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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

*AA* – Acts of Andrew  
*AAA* – Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles  
*Advice* – Plutarch, *Advice to Brides and Grooms*.  
*Apt* – Acts of Peter  
*ATh* – Acts of Thomas  
*AThe* – Acts of Paul and Thecla  
*CCels* – Origen, *Against Celsus*  
*CommCt* – Origen, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*  
*CommRm* – Origen, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*  
*ExhMart* – Origen, *Exhortation to Martyrdom*  
*HomCt* – Origen, *Homilies on the Song of Songs*  
*HomEx* – Origen, *Homilies on Exodus*  
*HomGn* – Origen, *Homilies on Genesis*  
*HomJos* – Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*  
*HomLev* – Origen, *Homilies on Leviticus*  
*HomNum* – Origen, *Homilies on Numbers*  
*Meth. Symp* – Methodius, *Symposium of Virgins*  
*Parch* - Origen, *On First Principles*  
*PE* – Protoevangelium of James  
*Perpetua* – *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*  
*PEuch* – Origen, *On Prayer*  
*Purity* – Novatian, *In Praise of Purity*

All other abbreviations correspond to those found in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*.

All apocryphal gospels are translated by J.K Elliot (1993) in *The Apocryphal New Testament*.

## INTRODUCTION

“What is said in praise of all good women is the same, and straightforward. There is no need of elaborate phrases to tell of natural good qualities and of trust maintained. It is enough that all alike have the same reward: a good reputation”.<sup>1</sup>

At the end of the second-century AD Christianity was a relatively minor sect on the margins of Roman society; it suffered the attacks of Roman authors and emperors to the point of physical persecution, but despite Tertullian’s assertions, the number of converts was small.<sup>2</sup> By the second decade of the fourth-century, Christianity was an established and accepted religion claiming even the emperor as a convert.<sup>3</sup> Clearly the intervening third-century was a pivotal point in Christian history, and yet it is one that is rarely studied. Traditional textbooks on any subject in the late antique world and early Christianity will regularly skip the period entirely, or introduce it merely in passing. It is easy to see why: the third-century was a time of great political upheaval, and social and economic change that is extremely difficult to monitor, traditionally characterised by the term ‘the third century crisis’. Contributing significantly to the neglect of this period in modern historical study is the relative lack of reliable source material. Only two contemporary histories remain: that of Cassius Dio, which ends in 235, and of Herodian, whose work ends in 238. For the remaining decades, modern historians have had to rely on the controversial and erratic *Scriptores Historia Augusta* – a work that appears to openly dissemble about everything from its date of composition to the number of its authors.<sup>4</sup> Even producing a chronology of the third-century has thus been an immense challenge.

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<sup>1</sup> Eulogy of Muria *ILS* 8394.

<sup>2</sup> Tert. *Apol* 37.8. Hopkins 1998; Stark, 1996: 10-14; Lane Fox, 1988: 590; Wilken, 1984: 31.

<sup>3</sup> Although Constantine’s actual conversion to Christianity remains a highly contentious point, his favourability to the religion is undeniable.

<sup>4</sup> An excellent overview of the arguments surrounding the *SHA* can be found in Syme, R.1972. ‘The Composition of the *Historia Augusta*: Recent Theories’ *JRS* 62: 123-133

Recently historians have begun to notice this void in the research field, particularly within the field of early Christian studies, and this research aims to fit into this emerging area.<sup>5</sup> In particular, this research will look at the concept of idealised womanhood in both pagan and Christian thought of the third century. The primary goals of this work are to study the ways in which the idealised female is represented in Christian literature of the third century, how far these ideals can be seen to have ‘filtered down’ to the general populace and can be seen in the funerary epigraphy, and how far these Christian ideals have developed and diverged from the pagan concept of idealised womanhood.

The study of early Christian women has been an important focus for historians of early Christianity since the ‘second wave’ of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s. Although the American ‘first wave’ of feminism in the late nineteenth century produced a few theological texts that focused on women, most notably Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s 1895 *The Women’s Bible*, it wasn’t until the late-twentieth century that historical study into early Christian women truly began. From the start the study of Christian women paralleled the (equally fledgling) study of pagan Greek and Roman women with its focus on ‘status’ and the reconstruction of the lives of ‘real women’. It was assumed that, if studied hard enough and in the right way, the classical sources would reveal an historical, truthful picture of women’s lives and experiences in antiquity. In the Christian studies this revealed itself in the proliferation of works on the women of the Bible as historical figures, and in reconstructions of the earliest Christian communities. These works have almost invariably fallen into two opposing categories: the casting of a ‘Feminist Jesus’ within the notion of

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<sup>5</sup> This can be seen in recent doctoral theses such as Rhee, H. 2004. *Christian self-representations in the mid-second and the early third centuries: The apologies, apocryphal acts, and martyr acts*. Ph.D. dissertation. Fuller Theological Seminary, School of Theology; and Holliday, R. 2006. *Origen of Caesarea: Creating Christian identity in the third century*. Ph.D. dissertation . University of Kentucky.

Jesus communities as feminist utopias, or the depiction of all Christianity and Christian communities as misogynistic patriarchal institutions.<sup>6</sup>

As the field developed through the 1980s and 1990s, the complexities inherent in the study of women became clearer, and the research less general. Focus on representations of women and their meanings came to the fore of the field, with particular attention paid to concepts of the body, asceticism, sexuality and virginity lead by Elizabeth Clark and Peter Brown.<sup>7</sup> The theoretical and political movements of the time meant that the idea of women in classical texts as stereotypes and literary constructions also became popular and important through the works of Amy Richlin and Sarah Joshel, and Suzanne Dixon. In particular her 2001 work *Reading Roman Women* – an invaluable text on the importance of genre on the representations of women in the classical sources, and thus a major influence on this work. This approach was influenced greatly by the French feminist theory developed and fronted by Julia Kristeva, Xafiere Gauthier, Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous who saw language as all important, and could not conceive a world outside of the texts they studied.<sup>8</sup> Epitomised by Judith Hallett and Barbara Gold within the field of Classical studies, this approach was hugely influential, viewing the women in the texts as conventions of discourse, rather than as factual historical players, as the Anglo-American

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<sup>6</sup> For feminist utopias and the ‘Golden Age’ of Christianity: Schussler Fiorenza, E. 1984. *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*. London; Swidler, L. 1971. ‘Jesus Was a Feminist.’ *Catholic World*, January, 1971, 171-183; MacHaffie, B.J. 1986. *Herstory – Women in the Christian Tradition*. Philadelphia. Reuthers, R.R and McLaughlin, E. (eds). 1979. *Women of Spirit: Female Leadership in the Jewish and Christian Tradition*. New York.

For the patriarchal view: Daly, M. 1974. *Beyond God the Father: Towards a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation*. Boston; Daly, M. 1978. *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*. Boston; Daly, M. 1975. *The Church and the Second Sex*. New York; Goldenberg, N. 1979. *The Changing of the Gods: Feminism and the End of Traditional Religions*. Boston.

<sup>7</sup> For the body, sex and ascetism: Clark, E.A. 1986. *Ascetic Piety and Women’s Faith: Essays on Late Ancient Christianity*. New York; Clark, E.A. 1983. *Women in the Early Church*. Wilmington; Shaw, B. 1996. ‘Body/Power/Identity: Passions of the Martyrs’. *JECS* 4. 269-312; Brown, P. 1987. *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*. New York; Walker, C.B. 1987. *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*. Berkeley, CA; Elm, S. 1994. *Virgins of God: The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity*. Oxford; Pagels, E. 1988. *Adam, Eve and the Serpent*. London; Beal, T & Gunn, D. M. 1997. *Reading Bibles, Writing Bodies: Identity and the Book*. London; Clark, E.A. 1998. ‘Holy women, Holy words: Early Christian Women, Social History and the “Linguistic Turn”’, *JECS* 6.3.413-430

<sup>8</sup> Dixon, 2001:16; Gold, 1993: 165; Lewis, 2002:198.

theorists had previously and overwhelmingly viewed them. Perhaps the most prominent researchers on the Christian side of this field have been Averil Cameron and Elizabeth Clark, whose works on the conceptualisation of women and their attributes in the writings of the Christian fathers are unsurpassed.

This research attempts to sit between the two theories, between the standpoints of Culham and Hallett.<sup>9</sup> It utilises both material culture in the form of funerary inscription, and literary texts, and attempts an approach more akin to that of contemporary Cultural Studies.<sup>10</sup> Through these combined approaches, I attempt to create as unified a picture of the many varied facets of the idealised woman of the third century as possible.

The primary body of evidence is female epitaphs of the third-century AD from both pagan and Christian burial grounds. This evidence set has been chosen on the grounds that ‘*de mortuis nil nisi bonum*’. Epitaphs are, on the basis of this maxim, and through the study of the epigrams chosen to commemorate individuals, an excellent indicator of idealised characteristics in a society. Hanne Sigismund Nielsen has already demonstrated that significant differences can be seen in the epigrams used by pagan and Christian commemorators, although her conclusions have been criticised as “less than expert”.<sup>11</sup> My Christian sample of 424 epitaphs has been taken from the *Epigraphic Database Bari*,

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<sup>9</sup> Gold, 2002, 165. Phyllis Culham argued that a heavy focus on material evidence enabled historians to study accurately working women and lived experiences. Judith Hallett, alongside Mary-Kay Gamel and Amy Richlin responded that ‘lived experience is always mediated’ and is impossible to reconstruct.

<sup>10</sup> This approach has most notably been used in Classical studies in Richlin 1992. See her introduction for the explicit statement. Cultural Studies is defined by Freccero (1999: 14) as “a range of theoretical and political positions that use a variety of methodologies...ethnography, anthropology, sociology, literature, feminism, Marxism, history, film criticism, psychoanalysis and semiotics...argues that all forms of culture need to be studied...[i]t is thus interdisciplinary in its approach.”

<sup>11</sup> Sigismund Nielsen, 2001:165-77. This criticism comes from Cherry, 2000: 222 with reference to a previous article ‘Interpreting Epithets in Roman Epitaphs’ (1997).

where both date and location have been specified.<sup>12</sup> The overwhelming majority of this sample has come from the catacombs of Novatian, Callistus, and Priscillia, although some others were also used.<sup>13</sup> An equivalent sample of 934 female epitaphs from the fourth century was taken from the same cemeteries for comparative purposes.

The sample of 269 pagan epitaphs from the third-century has been taken from the *Epigraphische Datenbank Heidelberg* and the *Epigraphic Database Roma*, where date, but not location, was specified.<sup>14</sup> As much as has been possible inscriptions from above ground sources have been filtered out manually, but it must be acknowledged that this is an imperfect method and that some may have been inadvertently included. At first Sigismund Nielsen's pagan sample in her original study was examined, but it was felt that it was overwhelmingly weighted by epitaphs of freedmen and women of the late republic and early empire.<sup>15</sup> While she makes her reasons for her choice very clear, it was felt that her sample was overly representative of one class of Roman society, and too little representative of women, and so an alternative sample was sought.<sup>16</sup> Use of the *Epigraphische Datenbank Heidelberg* has forfeited my full confidence that only underground epitaphs were used, but has, I believe, still resulted in a more representative and valid sample than the original. Use of this database has also meant that more recent finds than those contained within the *CIL VI* have been able to be included in this study.

For comparative purposes, a sample of 286 pagan epitaphs from the first and second centuries AD have been taken from the same sources. A fourth century sample is not included as repeated searching of both the *Epigraphische Datenbank Heidelberg* and the

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.edb.uniba.it/>

<sup>13</sup> Other coemeteria used were those of Cornelius, Praetextus, St. Agnetis and the Sepulchre of the Aurelii.

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.uni-heidelberg.de/institute/sonst/adw/edb/index.html> & <http://www.edr-edr.it/>

<sup>15</sup> Sigismund Nielsen's sample was taken from *CIL VI* 3927-8210, all of which originate from a single columbarium. She states her reasons for choosing this particular sample as being related to her strong insistence on comparing only underground epitaphs.

<sup>16</sup> Her entire pagan female sample is 137 epitaphs.

*Epigraphic Database Roma* could not produce a large enough sample of epitaphs from this period to be statistically valid.<sup>17</sup>

It must be emphasised, however, that there are a myriad of problems involved in epigraphic study. There is no infallible method of dating either Christian or pagan epitaphs. Many dates are still based on Mommsen and De Rossi's nineteenth century process of 'collection and comparison', combined with their thorough personal knowledge of the locations.<sup>18</sup> Specifically dated inscriptions are extremely rare, particularly for early Christian period. The *ICUR* cites just three from the Catacomb of St. Callistus (arguably the largest of the Christian catacombs) that are dated by consuls.<sup>19</sup> Reliance on the consular-dating system has led to a conventional procedure of dating which is dependent on the assumption that the 33,000 undated inscriptions from Rome have an identical distribution pattern to the 2,000 that are dated.<sup>20</sup> It is this assumption that has directed the, clearly somewhat unlikely, conclusion that prior to the fourth century, and after the sixth, there were almost no Christian inscriptions in Rome. Recently, there have been challengers to this traditional chronology and the accepted date ranges for inscriptions. Mark Handley, for example, has proposed that there were perfectly valid reasons for the lack of consular dating by Christians prior to the fourth century, and has strongly questioned the validity of the traditional chronology. He has also been at the forefront of the calls for a full reappraisal of the entire corpus of Latin inscription to rectify the problem.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Repeated searches could only find 19 non-Christian epitaphs definitely dated to the fourth century.

<sup>18</sup> Mommsen's method is described in detail in *CIL I*: 204. It is reproduced in English with a detailed description of De Rossi's version of the method in Northcote, 1878: 39-40.

<sup>19</sup> *ICUR* 7 9473, 9546 and 9547.

<sup>20</sup> For example: Osbourne, J 1984 in 'Death and Burial in Sixth Century Rome'. *Classical Views* 3. 291-99, reproduced in Handley, 2003:15. This chronology has been accepted for many decades.

<sup>21</sup> "It is well known that until the conversion of Constantine many Christian thinkers perceived the Roman state as the embodiment of the anti-Christ. Should we imagine therefore that the third century Christians



Even with perfect dating, epigraphic study is a challenging task. Recently J. Edmondson, J.R.W Prag and G. Woolf all emphasised the difficulties that statistical analysis of large samples of inscriptions can cause: “Such calculation is a blunt analytical tool that can only produce crude results...[a]ggregating data-sets in order to create samples of a size susceptible to statistical analysis inevitably involves the loss of some variation.”<sup>22</sup> Epigraphic study of the ancient world is thus a balancing act between the statistical validity of the numbers, and the historical validity of accurate representation. This dilemma is clearly demonstrated in this research. To use just one catacomb or columbarium as a sample would result in numbers of female epitaphs so small as to be negligible; but by using a large variety of locations perhaps a good deal of variation has been lost, particularly as two of the catacombs used are those named for, and presumably used by, the followers of schismatics.<sup>23</sup> It is a common dilemma, with no simple solution – if there is one at all. One must acknowledge these limitations and attempt to produce the most valid research that one can.

The second area of evidence used is the body of Christian literature from the late-second, third and fourth centuries. This primarily comprised apologia, theological and moral treatises, epistles and hagiography. The writers of these works - Tertullian, Origen, Cyprian, Clement of Alexandria, Methodius, Hippolytus and Novatian, were the leaders of

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would be happy dating their epitaphs by reference to the two highest magistracies of the Roman state? Perhaps not.” Handley, 2003:15 - 16. Marucchi and Vecchierello suggest different and somewhat less dramatic motives for the lack of dating on epitaphs by making clear that pagan epitaphs are not dated to year either – it was simply not a common practice. Marucchi & Vecchierello, 1935: 204. Also, Woolf, 2002:183.

<sup>22</sup> Woolf, 2002:184.

<sup>23</sup> Those of Novatian and Hippolytus. The use of these is justified by Stevenson’s assertion that they show very little variation from the orthodox catacombs. Stevenson, 1978: 109-10

their communities, the clergy, bishops and even the (anti)popes.<sup>24</sup> Each of these men clearly had great influence in their individual communities, and on the wider Christian church, even if only by opposition.<sup>25</sup> Each of these men discusses women; whether it is Tertullian's infamous declaration that women are "the devil's gateway" or Cyprian's epistles referencing the "weaker sex",<sup>26</sup> women are repeatedly discussed, examined and described without female input. Through these discussions, the idealised female as seen by the intellectual elite of the Christian world can be found.

Martyr texts, for example, present us with utterly idealised females: martyred women are exemplars for later generations of Christian women; their stories are didactic texts for catechumens and established Christian communities alike.<sup>27</sup> They can be seen as "the very strongest and highest human realisation of the religious profession in question".<sup>28</sup> This is not to say, however, that they are not challenging texts for an historian to use. These are texts that have been written, re-written, framed and re-framed countless times by countless different religious communities across the world. The passion of Perpetua is a neat example of this continual re-framing. The passion exists with an apparently contemporary, and evidently male, introduction, commentary and conclusion that directs the audience to read the diaries in a very specific way. A century later, the passion was re-written in a characteristic 'Acta' style as a trial transcript that bears little resemblance to the original form. At approximately the same time, St. Augustine used her story regularly in sermons

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<sup>24</sup> Tertullian was ordained in approximately 200AD; Origen was a priest, but also an influential teacher in Caesaria; Cyprian was a bishop; Clement was a priest and head of the catechetical school at Alexandria; Hippolytus was a bishop and anti-pope; Novatian was a priest and anti-pope.

<sup>25</sup> Hippolytus and Novatian were exiled in their lifetimes for heresy, while Origen was officially declared a heretic in 553 AD.

<sup>26</sup> *De Cult* 2.1; *Cyp. Ep* 4.2

<sup>27</sup> Augustine, for example, regularly used St. Perpetua as a rhetorical tool in sermons. For hagiography as didactic literature: Brown 1983: 21-25; Coon 1997.

<sup>28</sup> George & George 1955: 85

but with typically Augustinian foci.<sup>29</sup> Perpetua's tale is transformed through these framings and re-writes into something that fits the contemporary ideals and occupations of the redactors, and the messages of the third century are buried.<sup>30</sup> Similar processes occur too with many of the early martyr stories, particularly through the Middle Ages, with the extraordinary rise of the saint cults and their immense popularity.<sup>31</sup> Great care must be taken, therefore, when using these sources.

Equally importantly for this research is the relative paucity of female martyrs in this period. Despite apparently much higher numbers of female converts, there are four times as many male martyrs celebrated.<sup>32</sup> There are only 8 female martyrs who can be reliably dated to the late second or third centuries, which makes drawing valid and representative conclusions challenging.<sup>33</sup>

Epistles, apologia and treatises are problematic in different ways. This research has focussed for the most part on the most prominent writers of the period as previously listed. Clearly, they are not all orthodox Christians.<sup>34</sup> They were, however, all notably important in the Christian community of the third-century across the Western Empire, and subsequently in the shaping of orthodox doctrine. The third-century was an exceptionally significant period in the process of Christian self-definition. It is the period where Christians suffered the most external attack in the form of several centrally organised persecutions, combined with continual internal schism. The combination of heresy and

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<sup>29</sup> E.g Augustine's sermons 280-282

<sup>30</sup> Shaw 1993 is the seminal work on the Passion of Perpetua and its transformations.

<sup>31</sup> See Brown, P. 1981. *The Cult of the Saints – Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*. Chicago and London.

<sup>32</sup> Shaw, 1993: 13

<sup>33</sup> These are Crispina and her companions Maxima, Domitilla and Secunda; Blandina; Agathonikē; Perpetua and Felicitas. All of whom are included in Musurillo's *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*.

<sup>34</sup> See n23.

external abuse meant that orthodox Christian doctrine had to be formalised, but with the large scale meetings of councils and synods that became the characteristic response to doctrinal dispute in post-Constantinian Christianity illegal for much of this period, a vast majority of arguments were played out in treatises, letters and theological writings of the church leaders. This is as true for models of idealised womanhood as for concepts of the Trinity, and so these works are invaluable for the purposes of this research.

For comparative purposes, the third body of evidence used comprises of the pagan writings of the late second and third centuries. The third century appears to have been a time of decline in the production of literature from non-Christian sources, or at least, very little has survived, and so this is not a large corpus. It is mainly comprised of the histories of Cassius Dio and Herodian, the writings of Porphyry, and the third-century Greek novels. The *Scriptores Historia Augusta* would appear to fit into this body of works, but this remains a controversial work with regards to dating and authorship. Current thought, while never a consensus, tends to assert that it is not the third-century collection it claims to be, but that it is a fourth-century work.<sup>35</sup> As a result of this controversy, it has been decided to discount the *SHA* as a valid tool for the aims of this research. This leaves a very small set of works from which to work. They are also arguably the most difficult to use in practice. Where the Christian literature is openly expounding ideals and exemplars, the pagan works

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<sup>35</sup> For the controversy: Syme, R. 1968. *Ammianus and the Historia Augusta*. Oxford; Baynes, N. 1926. *The Historia Augusta: Its Sources and Dates*. Oxford; Syme, R. 1971. *Emperors and Biography: Studies in the Historia Augusta*. Oxford; Syme, R. 1972. The Composition of the *Historia Augusta*: Recent Theories, *Journal of Roman Studies* 62: 123-133; White, P. 1967. 'The Authorship of the *Historia Augusta*' *Journal of Roman Studies* 57: 174-202.

have very different motives. The female players and characters in these works are not so easily used as examples of idealisation or anti-idealisation, and the role of genre, literary *topoi* and cliché become far more prominent. The very small amount of works surviving from the third-century, combined with the generally consistent composition of the Roman ideal female from the Late Republic onwards has meant that various sources from earlier centuries have also been used.

With these three bodies of evidence, idealised womanhood will be studied at as many different levels and through as many different lenses as possible. Through these approaches, a unified paper on the changing and varied concepts of the ideal woman in these very different spheres of Roman life will emerge, each chapter focussing on a different aspect of idealised womanhood.

Chapter one will look at wifely virtues in the literature, particularly domesticity and submission as well as briefly discussing the emotional expectations of husbands and wives. Chapter two will consider sexuality and the emerging ideal of lifelong virginity in Christian thought over the more Roman principles of control and chastity. Chapter three will examine ideas of motherhood, with particular focus on the emergent Christian denigration of physical reproduction and the subsequent popularity of the concept of spiritual motherhood, in particular the way in which this concept allowed motherhood to become a virtuous path the both men and women could follow. Each chapter shall conclude with an examination and comparison of the usage of the relevant epithets in the epigraphic samples with a discussion of the implications of any significant (or insignificant) results.

## WIVES

“*Pudicitia* is proof of ugliness”<sup>36</sup>

For a woman in the ancient world, to be married and become a wife was not a matter of choice, but a legally enforced compulsory step, often at a young age.<sup>37</sup> As such, a woman’s role as a wife was one of the most highly idealised in the Roman consciousness encompassing all the previous roles I have analysed; a woman as a mother and a virgin could only exist within the frame of being, or one day being, a wife. In modern culture Roman wives have traditionally been characterised as extravagant, emancipated harlots,<sup>38</sup> or sexless matrons.<sup>39</sup> Although these over-simplified stereotypes are rarely found in academic scholarship anymore, they are a product of the ancient sources and reveal a uniform and stable picture of the idealised dress, behaviour and demeanour of a Roman wife.<sup>40</sup> This chapter will examine several components of this ideal: their role within the household, their sexual role, their appearance and their behaviour towards their husbands and the Christian responses, modifications and continuities.

The first of these components is the wife’s responsibility to manage the household. The task of wool-working is crucial to this facet, and became a vital cultural marker in the Roman consciousness. From the very beginnings of Roman republican history, *lanifica* was associated with the very best of Roman women and Roman values. The loom symbolised a great deal in Roman myth and history, invoking honesty, loyalty, chastity,

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<sup>36</sup> Seneca, *Ep. Luc* 88.8

<sup>37</sup> See Hopkins, 1965; Saller, 1994:25-42; Shaw, 1987 on the ages of Roman girls at marriage. There are exceptions to the enforcement for religious purposes, for example the Vestal Virgins.

<sup>38</sup> Carcopino, 1956:95-100; D’Avino, 1967. This is an image that popular culture, such as the recent BBC/HBO drama *Rome*, has found particularly attractive.

<sup>39</sup> Balsdon, 1962: 215

<sup>40</sup> Fantham et al, 1994: 345, Williams, 1958: 28; 1996: 8

and a general sense of ‘virtuousness’ epitomised by Lucretia.<sup>41</sup> The image of this privileged wife neglecting rest or frivolity in favour of toiling by poor light with her slaves at the loom is central to the Roman definition of a good wife.<sup>42</sup> Through her an image of a rich and well born woman doing the work of a slave came to epitomise marital good conduct. The most famous usage of *lanificia* is the claim by Augustus that the empress Livia was personally responsible for the imperial household’s cloth production.<sup>43</sup> *Lanificia* represented a uniquely Roman modesty and virtue and was a powerful propaganda tool. It is perhaps notable it is not an image that appears with any regularity in the literature of the second or third-centuries despite its abundant popularity during the Augustan period, suggesting that it played a significant part in the Augustan rhetorical programme while having only a small incidence in reality among aristocratic families.<sup>44</sup>

Domesticity and *lanifica* are intimately connected to ideals of modesty. This concept of modesty underlies each feature of the ideal Roman wife, in particular her approach to beautification and decorative adornment. The processes of female beautification were controversial in Roman life. As an activity it embodied a luxurious life of leisure, and was universally reviled in a literature that idealised a time where women were thought to be

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<sup>41</sup> Fantham et al, 1994: 286; Shelton, 1990: 168. There is a great deal of debate over whether aristocratic women of the Late Republic and Empire actually produced cloth for their households. On the one side Clark (1981) argues that *lanifica* is analogous to the ‘accomplishments’ of girls in the nineteenth-century – a pleasing attribute in a wife but entirely ornamental rather than a practical necessity. (199) On the other, Suzanne Dixon argued that any primary reference to a reduction in home-spinning is a part of the traditional rhetoric of ‘luxury and decline’, and that “A Roman matron at any social level accepted responsibility, as supervisor and participant, for supplying the clothing needs of the family members and wider slave household.” (2004, 66;68)

<sup>42</sup> Livy 1.57-60. In Ovid’s account, the association of *lanifica* with loyalty to one’s husband and honesty is emphasised as Lucretia is depicted spinning a cloak for her husband while weeping and lamenting his absence. *Fasti* 2.6.7.

<sup>43</sup> Suet, *Aug* 73

<sup>44</sup> The great senatorial contempt that is evident throughout Roman history for lower class women who engage in *lanifica* for profit is perhaps further evidence that in aristocratic circles it was not viewed as a practical necessity but a symbolic practice. Perhaps as part of the ‘protective cloak of signs’ theorised by Kate Cooper (1992: 153).

kept modest and honest by poverty and hardship.<sup>45</sup> In other outlets, such as sarcophagi, a leisured life sustained by great fortune was a popular image to portray with a great many including scenes of female beautification to enhance the reputation of the family.<sup>46</sup> The most famous literary account of the significance and undesirability of female adornment is the debate over the repeal of the Oppian Law in 195 BC described by Livy and Dio.<sup>47</sup> The behaviour of the women here is presented as reprehensible, while Cato is universally presented positively. This is just one in a long series of literary admonishments of the 'innate' (but anti-Roman) female desire for ornament.<sup>48</sup> In Juvenal's sixth satire, for example, the vilification of make-up and ornamentation is a constant theme.<sup>49</sup> The literature portrays the adorned and beautified woman as universally bad and worthy of horror. The proper Roman wife should be veiled, covered from head to toe and adorned only with virtue.<sup>50</sup>

The denigration of feminine beautification was heavily used as a political issue in Roman literature, and also in less metaphorical terms as connected to a wife's sexual conduct. The traditional Roman attitude to ideal marital sexual behaviour of women can be briefly summarised: the wife should be beautiful enough to incite desire in her husband, but not

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<sup>45</sup> Juv, *Sat VI* 1-20

<sup>46</sup> Bartman, 2001: 4; Wyke, 1994: 142; Kampen, 1981: 149-52.

<sup>47</sup> Dio 18.17 & Livy 34.1.8 This incident is central to a long-established rhetoric of luxury and decline in Roman literature that views the past as vastly morally superior to the time in which any given author is writing. The accumulation of the empire and the associated wealth it brought to Rome is traditionally ascribed the blame for this perceived moral decline. Both Livy and Dio's accounts of this event then are political pieces, describing their own contemporary societies.

<sup>48</sup> Columella *De Res Rus* 2.pr.9

<sup>49</sup> His cruel mistress beats that slave that does not style her hair correctly (486-93); the neglectful wife spends her days creating elaborate hairstyles (501-10. Bartman (2001) believes that female hairdressing does not incite the vitriol that cosmetics do in Roman male literature, being instead encouraged as part of both a marker of social participation, with the elaborate styles being representations of each wife's control and modesty. Here is at least one example of hairdressing being treated with as much contempt as make up and jewellery and connected equally to the discourse of decline.) ; the musical wife is adorned with sardonix rings (379-82), while his description of female cosmetic techniques is designed to disgust the reader (461-7).

<sup>50</sup> Winter, 2003 77-96; Ovid, *Ars Amor* 1.31-34



attempt to attract attention from any other man.<sup>51</sup> The maintenance of a woman's marital chastity was paramount to her reputation. It is the lynchpin of the ideal wife and virtually every other facet of the construction of the idealised wife can be reduced to an aspect of ensuring chastity. Concern over the sexual behaviour of wives is common in many societies, particularly those which are agnatic and consequently concerned with the legitimacy of offspring. Romans, however, appear to have had a rather overwhelming preoccupation with the sexual purity of their wives.<sup>52</sup> The most famous women in Roman history were famous because of their great chastity, while the most famous men ensured that their wives were renowned for theirs.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, the most effective and common approach to destroying a prominent woman's reputation was to attack her chastity, and this is seen repeatedly in Roman literature.<sup>54</sup> A wife's chastity then serves many ideological and practical ends and is of utmost importance to the idealised portrait of a true Roman wife.

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<sup>51</sup> Dixon, 2001: 40. It has long been argued in classical scholarship the sexual pleasure was not expected within marriage because of the reluctance of Roman writers to sexualise their wives in print. Thus, J.P.V.D. Balsdon was able to say: "That a man's virility might reasonably require greater outlet than his matronly wife could provide was a fact...that should be realistically appreciated." (1962: 215) This assumption was reassessed by Suzanne Dixon with a series of new perspectives on marital sex that presented an image of love and sexual pleasure for both parties. Dixon, 1991; 1997; 2003

<sup>52</sup> A classic example of this preoccupation is Apuleius's *Metamorphoses* in which there appears a litany of twelve spoiled marriages, almost all of them as a result of adulterous and over-sexual wives. The surviving epitome of the Greek original on which the *Metamorphoses* is based, however, contains no hint of the scandalous adultery tales that are so prominent in Apuleius's version, suggesting a distinctly Roman fear is present in the Latin version. It is equally displayed in Juvenal's satire in which women are persistently portrayed as inherently unchaste and guaranteed to commit adultery, and in Seneca's letter to his mother in which he declares: "Unchastity, that great evil of our age, has never classed you among the ranks with the great majority of women" (*Ad Helv* 14.3).

<sup>53</sup> Julius Caesar's infamous remark upon divorcing Pompeia that "Caesar's wife should be above suspicion" is exemplary of this tendency Cicero, *Ep. Att* 1.13; Plut, *Caesar* 9-10; Dio, 37.45; Suet, *Julius* 6.2. This remark came after Publius Clodius Pulcher - who was apparently notorious for his sexual behaviour - invaded the female-only rites of the Bona Dea held at Caesar's home causing rumours to circulate about subsequent events. A further example is Augustus's wife Livia who, in Dio as well as others, is portrayed as implacably chaste while ignoring Augustus's own infidelity. 58. 4-5

<sup>54</sup> From Cicero's accusations towards Clodia Metelli to obfuscatory allegations against his own client Caelius, to the endlessly exaggerated claims about Claudius' wife Messalina, to the adulterous and uncontrolled women of Commodus' household. Cicero, *Pro Cael.* Esp 36; 57; On Messalina: Tac, *Ann.* XI. 1, 2, 12, 26-38; Suet, *Claud.* 17, 26, 27, 29, 36, 37, 39 in which is generally reprehensible; By Juvenal *Sat VI*.115-134 she has become a full prostitute. By Dio 60.18 she is not only adulterous herself but also forces other women to commit adultery in front of their husbands. Dio 73.4.5-6 on Lucilla and Crispina, the wife and sister of Commodus.

While a wife's reputation serves to enhance her husband's if good and seriously harm it if not, the development of an individual and independent identity was not greatly encouraged. A desire for a marriage to be an affectionate partnership, based on shared interests and mutual care becomes quite common in Roman philosophical thinking. It was this thinking that compelled many to utilise the language of love elegy in letters about or to their wives to portray this ideal of love and attachment.<sup>55</sup> It is representations such as Pliny's that led Veyne and Foucault to portray Roman marriage during the Imperial period as being a loving collaboration based on mutual understanding and respect, or at least ideally represented as such.<sup>56</sup> This interpretation is rarely found now in contemporary scholarship, as the focus of this 'mutual devotion' and 'shared interests' is very clearly set upon the wife in the classical texts. The ideal wife of Pliny's letters, Plutarch's moral treatises and Juvenal's satires is a woman who entirely submerges her personality and interests into her husband's. To be docile, agreeable and utterly immersed in one's husband's life was to be acceptable.<sup>57</sup> In his praise of his wife Pliny describes her as entirely devoted to him and his interests: sitting behind a curtain to listen to him speak, putting his words to music of her own composition and cradling a copy of his writings when parted from him.<sup>58</sup> The same ideal leads Plutarch to advise brides in all seriousness that they should have no emotions or moods of their own, but moderate their feelings to fit their husband's,<sup>59</sup> and Juvenal to characterise a great many of his frightful women as women with interests outside of their

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<sup>55</sup> Cicero, *Ep* 14; Porphyry, *Ad Marc*; Pliny, *Ep* 6.7;6.4;7.5. Jo-Ann Shelton describes Pliny as being particularly explicit in his portrayal of his marriage to Calpurnia as a devoted partnership Shelton, 1991: 165.

<sup>56</sup> Foucault, 1986: 78-80; 150-64; Veyne, 1987: 33-51, especially 40-42

<sup>57</sup> Shelton, 1993: 166-7; 179; 182 "The ideal Roman wife apparently agreed with her husband in all matters".

<sup>58</sup> Pliny *Ep* 4.19

<sup>59</sup> Plut. *Advice* 1.14

home and husband.<sup>60</sup> As much as immersion in and devotion to one's husband's interests, working to agree with and not annoy one's husband was equally valued.<sup>61</sup> Women cannot rely on beauty and breeding alone, they need to develop their character so as to be entirely inoffensive to their husbands.

For all the seemingly multifarious facets of the idealised Roman wife, she can be summarised in just a few words: chaste, modest and submissive. The many different elements of an ideal Roman wife are represented repeatedly in Roman literature symbolised by the loom, the veil and so many semi-mythical exemplars. It was enshrined in Roman law, custom, religion and the arts and vividly advertised through the Imperial propaganda tools. The Christian movement needed to develop an ideal of its own to combat the Roman model and to allow Christian wives to create for themselves an identity removed from their Roman counterparts. This need for a separate Christian-wife identity, however, was little filled. The rhetoric of virginity, asceticism and denial was dominant, providing a more conspicuous and striking locus for debate and thought than the traditional *familia*. Wives are, to the Christian writers, more interesting than husbands and a picture of a Christian wife begins to slowly appear in the third-century.<sup>62</sup> In the broad description, the ideal Christian wife is not significantly different from her traditional Roman counterpart. She is still modest, chaste and submissive. But in the details and the expression of this ideal there are distinct variations.

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<sup>60</sup> E.g. The athletic wife Juv, *Sat VI* 246-67; the musical wife 379-97; the partying wife 600; the Grecophile wife v184-99; the educated wife 434-56

<sup>61</sup> See, for example, one of Plutarch's favourite anecdotes about Aemilius Paulus. His friends were apparently shocked that he had decided to divorce Papiria, who they view as chaste, beautiful, high-born and fecund. Paulus responds by analogy to his shoe that: "mere petty repeated annoyances, arising from unpleasantness or incongruity of character, have been the occasion of such estrangement as to make it impossible for man and wife to live together with any content" (Plut. *Aem. Paul.* 10.5.2; *Advice* 1.22).

<sup>62</sup> Cameron, 1994: 153: As women they provide "convenient polarities" for the expression of thought that the concept of man or husband could not.

Some themes that are strong in Roman expression of female idealisation are almost entirely absent from the parallel Christian rhetoric, housekeeping and its associated tasks being a clear example. The Christian authors were evidently preoccupied with moulding and controlling public Christian roles and sorting heresy from orthodoxy and so the roles and image of the *materfamiliae* are largely not discussed. Except for one passing mention by Tertullian *lanifica*, for example, is not mentioned or promoted.<sup>63</sup> It is perhaps the deep symbolic connection that *lanifica* has to Roman culture and Roman womanhood that encouraged Christian writers to avoid the loom as a point of reference for Christian wives.

For the early Christian writers, ensuring that women remained at home at all appears to have been a much more pressing issue than controlling behaviour within the house. The instruction to women that they should remain at home and be domestic is repeated over and over in the texts of the third-century, drawing on Paul's several statements that women must not preach which often appear attached to exhortations to domesticity.<sup>64</sup> While the instruction to remain in the house is repeated often, the demands for related domestic action are not. Origen promotes the idea that women must remain at home by portraying them as "weak vessels" that would break in "battle" and so must be kept safe at home without elaborating on what they should be doing there.<sup>65</sup> Only in his exegesis of Romans does he instruct that women should "govern their homes well".<sup>66</sup> Tertullian furthers the direction to remain at home by instructing his listeners that they should not be seen in public except to attend church or visit the sick, visiting friends only in the most unavoidable circumstances.<sup>67</sup> His interpretation of the tales of Thecla underscores his

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<sup>63</sup> Tert. *De Cult* 2.13.7

<sup>64</sup> E.g. 1.Tim.2:12-14; 1.Cor.15:34-5; Titus.2:4-5. All biblical quotes are taken from the Authorised King James Bible.

<sup>65</sup> Origen, *HomJos* 3.1

<sup>66</sup> Origen, *CommRm* 10.21

<sup>67</sup> Tert. *De Cult* 2.11

aversion to women being visible parts of the Christian community.<sup>68</sup> Clement too insists that wives must avoid going out and hide themselves from “those she ought not be gazing at”, instead valuing the pursuit of “caring for the home”.<sup>69</sup> These continual requests for wives to know their place have been seen by some feminist scholars as evidence that women were in fact highly prominent teachers and speakers in the early Christian communities and that they presented a threat both to the male personalities and to the church as a whole by drawing unwanted attention from the pagan world.<sup>70</sup> The veracity of this interpretation is debated still, but certainly Christian writers were striving to limit the interpretation of freedom from the home that could be read from the Gospels. It was the ideal that women should remain in their homes that was actively promoted during this period, while drawing attention to themselves is discouraged. This was apparently more important than regulating what occurred within the home. Perhaps the concept of domestic labour was merely assumed to be part of the restriction to the house, with authors seeing no need to reinforce it.

The Christian ideal that women not draw attention to themselves is both underlined and undermined by their discourse on beautification and adornment. The subject of female appearance was common in third-century literature and is most thoroughly covered by Tertullian and Cyprian in treatises specifically discussing this topic. Modern scholars have noted that the biblical tales of the Creation of woman from Adam’s rib conceived women intrinsically as ornament for man in the Christian mind. She is automatically associated with artifice.<sup>71</sup> Equally, the story of the Fall indoctrinates that woman is inherently related

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<sup>68</sup> Tert. *De Bapt* 17

<sup>69</sup> Clement, *Strom* 2.23

<sup>70</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, 1984: 54-5; 265-6

<sup>71</sup> Bloch, 1987: 11 referring to Gen.2:18-23

to both to deceit and deception and to the need to wear clothing at all.<sup>72</sup> To the Christian male mind of Tertullian and Cyprian, beautification with clothing, make up and jewellery by female Christians was a visceral representation of their inherited guilt from Eve. While Roman aristocratic circles could condemn excessive ornamentation or beautification in print as un-Roman, while celebrating it in statuary and tomb art as demonstrating a successful and prosperous family, the Christian theological basis for condemnation meant that it could never be celebrated but that denunciation had to be pursued even further. Thus we see tracts approaching this topic alone, rather than as part of a generalised description of women as a whole. Tertullian in particular makes his points clearly and with alarming vitriol in his *De Culta Feminarum*. Opening with an address to the women it is written for, he immediately connects clothing to Eve and assures each listener that she is “each an Eve”, that her guilt lives in them.<sup>73</sup> In his first paragraph he demands that women wear only mourning garments in constant repentance. Basing his argument on the apocryphal gospel of Enoch, he goes on to associate all artificial adornment with a set of fallen angels who brought their manufacture to mortal women in order to punish them for enticing the angels to earth by inciting their lust.<sup>74</sup> Considering clothing beyond the most basic to be ‘ambition’ and all beautification to be ‘prostitution’ Tertullian demands that all Christian women refuse all forms of both in order to comply with a perfect, Christian modesty.<sup>75</sup> Modesty is advocated clearly by the Roman authorities and in its simplest form the Christian ideal of modesty is consistent with the Roman teaching. As with virginity, Christian modesty of appearance had to be better, more perfect. While pagan women were

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<sup>72</sup> Cameron, 1989a: 186; 191 referring to Gen.2:25: “And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed.” To Gen 3:7: “And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they *were* naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons.”

<sup>73</sup> Tert. *De Cult* 1.1

<sup>74</sup> Tert. *De Cult* 2.4. Furthermore, he proclaims that precious jewels originate in the foreheads of Dragons and are therefore originate directly from the devil. Tert, *De Cult* 6.2-3

<sup>75</sup> Tert. *De Cult* 2.1

expected to pay a small amount of attention to their exteriors in order to remain alluring to their husbands,<sup>76</sup> Christian women are to make themselves deliberately unattractive.<sup>77</sup> Here we find another theological basis for condemnation: by beautifying themselves, women make themselves sexually attractive, thus arousing lust in men who see them. As lustful thoughts are adultery according to Paul, by arousing these thoughts women are forcing men to commit a sin and damage their souls.<sup>78</sup> By placing even further guilt on the heads of women – now they are responsible for the fall of all mankind, their own salvation and that of any man who catches sight of them – strong impetus to live up to the ideals of highly ascetic Christian modesty is introduced. Tertullian is not the only Christian author to censure female adornment, although he is the most vitriolic. Origen mentions on several occasions that women are banned from beautifying themselves,<sup>79</sup> Clement assures women that they are beyond reproach if they refrain from “prettifying or adorning” themselves,<sup>80</sup> Cyprian declares in his *De Lapsis* that female adornment causes women to lose their souls.<sup>81</sup> The logic that underpinned this denunciation of beautification was that Christian women should always be unobtrusive and hidden, rejecting the need to be beautiful or desired or even seen. The result, however, was to make Christian women even more visible in their rejection of the normal appearance of their contemporaries. It is clear from Tertullian’s cry that Christian women of his community abhorred being mocked by their

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<sup>76</sup> Plut. *Advice* 1.29

<sup>77</sup> Tert. *De Cult* 2.2.1; 2.2.4-5

<sup>78</sup> Tert. *De Cult* 2.2.5 based on Matt. 5:28

<sup>79</sup> Origen, *PEuch* 11.2

<sup>80</sup> Clement, *Strom* 2.23

<sup>81</sup> Cyprian, *De Lap* 30. These denunciations seem to originate from the apocryphal second-century tale of Paul and Thecla in which Thecla escapes her privileged home and approaches Paul for the first time in prison. In order to reach him she is required to pass through several guarded gates which she passes by bribing the guards with her jewellery. The message is plain in order to reach sanctity; she must shed her worldly, unnecessary adornments.

pagan friends as dirty and poor, Christian ‘modesty’ of appearance highlighted one’s Christianity and made one even more conspicuous.<sup>82</sup>

While the external appearance of Christian wives was well covered in literature, private sexual behaviour was not. Sex was a highly popular topic for discussion in the early Christian world as we have seen, but the primary focus remained firmly on the meaning, origin and metaphysical effects of sex as a practice at all, rather than the accepted standards of sexual relations within the legitimate marriage. Where marital intercourse is tentatively approached – by Clement and by Origen - there is a clear divergence from the Roman ideal of regular, mutually pleasurable sexual intercourse.<sup>83</sup> Instead both present an idealised marriage of chaste affection with sex framed as a necessity to be used only for procreational purposes.<sup>84</sup> Clement’s work was written with the express, albeit reluctant, purpose of reassuring married householders that sexual intercourse in certain and specific situations was acceptable for Christians. Procreative purpose is the only acceptable justification for sexual contact in Clement’s writings.<sup>85</sup> Marriage is not a free pass to indulge a sexual desire. Clement reminds women that they should not attempt to entice their husbands, nor should men treat their women like sex objects “making their goal the violation of their bodies”.<sup>86</sup> There is no suggestion that a Christian woman would consider approaching a man for sexual pleasure, and the *Stromateis* appears to deal exclusively with the male role as husband, perhaps assuming the Christian women would automatically know that for a wife to initiate sexual contact would be meretricious and even sinful. Only Origen explicitly states that wives are forbidden from making sexual advances in his

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<sup>82</sup> Tert, *De Cult* 11.3

<sup>83</sup> Eg. Catullus 61.144-46; 61.97; Plutarch, *Conjugal Precepts* 5; Dixon, 2003: passim; Lattimore, 1942: 296

<sup>84</sup> Clement, *Paed* 2.1.1.2.1

<sup>85</sup> Clement, *Paed* 2.10.1; *Strom* 2.23; 3.9; 3.12

<sup>86</sup> Clement, *Strom* 2.23



exegesis of Genesis while defending Lot's daughters.<sup>87</sup> The connection of Christian wives to any sexual activity within the home beyond this is rare, either due to an inherited reluctance to connect *matronae* to sexuality or because of the preoccupation with the nature of the body and sexuality as a whole. There does remain a focus on female adultery; inherited from the gospels which explicitly state that female adultery is the sole acceptable grounds for divorce.<sup>88</sup> A certain amount of attention is therefore paid to this concept, most regularly in an allegorical sense with an 'adulterous wife' representing a variety of different bodies from the soul to heretical groups.<sup>89</sup>

A more common theme in the Christian literature is that of spiritual intercourse with God by either virgins or the Church who were both characterised as Jesus' wife. This bridal imagery is most clear in Origen's exegesis of the Song of Songs, which he recommends should not be read by any who have not "withdrawn from corporeal desire" in case they are corrupted by a false reading.<sup>90</sup> Through this exegesis runs two related allegories, one in which the bride represents the Christian soul having intercourse with the Word, and a second in which the Church is represented by the bride marrying Christ. This exegesis removes any physically sexual interpretation from the obviously passionate verses and thus removes any passion from perfect Christian marital sexual intercourse. The only

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<sup>87</sup> Origen *HomGn* 5.4 Lot's daughters' chastity survived being prostituted by their father (Gen 19:8) and they also survived the destruction of Sodom. However, they lost their virginities by seducing and conceiving children by their own father. (Gen. 19:1-38). Origen's defence of their actions maintains that as foolish women they misinterpreted the destruction as the end of the world and believed they were restoring the human race. To have preserved their chastity and avoided incest would therefore have been a worse crime. They are later analogously presented as Pride and Vainglory attacking righteousness against his will, which seems somewhat to undermine his defence of their action as reasonable and necessary in anomalous circumstances. *HomGn*. 5.6

<sup>88</sup> Matt 5:32; 19:9

<sup>89</sup> Cyprian, *De Ecc. Unit. Cath* 6 on heretics as adulterous wives; Origen *HomJos* 1.3 on the Church as adulterous wife, committing adultery against the Law of Moses; Martyrdom 9 on the Church as potentially adulterous unless kept in check by the threat of God's wrath; *HomGn* 1.15 on the "female" soul being adulterous. In Origen's case this allegory corresponds to his belief that the female was weak, imperfect and both directly connected and naturally drawn to bodily desire, pleasure and deceit, where 'female' represents not a gender but a duality of the soul. This theme runs prominently through his exegeses of the scriptures.

<sup>90</sup> Origen *ComCt*

passionate love a wife should feel is for God and the only wives who are truly able to enjoy this passion are the virginal Brides of Christ.<sup>91</sup> This ideal is supported by the Apocryphal Acts in which several wives appear challenging their pagan husband's morality through a refusal to engage in physical intercourse and by renouncing any passion or love their husbands expect from, and offer, them. The character of Maximilla in the *Acts of Andrew* is converted by the apostle and subsequently refuses sexual contact with her husband Aegeates on the grounds that it is "a heinous and despicable act" regardless of their legal marriage.<sup>92</sup> She executes an elaborate plan to trick her husband into allowing her to remain chaste by prostituting her female slave to him.<sup>93</sup> This course of action suggests that it is not sex itself that Maximilla and the author of the Acts finds repellent, but the idea of a Christian woman engaging in sexual acts. Maximilla finds a new form of sexual love in Christ and describes her new religious faith in erotic terms:

"I am in love, Aegeates, I am in love and the object of my love is not of this world...Night and day it kindles and inflames me with love for it...let me have intercourse with it"<sup>94</sup>

Equally, the *Acts of Thomas* tell of a bride and groom who are converted by Thomas on their wedding day. The passages discussing this incident contain numerous references to the concept of the Bride of Christ and the true intercourse between the soul and God. Conjugal intercourse with an earthly husband is said to prevent true intercourse with the true husband.<sup>95</sup> The *Acts of Peter* contain numerous tales of women who hear the Word and are compelled to stop sexual activity with their husbands as a result.<sup>96</sup> These can easily

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<sup>91</sup> Origen *HomCt* 1.2; 2.1

<sup>92</sup> AA 21.

<sup>93</sup> AA17-19

<sup>94</sup> AA 23-25

<sup>95</sup> *ATh* 12-13

<sup>96</sup> *APt* 34

be read as instructions to Christian women with pagan husbands exclusively, and these women certainly required ideals to confirm their faith, but the accumulated denigration of marital passion must have had an influence on the ideals held by Christian wives with Christian husbands also.

One area of the idealised Christian wife that is covered in detail is the ideal of devotion and submission. That a wife should defer to her husband and agree with both his opinions and his moods is an ideal that was prominent in Roman literature. This ideal was presented by the male writers as a path to a mutually supportive marriage based on affection, desire and mutual contentment. This is recreated in Christian thought, but with a far more misogynistic theological basis. Denigration of the female in Roman literature tends to be implicit and assumed, while in the Christian writing it is an explicit theme used to support ideals of submission and obedience that appear shockingly misogynistic. Submission of the wife to the husband runs throughout the Old and New Testaments. From Genesis Eve is told that she is to be beneath the heel of Adam and that she is subject to her husband as punishment for her transgression in Eden.<sup>97</sup> This premise continues throughout the New Testament, particularly in the Pauline and Deutero-Pauline letters. In 1 Timothy women are instructed to remain “under all subjugation” in a passage that evokes Eve’s fall as justification,<sup>98</sup> 1 Corinthians declares that “the head of the woman is the man”, followed almost immediately by “for the man is not of the woman, but the woman of the man. Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man.”, a passage recalling the creation story which carries strong connotations of subjection to Christian

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<sup>97</sup> Gen. 3:15-16

<sup>98</sup> 1.Tim.2:11

readers.<sup>99</sup> Women were “commanded to be under obedience”,<sup>100</sup> and a wife is perceived to have no care other than her husband suggesting that Christian, as Roman, marriage brought with it expectations of full devotion to one’s husband.<sup>101</sup> An important difference in the nature of this devotion is clear; while the Roman writers were keen to present their wives’ devotion as contributing to a happy ideal of affectionate love, the Christians were more occupied with creating an ideal image of a humble woman bowed by her faith into recognising her innate inferiority and her husband’s right to rule her. This picture appears regularly in the third-century literature. Mary quickly becomes idealised as an exemplar of humility and obedience based on her unquestioning acceptance of God’s command that she shall bear Jesus.<sup>102</sup> Origen identifies her as an embodiment of the virtue of humility in his exegesis of Luke. In this passage his Mary says: “God looked upon me because I...practice the virtues of gentleness and submission”<sup>103</sup> In the apocryphal *Protoevangelium of James* Mary’s obedience to God and Joseph are emphasised.<sup>104</sup> Origen and Tertullian take these examples and extend them to create a perfect Christian wife. Paul’s pronouncement that marriage focuses the mind to worldly things is developed into a doctrine that women are to be yoked by and bowed to their husbands.<sup>105</sup> The insistence that Christian women are “bound to please no-one but their husbands” is repeated often with the addition that Christian women are obliged to fulfil a higher ideal than Roman wives.<sup>106</sup> Even so, Tertullian is one of the few Christian writers to promote a concept of mutual support in marriage.<sup>107</sup> Origen’s opinions on the correct role of Christian women

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<sup>99</sup> 1. Cor. 11: 3; 8-9

<sup>100</sup> 1 Cor.14:34

<sup>101</sup> 1. Cor. 7:34. Strangely the previous verse (“But he that is married careth for the things that are of the world, how he may please *his* wife”. 1 Cor. 7:33) and its implications are much less discussed.

<sup>102</sup> Luke 1:38; Cameron 1994: 158

<sup>103</sup> Origen, *HomLc* 8.4-5

<sup>104</sup> *PE* 11.3; 13;

<sup>105</sup> Tert. *De Cult* 2.4.2

<sup>106</sup> Tert. *De Cult* 2.2.4; 2.4.2; 2.13.17; *Uxor* 3.

<sup>107</sup> Tert. *Uxor* 11.8

are less equivocal. He is clear and consistent in his belief that the female is inferior to and should be subject to the male. In his exegesis of Genesis he states that women must remain behind and follow their husbands.<sup>108</sup> He continues to use this as a basis for his exegesis of the passage:

“And God said unto Abraham...in all that Sarah hath said unto thee, hearken unto her voice;”<sup>109</sup>

Origen concludes that this cannot refer to physical marriage as “it is revealed from heaven” that a woman’s husband shall have dominion over her.<sup>110</sup> On this basis he presents the passage as allegory where Sarah represents virtue but Abraham remains a human figure. It would appear that the theological support given to the concept of female inferiority led to it being so embedded it could legitimately be used as a root for exegesis and make a literal reading of a biblical passage impossible. In a reversal of this example, in his treatise on martyrdom he uses the conception that a woman should focus all her attention on her husband, and that her husband should encourage this with jealous behaviour as an analogy to explain the jealousy of God towards his church.<sup>111</sup> In his commentary on the epistle to the Romans he echoes Paul as he describes an idealised woman with the instruction to “be submissive to their husbands”.<sup>112</sup> In his commentary on Luke he becomes near delirious with joy over the order of prophets that approach Jesus in his manger to prophesise salvation for man (Simeon) and woman (Anna):

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<sup>108</sup> Origen, *HomGn* 4.4

<sup>109</sup> Gen. 21.12

<sup>110</sup> Origen, *HomGn* 6.1 referring to Gen 3.16

<sup>111</sup> Origen, *ExMart* 9

<sup>112</sup> Origen, *CommRm* 10.20

“How beautiful that order is! That woman did not come before man!”<sup>113</sup>

The result of all this is an overwhelming portrait of an idealised Christian woman who is utterly submissive to her husband’s desires and totally devoted to his needs. This portrait is not overly dissimilar from the Roman image of a wife who is advised to have no emotions of her own. The terms through which it is expressed are where the Christian discourse differs. The theological explanations developed to explain and reinforce this ideal of submission appear to reveal an overt misogyny that is absent in the Roman texts. Furthermore, the sentimental ideal of mutual affection is rarely raised by Christian writers. The Roman ideal was one which had been relatively constant for five hundred years by the third-century, and wives needed little in the way of explanation of the ideal anymore. The Christian tradition was still in development and, so it is quite possible, as feminist scholars argue, that the early Christian preoccupation with female subjection can be attributed to a strong movement of Christian women who were living very public lives, teaching, going unveiled and prophesising. In an attempt to destroy this movement in order to lessen Christianity’s appearance of being a threat to Roman culture, this ideal became heavily enforced.<sup>114</sup>

The Roman and Christian ideals of proper wifely behaviour differ little in their generalities but widely in their expression. When looking at the Roman and Christian expressions of these ideals in funerary epigraphy then very little difference between are to be expected. Epitaphs express ideals through generalisations and simplifications for the detail of a

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<sup>113</sup> Origen, *HomLc* 17.9 Even in fragments of works that did not survive extant reveal his misogyny, such as fragment 254 which reworks the story of Christ’s resurrection to cast women as sceptical and disbelieving. This is in direct contrast to Matt 28:1-8 and especially Luke 24:1-11. The women are the first to know of the resurrection in both version and in Luke’s they tell of it to the disciples but are not believed.

<sup>114</sup> For example Schüssler Fiorenza, 1984: 54-5; 265-6

complex discourse articulated through such a medium would be unexpected. Some wifely virtues are very unlikely to be celebrated on tombstones. The ideal of thrift, for example, is unlikely to appear in epitaphs when celebrating a luxurious lifestyle was evidently common.<sup>115</sup> Furthermore, the dead interred in underground cemeteries with small epitaphs would represent the poorer, non-aristocratic inhabitants of Rome for whom thrift may not have been a voluntary virtue. The demographic make-up of the cemeteries used in this sample may also account for the complete absence of any celebration of wool-working in either the Roman or Christian samples despite the frequency of its appearance in larger, above ground memorials.<sup>116</sup> *Lanifica* for profit was roundly scorned by the elite of both the Roman and Christian cultures; it was only celebrated as a symbol in women who did it voluntarily.<sup>117</sup> A range of wifely virtues are represented in the samples. The number of women who are remembered as wives is significant. Within the pagan sample for the second-century 14% (39) epitaphs contain a reference to being a wife, in the third-century sample this has leapt to 24 (64). Where epithets have been used the most common are *cara*, *casta*, *optima* and *pia* and their usage remains generally consistent between the second- and third-century pagan epitaphs.<sup>118</sup> Between the third-century pagan and Christian epitaphs the rate of commemoration specifically as a wife is 24% (64) to 18% (30). By the fourth-century 37% (97) women were commemorated as wives. The fall in females being recognised as wives during the third-century is unexpected as no reason for it is clear. The real question here is how far the usage of specific epithets changed. The percentage rates of usage in the pagan and Christian epitaphs of the third century are as follows:

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<sup>115</sup> See n.11

<sup>116</sup> Most famously *CIL* VI.15346 –Claudia and 6.1527 – Turia

<sup>117</sup> See, for example, Origen's *CCels* where Celsus denounces *lanifica* as a profession as being lowly and worthy of contempt and Origen makes no attempt to counter him: 1.29; 3.55. Dixon, 2004: 57; 2001: 117; 119-20

<sup>118</sup> See appendices 1 & 2.

	Pagan % (#)	Christian % (#)
<i>Cara</i>	5 (13)	6 (10)
<i>Casta</i>	1 (3)	2 (3)
<i>Optima</i>	2 (5)	4 (6)
<i>Pia</i>	6 (17)	2 (3)

With the exception of *pia*, there are very slight increases in each of the epithets from the Roman to the Christian usage. The rejection of the term *pia* is not unexpected. It was a word intimately connected to the Roman religion and Roman culture rejected by the Christian community. The term *sancta* is equally rejected.<sup>119</sup> These religious terms are replaced with specifically Christian theological terms where *in pace* is particularly prevalent. The increase in the usage of *optima* suggests a Christian desire to emphasise the exceptional virtuousness of their wives. It may be that the Christian community was keen to present an exterior image of conformity to traditional female roles. Equally it may betray a form of Christian arrogance connected to the claims of the Christian writers that only Christian modesty was perfect or indeed real. Certainly it seems to reveal a small increase in the husband's desire to present his wife as going beyond the call of wifely duty. The slightly higher Christian emphasis on chastity is also unsurprising given their developing discourse on sex. That the increase is not larger is perhaps the most unexpected part of this comparison and, much like in the previous chapter, it may betray a reluctance

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<sup>119</sup> Usage of *sancta* falls from 3% (7) in the pagan epigraphy to 1% (3) in the Christian in the third-century, and remains low at 1 (8) in the fourth-century Christian sample.



on the part of the lay-Christian to buy too heavily into this discourse at this time. Certainly by the fourth-century emphasis on chastity has increased among Christian commemorators to 2.5% (6) using the term *casta* and 1.5% (4) using *pudicitia*.<sup>120</sup> One commemorator of the fourth-century even goes so far as to announce that his wife had lived her life “*cum summo pudore*”.<sup>121</sup> The next chapter on virginity will examine the hypothesis that Roman Christians of the third-century remained sceptical in their approach to the extreme denigration of sexual conduct that was prevalent in the contemporary literature. The findings of this chapter would appear to lend some support to this suggestion.

In their most simplistic incarnations the wifely ideals of both the Roman and the Christian traditions are exceedingly similar with their emphasis on chastity, modesty and docility. Both abhor adornment and both demand that women submerge their entire personality into their husbands'. It is in the expression and the details of these ideals that differences appear as the Christians stress a theological message of inherent female inferiority and replace the Roman ideal of partnership (however one-sided) with one of bowed submission. The Christian ideal appears to take the Roman as a base line upon which to build, making their ideal wife *more* chaste, *more* modest and *more* submissive than ever before. It would be near impossible to express these nuances of discourse through the limited medium funerary epigraphy except through the increased usage of epithets, particularly in their superlative form, by Christians to highlight their moral superiority. The sample analysed here certainly seems to reveal the very beginnings of such a phenomenon.

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<sup>120</sup> No epitaphs in the third-century sample used the term *pudicitia*.

<sup>121</sup> ICUR IV.9910

## VIRGINITY

“Continnence follows Christ”<sup>122</sup>

The early Church’s emphasis on the virginity of its heroes, clergy and laity is one of the most studied areas of early ecclesiastical history. The grand declarations of the Church Fathers casting women as “the Devil’s Gateway”;<sup>123</sup> the rhetorical glories heaped upon those who took vows of chastity;<sup>124</sup> the huge ascetic communities of the fourth-century, and the detailed biographies and exaltations given to the Desert Fathers and their female counterparts all combine to make sexuality and its renunciation arresting themes in the early Christian literature.<sup>125</sup> A vast majority of the scholarship has focussed heavily on the fourth and fifth-centuries, in particular on the monastic communities of the Eastern Empire and on the strikingly pro-virginity writings of Jerome. Even heavier still has been the attention given to the fifth-century Saint Augustine. The writers of the third-century have generally received less attention.<sup>126</sup>

Approaches to the study of sexuality and virginity, as well as interpretation of the phenomenon of Christian sexual renunciation have been as varied as they are numerous. From the overtly feminist interpretations of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, to the French-feminist influenced hermeneutical analyses by Averil Cameron, to the individualistic tones of Peter Brown and Aline Rousselle, sexual renunciation has been cast as a new pathway

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<sup>122</sup> Cyp. *Virg* 5

<sup>123</sup> Tert, *De Cult* 1.1

<sup>124</sup> Meth, *Symp* Marcella 4;

<sup>125</sup> Melania the Elder (Paulinus of Nola, *Letter* 29), Olympias of Constantinople (Palladius, *Lausiac History*) Antony (Athanasius, *Life of Antony*), Paula (Jerome, Ep.107)

<sup>126</sup> With the exceptions of Origen and Tertullian, a combination of whose apparently rampant misogyny and evident influence on the later Church made them stand out.

to social freedom for women;<sup>127</sup> a weapon used in a contest between the pagan and Christian worlds,<sup>128</sup> and a misogynistic rhetorical theme,<sup>129</sup> among many others. Roman concepts of virginity have been rather less studied, being not nearly so radical or remarkable. This chapter will examine the Roman ideals of premarital virginity, marital chastity and the rare examples of pledged religious virginity that formed the backdrop for the emergent Christian ideal, and the unique definition of Christian virginity that developed during the third-century.

For the vast majority of women in the Roman tradition, virginity was not expected of them after a certain age. Although their virginal status would be fiercely protected until their wedding day, after their marriage had been contracted, their social status changed and to remain a virgin would be shameful.<sup>130</sup> As we have seen, the expected, encouraged and idealised behaviour for a married woman was to bear children, a function that clearly a virgin could not fulfil. After widowhood, chastity was ideologically encouraged, but – after Augustus at least – legally discouraged until the age of 50. The idealised sexual behaviour of Roman girls and women was therefore distinctly separated into stages of the life course, each with distinct sexual codes: girlhood, marriage and widowhood.

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<sup>127</sup> Clark, 1986b: 43; Reuther, R.R. 1979. 'Mothers of the Church: Ascetic Women in the Late Patristic Age', in *Women of Spirit: Female Leadership in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*. New York; Reuther, R.R. 1974. 'Misogynism and Virginal Feminism in the Fathers of the Church', in R.R.Reuther (ed) *Religion and Sexism*, New York. 150-84; Dreyer, E.A. 1996. 'Asceticism' in L.M. Russell & J.S. Clarkson (eds) *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*. London. 17-18.

<sup>128</sup> Cooper, 1996: 49

<sup>129</sup> Cameron, 1989a: 153

<sup>130</sup> E.g. When the young Octavian returned his wife Claudia to her mother Fulvia apparently untouched, this was seen as a grave insult both to her and her family. Sue, *Aug* 62; Dio 48.5.3. Equally, Origen argues that had Mary been a married woman when she was blessed with divine conception, her virginity would have been a shameful state. Origen, *HomLc* 6.3

For young, pre-marital girls, their virginity was paramount. An unmarried girl's sexual behaviour was controlled because it was seen to be indicative of her behaviour within marriage. An unchaste maiden would be expected to be an unchaste wife.<sup>131</sup> There were several exemplars of premarital virgins enshrined in the histories of Rome and passed down through the generations. Perhaps the most famous was Verginia, who was abducted by Appius Claudius (451 BC). After a lengthy trial in which Appius attempted to claim that Verginia was his slave, she was eventually killed by her father to protect her virginity.<sup>132</sup> Valerius Maximus recorded further examples, mostly focussing on the father's duty to protect his daughter's virginal state at any cost. Thus, he recounts the tale of Pontius Aufedianus who, when he discovered that his daughter had been 'given' to Fannius Saturninus by a slave, killed both slave and daughter.<sup>133</sup> Even more explicit is the story of P. Maenius who punished his freedman and daughter severely when they are found to have kissed. Valerius Maximus explains that Maenius's actions are designed to teach his daughter, and others, the discipline of chastity.<sup>134</sup> The daughter's virginity was seen as one of, if not the, most valuable assets brought to the marriage.<sup>135</sup> So Apuleius says in his *Apologia* where he declares that a beautiful virgin is so valuable as to scarcely need a dowry,

“For she brings to her husband a fresh untainted spirit, the charm of her beauty, the unblemished glory of her prime. The very fact that she is a maiden is rightly and deservedly regarded by all husbands as the strongest recommendation...Virginity only, once it has been given, can

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<sup>131</sup> Brown, 1987:29

<sup>132</sup> Livy 3.44-58

<sup>133</sup> Val. Max 6.1.3

<sup>134</sup> Val. Max 6.1.4

<sup>135</sup> Evans Grubbs, 1995: 195.

never be repaid; it is the one portion of the dowry that remains irrevocably with the husband.”<sup>136</sup>

The seriousness of the matter of an unmarried girl’s virginity is repeated in the legal codes, and become severe after the time of Constantine when death was institutionalised as the standard punishment for both the girl and her partner regardless of her consent.<sup>137</sup> Constantine also introduced laws forcing betrothed girls to undergo examination to prove their premarital virginity, further highlighting its extreme importance.<sup>138</sup>

Perhaps the most definite examples of the pagan emphasis on ideal premarital virginity come in the popular Greek novels of the second and third-centuries of which several remain extant.<sup>139</sup> Each novel tells the story of a young couple faced with a series of adventures, travels and mortal dangers as they attempt to get to a home destination where they can settle, marry, have children and live happily ever after. The female suffers further danger in that her virginity is constantly and repeatedly imperilled.<sup>140</sup> The protection of the heroine’s virginity is one of the most striking features of the novels, and they often include a supernatural ‘test’ of virginity in the finale.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Apul. *Apol* 92.

<sup>137</sup> *CT* 9.7.2.

<sup>138</sup> *CT* 9.8.1.

<sup>139</sup> Reardon, 1969: 293. The ones primarily studied here are Achilles Tatius’ *Leukippê and Clitophon*; Heliodorus’ *Aithiopika* and the anonymous *Apollonius of Tyre*.

<sup>140</sup> One male protagonist also has his chastity threatened: Clitophon, who despite his reservations about the existence of a male virginity (5.20.5; 8.5.7) has promised to stay true to Leukippê. He eventually surrenders to Melitte - whom he has married through the mistaken belief that Leukippê is dead, *after* he has discovered that she is still alive. Leukippê however, remains chaste, even resisting rape.

<sup>141</sup> *Leukippê and Clitophon* 8.6.7. *Aithiopika* 10.9 Charicleia in *the Aithiopika* endures the most frequent attacks on her chastity as a dedicated virgin of Artemis. Her virginity, and her fear of losing it, is emphasised repeatedly by her, the narrator and the other characters and is critical to her character and the story.

The virgin daughter was evidently extremely important in Roman society, with their virginity being a major commodity in the negotiation of marriage contracts which affected the wealth and social status of both sets of parents and the husband.<sup>142</sup> The point, however, of valuing premarital virginity is that it is only valued up until the wedding, whereupon it is no longer treasured. Once a girl has been married, she becomes a woman – an entirely different life course stage, which brings with it new standards of sexual morality.

To be a virginal Roman wife, however, was a shameful thing. The primary function of a wife was to bear legitimate children, a role that a virgin quite clearly could not fulfil. The marriage ceremony therefore marks the end of the girl's life as a *virgo*, and the beginnings of a new sexual life. The focus is no longer on her protecting her virginity, but her chastity – her *puditica*. The great and famous exemplar of marital chastity is, of course, Lucretia. The rape of Lucretia is one of the most well-known tales of Roman myth, along with her infamous dying words: "...nor in time to come shall ever unchaste woman live through the example of Lucretia"<sup>143</sup> she is the ultimate Roman ideal of a chaste and loyal wife, unable to live with the knowledge that she has been violated.<sup>144</sup> Langlands has argued that when Roman men are writing about sex, particularly in the Imperial period, they almost always

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<sup>142</sup> Jack Goody & S.J Tambiah (1973) and Alice Schlegel (1991) have investigated the value of virginity from an anthropological perspective and both see a connection between the control of a daughter's sexuality and the social hierarchy of the pertinent society. Schlegel gives the most thorough explanation of why virginity has a value (Schelegel,1991:724).

<sup>143</sup> Livy 1.57-60

<sup>144</sup> As with the story of Verginia, there are heavy political overtones to the story of Lucretia's rape and her reaction, which are intimately connected to the overthrow of the Roman kings. See De Beauvoir, 1988 (1949): 162; ; Joshel, 1992:119; 125 Dixon, 2001b: 46-47; Bayle, cited in Donaldson, 1982: 8 These political readings do not, however, preclude the story from being used equally as an exemplar of marital chastity, as is evidenced by Valerius Maximus' citation of her fate. Val. Max. 6.1. Langlands, 2006: 143; Donaldson, 1982:10.

have Lucretia on their minds both as an ideal and a norm.<sup>145</sup> Lucretia is presented repeatedly as an example to be reproduced by good Roman women.

The necessity to be seen as a chaste wife is an overwhelming aspect of the Roman woman's life, ideally influencing the way she speaks, dresses, acts and even reacts to external stimuli. Ovid declares that a woman's chastity (or lack thereof) should be displayed openly in these ways.<sup>146</sup> Seneca equally in describing how a woman should behave to "oppose the lust of a seducer" advises that "even when she returning the greetings of relatives, she should be blushing greatly",<sup>147</sup> suggesting that even her physical reactions should be under her conscious control as prominent indicators of her *pudicitia*.<sup>148</sup> The seemingly endless lamentations of the writers of Imperial Rome that the women of their age were failing to live up to their idealised standards apparently exemplified by the women of the past emphasise the perceived importance of a woman's general appearance and demeanour in indicting her sexual morality. Thus, Tacitus is willing to insinuate that literacy leads to adultery while comparing the sexual behaviour of Roman women unfavourably to that of the barbarian Germans, while Juvenal describes a litany of women obsessing over their elaborate hair while ignoring their husbands and pleasing their lovers.<sup>149</sup> A *matrona*'s chastity is vitally important for reasons intimately connected to the reputation of her husband and the stability of the state as well as the obvious concerns over the legitimacy of heirs.

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<sup>145</sup> Langlands, 2006: 332

<sup>146</sup> Ovid, *Fasti* 4.309-310 where Claudia, later proven to be most chaste, is the subject of critical rumour because of her loose hair and 'ready tongue'. Much like the later Greek novels, she subjects herself to a supernatural test of her chastity.

<sup>147</sup> Sen. *Cont* 2.7.3

<sup>148</sup> Langlands, 2006: 72

<sup>149</sup> Tac *Germ* 19; Juv *Sat VI* 501-11

The Christian ideal of dedicated lifelong virginity was a revolutionary concept. Ordinary men and women who remained virgins all their lives were extremely rare in the Roman world, and would have been highly criticised. The single example of an individual in the Roman world pledging lifelong virginity voluntarily and unrelated to the holding of a priesthood is the artist Iaia of Cyzicus who is mentioned in Pliny's *Natural History* where her unmarried status is unique enough to be remarked upon.<sup>150</sup> Men and women who elected to remain unmarried, particularly in the upper classes, would have exposed themselves to both legal and social discrimination. The Augustan marriage laws that penalised those of senatorial and equestrian rank who did not marry or reproduce: they limited both engagement and mourning periods, made the unmarried life both unappealing and difficult and remained in circulation until the time of Constantine.<sup>151</sup> Social disapproval would also have been rife, particularly for women whose primary purpose in life was to marry and reproduce. There is some evidence of men remaining unmarried for philosophical reasons, but with no indication that this meant a sexual renunciation.<sup>152</sup> Evidence for the horror caused by a girl pledging lifelong virginity comes in Heliodorus' *Aithiopika* where Charicleia chooses perpetual virginity in the service of Artemis. Her father is distraught that she is abandoning her civil duties as wife and mother and employs a magician to force her to change her mind.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>150</sup>Plin. *NH* 35.147. As Iaia is a women "unmarried" is synonymous with "virginal".

<sup>151</sup>Evans Grubbs, 1995: 103-139 Although there is considerable debate over the implementation and effectiveness. See *CAH X*, 1996: 892-3; Winter, 2003: 47-51; Treggiari, 1991: 277-98.

<sup>152</sup>Williams, 1996: 133; Ulp. *Digest* 48.5.35

<sup>153</sup>*Aithiopika* 2.33



One avocation of lifelong virginity remains extant in Soranus's *Gynaecology*, although Soranus himself claims that others have also recommended permanent virginity as a lifestyle, suggesting an ongoing debate on the matter. He outlines the arguments against lifelong virginity in terms of the effects on the health of a woman,<sup>154</sup> with the consensus being that women required frequent sexual intercourse in order to continue menstruation, prevent running to fat, and keep a noble health.<sup>155</sup> These can be compared to Galen's arguments against the idea of permanent virginity.<sup>156</sup> Soranus, however, argues that "permanent virginity is healthful", making women stronger, less susceptible to disease and free from the harms that are caused by sexual intercourse.<sup>157</sup> Even so, Soranus finds it impossible to advocate a life of dedicated virginity, stating that, despite its dangers, "intercourse seems consistent with the general principle of nature according to both sexes".<sup>158</sup>

Permanent virginal behaviour was extremely rare in the Roman world. Long term virginity tended therefore to only be practiced by those who undertook the few priesthoods that demanded it, the most prominent being that of the Vestal Virgins. Even the virginity of the Vestals did not live up to the high ideals of the Christian concept, being a great deal more complex than first appears. To begin with, the Vestals were not employed for life. Their service lasted thirty years, being completed in their forties. After their term of service, they

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<sup>154</sup> Notably, the debate only concerns the virginity of women, perhaps related to the musings of Clitophon that question the existence of a male virginity at all: Achilles Tatius, *Leukippê and Clitophon* 5.20.5; 8.5.7

<sup>155</sup> Sor. *Gyn* 1.31.

<sup>156</sup> Gal. *Loc. Aff.* 6

<sup>157</sup> Sor. *Gyn* 1.32: "intercourse is harmful in itself, as has been shown in more length by this book".

<sup>158</sup> Sor. *Gyn* 32-33

were free to marry and live as normal, although it appears that few did.<sup>159</sup> Their virginity was therefore not the permanent pledge expected by the Christian church.

It has been suggested by both Peter Brown and Mary Beard that a great deal of the holiness and sacredness of the Vestals was drawn from their anomalousness in Roman society. Brown calls them an “elaborately contrived suspension of the normal process”, while in 1980 Beard drew on Mary Douglas’s anthropological work to highlight their interstitial status as a critical element in their sacred status.<sup>160</sup> She examined the complex iconographies embodied in the dress and rituals of the Vestal virgins and concluded that their virginity is not solely that of abstention from sexual intercourse, but is equally closely related to the *pudicitia* of the univirate Roman wife.<sup>161</sup> In 1995 she re-assessed her original work and re-emphasised the importance of the physical virginity of the Vestals as a factor in defining general virginity while retracting a number of her previous assessments on their sexual ambiguity. The actual virginity of the vestals was vital to their sanctity and authority, as is evident from the Roman discussions of the office.<sup>162</sup> The capacity of virginity to grant power, however, is what makes sacred and therefore necessarily rare in the Roman world. If the Vestals were often imitated by young girls desiring a form of their power for themselves – as many Christian girls (or their parents) evidentially did - their sacredness would be diluted. A Roman audience could not and did not read them as exemplars of a behaviour that was to be reproduced.

Christian writers appear to present the Vestals in very different terms to those of the pagan tradition, viewing them as a pagan precursor to Christian chastity and thus models for

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<sup>159</sup> Plut. *Numa* 9.5-10; Gell *NA*: 1.12; Pomeroy, 1975:211

<sup>160</sup> Brown, 1987:9; Beard: 20.21; Douglas, 1966 42-58.

<sup>161</sup> Beard, 1980:14

<sup>162</sup> Ovid, *Fasti* 6.249-460; Dion. Hal., *Ant Rom* 2.64-69

Christians to improve upon. Municius Felix claims that the virgin priestesses are almost solely responsible for all Rome's successes,<sup>163</sup> while others appear to see them as a challenge with the argument that if the pagans can maintain continence, then Christians should be able to, and must, perform better.<sup>164</sup>

It is clear already that notions of Christian virginity differed radically from even the most idealised of Roman virgins. Where the Romans saw virginity as a temporary phase in the life course, as a currency in marriage transactions or as a contrived anomaly that conferred holiness to a few, Christians very quickly redefined the untouched state as a state of perfection, of closeness to God and as an imitation of Jesus to be emulated. Interpretation of the creation and the nativity make sexual contact unworthy of God and polluting.<sup>165</sup> Jesus' birth through a virgin strongly suggested to early Christians that only a virgin was worthy of God's touch,<sup>166</sup> Jesus himself told tales of glorified virgins in Matthew 25.1-12, and there are repeated mentions of virgins in the Pauline letters that can be, and are, easily read as exaltations of their state.<sup>167</sup> By the time Book of Revelation was authored, virgins were already attributed the label "first-fruits of God".<sup>168</sup> The glorification of virginity spread and grew throughout the church from its inception and reached its crescendo in

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<sup>163</sup> Mun. Fel. *Oct* 6.2

<sup>164</sup> Origen, *CommRm* 3.2.12; Tert., *Uxor* 6.

<sup>165</sup> De Nie, 1995: 107

<sup>166</sup> Origen, *CCels* 1.35. This seemingly ignore the messianic prophecy of Is.7:14, repeated at Matt. 1:23 which states: "Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel" which strongly suggests that a Jesus was miraculously born through a virgin, not to glorify the state of virginity or denigrate sexual contact, but to prove his divinity.

<sup>167</sup> E.g. 1.Cor.7:32: "There is difference *also* between a wife and a virgin. The unmarried woman careth for the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and in spirit: but she that is married careth for the things of the world, how she may please *her* husband."

<sup>168</sup> Rev. 14:4. The Book of Revelation is commonly dated either to the reign of Nero (37-69AD) or to Domitian (81-96AD), but can be as late as 117AD. See Ladd, 1972:8; Irenaeus, *Ad. Her* 5.30.3; Victorianus, *Comm. Rev* 10.11; Mounce, 1977: 31-36

431AD at the council of Ephesus. It remains one of the most arresting and fundamental aspects of fourth- and fifth-century Christianity.

Prior to the third-century, there is very little evidence for the adoration or organisation of virgins in the orthodox Church that came to characterise later Christianity.<sup>169</sup> The apocryphal story of Thecla and Saint Paul is the most significant of the pre-third-century works extolling virginity as a life choice. It tells the tale of a young woman who is quite literally captivated by Paul's discourse on virginity, so much so that she flees her family and fiancé and begins an epic journey, involving many threats to her life and virginity, to follow Paul and join his community.<sup>170</sup> The tale has been repeatedly compared to the Greek romance novels of the same period, and the similarities are clear.<sup>171</sup> It is the layman's simplification of the theological thought of the time.<sup>172</sup> There is one crucial difference: while the romances end, always, with the heroine happily married to the hero, her virginity only precious because of its value to him; Thecla's tale ends when Paul accepts her baptism and her pledge to maintain her virginity forever and allows her to join his band of followers.<sup>173</sup> Alongside the *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, this is one of the earliest declarations that lifelong virginity was desirable and preferable for all Christians. The proliferation of these texts points to the popularity of these ideals within Christian communities, despite the rejection of these works by the mainstream Church hierarchy.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> Athen, *Supplicatio* 33 briefly mentions groups of men and women "growing old in virginity" already in the late second-century, while Eus. *HE* 4.23 quotes an epistle of a second-century bishop of Carthage to Pinytus, bishop of Cnossos imploring him to lessen "the burden of celibacy" he placed on his flock.

<sup>170</sup> 'The Acts of Paul and Thecla' in *The Apocryphal New Testament* (trans. J.K. Elliott, 1993) which is traditionally dated to the second-century.

<sup>171</sup> Two individuals are separated and embark on a great journey to reunite while the female of the pair endures repeated threats to her virginity, which is of paramount importance, all of which she overcomes through the awe-inspiring power of her chastity. The most in-depth analysis of these similarities is Kate Cooper's 1996 study *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealised Womanhood in Late Antiquity*.

<sup>172</sup> Armstrong, 1990:84

<sup>173</sup> *AThe* 41-43

<sup>174</sup> Tertullian (*De Bapt* 17) and Origen (*PArch* 1.2.3) both attest to the existence of the Acts of Paul, for example, and criticise them suggesting that they were well known and well travelled. The proliferation of

These references to virginal communities, however, are rare, and, within the mainstream Church, are predominantly from the later second-century, suggesting that the events and theologians of the third-century were instrumental in the development of the doctrine as a way of life.

The earliest Christian writers of the third-century correspondingly do not advocate a lifestyle of Christian virginity. Clement of Alexandria, as we have seen, advises that married life and controlled continence are to be as equally rewarded and as glorified as permanent virginity. He argues that celibacy is a matter of choice, not commandment and insists that only heretics consider sex to be inherently polluted.<sup>175</sup> Clement presents his ideal image of a Christian marriage as one which includes controlled sexual intercourse for procreative purposes, but without sexual desire.<sup>176</sup> Although Peter Brown sees Clement as sincere in his advocacy, he can easily be seen as responding to the highly ascetic heresy of Marcion.<sup>177</sup> Equally, his writings seem to exclusively consider the role and behaviour of men, with little to no reference to women. Nonetheless, he does not recommend celibacy as a way of life to his audience, nor does he exalt virgins themselves at any point but

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surviving manuscripts (Elliott, 1993: 350-362) as well as their continued attestation in the later hagiographical texts highlights their popularity. Jerome finally declared the Acts of Paul to be apocryphal and not orthodox: *De Vir. Ill* 7

<sup>175</sup> Clem., *Strom.* 3.6-9.

<sup>176</sup> Clem., *Strom.* 3.7

<sup>177</sup> Brown, 1987: 131-8; Originating in the second-century, the Marcionites were unable to reconcile the actions of the Creator-God Yahweh of the Old Testament – which they saw as unpredictable, inhumane, regularly genocidal, wrathful and inconsistent – with the words and message of Jesus in the New. They therefore developed a dualist system of separate Gods: the Creator, who they saw as a lesser demiurge who was responsible for the physical world which, because of his inherent limitations, was created intrinsically evil; and the True God of the New Testament who was the greater and the better and who was not responsible for the creation or for the ills of the world. This theology led to their docetic Christology and their full rejection of the physical world and physical procreation. See Clement, *Strom* 3.2.12; Tert, *Ad. Marc.*: 1.29; 4.11; Justin Martyr, *Apologeticus*: 1.26; Hippolytus, *Refutation of all Heresies*: 10.19; Tertullian: *Ad. Marc.*: 1.6.

focuses on those Christians who are able to live in chaste marriage without desire.<sup>178</sup> That Clement was compelled to include these passages in the *Stromateis* is telling, their inclusion implies a widespread denouncement of sexuality – be it from heretical or orthodox sources –and that the extent of this denouncement was troubling to him. It would appear that, in Clement’s world at least, virginity was not yet an orthodox ideal to be attained by all.

Tertullian begins the orthodox avocation of virginity as a way of life, although not directly. His attitude towards women and sex is arrestingly misogynistic – his declaration on the role of women in the world in his *De Culta Feminarum* is unforgettable and is regularly cited today as an exemplar of the misogyny of the Christian fathers. This particular work, however, Tertullian addresses to married women and is focussed more on the maintenance of modesty and chastity through dress and deportment than on virginity.<sup>179</sup> In other texts, virginity becomes more central. In his letter to his wife he advises her to pursue continence after his death, and claims that the death of a husband is God’s way of communicating to the wife that he disapproves of her sexual life and that she should therefore be continent.<sup>180</sup> In earlier passages he argues that although marriage is permitted to Christians, celibacy is always preferable, citing 1 Corinthians 7.32 as evidence.<sup>181</sup> It is here that he also cites the virgin priestesses of various Greek and Roman cults as examples to be bettered by Christian women.<sup>182</sup> Although Tertullian presents lifelong virginity as being eminently laudable, he nonetheless considers it only slightly better than pledged

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<sup>178</sup> Clement sees the ideal Christian not as a man who has desires but ignores them, but as a man who has no desires at all. *Strom*: 3.7

<sup>179</sup> Tert. *De Cult* 2.1; 4.2;

<sup>180</sup> Tert. *Uxor* 1.7-8

<sup>181</sup> Tert. *Uxor* 1.3

<sup>182</sup> Tert. *Uxor* 1.6

chastity from baptism (the “second birth”) and monogamy, which he equates with celibacy after widowhood.<sup>183</sup> It is evident from many of his works, most notably *De Virginibus Velandis*, that organised groups of virgins already existed in the Western church and that they were prominent in their communities,<sup>184</sup> but Tertullian makes no attempt to encourage his audience to join them or to suggest that they are to be emulated, apparently seeing them as a limited anomaly of women in his community who have chosen to wed themselves to angels.<sup>185</sup> Indeed, much of the focus of this treatise is to insist the Carthaginian virgins refrain from drawing attention to themselves, but to dress and act as married women.<sup>186</sup> To Tertullian, the virgins are still women and subject to the sexual shame of women, and therefore the same rules of behaviour as women.<sup>187</sup> Tertullian’s virgins, like Clement’s, are special, the Brides of Christ, limited and discouraged.

It is not until Origen that we see the lifestyle of permanent virginity being openly encouraged, with virgins glorified to extraordinary levels.<sup>188</sup> Already by Origen’s time virgins were considered to be closer to God than ordinary Christians and the concept of virgins as Brides of Christ was beginning to spread.<sup>189</sup> Origen, despite dismissing the Bride of Christ line, saw the virgins as something much more: as physical proof of the superiority of Christianity to all other ways of life.<sup>190</sup> By describing lifelong continence as “a bird soaring to heaven”, as opposed to sexual activity which is characterised as a serpent, in Origen virginity becomes a pathway to God, the only humans worthy of

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<sup>183</sup> Tert. *Ex. Cast* 1

<sup>184</sup> This work is commonly dated to around 213AD: Morel, V. 1946. *De Ontwikkeling van de Christelike Overlevering Volgens Tertullianus*, Brussels. 24.

<sup>185</sup> Brown, 1987: 81. *Tert. Virg. Vel* 7.6

<sup>186</sup> *Tert. Virg. Vel* 9.2; 10.3

<sup>187</sup> *Tert. Virg. Vel* 5

<sup>188</sup> Brown, 1987: 170

<sup>189</sup> Athen., *Supplicatio* 33; *Tert. Virg. Vel* 16

<sup>190</sup> Origen, *HomJos* 2.1

closeness with God.<sup>191</sup> Origen's antipathy towards sexual intercourse was such that he reportedly had himself castrated in an uncharacteristically literal interpretation of Matthew 19.12, his behaviour reflecting his allegorical exegesis of the testaments which clearly subordinate the body to the soul.<sup>192</sup> This exegesis also served to separate Christian and pagan concepts of virginity entirely, because Christian virginity was now a characteristic not only of the body, but also of the soul. Christian virginity was a gift from God, a new behaviour that had not existed before the coming of Christ.<sup>193</sup> By claiming that virginity did not exist before the coming of Christ, Origen redefines virginity and this new definition makes virginity as much a feature of the soul as of the body. Maintaining physical virginity is no longer 'enough' for Christian virgins. In order to be a 'true' virgin, maintaining 'true' virginity, the soul too must be kept pure and undefiled through perfect thoughts and behaviour.<sup>194</sup> Integrity of the body is a mere by-product of the integrity of the soul.<sup>195</sup> This is a complete break from the previous Christian writers who had seen pagan virgin priestesses as one of the few virtues of the pagan world, to be bettered by Christians, now Origen declared that they were not real virgins as prescribed by God because only those who kept their souls also virginal – which could only occur through a Christian life and Christian thoughts – were truly undefiled.

This revolutionary thinking was hugely influential. The contemporary Cyprian echoes Origen's thoughts. In his *On the Dress of Virgins* Cyprian prescribes more than just the

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<sup>191</sup> Origen, *HomGn* 1.8; *CCels* 1.35.

<sup>192</sup> Eus. *HE* 6.8.2-3

<sup>193</sup> Origen, *HomJos* 13.4; *CommCt* 2.7

<sup>194</sup> There is evidence that the inner purity of the Vestal virgins was considered to be important in philosophical circles at least. Sen. *Cont* 6.8 describes a Vestal who has written poetry about marriage and the possibility of sex and discusses whether she is consequently guilty of unchastity.

<sup>195</sup> Origen, *HomGn* 10.2; *CommRm* 8.10; *HomLev* 1.53; Camelot, 2003: 546. This remains a fundamental doctrine of the Catholic Church.



modest attire suggested by Tertullian, but insists upon a highly restrictive lifestyle in order to keep their minds and souls virginal. In *Ad Donatum*, he forbids virgins to attend spectacles, declaring that she who attends a show a modest woman returns immodest, echoing Tertullian.<sup>196</sup> He goes even further in this treatise though, forbidding attendance to weddings which also defile virgins “in eyes, in ears, in tongue”. Why, he asks, would virgins attend such an event that is so utterly alien to their life, where they are exposed to virulent un-chastity in the very nature of the event? Merely by witnessing a ceremony that implicitly precedes legitimate sexual intercourse, their virginity is diminished.<sup>197</sup> Nor are a virgin’s private thoughts free from control if they wish to remain true virgins. Simply by desiring to freely leave their houses, virgins are defiling themselves: “Thus, while virgins wish...to wander with more liberty, they cease to be virgins, corrupted by a furtive dishonour”<sup>198</sup> It would seem that many women pledged virginity in order to acquire more personal freedom than was otherwise traditionally allowed to them, and much of Cyprian’s proscriptions can be seen as an attempt to control these women through theological discourse.<sup>199</sup> Nonetheless, Cyprian’s influence was wide and strong and combined with Origen’s very similar pronouncements; Christian virginity was transformed.

By the end of the third-century, this definition of Christian virginity was apparently widespread. It reaches a pinnacle in Methodius’ *Symposium* which not only repeats the belief that virginity did not exist before Christ, but gives it a linear history connected to the belief that Jesus had nullified the Old Testament command to “Be fruitful, and multiply”. Thus, virginity is a gift sent from heaven through Christ to complete a sequence of sexual

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<sup>196</sup> Cyp. *Ad Don* 8; Tert. *De Spec* 22.5

<sup>197</sup> Cyp. *Virg* 18.

<sup>198</sup> Cyp. *Virg* 20.

<sup>199</sup> Dunn, 2003: 16

proscriptions from God throughout human history.<sup>200</sup> Marcella not only insists that bodily virginity is not enough for Christian virgins and emphasises that virginity had not existed in the world prior to the coming of Christ, but also refuses to acknowledge the existence of any pagan virgins, indicating that to Methodius, and to his readers, Christian virginity was considered to be more than abstinence from sexual contact.<sup>201</sup>

Methodius is the most effusive in his praise of virgins, with his famous morphological analysis of virginity that finds it inherently divine.<sup>202</sup> He sees virgins as “the likeness of God”,<sup>203</sup> echoing Cyprian’s gushing adoration that declared them “the image of God, reflecting the holiness of God”.<sup>204</sup> This glorification is not seen in the earlier part of the century where Tertullian and Clement were quick to give honour, but not adulation to the virginal groups in their communities, apparently unwilling to openly advocate it as a way of life. Origen, Cyprian, Novatian and Methodius exalt virgins quite literally to the heavens, promise them rewards equal to those of martyrs and compare them to Gods and angels.<sup>205</sup> By the middle of the century it is evident that permanent virginity was being represented as the central ideal of the Christian church, to be envied and reproduced by all who were capable.

There is clearly a variation between the Roman and Christian definitions of virginity, with the Christian becoming far more focused on a new concept of internal virginity and purity.

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<sup>200</sup> Meth. *Symp.* Marcella 3. The sequence runs, in order of proscription: incest, polygamy, marriage.

<sup>201</sup> Meth. *Symp.* Marcella 1-2

<sup>202</sup> Meth. *Symp.* Thecla 1: because the Greek word Parthinia (virgin) becomes Parthia (divine) by the change of one Greek letter.

<sup>203</sup> Meth. *Symp.* Marcella 4

<sup>204</sup> Cyp. *Virg.* 3

<sup>205</sup> Cyp. *Virg.* 3; 23; Origen, *HomJos* 2.1; 15.6; 2.7; Meth, *Symp.* Thecla 1-17; Novatian, *Purity* 7

Roman virgins were either young women awaiting marriage, or an extreme minority of priestesses. Christian virgins were the ‘first-fruits of God’, ‘the image of God’, ‘like angels’ and ‘reaching to heaven’, the spiritual elite of their communities, ‘honoured above all’. This adulation must have been a powerful influence on young Christian girls, both in terms of their personal self-definition and their identities as Christians. Indeed, Peter Brown has argued that Origen’s watershed moment of orthodox glorification of virgins was a direct result of younger Christians: “For the first time in history, Christianity had become a religion for the young”.<sup>206</sup> By becoming consecrated virgins, young women created a powerful Christian identity for themselves, even more so when it became common practice to clearly mark Christian virgins out as such.<sup>207</sup> Equally, Christian families could enhance their reputation by having a virgin in the home, even if she was never seen.<sup>208</sup> Being a consecrated virgin, or being the parent of one, not only demanded the respect of the Christian community and associated honours, but also highlighted the family’s religious preferences to the outside world –regardless of Tertullian’s entreaties, consecrated virginity made one conspicuous. Here, parallels between martyrs and virgins become clear, and certainly they are repeatedly conflated in Christian texts.<sup>209</sup> Christian martyrs advertised Christianity to the pagan world through their trials, their deaths and the *acta* that circulated about them. Martyrs were the most prominent spokespeople for the faith and were honoured as such. In times of peace, although they are constantly reminded as individuals not to attract attention to themselves and to remain in their homes, virgins take their place as the attention-grabbing glories of the church.<sup>210</sup> To become a consecrated virgin was to ideologically become part of the very centre of the Church, even

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<sup>206</sup> Brown, 1987: 191

<sup>207</sup> Cyp. *Virg* 5

<sup>208</sup> See Vuolanto, 2008 for a detailed discussion of the benefits afforded by having a virgin in the house.

<sup>209</sup> Cyp *Ep* 59.13; 66.7; Hayne, 1994: 211

<sup>210</sup> Brown, 1987:69

if physically they were prevented from appearance in public. It was a bold assertion of a Christian identity that served to legitimise that identity.<sup>211</sup>

The motivations for Christian girls of the third-century to remain virginal were great, in terms of tangible, spiritual and individual rewards both for themselves and their families, and the texts attest to numbers of girls taking the opportunity. The prestige gained from the ministry made consecrated virginity a successful route to power and influence in the growing Christian community.<sup>212</sup> Virginity is by far the most lauded and idealised virtue of the Christian world and so it is reasonable to expect a large number of the Christian laity celebrating the purity of their dead in their epitaphs.

The Romans did not commemorate virginity in great numbers. Of the second-century sample of 286 epitaphs, none commemorated any females as virgins. In the third-century sample of 269 epitaphs only one included a virgin commemorated as such, in a family epitaph which included a virgin daughter of unknown age.<sup>213</sup> This result is unsurprising; when a girl's virginity is a social assumption and not a unique virtue there is little to gain in celebrating it over rarer and more valuable assets.

Christian virginity is a different animal; more than physical purity, it is a state that only the strongest Christians can ascend to. By this definition, it is a rarer, more exceptional quality and one much more worthy of being expensively inscribed on an epitaph. It is perhaps a surprise then to see that in the third-century, when virginity came to be glorified above all other virtues that only 2 epitaphs of 165 epitaphs (1%) were dedicated to virgins.<sup>214</sup> By the

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<sup>211</sup> Weeks, 1995: 111

<sup>212</sup> Cameron, 1989b:192; 195; Clarke, 1986b:43; Brown, 1987: 61; 147

<sup>213</sup> HD004644

<sup>214</sup> 165 epitaphs with epithets. 0.47% of the full 424 third-century epitaphs.

fourth-century this number had leapt significantly to 5% (22) of the 431 epitaphs. This number is still very low, but there are several possibly explanations. Firstly, it is possible that the term 'virgin' was reserved for fully consecrated Brides of Christ, who would have received a far more elaborate burial than the ones examined for this study. The consecrated virgins, as part of the elite of their community would presumably have received burials fitting to their station. Furthermore, it is suggested that the vast majority of consecrated virgins of this period were women of the higher, richer classes who were able to support themselves.<sup>215</sup> They would, therefore, have expected and received a more prestigious burial than the general laity simply by virtue of class alone. Another explanation or series of explanations is required.

That the Christians of Rome were still commemorating as much in the traditional Roman fashion as they were in the emerging Christian tradition must be a significant factor. In this light, the absence of sexual language in commemoration becomes more reasonable. As Suzanne Dixon has noted, Romans remembered their virtuous women as asexual.<sup>216</sup> The exceptions to this rule are the instances where a wife's extreme chastity during marriage was being praised. This celebration of chastity tends to not be entirely related to sex, however, but equally reflects a generalised virtue and so cannot truly be counted as a tribute to sexual behaviour alone. To celebrate virginity is to draw attention to a possible sexual life while denying its existence. If the sexualised woman is traditionally seen only

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<sup>215</sup> Sigismund Nielsen, 2001: 175. This is highlighted by Cyp. *Virg* where chapters 7-11 are dedicated to rich virgins.

<sup>216</sup> Dixon, 2001b: 43

as a villain then to highlight the sexuality of one's daughter, sister or mother, even with a view to remembering her denial of it, could easily be seen as quite distasteful.<sup>217</sup>

Peter Brown argues forcefully for a division of the Church that could provide a further explanation. He sees a crucial difference in the way that virginity was presented and practiced in the Greek Church of the east and in the Latin western Church. In Brown's view, the Greek-speaking world exalted the virgin body far above the praise it received in that Latin-speaking west, presenting it as a state apart, a bridge between heaven and Earth.<sup>218</sup> The Roman church, embodied by Cyprian, refused to exalt the virgins so highly, regarding them as the crowning glories of the church but no further: "to Cyprian the control of sexuality was merely one example – and not a very prominent one – of the Christian's need to control a body subjected to the huge pain of the world".<sup>219</sup> This then could be a factor in the low rates of commemoration of virginity in Rome: if virgins were not as highly exalted in the Latin writers that (presumably) were more accessible and widely read in Rome than the (more numerous) Greek writers, then virginity would not seem to be as worthy a virtue as some others to Roman Christians. This cannot be a full explanation however. By focussing on Cyprian, Brown neglects other Latin writers who *did* exalt virginity highly. The third-century anti-pope Novatian, for example, was a deeply controversial figure in the Roman church, but was nonetheless hugely prominent and influential both in his own time and for many centuries after his martyrdom.<sup>220</sup> In one of his letters he declares: "Virginity makes itself equal to angels...virginity even outdoes the angels because it must struggle against flesh to gain mastery over a nature angels do not

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<sup>217</sup> On the sexualised Roman woman as a villain or threat: Dixon, 2001b: 43

<sup>218</sup> Brown, 1987:193

<sup>219</sup> Brown, 1987:195

<sup>220</sup> Cyp. *Ep* 46; 55.24; Eus. *EH* 6.43; Weyer, 2003: 465

possess”.<sup>221</sup> This indicates that there certainly were factions of the Latin Church that highly valued virginity above all other Christian virtues.

Brown’s distinction between the Latin and the Greek-speaking Churches does provide a further factor in explaining the inscriptions. Connected to his separation of the terms of exaltation of virginity between east and west, he also presents a separation of practices. He argues that in the Latin west, “the holiness of the continence of the flesh’ tended to gravitate around the clergy of the Catholic Church”, while in the Greek east, asceticism from the very beginning was practised by large parts of the laity as well, pointing to ascetic communities in Asia Minor, Syria and Mesopotamia.<sup>222</sup> The Church of Rome then promoted a separation of elite clergy and general laity in terms of their practice of the Christian virtues, whereby the excessive continence of the clergy was, much like the Vestal Virgins, what served to mark them out, conferring both holiness and authority to them. Certainly it is this model that is preserved in Eusebius’ *Proof of the Gospel* of the fourth-century, where he lays out two ways of life given by the Lord: one to the priesthood of continence and enforced poverty, and a “more human” way for the laity for whom it was not necessary to be “celestial”.<sup>223</sup> This Brown also presents as a critical factor in the final success of the Catholic Church over the innumerable heresies of early Christianity: while the heretics tended to insist upon full observation of the most ascetic lifestyles for all members, the Catholic Church divided its members into a clergy who lived in full observance of the law of Christ and a laity who married and worked and served to support

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<sup>221</sup> Novatian, *Purity* 7

<sup>222</sup> Brown, 1987: 202-3

<sup>223</sup> Eusebius, *DE* 1.8

the clergy.<sup>224</sup> This may well be a key factor in the apparent disproportion between the idealisation of virginity in the texts and in the epigraphy. For if Roman Christians saw their virgins exclusively as ideals of the church elite, not the laity there would be little motivation at first to imitate them. However, as virginity became more of a recognised value of Christianity, and heroic virgins emerge – such as Saint Antony, Melania the Elder (fourth-century) or Mary of Egypt<sup>225</sup> – virginity becomes more popular among the laity as an ideal to be imitated.<sup>226</sup> Whatever the full explanation, it is evident that – despite the prevailing rhetoric – few were willing to buy into this virtue just yet.

In this way the Christian virgin in the Roman Church in the third-century can be seen in a similar light to the Vestal Virgins: as unique members of the community conferred status and authority through their unusual sexual practice. It is only by the fourth-century, the decriminalisation of Christianity and the subsequent end of martyrdoms causing the emergence of notable individual virgins that virginity in the Latin-speaking world takes on a character that can be practised and celebrated by the general population.

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<sup>224</sup> Brown, 1987:143

<sup>225</sup> Although Mary of Egypt is dated to have lived in the late fourth-century, her extant *vita* was written by St. Sophronius and dates from the mid seventh-century.

<sup>226</sup> A similar pattern can be seen in the use of the term *univera*, which begins as an elite term but eventually filtered down to the lower classes as documented in Lightman, M & Zeisel, W. 1977. 'Univera: An Example of Continuity and Change in Roman Society.' *CH* 46. 19-32.



## MOTHERHOOD

“Truly happy, therefore, is the fecundity of the soul...”<sup>227</sup>

By the third-century AD the Roman models of wives and mothers had become fixed - almost clichés - with their stories learned by rote by schoolboys and young girls in any Roman household.<sup>228</sup> Fecundity was an integral part of being a wife, to that extent that it was possible to say that “a husband makes a woman a mother”.<sup>229</sup> The Christian models of motherhood – particularly the Virgin Mary and Saint Perpetua - were still developing and were therefore contradictory and complex. That Mary and Perpetua were biologically mothers is integral to their stories and identities, and their glorification stems from their bearing of children or subsequent behaviours in the role of mother, but the nature of their exaltation is not as would be expected. Mary’s glorification is theologically complex, and in this period is connected to the nature of her virginity than her role as a mother figure. Part of Perpetua’s exultation is as mother who rejects her child in favour of God. Clearly Christian conceptions of idealised motherhood at this time are neither linear nor intuitive. Nor are all Christians in agreement over the exact nature of ideal Christian motherhood. As we shall see, orthodox Christian authors are in continual debate among themselves - and with heretical groups - over the meaning and desirability of being a mother.

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<sup>227</sup> Origen, *HomNum* 20.2

<sup>228</sup> Dixon, 1988 30.39; Dixon, 2001: 75n5, Fantham et al, 1994: 345, Williams, 1958: 28; 1996: 8 See for example Tac, *Dial*: 28.

<sup>229</sup> Clement, *Strom*, 2.23

Roman culture venerated fecund women. The most famous of the Roman mothers, Cornelia, is celebrated by Pliny the Elder and Seneca for bearing twelve children.<sup>230</sup> Although modern historians have questioned this number, and have pondered whether this might be a hagiographic element to Cornelia's life designed to reinforce her image as an iconic mother even as a lie it highlights the importance of female fecundity in the Roman imagination.<sup>231</sup> Through all genres and sources and through a variety of means, fertility is underscored as a defining feature of womanhood. The medical texts of Soranus are, in the Greek tradition, preoccupied with female puberty and menstruation; preferred and undesirable times for sexual contact and pregnancy; correct diets and exercise regimes for optimum menstruation and fertility, and the realities and complications of pregnancy and childbirth.<sup>232</sup> In literary works women are celebrated for their ability and willingness to give birth, and - more commonly - attacked for their unwillingness to reproduce. Thus, in a great multitude of works from Juvenal's satires to Seneca's letters abortion and contraception are abhorred both for their links to adultery and luxury, and their undermining of the natural order of female procreative purpose.<sup>233</sup>

Legally, procreation was of great importance. In census declarations men were asked to confirm that they had married for the purpose of procreation, and divorce due to female infertility was represented favourably.<sup>234</sup> Aulus Gellius describes Carvilius Rufus' divorce for this reason as the first in Roman history (in either 235 or 231 B.C) in highly positive terms in two separate books of his *Attic Nights*, emphasising that Rufus "dearly loved" his

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<sup>230</sup> Pliny *HN* 7.57; Seneca *Ad Hel* 16.6.

<sup>231</sup> Dixon, 2007: 7

<sup>232</sup> Soranus *Gyn.* Puberty: 1.24-26; for fruitful sexual contact: 1.36; diet and exercise: 1.25; childbirth: 2.1-3.

<sup>233</sup> Juv, *Sat VI* ref; Sen, *Ad Helv* 20.1; 16.3

<sup>234</sup> On census declarations: Val. Max 7.7.4; Gel. *NA* 4.3.2; 17.21.44; Livy *Ep.* 59; Suet. *Julius* 52.31; Cic. *Leg* 3.7; Dion. Hal. 2.25.7

wife but that he set aside that love in favour of his duty to the state to produce children, displaying Rufus as a model of idealised behaviour in this respect.<sup>235</sup>

Procreation in the Roman mind then is an act of civic duty, and this is repeatedly reiterated in the legal texts and in popular culture. Augustus' marriage legislation of 18 B.C and 9 A.D vigorously encouraged both men and women of the aristocratic classes to reproduce by providing rewards and incentives for those who had more than three children.<sup>236</sup> That women as well as men were rewarded for having children betrays either a certain level of female control over reproduction, or is evidence for a male fear of a perceived female control. The Augustan laws clearly highlight the Roman conception of fecundity as a force for the greater social good and the celebration of women for childbearing. This ideal of legitimate childbearing as social renewal can be seen in virtually all levels of Roman literature. It is particularly prevalent in the popular novels of Late Antiquity, as has been shown by Kate Cooper who argues that they enlist the reader to "embrace social renewal" through the "ideology of marriage as a 'rampart for the city' and by encouraging legitimate offspring".<sup>237</sup> She asserts that the Greek romances are an attempt to encourage the fulfilment of this civic duty in young citizens by "emphasising its attractions".<sup>238</sup> To become a mother was the expected goal of any woman's life was the fulfilment of her duty to the state and served to enhance her status with each child she produced.<sup>239</sup> It was likely

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<sup>235</sup> Gel. *NA* 4.3.2 & 17.21.44. See also Dio 59.3.4 on a somewhat less acceptable instance of this behaviour: when the emperor Gaius divorces his second wife for infertility and marries Caesonia, a woman who has already proven her fecundity Dio's tone is characteristically disapproving.

<sup>236</sup> Freeborn women who had three or more children became *sui iuris* (legally independent) upon the death of their father. Men who desired to reach the position of consul were now legally obliged to have three or more children. Sue, *Aug*: 34; Dio: 56.1-10. A full list of sources is in Rotondi, G. 1922. *Leges Publicae Populi Romani*. Milan.

<sup>237</sup> Cooper, 1996: 23-4

<sup>238</sup> Cooper, 1996: 37

<sup>239</sup> Dixon, 1988: 44; 73

an aspiration of most Roman girls to become mothers.<sup>240</sup> After Augustus's legislative reform these rewards and status enhancements became real and tangible incentives.

It is from these traditions of venerated fecundity that Christianity grew from, and to an extent, broke with. Concepts of a civic or religious duty to renew and replenish the population were abandoned as it became clear that the loyalties of a Christian lay outside of mortal communities. The need and desire for renewal in this world is replaced by a desire for a pure and childless death.<sup>241</sup> Reproduction, however, is a biological imperative, and was deeply ingrained in Roman culture as one of the most fundamental measures of female worth. The elemental connection of motherhood to the continuation of the family meant that it could not be eradicated entirely, but had to be engaged with. The emergent ideals of denial and virginity that were coming to prevalence in the third-century inherently and deliberately contradicted the family values of Roman culture. Individuals were being encouraged by the New Testament to abandon their families and care no more for mortal continuity.<sup>242</sup> Continuity of the family name and individual reputation after death was of paramount importance in Roman culture and children are a critical part of this continuity, to continue the family name and reputation and to maintain the honouring of ancestors (including oneself), and to have children of their own.<sup>243</sup> The Christian ideal of virginity, which inherently denies individuals heirs, which has huge consequences for families, was a shocking break from traditional Roman values. The potential consequences for families who allowed or encouraged a daughter or granddaughter to consecrate themselves to virginity could far outweigh any rewards of status during their lifetime. Thus,

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<sup>240</sup> Dixon, 1988: 98.

<sup>241</sup> Cooper, 1996: 44

<sup>242</sup> Matt 22:19; Luke 21:22-23

<sup>243</sup> Vuolanto, 2008: 175-206; see also Meyer, 1990 who highlights the importance of heirship to Roman citizens.

a new form of motherhood and fertility emerges in Christian literature during the third-century to negotiate this dilemma: spiritual motherhood and fecundity through virginity.

This development can be seen to be epitomised in the apocryphal *Protoevangelium of James*.<sup>244</sup> This apocryphal gospel contains a telling parallelism that seems to represent the break from idealised biological motherhood to the new Christian model. It begins with the parents of Mary lamenting, and being tangibly punished for, their failure to have children.<sup>245</sup> In Anna's song of lament, which makes explicit reference to her infertility as a curse, she proclaims herself to be "not like this earth, because even the earth bringeth forth its fruits in season".<sup>246</sup> It is clear that her barrenness is viewed in a traditional Jewish light, and brings misery and exile on the family. So, Anna is visited by an angel who impregnates her immaculately and she gives birth to Mary.<sup>247</sup> At the point of birth, of becoming a mother at last, Anna rejoices with the word "My soul is magnified this day".<sup>248</sup> James' tale continues to document Mary's life and her insemination by God until the point of her labour in a cave. As Jesus is being born and a great light fills the cave Mary's midwife declares:

"My soul is magnified this day, for my eyes have seen wonderful things;  
for salvation is born to Israel".<sup>249</sup>

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<sup>244</sup> This gospel is a second-century text rendered theologically unacceptable for its claim that Joseph had both a previous marriage before Mary, and previous children from that marriage. Elliott, J. K. *The Apocryphal New Testament*. Oxford. 50-51

<sup>245</sup> Joachim and Anna are forbidden to "give offerings" in the synagogue as a result of their failure to "make seed in Israel". *PE* 1.2

<sup>246</sup> *PE* 3.1

<sup>247</sup> *PE* 4.1-2

<sup>248</sup> *PE* 5.2

<sup>249</sup> *PE* 19.2

It is quite possible to argue that the juxtaposition of this statement in these two contexts demonstrates for the Christian reader the new nature of motherhood after the birth of Jesus. In Anna's case her biological motherhood brings joy to her soul because she has produced the "fruit of righteousness" and removed the "reproach of enemies".<sup>250</sup> In Mary's case, her becoming a mother brings exaltation not to her own soul but to the souls of the witnesses. The birth of Jesus brings about not personal or civic joy, but salvation to believers. Mary's labour marks the end of traditional notions of motherhood, and forms a prototype of a new form where there are no sexual relations, where true motherhood is denied, and where the offspring is more than a biological being who brings salvation and joy to a wider world. For believers, the virgin birth signals an end to the consequences of Eve's fall

This radically new approach to idealised motherhood is always based on the denial of biological motherhood with several variant defences of this denial. Two are particularly popular: firstly the argument based upon Matthew 24.19 and Luke 21.23 that the Rapture is close and so further reproduction is not only unnecessary, but will cause actual suffering to those who have born children;<sup>251</sup> secondly that laws of Jesus have modified the some of the laws of Moses, including the commandment of God in Genesis 1.22 and 1.28 to "Be fruitful, and multiply". According to some early Christians the Jews had been commanded to fill the earth, but the coming of Jesus and the pronouncement of continence in the New Testament adapted the pronouncements of fertility in the Old and was a declaration that the earth was now filled.<sup>252</sup> These theories, once connected to the Christian association of sex with sin and the consequent denigration of the physical body (and thus of women as

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<sup>250</sup> *PE* 6.2

<sup>251</sup> Matt. 24.19 "And woe unto them that are with child, and to them that give suck in those days."  
Luke 21.22-23 "For these be the days of vengeance, that all things which are written may be fulfilled.  
But woe unto them that are with child, and to them that give suck, in those days, for there shall be great distress in the land, and wrath upon this people."

<sup>252</sup> Cyp, *Virg* 23; Tert, *De Anim*: 30.2;

symbols of physical procreation);<sup>253</sup> Mary's conception narrative at Luke 28-33 which gives rise to the notion of conception through the hearing of the Word; and the words of Paul in Galatians 4.19 are the primary catalysts for the model of spiritual motherhood that emerges.<sup>254</sup> This idea takes the primary positive associations of biological motherhood – those of heirship and continuity of family and reputation – and connects them to the ideal of denial. In this new paradigm women do not need to defile their souls with sex in order to be mothers. They do not need to physically bear a child in order to promulgate their family. The Christian family is the Christian community, and Christian offspring are Christian converts.<sup>255</sup>

This is taken up enthusiastically by Origen who was vital in the development of this doctrine. Origen's statements that the dead womb produces the best fruits and that she who "brings forth sons of chastity" shall be a "mother of Jesus" were a direct exegesis of the Galatians passage.<sup>256</sup> In his homilies on the Song of Songs he continues, urging the rejection of biological motherhood and an acceptance of a spiritual conception of God's Word in the listener with the words:

"not only in Mary did his birth take its beginning from the shadow,  
however, but also in you, if you be worthy, will God's Speaking be  
born".<sup>257</sup>

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<sup>253</sup> Clark, 1986: 38

<sup>254</sup> The passage reads: "My little children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you".

<sup>255</sup> Vuolanto, 2008:79

<sup>256</sup> Origen *CommRm*: 4.6.9 & 7.4.14.

<sup>257</sup> *HomCt*2.6 This is an exegesis of the verse of the Song of Songs which reads "As an apple tree among the trees of the woods, so is my beloved among young men. With great delight I sat in his shadow and his fruit was sweet in my throat." 2.3.

In this interpretation of the passage idealised fertilisation, birth and progeny are all conceptualised into something spiritual and sacred.

Origen is even more explicit in his homily on Numbers where he writes:

“Truly happy, therefore, is the fecundity of the soul when her union with the Word of God will have taken place and when they will have exchanged embraces. From this, a noble progeny will be born”.<sup>258</sup>

Giselle de Nie and Gail Patterson Corrington have argued persuasively that these passages show the development of this entirely new concept of motherhood. Stemming from the need to address the natural desires of female Christians, and to provide a role model other than that of a male fighter-martyr, combined with the equally necessary denigration of the physical world and glorification of virginity, the spiritual mother emerges during the third-century as a new role model for Christians. The spiritual mother is one, male or female, who chastely hears the Word of God, nurtures it within themselves, and labours to generate the *Logos* again either through personal conversion, the conversion of others or the nurturing of others. Thus, in the life of the third-century Saint Eugenia, her biographer is able to invoke the image of the virginal Bride of Christ daily bearing countless children for him as a powerful metaphor in her defence of Christianity.<sup>259</sup> A new fecundity can now be found in virginity.<sup>260</sup>

Patterson Corrington in particular focuses on the nurturing aspect of this new paradigm and on the metaphor of breastfeeding where ‘milk’ becomes a symbol of intellectual and

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<sup>258</sup> *HomNum*: 20.2

<sup>259</sup> Eugenia disguised herself as a man to enter an all male ascetic community, and was swiftly made deacon. She is on trial for licentious behaviour in the guise of a man. *Vitae Eugeniae* 27 (cited in De Nie, 1995: 129): “This man himself has a virgin for a wife, who creates children for him every day, [who] bears him innumerable children [since] she joins her flesh with his flesh every day”.

<sup>260</sup> Crouzel, 1989 : 143 ; de Nie, 1996 : 129 “Virginity, barrenness of the body, [is] not only angelic, but also a ‘generator of life’”



spiritual nourishment from the Father. This is repeatedly invoked by church fathers drawing on the New Testament. Both Cyprian and Clement utilise the metaphor within a discussion of the Church as mother, with Clement particularly focussing on nurturing: “As nurses nourish new-born children on milk, so do I also by the Word, the milk of Christ, instilling into you spiritual nutriment.”<sup>261</sup> The new mother of the Christian world need not - and indeed preferably did not - engage in sexual relations or bear actual children. Indeed, the new Christian mother did not even need to be female. Ideal motherhood was transforming into spiritual motherhood.<sup>262</sup>

This image of the virginal Christian bride-mother is hugely powerful and popular by the fourth-century, and it is not hard to see why this spiritual motherhood would be alluring to young women. Physical pregnancy and labour were dangerous pursuits in antiquity.<sup>263</sup> In Rome both maternal and infant mortality rates were high, and this fact was used regularly by Christian writers to dissuade women from biological motherhood and into a life of virginity.<sup>264</sup> It is used to even greater effect in the apocryphal *Gospel of Thomas in India*, a highly ascetic and arguably Gnostic gospel which graphically highlights the tribulations of parenthood:

“If you get many children, for their sake you become grasping and avaricious, plundering orphans and deceiving widows, and by doing this you subject yourselves you most grievous punishments.”<sup>265</sup>

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<sup>261</sup> Clement, *Paed.* 1.5. 42.1-2; Cyp, *De Ecc. Unit. Cath.* 6.6.

<sup>262</sup> De Nie, 1995: 131

<sup>263</sup> Rouselle, 1994: 298; Shorter, E. 1982. *A History of Women's Bodies*. New York

<sup>264</sup> For example Cyp, *Virg* 2.22: “You are free from this sentence. You do not fear the sorrows and the groans of women. You have no fear of child-bearing.”

<sup>265</sup> *ATh*: 12.

The author of Thomas' gospel then invokes the concept of spiritual motherhood as a logical replacement. In the gospel, Christians who keep their souls pure are blessed with "living children, untouched by hurtful things" who will not bring pain or grief to their parents.<sup>266</sup> One of the most telling aspects of this passage, however, is that it is clearly directed at a male audience. Here we see one of the most fundamental shifts from the Roman veneration of physical motherhood and the new Christian ideal of invisible motherhood: while the former is uniquely a female accolade, the latter is almost un-gendered. This gender-free version of motherhood becomes a particularly useful rhetorical tool for Christian authors of this period and pregnancy and childbirth becomes a popular metaphor for proselytising in the literature. In apocryphal *Acts of Andrew* this metaphor is used to great effect. In this work, Andrew incites Stratocles to "bring birth" to the Christian inside of himself, likening that Christian to a child and himself to a midwife facilitating Stratocles' painful labours to become a Christian:

"Bring birth to the child you are carrying, and do not give yourself to labour pains alone. I am no novice at midwifery of divination, I desire what you are bearing...I will suckle what is within you."<sup>267</sup>

Both men in this metaphor take on feminine roles: Stratocles as a mother and Andrew as a midwife and wet nurse. A little later in the gospel, Andrew again uses graphic birthing imagery to encourage Stratocles to make his conversion public proclaiming:

"it is not right for you to conceal you labour pains...as the foetus becomes obvious and noticeable to the attending women...Bring your offspring into the open."<sup>268</sup>

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<sup>266</sup> *ATh*: 12

<sup>267</sup> *AA*: 7

Perhaps the most transparent elucidation of this new form of motherhood comes from Thaleia's speech in Methodius' *Symposium of Virgins*. Thaleia is responding to Theophila's somewhat half-hearted defence of procreation with an allegorical interpretation of the "Be fruitful, and multiply" of Genesis. Rather than argue the literal interpretation, following the 'the Earth is filled' strategy, Thaleia contends that this pronouncement is instead to be read as a commandment to expand the church. Using the Bride of Christ metaphor, with the Church as the bride, she describes a form of procreation when the Church receives the *Logos* (the seed) and gives "birth and nourishment to virtue". Conception is visualised as the hearing of the Word with birth explicitly re-framed as "new birth by the layer of regeneration".<sup>269</sup> Thaleia extends the metaphor even further, utilising the imagery from *The Gospel of Andrew* of a mother-midwife assisting the birth of new "children" into the faith.<sup>270</sup> She is also emphatic in her renunciation of gendered motherhood as she describes Saint Paul as the:

"helpmeet and bride of the Word...receiving and conceiving the seeds of life, he who was before a child becomes a Church and a mother".<sup>271</sup>

When placed in the context of the preceding speech, Methodius' position is very clear: biological motherhood is not to be encouraged, spiritual motherhood is the new model.

In Christian thought, fecundity and childbirth were becoming something more than physical procreation. In certain circles they had transformed into spiritual, invisible and metaphorical ideas, to be utilised in a multitude of ways in the rhetorical battle against

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<sup>268</sup> AA: 9

<sup>269</sup> Meth, *Symp* Thaleia 8

<sup>270</sup> Meth, *Symp* Thaleia 8

<sup>271</sup> Meth, *Symp* Thaleia 9 Gal. 4:19 and 1.Cor.4:15 are the scriptural basis for this exegesis.

paganism. Quite organically, it had been conceptualised away from the female sphere of life experiences and integrated into a more universal view of the world where biological procreation is unnecessary and undesirable, but where superior, invisible motherhood can be attained by anyone.<sup>272</sup> The separation of motherhood from female biology meant that it could be used as a metaphor for celibate or proselytising men without associating them with feminine carnality and weakness. Indeed, one of the earliest examples of mothering attributes being associated with a male figure comes from Clement who uses an extended maternal metaphor of nursing and nurturing to describe God, who can – of course – never be female or associated with female flaws.<sup>273</sup> At no point does anyone actually declare God to *be* a mother, but that he is occasionally associated with maternal imagery is telling of the new way of perceiving motherhood as divorced from women. Paul and the apostles could all safely be described as mothers as a part of their glorification, but without a corresponding elevation of female physical motherhood. Family metaphors were used to describe the Christian community from the very beginning, absorbing the vital and positive connotations attached to familial imagery to legitimise a very different set of relationships.<sup>274</sup> Converts are ‘brothers and sisters’, God and the clergy are ‘father’, and so a ‘mother’ figure is needed that is not sullied by biological connections. The church, virgins who have renounced their femininity and proselytising, celibate men all fulfilled this mothering role in different ways; by bringing new converts through their re-birth into Christianity, or nurturing their offspring with the ‘milk’ of God’s love and the scriptures, or giving them moral guidance. The disassociation of spiritual motherhood biological, maternity from women and sex made this new concept legitimate and acceptable to Christian theology and morality.

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<sup>272</sup> Based on the infamous pronouncement of Paul at Galatians 3.28: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus”

<sup>273</sup> Clement, *Paed* 1.6.

<sup>274</sup> Vuolanto, 2008: 209; 213

This idea is evidently a popular one, to be found in some of the most influential authors of the third-century, as well as in the less intellectual works of the period suggesting that this was not merely the preserve of the highly educated. Nonetheless, it was not universal and there is evidence of a certain encouragement of procreation in Christian literature, although they are very rarely a celebration of motherhood as a female virtue, and can seem uncommitted. This reluctant encouragement of physical procreation stems from the practical and theological necessity of countering heretical groups. In this instance it is the Gnostic group led by Marcion whose theological heresies demanded refutation from the orthodox Church. The entirely unacceptable nature of Marcion's views, coupled with his formidable proselytising, meant that they had to be countered by orthodox thinkers from within the church – regularly and at length.<sup>275</sup>

Accordingly, the Marcionites were the impetus for a great deal of theological writing during the third-century.<sup>276</sup> In order to refute Marcion's Christology and theology, it was also necessary to refute the moral implications of them, including his total rejection of marriage and procreation. It is this that drove Clement to produce books two and three of his *Stromateis* in which he endeavoured to encourage Christian reproduction. Apparently unable to encourage sexual intercourse in itself, Clement is forced to argue a stance of procreative purpose for marriage.<sup>277</sup> This is the best Clement can do: reproduction is not to be celebrated but is an unavoidable consequence of a sexual desire that has not been

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<sup>275</sup> On the significance, spread and popularity of the Marcionites: Evans, 1972: ix; xv; Ferguson (ed), 1990: 568; Frend, 1984: 215; Lane Fox, 1986: 332; 358

<sup>276</sup> For example: Tertullian's *De Carne* and *De Res*; many of Origen's commentaries and homilies and Clement of Alexandria's *Stromateis*.

<sup>277</sup> Noonan, 1986: 78

entirely eradicated, with total continence being implicitly preferable. It is a way of controlling that sexual impulse and directing it towards a purpose than can, albeit obscurely and reluctantly, be seen as holy. This unenthusiastic endorsement of procreation, however, is not addressed to women. The female role in reproduction is on no way praised and is barely acknowledged with Clement even transferring the salvation through childbearing granted to women by Saint Paul to men.<sup>278</sup> It is very clear that motherhood is not an ideal or an aspiration for the women of Clement's world.

A similarly hesitant encouragement of procreation can be seen in Methodius. Only one speaker, Theophila, argues against the notion that all people should abstain from reproducing at all times. Again, this speech deals only with the male role and the male point of view, particularly in its focus on illegitimate children and their worth.<sup>279</sup> Theophila argues that biological reproduction is a re-creation of the first creation and is therefore a holy endeavour, and that to deny procreation is to be "guilty of audacity".<sup>280</sup> This argument is less reluctant than Clement's, but is utterly demolished by the next speaker Thaleia.<sup>281</sup> Even Theophila moderates her own defence of procreation with an acknowledgement that chastity is to be preferred.<sup>282</sup> Additionally, the heavy male bias in the text – with the focus of the perceived benefits of parenthood being entirely from the perspective of fatherhood – does nothing to even attempt to glorify motherhood.

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<sup>278</sup> Clement, *Strom*: 3.12 from 1. Tim. 2:15: "Notwithstanding she shall be saved in childbearing, if they continue in faith and charity and holiness with sobriety."

<sup>279</sup> Meth, *Symp* Theophila 3-6. Origen also deals with the notion of illegitimate children but comes to a different conclusion. While Methodius decides that all children are formed by God and are equal regardless of the marital status of their parents, Origen concludes that a child born out of wedlock is has a soul that is contaminated by sin and is thus inherently morally and physically inferior to a legitimate child. *CCel*: 1.33.

<sup>280</sup> Meth, *Symp* Theophila 3

<sup>281</sup> Thaleia responds that to attempt to bear children and provide a scriptural or theological defence for the practice is nothing more than the "sensual gratification of the body" Methodius, *Symposium*: Thaleia 10

<sup>282</sup> Meth, *Symp* Theophila 7

Tertullian's refutation of Marcion's Docetism in *De Carne Christi* led to a more enthusiastic representation of physical Christian motherhood. Tertullian's engagement with women as procreators immediately sets his approach apart from Clement and Methodius', and his characteristically passionate writing exposes further Clement's reluctance. In Tertullian's treatise motherhood is a natural, beautiful and – most importantly – sacred.<sup>283</sup> Mary's role as a mother, rather than solely as a virgin, takes some importance in this work in her theological function as the redeemer of Eve's transgression.<sup>284</sup> Through this exegesis of the Nativity Mary is developed into a model of both spiritual motherhood and physical motherhood; the Word of God can produce not just spiritual children, but biological children too. This is especially clear in the context of the central argument of the treatise – that Christ had a true, fleshly, mortal body. To Tertullian then, procreation should be “virginal in the spiritual sense,” but is not to be degraded.<sup>285</sup> Although he does not actively encourage motherhood as a goal, this presentation of motherhood as a sacred practice, responsible for bringing Christ into the world is one of the very few positive Christian images of women and procreation. It is surprising that this image comes from Tertullian, a man whose treatise on female adornment contains one of the most misogynistic passages in early Christian literature, which perhaps betrays the extent of the heretical groups who insisted upon the full sexual renunciation of their members and the threat felt by them.

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<sup>283</sup> Tertullian, *De Carne* 4

<sup>284</sup> This stance – that by bringing Jesus into the physical world, as Eve brought evil into the world (In Tertullian's version, it was Eve's womb that produced both evil and the Devil, in the form of Cain. *De Carne* 17) she annulled Eve's disobedience – had been acknowledged since the second-century where it was developed by Irenaeus of Lyon., *Her*: 5.19.1.

<sup>285</sup> Tertullian, *De Carne* 20

Orthodox Christianity was in a state of disagreement and debate during the third century, and this topic of Christian motherhood is demonstrative of this situation. The most prominent and influential theologians and churchmen of the period have distinctly differing views, with Origen and Cyprian advocating a renunciation of biological reproduction with the assertion that ‘the world is filled’, and its replacement with a new form of spiritual motherhood. Alongside this standpoint Tertullian and Clement are battling the Marcionite heresy leading them to advocate controlled procreation. Tertullian fails even to agree with himself proclaiming at another point that the earth is full.<sup>286</sup> Within the Apocryphal Acts it is the stern anti-procreation stance that is dominant. This is evidently a topic of debate, but what is striking is the lack of acknowledgment of mothers in this debate. Overwhelmingly the discussion centres on the male role or viewpoint on the act of procreation, and when mothers are present it is often in a highly conceptual role related to spiritual motherhood, or is part of a metaphor that is in actuality examining men. Evidently, the physical ability of women to conceive and bear children and propagate mankind was not celebrated by either the Christian Fathers or the popular Christian writers in the same way as it was in the traditional Roman culture.

Fecundity is only part of the Roman idealisation of women as mothers; a large part of the Roman ideal mother is in her behaviour after the birth. Suzanne Dixon examined the Roman mother in 1988 and concluded that the superlative mother was an important and influential figure in a child’s life as a disciplinarian, a teacher, an intercessor and a moral guide.<sup>287</sup> Throughout Roman literature from the Late Republic onwards the mothers of famous men appear time and time again to reinforce the image of the model behaviour of a

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<sup>286</sup> *De Anima*: 30.2

<sup>287</sup> Dixon, 1988 : 233; 2001 :33; 56 ; 2007: 53



mother. So, Cornelia's attempts to restrain her youngest son's ambitions are repeatedly played out in almost all histories of Rome alongside Veturia's successful prevention of Coriolanus' march on Rome as models of intercession for the greater good.<sup>288</sup> Atia and Aurelia are habitually raised as exemplars of maternal care for the strict moral education they provided for their children.<sup>289</sup> Alongside these prototypes of motherly virtue ran other ideals suggesting a softer paradigm. Cornelia's familiar declaration that her children were her jewels, when considered alongside the perpetually tormented and bereaved mothers of Ovid, Octavia's despair upon the death of Marcellus and Plutarch's *De Amore Proliis* suggest a close relationship between mother and child was to be expected and was not abhorred.<sup>290</sup> Certainly Roman literature is replete with criticism of mothers who refuse to breastfeed or who are perceived to neglect their children.<sup>291</sup> It is here that a further break from this tradition is seen. At this point in Christian history there are no women being lauded for their mothering skills, except within the emerging tradition of spiritual motherhood where, as we have seen, the 'mother' tends to either be a man or disguised as one. Even Mary is only recognised as a mother in her theological role as the salvation of Eve. Beyond this she receives none of the glorification as an intercessory force or as the *Theotokos* that she received from the fourth-century and to the present day. Instead her virginity is heavily emphasised throughout the third-century, and her cult is near non-

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<sup>288</sup> Veturia: Livy, 2.39.1-40.12; Plut, *Cor*: 33-36; Dio fragments in Zonaras: 7.16 and Tzetses: 6.551-555.

Cornelia's letter to Gaius Gracchi: Plut, *Gaius Gracchus*: 13; Cicero, *Pro Caelio*: 211; Cornelius Nepos, *On the Latin Historians*; Fragments 1 & 2. The authenticity of this letter has been debated. For example Hallett, 2006: 121 believes it to be entirely genuine whereas Dixon, 2007: 27 considers it to be falsified "Optimate propaganda" designed to discredit Gaius.

<sup>289</sup> Atia: Nicolaus of Damascus, *Life of Augustus*: Fragment 127; Tac, *Dial*: 28; Suet, *Aug*: 61.2. Aurelia: Tac, *Dial*: 28; Plut, *Caesar*: 7.3; 9

<sup>290</sup> Ovid: Lateiner, 2006 suggests that the continual abuses that mothers suffer in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* show that, to the Roman eye, "loss of a child was an unequalled pain" for a mother. For example: Dryope (book 9) and Hecuba (book 13).

<sup>291</sup> On the idealisation of breastfeeding: Dixon, 1988: 3; Gell, *NA*: 12.1; Tac, *Dial*: 28; Plutarch, *De Am Proliis*: 3; Plutarch, *De Lib Ed*: 5; Tac, *Germ*: 20; Juvenal *Sat VI*: 592-4; Soranus, *Gyn*: 2.11 & 2.18.

existent with that of Paul's disciple Thecla being far more popular.<sup>292</sup> The only Christian mothers visible in the third-century are the martyrs Perpetua and Felicitas who are remembered not for their ability to raise successful children, but for their rejection them for the sake of God. Perpetua's tale is one of the most famous from the third-century due to the diary format in which it has been recorded leading to the belief that it is a unique first-hand, female account of martyrdom. In regards to her behaviour as a mother it has been argued that the veracity of this belief is questionable as Perpetua appears throughout her narrative to be developing from a biological to spiritual motherhood.<sup>293</sup> At the start of her passion Perpetua is a young woman still nursing her young son and apparently suffering greatly both physically and emotionally at her separation from him.<sup>294</sup> However, her distress at their separation will not mitigate her desire to be martyred and she persistently rejects calls from her father and the magistrate to "have pity on her son".<sup>295</sup> Her refusal to allow her biological motherhood to prevent her from her mission as a Christian leads God to reward her – as she is no longer allowed to have her baby in prison with her; God both weans the child and halts Perpetua's milk production. Perpetua is no longer a mother in the traditional sense and this is the last we hear of her biological child. Giselle De Nie has argued that the visions immediately subsequent to this miracle regarding her spiritual intercession on behalf of Dinocrates can also be read as a conceptualised version of transformation of her relationship with her son after the miraculous weaning.<sup>296</sup>

This can be taken further and be seen as a representation of her metamorphosis into a spiritual mother: she no longer gives physical nourishment to a child, but instead provides

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<sup>292</sup> Cameron, 1994: 159; Davis, 2001: 4

<sup>293</sup> De Nie, 1995: 119

<sup>294</sup> *Perpetua* 1.2 where her distress at her imprisonment is only distress at the absence of her son. Once she is allowed her child in prison with her, it becomes "a palace".

<sup>295</sup> *Perpetua* 2.2.

<sup>296</sup> De Nie, 1995: 119

metaphysical sustenance to her fellow Christians. This transformation is only emphasised later as Perpetua takes on the role of mediator on behalf of the group of Christians, improving their condition in prison.<sup>297</sup> This mediating function of a mother was important and celebrated in the Roman tradition. Perpetua is presented as the Christian, spiritual, version of Cornelia or Volumnia. Like Eugenia, Paul, the virginal Brides of Christ or the Church itself, she is idealised through this new and Christian form of motherhood, to the extent that she is forced to reject her living child in order to embrace her children in eternal life.

In this passion, as in so many other Christian works, mothers cannot be sacred until they have rejected the role both in body and in mind. It is paralleled in the many acts of female martyrs who are entreated to 'have pity on' their children to no avail.<sup>298</sup> Biological motherhood represents sexuality and the body which were ideally to be denied by all Christians. It cannot be a model of sanctity, but can only be idealised as an obstacle to be overcome and transcended.

Through the Christian writings of the third-century it has been demonstrated that physical motherhood was neither encouraged in Christian women nor celebrated as a beneficial or exemplary activity for females as it was in the classical tradition. Even the lacklustre motivation for procreation that was given by the ecclesiastical writers was directed exclusively towards men.

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<sup>297</sup> *Perpetua* 5.3

<sup>298</sup> E.g. The martyrdom of Agathonike.

Instead a radically different and complex paradigm of spiritual motherhood was developed which conceptualised the human generative capacity while still being in line with teachings on the nature of sexual relations. This innovative approach to procreation allowed motherhood to be truly holy. How far, then, did lay Christians adhere to this new concept? One way of assessing this is to examine the female epitaphs of the third century, both Roman and Christian, and compare the numbers of each that celebrate themselves and their relatives as mothers. Given the prevalence of the denigration of both procreation and sexual contact throughout the literature one would expect to see a much lower rate of commemoration in the Christian epigraphy. If procreation is considered a necessary evil at best, then there is no motivation for celebrating it on a permanent and costly inscription designed to present only the best of the person represented.

In the second-century pagan sample, 2.5% (7) of 286 epitaphs contained the epithet *mater*. Within the third-century pagan sample, this has leapt to 6% (16). Within the female Christian epitaphs of the third-century examined, only 4% (17) of the total contained the epithet *mater*. This number can be clarified further: although 424 epitaphs were examined, only 165 of those contained any epithets. Using this number, 4% of those who celebrated anything about their women beyond their existence chose their role as a mother to be remembered. For the most part this is by children commemorating their ‘most deserving mother’, and occasionally by husbands or parents. By the fourth-century this number has in fact slightly increased to 5% (21).<sup>299</sup> There is a slight fall in the honouring of women as mothers, and within the Christian sample, a slight increase from the third to the fourth century.

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<sup>299</sup> Mothers as commemorators to children have been removed. This statistic is formed from the number of fourth-century epitaphs with epithets numbering 431, rather than the full 931. Using the full number of epitaphs examined, the percentage is 2.25%

As we have seen from the discussion of virginity, lay Christians of third-century Rome were unwilling to buy into the rhetoric of denial promoted by the ecclesiastical writers. It is consequently unsurprising that the corresponding ideal of spiritual over biological motherhood would also be rejected. That their parishioners regularly did not fulfil the expectations of the church fathers is evident in the literature and in the apparently high number of apostates during the periodic persecutions.<sup>300</sup> Christians, like their counterparts in any cultures, did not act on ideals.<sup>301</sup> The denigration of biological motherhood is fundamentally connected to the glorification of virginity, and so the possible explanations given in chapter one will be equally as valid here. People who are reluctant to buy into one form of the ideal of denial will be equally as reluctant to accept a derivative of that ideal.

A further explanation can perhaps be seen in Origen's works, as well as the New Testament. It is repeatedly stated throughout the 'higher' theological writings that those who are weak in faith should be fed "vegetables" or "milk" referring to a simpler version of Christian theology.<sup>302</sup> The suggestion implicit here, perhaps with good reason, is that catechumens and lay-Christians are not to be aware of the 'higher' theological dialogues. With spiritual motherhood being a diverse, complex concept could it be that most Christians were simply unaware of this ideal? While its presence in the popular apocryphal acts suggests a wide dispersion of the idea, taking this idea of 'spoon-feeding the weak' into account may make the statistical result somewhat less surprising.

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<sup>300</sup> For example: Origen's complaints about Christians attending church merely to socialise and gossip *HomJos*: 1.7; Tertullian's exasperation at Christian women continuing to act as pagan women in *De Cult* especially 2.11 to name just two instances. The question of what to do with lapsed Christians once each persecution had subsided spawned a series of schisms such as that of Novatian between the hard-line who, appalled by the apostates lack of loyalty, refused to accept them back into the church and the softer attitude of the orthodox church that would accept them back on the condition of a period of penance. This situation illustrates nicely the disappointment some church leaders felt in their parishioners' behaviours.

<sup>301</sup> For further examples of un-Christian behaviours see MacMullen, 1986: 322-43

<sup>302</sup> Rom. 14.1-2; 1.Cor. 3.2.Origen: *Comm. Rom.* 4.6.4 Clement, *Paed.* 1.5; 1 Peter 2:2-3; *Cyp. De Ecc. Cath. Unit.* 6.6;

Considering the anti-family, anti-female, anti-motherhood rhetoric that is so prevalent in the ecclesiastical writings, the statistical increase in the Christian epigraphy from the third to the fourth-century may seem surprising. Mary Harlow examined a series of the most prominent ascetic women of the fourth and fifth-centuries and demonstrated that to be a mother did not exclude one from being revered as an ideal Christian woman, held up for admiration and emulation.<sup>303</sup> Paula, for example, receives equal praise from her mentor Jerome as her virginal daughters Eustochium and Blesilla for her ascetic practice after her widowhood, although it must be noted that her rejection of her children is utilised by Jerome to emphasise her rejection of the family and the mortal world.<sup>304</sup> Furthermore, all the case studies examined by Harlow appear to reveal intimate mother-child (particularly daughter) relationships suggesting that despite the influence the rhetoric evidently had on these women's life choices, and their biographers' emphasis on their rejection of family ties, family structures and the importance placed on traditional roles remained strong.<sup>305</sup> Clearly Christian women were finding ways of fulfilling their social obligations of marrying well, bearing children, continuing the family line and protecting family assets, and successfully negotiating the ideals of their Christian communities. Although virgins would always be morally superior, in the real world, outside of the discourse, biological motherhood did not preclude sanctity. Hagiographic accounts of models such as Paula and Melania demonstrated this to the lay populace and allowed them to celebrate their roles as mothers without shame.

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<sup>303</sup> Harlow, 1998: 119-153

<sup>304</sup> Jerome, *Ep* 108.6

<sup>305</sup> Harlow, 1998: 149

Motherhood was one of the most important factors in the traditional ideal women of both the pagan and Jewish cultures from which Christianity grew and with which it communicated, and it is therefore one of the most significant breaks that Christianity makes while constructing its own ideal female. That Christian theologians would be reticent in advocating procreation or celebrating the female procreative ability is not surprising: the amalgamation of the implications of Eve's transgression; the still-living belief in an imminent Rapture; the denigration of the physical body and sexual contact and the various pronouncements of the New Testament that support these views make an idealised Christian mother near impossible. The importance of motherhood in the Roman culture meant that motherhood was not abandoned as an ideal, but was instead conceptualised and incorporated neatly into the Christian ideal without violating the prevailing theologies; ideal fecundity and motherhood became virginal fecundity and spiritual motherhood with Christ as the father and Christians as offspring. While hard-line heretical groups forced orthodox writers to encourage actual procreation as a last-resort action to curb concupiscence that could not accept full continence, this encouragement did not lead to any exaltation of women in this role.

This rejection of motherhood from the liturgy of idealised behaviours does not appear to have impacted upon the general population. Christians are still as likely to include the epithet '*mater*' and honour a 'well deserving mother' as their contemporary pagan Romans. Motherhood as a vital role for individual women, families and society as a whole was too important, and could not be eradicated with theology.

## CONCLUSION

“Radical Christianity...cannot itself exist without the counterweight of other types of Christianity.”<sup>306</sup>

The third-century AD was a period of internal conflict and sporadic external persecution for the Christian church. A multitude of disparate sects fought for recognition as orthodox, while the demonstrable falsity of the eschatological view of an imminent Rapture became clearer and clearer. These extreme circumstances forced a radical period of self-definition and the development of standardised ideals of how Christians should act or react in any given circumstance; from their sexual practices to their physical appearance.<sup>307</sup> Through the writers of the third-century these ideals began to crystallise and formalise into those that became so prominent in the fourth-century. Most prominent of all the ideals to emerge from the milieu was the ideal of virginity – for both men and women, but regularly involving a focus on women alone – and the rejection of the traditional family and household life inspired by the New Testament scriptures.<sup>308</sup> The radical nature of these ideals of celibacy and childlessness was couched in terms of domesticity, family and reproduction.<sup>309</sup> Thus, fellow Christians are ‘brothers and sisters’, with God as the father and the Church (or, later, Mary) as mother creating a whole new family; virginity becomes ‘spiritual fecundity’, leading to an ideal of ‘spiritual motherhood’ developed from a concept of imminent Rapture and the virtues of extensive proselytising. The ecclesiastical writers harnessed the positive and familiar associations attached to these images of motherhood and family to justify radically oppositional ideals of how Christians *should* be

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<sup>306</sup> Niebuhr, 1975: 82

<sup>307</sup> Wilken, 1984: 199-200; Cameron, 1994: 156

<sup>308</sup> E.G. Luke 14:26; Matt. 10:37

<sup>309</sup> Vuolanto, 2008: 67; 79; 209; 213



living their lives. For women these concepts had drastic consequences. The role of the chaste, loyal wife and mother which was so revered in Roman culture through such exemplars as Lucretia and Cornelia could now be presented as a base, unnecessary and unsavoury career founded on lust and squalor.<sup>310</sup> New idealised roles for Christian women were based almost exclusively on the concept of lifelong virginity. Any attempts to engage with the fact that the vast majority of Christian communities were populated by families or to counter the popular Marcionite heresy were reluctant at best.

The tracts and epistles that remain available to us today were evidently transmitted to the laity during community meetings.<sup>311</sup> Clearly they were designed to educate their audience and the writers expected that they would be informing and altering their audience's life choices. Throughout the epigraphy of third-century Rome, however, we have seen only tiny changes in the usage of significant epithets. These small changes represent what may be seen as the 'early adopters' of Christian values. These few Christians who emphasised the Christian ideals lay the way for the explosion of epithets that come in the fourth-century. Of course, the social influences of the illegality of Christianity and the apparent financial difficulties of the century could have contributed significantly to a lower rate of epithet usage overall during this period, and certainly the numbers of people being commemorated with epithets increases dramatically in the fourth-century. The fact remains, however, that Christians were commemorating using specific Christian phrases such as *in pace*, but not emphasising specific Christian virtues suggesting it was not an unwillingness to promote of the religious beliefs of the family or an inability to afford commemoration

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<sup>310</sup> Clark, 1993: 40

<sup>311</sup> See Origen *HomJos* 10.1; *HomLuc* 7.7; 21.4; 22.6; Tert. *De Cult* 1.1; 11.3, the entire piece is directed at female catechumens; Novatian, *Purity* 1.1; 14.4

that prevented the celebration of Christian virtues, but an apparent unwillingness to accept them as ideals just yet.

Over the preceding chapters I have attempted to present some possible explanations for the reticence of the third-century Christians in endorsing the ideals of the literature in their funerary commemorations. Firstly, I proposed that human examples of ideals are vital to their dissemination to the general populace. In the ideal of lifelong virginity and the related ideal of spiritual motherhood over biological reproduction virginal exemplars are of paramount importance in embedding the ideal into the cultural heritage of Christianity.<sup>312</sup> In both anthropology and sociology the importance of human examples in creating and transmitting new concepts is acknowledged. In Holland and Quinn's *Cultural Models in Language and Thought*, for example, the role of the 'upper-level schema' in directing the evolution of cultural models and the behaviours of 'lower-level schema' is presented as fundamental.<sup>313</sup> The upper-level schema, which in this case would be prominent and celebrated virgins, provide models of a successful life lived in accordance with the new ideals making them more palatable to the laity than an abstract literary notion can be. During the third-century not even the clergy lived lives of celibacy, and examples of specific contemporary virgins are rare and it is martyrs who receive the primary focus.<sup>314</sup> The de-criminalisation of Christianity and the end of martyrdom opportunities led to a new focus on ascetics and the exaltation of individuals that spread the ideal of Christianity in media far more effective than abstract rhetorical theorising. Cavalli-Sforza and Feldman in their mathematical analysis of cultural transmission concur with Holland and Quinn. The

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<sup>312</sup> Brown, 1983: 9

<sup>313</sup> Holland & Quinn, 1987: 23 where cultural models are defined as "taken-for-granted models of the world that are widely shared...by members of a society and play an enormous role in their understanding of that world and their behaviour in it" (4)

<sup>314</sup> Thecla comes from the second-century. Eugenia is third-century but does not seem to have been hugely popular. Both Cyprian and Tertullian refer to groups of virgins within their communities but without reference to individuals.

dissemination of cultural innovations is driven exclusively by contact with human adopters of the innovations.<sup>315</sup> This highlights not only the importance of the high-profile ‘upper-level schema’ examples, but also the early adopters among the laity. Early adopters of ideals of virginity, of extreme modesty and chastity bring a fuller awareness of those ideals to the communities in which they live and help to spread those ideals.<sup>316</sup> Thus, the reluctance of third-century Christians to celebrate perfect Christian chastity, virginity, obedience over other, more generic virtues can be seen to be a result of these values not yet filtering fully into the Christian consciousness.

A secondary explanation offered is that the Christian authors have created or greatly exaggerated moral conflicts that do not exist in the real world of the laity for rhetorical or didactic purposes, with the clear distinction between Christian and pagan virtues being wholly imagined by the authors. Certainly, the distinction between pagan and Christian Romans is unlikely to have been as clear as the ecclesiastical writers presented it at any time. Authors from both the second and third centuries emphasise that conversion to Christianity involves a fundamental shift in moral attitudes,<sup>317</sup> and demonstrate profound conflicts between Christian converts and their pagan friends and relatives.<sup>318</sup> Nonetheless, many scholars have downplayed the differences between the two cultures. Paul Veyne wrote that a conflict between pagan and Christian morality is essentially imagined by modern scholars based on crass stereotypes, drawing on pagan philosophers such as Musonius Rufus who advocated similar moral precepts to some Christian authors.<sup>319</sup> Peter Brown emphasises a “silent majority of householders” who form the foundation of Christian communities, and writes that many Christians probably lived by a moral code

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<sup>315</sup> Cavalli-Sforza & Feldman, 1981: 30

<sup>316</sup> Cavalli-Sforza, 1981: 34-5; 346

<sup>317</sup> Justin, 1 *Apol* 14-16; 27-29; Tert. *Apol* 3; Athenagoras, *Supplicatio* 11

<sup>318</sup> Tert. *Apol* 3; *De Cult* 11.3

<sup>319</sup> Veyne, 1987: 217

virtually indistinguishable from their Jewish (or pagan) neighbours.<sup>320</sup> Kate Cooper reminds that “those who wished to distance Christians from their identity as Romans were not always in the majority” suggesting that the authors who did were a radical minority.<sup>321</sup> Some feminist scholars equally argue that much of the conflict presented in the texts does not reflect reality but represents a rhetorical discourse for the definition and discussion of theoretical and theological concepts. Thus, scholars such as Averil Cameron, Kate Cooper and Elizabeth Clark argue that women in the Christian texts are simply devices for discussing the important issues of male power and control;<sup>322</sup> that woman is a concept used for her “convenient polarities” in theological thought;<sup>323</sup> that marriage in the apocryphal acts is a theoretical battleground where battle for control of the empire plays out.<sup>324</sup> In this interpretation too, moral conflict is not tangibly real but a rhetorical tool. Discourse, however, does not exist on its own. The authors may not have reflected reality but they certainly informed it.<sup>325</sup> Many texts include direct engagement with their perceived audiences and it is clear that the authors expect that the information they provide within epistles and treatises will be read, heard and obeyed.<sup>326</sup> They expected Christians of the third-century to feel and act differently from their Jewish or pagan neighbours and appear disappointed or angry when they do not.<sup>327</sup> This may go some way to explaining the slowness of the Christian populations of Rome in accepting the ideals presented to them as ideals: if the authors are not reflecting the behaviours of the communities they lead, but trying to shape them, then many third-century Christians apparently *do not* see themselves as distinct from the pagan populations and thus do not commemorate distinctly as

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<sup>320</sup> Brown, 1987: 137-8

<sup>321</sup> Cooper, 1992: 162

<sup>322</sup> Cameron, 1989a: 181; 184-5

<sup>323</sup> Cameron, 1994: 153

<sup>324</sup> Cooper, 1996: 19

<sup>325</sup> Harlow, 1998: 3

<sup>326</sup> See n.2

<sup>327</sup> E.g. Origen, *HomJos* 10.1;

Christians, they apparently require near-constant reminding and bullying from their spiritual leaders that they are *supposed* to be different. As these messages of moral conflict are passed on to new catechumens and children born into Christianity through the third and into the fourth centuries, Christian communities develop into the communities envisioned by the writers now shaping new generations. Anthropologists have long acknowledged that religious converts regularly do not engage with the high doctrines of their new faith until long after their identification with its general tenants.<sup>328</sup> Popular belief and theological doctrine are often dissimilar concepts.<sup>329</sup> That third-century ecclesiastical writers felt that their communities had to be regularly reminded of their new obligations as Christians and the fundamental differences between them and the pagan communities is therefore unsurprising. That so many Christians of the third-century failed to fully absorb and act by the difficult theological ideals of their leaders is equally predictable.

Finally, and maybe most significantly, it is important to remember that ideals cannot be fulfilled by everyone, or accepted by everyone. A multitude of ‘goods’ can exist within a common notion of what is ‘good’ overall. The third-century of Christianity ecclesiastical leaders were struggling against external and internal pressures to define exactly what an orthodox Christian was; how they thought, acted and reacted. Within this struggle they frequently disagreed with each other over each subject. These writers, despite representing at the time the orthodox, catholic church, did not present homogenous views, indeed two later became heretics.<sup>330</sup> There is a considerable amount of overlap in terms of the broad definitions of ideals and the expression of them, but these ideals are still in their infancy

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<sup>328</sup> Hefner, 1993: 17-19 “It is misleading to assume that the formal truths embedded in religious doctrines directly reflect or inform believer’s ideas or actions”. (19)

<sup>329</sup> Badone, E. 1990. *Religious Orthodoxy and Popular faith in European Society*. Princeton; Hefner, R.W. 1985. *Hindu Javanese: Tengger Tradition and Islam*. Princeton ; Schneider, J & Lindenbaum, S. (eds) 1987. ‘Frontiers of Christian Evangelism’, *American Ethnologist* (Special Issue) 14.1.

<sup>330</sup> Tertullian joined the Montanist heresy during his lifetime. Origen was posthumously branded with heresy in the fifth-century because of the neo-Platonist influence of his theological exegesis.

and are – like all ideals - not always consistent. Christians could not be expected to live up to ideals unequivocally, as Romans did not to theirs. The pagans did not consistently celebrate *lanificio*, despite its fundamental symbolic importance in Roman culture, nor chastity or motherhood or marital status, and the Christians cannot be expected to uniformly rejoice in virginity, modesty, religiosity or obedience.<sup>331</sup>

None of these explanations can be all-encompassing, but they can work in conjunction as a preliminary attempt to describe the possible reactions of lay Christians to the extreme views developed by the ecclesiastical authorities. It is these extreme views that tend to pervade modern perceptions of early Christianity, seen as violent and frightening in its attitude towards sex and women; but it is clear from the funerary epigraphy – the point at which an individual is represented in the best possible way according to the ideals of their culture – that the lay Christians were not accepting the arguments of their leaders blindly, but in their own ways. The development from traditional codes of virtue to Christian is gentle and slow and what the third-century epigraphy demonstrates is the very gradual infiltration of Christian ideals into the general populations. The Christians of the third-century who strive to live by and think by the structures developed by the ecclesiastical writers are laying the path for the great ascetic communities and individuals of the fourth and fifth centuries and represent some of the first successes of the new Christian morality.

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<sup>331</sup> Sociological, Philosophical and Social Anthropological research regularly emphasises the heterodox nature of ideals: Pitt-Rivers, 1965: 39; Primoratz, 1999: 171; Russell, 1942 passim.

**APPENDIX 1:**

TABLE OF INCIDENCE OF EPITHETS IN PAGAN EPITAPHS OF SECOND AND  
THIRD-CENTURY ROME

Epithet	Second-century % (#)	Third-century %(#)
Cara	9 (25)	5 (13)
Casta	1 (3)	1 (3)
Clara	0 (0)	3 (7)
Dulca	9.5 (27)	8 (22)
Optima	3.5 (10)	1 (2)
Pia	6 (16)	6 (16)
Sancta	3.5 (10)	3 (7)
Virgo	0 (0)	0.5 (1)
Mater	2.5 (7)	6 (16)
Wife (Uxor/Coniunx)	14 (39)	24 (64)
Name/Name and age only	18 (52)	20.5 (55)

**APPENDIX 2:**

TABLE OF INCIDENCE OF EPITHETS IN CHRISTIAN EPIGRAPHY OF THIRD  
AND FOURTH CENTURY ROME

Epithet	Third-Century % (#)	Fourth-Century % (#)
Cara	3 (10)	2.5 (16)
Casta	2 (3)	2.5 (6)
Clara	0.5 (2)	1.5 (10)
Dulca	7 (27)	8 (53)
Optima	4 (6)	17 (6.5)
Pia	2 (3)	1 (8)
Sancta	1 (3)	1 (8)
Virgo	1 (3)	3.5 (22)
Mater	4 (17)	5 (21)
Wife (Uxor/Coniunx)	18 (30)	37 (97)
Name/Name and age only	57 (224)	31 (205)



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Abbreviations used:

ACW: Ancient Christian Writers

ANCL: Ante-Nicene Christian Library

FC: Fathers of the Church

LCL: Loeb Classical Library

SPCK: Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge

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