The Blazing Body: Ascetic Desire in Jerome’s Letter to Eustochium

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This essay explores the theory of sexuality that Jerome sets forth in his Ep. 22. Focusing on the manner in which sexuality is discussed in terms of erotic metaphors of the female virginal body, the essay argues that Jerome’s view of asceticism was founded on a paradox wherein erotic sensibilities are both denied and intensified. Perspectives drawn from contemporary literary-critical theory are used to uncover a figural movement in Jerome’s text in which an attempt is made to “erase” the literal body and its dangerous sexual passions by “rewriting” it with Scriptural tropes. The essay proposes that Jerome’s ascetic theory foundered on an interpretive problematic, namely, his figuration of asceticism in terms of linguistic metaphors of desire.

As a way of introducing the thematic concerns of this essay, I begin with a poem by the contemporary poet Robert Creeley.

LOVE
There are words voluptuous
as the flesh
in its moisture,
its warmth.

Tangible, they tell
the reassurances,
the comforts,
of being human.

Not to speak them
makes abstract
all desire
and its death at last.¹

In this poem, Creeley expresses the view that words can be as voluptuous as the flesh, and that such words make desire humanly tangible. In the absence of such words, desire becomes abstract, and so dies. In my reading, this poem articulates a paradox of desire, a conundrum that I wish to explore here. The paradox is this: desire finds its voluptuous expression not in the flesh, where one would expect to find it, but in words; the tangible warmth of desire comes alive in language, spoken across the space between bodies, where words express the “presence of want.”²

St. Jerome, lifelong lover of words by his own admission,³ may seem an unusual, even inappropriate, conversation partner for the poet Creeley, since Jerome’s voluptuous words were directed against the voluptuous and for the ascetic cause. Yet, there is in Jerome’s writing, as in the poet’s, a peculiar net of relationships involving the body, desire, and language. Nowhere is that net more densely intertwined than in his letter to Eustochium, which will be the focus of this analysis.

Jerome wrote this letter in C.E. 384 during his second sojourn in Rome.⁴ These were heady days: consultant to Pope Damasus, Doktorvater to a circle of talented and wealthy Christian women, Jerome was riding high on the crest of rigorous ascetic doctrine that he was urging on the Roman church.⁵ His letter to Eustochium is generally considered to be the finest expression of his ascetic doctrine, a “systematic theory of sexuality.”⁶

Eustochium, daughter of Jerome’s beloved student and friend Paula, was an adolescent girl who had already dedicated her life to asceticism, and particularly to perpetual virginity.⁷ To her Jerome wrote a very long letter characterized by one modern scholar as “the greatest slander of women

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⁴ For issues of dating Jerome’s letters, I have followed the chronology of J. N. D. Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975); for the date of the letter to Eustochium (Ep. 22), see 100.
since Juvenal's sixth satire." Of course Eustochium was not the one so slandered in the letter; on the contrary, her status, described almost entirely in terms of her body and her sexuality, is repeatedly viewed by Jerome in terms of the bridal imagery from the biblical Song of Songs. Her closed virginal body, token of a soul already "laden with gold," is subject only to the highest praise. Yet, as Jerome says, the object of his letter is not praise of virginity. Rather, his goal is that Eustochium should understand that she is "fleeing from Sodom and should be fearful of the example of Lot's wife."11

Contemporary scholars have noted the oddity of Jerome's warm friendships with women in the face of his advice to other men to avoid their lascivious, contaminating company. In the case of this particular letter, there is the further incongruity of sending to a woman a portrait of women that is filled with biting ridicule. Yet there is no reason to doubt that Jerome intended this letter to be religiously educational. As Elizabeth Clark has pointed out, "[Jerome's] letters to women are in fact educational devices for Scriptural instruction," and the letter to Eustochium is no exception with its hundreds of references to Biblical texts.

Jerome's stated intention as author was to warn Eustochium about the dangers to spirituality that were posed by the body, and, on its surface, the letter presents itself as an expression of pastoral care for the moral well-being of its recipient. The explicit intentions of an author, however, cannot always control or limit the meanings that arise from the associative movements and configurations of his or her text's tropes and metaphors. Texts can articulate perspectives and bear significations that are quite different from the announced goals of the author. Thus in exploring the relationships among body, language, and desire in Jerome's letter, I am going to follow the metaphorical figurations of the text rather than Jerome's explicit intention of offering avuncular advice to the daughter of his friend. When the letter is read by attending to the figurations which emerge in its con-

8. Wiesen, St. Jerome, 164; Clark, Jerome, Chrysostom, and Friends, 45.
10. Ep. 22.3.1 (CSEL 54.146).
11. Ep. 22.2.1 (CSEL 54.146).
12. Wiesen, St. Jerome, 164; Clark, Jerome, Chrysostom, and Friends, 45.
13. Clark, Jerome, Chrysostom, and Friends, 47, 75–76.
structions of the female body, such metaphors as "the flight from Sodom" take on a life of their own which is different from Jerome's vitriolic cautionary tale. In this letter there is in fact a double "flight": the movement of the letter's "flight" from the literal female body has a parallel in a "flight" toward a metaphorical female body which is a creation of language, a "textual" body that is the object of Jerome's desire. It is this figurative movement that this essay will follow.

In the letter to Eustochium, Jerome describes the body in general as "fragile"; it is bestial, it is voracious, but most of all it is sexual. The "Sodom" of the body is its libido, its desire, which "titillates the senses"; even more, "the seductive fire of sensual pleasure floods us with its sweet heat." According to Jerome, the body's major tendency is to be on fire. Speaking against the drinking of wine, he asks, "Why do we throw oil on the flame? Why do we supply kindling-wood to a little body that is already burning with fire?"

This blazing body is burning with the signifiers of desire. For Jerome, the fiery flesh is not only a physical fact; it is also a psychic landscape or, perhaps better, it is a physical alphabet of the inner person's most basic drives. In the letter to Eustochium, it is the texts of the physical bodies of women with which Jerome is seemingly most concerned. The sensuality and lewdness of women is described in terms of their bodies: what they wear, what they eat and drink, the color of their skin, their gestures, their pronunciation of words. From the pompous display of a rich widow

15. Ep. 22.4.1 (CSEL 54.148) and throughout the letter. See the discussion by Peter Brown, The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 376–77, who remarks that, for Jerome, "the human body remained a darkened forest, filled with the roaring of wild beasts, that could be controlled only by rigid codes of diet and by the strict avoidance of occasions for sexual attraction. . . . Men and women were irreducibly sexual beings" (376).


19. Ep. 22.8 (CSEL 54.154–56), wine and food; 22.10–11 (CSEL 54.157–59), gluttony, luxury, dainty food; 22.13–14 (CSEL 54.160–62), false virgins with swelling wombs, clothing; 22.16 (CSEL 54.163–64), clothes as signifiers of inner disposition; 22.17 (CSEL 54.164–66), skin color; 22.27 (CSEL 54.182–84), physical gestures of
distributing alms, to the women who disfigure their faces and lower their voices to a whisper to simulate fasting, women's physicality is presented as both disturbing and disgusting.20

Dismayed by the pornographic bodies of women, which he interprets as though they were texts to be inspected for clues to psychic flaws, Jerome proceeds to re-write those bodies, using Eustochium as his model. The female body, fearful for "its power to articulate itself,"21 is re-articulated by Jerome. This re-articulation is based on what Jerome presents in his letter as social criticism of Roman Christian women, whose behavior he had observed at first hand. However, it has been shown convincingly that Jerome's observations are not straightforward descriptions, but caricatures. He based his portraits on the rhetorical conventions of Roman satire and mimicry.22 The conceit of the letter is social critique, which disguises the rhetorical indebtedness of the text to a literary technique. But the satirical rhetoric of the text disguises another of the text's figurations, which is Jerome's re-articulation of the too-open body of woman as the closed body of the virgin.

Women's bodies were disturbingly open for Jerome not only because they were obviously open to sexual penetration. Rather, encoded in that openness was the dangerous strength and persistence of that fiery desire that Jerome came to identify with the flesh.23 The "surface" of the literal body mirrors the "depths" of the psyche, ablaze with sensuous desire. Writing, for example, about good and bad virgins, Jerome argues that virginity is not only a condition of the body, but also of the inner self. Virginity may be lost even by a libidinous thought: such are "evil virgins, virgins in the flesh, not in the spirit."24 In this instance, however, the non-virginal mind shows that the literal body's virginity is a sham. Jerome appears to be caught in a dilemma: on the one hand, the literal

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20. Ep. 22.32 (CSEL 54.193–95), the rich widow; 22.27 (CSEL 54.184), simulation of fasting.
21. This phrase is from Susan Gubar, "The Blank Page' and the Issues of Female Creativity," in Writing and Sexual Difference, ed. Elizabeth Abel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 76. Gubar traces the history, in Western culture, of woman's body as a "blank page" written on by men, with an emphasis on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.
24. Ep. 22.5.3 (CSEL 54.150).
bodies of women are blatant signifiers of psychic libido and other moral flaws; but on the other hand, as in the case of the evil virgin, the literal body can lie, presenting a false mirror of the soul.

Because of the semiotic problems presented by the female body, I suggest, Jerome moved away from the literal physicality of women altogether, and he did so by shifting to a figurative mode of interpretation in which the psyche is described with bodily metaphors. To return to the "evil virgins": following his statement that their virginal flesh does not reflect a virginal spirit, Jerome then characterizes loss of virginity in the inner self with bodily metaphors drawn from Scripture. Such women will be found with their skirts over their faces, opening their legs to all who pass by. Using images of prostitution from the Biblical prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel, who had themselves appropriated the female body metaphorically as a sign of spiritual debasement, Jerome moves from the semiotically unstable physical body to a textual body that does not lie.

In his discussion, Jerome has shifted his focus from the actual physicality of women (whose grossness is apparent even, or especially, in his caricatures) to bodily metaphors used to describe psychic states. It is at the level of physical metaphor that Jerome's rewriting of the female body takes place, and it is there that he will construct an erotics of asceticism that will be applicable not only to women but also to men. Curiously, as Jerome distances himself from the libidinal contagion of literal female bodies, the "blaze" of the body burns more brightly in the metaphorical constructions of his text. With regard to Eustochium, whose body will be the sign of Jerome's own desire, it is the transmutation of the physical body into a textual—specifically, a Scriptural—body that is most striking, and that engages Jerome's interpretative energy.

Jerome begins by giving Eustochium the usual ascetic advice, encouraging her in the course of action that she had already undertaken. Counseling avoidance of wine and delicate food, he writes Eustochium's body by reducing it to "a rumbling stomach and fevered lungs," both of which are images that he has drawn (rather arbitrarily) from Scriptural passages. Eustochium's literal body is not only reduced to three of its organs, it cannot even be understood apart from textual references. The body's phys-

25. Ep. 22.6.2-3 (CSEL 54.150-51).
26. Ep. 22.6.2-3 (CSEL 54.151). The Biblical quotations are from Jer 13.26 ("I myself will lift up your skirts over your face, and your shame will be seen.") and Ezek 16.25 ("At the head of every street you built your lofty place and prostituted your beauty, offering yourself to any passerby, and multiplying your harlotry").
27. Ep. 22.11.1 (CSEL 54.158). Jerome supports this image with a concatenation of verses from Job, Ps, Gen, Ex, Matt, 1.k, and Ezek.
ical needs, like eating and drinking, can corrupt the soul; in order for a soul to flee from its own Sodom, it must have a newly-inscribed body, rewritten in Scriptural metaphors. Much of Jerome's practical advice to Eustochium repeats this movement from the physical to the metaphorical. Oddly, the virginal body is achieved at the expense of the actual physical body; biological femaleness is not overcome or erased but transformed by being absorbed into Scriptural texts. Oddly, the virginal body is achieved at the expense of the actual physical body; biological femaleness is not overcome or erased but transformed by being absorbed into Scriptural texts.28 Once safely textualized, that body was ready for use as a signifier of theological desire.

It is when Jerome writes Eustochium's virginity as such, as differentiated from advice on how not to lose it, that the displacement of the physical by the metaphorical is most stark and paradoxically most voluptuous. The virginal body breaks the Biblical curse: "Death came through Eve, but life through Mary. For that reason, the gift of virginity comes forth more richly in women because it began from a woman."29 The virginal body is most essentially a female body, yet it becomes the site for Jerome's drive toward signifying the ideal human body. Although physical woman, as Jerome so satirically shows, is "nothing", her textual body is really "something," and it provides the space for a stunning theological articulation of desire.30

Jerome accomplishes the transformation of Eustochium's physical body into a metaphorical body by way of tropes from the Song of Songs. From the many images offered by this Biblical poem, Jerome draws particularly, indeed almost exclusively, on two kinds: images of closure and images of seductive sexual foreplay. Eustochium is, as Jerome often says, God's bride, and as such she lives in a "paradise of virginity." Textually speaking, paradise is found in a Scriptural love poem, where Eustochium is the Shulamite, the Bride, the black but comely one who has been "washed white."31 The coarse and disturbing physicality of her body, characteristic of all women's bodies, has been "whitewashed" (dealbata) in the course of its transformation into a poetic body of Jerome's construction, an imaginal body which becomes a signifier of desire precisely because of its closure.

Practically speaking, Jerome advises Eustochium to stay inside her house.32 Domestically sequestered, she is doubly closed, and the physical

28. For a discussion of other ways in which Jerome attempted to transform the femaleness of his friends, see Clark, Jerome, Chrysostom, and Friends, 48–59.
29. Ep. 22.2.1.7 (CSEL 54.173).
space of her enclosure underscores the psychic significance of her virginity. Jerome's poetic articulation of her enclosed body places her, however, in the king's chamber of the Song of Songs.\(^33\) This is no ordinary room, but a bridal chamber, a space of sexual love. Eustochium's imaginal body is for Jerome "a garden enclosed, a fountain sealed,"\(^34\) but this closing of the female body does not end erotic desire. It intensifies it.

Jerome's choice of the king's bridal chamber and the enclosed garden as images that articulate Eustochium's body leads directly to the other set of images from the Song of Songs to which he appeals. The king desires his bride and will lead her into his chamber with his own hand; he will kiss her, and she will seek him by night; he will put his hand through the opening and her inner body will be moved for him.\(^35\) As Jerome remarks, "desire is quenched by desire": the poetic body is an erotic body of the highest degree; it is the text of inner desire.\(^36\)

Interpreters have noted how peculiar it is to find such sensuous language in a text that argues for rigorous asceticism. In his biography of Jerome, J. N. D. Kelly, for example, observes that "it is ironical to reflect that, in urging a young girl like Eustochium to crush the physical yearnings of her nature in the effort to surrender herself the more completely to Christ, he should feed her fantasy with such exciting images."\(^37\) A similar perspective is offered by Geoffrey Galt Harpham in his book *The Ascetic Imperative in*
Commenting on Jerome’s appropriation of the scene of sexual foreplay, Harpham says, “The difference between the pleasures of the figural bridegroom and those of any literal one is not altogether clear; one cannot say with complete confidence that ascetic ‘sport’ is altogether non-erotic.”38 To Kelly’s sense of the irony of Jerome’s use of the Song of Songs in an ascetic context and Harpham’s sense of the blurring of boundaries between the literal and the figural, I would add Julia Kristeva’s understanding of the Song of Songs, which will help to show the appropriateness of Jerome’s use of this love poem in his rewriting of the female body.

Kristeva notices that union is not achieved in the Song of Songs. There is no sexual intercourse. “Conjugal, exclusive, sensuous, jealous—love in the Song of Songs is indeed all of that at the same time, with in addition the unnamable of carnal union.”39 Love in the Song of Songs is “sensuous and deferred”; never fulfilled, the erotic sensibility in this poem is “indissolubly linked with the dominant theme of absence, yearning to merge,” such that the poem is “a legitimation of the impossible, an impossibility set up as amatory law.”40 The Song of Songs constructs erotic love in such a way that its climax is always deferred, never quite reached, yet it holds out union as the end toward which the lovers strive. Desire is continuously kindled, but never satisfied.

For Jerome, too, union was the ideal. It was his “amatory law.” As he says in the letter to Eustochium, “flesh desires to be what God is” (cum caro cupit esse, quod deus est).41 Like the “unnamable” of the carnal union of the bride and the bridegroom in the Song of Songs, however, the union of flesh with God is perpetually deferred but also tantalizingly seductive in its ongoing appeal. As Harpham has suggested, “asceticism is essentially a meditation on, even an enactment of, desire. . . . While asceticism recognizes that desire stands between human life and perfection, it also understands that desire is the only means of achieving perfection, and that the movement towards ideality is necessarily a movement of desire.”42

Jerome chose to move toward ideality by reconfiguring the female body as a text that could mediate between the flesh and God. Eustochium’s virginal body, which closes the fearful articulation of women’s physical

40. Ibid., 96, 94, 97.
42. Harpham, *Ascetic Imperative*, 45.
bodies, becomes a poetic text, but the paradox is that her imaginal body is still fearfully articulate, having become even stronger in its erotic charge. The female body is still open, but now it is open as a channel of theological desire. In one of his literary-critical essays, the Italian novelist Italo Calvino wrote that “the language of sexuality makes sense only if it is placed at the top of a scale of semantic values. When the musical score needs the highest and the lowest notes, when the canvas requires the most vivid colors: this is when the sign of sex comes into operation. . . . The positive or negative connotation that accompanies the signs of sex in every single literary production determines how values are assigned within the text.”

Asceticism was Jerome’s musical score, and he used the language of sexuality to hit the highest and lowest notes. This helps to explain how the figuration of women’s bodies in Jerome’s letter signifies more than social critique or satiric exercise in misogyny. Upon woman’s paradisal body he constructed a space for the expression of the erotic desire that asceticism only seemingly denies. When it is textualized, woman’s erotic body hits the “high note” of desire for union with God.

Why did Jerome choose the female body for the articulation of his erotics of asceticism? We have already noted that Jerome wrote to Eustochium that virginity, as the gift of Mary, was in a sense engendered as female. Thus the female body is the more appropriate one for ascetic signification. However, in the letter, Jerome’s erotics of asceticism is applicable to men as well as to women—indeed, it is applicable particularly to himself! Woman’s body has become a text to be read by women and men. The erotic ideal of a union that is never consummated—that is to say, the constant desire for what is other-than-oneself—has been encoded as feminine, as woman. What is other to the self, which constitutes the goal of the self’s desirous theological yearning, is figured as woman.

Having used his rearticulation of the body of woman to express the
paradoxical erotics of asceticism, Jerome is then free to explore his own eroticism. Eroticism is here understood as a desire for what is other to the self. As Anne Carson has explained, “eros denotes ‘want,’ ‘lack,’ ‘desire for that which is missing.’ The lover wants what he does not have.” Construing desire as “want” catches nicely the ambiguity inherent in the concept, a simultaneous feeling of yearning and recognition of absence. Desire fulfilled would no longer be desire. This is as true of theological as it is of carnal desire, a fact that makes Jerome’s use of the Song of Songs’s dynamic of unfulfilled, and so continuously present, desire so fitting as a trope of ascetic desire. As he explores his own desire in this letter, Jerome presents the reader with a textualized version of his own body. His body, too, is subject to the kind of imagistic troping that transformed Eustochium’s body from a literal to a metaphorical register. Leaving the literal body, the ascetic turns to language, “the true medium of sexuality” for asceticism, as Harpham has argued. However, Jerome’s physical presence in the letter is very strong—much stronger, in fact, than Eustochium’s—and, as we shall see, he was not able to achieve that metaphorical closure for his body that he accomplished for Eustochium’s.

One aspect of Jerome’s physical presence in the letter is the fact of the letter itself. It is well known that Jerome was a prolific letter-writer, and that he used the epistolary form not only to send greetings and news but also to provide exegeses of texts and theological reflections on various issues. But it is especially his frequent use of the letter as the form within which he developed his ideas about asceticism that is of interest here. The letter as a form is an erotic construction, as Carson has shown. Her argument is as follows: “Letters are the mechanism of erotic paradox, at once connective and separative, painful and sweet. Letters construct the space of desire and kindle in it those contradictory emotions that keep the lover alert to his own impasse. Letters arrest and complicate an existing two-term situation by conjuring a third person who is not literally there. . . .” Part of the paradox of letters is that they would seem to dissolve the boundary that erotic desire erects, that is, “the boundary of flesh and self” between two people. But, as Carson notes, the fact of a

46. Carson, Eros the Bittersweet, 10.
47. Harpham, Ascetic Imperative, 132.
48. See Kelly, Jerome, 210–20; Clark, Jerome, Chrysostom, and Friends, 47.
49. In addition to Ep. 22, see also Ep. 54 (CSEL 54.466–85 [to Furia]), Ep. 107 (CSEL 55.290–305 [to Laeta]), and Ep. 125 (CSEL 56.118–42 [to Rusticus]).
50. Carson, Eros the Bittersweet, 91–110.
51. Ibid., 92.
52. Ibid., 30.
letter underscores separation as much as connection. Yet, while a letter betokens the presence of absence, it is itself a kind of presence, a poetic or imaginal presence, a “third” person. In a letter, one fabricates one’s own metaphorical body; such was, in a formal way, Jerome’s “physical” presence in his letters.

It seems significant that Jerome sent Eustochium his thoughts on asceticism in a letter (he was, after all, literally “just across town” and presumably could have spoken with her in person). It also seems significant that he used the erotic medium of a letter to construct Eustochium’s body as a Scriptural body and an erotic text. “Assuming the character of language,” Eustochium becomes a pure representation of that which Jerome himself desires. However, she assumes, not the character of language in general, but the character of the Song of Songs in particular. This was not a language that was available to Jerome for the erotic textualization of his own body, because, as Peter Brown has observed, “the language of the Song of Songs . . . came, in the course of the fourth century, to settle heavily, almost exclusively, on the body of the virgin woman.” While his articulation of the desire on which his ascetic program was founded did enable Jerome to explore his own body in the letter, he did not have available to him the kind of erotically-charged metaphor of desire that he used to construct Eustochium’s body as ascetic text.

Interestingly, Jerome made one attempt in the letter to textualize his own body by using a female metaphor from Scripture. Describing to Eustochium his struggles with the “bubbling fires of lust” in the desert, Jerome casts himself in the role of the sinful woman of Luke 7.37–50, who had washed the feet of Jesus with her tears and dried them with her hair. “Helpless,” Jerome wrote, “I threw myself at the feet of Jesus, watered them with tears, dried them with my hair, and I subdued my resistant body with weeks of fasting.” Sadly, this attempt at encoding his body with a textual metaphor was not theologically satisfying for Jerome. Unlike his troping of Eustochium’s body with an ecstatically erotic metaphor of vir-

53. Harpham, Ascetic Imperative, 20, describes asceticism as “an attempt by human beings to stand ‘outside the world’ by assuming the character of language.” Also, “. . . asceticism is an application to the self of certain insights into language: to be ascetic is to make oneself representable” (27).


55. Ep. 22.7.3 (CSEL 54.153); my thanks are due to Elizabeth A. Clark for calling this passage to my attention.
virginity, Jerome troped his own body with an image of prostitution, and it served only to remind him of his own lost virginity: "I do not blush with shame [in the face of] my wretchedness, rather I lament aloud that I am not now what I used to be." This failed attempt at "feminizing" his body with a Scriptural metaphor is suggestive of the difficulty which the encoding of virginity as female presented for Jerome, since the literal male body is not easily metaphorized with images of closure and intactness. This may explain Jerome's obsession with Eustochium's body as the most appropriate field for the cultivation of ascetic virtue: as a paradigm, her body functioned as an erotic allure that fired his ascetic longings as well as his attempts to conceive his own body in an imaginal way.

It appears that Jerome was doubly bound by his physical maleness and loss of virginity and by his inability to find a Scriptural metaphor that would, by textualizing his body, safely remove him from the fiery libido of the flesh. Nonetheless, he experimented with languages to use for articulating his desire; these experiments, I will argue, can be seen as steps in Jerome's journey toward the paradigmatic goal that he so forcefully expresses under the sign of "Eustochium."

The space of Jerome's letter to Eustochium consists of oddly juxtaposed passages in which the presentation of Eustochium's idealized body gives way to Jerome's presentation of his own body. These shifts of focus are accompanied by shifts in language, for while the language of Scripture applies most successfully to Eustochium, the languages of memory and dream apply to Jerome. There is an intriguing passage in Aristotle's Rhetoric that can provide a helpful interpretive framework for understanding Jerome's presentation of his body in these ways. Aristotle defined desire as "a reaching out for the sweet"; in her discussion of this passage, Carson explains that he goes on to say that "the man who is reaching for some delight, whether in the future as hope or in the past as memory, does so by means of an act of imagination (phantasia)." Desire is encoded imaginarily, that is, in languages of figural perception. While Jerome did not have the imaginative code of the Song of Songs to use in constructing his erotic body, he did have the languages of memory and dream, or, in Aristotle's terms, languages of the past and the future. It was these that he used "to


57. Aristotle, Rhet. 1.1370a6, quoted and translated in Carson, Eros the Bittersweet, 63.
reach for delight” as he investigated the possibilities for articulating an imaginal body for himself.

There are two places in Jerome’s letter where he is bodily present. The first is his memory of his years in the desert, in which he “writes” his remembered body with metaphors of libido, picturing himself as a lustful bag of bones, tormented body and soul by physical and psychic heat.58 The second is his nightmare, a brutal projection of his future should he continue in his Ciceronian reading habits.59 These two references to his person accord well with Aristotle’s sense that desire, the reaching out for delight, is configured imaginatively either as a future hope or as a memory of the past. However much a nightmare experience of the future and a memory of a desert past may not seem to partake of delight, both the dream and the memory are exercises of phantasia, of imagination, and, most importantly, both are grounded in eros.60

The languages of dream and memory are both erotic because they participate in lack—and here I petition the “wanting” and “lacking” dimensions of eros, discussed earlier, that give the term “erotic” a meaning that is more encompassing than “mere” delight. In memory and dream, the imagination constructs as present objects that are literally absent. “Eros is lack,” and, as Freud and many others both ancient and modern have shown, “that which is known, attained, possessed, cannot be an object of desire.”61 What Jerome did not possess was his body, that is, the metaphoric body that would make union with God, the object of his desire, possible. In memory and dream, then, he constructed an imaginal body, a move which, paradoxically, both displaced his literal body and underscored its problems all the more forcefully.

The other of the self that Jerome desired was the ideal face of his soul’s divinity, the union of his flesh with God.62 Such unachievable perfection was tauntingly seductive, and I suggest that it was with a sense of the impossibility of what was nonetheless an “amatory law” that Jerome remembered and dreamed his body. What he found there was lack and an uncomfortable feeling that something was missing, that his body was too “open” and not yet virginally “closed.” In this regard, Carson has written that, “reaching for an object that proves to be outside and beyond himself,

60. For discussions by contemporaries of Jerome on these issues, see Augustine, Conf. 10, where memory is discussed as a storehouse of images, and Synesius of Cyrene, De som. 3–5, on the connection between dreams and imagination.
61. Carson, Eros the Bittersweet. 65.
the lover is provoked to notice that self and its limits. From a new vantage point, which we might call self-consciousness, he looks back and sees a hole. . . . Desire for an object that he never knew he lacked is defined, by a shift of distance, as desire for a necessary part of himself.  

Having constructed his paradigm in his rewriting of Eustochium’s female body, Jerome could explore the “gaps” in his own body as part of his journey to a closed “female” body of his own.

In his letter, Jerome offers both of his personal reminiscences to Eustochium as illustrative warnings about the dangers of the ascetic commitment. Since he presents the memory of his days in the desert in section seven of the letter, and his dream in section thirty, I will deal with the memory first, although in chronological terms it is probable that the dream preceded Jerome’s stay in the desert.

Just prior to his account of his experience in the desert, Jerome had been telling Eustochium about the inner heat that attacks the senses: “lust [libido] titillates the senses” and “the seductive fire of sensual pleasure floods us with its sweet heat.” Such inner heat, for Jerome a phenomenon both physical and psychological, apparently reminded Jerome of the literal heat of the desert sun; it was a libidinal theory of the body that triggered his memory.

When I was living in the desert, in that vast solitude . . ., inflamed by the burning heat of the sun, how many times did I imagine myself amid the delights of Rome! . . . Although in my fear of hell I had condemned myself to this prison, with scorpions and wild beasts as my only companions, I was often surrounded by troops of dancing girls. My skin was pale with fasting but, though my frame was chilled, my mind was burning with desire, and the fires of lust bubbled up while my flesh was barely alive. Helpless, I threw myself at the feet of Jesus, watered them with my tears, dried them with my hair, and I subdued my resistant body with weeks of fasting. I do not blush with shame in the face of my wretchedness, rather I lament aloud that I am not now what I used to be. . . . I feared my cell as though it knew my thoughts.

As with Eustochium, Jerome pictures himself as enclosed, he in a cell, she in a garden. Her garden, however, is sealed, while his cell opens on a torrid landscape of psychic fever.

63. Carson, Eros the Bittersweet, 32–33 (italics in original).
64. Kelly, Jerome, 41.
65. Ep. 22.6.4 (CSEL 54.151); Jerome again discusses the topic of “innate heat” in Ep. 54.9 (CSEL 54.475), appealing for authority to the Greek physician Galen. For the evidence from ancient medical writings on this and related topics, see Rousselle, Pornelia, 5–23.
Peter Brown has described this passage as an “artistically brilliant contraposto of the sweltering body of the monk and the untamed sexual drives of his mind.”\(^{67}\) However, apart from the opening reference to the burning desert sun, Jerome describes his body as literally icy cold, his flesh as good as dead. The literal pallor and chill of a body ravaged by ascetic fasting was not matched by a cooling of desire; indeed, Jerome’s libidinal imagination was producing dancing girls by the dozen. As with the evil virgin described earlier, Jerome’s literal body was not a trustworthy mirror of the condition of his psyche. I suggest that Jerome’s opening picture of himself as *exusta solis ardoribus*, “inflamed by the burning heat of the sun,” is a portrayal of his *imaginal*, not his literal, body. *Exusta*, from *exuro*, can carry the metaphorical sense of “inflamed” as well as the literal sense of “burned” or “dried up.”\(^{68}\) Whatever one might say about his actual body, it was the “body” of his imagination that was on fire.

It was this kind of passage that led an older generation of scholars to view the basis of asceticism as a dualistic split between body and soul; hatred and therefore punishment of the body were the complement of spiritual devotion.\(^{69}\) A newer generation of scholars has almost completely reversed this view. In the words of Brown, “Seldom, in ancient thought, had the body been seen as more deeply implicated in the transformation of the soul; and never was it made to bear so heavy a burden. . . . In the desert tradition, the body was allowed to become the discreet mentor of the proud soul.”\(^{70}\) I agree with this perspective as an overview, but in Jerome’s case I think it needs to be qualified. Given his flight from the actual body and his attempts to construct a paradigm of an ideal body in his letter to Eustochium, the question that presents itself is: *which* body served as mentor to the soul? It would appear that only the body-as-metaphor could serve Jerome as psychic tutor.

In his epistolary textualization of himself in this memory-space of desire, Jerome has taken the steps he took when writing women’s bodies: he has noted his own gross physicality, and he has then shifted his vision to a bodily metaphor—the chorus of girls—to signal his psychic condition. What he has not yet attained, however, is a poetic body that would allow him to express his erotic drives in a register other than the carnal. The one

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\(^{67}\) Brown, *The Body and Society*, 376.

\(^{68}\) Lewis and Short, *A Latin Dictionary*, s.v. *exuro*.


Scriptural image that he does find in the passage quoted above, the Lukan image of the penitent prostitute, only underscores his dilemma. Lacking, then, a transformative Scriptural body, Jerome remained too open to the fearful articulations of his libido. Only by assuming the character of language in the mode of the chaste eroticism of the Eustochium-paradigm could Jerome unite his physical and psychic bodies in that “third” body where erotic expression could be given free rein.

Harpham has written that the man who went to the desert had placed himself “under a virtual obligation to reinvent himself.”71 The self of the ascetic in the desert was an unfinished work of art for whom “the personal is the trivial; it is that which must be sacrificed in the interests of form.”72 This was exactly Jerome’s situation in the desert, at least, this was Jerome’s situation in his written memorial of his experience in the desert. In this textualization of his memory, he was struggling to banish the personal and, like his view of Eustochium, to become the form of his own imaginal body. That he took a step toward the final chiseling of his self in the desert is not part of his narrative to Eustochium, but we know from elsewhere that he did take that step, and he did it in and by language.

Given the specific Scriptural images that Jerome used to rearticulate Eustochium’s body, it is interesting that, while he was in the desert, he asked Rufinus to send him a copy of a then-popular commentary on the Song of Songs.73 It would seem that, burning with “heat” as he was at that time, he needed textual images of eroticism to gratify his own blazing body. The language of the Song of Songs was not, however, the language that provoked a turn in Jerome’s relation with his carnality; rather, that language was Hebrew.

In a letter written some thirty years after his stay in the desert, Jerome wrote:

When I was a young man walled in by the solitude of the desert, I was unable to resist the allurements of vice and the hot passions of my nature. Although I tried to crush them with repeated fastings, my mind was in a turmoil with sinful thoughts. To bring it under control, I made myself the pupil of a Christian convert from Judaism. After the subtlety of Quintillian, the flowing eloquence of Cicero, the dignified prose of Fronto, the smooth grace of Pliny, I set myself to learn an alphabet and strove to pronounce hissing, breath-demanding words.74

71. Harpham, Ascetic Imperative, 24.
72. Ibid., 25.
73. Ep. 5.2.2 (CSEL 54.22); see Kelly, Jerome, 48.
Language—in this case, the Scriptural language of Hebrew—provided Jerome with a refuge from his body. But it also proved itself to be an erotic outlet, with its “hissing words” that made him literally “pant” for breath.75 Only by submerging his desire in a language that took his breath away could he begin to experience the closure for which he longed. Jerome had discovered that his fasting could not satisfy the voracious hunger of his inner self. Contrary to his ascetic expectations, a hungry body did not make for a chaste libido.76 Like the haiku poet who said,

I can’t eat all this lust
Jerome found another way in which to engage his desire.77

Moving from Jerome’s memory of the desert to his dream, it will again become apparent that his goal was to cure his body through language. The idea that language might be a therapy of the body is not unique, it would appear, to contemporary psychoanalysis; it was already at work in Jerome’s quest for healing.78 Particularly in his account of his famous dream in the letter to Eustochium, there is explicit evidence of a conviction that a new language, the language of Scripture, could bring Jerome closer to his ideal body.

Jerome recounts his dream to Eustochium in the course of advising her not to be overly eloquent either in her pronunciation of words or in her choice of reading material. He characterizes such trifling with language by using, typically, a sexual metaphor: such trifling is an “adultery of the tongue.”79 He follows this with his well-known paraphrase of Tertullian: “What has Horace to do with the psalter, Virgil with the gospels, Cicero

75. See Kelly, Jerome, 50, n. 17: “The participle anhelantia (lit. ‘panting’) refers to the drawing of breath required for pronouncing certain aspirate or guttural sounds in Hebrew.” Such forceful drawing-in of the breath would require a correlatively forceful exhalation.

76. On the relation between food and sexuality in ascetic thinking, see Rousselle, Porneia, 160–78. Both doctors and ascetics subscribed to the idea that a severely restricted diet would reduce sexual urges, and Jerome was no exception (see n. 65 above); in his case, however, the diet didn’t work.

77. This haiku is by Morimoto Norio and is quoted in Hiroaki Sato, One Hundred Frogs: From Renga to Haiku to English (New York: Weatherhill, 1983), 143.


79. Ep. 22.29.6 (CSEL 54.188).
with the Apostle?" As though in direct answer to those questions, Jerome then narrates his dream. He prefaces the narrative of the dream with an account of the beginning of his ascetic practice: unable to give up his beloved library, he would fast—only to be able afterwards to read Cicero as a reward for his labors. So too with Plautus and, by implication, the rest of the secular corpus that he so admired. Sadly, he remembers, the style of the Scriptures seemed "rude and repellent" by comparison. According to Jerome, "the serpent was sporting [inluderet] with" him, just as the Bridegroom will later "sport" [ludat] with Eustochium. However, the serpent's play ensnared Jerome in a clash of forms and a reluctance to reinvent himself; such sporting produced, not a re-made body like Eustochium's, but a deadly fever. In the midst of this illness, Jerome dreamed.

Suddenly I was caught up in the spirit and dragged up to the tribunal of a judge. . . . Asked about my identity, I replied, "I am a Christian." And he who sat [behind the tribunal] said, "You are lying; you are a Ciceronian, not a Christian; for where your treasure is, there is where your heart is also." Immediately I became mute, and, amid the floggings—for he had ordered that I be beaten—I was tortured more strongly by the fire of conscience, pondering within myself that verse, "In hell who shall acknowledge you?" Nevertheless I began to cry out and woefully to say: "Have mercy on me, Lord, have mercy on me." Amid the lashings this sound rang out. Finally those who were standing around, falling down on their knees before the one who was presiding, begged that he have mercy on my youth and give me the opportunity for penitence. There would be more torture at a later point if I were ever again to read pagan literary books. . . . I began to make an oath and, calling on his name as witness, I said: "Lord, if at any time [in the future] I possess pagan writings or read them, I will have denied you." Dismissed after this oath, I returned to the upper world. . . . This was not an idle dream. . . . My shoulders were black and blue, and I felt the bruises after I awoke from sleeping. Thenceforth I read the divine books with much more eagerness than I had read the books of human beings.

The picture of himself that the dream presented to Jerome is very much like his portrayal of himself in the desert. There, determined to forget or somehow beat his body into submission, he was obsessed with images of

80. Ep. 22.29.7 (CSEL 54.189); for Tertullian's famous exclamation, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem, or what has the Academy in common with the church?," see Praescr. haer. 7 (CSEL 70.10).
81. Ep. 22.30.2 (CSEL 54.189).
Caught between two literalisms—that is, a negative theology of his own carnality, on the one hand, and a possessive sexualization of women, on the other—desire wreaked havoc on him both psychologically and physically. Likewise, the dream also presents Jerome to himself as a battleground, and again his body is the locus of the clash, this time a clash of cultures, one secular and the other religious. In both memory and dream, Jerome reveals that he had suffered the delicious return of what he had tried to repress. Cicero and the dancing girls would not give way to Scripture and chastity.

Although Jerome prefaces this dream with a lucid account of the condition that provoked the dream, I think it is the case that he was not conscious of his schizoid swing between denial and gratification until after the dream had occurred. As Aristotle said, the one who is impelled by desire reaches for delight by means of an act of imagination. One cannot know one's desire apart from such acts.

In the dream theory of late antiquity, the dream was a phenomenon of imagination in two particular ways. First, theorists and ordinary dreamers alike thought that dreams were predictive of the future—not “merely” predictive but deeply revelatory of the flow in time of configurations embedded in the present. Jerome’s dream, for example, shows him the necessary outcome of his present conflicted condition, and marks that condition on his very body with bruises, the physical tokens of his imaginal experience. A second aspect of late antique culture’s understanding of dreams which is important to bring to bear on Jerome’s dream is their source. Dreams were not considered to be personal acts of imagination originating in the inner self of the dreamer but were rather thought to be presentations to the dreamer by an extra-personal figure, usually divine.
Again, Jerome has no doubt about the truth and divinity of this dream, or of others that he mentions elsewhere.88

Dreams, then, were thought to deal with the hidden present, a present not accessible to the consciousness of the dreamer until the dream itself appeared. What a dream presents is the "other" of the conventionally constituted self, since the self presented by the dream does not match the dreamer's (prior) self-perception. The dream is a picture of a self that does not yet exist; it is a text of desire, founded on lack. Further, since the source of dreams was located in otherness—in God—the dream presents the dreamer to himself as "written" by what is other to himself. The "I" of the dreamer is estranged from itself, decentered and reformulated.

Harpham notes that St. Anthony urged his desert followers to write down their dreams, thus, in his words, "moving textuality into the undisclosed regions of the self."89 From this perspective, Jerome's dream is doubly textual and also doubly disclosive. Written in the letter to Eustochium, the dream is a text that is about text, and it reveals not only an undisclosed region of Jerome's self but also an unknown aspect of his body. In Jerome's case, writing down his dream issued in a textualization of the unknown self that he desired; but it also produced a physicalization of his inner self. The unknown self that comes to consciousness in Jerome's dream—the self split between a desire for style and a desire for religious sensibility—is played out entirely on the body of the oneiric Jerome. Like Eustochium's, his body is a space of desire, and it is on his body that his quest for his own imaginal form is pursued.

The dream writes Jerome's body just as Jerome wrote Eustochium's body. In both instances, the language out of which the desired body is constructed is Scriptural language—literally, for Eustochium, in the images of the Song of Songs, and potentially, for Jerome, in the turn from secular to sacred literature. Jerome, waking up with black and blue shoul-

88. Jerome remarks in Ep. 22.30.6 (CSEL 54.191) that his was not a vana somnia, "an idle dream." See also Ep. 107.5 (CSEL 55.295), in which Jerome narrates the fulfillment of a dream in real life with no doubt about the causal connection between the dream and the event. In his C. Ruf. 1.30–31 (PL 23.421B–424A), Jerome later reversed himself on this topic, calling dreams "vague fancies." But in this case his back was against the wall, since Rufinus, in his Apol. 2.6–8 (CCL 20.87–90), had accused Jerome of failing the dream and his oath never to read secular literature again. In self-defense, Jerome objects to being taunted with a "mere dream" and says that the promise made in the dream pertained to the future; if he still quotes secular literature, it is from memory, which he can't erase, not from his post-oneiric reading practices. Thus Jerome both retains and denies the authenticity of the dream in C. Ruf.

89. Harpham, Ascetic Imperative, 14.
ders, did not quite manage the ideally closed and untouchable body of metaphor that he concocted for Eustochium and, as any reader of the text in which this dream-text is embedded knows, he did not keep the oath he made in the dream even in the letter in which he tells the dream, studded as it is with allusions to the very classical texts that he supposedly foreswore.90 Still, the idea that drives Jerome’s letter, that is, the idea that language can be a therapy of the body, rewriting it in voluptuous imaginal terms, is present in the dream-text’s picture of Jerome suffering the forging of a new language in the fabricated body of his imagination.

Encoded in Jerome’s bruises were the signifiers of his desire, a desire to reinvent himself in Scriptural terms. Much more so than his memory of the desert, the dream encapsulates and brings to expression the intricate relationships among body, desire, and language that fuel the letter’s passion. Although memory too is a desirous act of imagination, it retains the possibility of an historical kernel, a remembered contour of the self from the past. A dream, however, is entirely fictive; as a phantasmatic signifier of what is other to and lacking in the self, it is a pure projection of desire and so was a particularly fitting vehicle for Jerome’s rearticulation of the body—his own, and, in fact, Eustochium’s as well.

What my discussion has suppressed to this point is that the most heavily eroticized passage in Jerome’s letter to Eustochium, the moment when her body is aroused by the sexual foreplay of the bridegroom, is presented by Jerome as a dream! Here are his words: “The secrets of your bedchamber always guard you; your bridegroom always sports with you on the inside. Do you pray?: you speak to the bridegroom. Do you read?: he speaks to you. And, when sleep comes upon you, he will come behind the wall and put his hand through the opening and touch your inner body, and trembling you will rise up and say, ‘I am wounded by love.’ ”91 As a representation of the self’s otherness, the dream served Jerome well as a vehicle for the ideal body, wholly external to its own carnality yet voluptuous nonetheless, ephemeral in its poetic composition yet tangible as a textual “magnet for erotic interest.”92

A written dream is a curious combination of the ephemeral—the dream—and the permanent—the text. It is a paradoxical construction that matches perfectly the sexually chaste body of Jerome’s desire. As I have pursued this paradox through Jerome’s letter to Eustochium, I have not, of course, been reading Jerome’s understanding of the intentionality of

90. Wiesen, St. Jerome, 119–27, esp. 126; see also Kelly, Jerome, 43.
92. This phrase is from Harpham, Ascetic Imperative, 51.
his text. I have been following a figuration of the text's imagistic structure. Interestingly, a subsequent exchange between Jerome and Eustochium suggest that she, too, had perceived the erotic underpinnings of her mentor's ascetic advice.

Jerome probably sent his letter to Eustochium in the early Spring of C.E. 384. Some weeks later, at the end of June, Eustochium sent Jerome some presents to mark the feast of St. Peter, a celebratory day for Roman Christians. We know about these presents because Jerome wrote another letter to Eustochium thanking her for the gifts. To the man who had recently configured her as the erotic bride of the Song of Songs, Eustochium sent a letter, bracelets, doves, and a basket of cherries. Unfortunately we do not have Eustochium's letter to Jerome, but it is hard to believe that his earlier letter was not on her mind, since in it Jerome refers so often to the passage in the Song of Songs in which the bridegroom calls his lover a dove. In the form of a gift of doves, Eustochium sent to Jerome a token of her imaginal body.

At the beginning of this second letter, Eustochium's erotic response to him seems to have escaped Jerome, who devotes half of his text to an exploration of the hidden significance of her gifts of a letter, doves, and bracelets. He converts them into a threefold warning: "Take care that you do not abandon the ornaments of good works, which are the true bracelets of the arms. Do not tear the letter written on your heart as the wicked king cut with a penknife the letter brought by Baruch. Do not let Hosea say to you as to Ephraim, 'You are like a silly dove.' " The doves, bracelets, and letter are all explained by way of Scriptural passages. Deflecting the gifts from himself, Jerome is again writing Eustochium's body, but this time it is a moralistic, not an erotic, body.

Halfway through this letter, Jerome finally thanks Eustochium for her gifts in a tone which suggests that he realized that his moralizing allegories might seem a rather sharp way to receive presents. He names in particular the cherries, which he has not mentioned to this point. "Still, lest I seem to slight your gifts," he writes, "I accept them, especially the basket filled with cherries so fine and blushing with such virgin modesty." Writing what Kelly calls "an almost skittish reference to the colour of the cherries, which

93. Kelly, Jerome, 100.
94. Ep. 31 (CSEL 54.249–51).
96. Ep. 31.2 (CSEL 54.250); the Scriptural references are to 1 Tim 2.10; 2 Cor 3.2; Jer 36.23; Hos 7.11.
97. Ep. 31.3 (CSEL 54.251).
recalls a virgin’s blushes,” Jerome immediately displaces the cherries, since there are no Scriptural references to them, and speaks of figs instead, also in a moralizing tone. His deferral and displacement of these cherries suggests that Jerome actually did perceive an *eros* in Eustochium’s presents, and it made him “skittish.” Why? Why could the man who had so eroticized this young woman’s body, transferring it so completely to an imaginal register, not accept the round, red tokens of the space of her desire?

Jerome’s attempt to erase the literal body by reimagining it as an assembly of textual metaphors appears not to have worked. Even the poeticized body was dangerous. Despite recent scholarly attempts to view positively the place of the body in asceticism, Jerome was fleeing from the body, even as he constructed seemingly “safe” poeticized versions of it. However erotic that poetic body of metaphor was, and however paradoxical was his figuration of asceticism, Jerome’s distaste for carnality (and his pull toward it) was so strong that, instead of achieving a union of flesh and soul in the textual body of his dreams, he produced a split between them that was all the more dangerous because his paradigm was so physically poetic, so appealing as a mirror of desire. Had he accepted the cherries with delight, the end of my story would be different. But the cherries, I think, provoked in him that untamed libidinous fire that is the other side of bodily repression. In fact, unlike the poet with whom this paper began, for whom words are as voluptuous as the flesh, Jerome displaced all of his desire onto words, leaving the fleshly body prey to the schizoid situation he was trying to overcome.

Jerome’s second letter to Eustochium shows that his attempt in his first letter to construct a space of desire in which a union of flesh and spirit could take place ended in a fetishization of language. And his rewriting of the body—woman’s body in particular—made it a fetish as well. When female sexuality is identified with textuality, as it often has been, the woman’s body becomes a “blank page” to be written by men, and its “fearful power to articulate itself” is allowed only the channels of ephemeral virginity or pornographic carnality. Finally, Jerome’s vision of an imaginal female body universally available as the goal of religious *eros* was only a “tragic


way of killing a woman," to borrow the title of a recent book. It was also a tragic way of killing a man, as his own biographical sketches in the letter to Eustochium show. He never achieved the poetic closure that he projected as his ideal body because the ideal itself did not take the body seriously, and he remained a slave to sexual lust.

“Desire is quenched by desire” is a dangerous battlecry on the field of the body. It closes the space that eros needs in order to flourish.

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100. Nicole Loraux, *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman*, trans. Anthony Forster (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987). This is a study of the manner in which the heroines of Greek tragedy were put to death; in his comments on the jacket of the book, John Winkler summed up its import succinctly: “In studying the reasons and methods of death, Loraux elicits the code or syntax of female honor from the language of male tragedy. Among other things she shows how the spectacle itself, with its various etiquettes of death, is an act of cultural violence to the mythological heroines it portrays.”

101. See Kelly, *Jerome*, 295, who discusses a passage from Jerome’s *Comm. Amos 2* pro. (CCL 76.263–64); written when he was in his mid-seventies, this passage “lays bare his guilt-ridden psychology.” It shows that, in his old age, Jerome was still bothered by, in his words, “that uniquely burdensome tyrant, sexual desire,” which he continues to describe with metaphors of fire: “When one is old, the spark now and then glows among the burnt out ashes and tries to come to life, but it cannot get the blaze going.”

102. *Ep. 22.17.4* (CSEL 54.166).