 45
symbolic role of women within early Christian and Late Antique society through an examination of the manner in which the female body functioned as a textual object. This is not an investigation into the sexualities of Christian women, or indeed into their lived experiences and realities. Rather, this thesis forms an inquiry into the body and its identity, and the construction of the boundaries and borders of the Christian world around such an object, the sacrifices required by the individual in service of the creation of cultural ideologies, and the salvation which was hoped for by Late Antique authors.

The texts examined span Late Antiquity, from discussions of the Pauline epistles to heresiology, ascetic discourse to the lives of harlots, and martyr acts to the philosophies of virginity. In doing so, this thesis will demonstrate the centrality of the female body to the creation of Christian society, as I would argue that such great weight is accorded to the textual construction of women that the cultural ideologies of Late Antiquity cannot be fully understood without knowledge of the manner in which the female body was manifested. The creation of female identities by church authorities is inextricably intertwined with their own self-perception and understanding of their societies, being fundamental to the construction of ‘Christian’ identity itself. This is not to attempt to claim that this thesis will conclusively unravel the complex threads which weave their way through texts concerning the female body. However, the connections which will be drawn across genres and between differing women, such as the consecrated virgin and the heretical woman, will serve to shed light upon the myriad ways in which the penetrable and impenetrable female body was interpreted by church authors, both in relation to those internal to their community, and those external to it. I am not constructing a reflection which can be considered purely literary, theological or historical, but rather aim to combine these facets of exploration across a wide range of texts in order to demonstrate primarily that female identity and the female body were an intrinsic aspect of the foundations of Christian society, and consequently to elaborate on this by establishing that these texts, through a thematic analysis, contain the same inherent cultural ideas, arguments and complexities.
This thesis is not presented in a strictly chronological order, with some chapters reflecting back upon authors previously discussed, but rather it is presented thematically in order to prevent the chosen texts from being analysed in a vacuum. This consequently allows for the establishment of a series of connections across genres and time periods, illustrating the evolution of themes and ideologies intrinsic to such writings. The opening chapter of this thesis will address the ideologies of martyrdom which developed within the first three centuries, the era regarded as that of extensive persecution by later church authorities, examining martyr acts which feature women and thus establishing the philosophies which became central to the construction of Christian identity within Late Antiquity. An examination of the profound significance accorded to the body of the martyr, and the nature of the sacrifices which they performed, enables the establishment of initial theories regarding the role of the body, and the relationship of the martyr with Christ. Of particular interest here is the martyrdom of Perpetua, which will be closely discussed at the close of the chapter with a particular emphasis on her perception of herself as becoming a man, and the repercussions of this for the construction of female identity within the early Christian world. Following on from this, chapter two will reflect upon the development of ideologies regarding consecrated virgins and the state of virginity, considering those which appeared during the earliest centuries, and their evolution into the tractates of fourth century bishops such as Ambrose. This chapter will serve to consolidate the role of the martyr and the significance of the martyr’s body through a reflection on the adoption, by the authors of virginity, of the ideals espoused within chapter one. Furthermore, the notion of the virgin as a representative of the church, and the consequent implications of this for the resident bishop, serve to secure the ideologies of martyrdom and introduce new cultural concerns, the precarious status of the virginal body hinting toward the instability of the church.

Within chapter three, this volatility will be explored further through a discussion of texts which infuse the philosophies of martyrdom and virginity with a profound eroticism. These writings, primarily from the fourth and fifth centuries, recount the violent martyrdoms of
beautiful young women, diverging from earlier texts through their promotion of erotic sexuality within an ascetic framework, and illustrating the extent to which the individual author could locate himself within a text. This eroticism is juxtaposed with the harsh accounts of sexual sin discussed in chapter four, which reflects back upon the Pauline epistles in order to establish the nature of ideologies of immoral sexuality within early Christian discourse. This will then be examined in relation to the licentious women observed within heresiology, whose bodies exist in opposition to that of the consecrated virgin, but which rely on the same fundamental conception of female bodies, their penetrability and potential for sin. Finally, the last category of women analysed will be the repentant harlots of Late Antiquity, whose Vitae represent the culmination of the myriad ideologies which developed before them. The body of Pelagia, the final woman to be discussed within this thesis, exists at the centre of a complex network of philosophies which relate to salvation, sacrifice and sex, reflecting the ideologies examined within each previous chapter to provide a clear culmination point for this thesis. Before beginning, it is first necessary to consider the manner in which this thesis came into being, and the works of scholarship which have enabled the study of this genre of Late Antiquity.

**Constructing the History of Women**

Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz, introducing the 1993 collection of essays *Feminist Theory and the Classics*, bemoaned the necessity for those wishing to publish academically of including ‘an exhaustive and exhausting review of everything which has been thought or said about one’s subject.’ Such an exercise requires those carrying it out to return to the bastions of Classics and Theology whose names continue to be scattered within twenty-first century scholarship long after their works were first published, and who are, inevitably, male, such

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2 Rabinowitz, 1993, 8
as Barth (who stated that women are ‘ontologically subordinate to men’\(^3\)) and his contemporaries. ‘The patriarchy,’ states Rabinowitz, ‘is very much in evidence as we diligently cite our forefathers.’\(^4\) As Kraemer and D’Angelo note, female scholars who were the forerunners of current feminist scholarship were initially warned away from such study by their male colleagues, as the ancient evidence accessible was viewed as ‘inhospitable to such inquiry.’\(^5\) The sheer amount and range of publications from the past forty years on these topics demonstrate wholeheartedly that these initial statements had no real footing. Current scholars of women in antiquity have benefitted greatly from these endeavours, as such study is no longer viewed as being a lesser alternative to traditional modes of research into the world of Antiquity. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, in her ground-breaking 1983 work, *In Memory of Her*, reflects on the fact that ‘usually, anyone associated with the “feminist cause” is ideologically suspect and professionally discredited. As one of my colleagues remarked about a professor who had written a moderate article on women in the Old Testament: “It is a shame, she may have ruined her scholarly career.”’\(^6\)

Whilst a modicum of feminist works and those addressing women’s history had been published prior to the 1970s, such as Simone de Beauvoir’s *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949) and Mary Daly’s *The Church and the Second Sex* (1968), it was the growth of the wider feminist movement within America from the 1970s onwards which provided a catalyst for the advancement of feminist and women’s studies in academia.\(^7\) In 1974, Daly released her explosive *Beyond God the Father*, a text which, whilst it must be acknowledged that its arguments are somewhat extreme, can nonetheless be counted as essential in the formation of the genre of feminist studies through its provocative arguments and sharp critique of church patriarchy. Indeed, one reviewer has commented that Daly’s work ‘appears regularly on the reading lists of major theologians who can handle the problem of God but cannot

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\(^3\) Barth in Plaskow, 1997, 12  
\(^4\) Rabinowitz, 1993, 8  
\(^5\) Kraemer & D’Angelo, 1999, 9  
\(^6\) Schüssler Fiorenza, 1994a, xlvi  
\(^7\) Wilkinson, 2015, 5
handle the challenge of Mary Daly. Following on from Daly, Elizabeth Clark and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza published extensively on the topic of women in the early Christian world, with works such as Clark’s *Women and Religion: A Feminist Sourcebook of Christian Thought* (1977) and Schüssler Fiorenza’s *In Memory of Her* (1983; 1994a) retelling the tale of the foundations of Christian culture and society from a female perspective, demonstrating the role which women played within church life, and their relationships both with one another and with various Church Fathers, providing methods for a feminist reinterpretation of ancient texts. Within this thesis, I will explore the manner in which authorities such as Athanasius, Ambrose and Jerome interacted with women, demonstrating how these authors of the church came to rely on a literary conception of women for the establishment of their communities, in order to develop an understanding of the pivotal position which women occupied within early Christian society and the establishment of its boundaries and borders.

Schüssler Fiorenza’s opening chapter, ‘Toward a Feminist Critical Hermeneutics,’ offers a methodology through which a feminist model of Biblical interpretation can be constructed, demonstrating how readers can move away from androcentric language and patriarchal interpretations, and emphasising the centrality of women to New Testament texts. Through a notion of common suffering under patriarchy, and the unity which was cultivated in consequence of this, Schüssler Fiorenza aims to connect modern Christian women to their forebears, with the hope that this may ‘set free the emancipatory power of the Christian community.’ By examining the ideologies inherent to Late Antique constructions of women, I aim to allow for a greater understanding of the manner in which women and the female body contributed to the Christian world, not, perhaps, emancipating them in the manner of Schüssler Fiorenza, but rather establishing their centrality to constructions of identity and community and thus centring them within the history of Christianity itself. Clark’s works placed a greater emphasis on Gnostic and patristic texts than on those of the

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8 Augusta Neal, 1976, 441
9 Schüssler Fiorenza, 1994a, 92
Bible, as she predicted in an article originally published in 1982 that future research into the social history of Christianity would include a focus on ‘orthodox’ women such as Macrina, as such women had begun to gain notice within the scholarship of the 1980s.\textsuperscript{10} By considering the approaches of Clark and Schüssler Fiorenza simultaneously, this thesis will trace a path from conversations regarding the position of women within the New Testament through later patristic and hagiographical works, examining the manner in which Biblical constructions of women became key metaphors for the men who exerted authority over the chaotic Christian world of Late Antiquity.

One further scholar of the 1980s without whom an account of feminist historical and theological research would be incomplete is Rosemary Radford Ruether, whose 1983 \textit{Sexism and God Talk} demonstrated a similar, albeit less extreme, approach to that of Daly through its focus on feminist ‘spirituality.’ Radford Ruether aims to explore the nature of ‘the association of the humanity of women with the divine,’\textsuperscript{11} which, she argues, has been disregarded throughout history. Her approach emphasises female experience, and challenges what she holds to be the notion that male experience lies at the centre of classical theology. Radford Ruether argues that this androcentric concept stems in part from theological language, receiving support from feminist theologians from similar schools of thought who emphasised debates regarding God’s gender and perceived maleness.\textsuperscript{12} As will be discussed within chapter three, conversations regarding the female body often reflected issues experienced by male authorities, and thus the female form became a mechanism through which men could reflect on their state of being. However, the application of ideologies associated with Christ and the crucifixion upon the female body within these texts illustrates that a consistent level of sanctity was accorded to women who had succeeded in certain practices and behaviours, such as asceticism. Consequently, the association of women with the ‘divine’ does permeate Christian texts, having the impact of enabling

\textsuperscript{10} Clark, 1986, 10. Clark has, undoubtedly, been proved correct.
\textsuperscript{11} Radford Ruether, 1992, 19
\textsuperscript{12} Radford Ruether, 1992, 13. Radford Ruether’s written term God/ess sought to provide a temporary solution to this issue.
women to enter into a close relationship with Christ and to achieve a status assimilated to that of angels. Twenty years later, when Radford Ruether published *Goddesses and the Divine Feminine*, she noted a further conflict which had arisen within feminist theology as a result of the issues pertaining to the interpretation of female religious experience. So-called ‘Goddess theologians’ had rejected Judaeo-Christian texts as a resource for feminist theology, choosing instead to look for inspiration within ‘Goddess movements.’

As the discussion of repentant harlots within chapter five will demonstrate, there exists a wealth of inspiration among Christian texts to discover such identities, and indeed the radical and provocative tales of former harlots illustrate the complexity and significance inherent to female bodies and their experiences.

The foundation, in 1985, of the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* created an outlet in which scholars from an array of theoretical backgrounds could publish work which was both interdisciplinary and intersectional, and which was not restricted to the study of Judaeo-Christian history. Consequently, suggests Marchal, this enabled academic debate to thrive, forcing the field of feminist religious research to adapt and evolve.

Schüssler Fiorenza’s *But She Said*, published in 1992, coined the term ‘kyriarchy’ as a new manner of examining the hierarchical nature of gender relations, acknowledging the existence of a myriad of power dynamics and social networks which exist internally to the term ‘patriarchy.’ The term, to quote Marchal, allows for the consideration not just of gender inequality, but of ‘racism, classism, ethnocentrism, heterosexism, colonialism, nationalism and militarism,’ structures which affected those in the ancient world through the hierarchies of male, female, elite and slave, to mention but a few. The tale of the death of a slave girl named Eucledia, discussed in chapter four, reflects the necessity of such a term, and indeed, the tales of repentant harlots similarly demonstrate the complexities of the social hierarchies of Late Antiquity, and the manner in which sexual status defined women regardless of their

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13 Radford Ruether, 2005, 4
14 Marchal, 2014a, 158
15 Marchal, 2014b, 173
complicity in such acts. The Schüessler Fiorenza-edited *Searching the Scriptures* (1994 and 1995) demonstrated, through the range of authors chosen to contribute, the necessity of acknowledging kyriarchy, featuring academics from differing social and ethnic backgrounds. In her introduction Schüessler Fiorenza addresses Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s *The Women’s Bible* and, whilst acknowledging that Cady Stanton’s work was of an undeniable importance toward the overall construction of a women’s movement, emphasises that it is emphatically a ‘white feminist gender discourse,’ and must therefore be treated as such rather than be held up as a ‘*the* milestone in the history of women’s biblical interpretation.’

Throughout the late 1980s and 1990s, the theology and history of women began to advance in new directions as the concentration upon the social history of women, and what Dale Martin refers to as ‘the “recovery” of history about women,’ was gradually replaced with a focus upon the nature of gender itself, and on the construction of new methodologies through which the complexities of gender could be analysed. Clark’s 1998 article ‘Holy Women, Holy Words,’ identified by Martin as a central text within the evolution of female-centric gender analysis, addressed the notion of textuality within ancient texts pertaining to women and the feminine, and proposed new methods of addressing gender within the study of antiquity, citing poststructuralist literary theories as a possible source. Whilst such texts were a veritable goldmine of inspiration, they were, for many feminists, too inherently problematic to be used within feminist theory due to the negation of ‘woman’ which followed from the deconstruction of both textual and literary categories. ‘As many feminists have queried,’ stated Clark, ‘why were we told to abandon “subjectivity” just at the

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16 The introduction to the second edition of Clark’s *Women and Religion* (1996, 6) notes the increase in recent feminist theological scholarship of contributions by women of colour, such as Jacquelyn Grant and Ada Mariá Isasi-Díaz, both of whom feature in *Women and Religion*.
17 Schüessler Fiorenza, 1993, 12
18 Martin, 2005, 11. This time period additionally saw the development of feminist theory and updated methodologies within Jewish studies, in relation to Jewish feminist biblical interpretation and analysis of rabbinic texts. Judith Plaskow’s *Standing Again at Sinai* (1990), and Daniel Boyarin’s *Carnal Israel* (1993) stand out in particular among these works.
19 Martin, 2005, 11
historical moment when women had begun to claim it?" Whilst such criticism has undeniable grounding in reality, Grace Jantzen argues in *Becoming Divine* that due to the nature of feminist theology, ‘feminist scholars are seeking – sometimes inventing – the tools and resources that enable us not only to dismantle the master-discourses in the study of religion in modernity, but also to construct new dwelling places,’ a notion which resonates within this thesis. Whilst I have interacted with scholars who utilised such approaches, such as Clark, Jantzen and Burrus, benefiting from their reinterpretations, I have restricted psychoanalytical approaches to chapter three and the discussion therein of eroticism and death. The female body lies at the heart of this thesis, and I would seek to deconstruct it in a manner which continues to engage with its physicality without drawing attention away from the presence within the texts of church authors and leaders. Engaging with philosophies which can negate notions of gender would, with regard to a thesis which discusses the female body, have the effect of disintegrating the presence of women within such texts further. However, maintaining an awareness of these complexities enables the development of a more advanced scholarly matrix, one within which feminist researchers are able to adapt those perspectives which may be considered to erase or to oppress women textually, reformulating them for a new purpose.

Patricia Cox Miller’s ‘The Blazing Body,’ a 1993 article which addresses the presence of ascetic forms of desire within Jerome’s writings, provides a succinct example of the application of the techniques which Clark espouses: Cox Miller interacts with the work of Foucault and Barthes, alongside Kristeva, in order to illustrate her notion of a body constructed as a text, bringing together theories of language, text, gender and the body itself. Throughout this thesis, the textual construction of the female body has been emphasised in such a manner, with additional focus on the presence of the author within the text, and the consequential alteration of power dynamics which can develop from this.

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20. Clark, E., 1998b, 3
22. Martin, 2005, 12
Within chapter three, the analysis of texts which recount the eroticised deaths of young virgin girls will unite these concepts, establishing the notion of the body as a text through which hierarchies of power (both earthly and divine) can be debated, and examining the ideologies which led to the marriage of eroticism with asceticism, through a particular focus on Prudentius and Jerome. The textual-critical developments of the 1990s enabled feminist history and theory to flourish into new interdisciplinary grounds, and the impact of such advancements has been made evident over recent years. The works of Virginia Burrus demonstrate emphatically the benefits of engaging with poststructuralist and psychoanalytical theories, illustrating how the writings of Cixous and Irigaray can be applied successfully within feminist theory despite their limitations. Joseph Marchal and Daniel Boyarin have likewise contributed to the development of this theoretical playground, in addition to Martin’s interactions with gender, sexuality and Christian theology within the field of postmodern biblical criticism. Martin’s reflections on the complexities inherent within the language of sexuality throughout the New Testament have been applied within chapter four, in order to aid in the construction of an ideology of sexual behaviour which can consequently be utilised within discussions concerning heresy and women.

Burrus’ work demonstrates the evolution of Clark’s proposal for new readings of ancient texts, as she weaves together theology, literary criticism, psychoanalytical theories and feminist interpretations of history. These practices appear throughout The Sex Lives of the Saints (2004), Saving Shame (2008) and Seducing Augustine (2010), and Burrus’ application of Foucault’s theories of power and sexuality to texts relating to penitence, shame, asceticism and punishment allows for the development of a dialogue regarding the presence of powerfully erotic language and imagery within the ascetic traditions of antiquity. The power dynamics between author, audience and subject which arise from narratives of martyrdom can be considered in relation to this construction, and within the first chapter of this thesis shame and power will be discussed with regard to the establishment of a Christian

23 Martin’s 2006 publication Sex and the Single Saviour provides an excellent example of this.
identity, and the significance of a female body within this matrix. Martyr narratives which lean on eroticism as a point of textual significance, discussed within chapter three, will be considered in relation both to the ideologies of power and gender established within chapter one and the philosophies of virginity elucidated upon in chapter two, drawing on Burrus’ conception of ‘ascetic eros’ to illustrate the multifaceted nature of the body, and the matrix of differing textual constructions revolving around the notion of the female form. Within The Sex Lives of the Saints, Burrus engages in a dialogue with Baudrillard, Bataille and Foucault which seeks to untangle the three from one another, to employ them for her own purposes, and to propose a possible departure from, or rereading of, ‘Foucault’s script’ of ancient sexuality. Foucault’s work is intimately connected to the foundation of the genre of the history of sexuality itself, to the extent that it is virtually impossible to conduct a discussion of the topic without considering his methodologies, and many scholars (including those of women) are unwilling to do so. Yet, Foucault is notable for his lack of engagement with women within his L’Histoire de la sexualité, and indeed Richlin goes as far as to suggest that ‘Foucault’s History presents us with a vision of ancient sexual systems that is even more male-centred than what his sources present.’ Richlin additionally notes that the ‘New Historicism’ which evolved from the writings of Foucault has had the consequence of eradicating work conducted by feminists on sexuality, gender and power. However, to follow Burrus’ musings and suggest a slight departure from Foucault in the pursuit of the construction of a new history of sexuality – one which, at the very least, has a place reserved within it for women – would allow for the preservation of his observations on the significance of power relations to sexuality, whilst acknowledging that male authority is an essential aspect of this. As this thesis will demonstrate, the literature of Christian antiquity

24 Burrus, 2004, 2-3. For Burrus, Baudrillard here provides the most significant theoretical application when ‘read explicitly against its antifeminist (as well as, implicitly, its anti-Foucaultian) grain’ (2004,13). Baudrillard’s Seduction (1979), and Bataille’s Erosion (1962) provide a wealth of theoretical frameworks to interact with in discussions of sex, sexuality and gender.

25 Larmour et al., 1998, 20 & Richlin in Larmour et.al, 1998, 148. It may be of slight interest to note here that David Halperin, a scholar who has written extensively of his praise for Foucault, is accused by Marchal of having an ‘at times casual disposition to those subjugated in and by these constructions’ (2011, 380).
addressed the hierarchies internal to gender, family and church, the female body serving as a location in which all the battles of the Fathers could be fought.

**Defining an Era: Late Antiquity**

Whilst feminist theory and the study of women were making inroads within academic communities, a second scholarly genre was simultaneously developing which both intersected with, and was advanced by, research carried out by scholars such as Clark. ‘Late Antiquity,’ as it is now known, was pioneered by Peter Brown, whose *The World of Late Antiquity* (1971) was a fundamental aspect of the construction of a new category of historical thought. It was during the 1970s that scholars began to define themselves as historians of Late Antiquity, in contrast to previous self-identifications such as ‘classicist,’ ‘theologian,’ or ‘church historian,’ with Martin proposing that Late Antiquity came to be understood as the period from 100-700 A.D, in the aftermath of Jesus and the New Testament writings.26 He contends that those academics who fell into the category of Late Antiquity came from a range of scholarly backgrounds which allowed for the consequent merging of multiple methodologies, with those who previously were considered classicists or medieval historians taking fresh approaches to religious texts and traditions, whilst scholars of patristics were in turn influenced by the social and economic models propounded by classicists.27 The texts analysed within this thesis range from New Testament writings authored in the first century to the hagiography of repentant harlots which circulated in the sixth and seventh centuries, with the intermediary years addressing those prominent Church Fathers and authors whose works functioned to establish boundaries and identities for the communities in which they resided. For Brown, previously a scholar of medieval history,

26 Martin, 2005, 1  
27 Martin, 2005, 2. Martin additionally cites the influence of socio-economic models which had begun to develop within New Testament scholarship, in particular the works of Wayne Meeks (whose influence upon her work Elizabeth Clark has noted), Bruce Malina and Gerd Theissen.
establishing the relationship between the political and social events of Late Antiquity and the development of the Christian church was of great significance, as explored within *The Making of Late Antiquity* (1978).

It was, argues Burrus, Brown’s attitudes toward ascetics (in particular, holy men), and his focus upon these figures in place of the traditional centralisation of emperors and upper class males within historical scholarship, which marked his work apart, and allowed him to generate a new manner of thinking about Late Antique society in which the boundaries of both bodies and civilisations featured prominently.\(^{28}\) For this thesis, it is holy women who form such a central aspect of Late Antique society, as it is argued that their bodies were the fundamental mechanism through which church authorities were able understand the issues affecting their societies, and to establish ideological borders in light of this. The investigations of social anthropologists such as Mary Douglas, whose *Purity and Danger* (1966) was greatly influential within the field of Late Antique studies, were adopted by scholars such as Brown, due, suggests Martin, to the fact that ‘rather than simply commenting on texts and ideas, scholars of the period began to see themselves attempting to “enter a world”… much the way an ethnographer would enter a foreign culture.’\(^{29}\) As had occurred during the development of scholarship regarding women, studies within Late Antiquity began to adopt theoretical constructions from psychoanalytic texts to illustrate the social and sexual tensions which underscored ascetic societies, and Averil Cameron has noted that a meeting with Foucault would prove to have long-lasting effect upon Brown.\(^{30}\) Foucault’s theories were influential upon Brown’s renowned 1988 work, *The Body and Society*, an extensive study of the nature of sexual renunciation by both men and women in Late Antiquity,\(^{31}\) with his emphasis upon the manner in which the body can be constructed through rhetoric echoing Foucault’s analyses. Yet, perhaps in consequence of this, a similar

\(^{28}\) Burrus, 2000, 8-9  
\(^{29}\) Martin, 2005, 5. The works of Clifford Geertz are also noted to have been of great influence.  
\(^{30}\) Cameron, 1999, 28  
\(^{31}\) It is a marker of the great advancements made regarding the study of the history of sexuality that Brown somewhat amusingly comments that ‘only a hundred years ago, I would have had to begin any study that dealt with sexuality and its renunciation with an apology’ (Brown, 1988, xvi).
criticism has been levelled by contemporary feminists against Brown as has been levelled against Foucault.

Within Brown’s construction of ascetic sexuality, his acknowledgement of the interplay of gender is occasionally flawed and, at times, altogether absent, despite his statement that ‘I have begun to benefit, slowly, from the gains of a remarkable recent development in the study of the religious world of women.’ Wilkinson has noted that Brown’s work on Jerome acknowledges that he communicated with a wide range of women, yet proceeds to focus virtually entirely on Jerome himself, with little thought for the manner in which male sexual ideologies impacted upon women. Clark’s 1999 *Reading Renunciation* focusses upon the effect of an increased interest in asceticism within Late Antiquity for women, and Clark notes the contributions of Kate Cooper, specifically within *The Virgin and the Bride* (1996), towards the development of a new rhetoric of gender within Late Antique studies; Cooper herself takes an approach which differs from that of Foucault. The issue of neglecting ascetic women within dialogues regarding sexuality in antiquity is addressed throughout this thesis with a consideration of Jerome’s problematic relationship with his own body, and the consequential effect that this had upon his perception of the female body. Foucault’s reluctance to locate gender as a central aspect of power relations, coupled with his neglect of a direct discussion of women, has been considered by some feminist critics, suggests Larmour, to have ‘led to the continued erasure of women from history.’ Brown’s own analysis seems invariably to have echoed Foucault’s practice, and thus in the context of a feminist history, and of returning women to the pages of history, the prioritisation of male sexual ethics over female in Brown’s work must be taken into consideration. Brown’s foundational role within Late Antique studies is evidenced through his continued influence on scholars of this era, however, it is imperative that gender is considered more extensively

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32 Brown, 1988, xvii
33 Wilkinson, 2015, 9
34 Clark, 2001, 424
35 Larmour et al., 1998, 18
with regards to the texts of Late Antiquity, particularly in works which are not directly labelled as being those which discuss gender, as this thesis has aimed to do.\textsuperscript{36}

This thesis frequently engages with the topics of heresy and asceticism, two terms which are fraught with complexities given the wide range of meanings which they can be held to imply. Heresy, a word loaded with social, cultural and theological implications will be addressed in relation to the specific authors who form a discourse around it, such as Athanasius. My intention is not to create a firm definition of a volatile concept, but rather to demonstrate how socio-cultural tensions impacted on the individual bishop and his church, with the consequence that the female body was centralised within discussions of heresy in order to attempt to construct a boundary between one community and the next. As Iricinschi and Zellentin have noted, theoretical constructs such as socio-economic, anthropological and psychoanalytical approaches contribute toward the developing understanding of heresy in antiquity. Theological ideologies which define heresy have, they argue, been replaced with an understanding that heresy and orthodoxy are not clearly defined categories which rely solely on their theological values, but rather were based upon cultural notions of gender, identity and the differentiation of insiders and outsiders within individual communities.\textsuperscript{37}

Referring to heresy as a notion or a concept, rather than as a definitive doctrine, aids in reflecting the fluctuating nature of the discourse which surrounded it. The works of Shaw (2005) and King (2003b) complement discussions of heresy, with both authors addressing the contradictions inherent to debates on such a subject, and the necessity of avoiding strict definitions of such a category of thought. Some elaboration upon the term ‘asceticism’ is additionally required, as the presence and nature of ascetic behaviour within Christian writings differs between authors, and indeed the term itself can be employed with a variety of intentions. Elm, whose work on virginity has been reflected extensively upon within this thesis, refers to asceticism as a ‘way of life that requires daily discipline and intentionality in

\textsuperscript{36} For example, Athanasius’ numerous writings on the Arian controversy are inherently political, but utilise gender and the female body as a key textual device through which to discuss such issues.

\textsuperscript{37} Iricinschi and Zellentin, 2008, 7. Furthermore, they propose that scholarly developments suggest an increased focus on heresiology, rather than heresy, which will be maintained within this thesis.
bodily behaviours,’ a proposal which will be applied here.\textsuperscript{38} Ascetic behaviour can be observed in regard to consecrated virgins who resided in their households within bustling cities, or to emaciated repentant harlots occupying isolated cells in the wilderness of the desert: at a fundamental level, the renunciation required of ascetics enabled them to separate themselves from their wider community, whether in spirit or through the abandonment of the city for the desert. As shall be expanded upon, the bodies of ascetic women functioned in a manner of ways within texts which addressed their status, existing in relation to the community of which they were held to be a part, or could be perceived to represent. Whilst ascetic behaviour could manifest itself in a variety of forms, the principal actions addressed within this thesis relate to the renunciation of sexuality, whether before the act (the consecrated virgins analysed within chapter two), or in the years after it (as was the case for the repentant harlots discussed within chapter five).

Whilst previous scholarship has considered the presence of women within the works of the Church Fathers, of various bishops, monks, poets and hagiographers, the positioning of these bodies in relation to the wider community has not been developed upon. This thesis thus aims to fulfil such a task, analysing the role which the body plays within an individual text and extending the conclusions drawn to apply to the societies in which each text was composed, and to illustrate their influence upon later writings. Publications such as Elm’s \textit{Virgins of God} (1994) and Burrus’ \textit{Sex Lives of the Saints} (2004), the two works with which this thesis is most closely aligned, have touched upon such topics, yet areas of absence still exist. Elm analyses the position of ascetic women within Christian Antiquity, as this thesis has done, emphasising the lived experiences of such women and their daily habits. Whilst this is an important discussion, this does not take into account the manner in which the female body itself, as a literary tool, was utilised within discussions of virginity, asceticism and heresy to further the philosophies of individual authors, and to shape communities.

\textsuperscript{38} Elm, 1994, 6
Burrous’ *Sex Lives* analyses the hagiographies of various Saints with a view toward understanding the complexities inherent to these texts and the multiple ideologies contained within them, much as this thesis has aimed to do with its chosen texts, and Burrous’ methods of analysis continue to provide a valuable lens through which to consider Late Antique writings. However, *Sex Lives* discusses each hagiography in isolation, which restricts the extent to which the ideologies of each work can be connected to one another. Furthermore, Burrous considers a number of male hagiographies, texts which function differently to those of women (particularly with regard to the textualisation of the body) and which thus remove focus from the female body and its significance to the construction of Late Antiquity.

Within this thesis, the core authors and texts discussed continue to be reflected upon throughout, in order to illustrate the continual evolution of philosophies based in the body and society throughout Late Antiquity, and the manner in which the female body functioned within these constructions. Whilst the influence of martyrdom acts and the ideology of martyrdom is noted within scholarship in relation to texts from the fourth century onward, the more subtle connections between these works are not examined, with themes such as gender and nudity left unacknowledged in place of a focus on the relationship between Christ, the crucifixion and martyrdom, and the adoption of these ideologies by ascetic penitents.\(^{39}\) As this thesis will argue, the significance of the female body to martyr acts endured, and, indeed, can be seen within texts as late as the seventh century, the bodies of women such as Pelagia reflecting the bodies of the earliest female martyrs, to whom this thesis will now turn.

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\(^{39}\) It should be noted here that such ideologies have been discussed within scholarship which pertains to the early Christian period, analysing martyr *actae* from the first centuries A.D. and the constructions of identity which can be observed within these texts (cf. Cobb 2008, Moss 2010 & 2012, and Denzey Lewis 2007).
1. As First Fruits for God: Martyrdom and Identity

‘Plentiful sacrifice and believers in redemption are all that is needed’

Audre Lorde, *When The Saints Come Marching In*

‘It's bad enough to be a girl, anyway, when I like boy's games and work and manners! I can't get over my disappointment in not being a boy. And it's worse than ever now, for I'm dying to go and fight with Papa. And I can only stay home and knit, like a poky old woman!’

Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women*

During the fourth century, John Chrysostom found himself tasked with reinforcing the boundaries of the Christian community at Antioch due to the presence of two competing shrines to the Maccabean martyrs, one Jewish and one Christian. His parishioners, notes Sizgorich, had evidently paid homage at the wrong shrine, unaware of the ideological repercussions of their actions, simply identifying the Jewish shrine as a holy location within the history of their city. For Chrysostom, these actions threatened the boundaries of the community for which he was responsible, with Sizgorich concluding that within the space of the Jewish shrine, Christian believers ‘acted like Jews by acting like Christians.’

For ancient societies across the Mediterranean, communal boundaries and identity occupied a position of profound significance, sitting at the forefront of imagination and ideology, reflected in the public image a society constructed for itself, and echoed within the bodies of its citizens. ‘Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?’ asked Paul of the wayward Corinthian church, firmly reminding his lost sheep of their duty to their wider community, a community whose borders they had threatened through illegitimate sexual relations. Prior to the gradual legitimization of Christianity, the borders of Christian

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40 Sizgorich, 2012, 47. Sizgorich further argues that martyrdom and its surrounding ideologies are fundamental in comprehending the nature of the ‘militant piety’ observed in the centuries after Constantine (2012, 49).

41 1 Corinthians 6:15
communities and the bodies of their members were violated through persecutions enacted by over-zealous local governors, and later by the Roman state itself, in order to defend their own communal and ideological boundaries.\textsuperscript{42} The refusal of Christians to participate in the religious rituals which formed such a fundamental aspect of Roman identity led to their attempted erasure from the society whose values they denied, through a humiliating, excruciating public execution designed to relocate these intransigents within the walls of a more dominant ideology.

Yet, despite the atrocities performed upon the Christian body, Christianity did not crumble but survived, subverting the Roman ideologies of execution enacted within the arena, infusing death with life and embracing degradation and suffering with open arms. Christians were exhorted to ‘put on the whole armour of God’ in their struggle against Satan and Empire, to ‘take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit,’\textsuperscript{43} imitating Christ and locating his sacrifice within their own bodies. Through their self-oblation, a Christian identity began to blossom, one rooted in suffering and endurance, with Burrus suggesting that martyrs’ deaths allowed for the vocalisation of ‘a truth that is at once a confession of faith and a forging of self-identity.’\textsuperscript{44} The performance of martyrdom and the ideologies which lay behind it enabled notions of communal identity to take root within the disparate Christian societies of the Principate, as established within the part one of this chapter through a discussion of the centrality of blood and sacrifice to the early Christian state. Indeed, this chapter lays the foundational roots for the ideologies expounded upon within the coming chapters, with the presence of persecution within Christian memory creating a fertile breeding ground for the continued growth of this new-born identity in the post-martyrdom era. Contained within the body of the individual lay the radical potential to subvert a

\textsuperscript{42} As Moss (2013) and Shaw (2015) note, claims for early formalised persecutions (such as the Neronian executions) are somewhat suspect; the significance of these events for this thesis lies not in their historical reality, but in the perception and presentation of such events by Christian authors from the mid-fourth century onward. In later centuries, systematic persecutions can be observed in light of state decrees such as that of Decius (249-250), and in particular during the ‘Great Persecution’ of Diocletian in the early fourth century (Rives, 1999, 141 & Shaw, 2015, 93-7).

\textsuperscript{43} Ephesians 6:11; Ephesians 6:17. καὶ τὴν περικορφαῖαν τοῦ σωτηρίου δέξασθε καὶ τὴν μάχαμαν τοῦ πνεύματος.

\textsuperscript{44} Burrus, 2008, 19. Cf. also Lieu (1999), Cobb (2008) and Moss (2010).
multiplicity of ideologies rooted in Imperial Roman society, and the very process of martyrdom enabled certain martyrs to break their corporeal fetters and move fluidly between constantly developing iterations of their own bodies. The diary of Perpetua, whose bodily evolution is analysed within the second half of this chapter, illustrates profoundly the manner in which martyrdom, whilst ostensibly serving to defend the community and to provide the foundations for those to come, could additionally act as an extreme outlet for radical self-expression.

1.1 Blood and Sacrifice

In his Bibliotheca historica, Diodorus Siculus records an account of mass human sacrifice in Carthaginian history, claiming that ‘they selected two hundred of the noblest children and sacrificed (ἔθυσαν) them publicly; and others who were under suspicion sacrificed (ἔδοσαν) themselves voluntarily, in number not less than three hundred.’ Such an event occurred, he proposes, in order to allow the Carthaginians to atone for their crime of buying potential victims for sacrifice, rather than selecting them from their own people. These purchased victims did not share the superstitions of the Carthaginians, and thus their lack of belief in Carthage’s ideology of human sacrifice negated the impact of their deaths. This sacrifice, argues Futrell, served the purpose of ‘cementing the vertical and horizontal power

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45 Diodorus Siculus, Bibliotheca historica 20.14.5. Where Greek/Latin terms appear within the main body of text, this is to account for the wider ramifications of certain key words, the direct translation of which cannot fully incorporate the nuanced inferences of such terms; here, for example, ἔθυσαν emphasises the ritualistic nature of the event, invoking notions of animal sacrifice, fire and the offering of thanks to the gods, whilst ἔδοσαν emphasises the personal nature of giving oneself over (here to a deity), and the individual mindset required in such activity. Tertullian, himself a Carthaginian native, would later claim that ‘children were openly sacrificed (immolabantur) in Africa to Saturn as late as the proconsulship of Tiberius’ (Apol. 9), whilst Augustine (Civ. 7.19) records that ‘Varro goes on tell us that some peoples used to sacrifice (immolare) children to Saturn, as did the Carthaginians.’ Futrell proposes that in light of the excavations of children’s cemeteries at Carthage and surrounding Phoenician sites, alongside biblical references to the Valley of Ben Himmon and the sacrifice therein of children by fire, these sites should additionally be named ‘Tophet’ (1997, 175). Salisbury, within her analysis of Carthaginian child sacrifice, further adds that Jezebel, responsible for introducing idolatrous practices to Israel through her marriage to its king, was herself the daughter of the Phoenician king of Tyre (1997, 50).
relationships within the social structure,"\textsuperscript{46} and the lack of participation within this specific social network by externally located victims prevented them from providing an appropriate sacrifice. Human sacrifice within ancient worlds was practiced in times of great despair, in the hope that offering up the lives of living persons could serve to assuage the perceived anger of the gods, or bring prosperity to a suffering community. Identification with that community by the victim was central to the success of the sacrifice, as the performance of such a religious event functioned collectively for the community as a whole. For Futrell, human sacrifice was an event which demonstrated above all the devotion of the voluntary victim to the society in which they resided, requiring no definitive ritual performance in which members of a community formally sacrificed one of their number, but rather relying on the spiritual and religious impact of the victim’s death upon those who existed both internally and externally to the social group upon whose behalf the sacrifice had been performed.\textsuperscript{47} This voluntary immolation served to defend and strengthen the boundaries and borders of a community, cementing its own notions of social identity: a ‘foundation sacrifice,’ states Futrell, adopting the conclusions of Maccoby, allows for the ‘construction of a community identity based on political or religious ideology,’\textsuperscript{48} with a social group and its ideals being reinforced on both a physical and a spiritual level through the voluntary death of an individual, whose blood represented not death but life. It is, argues Maccoby, a resurrection of the society itself, a life being offered in place of a collective soul in order to prevent the death of an entire social grouping, its ideals and identity, and to refound the community once more.\textsuperscript{49}

Such a sacrifice, the most extreme demonstration of social devotion, can thus be read both as a response to the perception of a threat to the wellbeing of the state, and as a mechanism through which a community could assert the dominance of its ethical system and ensure its

\hspace{1cm}\textsuperscript{46} Futrell, 1997, 177
\textsuperscript{47} Futrell, 1997, 207; Weigel, 2012, 184; Cf. also Heyman, 2007 on Roman sacrificial traditions
\textsuperscript{48} Futrell, 1997, 171
\textsuperscript{49} Maccoby, 1982, 97. It should be noted here that Moss has emphasised that sacrifice is one of a number of cultural ideologies which influence Christian interpretations of martyrdom, and thus cannot be taken as the sole lens through which a martyr’s death was viewed (2010, 87-8).
continuation. Indeed, the author of 1 Clement went as far as to claim that members of ancient Imperial families had ‘given themselves up to death in order to rescue by their own blood their fellow citizens.’ This latter notion of the purpose of human sacrifice can go some way toward identifying interpretations of this practice within early Imperial Roman society, as whilst Rome did not directly engage in the ritual sacrifice of its citizens to the varying members of the Roman pantheon, practices which lay at the heart of Roman tradition acted to fulfil such a role. Individuals who laid down their lives upon the sands of the arena were, argues Futrell, ‘a symbolic representation of the Populus Romanus,’ their deaths functioning as a sacrifice offered on behalf of the Empire. The social symbolism inherent to the arena caused it to serve as the ideal location in which such sacrificial rituals could be carried out, with the public deaths of gladiators, criminals, war captives and those who failed to adhere to the religiopolitical expectations of Empire serving to confirm and consolidate the literal and ideological strength of Imperial Roman power. Gladiators, proposes Futrell, did not provide a challenge to Imperial dominance, but rather functioned as a symbolic foundational sacrifice for Empire, their deaths providing ‘a channel through which ritual is accomplished.’ The spectacles in their locational context allowed for the physical expression of Roman identity and power, of the social hierarchy relating to both class and gender and the profound significance of the shedding of sacrificial blood within a ritualised enclosure. Jantzen identifies Gunderson’s theory of the arena as key to this conception, arguing that the arena reflects almost all aspects of the hierarchies of Imperial power, including ‘political theatre; crime and punishment; representations of civilisation and Empire; repression of women and exaltation of bellicose masculinity.’ However, as she further notes with reflection toward Foucault, power inevitably causes the development of

counterpower, and it is therefore within sites in which supremacy is demonstrated at its strongest that resistance toward oppression can be identified.\textsuperscript{54}

‘You are, I suppose,’ wrote Tertullian in his impassioned defence of Christianity, ‘more devout in the arena, where after the same fashion your deities dance on human blood, on the pollutions caused by inflicted punishments, as they act their themes and stories.’\textsuperscript{55} Public execution was a performance, providing a literal depiction of Roman \textit{mores} on those occasions in which victims were compelled to don attire which reflected religion, myth and custom, to suffer, claims Tertullian, in a manner which enacted the ancient fables of the Empire.\textsuperscript{56} Such a practice was intended in part to quash the identities of those who did not partake in the religious leanings of Empire, and yet, for early Christian martyrs, this challenge was not merely resisted but was radically undermined, the blatant refusal of martyrs to play the Roman game of death enabling the very nature of sacrifice in the arena to be rewritten, transcribed anew on the bodies of those who observed their deaths to be voluntary, even heroic. Within the \textit{Anonymous Apophthegmata}, one martyr is recorded as so grateful for his death sentence that he calmly thanks the handmaid who betrayed his confidence ‘for having been the procurer of such good things for me.’\textsuperscript{57} By embracing a humiliating and public death with joy, holding it to serve as an act of witness to God and infusing martyrdom with notions of resurrection and assimilation with Christ, martyrs undermined the system which had designed their deaths, subverting social constructs of Imperial power, violence and sacrifice and saturating the arena with an ideology which radically challenged Roman social constructs.

\textsuperscript{54} Jantzen, 2004, 329
\textsuperscript{55} Tertullian, \textit{Apol.} 15. ‘\textit{Plane religiosiores estis in cavea, ubi super sanguinem humanum, super inquinamenta poenarum proinde saltant dei vestri, argumenta et historias noxis ministrantes.}’
\textsuperscript{56} Further on within verse 15 of the \textit{Apol.}, Tertullian states that ‘we have seen in our day a representation of the mutilation of Attis,’ listing the numerous cruelties performed by executioners dressed in ritual attire (one, he suggests, is clad as Mercury), and endured by those whose deaths allow for the visualisation of brutal mythology (such as a man ‘burnt alive as Hercules’). Brown (1988, 69) argues that for Christians of the second century, it was imperative that a believer had the potential to endure the torments of martyrdom, with the presence of the Sprit within a believer’s body enabling this should such violence occur. Social issues such as sexual continence, he concludes, were thus of secondary significance to interpretations of the body during this time.
\textsuperscript{57} \textit{Anonymous Apophthegmata} N. 42.
From Iphigenia to Cato the Younger, Greco-Roman history and mythology was replete with examples of individuals sacrificing their lives for the benefit of the state, or of a certain philosophy, and yet no single term existed to fully encompass the myriad of ideologies wound up within such a death. The development of the term ‘martyr’ thus served to elevate the status of this social sacrifice, allowing it to move beyond those examples present within the memory of the state and to become a phenomenon individual to Christianity, an inherent aspect of the religion for centuries to come. Defined as ‘witness’ in its original, legal sense, μάρτυς was established by early Christian authors as an identity for those who had sacrificed their lives for Christianity in an act of witness to God, evolving gradually over time to become synonymous with the notion of being a voluntary sacrificial victim.\textsuperscript{58} Martyrdom was by no means a phenomenon created by early Christians, as Moss has extensively demonstrated, yet for early Christians it was not the notion that martyrdom was a new occurrence which allowed for its influence, but the impression that it was in some way unique to the Christian religion.\textsuperscript{59} Furthermore, as Stroumsa has argued, Christian martyrdom illustrated a radical break from contemporary and previous conceptions of sacrifice, as ‘no reciprocity, no immediate quid pro quo’ was required from God, a challenge to the very nature of ancient religion.\textsuperscript{60} Consequently, the very possibility of martyrdom became an inherent aspect of Christian ideology both internally to the community and externally in relation to the wider perception of Christianity, with the potential for an individual to be martyred being cemented within the self-identity of those who refused to convert.\textsuperscript{61}

The construction of martyrdom within early Christian thought relied in part on the meaning it was imbued with as a result of the notion that Christians were engaged in a war, a ‘cosmic’

\textsuperscript{58} Salisbury, 2004, 131; Bowersock, 1995, 5-6; Moss, 2012, 23-4
\textsuperscript{59} Moss, 2013, 24-5; Moss, 2012; Middleton, 2006. The notion of the martyr as a sacrificial victim is an ideology which features strongly within martyr acts written after the persecutions, with the 4\textsuperscript{th} century poet Prudentius having his young martyr Agnes directly state that she is a ‘sacrifice to the Father (Patris hostiam)’ (Prudentius, Peristephanon 14.84).
\textsuperscript{60} Stroumsa, 2016, 113
\textsuperscript{61} Jantzen, 2004, 333
battle against the forces of Satan,\textsuperscript{62} represented on earth by the judges who condemned martyrs in law courts, the executioners who took their lives, and the men and women who delighted in violent bloodshed. Martyrdom provided a sacrifice on behalf of a community at war, the deaths of the martyrs evidence of the persecution endured by Christian communities within an event which Middleton identifies as a ‘metaphorical’ war, and simultaneously of the ability of Christians to overcome evil and gain glory in their ‘metaphysical’ conflict with Satan.\textsuperscript{63} Cyprian utilised military imagery and language extensively within his letter to the martyrs, stating that ‘the combat has increased, and the glory of the combatants has increased also.’\textsuperscript{64} Defining the martyrs as \textit{milites Christi}, Cyprian emphasised their position as representatives of Jesus, and as mechanisms through which he could be known in the war against persecution. ‘How did Christ rejoice therein!’ enthused Cyprian in his address to the North African Martyrs, reminding his readers that Christ ‘lifted up, strengthened, animated the champions and assertors of his name. And he who once conquered death on our behalf, always conquers it in us.’\textsuperscript{65} The notion that Christian communities were placed in a war-like conflict with Pagan authorities and traditions takes root at the earliest stages of the birth of Christian ideology, appearing throughout the New Testament. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus had reminded his followers not to think ‘that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.’\textsuperscript{66} As Carter has demonstrated, this message of violence illustrates that, for Christians, peace on earth was not achieved during the lifetime of Christ, with Jesus’ words ‘evoking struggle, conflict, war, violence and death as elements of the establishment of God’s empire.’\textsuperscript{67} Furthermore, this speech sees Christ challenge the construction of the traditional Pagan household, stating that ‘I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother…and one’s foes will be members of

\textsuperscript{62} Middleton, 2011, 71
\textsuperscript{63} Middleton, 2011, 71; Moss, 2013, 244
\textsuperscript{64} Cyprian, Ep. 8
\textsuperscript{65} Cyprian, Ep. 8
\textsuperscript{66} Matthew 10:34
\textsuperscript{67} Carter, 2000, 242
one’s own household.\textsuperscript{68} A rejection of the family provided a means by which to further undermine the values of Imperial society, which placed such great emphasis on marriage and childbirth, and which is illustrated to a somewhat poignant degree within the \textit{Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis}. Perpetua, a Roman daughter and mother,\textsuperscript{69} denied the authority of her father in order to die in the arena alongside a family which she had created for herself, united through blood and belief. Perpetua’s desperate father casts himself at his daughter’s feet, inverting the familial gendered hierarchy in order to beg his child to ‘have pity on your father…think about your son who will not be able to live without you.’\textsuperscript{70} Perpetua’s resistance to his pleas and rejection of her child demonstrate the adoption of the words of Christ in their most literal degree, discarding her blood family in favour of one born of blood, taking to heart Christ’s invocation to ‘take up the cross and follow me.’\textsuperscript{71}

This virtual call-to-arms was cemented within the early Christian world view, with the death of Christ serving as both a foundation sacrifice for a society still finding its feet, and as a standard which all martyrs could imitate through their violent, humiliating public deaths. For the persecutors, argues Clark, the mutilation of a Christian enabled ‘the permanent and degrading transformation of the body.’\textsuperscript{72} This brutality thus served, in the Roman mind, to dismember both body and society, tearing at the boundaries of the community whilst expressing Imperial dominance, the martyred body a canvas of socio-cultural ideologies. However, willing participation in the Roman social hierarchy was a necessary predicate of understanding both the shame and philosophy of death in the arena, and the nature of the crucifixion enabled a martyrdom to metamorphose from a denigrating, shameful punishment

\textsuperscript{68} Matthew 10:35-37
\textsuperscript{69} It is not explicitly stated within the text that Perpetua is (or was) married, and indeed the absence of her child’s father from the account is an intriguing lacuna, which provides a wealth of questions as to her exact social status. Cooper (2011) has argued that Perpetua was unmarried and may possibly have been a concubine, a legitimate social arrangement which could explain the absence of any references to marriage and a husband. Given Perpetua’s changing perceptions of her own status as a Christian woman, the lack of reference to a male partner could perhaps be a deliberate decision, one which leaves Perpetua free to re-write her body and identity within her new religion.
\textsuperscript{70} \textit{Passio Perpetuae} 5.2-3
\textsuperscript{71} Matthew 10:38. καὶ ὃς οὐ λαμβάνει τὸν σταυρὸν αὐτοῦ καὶ ἀκολουθεῖ ὑπὸ σου, ωκ ἐστιν μου δίκιος.
\textsuperscript{72} Clark, G., 1998a, 99
into an expression of Christian endurance, a joyful declaration of victory. The emulation of Christ allowed for a martyr to transform their death into a personal, voluntary sacrifice which both invoked the emotions and suffering of the crucifixion, and enabled an individual to partake in Christ’s experience, augmenting the potency of the blood which he had shed by contributing their own, consolidating and strengthening the ideological borders of the community. ‘Christians held with unswerving faith to the belief in the previous resurrection of Christ,’ Augustine reflects, ‘and this belief was fearlessly proclaimed; and was to produce a more plentiful harvest throughout the world when the blood of martyrs was the seed sown.’ Indeed, Stroumsa holds that early Christian religion was a fundamentally sacrificial cult, one in which the central religious ritual took the form of ἀνάμνησις, which rather than simply implying the memory of Christ’s sacrifice inferred its continued presence within the community, and the processes of sacrifice which occurred daily through collective practices such as the Eucharist. As Paul reminded his Corinthian community, the bodies of believers were instilled with the death of Christ, and indeed they were ‘always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh.’ The blood spilled by Christ was a potent force which enabled salvation for the wider Christian community, an image and ideology which permeated the roots of early Christian self-identity and became a depiction both physical and spiritual of the protection granted to the community through death and sacrifice.

Blood fertilised the seeds of the Christian community, defending boundaries and sanctifying them through its promise of resurrection and salvation, and its profound and violent illustration of the tensions of life and death, of persecutor and persecuted. John Chrysostom held that the death of Ignatius of Antioch, in addition to those of Peter and Paul at Rome,
enabled them to ‘purify with their own blood, the city which had been defiled with blood of idols’ as they followed in the example of Christ.\textsuperscript{76} Blood, argues Biale, is a visual depiction of the tensions internal and external to the body, its ability to symbolise impurity in certain contexts demonstrating how ideologically fluid such a liquid force can be and enabling observers to gain an insight into the ‘hidden and hermetic’ world.\textsuperscript{77} For the martyrs themselves, their bloody trials symbolised both death and life, as the bodily fluids which they spilled signified both the decline of their physical body and the birth of their spiritual \textit{corpus}, exsanguination serving as a form of baptism. Felicitas, the pregnant slave of Perpetua, advanced ‘from blood to blood’ following the birth of her child, her martyrdom providing the purification rituals necessary and enabling her to be ‘washed after childbirth in a second baptism.’\textsuperscript{78} So too Tertullian wrote of the possibility for a baptism in blood, with the wound on Christ’s torso constructing the foundations of a second font in which a believer could be purified,\textsuperscript{79} whilst Origen urged his readers to question ‘whether baptism by martyrdom, just as the Saviour’s brought cleansing to the world, may not also serve to cleanse many.’\textsuperscript{80} For Middleton, baptism taken to its greatest extent can thus be interpreted as being ‘the dying and rising of those who have been crucified with Christ.’\textsuperscript{81} The near-romantic tales of martyr relics found soaked with blood many years after death testify to the enduring potency which martyrial blood had accrued within Christian society, and the intense spiritual authority which martyrdom continued to wield long after the persecutions had ended. Ambrose, writing to his sister on his discovery of martyr relics in Milan, spoke of the physical presence of blood within the burial sites and its abundance within the tombs

\textsuperscript{76} John Chrysostom, \textit{Hom. Ign. 4}
\textsuperscript{77} Biale, 2007, 4. Anidjar has taken this further, and proposed that in light of the myriad ideologies which lie behind blood in the ancient world, blood in and of itself ‘must become a category of historical analysis (2014, 44).
\textsuperscript{78} \textit{Passio Perpetuae} 18.3. ‘…a sanguine ad sanguinem, \textit{ab obstetrice ad retiarium, lotura post partum baptismo secundo.’}
\textsuperscript{79} Tertullian, \textit{Bapt.} 16. ‘We have indeed, likewise, a second font…of blood, to wit, concerning which the Lord said, “I have to be baptised with a baptism,” when He had been baptized already…These two baptisms He sent out from the wound in His pierced side, in order that they who believed in His blood might be bathed with the water; they who had been bathed in the water might likewise drink the blood.’
\textsuperscript{80} Origen, \textit{Mart.} 30. εἰ τὸ κατὰ τὸ μαρτύριον βάπτισμα, ὀσπερ τὸ τοῦ Σωτῆρος καθάρσιον γέγονε τοῦ κόσμου, καὶ αὐτὸ ἐπὶ πολλῶν θεραπεῖα καθαρόμενον γίνεται.
\textsuperscript{81} Middleton, 2011, 65
of those whose physical bodies had long since decayed. ‘The martyrs,’ he states, ‘began to
make their presence felt to such effect that instantly, without a word from me, a woman was
seized and flung headlong towards the site of the tomb.’

Time had not erased the power of
those who had sacrificed themselves for the community, and their subterranean presence,
despite having been kept hidden from Ambrose and his church, had infused the city of Milan
with a divine strength, connecting the Christian community on earth with that in heaven.
Blood, concludes Ambrose, ‘has a melodious voice which reaches from earth to Heaven.’

1.2 Altars and Arenas

The apocalyptic visions of John within Revelation contributed extensively to the
 glorification of martyrdom, and the acute significance which sacrificial blood accrued within
the spiritual and physical realm of death in the arena. The narrative of the first witnesses to
Christ, those robed in white at Revelation 6:11 and standing alongside the Lamb on Mount
Zion at Revelation 14:1, invokes notions not just of sacrifice but of retribution for crimes
committed against the Christian body. John observes ‘the souls of those who had been
slaughtered (ἐσφαγμένων) for the word of God’ seated beneath an altar, questioning when
the Lord will ‘judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth.’ They are
commanded to ‘rest a little longer,’ and wait until such a time as their number becomes

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82 Ambrose, Ep. 22.2. Miles suggests that Tertullian later encourages potential martyrs to fast before
their deaths, much as a catechumen would fast prior to baptism (1989, 35).
83 Ambrose, Ep. 22.23. ‘habet enim sanguis vocem canoram, quae de terris ad coelum pervenit.’
Ambrose’s fascination with the spiritual significance of blood reached beyond the confines of his
community, and can perhaps be observed to have manifested itself at the highest levels of the Empire,
through the actions of Theodosius. Following the civil war, the Emperor, himself closely influenced
by Ambrose, did not take communion for a significant period of time, only returning to the ritual once
his son Honorius had returned to Italy, an occurrence which Theodosius held to be an affirmation by
God that he was once more in favour. His decision to cease receiving communion was, argues
Liebeschuetz, largely due to the pollution which Theodosius felt had become attached to his person
through the extensive spilling of blood in the Civil War, an ideology which he likely adopted through
84 Revelation 6:9-11
85 Revelation 6:10. καὶ ἐκραξαν φωνῇ μεγάλῃ λέγοντες· ἐδώς πότε, ὁ δεσπότης ὁ ἀγιος καὶ ἀληθινός,
οὗ κρίνεις καὶ ἐκδίκεις τὸ αἷμα ἡμῶν ἐκ τῶν κατοικοῦντων ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς;
complete, a statement which Yarbro Collins argues could consequently have encouraged early Christians toward martyrdom, particularly those who were ‘desirous of vengeance on Rome.’ Whilst these souls are not explicitly noted to be providing a sacrifice, John notes that they had died ‘for the testimony (μαρτυρίαν) they had given,’ and the connection of their blood with the act of witnessing provides an embryonic depiction of an ideology prevalent in late Antique Christianity. The sight of the 144,000 ‘first fruits for God (ἀπαρχῇ τοῦ θεοῦ)’ standing alongside the Lamb upon Mount Zion in chapter 14 provides a direct assertion of the position of sacrificial imagery within the doctrine of martyrdom, and of the role of Christ therein. Although these first fruits are not as desirous of reprisal as their white-robed brethren, John’s terminology demonstrates their equally significant role within the construction of an overarching narrative of martyrdom, the usage of ἀπαρχῇ reinforcing the notions of foundational sacrifice and communal dedication which wove their way through the Christian understanding of early martyrdom. This term, suggests Yarbro Collins, additionally invokes the notion of an ‘untimely and violent death,’ a hint toward the brutal realities of martyrdom often quashed beneath layers of lyrical assertions of the beauty of such a death.

These first fruits are with the Lamb on the mountain and follow him ‘wherever he goes,’ a hint toward Christ’s own position as a sacrificial figure, the redemption available through him for the martyrs, and his presence within the arena during the struggles of those who provided a testimony. When the time comes for Felicitas to give birth, her premature labour, coupled with the conditions of her imprisonment, leads to an agonising experience before she has even arrived in the arena. Her cries of pain attract the attention of a nearby guard, who mocks the labouring woman by questioning how, if she suffers so greatly at this early

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86 Yarbro Collins, 1984, 160
87 Revelation 6:9. Paul (Acts 22:20) makes a similar association of blood and witnessing through his account of the early martyrdom of Stephen: καὶ ὅτε ἐξεχύνετο τὸ αἷμα Στεφάνου τοῦ μάρτυρος σου... Ambrose is rather more graphic in his description of Stephen’s martyrdom, stating that ‘he is caught not by a net, but by a hook so that he may be pulled up into heaven in the stream of his own blood’ (Virginit. XVIII.120).
88 Revelation 14:4
89 Yarbro Collins, 1984, 128
90 Revelation 14:4
stage, she will endure ‘the beasts which you scorned when you refused to sacrifice (sacrificare).’ Felicitas remains unmoved, stating that whilst she suffers alone in her cell, in the arena ‘there will be another inside me, who will suffer for me, because I am going to suffer for him.’ Her belief in the divine companionship which she was to receive within the arena reflects both the notion that Christ suffered alongside martyrs throughout their tortures, a pillar of strength in the midst of extreme suffering, and the presentation of martyrdom as a continuation of Christ’s original sacrifice, preserving it for the community. Such an attitude, argues Heffernan, can allow martyrdom to be viewed as a form of sacred covenant, realised most clearly through the statement within 2 Timothy that ‘If we have died with him, we will also live with him.’ These gestures toward an apocalyptic world view are heavily complemented by John’s 144,000, and the depiction of those who have died for Christ standing alongside the sacrificial Lamb after the first resurrection. ‘Whereas the Apocalypse makes an arena of the world,’ argues Burrus, ‘subsequent accounts of martyrdom bring us into the world of the arena,’ a location in which the identity of the individual can evolve through resistance to an oppressive hierarchy, and that of the community finds freedom to flourish. Within the torture narratives of martyr acts, the simple declaration that ‘I am a Christian’ is imbued with a myriad of potential, for the possibility of the person making the declaration to ascend to martyrdom and for the redefinition of one’s identity as something greater than that which could be achieved within the suffocating boundaries of the Imperial social hierarchy. In her study of 20th century torture practices, Elaine Scarry proposes that interrogation cannot be divorced from physical torture, as it is ‘internal to the structure of torture, exists there because of its intimate connections to and interactions with the physical pain.’ Thus, the interrogation of a martyr prior to their experience in the arena, the Christiana/us sum that provides the definitive

91 Passio Perpetuae 15.5-6. ‘… illic autem alius erit in me qui patietur pro me, quia et ego pro illo passura sum.’
92 Heffernan, 1988, 228; 2 Timothy 2:11.
94 Scarry, 1985, 29
conclusion of a trial and condemnation of an individual, can be held to be of as much significance to the overall narrative of a martyrdom as the actual death scene itself. Through a simple two-word statement, an individual redefined their public identity, made a declaration of who and what they were within the physical world in which they resided, and demonstrated that the crucified Christ was present within them, whether male or female, slave or free.

John’s first fruits come with an additional qualification: they are those ‘who have not defiled themselves (ἐμολύνθησαν) with women, for they are virgins.’ This statement, argues Yarbro Collins, suggests an influence from the Essene Jewish communities of Palestine with whom John may have interacted, as such an attitude reflects their societal notions of sexuality and the divine. For the Essene communities, notions of holy war were heavily connected to sexual behaviour, as Yahweh was held to form part of the military camp and sexual activity subsequently ceased to occur in such a context, in order to ensure the spiritual purity of the encampment. John’s statement is quite clearly made in reference to men, with the consequent inference that the divine military camp, and thus martyrdom, were not the realms of women, who contained within their bodies notions of impurity and the potential for sexual transgression. In spite of this suggestion, numerous women were martyred independently to, or alongside, men throughout the years of persecution, their martyr narratives a testimony to early Christianity’s ability to confer the glory of God across the broad reaches of the social hierarchy. Indeed, the very ethos of martyrdom can be suggested to prioritise those virtues considered traditionally female through its subversion of Roman understandings of honour, shame and status. Castelli notes that despite the presence of masculine concepts within martyrdom narratives, they fundamentally emphasise the values of ‘passivity and submission,’ which, in their Imperial context, were behaviours associated

95 Revelation 14:4
96 Yarbro Collins, 1984, 130-131. Yarbro Collins does additionally note that some scholars have concluded that this reference is not to actual sexual activity, but rather symbolises idolatry, as John on occasion uses ‘harlotry’ in reference to idolatrous practice. (1984, 129).
with the female realm. Despite the physical strength displayed by martyrs throughout their trials, they calmly accept their fates, traits which are prioritised by later Christian authors within the construction of those texts which allow for the flourishing of Christian identity, enabling a re-positioning of feminine behaviours within the early Christian world. The presence of women within martyr narratives is in itself a radical action, a subversion of Imperial understandings of sex and gender which privileged male authority, and restricted female honour to the household and hearth. Indeed, the very notion of being passive within a martyrdom is not restricted to a suggestion of meek acceptance, but rather, through its etymological connection to passivus, and thus patior, hints toward suffering and endurance: passivity is bolstered by strength, and the demonstration of this by female martyrs in a fiercely masculine location had the potential to be a radical and destabilising force. From suffering was born a victory, with the crown of martyrdom providing a mechanism through which the lowliest of persons could gain eternal glory.

Such a person can be found within the account of the martyrdom of those Christians at Lyons in the second century. The slave woman Blandina, states the mysterious author of the letter preserved within Eusebius’ writings, reflected ‘the things that men think cheap, ugly and contemptuous.’ Blandina suffered a series of increasingly extreme abuses, being beaten and stoned by an enraged mob before being tortured within the arena to such an extent that ‘even those who were taking turns to torture her in every way from dawn to dusk were weary and exhausted,’ eventually hung on a post in order to bait animals and finally, triumphantly, following in the footsteps of her companions, being released from her fleshly prison. The narrator emphasises both her heroic endurance and the manner in which she supports those suffering around her, providing inspiration to them through her ability to withstand a near-crucifixion, and, much like the mother of the seven Maccabean martyrs, encouraging them to their deaths and only facing her own once she has witnessed the

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97 Castelli, 2004, 61  
98 Eusebius, Historia ecclesiastica 5.1.17  
99 Eusebius, Historia ecclesiastica 5.1.18
triumph of her ‘children.’ The presence of this maternal motif (the narrator directly describes her as being ‘like a noble mother’) draws attention to Blandina’s female body, emphasising a trait firmly associated with her biological sex in a text which places profound significance on her ability to resist physical suffering and the oppression of a masculine empire. Furthermore, this final descriptor of the soon-to-be martyr occurs in the aftermath of a series of accounts which accord to Blandina the traits of Christ himself, ‘that mighty and invincible athlete.’ She is herself a ‘noble athlete (γενναῖος ἄθλητής)’ whose faith and confession does not diminish through her suffering, but rather is augmented to its greatest heights, causing her to reiterate her statement that Χριστιανή εἶμι. This greatest of revelations culminates with Blandina’s suspension on a post within the arena some days later, as Christ visually shows his presence within the divine camp, appearing both within and through Blandina’s body. As the tormented woman prayed through her pain, her companions ‘saw in the person of their sister him who was crucified for them,’ the profound association of shame and suffering with the divine and resurrection made emphatically clear through the appearance of Christ within the form of a tortured slave woman, a person to whom all dignity and respect had been denied in life. Her gender here is, argues Burrus, ‘fraught with significance’ as Blandina’s comparison to Christ is followed by the statement that ‘for her victory in further contests she would make irreversible the condemnation of the crooked serpent,’ with Blandina thus intimately associated with both Christ and Eve, she who was tricked by the devil and he who died for the sins of the world. Blandina’s lowliness is fundamental to her triumph, as her subjugation to the whims of empire, and its rejection of her humanity not just as a slave but as a woman is what causes her resistance to authority to be so radical, and to rise above her male companions in

100 Eusebius, Historia ecclesiastica 5.1.55. …καθάπερ μήτηρ ἐγεννής παρορμήσασα τὰ τέκνα…Cf. 2 and 4 Maccabees; Cobb, 2008, 115
101 Eusebius, Historia ecclesiastica 5.1.42. …μέγαν καὶ ἀκατατούνσιον ἀθλητὴν Χριστὸν ἐνδούμανη
102 Eusebius, Historia ecclesiastica 5.1.19
103 Eusebius, Historia ecclesiastica 5.1.41. …διὰ τῆς ἀθεληφῆς τὸν ὑπὲρ αὐτῶν ἐκτυφαρμένων. Blandina is later stated to have ‘put on (ἐνδεδυμένη) Christ,’ echoing Paul’s command at Romans 13:14: ἀλλ’ ἐνδύσασθε τὸν κύριον Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν
104 Burrus, 2008, 26
105 Eusebius, Historia ecclesiastica 5.1.42
the arena at Lyons. Indeed, states Burrus, her social situation causes her to possess a ‘bottomless capacity for shame.’ As a figure simultaneously athletic, Christ-like and maternal, Blandina’s martyrdom reflects not only the potential for Christian adherents to destabilise constructions of gendered identity, but for women to perform actions which allow them to define the identities of their own community, through suffering and sacrifice, whilst maintaining their own definition as female.

Blandina is one of a multitude of early female martyrs – indeed, she is not the only woman to be martyred at Lyons – and the tortures enacted on female bodies were located at the centre of a multitude of cultural perceptions, both pagan and Christian, of the role and position of a woman in Imperial society. Her martyrdom is notable in that the author does not dedicate a large portion of the narrative to the intimate details of her torture and its impact upon her body, a prominent feature of martyr acts composed from the late fourth century onward. The eventual death of the tortured woman was reserved for the last day of the martyrdoms at Lyons, as the inclusion of a woman in public spectacles was a rare experience for the Roman audience, and one which hinted at a provocative display which challenged conceptions of sex and gender. Blandina’s rebellion thus allowed her to defy the expectations placed upon her as both a slave and a woman in the face of a male-dominated empire, whilst simultaneously being used by this society as the final course in a titillating public showing which allowed for the state-sanctioned undermining of traditional understandings of the public appearance of women. As Clark emphasises, the tortures enacted upon the bodies of martyrs were generally not gender-specific; the very appearance of a woman in such a context ‘made a different impact from the torture of a man.’ Furthermore, argues Clark, the authors who transcribed such events and the audiences who read their texts had motives of their own in emphasising certain facets of a martyrdom,

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106 Burrus, 2008, 27
107 The Vita Febroniae, which is discussed within chapter three, focusses much of its attention on the specifics of its martyr’s suffering, listing her tortures in a manner which borders on enthusiastic.
108 Shaw, 1993, 18
109 Clark, G., 1998a, 103
which become all the more complicated when considering the presence of an exposed female body in the public sphere.\textsuperscript{110} For the Roman audience, particularly male figures of authority, the manner in which Christian women rejected the expectations of empire and the understandings of gender which were centralised within this nexus provided a challenge to their authority as both the dominant culture, and the dominant gender. Such a threat has been additionally identified by Jantzen as being present in relation to female gladiators who, much like female martyrs, provided a source of public entertainment which functioned to solidify the ideals of Rome, yet through their gendered presence within the arena allowed for a resistance to hierarchies of gender, their strength on the sands serving to challenge masculine virility and control.\textsuperscript{111}

For Christian women, a public martyrdom was not the only punishment issued to them by their persecutors. ‘Lately,’ stated Tertullian in his \textit{Apologia}, ‘in condemning a Christian woman \textit{ad lenonem} rather than \textit{ad leonem} you made confession that a taint on our purity is considered among us something more terrible than any punishment or death.’\textsuperscript{112} Punishment by being exposed in a brothel, with the consequent implications of sexual violence, is reported in several martyrdom acts; those women who suffered such a fate find themselves miraculously released without experiencing rape or assault, dying in the arena without, as Tertullian would perhaps claim, a taint on their purity. Sabina, a companion of the martyr Pionius, was threatened with such a fate and laughed in the face of her accusers, stating only that ‘the God who is all holy…will take care of this.’\textsuperscript{113} Bowersock has claimed that the evidence for this punishment is ‘meagre,’ consequently holding that this demonstrates a lack

\textsuperscript{110} The manner in which authors from the mid fourth century onward presented the martyred female body, and the erotic underpinnings of these writings, will be further debated within chapter three.
\textsuperscript{111} Jantzen, 2004, 278
\textsuperscript{112} Tertullian, \textit{Apol.} 50
\textsuperscript{113} Martyrium Pionii 7. Sexual violence within martyrdom – or rather, the lack thereof – will be discussed in chapter three, with a view towards establishing the reasoning behind the absence of this punishment, alongside the metaphors utilised by authors such as Prudentius which imply sexual assault. I would note here that an issue arises from the absence of sexual violence within martyr acts when considering the fundamental necessity of shame to martyrdom, and the manner in which humiliation and suffering are ingrained within martyrology. The impact of rape would be, it appears, so great that the experience of ‘shame’ within such an event went beyond that which was required for a martyrdom.
of interest among the Roman peoples to engage with such penalties.\textsuperscript{114} Whilst this statement holds some value with regards to the question of how commonplace such an event was, it must be emphasised that the significance of such a punishment lies not within the frequency of its enactment, but within the ideologies which support it, and the manner in which this illustrates the strength of the blow dealt to Imperial identity by the resistance of Christian women. Within the walls of the arena, women such as Blandina, whose names would otherwise remain unknown, proved that the limitations of sex and social class within the empire did not prevent the lowliest of persons from accessing divine strength, from withstanding the tortures heaped upon their body and from clothing themselves with Christ in order to achieve the greatest of victories. The possibility for a woman to be thrown within a public brothel and to endure sufferings which would not be witnessed by the great crowds whose beliefs she had denied, in place of being publicly executed in the arena for the benefit of all citizens, has the potential to suggest that the presence of a woman in a public martyrdom had come to level such a radical threat against the tenets of empire that Roman officials began to consider removing women from such a context altogether. Within the arena, argues Jantzen, the nature of martyrdom caused the traditional understandings of dominance, of penetrator and penetrated, to be resisted through the martyrs’ wielding of divine power and resistance of torture, a consequent threat to notions of masculine potency.\textsuperscript{115} Removing women from the arena and placing them in brothels could go some way towards undoing this challenge, with sexual violence serving to re-inscribe cultural understandings of masculine dominance on female bodies in a tragically literal manner.

Female resistance to the oppression of a pagan empire was actively encouraged by the early Church Fathers, who exhorted women to take up arms in the war against Satan and praised those who had laid down their lives in the name of Christ. John’s white-robed souls awaited their ἄδελφοι, however, his successors had realised that a triumph in the arena was not

\textsuperscript{114} Bowersock, 1995, 53. Furthermore, I would state here that Bowersock’s argument is not aided by his rather blasé description of sexual violence as a ‘sordid contribution of martyrs to the civic life of eastern Roman cities.’

\textsuperscript{115} Jantzen, 2004, 337
restricted to men, and adjusted their treatises accordingly. Cyprian, another authority who emerged from the hotbed of religious tension that was Carthage, celebrated the sacrifices of ‘blessed women also, who are established with you in the same glory of confession,’ noting that these women were ‘braver than their sex,’ whilst Clement of Rome noted that ‘many women, invested with power through the grace of God, have accomplished many a manly deed (πολλὰ ἀνδρεῖα).’ The suggestion, whether through the subtle application of terms rooted in societal constructions of masculinity, or more outright statements such as that of Cyprian, that female martyrs had in some manner overcome their sex occurs in a number of martyr acts, a textual feature which saw women be transformed into men when taken to its greatest extreme. As Shaw has noted, the titles of Dominus and Domina accorded to victorious martyrs are closely interlinked with notions of ‘mastery, ownership and domination,’ characteristics which he defines as being conventionally male. Indeed, Cobb has taken this conclusion even further, arguing that rather than allowing female martyrs to challenge Imperial notions of sex and gender, martyr acts universally portray Christians as men, with female martyrs failing to undermine social hierarchies. Martyrdom acts, argues Cobb, place such value on ‘virtue and strength’ that their ultimate success can be predicated on the fact that they ‘personified Roman masculinity.’ Whilst certain qualities of female martyrs can be read as being masculine in their nature (the role of military victor, for example, was an occupation typically reserved for men) classically feminine qualities such as passivity are given great weight within martyr acts, and many female martyrs personify feminine ideals in their most explicit sense through their depiction as maternal figures – mothers of the church, of the community, of their fellow martyrs. The existence of this comparison can itself be said to be restrictive when considering the overall impact of martyr acts on the lives of women, with this prioritisation of motherhood placing

116 Cyprian, Ep. 80 (PL Ep. 81)
117 1 Clement 55
118 Shaw, 1993, 6. The usage of such terms raises further issues regarding the presence and treatment of slaves, both as martyrs and within Christian households from the fourth century onwards; due to the focus of this thesis this topic will not be explored further.
119 Cobb, 2008, 5
women firmly within traditional understandings of the expectations of gender. However, these martyrs are not mothers in the most literal sense: there is no mention of whether Blandina has biological children of her own, and Perpetua and Felicitas reject their young children in favour of their new family in Christ. This presentation of women as mothers within martyr acts thus places a greater emphasis on their role as spiritual leaders, whose maternal tendencies place them in a position of loving authority over their companions.\(^{120}\)

Cobb’s application of the term ‘Roman masculinity’ toward the characteristics which appear in the arena thus fails to take into account the presence of feminine traits in the experiences of female martyrs, and additionally does not allow for a realisation of the manner in which Christian martyrs radically challenged Roman notions of gender through their extreme transgressions of the boundaries of the body and of its identity. The arena was a location in which martyrs were repeatedly penetrated – by swords, spears, knives and whips wielded by their emphatically masculine executioners – and yet this violent assault did not equate to a repeated affirmation of the hierarchies of gender and cultural identity, but rather defied it from within, with women utilising their experiences upon the sands to redefine their existence and seek new identities as guardians of the Christian community, creating the building blocks upon which the fragile church could stand. These dramatic acts of recalcitrance, some as simple as stating *Christiana sum*, provided a mechanism through which women could rewrite the script transcribed for them by the Roman Empire, examining multiple aspects of their identities and questioning their legitimacy. Nowhere is this radical self-exploration more evident than through the lives of women who not only questioned their gender but transgressed its boundaries altogether, ceasing to identify with the sex and consequent gendered expectations assigned to them by their society altogether.

\(^{120}\) I would additionally highlight here that this slight reinterpretation of the nature of motherhood allows for such texts to contribute toward discussions relating to motherhood and women who are unable to carry biological children, such as transgender women, a point of significance with regard to Queer Theologies.
1.3. Facta sum Masculus

Following yet another rejection by her desired mentor Paul, Thecla, the eponymous heroine of the Acts of Paul and Thecla, declares to the Apostle that she ‘will cut my hair and follow you wherever you should go,’ a plea which falls on deaf ears. After surviving a second near martyrdom, Thecla began again her search for Paul, discovering that he resided in Myra and ‘girded herself, and sewed her mantle into a cloak after the fashion of men,’ in order to travel to the city. Thecla’s rejection of her hair and of female dress, two visual descriptors inherent to the cultural understanding of ‘woman,’ emphasise her gradual evolution away from the role of Roman wife and mother, social positions defined by the dominant culture in which she resides, and her denial of the confines of her sex. Indeed, Burrus proposes that Thecla’s challenge toward the expectations placed upon her as a woman appears from the outset within the text, as by positioning herself by the window within her house and looking out from it toward Paul, away from her duties internal to the house hold and to her fiancé, Thamyris, Thecla ‘shatters the spatial boundaries which define women’s roles.’

This transformation is not so drastic a denunciation of her former life as to suggest an entire rejection of her gender (Thecla is not directly described as ‘becoming male’), but rather serves to enable Thecla to remove herself from a social situation which would restrict her ability to fulfil her destiny as a servant of God, and a conduit for the Holy Spirit on earth. Aspegren argues that Thecla’s abandonment of female adornment in favour of masculine attire allows her to become associated with male traits such as ‘activity, initiative, reason and spiritual life,’ enabling her to carry out those tasks allocated to her, a reiteration of the notion that in order for a woman to serve as a spiritual authority she had first to leave behind

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121 Thec. 25
122 Thec. 40. καὶ λαβὼνα νεανίσκοις καὶ παιδίσκας, ἀναζωοσαμένη καὶ ῥώσασα τὸν χτένα εἰς ἐπανώθην σχῆματι ἀνδρικῇ ἀπάληκεν ἐν Μύροις. Such a trope is additionally seen in the Acta Philippi (43), wherein Charitine, having been healed of an eye wound and baptised, ‘put on male attire and followed Philip.’
123 Burrus, 1994, 47
124 Aspegren, 1990, 108
those facets of her being which negated her leadership. Whilst this development illustrates the radical manner in which Christian women transgressed the boundaries of their gender, it also hints toward the deeply troubling notion that, just as with female martyrs who were, to use Boyarin’s terms, virilised within their narrative, for a woman to achieve success she had to abandon those aspects of her identity which made her female.125 As Aspegren emphasises, Thecla can only preach when she is ‘in man’s attire,’126 and within later texts which mention the name of Thecla, she ‘was to receive the epithet of male’ through her illustration of virtues adopted as masculine in the centuries to come, such as chastity.127

The tale of Thecla’s life is additionally remarkable through the fact that she is continually assisted by women throughout her sufferings, from Tryphaena, the queen who took Thecla into her home in order to protect her as she awaited trial, to the very animals led into the arena to see to her death. ‘And a bear ran upon her,’ states the anonymous narrator, ‘but the lioness ran and met him, and tore the bear in sunder.’128 Paul himself repeatedly abandons Thecla, an action which leads to Thecla’s two near-martyrdoms and which sees the young woman deciding to brave the dangerous journey to Myra to join him. In doing so, Paul takes a step back within the overall arc of Thecla’s narrative which allows Thecla to achieve each of her victories on her own merit, with the support not of a male apostle but from varying women, in acts of solidarity which create a profound portrait of the relationships between women in antiquity. Indeed, had Paul not rejected Thecla, she would perhaps have been unable to perform some of the radical acts which are recounted within her story, such as her self-baptism within the arena.129 Thecla’s baptism occupies a position of profound significance within the text, marking the moment in which she wholly rejects her identity as a pagan member of the Roman Empire in favour of that of a Christian, whilst simultaneously

125 Boyarin, 1999, 75
126 Aspegren, 1990, 108
127 Aspegren, 1990, 115
128 Thec. 33. Aspegren notes that the presence of multiple women, both human and animal, who support Thecla in her endeavours contributes strongly to the notion that the anonymous author of the acts may have been a woman (1990, 103).
129 Thec. 34. ‘And when she had ended her prayer, she turned and saw a great tank full of water… And she cast herself in, saying: “In the name of Jesus Christ do I baptize myself on the last day.”’
demonstrating her realisation that Paul is not the only person through whom she can access the word of Christ, as this ability is contained within Thecla herself. As a near-confirmation of this, the animals placed within the tank to execute Thecla are themselves destroyed as she casts herself into the water, whilst ‘there was about her a cloud of fire’ which does not harm Thecla, but rather prevents the crowd from seeing her nakedness. Whilst it may be romanticising the tale somewhat to suggest that Paul dismisses Thecla in order to allow the young woman to flourish in her own right, his abandonment of her has the consequence of enabling a distinctly female Thecla to accomplish tasks which affirm her holy status and authority without placing her under the aegis of a male authority.

Thecla dons male clothing and rejects the cultural markers of her femininity, with Burrus proposing that Thecla’s male dress ‘marks her as both a woman and a man.’ Her baptism and her eventual mission are gained not through a constant adoption of male virtues but through her own experiences as a woman, as an object of sexual desire from men who sought to assert dominance over her, and from a teacher whose rejection of her dedication enabled Thecla to thrive. Thecla’s adoption of this new style of clothing arrives at the climax of a series of events which see her become a spiritual authority independently of the interventions of others, and thus her decision to clothe herself so may perhaps serve not as a reflection of her interweaving of gender, but rather suggests her realisation of her new status, which was no longer predicated on the fact of her being a woman. Thecla’s humble cloak imitates the garb of her teacher Paul, a nod toward the spiritual authority which she had now gained, and a hint that the student no longer required teaching. Indeed, upon reaching Paul at Myra, the apostle did not reject Thecla but accepted her self-baptism, commanding her to go forth and preach. Thecla does not deny her sex, or adopt male traits in order to become

130 Thec. 34
131 Burrus, 2008, 35. Miles has suggested that Thecla’s male dress is in part designed to enable her to travel with greater safety, and to avoid the danger of rape which threatened women making such great journeys (1989, 55). Whilst such an argument does hold a certain truth, Thecla is written to have surrounded herself with young men and women after her second martyrdom, before departing for Myra, and it is unclear as to whether her brethren accompany her. If so, travelling with a number of others, including men, would allow Thecla’s journey to become safer, and it would perhaps be unusual for Thecla to disguise herself thus, but not the other Christian woman, suggesting that Thecla’s change of outfit is rooted in her connection to Paul and her attainment of leadership.
both man and woman, but rather abandons those facets of her society which restricted her, redefining for herself the nature of her female identity through her lived experiences. The radical outcome of such a text is illustrated by Tertullian, whose response to the *Acta* implies that some women had taken Thecla’s tale to suggest that they were capable of baptising and teaching others. ‘But if the writings which wrongly go under Paul’s name, claim Thecla’s example as a licence for women’s teaching and baptizing,’ Tertullian stated, ‘let them know that, in Asia, the presbyter who composed that writing...was removed from his office.’

Women, Tertullian curtly reminded his followers, were to remain silent and to ask questions only of their own husbands.

In 203 A.D., at the games in honour of Geta Caesar’s birthday, a young Christian woman named Perpetua was martyred alongside some fellow converts, one of which was her heavily pregnant slave, Felicitas. Perpetua’s diary, written whilst in prison and completed by an anonymous Christian who recorded the final executions, paints a remarkable portrait of a woman whose conversion enabled her to strip her identity as a pagan mother down to its very bones, and to reconstruct her entire identity in line with that of her community, a small family brought together through Christ whose sacrifice bound them as one for eternity. Throughout the text, Perpetua undergoes a multitude of transformations, the most extreme of which sees the young woman appear in the likeness of a male gladiator to do battle with the devil himself, with each evolution forming a rung on the ladder which she climbs toward the arena, toward Christ and toward the consolidation of her identity. From the earliest stages of the text, Perpetua presents herself a dominant force in the face of exclusively male authority, namely that of the judge in her trial, and her elderly father, who begs her to reconsider her conversion. Perpetua responds with the simple statement that *Christiana sum*, two words saturated with implications of resistance and transgression toward her family unit and the empire of which she is a member. Her words undermine the authority of her father, who

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132 Tertullian, *Bapt.* 17

angrily ‘threw himself at me, in order to gouge out my eyes,’ and illustrate a profoundly literal manifestation of Christ’s words at Matthew 10:36 through a young woman’s refusal to accept the rights of *patria potestas*. Her words allow her to additionally reject the authority of empire, as manifested in the form of the procurator who persecuted the Carthaginian Christians, challenging both masculine authority and deeply-rooted societal traditions surrounding the role of women. Her decision to define herself as a Christian, rather than through her own individual name can itself be suggested to have ramifications for her identity as ‘Perpetua,’ as she does not utilise her name throughout her trial narratives, renaming herself with a collective term which connects her with those persecuted alongside her and with the community whose ranks will be strengthened through the shedding of her blood. However, as Cox Miller has argued, this abandonment of her name is a further mechanism through which Perpetua is able to liberate herself from the ties of her birth family, and indeed ‘sets her free from social and paternal definition,’ enabling her to define herself externally to customs which are themselves defined by men.

Indeed, it is following this first act of recalcitrance that Perpetua records the first of four visions which she would undergo whilst imprisoned, her rejection of the authority of family and empire deepening her understanding of the wider consequences of her actions and providing her with access to a greater spiritual authority. ‘I see a bronze ladder of great length,’ Perpetua recorded, ‘reaching up to heaven, but so narrow that people could only climb up one at a time. And on the sides of the ladder, iron implements of every kind were attached…so that if anyone climbed up carelessly, or not looking upwards, he was torn to pieces…’ Braving the dangers of the ladder, including the serpent coiled at its base upon whose head she steps, Perpetua ascended to discover ‘an enormous garden and a white-haired man sitting in the middle of it dressed in shepherd’s clothes,’ surrounded by ‘many

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134 *Passio Perpetuae* 3.3  
135 Cox Miller, 1992, 49  
136 *Passio Perpetuae* 4.3; Genesis 28:12. ‘And he dreamed that there was a great ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.’  
137 *Passio Perpetuae* 4.7. ‘And from beneath the ladder itself, the serpent slowly stuck its head out, as if it feared me, and I stepped on its head and climbed up, as if it were the first step.’ See Genesis 3:15.
thousands dressed in white.'\textsuperscript{138} This clear invocation of Jacob’s Ladder and the punishment of the snake in the Garden of Eden confirms for Perpetua that she will face immense suffering in the arena but that, much like Jacob, she has been chosen by God for this purpose and is destined to transcend the limits of the fallen earth and the suffering therein to find her community in heaven. The ladder, Cox Miller has suggested, allows for the connection of the shepherd and the serpent, and thus forms a ‘phallic signifier of male domination that is clearly a threatening trope,’ noting that this vision follows on from the attack of Perpetua’s father upon his daughter.\textsuperscript{139} In light of this proposal, as Perpetua bridged the gap between the serpent, representative of the sinful empire, and the kindly, paternal shepherd,\textsuperscript{140} she simultaneously unchained herself from the world which held her back, and furthered her ability to overcome the male authorities that had governed her life thus far, and which had focalised her potential to bear children, denoting her as a receptacle for male sexual and reproductive needs. Furthermore, upon reaching the garden the shepherd ‘from the cheese that he had milked he gave me as it were a mouthful,’\textsuperscript{141} an action laden with significance when considering Perpetua’s current status on earth. Prior to the vision, Perpetua’s young son had been brought to stay with her in prison, significantly weakened from his time away from his mother, who had been breast feeding him, and whose nerves were significantly calmed having had her child returned to her. Her unnamed son constituted Perpetua’s last connection to the family and the world which she had left behind, and to her identity as a Roman mother. Within this vision, argues Burrus,\textsuperscript{142} Perpetua, who has provided milk in prison, is now herself fed within the garden, taking the food ‘with folded hands’ after which those surrounding her call ‘Amen,’ the vision thus acting to perform a Eucharist of sorts.

\textsuperscript{138}\textit{Passio Perpetuae} 4.8. ‘\textit{Et vidi spatium immensum horti et in medio sedentem hominem canum, in habitu pastoris, grandem, oves mulgentem; et circumstantes candidati milia multa.’ See Revelation 6:9-11.
\textsuperscript{140} Whilst it may perhaps be a simple descriptor with little symbolism, the shepherd is described as \textit{hominem canum} (4.8), whilst Perpetua’s father, in the following section (5.2), begs his daughter to have pity upon \textit{canis meis}, a potential signifier toward Perpetua’s movement into her family in Christ, as she engages within this new paternal figure whose visual appearance hints toward that of her own father.
\textsuperscript{141}\textit{Passio Perpetuae} 4.9
\textsuperscript{142} Burrus, 2008, 29
Her ascent of the ladder and celebration within the garden thus collectively serve not only to allow for her realisation of her fate in the arena, but for a symbolic role reversal which weakens the ties to her baby through Perpetua’s transformation into a metaphorical child, one who receives nourishment rather than provides it. ‘Immediately I grew stronger,’ Perpetua recorded after the arrival of her child to prison, breastfeeding her son who, in return, provided her with a spiritual strength which fed her soul. However, her interaction in the garden served to provide her with all the sustenance which she required, absolving her of responsibility to her son through her brief return to a childlike state. Perpetua had rejected her identity as a member of a masculine, oppressive empire through her conversion to Christianity and her refusal to obey the laws which governed the responsibility of children to their earthly fathers, following those of Christ instead. Her interaction in the garden enabled Perpetua to undo a second facet of her identity (a mother) which was closely intertwined with her previous existence as Roman woman, whilst rewriting the first aspect (a daughter) in a manner which encouraged her spiritual ascendance. During her father’s visit in the aftermath of her vision, Perpetua experiences no difficulty in rejecting him, and her response to the emotions of her family is somewhat altered in light of her newly gained spiritual knowledge. Whilst Perpetua had ‘suffered grievously when I saw how they suffered for me’ during her first trial, her grief was no longer in response to their sorrow, but rather relied upon her realisation that her father ‘alone of all my family would not rejoice in my suffering.’ This conclusion is demonstrated somewhat graphically through her father’s decision to supplicate his daughter in a desperate attempt to change her mind, an action which constituted a radical restructuring of the social hierarchy, with a wayward daughter, rather than being punished for her insubordination, achieving authority over her paternfamilias. In throwing himself at Perpetua’s feet, her father places himself in position of

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143 Passio Perpetuae 3.9
144 Passio Perpetuae 3.8. ‘…tabescebam ideo quod illos tabescere videram mei beneficio.’ It may be of interest to note that in Felicitas’ discussion of her suffering in labour, she utilises the verb patior, closely associated with martyr narratives. Perpetua’s slightly unusual choice of tabesco may serve to subtly differentiate between the emotional grief experienced by both martyr and family, and the euphoric suffering endured within the arena.
145 Passio Perpetuae 5.6. Perpetua here utilises passione to indicate her future sufferings in the arena.
submission which is both physical and emotional, addressing his daughter no longer as filia but as domina.\textsuperscript{146} His pleas fell on deaf ears, as did his attempts during Perpetua’s trial on the following day to dissuade his daughter from her path by utilising her son as an emotional bargaining tool, begging Perpetua to ‘have pity on your baby,’ an intervention which led the proconsul to order the elderly man to be beaten with rods.\textsuperscript{147} Having returned to the prison, Perpetua was denied access to her child; having experienced the transformative revelations of her vision, this no longer provided her with a cause for concern, and ‘as God willed, the baby no longer desired my breasts, nor did they ache and become inflamed, so that I might not be tormented by worry for my child or by the pain in my breasts.’\textsuperscript{148}

This first vision provides an unusual parallel of sorts for Perpetua’s fourth vision, as both sequences enable Perpetua to challenge the nature of what it truly meant, for her, to be a mother, daughter and woman, aspects of her identity which were formed and defined within the empire which she has now rejected. Separating these two revelatory occurrences lie two closely intertwined dream sequences which serve to further document Perpetua’s spiritual journey and increasing authority over those around her. Despite being free of her son, it is established that Perpetua has one final family member with whom she must commune – her deceased brother, Dinocrates, who ‘died horribly at the age of seven from a cancer of the face.’\textsuperscript{149} After praying for her brother, Perpetua observes him crawling out of a dark hole in a vision, hot, dirty and with his facial wound still raw and exposed, unable to access the pool of water above his head to quench his thirst.\textsuperscript{150} Waking in turmoil, Perpetua prayed constantly for the safety of her brother, eventually being granted a second vision in which

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{146} \textit{Passio Perpetuae} 5.5
\item \textsuperscript{147} \textit{Passio Perpetuae} 6.2-5
\item \textsuperscript{148} \textit{Passio Perpetuae} 6.8
\item \textsuperscript{149} \textit{Passio Perpetuae} 7.5. Cf. Gonzalez, 2014, 190-194 on the influence of Greco-Roman concepts of Hades within this vision, and its wider relevance for understanding early Christian considerations of the afterlife.
\item \textsuperscript{150} \textit{Passio Perpetuae} 7.4. Dinocrates died at a very young age, and given Perpetua’s late conversion, it is perhaps not too far a step to suggest that her brother was not a Christian, and has thus, to Perpetua’s mind, not enjoyed a particularly pleasant afterlife. In liberating him from his suffering, Perpetua showcases the profound spiritual power which she has ascertained, releasing him from torment and allowing him to rest at peace. This may, then, serve as a minor form of a spiritual conversion.
\end{itemize}
Dinocrates appeared with ‘his body clean, well dressed and refreshed,’ and his scar healed. Bal has proposed that Perpetua visualised her brother due to the fact that her current physical circumstance enabled her to identify with his suffering: as she is entombed in the dark cell of her prison, he too is restricted to a dark corner in which to suffer. Furthermore, she suggests, the open wound on Dinocrates’ face can represent female genitalia, and when taken with his young age (which Bal defines as ‘pre-gendered’), this scene serves to reinforce the implication that Perpetua is moving away from gender itself. It must, however, be emphasised that these paired visions serve primarily to establish Perpetua’s newly-realised ability to provide salvation for others, including those already departed from the world, yet another step on her journey to the summit of the ladder. For Böhme, Dinocrates’ open wounds reflect not his suffering but that of Perpetua, as they hold within them evidence of her previous life as a pagan. Thus, he argues, ‘in healing Dinocrates, she fulfils her own desire to bury her old identity and create a new one.’

The two visions of Dinocrates contrast to Perpetua’s first and fourth visions, as Dinocrates is the most significant figure therein, as opposed to his sister, and indeed Perpetua adopts a passive role and does not feature directly within these visions. Thus, given the transformative elements of Perpetua’s visions to her own identity, she herself is likely reflected within Dinocrates, as Bal and Böhme propose, and indeed given the centrality of Perpetua’s sex to her pre-Christian experiences, the facial wound perhaps represents both the conclusion of her previous life, and the seeds of thought which cause Perpetua to question the manner in which her gender itself plays a role within her overall narrative. Furthermore, given that Perpetua’s fate is now certain following her official sentencing, the abuse to which her body will soon be subjected in the arena may be reflected within the sealing of Dinocrates’ wound, with Perpetua exhibiting a desire to make her body impenetrable, to seal it off from the external attacks of her persecutors on all sides, and to heal those aspects of

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151 *Passio Perpetuae* 8.1
152 Bal, 2012, 142
153 Bal, 2012, 143
154 Böhme, 2012, 223-4
her body which had previously been laid bare. Having rejected her biological child as a necessary step in the metamorphosis of her identity, Perpetua may have viewed the closure of her brother’s open wound as a visual metaphor through which she herself could seal the evidence of the pre-Christian pregnancy which had bound her so tightly to a fallen world.

Having begun the task of reconstructing her identity as a mother and a daughter within the Roman world, Perpetua, within her fourth and final vision, wrestled with the aspect of her character which lay at the root of her being, and through questioning the nature of her sex itself experienced a final revelation of her true task in the arena. ‘We began to walk through places that were rugged and winding,’ she recounts, her walk to an imagined arena a reflection of the paths on which she has travelled in order to arrive at this moment. Once in the arena, Perpetua observes the presence of her opponent, and realises that she is no longer herself: *facta sum masculus*, she states, as her attendants rub her naked body with oil, and an enormous man enters the arena to inform Perpetua that should she lose the fight, her opponent shall kill her with a sword, but should she be victorious, she will receive ‘a green branch on which there were golden apples.’ The action of stripping naked, suggests Aspegren, reflects the notion of ‘laying the body aside,’ and when directly followed by her realisation of sudden masculinity, hints towards Perpetua’s move away from humanity and sin (themselves inherently associated with women) to occupy a body which is utterly removed from such complications, a body as pure and spiritual as that of Adam before the Fall. This evolution, Aspegren continues, does not suggest that Perpetua has now lost all sense of femininity, but rather that she has united both male and female as one, and indeed Castelli proposes that becoming male marks a necessary step of her spiritual transformation, as Perpetua’s experiences have seen her move away from her female standing and toward

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155 *Passio Perpetuae* 10.3
156 *Passio Perpetuae* 10.7, ‘*Et expoliata sum, et facta sum masculus, et coeperunt me favisores mei oleo defricare, quomodo solent in agone.*’
157 *Passio Perpetuae* 10.9
158 Aspegren, 1990, 138
159 Aspegren, 1990, 143
that of the male, reflecting ‘her increasingly holy status.’\textsuperscript{160} The notion that becoming male was a mechanism through which women could illustrate the height of their holiness weaves its way through a multitude of Christian texts across varying locations and centuries, and indeed Gregory of Nyssa declared that his sister Macrina could not truly be designated a woman ‘for I do not know if it is right to use that natural designation for one who went beyond the nature (φύσεως) of a woman.’\textsuperscript{161} Perpetua’s transformation consequently appears to lift her experiences altogether beyond those of the feminine, as she sheds her female body in favour of a stronger, salvific form.

Whilst Aspegren and Castelli have focussed on the centrality of virtue and masculine restraint to this remarkable metamorphosis, Bal and Burrus have instead emphasised the potential erotic overtones of Perpetua’s gender transformation, as having been stripped naked, this woman (who both is and is not) is rubbed down with oil, an action which Bal suggests is indicative of Perpetua’s yearning to engage in an erotic encounter restricted to men, thus suggesting that Perpetua’s transformation is motivated in part by sexual desire.\textsuperscript{162} For Burrus, the moment of tension arises from Perpetua’s shedding of her clothes, as the reader expects to observe a hidden female body being revealed from head to toe within the arena, and yet is instead confronted with that of a male, one which is then oiled by young men.\textsuperscript{163} Given the positioning of this vision within the narrative, following directly on from the sealing of Dinocrates’ wound/Perpetua’s body as she attempts to prevent external forces from impacting upon her, the notion that she herself is enacting an erotic experience in an arena riddled with the features of the empire which she rejects does not align fully with the arc of Perpetua’s journey. In addition to this, the practice of being oiled down was a traditional aspect of a gladiator’s experience in the arena, and indeed served as a key

\textsuperscript{160} Castelli, 1991, 35
\textsuperscript{161} Gregory of Nyssa, \textit{Vita Macrinae}
\textsuperscript{162} Bal, 2012, 144
\textsuperscript{163} Burrus, 2008, 30
contributor to the definition of masculinity within such a social context. Consequently, the inclusion of such a scene could serve to reflect Perpetua’s complete immersion in the culture of the Roman arena, within her newly male body. A further interpretation of the oil-rubbing scene is offered by Heffernan, who emphasises that anointing a catechumen was a significant aspect of the baptism ritual, which consequently both implies Perpetua’s own baptism and solidifies her position as a Christian athlete, itself a notion deeply embedded within martyrdom narratives. Thus, Perpetua’s nakedness and her oiled body suggest that in this visual metamorphosis, she toys with a multitude of cultural concepts held within both her own community and that from which she would seek to escape, in order to allow her to present herself as a true martyr, an athlete of God whose baptism at the moment of her battle imbues her with spiritual authority and sanctity within a location saturated within sin and the presence of Satan himself, whilst simultaneously locating herself so firmly within the ideologies of empire and masculinity that she gains the power to subvert and destroy these from within.

In light of this, Perpetua’s transformation into a man does not serve to denigrate her identity as a woman, and indeed is not a bodily change predicated on a necessity for masculine strength within a location unsuited to a female body. Nor does it imply that Perpetua has adopted such a form due to the social hierarchies which stated the superiority of a body not her own. The trope of masculinity, Cox Miller proposes, serves as a mechanism through which Perpetua – a woman, and thus the ‘other’ of a man – is able to demonstrate fully ‘an expression of otherness,’ inverting the ideologies of her persecutors in a radical discourse which enables her reconstruct her own identity as a woman. Indeed, Cox Miller locates hints of eroticism within the text not in relation to the naked Perpetua, but rather through the appearance within the arena of the gladiator trainer who carries with him a bough of apples

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164 Williams, 2012, 64. Williams further argues that Perpetua’s experience of these masculine events could imply that whilst she undergoes events ‘culturally coded as masculine,’ this cannot be taken to directly imply that she has turned into a man, rather that she is living through events which are taken as unavailable to women, and she thus interprets this as becoming male.

165 Heffernan, 2012, 263

166 Cox Miller, 1992, 61
and announces the contest, an appearance which, she argues, consolidates the claim that Perpetua’s transformation serves to subvert gendered tropes, rather than support gender hierarchies. The strong association of apples with Aphrodite, and thus with erotic love, functions as a visual depiction of Perpetua’s resistance to gendered identity, as the apples serve to eroticise the image of the trainer in a typically feminine manner, thus placing him in a role traditionally occupied by women. This moment occurs at a key location within Perpetua’s narrative: having become male, Cox Miller concludes, ‘that trope is itself troped by the appearance of an image of sexual identity that is female and not inscribed within the code of patriarchal definition.’\textsuperscript{167} A woman is transformed into an expression of violent masculinity, whilst a man is himself feminised by being positioned in the role of potential erotic object. When Perpetua defeats the Egyptian and is handed the bough of apples,\textsuperscript{168} their symbolism within the narrative is no longer that of erotic emblem, but rather allows for a moment of unity between two individuals whose presence obliterates a cohesive and rigid understanding of sex and gender, here returned to their original bodies, with the masculine acknowledging the authority of the feminine. \textit{Filia, pax tecum},\textsuperscript{169} states Perpetua’s trainer as she walks toward the Gate of Life, this final farewell a reminder both of Perpetua’s femininity after an intensely masculine narrative, and of her position within her new community, as a daughter no longer of any parent on earth, but of that in Heaven. The climactic altercation within Perpetua’s spiritual arena reflects not her abandonment of her female identity, or her ascendance to a higher plane accessible only to the male, but rather her undoing of the chains which controlled understandings of sex and gender, and the requisite behaviours attached to these concepts, within Roman Carthage. Come the time of martyrdom, Perpetua had thus utterly divorced herself from the empire which had denied her

\textsuperscript{167} Cox Miller, 1992, 62
\textsuperscript{168} \textit{Passio Perpetuae} 10.11. ‘And I was raised up into the air, and I began to strike him stepping on his face, as though I were unable to step on the ground…and he fell on his face and I stepped on his head.’ There are clear parallels between the face of the Egyptian and the head of the snake within Perpetua’s first vision, and thus the continued presence of the devil via Genesis. It is only here that Perpetua truly understands the purpose of her death in the arena, with the Gate of Life illustrating her ascendance to an eternity with Christ.
\textsuperscript{169} \textit{Passio Perpetuae} 10.13
the life she wished for, formulating for herself a new identity and redefining what exactly it meant to be a woman, a mother and a daughter within the Christian world.

This is Perpetua’s final vision and, indeed, her final diary entry. ‘I knew that I was going to fight with the devil and not with the beasts,’\textsuperscript{170} she recorded upon waking, and with the truth of her destiny being revealed to her, there remained no need for Perpetua to continue to narrate her own story. The final sections of the compiled \textit{Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis} recount the individual revelations and sufferings of Saturus and Felicitas, two of Perpetua’s fellow martyrs, before concluding with the new community’s martyrdom, the death which would bring new life which they ecstatically awaited. As Perpetua moves toward the arena, the narrator emphasises her calm poise and her leadership, with a subtle sense of gravitas underlying the text. She is as a ‘wife of Christ (\textit{matrona Christi})’\textsuperscript{171} her authority illustrated through her ability to resist the attempts of the tribune to dress the martyrs in pagan religious costume. ‘Injustice recognised justice,’\textsuperscript{172} and the martyrs moved into the arena with their identity intact, resisting attempts to smother this through costumes which reflected the values of the society which they denied. Indeed, attempts by Roman authorities to return the Carthaginian martyrs to their position of subjugation to Empire are reiterated throughout the execution, with the women thrown naked into the arena alongside a wild cow.\textsuperscript{173} The choice of animal was somewhat unusual, yet served to introduce further levels of humiliation into the martyrdom through the connotations of adultery presented by such a beast. A bull was typically employed within the punishment of an adulteress; the use of a wild cow enabled the persecutors to both hint at allegations of sexual immorality through the cow’s well-known parallel figure, and, argues Shaw to deride the identity of those in the arena by

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{170} \textit{Passio Perpetuae} 10.14
  \item \textsuperscript{171} \textit{Passio Perpetuae} 18.2
  \item \textsuperscript{172} \textit{Passio Perpetuae} 18.6
  \item \textsuperscript{173} \textit{Passio Perpetuae} 20.1-2. ‘For the young women, however, the devil prepared a wild cow – not a traditional practice – matching their sex with that of the beast. And so stripped naked (\textit{dispoliiat\ae}) and covered only with nets, they were brought out again. The crowd shuddered, seeing that one was a delicate young girl (\textit{puellam delicatam}), and that the other had recently given birth, as her breasts were still dripping with milk.’
\end{itemize}
utilising a female of its species to enable their deaths.\textsuperscript{174} Once more, the attempted erasure of Christian identity through an attack on its values failed, as the naked figures of the women did not titillate the crowd, but rather offended it. The marks of childbirth still visible on both bodies did not align with the ideology of the arena, and thus the women were clothed once more, to be tossed about by the cow before the final, climactic interaction of martyr and executioner.

There is much to be said on the presentation of Perpetua within the final stages of the text – she is a woman once more, a leader to her fellow Christians and a wife of Christ. Her death is deeply evocative of the tragic women of Greco-Roman literature, such as Polyxena and Iphigenia, her throat slit in a moment which directly invokes notions of sacrifice. For Castelli, the concluding images of Perpetua are those of a woman who is placed ‘back into the conventions of gender,’ a stark contrast to the revolutionary woman observed within the diary.\textsuperscript{175} Whilst Jantzen can question the conclusions drawn from Perpetua’s death narrative, asking who was truly penetrated within the arena and where the markers of passive and active lie, just as Burrus locates a challenge to masculinity in the very moment of Perpetua’s execution and the weakness of the gladiator,\textsuperscript{176} the fact remains that these concluding paragraphs do not reflect Perpetua’s own identity and her personal revelations in the face of persecution. From these final words, wider Christian notions of the role which women occupied within the arena can be demonstrated, in particular the return of Perpetua to an explicitly maternal figure who guides her fellow martyrs through their suffering. After being attacked by the cow, Perpetua’s dress exposes some of her thigh, and she stops in the arena to adjust both her clothing and hair. This action, Burrus notes, serves to emphasise the young woman’s modesty,\textsuperscript{177} and thus can function within the text to remind those who would read it after the fact of the importance of demure behaviour, even in such extreme circumstances, a message which finds no reflection within Perpetua’s own writings. Indeed,

\textsuperscript{174} Shaw, 1993, 7
\textsuperscript{175} Castelli, 1991, 35
\textsuperscript{176} Jantzen, 2004, 338; Burrus, 2008, 32
\textsuperscript{177} Burrus, 2008, 10
the anonymous narrator comments of Perpetua’s death that ‘perhaps such a woman...could not have been killed unless she herself had willed it,’ a subtle reinforcement of the notion that martyrdom, positioned as it was within the arena, represented fundamentally masculine ideals which made the notion of a female martyr border on the inconceivable. As Augustine would later note, when reflecting on the absence of the male martyrs’ names from the title of the Passion, ‘the reason this has happened is not that the women were ranked higher than the men in the quality of their conduct, but that it was a greater miracle for women in their weakness (infirmitas) to overcome the ancient enemy.’

For Perpetua, however, her physical body and her sex are of little consequence to her, as her imprisonment and ultimate realisation of her fate hinge both on her identity as a Christian, and in her ability to negate those aspects of her person which oppressed her within the Empire, thus remaking herself as a new Perpetua. The diary and the passion of Perpetua collectively illustrate the manner in which martyrdom enabled the flourishing and self-actualization of the individual, whilst simultaneously providing a sacrifice on behalf of the community through the re-enactment of the death of Christ, and an example for later Christians to follow in the gradual construction of a society post-persecution. ‘In the confession of your voice and the suffering of your body,’ stated Cyprian, ‘you provoke the minds of your brethren to divine martyrdom, by exhibiting yourselves as leaders of virtue,’ an ideology which would be proven to endure. Whilst this enables the overall text to illustrate a myriad of the complexities rooted in the early Christian world, it removes, to a certain extent, the significance of the Saint who lies at the centre of the tale, and complicates further the issues of sex and gender therein. Separating the diary from the Passion, and thus concluding Perpetua’s exploration of identity not with her literal martyrdom within the arena, but with her spiritual victory in the dream-theatre, enables the radical nature of her rejection

178 Passio Perpetuae 21.10. ‘Fortasse tanta femina aliter non potuisset occidi...nisi ipsa voluisset.’
179 Augustine, Serm. 282. In Jacobus de Voragine’s Legenda Aurea, the thirteenth century text recording the lives of numerous Medieval saints, Perpetua and Felicitas’ names are placed after that of their fellow martyr Saturus in the title of the Act, and Perpetua is provided with a husband who additionally begs her to recant her statements of faith.
180 Cyprian, Ep. 76.1
of an identity assigned to her to be prioritised, unravelling the two Perpetuas and prioritising the transgressive Christian woman who recorded her own Revelation and transcended the limits of her body itself.

Martyrdom narratives illustrated the transformation of the body, with the wounds inflicted upon vulnerable flesh providing a witness to God and a gateway through which a martyr could pass in order to stand alongside the Lamb on Mount Zion. In the centuries to come, the profound significance of this cosmic metamorphosis for both the wider community and the individual resonated throughout texts which recounted the sacrifices enacted daily by those who performed ascetic behaviours in both the city and the desert. The transgressions of gender and sex which occur therein testify to the evolution of Christian concepts of identity, and the significance of the female body toward the founding and construction of a community. ‘A myth,’ writes Maccoby, ‘forms a culture, and once the myth has set and become established in the minds of people, the outlines of the culture are determined.’ Martyrdom reflected not just the physical limits of the body, but those of the community within which the martyr resided, and the notion of an ‘identity,’ whether of an individual or a people, occupied the writings of a multitude of church authors who held the body, community and identity to be fundamentally and inextricably intertwined with one another. The exploration of the symbolism inherent to the female body which weaves its way through a myriad of Christian writings from the fourth century onward illustrates the tensions experienced by a society unsure of its own identity, one which was rooted in the violent dismemberment of individual bodies and communities. As the literature of martyrdom developed during the first three centuries, so too did texts pertaining to

181 Furthermore, analysing the two texts through separate lenses can allow for a greater focus to be accorded to the second woman for whom the martyrdom is named, Felicitas.
182 The ‘living martyrs’ of Late Antiquity will be considered within the following chapter with regard to consecrated virgins, and additionally within chapter five through the ascetic penitence of repentant harlots. The topic of post-martyrdom martyr acts, and the ideologies enshrined therein, will be discussed within chapter 3 with a particular focus on the eroticism observed within such texts.
183 Maccoby, 1982, 182
consecrated virginity, as young women turned away from the traditional expectations of their families in order to pursue a life devoted to Christ alone. Whilst the steady legitimisation of Christianity from the beginning of the fourth century onward saw the end of martyrdom, the significance of the sacrificial bodies of these first fruits endured. Consequently, texts which addressed virgin women and the ideology of virginity adopted and adapted these ideals, with the bishops, monks and authors who will now be discussed rewriting the traditions of martyrdom in order to define the fractured boundaries of their churches and communities.
2. Behold, the Land of my Body: Virginal Motherhood and the Boundaries of the Church

‘With rage set aside, your brother returns, relinquishes a part of power, reassembles the limbs of the mutilated household, and restores you to yourself.’

Seneca, *Thyestes*

‘You are a woman, a vast land filled with holy cities. You are a woman becoming. You are a song to your mother, a city filled with landmarks of joy.’

Ijeoma Umebinyuo, *Love Letter to Adeyemi*

Perpetua’s motherhood had provided the martyr with an additional stepping stone to traverse, her rejection of her young child forming a key aspect of her transformation into a sacrifice, and elevation into her new Christian family. However, for many young women within the earliest Christian movement, the prospect of earthly motherhood was rejected from its very outset, the notion of engaging in sexual intercourse providing a bleak reminder of sin, with the bloody birth of a child and the anguish of the associated pains recalling the terrible mistake of Eve.\(^{184}\) Tertullian, an early proponent of a life of perpetual virginity, was quick to remind women of the tragic outcome of Eve’s pregnancy and the sorrow which she had endured, and his contemporary Cyprian similarly recalled the words of Genesis when emphasising that consecrated virgins were liberated from such suffering.\(^{185}\) For Gregory of Nyssa, the very act of childbirth was a reminder of the mortality conferred upon mankind and the precarious position occupied by Christian believers within the physical world. ‘The physical bringing of children into the world,’ wrote Gregory in his analysis of the state of virginity, ‘is as much a starting-point of death as of life; because from the moment of birth the process of dying commences.’\(^{186}\) The adoption of a life of perpetual virginity thus

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\(^{184}\) Genesis 3:16.
\(^{185}\) Tertullian, *Carn. Chr.* 17; Cyprian, *Hab. Virg.* 22
\(^{186}\) Gregory of Nyssa, *De virginitate* 13
allowed an adherent to achieve a level of purity both physical and spiritual, being removed from earthly cares and engaging only in the interests of Christ, within the heavenly kingdom. As the philosophy of martyrdom permeated the Christian imagination, so too the notion of virginity as key aspect of Christian identity took root, to the extent that by the end of the third century, Methodius could claim that ‘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.’ Those who practiced asceticism were, argues Cooper, in the minority of the population, however, so great was the symbolism accorded to their status that consecrated virgins ‘exerted an influence disproportionate to numbers.’

The development of ascetic practices amongst women within the Christian movement became a veritable gold mine for the writers of the early church, who sought to simultaneously laud the values of perpetual virginity whilst ensuring that its adherents remained faithful to their vows. Such practices had become established as early as the second century, with church authorities thus finding themselves compelled to interpret the motives of women to choose an ascetic lifestyle, and to begin the construction of a wider ideology of virginity which reflected the concerns of fledgling Christian communities. The ascetic movement was itself first popularised within the eastern realms of the empire, with Tertullian’s early-third century De virginibus velandis, addressed to consecrated virgins in Syria, suggesting that some Christian women had eagerly adopted such a lifestyle, but were not adhering to the expected behavioural standards. Despite the lack of clear doctrine

187 Methodius, Symp. 1.1. Ὅτι μεγάλη τίς ἀστιν ὄμαρφως καὶ θαμαστὴ καὶ ἐνδοξος ἡ παρθενία καὶ εἰ χρή φανερῶς εὑπεν ἐπομένην τάς φίλες Γραφαῖς, τὸ σύδηρ τῆς ἀφθάρσιας, καὶ τὸ ἄνθος καὶ ἡ ὄμαρφη αὐτής.
188 Cooper, 1996, 52
189 The notion that perpetual virginity bestowed honour upon those who maintained it into their adult life was not unique to the Christian movement, with priestesses of certain Greco-Roman cults (such as the Pythian oracle and the Vestal Virgins) maintaining their virginity throughout their childbearing years in order to expand their capacity to commune with the divine. Unlike consecrated virgins within the Christian movements, virgin priestesses of these cults were not expected to maintain their virginity throughout their entire lifetime, but rather solely during their time serving a specific deity. As Seim notes, virginity in these cases was viewed as ‘furthering the charismatic dimension,’ and thus was necessary in order to ensure purity within the divine arena (1994, 189).
190 Salisbury, 1991, 4; Countryman, 1989, 137
on the nature of asceticism, Tertullian still felt capable of criticising these women for failing to correctly cover their heads in public, an act which he felt was comparable to experiencing shameful violence.\textsuperscript{191} Within this text, Tertullian reminds his addressees that they are ‘wedded to Christ,’ and that the veil they wear denotes their status as a married woman, being thus an essential part of their dress. The portrayal of the virgin as being the bride of Christ was a popular theme, often applied in conjunction with references to the Song of Songs, whose bridal imagery and erotic undertones reflected the Church Fathers’ own attitudes toward virginity.\textsuperscript{192} Both Tertullian and Cyprian excoriated the behaviour of female virgins in tractates which examined modes of dress and behaviour, their words reflected centuries later in the epistles of Fathers such as Jerome and Augustine, who sent personal missives to women whose behaviour was perceived as wayward, or who needed guidance.\textsuperscript{193} Such actions could serve to provide a criticism of the authority under whose aegis the women operated, with the possibility for a bishop’s morality to be called into question, whilst those men who held influence over respected virgins could see an increase in their own social reputation.\textsuperscript{194} Indeed, Ambrose’s own sister was a consecrated virgin, and he could claim a connection to the virgin martyr Soteris, which supported his efforts to situate himself as a legitimate authority on the matter, and to augment his own superiority within the church through his close association with a woman of exceptional piety.\textsuperscript{195}

Whilst virginity had been adopted by male and female Christians alike, texts regarding the nature of consecrated virginity focussed on the female virgin, with many tractates being addressed directly to such women, whilst others utilised the female virgin’s body as a mechanism for discussion on the nature of the church.\textsuperscript{196} In his second address to the Corinthian church, Paul had expressed his fear that the congregation had once more strayed

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{191} Tertullian, Virg. 3  
\textsuperscript{192} Burrus, 1994, 39  
\textsuperscript{193} See Tertullian, Cult. fem. and Virg.; Cyprian, Hab. virg.; Jerome, Ep. 22 & 27; Augustine, Ep. 211.  
\textsuperscript{194} Brown, 1988, 266  
\textsuperscript{195} McLynn, 1994, 60  
\textsuperscript{196} Rousselle, 1988, 132. Cloke (1995, 60) additionally notes that Gregory of Nyssa is the only Late Antique author to include male virgins within his discussion of the state of virginity, the \textit{De virginitate}. 
\end{flushright}
from its true path through dangerous external influences, just ‘as the serpent deceived Eve by its cunning.’  

197 For Paul, this church was a virgin whose purity he urgently needed to protect in order to ensure the legitimacy of divine union, and of spiritual boundaries whose transgression could allow illegitimate doctrines to damage of the sanctity of the community, a notion reflected throughout the commentaries of the early Church which examined virgins and virginity. The adoption of an ascetic lifestyle had provided women with the opportunity to embark on a life free from male influence through the rejection of the familial authority provided by fathers and husbands, as had been evidenced through the apocryphal tale of Thecla. In his De baptismo, Tertullian had criticised ‘the writings’ which ‘claim Thecla’s example as a licence for women’s teaching and baptising,’ reminding his audience that women were not permitted to engage in such activities, and thus suggesting that the stories which circulated regarding Thecla had gained traction within certain communities.  

198 Asceticism, as with martyrdom, held the potential to enable women to gain a level of prestige based on their physical achievements, as opposed to through their family name, or ability to carry out their expected social role.  

199 Castelli has consequently concluded that a woman’s decision to remove herself from the established expectations of her sex was not always welcomed by church authorities, who viewed this practice as ‘dangerous to the natural and hierarchical order of social relations.’  

200 However, as this chapter will argue, the ascetic practice of virginity among Christian women formed a vital cornerstone on which the church could be constructed, coexisting alongside the ideologies of martyrdom which accorded such weight to spiritual concepts of fertility and warfare.

For martyrs, their struggle had been against Satan, himself personified through the oppressive regimes which had torn living bodies limb from limb in an attempt to reassert cultural authority. The female virgins who came to occupy nunneries, communes, cities and deserts maintained the integrity of their bodies, yet continued to resist the evils of Satan.

197 2 Corinthians 11:3  
198 Tertullian, Bapt. 17  
199 Cooper, 1996, 86  
200 Castelli, 1991, 46
through their daily repudiation of sexual encounters and desires, the temptations of pleasure being numbed through prayer and penitence. Furthermore, the language of fertility which infiltrated the ideologies of martyrdom held a prominent place within the creation of a wider cultural philosophy of virginity, which suggested that sexual renunciation provided a vital energy for the spiritual life of the church, through the positioning of virgin women as symbolic mothers of the faith. These notions will be addressed within the first half of this chapter, which seeks to establish the manner in which the concept of female virginity became a near-formalised ideology central to the construction of early Christian communities, evolving alongside the principles of martyrdom. In the tumultuous hotbed of tension that was the fourth century, female virgins became key mechanisms through which the men of the church could display their authority. The Song of Songs provided a rich source of inspiration for those authors who attempted to navigate the bodies of virgins and establish their position in relation to the wider church, with the imagery therein of the bride being utilised to apply to both the individual virgin, and the church which she represented. The works of Tertullian, Methodius, Athanasius and Ambrose lie at the centre of this chapter, their relationships with virgins and the state of virginity providing an insight into the social roles which each author occupied, and illustrating the varied ideologies which could lie behind the promotion of a virgin lifestyle. As Shuve notes, Ambrose’s usage of the Song within his De virginitibus to refer to individual virgins ‘broke new ground’ within Christian tradition, allowing the bishop to defend his stance on the privileging of living virgins.

Shuve’s 2016 examination of the Song of Songs and its reception within the church authors of the Christian West is of particular significance to this chapter, as Shuve’s analysis of Ambrose is exceptional in its focus on the application of the Song of Songs and its relation to the bishop’s own, fractured, community. Within this chapter, this discussion has been

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201 See Tertullian, Cult. fem. 1.1; Or. 22; Methodius, Symp. 7.3
202 Shuve, 2016, 109. Shuve further highlights that Ambrose’s position within the wider textual tradition surrounding the Song of Songs has been somewhat neglected by scholarship, with the works of Origen being prioritised. This chapter shall thus aim to emphasise the significant contribution made by Ambrose to this tradition, and the manner in which this affected the ideology of virginity within his community (2016, 110).
expanded to additionally include Athanasius’ usage of the Song, considering the manner in which his political and religious rivalries influenced his relationship with the virgins in his community. Brakke’s political analysis of Athanasius, and the socio-cultural works of Brown, Elm and Salisbury are central to the arguments expounded upon within this chapter, in order to demonstrate the manner in which religion, politics and cultural ideologies were woven together to create a complex and intricate philosophy of virginity for the fourth century. The second half of this chapter will, therefore, address the relationships between consecrated virgins and the men who sought to control their behaviour, and establish these women as idealised examples of faith whilst bolstering their own authority in the face of increasing controversy and debates surrounding the nature of ‘heretical’ cults. The fifth century *Vita Heliae* will be analysed as a point of conclusion, with the anonymously-authored text reflecting the influences of the philosophies of martyrdom acts and tractates on virginity, finding clear inspiration in the works of the fourth century Church Fathers and taking these ideologies to their most profound extent.\(^\text{203}\)

### 2.1 Virginity, Martyrdom and Sacrifice

If Antony had been the initiator of the monastic movement, a man whose actions caused countless men who aspired to martyrdom to enter the wilderness of the desert to fight with the devil, it was women who were responsible for the rapid growth of the adoption of a virgin life. Mary, stated Jerome, had through the virgin birth brought into the world a life which was the antithesis of the death which Eve’s labours had wrought upon the world. Thus, he argued to Eustochium, ‘the gift of virginity has been bestowed most richly upon women, seeing that it has had its beginning from a woman.’\(^\text{204}\) The anonymous 144,000 first fruits of John’s Revelation are noted to have been those ‘who have not defiled themselves

\(^\text{203}\) Salisbury, 1991, 79; Burrus and Conti, 2013, 30

\(^\text{204}\) Jerome, Ep. 22.21
with women, for they are virgins,"\textsuperscript{205} their sexual purity emphasised alongside the sacrifice which they have simultaneously made, and become. Whilst the potential influence of Essene religious beliefs regarding sexual activity and holy war upon the ideology of martyrdom has been discussed within the previous chapter,\textsuperscript{206} the possibility for virginity to form an aspect of holy war in and of itself has not been expanded upon. The significance of virginity to martyr acts from the late second century onward, and the growth in texts which dealt solely with the issue of female virginity, suggest that the significance of sexual purity to early Christian communities both endured and grew in its potency. Indeed, the emphatic promotion of the virginity of female martyrs by fourth century authors such as Ambrose and Prudentius contained highly symbolic resonances of traditions of holy war, the purity of these female martyrs allowing them to attain additional honours within their battles for faith. Whilst virginity was not a precursor for martyrdom, those who died with their bodies sexually intact gained, argued Ambrose, ‘each crown, that of martyrdom and that of virginity.’\textsuperscript{207} Pagan authors had been intrigued and mystified by the perceived absence of sexuality within the Essene military camps, with Pliny claiming that ‘they have no women among them; they have rejected sexual love.’\textsuperscript{208} Similarly, the resistance of Christian women to sexual activity, and their rejection of expectations to marry and produce children caught the attention of Roman authorities, and by the third century a common punishment for women who refused to renounce their Christian beliefs was to be thrown into a brothel, with the implication of punishment through sexual assault.\textsuperscript{209} Within his Apologeticus, Tertullian had directly connected such a punishment with the veneration of virginity among

\textsuperscript{205} Revelation 14:4
\textsuperscript{206} See Yarbro Collins 1984; Brown 1988. In addition to the necessity of celibacy for holy war, the belief that sexual activity was in some way defiling can be seen within numerous later Christian authors, who equate sexual relations and their aftermath with blood, gore and filth (e.g. Tertullian, \textit{Carn. Chr.} 4; Augustine, \textit{Confessiones} 2.1.1-2).
\textsuperscript{207} Ambrose, \textit{Virg.} 2.4.24
\textsuperscript{208} Pliny the Elder, \textit{Naturalis historia} 5.73. ‘…sine ella femina, omni venere abdicata.’ The translation has here been adapted, as the original suggestion of ‘to sexual desire they are strangers’ implies that such relations have never been experienced by the Essene tribes, whereas \textit{abdicata} contains stronger connotations of an outright rejection, which aligns itself with Essene notions of sexual relations and holy war, but does not imply that the Essenes have never engaged in such relations.
\textsuperscript{209} Brown, 1988, 192
Christian believers, and his comment on the sexual punishment of Christian women, alongside extensive praise for martyrdom, hints toward one of the most influential interpretations of virginity which developed from the third century onward. \(^{210}\) Just as Antony’s excursions to the desert had come to enable the monastic life to be interpreted as a form of living martyrdom, so too female virginity was reconfigured as a form of Christian martyrdom, the language of holy war being intertwined with the symbolic fertility identified within the deaths of martyrs to establish virgin women as living sacrifices, martyrs who walked daily among the community. \(^{211}\) Whilst some women, such as the defiant Amma Sarah of the *Apopthegmata Patrum*, took their battles to the desert in order to push their physical bodies to the greatest of limits, many ascetic virgins remained within their cities, residing within their family homes or in communal groups with other women who had chosen this vocation. \(^{212}\) In choosing to live out their lives alongside the wider community, the spiritual impact of the virgins could be felt daily, and indeed the very sight of them within churches could inspire faith within other believers, who were now able to observe living reminders of Christ’s sacrifice. Furthermore, those who adopted a virgin lifestyle were able to provide a direct connection to the almighty, and a vision of the world to come within the current, fallen world. As Athanasius would argue, whilst polemizing against the Arians, virgins were ‘a picture of the holiness of Angels.’ \(^{213}\)

Paul had chosen a virgin lifestyle for himself, encouraging others to join in this way of life where possible, yet had offered marriage as an alternative for those who could not resist the

\(^{210}\) Tertullian, *Apol.* 50. The implications of punishment within a brothel will be discussed within the following chapter, in relation to the issues arising from the absence of sexual assault in martyr acts.

\(^{211}\) Brakke, 2006, 24-25. The presentation of the figure of Antony as a living martyr, as illuminated within Athanasius’ *Vita Antonii*, undeniably complements the simultaneous development of the notion that female virgins’ vows constituted a form of martyrdom through their daily sacrifices. The interactions between Antony and the tempting women he encounters in the desert, and the contribution of this aspect of the *Vita Antonii* to the discourse of desert asceticism will be explored within chapter five.

\(^{212}\) Elm, 1994, 14. As Elm argues, the separation of a person from the world via an engagement with ascetic practices did not necessarily mean removing oneself entirely from a community established within an urban environment. Asceticism, she argues, ‘can thus be practiced with equal success in the middle of the city or in the countryside, while living alone, or in groups.’

\(^{213}\) Athanasius, *Apol. Const.* 33. In addition to this, Athanasius and his contemporaries maintained that consecrated virgins were brides of Christ, wedded to the Divine Bridegroom.
temptations of intercourse, providing a relationship in which sexual activity could be conducted in a legitimate fashion. The Apostle’s first missive to the Corinthian church established an understanding of the significance of perpetual virginity for both men and women, emphasising that such a practice enabled an adherent to devote themselves wholly to the Lord, minimising their connection to the physical, fallen world around them.\textsuperscript{214} In the years after Paul’s work had been brought to a violent end, the notion that the rejection of sexual relationships allowed virgins to enjoy a particularly close relationship with the divine, whilst existing in a realm which was spiritually ‘other’ to that which non-virgins occupied, continued to hold sway. Rejecting sexual relationships in the form of marriage and childbirth marked a clear departure from the familial traditions of the Empire, in which young women were expected to marry in order to further family lines and strengthen alliances between noble families. This was in itself a form of resistance to the authority of the Empire and its values, with the tale of Thecla illustrating the most extreme consequences of such an action for the young women who defied the wishes of their non-Christian parents. For Thecla, virginity is almost synonymous with her desire to convert to Christianity, being both a representation of her rejection of traditional Roman conventions, and a mechanism through which she can gain freedom of religion, body and soul.\textsuperscript{215} As Brock notes, martyrs of the early Church ‘represented an ideal,’ one of faith, endurance and perfection, and played an essential role within Christian communities’ beliefs about themselves and their social situation.\textsuperscript{216} Consecrated virgins occupied a similar sphere to those who had died for their faith, their outright rejection of the traditional expectations of the dominant culture serving as a form of social resistance, and their abandonment of sexual relations enabling them to achieve a level of spiritual perfection whilst still on earth.\textsuperscript{217} Like martyrs, they were a brief

\textsuperscript{214} 1 Corinthians 7:34. ‘…and the unmarried woman and the virgins are anxious about the affairs of the Lord, so that they may be holy in body and spirit; but the married woman is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please her husband.’

\textsuperscript{215} Aspegren, 1990, 104

\textsuperscript{216} Brock in Castelli, 1986, 66

\textsuperscript{217} This form of resistance is not solely limited to women who rejected marriage in favour of a life of perpetual virginity. Certain Apocryphal Acts (in particular, the \textit{Acta Andreae}) feature married women who undergo a conversion after meeting with an apostle, and who subsequently refrain from engaging
glimpse of the glory which was yet to come, a notion which Cyprian expounded upon in his *De habitu virginum*. Quoting Luke 20:35-36, the bishop argued that virgins possessed ‘already in this world the glory of the resurrection. You pass through the world without the contagion of the world; in that you continue chaste and virgins, you are equal to the angels of God.’

Virgins were not held down by the sticky, contentious quagmire of human sexuality, devoting themselves to Christ and to their family within him, sacrificing the physical aspects of their body in order to allow a little of Christ’s grace to be made visible within their community. This notion that virgins could serve as a sacrifice, argues Salisbury, relied on the belief that ‘a virgin killed the fleshly part of her,’ forfeiting her sexuality and her ability to bear living children within the world. Athanasius applied this trope quite literally, stating that ‘the virgin makes manifest the vow of her intention to be a whole burnt-offering,’ and later arguing that virgins ‘presented a willing sacrifice.’

In this way the language of martyrdom permeated texts concerning virginity, with the focus upon the sacrifices made by virgins, and their heightened spiritual status, serving to establish these women as living martyrs, their existence providing protection for their church and community through their daily demonstrations of faith and grace. Indeed, Gregory of Nyssa’s panegyric for his beloved sister, Macrina, grants her body a status similar to that of a martyr’s relic upon her death. In addition to emphasising the extensive vigils and funerary processions, and the multitudes who come to mourn the passing of the great virgin, Gregory

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in sexual relations with their husbands in order to adopt a life of chastity. The husband of Maximilla within the *Acta Andreae* is a Proconsul, a prominent member of his community who ultimately imprisons the Apostle, Andrew. Maximilla’s decision to follow Andrew’s teachings and to reject her husband’s right to sexual relations is thus painted as a form of resistance to Empire, a social protest enacted by a woman in order to remove herself from earthly constraints, and engage wholly in her relationship with God. These texts will not be discussed within this chapter due to the necessity of a focus on virginity as opposed to chastity, and additionally due to the complexity surrounding debates regarding the authorship of the Apocryphal Acts. Burrus (1987) and Salisbury (1991) have argued that certain of the Acts may have female authorship, due to the prominence of female heroines with whom an audience could associate themselves, and the lack of positive male characters which men could identify with. Apostles, argues Burrus, do not fulfil this role, as they possess a power which is almost magical in nature, appearing somewhat inhuman, and removed from the earthly sphere (1987, 75-76).

218 Cyprian, *Hab. virg.* 22. ‘*Vos resurrectionis gloriam in isto saeculo iam tenetis, per saeculum sine saeculi contagione transitis. Cum castae perseveratis et virgines, Angelis Dei estis aequales.*’

219 Salisbury, 1991, 29

220 Athanasius, *Ep. virg.* (Copt.) 19; *Ep. virg.* (Syr.) 23
notes in detail the marks on Macrina’s body caused by her previous illnesses. One stands out to him in particular, and upon further inquiry, he is informed by one of Macrina’s fellow nuns that the mark ‘has been left on the body as a reminder of the great help of God.’ A tumour had developed upon Macrina’s chest and, rather than seek the help of doctor, the holy woman had prayed for assistance, making a poultice out of mud created by her own tears. When her mother had made the sign of the cross on Macrina’s body, the tumour was found to be healed. The scar that remained served to reflect both Macrina’s own sanctity, and the manner in which God had worked through her to heal the wound, itself a reminder of ‘the divine consideration,’ providing a starkly physical message of the grace of God and the power of Macrina’s faith. Consequently, the body of Macrina takes on the authority of that of a martyr, and indeed Brown Hughes argues that Macrina’s status as a relic has ‘its power granted by her sharing in the sufferings of Christ.’ To partake in Christ’s suffering was a fundamental aspect of martyrdom, and his own virginal status enabled those who followed such a lifestyle to claim assimilation with he whose example they replicated.

For Gregory, Brown Hughes notes, ‘the redemptive work of Christ in the world is continued after his ascension by the spiritual birth of Christ in the virgin soul.’ The consequent implication that the grace of Christ is seen within the world through the individual virgin furthers the notion that a virgin’s decision to adhere to such a lifestyle enables her to provide a form of spiritual protection for her community, and evidences the glory of the resurrection. Macrina’s scar, like the scars of the crucified Christ, served as a reminder of the sufferings which could be endured within the world, but simultaneously of the life which was yet to

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221 Gregory of Nyssa, *Vita Macrinae*
222 Gregory of Nyssa, *Vita Macrinae*. Furthermore, Macrina wore around her neck a ring which was believed to contain a fragment of the true cross. This ring, posits Brown, provided a physical demonstration of Macrina’s relationship with the Divine Bridegroom, acting as a ‘pledge of the enduring presence of Christ.’ The ring was a reminder of the marriage which she had once been intended for but which had never come to pass, with the relic emphasising the identity of Macrina’s true bridegroom (1988, 272-3).
223 Brown Hughes, 2016, 72
224 ‘And whom can we judge to be its author but the immaculate (immaculatum) son of God?’ Ambrose succinctly asked of virginity, before stating that ‘Christ was before the Virgin, Christ was of the Virgin’ (*Virg*, 1.5.21).
225 Brown Hughes, 2016, 70
come, and the presence on earth of those willing to make sacrifices - indeed, to be sacrificed – for their communities.

Whilst Paul may have held that it was better for one to marry than to burn,²²⁶ the influence that holy war had upon the ideology of virginity caused later Christian authors to perceive of this flame as an essential aspect of the struggles of a virgin lifestyle, adopting the militaristic language of holy war enshrined within martyrdom acts to transform the renunciation of sexual activity into a radical struggle against the forces of Satan. Within his Symposium, Methodius states of virgin women that:

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.²²⁷

The endurance which martyrs displayed during their trials was recalled within tractates on virginity, with the strength which women such as Blandina, Perpetua and Felicitas had exhibited in the face of violent torture finding itself reflected within the virgin’s struggle against sexual desires and physical pleasures. Indeed, the physical struggles of martyrs against their oppressors were often employed by authors attempting to encourage young men and women to renounce sexuality and sexual desire, used to provide messages of strength to those rebelling against the traditions which dictated that they should marry and continue a

²²⁶ 1 Corinthians 7:9
²²⁷ Methodius, Symp. 7.3. Ἐμαρτύρουσαν γάρ, οὐ κατὰ τι μόριον χρόνου ἐν βραχεί καρποφόρησαν σωμάτων ἀγχηδόνας, ἀλλὰ δίᾳ παντὸς τίλησαν τοῦ βίου, μὴ ἀποδειλάσθαι τὸν ἁγιὸν τὸν Ὀλυμπιακὸν ἀληθῶς διαθήσατας τῆς άγνείας. Ἑσάνοις τὰ γὰρ ἁγρίας ἡμῶν καὶ φόβος καὶ λύπας ἀντισχοδεῖσα, καὶ τοῦς ἄλλους τῆς πονηρίας τῶν ἀνθρώπων κακίας, ἀποφέροντα τὰ γέρα πρόστας τῶν ἄλλων, εἰς τὸν ἀμένω τῆς ἐπαγγελίας ἔκτασισόμεναι χόρον.
For Ambrose, virginity and martyrdom became almost synonymous with one another, and the bishop claimed within his vast tractate on virgins, the De virginibus, that ‘virginity is not praiseworthy because it is found in martyrs, but because itself makes martyrs.’ Martyrs had engaged in battles against Satan and his emissaries within law-courts and arenas, but the battles of the virgin could take place within her own room, within a convent or a community of other like-minded women, with Ambrose praising a group of virgins at Bononia who had left their homes and entered ‘the houses of Christ, as soldiers of unwearied chastity.’ As the fantastical tales of monks who abided in the desert made clear, Satan could strike at any time, and his armies were countless.

The stories which tell of tempted monks feature beautiful and seductive women, who appear with the purpose of steering the monk away from the righteous path. With regard to virgins, Satan found his representatives within the very families of young women who sought to resist marriage and sexual relations: Perpetua’s aged father had desperately pleaded with his daughter to renounce her new religion and its teachings, yet Thecla’s mother had turned on her child with alarming speed. Upon discovering that Thecla no longer intended to marry her betrothed, Theoclia angrily called upon the governor to ‘burn the lawless one, burn her that is no bride in the midst of the theatre.’ The words of Christ at Matthew 10:35 became a reality for young women who sought to avoid marriage and child bearing, instead desiring to live out their days in a manner which enabled them emulate the historic sacrifices of the martyrs. Thecla’s resistance to Theoclia’s rage (and, undoubtedly, her miraculous survival in the face of two near-martyrdoms) enabled her to become a heroine to the cause of

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228 Clark, G., 1998a, 105
229 Ambrose, Virg. 1.3.10. ‘Non enim ideo laudabilis virginitas, quia et in martyribus reperitur, sed quia ipsa martyres faciat.’
230 Ambrose, Virg. 1.11.60. ‘…indefessae milites castitatis…’
231 Texts such as the Apophthegmata Patrum, and the Vitae of several ascetic women who sought penance in the desert shall be discussed in chapter five.
232 Whilst it may, more simply, be the case that the Fathers who wrote on the subject of virginity found themselves incapable of writing seductive men into their narratives, it is nonetheless of interest that the greatest challenges to a woman’s virginity come from her own family or, somewhat horrifically, from sexual violence. The positioning of a woman such as Thecla’s mother within this narrative serves as a reminder of Matthew 10:36, yet additionally reflects the fact that women were still thought of in relation to their birth families, rather than their family in Christ.
233 Thec. 20
virginity, demonstrating through her actions the necessity of rejecting the biological family in order to follow the correct path toward spiritual salvation. For a young woman to find herself in a similar situation to Thecla, denying the authority of her family and of tradition, required nerves of steel on behalf of the virgin, and indeed Burrus argues that it is precisely ‘a martyr’s conviction’ which must be employed in order to survive such circumstances. Over a century after the Acta Pauli et Theclae began to circulate, following on from what Elm succinctly describes as the ‘official toleration of Christianity,’ Ambrose displayed a great deal of concern at what he perceived to be the forced marriage of young Christian women. His De virginibus emphasised at length the significance of the relationship between the virgin and the Divine Bridegroom, the accounts of virgin martyrs dying through suicide in order to ensure the preservation of their virginity being heavily imbued with wedding imagery, emphatically promoting this relationship over any that could be formed physically on earth. Ambrose dramatically recounts the tale of a young virgin who, ‘being urged to a marriage by her parents and kinsfolk, took refuge at the holy altar,’ pleading for protection and a blessing from the priest therein. The necessity of seeking religious sanctuary serves to emphasise the precarious situation in which virgins found themselves, as the popularity of the virgin lifestyle, with regard to the benefits it conferred on the wider community, did not necessarily cause a family to joyfully accept a daughter’s decision to consecrate herself in such a manner. Indeed, claims Ambrose in the later De virginitate, it was necessary for pagans to bribe young girls away from marriage, or even to force them to abstain through violence. ‘Among us,’ questions the indignant bishop, ‘are virgins to be forced, by blows, into marriage…are we to do violence to prevent a public profession of virginity?’ For at

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234 Burrus and Conti, 2013, 25
235 Elm, 1994, 28
236 See Virg. 1.2.7-9; 1.4.19; 2.3.19-20; 2.4.22-29; 3.7.33-35, and also Boyarin, 1999, 89. It should be emphasised here that the women in question are upper-class, and indeed are often directly stated to be so. The significance of marriage for the higher echelons of Roman society was such that the decline in this practice became a cause for concern (as had been seen centuries previously through the establishment of Augustus’ marriage laws) due to the necessity of forming alliances between families of renown (Cooper, 2013, 165).
237 Ambrose, Virg. 1.12.65
238 Ambrose, Virginit. III.13
least one virgin, the violence never materialised: Ambrose’s supplicating young woman on
the altar was successful in her pleas, and found her devotion rewarded.

2.2 Fertility and Motherhood

In the early fifth century, the Bishop Augustine sent a letter to Proba, an aristocratic Roman
grandmother, and her daughter-in-law, Juliana. The letter concerned Juliana’s daughter,
Demetrias, who had recently announced to her family her intent to follow an ascetic path,
and consecrate her virginity to Christ. Her mother and grandmother, along with the Bishop
of Hippo, were overjoyed to hear of this revelation, with Augustine noting the ‘glory and
advantage gained by your family’ through Demetrias’ new social status. How much greater,
the bishop enthused, was the glory which Demetrias would now attain in heaven, when
compared to that which she would otherwise have received on earth through a good
marriage and the bearing of children. The young girl, Augustine stated, would ‘travail not
with the earthly in the pangs of labour, but with the heavenly in persevering prayer,’ her
chosen path allowing her to partake in a ‘richer and more fruitful condition of
blessedness.’

The notion that Demetrias’ abstention from childbirth did not eradicate the
fertility of her body, but rather exacerbated it within the spiritual plane, was one which had
appeared within numerous early Christian texts, and which exhibited the influence of the
ideology of martyrdom in a profound manner. The veneration of early Christian martyrs
was closely connected to their association with fertility and prosperity, itself a direct result
of the heavy symbolism accorded to sacrificial blood in antiquity. Within his evocative
account of the martyrdom of the young virgin Eulalia, the fourth-century poet Prudentius,
stated that Emerita was ‘as a city, great and populous, but greater through the blood of
martyrdom and a virgin’s tombstone,’ an illustration of the beneficial power believed to

Augustine, Ep. 150. See Tilley, 2005, 45
Augustine, Ep. 150. ‘Haec est uberior fecundiorque Felicitas.’
have been released through martyrdom, and which was contained within the martyrs’ relics.\textsuperscript{241} More explicitly, the relics of the Syrian martyr Febronia, another sacrificed virgin, held such great potency that people came flocking from far and wide to observe its mystical powers. Upon her death, Febronia’s hagiographer tells us, one of the woman’s teeth was gifted to the bishops of her city, who took the relic to a shrine erected in Febronia’s honour. Having exposed the tooth to those gathered there, ‘all the blind, lame, and possessed were healed…everyone was healed of whatever disease he had.’\textsuperscript{242} Febronia’s ability to continue to protect her community after death caused the martyr to remain a central aspect of the city’s life, the fertility of her body and bones enabling the healing of the sick, and the flourishing of her community. Correspondingly, consecrated virgins whose very lives were one enduring sacrifice continued to maintain the notion of fertility through death, with the demise of their sexuality enabling the birth of a spiritual fertility which blessed their communities. These virgins were not perceived to be barren, but rather, through their denial of sexual relations and their own fertility, to be the strongest and purest representatives of the fruitfulness of Christian life.\textsuperscript{243}

The assimilation of the individual virgin with the church itself helped lend credence to the notion that those who denied sexual relations had ultimately gained access to the greatest form of fertility possible, whilst reinforcing the implication that a virgin’s manner of life granted a spiritual protection to her community, her unpenetrated body echoing the defences of the church. In his \textit{De sancta virginitate} Augustine had compared the Christian church to a female virgin through his reflections on 2 Corinthians 11:2, reminding his audience of the virginity of Christ’s own mother, Mary. Just as Mary had borne Christ, Augustine argued, ‘the Church bears the members of that Body after the spirit. In both virginity hinders not

\textsuperscript{241} Prudentius, \textit{Peristephanon} 3.8-10. ‘\textit{urbe potens, populis locuples, sed mage sanguine martyrii virgineoque potens titulo’}. Salisbury (2004, 138-141) has noted the enduring significance of sacrificial blood to Christian communities and has taken this notion one step further, concluding that Prudentius’ reference to Eulalia’s ‘virginal tomb’ implies that it is not merely the blood which she shed in martyrdom which benefitted the city, but the menstrual blood of her virgin womb, uncorrupted by the stain of sexuality.

\textsuperscript{242} \textit{Vita Febroniae} 42. Febronia’s \textit{Vita} will be discussed further in chapter three.

\textsuperscript{243} Brown, 1988, 363
fruitfulness: in both fruitfulness takes not away virginity.' As Salisbury notes, virgins could simultaneously be observed to be Christ’s bride, the church itself, and the Virgin Mary, with each allegory providing a mechanism through which the literary authors of virginity could explore the nature of a virgin’s relationship with Christ, her community and indeed her own body. The church was a symbolic mother to its community of believers, and consecrated virgins could thus be identified as the eternal, earthly guardians of the faithful, inheriting the sacred legacy of communal protection provided by the martyrs. As Tertullian had stated, the blood of martyrs formed the seed of the church, a fertile liquid which contained within it the life forces of those who had died and held the potential for new life, and new faith. In a similar manner, consecrated virgins retained within their unpenetrated bodies the possibility for a flourishing of faith, and the birth of new life in the form of their uncontaminated spirituality. The body of a virgin was a field ripe for fertilisation, a garden in which flowers of inconceivable beauty could flourish, tended by the care of the sower, Christ. In his polemics against the Donatists, the Numidian Bishop Optatus had argued that virgins ‘are spiritual seeds; of these God plants trees in paradise,’ criticising what he perceived to be Donatus’ restrictions on the size and breadth of the church. The garden, he concludes, must be ‘spread far and wide,’ and to restrict it would be to restrict God.

Within his Symposium, Methodius’ ten virgins engage closely with the notion of their eternal spiritual fertility, with the author utilising imagery that evokes sexual union, gestation and labour in his philosophical reflections on the nature of virginity. Virgins, he states, are able to assist in the salvation of others once they have received ‘the pure and genuine seed of His

Augustine, Virg. 2. ‘In utraque virginitas fecunditatem non impedit: in utraque fecunditas virginitatem non adimit.’

Salisbury, 1991, 31

The parable of the sower at Matthew 13:3-23 is echoed throughout the writings of Fathers such as Methodius and Optatus, who expounded greatly upon the notion of virginity as an inherently fertile state of being. As shall be discussed within the following chapter with regard to erotic language within texts concerning martyrdom and virginity, the Song of Songs was a key inspiration for such authors.

Optatus, Contra Parm. 2.11. ‘…spiritalia sunt semina: harum rerum arbuscas, in paradiso Deus plantat.’
doctrine,\textsuperscript{248} becoming aides to their divine partner, who has fertilised the potential which lay within them. Those who are not yet ‘perfect’ will be guided by those who are, being ‘born to salvation, and shaped, as by mothers…until they are brought forth and regenerated unto the greatness and beauty of virtue.’ Much as an expectant mother nurtures a child within the womb, providing it with the sustenance required for growth until it is ready to come into the world, so too consecrated virgins nurture those around them until they are fully formed, and reborn. These virgins in turn, Methodius suggests, will care for children of their own, and will nurture believers just as they themselves were cherished. Indeed, Methodius concludes that these virgins, ‘having become a church, assist in labouring for the birth and nurture of other children, accomplishing in the receptacle of the soul, as in a womb, the blameless will of the Word.’\textsuperscript{249} The daily lives of these virgins speaks to the enduring presence of Christ within the world, as through his grace the seeds of faith within the virgin may be watered, enabling them to go forth and become nurturers of their community, solidifying and protecting the faith of those within their community. Furthermore, the role of parent which is taken on by virgins echoes once more Christ’s statement that ‘my mother and brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it,’\textsuperscript{250} with the concept of the family continuing to be rewritten in light of new understandings of pregnancy and childbirth.

The heady, surreal manner in which Methodius and his contemporaries describe the relationship between the virgin and Christ, and the unending flourishing of the virgin’s fertility, stands in a marked contrast to their representations of physical pregnancy and childbirth. Ambrose had referred to those ‘happy virgins’ who ‘know nothing of the burden

\textsuperscript{248} Methodius, \textit{Symp.} 3.8. τὴν καθαρὰν τῆς διδασκαλίας ὑποδέχεσθαι καὶ φόνιμον σπορᾶν. See also section 7.1, in which Methodius states that a virgin is ‘a garden sealed, in which all the odours of the fragrance of heaven are grown (παράδειγμαν ὢσπερ ἀργυραγωμένην, ἐν ὕπερ πάντα τῆς εὐωδίας τῶν αὐρανῶν φῶς τα ἄρωματα) that Christ alone may come and gather them.’

\textsuperscript{249} Methodius, \textit{Symp.} 3.8. καὶ πάλιν τὸν τὸν ἀδιάκριτον ἀκολούθησιν ἐκκλησίαν καὶ ὅπως γεγονότα, εἰς ἐτέρων τόκων ὑποτρόφησιν τέκνων καὶ ἀντερφήσιν, μήπες δίκην, ἐν τῷ δοξείῳ τῆς ψυχῆς, τὸ θέλημα τελεσφόρησιν τοῦ ἀλώβητον τοῦ λόγου.

\textsuperscript{250} Luke 8:21. As Seim notes, this challenge to the notion of the family additionally serves to alter the role of Mary, which is ‘converted from that of a mother with conventional rights to a motherhood constituted exclusively by the fruitful reception of the word of God.’ This consequently enables other women to share in Mary’s experience, as through their engagement with, and acceptance of, God’s word, they are able to enact Mary’s pregnancy and sacrifice within their own lives, through faith and spiritual flourishing. (Seim, 2002, 105).
and pain of childbearing, but more are the offspring of a pious soul, which esteems all as its children, which is rich in successors, barren of all bereavements, which knows deaths, but has many heirs.\textsuperscript{251} The curse of Eve was regularly employed by church authors to remind young virgins of the horrors which awaited them should they stray from their vows, with the corresponding promotion of the concept of fertile virginity serving to allow for the reinterpretation of cultural understandings of female fertility. The act of bringing a child into the world was not, for many Fathers, an occasion to be celebrated, as such an event served only as a reminder of the mortality of man, and of the sin which had stagnated within the physical kingdom which they occupied. Pregnancy, childbirth and death formed an endless cycle in which the world had become locked; Christ’s virgin birth, along with his ultimate death and resurrection, had provided an opportunity for those who engaged with the virgin life to extrapolate themselves from this matrix. Gregory of Nyssa had emphasised this within his \textit{De virginitate}, stating of childbirth that ‘those who by virginity have desisted from this process have drawn within themselves the boundary line of death…they have made themselves, in fact, a frontier between life and death, and a barrier too.’\textsuperscript{252} By adopting a life of perpetual virginity, a woman could continue to re-enact Christ’s rejection of the birth-death continuum, turning away from the inevitability of death through the embrace of spiritual childbirth in place of physical labour. As Brown Hughes notes, the virginity of an ascetic ‘functions continually as a christologically-shaped barrier halting death by throwing a wrench in the endless cycle of births and deaths.’\textsuperscript{253} The fertility of pregnant women was imbued with decay, with an overwhelming sense of the futility of continued reproduction, and the separation between married, child-bearing women and consecrated virgins was immense. For Methodius, argues Brown, reproduction and sexual relations were ‘passing shadows, which pointed to the only truly fecund union, that of Christ and the Church…the joys of physical parenthood were a pallid reflection of the truly fertile

\textsuperscript{251} Ambrose, \textit{Virg.} 1.6.30. See also Cyprian, \textit{Hab. virg.} 22 and Gregory of Nyssa, \textit{De virginitate} 3 & 13.

\textsuperscript{252} Gregory of Nyssa, \textit{De virginitate} 13

\textsuperscript{253} Brown Hughes, 2016, 69
life of the virgin girls, gathered around their spiritual father, a discreet and learned priest.  

It is to this relationship, between girl and mentor, virgin and priest, that we must now turn.

2.3. The Bishop and his Flock

The great esteem accorded to the condition of virginity, alongside the placement of this state within the realm of martyrdom, had caused consecrated virgins to occupy a position of profound importance within their communities, their role as spiritual mothers and the inheritors of Christ’s grace raising them to the loftiest heights of faith.  

However, despite the melodious words of authors such as Methodius on the inherent beauty and joy of a virgin lifestyle, a virgin existed upon a precarious knife edge, and the possibility for her to stray into darkness remained a continual fear. ‘I promised you in marriage to one husband,’ Paul had written to the church at Corinth, ‘to present you as a chaste virgin to Christ. But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by its cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ.’  

The assimilation of the virgin with the church itself only served to increase the necessity for church authorities of ensuring the continued purity of virgins and their behaviour. If a virgin fell, she did not confer sin upon her own body alone; just as the stain of lust was now marked upon her being, so too could it appear on the walls of the church which she had represented, pure and unpenetrated, but now defiled. She had, stated Basil, ‘flung away the yoke of that divine union; you have fled from the undefiled (ἄχραντον) chamber of the true King.’  

Infidelity within ones marriage was

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254 Brown, 1988, 185
255 It should be noted that, as Hack Polaski (2005, 36) and Cameron (1980, 66) both argue, the increase in spiritual authority granted to consecrated virgins corresponded with a decrease in their official status within the Christian community. More specifically, positions of organisational authority were substituted for those of a spiritual nature, in an attempt to reduce the independence that unmarried virgins could potentially accrue.
256 2 Corinthians 11:2-3. ζηλῶ γάρ ὑμᾶς θεοῦ ζήλω, ἡμισόμενη γάρ ὑμᾶς ἐνί άνδρὶ παρθένον ἄνην παραστήσας τῷ Χριστῷ· φοβόμεθα δὲ μὴ ποι., ως ὁ ὅφις ἐξηπάτησεν Εὔαν ἐν τῇ πάνω γῆς αὐτοῦ, φθαρή τα νοήματα ὑμῶν ἀπὸ τῆς ἀπλότητος καὶ τῆς ἁγνότητος τῆς εἰς τὸν Χριστὸν.
257 Basil of Caesarea, Ep. 46.2
forbidden for those who had entered into earthly unions, and so for a virgin to commit adultery within a divine engagement was a crime of immeasurable consequence, with its ramifications felt within the physical church, and the celestial sphere. Furthermore, Basil had noted, a virgin who willingly engaged in sexual relations was deceived twice over, as the serpent in the Garden of Eden had tricked only Eve’s mind. A fallen virgin had allowed her mind to be corrupted by a man who had drawn her away from her vows, and had then allowed her body to be defiled through sexual relations.

From the late second century onward, texts began to circulate throughout the Christian world regarding the nature of virginity and of consecrated virgins. These writings demonstrated the ideal manner in which a virgin should be held to behave, providing examples of previous virgins who had excelled in their own arenas of faith and criticising the actions of virgins who misbehaved, and of heretics who committed terrible crimes against such women. It was imperative that a church leader was able to control his flock and ensure their conduct, whilst providing them with the guidance that his role demanded, thus demonstrating his own suitability as a mentor, leader and spiritual authority. Furthermore, it was of the utmost significance that a virgin fully understood the expectations placed upon a bride of Christ, and acted in a manner suited to her role. Tertullian’s De virginibus velandis had forcefully reminded virgin women of the necessity of dressing modestly in order to honour their divine husband, fearing that the slight taste of independence experienced by these women had caused them to abandon certain standards of living. For Tertullian, the unveiling of a

258 This ‘fall’ is not limited to sexual immorality, but rather, as shall be discussed later within this chapter and additionally within chapter four, extended to the adoption of those doctrines considered to be heretical, an act which allowed ideologies perceived as negative and corrupt to enter into the pure church.
259 Basil of Caesarea, Ep. 46.3. ‘You have been deceived by the serpent more bitterly than Eve; and not only your mind but your body has been defiled (φθαρῇ).’ The lacuna within Basil’s statement is the unfortunate question of how a virgin who had been raped would be viewed. This issue will be addressed within the following chapter, through a discussion of Augustine’s comments on such a topic.
260 Key examples include Alexander of Alexandria’s Ep. Alex. Const., Ambrose’s Virg., Athanasius’ first and second letters ad virgines, Augustine’s Virg. as well as several of his epistles, Gregory of Nyssa’s De virginitate, Jerome’s various letters to virgins and ascetics under his care (especially the renowned twenty-second epistle to Eustochium) and Methodius’ Symp.
261 Salisbury, 1991, 57; Castelli, 1986, 71
consecrated virgin equated to the suffering of a sexual shame, the evocative ‘stupri passio’ inviting thoughts of defilement, adultery and sexual violence. For Tertullian, argues Castelli, the practice of velatio was itself a demonstration of the symbolic, spiritual marriage of the virgin to Christ, and so to remove the veil was an act of ‘sacrilegious adultery.’ Indeed, Tertullian utilised the position of the virgin as Christ’s spouse to great effect in his exhortations for virgins to wear veils, arguing that they should ‘walk in accordance with the will of your Espoused. Christ is He who bids the espoused and wives of others veil themselves, and, of course, much more his own.’ Cyprian had similarly addressed these issues extensively within his De habitu virginum, whilst John Chrysostom had voiced his criticism of those types of dress which he felt failed to honour the Divine Bridegroom, asking the virgins of his congregation why they do not ‘wear the ornament that is pleasing to him; modesty, chastity, orderliness, and sober apparel?’

Ambrose dealt with such issues in a gentler, and perhaps more subtle manner, reminding virgins of those women who had come before them, and had preserved their modesty even in the direst situations. Recounting the tale of a young Christian virgin forced into a brothel during a persecution, Ambrose notes that when the girl escapes (thanks to the miraculous appearance of a hitherto secretly Christian soldier), he exhorts her to dress in his apparel as it will ‘hide the limbs of a virgin, but preserve her modesty.’ Similarly, in his discussion of the virgin Pelagia’s death by suicide to avoid capture, he emphasises that the virgin martyr ‘is said to have adorned her head, and to have put on a bridal dress,’ her choice of clothing a visual representation of the divine union into which she has entered, a lasting reminder of her vows and eternal chastity. The portrayal of the virgin as the bride of Christ was an

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262 Tertullian, Virg. 3. ‘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.’ Tertullian accorded a great weight to the idea that virgins were married to Christ, stating that ‘you are wedded to Christ: to Him you have surrendered your body; act as becomes your Husband’s discipline’ (Or. 22).
263 Castelli, 1986, 71
264 Tertullian, Virg. 16
265 John Chrysostom, Hom. 1 Tim. 8
266 Ambrose, Virg. 2.4.29
267 Ambrose, Virg. 3.7.34
essential aspect of the Church Fathers’ attempts to simultaneously ensure the continued correct behaviour of consecrated virgins, and remind both them and the wider community of the manner in which the relationship of Christ and the church was echoed through that of Christ with the virgin. The marital obedience which consecrated virgins had evaded through their rejection of marriage thus found a way to rear its head within their daily lives, with reminders of patriarchal admonitions to bow to the head of household being interspersed with profound images of the love of Christ by church authorities who required a modicum of control. This is a central aspect of Ambrose’s De virginibus, with Burrus arguing that the bishop utilises the imagery of traditional, patriarchal marriage between the virgin and Christ to ‘defend the church’s right to remove the sexual bodies of elite Roman daughters from one sphere of social interchange.’ Such a notion is emphatically reinforced within Ambrose’s opening tale, that of the young virgin martyr Agnes, seen additionally in Prudentius. Ambrose’s Agnes rejects the attempts of the executioner and other witnesses to lure her toward an earthly marriage, stating that ‘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.’

For Ambrose, the virginal body, soul and church could not be separated from one another, a concept prominent in both the De virginibus and the De virginitate. Consequently, the bishop found great inspiration within the Song of Songs, a text which enabled him to illustrate the divine, marital intimacy of the virgin and Christ in tandem with the relationship of Christ and the church, assimilating the two concepts with one another whilst placing himself in the position of guardian. Shuve argues that the Song allowed Ambrose to ‘articulate an ascetic account of Christian identity, in which the literal celibacy and enclosure of the consecrated virgin was extended symbolically outwards to the church and all of her members.’ The image of the virgin as being ‘a garden locked, a fountain

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268 Burrus, 1995, 30
269 Ambrose, Virg. 1.2.9. ‘Et haec Sponsi iniuria est exspectare placitum. Qui me sibi prior eligit, accipiet.’
270 Shuve, 2016, 111-112
sealed was a metaphor of boundless possibility for Ambrose, who saw in this the eternal purity of the virgin, her infinite fertility as it was harvested by Christ, and the vision of a church free from all corrupting stains. Through his use of the Song, the church became imprinted on the body of the virgin, itself a wild landscape in which the Divine Bridegroom walked unfettered, sowing seeds of faith, strengthening the walls of the church. It is for this reason that the treatise opens with the martyrdom of Agnes, a virgin who died without renouncing her faith or her virginity, a bride of Christ whose wedding took place in an arena. ‘Was there room for a wound in that small body?’ questioned Ambrose, for whom a wound had the potential to be much greater than simply the piercing of skin with steel. Agnes endured her torments, receiving wounds which spoke of her bravery, and resisting those which could hint toward a worse penetration, of sexual actions undertaken willingly or unwillingly, and of a turn away from her chosen task as a bride of Christ. ‘You have then in one victim (hostia) a twofold martyrdom, of modesty and of religion. She both remained a virgin and she obtained martyrdom,’ the bishop concluded. Consecrated virginity was not overly common in Milan at the time of Ambrose’s writing, and thus his work sought to sway young women toward this manner of living, appealing both to the valour of martyrdom, and the near-romance of the Divine union. Throughout the De virginitate, Ambrose alternates between heroic stories of young women defending their faith and their virginity, often to the point of death, and ethereal, heady reflections on the fertile spirituality of virginity which employ the Song as a medium through which Ambrose is able to reflect on the harmony of an intimate union. Reflecting on the Song of Songs 8:12, Ambrose illuminates the relationship between Christ and the many gardens dedicated to him:

Then the Lord of peace Himself, after having embraced in His strong arms the vineyards committed to Him, and beholding their shoots putting forth buds, with

271 Song of Songs 4.12. κήπος κεκλεισμένος ἁδελφή μου νύμφη κήπος κεκλεισμένος πηγή ἐσφραγισμένη
272 Ambrose, Virg. 1.2.7
273 Ambrose, Virg. 1.2.9
274 Shuve, 2016, 115
glad looks, tempers the breezes to the young fruits, as Himself testifies, saying: My vineyard is in My sight, a thousand for Solomon, and two hundred who keep the fruit thereof.\textsuperscript{275}

2.4 Insiders and Outsiders

The gradual legitimisation of Christianity which arose in the early fourth century, through events such as the Edict of Milan and the Council of Nicaea, inevitably did not lead to the unification of the varied churches scattered across the Empire. Indeed, the association of imperial power with the Christian movement, argues Burrus, served only to reinforce the divisions of different religious branches, as the prospect of rewards from the Emperor himself led to intensive rivalries between different church authorities.\textsuperscript{276} The necessity of finding a self-definition, and indeed a specific identity for a community, was deeply rooted within the martyr acts which influenced texts addressing the state of virginity, and thus identity came to be an integral aspect of the ethos which lay behind consecrated virginity. The increased prominence of groups held to be ‘heretical,’ and those which promoted theological ideologies contrary to those espoused by the ‘orthodox’ church, made it all the more necessary for bishops such as Athanasius to secure their positions, and establish themselves as superior to leaders such as Arius. The body of the virgin woman, unpenetrated, pure, infused with spirituality and occupying a key position within the community, provided a valuable blueprint through which church leaders could defend their own doctrines and churches, whilst attacking those they deemed to be ‘other.’ Cyprian held virgins to be symbolic representatives of the true church, consistently under threat from external corrupting influences, placing himself as the head of the church on earth. By demonstrating that he had a God-given right to such authority, which manifested itself

\textsuperscript{275} Ambrose, Virg. 1.9.50 (\textit{PL} 1.8.50)  
\textsuperscript{276} Burrus, 1994, 44
through his position of guardian to the virgins, Cyprian was thus able to use dialogues on orthodoxy and virginity as a means to secure his own position within the church.\textsuperscript{277} The bishop served as father of sorts to his flock of virgins, entrusted with the protection of their precious virginity and ensuring the safety of these vulnerable women.\textsuperscript{278} Indeed, Ambrose stated that ‘it has always been the privilege of bishops to sow the seeds of celibacy, to encourage a desire for virginity,’\textsuperscript{279} his decision to centralise himself within the discourse of virginity reflective of the manner in which he viewed himself, and the necessity of virgins for his tenure as bishop.

Virginity had formed the ideal platform upon which Ambrose could construct his ministry at the time of his ascension to the position of Bishop of Milan, as, argues Liebeschutz, the significance of consecrated virginity had not been a primary source of tension between Nicene and Homoian Christians, and thus Ambrose could avoid wading into heavy theological debate early within his bishopric.\textsuperscript{280} However, Shuve posits that Ambrose’s promotion of virginity was not wholly without thought toward the tensions in his city, and was intended to assist with the reparation of some of the cracks in the church through the construction of an ideology which promoted unity with regard to the church’s borders.\textsuperscript{281} It is not, perhaps, by chance that Ambrose’s strongest influence came from an author renowned for his battles with those he held to be heretics: Athanasius. His application of marital imagery to the relationship of Christ and the virgin, heavy reliance on the Song of Songs and presentation of virginity as a ‘state that transcends human nature’ are, argues Shuve, taken directly from Athanasius’ two letters to the virgins, texts which were heavily...

\textsuperscript{277} Brown, 1988, 195
\textsuperscript{278} Whether large groups of consecrated virgins were, in reality, vulnerable, is a separate discussion entirely. The vulnerability which men such as Cyprian, Athanasius and Ambrose identified in their virgin followers likely reflects more their concerns with the fragility of their churches and communities, and the necessity of ensuring cohesion and peace within their cities and followers.\textsuperscript{279} Ambrose, Virginit. V.26. ‘…iacere semina integritatis, et virginitatis studia provocare.’\textsuperscript{280} Liebeschuetz, 2005, 10. Ambrose would later publish several fierce polemics against the Homoian position, however, at the start of his career in 370 A.D., a tractate on the sacred status of consecrated virgins was an ideal way for the bishop to spread his influence, and establish himself within the literary world of the fourth century (Liebeschuetz, 2005, 11-13).\textsuperscript{281} Shuve, 2016, 118
rooted in the Arian controversy which had spread throughout Alexandria. Virginity was significantly more popular in Alexandria than it would later be in Milan, and consecrated virgins were assimilated both with Arian factions, and those groups who supported Athanasius, and thus it was crucial for the Bishop to ensure that those virgins who supported him maintained the correct approach to the virgin lifestyle, and resisted any temptations from those who promoted doctrines he perceived to be illegitimate. The union of Christ and virgin was a key aspect of these apologetic strategies, with Athanasius emphasising the significance of this relationship above all others, and painting himself (as Ambrose later would) as an earthly guardian of this relationship. ‘He is sufficient for you in every way,’ Athanasius reminded his virginal subjects, ‘so do not give yourself to another.’

Just as Paul had positioned himself as the guardian of the earthly church, protecting her purity and virginity for Christ by ensuring the correct behaviour of the congregation, so too bishops such as Athanasius found themselves protecting the integrity of the virgin, ensuring that corruption in the form of heretical doctrine could not enter the church which she represented. The issues which had been raised when considering the boundaries of the church – of insiders and outsiders, heretics and true believers, and of men and women – are reflected throughout texts addressing virginity, as the body of the virgin was a ripe source of inspiration. Images of fertility which flowed through texts praising the virtues of virginity could be equally applied to warn virgins away from those who could corrupt them, and to remind them of the authority of their Lord. ‘Virginity is like an enclosed garden that is not trodden upon by anyone, except its gardener alone,’ stated the ever-concerned Athanasius, reminding virgins that they must ‘be careful that no merciless stranger spoils the manifold seedlings and beautiful blossoms of the garden.’

Athanasius’ emphasis within the Song of Songs was upon the notion of the virgin as a garden closed above all else, his focus upon the

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282 Shuve, 2016, 113; 115
283 Athanasius, Ep. virg. (Copt.) 41
284 2 Corinthians 11:1-6
285 Burrus, 1994, 44
286 Athanasius, Ep. virg. (Syr.) 30
sealing of the body, and withdrawal to the bridal chamber, serving to promote the notion that virgins should remove themselves from the world around them. If a virgin remained locked away in her room, allowing only the Bridegroom to enter that sacred chamber, the chances of corruption were minimised as the possibility of direct engagement with corrupt heretics was removed. Athanasius’ virgins did not reside in a peaceful community, as Alexandria, a city with a long history of religious and social tensions, was the site of a Christian community frequently affected by violence and church politics. In his polemics against the Arians, Athanasius had spoken at length about the assaults on consecrated virgins which he had witnessed in the city, claiming that ‘naked swords were at work against the holy virgins and brethren,’ and accusing the Arian contingent of a multiplicity of violent crimes. These assaults, writes Burrus, were of such great concern to Athanasius as they did not consist solely of the violation of a female body, but rather ‘constituted a rape of the true church and a defilement of its purity.’

Thus, for Athanasius, the Song of Songs formed a medium through which he could provide a theological support for his claim that virgin women should avoid the dangerous world of the city by remaining locked away. This was a necessity for the bishop, for whom virgins were a key source of support, as this would prevent them from coming into contact with rival doctrines, and moving away from his sphere of influence. The notion that virgins had inherited the martyrrial tradition of sacrifice was ingrained within the writings of Athanasius, who had written of the consecrated virgin that ‘you offered yourself and wrote that you would strive. By your own will you were brought to the arena: he did not bring you by force, but persuaded you with the promise.’ Providing a multiplicity of evocative metaphors, Athanasius’ reflections on the nature of virginity and the virgin body enabled the bishop to reinforce his own authority within his community, and to emphasise the significance of

287 Brakke, 1995, 78; Shuve, 2016, 114
288 Athanasius, Apol. sec. 1.15. Athanasius’ accusations against Arius and his followers regarding the assaults of consecrated virgins will be discussed further within chapter four, which addresses ideologies regarding heresy and heretical women.
289 Burrus, 1994, 36
290 Athanasius, Ep. virg. (Syr.) 23
ascetic practices to the Christian life. ‘Heresy,’ argues Arnal, ‘requires an orthodoxy,’ and in order for a world view to arise that could be conceived of as heretical, there needed to exist a corresponding ideology which could fashion itself as being a true doctrine, the only correct path to follow. Thus, heresy and orthodoxy are cultural constructs, reliant on the wider complications of the societies in which they appear, and on the individuals who espouse particular ideologies. The female body had provided a boundless source of inspiration to church authors from the first century onward, being a location in which the borders and ideologies of the church could be explored and constructed, with the viewpoints of individual authors, inspired by or in response to one another, being written into a formal existence that enabled their own identities and theologies to flourish. Indeed, as Shaw argues, texts which address virgin women ‘may tell us very little about the women in question and more about male ideals, fears and pious self-presentation.’ The continued reinforcement of the notion that the virgin represented the true church thus caused a vague, near-personal concept such as heresy to become culturally ingrained, become conceived of as a clear mind-set that stood in defiance of the true path to righteousness. The constant promotion of the virgin lifestyle throughout tractates on heresy caused it to become almost tangible, as within the body of the textually constructed virgin a notion of orthodoxy began to take shape, based around the physical and spiritual integrity of the virgin, and her relationship with Christ and the first fertile virgin, Mary. The female body was central to the construction of heresy: if female martyrs saw their bodies being torn limb from limb in the arena, virgins found themselves dismembered by the words of bishops who sought to write their notions of the church into being.

291 Arnal, 2008, 50
292 Shaw, 1998a, 156
2.5 The Life of St. Helia

In the early fifth century, an anonymous author committed to paper the life and trials of a certain Saint Helia, a young virgin who was faced with great adversity in her teenage years. Whilst the heroine is claimed by the author to be from Dyrrachium, Burrus and Conti have noted the compatibility of the text with rural Spain through the issues explored, whilst Salisbury suggests that Helia may have been given an eastern origin in order to lend credence to the text, as eastern ascetics were more prominent icons than those in the west. Helia’s hagiographer does not reveal their identity, and throughout the text the influence of the authorities on consecrated virginity reveals itself strongly, with the Vita interacting with notions of spiritual fertility, engagement with the Divine Bridegroom, and the necessity for virgins to serve as a living sacrifice. ‘Who is more excellent than our virgin who, stained by no one’s blood, offered herself as a living sacrifice by destroying the vices of her body?’ questions Helia, inferring Romans 12, and thus Paul himself, to support her defence. The presence of Ambrose and Jerome ripples throughout the text, although Helia’s boldness in her retaliations marks a distinct move away from the silent, withdrawn virgins of the fourth century, who spoke only to Christ within their bedchamber. Much like those who influenced this text, Helia cites Christ as the ‘author and prince of virginity,’ and her language within her descriptions of his position as the root cause of this holy life is heavily laced with metaphors of fertility and growth. ‘After the banner of virginity had been raised in his own body, the hidden virginity of the whole world might rise to meet him,’ argues Helia, concluding that ‘when the seed of integrity had been sowed, the fecundity of singleness might sprout forth.’

293 Burrus and Conti, 2013, 57; Salisbury, 1991, 75
294 Vita Heliae 1.588-590. ‘Quam praestantior urgo nostra quae nullis sanguine cruentata proprii corporis utia iugulando se ipsam uiaam obtulit holocaustum?’ Romans 12:1. ‘I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice (θυσίαν ζῶσαν) holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.’
295 Vita Heliae 2.87-91. ‘...ut in corpore suo virginitatis elevato uexillo de toto mundo in occursum eius absconsa virginitatis obularet, et integritatis iactato semente, singularitatis fecunditas germinaret.’
notions of earthly union, and indeed Burrus and Conti note that her ‘defence against the charge that she condemns marriage conforms to Jerome’s own defence in Against Jovinian 1.3.’

Perhaps most gripping within the tale is its presentation as a form of martyr act, a prolonged adaptation of the martyrdom of Thecla in which the young virgin is placed on trial by other Christian adherents due to her decision to adopt a life of virginity. ‘Called only by the inspiration of God, she began to prepare herself to be a wife of Christ,’ recounts her biographer, stating that the maiden desired ‘to be found not guilty of the curse of Eve but rather a participant in the blessing of Mary.’ Helia, however, found her path to virginity to be obstructed, as her mother, painted as a military leader ‘accompanied by a large army’ gathered together large numbers of supporters, ‘seizing here countless people of desire (libidinis), there hordes of violence, and there bands of fury.’ Holy war finds itself drawn to a quiet community in which a young girl must desperately plead with a priest to ‘bring me spiritual weapons from the arsenal of Christ,’ the priest and virgin united against an angry mother and a long-suffering judge. Those who aim to prevent her from succeeding in her quest draw weapons against her in the form of their own theological arguments, attempting to dissuade the girl through appeals to doctrines which would threaten her holy status, much as Athanasius perceived the Arians to be luring virgins away from the true path to Christ. Helia is a foot soldier of the Lord, her virginity shown to be intimately connected to a holy war through her statement that ‘the one who takes a wife is withdrawn from the military camp of the Lord, whilst virginity constantly accompanies Christ.’ Helia’s marriage is one which contains no sexual union, no sin which would hinder her ability to join with Christ upon the battlefield for all eternity. Ambrose had exhorted virgins to let ‘holy Mary

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296 Burrus and Conti, 2013, 32
297 Vita Heliae 1.41-43
298 Vita Heliae 2.276-277
299 Vita Heliae 2.307. Helia is supported by various onlookers, who comment that ‘the girl ought not to fail, since the Lord Jesus Christ the bridegroom was joining battle with the conquering forces on her behalf’ (2.341-342).
300 Vita Heliae 2.136-137
instruct you in the discipline of life, and Thecla teach you how to be offered (doceat immolari), a statement which finds a near literal adoption in Helia’s fight to preserve her virginity.

The anonymity of the author raises questions regarding the exact purpose of the Vita. Cloke argues that by the late fourth century numbers of consecrated virgins had begun to decrease, and thus this text can be suggested to partially serve as a response to this issue, styling Helia as a Thecla for the fifth century. The image of a brave young girl dedicated to Christ, resisting the authority of her mother and defending her right to virginity in the face of encroaching armies is an inspiring one. Furthermore, whilst Helia is, in many places, speaking words which could well have belonged to a bishop, the authority granted to her is unlike any seen within the brave virgins of Ambrose’s histories. Whilst Helia begs her bishop for help, it is she who leads the charge, and speaks with the greatest authority. This is not to say that the Life was, therefore, written by a woman, but rather to note the dramatic conclusion of third and fourth century ideals of virginity when pushed to their furthest point, Helia’s virginity being placed on trial within a Christian community in the form of a martyr act. Her virginity is wild and untamed, not a garden so much as a wilderness, her children endless and her sacrifice eternal. As the text reaches its climax, so too do Helia’s arguments as she renders her body an open map upon which the grace of Christ can be chartered, evidence of the inherent promise which lay within a virgin life, and the wild spirituality which flowed through her. ‘Behold,’ announced Helia,

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301 Ambrose, Virg. 2.3.19
302 Cloke, 1995, 59
303 Salisbury has argued that this text does, in fact, have female authorship, and has identified a correspondent of Jerome’s named Theodora as the source for the Vita (1991, 74-6). Theodora was Spanish, and, along with her husband, greatly interested in asceticism and sexual renunciation, having received some of Jerome’s treatises on the topic. The repetition of themes identified within the works of Jerome within the Vita Heliae, in addition to Theodora’s location and connection to Jerome, has enabled Salisbury to come to this conclusion. Whilst the link is undeniable, there are numerous other influences identified within the Life, and the direct attribution of the text to Theodora seems a slight leap. Furthermore, Burrus and Conti refer to the author as male, arguing that ‘the prologue points in this direction, at least as far as self-representation goes’ (2013, 42 f.113).
The land of my body, sowed by him of whom it is said, *He who sows is the son of man*, bursts forth in fruit of hundredfold fecundity. Why are you troublesome to my land, which produces an abundance of such fruitfulness? Not a human but God sows my land: for truly when a virgin sows, virginity must sprout.\(^{304}\)

Whilst the *Vita Heliae* concludes with Helia’s triumphant final speech, the outcome of her trial is left unknown, Helia’s ultimate fate a mystery. This development allows the text to remain open, the lack of a definitive ending ensuring that the ideologies espoused therein can continue to blossom and flourish, taking on a life of their own outside the confines of their pages. Indeed, to gain knowledge of the trial’s result would add little to the philosophies promoted within the *Life*, as it is through the arguments of Helia that the true purpose of virginity is revealed, the extent of its fecundity and the profound intimacy of the relationship between Divine Bridegroom and virgin: there is nothing more that can be said that would not serve to detract from Helia’s arguments.

The literature of martyrdom emphasised the sacrifices of those who resisted the authority of their persecutors in the name of Christ, reflecting the ideologies of holy war in order to illustrate the relationship of a martyr with the Divine. Helia, a girl prevented from entering into marriage with the Divine Bridegroom by an authority figure, inherited these ideologies and, through the medium of her textual body, married them to an understanding of the spiritual fertility of virginity, enabled through divine marriage. Martyrs’ blood had been seed, but Helia’s body, and its enduring presence within her community as a consecrated virgin, was a field of many seeds which could be replenished several times over through her position as a bride of Christ and a mother of the church. Indeed, the virulent attacks on Helia by her mother echo the attacks on the church with which Ambrose and Athanasius

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\(^{304}\) *Vita Heliae* 3.160-163. ‘Ecce terra corporis mei, illo seminante de quo dicitur: Qui seminat filius hominis est, centenae fecunditatis erumpit in fructu. Quid molesti estis terrae meae ubertatis tantae copiam praeferen? Terram meam non homo serit sed Deus. Virgine etenim seminante uirginitas necesse est pullulare.’
were so deeply concerned, her words designed to draw Helia away from her chosen path, and thus away from Christ. Helia is herself the true church, pure, undefiled and dedicated solely to Christ, capable of bearing multitudes of spiritual children; the threats to which she is subject are a reminder of the volatility of the church, and the precariousness of its walls. The unpenetrated body of the virgin resisted the outside influence of immoral doctrine, sexual impurity and sin, maintaining its position as a closed garden and a sealed fountain. Taken to its greatest extent, the powerful metaphors which stemmed from a dialogue of fertility enabled the virgin to become a field, an open plain of wild landscape through which the Gardener could walk, fertilising the seeds of faith, a restriction on sexual relations and a withdrawal from the physical world allowing a virgin to gain access to the realms of the divine. However, the image of the virgin as a woman wedded to her divine husband would inspire other church authors to construct a virgin whose body was infused with eroticism and desire, their asceticism a gateway for readings of the body which were not so much polemical as they were psychological. The promotion of virginity throughout the fourth century had enabled church authors to construct ideals for communities in which the tensions of church politics and religious factions had loomed large. For men such as Jerome and Prudentius, however, the notion of virginity contained the potential for the exploration of the erotic imagination, and of the torments which wracked the ascetic body.

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305 The presentation of bodies as geographical spaces, particularly with regard to sexual renunciation, will be returned to in chapter five, through a discussion of repentant harlots.
3. I Have Found Him Whom my Soul Loves: Erotic Martyrdom and Divine Love

“You all die at fifteen,” said Diderot, and turn part legend, part convention.’

Adrienne Rich, Snapshots of a Daughter in Law

‘Going down the steps, I try to remember what the rest of her was like, her face, but I can only see the potent candies, inaccessible in their glass reliquary, and the arm, miraculous in an unspecified way like the toes of saints or the cut-off pieces of early martyrs, the eyes on the plate, the severed breasts, the heart with the letters on it shining like a light bulb through the trim hole painted in the chest, art history.’

Margaret Atwood, Surfacing

A distinctly unsettling tone permeates many works which relate to virginity from the fourth century onward. In their exhortations to young women to choose a virgin life, their letters of guidance and encouragement and their accounts of the deaths of young virgins in the arena, the authors of the church integrated erotic and language and near-pornographic imagery with appeals to women to cleanse themselves of sexuality and desire, marrying this with increasingly violent narratives on the prolonged, bloody sufferings of virginal martyrs. The body of the virgin had a provided a mechanism through which the Church Fathers could discuss their socio-political ideals, curating cities around the unpenetrated bodies of women who daily provided witness to the sacrifice of Christ, and inherited the blessings of his virginity. However, the undeniable fact remained that consecrated virgins were women, born with an innate sexuality which existed below the surface of their skin, and which had the potential to be released should the virgin fail in her calling, as the heavy symbolism accorded to the female body within the construction of Christian societies required that all aspects of a woman had to be considered. Desert ascetics, whose sacrifices will be

As will be addressed within the following chapter, women who associated themselves with heretical cults were perceived to be extremely licentious, tempting men away from the true church.
addressed within the following chapters, wrestled with the demon of sexuality in order to utterly erase it from their bodies, the scorching heat of the desert matching that of their burning bodies as they sought to destroy desire itself. However, the consecrated virgins who lived in populous cities, such as those addressed within the writings of Athanasius and Ambrose, had been encouraged to find union with the Divine Bridegroom, the eroticism of the Song of Songs used to great effect when reminding the brides of the significance of their relationship. The beauty of a young virgin was required to be withheld from all but her beloved heavenly spouse, both in order that she could continue to fulfil the ideological role ascribed to her by the Church Fathers, and to minimise her potential to tempt to lure righteous men away from their path.307

The sexualisation of the virginal body of a woman, most commonly portrayed as young and beautiful, was a literary trope which went hand-in-hand with a derision of human sexuality and an overwhelming fear of the temptation which women could provide to the ascetic male. This fear manifested itself in numerous ways, appearing in tractates which called upon women to hide their bodies from the public eye and to do all which they could to mar their beauty, allying itself with an unrelenting misogyny which associated women with lust, temptation and Eve’s sin. Tertullian was an early proponent of such an ideology, his De cultu feminarum providing a scathing critique of the manner in which women dressed and acted, and reminding them that the sin of Eve lived on in each and every woman. Having criticised the gaudy jewellery worn by women within his community, Tertullian exhorted women instead to ‘clothe yourselves with the silk of uprightness, the fine linen of holiness, the purple of modesty. Thus painted, you will have God as your lover!’308 His repeated pleas for women to dress and act accordingly, seen additionally within his De virginibus velandis, relied heavily on the notion that sexuality was innate to women. Tertullian’s

307 Augustine, for example, had written a somewhat critical letter to the nuns at the monastery in which his sister had resided, reminding them that ‘in walking, in standing, in deportment, and in all your movements let nothing be done which might attract the improper desires (illiciat... libidinem) of anyone, but rather let all be in keeping with your sacred character’ (Ep. 211.10).
308 Tertullian, Cult. fem. 2.13. ‘Taliter pygmentatae Deum habebitis amatorem.’
misogyny, suggests Brown, was based on what he believed to be the ‘unalterable facts of nature,’ which were simply that regardless of their personal values, women were a source of seductive enticement.\textsuperscript{309} Tertullian’s concerns did not feature prominently in the literature which followed him in the next century, as it was not until the fourth century that the dangers of temptation and sexuality began to gain prominence within the literature of the church. Christian martyr acts from the second and third centuries which featured women in positions of prominence, such as the martyrdoms at Lyons, noticeably do not contain strong levels of eroticism. The sufferings and death of Blandina, a central martyr within the text, reflect many of the key themes of early martyr literature, whilst the references to her gender focus on the strength which she shows throughout her torture, as opposed to the sexualised potential of her physical body. Indeed, in sharp contrast to the graceful virgins of the fourth century poet Prudentius, Blandina is recorded as being ‘cheap, ugly and contemptuous’ in the eyes of men, her physical body providing strength to the other martyrs, as it was through her that they witnessed ‘him who was crucified for them.’\textsuperscript{310}

As has been established within the previous chapter, the political and social tensions which reverberated throughout the fourth-century church necessitated the reinforcement of the boundaries of differing Christian communities. The enduring influence of martyrdom acts enabled these texts to become a blueprint upon which later authors could sketch the outlines of their congregations and cities, with the strain felt by varying Church Fathers to assert their authority and doctrine appearing within their works. The borders of the physical body were a constant source of fear and doubt, and thus provided the ideal vessel through which to explore the wider issues faced by both the church and its individual authorities. In the tumultuous years which followed the persecutions the body was, states Shaw, ‘the site of a struggle,’\textsuperscript{311} a location in which men who sought to guide the church, to record its history and to place themselves within it, could find boundless depths of inspiration. Those texts

\textsuperscript{309} Brown, 1988, 81  
\textsuperscript{310} Eusebius, \textit{Historia ecclesiastica} 5.1.17; 5.1.41  
\textsuperscript{311} Shaw, 1996, 311
which eroticise the bodies of female virgins provide witness to some of the myriad of issues faced by such men, illustrating the near-tangible fear of sexuality and temptation which occupied their minds. This focus on the female body and its sexual potential was not a direct victimisation of women, but rather, suggests Miles, reflects the prevalent belief that the bodies of women were a ‘potentially destabilising factor in Christian communities.’

The literature of the eastern ascetic tradition, discussed within the following chapter, is heavily permeated with a fear of women and their potential to tempt even the most virtuous monk away from his calling. Indeed, it was this all-consuming fear which caused many ascetic men to adopt the life of a hermit in the desert, as women were painted as the epitome of temptation and desire, dangerous creatures whose very existence threatened their righteousness.

In the Latin west, Church Fathers such as Jerome exhibited a preoccupation with the female body and its necessary destiny which ran parallel to a deep-rooted fear of women and human sexuality. For Jerome’s contemporary, Augustine, a man who had waged war against the sexual urges which had consumed him throughout his younger years, the male erection could be connected directly with the sins of humanity, with such an occurrence reminding a man of ‘the evil of his own disobedience.’ Augustine’s words, particularly when coupled with his reflections on his own sexual experiences within the *Confessiones*, demonstrate an intense level of self-loathing at his own bodily functions, and a desperate desire to rid himself of such sensations. This horror is additionally seen within Jerome’s various letters to the virginal and chaste women who moved within his flock, with the priest utilising dialogues on their behaviour to examine his own body and relationship with it.

Writing on Plato’s *Symposium*, Halperin argues that Diotima’s presence is validated because it is through a woman that a man can learn of his own desires, concluding that ‘it takes a

312 Miles, 1989, 77
313 Elm, 1994, 257; Avis, 1989, 93
woman to reveal men to themselves.\textsuperscript{315} The discussions of the female body – eroticised, sexualised, dismembered – which will be addressed within this chapter reveal within them a great deal about their authors, the manner in which they conceived of their own bodily identity, and the problems which they deemed to be greatest within their communities. Desire, physically manifested through the erection, was one of the greatest issues facing both individual and communal moral values, with sexuality thus stripped down to its bare bones in order to attempt a description of sexual desire which could be appropriate for the community in which it existed.\textsuperscript{316} It was by talking about desire, engaging in erotic dialogues and sexualising the very bodies which inspired such fear that authors such as Jerome could rewrite sexuality and temptation, transforming physical desire into an all-consuming love for God. It is this which Burrus defines as ‘ascetic eros,’ evidence for a sexuality which may have been sublimated by its authors, or may represent the deeper problems inherent to the discourse of desire in the fourth century, a ‘pathological hatred of the body.’\textsuperscript{317} Burrus’ construction of the notion of ascetic eros is a central aspect of the arguments expounded upon within this chapter, as it is fundamental to understanding the ideology which lies behind texts which marry erotic language and sexuality with virginity. The first section of this chapter will establish the philosophy of ascetic eros, focussing on eroticism, desire, power and authority, exploring the dynamics of the relationships between author, subject, and audience. Of particular interest to this section are two key texts: Gregory of Nyssa’s \textit{Vita Macrinae}, and Jerome’s first epistle, addressed to his friend Innocent, which details the martyrdom of an anonymous Christian woman. These works demonstrate the two main ways in which eroticism can play out within a text, namely through reflections on the relationship between the bride of Christ and her betrothed, and the introduction of erotic language to texts which document the violent death of a woman and accord a high level of violent sexual impulse to her executioner. The philosophies of

\textsuperscript{315} Halperin, 1990, 113
\textsuperscript{316} Burrus, 2004, 4
\textsuperscript{317} Burrus, 2004, 1
Bataille will be briefly reflected on in order to understand the manner in which eroticism can reflect the ideologies of its author.

The nude body is a common feature of post-third century martyr acts, and is most often that of a young woman, inevitably a virgin. In the second part of this chapter, the association between nudity and female identity will be examined, with a view toward establishing the purpose of nudity in martyr texts, and the manner in which this contributes toward a wider theory of eroticism. Differentiating between the naked and the nude is essential, and Miles’ work on theories of carnality within Late Antiquity will be applied within this section. Prudentius’ *Peristephanon*, with its dramatic accounts of the martyrdoms of the young virgins Agnes and Eulalia, will be analysed alongside the contrasting accounts of Thecla’s near martyrdom presented within the *Acta Pauli et Theclae*, and Ambrose’s *De virginibus*. Following on from this discussion, the chapter will move on to examine the nature of erotic death itself, observing this with thoughts toward the impact of these texts upon their socio-cultural environment, and establishing the manner in which they can contribute to the construction of an identity for Christian communities, particularly when considered against pre-fourth century martyr acts. Furthermore, the potential erasure of female identity, at the expense of one for a wider society, will be examined, with a continued focus on Prudentius, and an additional analysis of the *Vita Febroniae*. In light of the conclusions established, the fourth section of this chapter will develop an uncomfortable, but necessary, discussion regarding the absence of rape within martyr acts. The lack of direct sexual violence within martyr texts is a glaring lacuna in light of the other horrific tortures enacted on the bodies of women, particularly when the tendency toward erotic, highly sexualised torture narratives is considered. Establishing the reasoning behind this absence is necessary in order to better understand the wider ramifications of narratives of erotic violence for early Christian women, in particular those who had suffered sexual assault within the violent and tumultuous late

318 Miles, 1989
antique world. Concluding this chapter is a close analysis of Jerome’s renowned twenty second epistle, sent to the young virgin Eustochium and providing an insight into the relationships between bride and Christ, teacher and student, and ascetic and the body. Cox Miller’s work on Jerome and ascetic desire will be applied within this conclusion, with the intention of expanding upon Jerome’s wildly lyrical perceptions of the female body to consider the presence of his own within the text. The parallel associations of desire with erection, and of woman with temptation, reflects the heavy phallocentrism of early Christian ideologies regarding sexuality, and the extent to which the personal identities of women were erased from such texts in favour of a masculine moral discourse. Jerome’s letter to Eustochium tells us very little of the woman herself, revealing instead the profound insecurities which wracked the mind and body of her teacher. ‘The love of God has often been a haven for women,’ stated Irigaray, however, this haven was invaded by authorities who sought to dictate how a woman should love her Divine Bridegroom, in the hope of understanding themselves, and the world in which they resided.

3.1 Desire and Power

‘Eroticism,’ argues Bataille, is a psychological quest independent of the natural goal: reproduction and desire for children. Bataille’s critical analysis of eroticism placed great emphasis upon the transgressive nature of such sexuality, noting frequently the connection of eroticism to death and suffering, which can be located either within an external object of desire, or in the body of an individual whose own personal character can gradually be eroded

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319 Augustine’s examination of the rape of women during Alaric’s sack of Rome will be considered for this analysis, as Augustine found himself in the position of counsellor to women who had suffered sexual violence.

320 Irigaray, 1993, 63

321 Bataille, 1986, 11
Eroticism is fundamentally transgressive, a sexual inclination which exists at the outer reaches of that which is acceptable, delineated by spaces and boundaries which must be broken open, revealed to the world. The bodies of young virgins in the arena function in such a manner, their physical form simultaneously closed through their resistance to sexual penetration, and thrown open through the textual illustration of their relationship to Christ. Their deaths are conceived of as marriages, the sacrificial altar becoming a bridal bed which itself invites thoughts of the sexual activity expected of a wedding night. Prudentius’ Agnes delights in the sight of her executioner, announcing that she shall ‘welcome the whole length of his blade into my bosom’ in order that she may more swiftly meet her death, and join her divine husband in the heavens, whilst Ambrose’s narrative of her death relies on parallels to the wedding procession. Eroticism is located within Agnes’ death not merely through the extensive erotic language applied to her experiences, but through the manner in which her body transgresses the limits of acceptability to engage in a desire that is utterly unrestricted, and which has no end. Her desire is not merely for physical union with a spouse, but for the limitless potential of an intimate relationship with Christ within the heavenly realm. Furthermore, her transgression extends beyond her faith to reflect the wider resistance embodied in the refusal of a young woman to marry: Agnes’

322 Bataille, 1986, 17
323 Burrus, 2004, 6
324 Prudentius, Peristephanon 14.77. ‘ferrum in papillas omne recepero’; Ambrose, Virg. 1.2.8
325 Agnes states that as Christ’s bride, she shall ‘o’erleap all the darkness of the sky and rise higher than the ether’ before bending her neck to worship Christ, in order to quicker receive the executioner’s blow (Peristephanon 14.79-80).
desire for Christ comes at the expense of an appropriate marriage to an earthly husband, with the associated expectations for children, and the continuation of a family line. Her own eroticism thus transgresses societal expectations, challenging the familial structure and the authority of earthly patriarchal figures, recalling, to an extent, the resistance of Perpetua to her father.

Bataille’s writings have been criticised for their inherent androcentrism, near-pornographic violence against women, and for presenting female figures in a manner which is ‘as one-dimensional as the worst porn.’ Although there is an undeniable thread of misogynistic tendencies which runs through his work, his reflections upon the nature of eroticism nonetheless provide an insightful structure for the analysis of fourth century texts on virgin martyrs. As discussed within the introduction to this chapter, the male erection had become directly associated with sexual sin, a terrible sensation which reminded a man of his physicality, and his inability to resist temptation. It was desire, argues Burrus, which presented the greatest sexual problem from Christianity, rather than the issues of ‘penetration and domination’ which had plagued the classical world. The erection, a symbol of desire, consequently became synonymous with the wider difficulties of sexuality which the authors of the Church wrestled with. Thus, those Late Antique texts concerned with eroticism are as androcentric as Bataille’s theories, presenting similar messages with regard to the status of women and ‘the feminine’ within a wider discourse of sexuality, and the imbalance of power when considering gendered hierarchies. By identifying these issues, and continuing to reflect on their impact when addressing the works of authors such as Jerome, Prudentius and Ambrose, a reading can be produced which removes these texts from isolation and places them in a wider social context of phallocentrism and patriarchy. Furthermore, this enables a discussion which takes into consideration the problem of power

326 Hegarty, 2000, 127. See also Goshorn (1994) on Baudrillard and the similar issue presented by Baudrillard’s theories of seduction and presentation of women, and Richlin (1998) on the application of Foucault’s History of Sexuality to the study of women.

327 Burrus, 2004, 4
and dominance, as shall be discussed further within this chapter, and the authority which an author can exert over an unwilling subject.

To Bataille, one of the fundamental markers of eroticism within the ancient world was a sense of destruction, which, he proposed, allowed ancient societies to create a link between erotic love and sacrifice. Bataille strongly emphasised the significance of gender to this development, stating that the female partner within a relationship which was characterised by eroticism served as the victim, whilst the male partner held the role of metaphorical sacrificer. If eroticism is characterised through destruction, through death, suffering and pain, it is also noteworthy that those who engage in these acts and emotions do so willingly. Gregory of Nyssa’s account of the life of his sister presents Macrina’s personal desire for Christ as increasing rapidly the closer she arrives to death, with Gregory commenting that ‘the zeal in her did not decline. Indeed, as she neared her end and saw the beauty of the Bridegroom more clearly, she rushed with greater impulse towards the One she desired (ποθούμενον).’ Macrina’s deathbed prayer to her Divine Bridegroom reveals the intensity of desire which she feels toward him, as she seemingly delights in the sufferings she has endured in his name: ‘Oh God everlasting…whom my soul has loved (ἠγάπησεν) with all its strength, to whom I have dedicated my body and my soul…I, too, have been crucified with You, having nailed my flesh to the cross for fear of You.’ For Macrina, the process of dying is an almost revelatory experience, one in which she celebrates her love for Christ and gives herself into his hands as ‘an offering (θυμίαμα),’ a brief hint toward the sacrificial language inherent to martyrdom acts. This decision to voluntarily place oneself in a position of submission to a higher power contains a somewhat paradoxical implication of

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328 Bataille, 1986, 18
329 Gregory of Nyssa, Vita Macrinae. Furthermore, the relationship between virgin and Christ is presented in terms of authority and submission, with authors such as Tertullian, Ambrose and Gregory emphasising the obedience required by virgins within this spiritual marriage. Bishops and other authorities thus introduce their own voices into the text by assuming the role of guardian, shifting the power dynamics within the Divine union by necessitating the presence of a third individual, one who translates the spiritual relationship a virgin may enjoy with Christ into an eroticised narrative which reasserts gender hierarchies, and reflects the ideologies of the author (See Castelli, 1986, 71-2).
330 Gregory of Nyssa, Vita Macrinae
331 Gregory of Nyssa, Vita Macrinae
liberation, as it is through this voluntary sacrifice that Macrina transcends earthly restrictions, rejecting her physical body in anticipation of what awaits her after death. Bataille found such actions to be fundamental to religious eroticism, which allowed for ‘the fusion of beings with a world beyond everyday reality.’\textsuperscript{332} Yet, whilst Macrina’s life concludes with a joyous exultation to her true love, it is of the utmost significance to note, as Burrus has argued, that the centrality of death to the \textit{Lives} of prominent early Christian women, and the commonalities between such works and the early martyr acts, holds the implication that women ‘must die in order to get a life.’\textsuperscript{333} For Bataille, death and eroticism are highly interconnected, and it is in the moments preceding death that virgin women are most intensely eroticised; indeed, it is the moments preceding death which occupy such a central aspect of martyr acts. In a sharp contrast to the \textit{Passio Perpetuae}, which covers Perpetua’s time in prison, her family relationships, thoughts and her visions, fourth century martyr acts focus nearly all of their attention on extended narratives of torture, and a woman’s eventual death.

The increasing prominence which was accorded to women’s bodies and their sexuality within fourth century literature lay in part in the political tensions of the church. The need to define ‘orthodoxy’ and ‘heresy’ went hand-in-hand with disputes over power within the ranks of Church authorities, with those caught up such disputes requiring a textual mechanism through which they could delineate the borders of their communities and propagate their ideologies, the female body providing such a tool. Power was a fundamental aspect of texts which featured eroticisation, having stemmed in part from the need to include a language of authority within anti-heretical texts. In the face of so-called heretical Christian cults, in which the relationship between genders was not as clearly defined as that in the orthodox church, a firmly patriarchal institution, it was necessary for Church authorities to reinforce the gender boundaries within their own communities, a practice which extended to metaphorically define the boundaries between those inside the community, and those

\textsuperscript{332} Bataille, 1986, 18
\textsuperscript{333} Burrus, 2004, 12
Martyr acts served to remind members of the community of the strength demonstrated by martyrs in the face of their persecutors, being written into communal history by Church Fathers who viewed themselves as the arbiters of right and wrong. Shaw describes Jerome’s description of a woman’s martyrdom in his first epistle as being a ‘pornography of power,’ in which the repeated attempts by various executioners to kill the woman are juxtaposed with her resistance to them in highly erotic language. If the practice of eroticisation reinforced the authority of male authors over their female subjects, erasing their identity for a perceived ‘greater good,’ notions of power must logically form a central aspect of the development of eroticisation as a narratological tradition. Irigaray notes that sexual desire itself is intimately connected to a desire for physical objects, and that in consequence of this, violence can be explained as a significant aspect of desire due to the ‘need to possess objects and the competition for their possession.’ This has a profound impact upon the presence of eroticisation in virginity texts, as the question of the identity of the competitor and the desired object becomes increasingly unclear.

The martyrdom recounted in Jerome’s first epistle, proposes Shaw, is written in ‘that rhetorical mixture of eroticism and outright pornography of which Jerome, a saint, was particularly capable.’ In witnessing the tortures applied to the woman, the governor is described as ‘feasting his eyes upon the bloody spectacle…like a wild beast,’ a phrase which serves to imply both that the governor is gaining physical satisfaction from observing the spectacle, and that he is simultaneously losing control over his physical self-restraint. The woman is capable of reducing the authoritative governor to an animalistic state, yet in consequence of her defiance she is tortured still more, with Jerome emphasising that ‘even her breasts do not escape.’ At the moment of the woman’s execution, the executioner attempts to exercise his power over his female victim, whose resistance to this serves to

334 Burrus, 1994, 44
335 Shaw, 1996, 273
336 Irigaray, 1993, 195
337 Shaw, 1996, 272
338 Jerome, Ep. 1.4
339 Jerome, Ep. 1.5. ‘...nec papillis dantur indutiae.’
partially reverse their positions (it is worth noting that whilst the woman dies, it is later made clear that she is either only seemingly dead, or has been miraculously brought back to life). The sexualised language therein is centred upon the executioner, and is dependent upon the unspoken threat of rape: his repeated efforts to physically attack the woman with his sword provide a loosely hidden analogy for attempts to sexually assault her. His sword cannot penetrate the woman as ‘the moment it touched her flesh the fatal blade stopped short,’ and Jerome’s language makes a mockery of the virility of the executioner, referring to his ‘drooping sword’ as he fails time and time again to complete his task. He is further described as ‘enraged and panting’ at the woman’s resistance to his physical power, stripping off his clothing to allow him more freedom of movement in an action which heightens the threat of direct sexual assault. The interaction between the ‘enraged and panting’ executioner, unable to exert his authority over the condemned woman, and the woman who calmly awaits her death reflects, argues Shaw, the subversion of the power and gender relations of the society in which the woman resided, wherein the male authority was expected to demonstrate values of self-control and calm authority. The woman is fearless, all but laughing in the face of death and consistently undermining the authority of her executioner and, by proxy, the society which persecutes her.

Yet despite the reversal of roles, is the woman truly the figure of power here? The story is narrated by Jerome, an external author who has the power to tell of the manner of the woman’s death and the strength which she portrays, who uses her suffering to provide an example to the Christian community, and whose decision it is to include textual eroticisation within this letter. Whilst, in this scenario, it is not the woman herself who is the direct object of erotic language (which may hinge on the fact that the woman is nowhere described as being a virgin, and has in fact been accused of adultery, making her an inappropriate vessel for such discussion), Jerome’s decision to integrate this language within the text through the

340 Jerome, Ep. 1.7. ‘gladio marcescente.’ This reference to the ‘drooping sword’ echoes the barely-hidden phallic imagery which Prudentius employs within the Passio Agnetis.
341 Jerome, Ep. 1.7. ‘…furens et anhelus…’
342 Shaw, 1996, 272
medium of the threat of sexual assault reflects the author inserting his own authority into the
text, a reminder of the fragility of the female body and its potential for destruction. Whilst
the woman is capable of resisting an execution which serves as a metaphor for her attempted
rape, her physical position throughout this event serves to further reinforce gender
hierarchies and the authority of a male executioner over a female victim, of the power of
desire and the erection over the unstable female body. 343 She kneels down on the ground in
front of the executioner, and upon the arrival of a second executioner Jerome states that ‘the
victim takes her place.’ 344 ‘Her place’ is one of highly gendered submission, permeated with
threats of sexual violence. Shaw has identified that the entire letter connects the physical
positioning of bodies with wider concepts of gender, and sexual systems of honour and
shame which are explicated at the expense of individual identity. 345 We learn very little of
the woman herself throughout the account of her martyrdom – indeed, we do not even learn
her name. The consequence of Jerome’s manner of illustrating extreme violence, both that
which is real and that which is implied, is horrifying for the woman who has already had
much of her identity erased: she must suffer, notes Shaw, both the ‘obliteration of her body’
and the textual enactment of ‘a violent sexual metaphor.’ 346 Jerome’s intense focus on
dichotomies of power within the letter, and his expression of these relations through physical
bodies, has the consequence of utterly erasing the identity of the central figure. The woman
subverts the power of her persecutors, but her power is in turn subverted by Jerome, who
uses her as a literary tool with no thought to the reality of her sufferings, or to her identity.
For Jerome, she is little more than an inanimate object, and despite his usage of a female
figure to undermine male authorities, his letter ultimately reinforces pre-existing notions of
the authority of men over necessarily submissive, sexualised women.

343 To push this point a little further, the association of desire with the erection, alongside the tangible
threat of rape, reflects back upon the manner in which sexual relations and childbirth were viewed.
Sexual interactions could result in childbirth, a continuation of the cycle of life and death which
perpetual virginity sought to eradicate, and thus the threat of sexual violence within this epistle
implies the presence of two forms of death: that of the woman within her martyrdom, and of the death
which came through childbirth in the continuation of the world.
344 Jerome, Ep. 1.11. ‘stat uictima.’ Jerome’s use of uictima, frequently seen in the context of animal
sacrifice, reinforces the sacrificial themes of martyr narratives.
345 Shaw, 1996, 304
346 Shaw, 1996, 304
The tendency to locate topics of great significance within the metaphorical physical form is prevalent throughout the works of the Church Fathers, extending to cover both male and female bodies. Women, particularly virgins, find their histories restricted to male-authored accounts in which, in the words of Burrus, men ‘distort and obscure’\textsuperscript{347} female bodies. The intertwining of eroticisation and social pressures reveals the extremity of gender-based tensions for men such as Jerome, who were wracked with self-hatred and fear of that which could cause them to stray from the path they had chosen. Underlying these issues was a rejection of power in the sense of persecution and the Empire, a rejection of Satan, desire, sex and lust, a rejection of the unwanted power which was placed upon the shoulders of women by men who believed that such women had the ability to destroy their chastity.

Baudrillard stated that ‘power seduces,’ his belief in this fact relying on his theory that the very idea of power suggests that it can be reversed.\textsuperscript{348} Such a thought is reflected extensively within female martyrdom acts: authority is granted to a young woman who has overcome immense suffering on behalf of the community and who has undermined the power accorded to her persecutors. Yet by virtue of this very power, she holds the potential to disrupt the social restrictions placed on gender, and thus the very narrative of a martyr act attempts to reverse the power status once more, with textual eroticisation serving to reinforce social hierarchy and place the female subject in a place of gendered submission. Thecla exhibited great strength and power within her life, particularly through the endurance she exhibited during two attempted martyrdoms, yet Ambrose sees her tale as one which provides a model for submission, a woman who could ‘teach you how to be offered.’\textsuperscript{349} In light of this, the frequent threats of sexual assault, particularly those which are metaphorical, can be interpreted as an additional form of power play, in which the indirect hints toward the potential for the destruction of a woman’s integrity become a mechanism which enables male authors to assert their power over an authoritative woman. Consequently, the image painted of martyrs, of virgins who misbehaved and virgins who were radically ascetic, is one

\textsuperscript{347} Burrus, 1994, 45
\textsuperscript{348} Baudrillard, 1990, 45
\textsuperscript{349} Ambrose, Virg. 2.3.19
twisted for a multitude of cultural purposes, and warped by the language of power and eroticisation.

3.2 Nudity and Identity

The naked body lies at the heart of many martyrdom acts: even Perpetua and Felicitas find themselves stripped naked and forced into the arena. For some female martyrs, nudity is forced upon them before they have even reached the area of their death, with Agnes being compelled to stand naked within the square during her trial (a violation which has dire consequences for those who gaze upon her, as one such individual is ‘blinded by the gleaming flash’ of a thunderbolt).\textsuperscript{350} The decision of pagan authorities to have female martyrs placed naked into the arena contributes to the sense of shame and humiliation with which their deaths were designed to be associated, yet, as was previously noted, Christian martyrs undermined the powers who persecuted them within their own martyrdoms. Nudity is not presented as being an aspect through which martyrs could display resistance to the Empire, and indeed exists within a complex network of power relations, and of authors asserting their authority over the bodies of young women whose lives saw them try to defy this. It is notable that within Perpetua and Felicitas’ martyrdom, which occurred prior to the development of textual eroticisation, the crowd reacts negatively to their nakedness and ‘shuddered, seeing that one was a delicate young girl and that the other had recently given birth.’\textsuperscript{351} Perpetua and Felicitas are consequently removed from the arena and provided with clothes. The sympathy of the crowd for the young age of Perpetua is not reflected within later acts, and despite the emphasis upon the fact that Agnes is ‘a young girl, in her earliest

\textsuperscript{350} Prudentius, \textit{Peristephanon} 14.48 \\
\textsuperscript{351} \textit{Passio Perpetuae} 20
years, scarcely fit for the marriage bed,’\textsuperscript{352} her naked body is placed in a position of centrality to the audiences of both her trial, and the text itself. Margaret Miles’ work on the significance of naked bodies within early Christianity extensively explores the symbolism of the naked woman, and Miles emphasises the necessity of differentiating between a naked body, and a nude one. Referring back to a lecture given by Kenneth Clark at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, Miles notes that in establishing the difference between naked and nude, Clark does not fully acknowledge the gender imbalance present within the debate. Within nude paintings, the subject is typically a woman, being drawn by a male painter who ‘eliminates the “small imperfections” and creates a body of idealised proportions.’\textsuperscript{353} The naked body is one of imperfections, contrasting to the nude, perfect body. For Clark, argues Miles, the transition from a naked body to a formal nude is characterised by the erasure of identity for the body in question, as in the process of removing the imperfections of a body, its ‘individuality and personality’ are additionally made absent.\textsuperscript{354}

Within texts which recount the martyrdom of young virgin women, the narrative of male authors surrounding the moment in which a female martyr is stripped naked emphasises the beauty of the woman in question above all else, the perfection of the unclothed bride of Christ thus allowing her to be read as a nude. Prudentius refers to Eulalia’s ‘fragrant hair’ and ‘the grace of her maidenhood,’\textsuperscript{355} describing the final moments of her death in an almost lyrical manner as he locates erotic language heavily within her body. Conversely, the shock the audience express at the nakedness of Perpetua and Felicitas is in part dependent upon

\textsuperscript{352} Prudentius, Peristephanon 14.11-12. ‘aiunt iugali uix habilem toro primis in annis forte puellulam Christo calentem…’ Thomson’s translation has been adapted here in order to emphasise the centrality of Agnes’ perceived sexuality to the text, as Thomson states that Agnes is ‘scarce yet marriageable,’ a translation which does not take into the account the subtleties of \textit{toro}, with its connotations of the bridal bed, a sharp reminder of the role for which Agnes is destined. Prudentius describes Agnes as being a \textit{puellulam}, emphasising that she is barely more than a child and creating an uncomfortable tension between her youth and the sexuality being placed upon her, which she will simultaneously embrace through her speech, but reject though her death and ascension as Christ’s bride.

\textsuperscript{353} Miles, 1989, 13

\textsuperscript{354} Miles, 1989, 14

\textsuperscript{355} Prudentius, Peristephanon 3.151-154. ‘Crinis odorus ut in iugulos fluxerat inuolitans umeris, quo pudibunda pudicitia virgineusque lateret honos tegmine uerticis opposito.’
Felicitas’ physical state post-pregnancy: the author notes that her breasts were ‘still dripping with milk,’ a definitive physical imperfection which causes a reaction from the crowd, and marks Felicitas’ body as naked, rather than nude. Within early Christian society, the naked body was not initially associated with notions of sexuality and desire, and the almost pornographic usage of nudity which can be located within fourth-century texts was notably absent. Nakedness, argues Miles, was first associated with ‘the innocence, fragility, and vulnerability of human bodies in their initial creation,’ reflecting back upon Adam and Eve’s almost childlike nakedness before the Fall. It also, she notes, directly related to virginity. However, there existed a vast difference between the perception of a naked male body, and that of the naked female, as whilst the male body came to symbolise spiritual strength, the female body became associated with physicality, the ties of the world and the sin which lay therein. The presence of naked bodies in early Christian literature served to reinforce the ideology which lay behind gender hierarchy, as a naked man stood for notions of discipline and rationality, whilst a naked woman served to remind audiences of the Fall from perfection into sin, and of the sexual lust which was inherent to women. As a prominent aspect of martyr acts, nakedness was intertwined with humiliation and suffering, echoing pre-existing social reflections on the state of being naked that connected it to those in positions of social impotency, such as prostitutes and slaves. Yet, in direct religious reflection (which in itself can be located within certain martyr acts), the very act of being publicly exposed demonstrated an individual rejecting a fallen, pagan society. ‘To be stripped of clothing,’ argues Miles, ‘was to be stripped of secular socialisation.’

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356 *Passio Perpetuae* 20
357 Miles, 1989, xi. Aspegren (1990, 123) notes that Philo observed Adam and Eve as being ‘childlike, that is, asexual’ within the Garden of Eden, whilst Shaw argues that the nakedness of Adam and Eve within the garden is tied closely to the clothing which they weave, after they have realised their state of being. Utilising Scarry’s interpretation of the Genesis story, Shaw posits that the making of clothing is the first step Adam and Eve take toward participation in the physical, material world – the fallen world which virgins were trying to disentangle themselves from. Virgins and ascetics enacted certain behaviours (such as fasting) which were hoped to facilitate a return to paradise, and thus a return to a state of being in which sexual desire, and indeed gender, would have no place (Shaw, 1999b, 173-198).
358 Miles, 1989, xi; Sissa, 2008, 186
359 Miles, 1989, 82
360 Miles, 1989, 81; Clark, G., 1998a, 103
on the violence done to virgin women in his accounts of the Arian controversy, Athanasius stated that ‘virgins were stripped,’ his discussion of their forced public nakedness serving to emphasise the shame and humiliation to which they were made subject (in this particular text, it is also heavily implied that the women in question were raped), and the utter wickedness of the Arian community that they would engage in such violence. For Athanasius, the naked body here takes on a greater symbolism, as the virgins in question belonged to his flock, and were thus representatives of his church. The unpenetrated virgin reflected the unpenetrated church, free from sexual desires or heretical doctrines, and for her to be stripped naked suggested the stripping of Athanasius’ own church, a challenge to its dignity and integrity.

In contrast to this, when the Thecla of the Acta Pauli et Theclae is dragged naked into the arena not once, but twice, her naked body is a direct statement of the great strength which lies within her. During her first near-martyrdom, ‘the governor wept and marvelled at the power that was in her,’ and no more is said of Thecla’s nakedness, with the text focussing instead on her bravery in the face of death, and the divine intervention which saves her. For Bataille, the action of stripping naked opened up the individual to a world of internal and external experiences of the self. It is, he stated, ‘a decisive action,’ one which impacts strongly upon the perceptions of others due to the extremity of the action, which consequently causes the word ‘obscenity’ to be attached to the naked individual. This word, he argued, is dependent in part on the social expectations that revolve around self-possession, and which members of a community are expected to demonstrate. To find strength in nakedness subverts concepts of correct behaviour, and thus is perceived as negative by those who have restricted themselves in the accepted manner. Indeed, during Thecla’s second attempted martyrdom, when the young woman finds herself once more stripped naked, she seizes the opportunity and baptises herself within the arena, with the

361 Athanasius, Apol. sec. 1.30. παρθένοι ἐγυμνώθησαν
362 Thec. 22
363 Bataille, 1986, 17
364 Bataille, 1986, 17
consequence that ‘neither did the beasts touch her, nor was she seen to be naked.’ For Thecla, an action designed to be humiliating and shameful finds itself transformed into a redemptive opportunity to seal her relationship with Christ and confirm her faith in him, her baptism in the water mirroring that of blood experienced by martyrs within the arena. Upon being given clothing and released, Thecla thanks ‘he who clad me when I was naked among the beasts,’ stating that on the day of judgement, he ‘will clothe me with salvation,’ her robes representing the divine interventions which saved her within the arena, and confirming her baptism into her faith, her experience in the arena more as one of rebirth, rather than humiliation.

The characterisation of Thecla within this text is radically different to that seen within Ambrose’s account, and indeed Ambrose not only makes Thecla’s nudity a central point of the narrative, but changes some key details in order to reduce the centrality of women to Thecla’s tale, and introduce an implication of male sexual dominance. Within the Acta, Thecla is defended in the arena by a lioness, whilst an audience of women ‘cried aloud’ and later ‘bewailed yet more, seeing that the lioness also that succoured her was dead.’ Ambrose, however, replaces the female lioness with a male lion, a creature whose vicious nature is erased in Thecla’s presence: ‘the beast was to be seen lying on the ground, licking her feet, showing without a sound that it could not injure the sacred body of the virgin.’

The lion, argues Boyarin, represents the sexual dominance and cruel nature of both men and the Roman Empire itself, which can be overcome by the strength of a virgin martyr. Its radical transformation thus demonstrates the power of the divine virgin in the face of Pagan sexual dominance, with Ambrose rewriting a story which initially privileged female unity as one which utilised the body of the Christian virgin to create barriers between rival social groups, and to illustrate the overwhelming strength of Christian faith. ‘So the beast

365 Thec. 34
366 Thec. 38; see also Matthew 25:36 and Revelation 19:6-9.
367 Thec. 33
368 Ambrose, Virg. 2.3.20. ‘…sacrum virginis corpus violare non posse.’
369 Boyarin, 1999, 74
reverenced his prey,\textsuperscript{370} writes Ambrose, his description of Thecla as ‘prey’ serving as a reminder of her reduced position within his text. Thecla is no longer the ally of a lioness in a show of united female strength, but rather a sexualised victim of a dominant male beast who has taken pity on her, and who, despite his supposed respect for her, cannot keep himself from physically touching the virgin’s body, placing a ‘kiss (exosculantur)\textsuperscript{371} upon her feet. Indeed, Thecla turned away from the leering crowd and ‘offered her vital parts (vitalia) to a fierce lion,’ an action which focalises her nudity and suggests that its public exposure transcends the view of those in the arena as, rather than exposing herself to an crowd of anonymous spectators, she turns her sexual organs toward the representative of the Empire itself. Whereas Thecla’s nudity reflects her own theological journey within the apocryphal text, Ambrose accords to it a significance which can be extended to defend his own beliefs regarding virgins, and to criticise the immorality of the non-Christian audience, simultaneously condemning the ‘immodest looks (impudicos…oculos)’ of those in the crowd and redirecting the gaze of the literary audience to Thecla’s naked body.\textsuperscript{372} Thecla calms the beast, taming the Empire and its bubbling undertones of sexual voracity; the allure of the text hinges on the precarious nature of her integrity, which could be destroyed at any second by the rapacious hunger of the lion. If one virgin was capable of such strength in the face of seemingly unstoppable violence, how much more strength could Ambrose’s church then gain through the presence of the many virgins in his congregation, learning through their bishop how to be sacrificed in the manner of Thecla.

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\textsuperscript{370}Ambrose, Virg. 2.3.20. ‘Ergo adorabat praedam suam bestia…’ \textsuperscript{371}Ambrose, Virg. 2.3.20  
\textsuperscript{372}Ambrose, Virg. 2.3.19  
\end{flushright}
3.3 Erotic Death

The varying presentations of the naked female body within martyr acts exist alongside deeply eroticised accounts of their suffering and death. Such narratives recount horrific levels of torture which serve to illustrate the strength of the martyr, and the wickedness of her persecutors, yet in and of themselves the acts receive little direct condemnation, being presented in a manner which is at times clinical. Thecla is stripped naked in the arena but ultimately escapes the physical torment and death experienced by women such as Febronia, Agnes and Eulalia, whose torments are described in erotic language similar to that of Ambrose in his account of Thecla’s near-martyrdom. The narratives regarding their deaths take the eroticism of Ambrose to extreme lengths, integrating erotic imagery and language with graphic accounts of bodily mutilation, and heavily implied sexual threats. There is, observes Clark, a fundamental difference in the impact of tortured male and female bodies within ancient texts. Whilst the tortures which men and women undergo are often very similar in nature, the implications of an exposed female body were far greater than those of a male, as the public nakedness of a woman ‘marked that woman as sexually available.’ In martyr acts, the focus upon the tortured bodies of women, placed alongside threats of sexual assault (as noted earlier in relation to Jerome’s first epistle) thus requires the intentions of the authors, and the reception of the text by readers, to be scrutinised in greater detail. The problematic nature of the prevalence of eroticised torture relates directly to the previously-discussed centralisation of naked female bodies in martyr acts, in that the commonality of such a trope implies that audiences had come to expect such horrors to feature within narratives, and to be intertwined with erotic language. Heffernan has noted a similar theme within martyr acts which found popularity in the early Middle Ages, observing that in order for the audience of these texts to receive ‘some degree of titillation,’ the text in question had to contain an underlying criticism of sexuality itself, thus serving the purpose of

373 Clark, G., 1998a, 103
374 Heffernan, 1988, 282
allowing the audience to gain a certain level of pleasure from the texts, whilst simultaneously ensuring that they felt some level of shame at their actions. The erotic desire present in these texts, he argues, ‘could only have been derived from a narrative which maltreated the desired but forbidden object’ (and which thus placed sexuality in a negative context), as in order for the texts to be read in public, or freely circulated, a certain moralising discourse had to present within them. For texts such as that of Agnes’ martyrdom, Heffernan’s theory applies well: Agnes is a heavily eroticised figure who is tortured extensively, a moralising reflection upon the crimes of the pagan Empire, whilst her sexualised interactions with the executioner (presented in the guise of a potential rapist) serves to associate rampant sexuality with the immoral Roman Empire, thus presenting both the persecutors and sexuality itself in a negative light.

An additional consistency among female martyrs is their young age and physical appearance, with their beauty in particular serving as a focal point of the narrative, and often a motive for persecutors. The martyr Febronia is described as ‘of extremely handsome appearance: her face and features were so beautiful that the eye could never be sated by gazing upon her.’ Febronia’s beauty is repeatedly referred to within the text, and indeed is given as a reason for her martyrdom. Upon hearing that soldiers will raid the convent in which they reside, Febronia’s fellow virgin Thomais states that ‘if we are arrested by the soldiers, the tyrants will quickly put us two to death as we are both old women, but they will grab you, seeing that you are young and beautiful, and they will upset you with their advancements and words of seducement.’ So great is Febronia’s beauty that after witnessing her terrible death, Lysimachos, the man to whom she had been offered marriage if she renounced her faith, is overcome with distress and ultimately converts to Christianity. Thus, the torture and death of a beautiful young woman serves as a mechanism for a conversion to Christianity by her male, pagan oppressor, whilst the focus on her physical beauty alongside her torture causes

375 Heffernan, 1988, 282
376 Vita Febroniae 5
377 Vita Febroniae 14. Ἐὰν οὖν συλληφθόμεν, καὶ κολακευτικὸς λόγος παρακάλεσιν σε, μὴ πεισθεὶς αὐτοῖς.
Febronia to become a heavily eroticised subject of textual desire. Thomais’ premonition transpires to be true, as whilst she and her fellow elderly virgin Byrene are cast aside by the soldiers, Febronia is taken captive, with the judges of her trial repeatedly commenting on her physical appearance. While first her beauty causes Selenos, a leader in the persecution, to ‘overcome the force’ of his anger toward her, her consequent rejection of marriage offers due to her devotion to Christ causes him to turn on Febronia, accusing her of enjoying the humiliation which he attempts to force upon her: ‘I know very well that you are proud of your shapely features, and that is why you do not think it a shame or disgrace to stand there with your body naked.’ Like many of her fellow virgin martyrs, Febronia is of a marriageable age, and instantly becomes an object of desire for her persecutors, whose offer of marriage is reliant in part on their desire to place Febronia back into a social position which can be controlled, and through which she can return to fulfilling her natural, and expected, social destiny. The repeated emphasis on Febronia’s beauty and nakedness serve to place her as an object of erotic desire, a literary nude, both to the onlookers at her trial and the audience of the text itself as, in a similar manner to Ambrose’s account of Thecla, the author consistently directs the gaze of the audience toward Febronia’s body.

Febronia is consequently tortured to a horrific extent, with the removal of her breasts granted an extensive description. Selenos orders that ‘those members of the impudent girl’s body that provide milk be cut off,’ and following on from this command the narrator states that ‘the doctor straightaway took a surgeon’s knife and approached the girl.’ The process of cutting Febronia’s breasts off is dragged out uncomfortably, and when the surgeon initially

378 Vita Febroniae 22
379 Vita Febroniae 24
380 It is perhaps of relevance to note here the debate surrounding the authorship of Febronia’s martyrdom. The author claims to be Thomais, the same virgin who lived with Febronia but, as Brock and Ashbrook Harvey (1987) have noted, it is highly unlikely (due to issues such as the dating of the text) that Thomais wrote this text. Whilst Brock and Ashbrook Harvey note that it is not impossible for this text to have been written by a woman, the emphasis on sexualised torture, Febronia’s naked body, and the thread of erotisation which runs through this text would imply that it was directed at a heterosexual male audience, to whom the erotisation would (in an ancient context) appeal most greatly (See Burrus, who notes the heteroeroticism prevalent in martyr acts/hagiographies which are definitively authored by men, who view the text as a medium through which to interact with their own identities (2004, 59)).
381 Vita Febroniae 27
hesitates to carry out the act, Selenos must repeat his command to ‘cut them off.’\textsuperscript{382} The specificity of the surgeon’s presence, rather than that of an executioner, the manner in which he ‘approached (προσελθ\\ ν\\ ο\\ ν)’ the tortured woman, and the consequent cries from the crowd to spare Febronia place the audience of the text in a position of terrible anticipation, awaiting the inevitable. Febronia is naked and bound in the middle of the arena, awaiting further torture, and as the slow process of removing her breasts (‘the doctor took up the surgeon’s knife, and as he was starting to cut off the girl’s right breast…’)\textsuperscript{383} begins, the image created is one of a deeply misogynistic suspense, in which a beautiful, naked woman is tortured in a specifically sexual manner that is drawn out to increase the impact of the text itself. After the surgeon has eventually finished, her breasts are ‘thrown to the ground,’\textsuperscript{384} an action so dismissive that it dehumanises the young woman, reducing her to a series of parts to be gradually dismembered. The prevalence of the torture of women’s breasts within martyr acts has been analysed by Heffernan, who states that this particular performance forms one of the two central aspects of the eroticisation of female virgins, the other being the emphasis on the nudity of female saints.\textsuperscript{385} Selenos refers to Febronia’s breasts as being objects which ‘provide milk,’ a direct reference to the maternal function of breasts and a reflection of the ancient male perception of women’s sexuality as being inherently connected to childbearing. Heffernan holds that this connection is a central aspect of the ideology which lay behind the necessity of the torture of breasts to female martyr acts, which itself contains strong implications within the context of eroticisation and sexuality. This action, he argues, reflects the transformation which is inherent to the life and death of a female martyr: the virgin enters the arena and announces her desire to be a bride of Christ, transforming into this through her death, whilst in the aftermath of her death she can be assimilated with both the bride of Christ and Mary, the mother of God. This evolution echoes the notion, argued in

\textsuperscript{382} Vita Febroniae 27
\textsuperscript{383} Vita Febroniae 27
\textsuperscript{384} Vita Febroniae 28
\textsuperscript{385} Heffernan, 1988, 279. The action of disrobing, argues Heffernan, is based on the ‘typological paradigm’ of Christ prior to the crucifixion, and when applied in relation to a female body introduces a level of eroticism to the event which is absent from that of Christ.
the previous chapter, that virgins are symbolically the mother of the Church, itself an extension of Christ. For Heffernan, the martyr’s tortured breasts serve as a physical demonstration of this development, reflecting the ‘miraculous metamorphosis’ of the virgin into a near-divine mother, and allowing the virgin to physically demonstrate her ascension in a manner close to the stigmata of Christ.\textsuperscript{386} Such an interpretation is powerfully symbolic for the women who wished to become brides of Christ, yet the sheer brutality of the event, coupled with the specific connotations of sexuality which are accorded to breasts, cannot be ignored.

This violent form of gender-specific torture has the additional impact of desecrating a woman’s earthly, physical sexuality (whilst prioritising male sexuality through the underlying implications of desire for a naked, beautiful woman), in a move which may further be interpreted as erasing aspects of the female body in order to allow a movement toward the masculine. More significantly, the action of removing the breasts reasserts the authority of a male persecutor with regard to the sexual power he holds over the victim. By physically removing an aspect of the body which is directly associated with sexuality and maternity, the judge reasserts his authority over the body of the young girl through a graphically visual attempt to destroy her sexuality. The price that women such as Febronia must pay for refusing marriage is to have their physical sexuality utterly destroyed. The text thus reveals an underlying sense of the ownership which male civic authorities felt toward women who resided within their cities, with Selenos holding violent torture to be a viable solution to the young woman’s refusal to marry Lysimachos, a physical demonstration of the authority which he hold over her. Indeed, reflecting on the conclusion of the text, the sharing of Febronia’s relics with the Christian community of the city continues with this theme, as her tooth becomes the property of the bishops of the city, who through such a gift will inevitably see an increase in their own status.\textsuperscript{387} The textualisation of Febronia’s

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\textsuperscript{386} Heffernan, 1988, 283
\textsuperscript{387} Vita Febroniae 41-42. The bishops expose the tooth to a large crowd, with the sick in the audience consequently being healed, and the crowd swells in number with many people coming to observe the
martyrdom and the inclusion of erotic language therein, alongside the physical treatment of her body by her persecutors, reduces her to the sum total of her parts, an object to be manipulated by multiple figures (judge, executioner, author) who seek to demonstrate their authority over her body in an attempt to assert their own cultural values. The eroticism of the text relies on the early descriptions of Febronia as she is stripped naked, the audience’s gaze directed toward her body, which is repeatedly referred back to throughout the narrative in terms which emphasise its beauty.\textsuperscript{388} Thus, the eroticism is directly linked with the torture which Febronia undergoes, existing alongside and within it, with abuse and arousal interlinked in a display which culminates with a physical attack on the woman’s sexuality, the brutal removal of her breasts. After this event, many of the audience leave in disgust at the violence, whilst the tortures that follow are more scattered, presented with a carelessness which suggests that the focus has been lost.\textsuperscript{389} Now that Selenos has been able to truly punish Febronia for her resistance to marriage, alter her physical state irreparably and erase the bodily parts which hinted toward the woman’s potential sexuality, all other torture loses its power, becoming gratuitous. At the moment in which the severance begins, Febronia falls silent, and does not speak again throughout the text, as her own arguments have ceased to be necessary: all that is required now is the final stroke of the axe, the death which will mark the concluding aspect of her transformation. The audience begins to leave, unwilling to watch the final moments of the terrible spectacle, but the hagiographer continues to write, and the reader continues to follow his words, with the near-voyeuristic aspects of tales such as those of Febronia and Thecla serving to place the reader within the complex power networks already at work within the tale. Despite not seeing, we do not turn away, but instead read on to the inevitable conclusion. The judge and executioner exert violence on Febronia’s body, resorting to crueler methods as she continues to proclaim her betrothal to relic. The bishops had originally attempted to remove Febronia’s corpse from the convent to which it had been brought, but a clap of thunder caused them to realise that Febronia wished her body to remain within her home. Nonetheless, they are still able to remove part of her body and utilise it to their advantage, itself a further dismemberment of the martyr.

\textsuperscript{388} See Heffernan, 1988, 274.

\textsuperscript{389} Bored of the events, Lysimachos asks of Selenos ‘what else have you got in store for this wretched girl? Come on, it is time to eat’ (\textit{Vita Febroniae} 31); see Burrus, 2004, 59.
Christ. Febronia’s hagiographer exerts violence on her textual body, providing an account of her sufferings which is deeply eroticised and painting sexuality onto the figure of a woman who sought to resist this in her earthly life.

Whilst Febronia represents a more extreme account of eroticised violence, her death is one of many overtly eroticised death narratives within martyr acts. Agnes, featured in both Ambrose and Prudentius, is another such virgin whose death is replete with metaphors for sexual violence, and a focus on her emphatically female body. Ambrose’s account, less extensive than that of Prudentius, gives great priority to Agnes’ youth, commenting on her ‘tender age’ and questioning, in the first of many sexualised comments, whether ‘there was room for a wound in that small body.’ Burrus notes Ambrose’s emphasis on Agnes’ age, which runs parallel to multiple threats for sexual violence and serves to contrast the potential for penetration with the eventual preservation of Agnes’ virginity, the male authorities who punish her being unable to demonstrate their authority over her physical, sexual body. Agnes, Ambrose writes, offered ‘her whole body to the sword of the raging soldier,’ being not fearful of physical torment and resisting the ‘threats the executioner used to make her fear him,’ and the ‘allurements (blanditiis)’ with which he attempted to persuade her to reverse her decision. Such language positions Agnes as a figure of erotic desirability for the reader and, Burrus argues, serves to transfer the emphasis of the tale from the realities of her martyrdom to her physical virginity, and the potential for it to be brutally erased.

Prudentius follows a similar narrative pattern, with his text utilising erotic imagery to a more extreme level than Ambrose chooses to. His Agnes goes as far as to refer to the executioner as ‘this lover (hic amator)’ whilst the threat of rape within the text is made more of a close reality than that of Ambrose, as the naked Agnes is initially sentenced to a brothel before being taken straight to the place of execution. In the speech which Prudentius’ Agnes gives

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390 Ambrose, Virg. 1.2.7. ‘Fuitne in illo corpusculo vulneri locus?’
391 Burrus, 1994, 29
392 Ambrose, Virg. 1.2.7. ‘…nunc furentis mucroni militis totum offerre corpus.’
393 Ambrose, Virg. 1.2.9
394 Burrus, 1994, 27
to the executioner, the author utilises the virgin’s own sexuality extensively, as Agnes uses highly erotic language in her acceptance of death. Upon catching sight of the executioner, who stands with his ‘naked sword (mucrone nudo),’ Agnes rejoices at the ‘savage, cruel, wild man-at-arms’ who is to be her executioner, welcoming this man who is ‘coming to destroy me with the death of my honour.’ Prudentius’ wording throughout this speech makes sexual assault all but a reality, and indeed his use of ‘perderet’ for Agnes’ destruction, a term which implies notions of ruin, alongside the girl’s claim that her honour shall die at his arrival, implies that Agnes not only expects rape, but somehow, inexplicably, welcomes it. The arena of Agnes’ death thus becomes a location in which she can enact her wedding, her wedding night, and her funeral. This speech, Burrus suggests, provides a metaphor for Agnes’ eventual sexual union with the divine bridegroom, with the executioner’s sword serving as the penis which will take her virginity, an acceptance of the sexual encounter which she escaped in her near confinement to a brothel. The manipulation of Agnes’ sexuality within her martyr acts places her as an intensely erotic figure, and additionally reflects Heffernan’s argument that eroticised texts necessarily feature a criticism of sexuality: here, Agnes’ desire for the executioner is so profoundly erotic as to be obscene, and is intimately connected to her suffering and death.

Eroticism within martyr acts stems directly from the torture which a martyr is forced to endure, and thus, concludes Heffernan, ‘is inseparable from the debasement of her sexuality.’ It exists alongside extreme torture and a desirous acceptance of death, manipulating female sexuality in order to create a tale which simultaneously eroticises young virgin girls for the awaiting (male) audience, and which subverts the multiple intricacies of power to return these girls to gendered inferiority, degrading the sexuality of

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395 Prudentius, Peristephanon 14.68; 14.69-73. ‘Exulto, talis quod potius uenit, uaesanus, atrox, turbidus, armiger quam si ueniret languidus ac tener mollisque ephebus tintus aromate, qui me pudoris funere perderet.’
396 Burrus, 1995, 36. Ross comments of this paragraph that it ‘leaves no doubt that Agnes views her union with Christ like the physical consummation of an earthly marriage,’ with her death opening a door to an endless spiritual fertility (1995, 342).
397 Heffernan, 1988, 282
women to provide a flicker of moralisation, and utterly extinguishing their identity. For Prudentius, argues Ross, the very act of recording a martyrdom is central to his own self-identity, enabling him to position himself within the texts in relation to both martyr and Christ, the act of writing becoming a form of salvation.\textsuperscript{398} Within the second chapter of the \textit{Peristephanon}, Prudentius appeals directly to Christ by asking him to ‘hear the prayer of Prudentius’ as it is through ‘the advocacy of the martyrs (\textit{patronos martyras})’ that the poet ‘may attain healing,’ his inscription of the sacrifices made by those who provided a witness to God serving as an act of faith, an ascetic practice in itself.\textsuperscript{399} Indeed, Prudentius’ account of the death of Eulalia, Agnes’ fellow virgin martyr, transforms the girl’s body into a written text through his description of the wounds inflicted upon her chest. ‘See, Lord,’ Prudentius has his Eulalia state, ‘thy name is being written on me. How I love to read these letters, for they record thy victories, O Christ, and the very scarlet of the blood that is drawn speaks the holy name.’\textsuperscript{400} The union of Agnes and Eulalia with Christ additionally reflects the ideologies seen within texts such as Methodius’ \textit{Symposium}, and Helia’s \textit{Vita}, wherein Divine Union enables a virgin to become spiritually fertile, adopting a maternal role within her community and gaining a myriad of children in the form of the faithful. Eulalia’s tomb provides her city, Emerita, with numerous benefits, whilst the virgin herself, sitting at the feet of God, ‘views all our doings’ and ‘cherishes her people.’\textsuperscript{401} The area surrounding her tomb is described by Prudentius as a ‘rose-covered meadow blushing with varied blooms,’ which he encourages his readers to pluck as they are ever-fertile, and will survive even the bitterest winters, collecting them becoming an act of thanks for Eulalia.\textsuperscript{402} As for the poet himself, he provides a gift for the girl not of fertile wildflowers, but of fertile words,

\textsuperscript{398} Ross, 1995, 327
\textsuperscript{399} Prudentius, \textit{Peristephanon} 2.579-582. Ross proposes that for Prudentius, ‘textualisation is a form of ascetic discipline,’ with the conclusions of his poems (the ascent to heaven of the martyr’s soul) demonstrating the manner in which the martyr, or ascetic, can transcend the earthly, fallen world to abide with God (1995, 330-331).
\textsuperscript{400} \textit{Peristephanon} 3.136-140. ‘Scriberis ecce mihi, domine, quam iuuat hos apices legere, qui tua, Christe, tropea notant, nomen et ipsa sacrum loquitur purpura sanguinis eliciti.’ Prudentius does not directly state that Eulalia’s breasts are tortured, in the manner discussed with regard to Febronia, but does emphasise the rending of her upper chest and sides, which certainly implies the torture of the breasts. Eulalia’s chest, he notes, is ‘girlish, virgineum.’ (\textit{Peristephanon} 3.133).
\textsuperscript{401} Prudentius, \textit{Peristephanon} 3.213-215
\textsuperscript{402} Prudentius, \textit{Peristephanon} 3.199-207
‘garlands wreathed of dactylic measures, of little worth and faded, but still joyous.’

His textualisation of Eulalia is thus designed to honour both martyr and poet, the eroticisation of Eulalia’s union with Christ an extension of the poet’s own desire to establish a relationship with the Divine which will ensure his own salvation. Death and life are intimately intertwined within Prudentius’ narratives, with the destruction of the physical body an event to be celebrated, instilling into fourth century tradition a subliminal necrophilia.

3.4 Sexual Violence

Prudentius’ Agnes is saved from the brothel by a chance flash of lightning, which blinds a man who stares lustfully at her naked body and causes the judge to take her straight to her place of execution. Ambrose tells of a virgin who, having been condemned to a brothel, is saved when a soldier who visits her is revealed to secretly be Christian, and who consequently disguises the woman in his uniform in order to allow her to escape. The very action of placing a woman in a brothel contains the clear implication of punishment through sexual violence, a fact noted by Tertullian, whose observations suggest that those who wished to persecute Christians had realised the importance of chastity and virginity to the faithful.

Both Ambrose and Tertullian additionally recount the tales of young virgin martyrs whose experiences are illustrated through a heavily sexualised narrative ripe with metaphors for violent sexual assault, and yet, despite the brutality exhibited by their persecutors, there are no occurrences of rape recorded within martyrdom acts. This is omission is somewhat striking: the punishments performed upon the bodies of martyrs were horrific, designed to humiliate, desecrate and exert authority, and it is unlikely that sexual assault, with its connotations of shame, would not be considered an aspect of this

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403 Prudentius, Peristephanon 3.208-210. ‘ast ego serta choro in medio texta feram pede dactylicto…’
404 Prudentius, Peristephanon 14.27-56; Ambrose, Virg. 2.4.22-2.4.33
405 Tertullian, Apol. 50
punishment. Indeed, Moriarty has suggested that Perpetua’s gender-transformation vision may reflect her ‘wish to avoid the customary rape of female victims,’ whilst Miles proposes that Thecla’s decision to cut her hair and dress as a man was carried out in order that she could avoid the prospect of rape on her travels. The possibility of sexual violence for early Christian women was very real, with another of Ambrose’s accounts of martyrdom telling the story of a young woman named Pelagia, her mother and her sisters, who became the victims of persecution despite their initial attempts to hide. Pelagia, states Ambrose, saw herself ‘surrounded by those who would rob her of her faith and purity,’ and consequently committed suicide to prevent herself from experiencing sexual violation. Her would-be rapists, having ‘lost the prey of her chastity (praedam pudoris),’ proceeded to pursue her mother and sisters, who drowned themselves in order to avoid such a fate.

Given the profound impact which martyr acts had upon early Christian society, their enduring influence throughout Late Antiquity, and the manner in which they functioned to guide Christians throughout any trials or suffering which they underwent, this absence of direct sexual violence potentially contains powerful ramifications for Christian women who were themselves victims of rape. As Clark comments, if we read martyr acts as a possible source of empowerment to women, through the granting of a prominent role within holy war, ‘women might particularly be expected to reassure women that rape is not the destruction of their essential self and their personal integrity.’ The juxtaposition of the erotic language of Christian authors with the very real threat of rape which women faced, but which is insinuated rather than directly addressed, illustrates the desires of Church authors to manipulate female bodies which could not be controlled by their authority as they had fallen victim to an immoral establishment, and whose sufferings the Fathers could only influence in a textual manner. Once more, the issue of power and authority with regard to Christian women arises when considering condemnation to a brothel. In the Acts of Andrew,

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406 Moriarty, 1998, 9; Miles, 1989, 55
407 Ambrose, Virg. 3.7.33. ‘…cum se a praedonibus fidei vel purdoris circumсидерi videret.’
408 Ambrose, Virg. 3.7.34
409 Clark, G., 1998a, 107
Trophima, a Christian convert who refuses to engage in sexual relations with her husband in light of her new faith, is sent to a brothel, from which she manages to escape. Despite the escape, argues Kramer, ‘the fact remains that the woman who renounced acceptable forms of sexual behaviour in favour of celibacy is doomed to the most degrading form of the very sociosexual identity she has rejected – prostitution.’\textsuperscript{410} The power of male authority is demonstrated through the response of the judge to her decision: if she will not voluntarily engage in sexual relations, she will be forced into them in a humiliating manner. Her escape from the brothel, as with those in Ambrose and Prudentius, demonstrates Christian authors re-asserting control over the fates of the women whose lives they recount, in order that these tales can tell the stories which are best suited to their environment. In Ambrose’s account of the virgin condemned to a brothel, he states that ‘the door is shut within, the hawks cry without; some are contending who shall first attack the prey,’ his application of a graphic hunting metaphor illuminating the fear felt by the prey, the rapacity of the predators, and inserting his own viewpoint into the text.\textsuperscript{411} His insinuation of the horrific possibility that the virgin may be raped by not one, but a series of violent men, turns the fundamental dread of the event from vague to tangible, drawing the bishop’s audience into the event and making it one of his own creation.

The explicitly sexual threat of punishment through imprisonment in a brothel is restricted to women, with, as Tertullian had unfortunately summarised, the consequential implication that the shame associated with rape was a greater torture to Christian women than any horrors they may have undergone in the arena. As Augustine would later comment, in response to reports of sexual assault during the invasions of Rome, ‘our adversaries certainly think they have a weighty attack to make on Christians, when they make the most of their captivity by adding stories of the violation of wives, of maidens ready for marriage, and even in some

\textsuperscript{410} Kraemer, 1980, 306
\textsuperscript{411} Ambrose, Virg. 2.4.27. ‘…quis praedam primus invadat.’
cases of women in the religious life. As Augustine’s statement illustrates, the absence of rape from martyr acts did not reflect the realities of female life experiences in a time of war and persecution, the repeated divine interventions which saved women condemned to brothels having the tragic implication that a woman who was truly pure and worthy would not be raped, and would instead be saved in order to go to her martyrdom free of sin. The first book of de Civitate Dei addresses the aftermath of Alaric’s sack of Rome in 410, during which Christian women suffered extensive sexual violence. As Shaw notes, Augustine’s response to this was in part due to the glee which the enemies of the Christian community had demonstrated with regard to the mass rape, and their decision to ‘play up the shame and humiliation of these women.’ Augustine’s lengthy discussion of the impact of rape upon a woman’s chastity, and his focus on rape as the main crime perpetuated during the invasion of Rome, certainly implies that this was a widespread issue, and one which had deeply affected Christian women. His analysis of the impact of sexual violence demonstrates, initially, some remarkably progressive ideas for a Church Patriarch, as he held that purity was a virtue of ‘the mind,’ and not the body, and thus that ‘there will be no pollution (polluet) if the lust is another’s.’ It is evident through his connection of rape to the theological complications of suicide that some women had taken their own lives as a result of their abuse – to Augustine, suicide was a sin, and his attempts to demonstrate that an inner virtue could be maintained after suffering sexual assault developed in part from his attempts to prevent rape victims from conferring an additional crime upon themselves. It is, he states, because they ‘have the glory of chastity within them’ that many violated women chose not to commit suicide.

412 Augustine, Civ. 1.16. ‘Magnum sane crimen se putant obicere Christianis, cum eorum exaggerantes captivitatem addunt etiam stupra commissa, non solum in aliena matrimonia virginesque nupturas, sed etiam in quasdam sanctimoniales.’
413 Shaw, 2011, 215
414 Augustine, Civ. 1.18
415 Augustine, Civ. 1.19. They will not, concludes Augustine, ‘deviate from the authority of God’s law by taking unlawful steps to avoid the suspicions of men.’
However, the writings of authors such as Ambrose, which had lauded women who had committed suicide to avoid rape, loomed large in the mind of both Augustine and his injured flock. Augustine does not have an answer as to whether suicide could prevent such women from achieving the status of martyr, stating simply that ‘I would not presume to make hasty judgement on their case,’ concluding that their veneration was due to ‘divine instruction.’

As Augustine’s reflections develop, so too does his perception of the rape victims he had found himself becoming a councillor to, as the bishop concluded by attributing a divine purpose to the very act of rape itself. Augustine asked rape victims to ‘honestly examine your hearts and see if perhaps you have not plumed yourself overmuch on the possession of your virginity, your continence, your chastity.’

The outcome of the crime, he suggests, is that victims are now ‘persuaded to be humble,’ a reminder that it was for a bishop to decide the level of praise to attribute to a virgin, not the virgin herself. Indeed, Augustine went as far as to suggest that the shame was only felt by the rape victim as the act ‘could perhaps not have taken place without some physical pleasure.’ This statement, argues Sissa, demonstrates Augustine’s adoption of the belief in the ‘latent sexuality of women,’ the influence of which caused him to perceive ‘an undesired sexual act as something dangerously desirable.’

Thus, Augustine’s own concerns as the leader of a church which had had its borders grossly violated began to express themselves through reflections on the sufferings of others, the bishop using the events as a blueprint upon which to build his own conception of sexuality, women and the independence of virgins. The borders of the body were a constant source of fear and doubt for Augustine and those who had gone before him, and the female body had become so closely intertwined with the body of the church that it became difficult to untangle it, and to view terrible events such as the sack of Rome independently of wider ideologies. To involve rape in the texts which had become foundational for the Church would had left open a gateway through which any number of

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416 Augustine, Civ. 1.26
417 Augustine, Civ. 1.28. ‘uerum tamen interrogate fideliter animas uestras, ne forte de isto integritatis et continentiae uel pudicitiae bono uos inflatus extulitis...’
418 Augustine, Civ. 1.16. ‘quod fieri fortasse sine carnis aliqua uoluptate non potuit.’
419 Sissa, 2008, 186
sins could enter, a door which would be extremely difficult to close. The blood of the martyrs was pure and undefiled, fertilising the seeds of faith and being infused with notions of sacrifice and salvation, a reminder of Christ on the cross. The blood which would be shed through acts of sexual assault, however, was inherently connected to sin due to the corruption which sexual activity conferred upon the body, with virgins in particular being required to be utterly extricated from such a notion, preserving their ability to produce numerous spiritual children. Sexual intercourse could cause even unwilling bodies to fall into corruption, and indeed Jerome had claimed that ‘though God can do all things He cannot raise up a virgin when once she has fallen,’ the wound left on the body through the sin of a sexual act being a wound through which the glory of God could not be identified.

### 3.5 The Living Virgin: Jerome and Eustochium

Eroticisation and the manipulation of female sexuality are by no means limited to texts in which the virgin in question suffers extensively, or even ultimately dies. Jerome’s written communication with consecrated virgins and chaste women reveals his near-obsession with the female body and its sexual behaviour, which he frequently utilised as a textual mechanism through which to establish wider reflections on the nature of the body and desire. Jerome, argues Cox Miller, saw the female body as being worth little in an earthly, physical context, yet its textual capabilities were limitless and allowed for ‘a stunning theological articulation of desire.’ Indeed, whilst the audience of Jerome’s works were both men and women, and indeed many of his texts were directed specifically at women, it is the female body alone which provides him with a blueprint for his textual eroticisation. Jerome’s letters

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420 Tertullian, for example, discussing the rape of Lucretia, states that through her suicide she ‘cleansed the defilement of her flesh (sanguine suo maculatum carinem abluit)’ interpreting her death as a noble action (Exh. cast. 13). Augustine had taken Lucretia’s suicide to suggest that she may have found enjoyment in her rape, and had taken her life due to her own guilt and shame at such feeling (Civ. 1.19).

421 Jerome, Ep. 22.5. ‘cum omnia Deus possit, suscitare virginem non potest post ruinam.’

422 Cox Miller, 1993, 27
are permeated with his own fear of women, and of the desire which a female body could
provoke in an ascetic male. The "openness" which he associated with the female body
inspired thoughts of penetration, of a physical realisation of sexual temptation and a fall
from a state of grace, and thus to Jerome the female body represented desire itself and the
sins of the flesh which were a perpetual source of danger. Jerome claims to admire
celibate women, argues Salisbury, because in rejecting their own sexuality they were able to
overcome the physical realities of their gender and thus to symbolically leave the dangerous
trappings of a female existence behind. Jerome lived in near-perpetual fear of his own
body and its physical behaviour, and it was through the games he played with the textual
female body that he was able to give voice to the desire which had permeated his being. To
Cox Miller, Jerome’s manipulation of the bodies of women within his writings was a
practice which served to allow him to create ‘a space for the expression of erotic desire that
asceticism only seemingly denies.’ The eroticisation of virgin women allowed Jerome to
create a textual eroticism within his own asceticism, which could extend to that of his
readers, giving voice to a desire which could not be touched, could not itself physically
destroy his own chasteness. Yet, the creation of this eroticisation came at the expense of the
identity of individual women, with Jerome’s extensive use of Eustochium’s body as a
literary tool serving to erase her reality, and recreate her as a solely textual, one-dimensional
figure. Her sense of self, her individual character and the truth of her existence are of
secondary value to Jerome, who sees her body as a template upon which to build the
foundations of his literary eroticism.

It is within his twenty-second letter to Eustochium, in which he reflects greatly on her
intimacies with the Divine Bridegroom, that Jerome’s complicated relationship with

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423 Cox Miller, 1993, 25; Shuve, 2016, 191
424 Salisbury, 1991, 79. Notably, Jerome states that marriage and wedlock are only worthy of some
level of respect because ‘they give me virgins’ (Ep. 22.20), and his horror at the processes of
reproduction is such that even the birth of Christ himself is presented as impure and abhorrent: ‘Nine
months He awaits his birth in the womb, undergoes the most revolting conditions and comes forth
covered with blood…’ (Ep. 22.39).
425 Cox Miller, 1993, 30
sexuality, the female body and his own body is most strongly revealed. The insistence with
which Jerome emphasises his guidelines for ‘correct’ female behaviour, suggests Burrus,
reflects his belief that the purity of a virgin was in constant danger of being destroyed, and
that women could at any moment fall into sin. Indeed, the epistle places great focus on
women who have ceased to be virgins, whether openly or in secret, with Jerome noting that
‘virginity may be lost even by a thought. Such are evil virgins, virgins in the flesh, not in
the spirit.’ Contrasting fallen women with self-contained virgins such as Eustochium
serves to emphasise how tempting the closed body of a virgin was to Jerome, and indeed his
use of the Song of Songs to describe Eustochium’s relationship with Christ borders on the
obscene at times. ‘Ever let the bridegroom sport with you within,’ Jerome enthuses, his
use of the verb *ludo*, with its casual sexual connotations, implying the manner in which
Eustochium and the Bridegroom will be ‘sporting’ with one another. Employing the pre-
existing imagery of the Song of Songs allows the metamorphosis of Eustochium’s physical
body into a metaphorical one, in which Jerome’s juxtaposition of the closed body of the
virgin with the erotic imagery of the divine bridal chamber focusses the reader’s attention
toward sexual desire and promotes an eroticised image of the virgin. Jerome adopts the
image of the virgin as ‘a garden locked, a fountain sealed,’ and through his assimilation of
Eustochium’s closed body with the bridal chamber ultimately opens up the physicality of the
virgin through the inference of sexual union which will occur within, pushing the language
adopted from the Song of Songs to its furthest point in order to cement his notion of ascetic
eros deeply within the virginal body. As Shuve notes, Jerome’s adoption of verse 5:4 of the
Song of Songs takes the imagery therein to a directly erotic conclusion, as Jerome writes that
the Bridegroom will ‘put forth His hand through the opening and will touch the swelling of

426 Burrus, 1994, 41. Jerome discusses Eustochium’s diet at great length, exhorting her to avoid wine
and certain foods, and to spend her time with other virgins, as married women may cause her to stray
from the path of virginity.
427 Jerome, Ep. 22.5. *Perit ergo et mente uirginitas. Istae sunt uirgines malae, uirgines carne, non
spiritu.* The notion that Christian virgins can be ‘evil,’ maintaining the title of virgin in name alone,
will be discussed within the following chapter with regard to the reception of virgins within heretical
sects.
428 Jerome, Ep. 22.25. *Semper tecum sponsus ludat intrinsecus.*
429 Cox Miller, 1993, 27
your belly,’ introducing a sexualised physical contact which is absent from the Song. Cox Miller argues that erotic desire within the Song of Songs never reaches a final point and is never consummated, being rather a consistent presence throughout the text that waxes and wanes, a desire that is ‘continuously kindled, but never satisfied.’ Such a pattern is repeated within Jerome’s own letter, in which he fluctuates between the erotic application of the Song of Songs to Eustochium’s body and her relationship with the Divine Bridegroom, and miserable reflections on his own battles with temptation. Jerome comes tantalisingly close to the final act of union within the bridal chamber, before turning away and returning to the desert, where his own desire festered within him without reaching a conclusion, his body burning with the eroticism which he transferred onto Eustochium’s divine relationship.

The twenty-second epistle is presented as a guide for the young virgin with regard to her relationship with Christ and the behaviour expected of her, yet it ultimately demonstrates the terror which Jerome feels with regard to the female body and its sexuality, and his complicated relationship with his own physical form, a body which, it seems, does not always obey in the manner which its owner desires. Writing to Eustochium, Jerome reflects on his retreat to the desert and the temptations which afflicted him there. ‘I found myself amid bevies of girls,’ he recalls, noting that ‘my mind was burning with desire, and the fires of lust kept bubbling up before me when my flesh was as good as dead.’ The desert was not a place which enabled ascetic satisfaction for Jerome, who describes his battles with Satan and his emissaries not as a glorious triumph but as an unending suffering, the desert functioning as a ‘prison’ for the beleaguered priest. As Cox Miller notes, the reality of the message of Jerome’s letter differed from its stated intent, as the symbolism of the metaphors and imagery which Jerome employed integrated eroticism into a text which originally

430 Shuve, 2016, 188; Jerome, Ep. 22.25. ‘…et mittet manum suam per foramen et tanget ventrem tuae…’ The translation provided within the NPNF simply states that the Bridegroom will ‘put His hand through the hole of the door,’ and so the translation has here been adapted to reflect the physicality emphasised by Jerome, and the underlying eroticism introduced through the nature of the physical contact. ‘Ventrem,’ when referring to women, implies not just the belly but the womb itself, emphasising furthermore the relationship of bride and Christ, and hinting toward the spiritual pregnancy of the consecrated virgin.

431 Cox Miller, 1993, 29

432 Jerome, Ep. 22.7
purported to serve as a warning against such dangers.\textsuperscript{433} Eustochium, the untouchable virgin dedicated to Christ, the erotic object of this text, becomes a reflection of Jerome’s own desires. These desires function across a wide spectrum of emotion, as whilst the language which Jerome uses to describe Eustochium hints at his own desire, it perhaps demonstrates more strongly the yearning which Jerome feels to have access to acceptable desire itself. Eustochium can engage with desire for the Bridegroom through the medium of the Song of Songs, yet no such framework exists for Jerome himself, and thus he condemns his own body to extreme ascetic penitence, and a profound level of self-hatred. It is this, Cox Miller asserts, which most clearly explains quite why Jerome is so overwhelmingly preoccupied with the body of Eustochium, as through the textual eroticisation of her body and her relationship with the Bridegroom, he was able to gain access to his own desires, which themselves were rooted deeply within his asceticism, whilst attempting to develop an understanding of his own body.\textsuperscript{434}

Eustochium is a ‘garden enclosed,’ yet due to his own lack of virginity Jerome is unable to define himself in such a way. Consequently, he draws textual parallels between Eustochium’s state and his own, with his reflections upon his time of ascetic penance in the desert (which he refers to as his ‘prison’,\textsuperscript{435} an enclosed space such as Eustochium’s own body and a parallel to the ‘prison-house’\textsuperscript{436} in which she resides) mirroring Eustochium’s dedication of herself to Christ. Jerome reminds Eustochium that ‘it is not enough for you to go out from your own land unless you forget your people and your father’s house; unless you scorn the flesh and cling to the bridegroom in close embrace.’\textsuperscript{437} In the desert, Jerome had scorned his own flesh by turning his solitude into ‘the house of correction for my

\textsuperscript{433} Cox Miller, 1993, 23; Burrus, 1994, 45  
\textsuperscript{434} Cox Miller, 1993, 33  
\textsuperscript{435} Jerome, Ep. 22.7. ‘...qui ob gehennae metum tali me carcere ipse damnaueram.’  
\textsuperscript{436} Jerome, Ep. 22.41. ‘Egredere, quaeso, paulisper e corpore.’ Jerome refers to his prison as carcer, yet Eustochium’s prison-house is a very literal body: corpore. Jerome must remove himself from the civilised world in order to close off his body, yet Eustochium’s virgin body provides a prison enough for her.  
\textsuperscript{437} Jerome, Ep. 22.1. ‘Verum nonsufficit tibi exire de patria, nisi obliviscaris populi et domum patris tui et carne contempta sponsi iungaris amplexibus.’
unhappy flesh,’\(^{438}\) and in leaving home he too ‘had cut myself off from home, parents, sister, relations, and – harder still – from the dainty food to which I had been accustomed.’\(^{439}\) The rejection of food here echoes Jerome’s reminders to Eustochium that she must restrict her eating extensively, as it is through eating that she may find herself ‘excited by the alluring train of sensual desires.’\(^{440}\) Thus, in Jerome and his discussion of a living virgin, textual eroticisation crosses over with that seen in martyr acts through the reduction of female identity, the association of sexual desire with the female body, and the integration of an ‘acceptable’ erotic desire for women with a moralising reflection on the dangers of the flesh. However, eroticisation finds an additional level of meaning within Jerome’s commentaries, as it serves to allow him to develop a definition of his own body and the chains of sexuality which bind it, through the medium of a woman he can shape into any textual form that he wishes. The revelations of Jerome’s self-identity which speak through the eroticised body of Eustochium reveal an overwhelming preoccupation with his physical body, his desires and his fear of failing in his ascetic practices. The sheer terror which Jerome feels when contemplating his own lusts exists alongside what Cox Miller refers to as a ‘possessive sexualisation of women,’\(^{441}\) a demonstration of the extent to which desire and the body controlled Jerome’s day-to-day existence and his relationship with the women who surrounded him.

Unlike men such as Athanasius and Ambrose, Jerome was not a bishop, his flock of virgins and chaste women limited to a smaller community of upper-class women in Rome, who acted as his patrons.\(^{442}\) Thus, the body for Jerome did not need to hold the same literary

\(^{438}\) Jerome, Ep. 22.7. ‘illud miserrimae carnis ergastulum...’
\(^{439}\) Jerome, Ep. 22.30
\(^{440}\) Jerome, Ep. 22.17. ‘...dulcis libidinum pompa concusserit.’ Jerome is not alone in connecting erotic feelings with food; Basil wrote extensively on the direct associations of food with desire.
\(^{441}\) Cox Miller, 1993, 40. Burrus additionally argues that Jerome’s concern for the precarious nature of virginity is a ‘near-obsession,’ which he illustrates ‘still more explicitly than his predecessors’ (1994, 41).
\(^{442}\) Shuve, 2016, 176-177. Shuve additionally argues that Jerome’s twenty-second Epistle can be read in part as a response to Ambrose, indeed perhaps even a critique, as Jerome had translated two of
impact as it did for his contemporaries, as the boundaries of the church did not hold the same concern for him as it did for those who fought to ensure the integrity of their communities and, to establish the authority of their ideologies. For Jerome, desire and sexuality (or perhaps, the attempt to extinguish these) were fundamental to his self-identity, the virginal body the ideal medium through which he could engage with sexuality and bodily identity in an appropriate theatre, reflecting on the relationship of city and desert for the ascetic adherent whose daily sacrifices attempted to imitate those of the martyrs, and in turn that of Christ. The sexuality conferred upon the body of the virgin reflected the tensions inherent to ascetic practices, the adoption of traditions regarding the Song of Songs and virginity an attempt to address these pressures. However, despite the introduction of erotic language and imagery to the female virgin body, the fact remained that the establishment of guidelines regarding virginal behaviour remained the office of male church authorities. Sexual desire could be imprinted upon the body of the virgin, written into Christian culture in order to allow for reflections upon the wider issues faced by individual communities; for virgins to engage independently with such notions had no place within the church, the eroticism located in the body restricted to the spiritual realm. It was, perhaps, inevitable then that the critiques hurled at heretical groups would take aim at the women within them, constructing notions of heresy itself as a licentious woman and claiming rampant promiscuity among female adherents, and this thesis will now turn to the ideologies of sexual immorality within Christian antiquity.

Origen’s commentaries on the Song of Songs and utilised aspects of these within the epistle. As another author of virginity, Ambrose was a rival of sorts to Jerome, and in demonstrating his understanding of the Greek texts of Origen and making them accessible to a Latin audience, Jerome was, argues Shuve, attempting to demonstrate his cultural and intellectual superiority (183-184).
4. So Readily Deceived: Sexual Immorality, Prostitution and Heresy

‘He took it
in the tongs of metaphor
so it wouldn’t burn.’

Chana Bloch, Covenant

‘For she is the dangerous hills and many a climber will be lost on such a passage.’

Anne Sexton, Eighth Psalm

By its very nature heresy required orthodoxy, and in order for spiritual eroticism and consecrated virginity to hold sway within the true church, an ideological construct had to exist which formed the other to these ideals, and whose inherent sinfulness could thus support the philosophies espoused within the writings of Church authorities. Whilst women had been granted great spiritual authority through the texts which moulded their bodies to shape the outlines of the Church, the precariously open nature of the female body, and the potential for it to fall into sin, simultaneously caused it to become the ideal vehicle through which this ‘other’ could be constructed. In her 1990 novel Bitch: In Praise of Difficult Women, Elizabeth Wurtzel addressed the dichotomy which exists between the perceived public sexuality of the male body and that of the female, concluding that ‘women as a rule are so sexual, they are such natural erotic objects…men’s sexuality is tied up in one organ, while women just embody it all over.’\(^{443}\) It was this conclusion which the authors of the Church found themselves unable to escape from, with Augustine’s comments on the fear of his erection and what it may symbolise, alongside his admonitions to consecrated virgins

\(^{443}\) Wurtzel, 1998, 395
that they should at all times hold themselves in a manner which avoided drawing a man’s
gaze, illustrating the tensions which undercut Christian society. A woman could dedicate
her life to Christ, and could follow the guidelines of an Athanasius, an Ambrose or a Jerome,
yet the very fact remained that her body was innately sexual, a potential source of temptation
for the virtuous man, and thus the perfect conduit through which to discuss spiritual
temptations such as heretical doctrines. The notion that there was a sexual and spiritual
danger inherent to the female body was a prevalent trope within early Christian literature, one which developed alongside the Christian authors’ dependence upon virgin, chaste and ascetic women for their oratory stylings. Much as the consecrated virgin represented the true mater ecclesia, the licentious woman represented the other, the heretical, idolatrous or pagan congregations who existed apart from the ‘true’ church, as defined by leaders who styled themselves as orthodox.

The ‘licentious woman’ appears in many guises: she can be a prostitute or an adulteress, a courtesan or a false prophet, or can even claim to be a consecrated virgin within her own heretical church. The body of a woman who engaged in immoral sexual or spiritual behaviours, two concepts which were closely entangled with one another, was as open as the virgin’s was closed, and was thus utilised extensively within the texts of Christian antiquity to demonstrate the dangers inherent to heretical communities. So open was her body that a reflection on this served to bolster the strength of the true church, as the contrast between bodies emphasised how securely sealed the body of the consecrated virgin was, how impenetrable her walls, and those of the church. Central to the construction of a philosophy regarding negative sexual interactions, and the assimilation of sexual immorality with spiritual sin, were the instructions of Paul regarding legitimate and illegitimate sexual

\[444\] Augustine, Nupt. 1.7; Ep. 211

\[445\] Tertullian’s Cult. fem. provides an excellent example of such a construct, as his criticisms of the outward presentation of women develop alongside a weighty attack upon the nature of ‘woman’ herself, and the sin which all women possess through their very condition. ‘Do you not know that you are an Eve (et Euam te esse nescis?)’ Tertullian inquires, before placing the blame for Christ’s death upon women, through their inheritance of Eve’s sin and the consequent development of death within the world (Cult. fem. 1.1).
activity within chapters 6 and 7 of his first letter to the Corinthians. The reflections therein on intercourse with a prostitute, the values of virginity and the acceptable circumstances in which marriage may occur place sexual activity alongside questions of insiders and outsiders, and the role of Satan in tempting the faithful. These formative arguments will be discussed within the first section of this chapter, in order to establish the nature of the ideology which later authors such as Athanasius drew upon in their invectives against heretical churches, and the combination of sexual and spiritual sin which underpinned their arguments. Athanasius utilised these concepts in two primary ways: he constructed heresy as being a woman itself, relying on notions of sexual sin to elucidate upon this, and additionally criticised the behaviour of heretical women through reflections on their perceived licentiousness. These criticisms were dependent upon pre-existing ideologies surrounding virgin women, the impenetrability of their bodies and the assimilation of this with the true church, with Athanasius thus positioning heretical women as dangerous churches which lacked the structured boundaries of his own. The words πόρνη and πορνεία appear prominently within tractates regarding sexuality from the New Testament onward, and the complications regarding the exact rendering of these terms will be reflected upon in order to highlight the fluidity of the language which surrounded sexual immorality, and the extent to which it was based upon dichotomies of insiders and outsiders. Central to this discussion will be the investigations of Martin and Harper,446 whose interpretations of the terms πόρνη and πορνεία (with regard to 1 Corinthians 6 and 7, and the Whore of Babylon) establish a key starting point from which this chapter will develop a connection between Paul and his construction of πορνεία, and the writings of Athanasius and his fellow heresiologists.

The figure of Revelation’s Great Whore is unmissable within a discussion of the dangers of sexual interaction and incorrect spiritual practices. Babylon will be discussed within this chapter in light of the conclusions drawn from Paul’s words to the Corinthian church, and with a thought toward her influence on the construction of boundaries, and the violence done

446 Martin, 1995; Martin, 2006; Harper, 2012
toward those who are not perceived as belonging within a community. When the first tendrils of the doctrines which would become known as ‘heretical’ began to spread through the church, women were instantly associated with such ideologies, with Cloke noting that they were seen as ‘particularly apt pupils at propagating heresy.’ Babylon had brought great kings of men to their knees, her fornication and idolatry a defining aspect of her being, and the women of heretical communities came to be viewed in a similar manner. The heretical woman had the ability both to deceive and be deceived, a volatile force who threatened the borders of the true church through her ability to tempt righteous men away from their true faith. As McGinn notes, ‘feminine honour defines not only a woman’s social personality, but also the honour of the group she represents,’ a notion reflected both within the works of the Church Fathers on their flocks of virgins, and through their attacks on heretical groups via the perceived virtue of female adherents. If a consecrated virgin had the potential to tempt a man, being required to withdraw to her inner chambers and commune solely with the Bridegroom and her fellow virgins, how much more dangerous was the woman whose sexuality was imprinted openly upon her, and who could draw the faithful into illegitimate unions with immoral women and idolatrour beliefs. Such a philosophy is developed extensively within the anti-Arian works of Athanasius, a man who, as has previously been discussed, was a figure of authority within an intensely fractured Christian community, and whose lauding of virginity and the virgins within his church developed alongside vitriolic diatribes against his rivals. The nature of the heretical women will be addressed within the second section of this chapter, illustrating the myriad of ways in which the body of a woman could construct a church. Wright Knust’s examination of the nature of sexual slander in antiquity is integral to such a discussion, as it takes into account the messy and complicated nature of heresy within Late Antiquity, demonstrating the extent to which sexual slander can be utilised in attempts to clarify boundaries in addition to

447 Cloke, 1995, 8
448 McGinn, 1998, 10
defining them. Concluding this chapter is a discussion of Athanasius’ polemics against Arius, and Epiphanius’ *Panarion*, a catalogue of heresies built upon the blueprint of the Song of Songs, which provides an illuminating insight into the manner in which the Song could be utilised in relation to both virgins and heretics.

### 4.1 Paul and Porneia: Constructing an Ideology

Jesus’ statement within the Gospel of Matthew that ‘the tax collectors and prostitutes (αἱ πόρνατ) are going into the Kingdom of God ahead of you’ has become a phrase widely known externally to the Gospels (indeed of the New Testament), utilised with little context to demonstrate Jesus’ egalitarian and radical nature within modern-day discourse surrounding prostitution. The application of such a term often fails to take into account the discussion of prostitution, and its impact upon the body of the believer, which appears within the Pauline epistles. Within the first missive to the church at Corinth, Paul utilises the event of sexual intercourse with a prostitute as a foundation upon which to build a discussion regarding sexual morality, and the relationship between the body of the believer, the body of the community and church, and the body of Christ. It is evident that certain members of the Corinthian church had not taken Paul’s admonitions regarding sexual behaviour to heart, and had been engaging in what Harper refers to as ‘a category of sexual activity that some members of the Corinthian community believe is allowed, but that Paul views as illicit.’

The usage of prostitutes, Harper continues, formed a particular aspect of sexual relations outside of legitimate marriage which were traditionally accepted in Greek culture, but which Paul considered to stand against the sexual moralities he was advising.

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449 Wright Knust, 2006
450 Matthew 21:31
451 Harper, 2012, 378. Harper concludes that the explicit application of the word πόρνη (as opposed to a more vague term which could imply a range of categories of sexual immorality, such as adultery), suggests that Paul believed that ‘prostitution was the main venue of such pagan sexual license.’
Scolding his wayward flock and their behaviour, Paul reminds them of the contract into which they had entered through their faith:

Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Should I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that whoever is united to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For it is said, “The two shall be one flesh.” But anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. Shun fornication! Every sin that a person commits is outside the body; but the fornicator sins against the body itself. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body.\footnote{1 Corinthians 6:15-20. οὐκ οἴδατε ὅτι τὰ σώματα ὑμῶν μέλη Χριστοῦ ἐστίν; ἀρας οὖν τὰ μέλη τοῦ Χριστοῦ ποιήσω πόρνης μέλη; μὴ γένοιτο. [ἢ] οὐκ οἴδατε ὅτι ὁ κολλώμενος τῇ πόρνῃ ἓν σῶμα ἐστιν; ὁ δὲ κολλώμενος τῷ κυρίῳ ἓν πνεῦμα ἐστιν. Φεύγετε τὴν πορνείαν. πᾶν ἁμάρτημα ὃ ἐὰν ποιήσῃ ἄνθρωπος ἐκ τοῦ σώματος ἐστιν. Φεύγετε τὴν πορνείαν. πᾶν ἁμάρτημα ὃ ἐὰν ποιήσῃ ἄνθρωπος ἐκ τοῦ σώματος ἐστιν. ὃ δὲ πορνεύων εἰς τὸ ἴδιον σῶμα ἁμαρτάνει. ἤ οὐκ οἴδατε ὅτι τὸ σῶμα ὑμῶν νωὸς τὸ ἐν υἱῷ πονεύματός ἐστιν. ὃ δὲ πορνεύων εἰς τὸ ἴδιον σῶμα ἁμαρτάνει. ὃ οὐκ οἴδατε ὅτι τὸ σῶμα ὑμῶν νωὸς τὸ ἐν υἱῷ πονεύματός ἐστιν. ὃ δὲ πορνεύων εἰς τὸ ἴδιον σῶμα ἁμαρτάνει.}

Paul’s argument, suggests Countryman, hinges on his reinterpretation of Genesis 2:24,\footnote{Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.' Countryman, 1996, 204} as Paul contends that when a man and woman are united in sexual intercourse of any kind, they become one flesh.\footnote{Glancy, 1998, 493-494. This statement raises questions regarding the status of prostitutes within the Christian community, particularly slave prostitutes. Paul’s admonitions against πορνεία and his usage of prostitution within a wider discussion of communal boundaries makes it evident that he does} Thus if a Christian believer ‘becomes one’ with a prostitute, his body and hers become unbreakably entwined – one flesh, in the sense of Genesis – with the resulting implication that the dirt and pollution inherent to the prostitute’s body are transferred to that of the Christian believer, who is himself ‘united to the Lord’ in one spirit. Furthermore, as Glancy notes, Paul’s discussion of the body repeatedly emphasises that the body of the believer was created for the Lord, and thus ‘will share in the Lord’s resurrection,’ with the implication that the body of the prostitute is not intended for such a destiny.\footnote{This statement raises questions regarding the status of prostitutes within the Christian community, particularly slave prostitutes. Paul’s admonitions against πορνεία and his usage of prostitution within a wider discussion of communal boundaries makes it evident that he does}
For Brown, this is a ‘startling’ application of physical imagery, yet the notion that the pollution inherent to the body of the prostitute, an outsider in relation to the church, is adopted by a Christian adherent forms a central aspect of the development of ideologies surrounding immoral sexual activity, in which the borders of the true church could be physically shattered by the most minor of infractions. Paul’s interweaving of the physicality of the sexual act with its spiritual implications upon both body and soul is reliant in part upon his perception of the nature of the body of Christ, and the positioning of physical and divine bodies within the cosmos. Within 1 Corinthians 6:15-20, argues Martin, Paul constructs a dichotomy in which he places πορνεία, representative of those things removed from the sacred order, on one side, and God, Christ, and the physical body of the Christian upon the other. Consequently, such an act of πορνεία wages an attack on the spiritual boundaries of the church, as the pollution and sin inherent to the body of the prostitute find a gateway to the community, with the physical connection of prostitute and client having the potential to cause her to became a ‘member’ of Christ. Paul’s discussion of πορνεία overflows with notions of borders and boundaries, those of both the body and the community, his description of the body as ‘a temple of the Holy Spirit’ which must be protected from external invasions by negative forces within the cosmos an overt demonstration of the language and ideology which later patristic authors employed in their attempts to ensure the purity of the church. As Martin emphasises, the dilemma which Paul faces regards illicit sexual relations between a Christian believer and a person whose very being is one with the sin of fornication, a foreign body whose acceptance by an insider...
‘implicated Christ’s body in coitus with the cosmos’ and opened the doors of the church to pollution and decay.\footnote{Martin, 1995, 179; see also Romans 1:24-27, in which Paul’s arguments are similarly expressed through a discussion of the body and sexual sin in order to demonstrate a movement away from God, with references to idolatry.} Paul’s application of a multitude of metaphors relating to sex, the body and the Lord in parallel with a discussion of the authority of God and his possession of the body thus places the sexual morality of the community as a fundamental aspect of the purity of the wider church.\footnote{Wright Knust, 2006, 79} For Paul, the body of the individual represented more than just the legs, the arms and the organs of one person, but rather served as a fleshly representative of the body of the church.

Within the following chapter, Paul lays out the correct boundaries regarding marriage and sexual activity, an outlet in which sexual interactions could be conducted appropriately without fear of incurring the pollution of fornication. His comment that ‘it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion’ reflects the ideology espoused within later Christian authors that it was desire, above all, which presented a problem for Christian believers.\footnote{1 Corinthians 7:9.} Indeed, as Martin argues, Paul’s description of the occasions on which marriage was acceptable suggests that he was not suggesting the existence of an arena in which sexual desire could be properly expressed, but rather was attempting to ‘preclude the possibility of it.’\footnote{Martin, 2006, 59} Marital intimacy was not here designed to be an outlet for the growth of sexual desire and passion, but rather assisted in the prevention of this growing elsewhere, with Paul stating that it is ‘because of cases of sexual immorality (τὰς πορνείας)’ that it is acceptable for men and women to marry.\footnote{1 Corinthians 7:2} Paul’s comments regarding marriages between believers and non-believers reflect his fundamental opposition to sexual desire and the threat which he held it to pose to the church, as the apostle concludes that men and women married to non-Christians should remain in such marriages, as the spouse of a believer can be ‘made
holy.’\textsuperscript{463} Such an argument undoubtedly aids in understanding the threat of immoral women toward the church, as it was the potential for desire toward these women which Paul and his successors feared, as desire was (as Jerome had so eloquently expressed) a difficult demon to overcome. The prostitute who had provided such a key cornerstone in Paul’s condemnation of πορνεία within 1 Corinthians was absent from the following chapter, in which Paul instead assimilates πορνεία with Satan. The ‘sexual immorality’ which has led him to conclude that marriage is a necessity for some believers can stem, states Paul, from the temptations of Satan, and thus the union of husband and wife will ensure that ‘Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.’\textsuperscript{464} In both cases, a Christian believer has engaged in fornication, in a sexual activity which pollutes and desecrates the body of the believer and thus of the church. The inclusion of Satan within chapter 7 implies the extent to which this sin can affect the community, whilst inferring that Satan can be considered to be present to some extent with regard to the union with the prostitute.

The term πορνεία itself exists within a matrix of theological, cultural and ethical ideologies, forming what Harper refers to as ‘the lexical and ideological cornerstone of Christian sexual morality’\textsuperscript{465} and containing within it a multitude of meanings inherited by Christian authors. Derived from πόρνη, generally translated as ‘female prostitute,’ πορνεία appeared in Latin as fornicatio, which ultimately led to its translation as ‘fornication,’ a word which most commonly appears within Church texts.\textsuperscript{466} In Athanasius’ Vita Antonii, the devil refers to

\textsuperscript{463} 1 Corinthians 7:12-16. ‘To the rest I say – I and not the Lord – that if any believer has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her…Wife, for all you know, you might save your husband. Husband, for all you know, you might save your wife.’

\textsuperscript{464} 1 Corinthians 7:5

\textsuperscript{465} Harper, 2012, 364; Loader, 2012, 235

\textsuperscript{466} Harper, 2012, 364. Πόρνη is itself a little non-specific, as it does not take into account the many different types of women who could engage in prostitution, with the consequent inferences that come from such identities. Latin texts feature a slightly clearer division of words within discourse regarding fornication, intercourse and prostitution. As Adams notes, the differentiation between terms such as scortum, meretrix and lupa serves to highlight the varying natures of the women associated with such labels, with scortum being a ‘far more “marked” term, with stronger negative connotations’ in relation to meretrix, which is frequently featured as an object of the verb amo and with the addition of the name of the woman to whom it refers. (1983, 325). Lupa, on the other hand, was employed in regard to a prostitute of particularly low status, likely through its linguistic connections to lupus femina – as female wolf. Lupa is first attested of prostitutes, rather than of animals, but, as Adams argues, ‘it was surely the rapacity of the she-wolf which inspired the image’
himself as the ‘spirit of fornication (πνεῦμα πορνείας),’ whilst Augustine in his *Confessions* refers to his own ‘fornications’ against God, *fornicanti*, and the fornications of the soul when it turns from God (*fornicatur anima*). The roots of *πορνεία* and its ideological impact lay in classical Greek, and the simultaneous association of the term therein with both adultery law and the sexual violation of respectable women reflects the complexities which existed within *πορνεία* from its very origin, and the linguistic complications which seeped into Christian sexual criticism. There was, Harper argues, no single word in the classical Greek language which defined the sexual experiences which a man could legitimately engage with outside of marriage (such as with his slaves or public prostitutes), with the consequential impact of this being that the words utilised within debates regarding sexual activity and morality contained wide-reaching allusions to a range of sexual behaviours, both acceptable and not. Gaca has emphasised the need to separate the biblical usage of *πορνεία* from its application within classical texts, holding that within both the New Testament and the Septuagint, the centrality of ‘biblical monotheism’ to usages of *πορνεία* suggest that ‘fornication’ here refers to sexual acts which remove the believer from God, and in some way prevent the worship of one divine Lord alone.

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467 Athanasius, *Vita Antonii* 6
468 Augustine, *Confessiones* 1.13.21 and 2.6.14. Augustine’s references here reflect the literary mechanisms of the Hebrew Bible in its discussion of the fornicating soul. The application of the imagery of fornication/prostitution to a soul which has strayed from God can be identified in numerous places within the moralising statements attributed to certain desert Fathers within the *Apophthegmata Patrum*. Abba Gerontios is held to have stated that ‘many, tempted by the pleasures of the body, commit fornication (*ἐξεπόρνευσαν*), not in their body but in their spirit, and while preserving their bodily virginity, commit prostitution in their soul’ (*Apophthegmata Patrum*, Gerontios 1).
469 Harper, 2012, 369
470 Gaca, 2003, 20. Although the literary and theological inspiration which the Hebrew Bible provided for New Testament and early Christian writers in regard to notions of fornication is not a topic which will be discussed within this chapter, due to the limitations of length, there are some key areas which must briefly be addressed in order to add further illumination to the ideologies seen in Christian texts. Sexual relations with a prostitute were not completely forbidden within the laws of the Old Testament, and, indeed, there are certain areas in which prostitutes (notably Rahab within Joshua) serve as significant figures within the narrative, and are portrayed positively. Fornication/prostitution as metaphors appear frequently, particularly in relation to adulterous Israel. Loader notes that ‘both priestly and prophetic texts depict Israel as engaging in prostitution while married to Yahweh, by developing liaisons with other gods’ (Loader, 2012, 15), and in Ezekiel, the adulterous wife Jerusalem is accused of having ‘played the whore’ due to her renown (Ezekiel 16:15;
classical usages, she argues, πορνεία refers simply to prostitution, and is removed from any religious context. Thus, the application of terms such as πορνεία, or fornicatio, contains within it the implications of a separation from God, Christ and the true church, the adoption of an immoral doctrine. The language of fornication, as with that of martyrdom, virginity and asceticism, functioned to create a clear divide between those inside the community and those outside it by defining the negative traits of immoral persons and placing them in direct opposition to those ideologies espoused by true believers.

The themes of sinful fornication and idolatry permeate John of Patmos’ Revelation, echoing the sentiments expressed by Paul in 1 Corinthians regarding the boundaries of the church, with the fornicators placed emphatically outside a Christian community which watches them burn whilst an idolatrous, sexual woman, who is simultaneously a prostitute, an adulteress and a concubine is made responsible for many of their sins. ‘Shun fornication!’ Paul had stated, and in John’s Revelation this exhortation finds an apocalyptic footing. At 2:20, ‘that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet and is teaching and beguiling my servants to practice fornication (πορνεύσαι) and eat food sacrificed to idols,’ is condemned to suffer επόρνευσας is used within the Septuagint). As Wright Knust has shown, the worship of any gods other than Yahweh is depicted as a form of prostitution throughout the Hebrew Bible (2006, 7), an occurrence which Corrington Streete suggests implies the extreme danger represented by foreign women, whose differing religious traditions and immoral sexuality threatened both the boundaries of the community and those of its men (1997, 74). In Exodus (34:15-16), Moses is forbidden from making a ‘covenant with the inhabitants of the land’ by the Lord, as they ‘prostitute themselves to their gods,’ and should these people join with those of Moses in marriage, ‘their daughters who prostitute themselves to their gods will make your sons also prostitute themselves to their gods’ (the Septuagint utilises ἐκπορνεύσωσιν for both instances of ‘prostitute themselves’). It has been suggested that this implies sacred prostitution was a key aspect of Canaanite traditions; due to the prevalence of this metaphor, its usage in relation to Israel and its adoption by Christian authors, I am inclined to follow Wright Knust’s (2006) conclusion, and her suggestion that this possible accusation of sacred prostitution was simply polemical. As Gaca has stated, ‘spiritual fornication uses sexual fornication as a symbol of religious disobedience,’ and was therefore a literary construction which was frequently utilised in order to discredit ‘religiously alien women’ (2003, 160). Thus, the notions of idolatry, rejection of God, and communal barriers which form a fundamental aspect of the fornication/prostitution metaphor can be demonstrated as having been adopted from literary mechanisms in the Hebrew Bible, being employed by Christian authors in a similar manner regarding the delineation of their society (see also Hosea 4:15-19 and Leviticus 17:6-7).

471 1 Corinthians 6:18

472 Revelation 2:20. The usage of the name ‘Jezebel’ and its related connotations will appear frequently throughout wider texts concerning heresy, seduction and sexual women, and, such as in this case, women who are thought to have prophesied. The notion of fornication as associated with the sins of mankind is a common feature of Revelation, featuring additionally at 9:21, 14:8, 17:1-6, 17.15-18, 18:1-3, 18:9-10, 19:1-2, 21:7-8 and 22:14-15.
through her refusal to repent of her sexual immorality, and the verses preceding this judgement directly associate fornication with the sufferings of Israel through the actions of Balaam and Balak.\footnote{Revelation 2:14. ‘But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the people of Israel, so that they would eat food sacrificed to idols and practice fornication (πορνεύσαι).’} These dramatic warnings against fornication pale into near-insignificance upon the appearance of the Whore of Babylon – ἡ μεγάλη, ἡ μήτηρ τῶν πορνῶν.\footnote{Revelation 17:5} Babylon’s sins are legion, and she has committed them with great Kings of men from across a vast empire, her fornication spreading like a plague as she delights in the death of the martyrs, sitting on her throne ‘drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the witnesses to Jesus.’\footnote{Revelation 17:6. καὶ εἶδον τὴν γυναῖκα μεθύουσαν ἐκ τοῦ αἵματος τῶν ἁγίων καὶ ἐκ τοῦ αἵματος τῶν μαρτύρων Ἰησοῦ} Her eventual demise is brutal, with John recording that ‘they will make her desolate and naked; they will devour her flesh and burn her up with fire,’ whilst the Kings of men weep at her judgement and the myriad of heavenly voices cry ‘hallelujah!’ at her fall.\footnote{Revelation 17:16; Revelation 19:1} Such is the fate that awaits the fornicators and idolaters, with the great whore – the mother of prostitutes – illustrating the brutal condemnation assigned to the sexually immoral. The tale of the great whore is graphic, bloodthirsty and violent, juxtaposing the sinful and sexual Babylon with the radiantly pure ‘new Jerusalem’\footnote{Revelation 21:1-2 and 21:9-11} in an apocalyptic vision of the Madonna/Whore complex. Martin emphasises the purity of the bride Jerusalem and her white linen robes, noting that the bride’s clothing is ‘composed of male deeds and bodies, the population of the divine household, the eschatological city, the finally victorious kingdom and empire.’\footnote{Martin, 2006, 110. The reference at Revelation 19:8 to the bride’s fine linen clothing, which ‘is the righteous deeds of the saints (τὰ δικαίωμα τῶν ἁγίων ἔστιν)’ recalls those dressed in white at Revelation 6:9-11, the souls of those who had laid down their life for Christ in an act of witnessing. Thus, the bride and Babylon both reflect the ideologies of martyrdom, and the triumph of martyrs over the evils of Satan and Empire within the arena.} In contrast to the filthy, bloody Babylon, the bride illustrates all that awaits the truly faithful, celebrating the victories of the saints and the triumph of the true church over those who exist apart from it, and who would see its destruction.
The ideology of female sexual immorality was reflected throughout numerous texts from Christian antiquity, and before moving on to address the influence of this philosophy in relation to heretical women, there is one final text which must be addressed. The *Passio Andreae*, with its account of a licentious female slave who meets with a violent death, reflects the fate of both Babylon and Jezebel in an explicit manner. Within the text, the recently converted matron Maximilla devises a plan in order to avoid engaging in sexual intercourse with her husband, Aegeates, her conversion having convinced her of the inherent sinfulness of sexual activity, and the values of a chaste life. Her scheme involves dressing up a slave-girl, Eucleia, in her likeness, with Eucleia consequently joining Aegeates late at night in his bed, before returning to Maximilla’s chambers. In order to ensure the silence of Eucleia, Maximilla plies her with expensive gifts, granting to the girl whatever she may desire, and promising that ‘you will have me as a benefactor of all your needs, providing you scheme with me and carry out what I advise.’[^479] Eucleia is ‘shapely, exceedingly wanton,’ and expresses no resistance to the notion of being commanded (Maximilla is, after all, her mistress) to engage in regular intercourse with her master, happily taking additional items from Maximilla whilst she ‘flaunted the affair before the other servants, boasting like a show-off.’[^480] She is not presented as a woman with any inherent honour, the author declining to take into account her position as a slave, and thus when the ploy is revealed to Aegeates, and Eucleia is killed, there is a complete lack of condemnation regarding Aegeates’ actions.[^481] The offended husband, more concerned with defending the reputation of his wife than questioning the reasons behind her act of subterfuge and considering where blame should be placed, ‘cut out Eucleia’s tongue, mutilated her, and ordered her thrown outside….

[^479]: *Passio Andreae* 17
[^480]: *Passio Andreae* 17. παιδίσκην πάνω εὑμορφόν καὶ φόσει ἅτακτον ὀπερβολή; *Passio Andreae* 18
[^481]: Given that Maximilla has recently been converted to Christianity by Andrew (in the manner typical to the conversion narratives of the Apocryphal Acts of varying Apostles), she also receives no condemnation for her facilitation of the plan which ultimately led to Eucleia’s death, despite the explicit connection of her contributions with Eucleia’s punishment: ‘…under torture, she confessed to all the payoffs she received from her lady for keeping quiet’ (*Passio Andreae*, 22).
she became food for the dogs.\textsuperscript{482} The slave-girl’s death is unsubtly reminiscent of Jezebel’s final hours, in which, having adorned herself, she was thrown from a window and had all but her skull, hands and feet consumed by dogs. Thus, the parallel between a wanton (slave) girl and an idolatrous queen closely associated with the ideologies of fornication reinforces the notion established through the Whore of Babylon that the only acceptable fate for a sexually licentious woman is to suffer the utter disintegration of her body, to be torn to shreds by wild beasts.

4.2 Immoral Women and the False Church

Through Paul’s association of fornication with the sanctity of both the body and the church, and the emphatic metaphors expounded upon within the Book of Revelation, the connection between sexual licentiousness and idolatry became a key aspect of early Christian ideology. By identifying those inside the Christian community as sexually pure, early Church writers were able to place themselves in direct opposition to the immoral and idolatrous pagan societies which oppressed early Christian adherents, reinforcing their own moral superiority in conjunction with accusations of sexual crimes and lax principles: Jude’s epistle refers to ‘certain intruders’ who have made their way into the church, and ‘who pervert the grace of our God into licentiousness.’\textsuperscript{483} As early as the second century, Tertullian could claim that pagan opposition to Christianity was rooted in the refusal of Christians to partake in public celebrations which moved ‘to deeds of shamelessness to lust allurements!’ Christians, he stated, ‘celebrate their festal days with a good conscience, instead of with the common

\textsuperscript{482} \textit{Passio Andreae} 22; 2 Kings 9:30-37. The slaves who inform Aegeates of the deception are themselves crucified.

\textsuperscript{483} Jude 4. παρασείδοσαν γάρ τινες ἄνθρωποι, οἱ πάλαι προγεγραμμένοι εἰς τοῦτο τὸ κρίμα, ἀσεβεῖς, τὴν τοῦ θεοῦ ἡμῶν χάριτα μετατιθέντες εἰς ἁσέλγειαν καὶ τὸν μόνον δεσπότην καὶ κύριον ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν ἀρνούμενοι.
wantonness (*lascivia*). Likewise, Irenaeus within his *Adversus haereses* accused certain Gnostic adherents of ‘promiscuous intercourse and a plurality of wives,’ criticising them as being ‘the slaves of fleshly lusts,’ who lived in ‘the manner of swine and dogs,’ concluding that the apostle himself would correctly term them as ‘carnal’ as this was the only matter of importance to such degenerates. In a quite remarkable application of these ideologies, the fifth century author Salvian, in his *De gubernatione Dei*, discussed the crimes committed by the Christian citizens of Carthage in a manner somewhat reminiscent of Tertullian and Irenaeus’ accusations against pagans. As the armies of the Vandals attacked, he claimed, ‘the Christian congregation of the city raved in the circuses and wantoned in the theatres. Some had their throats cut without the walls, while others still committed fornication within.’ Salvian’s application of sexual slander to define a community which had turned from the principles of Christianity extended as far as to propose that the Barbarian Vandals who took the city were superior both to the pagans who had previously commanded Carthage, and to the Christian communities within. ‘The cities of Africa were full of monstrous vices,’ moralises Salvian, and yet ‘the Vandals were not polluted,’ demonstrating their superior morality by ‘cleansing the stains of our disgrace.’

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484 Tertullian, *Apol.* 35. ‘Ad impudentias, as libidinis illecebras.’
485 Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.28.2. ‘…indifferentes coitus, et multas nuptias induxerunt…’
486 Irenaeus, *Haer.* 5.8.2. ‘…carnis autem uoluptatis serviunt…’
487 Salvian, *Gub. Dei* 6.12. ‘et ecclesia Carthaginensis insaniebat in circis, luxuriabat in theatris. Alii foris jugulabantur, alii intus fornicabantur.’ As Augustine had done within his *Civ.*, Salvian’s writings attempted to deal with the crisis affecting the Roman Empire, and the repeated invasions by ‘barbarian’ tribes which were a great cause for concern. Considering Augustine’s ultimate conclusion with regard to the reports of rape in the aftermath of Alaric’s invasion (that it may have served to curb the arrogance of women who placed too great a pride in their virginity), Salvian may have been employing a similar ideology by suggesting that it took the violence of barbarians to cause sinful Christians to realise their errors of behaviour, and thus ultimately bring them closer to the God they had forgotten.
488 Salvian, *Gub. Dei* 7.22. ‘Wandalos autem iis omnibus non fuisse pollutes…..Barbari ad emendandum nostrarum turpitudinum labem extiterunt ’ Intriguingly, Salvian goes on to claim that the Vandal armies which took Carthage reformed the city so extensively that they ‘ordered and compelled all prostitutes to marry’ in order to create a society which restrained sexual immorality, with the suggestion that marriage would enable these women to engage in sexual interactions in an appropriate manner, and would be prevented from returning to their former lives through their new male guardianship. Thus, states Salvian (following Paul), ‘sexual desire (*calor corporalis*) might have this legitimate outlet without sinful lust (*peccatum incontinentia*).’ Salvian’s wording here is unusual as he argues that sexual passions could be legitimately expressed in marriage. Despite his claim that he is following the orders of the apostle, the suggestion that passion can occur within marital relations moves away from Paul’s attempts to establish guidelines regarding sexual desire/passion, and his hope that marriage would reduce such feelings. Indeed, whilst Paul had stated
decision to employ notions of sexual purity and pollution positively in relation to a Barbarian force which, quite literally, breached the walls of the community, and to attempt to find an answer for the sufferings which he observed within Christian communities, is somewhat unusual given its original application by Paul and John toward non-Christian outsiders. Salvian’s integration of this ideology within his commentary on the failings of his own society demonstrates the immense scope of such powerful symbolism, whilst reflecting the volatile status of Christian communities during the fifth century.

Sexual slander, argues Wright Knust, was an essential mechanism through which the boundaries of social groups could be delineated and defended, being highly effective both in relation to accusations against individuals, and against entire communities. This was not a development radically new within the Christian movement, and indeed, early Christians themselves had been the subject of sexual slander. However, the addition of deep theological and spiritual implications to notions of sexual deviancy, seen within the Pauline writings and inherited by later authors such as Tertullian, enabled Church writers to further enhance the divide between their communities and those of their rivals, creating a matrix of sexual ideologies which, at its heart, emphasised the possibility of joining with Christ in the resurrection: the 144,000 on Mount Zion at Revelation 14:1-5, are virgins, and undefiled. This notion that sexual purity was restricted to those within the Christian community was, Wright Knust proposes, a key aspect of Christian writers’ attempts to ‘produce and maintain a discernible Christian identity.’ Accusations of sexual immorality, of licentiousness, incest, adultery and shamelessness, weave their way through texts pertaining to heresy and orthodoxy, adopting pre-existing techniques of sexual slander and marrying them to notions

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489 Wright Knust, 2006, 1
490 Wright Knust, 2006, 4. Within his Octavius, a dialogue between a Christian and a non-Christian, the apologist Minucius Felix had written that ‘everywhere also there is mingled among them a certain religion of lust, and they call one another promiscuously brothers and sisters, that even a not unusual debauchery may by the intervention of that sacred name become incestuous,’ concluding by stating that Christians ended religious ceremonies in the dark, in order to hide the licentious acts committed between believers (Octavius 9).
491 Revelation 14:4. See chapter one for a closer discussion of this statement.
492 Wright Knust, 2006, 9
of spiritual fornication and separation from God. Indeed, Clement went as far as to state of
eretical cults that ‘the wretches make a religion out of physical union and sexual
intercourse, and think that this will lead them into the kingdom of God.’ Accusations of
sexual misbehaviour against groups taken as heretical associated fornication directly with
Satan, and thus not only were such deviants guilty of πορνεία, they were guilty of
assimilating themselves with the Devil himself. Particularly of note within these heretical
groups were their female adherents, accused of being as easily deceived as Eve, and equally
capable of deceiving their own Adam.

Whilst authors such as Athanasius, in his waterfall of polemical accusations against the
Arians, placed the categories of ‘orthodoxy’ and ‘heresy’ against one another in a starkly
black-and-white manner, resonant of the sharp dichotomies of Paul in 1 Corinthians, these
two conflicting communities were intensely entangled with one another. Burrus, citing the
work of Le Boulluec, emphasises the manner in which the identities of these communities
evolved both through and from their creation of the ‘other,’ of a negative, dangerous
opposition. A formative aspect of this interdependence which Le Boulluec neglects to
take into account is, argues Burrus, the positioning of the heretical woman as a literary trope.
Heresiological texts, from Tertullian to Optatus to Athanasius, were written by male
orthodox Christians who, Burrus emphasises, utilized ‘the figure of the heretical female as a
vehicle for the negative expression of their own orthodox male self-identity.’

The complex sexual identities of ascetic male Church writers, who, as will be discussed within the next
chapter, were endlessly tormented by visions of beautiful women in their quest for heavenly
perfection, were steeped in loathing of the body, Jerome’s carcer, and a fear of the seductive
power innate to the female form. The large majority of women mentioned in tractates

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493 Clement, Stromata 3.4.27. ‘...hominis infelicissimi carnalem concubitus communionem
consecrant, et haec ipsos putant ad regnum Dei perducere.’
494 Wright Knust, 2006, 114
495 Burrus, 1991, 230. Iricinschi & Zeller have noted the significance of Le Boulluec’s attempts to
create a ‘discursive’ structure with regards to heresy, which they propose enables the ‘constructed
character’ of heresy to be made clear, however, have additionally emphasised the criticism which Le
Boulluec has faced for his claim that heresy was ‘invented’ by Justin Martyr (2008, 7-8).
496 Burrus, 1991, 230; Gaca, 160
regarding heresy are anonymous, a commonality which has led Burrus to argue that, in many cases, the heretical woman is entirely symbolic and is not based directly upon any actual licentious and non-orthodox women. The authors of texts regarding heresy were extensively concerned with protecting their churches and community boundaries, a central aspect of which was the regulation of sexual morality, as within the turbulent cities of Late Antiquity the potential to sin was high. Seduction, argued Baudrillard, appears ‘to all orthodoxies as malefice and artifice, a black magic for the deviation of all truths,’ and such was the nature of the power accorded to the heretical woman.

Whilst the heretical woman frequently features as secondary to the man who leads the sect overall – a dissident, glorious assistant to the corrupt apostate magician who runs the show – it is often through her that cultic leaders are able to extend their influence. By her very nature, the heretical woman is designed to seduce men into her church. Jerome, writing to Ctesiphon on heretical doctrines, includes an extensive list of women who have assisted corrupt male leaders in the spreading of their false doctrines: Marcion, he says, ‘sent a woman before him to Rome to prepare men’s minds to fall into his snares,’ whilst Montanus employed ‘two rich and high born ladies Prisca and Maximilla first to bribe and then to pervert many churches.’ For Jerome, heretical women were fundamental to the founding of a heretical cult, and indeed so varied is his list of names and places in the epistle to Ctesiphon that it almost seems as though it is impossible to found a dissident church without a wayward woman. Heretical women, sexually licentious and constant companions of their male counterparts, are heavily implied to engage in sexual relations with these men, and indeed Simon Magus’ female associate, Helena, is directly referred to as a ‘harlot.

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497 Burrus, 1991, 246
498 Baudrillard, 1990, 2
499 Jerome, Ep. 133.4. ‘… primum auro corrupit; deinde haeresi polluit…’
500 Burrus, 1991, 245-6. Burrus emphasises here Jerome’s application of 2 Timothy 3:6-7 within the epistle, but notes that Jerome is a little more restrained than usual within this letter, as its true target, Pelagius, had obtained powerful followers. Nonetheless, she argues, so strong was the connection of sexuality and heresy that he did not need to explicitly discuss this in order for the message to be carried across.
Tertullian refers to a heretical woman named Philumene, a consort of Apelles (who was himself a student of Marcion), and whose sexual morality is questionable as she is claimed to have become a prostitute after her dalliance with Apelles. So deeply did Jerome feel sexual licentiousness was ingrained within heretical cults that, in his letter to Eustochium, he plainly denied the existence of consecrated virgins within certain sects. They should be considered, he informs Eustochium in his concerted attempt to control her own behaviour, ‘not virgins, but prostitutes.’ Jerome’s criticisms serve not only to reinforce the trope of the licentious woman, with her requisite deceitful and seductive wiles, but to utilise her as a mechanism through which to attack male heretical cult leaders, adopting the ancient tradition of attacking the honour of female members of opposing social groups, whilst subtly suggesting that such cults subvert the natural order through their reliance on women for the spread of heretical doctrine.

The heretical woman was a dangerously seductive force which could tear righteous men from their churches, yet was simultaneously one of the ‘silly women’ referred to in 2 Timothy, blindly unaware of the truth, incapable of independent thought and controlled by her own desires. The author of 2 Timothy’s use of γυναικάρια, a diminutive of γυνή, infantilises the women in question, implying their childish ignorance and inability to resist the influence of dangerous men who invade their home, a home which is itself the church. These women are not only the silly women of 2 Timothy, ‘overwhelmed by their sins and swayed by all kinds of desire,’ but have additionally inherited the cunning and guile of the Whore of Babylon, which causes certain women to begin to lead, rather than be led. ‘In

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501 Jerome, Ep. 133.4
502 Tertullian, Praescr. 30. Philumene, states Tertullian, ‘afterwards became a monstrous prostitute (postea vero immane prostitulium).’ The ANF translates immane as ‘enormous,’ which renders Philumene’s transformation into something almost tangible, almost implying that Philumene has experienced a physical transformation of sorts. The translation has here been adapted to emphasise that Philumene’s prostitution is enormous through the depravity of her character, and the extent of her licentiousness.
503 Jerome, Ep. 22.38. ‘scorta sunt aestimanda, non virgins.’
504 2 Timothy 3:6 Ἐκ τούτων γὰρ ἐστίν οἱ ἐνδόνοντες εἰς τὰς οἰκίας καὶ σχεδοφρονοῦσες γυναῖκας σαρκασμέας ἁμαρτίας, άρχουσα εἰσθαμμένης ποικίλας. For occasions of this literary tradition within the Hebrew Bible, see Proverbs 2:16-19, 5:1-6 and 7:1-5. Clement utilises 5:1-6 and the notion that ‘the lips of a loose woman drip honey’ within book 3 of his Paedogogus to illustrate the dangers of women who paint their faces and act in a manner which tempts men.
Spain’, Jerome dutifully records, ‘the blind woman Agape led the blind man Elpidus into a ditch.’ His wording here is hardly subtle, yet it nonetheless drives home the fundamental issue which Jerome locates within heretical cults: women who are blind to the word of God lead the way for men who likewise lack true sight, a reversal of the correct social hierarchy and a rejection of true gospel. Agape’s name, and the implications of this, can hardly be a coincidence. Agape is not the only woman to spread the gospel of the heretics, with Jerome claiming that Elpidus’ path into the ditch is followed by the Zoroastrian Priscillian, supported by a woman named Galla, who ‘left a wandering sister to perpetuate a second heresy of a kindred kind.’ If virginity gave birth to virgins, to the flowers of the true church and the doctrine of Christ, so too did heretical women breed more heretics, and more heresy. The application of 2 Timothy 3:6-7 to texts regarding heresy, with the purpose of implying the innate connection between women and dissidence originated, argues Burrus, in the writings of Alexander of Alexandria. In Alexander’s letter to Alexander, Bishop of Constantinople, written regarding the heresies of the Arians, he notes that these ‘wicked men’, who were ‘incited by the devil’, engaged in ‘intercourse with silly and disorderly women, whom they have led into error’, before later in the epistle quoting 2 Timothy 3:6. Alexander’s introduction of 2 Timothy and its themes served to place the female followers of Arius into disrepute, whilst emphasising their immoral public behaviours (female adherents, claims Alexander, are seen ‘disgracefully wandering about every village and street’) and, by proxy, the lack of control which male authorities had over ‘their young

505 Jerome, Ep. 133.4
506 Jerome, Ep. 133.4
507 Burrus, 1991, 233 & 239. I would agree with Burrus as regards Alexander being the first to form a coherent ideology relating to heresy stemming from the sayings of 2 Timothy 3:6-7, however, Irenaeus, within the second century Haer. (1.13.6), does refer briefly to the followers of the Gnostic teacher Marcus as having ‘deceived many silly women, and defiled them (ἐξαπατώντες γυναίκαρ πολλὰ διήθαν).’
509 Alexander writes that: ‘They go about their cities, attempting nothing else but that under the mark of friendship…by their hypocrisy and blandishments, they may give and receive letters, to deceive by the means of these a few “silly women, and laden with sins, who have been led captive by them!” (Ep. Alex. Const.13).
maidens’ in such cults. This serves, argues Burrus, to emphatically highlight the ‘subversive and disorderly nature of the movement as a whole.’

Alexander’s writings had a profound impact on one his primary successors in the battle against Arianism: the ever-vocal adversary of heretical doctrine, Athanasius. For Athanasius, heresy herself was female, with Arianism appearing as the ‘harbringer of Antichrist.’ Arianism, wrote Athanasius, was the younger sister of other pre-existing heresies, a venomous female doctrine which had ‘already seduced (ἐπλάνησέ) certain of the foolish’ through her deceit, which could be seen through her attempts to ‘array herself in scripture language.’ She is, he states, ‘forcing her way back into the Church’s paradise,’ where she will continue to deceive and destroy those who fall into her path, ‘like her father the devil,’ with Arianism thus positioned as a second serpent who was distinctly female. This introduction of imagery extracted from Genesis and its account of the Fall allowed Athanasius to further emphasise the inherently female nature of heresy, and the close connection between women and dangerous sects. Arianism, he enthuses, has seduced those foolish souls ‘not only to corrupt their ears, but even to take and eat with Eve.’

Burrus concludes that Athanasius, through his adoption of the trope of the heretical woman and his transformation of heresy itself into an abstract, feminine concept, was ultimately able to imply that the myriad negative qualities of women (irrationality, carnality, foolishness,

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511 Burrus, 1991, 239. Alexander’s texts additionally make hints toward the presence of a feminised male heretic, a theme which was enthusiastically adopted by Athanasius. Burrus (1991 & 2000) has discussed this at length; given the focus upon the female body within this thesis the notion of the effeminate male heretic will not be examined.
512 Athanasius, *C. Ar.* 1.1. Ἐπειδὴ δὲ ἢ μία τῶν αἱρέσεων ἢ ἁσχατη, καὶ νῦν ἐξαλθοῦσα πρόδρομος τοῦ Ἀντιχρίστου, ὁ Ἀρσιανὴ καλουμένη, δύόλος ὀσία καὶ πανοίριγμος, βλέπουσα τὰς πρεσβυτέρας ἑαυτῆς ἀδελφὰς ἄλλας αἱρέσεις ἢκ ἀρνοῦσα στήλησθείσαις, ὑποκρίνεται περιβαλλομένη τῶν τῶν Γραφῶν λέξεως, ὡς ὁ πατὴρ αὐτῆς ὁ διάβολος, καὶ βίαζεται πάλιν εἰσελθείν εἰς τὸν παρᾶδεισον τῆς Ἐκκλησίας.
513 Athanasius, *C. Ar.* 1.1. Athanasius cannot avoid including the tropes of 2 Timothy, despite his theological re-stylings surrounding women and heresy. At 1.23, he states that despite the illogical nonsense spewed by the Arians, it is nonetheless necessary to formally refute their arguments, ‘especially on account of the silly women (γυναικάρια) who are so readily deceived by them.’
subservience) were an inherent aspect of the identity of heretical cults.\textsuperscript{514} Indeed, Athanasius utilised the notion of heretics as sexually wanton and uncontrolled to claim that the occurrence of direct attacks on his own community and the consecrated virgins therein were the product of Arian violence, stating in the *Epistola encyclica* that ‘holy and undefiled virgins were being stripped naked, and suffering treatment which is not to be named,’\textsuperscript{515} and recounting in his *Apologia* that ‘Naked swords (ξίφη γυμνά) were at work against the holy virgins and brethren… the virgins were assaulted with naked swords, and were exposed to all kinds of danger, and insult, and wanton violence.’\textsuperscript{516} For Athanasius, the physical attacks of the Arians on his congregation existed in the same realm as their attacks on his doctrine, each equally dangerous with regard to damaging the sanctity of his community, and the impenetrability of his theological constructions. Such a metamorphosis does the heretical woman undergo within the works of Athanasius that he is able to characterise Arius himself as such a woman, accusing him of imitating the dance of a prostitute, specifically, that of Herodias’ daughter Salome. The heretic, Athanasius declares, has emulated the ‘dissolute and effeminate (θηλυκὸν) tone’ of his disgraceful writings, and Salome he has ‘rivalled in her dance, reeling and frolicking in his blasphemies against the saviour.’\textsuperscript{517} For Athanasius, the philosophy which lies behind the image of the heretical woman is more significant for his doctrine than the individual heretical woman herself, as his expansion of the ideologies of sexuality, women and heresy held far greater weight with regard to the textual warfare which the beleaguered bishop was waging.

The interweaving of the imagery of the Fall, and the corresponding figure of Eve, with the notion that heresies were themselves female and connected through a family tree of depravity can be further observed within the writings of Epiphanius. His *Panarion*, a lengthy catalogue of heresies both renowned and obscure, describes pre-Christian heretical

\textsuperscript{514} Burrus, 1991, 239. Athanasius utilises his transformation of heresy into a female form to illustrate Arius as being highly feminised, with Burrus stating that this forms a central aspect of his rhetoric regarding his rival (1991, 235).


\textsuperscript{516} Athanasius, *Apol. sec.* 1.15

\textsuperscript{517} Athanasius, *C. Ar.* 1.2
communities (such as, he suggests, Barbarism and Hellenism) as the ‘mothers’ of the sects which arose during the Christian era, and relies heavily on depictions of both Eve and reptiles. 518 Indeed, within his onslaughts against an all-female sect known as the Collyridians, Epiphanius renders the community a ‘coiled serpent,’ reminding his readers that ‘our mother Eve should be honoured because formed by God, but not be obeyed, or she may convince her children to eat of the tree and transgress the commandment.’ 519 ‘Every sect is a worthless woman,’ enthused Epiphanius, ‘but this sect more so, which is composed of women and belongs to him who was the deceiver of the first woman.’ 520 Eve was, argues Burrus, the ‘prototypical heretic’ for Epiphanius, who viewed her sexuality as lying at the very core of her being, and consequently of all heretics who followed in her footsteps. 521 The heresies addressed in the *Panarion* number eighty in total, a number which was by no means arrived at by chance, and which demonstrates the application of an unusual twist on the connection of the heretical woman with prostitution and sexual licentiousness. Through his interpretation of the Song of Songs, Epiphanius concluded that the ‘dove’ of 6:9 represented the true church, ‘the holy bride and catholic church herself,’ 522 whilst the eighty concubines featured at 6:8 are interpreted as ‘meaning the sects.’ 523 Thus, the weaving together of the sexually licentious heretical woman with the Whore of Babylon, her name by its very nature introducing prostitution into the analogy, finds further biblical support through Epiphanius’ exegetical usage of the Song of Songs. Indeed, Optatus, who similarly identified the Song of Songs as a pertinent source of inspiration, went as far as to state that ‘we know that the churches of individual heretics are prostitutes without any legal sacraments, who lack the

518 Epiphanius, *Pan*. Anacephalaeosis 1. Epiphanius’ discussion of his twenty-sixth heresy, Gnosticism, utilizes such imagery throughout, alongside an in-depth description of the various sexual deviancies practiced among the sect.

519 Epiphanius, *Pan*. 79.7.5; 79.8.1


521 Burrus, 1991, 243

522 Epiphanius, *Pan*. 35.3.6; Song of Songs 6:8-9. ‘There are sixty queens and eighty concubines, and maidens without number. My dove, my perfect one, is the only one…’

523 Epiphanius, *Pan*. 35.3.6
status of an honest marriage.\textsuperscript{524} Within his extensive criticisms of the schismatic Donatists, Optatus saw fit to differentiate between the notion of ‘adulterer’ and ‘adulteress’ in their application as metaphors for immoral cults. Much as the concubines of Epiphanius represented illicit sects, adulteresses, stated Optatus, were ‘those people’s churches which Christ spurns and rejects in the Song of Songs,’ whilst adulterers, he argued, were heretics.\textsuperscript{525} Criticism of Donatism via an association with the imagery of the Song of Songs was equally realised by Augustine, who additionally utilised imagery taken from Psalm 45 to remind the divine bridegroom’s betrothed of the dangers of tempting gifts, themselves a manifestation of heresy. ‘O most beautiful among women,’ Augustine appeals to the bride, the pure church, ‘however beautiful others may be with gifts from your husband, they are heresies (haereses sunt); beautifully attired, not beautiful within…you must not be seduced, (corrumpti) by the perverse conversation of evil companions.’\textsuperscript{526}

The body of the consecrated virgin was a church of her own, pure and free from stain with her doorways barred shut against intruders, yet the body of the heretical woman formed an eminently different church. Her body, much like that of the prostitute, was laid open to all, freely available to those unable to adhere to the Pauline strictures on sexual relations, oozing out the seed of heretical doctrine along with the seed of lust that resulted from acts of πορνεία. Just as the sexually licentious woman is penetrated by multiple strange men, comments Burrrus, so too the promiscuous heretical woman allows unknown theological doctrines into the body of her church.\textsuperscript{527} Clement, criticising the supposed sharing of wives which occurred within heretical cults, stated that ‘it is to the brothels that this sort of communism leads,’ emphasising that ‘it is the whores who preside over the bordello and

\textsuperscript{524} Optatus, \textit{Contra Parm.} 1.10. ‘Scimus enim haereticorum Ecclesias singulorum, prostitutas, nullis legalibus sacramentis et in se fure honesti matrimonii esse.’

\textsuperscript{525} Optatus, \textit{Contra Parm.} 4.6. ‘Haereticos dicit moechos, et moechas Ecclesias illorum; quas aspernatur et repudiat Christus in Canticis Canticorum.’ His argument here is based in part on Psalm 50:18, which states that ‘you make friends with a thief when you see one, and you keep company with adulterers.’

\textsuperscript{526} Augustine, Serm. 138.8

\textsuperscript{527} Burrrus, 1991, 232. Burrrus additionally highlights that heretical women do not behave as respectable women should through their rejection of gendered space, refusing to remain in the ‘private sphere’ and to acknowledge that public domains are those of men, in defiance of the authority of their male superiors.
indiscriminately receive all comers who have the most to hope from them. The heretical cult was a brothel, a hotbed of iniquity and sin, with men replaced by women in command, and with those women allowing anyone who should chance upon them to enter – to enter their brothel, their church, their bodies. Indeed, so effective was the application of fornication and prostitution as metaphor within texts on heresy that, argues Shaw, the very term ‘heretic’ with its implication of the rejection of accepted church doctrine was less damaging than the associated heretical tenets of sexual misbehaviour and a general lack of morality. Sexual depravity became an aspect of heretical cults taken almost as doctrine. The ‘silly women’ so briefly mentioned in 2 Timothy were no longer simply vapid, easily-deceived female members of fringe cults, but were dangerous, sexually predatory deceivers themselves, both members and representatives of these communities, and contained within their bodies lay the clearest definition of what it meant to be a member of a socially, sexually and ideologically deviant heretical society.

‘Woman,’ argue Schwartz and Kaplan in their analysis of biblical heroines and villains, ‘entered the Greek world as a curse to men, and, in a certain sense, she never overcame that difficult beginning.’ In the sprawling Christian church of Late Antiquity, the tumultuous relations of competing sects and rival orthodoxies caused increased fears within those communities which considered themselves to be representative of the true church, and thus the power ingrained within the seductive nature of women provided a threat to their security, exemplified by the body of the female virgin which, if threatened, could fall into sin. By the fourth century, ascetic practices had achieved a level of prominence among these competing communities, yet, as Burrus notes, the ideologies of asceticism were complex and lacked clarity, and thus the heretical woman can be read as a ‘spectre of the fears of men who long

528 Clement, *Stromata* 3.4.28. ‘Ad lupanaria ergo deducit haec communio, et cum eis communicauerint suas et hirci, maximaque apud illos in spe fuerint meretrices, quae in prostibulis praestio sunt, et uolentes omnes admittunt.’

529 Shaw, 2011, 324

530 Schwartz & Kaplan, 2007, 22
for a clear articulation of group boundaries.\textsuperscript{531} Early church literature which pertains to the behaviour of chaste women and virgins reveals an underlying fear that these young women, whose pure and untouched bodies were so greatly integral to the ideology of men such as Ambrose and Jerome, would slip away from their divine calling and become another Eve, another ‘disgusting stone,’ to quote the former harlot Pelagia, whose life will be discussed within the following chapter, upon which an unsuspecting man could trip.\textsuperscript{532} Within the dangerous, untamed deserts of Late Antiquity, men such as Jerome sought solace, hoping desperately to wrestle with their demons and erase the taunting sting of sexual desire from their bodies. However, the deserts were haunted by demons, women as dangerous as the heretical woman if not even more so, as they had been sent directly by Satan to tempt the exhausted, battle-weary monk. These anonymous women developed out of an ideology similar to that of the heretical woman, as they challenged the body and integrity of the individual holy man, and his own convictions in his faith and ascetic behaviours. It is these battles which will now be examined within thesis, before concluding with the miraculous bodies of deeply ascetic, deeply scarred repentant prostitutes, whose \textit{Vitae} illustrate the coalescing of the ideologies of sacrifice, salvation and sex which had developed around the female body throughout Christian antiquity.

\textsuperscript{531} Burrus, 1991, 247
\textsuperscript{532} \textit{Vita Pelagiae} 24
5. Since I Left the World: The Women of the Desert

‘I am beset with fear, Aurel. I am afraid of what the men of the church may one day do to women like me. Not just because we are women – as God has created us women. But because we tempt you are who are men – as God has created you men.’

Jostein Gaarder, *Vita Brevis*: A Letter to St. Augustine

‘When the sun shone warmly again she went outside and sat in front of the tree. Her long hair covered her on all sides like a cloak. Thus she sat year after year, feeling the world’s misery and pain.’

The Brothers Grimm, *Mary’s Child*

The sexually licentious heretical woman was a source of immense concern for those Christian authors who engaged themselves in battles of theology within the church, and whose works aimed to alienate divisive and immoral cults from what they perceived to be the true church. These were not the only men of the church for whom seductive women provided a threat to their ideologies and way of life. In the sweltering and desolate deserts of the empire, ascetic monks abandoned their cities to begin new lives of penitence and suffering, pushing their bodies to the most extreme of limits in order to allow a transformation of both body and mind in a universe greatly removed from the bustling cities they had previously known. As one father, Abba Pambo, stated, ‘by the grace of God, since I left the world, I have not said one word of which I repented afterward.’

The desert was a location saturated with deep spiritual ideologies, as Jesus himself had been ‘led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil,’ and had overcome him, and thus the ascetic monks who fought with Satan’s demonic servants and with their own inner temptations could view themselves as the inheritors of a profoundly sacred tradition.

Asceticism by its very nature invited the imagery of the suffering of Christ, and the salvation

533 *Apophthegmata Patrum*, Pambo 5
which was implied as a result of the endurance of trials: it was, argues MacKendrick, ‘powerful, empowering, and still unquestionably violent.’ For these men, living as they did in total isolation or in small desert communities, the figure of a woman provided a source of temptation which could tear even the most rigorous of ascetics away from their holy path and, as Brown has commented, within ascetic literature ‘women were presented as a source of perpetual temptation to which the male body could be expected to respond instantly.’ Within this chapter, the manner in which desert monks interacted with women who resided in desert villages will be considered, alongside a reflection on the creation of an ascetic tradition which saw Satan appear in the guise of a woman to tormented monks, in order to attempt to lure them away from their path. It was in order to escape fornication, a mentality which itself became almost tangible through the myriad of accounts within which it appeared, that many of these monks fled from their cities, away from the existence there of the female sex, through which, Abba Arsenius claimed, ‘the enemy wars against the Saints.’ Jesus had battled with Satan for forty days and forty nights, but for the ascetic monks of antiquity, their desert warfare had no end in sight.

For those who had chosen more extreme practices in order to contend with the power of sexuality, and who wished to utterly eradicate desire within their bodies, anonymous yet spiritually symbolic seductive women were an ever-present aspect of their ascetic experiences, and featured prominently in texts pertaining to the renunciation of all that was connected to the world. The Lives of ascetic desert monks, from the celebrated Antony to

535 MacKendrick, 1999, 69
536 Brown, 1988, 242. There are accounts of women living ascetic lifestyles in the desert (Thecla being the prototype of this), and indeed there are some sayings of desert Mothers within the Apophthegmata Patrum. The Amma Sarah ‘waged warfare against the demon of fornication (τοῦ διαμονοῦ τῆς πόρνείας)’ for thirteen years, ultimately overcoming this spectre through her faith in Christ (Sarah, 1). Given that these women did not experience challenges to their chastity in the form of tempting women (at least, none are recorded to have done so, although the hypothetical possibility cannot be ruled out), their experiences with the temptations of fornication will be not be discussed within this chapter. Coon notes one key difference between the narrative of desert men and desert women, arguing that whilst male desert ascetics ‘reflect the supernatural spirituality of Christ,’ the tales of female ascetics ‘humanise the militancy of desert asceticism’ (1997, 72). Additionally, whilst certain Fathers emphasise that the desert was for male ascetics, the occasional tales of female ascetics (such as that of Paësia the repentant courtesan) imply that it was possible for women to experience the repentance and isolation promised by the wilderness (John the Dwarf 40).
537 Apophthegmata Patrum, Arsenius 28
the myriad of anonymous brothers who resided within Scetis, Thebaid and other desert monasteries, are riddled with appearances by beautiful young women whose sole purpose was to draw a monk into sexual sin. Whilst the heretical woman could be connected to Satan through her espousal of unorthodox doctrine, the mysterious femme fatale of the desert was the devil’s direct emissary, sent with the sole purpose of encouraging a monk to abandon chastity and fall into fornication. Consequently, the rare appearances of real women within the desert (such as those who resided within small desert villages) were viewed with immense suspicion, with the monks of desert monasteries and cells struggling to identify between an imagined force of Satan, and a woman of flesh and blood. The first section of this chapter will discuss the appearance of tempting women within the literature of the desert, establishing the manner in which they enable ascetic monks to engage in a spiritual battle with Satan, and the centrality of the notion of temptation to such discourse. Whilst heresiologists had utilised the body of the heretical woman to establish boundaries within their community, relying in part on ideological traditions based upon the impenetrable body of the virgin, the desert authors placed great emphasis upon the impact of temptation on the body of the individual monk. Seductive women in ascetic histories formed part of a tradition which intersected with that of heresy through the presence of tempting women; these texts served a different purpose to those of the city, as desert adherents engaged with a sexuality which was delineated by theological and spiritual ideologies unique to their location. Thus, women came to represent the world itself, the temptations not only of sex but of food, greed and idolatry which were associated with the cities which monks had fled.

Athanasius’ Vita Antonii was a key source of inspiration of ascetic adherents and authors alike, with Antony’s endless battles against the devil providing an aspirational tale for monks to emulate. Within this chapter, Antony’s Vita will be examined alongside the monastic examples provided within the Apophthegmata Patrum in order to establish the

538 Brown, 1988, 243
function of women within monastic literature, and their relationship with the sinful world external to the desert. MacKendrick’s analysis of sexual desire and temptation within early Christian literature will be utilised to complement this discussion, as doing so will aid in the creation of a desert ideology which placed temptation at the heart of ascetic struggle. Additionally, Elm’s commentary on virginity will be reflected on in order to establish the close connection between the philosophy of the desert and that of the city, and to untangle the complex relationship which asceticism maintained with the body and its sexuality. Concluding this first section will be a reflection on the struggles of Jerome and Augustine with their bodies and desires, two men for whom sexual temptation was a fearful spectre, and a battle which had defined their identities. Jerome had spent time within the desert, as discussed within his letter to Eustochium, his reflections upon this experience having returned to the city illustrating the extent of the physical and psychological torments undergone by those who resided in ascetic desert communities. Augustine had not enacted such ascetic penance, having himself engaged in sexual relations in both his youth and adulthood. His frank discussion of his desires provides a rare insight into the manner in which fornication and sin could shape the life of a young man within the fourth century, his *Confessiones* a re-examination of his perceived sin which is, in itself, a form of penance. Despite the overwhelming fear of temptation which permeated late antique texts, and the terror which could be inspired in a monk through the mere sight of a female body and the thought of sexuality, a genre of literature arose within Christianity from the fifth century onward which exclusively addressed prostitution within an ascetic framework. The *vitae* of repentant harlots will form the second half of this chapter, the final discussion of this thesis, as contained within these texts lie a multitude of ideologies which reflect those analysed previously, from martyrrology to heresy. Such tales detailed the experiences of women who were considered to have led lives of the uttermost depravity, but who found redemption through conversion and the adoption of an ascetic lifestyle and thus demonstrated the possibility for even the most fallen of souls to ascend to the height of sanctity. It is, McGinn

539 MacKendrick, 1999; Elm, 1994
argues, a development exclusive to Christianity, as the notion that a harlot can be lifted from her denigrated position in society finds no parallel in the cultural histories of other classical and late antique societies.\footnote{McGinn, 1998, 348; Salisbury, 1991, 69}

These \textit{vitae} were constructed to provide a radical message, offering fallen women the chance to redeem themselves to the point of sainthood, yet the eradication of female sexuality and gender which underlies many such texts provides a more sinister message, consequently causing this genre of literature to be construed as damaging to female identity. For Cameron, such stories demonstrate that women can only ascend to the highest level of sainthood through a total negation of their sexuality, and their neutralisation of ‘the dangers inherent in being female,’ whilst Coon defines repentant harlots as ‘mournful,’ concluding that their tales emphasise a belief in the necessity for women to perform penance for Eve’s sin and erase their femininity.\footnote{Cameron, 2011, 515; Coon, 1997, xvii} However, as this chapter will conclude, these texts contain within them strikingly bold declarations of the sanctity of women, and their ability to locate Christ within their bodies through an extreme ascetic penance which does not denigrate their femininity, but rather sees them defeat Satan’s most dangerous warrior, desire itself. Burrus’ analysis of hagiography and Sainthood emphasises the contradictions inherent to tales surrounding repentant harlots, and thus will be considered within the wider framework of the construction of repentant harlots, and their bodies, with an intention toward clarifying the complex relationships between sex, gender, identity and audience inherent to these texts.\footnote{Burrus, 2004}

Four \textit{vitae} will form the core of this analysis: the hagiographies of Thaïs, Mary the Niece of Abraham and Mary of Egypt illustrate the lives of three women who experienced sexual debasement and redemption in somewhat different ways, but who ultimately achieved Sainthood through their ascetic endurance and defeat of desire and Satan. Furthermore, these tales demonstrate the manner in which male authorities could influence the lives of fallen women, whether as mentors, students or saviours, and the role of such men with these
tales elucidates the manner in which ascetic monks positioned themselves in relation to both
text and subject. The *Vita Pelagiae*, a remarkable text recounting the conversion, repentance
and death of a woman who transforms from an image of Babylon to one of Christ crucified
will conclude this chapter, with Pelagia’s spiritual journey uniting ideologies of martyrdom,
virginity, eroticism, heresy and asceticism, culminating in her transcendent metamorphosis
from sinner to saint.

5.1 Temptation and Torment

If the heretical woman represented false churches which had turned from the light of God,
the seductive woman of desert temptation narratives was directly assimilated with Satan, the
‘enemy’ who battled with the saintly monks of the desert. Indeed, the tempting woman was
frequently sent by the devil himself in order to destroy the chastity of ascetic monks, with
Athanasius recording in his *vita* of the renowned ascetic Antony that ‘the beleaguered devil
undertook one night to assume the form of a woman (γυνή) and to imitate her every gesture,
solely in order that he might beguile Antony.’\(^{543}\) Similarly, the desert monk Pachomius was
frequently tormented by the devil when he sat down to eat, as evil spirits ‘used to come in
the form of naked women (γυμνῶν γυναικῶν) to sit and eat with him.’\(^{544}\) Within religious
traditions, seduction, so Baudrillard argued, ‘was a strategy of the devil,’\(^{545}\) and this notion is
an ever-present fear which underlies many ascetic writings. Sexuality itself, for these
ascetics, was closely associated with notions of the Fall, and the enduring nature of a sinful
world propagated through childbirth, which could, therefore, only be drawn to a close

\(^{543}\) Athanasius, *Vita Antonii* 5

\(^{544}\) *Vita Pachomiae* 19. It is of interest that these women specifically appear when Pachomius eats, as
this may reinforce the connection of sexual desire and food which appears throughout patristic
literature. Jerome, in his epistle to Eustochium, emphasises that the consumption of certain foods can
turn the chaste mind toward sin.

\(^{545}\) Baudrillard, 1990, 1
through the cessation of sexual relations. The *Vita Antonii* outlined the ascetic trials – and ultimate successes – of the man who was to become one of the paradigms for monasticism, with the overall narrative serving to outline the ideal way in which the life of an ascetic man would progress. Antony’s sexual temptation narrative sees the devil switch between forms, appearing first as a woman and then as a boy, with the latter serving as a mouthpiece through which Satan can directly communicate with Antony, whom he informs that:

‘I am the friend of fornication (τῆς πορνείας...φίλος). I set its ambuses and I worked its seductions against the young – I have even been called the spirit of fornication (πνεῦμα πορνείας). How many of those who wanted to live prudently I have deceived! How many of those exercising self-control I won over when I agitated them! I am the one on whose account the prophet reprimands those who fall, saying, you have been led astray by a spirit of fornication (πνεῦμα πορνείας)’

Satan’s direct address to the suffering monk provides an ideological blueprint upon which fornication and sexual sin could be developed within other ascetic texts and in the monastic ideology, with the consequence of this being that the tempting woman was, to the ascetic mind, not merely an immoral and heretical Whore of Babylon, but a physical manifestation of the devil. The *Anonymous Apophthegmata* tell of a young monk who was ‘terribly tempted by the demon of fornication,’ with four demons attempting to ensnare him by transforming into beautiful women and ‘wrestling with him to draw him into shameful intercourse.’ Despite their best efforts, the monk endured their seductions, with the outcome that ‘God granted him grace no longer to burn in the flesh again.’

Paul had berated his Corinthian audience for committing acts of πορνεία, offering them marriage as a mechanism through which sexual interactions could be legitimately conducted,

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546 Brown, 1988, 86  
547 Cameron, 2011, 508  
548 Athanasius, *Vita Antonii* 6  
549 *Anonymous Apophthegmata* N.188/5.41. ἐπειράσθη ὑπὸ τοῦ δαίμονος τῆς πορνείας δεινὸς.  
550 *Anonymous Apophthegmata* N.188/5.41. ἐφελκύσσασθαι εἰς αἰσχρὰν μίξιν.
and desire could be controlled, whilst tractates against heresy promoted the notion that sexual immorality was an inherent aspect of divisive religious cults. Ascetic monks sought to destroy the very stirrings of desire within them and to erase sexuality from their bodies, with the consequence that no possibility for legitimate sexual interactions could exist within the desert.\textsuperscript{551} The figure of the tempting woman – who did not have to be licentious, or seductive, but simply had to own a body – in these texts reflects far more than a movement away from the church doctrine espoused by writers such as Athanasius. Woman, here, was not merely a heretical enemy to be mocked, criticised or slandered for her sexual licentiousness and ill-formed theological opinions, but was the physical manifestation of all forms of sexuality, a demon armed with weapons forged by Satan himself. A tale regarding the experiences of an anonymous desert monk, recounted within the \textit{Vita Pachomiae}, demonstrates the extremity with which sexual lapses, or even the intention to sin, could be viewed.\textsuperscript{552} The ‘evil spirit’ had slowly worked its way into this brother’s person, manifesting itself through his arrogance, which caused the monk to leave his companions by their campfire and return to their hermitage by himself. There, the evil spirit ‘took the shape of a beautiful and well-adorned woman, and came and knocked on his door,’ with the beautiful woman consequently begging the monk to provide her with refuge, as she was being pursued by creditors. The monk, blind to the trickery at play here, allowed her in, and ‘as the diabolical spirit shot him with an evil desire (ἐπιθυμία κακή), he was inclined to sin. When he drew near in order to indulge his inclination, the evil spirit struck him down with a fit.\textsuperscript{553} Within this tale the monk does not actually engage in any form of sexual relations,

\textsuperscript{551} By legitimate, I refer here to sexual relations which a non-ascetic Christian would have considered acceptable, such as those within marriage.

\textsuperscript{552} \textit{Vita Pachomiae} 8

\textsuperscript{553} \textit{Vita Pachomiae} 8. The presence of certain Nag Hammadi codices within the monasteries of Pachomius may shed further light on Pachomius’ conception of temptation and sexual sin, for, as Dilley notes, whilst the writings of Athanasius circulated among Pachomian monks, so too did a variety of Nag Hammadi texts, whose influence may be identified within Pachomian reflections on prayer and repentance, with the \textit{Exegesis of the Soul} having particularly strong intersections with Pachomian ideals (Dilley, 2017, 27). The \textit{Exegesis} utilises metaphors of prostitution taken from the Hebrew Bible which relate to pollution and the defiling of the community, alongside references to the New Testament regarding the community’s perceived purity (such as 1 Corinthians 6). These textual inclusions echo Pachomius’ own reflections on desire, the soul and sin, with the beautiful woman of the passage discussed serving as a representative of evil who aims to entice a monk to sin and thus
yet so powerful was the mere notion of succumbing to temptation that his intention to perform the deed was condemnation enough, and despite attempts at repentance the evil spirit could not be removed from the body of the torment monk. He later ‘threw himself into the furnace of a bathhouse, and was burned.’

This profound opposition to sexuality occupied a prominent place within ascetic discourse, to the extent that despite attempts to eradicate it utterly from the worlds of the desert, provocative tales of sexual temptation continued to feature prominently within the ascetic writings which circulated among desert communities. Indeed, so intense was the ingrained notion that the very figure of a woman could cause sin that the number of women who feature even as background figures within ascetic narratives is somewhat striking. In a story attributed to Abba Abraham, the elderly Father heard tell of a fellow monk who claimed to have ‘destroyed fornication (Ἀπέκτανα τὴν πορνείαν)’ in himself, and visited the man in question to challenge him on this. 554 ‘If you were to find a woman lying on your mat when you entered your cell would you think that it is not a woman?’ Abraham questioned, to which the monk replied that he would not, but that he would ‘struggle against my thoughts so as not to touch her.’ Abraham’s inquisition served the purpose of demonstrating that although desire and temptation could be controlled through ascetic practices, they continued to live inside the body of the adherent, waiting for the moment when they could regain their power. The woman in question is not presented as sexually licentious, as a harlot, or indeed as being particularly beautiful or tempting. It is her mere presence alone that causes her to be a threat to the monk in question. As MacKendrick has noted, one of the most captivating aspects of asceticism lies in the fact that whilst it demands pure spirituality, this exists in

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554 Apophthegmata Patrum, Abraham 1. As Elm has noted, the many women who appear within the Apophthegmata are ‘employed to serve various purposes in the process of edification,’ and thus even those women who are not presented as seductive sources of temptation are included in the texts in order to provide moralising reflections on the condition of the monk (1994, 258).
opposition to a ‘blatant physicality,’ and the tensions which exist between the physical and the spiritual, she proposes, lie at the very heart of asceticism itself. Asceticism, Mackendrick argues, is constructed on a basis of opposites, in which the desire to be free of temptation is juxtaposed with the desire to be tempted, to be faced with a battle in which a monk can display the strength of their will and push their bodies to their furthest limits.

The numerous tales which feature Satan appearing in the form of a woman, with the purpose of enticing ascetic men, came in part as a consequence of the presence of real women within the desert, residing in small villages which could exist dangerously close to a monastery. The awareness of these women, suggests Elm, was a source of worry for many monks, who sought to address their fears by recounting stories of triumph over Satan and his feminine companions. The accounts which feature real and imagined battles with Satan far outweigh narratives of meetings between monks and real women in the desert; these stories frequently feature a monk who is dangerously tempted to sin, on occasion doing so, or who goes to extreme lengths to avoid committing an act which could draw him back in to the physical world he sought to escape. In a somewhat macabre demonstration of the manner in which physicality could manifest itself in ascetic texts, the Anonymous Apophthegmata record the tale of a monk who was filled with thoughts of desire for a woman he had observed before his retreat to the desert. Upon the woman’s untimely death, the monk ‘opened up her tomb’ and soaked his cloak in the bodily fluids which exuded from her corpse, with the outcome that he would ‘set that stench before him and do battle with his logismos’ having returned to his cell. By being in the presence of an item imbued with the

555 MacKendrick, 1999, 66. Cameron has highlighted how prominent a position the notion of physical temptation occupies within the Vita Antonii, in contrast to the writings of earlier authors such as Origen, for whom virginity was ‘fundamental to ascetic life’ (2011, 508).
556 MacKendrick, 1999, 71
557 MacKendrick, 1999, 65
558 Whilst this thesis does not have the scope available to devote as much attention as it needed to this topic, it must be noted here that the tales of monks and women have a complicated and at times disturbing relationship with ideologies of race and, in particular, the presentation of Ethiopian women. As Byron demonstrates, such women are depicted in a highly derogatory manner, being transformed from a ‘presumably attractive and sexually seductive Ethiopian woman into a repugnant and invisible object’ in a manner which raises numerous questions regarding the relationship of gender, ethnicity and identity within monastic literature (2002, 100).
559 Elm, 1994, 257
stench of her decaying body, he attempted to quell his feelings of desire for her, and ultimately ‘the battle was stilled for him.’ Such a tale is not only disturbing in regards to the extreme lengths to which the monk was willing to go to overcome his desires, but through its demonstration of the sheer lack of consideration for the woman involved, whose corpse is essentially desecrated by a monk in the pursuit of holiness. Much like the story of Eucleia within the Passion of Andrew, the woman here is little more than a plot device, a stepping stone within the account of a particular holy man’s journey to attain sanctity, a woman utterly dehumanised. Ascetic monks who resided in the desert, their skin scorched by the relentless rays of the sun, burnt in more ways than one, and the prevalence of tales regarding fornication and desire, concepts both intangible and, simultaneously, realised within the physical body of a woman, suggests that for many of those in the desert, sexual temptation was an integral facet of ascetic life, an aspect of the urban city which they had sought to eradicate but which endured. For Peter Brown, the tales show a ‘permanence’ regarding sexual fantasy, and suggest an awareness that sexual desire ran parallel to human nature.

The accounts of monks overcoming temptation reflect, argues Elm, ‘heroic struggles as well as shameful falls, and at the same time emphasise the power of divine redemption.’ Despite the dangers lurking within the murky depths of sexual temptation, and the lengths to which ascetic hermits went to destroy these feelings within their being, there exist tales which recount the sexual lapses of monks, and which conclude with their repentance and forgiveness. One anonymous story tells of a monk who, gathering water at a well, came across a woman with whom he ‘fell,’ after which he returned to his cell to be assailed by demons who informed him that ‘there is no salvation for you.’ Despite having broken his vow of chastity, the monk was able to regain his status through his resistance to his demons, and his assertion, quite intriguingly, that he had ‘not sinned.’ The father of his community

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560 Anonymous Apophthegmata N.172/5.26
561 Brown, 1988, 230
562 Elm, 1994, 258
563 Anonymous Apophthegmata N.50/5.47. συνέβη αὐτὸν πεσεῖν μετ’ αὐτῆς.
later came to him to inform him that God had revealed the young monk’s sin to him and stated that ‘though you had fallen, you triumphed.’ The monk, confessing all, was told that through his ‘discernment’ of the true meaning of the demonic onslaught, which was the removal of all potential for redemption from him through his destruction, he ‘shattered the power of the enemy.’ The woman in question here was not herself an emissary of Satan, but merely a young woman who a desperate and sexually-deprived monk happened to stumble upon. This account of a fallen monk able to redeem himself does not stand in isolation, and indeed the few tales which tell of sexual sin include that of men as high-ranking as bishops.\textsuperscript{564} As Rousselle and Brown have noted, the very fact of these lapses demonstrates the centrality of sexual temptation to ascetic life, and highlights the necessity for monks to live in increasingly isolated settings, as a chance encounter with a woman from a nearby village – indeed, as little as the very sight of one – could cause a monk to abandon his vows.\textsuperscript{565}

A somewhat disturbing facet of these tales arises from the fact that the willingness of the woman in question to partake in sexual relations is almost never mentioned.\textsuperscript{566} The women with whom monks fall do not appear as seducers: indeed, in some accounts they actively prevent the monk from committing a sin, such as a young woman within the \textit{Anonymous Apophthegmata} who prevented a monk from engaging with her sexually, and thus breaking his vows, by reminding him that she was menstruating. The woman, the author recounts, thus quelled the lust within the monk, who wept upon the realisation that he had come close to committing sin and thanked God who, ‘through her astuteness and discretion, had not allowed him to fall definitively.’\textsuperscript{567} God had acted through the person of the woman to aid the monk, a strange reflection of the manner in which Satan acted through women to tempt monks into iniquity. The steep fall from grace embodied within a sexual liaison with a

\textsuperscript{564} \textit{Anonymous Apophthegmata} N.32 BHG 1322h, \textit{de paenitentia episcopi}  
\textsuperscript{565} Brown, 1998, 230 and Rousselle, 1988, 144. Rousselle additionally discusses the accusations made against monks by young girls in desert villages who became pregnant after a monk had passed through the settlement (1998, 145).  
\textsuperscript{566} Rousselle, 1988, 147  
\textsuperscript{567} \textit{Anonymous Apophthegmata} N.52
woman reflected that first sin of Eve, and yet the tales of repentance following these suggest that in some cases, sin could be overcome. As with the πόρνη of first Corinthians, the bodies of women within these texts are of little relevance beyond their physical function, the place which they occupy serving to demonstrate the ramifications of sexuality and temptation for a male Christian within his overall journey toward the highest possible state of spiritual being. The link between the seductive woman, sexuality and the devil was cemented for those who would inhabit the desert from the account of Antony’s temptation onward, and Cameron has noted that such a development additionally serves to emphasise that women must, at all costs, be kept away from those areas of the desert occupied by male ascetics.  

One desert ascetic, Abba Eudemon, directly stated that a Father named Paphnutius informed him that ‘I do not allow the face of a woman to dwell in Scetis, because of the conflict with the enemy.’ Paphnutius’ statement is made all the more extreme as it is addressed not to a woman but to Eudemon himself, on the occasion of a visit he made to Scetis as a young man, his youthful appearance evidently providing too close an image of the feminine to be accepted in Paphnutius’ strict society. This tale additionally provides a hint toward an intriguing subsection of texts which regard ascetic temptation: temptation is a seductive woman, one sent by the devil for the purposes of sinful sexual encounters, yet in some desert communities the demon of fornication which tormented the ascetic became so strong that the need for Satan to provide the image of a beautiful dancing girl was bypassed altogether.

Within various *Apophthegmata*, certain desert fathers recount tales relating to sexual desire being expressed upon young boys within ascetic communities, their youthful beauty catching the eye of weathered monks, in whose beaten and wasted bodies desire had not

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568 Cameron, 2011, 510. Furthermore, Cameron argues that, as Antony’s first experience of temptation by the devil comes in the guise of a woman, this demonstrates that in terms of Antony’s ‘ascetic progress,’ overcoming sexual temptation can be observed as ‘belonging to the lowest level of ascetic ascent’ (2011, 509). Given the prevalence of sexual temptation throughout ascetic literature, and the weighty emphasis accorded to the tempting female body within ascetic ideology, I am not sure of the extent to which I agree with this. It may be the case that for the *Vita Antonii* specifically, sexual temptation is indeed the first level of ascetic warfare, but that the manner in which ascetic ideologies subsequently developed saw greater weight accorded to this form of temptation.

569 *Apophthegmata Patrum*, Eudemon 1
been fully suppressed. Indeed, Abba John the Dwarf stated that ‘he who gorges himself and
talks with a boy has already in his thoughts committed fornication with him.’\footnote{Apophthegmata Patrum, Abba John the Dwarf 4. ὅτι ὁ χορταζόμενος καὶ λαλῶν μετὰ παιδίου, ἴδῃ ἔπορνευε τὸ λογισμὸν μετ᾽ αὐτῶν.} John the
Dwarf’s statement here, moralising as opposed to being rooted in a factual occurrence,
expresses a direct suggestion that young boys were the objects of sexual desire, but does not
specify as to whether this occurs within desert communities, or relates to communications
between monks and non-ascetic desert village dwellers. A somewhat disturbing tale
recorded in the sayings of one Abba Carion, whilst avoiding making such a direct statement
as that of John the Dwarf, contains strong implications that a young monk’s presence in a
desert hermitage affected relations among the brothers who resided there, and caused
‘murmuring’ to develop regarding the adolescent boy.\footnote{Apophthegmata Patrum, Abba Carion 2. Carion’s story additionally raises the question of the fate of families left behind by monks who had been married before entering the desert, with the lack of consideration granted to them perhaps reflecting the ideals seen as early as the Passio Perpetuae regarding the necessity of rejecting the biological family in favour of the family of Christ.} The young man, Zacharias, was
the son of Abba Carion, who had left his family some years previously to pursue an ascetic
life in the desert, and as a result of a famine spreading through his city (and his mother’s
inability to care for her children alone), Zacharias had gone into the desert to join his father.
A child when he arrived at Scetis, as Zacharias grew up the other monks ‘murmured in the
fraternity about him’, with Carion and Zacharias deciding to leave; the younger showed
concern about where the two would go as ‘if we go elsewhere, we can no longer say that I
am your son.’ The notion that Carion and Zacharias’ father-son relationship is central to
their ability to travel and live together is a striking facet of the text, with its underlying
implication that the biological connection of the two is necessary in order to prevent any
rumours swirling regarding the nature of their relationship. Yet more remarkable is
Zacharias’ response to the continuation of murmuring which surrounds him upon his return
to Scetis: the young monk travelled to a lake filled with nitre, immersed himself in it, and
remained there ‘until his body was changed and he became a leper.’ Returning to the
monastery, his fellow ascetics were amazed at the transformation he had undergone, concluding that through his self-mutilation ‘he has become like an angel.’

The extremity of the boy’s suffering epitomises the nature of desert asceticism, as it was only through the most extreme violence, often self-inflicted, that a monk could truly demonstrate his connection with Christ and imitate his suffering on the cross. Virgins had become living martyrs through their daily sacrifices, their denial of sexuality, and their perpetual virginity. For desert ascetics, the violence which had been done to the bodies of martyrs was re-enacted in the most extreme manner, with Zacharias’ self-mutilation serving not only to erase the whispers from Scetis, but to demonstrate that the young man had the strength within him to experience a suffering akin to that of Christ, and thus to become like an angel. Violent treatment of the body was a prominent aspect of the ascetic lifestyle, and in isolation Zacharias’ actions may not appear so shocking when compared to the extremes of behaviour exhibited by other prominent ascetics. However, Zacharias’ maiming of himself was not performed in regard to any sin which he had committed, or any internal desires which he wished to quell: his ascetic devotion was undertaken in response to the thoughts of others. Zacharias, argues Schroeder, was a source of sexual temptation at the monastery in Scetis, being voyeuristically observed by his fellow monks throughout puberty, and through his disfigurement was able to ‘remove the guilty from the guilty pleasure’ and ensure his acceptance within the ascetic community. Such a tale strongly reflects the ideology observed within ascetic tales regarding repentant harlots, in which the guilt lies not with he who has dwelled upon desirous thoughts, but with the person whose physical image has inspired these sinful detractions. Reminiscent of Tertullian’s numerous exhortations for women to dress in a manner which would prevent the eyes of men from being drawn to them, Zacharias’ tale here stands out as the object of desire is a male body, and experiences the

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572 The sayings of Abba John the Dwarf contain various reflections on the differing forms of penitence which were expected to be performed by ascetic monks, including fasting, enduring extremes of temperature, being denied clothing and a command to ‘shut yourself in a tomb as though you were already dead’ (Apophthegmata Patrum, John the Dwarf 34).

573 Schroeder, 2009, 336
same harsh treatment as the female body would, a reflection of the power which the notion of desire held within the desert. It is notable that despite the previously mentioned statement of John the Dwarf regarding committing fornication through thought alone, there is no discussion of any admonition for the monks whose whisperings forced an adolescent boy to voluntarily walk into a chemical-filled lake.

The inherent fear of women which was woven throughout ascetic literature, particularly that of the fourth century, was, argues Brown, a ‘studied misogyny’ which contained a more universal purpose than to simply demonstrate the withdrawal of men from women due to their association with temptation.\(^{574}\) It served to illustrate the position which was occupied by asceticism within the wider Christian society of Late Antiquity, and to contain it in a manner which prevented it from spiralling out of control. Church leaders within the Christian cities which existed parallel to the deserts, Brown proposes, constructed and perpetuated ascetic literature in order to maintain the heroic imagery of ascetic monks whilst preventing the boundaries of city and desert from blurring into one, which they feared would occur as a result of the evolving nature of asceticism.\(^{575}\) Within this matrix an unashamed fear of women and notions of dangerous sexual temptation assimilated with Satan, which could only be resisted through extreme penance and suffering, provided a barrier between the two geographical areas, with these ideologies restricted to the desert. The notion of the heretical woman had placed a barrier of sorts between heretical and orthodox churches, with the implication that to join a heretical cult was to be placed at risk of seduction by such a woman, to become servile to her whims. The texts in which the heretical woman appears were directed toward the occupants of cities, in which heretical cults could spread like wildfire, and the underlying implication of the writings of authorities such as Alexander and Athanasius was that the man who joined such a cult would be unable to resist the sexual embraces of a heretical woman. In the desert, the almost inhuman strength of the monks, and the extremity of the sacrifices which they underwent, suggested that only men such as

\(^{574}\) Brown, 1988, 243  
\(^{575}\) Brown, 1988, 244; Cameron, 2011, 508
these were capable of resisting the temptation of a female emissary of Satan. Athanasius could guide his church away from heresies and try to prevent his congregation from falling prey to them. In the desert, the individual will of the monk was required in order to defeat the demons, with sexual desire becoming a veritable behemoth which stalked throughout the wilds of the desert.

Within the textual construction of asceticism, the isolation of the desert existed in a sharp contrast to the lively, exotic and bustling cities of antiquity. Jerome was heavily influenced by Athanasius’ writings on Antony, and, indeed, introduced a Latin translation of it to groups of ascetic adherents at Rome, whilst his own *Vita Pauli* mirrors many of Antony’s experiences and Athanasius’ narratological themes.\(^{576}\) In addition to featuring the ascetic tropes of temptation, desire and torment, the city which had been abandoned for a desert life features prominently within Jerome’s writings on asceticism, the interweaving of darkly sexual language with vividly visual imagery (which Jerome was so very talented at) allowing his own experiences in the desert to be transposed onto those of young virgins in urban habitats, whilst the city itself became a living, breathing, dangerous beast. ‘How often,’ Jerome tells Eustochium, ‘when I was living in the desert, in the vast solitude which gives to hermits a savage dwelling-place, parched by a burning sun, how often did I fancy myself among the pleasures of Rome!’\(^{577}\) Jerome’s extensive philosophising on his own broken body, worn down by the toils of the desert yet still, still subsumed with desire despite all that he had suffered reflects profoundly the nature of ascetic temptations, and how deeply the roots of desire ran within the body of the monk, how desperate ascetic men were to banish this demon from the fleshly bodies which entrapped them. The desert, Jerome wrote

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\(^{576}\) Jerome’s *Vit. Paul* will not be discussed within this section, as the nature of the text is such that a brief discussion of its eroticism and representation of female figures and desire would not do it justice. Nevertheless, it is intriguing to observe that within the text, Antony, on his journey to locate Paul in the desert, comes across a centaur, a satyr and a she-wolf, all of whom, Goldberg notes, ‘in one way or another point him toward the elder monk’ (2013, 625). These creatures are directly representative of the temptations of the city, and the licentiousness of the pagan occupants of such places in the era before the legitimisation of Christianity, and thus their function in the text can be read as highly illustrative of the manner in which the ascetic male must overcome various temptations in his ascent to the ascetic life. Additionally, the she-wolf here is a *lupa*, the implications of which directly nod toward the prostitute (Jerome, *Vit. Paul* 9).

\(^{577}\) Jerome, Ep. 22.7
to Eustochium, was a prison to which he had consigned himself, alone but for the ‘bevies of girls’ who surrounded him in his desperation, whilst Jerome sat, his face ‘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 good and dead’. This great beast of sexuality, manifested for Jerome through the tempting and undoubtedly licentious dancing girls who appeared to the lonely and desperate monk when he was at his most vulnerable, endured in Christian writings: Brown notes that Jerome’s construction of his textual body alongside the uncontrolled sexual desires in his mind became ‘instantly canonical in the Latin world’.

So overwhelming is Jerome’s textual construction of his own desirous body in the desert that, argues Burrus, it begins to seem as though Jerome’s desire for the delights of Rome whilst he occupied a cell in the desert are now matched by his desire for the desert, having returned to Rome. The impact of such writing, she concludes, is that Jerome utterly destroys the boundaries of ‘fact or fantasy…history or romance’. Jerome’s remarkable ability to delve deep into his own flawed, romanticised body whilst lecturing on the nature of those belonging to others creates a multi-faceted illustration of ascetic desire, the ascetic eros which he weaves into Eustochium’s identity existing in a harsh contrast to his own torment. Asceticism is deeply physical for Jerome, who must explore the bodies of others in order to understand his own, and to understand why desire continued to simmer within him despite the mortification of his flesh. Jerome’s reflections upon the enticing delights of the city and the dangerous temptations of the desert reveal the extent to which ascetic literature could titillate whilst simultaneously moralising, illustrating the sinful allure of cities overflowing with lust alongside an exhortation to the ascetic (or virginal) reader to utterly eradicate these sensations within their own bodies. This conception of cities as hotbeds of sin and iniquity in which young men could lose themselves to their own desires features prominently within the

578 Jerome, Ep. 22.7. ‘Pallebant ora ieiuniis et mens desideriis aestuabat in frigido corpore et ante hominen suam iam carne praemortua sola libidnum incendia bulliebant.’
579 Brown, 1998, 376
580 Burrus, 2001, 442
581 Burrus, 2001, 444
earlier chapters of Augustine’s *Confessiones*. The sexual transgressions of the youthful Augustine in the hellish cities of the empire would continue to affect the bishop throughout his adult life, echoing Jerome’s fantastical musings on the subject. However, where Jerome seems almost to delight in his literary explorations, Augustine’s words are saturated with self-loathing and horror. Throughout the second chapter of this most personal of confessions, Augustine reflects on his ‘past foulnesses (*foeditates*) and carnal corruptions (*carnales corruptiones*),’ occurrences which are ‘bitter in my memory.’

‘At one time in adolescence,’ Augustine remembers, ‘I was burning to find satisfaction in hellish pleasures. I ran wild in the shadowy jungle of erotic adventures.’ The dark undergrowth of Augustine’s jungle contains a myriad of sins which he cannot forget (and perhaps does not wish to forget), his relationship with his previous sexual delights a source of unbearable shame which nonetheless provides him with a deeply personal window through which to analyse redemption, human nature, the will of man and the will of God.

The city of Augustine is filled with ‘clouds of muddy carnal concupiscence,’ casting a fog over the streets which Augustine walked, and across his own vision, tempting him away from the purity of God. Somewhat remarkably, Augustine’s memoirs do not feature women as directly seductive figures, rocks upon which the future bishop would trip and sources of his need for repentance. There are no dancing girls or seductive spirits tempting Augustine to commit acts of sin, as it is desire itself which forms the basis of his reflections, and which Augustine was required to overcome. As Miles has noted, Augustine ‘fully claims and takes responsibility for his sexual lust,’ his acceptance of his contribution to such sin illustrating the manner in which he understood the depths to which desire was rooted in the human body, and the difficulties experienced by a man who tried to erase it.

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582 Augustine, *Confessiones* 2.1.1. Augustine later refers to himself as a ‘slave of lust (*libidinis servus*)’ (6.15.25), and as being ‘fettered by the flesh’s morbid impulse and lethal sweetness (*deligatus morbo carnis mortifera suavitate*)’ (6.12.21).

583 Augustine, *Confessiones* 2.1.1. ‘exarsi enim aliquando satiari inferis in adolescentia, et silvescere ausus sum variis et umbrosis amoribus…’

584 Augustine, *Confessiones* 2.2.2. ‘nebulae de limosa concupiscientia carnis.’

585 Miles, 1992, 92. Augustine, as is well known, resided with a concubine for a part of his adult life, with whom he had a son. His concubine was ultimately sent away due to his mother’s desire that
ascetic literature is far less clearly defined than that of the image of the heretical woman, as
the battle against πορνεία itself takes precedence over the multitude of additional spiritual
and theological complications observed within texts on heresy. Nonetheless, the underlying
implications of heretical texts echo within desert writings, as women once more appear as
the very embodiment of temptation and desire, a being through which the virtuous Christian
man could fall into sin. However, ascetic and anti-heretical texts which feature women
deviate slightly from one another through their presentation of desire itself. Tractates
against heresy discuss the sexual crimes of their subjects in stark, critical language, the
erotics of sexuality absent from discussions which establish the behaviour of immoral
women. Conversely, whether in the astounding stories of unnamed monks, hot, sweating,
utilising all the energy left in their decrepit bodies to resist the advances of the demon of
fornication, or in Jerome’s construction of a desert filled with desires, ascetic literature is
permeated with temptations presented through near-erotic imagery, the reader tempted
further inside monastic cells and desert communes in a manner reminiscent to Prudentius’
voyeuristic martyrdoms.

The temptations of these texts, argues MacKendrick, are what makes them so compelling,
and what has led them to continue to influence western art, music and literature. ‘Antony
untroubled in the desert,’ she comments, ‘would scarcely have inspired Athanasius, let alone
Flaubert; Antony is famously tempted.’\textsuperscript{586} Indeed, MacKendrick goes as far as to conclude
that despite the protestations against the physical aspects of the world which undercut ascetic
literature, the ascetic monk ‘courts temptation and raises desire \textit{in order} to do violence
against it,’\textsuperscript{587} as it is only through overcoming the most extreme, the most compelling, of
desires that a monk can truly prove himself and fulfil the ascetic purpose. Indeed, the desert

\textsuperscript{586} MacKendrick, 1999, 77
\textsuperscript{587} MacKendrick, 1999, 78
monk Evagrius is held to have stated that ‘take away temptations and no-one will be saved.’\textsuperscript{588} The tempting woman in ascetic texts did not have to be sexually licentious, immoral or seductive – her physicality alone invited desire from the repressed monk. However, asceticism by its very name necessitated temptation, and consequently the seductive woman who appears to a monk within his cell developed as a trope unique to the desert, being rooted in a culture which had magnified the tensions of desire, and placed great worth on the individual body of the battling monk. The brief intimations toward the existence of forms of πορνεία which did not feature women, illustrated within those tales which hint toward same-sex desire, reflects how deeply πορνεία was rooted within the male, ascetic body, intertwined inextricably within it despite the prevalent notion that sexuality was inherent to the female body. The consistent presence of the all-consuming and dreadful desire that was πορνεία within the harsh and violent accounts of ascetic life illustrates the great weight accorded to suffering in the desert, and the renown granted to those who battled their demons for many long years, waging war against Satan each day. Whilst overcoming desire was a worthy achievement, the war against it was bound up with ascetic life, with ascetic behaviour thus coming close to courting temptation itself in order to resist it. As the teenaged Augustine had so desperately prayed to his Lord: ‘Grant me chastity and continence, but not yet.’\textsuperscript{589}

\textbf{5.2 Naked, But Not Ashamed}

The monks who had abandoned the perils of the city for the wilds of the deserts recorded lengthy tales of their endurances, with the triumph of men over the demon of desire demonstrating the exceptional strength of body and spirit possessed by such monks.

\textsuperscript{588} Apophthegmata Patrum, Evagrius 5 
\textsuperscript{589} Augustine, \textit{Confessiones} 8.7.17. ‘\textit{da mihi castitatem et continentiam, sed noli modo.’}
However, during the late fourth and early fifth centuries, tales began to circulate regarding the presence in the desert of female ascetics whose bodies told a tale of a life filled with sin and licentiousness, of redemption and suffering, and of a journey to asceticism which contained within it a promise of freedom. These women came from a variety of backgrounds, yet were all women whose early lives had revolved around the flesh and its desires, but who had decided to renounce their life of sin and devote themselves to penitence within the desert. Indeed, due to their former manner of living, these women reflected some of the greatest fears of ascetics monks and chaste Fathers, and yet through their entrance into the masculine wasteland of the desert demonstrated the ability for such women to perform acts of penitence similar to, and in some cases greater than, their monastic predecessors. The women within each tale encounter a male authority who is able to convince them of the error of their ways, setting them on the path to redemption, with Elm concluding that the role of these individuals demonstrates the ‘reforming powers of the Desert Fathers’ above all. Indeed, Cox Miller has noted that these texts could be presenting redeemed harlots as a mechanism through which monks could address their own sinful state, serving as a ‘rebuke’ to monastic readers through the message that fallen women

590 The exact dating of these Vitae is varied, as whilst stories circulated within desert texts during the fourth century which originated the legends of repentant prostitutes (such as the brief tale of a repentant courtesan named Paësia in the Apophthegmata Patrum, John the Dwarf 40), their Lives were not formally established until the fifth-seventh centuries. Brock and Ashbrook Harvey suggest that the Vita Pelagiae circulated in Greek at some point within the fifth century, being translated into a Syriac Life (the first surviving edition of the text) during the late sixth or early seventh centuries (Brock and Ashbrook Harvey, 1987, 40-41; Coon, 1997, 77). The Vita Mariae neptis Abrahae is extracted from the larger Vita Abrahae, which Brock and Ashbrook Harvey suggest dates to the fifth century (1987, 27), whilst the later Vita Mariae Aegyptiacae, attributed to Sophronius, the Patriarch of Jerusalem, is roughly dated to 600AD (Salisbury, 1991,69). The Vita of the repentant harlot Thaïs, whose life is the shortest of the texts discussed, was translated in several languages, with the Latin translation being attributed to Dionysius Exiguus, although Ward maintains the author’s anonymity (1987, 83).

591 Defining these women through one single term can limit wider considerations of their identities, and the exact nature of their sexual sin. Thaïs is described as a harlot, and accepts money for sexual interactions, and Mary the Niece of Abraham works in a brothel, but does not enter there willingly. Mary of Egypt is an exceptionally promiscuous woman who lies with men for pleasure rather than money, and Pelagia, whilst being described as a prostitute, is evidently extremely wealthy and is a woman of come celebrity, having more in common, perhaps, with a courtesan than with women in brothels. The word ‘harlot’ contains within it a wider range of possibilities than simply ‘prostitute,’ implying personal promiscuity and enjoyment rather than being restricted to a system of exchange.

592 Elm, 1994, 258
had achieved a state of sanctity greater than their own.\footnote{Cox Miller, 2005, 90} Whilst Cox Miller’s argument is undeniably valid, these texts entered into a Christian tradition which had employed female bodies, both real and constructed, within its philosophies for centuries. Contained within the body of the repentant harlot lay a myriad of interconnecting ideologies which reflected the tensions experienced by Christian communities from persecution, to heresy, to invasion, and thus the repentant harlot was not merely a rebuke to flawed monks, but the culmination of textual female identity within Christian Antiquity, an explosive representation of the extent to which the female body had defined the borders of the Christian world.

A collective feature of these lives, which is emphasised consistently throughout the period of narrative in which the harlot makes her decision to repent, is the notion that these women must perform their penitence both for their own inherent sin, and for their part in the moral misbehaviour of others.\footnote{Cloke, 1995, 28} The notion that harlots repented both for their own souls, and for the souls of those they had corrupted, contains complex implications within the \emph{vita} of Mary the Niece of Abraham, as the Mary of this repentant harlot text initially became a prostitute in order to repent for a sexual sin she believed herself to have committed. Upon the death of Mary’s parents, she went to live with her uncle, a reclusive monk named Abraham, with Abraham occupying the inner areas of his home and the Mary the outer in a direct inversion of Greco-Roman traditions regarding gendered space. A monk who frequently visited Abraham spied Mary one day, and ‘fell in love with her at the mere sight,’ until he was one day able to coerce Mary into opening the doors to her cell and moving outside to meet him.\footnote{Vita Mariae neptis Abrahae 18. Mary’s life, translated by Brock and Ashbrook Harvey (1987), is recorded in Syriac, and so there will be no references to the original text within this chapter. The same issue applies to the \emph{Vita Pelagiae}.} There, the monk ‘assaulted her with his blandishments, bespatterning her with the mud of his lust,’ a vague recording of events which, as Burrus highlights, does not make it clear as to whether he seduced Mary, or raped her.\footnote{Burrus, 2004, 133} Consequently, the devastated Mary, thinking herself ‘now as good as dead,’ left Abraham’s dwelling and travelled to a town in
which she established herself as a prostitute within a tavern.\textsuperscript{597} Abraham, eventually realising that his niece had vanished and fallen into sin, located the tavern in which Mary worked and travelled there, disguising himself as a soldier and asking for a night with the beautiful prostitute, and upon entering her chamber was eventually able to persuade her to return home with him.\textsuperscript{598}

It is a somewhat startling feature of the text that Abraham emerges from his life of ascetic solitude to risk his own bodily integrity in travelling to a town (a sacrifice which the account emphasises heavily),\textsuperscript{599} and, furthermore, that once he has paid the tavern owner for a night with Mary, he does not immediately reveal himself. Mary consequently attempts to seduce her own uncle, ‘embracing and kissing his neck,’ caressing him in an unexpectedly erotic scene which sees these two ascetic Christians briefly adopt the roles of prostitute and lover, seductress and seduced.\textsuperscript{600} Indeed, Burrus has interpreted this interaction as reflecting Abraham’s ‘ambiguous complicity’ in the events which led to Mary’s rape/seduction.\textsuperscript{601}

Upon returning to the house which they had previously both occupied, Abraham placed Mary in the inner area of the house, his former chambers, taking for himself the outer rooms, enabling Mary to devote herself to repentance for her sins. The reversal of the previous situation hints toward Abraham’s responsibility for the situation which befell Mary, and his attempts to correct this, absolving himself of any crime by removing Mary from the brothel and enabling her to withdraw to an inner room in which she could commune with Christ. Ambrose, Athanasius and Jerome had emphasised the necessity for virgins to remain in their chambers, conversing with no one save the Bridegroom and their fellow virgins, and Mary’s inability to do so in the first instance had led to the very sin which these authors had dreaded. However, despite Mary’s fall into sin she was able not only to repent, but to rebuild her

\textsuperscript{597} Vita Mariae neptis Abrahae 18
\textsuperscript{598} Vita Mariae neptis Abrahae 21-24. Abraham, possibly hinting toward the strange events which lead to Mary’s adoption of a life of prostitution, asks his niece ‘Who has killed you this way – or so it seems?’ later stating that ‘the sin shall be upon me.’
\textsuperscript{599} Vita Mariae neptis Abrahae 22. ‘This man, who for fifty years had not eaten even any bread due to his ascetic way of life, now, for the sake of one soul, ate meat and drank wine, all in order to rescue a lost soul.’
\textsuperscript{600} Vita Mariae neptis Abrahae 21
\textsuperscript{601} Burrus, 2004, 136
relationship with God and become a vessel through which his grace could be seen on earth.

Mary, ‘dressed in sackcloth and humility…spent her time in tears and vigil,’ being eventually healed by God through her prayer and, at the time of her death, had been ‘reconciled with God.’ Indeed, so powerful had been her repentance that the foulness and pollution which had marred her was replaced with the light of the divine, with the author stating that all ‘who saw her face gave praise to God for its radiance.’

Mary’s life illustrates many themes prevalent in harlot literature, in which a prostitute is converted by a holy man and lives out her days in acts of repentance, ultimately being forgiven by God and achieving redemption. Yet, there is a distinctly troubling undertone throughout the text, as Mary does not appear as a prostitute who delighted in her works, instead being a young woman, possibly raped, who established herself in a tavern as a form of repentance. This action, argues Burrus, shows Mary ‘enacting her own social death and performing her shame,’ with seduction itself being her penance. This penance, for Mary, causes her body to become saturated with sin and sexuality, leading her to describe herself as having ‘befouled myself in this stench and mud.’ Whilst her actions may appear almost horrific given the potential that she had endured a terrible crime against her person, Mary’s decision to work as a prostitute demonstrates, Burrus concludes, her transformation of ‘her apparent victimisation.’ A victim, a prostitute, and finally a penitent who demonstrates the redeeming strength of God, Mary’s tragic tale provides an infinitely more human perspective of repentance and ascetic sacrifice than that seen within

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602 Vita Mariae neptis Abrahae 25-29
603 Vita Mariae neptis Abrahae 29. Notions of radiance and light were associated with the bride in Revelation (21:11), were seen in the Acta Pauli et Theclae when Thecla’s nakedness was hidden from the audience, and the seals within the tank in which she would be drowned were killed (34), and were employed by Prudentius to demonstrate God’s support for Agnes, as a thunderbolt and a great flash of light blind a man and prevent her from being taken to a brothel (Peristephanon 14.43-49). Perpetua was seen to have a ‘lucidio’ face as she entered the arena for her martyrdom (Passio Perpetuae et Felicitas 18).
604 Additionally, it is noteworthy that Abraham originally chose to place Mary in the outer area of the house, as opposed to the inner, which would have prevented her contact with monks who came to visit him, and thus his possible contribution to her original ‘fall’ cannot be ignored.
605 Burrus, 2004, 134
606 Vita Mariae neptis Abrahae 24
607 Burrus, 2004, 134
the almost inhuman accounts of ascetic monks such as Antony. Abraham’s attempts to encourage Mary to return home with him relied on his emotional appeals to her, his deep concern for the state of her soul and the love which he held for her as his niece. Abraham’s persuasions do not rely on a discussion of the myriad of souls which Mary may be held to have corrupted, and it is Mary herself, much like Mary of Egypt and Pelagia, who describes her body as sunk deep into the filth of sexuality.

In the *Vita Thaisis*, the holy man who intervenes in Thaïs’ sinful lifestyle is one Abba Paphnutius, who asks the harlot why she has caused ‘the loss of so many souls so that you will be condemned to render an account not only of your own sins but of theirs as well,’ striking fear into the heart of the young woman. Paphnutius is a striking figure within the account of Thaïs’ life as, unlike the other holy men who initiate the process of redemption for their respective harlots, he displays behaviour which verges on direct cruelty. Indeed, Paphnutius directly enables Thaïs’ initial sufferings by designing her penance for her, whereas other Fathers left women to engage in the ascetic practices which they felt were best suited to their sins. Having convinced her to leave her life of harlotry behind, Paphnutius took Thaïs to a monastery and placed her in a cell where, without telling her of his plan, he sealed the door shut with lead. Confused by this, Thaïs asked him ‘Father, where do you want me to urinate?’ to which Paphnutius replied ‘in the cell, as you deserve,’ a forced penance which removes the initiative from the woman herself. The notion that the body of the prostitute was steeped in foulness and sin was taken to the extreme by Paphnutius, who forced Thaïs to wallow in her own filth in the most literal depiction of the stains of depravity possible. His excessive engagement with Thaïs’ life, and his desire, which verges on the selfish, that he be responsible both for her repentance and forgiveness by God, reaches its peak upon his return to Thaïs’ cell some three years later. ‘He began to open up the door for her which he had sealed up, but she begged to be left shut up in there’, the narrator states, yet Paphnutius ignores the desires of the entombed woman and breaks open

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608 *Vita Thaisis* 1
609 *Vita Thaisis* 2
her cell, in order to inform her that ‘God has forgiven your sins.’ Fifteen days later, Thaïs died with her penance complete, emancipated from a relationship with a holy man who saw the enactment of her ascetic suffering as his responsibility, and thus his victory.

Sexually depraved women, through their atonement for the greatest of sins, served the purpose of demonstrating repentance for all the sins of mankind, including the primordial crime of Eve. Jerome could state that Eve brought death whilst Mary brought life, but Mary, in her extreme state of purity, could not possibly atone for such deeply immoral sins, as it took the person of someone so greatly fallen that they could consequently understand the nature of the extremes of depravity, and who had rebuilt themselves from these depths, to undertake the penitence necessary. Strikingly, in the account of the life of Mary of Egypt, it is through the Virgin Mary that the harlot is made aware of her sin, and resolves to repent, as upon attempting to enter a church consecrated to the Virgin, an invisible force prevents Mary from moving through the doors, leading her to pray directly to an image of the mother of God. The *Vita Mariae Aegyptiacae* is an unusual text within the literature of repentant prostitutes, as Mary’s transformation is initiated through a female figure, the Virgin Mary, and indeed the only male figure of great significance within the text is a monk named Zosimus, who discovers Mary in the desert. Furthermore, the first image seen of Mary is of the woman after her period of repentance, she narrates her own life story. Mary’s *vita*, as with many such texts, is recorded within the life of a male ascetic, for whom Mary provides an essential figure in relation to the monk’s spiritual progression. From the very moment in which Zosimus first spies her in the desert, ‘her body black as if scorched by the fierce heat of the sun’, the story seems to demonstrate, quite literally, the manner in which

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610 *Vita Thasis* 3  
611 Jerome, Ep. 22.21  
612 Cox Miller, 2005, 89. Coon suggests that the *Vita Mariae Aegyptiacae* (along with that of Pelagia) is ‘mythological and fabricated from biblical rhetoric, apocryphal lives of Mary Magdalene, and the lives of other desert hermits’ (1997, xvi).  
613 *Vita Mariae Aegyptiacae* 7. Coon argues that the reference to Mary as being blackened by the sun recalls the Song of Songs 1.5-6 (‘I am black and beautiful, oh daughters of Jerusalem’), thus presenting Mary as being like the bride of Christ, whilst simultaneously invoking the sin inherent to her body (1997, xiii). For Schroeder, Mary’s blackened form ‘serves as a physical witness to her past harlotry’ (2009, 337), the burning of her skin thus causing her ascetic penance to be made tangible in
male monks desired to utilise the sanctity of certain female bodies for their own textual and spiritual purposes, with little regard for the wishes of the woman involved. Mary flees from Zosmius, who pursues her relentlessly until she can run no more and has no choice but to converse with him, whilst later in the text, despite Mary’s clear lack of desire to discuss her past life, Zosimus pushes her to reveal all. Mary’s appearance in the desert is startlingly profound, deeply laden with spiritual imagery: Zosmisus initially ‘protected himself with the sign of the cross’ upon seeing her, as he believed himself to have seen ‘the appearance of a devil.’ The monk’s experiences allude to the first interaction of Jesus with the devil in the desert, yet the monk here saw not the devil, but the most sacred of beings.\textsuperscript{614}

Despite her emaciated and broken appearance, Mary, the former sinner, is now the embodiment of repentance itself, and when Zominus later refers to her as ‘mother,\textsuperscript{615}’ her additional role as an ascetic, spiritual guide for this desert monk is made clear. Indeed, argues Coon, Mary is ‘the physical personification of feminine self-indulgence and, conversely, the personification of Christian self-mortification.’\textsuperscript{616} These two concepts do not necessarily exist in opposition to one another when the paradox of asceticism is considered: excess is in itself an aspect of ascetic practices, argues MacKendrick, as asceticism is ‘a denial beyond all moderation.’\textsuperscript{617} The excesses which Mary demonstrated through her life as a harlot and her unending desire for sexual interactions are thus mirrored by those which she embodied within the desert, and the severity of the punishments which she enacted upon her body, pushing it to its very limits. Mary has transformed her life but so too has she transformed her body, a physical metamorphosis which reflects the manner in which her asceticism has imprinted itself upon both body and soul, simultaneously rooting her in the physical world whilst allowing her to spiritually transcend it. When Zosimus eventually

\textsuperscript{614} \textit{Vita Mariae Aegyptiacae} 7
\textsuperscript{615} \textit{Vita Mariae Aegyptiacae} 20. ‘Psalmos, o mater, didicisti...’
\textsuperscript{616} Coon, 1997. xiii
\textsuperscript{617} MacKendrick, 1999, 65
corners Mary, it is revealed that the woman he has been chasing is naked in her solitude within the desert. ‘Father Zosimus, forgive me, for God’s sake,’ pleads Mary, ‘but I cannot turn around and show myself to you, for I am a woman and, as you see, with the shame of my body uncovered.’ Her naked body exists within a remarkable nexus of ideologies, providing a slight hint toward her former life, as all the shame of her sin is laid bare across the tortured lines of her body and this emphatically visual demonstration of her self-mortification, whilst simultaneously allowing her to rewrite gendered expectations of clothing and the body. Zosimus gives Mary his cloak which, argues Salisbury, is a dramatic upheaval of the conventions which surrounded clothing and status, as Mary, a prostitute, would have been expected within the Roman world to wear the specific toga-like dress assigned to prostitutes, yet through her nakedness and acceptance of Zosimus’ offer of clothing, Mary openly shuns the expectations placed upon her manner of existence. Mary is ashamed when Zosimus, her monastic tutee, observes her naked body, yet for the rest of long years in the desert she existed in a state of nudity and near perfection through her penance. It is the intervention of Zosimus, his demands to become part of her life, his desire that some of her sanctity rub off on him, which causes Mary to lose her perfect solitude and be forced, through ascetic literary necessity (for Zosimus could not possibly speak to a naked woman and maintain his standing within the text), to once more cover her body. Having clothed herself, Mary begins to talk with Zosimus, which leads the monk to the discovery that this most holy of desert spirits was not always so sacred.

Mary’s discussion of her previous sexual immoralities recalls Jerome’s evocative illustrations of lust and temptation, with the ascetic woman recounting extensively, romantically, ‘how I was on fire with untiring and clamorous desire for lust…for seventeen years, I passed my life openly tarrying in the fires of lust.’ Having lost her virginity in Alexandria not ‘for any gift of money, for I frequently refused what they wanted to give me’

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619 Salisbury, 1991, 70
620 Vita Mariae Aegyptiacae 13. ‘…in incendio iacens luxuriae.’
Mary decided to journey to Jerusalem for a holy festival, offering her body to sailors as fare for the journey, desperate to visit this new city ‘so that I might have more lovers for my lust.’ It is at this point that the desert Mary, overwhelmed with horror at her former sins, begs Zosimus to be allowed to cease their conversation, yet he, ignorant (or uncaring) of the manner in which meditation on former sexual exploits could affect the devoted ascetic, desirous only of an end to the story and the expositions on Mary’s former crimes necessary for his tale to conclude, persuades her to continue. In Jerusalem, wandering the streets and ‘hunting for the souls of young men,’ Mary attempted to enter a church of the Virgin Mary, and thus her conversion began, as through her inability to walk through the very doors to this sacred place her own sins were revealed to her. Referring to herself as ‘defiled,’ emphatically praising the Virgin’s purity and chastity in relation to her own impurity and pledging herself to ‘my mediator of salvation,’ Mary was eventually able to enter the church where, having thrown herself to the ground and emphatically called upon the holy Virgin, she heard a voice commanding her to cross the Jordan, where she would ‘find rest.’ Mary left the city, taking naught but three loaves of bread to the desert with her, where, she tells Zosimus, she has resided for forty-seven years in an eternal penance. Ambrose and Athanasius had feared for the boundaries of the church, showing great concern for the possibility of damage to be done, and sin to be allowed to enter into a sacred place. Mary’s inability to physically enter the church – one dedicated to the Virgin Mary, no less – reflects the immensity of her sin and the strength of the virgin both repel her, and to negate the dangerous sin of Mary’s sexual activities in order that she may safely enter, a convert who thus becomes one of the many spiritual children of the virgin.

The tale concludes with the two agreeing that Zosimus would return to Mary after a year to bring the sacraments (an event which, when it occurs, sees Mary walk across the waters of

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621 Vita Mariae Aegyptiacae 13. ‘Ut multos haberem cooperatores in meae libidinis passione.’
622 Vita Mariae Aegyptiacae 15. ‘…juvenum illaqueans et capiens animas…’
623 Vita Mariae Aegyptiacae 16-17
the Jordan), and again the following year, in which he finds her corpse beside the river. Devastated to discover his sacred mentor dead, and unable by himself to dig a grave for her holy body, Zosimus weeps, only to be joined by a lion which, rather than attacking the aged monk, carves out a hole in the ground in which he buries Mary, naked but for the tattered remnants of the cloak which Zosimus gave her two years previously. The appearance of the lion, who aids in according respect to the holy woman by digging her grave, is perhaps reminiscent of Ambrose’s account of Thecla, wherein the virgin overcomes the lion, an expression of rapacious sexuality, through her sanctity. Thus, the lion here reflects the manner in which Mary has defeated sexuality itself, as she is no longer a servant to such sinful whims, but rather has tamed them in a manner which continues after death. A woman who was responsible for the fall of so many souls – for Mary openly describes herself as a voracious predator – and who delighted in the lowest of desires, who debased herself so fully, finds herself becoming an image of the universal possibility for human repentance, and for the forgiveness of God. Indeed, it is strikingly evocative that her conversion and realisation comes through the mother of Christ, she who had borne in her womb he who would die for the sins of all, the very antithesis of the sinful Eve. Mary cannot be a virgin mother in the manner of consecrated virgins of the church, and the fertility imagery so prevalent within texts concerning virgins is notably absent here. Yet, through her role as a penitent for all, an image of the salvation of the world, Mary is directly assimilated with Christ himself, her sufferings echoing his, her self-mortification acting not as a metaphorical pregnancy to create new believers within the church, but as a self-crucifixion to forgive their sins, with the holy woman becoming a living martyr.

624 Vita Mariae Aegyptiacae 22. ‘As soon as she had made the sign of the Cross, she stepped on to the water and walking over the flowing waves she came as if walking on solid land.’

625 Vita Mariae Aegyptiacae 25-26
5.3 Transcending the Body: The *Vita Pelagiae*

Mary’s tale is unique in that her conversion is enabled directly through the divine and is only supported by a male Church authority after her period of repentance, and additionally due to the fact that it begins after her period of penance, with Zosimus unaware of her identity upon discovering her in the desert. The *Life of Pelagia* demonstrates the more traditional approach observed within the hagiography of repentant prostitute, as the beautiful and licentious Pelagia is converted through the intervention of a holy man, and the narrative of the texts follows her journey chronologically from shameless harlot to sacred female figure. Toward the end of Pelagia’s life her tale takes a dramatic turn, as the harlot, through the extreme asceticism which has transformed her physical body, became the male eunuch and desert hermit Pelagius, whose true identity and gender are revealed only on her death. This transformation confers further complexity upon the ideologies which surround repentant harlots and their erasure of sexuality, as Pelagia destroys her sexuality and can be considered to similarly destroy her gender itself, of which licentiousness and lust was conceived as being an inherent aspect. Cameron places this problematic evolution alongside tales regarding the sanctity of the Virgin Mary as, she argues, within such accounts Mary’s maternal nature and innate femininity are highlighted, and whilst these tropes create a stereotype which undeniably incurs issues of its own, Mary is, at the very least, presenting a ‘positive female image.’ Repentant prostitutes, she argues, aim to ‘attain the status of ascetic men,’ divorcing themselves from their female bodies, a movement which Brock and Ashbrook Harvey define as being ‘almost sinister’ in Pelagia’s case. Cox Miller interprets this transformation through a different lens, suggesting that Pelagia’s movement into a male body reflects the ‘grotesque’ nature of bodies in repentant harlot literature, and the inability

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626 In addition to the *Lives* of Thaïs and the two Marys, there are several accounts of similar occurrences within the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, which follow a narratological construction similar to that of Thaïs, Mary of Syria and Pelagia, e.g. John the Dwarf 40, John of the Cells 1, Serapion 1 and Timothy 1.
627 Cameron, 2011, 516
628 Cameron, 2011, 516; Brock & Ashbrook Harvey, 1987, 20
of their authors to completely erase femininity from their heroines. However, Pelagia’s body is perceived as male rather than undergoing a direct metamorphosis into this state, and in the narrative of her funeral the name ‘Pelagius’ is abandoned in favour of a return to the distinctly female ‘Pelagia.’ Pelagia’s maleness is a perception by her hagiographer, rather than by the woman herself, and indeed she does not refer to herself as being either male or female when visited by the monk Jacob, who perceives her as male. As with the case of Perpetua and her climactic facta sum masculus, Pelagia’s transformation can be viewed not as the debasement of her sex, but rather as providing evidence for the extent to which she had transcended the limits of the body itself, undergoing a metamorphosis which saw gender become an afterthought, and reflecting Pelagia’s rejection of the world.

Pelagia’s Vita had initially been recorded in Greek during the fourth century, surviving through a Syriac translation recorded in the sixth or seventh century, and thus inherited many ideas regarding sin and repentance which characterised this period of Christian antiquity. Her first appearance within the text utilises imagery from an earlier era of Christian writings, as she is described in manner highly evocative of the wickedly licentious Whore of Babylon, whilst simultaneously mimicking Christ himself. Just as Christ arrived in Jerusalem on a donkey, so too Pelagia appears ‘sitting prominently on a riding donkey,’ yet in place of the humble garb of Jesus Pelagia is ‘decked out with gold ornaments, pearls, and all sorts of precious stones, resplendent in luxurious and expensive clothes.’ This astoundingly beautiful prostitute ‘lured everyone who saw her to stare at her,’ and the holy bishops of the city ‘averted their eyes from her, as though she was some sinful object.’ Despite the seductive and enticing danger inherent to Pelagia’s body, her appearance serves

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629 Cox Miller, 2005, 91
630 Brock and Ashbrook Harvey, 1987, 40-41; Cox Miller, 2005, 88
631 Vita Pelagiae 4; Revelation 17:4. ‘The woman was clothed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls…and Matthew 21.
632 Vita Pelagiae 5-6. This is noticeably different to the attitudes espoused by authors such as Augustine, who placed the onus on women to avoid drawing the eyes of men. This decision raises questions regarding the status of the bishops and its implication for their sanctity, as whilst looking away from Pelagia reflects their holiness, it simultaneously suggests that their own strength of character may not be as strong as that of Nonnus or even Pelagia, as to stare at the beautiful harlot may have caused them to experience feelings of desire.
to attract the attention of the Bishop Nonnus who, rather than condemning the woman or
averting his eyes, weeps at the sight of her, as her dramatic entrance has caused the bishop to
reflect on his own shortcomings as a servant of God. ‘What the prostitute accomplished in a
single day in beautifying herself,’ mourns the emotional bishop, ‘surpasses everything I have
ever achieved during all the years of my life.’ Given the extensive warnings against the
beauty of women within the writings of the Fathers, and the innate notion that even to gaze
at a tempting female figure could lead to a holy man being dragged into sin, Nonnus’
response to Pelagia is utterly astounding, as she causes the bishop to be inspired to achieve a
higher level of devotion. So strongly does Nonnus feel about Pelagia’s appearance that he
begs God not to condemn him, as the ‘utmost zeal’ which Pelagia has employed in her
service of Satan has, Nonnus believes, highlighted how neglectful he has been of God.

Pelagia’s devotion to Satan has had its day, and after making a sudden decision to attend a
church service, Pelagia hears ‘the teaching of the God-loving bishop Nonnus,’ and
consequently, recalling her crimes, begins to weep. Thus begins her process of repentance,
which sees Pelagia describe herself to Nonnus, now her mentor, in a manner which invokes
an extensive range of misogynistic tropes applied to women within condemnations of sexual
immortality. She is ‘a disgusting stone upon which many people have tripped up and gone
to perdition,’ and she is ‘Satan’s evil snare’; she is a ‘ravenous vulture,’ a ‘sly she-wolf’ and
a ‘deep ditch of mire.’ Pelagia’s words illustrate the belief that harlots were not only
responsible for their own downfall, but for that of any man who had chosen to employ their
services, and do so in an overflow of emotions which firmly locate such women at the very
bottom of society. This interaction with Nonnus, early on as it is within the text,
demonstrates the unusual relationship which the two will continue to have. Nonnus initially

633 Vita Pelagiae 11. The comparison between the bishop and the harlot is not new to Pelagia’s Vita,
and indeed within the Apophthegmata Patrum one Father is referred to as being ‘like a courtesan who
shows her beauty to increase the number of her lovers’ (John the Dwarf 46).
634 Vita Pelagiae 12
635 Vita Pelagiae 18
636 Vita Pelagiae 24. In addition to reflecting ideas of sexual intercourse and blame seen within the
Vitae of other repentant harlots, Pelagia’s choice of descriptors recalls Athanasius’ perspectives on
heretical women, Augustine’s reception of sexual intercourse, and the perception of dangerous
women by ascetic men within the Apophthegmata Patrum.
viewed Pelagia as a reminder of his own shortcomings as a bishop, her physical appearance serving to almost instruct him in his dedication, yet now the roles are reversed, and Nonnus here becomes the instructor. However, given that within ascetic literature repentant prostitutes illustrated the extremes of sin and redemption, Pelagia simultaneously instructs Nonnus as she is being instructed by him, his theological teachings being exchanged for the living demonstration of the redemptive power of Christ which she provides. Furthermore, whilst Pelagia enjoys a close relationship with Nonnus, she develops an equally spiritual connection with a deaconess named Romana, in whose house she resides during her time in the city. So extensive is the power of Pelagia’s conversion that at the very sight of her, ‘Pelagia’s fellow prostitutes and neighbours…were themselves moved to compunction and started weeping over themselves,’ consequently renouncing their former lives and turning to Pelagia for guidance.637 Pelagia, no longer requiring Nonnus for guidance on these spiritual matters ‘exhorted and urged them to do what she had done. Numerous prostitutes listened to her advice and were converted by the chaste bride of Christ.’638

The relationship of Pelagia and Nonnus does not rely on Nonnus’ authority and Pelagia’s submissiveness, but rather demonstrates that the two can respectfully learn from one another, realising the benefits inherent to the other’s state and absorbing these for their common benefit. Ward emphasises an ‘equality of love between the two,’ highlighting the mutual appreciation for one another which these two Christians demonstrate.639 Indeed, when Pelagia eventually comes to the decision to leave the city, she removes the robes which she has donned for her baptism and disguises herself in Nonnus’ tunic and cloak, which he willingly gives to her.640 The adoption of the bishop’s clothing is highly illustrative of

637 Vita Pelagiae 39. After Pelagia has disappeared from the city to fulfil her ascetic potential, Romana is ‘stricken with grief,’ and searches the city for Pelagia in tears (42).
638 Vita Pelagiae 39. The notion that Pelagia is able to convert other fallen women, alongside her definition as a bride of Christ, echoes the image of the bride as having multiple spiritual children.
639 Ward, 1987, 65. Additionally, the presence of Romana within the text provides an insight, albeit brief, into the significance of female relationships after conversion, and the bonds which could be formed between chaste women.
640 Vita Pelagiae 41. Clothing herself as a man reflects Thecla’s decision to attire herself in male clothing when she follows Paul to Myra, an act which may have been performed partially out of personal safety in light of the dangers of travelling as a woman, but which additionally demonstrated
Pelagia’s gradual metamorphosis into a holy being. The combination of sacred baptismal robes and a bishop’s clothing quite literally portray the woman as being clothed in the Divine, her new self being clothed in Christ and preparing to enact his sacrifice in her retreat to the desert.\textsuperscript{641} When Pelagia is next seen, she has become ‘Pelagius,’ a eunuch monk of renowned asceticism who resides in a cell on the Mount of Olives. So extreme is Pelagia/us’ ascetic penitence that when Jacob, a deacon of Nonnus who claims to be the author of the text, visited the renowned monk, he utterly failed to recognise the beautiful woman he had previously know, as ‘her pretty eyes had become hollow and cavernous as the result of much fasting and the keeping of vigils. The joints of her holy bones, all fleshless, were visible beneath her skin through emaciation, brought on by ascetic practices.’\textsuperscript{642} At the moment of the monk’s death, the holy men assigned to the task of cleaning the body ‘saw that she was a woman,’ and, shocked by this fact, praised God for the many hidden saints who existed on earth, ‘not just men, but women as well!’\textsuperscript{643} The monks initially wished to hide their discovery, yet found that it was not possible to do so, consequently holding a funeral which honoured Pelagia in ‘much splendour.’\textsuperscript{644} The notion that Pelagia’s transformation into Pelagius denigrates her identity as a woman by suggesting that a woman must become a man in order to attain sanctity is, then, a reading which fails to take into account the myriad complexities of Pelagia’s equally myriad transformations within this text. As Burrus notes, Pelagia ‘does not transcend gender, she flamboyantly transgresses it.’\textsuperscript{645}

Initially appearing as a quasi-Babylon, a harlot assimilated with licentious sexuality and idolatry, Pelagia enables a holy bishop to reflect on his own spiritual status, showing him the extent of his devotion through the mirror of her dedication to a false divinity: a heretical woman magnified into grandiose proportions. Pelagia’s conversion and initial penance paint

\textsuperscript{641} Galatians 3:27; Colossians 3:10
\textsuperscript{642} Vita Pelagiae 45
\textsuperscript{643} Vita Pelagiae 49
\textsuperscript{644} Vita Pelagiae 50. The monks, claims the author, could not hide Pelagia’s identity due to the statement in Matthew that ‘nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known’ (10:26).
\textsuperscript{645} Burrus, 2004, 146
her as a mournful figure, atoning for her sins and the souls of those she has corrupted, a sorrowful Eve through whom Satan has worked. The author states that Pelagia, weeping, threw herself at Nonnus’ feet, with the consequence that ‘the holy man’s feet got soaked by the prostitute’s tears’ whilst she wipes the dirt from them. This evocative image of the sinful woman prostrate in front of the bishop, washing his feet with her tears, mirrors that of the sinful woman and Christ within the Gospel of Luke, the bishop here assuming the role of a mentor and guide to help Pelagia through her penance. Yet Pelagia will go beyond this, abandoning whilst simultaneously embracing her status as a ‘sinful woman’ in order to expand the nature of her asceticism and ultimately enacting the sacrifices of Christ within her body. Furthermore, Pelagia, begins to carry out her own ‘conversions’ within the city, and it is through her that numerous other prostitutes repent of their ways, with the newly-defined bride of Christ gaining the spiritual children promised to her. Describing the harlot as the bride is radical, given Pelagia’s previous life, and serves here to illustrate the miraculous transformation which she undergoes, Babylon exchanging her robes of filth for white linen through the redemptive power of Christ, and the strength of the harlot’s conviction. Pelagia’s position as the bride is another stepping-stone on her journey, her replacement of the baptismal robes with those of Nonnus suggesting that she leaves behind the role of bride as she flees civilisation. Clad in Nonnus’ robe, she is no longer Pelagia, but is not yet Pelagius, her body in a state of flux as she breeches the spiritually vast gap between city and desert. By dressing herself in the bishop’s clothing at the final step before her leap to true sanctity, Pelagia becomes assimilated with Nonnus and by implication his authority and status, ultimately surpassing him through her penitence on the Mount of Olives. Here, Pelagia will become an ascetic of great renown, her self-mortification echoing the sufferings of Christ and enshrining them within her body each day, as she becomes a living martyr for her faith. Pelagia’s funeral is conducted is great reverence, with her transportation to her final resting place reminiscent of her first

646 Vita Pelagiae 24; Luke 7:36-50
647 Revelation 17:1-5; 19:7-8
appearance in Antioch, the prostitute resplendent in gold and pearls on a donkey, then as now enfolded by onlookers in a splendid procession. Carried down from the Mount of Olives by the bishops and clergy of Jerusalem, within Pelagia’s body is illustrated Babylon, the bride of Christ and Christ himself, an amalgamation of philosophies which reflects the boundless potential of the female body within Christian literature.

Pelagia becomes a bride of Christ, wedded to the Divine Bridegroom and consequently converting numerous other women in a literal illustration of the spiritual children which the virgins bore, itself an adaptation of the image of the martyred body as seed for the church. Yet, her sinful behaviour aligns her body with the heretical women condemned by Athanasius and the tempting demons of the desert, the decision of the bishops to turn their heads away from the harlot reflecting the extremity of her ability to seduce holy men away from their calling, and thus away from the church. Pelagia’s self-imposed isolation in the desert enables her to transform from an emissary of Satan into a penitent who has not only rejected his temptations, but has overcome them, utterly eradicating them within her body. Her ascetic behaviours allow Pelagia to achieve a level of immense spiritual authority and enable the complete abnegation of her prior sin, a dream which, for many desert penitents, was never to be completely fulfilled: in many ways, Pelagia fulfils Jerome’s requirements for the bodies of both Eustochium and himself, devoting herself utterly to Christ and withdrawing from the world in order to eradicate the erotic desires which had guided her previous life, finding a solace in the desert which Jerome could not. In rejecting her past life, Pelagia had rejected the fallen world, and had healed the scars of sexuality which marred her body, becoming a woman within whom the crucified Christ could be identified. Indeed, her body suggests the potential for shattered boundaries to be reconstructed, and for churches whose borders had been violated to cleanse themselves of these stains and return to a state of sanctity. Simultaneously, she illustrates the desert itself, the mutilation and mortification demanded of the ascetic, and the excess of desire which flowed through monasteries, cells
and sand dunes despite such concerted efforts to eradicate it. The repentant harlot contained the promise of salvation and the potential for repentance for the most fallen of sinners, providing a witness for the grace of Christ. Yet, the bodies of these women had once been laid open to all, as they had not come to this state of sanctity in the manner of consecrated virgins, and thus there remained a tension inherent to the harlot, a precariousness which mimicked that of the life of an ascetic. The desert was a place of spiritual warfare, a location filled with demons that existed only to trip the unsuspecting monk, and where the excesses of desire required the most extreme ascetic behaviour. The wilderness of the desert echoed the ragged nature of asceticism and its boundaries, never as neatly defined as those of the church in the city, where the unpenetrated virgin body stood as a clear emblem of purity. The body of a repentant harlot was simultaneously open and closed, defiled but pure, emaciated to the point of destruction and yet filled with life. It contained within it a promise of hope for the restoration of damaged communities, whilst providing the only true medium through which the untamed wilderness of the desert could be understood.
Conclusion: These Lovely Bones

‘This land will not always be foreign.
How many of its women ache to bear their stories
robust and screaming like the earth erupting grain.’

Audre Lorde, The Winds of Orisha

The events which had occurred during the early Christian movement, namely, the martyrdoms of Christian adherents, served to establish a fundamental philosophy through which Christian communities could view themselves and their history. Notions of sacrifice and the destruction of the body, through which Christ could be observed, lay at the heart of Christian identity, and influenced church authorities from the very start of the Christian movement and through its gradual legitimisation. Consequently, the ideologies which guided bishops, monks, poets and hagiographers from the fourth to the seventh centuries were inherited from the traditions of the first three centuries, and were continually re-written in order to apply to the concerns experienced by each era of the Christian movement. The female body became a battleground upon which ideological warfare was enacted, its volatility an essential aspect of its interpretation. Women were riddled with notions of instability through the potential for their bodies to be penetrated sexually: the wounds which opened up the body of a martyr were a gateway through which Christ himself could be observed; conversely, the opening up of the female body through sexual relations introduced sin into the world and reflected the power of Satan, being traced back to the first transgression of Eve. However, the birth of Christ through a virgin enabled the textual reconstruction of the female body, rewriting it in a manner which emphasised the potential for women to remain sealed and self-contained, a vessel overflowing with spiritual notions of fertility, rebirth and sacrifice.
To write the female body in such a manner was a powerful mechanism which contained within it notions of resistance to the ideals of the Empire which had carried out violent persecutions on the disparate Christian communities of the earliest centuries, as it stood in opposition to the notions of the role of women as wives and child-bearers. Consequently, through the parallel developments of texts concerning martyrdom and texts concerning virginity, the female body became an intrinsic aspect of the philosophies which defined early Christian society, the body of the martyr and the virgin simultaneously evidencing resistance to idolatrous regimes, and the enduring presence of Christ and his sacrifice within the fallen world. The women whose bodies formed the basis of such texts were, in many cases, imagined by their authors, creations who embodied the principles espoused within various ideologies, or large groups of anonymous women who together formed an ideal church. Nonetheless, the impact of such women within writings which constructed their societies was vast, continually evolving, with the textualised female body serving as a tool through which the authors of the church could explore the realities and complexities of Christian identity. This is an area which has not been widely considered by scholarship which seeks to construct a history of the representation of women, due partly to concerns that the patriarchal values entrenched within such writings prevent female history from being constructed in a positive manner. I hope to have demonstrated that by examining the situations and ideologies which inspired Church authors alongside their construction of the female body, a greater understanding of the radical role which such bodies occupied can be developed, with a view toward illustrating the significance of the textually constructed female body to Christian antiquity.

The writings of men such as Athanasius, Ambrose and Jerome, three of the most significant authors within this thesis, blur the lines between historical text and near-romanticised fiction, writing their personal ideologies into histories through reflections on the female body. Athanasius’ tractates against his religious rivals move from political and theological rebuttals to linguistic constructions of the notion of heresy as a woman, relying on his
presentation of the virginal body as a sealed church in order to create a counter-presence through the open and unhinged heretical woman. These texts have not been analysed as works which fit neatly into particular genres, as to do so limits an understanding of the complexities inherent to their engagement with the female body. Each work contains multiple ideologies which intersect with one another and constantly evolve in order to reflect the issues faced by the author, his community, and even his body. These three authors all relied on the same fundamental construction of the virginal body, utilising the Pauline epistles and the Song of Songs, and inheriting the notions of insiders, outsiders and boundaries constructed within the literature of early martyrdom, alongside the concept of ‘living martyrdom.’ However, each author differed in their application of such ideologies, with Athanasius prioritising his battles with Arius and heretical sects, Ambrose establishing his authority in Milan and his fundamental belief that virginity was a necessary practice within a city in which it was uncommon, and Jerome utilising the body of the virgin as a mechanism through which to explore his own identity, and the boundaries of the body within the confines of the city and the wilderness of the desert. Furthermore, texts such as these intersected not just with contemporary or pre-existing works, but with those which were still to come. As has been argued throughout the final chapter of this thesis, sixth and seventh century texts concerning repentant harlots inherited the traditions of the previous centuries, combining them in radical ways to illustrate the myriad of ideologies located within the female body, with Athanasius’ notions of sacrifice, Ambrose’s emphasis on the bride and Jerome’s focus on asceticism all appearing within a text such as the *Vita Pelagiae*.

The aim of this thesis has been to demonstrate that the philosophies of Christian antiquity which relate to identity, as defined by the female body, are intricately woven into one another, crossing the limits of location and time to create complex notions of insiders and outsiders, with the boundaries of the body and the community becoming assimilated with one another through the textualisation of the female body. Thus, heresiological texts intersect with tractates on virginity and tales from ascetic adherents in the desert, whilst the
Vitae of repentant harlots adopt the ideologies of martyrdom, virginity and asceticism. The extensive dialogues regarding consecrated virginity interact closely with notions of sacrifice and the continued presence of Christ within the world, as established within the literature of martyrdom and, when combined together, these philosophies additionally inherit ascetic concerns regarding sexuality and the body, resulting in the construction of fictionalised martyr acts which introduce erotic language to the death narratives of virgin girls. Whilst the texts which I have engaged with are already the subject of much scholarship, they are frequently studied in isolation from one another, leading to a lack of acknowledgment that these female bodies ultimately occupy the same spaces. I consider this to be a key contribution provided by my thesis, and hope that the conclusions which I have drawn illustrate the potential to examine the female body further within this manner, particularly with regard to the consideration of author, audience and power relations within the text. Engaging with my sources in such a way has enabled me to demonstrate the extent to which the female body formed an inherent aspect of the ideologies which shaped Christian antiquity, and the manner in which its manipulation and reconstruction enabled Church authorities to shape their communities and explore the disparate nature of Christian identity. Indeed, whilst certain aspects of the history of Christian antiquity can be examined without consideration of women, such as through discussions of church politics, military excursions and the relationships between Emperors and bishops, the ideologies of antiquity are predicated on the status of the female body. Thus, an examination of such philosophies which does not consider this fails to engage with the heart of debates surrounding identity and community, and to understand the fraught nature of the body itself.

This thesis has attempted to illustrate the fundamental necessity of the female body to the construction of Christian identity, elaborating on the profound symbolism accorded to it through an examination of a range of texts which address the community, identity and the body from varying perspectives. The conclusions which I have drawn regarding the Lives of Mary of Egypt and Pelagia, the final texts to be discussed within this thesis, aim to illustrate
the potential for these texts to be reinterpreted, and for the ideologies observed therein to be expanded upon in order to connect them back to the founding texts of the Christian world, and to enable an understanding of the true radicalism which can be identified within the constructions of the female body, and the complexity of its creation. The virgin was a living sacrifice, a *uiuam holocaustum*, this notion echoing through the literature of the desert and of asceticism. Contained within her body was a faint echo of the earliest martyrs, whose acts of witnessing to God had laid the foundations for a society whose self-identity was inextricably entwined with the notion of sacrifice, and the emulation of Christ. The female body underwent a multiplicity of sacrifices, the identity of the individual eradicated in order to allow the development of ideologies which could guide communities, defining those who could be considered legitimate members, and those who were not. However, these sacrifices, as with those of the earliest martyrs, enabled the textual female body to endure within Christian antiquity, each reiteration of it (martyr, virgin, bride, lover, heretic, demon and harlot) enabling the preservation of the bodies which had gone before. The death of the individual allowed for the birth of a community, and the outlines of the female body, broken down and reconstructed within the texts of Late Antiquity, ultimately shaped the ideologies of borders, boundaries and identities within the Christian world. To quote Alice Sebold,

> These were the lovely bones that had grown around my absence: the connections - sometimes tenuous, sometimes made at great cost, but often magnificent - that happened after I was gone. And I began to see things in a way that let me hold the world without me in it. The events that my death wrought were merely the bones of a body that would become whole at some unpredictable time in the future. The price of what I came to see as this miraculous body had been my life. 648

648 *The Lovely Bones*, 320
Bibliography of Translations

Adaptations of any translations are noted within the text itself.

All Old and New Testament translations are taken from the NRSV.


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