The fervor with which large numbers of early Christian women pursued lives of asceticism and renunciation is a curious fact in the history of women in late antiquity. In recent years, several feminist scholars have attempted to explain the attraction of the ascetic life for early Christian women by demonstrating that renunciation of the world paradoxically offered women the possibility of moving outside the constraints of socially and sexually conventional roles, of exercising power, and of experiencing a sense of worth which was often unavailable to them within the traditional setting of marriage. The purpose of this essay is to engage the question of the attraction of asceticism for women from a slightly different perspective, to try to determine the effect of worldly renunciation and celibacy on the lives and sexuality of early Christian women and on the culture which constructed women's limited options in the first place. The first section of the paper deals with the question of method and the problem of sources; the second section treats the idea of virginity as the fathers of the church and other male writers of the period portrayed it. The third section attempts to portray the diversity of women's practice of virginity and to set this experience in the context of the other options available to women at this moment in history; the fourth section seeks to draw conclusions about the meaning of virginity and renunciation for women's sexuality in late antiquity.

Problems of Method And Sources

To ask questions about women's history in any period is to embark on a treacherous and often disappointing search for buried treasure. When the

period of history is remote and evidence has had centuries to be lost, misfiled, unindexed, rewritten, suppressed, the task grows yet more frustrating. And when, finally, one turns to the history of women in Christianity in a remote period, the situation takes on Heraclean contours. In attempting to understand a distant moment in the lives of Christian women, an historian faces not only the silence of misplaced information and absent texts, but the work of orthodoxy over the centuries. Orthodoxy's power derives from its own dogmatism and its claim to absolute truth; the vacillations of orthodox truth over time have produced the approved bibliography and the filters through which information has passed. It is true that certain heterodox texts have survived through historical accident; it is also true that details concerning women's historical experience may sometimes be deduced from the texts that do remain, as, for example, when the actions of a church council or synod against a particular action by women provide evidence that women were acting outside of the prescribed conventions of the church. But this sort of evidence is almost always fragmentary, and women's side of the story is never preserved.

Even evidence concerning the most orthodox women is often absent through neglect or oversight. Jerome's letters to Paula, Marcella, Eustochium, and other learned and literate women were collected and preserved while not a single letter of any of these women remains. The situation is the same with respect to John Chrysostom's correspondence with Olympias as well as with other church fathers and the women to whom they wrote. A poignant example of the accidental nature of historical knowledge


3 John Chrysostom, Epistolae ad Olympiadem/Lettres à Olympias, 2d ed. aug. with Vita Olympiadiis/La Vie Anonyme d'Olympiadas, text established and French trans. Anne-Marie Malingrey. Sources Chrétiennoes no. 13 bis (Paris: Cerf, 1968). Hereafter cited as Ep. and Vita Olympiadiis. There is a certain irony, given the fact that none of Olympias' letters remain, that Malingrey says of John's letters, "Il nous reste encore un grand nombre de lettres qui ont le merite d'etre de veritablees échanges de pensee et d'amitié," Malingrey, "Introduction," 11. ("A large number of letters remain for us which have the value of being genuine exchanges of thought and friendship.")

4 Rousselle, Porneia, 231, n. 8 for a summary of the evidence on this point. One exception appears to be the letters of Melania the elder to Evagrius Ponticus, some of which have been preserved, along with his sixty-two letters to her, in Armenian. This preservation seems to have occurred, thanks to the special place Melania held in the Syriam tradition. Cf. Nicole Moine, "Melaniana," Recherches Augustiiniennes 15 (1980): 64, n. 327.
of even the most exceptional and orthodox women of the early church is the case of Macrina, the sister of Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa. Thanks to Gregory’s biography of Macrina, the story of her life is part of the church’s history. According to Gregory’s narrative, Macrina, at the age of twelve and through her own rhetorical finesse and theological understanding, evaded her parents’ attempts to marry her off, and later single-handedly converted her worldly brother Basil to asceticism. Of course, hagiographical fervor may account for some of Gregory’s claims about his sister’s life; nevertheless, there is no reason to believe that the entire account of Macrina’s influence over Basil’s spiritual life is invention. Therefore, it is somewhat shocking to discover that, in all of Basil’s writings, which comprise four volumes of Migne’s *Patrologi* and includes 366 letters, Macrina is never mentioned once. How many women lost their places in the written record of the church because no one chose to write their biographies and because the men whose lives they influenced omitted any mention of them? How many exceptional women may have been only mentioned and been otherwise lost without a trace? How many “ordinary” virgins are absent from the record altogether?

The regrettable state of the historical record duly noted, there nevertheless remain sources which help in the construction of a partial portrait of women’s experience of virginity and asceticism in the early centuries of Christianity, and which suggest certain interpretations of that portrait. With a few notable exceptions, the sources for the history of the idea and practice of virginity and asceticism among women are literary sources. One of the earliest sources is probably the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles, a collection of narratives which provides evidence for the attraction of Christian asceticism for women in the second and third centuries. Treatises and

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6 Ibid., 5, 6ff.  
7 Ibid., cf. Maraval’s introduction, 23–29, 92 on the text as a philosophical, *theios aner*-type work.  
10 These exceptions are papyrus documents which lend credence to the fact that literary sources do not tell the whole story of women’s experience of the ascetic life. The documents are BGU 13897, P. Oxy. 1774 and 3203; cf. A. M. Emmett, “Female Ascetics in the Greek Papyri,” *Jahrbuch der österreichischen Byzantinistik* 32 (1982).  
homilies on virginity and renunciation had their origins in the third century in Africa and seem to have become a favorite of writers in the fourth century and afterwards.\textsuperscript{12} The lives of certain exceptional women remain, notably Macrina, Syncletica, Olympias, and Melania the Younger.\textsuperscript{13} As noted above, there is a one-sided epistolary tradition involving virgins and ascetic women, women who received the carefully preserved letters of such important church fathers as Jerome, Paulinus of Nola, John Chrysostom, and Basil.\textsuperscript{14} The monastic movement in the east, a particular manifestation of the ascetic ideal, produced two anecdotal works which include information on women's experience of asceticism, Palladius' \textit{Historia Lausiaca} and the anonymous \textit{Historia Monachorum in Aegypto}.\textsuperscript{15} Finally, the monastic desert also preserved a handful of sayings attributed to the holy women Theodora, Sara, and Syncletica in the collection \textit{Apophthegmata Patrum}.\textsuperscript{16}


\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Apophthegmata Patrum} (PG 65, 71–440); sayings of Theodora (PG 65, 201A–204B);
The question then is how to use these texts to understand and interpret the experience and meaning of asceticism and virginity for women, and for the culture as a whole. Of course, as Butler, Rousseau, and Moine have ably shown, to act under the assumption that these texts portray history as twentieth-century scholars understand that concept would be naive. Narratives and discourses full of miraculous healings, demons (real or imagined), hagiographical fervor, and a desire to recreate—through example and dogmatic definition both—an ideal of Christian perfection and the angelic life, are not historically accurate in the modern sense, nor do they mean to be. Rather, they are orthodox attempts to frame and order experience and doctrine into a single, monolithic image of Christian existence. In a Christocentric, ecclesiocentric world order, each act and its motivation must be adapted to the dominant set of categories or be lost or called heretical. Thus, true virgins remained chaste for love of Christ, in a desire to perfect themselves for an angelic future, for an ideal of humility and self-effacement. They did not do so to escape disagreeable home lives, to avoid painful sex, or to have access to a different set of possibilities than the limited ones offered them by a constricting social order. The texts offer a glimpse of women’s experience of virginity, and a clear and well-developed picture of the frame which envelops the image, the frame comprised of the categories which constructed and attempted to appropriate and subsume the experience. The question becomes this: where did women’s experience of virginity and asceticism coincide with the orthodox line and where did it rupture that line? Did women use the Christian categories to try to break the severely limiting conventions of the social order? Was such a rupture possible, given the shared notion of patriarchal dualism which created the material and ideological realities of both late antiquity in general and early Christianity in particular? And the final, specific question which motivates this entire inquiry: what did the movement toward virginity and ascetic renunciation mean for women’s sexuality?

The Roots Of Asceticism And The Idea Of Virginity

The roots of asceticism lie at the very heart of the Christian tradition, in Jesus’ more radical exhortations on the requirements of discipleship and in Paul’s advice to early Christian communities to follow his example of the celibate life so as not to detract from preparation for the coming kingdom of God. How did these early roots bring forth such a flourishing of radical sayings of Sara (PG 65, 419B–422A); sayings of Synclletona (PG 65, 421A–428A). English translation in Owen Chadwick, ed., Western Asceticism (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1958), 33–189.


18 Mk 8:34–9:1 (par.); Lk 9:1–6 (par.); etc; 1 Cor 7.
renunciation? How did the eschatologically motivated words of Paul and the historical exigencies of the early centuries of the common era combine to produce an ascetic ideology and practice virtually unheard of in antiquity and certainly never before practiced by such large numbers of people representing such a spectrum of society?  

One convincing hypothesis suggests that the ascetic ideal flourished as a response to the end of the persecutions of Christians in the early fourth century. Brock, for example, argues this way:

Movements can often best be understood in terms of reactions against some aspect of contemporary society, and just as the idealism of modern aspirants to an “alternative society” has largely been motivated by disgust at the materialistic affluence of the post-war society they live in, so that of their fourth century counterparts was, to some extent at least, the product of a reaction against the degradation of the quality of Christian life after the last persecutions had ceased. As we shall see, the ascetic is in many ways the successor of the martyr. To the early church the martyr represented an ideal, and after the end of the persecutions, when this ideal was no longer attainable, it was replaced by that of the ascetic, whose whole life was in fact often regarded in terms of a martyrdom, and it is very significant that much of the terminology used in connection with ascetics, such as “contest,” “athlete” and so on, was previously applied to martyrs. In the case of the ascetic the human persecutor has simply been replaced by a spiritual, that is to say, demonic, counterpart. Moreover, if one sees the ascetics of the fourth century onwards as heirs to the martyrs, it helps one realise why they regarded their life as simply carrying on the norm of Christian life in pre-Constantinian times, when to be a Christian was usually a matter of real seriousness.  

19 Judaism offers two examples of communities self-consciously pursuing lives of ascetic renunciation and withdrawal, the Essenes and the Therapeutae and Therapeutrides. The ancient references to the Essenes may be found in Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* XIII, 5, 9; XV, 10, 4–5; XVIII, 1, 2–6; *Jewish Wars* II, 8, 2–14; Pliny, *Historia Naturalis* 5, 17; Philo, *Quod omnis probus liber sit* 12–13. The sole witness for the community of the Therapeutae/Therapeutrides is Philo’s *De Vita Contemplativa*. The Greek tradition is without a parallel notion of asceticism; cf. Anatole Moulard, *Saint Jean Chrysostom: Le défenseur du mariage et l’apôtre de la virginité* (Paris: Lecoffre, 1923), p. 171ff, which cites certain exceptions: temporary asceticism among athletes, but without moral connotations, and some ritual virginity which was also always only temporary. The Roman tradition offers the example of the vestal virgins, whose virginity was tied to the well-being of the state. That the virtues and dangers of virginity as a permanent condition were being discussed in the first century of the common era is attested by Soranus, *Gynaeciorum Libri IV*, ed. Ioannes Ilberg. Corpus Medicorum Graecorum vol. 4 (Leipzig: Teubner, 1927), paragraphs 30–32 (pp. 20–22). Finally, the philosophical tradition, particularly Stoicism, was exploring the question of the relationship between marriage and sexuality on the one hand and the pursuit of the good on the other; see below for the discussion of the Stoic influence on certain Christian notions related to virginity and asceticism.

Marcel Viller has traced the connection between martyrdom and asceticism from its origins in Christianity, showing how the ideology of asceticism made it possible for the faithful to follow Christ and achieve perfection even during the persecutions without becoming martyrs. He also demonstrates how asceticism was elevated during the years following the persecutions to a position more honored even than martyrdom itself, and how new notions such as that of the nonbloody martyrdom of renunciation arose after the fourth century to accommodate the new historical situation.21

Of course, one can probably not account completely for the rise of the ascetic ideal by invoking the historical move from cultural marginality to hegemony which the Christianizing of the empire represented. Nevertheless, it seems quite likely that the shift played an important role in the evolution and growth of asceticism in the fourth century. Certainly, the developing ideology of virginity and asceticism would sustain such an argument, since the special status of virgins, already asserted in the first centuries of Christianity,22 becomes a commonplace in the fourth-century literature.23

This unfolding ideology of virginity is highly complex, intertwining

21 Marcel Viller, "Le Martyre et l'ascèse," Revue d'ascétique et de mystique 6 (1925): 105–142. One example he offers comes from Anthony Melissae, Sententiae sive Loci Communtes II, 13 (PG 136, 1113D–1116A): "The martyrs often attained perfection in a single moment of battle; the life of monks, a daily battle for Christ, is also martyrdom, it is not only a battle against flesh and blood, but against the principalities and powers and the masters of the world of darkness, against the spirits of evil. We sustain the struggle until the last breath..." Cf. Pseudo-Athanasius, Vita Synclétique 8 (PG 28, 1489D–1492A) where Syncletica is compared with Thecla, and the author asserts that Syncletica's sufferings were greater than those of her martyred counterpart.

22 Cf., for example, Cyprian, De Habitu Virginum 3: "They [virgins] are the flower of the tree that is the Church, the beauty and adornment of spiritual grace, the image of God reflecting the holiness of the Lord, the most illustrious part of Christ's flock." Hippolytus includes ascetics in the seven divine orders (Fragmenta in Proverbia, PL 10, 627) and Origen places virgins third in his hierarchy, following only the apostles and the martyrs (Commentarius in Epistolam ad Romanos 9, 1, PG 14, 1205). For a complete discussion of Origen's position on virginity, cf. Henri Crouzel, Virginité et mariage selon Origène, Museum Lessianum section théologique no. 58 (Paris/Bruges: Desclee de Brouwer, 1963). Clement of Alexandria calls ascetics "even more elect than the elect" (Quis dives salvetur 36).

23 Cf. Methodius, Symposium, Discourse 7, 3, 157–158, where virgins are called the legitimate brides of Christ, while all other women in the church are concubines, young girls, or daughters; virgins are unique, elect, most honored in Jesus' eyes. Another familiar motif in the literature of the fourth century is excessively high praise for the exceptional virgins: Macrina is called "the common object of great boasting in our family" (Gregory of Nyssa, Vita Macrinae 22, 28); Eustochium is called the first among the nobles of Rome (Jerome, Ep. 22, 15); Melania the elder was "the true pride of Christians of our time" (Jerome, Ep. 39, 5); Melania the younger was "the first among the senatorial class of Romans" (Vita Melaniae 1), and Olympias' virtues are the object of especially abundant rhetoric (Vita Olympiadis 13ff).
theological arguments, current philosophical ideas, and a collection of contemporary rhetorical themes to produce a tightly woven image of virginity as the ideal of Christian life. The development of such an ideal was probably an inviting challenge for the writers of the early church, since they were always treading dangerous (which is to say, potentially gnostic) ground with the body-spirit dualism which undergirded the arguments for virginity. They avoided it by returning to the idea first expressed by Paul, that marriage was good but virginity was better; this notion became both the cornerstone for patristic discourses on the preferability of virginity and the tool used against those who were thought to pursue their asceticism too rigorously, such as the encratites attacked by John Chrysostom and the Eustathians condemned at the Council of Gangra. 24 At the same time, the notion of sexuality was extremely narrowly defined, which is to say, heterosexual intercourse within marriage with the goal of producing children. Justin asserts, “Formerly we took pleasure in debauchery, but now we embrace chastity alone. . . . If we do marry, it is absolutely only in order to raise our children, and if we renounce marriage, we keep perfect continence.” Clement of Alexandria discusses the goals of marriage, saying that the desire should be to act according to nature, which is to say, to produce children. Meanwhile, Jerome praises marriage because it produces virgins, as does Eusebius of Emesa. 25

While the church fathers may have defended marriage, they were also quite zealous in conjuring images of its limitations in order to create a sharper contrast between it and the ideal of virginity. The theme of the pains of marriage is common in the Hellenistic rhetorical tradition, and it became a useful trope in the construction of the notion of virginity in the fourth-century literature. John Chrysostom found in the comparison a rich theme on which to expound in his De Virginitate; he devotes twenty-two chapters to the pains of marriage and how the virgin escapes them. Jealousy is an


inevitable side-effect, but by no means the only disadvantage of marriage. A wealthy marriage is much more painful than a poor one: if the woman brings more property to the union, the husband must yield to the wife’s authority; if the man is richer, he becomes the wife’s master and she must do and suffer everything as though she were his slave. The married woman’s life is full of chagrin and worry: she must concern herself with family members and their affairs, their bad luck, their loss of money, their illnesses, their accidents, their deaths. She must worry about her spouse’s character, then over her own fertility—whether she might be sterile or, conversely, might have too many children. If she does conceive quickly, she must worry about miscarriage, about the potential death of the baby or her own death at delivery; the pains of childbirth are so torturous that they alone are capable of overshadowing all the joys of marriage. Then she dreads the possibility that her child might be malformed rather than healthy, or that she might have a girl rather than a boy. All this, without yet any mention of the problems of the child’s upbringing! The fear of the death of one of the spouses and the anguish of separation round out John’s rendering of the pains of marriage, a harsh and poignant account which will become the backdrop for the portrait of the ideal, virginity.  

John Chrysostom’s description of the pains of marriage is only one of many. Gregory of Nyssa echoes many of John’s observations, calling marriage the chief evil, leading to quarrels and suspicion; he invokes the authority of ancient narrators, and claims that every story begins with marriage and ends in tragedy. Finally, he compares marriage with disease. Jerome assumes that the arguments against marriage are well-known, so that he need not bother to reiterate them, but directs Eustochium to the treatises by Tertullian, Cyprian, and Ambrose on the subject. Eusebius of Emesa writes about the pains of marriage as well, making many of the same arguments as John and Gregory. He concludes his poignant description with this dramatic summary:

Such are the so-called advantages which seduce so many young girls [into marriage]. They constitute a warning to wise and sensible girls. Look at these modest and prudent brides: one buries her husband while another delivers herself over to funereal laments, and another is crushed with grief. This one yielded to injustice, that one died before her marriage, another succumbs right in the middle of the wedding itself. Another cries for her groom, another for her children, and another is desolate at the cruelty of her husband. Here is one who cries for herself, crazed by jealousy, who increases her

27 Gregory of Nyssa, De Virginitate 3, esp. 3, 10.
28 Jerome, Ep. 22, 2; 22, 22. Note that, elsewhere, Jerome preserves a fragment of Theophrastus’ De Nuptiis, against marriage (Adversus Jovinianum 1, 47; PL 23, 276–277).
investigations to discover the cause of her husband's enslavement [by another woman (A)]. Finally, here is a mother, burdened with children: to remove illnesses and to obtain medicines, she passes her nights wide awake; she sweats, she suffers, she is afraid, she torments herself. She awaits death as if it would bring to her a greater kindness than life. 29

The virgin, by contrast, suffers with joy for Christ and escapes the many difficulties of married life. 30 The virgin, says John Chrysostom, "is not obliged to involve herself tiresomely in the affairs of her spouse and she does not fear being abused." Even the harshest sufferings of the virgin cannot compare to the sufferings of the married woman. "Tell me," says Chrysostom,

during her entire life, does the virgin endure what the married woman endures almost every year, the one who is split apart by labor pains and wailings? For the tyranny of this suffering is such that, when divine scripture wants to represent captivity, famine, plague, and intolerable evils, it calls all these the pains of childbirth? And God imposed it on women as a chastisement and an affliction, not childbirth, I say, but childbirth with sufferings and anguish. "For in struggle," he says, "you will bear children." But the virgin stands higher than this anguish or this suffering. For the one who annulled the curse of the law, annulled this curse along with it. 31

Cyprian, earlier, used the same Genesis text (3:16) to show the liberating aspect of virginity. "You virgins are free from this sentence," he wrote;

you do not fear the sorrows of women and their groans; you have no fear about the birth of children, nor is your husband your master, but your Master and Head is Christ in the likeness of and in the place of a man; your lot and condition are the same (as that of men). 32

This theme of virginity as liberation was common in the treatises on virginity and occurs frequently in the traditions concerning particular holy women. 33 Jerome, for example, attributes this statement to Melania the Elder, upon the death of her husband and two children: "'Lord, I will serve you more easily, since you have relieved me of such burdens.'" 34

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30 John Chrysostom, De Virginitate 64.

31 Ibid., 59, 65.


33 Camelot, "Les traités," 281; Gregory of Nyssa, De Virginitate 3, 8; Eusebius of Emesa, Homiliae 6, 5; 6, 16; 7, 18 (cf. Amand de Mendieta, 794–797).

34 Jerome, Ep. 39, 5.
The notion of virginity as liberation from the exigencies of earthly marriage leads into the theme of celestial marriage with Christ, as Cyprian's text quoted above suggests. The language of Christ as bridegroom is present throughout all of the literature concerning virgins, along with the assertion that a vow of virginity is an irrevocable marriage contract with Jesus. Gregory of Nyssa brings together many of the images associated with this brand of "spiritual marriage" in his De Virginitate. There he speaks of the marriage of the virgin spirit with God as the authentic archetype for all marriage, a marriage in which God is preferred over all others. He uses eros-language throughout the text, and it would appear that he understands virginity to be a spiritual version of sexual love. To yield to passion is to commit adultery against the celestial bridegroom; virginity demands the mistrust of all flesh. Gregory carries even the notion of fertility into the spiritual realm: virgins possess a special spiritual fecundity and, as imitators of Mary, become themselves mothers of Christ. There is, in addition, a special and practical advantage to this spiritual fertility: it is the one way in which women can conceive without being dependent upon the will of men.35

Gregory was the only writer to systematize this collection of ideas in this way, but the notion of the virgin as the bride of Christ is present from the earliest patristic writings.36 Tertullian uses the idea to undergird his argument that virgins ought to be veiled; since a modest wife never goes out without a veil, virgins, who are brides of Christ, should all the more so wear veils.37 The rite of velatio (veiling) later committed the virgin to an irrevocable and mystical marriage with Christ38 and violation of the tie was considered sacrilegious adultery.39 In the fourth century, imperial law reinforced

35 Gregory of Nyssa, De Virginitate, Aubineau introduction, 193–204; 2, 2; 3, 3, 8; 4, 7; 14, 3; 15, 1; 16, 1–2; 20, 1 and 3–4; 23, 6.
36 On the Virgin as bride, see, for example, Augustine, De Sancta Virginitate 56 (PL 40, 428); Methodius, Symposium, Discourse 6, 5, 145; 7, 3, 157; Eusebius of Emesa, Homilia 6, 16; 6, 18. On Jesus as bridegroom: Pseudo-Athanasius, Vita Syncreticae 92 (PG 28, 1543C–1546A); Gregory of Nyssa, De Virginitate 3, 8; 15, 1; 16, 1; 20, 4; Jerome, Ep. 22, 2; Acts of Thomas 4ff, 6–7, 124.
37 Tertullian, De Virginum Velandis 16 (PL 2, 911).
39 This theme is very common in literature on "fallen" virgins; cf. Basil, Ep. 46, 2; Jerome, Ep. 22, 13; Vita Olympiadi 17; John Chrysostom, De non iterando Coniugio 3; Eusebius of Emesa, Homilia 7, 26; Cyprian, De Habitu Virginum 20. Cf. also Aubineau, "Les écrits de Saint Athanase," 155, and canon 19 of the Council of Ancyræ (314 CE): "All those who have consecrated their virginity and who have violated their promise ought to be considered bigamists" (Hefele, I: 321f).
this ecclesiastical proscription. The virgin-bride should do the will of the bridegroom, repress her senses through asceticism in order to gain access to the heavenly bridal chamber, and guard her body, spirit and soul for Christ, her spouse.

The erotic language which surrounds descriptions of a virgin’s encounter with Christ is rather striking. The metaphor of marriage leads to a kind of spiritualized sexuality:

Ever let the privacy of your chamber guard you; ever let the Bridegroom sport with you within. Do you pray? You speak to the Bridegroom. Do you read? He speaks to you. When sleep overtakes you He will come behind and put His hand through the hole of the door, and your heart shall be moved for Him; and you will awake and rise up and say: “I am sick with love.” Then he will reply: “A garden inclosed is my sister, my spouse; a spring shut up, a fountain sealed.”

This motif of eroticism and erotic substitution is present in the earliest narratives concerning women’s asceticism, the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles, and it continues as an important theme, especially in the lives of holy women. Macrina, on her deathbed, is filled with “that divine and pure love (erōs) of the invisible bridegroom,” and she hastens toward her lover. Olympias imitates the lovers (erastes) of Christ, burning with ardor, and John Chrysostom’s lessons are said to light the fire of divine love (theios erōs) in the virgins of Olympias’ convent. It is recounted that Melania the younger was in love with Christ from her youth and wounded by divine love.

Accompanying this erotic language, as with Gregory’s systematized notion of spiritual marriage, is the idea of spiritual fecundity. The image is an old one, found in Philo’s description of the Therapeutrides, then in early writers on the fertility of the church and finally, fertility becomes a characteristic of virginity itself. Methodius, for example, speaks of the virgins who receive the pure and fertile seed of doctrine as though they were

40 Leclercq, “Vierge,” 3102ff; Codex Theodosianus IX, 25.
41 Athanasius, De Virginitate 2 (PG 28, 253B–D), 24 (PG 28, 279C–282A); Pseudo-Athanasius, Vita Syndeticæ 9 (PG 28, 1491A–B); Jerome, Ep. 22, 25; John Chrysostom, Ep. 8, 3; Vita Melaniae 42. Conversely, false virgins do not deserve entry into the bridal chamber: John Cassian, Conference 22, 6. Also Basil, Ep. 46, 3; Cassian, Conference 22, 6; Methodius, Symposium, Discourse 5, 4, 116; Vita Melaniae 42; Athenagoras, Legatio 33. On the virgin’s body as an empty temple to be filled by the spirit, cf. Jerome, Ep. 22, 23; Eusebius of Emesa, Homilia 6, 18 and elsewhere (cf. Amand de Mendieta, 782–783); Crouzel, 46–49.
42 Jerome, Ep. 22, 25; cf. also Jerome, Ep. 22, 17, which acknowledges the difficulty of the human spirit renouncing love, but carnal love ought to be replaced by another desire: the virgin ought to be able to say, “During the night, in my bed, I sought him who loved my spirit.”
44 Gregory of Nyssa, Vita Macrinae 22; Vita Olympiadis 5; 6; 8; Vita Melaniae 1; 32.
45 Philo, De Vita Contemplativa 68: “Eager to have her [wisdom] for their life mate they
brides. Others describe the engendering of the son of God in the spirit of the virgin, thus making it possible for her to imitate Mary.

The underside of these metaphors of spiritualized marriage and sexuality is a persistent suspicion of the flesh and its passions, a suspicion not solely Christian in origin, but found throughout the Stoic philosophical tradition which influenced much Christian thinking about virginity. The Stoic system is based on the precept that passion and reason are natural adversaries and that the goal of human life should be to become logikos and apathes, reasonable/logical and without passions; to do so is to live life in accordance with nature. Clement of Alexandria, one of the church fathers particularly influenced by Stoicism, based his notion of sin on this Stoic idea; for Clement, sin was defined as the passion of the spirit against nature. The tyranny of sensation and the passions as an obstacle in the pathway to the Christian ideal is a common notion in early Christian writings, especially from the third century on, and especially in the writings on virginity and continence. Evagrius Ponticus describes a chain whose links are sensation leading to desire which leads to pleasure; the goal of Christian perfection must be to wipe out sensation in order to break the menacing chain. Saint Syncletica, in her attempts to achieve perfection, closed off her senses to everything except the Bridegroom. Eusebius of Emesa preaches:

Among the virgins whom the ardent desire of God has touched, lust is dead, passion killed. Nailed to the cross with its vices and desires, the body is like a stranger to them; it does not feel what you feel, it is no longer of the same nature as your body. The resolution of virginity has transported it to heaven; the human nature of the virgin is not long on earth with you.

have spurned the pleasures of the body and desire no mortal offspring but those immortal children which only the soul that is dear to God can bring to the birth unaided because the Father has sown in her spiritual rays enabling her to behold the verities of wisdom.” Cf. also Legum allegoricae 3, 180–181 and De cherubim 42, 43, 48f for similar imagery. Cyprian, De Habitu Virginum 3; Methodius, Symposium, Discourse 3, 8, 70–71; 75 (church as the receptacle of the fertile seed of doctrine); Discourse 8, 11, 197 (the virile/potent logos). Cf. also Crouzel, 15–44, on Origen’s development of the notion of the mystical union of the church and Christ. Also cf. Ambrose, De Virginibus 1, 5, 31 (PL 16, 197); Augustine De Sancta Virginitate 2, 5, 6, 12 (PL 40, 397; 401).

47 Ambrose, De Virginibus 1, 3, 6, 11, 30 (PL 16, 191f, 197); Augustine, De Sancta Virginitate 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, (PL 40, 397). For general discussion, cf. Bourassa, 30–33.


50 Spanneut, passim; Lutz, 20, n. 83; Clement of Alexandria, Paedagogus I, 6, 1.

51 Evagrius Ponticus, Capita Practica ad Anastolium (PG 40, 1243–1246C).

52 Pseudo-Athanasius, Vita Syncreticae 9 (PG 28, 1492).

53 Eusebius of Emesa, Homilia 7, 13 (Amand de Mendieta, 784).
In the spiritual marriage described by Gregory of Nyssa, to yield to the passions is to commit adultery against God and the very nature of spiritual marriage is the distrust of everything carnal.  

The philosophical ideal which Gregory outlines in his biography of Macrina includes liberation from the passions (apatheia) as one of its characteristics. At the tragic and unexpected death of her brother Naucratius, Macrina uses reason (logismos) against passion (pathos) to overcome her grief, and thereby becomes her mother’s instructor in the Stoic virtue, courage (andreia). One characteristic of the ascetic community created by Macrina at Annisa was the absence of passion; having liberated themselves from passion, these virgins were above human nature. Macrina, just before her death, so achieved the goal of apatheia that she became an angel in human form, with no affinity with the flesh. This apatheia, born out of devotion to Christ, should be so complete that the virgin lives an everyday death.

In Gregory’s biography of Macrina, the equation of pathos and femininity is made explicit. The connection may be Stoic in origin, as Seneca opens his dialogue, De Constantia Sapientis, with a comparison of Stoics and other philosophers, using the metaphor of sexual difference: “Stoici, virilem ingressi viam” (“Stoics, advancing along the manly way”). The idea is common in early Christian writers, and it provides an important metaphor for Philo as well. Porphyry’s well-known letter to Marcella provides an example from contemporaneous non-Christian writings of the connection between femininity and corruptible bodiliness:

Therefore, . . . do not preoccupy yourself with the body, do not see yourself as a woman, since I no longer hold you as such. Flee in the spirit everything feminine (thélunomenon) as if you had a male body which enveloped [you]. For from a virgin spirit and a virgin mind the most blessed things are born; from the intact is born the incorruptible; but that to which the body gives birth, all the gods called polluted.

54 Gregory of Nyssa, De Virginitate 16, 1–2; 20, 3.
55 Gregory of Nyssa, Vita Macrinae 10; on the virtue of andreia among women specifically, see below. John Chrysostom advised Olympias that she conquer her passions and sufferings through reason, Ep. 3, lb.
56 Gregory of Nyssa, Vita Macrinae 11; 22; For apatheia as a goal beyond mastery of the passions, cf. John Chrysostom, Ep. 8, 5a–b. For this goal as part of the model for the Stoic sage, cf. Seneca, De Constantia Sapientis III.
57 Vita Melaniae 12. Cf. also Jerome, Ep. 22, 17, which advises Eustochium to seek out for company only those virgins who are thin and pale through repression of their bodily passions, those who say lovingly, “I want to die [dissolve myself] to be with Christ.”
58 Gregory of Nyssa, Vita Macrinae 10. Origen makes the same equation; cf. Crouzel, 135–139.
59 Seneca, De Constantia Sapientis I, 1.
60 Richard A. Baer, Philo’s Use of the Categories Male and Female, Arbeit zur Literatur und Geschichte des hellenistischen Judentums no. 3. (Leiden: Brill, 1970).
61 Porphyry, Ad Marcellam/Lettre à Marcella, text established and French trans.
Many of the ascetic women whose stories remain are considered laudable because they escaped the bonds of their feminine nature: thus, Olympias and Melania are both called ἡ ἀνθρώπος (the [feminine article] hu/man [generic, masculine noun]). Gregory says of Macrina at the beginning of her story, "A woman is the starting-point of the narrative, if indeed a woman; for I do not know if it is proper to name her who is above nature out of [the terms] of nature." Likewise, John Chrysostom is said to have responded to a question concerning Olympias by saying, "Don't say 'woman' but 'what a man!' because this is a man, despite her physical appearance."62 In addition, in one of the few sayings attributed to women in the monastic tradition, Mother Sara says of herself, "I am a woman by nature but not in reason."63 Athanasius advises virgins to abandon feminine mentality, because women who please God will be elevated to male ranks.64

The idea of virgins transcending or rising above nature is a point at which Stoicism and Christianity part ways, though in the case of the Christian ideal, nature is apparently not meant in the sense of the nature-reason equation but rather as that which has to do with the material, female realm. John Chrysostom understands virginity as a struggle against the tyranny of nature as does Melania the Younger's biographer. Eusebius of Emesa portrays the Christian ideal as that which negates or transcends nature and calls fallen virgins those who "fall to the level of nature."65 Jerome is alone among the church fathers in seeing virginity itself as the natural state, though here he seems to be using the term "natural" as part of the nature-reason equation, since he makes the point in the context of arguing that sexuality itself is the product of the fall.66

The notion of ascetic women evading their female nature arises in an interesting narrative motif which appears early in the tradition and remains a controversial sign of female renunciation and spirituality well into the ninth century—the motif of women cutting their hair or disguising themselves as monks.67 Thecla, who remains the model of virginity for generations of

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62 Vita Olympiadis 3; Palladius, Historia Lausiacca 9 (on Melania); Gregory of Nyssa, Vita Macrinae 1; Palladius, Dialogus de vita S. Ioannis Chrysostomi (PG 47, 56).
63 PG 65, 420D. The same theme occurs also in Gregory of Nyssa, De Virginitate 20, 4 and Vita Melaniae 39.
64 Athanasius, De Virginitate 10–12 (PG 28, 261C–266B).
65 John Chrysostom, Ep. 8, 6d; Vita Melaniae 12, Eusebius of Emesa, Homilia 7, 6; 7, 8 (cf. Amand de Mendieta, 780–781); Amand de Mendieta, 819.
67 Evelyne Patlagean, "L'histoire de la femme déguisée en moine et l'évolution de la
ascetic women, both cuts her hair and wears men's clothing in the Acts of Paul and Thecla while, in other Apocryphal Acts, Mygdonia cuts her hair and Charitine wears men's clothing. Syncretica is said to cut her hair as a sign of her renunciation of the world. Transvestism among virgins is said to be accompanied by loss of female bodily characteristics, and to be followed by the negation of sexuality altogether:

But there is more: the fundamental negation of femininity, where the physical spoiling is a manifestation of the spirit's evasion of its native condition. Our texts often express themselves in this regard in images which are quite explicit. . . . "Her breasts were not like the breasts of other women," we read about Hilaria. "On account of her ascetic practices they were withered; and she was not subjected to the illness of women, for God had ordained it that way": the symbol remains clear under physiological evidence. The withered breasts, "like dead leaves," reveal, when Anastasia or Hilaria was shrouded, at once their femininity and the accomplishment of their asceticism. The body of Apollonaria became "like the exterior of a turtle," but Christ wanted to render her "the honor of the crown of the holy fathers," and to show her "virile virtue" [andreia].

The transvestite woman passes for a eunuch.

Despite their function as a sign of renunciation and holiness, transvestism and hair cutting were not always lauded as a practice demonstrating piety. Jerome warns Eustochium against women who dress as men and the Council of Gangra in the mid-fourth century condemned ascetic women who, as a part of their rigorous renunciation, cut their hair and wore men's clothing.

One last theme pertaining to the cultural construction of virginity remains to be examined: the notion of courage borrowed from Stoicism,
Lutz means. Preamble word writings, women as found enough feminine. This content downloaded from 165.82.54.147 on Tue, 2 Dec 2014 11:49:03 AM 
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life as a woman (marriage, sexuality, childbirth); it is also called another kind of marriage, a bond where sexuality is spiritualized, where the virgin gives birth to virtue or Christ himself, where loyalty to the Bridegroom must be absolute. The feminine has no place in this virginal order; it is explicitly banished, along with passion, materiality, and the body itself. What did this banishment mean? How did women experience it and why might they have chosen it? The next two sections will try to answer these questions.

*Women's Experience Of Virginity*

Virginity and asceticism, though probably not institutionalized completely until much later, were part of Christian practice from very early on. Clement of Rome makes an allusion in his first-century letter to the Corinthians to those who practice chastity, and Ignatius sends a special greeting to virgins in his letter to the Smyrneans which dates from the first decade of the second century.\(^{80}\) Galen’s mention of the Christians, in the second half of the second century, focuses specifically on their practice of chastity, and the virginity of Christians became a common apologetic theme in second- and third-century writings.\(^{81}\) The Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles, as noted in the previous section, attest to the importance of asceticism in the spirituality of second- and third-century women. Cyprian’s third-century *De Habitu Virginum* already suggests some kind of recognized category of virgins within the church, and perhaps some form of consecration by which a virgin becomes a member of such a group.\(^{82}\)

The evidence for women's asceticism becomes a bit less fragmentary with the rise of monasticism, the origins of which are traditionally placed at 307 with Pachomius’ founding of a coenobitic community of monks in Egypt.\(^{83}\) The tradition retains the story of Pachomius’ sister, Maria, who came to visit her brother at his desert monastery. He refused to see her, but offered to build her a hut outside so that she might follow the ascetic life as well. She agreed and became the leader of one of the two women's monas-

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\(^{80}\) Clement of Rome, *Epistola 1 ad Corinthios* 38, 2; Ignatius, *Epistola ad Smyrnaeos* 13, 1; cf. also n. 11 above for other references from the Apostolic Fathers.


\(^{82}\) Cyprian, *De Habitu Virginum* 4; 24. For an excellent study of the development of the practice of consecration of virgins, see Metz. In his discussion of the early centuries, he concludes that, while third-century texts do not rule out the practice of public vow-taking, they also do not provide enough evidence to prove its existence (66). He locates the institution of public vow-taking and the establishment of an actual order of virgins in the fourth century (74–76).

\(^{83}\) Butler, I: 206, n. 2 argues that the 307 date is extrapolated from the Arabic version of the Pachomian life, a version which is not authoritative; he places the founding of the first monastery between 315 and 320. For general histories of monasticism in the early years, cf. Mary Bateson, “Origin and Early History of Double Monasteries,” *Transactions of the
teries which remained, along with nine men's monasteries, after Pachomius' death. The nuns in these first convents followed a strict form of asceticism which differed from that of Pachomian monks only in the matter of dress. From these early beginnings, monasticism flourished, with evidence of communities of virgins in other parts of Egypt and in Palestine, Asia Minor, Syria, Rome, and other parts of Italy. By the beginning of the fifth century, Theodoret reports virgins living in large communities everywhere, Palestine, Egypt, Asia, Pontus (the northeastern-most corner of Asia Minor), and Europe.

Monastic life was not the only way that women pursued their commitment to virginity, however. Before the formation of such communities, virgins lived with their parents or with a small number of other virgins still in the world, albeit somewhat withdrawn from it. The anonymous Greek homily from the fourth century published by Amand and Moons presupposes a situation in which the virgin remained in her parents' home.

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84 Palladius, Historia Lausiaca 33. Maria's leadership is also mentioned in Athanasius' Vita S. Antonii 3; 54 (PG 26, 844; 921); Bateson, 139.


86 Theodoret, Religiosa Historia 30 (PG 82, 1493). Cf. also Metz, 81–87, for a discussion of the earliest communities of virgins.


Eusebius of Emesa's two homilies on virginity make no mention whatsoever of communities of virgins and, in fact, explicitly require a virgin to stay home unless her family abandons her, in which case she is permitted to live with another virgin. The practice of "home monasticism" was also common among the aristocratic women of Rome in the fourth century.  

There is also evidence from a variety of sources for women living continently with their husbands in marriage, apparently without suspicion. However, when virgins lived with continent men, as they did in large numbers throughout the early church, the practice came to be challenged and condemned by church fathers and councils alike. The earliest condemnation of *virgines subintroductae*, as the women were called, came in 268 at the Council of Antioch and was followed by restrictive canons produced in 300 at Elvira, in 317 at Ancyra, and in 325 at Nicaea. Basil and Cyprian both wrote epistles against the practice, and Jerome mentions "those women who appear to be, but are not, virgins" several times. The author of the two pseudo-Clementine epistles to virgins, dating from the fourth century, also condemns *subintroductae*, as do Eusebius of Emesa, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus. But none of these condemnations is as rhetorically rich as those produced by John Chrysostom in his two pastoral letters against the practice of cohabitation of virgins and continent brothers. All of these attempts to proscribe the practice reinforce

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89 Eusebius of Emesa, *Homilia* 6, 22; cf. Amand de Mendieta, 799–803, who sees these homilies as strong evidence for familial asceticism in the Greek east during the middle (330–350) of the fourth century; Clark, "Ascetic Renunciation," Yarbrough.


91 Hefele, I: 201, translator's n. 2: "This custom was widespread in the whole church in antiquity; we encounter it in Syria, Persia, Africa, Spain, Gaul, everywhere." For more general discussion of the practice, see Hans Achelis, *Virgines Subintroductae: Ein Beitrag zum VII. Kapitel des I. Korintherbriefs* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1902), and more recently, Clark, *Jerome, Chrysostom, and Friends*.

92 Ibid.; cf. also Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 7, 30, 12. Hefele, I: 236: Canon 27: bishops and other clerics may cohabit only with their own sisters or daughters and only if these women are virgins and have been consecrated to God. Hefele, I: 321f. Canon 19: virgins are prohibited from living like sisters with brothers. Hefele, I: 536ff. Canon 3: bishops, priests, deacons, and all other members of the clergy are prohibited from having a *syneisaktos* live with them unless she is the clergyman's mother, sister, aunt, or someone who escapes all suspicion.


94 John Chrysostom, *Adversus eos qui apud se habent subintroductas virgines* (PG 47,
the conclusion that it was a practice to which many virgins (and brothers) adhered. Whether virgins broke their vows of chastity in living with men, as some church leaders claimed, cannot be ascertained from the evidence. Yet it is clear that women found it a desirable arrangement in which they continued to participate at least well into the seventh century.\footnote{95}

The evidence for the ages of women devoting their chastity to God varies, though many appear to have done so early in life. Palladius tells of Talis, a woman who followed the ascetic life for eighty years, of Taor, who was a virgin for sixty years, and another virgin, unnamed, who was ascetic for sixty years as well. Macrina was twelve when she decided to remain a virgin; Olympias was widowed at nineteen and refused to remarry; Blesilla, Paula’s daughter and Eustochium’s older sister, began her ascetic life at her widowed age at twenty; Melania the Elder, widowed at twenty-two, pursued asceticism, and her granddaughter, Melania the Younger, renounced the world at twenty, after seven years of marriage.\footnote{96} Such early marriages and widowhoods were quite common in the Roman period, as marriage, within the aristocracy at least, was the standard method of sealing pacts between families and assuring that a legitimate heir existed for the passing on of property. The marriage often occurred between an older man and a young girl, sometimes younger than twelve.\footnote{97}

Despite the fact that girls were considered ready for marriage at such a young age, they were by no means thought to be capable of making decisions for themselves, and the decision to renounce the world and to guard one’s virginity was not often met with encouragement from parents and other family members. Often the parents were concerned to assure the continuation of their line, as was the case with Synclética and Melania the


\footnotesize{\footnote{96}Palladius, Historia Lausiaca, 46, 56, 59–61; Gregory of Nyssa, Vita Macrinae, Mar-aval’s introduction, 45; John Chrysostom, Ep. 8, 5c; Vita Olympiadis 2-3. Jerome, Ep. 39, 1; Palladius, Vita Melaniae, 8. Cf. Moine, “Melaniana,” 65, for a challenge to Melania the Elder’s age, on the basis of the unreliability of Palladius’ dating.}

Younger. Macrina also faced opposition when, at the death of her fiancé, she decided to remain a virgin. John Chrysostom speaks of the fact that Olympias scandalized many people by her practice of asceticism, and her biography tells of the emperor confiscating her wealth because she refused to remarry after being widowed at nineteen. The problem of parental opposition provoked much rhetoric on the part of the church fathers. Paulinus of Nola describes Melania the Elder's struggle to embrace asceticism after the deaths of her husband and two of her three children:

Many were her skirmishes down to the very elements in this warfare against the vengeful dragon. . . For the whole force of her noble relatives, armed to restrain her, attempted to change her proposal and to obstruct her passage. 98

Ambrose argues that girls can choose, by law, the men they want; why should they not be able to choose God? Jerome speaks of family members' attempts to impede girls from becoming virgins, and implores, "Mother, why are you distressed because your daughter wants to be the bride, not of a soldier, but of a king himself? She has brought you a big advantage: you have become the mother-in-law of God." 99

The decision to remain a virgin and to renounce marriage and the world did provide some virgins with an opportunity to pursue intellectual and spiritual activities which would otherwise have been unavailable to them. Especially among educated aristocratic women who wished to pursue a life of study, the life of ascetic renunciation was the only institutionally established means of pursuing intellectual work. Jerome praises the abilities of Blesilla, who knew Greek and Hebrew and rivalled her mother in the study and chanting of psalms. Melania the Younger rigorously pursued her life of study, and her biographer reports that many women from the senatorial class and other highly placed people came to her to discuss points of theology. Macrina, as noted before, is credited by Gregory of Nyssa with being her brother Basil's spiritual teacher; she was also the teacher of her mother and another brother Peter, and was the leader of the home monastic community at Annisa. Palladius lauds Melania the Elder and Olympias for their studiousness and their roles as teachers, and Olympias was also an influential leader of a monastery of women in Antioch. Other ascetic women also pursued the leadership of women's communities, notably Paula and Eustochium in Bethlehem and Melanie the Younger in Jerusalem. 100

100 Jerome, Ep. 39, 1; Vita Melaniae 23; 27; 54. Gregory of Nyssa, Vita Macrinae 6; 10; 12;
For affluent women, a life of asceticism and virginity also meant not total renunciation of their wealth, but paradoxically, control over it. Cyprian, in the third century, does not require the group of virgins to whom he writes to give up their wealth, but to be generous with it. The women of the Roman aristocracy pursued the genteel form of home asceticism without renouncing their wealth, though diverting it from the standard route of inheritance and thereby so disrupting the system of capital exchange within their class that eventually legislation was passed which prohibited such drainage of aristocratic holdings. 101

For the most part, little is known about the financial details of much early ascetic life, aside from the sponsorship of monasteries by aristocratic Christians. Certainly, not every community of virgins possessed such sponsorship, and furthermore, the majority of virgins were not wealthy women. Ascetic life was by definition, of course, quite spartan (the genteel asceticism of certain Roman matrons notwithstanding), and the value placed on manual labor in many communities 102 may have been significant enough to produce the necessities for a group of virgins. In addition, evidence from fourth-century Egypt provides a few hints of other possibilities. Three papyrus documents in particular, two letters and a contract, attest to the fact that Christian women pursued business dealings, perhaps to support themselves. 103 The letters involve a community of “sisters” which appears to be involved in a business providing commercial items to other groups of “sisters”; the letters include a rather eclectic list of objects and discussion of payment. The letters do not provide a clear indication of the nature of this group of “sisters,” whether they are consecrated virgins, how many they are, how they live. The letters do suggest, however, the strong—and otherwise unattested—possibility that a group of (ascetic?) Christian women were in business to support themselves, perhaps as a community. The contract documents the fact that two nuns have rented a piece of land to a Jewish man. Otherwise, it leaves open questions about the women’s background, how they came to acquire this land, where they live. But what is striking about these documents is that they provide evidence for activity among ascetic women—business dealings which may well have been the means of


101 Cyprian, De Habitu Virginum, 11; Clark, “Ascetic Renunciation,” 241–242; cf. also Rousselle, Porneia, 177, who notes as well that before 320, those who chose celibacy over marriage had no claim to their inheritances.

102 Gregory of Nyssa, Vita Macrinae, Maraval’s introduction, 48–49.

103 A. M. Emmett, “Female Ascetics in the Greek Papyri,” Jahrbuch der österreichischen Byzantinistik 32 (1982); BGU 13897; P. Oxy. 1774, 3203.
support for these women—otherwise unattested by the evidence for ascetic women in the first centuries of the church. While the documents provide very little concrete information, and while their uniqueness makes conclusions difficult, they are nevertheless an important reminder that women's asceticism is not fully described or explained by the evidence traditionally preserved as the history of the church.

Women's material experience of asceticism was diverse. Living at home, continently with husbands or religious men, in communities of virgins, ascetic women pursued their spiritual commitment in widely varying activities, including study, manual labor, and perhaps also commercial involvements. In doing so, they also avoided the conventional duties and potential dangers of marriage and motherhood. What did this renunciation, in practice and colored by the ideology which gave it form, mean for women and their sexuality?

The Meaning of Virginity For Women's Sexuality

The problem of interpretation remains, and it is a difficult one because the evidence remains fragmentary, and because it suggests at best a paradoxical reading. Others have demonstrated ably how asceticism and virginity may well have appeared as liberating options to women living in a culture that offered them few alternatives beyond the conventions (and potential dangers) of marriage and motherhood. Kraemer, for example, argues this way about that asceticism described in the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles:

The conversion stories of the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles reveal elements of the attraction which ascetic Christianity may have held for certain women in the Greco-Roman world—either women who found the traditional roles of wife and mother inadequate measures of their worth, or women who could not participate in the rewards guaranteed by adherence to those standards—socially marginal women, widows, or barren women. Although the Acts of the Apostles are replete with conversion accounts of men, the renunciation of sexuality and sociosexual roles, as we have seen, had far greater implications for women than it did for men. Religious systems which legitimize the rejection of the established socio-sexual standards, as did ascetic Christianity, are likely to attract large numbers of discontented and marginal women and to propound standards of worth and redemption more consonant with their circumstances. 104

Clark and Ruether demonstrate that asceticism provided the aristocratic women of the fourth century with otherwise unavailable opportunities to pursue study and to act as administrators and spiritual leaders of their

104 Kraemer, 306-307; cf. also Davies, 112-114, who argues, somewhat differently, that conversion to Christianity (as described in the Apocryphal Acts) permitted women to exempt themselves from sexual duties and to leave marriages where sexual continence was not possible.
communities. Rousselle argues that women's contribution to the development and spread of Christianity had more to do with the material and social freedom made possible under asceticism than with spiritual fervor.\(^{105}\)

These twentieth-century scholars are not the first to have asserted the "feminism" of the ascetic life. In an 1896 study probably influenced by the contemporary idea of a mother-age which preceded patriarchy, Lina Eckenstein describes the attraction of monasticism for early Christian women:

For at the time when contact with Christianity brought with it the possibility of monastic settlements, the love of domestic life had not penetrated so deeply, nor were its conditions so uniformly favourable, but that many women were ready to break away from it. Reminiscences of an independence belonging to them in the past, coupled with the desire for leadership, made many women loathe to conform to life inside the family as wives and mothers under conditions formulated by men. Tendencies surviving from an earlier period, and still unsubdued, made the advantages of married life weigh light in the balance against a loss of liberty. To conceive the force of these tendencies is to gain an insight into the elements which the convent forthwith absorbs.\(^ {106}\)

It seems fairly clear that ascetic renunciation did offer women in the early church an alternative to the conventions of marriage and motherhood, and thus a kind of control over their sexuality. In marriage, a woman could not deny access to her body to her husband, and much as she might wish to control her fertility, contraception and abortion, while apparently widely practiced, remained unreliable and often dangerous.\(^ {107}\) In this sense, asceticism, despite its harsh demands, may well have seemed attractive to many women. Yet it is not at all clear that the ideology of virginity was not as domesticating and circumscribing of women's sexuality as the ideology of marriage. Furthermore, the demands of self-renunciation had far greater implications, not only physically and socially, but culturally for women than for men because of the structure of the ideas of virginity, sexuality, and femininity in relation to theological ideas about redemption.

\(^{105}\) Clark, "Ascetic Renunciation"; Ruether, esp. 93–94; Rousselle, Porneia, 227.  
\(^{106}\) Lina Eckenstein, Woman Under Monasticism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1896), 3. Eckenstein also writes: "For the convent accepted the dislike women felt to domestic subjection and countenanced them in their refusal to undertake the duties of married life. It offered an escape from the tyranny of the family, but it did so on condition of such a sacrifice of personal independence, as in the outside world more and more involved the loss of good repute. On the face of it, a greater contrast than that between the loose woman and the nun is hard to conceive; and yet they have this in common, that they are both the outcome of the refusal among womankind to accept married relations on the basis of the subjection imposed by the father-age" (Eckenstein, 5).  
Women's sexuality, historically, has been appropriated as a tool of men's power, a sign in the masculinist system of communication, a commodity in the system of exchange. The institution of marriage arose as part of that system of exchange, and in the Roman world a girl's body was the token which sealed agreements between families, her virginity being the measure of her value. Thus, Plutarch writes of the Romans' practice of marrying their daughters off at an early age:

But the Romans give them [their daughters] away at twelve and even younger; for thus the body and the moral character [of the girl] might be clean and untouched for the husband.

In the realm of religious virginity, women's sexuality functioned in a similar way as a token offered to God as a sign of renunciation; the virgin's body belonged to the celestial Bridegroom, conceptually, in the same way that it would have to his earthly counterpart. I am not suggesting that the experience of marriage and virginity was identical; rather, I am arguing that women's sexuality was being used structurally in the same way, that the underlying idea of women's sexuality was the same in the social world and the religious realm. The religious system adopted the reigning idea of women's sexuality as token of exchange and reinforced it by investing it with theological significance. This fact would not be especially significant, except for the way in which sexuality becomes the hingepin for the whole system of asceticism. The renunciation of sexuality and sexual nature is a unique demand, given the meaning which is assigned sexuality by the culture. For women, their sexuality is synonymous with their identity in this cultural order; to demand its negation is to make a far more profound demand for alienation and renunciation of self than any demand for continence on the part of men. Thus Jerome's glorification, quoted above, of the virgins who say, "I want to die [dissolve myself] to be with Christ," becomes a haunting reminder of what was culturally at stake in the movement toward virginity: self-dissolution which has no counterpart in the culture of continence.

This does not mean that every virgin's experience of asceticism and


On Christian attitudes toward contraception and abortion, see Clement of Alexandria, Paedagogus II, 10 (96.1); Jerome, Ep. 22, 13 (which describes fallen virgins who inadvertently commit suicide by taking abortives which are poisonous); Crouzel, 80–81; R. M. Roberge, "L'avortement dans la pensée chrétienne des premiers siècles," Collection d'Etudes Anciennes 7 (1977): 83–90.


109 Plutarch, Vita Nona 26, 2.
renunciation was an experience of conscious alienation. It does mean that, to the extent to which external conceptualizations shape experience, the practice of virginity was given its contours and its tone by the idea of women's sexuality as a token of exchange in a masculine system, whether that system be social or religious. This becomes clear in two sets of evidence concerning virgins: first, the imagery of marriage which provides a structure for the virgin's relationship with Jesus, including the idea that fallen virgins are adulteresses; and, second, in a small but significant corner of the tradition concerning virgins—those who committed suicide when confronted with the threat of rape.

Is is not possible to tell how frequently virgins were confronted by this threat of violence; the Historia Monachorum in Aegypto speaks of a virgin of God being raped by brigands, and the isolation of eremetic women in the desert probably made them the victims of assaults more often than is recorded. Macrina's mother is said to have wanted to remain a virgin, but married to obtain protection because she feared abduction and rape. Jerome, in his letter to Eustochium, uses the tragic example of the results of Dinah's having gone out to exhort Eustochium (and other virgins) to remain indoors.110

In the literature on virginity itself, it is Eusebius of Emesa who raises the theme by incorporating three edifying tales of virgins into his Homilia 6; two of these stories—of Pelagia, and of Bernice and Prodocen—result in the suicides of the virgins to escape rape; the third, concerning Theodora,111 tells of the virgin's escape from prison (and the concomitant threat of rape) by trading clothes with Didymus, a fellow Christian who sneaked into her cell to save her and her virginity. The virgins are hailed as fine examples, who would die at their own hand rather than suffer the loss of their virginity. The horror of the threat of rape, as portrayed by Eusebius and others, is not the violence or the outrageousness of the attack, but the fact that it renders the virgins' bodies damaged goods, no longer eligible for the celestial bridal chamber. The problem was significant enough that the church fathers went on to debate whether a virgin had sinned in committing suicide under such circumstances; John Chrysostom concludes that the virgins had not sinned because of their sacrifice, and Ambrose says that their faith suppresses their crime. Augustine, however, asserts that flight from sin is not a sufficient motive for suicide in this case, because "the sin of others does not stain."112

110 Historia Monachorum in Aegypto 14, 4; Gregory of Nyssa, Vita Macrinae 2; Maraval, 145, n. 4 documents a certain frequency of such abductions during the period; Jerome, Ep. 22, 25.
112 John Chrysostom, Homilia in S. Pelagian (PG 50, 579–584); Homilia in SS. Bernicen et Prodocen (PG 50, 629–640); Ambrose, De Virginibus 3, 7 (PL 16, 229–232); Augustine, De Civitate Dei 1, 26 (PL 41, 39–40).
It is not unimportant that, along with assigning women's sexuality and virginity this commodity-value, the ideology of virginity adopts the familiar idea of the equation of femininity and passion, both of which must be repressed, even negated. Virgins were exhorted to abandon their female nature and to pursue reason and andreia, whose nuance of "manliness" cannot be wholly discounted. The demand to renounce passion is therefore much more poignant when applied to women because passion itself has been located in the idea of female selfhood. The construction of the feminine as passion means that women, the embodiment or the cultural representation of the feminine, are erased by that repression of passion. Therefore, for a woman to participate in the institution which calls for the negation of the feminine is, on one level, for her to participate in a profound self-abnegation, self-denial, even self-destruction.

The result of this inquiry produces a rather bleak picture of women's experience of both marriage and virginity in late antiquity, since both experiences were framed by a constraining ideology that constructed women's sexuality as an object of value to be traded—whether in the social marketplace or in the spiritual trading ground. The practical experiences of marriage and virginity were obviously different, and for this reason, virginity must have offered a significant alternative to many women. Nevertheless, the ideology of virginity did not challenge that of the surrounding culture, but rather adopted it and added to it a theological dimension, producing perhaps an even more restrictive and coercive system. Virginity offered then an opportunity to avoid certain constraints and real sufferings while extracting a profound price, not only the abdication of sexuality through the denial of passions but a far more poignant price on the level of cultural meaning, that of identity and self. Unfortunately, because their testimony is conspicuously absent, whether that cost was a worthwhile one for the women who paid it is something which will never be known.