THE CHASTITY PLOT: STUDIES IN AN ASCETIC IDEAL (LISABETH DURING)

Portia: ‘I stand for sacrifice’. (*Merchant of Venice*)

**CHAPTER I: VIRGINITY AND TERROR: READING *HIPPOLYTUS***

’Naked’ or ‘pure’ sexuality is directly connected to violence. It is the final veil shielding violence from sight; at the same time it is the beginning of violence’s revelation.

R. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*

The sexual sensations have this in common with the sensations of sympathy and worship, that one person, by doing what pleases him, gives pleasure to another person – such benevolent arrangements are not to be found so very often in nature!

Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, §76

**1.1 Virginity at a Loss**

In 428 BC Euripides won the prize at the Athenian festival of the Dionysia for his play about Phaedra and Hippolytus, the first an unhappy woman burning with love for her stepson, the second a young man passionate about wild things, smitten by the purity of nature in the raw. The story was well-known to its audience.[[1]](#endnote-1) Hippolytus, the son of King Theseus and the queen of the Amazons, was a name to make the admirers of chastity think twice. Hippolytus wanted to live and die a virgin, unbothered by women, marriage, children and the ordinary baggage of settled existence. He became the object of his stepmother’s uncontrollable desire. That was not Phaedra’s fault. The proud goddess Aphrodite, scorned by Hippolytus, worked her revenge through the erotic longing of Theseus’ Cretan wife. The goddess had a keen sense of irony. She resolved to humiliate the blasphemer who adored a rival deity, the virgin huntress Artemis. To this end, the ruler of love would feed a degrading passion into the veins of a virtuous woman, unknowing victim of her plot, a noble and quiet mother and wife.

To be desired by a woman horrified Hippolytus. The crime of incest played only a minor part in his repulsion. That horror was his ruin. Sexual purity is a bitter boon. It hurts those who come into its path. It also deforms those who dedicate themselves to it. The medicine they take for the purging of their soul has more than one effect. Expelling the libido, it opens up a space for other moral toxins – self-righteousness, arrogance, and insensitivity[[2]](#endnote-2). Their potential for mischief makes lust look benign. Or so the play argues. The end of Euripides’ tragedy is violent and devastating. Those who cared about their honour are dishonoured, and dead. There are others, who run their lives through aggression and cunning (Theseus, Phaedra’s wily Nurse). They are alive, but grieving.

The play suggests some reasons why there are so few famous male virgins in literature. Hippolytus had to wait almost 400 years to find at the Eastern end of the Mediterranean fellow travellers sympathetic to his peculiar anti-erotic obsessions. By then things had changed. ‘A new religious pattern’, as E.R. Dodds calls it, had ‘made its fateful contribution.’ Ancient Puritanism had arrived. Through the school of Pythagoras, through the Orphic cults, Greek-speaking persons learned they too could be part of a spiritual élite, training their ‘psychic powers through abstinence and spiritual exercises’, shunning pollution and seeking ‘purity, rather than justice’, as ‘the cardinal means to salvation.’[[3]](#endnote-3) Earlier, Socrates had offered one kind of solution to a condition the thoughtful could recognise as imperfect. Be just, be good: then you will be in tune with reason, serving its rule. Stoics agreed: human life and nature alike welcome a rational ordering. Those who knew the passions better thought otherwise, and Euripides was in their camp. Looked at from one direction, the passion for purity seems to be a friend of reason and order, of self-governance and social stability; in another, it is a force of destruction, as we shall see. Euripides is nothing if not ironic.[[4]](#endnote-4) Perhaps he has been learning from a goddess.

Hippolytus in his Athenian world was tragically alone. His devotion to chastity sounded like a fantastic aberration, raising suspicions of sorcery, manic possession, or – in the opinion of the more cool-headed observers –- bad faith. If he had been born later he would not have felt so alone. Young men and women in late ancient Antioch, Alexandria, Tyre and Corinth dreamt of being unsullied. The romance of perfect cleanliness captivated many, well before Christ introduced it to the masses. History has a sense of irony. For the adolescent Hippolytus at his pagan altars the passion for purity proved a mirage. The Christians found a way to make it last longer and dig deeper. But they worshipped Christ, a male virgin, not Hippolytus’ beloved Artemis, the ‘witch-goddess’ who was thrown out of her temples, denounced as a demon and an idol by a furious St Paul at Ephesus. The Greeks looked at the passion for virginity and saw hysteria. It took a Christian to read that mania as sublime.

Christians substituted heavenly and ethereal love for the divine *eros* of the Greeks and the Romans. In a twist of history’s tenacious memory, the Christians glorified that unyielding spirit of denial that made Hippolytus so annoying to his friends as well as to Aphrodite. Greek audiences went to see Euripides’ play to learn that male sexual purity makes a poor substitute for a life of self-knowledge and virtue; they learned also that lives of self-knowledge and virtue play little role in tragedy, and are probably the exception and not the rule even off the stage. A wise person must submit to the same laws as everyone else. That is the virtue the city needs, not wild ethical innovations like puritanical chastity. *Eros* belongs with those laws that will outlive this city and the cities to come. Its rule does not admit of exceptions no matter how high-minded. For those of us in the mortal condition it is irreverent to dream of *eros’*s demise, and futile (or perverse) to live alienated from *eros*. There is no place on this earth for anyone contemptuous of love, for anyone who disregards the power of Aphrodite.

Hippolytus’s opponent could not escape the goddess’s rule either. His unlucky stepmother was a paragon of feminine modesty and moderation, a good wife and a careful mother. But Phaedra, the daughter of King Minos and Queen Pasiphae and the descendant of the Sun, had a lineage that did not promise marital stability. Her sister Ariadne had already been abandoned by Theseus, left on the island of Naxos after she had defied her father and saved the Athenian prince from the Minotaur’s labyrinth. Dionysus became Ariadne’s partner, in one version of the myth. Phaedra’s life seems more ordinary. But in the play she is the chosen sacrifice to implacable desire, a fate any of us could suffer at any time. Before the action opens the audience knows that Phaedra has fallen hopelessly in love with the youth Hippolytus, who disdains her. Unable to speak of her guilty passion, Phaedra wants to die, her secret concealed. Her nurse, who loves her and cannot bear to see her misery, betrays her mistress’s confidence to the horrified young prude. Shocked, he repudiates any idea of satisfying her desire. He loves only wild things and the hunt; he serves the virgin goddess Artemis, who will not let anyone get close. And he hates women. But he is a person of integrity. He takes an oath never to reveal the shameful story to his father.

The confrontation in the palace of Troezen between these two moves quickly from misunderstanding to catastrophe. Phaedra is convinced that Hippolytus, to whom she has not even spoken, will expose her to Theseus when the King returns to his palace. The distraught young woman, half-dead with starvation, fatigue and self-hatred, hangs herself, but leaves a letter accusing Hippolytus of assaulting her. Theseus curses his son, and Hippolytus will not break his promise to protect Phaedra’s reputation. He refuses to defend himself. Doomed by the anger of his father and the violence of Poseidon, Hippolytus dies in agony, his body ripped apart by his terrified horses. And Artemis, coming too late to console her devotee, lets Theseus know the tragic error he has made. Now the great womaniser, hero of the defeat of the Minotaur, companion of Heracles, ruler of Athens, conqueror of the Amazons, has lost everything.

Is it chastity that has destroyed the house of Theseus? Modern tragedies can be tragedies of love. Ancient tragedies were often dramas of knowledge, ignorance and necessity. Euripides’ play is the first tragedy of chastity, and the only one to appear in the classical period. It is an anomaly for its time. But it does not remain one. What it inaugurates is a long history of debate about the ambivalent character of sexual virtue, and that debate continues in all the chapters of this book. It was for other reasons – not his skepticism about chastity -- that Friedrich Nietzsche denounced Euripides. Euripides, Nietzsche complained in the *Birth of Tragedy*, was the poet who killed tragedy and allowed the insidious power of philosophy to stifle the Dionysian spirit.[[5]](#endnote-5) Nietzsche does not blame Euripides for introducing into Greek culture the self-doubt and cunning associated with ascetic ideals, nor the morality of ambitious slaves. For those ills he blames the Jews, the Christians and the Platonists. Yet there is awareness in Euripides of the ambivalence of heroic values which may justify Nietzsche’s worry.

*Sophrosyne* is a virtue claimed in Euripides’ tragedy by both men and women. For males it means manly self-control, wisdom. For women it means chastity, modesty and humility. In the Greek city to be *sophron* was the pride and ornament of the citizen and statesman. *Sophrosyne* is at the same time the virtue that protects feminine discretion.[[6]](#endnote-6) The *sophron* woman stays home and does not disrupt the city. Female *sophrosyne* protects the reputation of husband and father.[[7]](#endnote-7) It is the honour for which ‘good women’ could be known without damaging their social position and their essential marginality. For a number of reasons, it is a virtue associated with the condition of mortals, those who are born, live, and die. Goddesses don’t have to be *sophron.* Unhampered by the constraints of marriage and the civic code, they can blaze across the erotic stage, or run with the beasts and fight wars. Some goddesses are virgins, shunning the bed of men. In this they are not like the rest of us. Divine virginity is very different from anything mortals can access. It is sovereign. It is untouchable. It is majestic, fearsome and violent. It represents integrity taken to a certain extreme, an uncompromisable self-identity that is never asked to justify itself or to give reasons for its existence. This is an assurance that mortals can only envy, even if human virgins have tried in literature and in history to usurp its power. The semi-mythical genre of romance has, as we shall see, made an impressive fetish of the idea of virginity, allowing defiant maidens to risk dangers, pursue adventures, astonish the world and even defeat men at arms: Joan of Arc was a heroine of romance, and so was Spenser’s Britomart and several of the heroines of the Hellenistic novels of late Rome. But as Joan’s story reminds us, the secular city has very little patience with virginal *hybris*. This was what Hippolytus discovered very early on. Fierce purity is fine for the goddess of the woods and the hunt. It is less tolerated among men.

**1.2 Artemis and her Cult**

15,000 people, more or less, would have been in the audience for the first performance of *Hippolytus*. If the play had been presented at Ephesus, as part of the festival of the Great Goddess who was patron of that city, Artemis could have reigned alone, her worship unchallenged. But this is Athens. Virgin goddesses have to share honours with others. Facing the audience, on each side of the stage, Euripides specified that there were to be two statues, one of Aphrodite, one of Artemis, presiding over the events. Sex and virginity. The bed versus the hunt. Is it a dual sovereignty? These goddesses don’t get along. Jealous of their prestige, the seductress and the tomboy fight it out. One uses intrigue, the other a bow and arrow. [[8]](#endnote-8)

Artemis was worshipped as Mistress of the Animals (Attic *Potnia Theron*) in the Minoan civilization well before Homer[[9]](#endnote-9) and as the Great Goddess in the sanctuary at Ephesus, present-day Turkey. Her cult is probably older than that of Aphrodite as a religious observance.[[10]](#endnote-10) It is bloodier, certainly more obscure. The arts of Artemis are hunting and war, activities of young men in packs, *ephebes*. In her case, unusually for antiquity, the packs include young women too, athletic and virginal girls who hunt and dance in her ritual rounds. She spends her time with them, seen by mortals, as by the Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite, running wild in the mountains, with her ‘love for the bow and slaying wild animals’, for ‘lyres and dancing and the piercing cries of women.’(l.17-19) Although she loves solitude, she takes part willingly in the violent doings of men. Anything to do with a bow and arrow finds favour in her eyes, quickens her mood, and the beasts she is intimate with are savage like her: bears, lions, panthers, deer, wolves, horses. Her dress is rough as well: in the temple of Despoina her statue is dressed in the pelt of a deer. Always moving fast, difficult to catch, in and out of the wilderness, she presides over the path of the wanderer in unfamiliar places and she sometimes exacts human sacrifices from those who need her help, as does Agamemnon, required to give up his daughter Iphigeneia to the goddess’s taste for blood. Intimately associated with the pains of women in childbirth, Artemis also knows the pleasures of those other painful activities, athletic competition and battle. Given her love for untamed animals, it is no wonder that she also protects children and those who look after them; in Laconia a ‘festival of nurses’ – the *Tithenidia* – was celebrated in her honour and little boys were brought in. She is appealed to by women in labour, and with her gentle hands, can ease the pain, although she also steals away those who die in childbirth. At her sanctuary in Elis, near a gymnasium where the *ephebes* play, Artemis receives one of her most appropriate titles: *philomeirax*, ‘friend of boys’.[[11]](#endnote-11)

Murderous and virginal, huntress and maiden, goddess of the untamed world and the young who have not yet been integrated into society, Artemis is double-natured to a fault. Or is hers one single nature that doesn’t compose itself in a single place or form but hovers on every boundary, every liminal space? All cultures know things like Artemis, odd and hard to classify, things that are not altogether dry and not altogether wet, neither savage nor civilised but somewhere in-between.[[12]](#endnote-12) Artemis has also been worshipped as a goddess of fertility, the force that sends unexpected life out of those uncultivated regions of the human or natural world, just as the stirrings of puberty quicken life and urgency in the playful timelessness of childhood, or the pangs of labour break into the sleepy world of late pregnancy. All these outbreaks of energy are essential. Yet they can also be disturbing, abrupt and harsh. And, as Hippolytus will find out, change makes human life precarious and exposed. The peaceful continuity of pastoral is a fantasy for beasts and the immature, not men and women.

Artemis is a nature deity, in that she cares for mountains, forests, streams, sea coasts and swamps, not farms and orchards. Modern conservationists should be leaving offerings at her shrines, and respecting her taboos. To be just towards the wild requires discipline and control. Even the hunter cannot perform his art without cooperation, restraint and awe. That is what distinguishes hunting from butchery, humans from beasts. Lines have to be drawn; initiates into the art have to undergo a process of education, training and self-discovery. For the young Greek man, hunting is an essential element ‘of the *paideia* that integrates him into the city.’[[13]](#endnote-13) On the edges of social structures and norms, religious piety still governs the Greek relationship to the cosmos. Strangers approach the city from the outside, potential foes; the gods insist that they be treated with hospitality, if they come as supplicants. Hostilities break out between peoples, threatening a reign of unrestricted, monstrous, ‘pure’, violence: sacrifices must be offered, codes of engagement drawn up, to shield the licit, sanctified violence from the bad, anarchic violence. Females are the gods’ cruel trick, a lawless but irresistible delight; they have to be carefully nurtured from their state of androgynous infancy into the docile creatures of the household; they have to be ushered into marriage through rites of initiation and gifts of appeasement. In the hunt, which steals from the wild, as in the ransoming of a maiden to bring to your bed, if something is taken away, something must be given back.

All of these exchanges have been supervised, in one myth or cult or another, by the goddess sister of Apollo, whose fascination has been so keenly revived in recent years by the lectures on Artemis of the great classicist Jean-Pierre Vernant at the Collège de France (1975-84). Aphrodite’s power is perennial. There has been no time in history oblivious to her effects and significance. Artemis is a deity peculiarly sympathetic to modern intellectual tastes. She saves the idea of chastity from its Babylonian captivity in the suffocating interiors of domestic femininity and brings it back out into the open air. She promotes in our cultural memory the elusive, skittish figure of the tomboyish maiden, proud of her independence from the sexual yoke, as a corrective and antidote to the confused doctrines of monotheistic prudery. Yet, as Vernant presents her, she is neither a force for regression nor an apologist for Rousseau’s noble savage school of primitivism:

she haunts all the other places the Greeks call *agros* , noncultivated lands that mark the boundaries of the territory, those *eschatiai* that lie beyond the fields…Artemis, then, is not wildness. She sees to it that the boundaries between the wild and the civilized are permeable in some way, since the hunt allows passage from one state to the other. At the same time, however, these boundaries remain perfectly distinct, for it they were not, men would become savage.[[14]](#endnote-14)

To honour Artemis you have to play seriously with wild animals, to get under their skin, become so close to them that they may not be able to tell which is the animal and which not. Ritual effectiveness relies on such confusions. It also relies on death, which is to say, violent death, the kind that takes the body apart. Sir James Frazer found that gods, too, need to be sacrificed if sacred things are to remain pure. Frazer begins the modern study of mythological comparisons with one of his many dying and returning gods. In the opening of the massively eclectic ‘Golden Bough’, he begins with the image of the murderous stranger, the priest-king – as Frazer calls him, the ‘King of the Wood’ - who tends the cult of Diana on the shores of Lake Nemi. Legend has it that fragments of the great statue of Artemis was brought from Tauris by Orestes and Iphigenia, and thus began the worship of the goddess in Italy in this very grove, clustered around a tree whose branches can’t be broken: the Golden Bough. The King of the Wood, the priest of Diana, isolated and outside the world of men, is a descendent of Hippolytus, or so Frazer conjectures.[[15]](#endnote-15) The mysterious nature of the rites at Nemi is what starts Frazer’s imagination going. Why this custom of sovereignty only being gained through murder? Why must a stranger and foreigner be the only one who can consort with the tree that represents inviolability? It must have something to do with the unhappy martyrdom of Hippolytus, the illegitimate son of an Amazon, a foreigner, who never got to be king of Athens, and died a maiden, in love with wild nature.

The city must need Artemis, since there are literally hundreds of cities and villages throughout Greece, Asia Minor, Italy and as far as Gaul, Spain and Egypt that built temples to her. But she doesn’t need the city. The outdoors is where she moves and has her being. Uncultivated and liminal spaces are the spots sacred to her, woods, mountain peaks, overgrown meadows and seashores exempt from agriculture and building. Her special places are those free from the signs of the human hand, never having been worked over or cut by axe, plough or spade: virgin, unprocessed, raw. Grown-ups in general don’t seem to suit Artemis. Goat horns, bulls and bears are more likely to find favour with her, and of course stags, dogs and virgins. Her cultic statue in the land of the Taurians demanded an annual sprinkling with human blood, to refresh it, we may assume. In Sparta, the young men celebrating the festival of Artemis Ortheia, had to steal cheese from her altar while being scourged unmercifully with giant whips; again the rite specifies that drops of blood decorate the altar. (Fraternity hazing takes its norms from these customs.) This taste for cruelty, even for crime, is not gratuitous. Purification, which holy things and consorting with goddesses demands, involves a passage through pain and physical rupture. To expel the unclean, in a religious context, you must eliminate what disturbs: often that can be done by consecrating a victim to destruction, and here an innocent one is always popular, animal or not; but at other times the violence has to be expended on the self. Pollution is contagious; the Greeks thought you needed fire to get rid of it when water isn’t enough, and the truly polluting, like Oedipus the parricide, must be banished for fear their stigma will spread.[[16]](#endnote-16) But violence is also contagious, and to achieve a release from the cycle of blood sometimes only more blood will do.

So we should not be surprised to discover among the customs sacred to this goddess a social and symbolic chain that leads, all too literally, from virginity to savagery to a surrogate death and real purification, only to end up at a place where virginity is no longer welcome. Artemis shuns marriage, and is quick to lash out if her virginal integrity is compromised. But she also holds the key to the mysteries of marriage, those that are hidden behind a veil and not spoken about in profane settings. Like all revelations that follow inductions into a mystery cult, marriage discloses its secrets only to those who have withdrawn from the world. The adolescents who must be prepared to travel from the old world of childhood to the unknown demands of adult life go through an initiation that is at once highly sexual – sometimes orgiastically so – *and* dedicated to an uncanny purity. But most of what happens in these rites sacred to Artemis and in other places, Dionysus, is secret and obscure. To recover cultic cleanliness – *hagneia* – it is best to avoid all contact with birth and death, and even with all the habits and pleasures of everyday domestic life; you might live in a cave, or eat raw flesh, wear strange clothes or go without sleeping, or fight naked until you drop. Initiation practices, that separate the young, seclude them and test them through aggression and rigorous deprivation, are rich, multiform, imaginative, and brutal. Ethnologists who have studied them argue that they can be interpreted as substitutes for a more definitive and human sacrifice: at least in these rites the victims survive. To navigate the path that leads to adult life and knowledge – especially sexual knowledge – exposes the young and unformed to danger. It may end in festivity and civic acknowledgement, but it is no less a crisis. Puberty is an ordeal.

At the centre of the anxiety that plagues the transition from childhood to maturity, from pregnancy to birth, and from life to death, there is always a goddess, and it is very often Artemis. All female virgins intended for marriage are implicitly consecrated to her. The little girl, often no older than 10, dedicates the playthings of her childhood in Artemis’s sanctuary; she offers her the maiden girdle removed before the threshold of wedlock is crossed. Would marriage be a profanation if it were not sanctified by a major sacrifice, in this case the sacrifice of virginity? When a wild she-bear she held dear was killed for scratching a young girl near Brauron[[17]](#endnote-17) (outside Athens), Artemis insisted that every young girl who expects to marry must first spend a year of her life playing the ‘she bear’ at her shrine. [[18]](#endnote-18) Guardian of those rites ensuring a passage through puberty, and into the adult world of sex and public performance, the deity gathers adolescents into a herd who hunt, steal, dance and compete together; often they form choruses, run races, sacrifice goats and live without clothes. Initiation, like most symbolic actions in the sphere of religion, mixes elements which are otherwise incompatible. It is meant to do so, as the difficult task it carries through – the renunciation of youth, the surrender of virginity – is itself ambivalent, and not everyone is willing to go the distance.

Artemis’s name reflects this ambivalence: it may come from the word for ‘safe’, healthy, or, perhaps, from the word for ‘butcher’. Chastity is her ideal, but there is nothing docile or modest in the way she represents it. Her inviolability is defiant. To equate virginity and violence, purity and cruelty, you don’t have to wait for Freud. Walter Burkert, the great German scholar of Greek religion, put it like this: “The serene and not entirely innocent picture of the Artemisian swarms of maidens is not without its darker obverse…The ritual cruelty brings some of the harshness of pre-civilized life into the civilization of the polis.”[[19]](#endnote-19) For a virgin, Artemis takes a great deal of interest in the more extreme states of bodily experience. Sometimes appearing in the guise of a Gorgon, she takes as her victims women who die in childbirth, but she also gives an easier labour to those who cry out to her in pain. One needs to be careful with Artemis; like her boars and stags, she bites.

The goddess of the margins is essential to civilization; the goddess of chastity is essential to marriage. Pre-pubescent Attic girls, on the ‘cusp of adult sexuality’[[20]](#endnote-20), participate in rituals of initiation that commemorate his agony. These are dedicated to Artemis and held at Troezen, among other places, in the name of the virgin hunter who met his death there.[[21]](#endnote-21) Young brides about to be betrothed will re-enact the Hippolytean flight from the marital bed. Like *ephebes* undergoing initiation, maidens fulfilling their duties to Artemis will spend time segregated from society. On their own in the ‘wild’ frontiers of the city, they play at savagery, play at being animals, or warriors.[[22]](#endnote-22) They dance, sometimes dressed sometimes not. In a few places their ceremonies are said to involve cross-dressing. And they kill animals, although this part of the procedures is shadowy and hard to pin down. Hippolytus, the virile but bashful parthenos, becomes after his death the cult hero, whose ordeal and vindication

will provide the symbolic model for the physical experience of others – nubile maidens on the eve of their marriage. But in weeping for him, as they will when they retelling his story of eros refused, the young virgins are acknowledging at the same time that his story is one they themselves must not literally imitate.[[23]](#endnote-23)

Inexperienced maidens will linger for a time with Artemis. Then they will put on their veils and enter their husbands’ bedrooms, allowing the girdles of their virginity to be loosened. Hippolytus was aghast at the very thought. For his impiety he will be punished, and Artemis, who guides the virgins over the threshold, cannot save him from his fate. In the name of *eros* but also of life and increase, Aphrodite functions not just as Artemis’s rival but as her collaborator: the goddess of love is on the watch against the arrogance of the fleshless. Her war must be won. Just as it is mad to seek to escape nature and immoral to long beyond human longings, it is hubristic to seek to escape the inexorable rule of desire. Eros conquers all. The cycle of sexual exchange cannot be dispensed with, or cities and states will crumble into oblivion. Hippolytus’s dream would turn the world into a desert. He is too young to have thought to the end the implications of his rejection of sexuality.

But, neurotic or not, Hippolytus is also unusual among Greeks in his sensitivity to the injustices of gender. His fondness for classically masculine pursuits like hunting and horse-racing does not disguise a certain androgyny in his presentation and manner. And his greatest loyalty is to a female deity. In his equivocal gender identity, he resembles those sacred monsters among the gods – Dionysus as well as Artemis and Athena – whose ambivalent presentation makes them persistent figures of the poetic imagination.The virgins among the gods are a special case in their challenge to patriarchy: protected by the Law of the Father, they line up behind Athena’s words in Aeschylus’ *Eumenides*: ‘I have nothing of the female, everything in me is of the male.’ (737) Absolute in their privilege because they are motherless, they exploit patriarchal license to the limit, exerting a sometimes unhealthy influence on mortals who, like them, run away from traditional femininity. When confined to special cultural performances of transvestism or cross-gender imitation, such as the adoption of hoplite clothing by the girl chosen to embody Artemis in her festival at Lake Tritonis, temporary ‘participation in the nature of the opposite sex’ serves the purposes of the initiatory procedure, allowing the novice ‘woman-in-training’ to test out the powers and drawbacks of masculinity before she commits herself finally to the conventional female form she has no choice but to accept. Yet the existence of such rituals testifies to an anxiety about gender and its rigidity also manifest in the Greek fascination for such extreme dissidents as Hippolytus, Atalanta, or the Amazons.[[24]](#endnote-24) A girl warrior is a contradiction in terms; she is, by this logic, therefore even more savage than a male could ever be; a boy sworn to the renunciation of sexual desire is less ‘emasculated’ (Hippolytus yields to no one in his brash frat-boy camaraderie with his hunting and riding band) than uncivilised and out of control. Without the tempering influence of the social institutions, maleness and femaleness alike are problematic. In their ‘pure’ state, where they abjure all ‘mixing’, combination and modification, they are forces of destruction. What the Greek myths tell us is that these ‘pure’ states do not exist in ‘normal’ human beings, that is, beings who have undergone the moulding of identity sponsored by the civic, familial and religious bodies and re-affirmed in the rites of preparation for adult life. But if ritual symbolizes and confirms, myth, as classicists remind us, always exaggerates[[25]](#endnote-25):

Thus a girl who refuses marriage, thereby also renouncing her “femininity”, finds herself to some extent forced toward warfare, and paradoxically becomes the equivalent of a warrior. This is the situation in myth of females like the Amazons and, in a religious context, of goddesses such as Athena...This deviation both from the normal state of women, who are destined for marriage, not warfare, and form the normal state of warriors, who are men, not women, gives a special intensity to warrior values when they are embodied in a girl. They cease, in a way, to be merely relative or confined to a single sex, and become “total.”[[26]](#endnote-26)

**1.3 Son of an Amazon: Hippolytus and Gender**

Hippolytus’s fanatical chastity exiles him from both gendered destinies available to Greeks in antiquity. In his hostility to the works of Aphrodite his misogyny comes to the surface, as Phaedra’s Nurse complains. But curiously it makes him susceptible to what we might call a sterile form of proto-feminism. To Hippolytus, woman’s business is repellent. And the ‘woman’ he means is the one he suspects Phaedra of being: the compliant and sensual servant of man, the glue of social exchange and male arrangements, the key to and connecting fibre of families. There may be another mode of femininity he finds sympathetic, one equally ill at ease in the family foyer: the warrior, the maidenly, athletic tomboy. For that is what Hippolytus is, less apprentice male than maiden manqué, Amazonian in the wrong skin.[[27]](#endnote-27) Judgemental as he is, like his patron, who was always quick to punish infractions of chastity among her nymphs, he is also protective. Once he has given a promise – to a servant, even – that he will preserve Phaedra’s secret, his word is good. He does not betray the trust. Although he gives way to scornful denunciations of his passion-wracked stepmother, (*Hipp*. 616-668) he shows an understanding of Phaedra’s plight, and that of women in general, unexpected from a young man whose speeches expresses a misogyny intemperate even by Euripidean standards.

Hippolytus has an irregular background. His mother was an Amazon queen, taken by Theseus as booty when the Amazon were conquered, and, after her death, replaced by Phaedra[[28]](#endnote-28) . Memories of his mother may help Hippolytus feel what it is like for a woman to be denied mastery of her own existence. This sort of insight into the punitive norms of patriarchy was what Euripides was famous for in his time. [[29]](#endnote-29) The first to put a maenad on stage (in the *Bacchae*), Euripides seems to know why a closeted female has no halfway place between invisibility and barbarism. Unlike goddesses and Amazons, respectable women are prisoners of the household. The weaknesses of the female character – which Hippolytus lists bitterly – stem from that social oppression. Marriage and child-raising constitute the entire horizon of female activity; how could their intelligence flourish and their moral sense develop under such conditions? Hippolytus’s rebellion against the rule of Aphrodite is solipsistic. He cares about himself, his Artemis, and his father. The plight of other men and women barely touches him. He refuses dependence, ‘binding’, connection, everything he associates with human relationships and social obligations. In the course of the play’s bitter persecution of him he is forced to experience those*.* But his tragedy exposes something of the callousness of sexual institutions and codes, as well as the more spectacular cruelty of the sexual drive itself, an indictment Euripides has no interest in extenuating.

Hippolytus is a young prince, but an illegitimate one. He is ardent, reckless, wilfully innocent, and an *enfant sauvage*. He worships the hunting goddess and runs wild with her pack. Good Athenian society found him dispensable. And he returned the contempt, saving his anger for the patron of carnal love, the goddess of *eros.* Aphrodite is quick to resent the insult: ‘He alone of all the citizens of Troezen here,’ she complains. “proclaims me the worst of divine beings. He says *No* to sex and will not touch marriage.’(14-17)[[30]](#endnote-30) Hippolytus dies young and in agony, despite his innocence and his ascetic virtue. He is not the only one in mythology to suffer for his defiance of *eros*. A punishment even more apt in its poetic cruelty was devised by Aphrodite for the maiden Myrrah, daughter of the King of Assyria: refusing sexual love and insulting the goddess caused her to be visited with an incestuous passion for her father, whose bed she shared without his knowledge, producing both his fury and the child Adonis, the circuitous (and unconscious) instrument of his mother’s revenge on Aphrodite, her destroyer.[[31]](#endnote-31) But even if Aphrodite will come to know grief herself as a result of her intemperate hostility to those who resist her spell, no mortal has been known to get away with such resistance scot-free. As the classicist Froma Zeitlin puts it:

Hippolytus must meet his fate in order to reconfirm the truth of the cultural dictum that no one may refuse the power of Aphrodite with impunity, not even the Amazon’s child and worshipper of Artemis.[[32]](#endnote-32)

Purity could not save him. Nor could nobility.[[33]](#endnote-33) His wish to be exceptional is at odds not just with the values of democratic Athens but also with the will of the gods, who govern all, life and death, and who bring all, mortal and immortal alike, under the sway of sex. Respect for Aphrodite is not an option, something one can take up or reject, an indication of character or the want of it, as he prefers to think. To acknowledge *eros* is to acknowledge one of the ‘ineluctable forces of the universe.’[[34]](#endnote-34) As Phaedra’s Nurse exclaims “*Kypris* is after all not a deity but something even mightier!” (360) To despise *eros* is not a mark of distinction but of impiety, pride, rebellion. (84-120, 530-564) Scorning desire, Hippolytus is brought down by the deity who writes the rules of desire. Hippolytus prayed to the virgin goddess he loved to let him die a virgin, as he was born.[[35]](#endnote-35) He got his wish, although not in the way he intended. An adolescent shocked by everything he suspects about the life of his elders, Hippolytus would prefer children were bought in the marketplace or produced mechanically; the night-time couplings sacred to Aphrodite are things he’d rather not know. Life’s origins disgust him, women he finds abominable, and the virtues admired in the secular city strike him as stale and compromised. As the tragedy unfolds, Hippolytus’s horror turns hysterical: everything indoors is vile. The world smells of human overuse. Words are tainted and insincere. (601-655) The female in particular, who works her plots from inside the house and with insinuation and indirection, is loathsome. Hippolytus is a Spartan escaped from a pre-war English public school. His fantasy is fresh air, riding, running, military drill, the world of the boy who never grows up. Is that so bad? Is it enough to destroy a dynasty, a noble house, and a civilization?

The play sees his ascetic enthusiasm as catastrophic and a crisis, an anarchic fissure too close to the city’s centre of power for comfort. It’s also, no way to get around it, annoying:

Figures such as Hippolytus who, in tragedy, are the embodiment of a religious insistence on total purity, are presented with such equivocal features and display a puritanism so ambiguous in its very excesses that there is a whole side to their characters that tips the scales over towards wildness…He rejects carnal union with the same intransigent disdain as a vegetarian rejecting animal flesh. He is a strange vegetarian though for he also appears to be very close to the wild beasts which he devotes his time to hunting and slaughtering and which then, once the hunt is over, he shares as a meal with his male companions…While he speaks of marriage only to reject it with indignation and horror, this young man, believed to be all modesty and reserve, has difficulty in masking under the artifice of a sophistic rhetoric the brutish violence of his true temperament.[[36]](#endnote-36)

“I have a virgin soul”, Hippolytus explains when he tries to make clear that he has not touched his father’s wife. ‘My body is untainted by love. I do not know this act save by report or seeing it in pictures (*graphei*). I am not eager to look at it either, since I have a maiden soul.’ (1005-06) “Oh!’, exclaims his father bitterly. “Your holy manner will be the death of me!” (1064) “You are practised in worshipping yourself!” (1080) Phaedra, his opponent, is the daughter of Minos and Pasiphae, the sister of Ariadne and half-sister of a Minotaur, descendent of the famous encounter of Europa and a divine bull. Hers is a different story. She knows very well that all her relatives are notorious for their transgressive desires, and she wants above all things to be decent, decorous, respectable. Aphrodite has other plans for her.

**1.4 Phaedra’s Story: *Sophrosyne* Divided**

*,* I: *sense of shame, bashfulness, modesty; a sense of shame* or *honour; regard for others, respect, reverence; awe, self-respect, regard;* II: *that which causes shame or respect; a shame, scandal; dignity, majesty* (*Liddell and Scott’s Greek-English Lexicon*)

Phaedra is caught in Aphrodite’s plot against the deviant who will not bend the knee. Phaedra who is wife to King Theseus falls victim to an incestuous passion for her husband’s son, the offspring of an abducted Amazon queen. At the start of the play we first see Phaedra already sick and wasted, broken down, hiding in the house, starving herself, flitting in and out of madness. Wracked by the shame of her desire, Phaedra cries for a death in cold running water. She wishes she could flee to the mountains and the woods; barely able to stand or walk, she calls for her bed to be moved outside the house, into the open air; she wants to be broken by hunting dogs and wild racing horses (215-222). She calls for Artemis, queen of the wild and innocent places (228-231). Artemis can’t come to her aid. For Phaedra is married and a mother. She belongs to the city and the family, and her shame is perfectly intelligible by the standards of family and city. Her offence is against s*ophrosyne*. She would be shamed, a scandal, disgracing the marital bed, one more of the monsters in her family’s list whose flamboyant lust and lack of *sophrosyne* is well known. Yet it is s*ophrosyne* that she invokes as the reason and motive for the most criminal of her actions: accusing Hippolytus of raping her. Best of all would have been to remain silent, to go to her grave repressing her desire and hiding her secret. But since her nurse found out her guilty thoughts, she can save her honour only by besmirching his. Doing this will allow her to die and leave her family convinced of her good reputation and good name, still a picture of *sophrosyne*, an example of chaste fastidiousness.[[37]](#endnote-37) Is this what the Greeks believed about s*ophrosyne* – that it had the power to kill?

It is the most Greek of virtues, and it is from the start an intellectual as well as a moral quality.[[38]](#endnote-38) It means ‘having a healthy mind’. Soundness of mind, respect for limits and measure, are key to the Hellenic understanding of justice, masculinity, being a ‘gentleman’. A young man should be ‘sophron’ (modest, sensible, quiet) but often is not; an old man is expected to be ‘sophron’ with less effort because by old age passion has diminished and wisdom has grown.[[39]](#endnote-39) To be *sophron,* for a well-born male, is to be judicious, moderate, prudent, sensitive to what the gods think is proper. It is to be allergic to arrogance and insolence. Its opposite is *hybris*. Relatively minor in its role in the heroic age and the Homeric poems[[40]](#endnote-40), *sophrosyne* comes into its own in the classical age of tragedy. By the end of the sixth century, writes Helen North, ‘a link was established between sophrosyne and the general idea of restraint or even abstinence.’[[41]](#endnote-41) *Sophrosyne* is, by many accounts, responsible for the crisis of this play. Hippolytus calls himself the most *sophron* of men; of all men the most chaste, he boasts (995, 1008. 1034-5, 1100, 1364-65.) *Sophrosyne* is his precious virtue, and it is one of the uncontested ideals of Athenian civilization. But he does not have a monopoly on it. Phaedra also is a paragon of *sophrosyne.* The two of them – mirrors but combatants, united by their familial bond with Theseus, allied in their thirst for purity – can only destroy one another. We are used to expecting such an outcome from lovers. But this stepmother and her virginal charge are drawn together in an emotion that looks more like hate. Fighting over the meaning of a word, they are at war, banging their heads against a wall, bent on a violence that will leave nothing standing. Can they both represent the same ideal? Or is s*ophrosyne* fatally divided, a word of torn and internally antagonistic intent?[[42]](#endnote-42) Can there be a *sophron hybristes ­*– temperance become fanatical, good sense become senseless?[[43]](#endnote-43) If there is, it will take a Euripides to recognise it.

In the banal language of everyday decency and discretion, *sophrosyne* is the art of moderation. In this play, the pursuit of moderation is nothing short of hysteric, as dangerous to its devotees as the love of bloodshed, or lust. Both protagonists take their mission to impart ethical instruction with grim tenacity: the phrase they use is identical: ‘I will teach him/her what it is to be moderate.’ Hippolytus insists that modesty and chastity belong only to those who possess them by nature and birth (78-80. 400-401); Phaedra rests her confidence in her own restraint on the way she has been taught, on her training, diligence and practice, on her sensitivity to environment and culture; she knows what is right even if she cannot always do it (380-81). Shame and honour are her guiding principles. For a woman, even one inflamed by inadmissible passions, it should be possible to achieve honour (*time,* 329-331) by her ethical self-mastery, which here means burying her guilty secret in silence and concealment. The argument about the relative values of nature or nurture raises the hot issues of Athenian political life, as it struggled to move an aristocratic system of values into a rougher democratic terrain. Hippolytus is pure by nature, by birth, he boasts. His nobility has all the extravagant recklessness of the young and arrogant among the upper classes: never will he lie or break a vow, not to save all that is most precious in the world, nor for charity or humanity or love or even for reason. Phaedra, on the other hand, tries to adopt the strategies of the new, relativistic middle classes, so cunningly formulated for her by her nurse. But she fails. It is Hippolytus’s morality that she shares; it is that morality which provides the only inner life she can recognise in herself; he is, as Zeitlin points out, her mirror, her original self, what she depends on. It is that self, the only one she knows, that she is torn from by her involuntary erotic mania. When Hippolytus can’t bear even to look at her, it is Phaedra acknowledging that the I is no more. Their parasitic intertwinement has sucked the life out of each of them; he, she curses, will ‘share my disease’ (730-731).

Phaedra’s final words, as she leaves the scene to prepare her own death by hanging,[[44]](#endnote-44) are a bitter indictment of the young man who has rejected her with contempt and horror: ‘He will learn of *sophrosyne* in moderation.’(730-31) Hippolytus dies on the stage. Since he is male not female, he does not need to hide his agonies,[[45]](#endnote-45) but his display of them brings him closer to the sacrificial victim than to the brave hero (Greek heroes never are shown in death or even being hurt; does anyone else die on stage?) In his painful speeches to his father, trying to defend himself without betraying his vow of silence to Phaedra, he reflects on the ethical instruction of *sophrosyne*: now aware of its ambiguity, his words show a deeper, more difficult understanding of Phaedra’s dilemma and his own: She showed *sophrosyne*, self-control, but was not able to be chaste,  *sophron*; I had s*ophrosyne* but was not able to use it in a beneficial way.(1034-5) Gender divides their respective performance of this ideal, and guides it with an iron hand: for a women to be *sophron* is, in the great majority of cases, to be sexually pure and modest. It is rare for that to be the criterion of *sophrosyne* for a man. Yet this is one of the messages of the play: male purity and female purity collide; another way for the sexes to be at war.

Ethically scrupulous, precise in her concern for her good name and a flawless reputation (), Phaedra is sincere in her struggle for self-control(375-81, 399) even if circumstances steal the rewards of that self-control from her.[[46]](#endnote-46) Both she and Hippolytus go to their deaths as champions of a moral ideal (the aristocratic complex of *aidos*, *sophrosyne* and moderation) which, the play suggests, they may have failed to understand. Or, as Hippolytus generously confesses in his last moments of agony, they may have failed to use fruitfully. (1034-5) Maybe *eros* could have taught them more about human limitations and needs, about abandoning oneself without calculation to emotions of care, compassion, generosity. Maybe they needed to consult Dionysus about the rights of the irrational. Maybe it is not *sophron* to resist the common lot of gods and men. Caught in the web the jealous Aphrodite has fashioned, in which she is a helpless pawn, Phaedra puzzles about our human ability to know and do what is right. More narrowly, as she argues to herself, this is a problem about the meaning of *aidos* or shame. *Aidos* is the ideal attribute of those noble by nature and birth.[[47]](#endnote-47) It is the virtue she yearns to represent, and the virtue young Hippolytus believed he could preserve only by fleeing society to race in uncut meadows with unmarriageable virgin deities. As Anne Carson neatly explains:

If you asked Hippolytos to name his system he would say “shame.” Oddly, if you asked Phaidra to name her system she would also say “shame.” They do not mean the same thing by this word. Or perhaps they do. Too bad they never talk.[[48]](#endnote-48)

But *aidos* comes in more than one form. There is a “fold” in the structure of shame, we are told in Barbara Cassin’s recent *Dictionary of Untranslatables*. Phaedra ‘does not know in which direction (honor or dishonour) *aidos* will incline her love for Hippolytus.’[[49]](#endnote-49) Like the Latin *pudor*, the Greek term can mean sense of shame, propriety, self-respect, all good things to have; if *aidos* is present, then dignity and circumspection can be expected, and the messy area of conduct is in safe hands. But *aidos*, as Phaedra has discovered, can equally refer to the very thing that causes dishonour, that ‘destroys houses’ (*Hipp*. 385-87) ‘Shame[[50]](#endnote-50) is sometimes a blessing, sometimes a curse.’(Hesiod, *Works and* Days, 363)[[51]](#endnote-51) It refers to the prudish and the erotic, to blushing and also to scandal. *Aidoia*, the plural of *aidos*, is used as a euphemism for the genitals (the ‘shameful parts’, Homer, *Iliad*, 2.262), like the Latin *pudenda.* Shame, Phaedra says, has two faces, one evil, one good, like *eris* in Hesiod’s *Works & Days*:

It looks like there’s not just one kind of Strife-

That’s Eris – after all, but two on the Earth.

You’d praise one of them once you got to know her,

But the other’s plain blameworthy. They’ve just got

Completely opposite temperaments. (21-25)[[52]](#endnote-52)

(One stimulates healthy competition, one the squabbling, wasteful pursuit of pointless quarrels and offenses)

Phaedra’s enigmatic meditation on the feminine propriety that has defined life and her bid for lasting glory is prophetic. To care too much about whether you are seen by others as temperate, self-controlled, discreet and modest puts you at risk of ‘immoderation’ and excess. Concern for shame ceases to be a route to good action and admirable behaviour: it can become, she reflects, catastrophic, the ruin of houses, a burden to families (355-57). The prophecy applies to her opponent as to herself: their elitist and ambitious moral idealism leads astray if pursued without due moderation and judicious measure; it becomes hubristic,, presumptuous, monstrous and inhuman. Phaedra, in her darkness and confusion, provides the interpretative key to her own disaster, for Aphrodite would nit have been able to achieve her destructive ends without the willing co-operation of these two claimants on the love and protection of King Theseus . Her vulnerability is not, as readers of Racine or Freud would suspect, her guilty desire. Phaedra’s doomed love troubles the social order, but this is still something that order can handle. Mythology has seen the situation often enough, Bellerophon and Sthenoboea[[53]](#endnote-53), the affair of Joseph and Potiphar’s wife, here with a more inbred twist, appropriate to a family like Phaedra’s that traces its descent from bulls but also, on occasion, mates with them. Phaedra’s illicit desire to shame her husband’s bed is, like parent-child incest, a story that comes around every generation. It is a reminder of a constitutive and intimate taboo, one that continues to appeal no matter how many times it is repudiated. What makes Phaedra vulnerable, and complicit in her own catastrophe, is her desire for moral rectitude, her excessive desire for temperance.[[54]](#endnote-54)

In this she mirrors her victim. But while the drama’s audience would have understood and sympathised with Phaedra’s dilemma and even with her solution to it, they would have been puzzled by the ardour with which Hippolytus chases his doom. Hippolytus’s passion is weird. A male virgin, an athlete with the sensibility of a Hamlet, he is horrified to hear of his stepmother’s passion for him. Women, he concludes, are a depraved race, an alien species, a mistake. They understand nothing of the joys of cold baths, rough riding, the simple life, self-denial.[[55]](#endnote-55) Aphrodite taunts him: so he despises women, but ‘he frequents the virgin sister of Apollo’ ([παρθένῳ](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=parqe%2Fnw%7C&la=greek&can=parqe%2Fnw%7C0&prior=u(/lhn) ξυνὼ, 17). Isn’t his worship of the huntress a bad case of lust displaced, a mystical pretence hiding his guilty fantasies? Longing (*himeros*) is not unknown to him even if what fascinates him is an inviolate goddess whose favour he courts in a desperate attempt to be something more than Greek masculinity can fathom – something exclusive, remote, invulnerable.[[56]](#endnote-56) Would he be happier if he were a god? Or a beast? What is it about humanness as such that he finds so base? To scorn the human is to lack mortal wisdom; proud of his temperance (his *sophrosyne*) the young man does not seem so *sophron.*

Left to his own devices, Hippolytus at Troezen represents an embarrassment for his family. Is he a potential threat to the inheritance of Phaedra’s legitimate children? What is anyone to do with this product of the obscure liaison of Theseus with a royal warrior from the tribe of the Amazons, those notorious enemies of all things male? We hear almost nothing about the fate of his mother (Antiope? Hippolyta? Same person, different names?)[[57]](#endnote-57); his grandfather Pittheus, known for his piety, raised him. Tellingly, he keeps a host of attendants who roam and hunt with him but have no other prescribed role. As adolescent, Hippolytus is intended for marriage and service to the court. As avowed celibate, he refuses that resolution. A religious genius without portfolio, Hippolytus looks less like a young man searching for his place in the world and more like Antigone, described by her sister Ismene as ‘in love with impossibility.’ (*Anti*. 90) An acolyte bearing bow and arrows, he seems driven by a spiritual fever that nothing in his surroundings can satisfy. In his first speech in Euripides' tragedy, Hippolytus enters with a crew of young horsemen, displaying the symbolic tokens of his self-anointed 'priesthood': I come to you, Lady Artemis, bearing a plaited garland I have made, gathered from a virgin meadow where the shepherd does not dare to pasture his flocks, here the iron scythe has never come (*Hipp.* 73-76). His preferred world is pastoral. And that means, for many, an evasion of the political world, a choice of nature over the city. Pastoral is an idealistic mode. When pastoral is developed by modern poets and examined by critics later than the Greeks and Romans, it is allied to a certain kind of sentimentality, ill at ease with practical concerns and nostalgic for an ideal state that may have never existed. Classical literature used pastoral to express roughly the same ideals. As a dream of uncomplicated pleasure, pastoral poetics object to the elaborate devices of sophisticated men and women in sophisticated settings. *Otium*, the noble use of leisure*,* is what good people cherish, rather than *negotium*, business. And these good people visit their country estates whenever they can, whenever the duties of power, war and wealth allow them a breathing-space. For the gentleman should have his other side in the freedom and simplicity of the shepherd; the poet should have the flexibility to leave his books and pick up a pipe made of reeds. That is the ideology of pastoral, and Hippolytus’ primitivism represents a tragic form of it. His birth, and his duties to the city, require him to violate his pastoral principles. But the images of nature he returns to obsessively contradict the argument for heroic masculinity as his father would understand that. Pastoral’s plaint is the anti-Theseus. If Theseus is the predatory chaser of women, Hippolytean pastoral sighs for a world where women and sex would be irrelevant. If conquest and bravado are what make you important, maybe it is better to live like the beasts. Why multiply intrigues? Why struggle for worldly power? For simple shepherds or tillers of the earth, the pastoral suggests, everything necessary is at hand. The rest of us don’t have that provision at hand: actuality makes demands. So we dream in pastoral colours, and pastoral colours our notions of moral simplicity.

Once thrown out of childhood, once exiled from the eternal garden, pastoral represents our memory of a door that would remain open, an innocence untouched by knowledge. For those exiled from natural purity, pastoral is “a sentimental longing for the ideal and an escape from the actual.”[[58]](#endnote-58) And this sentimental longing, in the case Euripides relentlessly examines, causes a crude misunderstanding of the power and significance of the erotic. Hippolytus is asking to be known for the quality of his life. Sexual relations are anathema to him. Exhorted to pay respect to the great goddess Aphrodite, whose statue he approaches, Hippolytus refuses: "I greet her from afar for I am pure' (*hagnos*). While she may be powerful, revered and feared, "I like no god whose worship is at night”.'(106) Following Artemis, his heart’s choice, is not for the common or the base; to wish to speak to her, be near her reveals a startling ambition: "I alone of mortals have this privilege", he boasts, for only someone as pure as me and in whose nature owes nothing to 'teaching' ([διδακτὸν](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=didakto%5Cn&la=greek&can=didakto%5Cn0&prior=o(/sois))but all to a chastitybestowed by nature ([ἐν](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=e%29n&la=greek&can=e%29n0&prior=a)ll%27) [τῇ](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=th%3D%7C&la=greek&can=th%3D%7C0&prior=e)n) [φύσει](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=fu%2Fsei&la=greek&can=fu%2Fsei0&prior=th=|)[τὸ](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=to%5C&la=greek&can=to%5C0&prior=fu/sei) [σωφρονεῖν](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=swfronei%3Dn&la=greek&can=swfronei%3Dn0&prior=to\)) (79-80) could have plucked the grass from this virgin meadow.

Hippolytus’s asceticism is an anomaly in the family home of Theseus, headed by a father who was a womanizer on a heroic scale.[[59]](#endnote-59) In the ancient world the counterparts of Hippolytus are few: Attis, who castrated himself for the goddess Cybele, the eunuch priests of Hecate of Lagina, the ‘bee-kings’ or *essenes*, a community of men who serve Artemis for a year at her sanctuary in Ephesus while pledged to sexual abstinence.[[60]](#endnote-60) There is something unGreek about Hippolytus (as his father complains), certainly something unClassical. It’s as if he were dropped into the world of palace, agora, and temple from somewhere else, from some 3rd century Theban desert populated by Christ-intoxicated hermits, where a narcissistic anchorite with a misogyny problem would have been perfectly at home. For it is rocks, mountains, caves, woods, sand and sea that form Hippolytus’s proper setting. Flushed with love for his virgin goddess Artemis, he brings her a crown, a garland woven from an uncut field, a meadow as inviolate as himself , a field ‘where no shepherd dares to graze his animal’, where no human knife of iron cuts the grass and no human hand works to cultivate the benefits of nature. (73-80) The raw is pure. In its absolute state, it is “watered by the dews of shame (*Aidos*)”; sacred to the gods, such land () is taboo for humans. The cooked is not taboo; it has been tended to, worked upon. Its merits and virtues are acquired, like education, not innate like Hippolytus’s *sophrosyne*. For the prince’s disposition to virtue, he boasts, is as immediate and elemental as a wave on the beach. And this exclusive focus on just one half of the landscape is his undoing. Insisting on his own *sophrosyne*, his austere and clean virtue, he misses the other meaning of *sophron* as balanced, moderate. He honours only one god, one version of holiness. Only primal nature untouched by human intervention[[61]](#endnote-61) has the integrity he longs for; even education imposes values that are artificial, not to be trusted.

**1.5 Purity and Purification in Antiquity**

Hippolytus’s premature Rousseauism is self-defeating. Neither for him nor for us is there an utopian virtue outside the social. The old servant who hears his first, defiant hymn to Artemis warns him: this is unwise, reckless, discourteous, arrogant; humans must honour the gods, all of them, and especially the imperious goddess of *eros.* (102) The savage purity he desires is not for mortals. Sanctity in Greek culture is not what Hippolytus imagines it to be. It is not a permanent condition or even a special status.[[62]](#endnote-62) It does not define a personal life. It is a requirement of a certain function or practice, like wearing a helmet is for a crossing guard. Good religious practice is akin to good governance overall, in the home and in the city. Taboos govern what can and cannot be done or even seen. Prescriptions for purity, accordingly, work to these practical ends. They are conditions that protect the well-being of society, they are barriers against its vulnerability. Water and fire are purifiers, cleansing agents, scrubbing out defilement. People hardly ever are. When they are – those who are *hagnos*, as Hippolytus says he is – they are that way because they shun blood and death, which he cannot, or because they are consecrated as sacrificial victims, a fate he seems unconsciously to pursue. Priests and priestesses must be pure for the duration of their office, else they risk contaminating the clean with the unclean. Their contribution is for us; it safeguards our place in a shared world and protects us from impiety. ‘Purification’, Walter Burkert writes, ‘is a social process’. It is a matter of ritual, of cultic actions and forms which establish a group’s standards and codes, excluding the outsider, the banned, the unstable. In special cases, rites of purification have a magical character. If illness, crime and madness are mysteries that disturb and even shatter, the need to overcome them is urgent: it calls for mysteries just as potent.[[63]](#endnote-63)

Sacred things must not be defiled, and if desecrated, their purity needs to be restored by sacrifice; those who desecrate are cursed or dangerous (*enages*), liable to endanger and pollute others.[[64]](#endnote-64) Sacred areas, like special events and festivals, are strictly marked off, barred from all that is profane,[[65]](#endnote-65) as Hippocrates writes in the third century BCE:

We ourselves fix boundaries to the sanctuaries and precincts of the gods so that nobody may cross them unless he be pure; and when we enter we sprinkle ourselves, not as defiling ourselves thereby, but to wash away any pollution we may already have contracted.[[66]](#endnote-66)

Festivals break up the Greek year into sacred and profane times. During the observance of any one of the local and urban cults, mundane activities are suspended, as they are in periods surrounding crisis, times of war, the illicit spilling of blood, outbreaks of disease. Everything to do with the gods, all that communicates between the ordinary and the religious domains, requires care and special hygiene. Statues of the gods need to be cleaned, their clothes washed on special occasions. Birth and death are naturally arising pollutions, and both sacred persons and divine beings avert their eyes from their occurrence. Yet the idea that removal from the sexual makes a person unique and to be revered was not obvious to the Greek mind. Virgin priestesses and oracles did play a special role, ‘part of the timeless religious landscape of the classical world’, as Peter Brown puts it. The Vestals are of course the most famous, and most intriguing to the later Christian mind. But their limitation as a model for sacred chastity needs emphasising:

The message conveyed by such women as the Vestal Virgins at Rome and the virgin priestesses and prophetesses of the classical Greek world was that their state was of crucial importance for the community precisely because it was anomalous. They fitted into a clearly demarcated space in civic society. Though eminent and admired, they were not thought to stand for human nature at its peak…The chastity of many virgin priestesses was not a matter of free choice for them. No heroic freedom of the individual will was made plain by their decision not to marry. The city recruited its virgins, by dedicating them to the service of the gods. Many virgin priestesses, such as the Vestals at Rome, were free to marry late in life. What had mattered, in their case, was an elaborately contrived suspension of the normal process, by which a girl moved with little interruption from puberty to child-bearing. By not marrying until they were thirty, the Vestal Virgins stood out as glaring anomalies. The presence in some cities of a handful of young girls, chosen by others to forego marriage, heightened the awareness of contemporaries that marriage and childbirth were the unquestioned destiny of all other women.[[67]](#endnote-67)

Virginity for real people is not a viable profession but a transitional phase, a condition meant to be terminated in the essential celebration of marriage. All we know of Greek religion confirms this fact. The demands of the sacred specify the renunciation of sexuality during a short, well-defined period of preparation and devotion, observed by the participant in the festival or the officiants at the sanctuary in respect and, almost always, voluntarily. The priests and priestesses in drama make this clear: Iphigenia guards the shrine at Tauris with her virginity and her watchfulness; Ion dedicates his child-like enthusiasm to Apollo; the citizen-wives who celebrate the Thesmophoria, the festival of Demeter, are not virgins but women who each year shun the company of men in their mysterious fasts and seclusion (although the consummation of the rite involves obscenity and phallic excess).

In part the option of abstinence is a privilege, in part it is an offering to the gods, renewing the festive contact with divinity. In other contexts the abstinence of the warrior, the hunter or the wrestler, serves as a kind of insurance, propitiating those powers that can give or take away success. Greek religion did not demand an autonomous position in the polis, over and above the requirements of civic life: its need for institutional structures was minimal, and the role of religious specialists like seers, diviners, priests, or communicators of oracles varied from place to place. It was, as the historian Robert Parker puts is, a ‘religion without a church.’[[68]](#endnote-68) The servants of the temple officiate part-time, raising their families and keeping the books when they are not performing sacrifices. In most of the great urban festivals, non-priests conduct the mysteries, and they are purified for the occasion. There exists no caste or class of professional priests or consecrated officiants who are considered exceptional, ontologically set apart, unconditionally ‘*hagnos*’. This is the situation from Homeric times through the 5th century, all through the Greek territories. Further East, other stranger customs are slipping into the cults of Artemis, Hecuba, Cybele – the practice of eunuch high priests at Ephesus, which was the sanctuary special to the Amazons, and ecstatic castrations among the followers of other divinities. But these reach the mainstream much later, in the 2nd century BCE. At the date when Euripides constructed a narrative around the known ritual commemorating Theseus’s young son, consecrated celibates were rare. Cultic chastity, if the gods require it in their service, was one thing. At Athens and elsewhere, priestesses who are either old and very young tend the temples of Athena and Aphrodite, vowed to sexual purity for the term of their service; since Homeric times it is clear that priests must shun anything polluting like death, childbirth, illicit sexual relations, or bodily disfiguration. But all such care and concern, which certainly must be administered scrupulously as lapses cause immediate and lasting disaster, exists in order to maintain the purity and holiness of religious ‘business’. The ultimate goal is protecting the community, keeping things in order. Chastity, on this account, is a prescribed offering, a compliment to those gods who happen to demand it, when they happen to demand it. It is not something I turn into the meaning of my existence.

Like marriage, purity belongs to the community. To make a fetish of it for my own self-adoration is something not just baffling but alarming. Everyone who moves across the scene of Euripides’s tragedy feels the tremors. What they are witnessing is a challenge for which there seems to be no precedent. Perhaps it could be, in some unimaginable elsewhere, a new religion, the law of some daimon yet to be encountered. Here and how it can be only a serious mistake, a perversion to selfish purposes of a piece of ritual and collective magic. So Hippolytus is punished, made into an offering on the altar of the *eros* he despises. Torn between the divine and the animal, there is no median place he can stand. The circumstances of his death are what Froma Zeitlin calls a ‘demonic parody of *eros*’.[[69]](#endnote-69) Driven mad by a bull[[70]](#endnote-70) sent by Poseidon, his own horses rip him apart. He dies in torment, the goddess he serves unable to console her favourite as the sight of dying men is polluting to the gods. But his cult, and his memory, are preserved at Troezen, where he lived and died, by young women from Athens who want to be married, and can’t do so unless they cut off their hair as an offering to the tortured male virgin who was so good with horses.

Love, on the other hand, is a languid woman.[[71]](#endnote-71) She seems designed for peace and leisure, luxury and ease. Associated with Cyprus, which was settled before the Greek archipelago, Aphrodite is Phoenician, and probably Semitic too. She has precedence. She came before her Olympian companions, even Zeus, because she is not born but made out of a mixture between the foam of the sea and the genitals of the sky (Hesiod, *Theogony* 188-2060. Like the elements she comes from, her sovereignty is primordial rather than political; everything that is alive is subject to it. The *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* (V) puts it like this:

Of all others, there is nothing among the blessed gods or among mortal men that has escaped Aphrodite. Even the heart of Zeus who delights in thunder is led astray by her though he is the greatest of all and has the lot of highest majesty, she beguiles even his wise heart whensoever she please, and mates him with mortal women.(lines 34-39)[[72]](#endnote-72)

You don’t need an especially religious nature to see why the principle of desire should be worshipped as a divinity. For some, both in antiquity and the Middle Ages, love was metaphysics as well as a passion. Neoplatonists enthroned love in the stars, as a cosmic power that moves all, creature, god and even matter. Love conquers all. Its origins are mysterious. Its effects are devastating: cities burn, families and dynasties are destroyed, traditional morality and piety lose their authority. Aphrodite must have her way. And her way has to be our way, or it’s all over. Sexual desire has an intelligence all its own, unconscious though it may be, as Schopenhauer reminded us more recently. Galen, the Roman doctor of the 2nd century AD, speaks of the cunning of sex, and Giulia Sissa paraphrases him precisely: “When nature gave all the animals their organs for conception, it equipped those organs with a special facility for creating pleasure, and the soul ‘with a marvellous and indescribable desire to make use of them’. By exciting and goading animals, this desire causes them to provide for the continuation of the species, as though they were perfectly wise, while in reality they may be young, foolish and entirely irrational.”[[73]](#endnote-73)

It is from carnal longing that earthly immortality is won, behind our backs, or in the dark. Voluptuousness may numb our reactions and seduction inflame our fears of dominating or being dominated, but the insatiability of sexual appetite keeps us alive. Aphrodite’s law is beyond morality, and her inspirations often lead to shame, crime and tragedy. This is the case Hippolytus is right to make against her, and the proof lies in the broken body of Phaedra, hanging from the noose. But her dark rites must be celebrated as without her there would be no marital consummations, no families, no filiation, no state. Chastity is not a mystery that provokes so much concern. Usually. Yet there on the other side of the stage, there’s Artemis, equal in grandeur, equal in pride, young, fast, impetuous, a hunter and a protector of everything untamed. In Euripides’s drama, Aphrodite launches the intrigue; her spell is at work before anything else has happened. Sensual, shapely but just as fierce as her outdoors sister, Aphrodite has the first word. She rules over the passions of love and conjugal relations. She protects the marriage bed, along with her fellow Olympian Hera. Vengeful and imperious, the goddess is hotly protective of her rights, exercising them without regard for moderation or human dignity. The violence that singles out her victims – for eroticism is cruel as well as wasteful – is unavoidable. She is a tyrant, she is terrible, says the Chorus in the middle of the play, after Phaedra has revealed her shameful passion. But there is a cruel violence that also pursues the followers of Artemis, the goddess whose precincts are far from the bedroom.

**1.6 Giving the Goddess Her Due (‘Mighty Aphrodite’)**

Given the outcome, Aphrodite, who fights for the marriage bed, comes off as the dominant force, the puppet-master of the events, the avenger who gets her revenge. She has claimed her sacrifice of two innocents; Hippolytus, for refusing sexual love, and Phaedra, used and discarded as a tool in the destruction of her household. And she has ruined in the process one not-so-innocent, Theseus, who killed the Minotaur and stole an Amazon as mistress. Does the play prove her supremacy? Its evaluation is certainly not a flattering one.

The Greeks, who respected the works of Aphrodite, observed that it was at times wise to stay well out of her way. The goddess of erotic love pursues her ends with a considerable violence. She cares neither for consequences nor propriety. Subject to amorous passion, men and women lose their dignity, their good sense, their honour; they become like slaves or pigs; they burn, go pale, struggle with words, waste their fortunes, make fools of themselves. They are possessed, deprived of freedom and self-understanding. As the adulterous Helen protested: I was forced; the goddess’s disease took me over (Euripides, *Trojan* Women, 940-990). Erotically inspired, the lover is capable of great sacrifices and great indiscretions. But what he wants from the beloved is not so clear. Fusion or annihilation, Plato has Aristophanes suggest in the *Symposium* (192c-d); perhaps to gaze, shiver, sweat and worship as if in the presence of a god (*Phaedrus* 251a). Love causes anguish, aching and irritation; it is a fever that makes the lover hot and parched, throbbing and itchy. Lovers think they are enjoying intense pleasures. Then they get sick, they suffer.[[74]](#endnote-74)

Sappho calls love a “loosener of limbs”, *lusimeles*. She calls it also a ‘wind’ and a ‘fire’ (Fragment 47, 48). The Greek language pictures sex as a ‘mingling’ (*mignumi*), boundaries confused in a fine frenzy, all bodily parts ‘melted’ and merged so that nothing remains separate and apart (Fragment 130).[[75]](#endnote-75) Beauty, seen through the eyes, melts us. We turn fluid in love. Euripides, looking with a colder eye at the disasters of love, is partial to a different metaphor, that of knots and nets, as is Lucretius (*validos Veneris perrumpere nodus*, 1148): Love ties the knot, lovers race to entangle themselves, and even gods and goddesses are caught in the web. But then the threads are cut: death cuts the threads, and fate, or love’s magnetic field goes slack. All is undone, all falls away. In death the bondage of the body is unstuck; the reins are cut, the yoke does not hold. This is what happens to young Hippolytus, straining to hold on to the harness as his horses tear away in a panic. He becomes entangled in a bond he could not untie (Hipp:1342-1345). This prince was famous as a trainer of horses. Luring them in from the wild, he pulled their leads tight; he earned his power to hold and to release, as his name suggests: Hippolytus, the one who loosens horses. Then his hold on life was loosened, his flesh mangled, his limbs divided. Melting is what happens in sex and in dying.[[76]](#endnote-76) Death is also a loosener, a *lusimeles*, freeing our limbs from the bonds of life, or from other tight constraints. (*Iphigenia among the Taurians* 692; *Hippolytus* 1244) In another place entirely, it is said of Christ that he gives his disciples the power to bind and loose (Matt18:18), which is to say, of life and death, freedom and slavery. Desire ties its victims into knots, then it pulls the threads. *Takeros*, melting and languid, is another of *eros’s* epithets. But it is also *algesidoros*, the pain giver. Like most tragedies, the story of Hippolytus and Phaedra is in love with death.

*Eros* is in love also with its own power, moral or immoral. *Himeros* is its other name, the sweet desire that dictates, captures and wounds. Human well-being is not its primary concern. ‘The teleological suspension of the ethical’: religious faith in the tradition of the Jewish and Christian Bible calls the faithful to step outside the community and the web of kinship. This is how Søren Kierkegaard read the exemplary and terrible tale of Abraham’s temptation. Abraham’s special relation to God severed him from the comprehensible moral world of duties and trust; the ultimacy of God has little to do with affection which we share with others. The Danish philosopher was thinking about a different variety of supernatural love, but the rupture he describes, dividing the mysterious claims of divinity from the comprehensible and decent duties of men and women, characterises erotic passion in its ancient poetic form. *Er­os* in Euripides is a religious business, unconditional like the Biblical love of God. Its terror has the aura of sanctity. Its profligacy and waste do not need to be justified by profane standards. The Chorus in Euripides’s *Hippolytus*, sweet-talking the terrible goddess (*deina Kypris*), takes great pains to seem pious: What is the use of slaughtering cattle to the Pythian Apollo ‘if we pay no honour to *eros*, the despot (τύραννον), who ruins mortals and sends them off on bitter adventures’ (535-541):

Eros, Eros, distilling liquid desire upon the eyes

Bringing sweet pleasure to the souls of those you make war against,

Never may you show yourself to me for my hurt

Nor ever come but in harmony.

For neither the shafts of fire nor of stars

Are more powerful than that of Aphrodite (525-532).

*Eros* in antiquity was a complicated matter. It was grand as well as squalid, tragic and farcical. It made the dumb articulate and the heroic shy. Desire fosters eloquence and numbs judgment. It jealously demands possession and inspires reckless generosity. It is often described as a delirium. Laying siege to the mind, it disturbs the rule of reason in its own domain. The Chorus in *Antigone* complains to *eros*: ‘You take the minds of the just and turn them aside to injustice.’(*Ant*. 781ff.) For Plato, *eros* must be sublimated and purged of carnal exclusivity if its creative powers are to fertilize rather than destroy. Religious propriety can demand special care in the affairs of sex. The successful performance of ritual actions required specific abstinence from sex at specific times and places. The human body was sexual, and that was natural and as it should be (*themis*, Iliad.9:276), but under the wrong conditions (childbirth, incest, rape), it was polluted and needed to be purified, to be insulated from the sacred .[[77]](#endnote-77) Strict hierarchies governed the uses of sex in Athens: an adult citizen-male must dominate, not be dominated. And concern for sexual propriety did not end when Latin replaced Greek. It was supplemented, however, by a greater aggressiveness. Certainly *eros* has its competitive side, which the Romans appreciated. If the founder and first of the Romans, Aeneas, was indeed the son of Aphrodite, it seems reasonable to expect heroism and not just degradation from those called to her cult. *Eros*, the Latin poets write, rewards the daring with glittering prizes..

All the ancient poets paid close heed to the scandals of *eros* even if they did not produce all their work in its shadows.Of the poets who specialised in eros, Catullus is the most tortured, Sappho the most elegant, and the tragedian, Euripides, is the most unflinching. Euripides does not rhapsodize or mock. He analyses. His Aphrodite is more than imperious. She is insolent. Her decisions are irrevocable, her whims devastating. There is little comfort to be expected from a rational protest. Here the claims of justice end. Jason, in his *Medea*, is shocked by the brutal intensity of his lover’s desire. He puts the responsibility on the goddess: her ‘inescapable’ shafts have pierced Medea’s heart. This woman who was first his deliverer is now his murderous nemesis. Her behaviour is inexplicable. Is Medea guilty? Or can there be no responsibility where they can be no resistance? Aphrodite’s dictates are, tragically, absolute. Like spells, they steal away the freedom and peace of the bewitched, violating some core of personal sovereignty which we would otherwise want to guard with care. The demands of desire are also cruel, less promises of pleasure than sentences to pain:

Desire is unpleasant…every form of *himeros* manifests itself as an urgent, impelling need to put an end to the sensation itself. In its negativity, this sensation – to be *missing something* (an action, a condition, a thing or a place) – impels impatience and rash haste towards its own annihilation. Desire is suicidal.[[78]](#endnote-78)

“Spare me from her mania” begs Phaedra’s nurse in *Hippolytus*. Those who serve her know great pleasures. But their lives are exposed to forces they cannot so easily rein in, and those who defy her fare worse: they are run down by wild horses, bulls, hungry animals from the sea, all reckless mobs whipped into action by a combustible force, image of her frenzy. Plato, in the *Phaedrus* (253c-e) says that Eros is a ‘volatile and ungovernable horse’ or (Rep, IX, 588c-590d) a hybrid monster inside the soul)[[79]](#endnote-79) At the very least, love’s violence disturbs. It is not necessarily fatal, but it does seem to preclude calm and prudent enjoyment. A later observer of erotic upheaval, Ovid, the Roman theorist of amorous success, gave explicit shape to a popular idea among the ruling classes in antiquity. As Ovid describes it, love is a contest, a public campaign where the ambitious seducer must not hold back. Conquest in the bedroom is what victory is in the arena. If you are good at it, you can beat your rivals, or you can bend a proud lover to your will. In the games of Venus, Ovid writes, the prize is rape, but the victor is as wounded as his victim. (*The Art of Love,* Book 1, 115-170) Love punishes and humiliates, so the pursuer is warned: your prey will be wary. The adept lover lays traps with delicate and insinuating compliments, all the better to disguise the brutality that disfigures his passion. No sooner satisfied than stale, conquest leads to possession and then to complacency and contempt.

Falling in love is a disorder, and a tragic illusion. You can try to outwit the tyranny, as Ovid suggests. Be strategic; be deliberate; plan and stick to your plan. Technique here is crucial. It represents the victory of art over nature, of intelligence and cunning over what we would now call the drives. Ovid’s solution saves masculine pride and feminine dignity: the woman is seduced when her no is taken to be a yes; the man seduces when he succeeds in an intricate policy that protects both of them, though at the price of a deceit that leaves passion looking a bit shop-worn. But there are other possibilities. We know another divinity who offers the dream of escape, of immunity and innocence. Why shouldn’t I enlist in the company of the virgin commander? Why not listen to the philosophers who are always going on about the austere beauties of asceticism. I don’t have to be a vegetarian like Pythagoras or Porphyry. But I can cultivate my self-control in the arena of pleasures. If I make myself unmoved by love’s darts, there is no limit to my invulnerability. The gods may envy me. There is something inhuman, of course, in such indifference, something not easily believed or practiced. Even for a religious skeptic, unconvinced about the dangers of blasphemy, the refusal of *eros* should sound risky. Epictetus argued that a true Stoic or Cynic could take it or leave it: marry if you can do it with integrity and find a wife harmonious with your soul; live unmarried if the conditions prove unfavourable. The enlightened live by reason, and refuse to be puppets at the whims of the gods. This is the code of the Epicureans, who dared to be choosy about the terms under which they allowed sexual love into their lives. But can enlightenment afford to forget its tribute to the underground forces of myth? Won’t the repressed return, and with a vengeance?

**1.7 Checking the Goddess: Enlightenment against Myth**

The poet-philosopher Titus Lucretius wrote around the middle of the first century BC.[[80]](#endnote-80) A missionary to those sick in spirit offering a message of intelligent healing, Lucretius believed that the philosophy of Epicurus could minister to the mind and reconcile us to nature. Our ills are man-made, he argues; they come from false ideas. Epicurus came like a hero to free us from the weight of superstition and religious fables. (*De rerum natura* I, 62-79) If the enemies to human flourishing are our own demented beliefs and not malicious deities, then it is up to us to create our own felicity. When we fix our intellects, our passions will follow. To the sensible man, erotic love means trouble, and a happy life will be impossible for us unless we purge our minds of exaggerations and excesses that make amorous attachment seem so enthralling. But Lucretius can’t resist the poetic pull of mythical thought. Love is a kind of magic. Eros releases a drop of Venus’s honey to drip into our hearts. Like the doctor sugaring the wormwood, the sweetness distracts: its delight is ‘to be followed by icy heartache’ (*hinc ileac Veneris dulcedinis in cor stillavit gutta, et successit frigida cura, De rerum natura*, IV:1059-1060*)*. Sappho invents the term that sticks. *Eros* is bittersweet (Frag.130).

This is Aphrodite’s realm, and that means myth has not relinquished its powers. Yet myth is a hard thing to keep in the house. When a dramatist like Euripides puts the gods on stage – Aphrodite in her corner, Artemis in hers – their rivalries will dwarf the human catastrophes we are there to pity and fear. This has to be the case, for otherwise the tragedy will be hollow, unserious, as Nietzsche complained. From Classical Athens to the Hellenistic period and beyond, Greek and Roman sophistry continued its valiant struggle to make sense out of nonsense, to purify myth with the aid of logos and rational thought, “an ancient program whose absurdity surprises us today”, as Paul Veyne puts it.[[81]](#endnote-81) Myth keeps coming back, especially if the ‘lies’ we are talking about; as Veyne is not shy to point out,[[82]](#endnote-82) arise from the need to justify our most popular forms of weakness.

Lucretius the Epicurean is an iconoclast, unimpressed with mysteries and supernatural fantasies.[[83]](#endnote-83) What have the gods to do with him? What interest could the gods have in the hopes and fears of humans? Epicureans, when they encountered the strange superstitions of the Jews and Christians, ‘scoffed’, as Stephen Greenblatt put it, at the very idea of divine Providence and the special favour of the Incarnation. This was not only the wishful thinking of childish people. (Why should anyone believe humans are unique, or that they occupy a privileged place in existence?) Such beliefs are intellectually naïve. If there are gods, and the Epicureans did not pre-empt the possibility, they are

Neither creators of the universe nor its destroyers, utterly indifferent to the doings of any beings other than themselves, they were deaf to our prayers or our rituals.[[84]](#endnote-84)

It’s not divine jealousies but our false opinions and beliefs that destroy happiness. [[85]](#endnote-85) Religious enthusiasm is the worst guide to living well; practical worldly wisdom has its own spiritual rewards, for those who are strong in virtue. The heavens simply don’t care whether we make a fuss about them or not. So living inconspicuously is a good idea. The gods ignore us most of the time; they have no pleasure in our ignorance and get no thrill from observing the follies of human superstition and self-doubt. The to-do about virtue may, even to a philosopher, be an error if it is private perfection one fantasises about. Behaving well is helpful to the community. That is true. Rigorous refinement and sculpting of the human moral material is, however, an elite privilege, perhaps one of those subtle signifiers of class that the universe can safely ignore. For an Epicurean, convinced there is nothing but atoms and the void, peace of mind does not accompany the fastidious pursuit of intellectual invulnerability. Human moral intuitions are ungrounded in any broader scheme of things, useful as they may be to keep the multitude in line. But for the enlightened an ascetic bias is superfluous, indeed it increases the very anxiety which the doctrines of Epicurus are meant to preclude. Hence the obsession with sexual virtue is a puzzle. A sophisticated free-thinker like Lucretius can’t imagine the gods bothering to punish violations of a chastity they only occasionally stop to admire. It is true that no man, and no god, wants his wife to act like a whore. Yet the fact that lusts can be a problem does not mean they must be. The wise man is not the plaything of his appetites. Families need replenishing, and reproductive sex is a duty, but recreational sex has its place too. The trick is to be sensible. Nature would not steer you wrong. Epicurean philosophy was judicious, and often sharply critical, in its attitude to desire. It was not prudish. It shunned only anything with the potential to degrade or demean. Any passion that clouds the judgment, and makes the mind susceptible to false ideas, is to be avoided. But all passions have their moderate use. Health, not romance or poetic idealism, justifies the carnal appetites and their exercise. There is nothing repulsive about the body’s enjoyment of everything nature presents as agreeable; the mind, like the body, is fully capable of recognising the signs of health and disease and directing itself accordingly. Sexual appetite – something natural but not necessary, according to the Epicureans—would be fine if it could be divorced from romantic love. If you enjoy sex without the inflammations of passion, writes Lucretius, count yourself lucky. You have taken the profit without the penalties. (IV: 1073-4)

Men, however, make their own torments, and the most clear-sighted materialism has yet to succeed in saving them. Physiologically a naturalistic perspective offers a way out. We could, like healthy sensuous machines, respond to stimuli without deferring to the imagination’s trick of dragging out the pleasure, weaving the net of alluring pictures, feeding our pains, conjuring up illusions like smoke and mirrors. A naturalist lover would be finished soon in the bedroom, just as happy to start again, but without lingering images of ecstasy and agony. *Eros* could survive without the smell of burning flesh or the excesses of the imagination. That is how a sensible Epicurean would reason. But then *Eros* would no longer be the sweet and bitter god people know so well. Lucretius stops in Book IV of *de Rerum Natura* and looks with suspicion at ‘what we term Venus’ (1058). She wants more costly victories. She wants us to languish and moan, to abandon our powers of detachment and our precious awareness of what constitutes our pleasure and what threatens our pain. Satisfaction and contentment are too easy for her tastes, and a world where knowledge could temper desire lacks the drama she views herself as deserving. Frenzied longing for an exclusive possession and unending bliss is what Venus prefers us to suffer. She will not be happy until her victims are trapped in her snares, helpless and unhappy. (IV: 1141-1152) In the language of myth, sexual desire is sublime just because it is insatiable and suicidal. Heraclitus, early in the history of Greek philosophy, saw with despair the endlessness of its flux and dissolution, the shipwreck of its urge for possession. Power and failure can’t be kept apart, when eros holds the reins. ‘Its impotence makes it despotic’, Giulia Sissa says. ‘Desire is a form of anxiety.’[[86]](#endnote-86) It promises sweetness. It brings terror, madness and ruin.

Lucretius addresses Aphrodite, or Venus – ‘Mother of Aeneas and his race’, ancestor of the Latins – in the prologue of his *On the Nature of Things*. She is his Muse. She is the creative force of Nature, whose spell spurs all beasts and men into motion. Guardian of the voluptuous, inspiration of generation, she is gracious, fierce and charming, but her command is not to be ignored; the law of desire enslaves all. Can the poet’s composition thrive without her blessing? All fertility is in her hands, and unless she plays along, the anger of war has nothing to check it. Lucretius pictures her in the arms of Mars, war laid low, peace at last. But the image is unstable. We are drawn by desire, cajoled by pleasures, and it makes us cling to life, just as if we didn’t know all the time that, in the relentless rush of atoms in a void, death and disintegration are with us constantly: ‘nature is the universal mother and the common grave’ (V: 258-9), and every day is both birthday and funeral. “What is this deplorable lust for life that holds us trembling in bondage to such uncertainties and dangers?”(III:1078-9)

This, then, is what we term Venus. This is the origin of the thing called love. If you find yourself thus passionately enamoured of an individual, you should keep well away from such images. Thrust from you anything that might feed your passion, and turn your mind elsewhere. Day by day the madness heightens and the grief deepens. Your only remedy is to lance the first wound with new incisions; to salve it, while it is still fresh, with promiscuous attachments or to guide the motions of your mind into a different direction. Do not think that by avoiding romantic love you will be missing the delights of sex. Rather, you will reap the sort of profits that carry with them no penalty (IV, 1107). The deception lovers seem unable to free themselves from is the belief that sexual union will make one out of two, that separation will dissolve in an ecstasy that makes mortality irrelevant. ‘They ask themselves what it is that they are craving for, but find no device that will master their malady.’ But love never delivers what your imagination expects: instead of fulfilment it enslaves you in a chain of repetition, disillusion and anguish. The wiser person knows that there is no compensation that transcends the norms of nature and materiality, just as there is no punishment by which the gods seek to make us afraid. This philosophical insight into the way things are, freeing us from a false belief in transcendence or a fantasy of something outside nature, will help the frustrated lover to resist the hellish snares of *eros* while paying due tribute to the ‘smiling’ and ‘kindly’ sovereignty of the goddess, carefully propitiated. For ‘all nature’ is her ‘gift’ (I, 1-20). The universe, for those who understand, is a hymn to Venus.

**1.8 *Sophrosyne* at Fault**

Christianity, the religion of love that took out the lust, will have a different answer to the problem of impossible desire. Corporeal mortification to extirpate the passions was one solution: fast, go without sleep, make your body hideous. Sensuousness will dry up for lack of nurturing. Idealisation was another strategy the Christians offered. The fusion and self-dissolution craved by the lover is impossible; this realization is enough, according to Lucretius, to make the pleasures of love bitter. But for the Christians such a loss of self in an ecstatic union is possible. It is promised to a different species of lover, the yearning suitor of the divine. The soul which gives itself to God loses all and gains all. Decreation is the fullest gift I can offer God, said Simone Weil, our last century’s most consistent ascetic. Let me empty out the space in the universe which I occupy, leaving it free and vacant for Him to take back. This is the extreme end of the mystic’s quest: Become nothing. Wipe out the self. Let your negativity be your glory. Desire not to desire, but long with all your heart for annihilation. It sounds a paradox, but in the hands of the mystic it is a method, even a career. And mysticism was growing increasingly popular in the Hellenistic world, given that the reason of the philosophers only satisfied the needs of an elite few. In the famous Chapter 15 of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman* Empire, Volume I, Edward Gibbon chronicles with melancholy irony the ‘remarkable victory’ of a religion of credulity and zeal over an ancient and worldly civilization, the mystifying triumph of a religion that preferred the miraculous to the logical: ‘The primitive Christians perpetually trod on mystic ground, and their minds were exercised by the habits of believing the most extraordinary events.’[[87]](#endnote-87) Late in the history of the Roman Empire, even philosophy was guilty of a certain hankering after wonder and the marvellous. Philosophers who considered themselves disciples of Plato were inspired by a more allegorical version of the Platonic metaphysics of the soul in the style of Plotinus and Porphyry. They began the fateful severance of philosophy from natural science: ‘Consuming their reason in these deep but unsubstantial meditations’, Gibbon wrote, these new Platonists ‘flattered themselves that they possessed the secret of disengaging the soul from its corporeal prison…and, by a very singular revelation, converted the study of philosophy into that of magic.’[[88]](#endnote-88) Perhaps, as Gibbon suggests, the ‘remarkable victory over the established religions of the earth’ that the strange Christian superstition was to enjoy can in part be explained by pagan philosophy’s willingness to surrender argument for faith and clarity for obscurity.

But the new beliefs had some added inducements as well. No Greek or Roman had been offered by their religion the promise of everlasting blessings in exchange for pious virtue, nor was it common to look forward to a better condition in the afterlife. Only in the Mystery cults could the ‘extraordinary claim’ be found – ‘extraordinary in terms of Greek religion, with its emphasis on this world…that initiation in the cult will bring the initiate a better lot in the afterlife.’[[89]](#endnote-89) The faithful were to be preserved and awarded eternal happiness; the unbelievers would continue in anguish and untruth, their torments incurable. The chosen few might aspire to be changed into a more than natural form even on this earth. Christian preaching anticipated a wholesale transformation of the universe – a destruction of old and tired nature and the commencement of a new order. In that order, all would be changed; the Kingdom Christ promised would arrive as an inner event, giving birth to a way of being human that broke all previous rules. For some radical Christians, the individual created a hybrid of flesh and spirit might solicit a different standing in God’s providential plan by dispensing with the function of sexual reproduction. Hence the relation of mortality to immortality is redrawn. As many reflective Greeks and Romans concluded, sexual desire, with its curious and persisting urgency, may represent the longing of those bound by birth and death to reach out for immortality. Such was one of the interpretations of *eros* Plato considered in the *Symposium*. Human love is all the more intense because the span of time in which it has its play is so short. Death makes the heart grow fonder. But Christians believed death might not be the end. For a Christian, who accepts the myth of the Fall, humans have lost their exemption from death through their own disobedience. Their zeal to contract carnal relations, blessed by divine approval if the aim is to reproduce, exists under the sign of that lesser achievement of immortality, the propagation of the species. What if one went further, renouncing the project, giving up marriage and sex and trying to live like the bodiless angels? Could this indicate a dazzling and perverse swerve in the history of carnal love? That swerve is what we call chastity rather than Venus. It was not a swerve Lucretius the Epicurean would have looked on with favour, much as he acknowledged the frustrations and savagery of carnal love. If it was dangerous to be ruled by Venus, it was absurd to think she could be dethroned in such a brutal fashion, swept aside, defeated by the self-destructive strategies of the eunuch.

Lucretius was not the only one to explore the sordid fascinations of sex. Other Greek and Latin poets have translated carnal obsessions into poetic forms, made allegories out of graphic sexual descriptions, and used a language of signs to register but deny the immediacy of sex. In the ancient world before Christianity the problem was not – with the brilliant exception of Platonism – the question of how to sublimate desire. Rather it was how to exercise on it a disciplined will and a commitment to virtue. Philosophy had much experience in supplying appropriate exercises for those who refused to be the slaves of love. Sensuality is a physic (healthful in the right amounts.) Usually unwisely, it can become a toxin. It needs taming, if it is not to make us servile and degraded. Such taming can include a number of things: the gentleman’s sense of how to use moderation to preserve a judicious power in all activities, for Aristotle; for a Stoic, the art of discriminating between what is and what is not necessary; for Lucretius, the need for a remedy, an antidote to an excess of voluptuousness and inflammation.

The young Greek prince Hippolytus believes himself to be set apart by his chastity, which he calls *sophrosyne*. He is not being a bad translator. Greek literature often uses the word *sophron* where it is sexual moderation and chaste restraint which is being described, and praised. Chastity is, unsurprisingly, a virtue expected from and admired in women, but it is only when women are in the picture that the term ‘*sophron*’ is used to designate sexual virtue. Gender and virtue, though often sealed together in rigid and conventional ways – masculinity with courage, femininity with thrift – can also diverge unexpectedly. The asymmetry of gender roles and gendered lives was acute in antiquity. But it was not absolute: it allowed for ambiguity, licensed boundary crossing, festive transvestism, heroic and divine changing of sexual personae. Androgyny plays a complicated role in Greek religion and myth, although scholars have not agreed on how seriously to take the indications that exist. Achilles and Heracles spend significant periods of time in drag, Dionysus is long-haired, soft-skinned, effeminate and bearded, as is, in some unusual examples, Artemis. And girls, in training to be wives and fulfil the demands of their sexual destiny, run away from the prospect of becoming-women in earnest, live in the woods, and act like feral boys. We would expect that the ways of being *sophron*, and the self-presentation encouraged for those who want to be famous for their virtue, moderation and temperance, will vary from male to female, as from noble to those below and from warrior to tradesman, But *sophrosyne*, a universally admired virtue, can signify sexual forbearance in both men and women, along with other characteristics that are its close affiliates: *aidos –* shame or modesty or, sometimes, respect; In a woman, it identifies ideal femininity: a docile, obedient prudent wife whose pleasure it is to remain at home, who doesn’t get herself spoken about and is herself sparing with words, who slips away when other women are gossiping lasciviously, as they do. Phaedra is famously *sophron*, or so she claims, and no one in the play contradicts her: what she means is that she has a good reputation, a good name (ς) (687-88); she has a need to be conspicuously sophron because, as she says (337-339), she comes from a messy lineage. Her father, King Minos, was sired by Zeus in the form of a bull, which the king of the gods considered the right way to approach Europa; her mother, Pasiphae, in some versions the daughter of the sun, was struck by Aphrodite with a passion for a beautiful white bull that Minos refused to sacrifice to Poseidon, and her half-brother was a monstrous Minotaur. Her sister, Ariadne, previously the partner of Theseus, Phaedra’s husband, helped the roving-eyed hero to escape the labyrinth, but was abandoned by him on Naxos, becoming there the bride of Dionysus.

According to Phaedra, there are two kinds of shame. One is the greatest of pleasures and a good for household and city, as the reverence for virtue keeps chaos in check. The other is destructive and dark. How cruelly ironic it is, Phaedra complains, that they are written with the same letters! (387f) Religious and moral thought in antiquity can be seen to puzzle about this duality in such a central ideal. Is self-denial strong or weak? Is it manly to be anxious about one’s reputation? If moderation is virile, as most experts argue, and cruelty, sexual excess and anger are weaknesses, considered even to be feminizing, then how does the phallic male enjoy his undeniable prestige? Aristotle has the clearest reply: it is not manly to over-indulge in pleasures. Rather it is bestial or slavish. ‘Excess with regard to pleasures is self-indulgence (*akolasia*) and is culpable.’ Being motivated solely by one’s desires for what is pleasurable is the mark of the immature. Hence persistent chasing after tasty things to eat or carnal indulgences are the habits of the lowly but not the upper sort of man. What makes the intemperate man weak (and ‘unmanly’) is his childish inability to cope with minor frustrations, while the manly, temperate man does not feel ‘pain’ at the absence of pleasure, nor does abstinence make him suffer. (*Nicomachean Ethics*, III, 1118b, 28-34)

It follows that for Aristotle and many of the Greco-Roman thinkers temperance is a kind of rationality, a way of maximising the influence of the will and minimising involuntary impulses. But the rational man is not without craving. Aristotle keeps in his mind the distinction that guides his politics and his metaphysics, and all in all, it is a distinction worth preserving: the human is neither god nor animal. Utter freedom from impulse and appetite would not be a merit for the best of men, indeed it could well be the sign of a sociopath, if Aristotle had such a term in his repertoire. *Sophrosyne*, he argues with some heat, is not insensibility. The good person, the *sophron*, craves what he ought to crave. A person who found no excitement and delight in sensuous pleasures would not be human; he would not even be imaginable. He has no name, for he doesn’t exist. (*Nicomachean Ethics* III, 1119a, 1-20) No proper man could be immune to sexual desire. *Enkrateia*, the disposition inflated by the Christians to heroic proportions and made the crown of the monastic life, is for Aristotle a deficiency, an absence of genuine continence, and something that would be condemned more often if it weren’t for the fact that it is hardly ever to be found.(NE VII 1151b, 23-32) The idea that you could turn the eunuch – who makes lifelong and dedicated celibacy a fact of the body – into a figure of social pride rather than mockery and contempt would be astonishing to Aristotle.

Roman sages were even more indignant at the prospect: “[T]he quality know as *virtus*,’ writes Mathew Kuefler in his fascinating study of *The Manly Eunuch*, “was the very summit of excellence and achievement, the supreme goal of human existence.” And it was “equally the foundation of masculinity, “manness” in its etymological origins…The equation or conflation of moral excellence and masculinity is typical of Roman writers.”[[90]](#endnote-90) Pseudo-Lucian, whose writings date presumably from the late 3rd century, include in his speeches defending the love of women against the lovers of males a typical jibe against the pathetic class of those ‘who have become old without any interval of manhood’, passing directly from boyhood to premature old age:

The daring of some men has advanced so far in tyrannical violence as even to wreck sacrilege upon nature with the knife. By depriving males of their masculinity they have found wider ranges of pleasure. But those who become wretched and luckless in order to be boys for longer remain male no longer, being a perplexing riddle of dual gender (ςς, neither being kept for the functions to which they have been born nor yet having the thing into which they have been changed. (Pseudo-Lucian, *Erotes* 21)[[91]](#endnote-91)

Eunuchs, as one poet puts it, are exiles from the society of the human race.[[92]](#endnote-92) Castration was outlawed in Rome and the Empire, and you would be severely punished if you were infamous enough to castrate another man. Yet eunuchs appear all through the later Roman Empire, not all imported from ‘soft’ and suspect Eastern regions. In terms of civil status, they were very low, almost as low as women. ; it was debatable whether they could write wills and bequeath property, whether they could adopt children or act as guardians to women or minors.[[93]](#endnote-93) They could not perform as witnesses in trials. How did they become figures to honour rather than to despise? How could a eunuch ‘enter the Kingdom of God’, as a later religious figure promised?

**Conclusion: Bloody virgins**

Attis, one of Hippolytus’s alter egos, offers his sexual organs as sacrifice to his demanding goddess, Cybele, whose priests form a eunuch brotherhood. When he awoke from his madness, Catullus writes, he was shocked to find himself bereft. Those who flee sexuality don’t escape punishment and their torture seems all the more cruel to us; it is not clear that it would have seemed so to the ancients.

Various explanations have been given for the relationship of castration to the worship of the Mother of the Gods. The priests’ self-castration was seen even in antiquity as a symbolic sacrifice of individual fertility in order to enhance the fertility of the community and even of the cosmos, and as a sacred re-enactment of the spring harvest…Likewise, both ancient and modern scholars have seen the priests’ self-castration as a pledge of their sexual purity. The priests’ self-castration may also have been part of a renunciation of masculine identity, however, and associated with their personal dedication to a feminine deity.[[94]](#endnote-94)

When Jean Racine wrote his *Phèdre* in the 17th century felt he had to change Hippolytus’s character to make him less ‘innocent’, otherwise the indignation at his fate would have overwhelmed the pity and terror. He gave Hippolytus a girlfriend and made the tragedy mainly Phaedra’s. Yet there is something correct, an accusation that sticks, in these stories about the vengeance visited on the sexually innocent. Great Mother goddesses don’t care too much about human vulnerabilities. Nor do virgin goddesses. Titian’s two great paintings, *Diana and Actaeon* and *Diana and Callisto*, have been called by Lucien Freud ‘the most beautiful pictures in the world.’ In the first, the angry goddess, discovered nude and bathing by a hapless young hunter who was looking for his dogs, is portrayed at a moment of exposure and repudiation: baleful, a recent critic calls her. Her shock and the terror of her nymphs lead to a swift and horrible act of violence, which the painting cannot show but which readers of Ovid will supply for it. The goddess splashes water on the unwary Actaeon, magically changing him into a stag. His hounds tear him to bits, echoing Hippolytus’s panicked horses. Diana’s grace towards those who follow her rites can be bestowed, as Hippolytus so passionately wishes, and taken away, just as arbitrarily. The fate of Callisto, Diana’s favourite nymph who accompanies her in Arcadia, is even worse. Wandering in a forest ‘whose trees no axe had deflowered’, Callisto loosens the strings of her bow, lets down her guard, and is raped by Jove who has taken on the form of the virgin goddess herself. She becomes pregnant by the god in the form of a female virgin, an anomaly that should make us think. Furious at her fall, Diana banishes Callisto and Juno turns her into a wild bear.

But the most telling image to stay with is the solemn ceremony in honour of Hippolytus, the nubile girls cutting off their hair as an offering in the temple of Artemis. Before the myth came the ritual, as the Cambridge anthropologists told us. Those about to marry, or in other cases, to become pregnant for the first time – those untilled fields made ready for the plough, as the Greeks so delicately put it – must first appease Artemis. Perhaps they have an obligation to pay her back for what she is about to lose. Or perhaps they have reasons to fear their own loss, the surrender of autonomy they have only barely glimpsed as they are about to leave the nursery and the schoolroom. In the rites for Artemis, maidens play with the idea of a return to the undisciplined life of the beasts that have not known a harness. The mistress whom they honour, and who keeps exacting sacrifices, did not have to become a wife and mother. Artemis did not go through the door to the husband’s home and his guardianship. Mortal women, by contrast, are made to live inside, according to the Greeks and Romans. Goddesses don’t agree. The goddess rules the open countryside and she enforces the ancient hunting taboo. The hunter must be continent or the prey will elude him; lucky in love, unlucky in war, is another way to put it. The sovereignty of Artemis is anomalous; she founds no dynasty, worries about no children. And her sovereignty remained unchallenged, her separateness intact; she moves in and out of the great house of the Olympian family, and she won her exemption from sexual service by charming her father, playing girlish games.

Human girls don’t have this choice. It remained for a new religion, arising in the dog days of paganism, to turn virginity into a political career. In so doing so it sapped the strength from this weird and exceptional option. The ascetic life had bewitched many, and the more it demanded the more attractive it seemed. Monks, hermits and consecrated virgins signed on for the charms of mortification. Asceticism was a life of extreme solitude and harsh diet, shorn of most of the ordinary markers of civilization like roofs and walls and beds, with minimal covering so that the ascetic would be exposed to sun and rain and dust. Sexual austerity or indifference was only part of the package: the spirit of a virginal existence was a rigorous spirit, working hard and sharing labour, retreating to caves or forming communities a bit like primitive federations.[[95]](#endnote-95) Christian world-renouncers challenged themselves physically in order to live in this world as if not of it, with their minds constantly on prayer, penitence and purity. Christians who followed the ascetic call could live outside the family, outside the yoke of sex. And remarkably, this option seemed open to females as well. ‘Dedicated virgins’, the Church decided between the 3rd and 5th centuries, could live in communities with other dedicated virgins, closely supervised, or they could live invisibly at home, veiled, silent, charitable and spiritually distinguished.[[96]](#endnote-96) But first it was necessary to defuse the sacred awe of queenly and warlike chastity, to make it mild and meek, humble and tender, not vengeful and austere. Against the image of Artemis, who is too proud and cold to look at her devotees as they lie dying, another face is juxtaposed: the docile and submissive Mary, compassionately bent over the scandal of her own immaculate pregnancy.

With the rise of a Virgin who is a kindly, humble and nurturing Mother, the game is over. Unlike Aphrodite, Mary is not sexual for anyone. She does not preside over marriage nor encourage the world to follow the law of love. Unlike Artemis, who was also a divine virgin, Mary is not proud or defiant, for the pure goddess of wood and hunting was cruel in her exemption from the human (and divine) passions that unite the rest of us. Mary is everything the Greek deities are not: she is feeling, caring, bitter in her grief, all-forgiving. And she has a remarkable way of focussing on the single task at hand, her infant and its needs. Mary the virgin, mother of God (*Theotokos*, bearer of God as she became officially in 431 A.D. in Artemis’s city of Ephesus)[[97]](#endnote-97), is exclusive. She does not look for other attachments. Her breast and the warmth of her skin are available only to her child. There is no one in the pagan pantheon, not even Demeter, who is so single-mindedly defined by her maternity. Yet the aura of female fertility, nurture, generation, has somehow enveloped Mary in its magic without interfering with her maidenhood. She is no longer a child. But she has not entered the world of men.

Having a mother who is a virgin is a fantasy. Lucky Oedipus, no father to fight with! There were a number of other remarkable births in the history of the world’s gods, and one privilege founders of cities are allowed is that of being *autochthonous*, born from one element, the earth. Mary’s virginal body is all that is needed to give the Trinitarian God a human flesh and life. The mystery of the Incarnation is both solved and made almost incomprehensible through this particular decision of the divine economy. Any other mixture of divine with human substance would have sullied the combination, given the man-God a rival descent and set of obligations. To achieve humanity through the female alone was an interesting choice. For God to render himself human through a mingling with something virginal was a choice that will have significant repercussions. It was not just any form of the human condition that could serve as a temporary home for the eternal and immutable deity. The one God chose was humanity as pure, unsullied, sexually inexperienced, docile, young, Jewish and maternal.

Thus Christ, the Son of man, when all is said and done, is ‘human’ only through his mother – as if Christly or Christian humanism could only be a maternalism.[[98]](#endnote-98)

‘We live’, writes Julia Kristeva, ‘in a civilization where the *consecrated* (religious or secular) representation of femininity is absorbed by motherhood.’ The other option – to represent powerful femininity as virginal and autonomous – is, Kristeva shows, absorbed into this one, the maternal. For her, that makes sense. It is normal because mother means (first) love, the ‘love that ensured the survival of the newborn’. It is a love approaching incest, and it forms the template on which all future loves are made. Perhaps maternal love is the only love besides the divine love that casts out fear and anxiety instead of creating those. Kristeva’s *Stabat Mater* probes the mystery of the transformations, from love that is almost thoughtless and wordless – the need felt through the mouth, the belly, the skin – through to the holy love that goes beyond death. Man overcomes the ‘unthinkable of death by postulating maternal love in its place.’[[99]](#endnote-99) Maternity is what sets ‘itself up at the place of this subdued anguish called love’. So far, the Marian complex of symbols is on the excessive side, but plausible enough. The dignity of motherhood, blessed by the needs of helpless infants everywhere, is affirmed the dominant masculine imaginary, whose ‘fantasy’ may be this: she was there for me, and for no one else.

And yet the weird compound of the ‘virgin mother’, Kristeva continues, does not exist merely as a reparation for the male child’s crushing and Oedipal wound. It can also be understood as a feminist strategy, an insistence by an angry and subordinated sex that men are unnecessary. ‘We conceived immaculately’, ‘we had no need for you’, ‘our marriage was to God alone’. In the world of Mary, there are no other women to be rivals, other female options. ‘I am alone of my sex’, alone in being conceived miraculously without sin, in ascending to heaven within dying, in leaving no body and no tomb. I am unique. I am the virgin spouse, the set-apart Bride of the Holy Bridegroom. Does the female ascetic’s or mystic’s appropriation of the place of the Canticle’s ‘virgin spouse’ mean that ‘she’ – perhaps no longer a lowly ‘woman’, but a third sex– has repudiated femininity as the counterpart and other to masculinity, and has thereby repudiated males as a sex, and as a destiny? As we shall see, the identification of the holy woman – virgin, nun, ascetic – with the Biblical ‘spouse of Christ’ – was an appropriation devoutly recommended and celebrated by the male establishment of the Church for centuries upon centuries, however tense the relations became between orthodoxy and female spirituality and mysticism (and they became very tense indeed).

Kristeva’s thinking has echoes in many feminist writers who have taken up the pre-modern history of female religiosity and mysticism. Her ideas, however, are more adventurous than most. Women should be welcomed into the contemporary ethical sphere, asserts Kristeva. They should contribute to the creation of a ‘heretical ethics separated from morality’, one is that is ‘undeath (*a-mort*),’ that is to say, love. This ‘herethics’ will have a different relationship to law; it will not oppose law, the flesh, and *jouissance*, but ‘enflesh’ the law, just as the Virgin ‘enflesh the Word’. But why does Kristeva believe it necessary that this new ethics, one which would withstand death, is the contribution of ‘women who harbour the desire to reproduce’?[[100]](#endnote-100) The last Platonism, of this non-dualist philosopher, re-attaches love to the desire for procreation, even if that procreation be metaphorical or spiritual. I propose that the category of virginity, and the representation of femininity, needs to be taken back from the clutches of maternity. There are some virgins who do not want to be anyone’s mother, or anybody’s spouse: not the Church’s, not the children’s, and not the husband’s. They are the true heretics. It is to them that my next chapter is dedicated.

**CHAPTER 2: MARRIAGE AND MAYHEM: BLOOD, SEX AND THAT ‘VIRGIN GODDESS BUSINESS’**

‘Better well hung than ill wed.’ (Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*)[[101]](#endnote-101)

‘It is better to marry than to burn.’ (St Paul, I Cor 7:9)

‘May the chaste daughter of Zeus, the untamed one, rescue us, the untamed ones; may we escape unwedded and unsubdued’. (Aeschylus, *The Suppliants*)[[102]](#endnote-102)

‘I could be content that we might procreate like trees, without conjunction, or that there were any way to perpetuate the world without this trivial and vulgar way of coition.’ (Sir Thomas Browne, *religion Medici*)[[103]](#endnote-103)

**2.1. Men, Women and Others: Chasing the *Parthenos***

Phaedra’s corrosive passion sticks in the mind. She can’t sleep, she can’t eat, she’s miserable indoors, she’s miserable outdoors, she doesn’t want to live, she doesn’t want to speak, she longs to fly away.[[104]](#endnote-104) She loves Hippolytus, he loathes her, she loathes herself. It’s shameful, and her quick sense of shame (*aid­os*) had been her pride, her protection.[[105]](#endnote-105) Phaedra, coming from a notorious family, wanted nothing more than to escape notoriety. She had been the most modest of women, the ornament of the family, the restoration of the reputation of the house of Minos. What can be more horrifying than to be suffocated by a desire you can’t control, a disease you have caught from a goddess who doesn’t care. That her object of desire is an innocent, puritanical and unformed, only magnifies her wretched grandeur. Too old, too incestuous, too many ill-omened relations, tormented by a purity she can’t have, Phaedra got her own back when her story was translated into high pathos by Seneca and Racine, who put her at the centre and demoted the young virgin into the margins. *Phèdre* is a role on the grand scale, for a Rachel Félix, a Sarah Bernhardt, the divas who had kings at their feet [[106]](#endnote-106). No one would say as much for her stepson. Who wants to play Hippolytus?[[107]](#endnote-107) Can there be tragic dignity in his self-important purity? The young man who refused sexuality is torn to pieces by a bull and his own mares, the reins of his chariot strangling his mangled body. A grotesque death, not heroic, perhaps, by Greek male standards. But it is a ravishment in which nature’s anarchy is soothed and an angry family reconciled through the death of something beautiful and wild.

Mauled by the beasts with which he is most at home, Hippolytus remains in the memory as someone sacred to arms and the hunt, like those warriors against Troy who would never again know the quiet of the hearth. If Phaedra achieves nobility by the violence of her desire, so does Hippolytus. Her case, however, belongs to a long history of magnificently deluded lovers, women sacrificed to love. His does not. Hippolytus deserves to be called unique. On his own until the broken young gods Attis and Jesus Christ come to join him, Hippolytus reigns over a much less familiar cult.

In honour of the great and savage goddess Artemis, Hippolytus*,* a male virgin and a self-ordained priest of purity, says No to *eros.* Indeed it is this quality, of intransigent purity, which by the same stroke inflames Aphrodite *and* ‘the daughter of Minos and Pasiphae’. What Phaedra loves in him ‘are precisely those qualities that make him unable to love anybody’[[108]](#endnote-108) except – and it is a fatal exception – a divinity. Artemis the divine hunter is an object of desire beyond the world and not at home in it. Might as well fall in love with the moon. Conventional Greek characters in the play, worried onlookers at the fast-brewing disaster, try to dissuade Hippolytus from his exclusive and blasphemous preference for an unfertile virtue. They can tell that this fixation on the inhuman is, in any code you could produce, monstrous.

But the young man is the child of an Amazon. And to the Amazons, nothing is anathema as much as marriage: it is the tyranny their existence is dedicated to resisting. Amazons are a living contradiction to everything Greek manhood is dedicated to preserve, and, for that reason alone, an endless source of fascination. It was all intriguing - their barbarity, their warlike fury, their unpredictability. A celebrated frieze from the tomb of Mausollos at Halikarnassos, now in the British Museum, shows the Amazons, with their queens Penthesilea and Hippolyta (Hippolytus’s mother) in battle against the armies of Herakles and Theseus. More than a match for their superhero assailants, these warriors are the ultimate female ‘other’, grotesque yet seductive. [[109]](#endnote-109) Legendary enemies of civilization, citizens of a single-sex state, they are, in their Greek depictions, neither quite men nor quite women. How could they seem anything else but ‘chaotic, disorderly, unruly’, in contrast to the ordered, reverent life of the ideal Athenian man? [[110]](#endnote-110) The Amazons returned the compliment. Centaurs and satyrs committed outrages against mortal women, as the same frieze shows in explicit detail; the Amazons banished all males over the age of 12. There is a rough equivalence. Sexual revenge answers mythic violence. In the process the very rationale for heterosexual alliance becomes hard to keep in view. The Amazons’ state of perpetual insurrection challenges the marital truce; perhaps it was only a temporary cessation of hostilities between what Hesiod called ‘the cursed race of women’ and their traditional opponents. For a Greek to fall in love with an Amazon, as Theseus does, means trouble. Like the other barbarians who populate the nightmares of the Hellenic imaginary (Persians, Scythians, Egyptians) the Amazon ‘cannot participate in the civilizing relationships of exchange and marriage’.[[111]](#endnote-111) The enemy has come within when you bring an Amazon into your home.[[112]](#endnote-112) The fantasy of doing so remained ‘irresistible’, and not just for Greeks like Theseus and Achilles. (Kathryn Schwarz’s account of English Renaissance fantasies of ‘Amazon encounters’ tells a similar story: ‘If there is something perverse about imagining Amazons within domestic roles, there is also, apparently, something irresistible.’[[113]](#endnote-113))

In the tragedy that bears his name, Hippolytus struggles to defend his exemption from the social order of gender roles and civic obligations, from everything that makes a Greek man a ‘man’. This includes marriage, something his heroic father has entered into a number of times, although Theseus’s legitimate couplings are modest compared with his notorious erotic adventures, starting with the rape of the 12 year old Helen at Artemis’s sanctuary in Sparta. Theseus is everything Hippolytus is not. Being a married man and head of a household is not what Hippolytus wants to be. In Hippolytus’s mind marriage symbolises a deep though obscure corruption and an unacceptable concession to the banalities of the everyday. Sexual love and marriage disgust him for no doubt neurotic reasons. (Euripides is not naïve about psychopathology.) A world without women strikes him as a far happier solution. Deities who must be worshipped at night shock him.

He is wrong to think he can escape. There is no human life that is not also sexual life. Even divine life is sexual life. This is a lesson the Greeks taught themselves. For them the ascetic experiments of Eastern Mediterranean subcultures remained a thing apart, bizarre, perhaps fascinating but probably unhealthy. Theseus is not indulging in reactionary bluster when he worries that his strange son may have absorbed some of the exotic novelties of the Orphic[[114]](#endnote-114) cult (*Hipp*. 948-957), that Eastern temptations may have addled his classical brain. Even among radicals like the Pythagoreans, who banned animal sacrifice and lived on a vegetarian diet, the idea that sexual relations are, in themselves, contaminating or morally dubious was never entertained. To reproduce yourself is a duty: civic honour and religious piety require it. Gods and dumb animals can do without conjugal attachment (although Zeus and Hera clearly model human marriage in its uptown version). Mortals need to negotiate the middle path between the sexlessness of the Golden Age and the promiscuity of a revived savagery.

The fantasy of a simple and uncorrupted way of life did capture the minds of some sophisticated and spiritually ambitious Greeks, who longed for something more exalting or stringent than the conventional codes of decent behaviour. Vegetarianism was one way to avoid the common, brutish form of the human. Sexual asceticism could have been another. But it was not, as Jean-Pierre Vernant explains: “In their quest for a life that is totally pure – alien to anything concerned with death and generation – the Pythagoreans could have adopted towards marriage the same attitude they adopted towards sacrifice….they could have taken up a more radical position and refused sexual union in all its forms just as they totally rejected blood sacrifice.’ It didn’t happen: in matters of sex and marriage they were not ‘religious extremists’. The Pythagoreans, Vernant writes,

do not appear to have had the idea that sexual activity is impure; they only considered it to be so if the union was an illegitimate one. The married couple remained pure in the carnal act which unites them as husband and wife.[[115]](#endnote-115)

Hierocles of Alexandria, a Neoplatonist philosopher and influential teacher in the fifth century CE, drew on the Pythagorean tradition and published on important set of commentaries on the ‘golden Verses of Pythagoras’. In the fragments that survive from his ethical treatise he has many admiring things to say about marriage:

[T]he married state is to be preferred by the sage, while a single life is not be chosen except under peculiar circumstances… [m]arriage is beneficial. First, because it produces a truly divine fruit, the production of children…In prosperity they will be the associates of our joy and, in adversity, the sympathetic diminishers of our sorrows. Marriage is beneficial not only because of the procreation of children, but for the association of a wife. When we are wearied with our labors outside of the home, she receives us with officious kindness and refreshes us by her solicitous attentions….What relation can be more ornamental to a family than that between husband and wife?[[116]](#endnote-116)

Pythagoreanism remains a cryptic sect: was it primarily philosophical, the active ingredient in Plato’s metaphysics? Is it better understood as a group of high-minded cranks whose strange taboos about diet were dedicated to the project of individual salvation and whose practices were at odds with official sacrificial religion? Was it a tolerated counter-culture steadily increasing its profile through the Hellenistic centuries until absorption into ascetic Christianity made it almost invisible? What is intriguing about the Pythagorean idea is that, in a civilization that would view Hippolytus as a freak, it made it possible to think seriously about innocence. Incorruptibility represented a qualitative leap beyond the moral aspirations current in the Classical world. Only the Mystery cults would touch on this terrain, with their secretive procedures and techniques of purification. But the Pythagorean insight changed the rules right in the face of public scrutiny, and its picture of virtue was designed as a practical option for a grown man, an active member of the community, neither recluse nor saint, neither androgyne nor eunuch.

Purity is not a category we can take for granted. The followers of Pythagoras imagined that by foregoing animal products they would return to the Golden Age and reproduce the diet of the gods. It is more than an Arcadian fantasy, although primitivism was always a temptation. The Pythagoreans, as Marcel Detienne puts it, were looking for a regimen ‘that did not open up insurmountable distance between men and gods but which aimed, in various ways, to establish a real fellowship between them.’[[117]](#endnote-117) Before the Age of Iron, before the creation of woman, the distinctions between god, animal and man were not so sharp. Then the invention of Labour and the cultivation of the earth brought the initial paradise to an end. They separated humans from a time when the needs of life were met simply and without struggle. Nature, in the Golden Age, was ignorant of greed and deprivation. It knew neither generation nor extinction. It was pure because nothing in it ever changed. Nothing was derivative, nothing mixed or composite. What has never been generated but has always existed must, on this reasoning, be immune from corruption. In their more mystical moments, the Pythagoreans tried to recapture the wisdom of the golden age, of simplicity and self-denial. Yet, and this is what must strike anyone who follows the history of ascetic thinking, this extreme pursuit of individual purification did not include the renunciation of sexuality and marriage. Health was too important, so the Pythagoreans taught that its needs should be met judiciously. These needs included sexual ones. Certainly, indulgence in the *aphrodisia* was potentially harmful to health if it went beyond due proportion. It was wise to limit such pleasures to the winter for fear of losing strength, although they were not so harmful in autumn or spring.[[118]](#endnote-118) The Pythagoreans took the responsibilities of marriage seriously. There was no danger as long as the practise of sexual life was conducted soberly, with no falling aside into incest, adultery or illegal lust.[[119]](#endnote-119) Indeed for these thoughtful ascetics, marriage could be seen as an instrument of purity,[[120]](#endnote-120) a redeeming force. Without wedlock, young boys and girls would remain trapped in a pre-human limbo, not a pristine moral integrity. Without it, depravity and promiscuity would be the rule.

To find an equivalent in antiquity to Hippolytus’s scandalous renunciation of the erotic we would have to go further to the margins, probably to the mystical and enigmatic cults like those associated with the Orphics.[[121]](#endnote-121) Orphism, as Jane Harrison describes it in her *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, was a religion fascinated with the afterlife, with the passages between the worlds of the living and the dead, with the soul and other out of the body things.[[122]](#endnote-122) Intended to compete with the cult of Dionysus,[[123]](#endnote-123) Orphism offered new, ecstatic mysteries to its initiates and imagined soul-journeys towards ever-increasing purification. The Bacchics had also promised human proximity to the divine. Their methods were intoxicating. To become a true devotee of Dionysus, your education might include madness (*mania),* delirium *(ekstasis*), possession (e*nthousiasmos*), tearing wild game to pieces without your bare hands (*diasparagmos* ), and eating it raw (*omophagia*).[[124]](#endnote-124) We don’t know if their rituals of bull-tearing and bull-eating actually included feasting on human flesh. But the rumour was rampant. The Orphics, avoiding the riot of the senses and orgies of erotic possession, wanted their exercises in transcendence less sullied. The Orphic initiate would pass upwards through ‘spiritual ecstasy’, through abstinence from sex and animal food.[[125]](#endnote-125) The Orpheus cults recognised that purification can come from dismemberment as well as disembodiment; it was, after all, the Maenads’ rage, tearing his body apart, throwing the head into the river, that made Orpheus pass from man into god.

By Greek standards, the Orphics may have overdone it, veering too close to the Christian fantasies of immateriality they seem so often to anticipate. They deprived their holiness of everything carnal, making it, as Harrison complains, tense and morbid.[[126]](#endnote-126) Stern spirits like Plato (*Rep*. 364b) distrusted Orphism for its shady snake-oil practices, for peddling what William James would call ‘soul medicine’. Theseus in Euripides’ tragedy would agree. When he believes he has learnt from Phaedra’s suicide note that his self-righteous son in a hypocrite, his scorn flares up and quickly gets out of control. A ‘manly man’ will distrust ascetic arrogance. What is it trying to prove? Theseus is no stupider than most men in his position: he is simply being conventional. He also has religion on his side.[[127]](#endnote-127) Those who despise carnality are potentially the tools of charlatans or demons. They are a disgrace to the laws of cult as well as polis. *Eros* is for moderns an acknowledged necessity. It is less often a religious duty. The Greeks thought differently.

Hippolytus longed for the freshness of an uncut meadow, no stepmothers, wild horses: an adolescent’s paradise. But paradise lasts only as long as innocence does. And innocence is a dubious gift, and rarely a recipe for happiness. In the stories I turn to in this chapter, the paradisal condition is in doubt from the start. The Greeks imagined the Golden Age as taking place before time began, before the fateful creation of Pandora, that beautiful evil. Before women appeared on the scene, history as we know it did not exist. Things were good. For males, at least. With history commences conflict, difference and division. In several of our great cultural traditions, the first event of historical time is an act of revolt. For the Greeks that revolt was that of the titan Prometheus. A titan rebelled in our name and for our sake. His brave act shames us, leaving us with a legacy of inferiority. (Is it typical of humans to have rebellions done by proxy?). It leaves us also an inheritance of progress and possibility. Prometheus’s defiance began human history for the Greeks, and inspired an angry Zeus to plague humankind with sexual difference. Once Pandora, the poisoned gift of femininity, was created, men came to know about suffering. Their ambitions to equal the gods’ felicity were severely constrained. Misery and heterosexual conjugality entered at the same door. And it is femininity that is at fault.

The Attic conception of the Golden Age reeks of misogyny. Other Paradises were more welcoming to women and couples. For Jews, Christians and Muslims, a pre-historical Golden Age seemed incomplete without the participation of women. In the perfect world, the green world of Eden, there already was a couple. This is certainly how the English account of Paradise and its loss understands the matter. Take the case of John Milton, the 17th century Puritan poet, defender of the ‘simple, sensuous, and passionate’[[128]](#endnote-128). For Milton the difference of the sexes is not, thankfully, the primal rupture from which we all suffer. Quite the contrary. His great poem, *Paradise Lost* (1667), celebrates companionate but not naïve love between the sexes as the outcome of the first sin.[[129]](#endnote-129) Like a number of literary texts pertinent to my argument, *Paradise Lost* tells of failed rebellion and its sequel, marriage. In Milton the first rebels are seraphs. Then come the human rebels, one male (Adam), the other female (Eve). A curious and adventurous pair shaken by the results of their bid for independence, Milton’s first married couple make the best of their education in the hardness of life. There are compensations, and Milton’s Fall is, as they say, fortunate, even for the fallen. Comforted by the delight they get from each other, Adam and Eve settle for a less pristine Eden. In the future they go off to meet, hand in hand, there will be childbirth and labour, love and desire, pain and death, and the definitive departure of innocence. This is, according to Milton, what marriage means.[[130]](#endnote-130)

Others who start out rebelling against the institution of marriage learn, under duress, to follow suit. Social as well as literary traditions overwhelmingly favour the ‘marriage plot’, the ready-made structure of narrative closure and social resolution. But there is also an ‘anti-marriage plot’. Literature offers a number of examples; two of the most instructive were written to be performed. When the anti-marriage plot takes to the stage, an essentially stable condition (marriage) begins to shake under the pressure of a passionate disagreement: defiant maidens behave in unmaidenly ways, daughters refuse to be wives, virtuous women act unruly and resort to breath-taking violence. In the name of autonomy and self-determination for women, and reinforced by a high-minded claim of immunity to the impulses of desire, the anti-marriage plot would appear to subvert the sexual and social order. Except that it doesn’t.

One of the first dramatisations of the anti-marriage plot is Aeschylus’s *The Suppliant Maidens*, staged early in the 5th century, the classic epoch of Athenian theatre. It was known to Euripides when he wrote his two versions of the Hippolytus and Phaedra story. The story behind *The Suppliant Maidens* has a long Greek pedigree. What Aeschylus did with it, however, deserves attention. The sexual politics in Aeschylus’ world are not those of Euripides, whose house of Theseus can sound almost Ibsenite. While Euripides is a skeptical, ironic and subversive artist ‘preoccupied with uneasily ‘modern’ themes: sexual ambiguity, religious doubt, the status of women’,[[131]](#endnote-131) Aeschylus’s voice seems to come from another world, where raw conflicts – of men and women, revenge and deliverance, archaic memories and brittle conventions – remain unresolved. *The Suppliant Maidens* is the only play that remains from a trilogy devoted to the daughters of King Danaus, legendary ancestor of the Danaan race, a patriarch wedded to at least 50 wives who is credited in some myths with the invention of the alphabet or the building of the first sea-going vessel.[[132]](#endnote-132) For a legend treating the delicate question of Greek ancestry and national foundations, the Danaid myth has some complicating features. The 50 maidens, pursued by suitors whom they consider violent and importunate, flee a mass marriage and, when their resistance fails, they murder in the marital bed the men who claim them as brides.

Myth also plays a role in my other theatrical anti-marriage plot, *Turandot*, the story of a Chinese ice princess, also known for executing her suitors. The story comes from a Persian verse epic of the 12th century by Nizami. Turned into a play and first presented in Venice in 1762, the play became better known when it formed the basis for the libretto Giocomo Puccini used for his last unfinished opera (staged at La Scala in 1926, after Puccini’s death). *Turandot’s* continuing popularity with audiences proves that combining Orientalism and male hysteria remains a potent recipe. In neither story do the angry virgins get their way. In Aeschylus, marriage replaces death. Husbands banished with one hand come back with the other. In the conflict between Phaedra and Hippolytus, no conjugal resolution was possible. Hippolytus, as we saw, was sacrificed. Turandot and the Danaids escape the tomb (unlike the other stubborn virgin, Antigone). But the price they pay is heavy. Avoiding one altar they end up at another. A life outside marriage is not among their options.

These two plays, Aeschylus’s *The Suppliant Maidens* and *Turandot*  by the 18th century Italian poet Carlo Gozzi, feature feminine insurgents, stubborn virgins who go to war against matrimony rather than God. Coming from women, the resort to violence is noteworthy and the surrender to conformity predictable. We might expect that things had changed by 1939 on Broadway and in Hollywood, when a bright woman’s struggle to reconcile self-respect and marriage could take place against a different background. In 1939 couverture had been abolished, the campaign for the women’s vote had been won, and the climate of manners and morals was more friendly to divorce in the case of marital breakdown or misery. My third literary example is friendlier to marriage. It is the Philip Barry comedy *The Philadelphia Story*  (filmed by George Cukor in 1940). Its assertive heroine is an American, an aristocrat from a democratic nation, who is neither a virgin – technically– nor spousicidal, although she is haughty enough to provoke comparisons with the Greek and Roman goddesses of the hunt. Tracy Lord is a Main Line socialite with not enough to do. Smart, rich, and thoughtful, her confusions about sexual politics and chastity are a source of some distress but not a motive for bloodshed. In her story, the ‘Philadelphia’ story, the violence in the air is psychological rather than physical. As it is a romantic comedy, the conjugal ending is on the cards from the start. Yet there is a sadness to this sophisticated portrait of a proud young woman who must learn to think less of herself before she can find contentment with a man. Consenting to marriage – indeed to a true and happy marriage, which is the one this story promises with considerable plausibility – is perceived as a compromise, a necessary one but a compromise none the less. The heroine of *The Philadelphia Story* must agree to set aside, not her physical virginity (she has already been a wife), but something similarly valuable to her: her intactness, her ‘individual exclusiveness’, something for which the cruder ‘fact of virginity’ is a symbol or a place-holder.[[133]](#endnote-133) ‘In comedies of remarriage’, Stanley Cavell writes in the book that defined and invented the genre,

The *fact* of virginity is evidently not what is at stake. Yet all the more it seems to me, is the *concept* of virginity still at stake, or what the fact meant is at stake – something about the possession of chasteness or innocence, whatever one’s determinable condition, and about whether one’s valuable intactness, one’s individual exclusiveness, has been well lost, that is, given over for something imaginably better, for the exclusiveness of a union.[[134]](#endnote-134)

This is the interesting lesson Cavell takes from the sparkling romantic comedies of the 1930s and 1940s, films he argues are worthy of comparison with the best of the European novels of the 18th and 19th centuries, worthy even of comparison to Shakespearean romances. Like the 18th and 19th century novels which first brought to full articulation the artistic possibilities of a psychological inquiry into interiority, the Hollywood comedies question the self: What do I want? Am I confused or unconfused? Am I understood or misunderstood? The novel’s interest in states of mind was also an interest in the reconciliation of the individual and society, and, most poignantly, the reconciliation of a woman with her social context. (The seminal novel of sentiment, Richardson’s *Clarissa*, makes it hard to believe that such reconciliation is conceivable.) For such reasons, there were few themes as important to the novel as marriage.[[135]](#endnote-135)

Like its companion genres, the bourgeois novel and the romance, the Hollywood comedy interrogates marriage. What is marriage for? Is it the bridge between society and the anti-social? The transition from savage nature to civilization? Is it the secular form of religious ritual? Is it an economic arrangement or an affair of sentiment and passion? What does it mean for men? What does it mean for women? Literature will pose those questions differently than social science or history (for which the economic function of marriage can often take precedence). It is the moral significance of marriage that matters for literature. It is the moral significance of marriage that also matters for philosophy, or at least it seemed so for one of the first philosophic husbands in the post-Enlightenment world. Most domesticated of all the great thinkers of the Western tradition was the German G.W.F. Hegel. ‘Marriage’, Hegel explained in his lectures on *Rechtsphilosophie* between 1816-1820, ‘is essentially an ethical relationship’. It would be ‘crude (*roh*)’ to interpret it either as simply a civil contract or a sexual relationship. ‘The *ethical* aspect of marriage consists in the consciousness of this union as a substantial end, and hence in love, trust, and the sharing of the whole of individual existence.’[[136]](#endnote-136) Marriage, taken as the honourable condition of mutuality, cannot offer happiness unless a woman’s proud attachment to her own inviolable integrity is surrendered: this is the surprising message of Barry’s bright comedy of love and class-relations among the Main Line elite. But one worries about the nature of this surrender. Does the attachment to chastity need to be exposed as a vain and timorous fantasy? What do these feints and counter-feints, virgin and lover, resistance and surrender, tell us about the character of sexual knowledge, or the ethics of sex?

Greek cult and social practice understood that the transition from virgin to bride is a perilous one.[[137]](#endnote-137) Sacrifices, called *proteleia*, were performed to mark the separation of the adolescent from childhood status and their initiation into the world of adults: initiation could involve seclusion, marginalisation, and the introduction into ‘mysteries’. They were performed also as accompaniment to weddings; as a recent study of ritual death and sacrifice in literature and opera suggests, ‘marriage is perhaps the rite of passage that has longest retained its aura of mystery and dangerous transition’.[[138]](#endnote-138) Much effort had to be expended in order to prepare for the real moment of danger, the wedding night. But what was demanded as ‘sacrifice’ was not entirely the maidenhead of both bride and groom. It was also the life that would have to be left behind, perhaps lamented, perhaps not. The maiden moved from one house to another; the youth from a society of his fellows to a household of his own where he would assume the reins and agree to guarantee the *polis*. The female ‘moves’, as Anne Carson stresses, temporarily unmooring, transgressing boundaries, introducing a principle of fluidity into the fixed structures of the *oikos[[139]](#endnote-139).* Her mobility is essential; without it reproduction would cease; but it also dangerous, unpredictable. That danger, as well as the serious mystery of ‘loosening the girdle’ in the marital bed, needs watching. And it is the job of ritual, ceremony and sacrifice to keep that watch, check those boundaries, make sure that men’s vestigial leaning towards the bestial does not dominate, and invite back the barbarian within.[[140]](#endnote-140)

Male youths in Crete, in practices that already were in decline by the 4th century, devoted themselves to hunting, sport, ritual contests that could include ‘being hunted’ by gift-laden older men. But once these fun and games were finished, the youth would withdraw from the young male ‘herd’, the *agela* , and get married.[[141]](#endnote-141) Virgin girls, before marriage, participated in the rituals which, as Burkert argues in his authoritative work on Greek religion and cult, ‘provided a clear demarcation of the stations of beginning and ending’; the ‘rhythms of sacrifice’ are the religious and civic prescriptions for the management of crisis.[[142]](#endnote-142) Between maidenhood and marriage, or between the life of the youth and the life of the husband, boundaries have to be crossed, and difficult beginnings taken in stride. It may not be experienced as ‘crisis’. But it is not just the same as picking rosebuds. Modern romance – I am thinking of literature here rather than life – has often failed to reckon with the difficulties of this transformation, and with the fact that marriage – for women—is a loss as well as a gain. Abandoning one’s physical virginity may not be so hard to do. But even there can be problems: In Hellenistic times, Longus’ charming pastoral narrative of Daphnis and Chloe posed some interesting questions: how do we know how to do sex if we haven’t been taught? Where does desire come from, for the innocent and inexperienced? Is it obvious that *eros* arises ‘naturally’ in the life of the young, that attraction knows how to find its way to pleasure and performance?[[143]](#endnote-143) The Greeks appeared to understand that initiation into the physical acts of love could be alarming, and defloration could be experienced as a ‘wounding’: a ‘common analogy’, Simon Goldhill writes in his study of virginity in the Greek prose romances, was to describe defloration as a ‘slaughter than does not kill’.[[144]](#endnote-144) To survive the first night could be hard enough. Breaking away from something described as ‘psychological’ or ‘spiritual’ virginity could be much harder. At least the possibility has to be considered that such a surrender could well be painful, close to what Freud would describe as a ‘narcissistic wound’. In the best cases of marital wish-fulfilment, the man that desires a woman’s consent also helps to make the passage out of virginity a mutual adventure. In the best cases (we shall look for some) the ‘goddessy’ airs of the woman are respected, and not treated either dismissively (as prudish skittishness) or brutally (as the No that means Yes.) In the best cases there is an integration of the desire for purity with a desire for shared innocence and pleasure: here the virgin’s claim for exclusiveness – which a cult of Artemis might protect as the purity of the young and the wild – can morph into a second and more mature innocence, an arrival at conjugal pleasure and confidence that does not annihilate or underestimate the childlike pleasures of independence and freedom.

The fetish of female virginity, it is often said, is a compensation for masculine fear of being sexually duped or deceived.[[145]](#endnote-145) Virginity in women is prized because men want to be the only one, or at least the first one. Why else would you want your wife to be a virgin except that you are highly invested in your rights of exclusive possession? (Women’s interest in the virginity of their spouses has attracted less social or psychological curiosity, as have unions that are not heterosexual.) From the ancients to the libertines of the 18th century and the reformers of the 19th, one answer to the answer to the question of ‘why chastity?’ was popular. Over-valuing chastity is society’s way of ensuring the legitimacy of children who will bear a man’s name. Since Freud other worries have emerged. Psychoanalytic observers approach a different side of the question of idealised virginity. Where a repressive tradition located moral excellence, the psychoanalyst wonders if a more dismal secret might be hidden. Inflating the virtue of chastity reveals the typical ruses of the psyche, adept at making motives for misery into objects of fear, awe and adulation. It may be neurotic to be attached to sexual purity. A horror of desire (which is unhealthy) could have been converted into an alibi of sanctity, or a memory of abuse might be disguised by a stance of sexual avoidance and indifference. The insights of psychoanalysis help to cast the war against sexual pleasure into a more clinical light without, however, depriving it of its intensity. The virginal rebels I discuss in this chapter offer a variety of reasons for their hostility to conjugal sex, for their flight from the bedroom or the altar. Theirs are not religious reasons. They are not trying to be saints or holy martyrs. Theirs are, I would argue, political reasons. Their protests are symptoms of a desire for self-possession and self-determination that a generous reading could call feminist. Yet in the cases I consider, all the female rebels end by giving up. In all my stories the plot moves in the same way: from resistance to submission, from the weapons of Artemis to the quiet of the hearth. Rebellion flares up; rules are broken, lives lost; then the conjugal norm is re-affirmed. For women rebellion is traditionally a losing proposition. Even speaking out can endanger their well-being. How would the fight to preserve their virginal state be anything but a waste of energy?

**2.2 Ambiguities of Virginity**

The male’s hesitation between fear and desire, between the fear of being in the power of uncontrollable forces, and the wish to win them over, is strikingly reflected in the myth of Virginity. Now feared by the male, now desired or even demanded, the virgin would seem to represent the most consummate form of the feminine mystery; she is therefore its most disturbing and at the same time its most fascinating aspect…A virgin body has the freshness of secret springs, the morning sheen of an unopened flower, the orient lustre of a pearl on which the sun has never shone. – Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex[[146]](#endnote-146)*

Defloration is, proverbially, much ado about nothing, at least in the opinion of seducers. But not all males lobby for their phallic rights. John Milton, the 17th century English poet who, in his college years, was teased as ‘the Lady of Christ’s’, was less dismissive about virginity’s mystique.[[147]](#endnote-147) Before hailing wedded love in *b* , Milton looked at the psychology of feminine unassailability through the ‘ensnared’ figure of ‘The Lady’ in his ‘Mask Presented at Ludlow Castle’(1634). The Lady is a fragile figure, slight but single-minded in her principles. In this she is unlike her Protean opponent, the demigod son of Circe and Bacchus, an irrepressible Lord of Misrule named Comus for whom disguise is a natural way of being and lying the highest form of amusement.[[148]](#endnote-148) The Lady’s purity of intention is challenged by her ordeal during the course of one enchanted night. Fascinated by her virginal prettiness, Comus attacks her reserve on all fronts. Licentiousness is only one of his vices. The threat of rape is aggravated by the Bacchic routs, dances, role-playings and general hilarity designed to offend Calvinists like the Earl of Bridgewater who commissioned the masque from Milton for performance on Michaelmas night in his Welsh castle at Ludlow. Rape and seduction are the threats; chastity the prize. The poem is the product of a Protestant sensibility. Consecrated celibacy is neither an obvious value, nor an acceptable vocation for a privileged, high-born young woman. Yet the agon between girl and libertine, resister and assaulter, has serious cultural business to do. Why was chastity so important to Milton?

Comus is, like his father, a shape-shifter, wriggling between his animal companions and his human targets, tempting the vulnerable girl with the spectacle of pleasures and opulence. He tries to unshake her moral confidence with an Epicurean argument, praising the beauties of fecundity and Nature’s generosity in giving us desires.[[149]](#endnote-149) She responds with the argument for a more absolute authority, the ‘uncontrolled worth of this pure cause’ (ll.793-94): virginity. Virginity has the power to shatter and overcome. Unleashed, its consequences are apocalyptic; no worldly institution will stand; no generation of men survive. Can this politics of revolutionary unworldliness really be Milton’s intention?[[150]](#endnote-150)

Committed celibacy was a mystery in the Catholic Church, a symbol of spiritual achievement, a way of portraying the freedom of the soul. In the sense that chastity represented a perfect transcendence of ordinary, muddled human fallibility, it was a radical ideal that the young man Milton seriously contemplated and, perhaps reluctantly, gave up.[[151]](#endnote-151) The rhapsodic language it inspires from him tells of a struggle, in his poetry and his prose, between an affirmation of virginity and an affirmation of married chastity. The first is, in Jeremy Taylor’s words, an ideal ‘burning like the Cherubim’, ‘unmingled with the World’, carrying us to the life of the angels. The other, the notion of married chastity, is blessed, of course, and in *The Doctrine and discipline of Divorce* (1643) Milton calls it an ‘intelligible flame, not in Paradise to be resisted’ (1:4). Angus Fletcher writes:

The idea of chastity is for him a burning, luminous, radiant core of energy...For chastity, like grace…metaphorically permits only perfect motion: that is, motion which redeems the wandering, mazy, labyrinthine error of ordinary life.[[152]](#endnote-152)

Perfect motion, however, is for celestial spheres, and rhetorical symbols. Narratives, like marriage, are made of lesser compounds. Marriage, to take up the argument of an important collection of articles on ‘Sexuality, property and culture in Early Modern England’, is an ‘enclosure act’. It embraces by excluding. We are accustomed to think of marriage as a conservative institution, ‘enclosing’ sexuality and the body within a sanctified or legally ordained field of operations, banishing illicit desires or uninhibited pursuits of sexual pleasures. Property must be regulated and guarded. So too the fertile bodies of women, which are ‘personal’ property of the marriage, must be overseen and guarded, else the production of children won’t have a jurisdiction and legitimation. But Milton’s ambivalence about chastity reminds us that marriage can also be blamed for a different kind of exclusion. There was another ‘paradise lost’ when the flesh became first divided into two and then recoupled as one in the ‘mysteries of connubial love’ (*Paradise Lost*, 4.472-43). Before the paradise of marriage there might have been the paradise of sexlessness, of solitary and innocent perfection. That paradise attracted the young Cambridge poet.

By the time he writes *Paradise Lost* Milton has put marriage and sexual love back into Eden. Radical chastity has been pushed aside. Uncorrupted sexuality existed in the Garden before the Fall, or so Milton believed, and as C.S. Lewis remarks with admiration, Milton ‘dared to represent’ it. Adam and Eve were created in full knowledge of their generative destiny. ‘Maidenly ignorance’, Lewis explains, ‘had never existed in Eve’. The first married couple were dignified but without sexual shame; they were ‘virgin in majesty’, the poem decides, but not virgin in body ‘and never virginal in the sense of being immature.’[[153]](#endnote-153) Their marriage was not some later accommodation to the woes of disobedient and miserable mortals, but a union designed for the perfect and deathless beings that Adam and Eve were. On this reading (a more robust version of what St Augustine came eventually to believe), marriage should never be condescended to by Christians. So too for the young woman in *Comus*, although in this case she is ‘virgin in body’. If married love, for which the Lady is destined, is to be virtuous, it must be stronger than ignorance and folly. But it must still be love. And it needs heat, the heat that can only come from sexual desire. Temperance cannot destroy enchantment, deliberation cannot extinguish the ‘flame’ of desire, awoken in Adam and Eve when they set eyes on one another. This is something Milton understands, when he constructs his ‘virginal philosophy’ as a prelude to marriage for the Lady, not a radically alternative life-style. Virginity ennobles her, in a way her tormenter appreciates, as he finds it adds to her attractions. It is also, for her as for Spenser’s chaste female warrior Britomart, an education in virtue. Sexual purity gives her better arguments, it keeps her mind more dexterous than those of her woolly brothers. Confronted with the hedonistic oratory of Comus, she is sure her case is stronger. To save her honor and vindicate her integrity, she resorts to the rational eloquence she has been taught. But is it a match for magic?

Early in the masque, this sheltered and civilised young woman, separated from her brothers, is lost in a tangled wood. She is confused by shadows and smooth shape-changers who appear in disguise. The Lady is a maiden, intended for a good marriage (Lady Alice Egerton, daughter of the Earl of Bridgewater, was 15 and an experienced masquer when she appeared in the entertainment Milton had been commissioned to write for her family.) Confident in the armour of her chastity, a ‘hidden strength’ as good as ‘complete steel’ (*Comus* lines 418, 421) , the Lady finds herself at a loss when she is unable to free herself from the insinuating power of the belly-god Comus, a slippery and gifted rhetorician whom readers of the poem have long preferred to the virtuous aristocrats. To an Epicurean sophist like Comus, child of Circe the enchantress and Bacchus the god of wine, abstinence is an offense against beauty and charm. Sheer hypocrisy to compliment as a supernatural virtue that grudging abstinence which represents a gross misunderstanding of Nature’s generosity. Why waste in disuse those ‘dainty limbs which nature meant for gentle usage and soft delicacy’? he complains to the defiantly chaste Lady: “You invert the cov’nants of her trust / And harshly deal like an ill borrower / With that you receiv’d on other terms’(680-682).[[154]](#endnote-154) If all the world subscribed to the Lady’s disdain for carnality, things would be in a sorry mess. Such ‘lean and sallow Abstinence’ may be suitable for dried-up old scholars and philosophers. It has no place in Nature’s plan, which is to lavish her fruits on every side and multiply beauty by beauty. And it is churlish in its lack of respect for God’s thoughtful provision:

If all the world

Should in a pet of temperance feed on Pulse,

Drink the clear stream, and nothing wear but Frieze,

Th’all-giver would be unthank’t, would be unprais’d,

Not half his riches known, and yet despis’d,

And we should serve him as a grudging master,

As a perennial niggard of his wealth,

And live like Nature’s bastards, nor her sons.

(lines 720-727)

Comus has in his mind the courtship speech Leander offered to Hero (with greater success) in Christopher Marlowe’s *Hero and Leander*:

The rites/ In which loves beauteous Empresse most delites/Are banquets, Dorick musicke, midnight-revell, Plaies, masks, and all that stern age counteth evill./Thee as a holy Idiot doth she scorne,/For thou in vowing chastity hast sworne/To rob her name and honour, and thereby/Commit’st a sinne far worse than perjurie,/Even sacrilege against her Deitie,/Through regular and formall puritie.

While the Lady is not moved by Comus’s Epicurean arguments, she is unable to free herself through the strength of her will and reason. Chaste she remains, but sovereign control over her own destiny remains elusive. Intact she may be, but self-moving she is not. She is not forced to drink Comus’s poisoned cup of lust, yet she is stuck grotesquely to a chair. Her tormenter reminds her of the dubious victory of those who resisted the ravishments of amorous gods (Comus knows his Ovid.) For young women pledged to Artemisian chastity, escaping seduction could mean losing everything essential to a human life, becoming a tree like Daphne, or a cow like Io. Militant chastity, it seems, makes women inert, turning them into animals, vegetation or statues. Is this borne out by the Lady’s experience? Quick in speech as the Lady is, passionate in her admiration for temperance and moderation, she is hampered in movement. Impervious to Comus’ s courtly flattery and Epicurean sophistry, she is nonetheless paralyzed by his magic. What is so admirable about her virtue if it makes her nothing but a manacled and angry young paragon, believing against the evidence in the absolute self-sufficiency of her chastity. Is Milton mocking the virginity his Mask intends to celebrate?

That would be a crude interpretation of a set of issues Milton does not want to pry apart. His case for the exemplary quality of feminine chastity is aesthetic as well as ethical: it ties freedom to consideration and courtesy, beauty to philosophic transcendence. If we imagine the ideal chaste heroine as acquiescent and silent, we fail to recognise the ‘sacred vehemence’ of the Lady’s virtuous authority. The Lady is, as her Brother puts it in the masque, ‘our unowned sister’(407), an emblem (therefore) of self-ownership. Young as she is, she ‘claims responsibility’ not only for her own body ‘but also’, as Kathryn Schwarz describes her, ‘for the social negotiations’ she engages in. [[155]](#endnote-155) Her chastity has serious has serious significance: for Milton (and not just for Milton) it can figure as another name for moral freedom, that gift of Creator to creature which Eve and Adam’s disobedience did not annul. It is a freedom of this order that the battle for chastity has in its sights. Compromised as it may become (and the social history of feminine upbringing and instruction proves just how compromised it has been), the ideal of maidenly honour shelters a conception of selfhood that the Mask presents as worth fighting for. The ‘Mask at Ludlow Castle’ is more than a graceful display of aristocratic qualities designed to flatter a powerful family. It is an early showpiece for Miltonic doctrine, anticipating but not equally the stronger diet of *Paradise Lost*.

Both in *Comus* and in the far more ambitious epic of divine Providence, fallen angels, and humanity’s second chances, Milton’s thought unites two conceptions of purity, the Protestant and the Platonic, crucial for the poet who struggled to keep both sides of his imagination at peace with one another: the sensuous and the austere, the aesthete and the Puritan, Adam and the angel, *l’Allegro* and *il Penseroso*. Miltonic virginity is not the enemy of married love. Miltonic innocence is not the antithesis of experience. Both virtue and vice need tempering. Virtue can be inhuman, but so can causal indulgence. A chastity that requires barrenness and absence of feeling is not genuine chastity, and could hardly be as moving and alluring as this young girl is presented as being. The young woman Comus tries to entrap is for Milton a figure of grace. Childlike, indistinct in outline, unequipped with complex desires or even complex thoughts, she is nonetheless a symbol for femininity redeemed, her virginity less a rebuff of human sensuality than a dream of a world before sexual difference. For with sexual difference came the possibility of subjection. Eve alone (a prospect the Bible could not imagine) has no master. Eve in love has Adam.

The ‘unowned’ Lady is a portrait of the peculiar privilege of innocence. Chastity allows her distance; it sanctions a certain abstractness in her manner and address. Distinguished by this ‘steel-clad’ virtue, the Lady may move through the world on her own, speak for herself, adopt tones of militancy and moral superiority. Yet Milton does not endow her with these exemptions from conventional feminine insignificance in order to prepare her for a life of celibacy or religious renunciation. Her chaste refusal of pleasures even the best of classical educations neglected to tell her about is a tribute to the clarity of her reason; it is not to be blamed on her ignorance or neurotic aversion to the senses and the body. Destined for marriage, the Lady still has a stake in the determination of her own meaning, her own choices. She is ethically mature enough to be subjected to temptation, to be put through the trial of the ‘wandering paths’ of the enchanted Wood and assailed by mockery, humiliation, and dubious flattery. All of Comus’s efforts to drag her away from the path of virtue fail, as they were meant by Milton to do. Yet it must be recalled that the masque is, like Mozart’s ‘Magic Flute’, the story of a rite of passage. The Lady, if she succeeds, will move from untried innocence to tested virtue. That objective itself raises problems, for the virtue she stands for – virginity– is the ‘power to remain unmoved, unseduced, unmetamorphosed, undeflowered, uninitiated, unchanged. For the virgin to remain chaste requires all these kinds of stability.’ As such, her virtue seems to imply, as Angus Fletcher writes, ‘absolute stasis’.[[156]](#endnote-156) Yet to prove her virtue, she must act, mobilise her reason and moral insight not in the safety of a cloister but the trials of experience. Can she change without ‘change’? Must purity pre-empt motion?

Such a worry occurs to the Lady’s Brothers when they realise they have lost her, that she has become separated from them on their journey. Girls should not be traveling alone. There are many things to fear. Will her ‘magical’ chastity shield him from all danger? Is the philosophical strength of the ‘unpolluted temple of the mind’ sufficient to disenchant, to undo evil spells? The Lady’s situation is complicated: socially, her purity does not belong to her but is a condition of her value, her compliance with ‘heterosocial imperatives’. But iconographically, it represents the integrity no one can force her to compromise, the integrity that makes her consent a serious matter despite her sex and her youth and her beauty not a snare but an inspiration. Chastity is a virtue with a double face, and if incompletely ‘owned’ it misunderstands its power to do good, to convey benefit, to enhance and ennoble. Thus in the poem the Lady’s rescue is blocked, despite her innocence being secured from harm. Chastity as resistance cannot do everything that Miltonic morality requires. Leaving the maiden fixed to her chair, static in her inexperience and immaturity, her virtue is locked in an impasse, checked at every turn by its deceiving opponent. But that is not the end of the story: chastity restored to its celestial setting is a principle of ‘bounty’ and flowering, an element of enchantment, not ‘Stoick’ pomposity. Importantly, the mortal girl herself cannot call on the magic of this chastity. Angry if defiant, she remains ‘glued’ to the bewitched seat: “smear’d with gums of glutenous heat” (917). She is freed only when another virgin, the nymph Sabrina, borrowed from Ovid, arrives in her defense, in response to a call from the Attendant Spirit:

Goddess dear/ We implore they powerful hand/ To undo the charmed band/ Of true virgin here distrest, / Through the forest, and through the wile / Of unblest enchanter vile.

The liberation of the Lady requires extra help, a *deus ex machine*. It requires in this case the magic of the immortal Sabrina, a magic which is compared to grace: virtue alone is insufficient. We recall that maidens fleeing seducers in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, also fight violation through extreme strategies, invariably involving the intervention of gods or magic. Indeed, such escapes are also provided in the *Metamorphoses* for young men: Ovid mentions an Acis or an Adonis who can escape death by being changed into flowers or rivers. Those at risk of rape can change form, even if that transformation ‘roots’ them to the ground, finishing their human lives by closing them off in natural stasis. Daphne becomes a tree to escape Apollo (*Metamorphoses*, I.452-547), Syrinx is changed into hollow reeds for the same reason (I.691-712), and Cornix is changed by Minerva into a crow when Neptune tries to attack her (II. 547-575).

Here we sense an important duality, not just in Milton but (I think) in the entire life of our virtue. Chastity seems the death of action, yet it is also that which animates drama; it makes things happen. Chastity may be accused of passivity, of a stubborn evasion of action and choice. To stigmatise it in that way is the genius of Comus’s rhetoric, as of most libertine rhetoric of the 17th and 18th century. Yet are those objections fair? How much difference does the gendering of chastity make? Even before John Milton had reason to worry about the vast potential for misunderstanding between woman and man, wife and husband, he worried about the moral minefield of sexual behavior. There was a touch of disgruntlement in the poet’s youthful defence of chaste masculinity, of that virile and poetic ‘chastity’ he claimed as his own preference in the *Apology for Smectymnuus*, responding to taunts by his fellow undergraduates at Cambridge who seemed to reduce masculinity to whoring and drinking. The virtue Milton described in the *Apology* embraced a tough temperance as well as a proud modesty­. It did not depend on a sentimental attachment to sexual inexperience. It was a vocation not an imprisonment. Could a woman’s virtue encompass the further (‘masculine’) allowances a Miltonic chastity identifies as proper to the ‘Lady of Christ’s’? Sabrina, a divine nymph, saves the Lady of the Mask from the ‘chains’ and ‘roots’ with which the wizard Comus has bound her. Chastity had been, for all its strengths ‘ensnared’. But the Lady’s honour has triumphed, even while her body was no more than stone. Her chastity would have been an empty boast had she not been subjected to the threat of seduction, had her integrity never been tested. Re-united with her family at the end of the poem, the Lady is now ready to enter the other ‘wandering woods’ – of marriage rather than doubt and enchantment.

**2.3 Virgins with and without Sex**

Not everyone can afford to be so sanguine about ‘the sage and serious doctrine of Virginity’ as the Lady calls it. [[157]](#endnote-157) Certainly there is potential for humour as well as anxiety in the passage out of sexual inexperience. Romance has one way of telling the story of sexual initiation; comedy has many more, not all of them edifying. The marriage plot that starts with the separation of lovers and ends with their conjugal reconciliation – and this is the skeleton plot of every romantic comedy – cannot afford to brood too intensely about the ‘sacrifice’ of the maidenhead. Nor can societies who depend on the survival of kinship networks, whose well-being demands the reproductive willingness of their members. The price of marriage needs to be kept affordable. And if religious expectations grow too ambitious, then marriage can be at risk. In this light, a social ambivalence about female chastity (and even more, female virginity) is not surprising. Consecrated purity, radical abstinence, will be translated into more accommodating commodities. When religious commands are off the table, then the assurance of sexual purity is a gift the bride or her family bring to the table, guaranteeing the value of what is being offered since the new owner will have exclusive possession. A badge of authenticity, like the label on the bottle of olive oil, virginity raises a bride’s status or, more accurately, that of her groom. But is it an indication of the quality of her soul?

This raises an old puzzle, recently posed by Michel Foucault. What has sex got to do with ethics? It has, as I see it, never been adequately answered. How did sexual behaviour become a moral concern? Why does sex matter to our souls? And why is the loss of virginity a matter of moral concern? We haven't gotten very far in explaining how the moment at which someone experiences sexual relations for the first time comes to have the profound meaning it is assigned in society. Is this promotion to moral seriousness an indication of how sexuality looks to the anxious heterosexual male? Or, pace Freud, because of the dread associated with the initial sexual experience: that there, and only there, something secret is revealed which otherwise remains mysterious? Is Freud right in his reckless speculation that the girl experiences a form of bondage to the man who ‘takes her virginity’ which is akin to that of the wild animal who is ‘broken’ decisively, or the slave who receives chains for the first time, even if she willingly – as Greek brides are represented as doing on thousands of vases and bowls – lets her husband ‘untie the girdle of virginity’? Why believe that anyone is ‘tied’ to his or her first sexual partner? Why not conclude that this is the last person you would want to remember?

The problem for an ethics of sexual initiation begins with definition. Famously, the ancient world saw no need for our modern category of ‘sexuality’.[[158]](#endnote-158) Greeks and Romans and their neighbors had plenty of things to say about ‘the things of Venus’ *(ta* *aphrodisia*)*:* the ancient interest in the assignment and proper organization of sexual pleasures was nothing if not intense. But their preoccupations do not neatly map onto a recent idea like ‘sexual identity’. Similarly with the terms I am trying to bring into focus. Virginity? Maidenhood? Neither the word nor the concept precisely capture what is meant in Greek by *parthenia*. Does it refer to age and marital status or to sexual status as well?[[159]](#endnote-159)What makes the modern and the ancient concepts different. Is, however, hard to pin down. It has been popular among Hellenists who, as Giulia Sissa puts is, ‘have studied the problems of sexuality, age groups, and rites of passage’, to argue that the Greek term refers to a social category, a status and an age, rather than ‘unambiguously’ denoting ‘the perfect integrity implicit in our word *virgin*.’[[160]](#endnote-160) Schooled in 20th century anthropology, sensitive to the changing constructions of sexual ideals, contemporary classicists arrive at roughly similar conclusions, as we can see from two examples of a broad consensus. Here is Joan Breton Connelly, Professor of Classics and Art History at NYU:

Unlike the lifelong celibacy practiced by clergy in Roman Catholicism and some other contemporary religions, virginity was viewed as a temporary state for ancient Greek priestesses. Indeed, the Greeks defined virgin (*parthenos* ) status quite differently from how we do today. For them, it was the condition of a maiden who has passed through puberty but was not yet married. Emphasis was not focused on a state of intactness, which the modern definition requires…The veneration of the virgin, influenced by Marian devotion, has no parallel whatsoever in the Greek experience, where virginity represented neither a state of perfection nor a guarantee of salvation. On the contrary, Greeks regarded *parthenos* status as a necessary stage through which girls and to pass on their way to full integration into society as wives and mothers.[[161]](#endnote-161)

And Claude Calame, the Swiss classicist and author of *Les chœurs des jeunes filles en Grèce archaïque* (1977):

[the term] or *virgins*...used in addition to *young girls* and *adolescent girls*, should not mislead: in Greece it embodies a concept very different from the one imposed upon our culture by twenty centuries of piety concerning the Virgin Mary. It refers to that particular status of the young woman who is pubescent but not yet married: the many Greek legends about young girls who have a child is proof, among others, that the term of *parthenos* by no means denotes a physical state of virginity, but simply the status of a young woman who is not yet married. (cf. Eur. *Ion*, 502f.)[[162]](#endnote-162)

But Giulia Sissa warns that too much reliance on the sociological understanding of the category leads to classicists into a contradiction:

Whereas the word *parthenos* tends to arouse skepticism in non-religious interpreters and to call for cautious handling, it is not easy to capture the meaning of the abstract noun *parthenia* with a purely sociological definition. It is something subject to seizure (*lamanein*), a treasure that one guards (*phylassein*), a value that must be respected (*terein*)…When Pindar in his eighth *Isthmian Ode* attributed to Themis the wish that the daughter of Nereus, the future mother of Achilles, “conquered by the love of a hero, loosen the charming tether of her virginity,” it is not easy to understand the point of the image if virginity refers to nothing more than an age group.[[163]](#endnote-163)

Sissa elaborates: “Sooner or later, every anthropologist of the ancient world and every historian of Western sexuality comes up against the fascinating figure of the *parthenos* – the virgin, or perhaps we should say, the unmarried woman.”[[164]](#endnote-164) How to translate it? If we prefer ‘unmarried and nubile young woman’[[165]](#endnote-165), we are committed to one sort of interpretation, perhaps that avoids the difficult question of ancient attitudes towards what we now call ‘female sexuality’; to assimilate the *parthenos*  to the contemporary ‘sexually inexperienced person’ is to opt for another interpretation. Both can be supported. When Elektra’s peasant husband assures her brother that, our of respect for her rank, he has left her a virgin, and she laments her ambiguous status – she can’t take part in the Heraia (the festival for marriageable girls), being a wife, yet must stand apart from the other married women, being still a virgin – they use the term *parthenos* to refer to her sexual status (Euripides, *Electra*  44, 309-311). When Kreousa and Ion have their difficult mother-son reunion in Euripides, *Ion* 1470-84, she must reveal to the boy whom she had left for dead that she bore him ‘as a *parthenos*’, without the benefit of wedding torches and dances’, although in fact Ion had been prepared for this revelation by the priestess of Apollo, who saved him as an infant and advised him to look for his mother among the Delphian women who gave birth as ‘virgins’ (1366). Clearly (or not so clearly) a Greek woman could be a married *parthenos* (a sad but not paradoxical situation) or a pregnant and childbearing *parthenos*, something modern usage considers almost impossible.

Given the paradoxical cases of young women in myth and tragedy called ‘*parthenos*’ who have been bedded and given birth, the condition cannot simply be a physical one. For heroines like Iole, Heracles’ young mistress, or Atalanta and Kreousa, their *parthenia*  can be terminated only when someone has taken them in as wife. Without that essential intervention, their maternity can produce only ‘virgin births’. Are the implications of the term *parthenos*, then, better understood through a functionalist scheme of things? Is there, for the Greeks, no ‘inner truth’ of virginity invisible to the outside world, no secret of chastity except the public acknowledgment of the ‘good wife’ and the ‘marriageable’ girl? Is virginity, like marriage, coextensive with its public manifestation, when the bride is properly unveiled under eyes of others, first in the ceremony and then in the bedroom?

We would not do justice to the mythic stature of virginity if we accepted without reservation the nominalist or constructionist view. While Hellenic Greeks show little of the later obsessiveness of other sexual cultures, they are well aware of *parthenia* as something publically undetectable, ‘as a fact to be found out’ or, given a girl’s skill in guile, concealed. Sissa gives the example of a contest among *parthenoi*, competing at a festival in honour of a Libyan goddess, which is mentioned in Herodotus’s *Histories*: ‘Herodotus notes that, though nubile and unmarried, those who died in competition were deemed *pseudoparthenoi.*’[[166]](#endnote-166) Later Greeks in Asia Minor, Africa, Italy and other Roman colonies knew of divinatory ‘chastity tests’, ways of separating the true virgin from the false.[[167]](#endnote-167) The *evaluation* of virginity may be quite different in pagan and Christian antiquity, as will become clear in the chapters that follow. But sad to say, the sexual ethics of the pre-Christian world were no friendlier to women. It was still possible for a young woman who had sex before marriage to be ‘ruined’ if her secret came out. The status of a *parthenos* was, Sissa writes, ‘defined by others’ belief in her integrity.’[[168]](#endnote-168) In the 2nd century CE the physician Soranus seemed to have something akin to our modern understanding of virginal chastity - meaning the continued avoidance of sexual relations -- when he argued, against the received wisdom of his day, that permanent virginity was healthy. Other doctors, called to treat the ‘green sicknesses of virgins’, prescribed a speedy marriage and early pregnancy: opening the flow of the blood, moistening the coldness of the female body with male heat, these recipes were common recommendations, and virgins were the beneficiaries of them as often as widows. The female substance is porous and the body hollow, a vase with two mouths; health is more likely when the movement between the openings is regular and unimpeded. But that happy result is to be expected from conception rather than defloration. Neither medicine nor religion in antiquity found much use for the image of the virginal body as ‘intact’. Anatomy was not destiny.

Certainly if the elusive membrane called the hymen is a signifier of virginity, then it is not till the late Middle Ages and the 16th century in Europe that medicine widely recognised such a thing, although its presence was ‘rumoured’. It follows that the rupture of such an unreliable membrane played no part in the Greek understanding of what differentiates a maiden from a woman, a *gyne* . Nor was defloration the distinguishing event, the unrepeatable marker of the threshold into sexual maturity:

Penetration by a male organ deflowered a virgin, yet the event existed only if it was found out by family and society or revealed by its consequences: the parthenic state depended on sexuality, hence on the body, yet was also a purely negative fact.[[169]](#endnote-169)

For us, what seems crucial about virginity is its aversive or exclusionary relation to sexual intercourse. A virgin is someone who has not had sex. The separation is definitive of the meaning, and the connection to sexual experience is what constitutes it by negation, a temporal one. You are a virgin for a while, and then you are not. But not so in the ancient world. A *parthenos* is a girl who , as Helen King explains, ‘combines the features of being “childless, unmarried, yet of the age for marriage’ linked on the epitaph of Philostrata (EG 463)’.[[170]](#endnote-170) A *parthenos* a young , marriageable but unmarried girl, can even get pregnant and have a baby, as does Kreousa, and still be considered a *parthenos*.[[171]](#endnote-171) That said, there is another term – *ataurote* - in Greek literature which does cover the relevant abstention from sex, the way a woman, if pure, ‘has nothing to do with the male organ’, the *tauros* . To vow such chastity is certainly something a married or experienced woman can do: she may not be able to be a *parthenos*  again – to undo the years of marriage and childbirth – but when the rebellious women in Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata* (217) swear to keep their men away, such chastity is the key to their bid for power and independence. Making herself – symbolically – a young girl again, the mature woman can speak for herself, outside the guardianship of her husband and the enforced silence of her house. Virginity is, again, a social status not a biological category. Normally, it is one the young marriageable girl passes from to become a *numphe,* a young betrothed bride: this is a status which, according to Claude Calame, extends ‘from the moment of sexual union consecrated by marriage up to its realization through the birth of the woman’s first child.’[[172]](#endnote-172) In myth, it is the Nymphs themselves who protect young brides, and guide them to the marriage bed. (They play a very active role this way in Longus’ late Hellenistic romance, *Daphnis and Chloe.*) Aphrodite and Hera preside over the marriage bed itself, and the latter jealously guards the privileges of marriage. But even Hera, queen of mature love, famously recovers her ‘virginity’ once a year by bathing in the stream Kanathos near Nauplion, in a solemn festival. Such a restoration, for the queen goddess, is not to be understood as a regression to adolescent simplicity. The re-virginating bath restores her sexual energy and potency; it does not make her insipid or innocent. Put in this frame, we can see there is an association for archaic and classical Greeks between virginity and power, an association we need myth to verify. For women of Athens whose gender denies them citizenship and political visibility, their liminal status as virgins (think of Antigone’s defiance) grant them an identity *with*  their nation and city, as potent as that which bound the willing virgin sacrifices like Polyxena, Macaria and Iphigeneia to their cities, which made them ‘heroines’ more courageous than the warriors they shamed.

As an image in the sphere of myth and cult, the *parthenos*  points in many other directions. “In the world of myth, there is nothing more ambiguous than the *parthenos* , who combines and embodies all the dreaded prohibitions of femininity”; even wore, she “is often more or less in league with death”.[[173]](#endnote-173) As virgin and ‘made’, not begotten, Athena is the only true daughter of her father (Athena Tritogeneia), owing nothing to a woman, nothing to femininity, nothing to maternity. Virginal in that she disdains all sexual ties, she is also virginal in the sense of indeterminacy of gender: she never becomes a reproductive woman; her filiation is ‘outside the confines of all sexuality’.[[174]](#endnote-174) Divine virginity, absolute and for itself, is free from all yokes; it is sovereign and can wield power over cities and populations. It lays a claim to transcendence and the release from ordinary mortality, from generation, fallibility, procreation and death.

To be virginal is to be available for consecration and not just for sexual use. Somehow, these two functions are correlative, although the one exclude the other and continues to do so. Sex is not impure or defiling in itself, but it must not be mixed with the things that belong to the gods. The animal victims Greeks sacrifice must be pure.(Plutarch, *Moralia.* 437B1-3) By extension, so must their human counterparts,[[175]](#endnote-175) and often this is required of the cultic priestesses, Pythia, sibyls or Prophetesses who live in proximity with the sacred.(*Moral*. 438C) Myth gives the virgin strangeness; it treats her with awe. This fact does not work in her favour, in the majority of cases. The anomalous, peripheral character of the *parthenos* justifies her choice as the ideal victim for human sacrifices. Inexperienced in the world, separated from the social ties of childhood and not yet enmeshed in those of maturity, she brings her fragile self as an unmixed, unfiltered element to ‘mix’ with the god.[[176]](#endnote-176) This is not something the divine virgin has to do. The pure and absolute virgin undergoes no change. Aloof and inviolable, the divine virgin lives free from desire, repelling corruption and compromise. Above our concerns, and our fears, she is also, to a considerable extent, beyond our categories of sexual difference.

Human virgins are another story. The maidens and pubescent boys we hear about normally are the ones emerging from latency, going into seclusion, undergoing puberty initiations, taking part in ceremonial choruses, festive combats, all the customs special to the city and country cults that supervise and sanctify the integration of the novice into the social order. They aren’t like gods and goddesses, though in a number of significant cases, they aspire to be so. Their destiny – sharply polarised, depending on the gendered group they are to join – is to emerge from the state of provisional gender ambiguity, where they run wild, dance and fight, no matter what their genitals dictate. Their next stage is to cross the threshold into maturity – either that of the wife or that of the warrior – and find themselves clearly defined, adopted and acculturated into their respective identities. Jean-Pierre Vernant’s formulation is famous:

(m)arriage is for the girl what war is for the boy: For each of them these mark the fulfilment of their respective natures as they emerge from a state in which each still shared in the nature of the other.[[177]](#endnote-177).

But what is interesting is what happens on that threshold.

Thus a girl who refuses marriage, thereby renouncing also her ‘femininity’, finds herself to some extent forced toward warfare, and paradoxically becomes the equivalent of a warrior. Their status as warrior is linked to their condition as a *parthenos*  who has sworn everlasting virginity. It could even be said that the deviation both from the normal state of women, who are destined for marriage, nor warfare, and from the normal state of warriors, who are men, not women, gives a special intensity to warrior values when they are embodied in a girl.[[178]](#endnote-178)

Female virgins who suspend the moment of decision may think they can prolong their deviation, as the Amazons did. But their cultic roles as defiant virgins, or unfeminine warriors with bows and arrows, are on loan, not theirs to keep:

It is, logically, impossible to make the *parthenos* wholly asexual, because every *parthenos* – other than the divine *parthenoi* – is a potential *gyne*.[[179]](#endnote-179)

Human girls are, for a time, virgins like the divine hunter. Then they are women. Greek medicine has a distinct conception of the types of flourishing and disabilities linked to the negotiation of these crucial stages in female life, even if the conception would not match anything modern science would offer. Social expectations are just as concrete. The immature girl does not yet bleed; if gynaecology devoted considerable energy to imagining the symbolic impact of those key moments at which the blood of females is ‘shed’, so does religion. The average Greek girls share in, or borrow as a temporary personification, the sacred guise of virginity as long as they serve in the train of Artemis, or live in a temple, or give up their mortal lives to become sacrificial offerings on the altar (something we can be pretty sure they only did in myth and drama). While they live close to the gods, they belong to the gods, and not to men. But their normal process is to yield their virginity for a new and radically different state: to accept domestication, and maturation, a reproductive future: in short, to re-invent themselves as women, and ‘die’ to their past, to their unformed childishness, associated by the Greeks with the elements of strangeness and barbarity. Indeed this is the same bittersweet passage from immaturity to ‘ripeness’ that Artemis solicitously prepares all ‘her’ young for, whether the ‘first fruits’ of the earth or the budding adolescent. And at special times and places, the city, as it benefits from the goddess’s care and supervision of the young, must pay back what it owes her.

The first fruits, just gathered, the first grain, still green, are not touched by the cultivator. He consecrates them to the goddess so as to desacralize the rest, to cut the ties that keep them still in this phase of “push forth”, “grow” and “ripen,” over which the *Kourotrophos*, in her role of nurse and teacher, maintains control. Once the first fruits are surrendered, the food becomes good to eat and the *parthenos*  good to marry. In some sense, all fruit, to be edible, must first be “emancipated” from the goddess’s domain, which implies that it must first be “abandoned” to her in symbolic form by a delegation of the tithe. And every *parthenos* , to be “consumable” and put at the city’s disposition, must first have been, by some procedure, emancipated from dependence on the goddess. By delegation or by a wholly other form of symbolic substitute, the *parthenos*  must be “offered” to Artemis, sacrificed or immolated, at least metaphorically, on her altar.[[180]](#endnote-180)

Every virgin, attaining the state of matrimony, must die first for Artemis.[[181]](#endnote-181)

Artemis, also the goddess of childbirth, guides the maidens through their games of bear-playing, fighting, hunting, dancing in the chorus, identifying themselves with the beasts that the goddess loves. The goddess of the streets and the harbours, as Callimachus’ s poem describes, her, she is rightly the mistress of the margins. Participating as overseer of the gymnasium and over some important episodes of military training, Artemis moulds and disciplines her male youths as well as her maidens. (Vernant, *Mortals and Immortals*., 245) She educates them, as part of the process that will make them alien to her, and finally make them ‘tame’, that will deliver then from ‘the primitive state of wildness’ to ‘the very heart of civilised life’.[[182]](#endnote-182) And sometimes she also demands them in bloody sacrifice. It is the cost she exacts for her other boon, the protection of childbirth and marriage, and the virgin must pay. Every marriage steals something from the goddess of chastity in the wild. (Sometimes an offering of the hair the youth or maiden cuts off is sufficient; at other times the altar of Artemis demands the more chilling purification of blood.) She may not want revenge each time her stock of the young and unsocialised is depleted, but she does observe and enforce certain symbolic exchanges that each time alter something from the realm of Artemis to enable its transition into the legitimate substance of marriage.

Religion treats these transactions with careful solemnity, but without ignoring their potential for violence and perversion. There is no once and for all establishment of an institution as crucial as marriage: unknown in the Golden Age of Greek myth, when Zeus had not yet punished the arrogance of Prometheus’ theft by creating that ‘beautiful evil’ Pandora, the institution of marriage preserved its integrity even in the practices of ascetic eccentrics like the Pythagoreans. The process of passing from childhood to puberty to marriage, in Greece, is one that is complex and cultically monitored. It is what anthropologists can call an extended series of rites of passage, which may include mysterious initiatory customs, although the exact details in Greek practice are so scanty that most scholars are circumspect in alluding to closely the well-known ephebic initiations to those of maidens.[[183]](#endnote-183) Virgins must marry. Their in-between state is precarious and vague, prone to dangers from within and without, to strange sicknesses (as Hippocrates argues, in *Diseases of Virgins* )[[184]](#endnote-184) and brutal abductions. ‘Submission to the male and to motherhood’ is their lot, their *telos*.[[185]](#endnote-185) Divinities can remain unattached, unmoored to husband and family, because they, as Vernant puts it, “can personify a single facet of feminine reality to the exclusion of all others. But this “purity” is impossible for human beings. Every mortal woman has to take on the totality of the female state, with all its tensions, ambiguities, and conflicts.”[[186]](#endnote-186)

**2.4 No marriage without Artemis?**

As *hagne parthenos*, Artemis’s function is to deny sexuality in such a way that it can only emerge in the conjugal context. But , by its very radicalism, this temporary rejection also runs the risk of giving sexuality over to all forms of deviance.[[187]](#endnote-187)

To refuse the transition to non-virginal life – a world of mixture and adaptation – is, in the texts I investigate, both noble and stupid. Some ancient pundits were convinced it was a quick route to insanity and suicide, as Plutarch suggests in his retelling of the mass suicide of the virgins of Miletus, who hung themselves ‘out of a desire for death’, perhaps in homage to their guardian deity, Artemis, sometimes known as ‘the Strangled’:

Once upon a dire and strange trouble took possession of the young women ( Τας Μιλησιων ποτε παρθενους δεινον παθος και αλλοκοτον κατεσχεν)…a yearning for death and an insane impulse towards hanging suddenly fell upon all of them. (Plutarch, *Moralia*, vol. III, *Mulierum Virtutes*, XI. 249)

The disorder was, everyone assumed, of divine origin and beyond human help until someone smart realised that they way to frighten these violent and self-murdering young maidens was to appeal to their modesty and ‘sense of shame’, by instituting an ordinance that the bodies of the hanged girls would be carried naked through the streets to their burial. That threat stopped the suicides instantly. Death by hanging is a virgin’s death; in some manner that we may need an expert in the unconscious to clarify, the noose symbolised an escape from the crueller affront, the horror of defloration. Helen King studies these extreme responses to the pressure of maidenhood in her chapter on Hippocrates called, appropriately, ‘Blood and the Goddesses’: ‘A bloodless suicide is, for example, a particularly appropriate way of avoiding the bloodshed of unwanted defloration.’ The committed *parthenos* is saying no to bleeding, to the shedding of blood that would mark her transition to a *gyne*. A proper woman bleeds ‘as part of her role in reproducing society…but she should not shed blood. Only a man may shed blood in war and sacrifice….’ A maiden will have her ‘girdle released’ or unbound by her husband when he deflowers her on the wedding night; the expectant mother will again untie her girdle in childbirth, bleeding generously.[[188]](#endnote-188) In all this we can detect the characteristic cunning of Artemis, who promises one kind of violence – an ascetic or masochistic violence – in exchange for the repudiation of another violence, the erotic violence of mutual surrender, conception and reproduction. A white and sterile violence, of pale, drained bodies or bodies buried where sound cannot escape, of death assigned to themselves or to others, quickly or slowly, is the committed virgin’s alternative to blood on the sheets. Artemis the goddess may make others bleed. But she does not bleed.

As a strategy, the virginal rebellion against defloration and marriage is, Vernant says,’radical’, ‘radical’ being a common way we flatter those versions of thought or life that don’t try hard enough to accept the conventional. It is another way of saying ‘noble but futile’. The combination is one we already saw movingly embodied in the figure of Hippolytus. An intransigent male virgin, he wanted to live in suspended animation, avoiding the disillusionment of a world he found too gross. But for him (as for all humans) a life ‘outside of time and process’ (Zeitlin 131) is unviable. Purity begets violence, and is violent itself. This, we shall see, is the message of almost all stories of rebellious virgins. Only a god who became man, lived virginally and died a sacrifice on the cross, could change the narrative outcome; insofar as he claimed to offer the power of mimetic identification to his followers, something Artemis strictly abjures. Jesus Christ, who is in every sense our most prominent and least ambiguous virgin, changed the meanings of *eros*, etherealising it and ridding it of its cosmic power. Christ is, to twist Zizek’s phrase, a ‘non-vanishing mediator’, an efficacious bridge between social anomaly and consecrated exception. He offered his asexual absolutism as a way out, a permanent possibility to those trapped in the flesh. They too could walk on earth but with their heads touching the heavens, as St Methodius puts it.

The *parthenos* Hippolytus wished to follow Artemis out of the city and into the wild. It was an unusual choice for a male, who had in Greece two other ways of avoiding the triviality of everyday life: war, and politics. To find women in pagan antiquity who are similarly attracted to the freedom of the virginal life we normally have to go to myth. Greek and Roman history is generally silent on the subject of the less conventional opportunities available to women, especially if we limit ourselves to the privileged texts, Xenophon, Plato, Thucydides. The outlines of available knowledge are sketchy at best: women are unimportant in the public record; their seclusion in the obscurity of the household was understood as a cultural ideal; their economic activities can only be guessed at. Yet it is clear that they played a prominent part in cultic worship and practice and, as priestesses, must have been very busy indeed[[189]](#endnote-189): Joan Breton Connelly mentions over two thousand cults ‘operating in Attica during the classical period.’[[190]](#endnote-190) Of these priestly offices, a number were reserved for virgins, meaning young women in their teens not yet promised in marriage. They come from the top citizen families, the same sources of other officers of the sacred; they have the money to contribute to their own maintenance. They are proud, dutiful, attentive. They tend the statues of Athena on the Acropolis; they wash its clothes; at Didyma they serve Artemis Pythia and are called ’water bearers’, *hydrophoroi;* at Sikyon a year-long priesthood ‘was open to a virgin called *loutrophoros*, reflecting the maiden’s role as a bearer of the wedding bathwater for Aphrodite. (Connelly 40).

All of these highly entitled women knew perfectly well their tenure was limited. Marriage waited for them at the other end of their service; indeed they could be both married and priestesses, if they were really fortunate, as the highest-ranking offices were reserved for the wives of citizens. This is not to suggest that Greek religion was blasé about purity, far from it. But its conception of purity is different (relative not absolute, time-bounded not ontological).

The value of the virgin in Greek culture, then, is generally social more than it is mystical or metaphysical. Rather than suggesting some mysterious alterity of the ‘untouched’ and inviolable body, the virgin’s strangeness is a function of her liminal, her temporary status. That is also the source of her power, the reason she is central to religious practice – to the performance of the cult, to some of the major mysteries, and, above all and most enigmatically, to the successful outcome of sacrifice. Outside the domain of the religions, the virgin is a gift, an *agalma*, in the negotiations of families and households; in this process, of course, she ceases to be a virgin and ideally becomes a *gyne,* the mother of children, ‘the reservoir of life’.[[191]](#endnote-191) Precious to the household, to the earth and its inhabitants, woman is a kind of wealth, the kind that increases and needs careful storage and investment. The bride is a ‘gift’, offered by one man to another ‘for the ploughing of legitimate children’, (even if the promising of a future bride can happen years before, in the ceremony of *enguesis,* where both the spouses might be no more than children.[[192]](#endnote-192))When the trophy is removed from circulation, when the ‘gift’ is seized back and refuses to be passed on to a new location, it has the capacity for a different function. It is because of her value in the marital system that the virgin has an additional, peculiar value when her predictable passage from one family to an other is abruptly or temporarily halted. Now she has a value when offered to a different recipient, to divine ones. Her worldly meanings suspended, something else happens: she becomes ‘holy’, which is to say, retired from profane use. For sacred things cannot be means of exchange or commodities.

Gifts offered to the gods are sacred, *hieros*, as are the garlands adorning their statues or worn at the festivals, the locks of hair dedicated to them, the days on which they are present, and the people who are dedicated to the god in temples. You do not mess with the possessions of the gods; they have things that are not to be spoken about, looked at, or touched. And certainly not taken in the act of sexual intercourse. Nonetheless, the sacred is not a fixed substance. While the realm of the sacred in Greek religion is delimited, it is also fluid. Boundaries contain it. But those boundaries can also move. The same objects which were under its sway at one point can be released, ‘desacralized’: the virginal attendant of the shrine can finish her stint and safely marry. In his study of pollution and purification beliefs in Greek religion, Robert Parker is torn between two explanations for the significance of cultic chastity, one more reductive, the other less so. In the Classical period, he writes, ‘many ritual functions fell to those who because of their age were necessarily pure – the ‘intact’ boys and girls of Catullus’ hymn’. (*Miasma*, 79):

It is not clear, however, that it was because of their purity that such ministrants were chosen for the classical rites, still less that purity was considered magically effective. Often it would be a reversal of the truth to say that children embody the purity that the ceremony demands; on the contrary, the rite’s sole function is as a stage in the induction of the children to adult life. (79)

In official religion (as opposed to the mystery cults), the quest for purity plays a role. But it is never an end in itself. You must be pure as a preparation for certain acts and interactions. And if you commit certain crimes, intentionally or unintentionally, you must be cleansed of the defilement. That, in a nutshell, is the thinking we find everywhere in Greek religious culture, from Homeric to Hellenistic times. To avoid pollution is a serious and unrelenting duty. Sexual purity can be one of the ways of limiting or checking contagion. We see this in practice in cult and in festival, as well as in momentous enterprise like war or killing wild beasts. Parker makes the distinction sharply: purity is a matter of what one does not what one is. Abstinence, he writes, could be imposed on those who are to take part

in a ritual of especial solemnity, whatever the source of that solemnity might be..[..]. It is less in order to be a certain kind of person that chastity is required than in order to enter certain places, touch certain objects, view certain sights. (86, 92)

Children are a good example. At an age when sexual activity has not yet begun, they have the necessary purity. It is their age that matters; no particular moral excellence comes into the picture. And adults, no matter what their other relationships or worldly attachments, will be well advised to adhere to vows of purity and abstention when certain aspects of their participation in religious life is in question.

The gods hate any types of pollution, above all the pollutions of blood and death. Defilement is dirty. It stains. But what can ‘dirty’ an individual or a community are many things we would now more readily consider as morally blameworthy, such as murder, as well as others where no obvious moral fault is involved: the corpse is defiling; childbirth is defiling; killing an enemy in self-defence or punishing a criminal by death is defiling. And defilement, as Vernant puts it, arouses an obsessive anxiety, a withering cycle of fear, harm, anger and shame.[[193]](#endnote-193) To ensure that *miasma*  (defilement, pollution, contagion) is warded off, at special times it is right to prohibit sexual activity, although sex is not in itself defiling or impure. Oracles at times demand sexual abstinence. Officiating at the Eleusian mysteries required a preliminary period of chastity. In an early book on cultic chastity in antiquity, Eugen Fehrle pursues the fragmentary evidence:[[194]](#endnote-194) important roles were reserved for virginal boys and girls who were neither priests or priestesses; celebrations dedicated to Apollo in Sparta involved virgins; in Thebes a virgin priest is mentioned, a young teenager like Ion, the boyish servant of Apollo at Delphi in the play by Euripides; in the Panathenaea it is maidens who dance and sing, as they do in honour of Artemis Limnatis in the account given by Pausanias in the 2nd century CE (*Description of Greece* IV.4.2; see also Callimachus, *Hymn to Artemis*, 172-3). Unmarried maidens hail the fertility goddess Demeter in Callimachus’ *Hymn to Demeter* (118).

*Hagneia* –purity – is rarely a lifelong state for Greek mortals until the coming of Hellenistic times, when the idea of physical purity as freedom from sexual taint begins to acquire that religious meaning we can recognise from the enthusiasms of the Christians and enkratics.[[195]](#endnote-195) “The Greeks”, writes Parker, “like other societies, divided the affairs of the world into sacred and profane, and this basic dichotomy was naturally extended into the sexual sphere. Profane life is, necessarily, sexual; to approach the sacred men must therefore become asexual.”(91)

Yet things are not so simple. Where the abstinence from sexual activity matters, it matters a lot. Everything that touches on the serious business of food and the harvest needs to be protected from any possible taint of pollution. From this necessity arises a complex duality in the agrarian world. Blatant sexual symbolism coexists with modest gestures of avoidance; what is shunned at one phase in a cult might be raucously celebrated at another. Many cultic practices mix the pure and the impure. The noble married ladies who celebrate the Thesmophoria practice sexual abstinence for three days, on the other hand the rite includes large phallic objects made out of bread dough and probably other sexually explicit associations. Demeter, the Earth Mother, is a good example. She presides over fertility and growth; she couples with a number of deities and non-deities; yet she and her daughter, the Maiden, also enforce chastity in their service. Sex and the asexual are not contradictory but mutually interdependent. We can see this ambivalence at its most striking in the figure of Hestia, the third Olympian virgin. Purity is essential to the hearth, the public centre of the house, sacred to fire and light. Hestia, its guardian and patron, preserves her virginity unchallenged. Immobile, non-circulating, she is the navel that fixes the home to the earth, guarantees its permanence. And she is also the spirit of the fire, manifestation of its purity, a virginal office the oracular Egyptian priestess Theonoe adopts as her own in Euripides’ *Helen*.

The connection of virginity to the hearth shows us something important about the meanings of sexual purity in Greek thinking, something that the Artemisian song of the wild ignored. For Hestia’s virginity is different. It is not the raw, naked, untouched purity of the natural world. Purity in the context of domesticity and household stands for something quite precious but static, for the value of that which cannot be exchanged. Integral, immobile, it remains the same; it is the base that is returned to.[[196]](#endnote-196) Everything else moves. Hestia’s virginity stabilises the world, keeps the interior safe inside, and keeps everything foreign ‘outside’. Without it, no centre. She who tends the fire needs to be unshakable and obstinate. Her stability renders immune to disturbance all those who meet in communal meals in the foyer she guards. At the table purity and solidarity are essential; the atmosphere must be one of trust, with no fear of impiety or aggression.[[197]](#endnote-197) Thus it is appropriate that the distractions of sexual desire be minimal here. In the Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite the reasons for her exemption from the otherwise invincible rule of Aphrodite are explained. Renouncing marriage gives Hestia the right to protect the permanence of the household. Significantly, it means that she ensures the integrity of the father’s line and name, the self-sameness of the paternal branch. Hestia means nothing but herself. This is not the case for other females.

A daughter who is sued for by another family, and given up by her father, cannot make such a promise. She cannot keep change at bay. Nor can a wife: she is mobile property, a movable value: “mobile like other commodities, she is similarly the medium for gifts, exchange, and abduction.’[[198]](#endnote-198) Levi-Strauss made this equation notorious: women are exchanged by men. Women exist to be invested not hoarded. They are to be passed on, and also received. The benefits bestowed by a wife take the family into the next generation; they lay claim to the future. Marriage, Vernant argues in his magisterial essay on ‘Hestia-Hermes’, is a *charis*, and charis“is the divine power manifest in all aspects of gift giving and reciprocity…which, in spite of all divisions, spins a web of reciprocal obligations’. Central to all images of reciprocal gift-giving is the union of woman with man. But when the woman gives herself, she renounces the hearth that was her original home. Only those images of femininity who keep their virginal status can, in Vernant’s words, ‘personify the permanent aspects of feminine nature’, remain ‘strangers to mobility’ (164). The fire kept alive by the virgin’s care is the fire of the father. This is a point Athena – het father’s daughter alone – makes imperiously (cf. Aeschylus, *Eumenides*, 736ff.). And Electra repeats, siding with her dead father and, a virgin, accepting only the relationship to her brother.

The virgin’s self-enclosure, if unchallenged, would be fatal to social life; it would be the end of dynamism, history and movement. Viewed unsympathetically, virginity can be sterile, unyielding in its stubbornness and lack of mediation. Hestia’s doors are permanently closed. Love fails to make an impression on her. Similarly, the wild virgin of the rocks and seashore looks too much like the animals she chases, bereft of language and civility. If primordial wildness is a dangerous ideal, so is self-sufficiency . Like many ideals, when one-sided, it deforms. A sealed garden, a fortress without access: the poetic images of virginity we know from other traditions do not disguise a certain horror of difference that makes virginity akin to incest or militant endogamy. Yet without the enclosure of Hestia and her hearth, family and society would lack a pure concentrated core of identity. Non-Greek religions frequently attach a similar weight of symbolic self-identity to that fiery ball of purity, the sun. The Greeks recognise its unblinking power of exposure when they speak about hiding what is shameful from the light of the sun, just as Hesiod says we should hide our shameful parts, or acts, from the fire in the hearth.[[199]](#endnote-199) Hidden and revealed; shameful and celebrated: the ambiguities of sexual life could well turn chaotic and daemonic. Marriage tames the anarchic potential of eros, to a certain degree. But its legitimacy, its ‘health’, requires the co-presence of that practice which looks like its enemy: defiant maidenhood, inward-turning self-possession. The things that will be mixed – graciously or violently – need also their time of staying apart.

Analogously, without the earth lying fallow, fertility is at risk. But without its disturbance, by the rough acts of cultivation and ploughing, civilization would be on hold, human life would end. The cultic virginity of those who follow the hunting goddess protects another domain of experience: the animals and land whose exemption from cultivation is what humans offer to the divinities for their own use. To be set aside as virginal, as ‘raw’ and wild (something a pious environmentalist of any epoch might think important), is pleasing and to be respected. The virginal Cassandra, while disdaining the embraces of Apollo, is sacred to him and off limits to men. Nothing could be more blasphemous than the attempts on her made by Ajax and Agamemnon (which some versions see as successful; there are texts which allude to Cassandra’s pregnancy on her arrival at the palace of Argos.) Akin to the virginal girl is the virginal place: the *temenos*  and the sacred grove. It is equally impious to infringe on them.

Virginal purity, again and again compromised, happily and unhappily, retains, I want to argue, its potency as a religious category. We should not be too eager to exempt the ancient world from the over-valuation of a quality that Christianity is usually blamed for taking into an idol. Here I believe a view like Parker’s is too cautious when it stresses the limited and functionalist character of sexual abstinence in Greek religion. “There are”, Zeitlin writes, “some powerful reasons for linking the virgin with the sacred, by which she retains mysterious but ambivalent associations with the immortal and higher aspects of life. The virgin body, untouched and untouchable (Aesch., *Suppliant Maidens*, 790) is whole unto itself, a sign of the self-integrity that resists any encroachment upon its boundaries, any admixture or compromise to contaminate its pure state of being. Permanent virginity is an attribute of goddesses, in whose domain it assumes an absolute value, undisturbed by the vagaries of time and change.’ [[200]](#endnote-200)And occasionally it can be an attribute of the mortal whose holiness defies ordinary categories, like the exotic prophetess Theonoe, communing with a *pneuma* from the heavens, a supra-Olympian realm of purity that informs her decidedly human wisdom and piety (Euripides *Helen*  865-72).[[201]](#endnote-201)

An epigram in honour of Artemis leaves a clue to the thinking of those who, maidens themselves, worshipped the maiden goddess:

Timareta, the daughter of Timaretus, before her wedding, hath dedicated to thee, Artemis of the Lake, her tambourine and her pretty ball, and the caul that kept up hair, and her dolls, too, and their dresses; a virgin’s gift, as is fit, to virgin Artemis. Daughter of Leto, keep your hand over Timareta, and purely keep her in her purity. (*The Greek Anthology*, Book VI.280.)[[202]](#endnote-202)

But if the *parthenos* clings to her maidenly life, her childish things, movement comes to a rude halt: society cannot function. Toys were fun for a while. It was nice to wear the special snood that binds a virgin’s hair. Yet there is a pleasing solemnity to giving them up, together with other precious gifts, embroideries and fans, veils and robes, brooches and earrings, to the goddess. If the maiden refused, if she could not bear to be parted from the hair of her adolescence – which the boy also cuts, offering it to gods and goddesses too – (*Greek Anthology*, Book VI. 282) then they would remain ‘trapped between categories’, anomalous. Helen King puts this neatly:

All women start their lives conceptually ‘outside’ male society, but most are taken ‘inside’ through the process of maturation…. the *parthenos*, ‘childless, unmarried, yet of the age for marriage’, is untamed *(admes*) and must be domesticated before it is even possible for a man to carry on a conversation with her (Xenophon, *Oeconomicus*, 7.10). There are a number of biologically defined points at which the transition from *parthenos* to *gyne* can be situated, the most obvious being menarche, defloration, marriage and the first parturition.[[203]](#endnote-203)

A smart girl moves on. Her family will take pains to ensure the integrity of her reputation while under their roof, but the honour of their house depends on her departure form it.[[204]](#endnote-204). For women in Greece sexual inexperience is associated with an age that is special and short-lived. It may well be difficult to leave behind this stage, to accept what comes next. For help one needs Artemis the inviolable and invincible; her grace and favour can make all the difference; her displeasure brings quick retribution. Patroness of the free young thing, Artemis is described in the *Odyssey* (6.102-109):

As Artemis the arrow-showering moves across the mountains, over long Taygetos or Erymanthos, delighting in boars and swift cunning hinds, and with her play the nymphs, daughters of aegis-bearing Zeus, who range in the wilds, and Leto rejoices in her heart: Artemis holds head and forehead above them all and is easily known, but all are beautiful; so excelling her handmaidens shone the unbroken virgin. (Burkert, 1985, p.150)

The ‘arrowy’ goddess (Hesiod, *Theogony* 923) transcends. Her purity outshines all imitations; she is *hagne* in a special sense, and it is a crime to lust after her, although her virginity is, as Burkert explains, not asexual as is Athena’s, but erotic, alluring and challenging. Of the three divine virgins, Artemis stands apart, her functions and powers different from those of Athena and Hestia, his sisters in chastity.

There could be said to be three types of virgin: the first of the world of men, the second of that of wild animals, but also of women in labour, and the third, the real *parthenos* of the heart of the ‘house’.[[205]](#endnote-205)

Off the battlefield, back from the woods, it is not Artemis or Athena who matters. In the ordered and sedate world of household and city, virginal femininity has its model in Hestia the guardian of the hearth, who stays inside, who is barely seen or heard. As we saw, Hestia represents virginity at its most passive and conventionally feminine. She has nothing of the aggressive vigour of Athena, the Amazonian impetuousness of Artemis. The warlike duo, Athena and Artemis, represent the other side of virginal femininity, its fierceness, its courage, even its virility. Essential to the protection of the city and its men at arms, the purity of the maiden ensures the inviolability of the community. Thus any assault on the sexual honour of such sacred maidens is an assault on the honour of the city; it is treason as well as sacrilege. Pausanias reports on the punishment visited on the land whose priestess, Komaitho, entertained her lover in the sanctuary of Artemis at Triklaria. (VII. 19. 1-4) Other maiden priestesses were subjected to similar outrages: Pausanias tells of Aristokrates in Arkadia, who raped the virgin priestess of Artemis in the sanctuary at Orchomenos (VIII.5.11-12;VIII, 13.1) leading the savvier communities to choose chaste old women ‘who had had enough of intercourse with men’,(VIII.5.12) rather than alluring maidens, to serve the cult of prickly Artemis.[[206]](#endnote-206)

We know the stories about Artemis and her rage against those attendants who fall from grace, usually unwillingly like Callisto. Pastoral landscape is the playground of eternal adolescence. It is also the favoured site of sexual pursuit. The image of her roving band of light-footed girls in short chitons, bows strapped across their chests, seems to allow for a category of those wishing to live on indefinitely in their perilous state of avoidance.[[207]](#endnote-207) The sexual ‘maturity’ Artemis’s flock is avoiding is shadowed by the one form of sexual initiation that dominates Greek mythology and art: rape. When John Keats addresses a Grecian Urn – ‘the men or gods, the maidens loth, the mad pursuit and struggle to escape’ – he may be enthralled by the timelessness of that moment just before desire turns to seizure, but there is nothing mild in the scene he is imagining. As Froma Zeitlin reminds us, it is at the very least sexual aggression, if not the pleasure in watching ‘supernatural beings act out masculine fantasies of phallic power and desire.’[[208]](#endnote-208) While revels with bow and arrows in the woods grants our mythical females a field of operations outside of organised cultural space and social norms – the wild virgin belongs to nature in the raw, as Hippolytus understood – the threat to their independence is never far away. Being raped by god, man, or the in-betweens (satyrs and centaurs) may indicate that the power of nature is this time negative in its uncivil violence and crudity. Froma Zeitlin puts the mythical contrasts into relief: “Although the refusal of sexuality constitutes a refusal to yield to the demands of culture, so that, like the hunter or militant virgin in Greek myth, one remains on the side of savagery and wild nature, the clearest sign of sexuality as a natural, if yet untamed, instinct is the propensity of the male towards rape.’[[209]](#endnote-209)

**2.5**. **Virgins in Revolt**

Is saying yes to sexuality consenting to violation? Marriage, the state at the other side of the ordeal of initiation, is hardly a perfect option for women. In 1922 the poet Marianne Moore, who called herself a ‘blameless bachelor’, began to write a poem on the subject, ‘Marriage’. It is by no means easy to be a woman and a Modernist. In this poem, Moore observes her position, driven by a desire to escape ‘this institution’, this public enterprise, as she calls it. The institution she has in mind, argues Ellen Levy, is as much the field of poetic and cultural production so clearly marked by male dominance as that of wedlock. Moore’s desire is an ascetic ideal, a wish to be exempt, refusing the ‘circular traditions and impostures’ which ‘requires all one’s criminal ingenuity to avoid’:

This institution,   
perhaps one should say enterprise   
out of respect for which   
one says one need not change one's mind   
about a thing one has believed in,   
requiring public promises   
of one's intention   
to fulfil a private obligation:   
I wonder what Adam and Eve   
think of it by this time… [[210]](#endnote-210)

As Levy explains: “marriage is ‘the’ institution, the one on which all others are founded. Marriage at once confers legitimacy on our sexual desires and confirms us a members of the polity: the wish to avoid it implies a rejection of both the sexual and social orders.” [[211]](#endnote-211) Some women just said No. Rape was bad enough. But marriage? It could be even worse.

Renouncing their duties to Aphrodite, young Greek women, daughters of royal blood with a strong sense of self-entitlement, have been known to take their lives into their own blood-stained hands. They knew a few things about the fate of the Amazons, those alien warriors who mated only once a year with a tribe of men, or took their mates by force, and kept only the female offspring. Outside of marriage, though capable of promiscuity, the Amazons were as devoted to Artemis as they were to Ares. [[212]](#endnote-212)Violence was preferable to making their peace with the race of men. The bloodiest of literature’s virgins[[213]](#endnote-213) agree. Most scandalous are the Danaid maidens who feature in a (partly lost) trilogy by Aeschylus, and the Chinese Princess Turandot, imperious heroine of Puccini’s opera of 1926. These well-born girls pursue their murderous ends with passion and deliberation, defying the local standards of what counts as femininity, unless your idea of the feminine includes a great deal of beheading. “May great Zeus ward off an Egyptian marriage for me”, the Chorus of virgins sings in Aeschylus’ *Suppliants* (1053-54). “Nessun m’avra! (No one will ever possess me!”) boasts Turandot (Act Two). Many a good hanging prevents a bad marriage, said the Clown in Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night (*I, v). These prospective brides took him at his word.

Generically *The Suppliant Maidens* and *Turandot* avoid the comic structure of the ‘marriage plot’. They are, like the ‘unorthodox’ or ‘averted’ tragic forms of Euripides’ *Ion, Helen, Alcestis,* and *Iphigeneia among the Taurians*, what the classicist Anne Pippin Burnett calls ‘plays of mixed reversal, mixing actions of catastrophe with others of favourable fortune.’[[214]](#endnote-214) Or, one is tempted to say: melodramas. When myth is beginning to give way to politics, and tragedies of fate to tragic-comedies of passionate disappointment, something different is happening in history, of a rather more secular complexion. In these two dramas marriage and slaughter are the competing weapons in a struggle over power between women and men. Outrage is met with retaliation. Reciprocal violence follows its own relentless path until a matrimonial pact interrupts the reign of hatred. The iniquities of gender are at once addressed and avoided; reversed (Turandot is an absolute sovereign and her word is law; all males are subject to her) and re-created.

It would be too ambitious to call the narratives I want to analyse versions of political myth. But that notion gives us a helpful hint. The inauguration of marriage is one of the most important steps into the civil order. From the sacrifice of virginity the social contract is born; the rule of the sun – a masculine enthronement -- eclipses theflickering sovereignty of the moon. This is one version of the myth. I want to interpret my stories of virginal protest more charitably, to see the ways in which they make a larger demand on the flexibility of the polis. Myth (‘Male and female principles locked in bloody war! Sterile feminine self-assertion relenting in favour of life and passion!’) can be resisted. There are other interpretative fictions, and one is John Milton and Stanley’s Cavell’s idea of the ‘conversation of the sexes’, which raises the possibility that husband and wife, like Aristotle’s citizens, can be friends. The rest of my chapter heads in that direction, hence away from tragedy, melodrama and those other remnants of what I still find a mesmerizing theological poetics, and towards a comic ordinariness. To anticipate in what can only now be roughly schematic: the sublime alienation of the chaste hero or heroine in a world of compromise and approximation is the material of romance; spiritual distinction is possible, but only at the cost of silence, aloofness, untouchability. I should not be forced, by violence or ostracism, to repudiate these ideals as illusions. But I may find I want to give them up if I want to listen and be heard, if I have a place in the social world that strikes me as neither oppressed nor oppressing.

For myth is tied to the cycle of violence and retribution, something which the Greeks called ‘barbarous’ when they choose to, despite being on very close terms with it. And, as the rebel girls in Aeschylus demonstrate, this deadly cycle is broken only if a new and unexpected clause is written into the marriage contract: the right of the bride to decide for herself, to choose her own husband rather than accept the authority of her father.[[215]](#endnote-215) In Aeschylus’s democratic Athens, just emerging from the terrors of the Persian Wars, the struggle between men and women made an irresistible metaphor for the opposition between civilised and barbarian. The Danaid maidens, savage in their ferocity, foreign and strange in their appearance and manners, are quick to denounce their suitors as the most thuggish and uneducated of barbarians; Turandot, a Chinese Astarte, ‘red in tooth and claw’, views the desires of men for women as the most vicious concession to despotism. We know that Aeschylus intended the outcome to be a reprimand to his Danaids’ campaign against marriage. In the lost conclusion to Aeschylus’s trilogy, the goddess Aphrodite brings back the reign of civility, and forgiveness, insisting that the duties of love be fulfilled and marriage honoured. In the myth of the Danaids, an alternative plot-line establishes the sisters themselves in Argos as priestesses of Hera: they have become the providers of fresh water to a region otherwise in danger of destruction because of its total drought, which had been its lot since it provoked the anger of Poseidon, denying him sovereignty over Argos. The Danaids, who have been described as taking up arms against their male cousins, are nonetheless the providers, the discovers of the essential spring, bringing the water that will purify their bloodshed. Blood turns to water, vengeance and rape turn into a first ‘social contract’.[[216]](#endnote-216) The one daughter of Danaus who refuses to murder her husband is put on trial for her disobedience: just in time, Aphrodite comes to her aid with an eloquent and persuasive speech that won Hypermnestra her case, ‘her right to decide for herself who was to be her husband’. (Detienne 47) Dedicating to the goddess and to Hermes a statue in gratitude, Hypermnestra with her man become the founders of the royal lien in Argos and begin the cult of Hera; her sisters, snatched back from bloody virginity, marry also and introduce into Greece

‘the initiatory festivals of Demeter known as the Thesmophoria, in which, to be sure, legitimacy was de rigueur and the powers of the female body were exalted, but at the same time the race of women, recovering autonomy even within marriage sanctioned by the *polis*, constituted a close city, an acknowledged and redoubtable gynocracy. (Detienne 48-49)

Yet the myth of foundation does not allow us to draw too neat a conclusion, as Detienne remarks. The private sovereignty of women, the ‘gynocracy’, happens only behind closed doors; it is a licensed aberration, a secret world from which men are excluded but from which virgins also are excluded. Here, in these rites for citizen-wives, respectable women who bleed according to the rules get a chance to shed blood themselves, to offer animal sacrifice. Marriage, the sexual union of a man and a woman, is a city in miniature. It is also founded on blood, resentment, and violence, and those traces will not disappear. Similarly in *Turandot.* At the end the empress heroine, the cold ascetic Moon presiding over the executions that terrify the city of Peking in Puccini’s opera, is convinced to turn away in favour of the rights of the Sun. Yet in both cases no resolution was possible until at least one stubborn virgin got her way.

Such a deferral to the wishes of the daughter is the last-minute truce to a hard-fought war in both these dramas. One girl in Argos, Hypermnestra, refuses to kill her bridegroom. One virgin princess in Peking gives up her war on men when she finds one worthy of her love. A marriage is happily contracted – between one of Danaus’s daughters and one of Aegytpus’s sons, between Turandot and the exiled Prince of Samarkand -- achieved with the blessing of Aphrodite and Hera and the sleepless deities of the Chinese night. This last-minute contract – masquerading not as coercion but as the satisfaction of a proud girl’s fancy -- is also the resolution of the modern romantic ‘comedy of remarriage’. Such comedies add a deeper, as well as a more playful, twist to the exchange of desires that is meant to bring a romantic crisis to an end and which, in marital contracts, we call consent. Old comedies, usually romantic ones, did also draw much mileage out of the uncertainties enveloping a boy and a girl’s interest in getting themselves married, an interest that is obstructed by obstacles from parents, pirates, class differences, and many other interferences. There are, nonetheless, critical differences in the intentions and moral questions of comedy when it is remarriage rather than marriage which is the problem. New ‘comedies of remarriage’ are more worldly and, in a sense, more skeptical. A pair that had been united find plenty of reasons why their union was not legitimate, inadequate to their desires, shared or separate. If they are to re-unite, they must pass certain tests, undergo certain ordeals, learn more about their desires: where there had been rigidity, yielding might be required; where they had been seriousness, there might need to be foolishness; where there had been indignation and misunderstanding, there might need to be forgiveness and laughter.

The remarriage comedy, to give it the name devised by its philosophic discoverer, is a sophisticated genre of the classical Hollywood movie of the 1930s and 1940s. Stanley Cavell identified it in a book called *Pursuits of Happiness: the Hollywood Comedy of* Remarriage (1984), which remains the best book any philosopher has written on film. Cavell is motivated not just by a desire to defend marriage, something he does with a careful attention to gender dissymmetry and the insult marriage can be for women. He wants to see if marriage can be friendly to the independence and improvisational genius of women. And he wants to see, through the effervescence of the best romantic comedies, whether the inherited forms of male-female relations can ever be amenable to women’s play of mind and women’s own ways of being poetic, not simply as objects of male poetic invention. Cavell’s ambitions are larger than those normally attracting intellectuals to popular genres. He has long been worried about the misfirings of the enlightenment ideal of political justice, an ideal that has had such a mixed career in the public record of the United States. In his study of several classic comedies that hinge on the breaking and remaking of marriages (*The Lady Eve, The Awful Truth, It Happened One Night, The Philadelphia Story, Bringing Up Baby, His Girl Friday* and *Adam’s Rib*), he questions the ‘will to marriage’ as something societies have always been ‘anxious to limit’, given that the consent to community, not to speak of the consent to being governed, involves limits to their freedom and desires that people are asked, again and again, to accept. Virgins who leap out of windows, hang themselves en masse, or take knives to their bridegrooms, are clearly opting out of the ‘consent’ part of the bargain.

For Cavell, the fate of marriage – can it be reconstructed to do justice to the aspirations and needs of intelligent women and their men? -- is bound up with the fate of the American political community, something similarly in question. It is a question for comedy, and even an old reactionary like Aristophanes in the *Lysistrata* knew how to pose it. Democracy, lust, marriage, and comedy: it is a dance, not a military parade or a parliamentary debate. The relations of the sexes are within the polis, not outside it. This justifies Cavell’s characteristic mode of questioning. Can feminine self-determination be reconciled with the needs of the city for stability and the needs of the family for lawful and productive procreation? Can joyous and urgent desire make you a good citizen rather than a buffoon, a con artist, an obsessive? Yes, if we leave tragedy behind. Comedy has a way of turning potential violence into a joke and sexual warfare into a skirmish, but it doesn’t avoid the hard political questions. Rebellious maidens are at home here too, if only provisionally. My third example of the virginal revolt against marriage is a cinematic one, one of Cavell’s exemplary comedies of remarriage, the 1940 George Cukor film *The Philadelphia Story*, a faithful adaptation of a first-class play by Philip Barry, starring Katherine Hepburn, Cary Grant, and James Stewart. In the film a modern American ‘princess’ is called (to her horror) a ‘married virgin’. The fact of her ‘unwanted’ virginity is the problem. In contrast to the furies of the Danaids and Turandot, the heroine’s resistance to marriage and sexuality is more subliminal and largely unconscious. The agonistic relations of women to men are transferred to the more brittle stage of romantic comedy.

Comic or not, the issues are still dark ones. If we look at a number of myths, we find strange ways of accounting for the invention of marriage, many of them violent. Rape and politics share a common history. Marriage is their middle term. For marriage to exist, says the Old Testament Book of Judges, first brides had to be stolen.[[217]](#endnote-217) Much later, when the most virtuous of wives, the Roman Lucretia, was assaulted in her own bedroom, the horror of rape was taken to represent the fragility of justice in a despotic system. Honourable marriage starts the city. It has to be defended for the city to survive and to flourish. The first republic, a Roman tradition has it, was founded in the uprising against a tyrant’s hybristic resort to rape. Only if rape is denounced can a political order respectful of consent and conversation begin, can the social contract even be imagined. Rape is for most people the extreme expression of a denial of consent. When the literature of virginal rebellion takes arms against the requirement of marriage, it tries and fails to add another crime to the record: compulsory heterosexual union, sanctioned by civil and religious law, is a travesty, the rebellious virgins complain, if it is imposed on us. The protest is heard. The audience is moved. The unresolved narrative moves to its predictable resolution: marital love trumps all, or perhaps it is the victory of expedience, or sovereign fiat and dynastic necessity. The virgin’s story of dissidence withdraws to the margins of the literary and theological canon.

Politically, things are a bit different, at least in those political myths of city-foundation and the heroic struggle against threats internal and external, myths that the Greeks and Romans loved. By a metaphorical substitution that seems to return age after age, political legitimacy and civic freedom are represented by sexual purity, the honor of the city by the honor of the body. The most famous of these myths does create a prominent place for the voice of the virgin and her Roman counterpart: the chaste, proud matron. It is the blameless and faithful wife Lucretia who represents the city’s virtue. Her outrage suggests that sexual purity is a weak and meaningless demand until it is coupled with individual consent, in this case a woman’s right to determine the disposal of her own body. The problem of sexual aggression, as articulated in the story of Lucretia, raised political questions about legitimacy, usurpation and the self-examination of justice which otherwise were difficult to bring into focus, whether the polities involved were under republican or autocratic rule. The relationship of sexual virtue and political idealism, between sexual coercion and political disorder, is a point needing far more elaboration, one that will return in the conclusion to this study with reference to a special canon of early modern literary examples: *Measure for Measure, All’s Well that Ends Well, Emilia Galotti and The Rape of Lucretia.*

But the anxiety of rape does not, as we can see in the case of Lucretia, disable the priority of heterosexual marriage: it may be men who rape, but it is also men who marry, and the city has to find a place for them. Girls who refuse husbands, and seem disgusted by the very idea of masculine sexual importunity, will not get a ready hearing in literature or in public life. Marriage, all in all, is the norm. It is the norm in monarchies and republics, in tribal communities and decadent courts; there have been some wishful utopian sketches that have imagined erotic and domestic life beyond the marital arrangement, and some who have argued that true paradise on earth, on a socialist or Platonic model, and with that true equality of the sexes, can never arrive until humans give up the habit of monogamy. I have sympathy for the utopians. The ancient Greeks had less time to waste on such sexual radicalism. The skittish adolescent girl who, as Calame puts in for the Greek example, ‘arouses desire but refuses the advances of men’, provokes in them a ‘resort to violent action: the violence of the abduction and if the rape has to be understood as a metaphorical domestication, by force and through sexuality, of the untamed young girl.’.[[218]](#endnote-218)Yet the protest against marriage in the name of self-possession is essential, for the dignity of men and women alike. It cannot be denied that marriage is society’s founding institution, its cement and its soul. Can it be the source of intolerable abuse? Like many originary institutions, it has behind it a guilty conscience, a memory of trauma. As Marcel Detienne explains

The Danaids showed that, while the social contract of marriage could exorcise the blood and warfare between those who were closest and most similar to one another, the union between a man and a woman nevertheless remained characterized by violence, and would forever be founded upon it.[[219]](#endnote-219)

My rebels take aim not only against the city and its norms but against the very survival of the species, a sacred (or evolutionary) obligation they suggest is compromised by the sacrifices wives are required to make in its name. The anthem they invoke is a revolutionary one: Freedom versus servitude. They are also invoking a less revolutionary more equally familiar one: women against men, two ‘races’ in violent antagonism. The story begins, in Detienne’s words,

with a band of boys harassing their female cousins. There are insults, blows, violence, all the makings of a drama…In that reciprocal violence in which males and females clash head on, what is essentially at stake is power: power in both senses of the word *kratos* – namely, might and authority.

But note that the ‘might’ the angry girls resent is not simply that of unchivalrous and entitled masculinity: it is the ‘might’ of marriage. Is marriage just? Is it a resolution to an eternal civil war that triumphs by concealing the infamy of defeat? Marriage is, in the resolution of the Danaids’ revolt, ‘the sovereign conjugality that is enforced in this territory (Argos) by Hera of Argos’, who is thus endowed with the credit for finding and regulating a ‘new way for the two antagonistic races to live together, sharing the same bed, without violence and with each partner respectful of the rights of the other. Such a story (Detienne concludes) is not common in the Greek memorial tradition.’[[220]](#endnote-220) We are most familiar with the plot and its collisions from Aeschylus’ surviving play, oriented towards a Periclean Athens where marriage is highly respected. Its revelation of the raw aggression and predatory brutality of marriage – indeed of heterosexuality-- itself must have been a complicated message for Athenians to swallow. Yet swallow it they did.

The story had been told in the seventh century, set out in an epic, the *Danais*, and it became one of the tales that the Greeks continued to tell and that everyone accepted…The story of the Danaids tells of a bloody war that escalated in a society whose members were related by blood…And in the horizon there can be glimpsed a space in which, for the first time, a social contract would be founded upon the conjugal relationship – a contract that would be supported by many ritual gestures and religious practices designed to guarantee particular ways of behaving, and that would constantly be safeguarded by the divine powers called upon to convert open hatred into a necessary alliance.[[221]](#endnote-221)

The 50 daughters of King Danaus are fleeing a mass marriage to their 50 cousins. The puzzled King of Argos, whom they supplicate for protection, asks them why they are willing to die rather than be ushered to the marital bed. What’s the justice of their claim? “Don’t make me become a slave to the sons of Aegyptus!” “Why should I buy myself a master?’ (335-338)[[222]](#endnote-222) What repels them in the happy ending plot most young single women are trained to desire is the sad scene the imagine beyond the bedroom door -- the intolerable condition of the subordinate.[[223]](#endnote-223) They have been reading the story of Bluebeard. Young girls get much of their knowledge of the world from fairy tales, and many of their sexual expectations from the same place. Some Sleeping Beauties see marriage as the awakening from the narcissistic fog of childhood; some Cinderellas expect the privilege of the wife to save them from a painful disregard and insignificance. Climbing on to the pedestal of their proud and self-sufficient virginity, invoking their goddess, the untamed champion of the untamed, the Artemisian candidates respond: where’s your evidence?

History, literature and myth give conflicting accounts of how communities have reacted to distress and mutiny in the ‘race of women’ (Hesiod), those unruly descendants of Eve, Pandora and Nora Helmer. Critics on the look-out for insurgency, ingratitude or perverse prudery find it hard to admit any moral force in the argument against marriage when presented by dissenting virgins (disenchanted husbands are a different type of witness.). Eve learned to conform and set the example, but the ‘good wives’ in antiquity – Penelope, Andromache, Alcestis – confirmed it. Women are designed to become helpmeets to men, sexual partners, housekeepers and mothers.

What happens when marriage is seen as the problem rather than the solution? Men have not been idle in complaining about the concessions and compromises married domesticity requires. Debating marriage as a life choice was popular among male sages and philosophers since the Cynics. A bachelor existence, if not sexual abstinence, was the rule for male scholars throughout most of Western history, as many were attached to institutions open only to clerics, and others, like Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Kant, Hume, Locke, Spinoza, Leibniz, etc., etc., attached themselves to ideals of freedom, work and solitude incompatible with conjugal entanglements.

If men can opt out, why can’t women? Some of the women who declined[[224]](#endnote-224) are runaway brides both literal and figurative. Their role models are not the female ascetics of religious tradition who yearn for union with the divine or who are exalted by the idea of self-sacrifice, but earlier figures from myth. The patrons of all runaway brides are those tough, wilful and strenuous dissenters from the ‘rule of Aphrodite’, the three divine virgins Athena, Artemis, Hestia. The Hom*eric Hymn to Aphrodite* calls them the goddesses she can neither persuade nor beguile; who cannot be tamed in love, nor charmed by the works of Aphrodite’, l.8-9, 16-17, 21-22). Runaway brides, I will argue, are trying to tell us something. The literature of defiant virginity is a subgenre with an unusually miscellaneous set of instances and conventions, and critics have only recently begun to explore it with an open mind.[[225]](#endnote-225)

Marriage, the Danaids imagine, must be bloody and horrible. The modern psychoanalyst wonders why: does this indicate hysteria, on the part of the woman? Or on the part of the man? There is something disturbing in the willingness of the Danaid maidens to anticipate a humiliating and oppressive future, should they be forced to join themselves to men physically and emotionally. It may be that their fears are sincere: Greek descriptions of the sexual union do not stint on the imagery of the male ‘mastering the female’ (*Theogony* 1008) But we should also consider the fact that the female perspective being portrayed here is mediated through a masculine writer: the male poet is imagining the revulsion of a large group of young women, horrified by the idea marriage. The panic does not only strike girls. Even the prospective husband could also be nervous about all the ways in which this ‘rite of passage’ can go wrong – his impotence? Her pain? The (metaphorical) disappearance of his penis? Freud and his contemporaries in armchair anthropology speak sagely of non-Western taboos surrounding the first act of coitus: the ‘contact’ itself is dangerous, exposing each participant to sexual properties which are feared as ‘contagious’, and even the sacramental character of the marriage ceremony (a conception of no use to the Greeks) can only partly secure the safety of a union that breaks what could be a deep taboo. ‘The state of marriage’, writes A.E.Crawley, a student of James Frazer, ‘is harmful and later, sinful, theoretically forbidden.’[[226]](#endnote-226) Among the Arunta in Central Australia, studied by Spencer and Gillen, ceremonial perforation in preparation for marriage is a form of proxy, to lessen the danger by magical substitution.[[227]](#endnote-227) Ritual and ceremonial, acts of separation and mimicry, often performed in groups, presumably as there is safety in numbers: however dubious the methodology of ethnography’s first generation of speculators, they agree on a phenomenon more scrupulous classicists since have generally confirmed. Marriage is not a simple treaty, concluded between authorised agents, whether individuals or families. It is a social ordeal, through which one passes only as profoundly changed. On the far side of the rite of marriage I may encounter someone I hardly recognise – and that stranger may not be my spouse but what used to be myself. Small wonder there were prospective brides who found the prospect intimidating.

Anthropologists try to learn more about the emotional and social meanings of marriage by looking at its rituals. On pots and cups, steles and amphora, the Greeks showed preparations for marriages, processions, sacrifices, the giving of gifts, the unveiling of the bride, the beautifying of the wedding party, even the approach to the bed. Like all important civic and religious events or crises in the 5th century polis, marriage and the preparation for it requires *sacrifice,* the spilling of blood, the honouring of the divine, a potent if limited communication between mortals and immortals, the practical and the mysterious. To understand some of the anxieties about the event of marriage that, I believe influence Greek notions of virginity and its ambiguity, the peculiar role of sacrifice needs more spelling out.

Animal sacrificial offerings are at the core of Greek religion. Propitiation is called for, since these unprotected maidens are marking dangerous transitions from childhood to maturity, from the profane to the sacred and back again.[[228]](#endnote-228) At such times the gods are not far off. Yet sacrifice is also ‘in the symbolic system of Greek thought’ the privileged way of marking out what is especially human, not bestial, not divine. Killing, for mortals, is reined in with taboos. The ‘bloody animal sacrifice of alimentary type’, as the modern theorists of Greek religious ritual have specified that version is a solemn and serious civic practice, which ‘simultaneously gave expression to the bonds that tied the citizens one to another and served as a privileged means of communication with the divine world.’[[229]](#endnote-229) (There were also bloodless sacrifices, of grains or cakes or spices, and these were the more everyday ones, to be performed at home. And esoteric sects like the Orphics and the Pythagoreans refused to offer bloody sacrifices. The deviant Dionysian’s, on the other hand, tore the victims they had hunted down into pieces and ate them raw (*omophagia*.)[[230]](#endnote-230) Only domestic animals can be sacrificed, and of those, only sheep, oxen, rarely pigs (to Demeter). The animals must consent;[[231]](#endnote-231) they are purified, garlanded, treated with care; the actual throat-cutting is done discreetly, quickly. The meat is cooked, generally roasted but sometimes boiled as well, and shared. The same festivals that involve sacrifices include competitive games, musical and theatrical performances. If the animal which was slaughtered is burnt in its entirety (a ‘holocaust’), it is intended to be consumed by the gods alone, and this is a special case of the rite reserved for certain hero-cults or cults of the dead. Otherwise mortals and immortals can eat the same food. If at one end of the line sacrifice is a meal, a compensation for brutalities committed, a sharing with the beasts who have so generously allowed themselves to be slaughtered, at the other it is art, cultural display, celebration as of a marriage or a victory, and solemn political confederation. For the Greeks sacrifice is considered ‘civilising’, the antithesis of ‘barbaric’. It is an offering that consecrates, a careful and cautious negotiation between the city and its gods. Hermes complains about barbarians ‘they don’t offer sacrifices.’ They kill and carve without culture.[[232]](#endnote-232) But with us, the Greeks asserted, the necessary element of violence is changed, treated differently. It must be remembered that the violence enacted in ritual has its limits. Humans accept blood sacrifice as a reminder of their mortal limits and the sacrilege in their distant pasts, when Prometheus brought them fire: this is the message Hesiod inscribed into his story of the foundational sacrifices and their causes in the *Theogony*. Only in myth is there allusion to human sacrifices; history offers no substantiation of such practices (there are of course rumours and hearsay). Human sacrifice? It is something we ‘remember’ but we don’t do.[[233]](#endnote-233)

In tragic poetry that memory of human offerings to voracious gods and heroes is kept alive with a cruel persistence. And there is one situation that tragedy in the classical age can never exhaust: the voluntary sacrifice of virgins. Animals get their throats cut, their blood spurts out as an offering to the gods. But by a strange process of association, Greek tragedies choose to ascribe the same sacrificial throat-cutting to a ‘deviant’ and monstrous offering of virgin daughters on bloody altars, as we note in the sacrifice of Iphigenia in Aeschylus and Euripides, of Polyxena in the *Hecuba* and the *Troades*, of the daughters of Erechtheus described in Euripides’ *Ion*. What makes this ‘unthinkable’ act thinkable? This ‘abnormality’ exemplary, as the French classicist Nicole Loraux puts it? It is, Loraux insists in *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman*, a ‘rule’:

[…] or what passes for a rule in the world of tragedy: a sacrifice is made with blood shed, and the victim is a young girl…The sacrifice of a virgin in the theater allows one to think the unthinkable, to question the norms from the standpoint of extreme abnormality, all the more freely since this abnormality is so flagrant.[[234]](#endnote-234)

Deviant, this, a sacrifice that is not an animal but a girl on the threshold of womanhood. ‘Of course’, Loraux adds, ‘in real life the city did not sacrifice its young girls, but during a performance it gave its inhabitants the double satisfaction of transgressing in imagination the taboo of *phonos* and of dreaming about virgins’ blood.’(33) And what is it about the situation, in mythology or tragedy, that makes a virgin appropriate for this appointment with death, to be offered up in a sacrifice that breaks the rules, when the girl is pure and goes willingly to death, silently and like a warrior, as Polyxena does in Euripides’ *Hecuba*? What else can she do, given the catastrophe her city is suffering? Through their courage, the heroic virgins can symbolically heal a threatened fracture that is putting the community at risk. This is the interpretation Helene Foley offers in her reading of Euripides and, like Loraux, Foley agrees that it is the interchangeability of marriage and sacrifice that makes the metaphor work. ‘When the victim is a virgin, the sacrifice is tragically ironic in that it resembles, all too closely, a marriage.’[[235]](#endnote-235) The girls with their throats cut are brides for Hades. They leave their own homes for an alien home, just like their surviving sisters led off by husbands. This is, writes Loraux, the ‘tragic destiny of the parthenoi.’ (38) Our dancing maidens at Brauron or Troezen, playing the bear, mimicking the warriors they can never be, are not designed for Antigonesque suicide. Yet something about that possibility remains available, and acknowledged. Is consent to marriage, for a young woman, analogous to consent to death? Is consent to sacrifice the same as losing your virginity?

**2.6**  **Blood on the Sheets**

Imagine a scene from the worst horror movie ever. The place is Mycenae, in the royal palace of the city of Argos, sacred to Hera who was for the Greeks the goddess of marriage and exacting protector of its duties. Great marriages have been celebrated here, and have come to sticky ends. Clytemnestra, daughter of the royal family of Sparta, sister of Helen, is an object-lesson for wary bridegrooms. A wife and no-wife, she broke the rules by murdering her husband Agamemnon with the help of her lover and cousin Aegisthus. An angry mother and jealous wife Clytemnestra took revenge for the sacrifice of her virgin daughter Iphigenia, but as mother she is denied by her own son, the vindicated matricide Orestes. Argos doesn’t look like a good place to be a wife.

In Aeschylus’ early drama *The Suppliant Maidens* the first or second part (we can only guess here) of a trilogy built around the ancestral family of Argos and the fates of those who trace their descent to Zeus and a nervous cow, a wedding was planned to join two royal families and unite an entire generation of cousins. The plan misfires, badly. Something went wrong between the conception and the execution: perhaps an oracle told King Danaus to be afraid of his Egyptian sons in law; perhaps the manners of the young men were too uncouth; perhaps a trepidation about endogamous alliances disturbed the family. The blushing virgins fail to enter into the spirit of things. They run away, with the help of their father; they commander a ship and reverse their grandmother Io’s path across the Bosphoros and Libya and down fro Egypt; they arrive at Argos at last, they ask for sanctuary and protection, invoking the sacred rights of the suppliant; their suitors chase them, violently make war on the Argive protectors, who are defeated; the girls are caught; marriage is forced on them. When the morning after the wedding night arrives, 49 bridegrooms are lying in their own blood on their nuptial beds, their throats cut by their reluctant brides. One bridegroom, Lynceus, was spared. His bride, Hypermnestra, did not have the heart for the slaughter. Her sisters, a Chorus of human Furies, had no such compunctions.

The violence they carry out is at once commonplace and unusual. Men are supposed to defend women, often by force. Most cultures exclude women from the exercise of violence, reasoning at times that the bearing of children is strenuous enough. In the Greek tradition from Homer on (and well into the Romans), jealousy and revenge were considered frequent presences in the female psychology/female psychology is a familiar battleground for jealousy, revenge; women resort to intrigue, cruelty, deception to protect their children and harm those who have wounded them; female deities are known for stormy and tenacious fits of rage. Some females were at home on the battlefield: Amazons, Platonic guardians, and women Spartans fought bravely and were not inhibited by the repugnance towards bloodshed.

But aggression, respected as an attribute of masculinity, did not belong among the feminine ideals. And the code of female virtue, invoked by orators like Lysias, Demosthenes, and Aeschines or politicians like Pericles, was conventional in ways that Victorians would easily recognise: women were not meant to be seen in public; the sharp demarcation between respectable and public women; respectable women’s names were not to be mentioned in wills or law courts; women lived in separate quarters of the house, normally on the second floor; they did not meet strange men; they socialised only with relatives; their education as limited, etc. They were born and raised to become wives and mothers. Why wouldn’t they be represented as decorously assenting to their sanctioned and inevitable fate, to be given as valuable gifts by their fathers to their husbands? Why wouldn’t they be eager to emerge from a tutelage that was broadly constricting to one that, while still limited, allowed them admiration, respect, and far more sway over their allotted realm of action – domestic economy, household management, presentation of legitimate children, spending their husbands money and earning his gratitude?

The 49 blood-thirsty brides of Argos thought differently. They rebelled. They are called the Danaids. Much of what we know about them is conjectural; the sources are diverse and contradictory. Only the fact of their adamant resistance to the state of marriage is a constant feature, together with the description of their bloody escape from it. The incidents are relayed, as a matter that tradition has established, in the 1st century BCE *Bibliotheke* of someone who went by the name of Apollodorus. In this book, a ‘library’ of myths, familiar and standard versions of old stories were related, from the fights of the Titans to the homecoming of Odysseus. And they are referred to again in the *Fabulae* of Hyginus, probably written in the 2nd century CE; and they are remarked on later by Pausanias.[[236]](#endnote-236) Hyginus’s version is informative if inelegant:

Danaus son of Belus had fifty daughters by several wives. His brother Aegyptus had just as many sons, and he wanted to kill his brother Danaus and his daughters so that he alone would possess his father’s kingdom. He demanded that his brother provide wives for his son. When Danaus realized what was going on, he fled from Africa to Argos with the help of Minerva who, they say, built the first two-prowed ship so that Danaus could escape. When Aegyptus found out Danaus had escaped, he sent his sons to pursue his brother and ordered them either to kill him or not to return home. After they reached Argos, they began a siege against their uncle. When Danaus saw he could not hold them off, he promised them his daughters as wives if they ceased their attack. They took the cousins they asked for as wives, but the women following their father’s orders killed them after they got married. Hypermnestra was the only one to save her husband, Lynceus. They say that the rest of them, because of their crime, pour water into a pot full of holes in the underworld. A shrine was built for Hypermnestra and Lynceus. (168)[[237]](#endnote-237)

Apollodorus has a few extra details: the grooms were killed in their sleep with knives supplied by Danaus; the reason Lynceus was spared by Hypermnestra is because he had not taken her virginity. The murderous brides buried he heads of their husbands in Lerna, but were later purified from the murder by Athena and Hermes. (*Bibliotheke* 2:21-22The murder itself first gets mentioned in *Prometheus Bound* which experts no longer believe was written by Aeschylus. What they did, and how they did it, his play only hints at; how Aeschylus would have framed it, and explained it, we can’t be sure. The punishment of the daughters of Danaus in Hades is the subject of later traditions. Their assignment to this task may represent futility, as it has generally been interpreted. It may also represent something more positive, their indispensable role in bringing water to parched Argos, which some legends tell about[[238]](#endnote-238).

In the play they persist in drawing attention to two things: their descent from Io, and their virginity. Most mortals seized on for sexual reasons by gods succumb with greater or lesser degrees of resistance and resentment. Io fought against her seduction; Creusa denounced her rapist (Euripides, *Ion*, 870-922). The Danaids are timid. Yet they are assertive, most forcefully when they threaten to tie themselves by their girdles to the statues of the gods. We would know more about their motives and defence if we had access to the two lost plays, the *Aegyptii* and the *Danaids*. In our play the young women have arrived across the sea at the shore they consider their ancestral homeland, Argos. Their cousins are hot on their heels, vowing to get them back. They ask for protection as suppliants from the reigning King, Pelasgus. Anxious about their status – are they promised to legitimate husbands who rightly are demanding their return? - Pelasgus initially refuses until he can get the agreement of the assembly. Once he does, he rises to the occasion, overcoming his scepticism and convincing his subjects to take up their cause, protecting these strange young visitors as suppliants and guests, defending them at the price of his life.

Despite the concession of the Argives, the attack mounted by the belligerent Egyptians succeeds. This we know from contemporary summaries of Aeschylus’ portrayal of the subsequent events. Versions of the Danaids’ story in circulation before Aeschylus took up the material give different versions, but agree that the Argive defenders are defeated. The girls’ father who has followed them to Argos conducts negotiations. Danaus gives up his claim on Egypt and inherits the throne of Argos, replacing the hospitable but unlucky Pelasgus. The Egyptian attackers are to be left their kingdom and given their cousins as wives. At this the murder happens. For the maidens have not accepted the need to renounce their virginity. In the early scenes of *The Suppliants* they speak of wedlock as an oppressive yoke, the act of a tyrant. Their cousins, they object, are brutal hawks, bent on carrying off these weak sparrows. They are insolent, immoderate, impious, furious. They behave like aggressive dogs; they don’t respect the gods. They think of women as slaves. Dark hints are made of cannibalism, of birds who eat other birds. There is no scope for equality in marriage, nor for mutual recognition and co-operation.

It is an unexpected accusation. What is Aeschylus doing pretending to be a modern feminist? A comic provocateur like Aristophanes might have given such speeches to his characters; the audience would know how to take them. Here they are a puzzle. Are the Danaids making a claim for equal representation as citizens? They certainly win almost everything they request, being granted the status of *polyxenie*. They have landed at the place they believe to be their traditional home, but they are clearly foreigners and look very odd to the Hellenes who meet them. Black of skin, speaking Egyptian, yet honouring the same Olympian gods, they appeal to their supposed Argive kin to extend to them the respect shown to women in Greek rather than barbarian cities. Any Greek would know that foreigners have nasty customs, and don’t abide by proper standards of honour and law. The pursuing suitors in good faith that the locals inquire about the legal status of the demand make it: are these girls their promised property? Would Argos be in violation of the Egyptians rights if it harboured these fugitives? At this, the maidens threaten to kill themselves on the altar, a desperate action that would bring pollution and catastrophe in the city and its citizens.

Pelasgus has no choice. He must decide how to save the situation, even if the correct judgment will mean invasion and war. The Argive King was not being teasingly provocative when he insisted he could do nothing without discussion and group consideration; his rule is democratic, which shocks the Egyptian visitors; barbarians were obviously going to be mystified by Greek democratic ideals and institutions, to find them implausible, probably a charade and an evasion. We can recall the incredulity of the Persians in Aeschylus’s earlier play, unable to get their heads around the intensity of the Greek attachment to freedom,[[239]](#endnote-239) But Pelasgus’ political ethics are emphasised with great care by Aeschylus, and this is almost the only instance of such focus in a Classical play, at least in tragedy. (Comedy did it a lot, but without idealising as here.) The allusion only underlines painfully the contrast to the subjection and inequality any woman, not just these homeless asylum-seekers, can expect from marriage. It is true their experience of ‘Oriental despotism’ may make them more suspicious. But they are accompanied by a father who claims to be conscientiously attentive to their wishes and fears, who consults their will rather than his own in many things, and whose insistence on their flight and spousicide is framed as out of concern for their fragility and independence: they should not have to be brutalised and dominated by… For them marriage means conflict and rivalry, a contest whose outcome is predictable, given the social hierarchy in which husband rules wife.

Classical scholarship has changed in its attitude towards the Danaids. In the early years of the 20th century their behaviour was universally denounced. They were ‘fanatics’, unnatural, repressed, exhibiting an extreme or neurotic aversion to men and sexuality. Their standing has risen somewhat in recent times. Classicists informed by feminist and psychoanalytic literature are more willing to speculate on the mystery of this female hostility to men. Perhaps we need to know about the origins of this sexual subjection which, it must be said, can provoke resentment of a kind that ‘never completely disappears in the relations between the sexes’, as Sigmund Freud puts it in his paper on ‘The Taboo of Virginity’. (1917)[[240]](#endnote-240) Could this bad feeling between the sexes stem from some primal scene of prehistory, at around the time when males and females first became differentiated? (One wonders if the psychoanalysts had the Garden of Eden in mind, or some place more exotic.) Freud’s colleague Sandor Ferenczi described a possible scenario, imagining a time when copulation ‘took place between two similar individuals, one of which, however, developed into the stronger and forced the weaker one to submit to sexual union.’ (279, citing a discussion later included in Ferenczi’s *Thalassa: A Theory of Genitality* (1924).

The habit of domination and submission hardened into a sex-gender system and became ‘normal’, that is to say, a social fact. The humiliation, however, remained, even in the psychological lives of moderns. Among his neurotic patients, Freud reports are women who confess to this fear of sex and men (and women) to the related desire to inflict pain and to dominate. Apprehension at the very idea of the first sexual experience could be quite explicable if Freud is right, that the loss of virginity for a woman ‘creates a state of bondage’ in relation to the man who was her first lover, leading in some cases to ‘an unusually high degree of dependence’, ‘the loss of all independent will’ and ‘the greatest sacrifices’ of one’s own interests’. (!) Yet such dependence is of the very nature of marriage, Freud remarks. Some measure of sexual bondage is essential if ‘polygamous tendencies’ are ‘to be held at bay’. (265-266). No wonder, says Freud, that ‘primitive peoples’ ‘approach the prospect of defloration with a certain ‘lurking apprehensiveness,’ (270) which indeed they are believed to feel ‘on all occasions which differ in any way from the usual’, occasions which are hard to understand or ‘uncanny’. The passage from virginity to sexual experience may be one of those ‘uncanny occasions’.

It is a fact that virginity is valued in most cultures. Thus it is incumbent on the psychoanalyst to offer something less flimsily conjectural in the way of explanation of this ‘virginity-phobia’ than what has been produced so far. There are reasons, he admits, for female virginity having such a strong appeal to the sexually anxious male, who hopes to create, through the ascertainment of purity, the feeling of ‘exclusive possession of a woman’.(265) Yet, Freud muses, there is much that is puzzling about the notion that ‘this right’ to exclusive possession, considered so central to the institution of monogamy, is something worth extending to ‘cover the past.’ You shall have had no lovers before me. Is that the sum total of civilization’s investment in sexual purity, to save the pride of a selfish, narcissistic, insecure lover? Groping about to find a less trivial explanation for the prestige of virginity, Freud picks up from some early and, by most criteria, prescientific anthropological literature, the intriguing notion of sexual dread as something that arises on the ‘threshold of a dangerous situation’, the threshold of a psychical danger, not clearly articulated but nonetheless real. Crossing the barrier between husband and wife, adolescence and maturity, is not all doves and roses. In women it can produce a fierce resentment and will to vengeance; in men a fear and sense of guilt that can make the pursuit of less ‘respectable’ love objects a much more rewarding choice.[[241]](#endnote-241)

What do Freud’s lurid conjectures tell us about marriage and the grisly lengths some will go to escape it? Was it the prospect of brutality that so enflamed the Danaids, as they claim – the barbarous hybris of their cousins? Was it their masculinity? Was it the maidens’ fear of sexual violation? Or was it the idea of marriage as such, the agreement that turns a maiden into a wife, that transfers her from one protection to another, from the household of her father to that of her husband and his family? That turned her into a gift, an item of value in a economy of obligation, exchange and benefit? Was it, in fact, the real power a husband could and did wield? What threat is posed to a maiden that would justify such an immodest act of self-defense?

Conventionally, marriage is the end of drama, its celebration an opportunity for resolution, peace and festivity, even finality. A wedding is the way we make a narrative hang together despite all evidence/pressure to the contrary; it is the ultimate co-ordinating device, a breathing-space that knits together the tangled web of plot. If marriage heals the uncertainties of literature, it does at least that much for society. (‘the heart of a heartless world’) Marriage is social action in its clearest form. Marriage regulations, in Levi-Strauss’s famous formulation, resemble words: they form part of communicating-systems between men.[[242]](#endnote-242) It is the elixir of economies and the advance planning of the future. It binds nations, defines families, manufactures alliances; it mediates between the stranger and the friend, the licit and the illicit, the inside and the outside: it is the all-purpose metaphor for an attempt to translate between privacy and public meaning, between secrecy and stubborn self-interest and the ever-needy collective good. Communities suffering from a marriage-default would die out. Land and wealth, if not replenished by marriage and secured by the complex laws and customs that have for millennia regulated the transmission of property through marriage-making, would be as ephemeral as the day-lily. With the decline of the original ‘clan system’, in which Friedrich Engels likes to imagine, land was held in common, came an increase in the accumulation of wealth, and with that the habit of subordinating women. Males recognised the urgent need to control inheritance through the male line, and so was invented female chastity and the monogamous organisation called the ‘family’, preserved through the rite of marriage, and flourishing only at the price of the ‘*world-historic defeat of the female sex*’ (italics in the original). [[243]](#endnote-243)

The rule of the man in the family, the procreation of children who could only be his, destined to be the heirs of his wealth – these alone were frankly avowed by the Greeks as the exclusive aims of monogamy. For the rest, it was a burden, a duty to the gods, to the state and to their ancestors, which just had to be fulfilled. (Engels, 739)

The institution of marriage is responsible for the raising and education of children, the formation of subjects and citizens, the stability of everyday life, the accumulation of estates and the transmission of name and status and obligation. In pre-industrial times, the family was the basis of the organisation of production. And it is the central battleground for the meeting of two races considered by the Greeks to be distinct and in unending competition: men and women (Hesiod, *Theogony* 593-616). Engels agrees with Hesiod, albeit in a different spirit:

The first class antagonism which appears in history coincides with the development of the antagonism between man and woman in monogamian marriage, and the first class oppression with that of the female sex by the male. (Engels, 739)

If you were a woman in antiquity, you were destined to become a mother and, all things being equal, a wife. Homer simply repeated the commonplace: Women are made for marriage; men for war, speech, action (*Iliad* 6.490-93; *Odyssey* 1.356-59) Jews, Greeks, Romans, Egyptians, Babylonians, Phoenicians: the female fate has a certain uniformity.[[244]](#endnote-244) Honour and prestige for a woman is to be found here, if anywhere. Across the Greek archipelago, in the colonies, in built-up towns and rural landholdings, from the Archaic period through late Hellenism and the entire life of Rome, the continuity in the conception of marriage is striking. Some of that may be more a matter of symbolism and ideology than legal form or definition.[[245]](#endnote-245) Though there are names for many of the elements in this ‘change of condition’ that ushers the unmarried into their new state, there is famously no word for marriage as such, nor for ‘wife’: *gamos*  refers to the act of forming the couple, and also to the rite of unification in its performance; it does not specify the institution in any abstract or theoretical sense. Indeed marriage is not a civic or public act, though it is a spectacle, a nuptial spectacle. There are torch-lit processions, there is a ritual bath, there are sacrifices, there is the meal, the songs (*epithalames*); there is the unveiling (*anakalypsis* ), and the ‘loosening’ of the bridal girdle.

Marriage is the keystone of social structure and stability. It forms links between households and families. It distributes wealth and property: from the groom’s family to the bride’s – as a payment or *hedna*– in Homeric times; from the brides to the grooms, as a dowry or *pherne* in classical Athens.[[246]](#endnote-246) Particularly interesting is the class of gifts called *diaparthenia dora*  - gifts in payment for the taking of the wife’s virginity.[[247]](#endnote-247) The woman is given from one family to another, and once properly ‘taken’ and put into the web of her new functions (sexual, maternal, mistress of the household), the action, passing from potential to actual, is ‘accomplished’; those married are *teleioi*.[[248]](#endnote-248) Of unique value, this gift of a wife. It opens doors between closed households; it brings new life, a future generation. It takes charge of the well-being of bed and board. A human group is formed; a small society within a larger society.[[249]](#endnote-249) With each new marriage, as Claudine Leduc puts it, ‘cattle and sheep moved from household to household’; goods circulated and created bonds of reciprocity and gratitude/obligation; lands were expanded; signs of status passed on, through the auspices of the legitimate marriage, from one generation to the next.[[250]](#endnote-250)

Marriage is for the girl what war is for the boy: For each of them these mark the fulfilment of their respective natures as they emerge from a state in which each still shared in the nature of the other. Thus a girl who refuses marriage, thereby also renouncing her “femininity”, finds herself to some extent forced toward warfare, and paradoxically becomes the equivalent of a warrior. This is the situation in myth of females like the Amazons and in a religious context, of goddesses such as Athena: Their status as warrior is linked to their condition as a *parthenos*  who has sworn everlasting virginity. It could even be said that this deviation both from the normal state of women, who are destined for marriage, not warfare, and from the normal state of warriors, who are men, not women, gives a special intensity to warrior values when these are embodied in a girl[[251]](#endnote-251)

**2.7 Turandot or Death: Cutting the Princess Down to Size**

**1**

‘What has happened? Nothing. Just a woman who gives up and gets married.’ (Catherine Clément, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, 1989)

It’s an understatement. At the end of *Turandot* – “Love! Eternity! Sun! Life! Our infinite Happiness! Princess! Love! Love! Love!” – the picturesque city of Peking explodes. Everyone is relieved about this marriage. The crowd is freed at last from darkness and night, and the taste for blood. The reign of Turandot had kept the city on its knees, hungry for the next display of high-minded feminine cruelty. It was mesmerizing but a bit indecent. The law of terror and torture, now brought to a satisfying end, began with a vow taken by Princess Turandot. Incensed by the rape and murder of a long-ago ancestress, she will never marry until a man comes along who can answer her three riddles. Suitors who fail the test of this glamorous sphinx will be put to death at nightfall. Now the dawn breaks to see a spectacular reversal.

But there are problems. The frenzied ‘happy end’ is a mess, narratively speaking: Puccini died before he could resolve his drama and tie up the loose ends. Everything runs headlong to a premature conclusion. “My glory is ended” moans Turandot. The male Sun rises, the Moon sets, the sovereign lord of Marriage and Daylight wins. The rich music saves it, even if Franco Alfano rather than Puccini leaves the last impression. Theatrically, it’s a scramble. Catherine Clément doubts that even the genius of a Busby Berkeley could have carried off the involuntary clowning. The finale is over almost before the lovers have a chance to sing their duet. Love’s victory is noisy yet anticlimactic, a dramatic equivalent of the penalty kick. The mutual passion that seals the final chorus is insufficiently motivated when compared to what preceded it: lavish suffering, heroic innocence, autocratic bad behaviour, masculine heads impaled on the walls of the city. The heroine, an icy virgin, had killed anyone who tried to interfere with her chastity. Even to look at her was sacrilege. When she felt annoyed, no one in the kingdom was allowed to go to bed. Raw and absolute, her name is Turandot the Pure, and she gives purity a bad name. But now she has just been swept off her feet by a kiss. Accordingly she renounces homicide and accepts ‘profanation’. Much ado about nothing? Her ‘cold veil’ is off, her body is warm. She who dictated the lives of others suddenly yields. It’s a lucky break. The marriage of the queen brings life back to the frozen world. The Ice Princess is no longer a sorceress, drawing her power from the moon and from revenge, but a votary in the new cult, one in which women rather than men are the sacrificial victims. And, as Clément observes, the mix of comedy, eroticism and severed heads is in the mode of the grotesque, a confused generic message for this opera about feminine rebellion and the sacrifice of virginity:[[252]](#endnote-252)[[253]](#endnote-253)

The Turandot story went through a number of hands before Puccini took it on. At a loss for a story, Puccini was attracted to this Persian fairy tale of a man hating Chinese Princess and the folkloric motif of the ordeal by enigma. Its exotic improbability had made it popular in an earlier generation when the Romantics had discovered the rich vein of the *fantastique*. The riddles are the crux of the drama. Yet the riddles and their answers are less important than the larger riddle. That is the complex riddle of erotic ambivalence, the hostility between the sexes, sexuality as a wound that promises to heal itself, and virginity as feminine protest against the eternal recurrence of the same. On stage and off, everyone by the end knows the secret of the riddle, even though it is one which the arrogant sphinx herself has a hard time acknowledging, for the secret is love. Yet almost as often as the word love is sung and celebrated in the final scenes, we hear repeated words of a different tenor: ‘possession’, conquest, victory, pride humbled, the shame of surrender. These are what recur. They sound ominous to Turandot as they sounded ominous to the Danaid maidens. Marriage is supposed to be the goal of a young woman’s life. What if it means the end of every possibility she could imagine wanting?

Such an ambivalence structures another familiar plot, the dilemma of the ‘new woman’ as she emerged by 1890 in the English and American novel. Her struggle was for independence in a world where life outside the home did not often show up as an option for women. In fiction, especially by men, the suffrage movement could figure as a dim background presence, and financial independence attracted heroines from Gissing and Schreiner to Bennett and Woolf. But the real crisis remained around the marital contract. Was a woman diminished by her relations to men? Was her destiny to disappear into private life, closeted by the intimate constraints of affection and maternity, invisible to the public world and (unless adulterous) of no further interest to the literary imagination? Some heroines ‘explicitly resisted’, as the critic Jane Miller puts it, ‘the narrative dominance of courtship and marriage.’[[254]](#endnote-254) Rebelling against the anatomical determinism that can find no other location for women than in marriage, a succession of exemplary heroines flirted with the idea of a life on the social margins, or in communities of women, or in exile from the European metropole. Rhoda Fleming in George Gissing’s *The Odd* Women (1895), Hadria in Mona Caird’s *The Daughters of Danaus* (1894) , Olive Chancellor in Henry James’s *The Bostonians* (1886), Clara Middleton in George Meredith’s *The Egoist* make deviation from the marriage plot a principle of action, essential to their search for a different identity and a more authentic form of experience. The price of such a drive for emancipation does not have to be the repression of desire. Outside fiction, authorial ‘new women’ (Vera Brittain, Olive Schreiner, Katherine Mansfield, Virginia Woolf, May Sinclair) experimented with the prospects of sexual happiness in less conventional forms, trying – and sometimes spectacularly failing – to re-invent the institution of marriage in more sympathetic guises. The accommodation to marriage might be a social or an economic necessity; it could also allow a certain amount of flexibility, given women or men with a will to frame their desires differently. But it was clear to the Edwardians, to the Ibsenites, the feminists and the sexual reformers, as to the post-war generation, that one central sticking-point in the plot had to be changed: the power relations that structured marriage. What was the use of emerging from the world of childhood and ignorance, if the way out leads straight into a new form of suppression? The sisters in Lawrence’s *Women in Love* consider what getting married has to offer them. The outlook is sobering:

Ursula and Gudrun Brangwen sat one morning in the window-bay of their father’s house in Beldover, working and talking. Ursula was stitching a piece of brightly-coloured embroidery, and Gudrun was drawing upon a board which she held on her knee. They were mostly silent, talking as their thoughts strayed through their minds. ‘Ursula,’ said Gudrun, ‘don’t you *really want* to get married?’

Ursula laid her embroidery in her lap and looked up. Her face was calm and considerate. ’I don’t know,’ she replied. ‘It depends how you mean.’

Gudrun was slightly taken aback. She watched her sister for some moments.

‘Well,’ she said, ironically, ‘it usually means one thing! But don’t you think anyhow, you’d be—’ she darkened slightly—‘in a better position than you are in now.’ A shadow came over Ursula’s face. ‘I might,’ she said. ‘But I’m not sure.’ Again Gudrun paused, slightly irritated. She wanted to be quite definite. ‘You don’t think one needs the *experience* of having been married?’ she asked. ‘Do you think it need *be* an experience?’ replied Ursula. ‘Bound to be, in some way or other,’ said Gudrun, coolly. ‘Possibly undesirable, but bound to be an experience of some sort.’ ‘Not really,’ said Ursula. ‘More likely to be the end of experience.’

Gudrun sat very still, to attend to this. ‘Of course,’ she said, ‘there’s *that* to consider.’

Olive Chancellor in James’ satire on Bostonian feminism is the clearest example. She remains true to her principles although miserable: ascetic solitude is the price she must pay for a life lived on her own terms; she has, of course, money to back her up. She thought she could do without reciprocated passion. Other Olives, devoted to political or religious causes, traded in their carnal investments for the exaltations expected from a career of dedication. That dedication, as a new study of writerly and artistic ‘celibacies’ in American Modernism argues, can be to a number of principles….Militant virgins, whether consecrated to gods or to themselves, think they can get a different deal than the normal run of females. “Do you want me in your arms by force”, Turandot asks the successful contender who has solved her riddles, “Do you want me reluctant, shuddering?” No, of course not, he replies. I need you to learn about the logic of sacrifice. Love isn’t victory and conquest. It’s the transformation of loss into gain. Only if I give you my life am I worth loving. Only renunciation understands what love is about. Marriage, in his roundabout argument, equals renunciation: the virgin’s independence rested on her invulnerability to desire, and that had also made her demonic. Other sorceresses had also been subjected to this pitiless conversion: wild creatures who fall in love, fairies like Melisande, Druid priestesses, when they succumb to homelier affections, they are lost, the temples of their exotic solitude turn ghostly. [[255]](#endnote-255) Christianity stripped many altars; marriage plays a similar part. Once Turandot learns to feel desire, her authority expires. As the Danaids feared, saying Yes to sex is, for a woman, saying No to power, to her power, that is.

Puccini liked the neat inversion. The operatic world was full of highly sexed sirens demanding sacrifices, turning men into jelly, violating conjugal vows and shocking the respectable. Oriental vamps were particularly popular, and so were sadistic beauties on the Salomé and Delilah model, subject of operas by Saint-Saëns and Strauss in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They had curious lusts, these fin de siècle ‘idols of perversity’, to adopt the title of Bram Dijkstra’s book on the aesthetics of twisted femininity in this period. They seemed particularly bent on decapitation, or what Dijkstra titles ‘symbolic castration’, avenging themselves on men in a frenzy that could be either carnal or strangely innocent. Best among the rich parade of such sublime viragos is the decadent Salomé painted by Gustave Moreau and adorned with all the fantasies the decadent aesthete Des Esseintes can conjure up in Joris-Karl Huysmans’ *A Rebours*  of 1884. She is a Jezebel, a witch unknowing of her power; she can inflame ‘the nomads inured to abstinence, the Roman soldiers skilled in debaucher, the avaricious publicans, and the old priests soured by controversy’, as Flaubert described her in his story ‘Herodias’ (1876). This is woman the emasculator: she breaks the will and masters the mind of the greatest of men; she is ‘the goddess of immortal Hysteria, the Curse of Beauty supreme over all other beauties by the catalyptic spasm that stirs her flesh and steels her muscles, - a monstrous Beast of the Apocalypse…’[[256]](#endnote-256)

But Salomé, we remember, is a virgin, self-centered in her purity, unaware of the lewd nature of her movements, wasting men but indifferent to them. Here was a different idolatry for Puccini to adapt, equally decadent and suited for the taste of the 1920s. The year Puccini’s opera first appeared was 1926, Toscanini was conducting at La Scala and Mussolini was in charge of Italy. In the opera sexual renunciation is drenched in Hollywood glitz, although the production hadn’t, as Clément complains, spent enough time studying the comic repertoire. Puccini’s design tastes ran instead to what Cecil B. DeMille was doing at the same time in Hollywood: cruel Roman temptresses in see-through robes surrounded by pulsating crowds, lavishly costumed extras with white mask-like faces. *Turandot* had every sort of Orientalist extravagance. On the stage loyal and innocent slaves cowered at the long shining swords of taciturn executioners. Gongs, pagodas, special effects, and brightly dressed crowds completed the picture. Puccini did not live to see his opera’s success. But he would have appreciated it. At around the same time, in Weimar Germany, the critic Siegfried Kracauer was spending nights at the Berlin cabaret when he recognised something new, the ‘mass ornament’:

The ornament is an *end in itself*. ..Viewed from the perspective of reason, the mass ornament reveals itself as a *mythological cult* that is masquerading in the garb of abstraction.[[257]](#endnote-257)

*Turandot* would be produced on more up-market stages than Kracauer’s nightclubs and music halls. But its aesthetic is similar. In *Turandot*, the composition itself is the ornament, and the ornament is a kaleidoscope, to use Kracauer’s terms: coherence is less important than the glitter of the surfaces, and classical aesthetic ideals like organic form or ‘spiritual life’ are, frankly, irrelevant.[[258]](#endnote-258) Escapism was the aim, and the Orient stood for an exciting if politically incorrect sexuality, for harems and eunuchs, dragon ladies and opium dens. In the best of all possible worlds, Anna May Wong would have been chosen to star (indeed she played Turandot in a dramatic adaptation at the Westport County Playhouse in 1937.)

We can imagine *Turandot* played differently. Carlo Gozzi wrote an 18th century version of what he thought to be an ‘old Persian fairy tale’, and his play was quieter than Puccini’s, if more satirical. The Venetian Gozzi was a cynic and a conservative. He directed his *commedia dell’arte*  pastiche as a broadside against the upstart middle classes who were starting in his day to write the rules of theatre and ideology. His text was more frank about the gender politics involved. Gozzi had learned something from Shakespeare’s breeches romances, from Beatrice and Benedict, from Rosalind and Orlando, from *Twelfth Night* and *Taming of the Shrew*. In Gozzi’s farcical tragi-comedy, the last words are those of the penitent female rebel against men and marriage who comes to beg pardon:

Heaven, I have indeed been brutal and stubborn in my hatred of men, and now I ask your pardon. Gentlemen, I once hated your sex, but I have repented. Pray, give me a sign of your forgiveness. (*She mimes applause*.)

Gozzi’s feminist Princess is tough but not sinister. Less of a sadist, her flaw is that she is very attached to her own opinions. She is smart, peremptory and insolent, her cruelty incidental rather than hysterical. Her fantasy was independence not revenge. Daily killings in the streets of Peking were part of the ritual because men kept failing to get the point. She did not aspire to supernatural sublimity, or picture herself drinking blood. Her defiance is secular. She just had a strong, principled objection to the character and behaviour of men, their way of thinking of themselves as the crown of creation, their fickleness and their lies. Her contempt for the sex is almost less important than her intellectual pride, although the two together are certainly a discouraging prognosis for a successful marriage plot. Why should someone as superior as Turandot make a fuss over some two-bit household despot? The Greeks had a fascination for this phenomenon too, the spunky virgin who isn’t ready to be tamed, who makes abrupt appearances in inappropriate places when you expect her to be invisibly sequestered in upper rooms.. Strong-minded girls like Antigone or Macaria made interventions in the public sphere that their married counterparts would find impossible unless they were willing to be seen as unfeminine monsters like Clytemnestra or Medea.

As the Greek tragedies understood, the condition of virginity endows young women with a sense of exceptionality that they may be reluctant to lose. Their purity is a kind of cross-dressing; as Jean-Pierre Vernant put it, they are not quite male, not quite female either. This gives them some stake in the privileges of both, and accordingly a leaning towards arrogance which their detractors are quick to deplore. The virgin’s mix of pride and aversion is, however, differently shaded in the two versions of *Turandot*. The Princess Turandot as she appears in Gozzi’s 18th century play is the kind of spoiled rationalist that French satirists sent up as *les precieuses*: fastidious ladies, over-educated, stubborn, priggish certainly, but not castrating demons. This is the context that explains Gozzi’s heroine. A woman attached to her privileges, the prospect of domination bothers her; sexuality appears only dimly on her horizon. While Puccini’s Princess, fixated on a traumatic memory and sleepwalking through her endless night, is manifestly terrorised by the possibility of physical contact, Gozzi’s Princess hardly bothers to imagine anything so tangible. What she hates is interference, the husband’s prerogative. ‘Men want to keep women weak and useless’, she objects. (IV/3) Marriage is bound to be an encroachment. For a girl brought up with no restrictions and no peers, marriage represents an undeserved defeat, the sad taming of a proud nature. Turandot puts it explicitly: The very name of ‘wife’, she says, sounded loathsome to her, nothing could be more cruel than the thought of submitting to a man’s authority. A thousand deaths would be better. Like Artemis arguing with Zeus, she beseeches her father to exempt her. To be ‘under’ a man, that would kill her. Schiller’s version of *Turandot* gives her the most uncompromising words:

Der bloße Name schon, schon der Gedanke,

Ihm untertan zu sein, vernichtet mich. (II/4)

What are my choices, Turandot wonders. Marriage or death? Death at least safeguards my honour. Like the Danaids who threaten to hang themselves on the altar by their girdles if they are forced to marry, Turandot is serious. Marriage is not that different from rape: both represent subjugation and despotic privilege. In the Greek myth told in Aeschylus’ *Supplices* the father supports the virgins’ resentment. Gozzi’s Turandot is on her own in her resistance. Her father is exasperated, embarrassed by her belligerence, and finds his impotence unbearable. He is very keen to give her away, to see her safely in the hands of another man. Marriage will reinstate the law of the Father, so perversely abrogated in this feminist fantasy which borrows from the romance tradition the joke of the ‘petticoat kingdom’, where bluestockings lecture their sceptical male subjects until sexual attraction mends the topsy-turvy world.[[259]](#endnote-259)

Puccini’s libretto goes several shades darker. Marriage is still a crisis that the troubled woman refuses to negotiate, choosing instead the suspended animation of the cool, uncommunicative maiden, friendless and mysterious, communing only with her long-lost relative, hiding in her bedroom. Gozzi’s Turandot has female friends; she gossips and stamps her feet, a feisty, headstrong Emma Woodhouse, if a lot more dangerous. Puccini’s haunted man-hater thinks of herself as a deity, a manifestation rather than a creature of flesh and blood; those who presume to get close to her commit sacrilege. Adami and Simoni, Puccini’s collaborators, rewrote not Gozzi but an Italian translation of Schiller’s ‘correction’ of Gozzi (Schiller raises the tone, removing the ribaldry, making Turandot and Calaf more exalted and serious).[[260]](#endnote-260) The traces of a Voltairean humour at the expense of proud women in love with their own cleverness are removed. Turandot becomes a fury rather than a bluestocking. The libretto adds a sinister backstory, a curse: Turandot has been made inhuman because she is haunted (possessed?) by the unappeased ghost of her ancestor, raped and murdered by a Tartar invader:

In this palace, a thousand, thousand years ago, a desperate cry resounded…Princess Lo-u-Ling…who reigned in your dark silence, in pure joy, and who defied, inflexible and sure, bitter domination, you relive in me today!

The stage directions have Turandot speaking as if from far away. The past dwells in her; the ancient Princess sleeps on in her ‘tomb’, which has taken the vivid form of a young woman’s life and actions. Turandot is a crypt in which the purity of her ancestor and her outraged pride is reborn. It is not just for herself that she wages this war. “No one will ever possess me!” Her invulnerability must redeem her ancestor, magically save her from the crime that took her life and pride.

No such distant horrors bother Gozzi’s Princess. Since her campaign is against the objectionable qualities of the male sex, what disarms her will not be a second sexual conquest – blissfully undoing the mischief of the first deadly one – but a recognition of qualities that are not at all objectionable. Calaf’s generosity, his kindness and loyalty, the nobility and goodness of his father and his old family friend, these soften Turandot’s heart, already losing its austerity in the face of these enlightened examples of the ‘new’ masculinity. Puccini’s Turandot is converted not by re-education but by the ‘magic’ of a sexual desire she had banished until it vanquished her: she remains a virago until she is kissed, forcibly. Gozzi’s , on the other hand, is slipping all the time, trying to figure out how to save face, how to avoid being defeated in a battle of wits, reluctant to give up the freedom of the virgin in society.[[261]](#endnote-261) Thanks to trickery, not to her natural superiority, she puts Calaf at a loss, but then renounces her unfair advantage. (V/2) Her dignity preserved, she can acknowledge him as an equal worthy of winning in a fair contest. (refer to Beatrice and Benedict; the Shakespearian friction of the sexes is resolved often through changing positions, seeing through riddles, allowing emotion to appear in language, deftness and wit.) What tormented her was the unjust domination of men, unworthy beings whose transformation she had not been ready to imagine. Once she is exposed to a more enlightened type of masculinity, one compatible with a greater degree of equality and shared interests, her objections can be answered and put to rest.

The vengeful moody princess in Puccini’s libretto inhabits another world, one where perversity is to be expected and authority is secured by force, not trickery. If love triumphs over adamant purity, the victory in Puccini is a brutal one; only because young Liu gives up her life, a cruel and unnecessary sacrifice to assuage the hatred of the woman whose rival she would have liked to be. Puccini is never sanguine about relations between the sexes: Turandot elects virginity as a defence against the indignities and terrors visited on women through eros and its cruel cults. She is a heroine for a Freudian age, one that has heard about the atavistic power of eros in the unconscious, one that has been listening to sexual iconoclasts like DH Lawrence talk about the dark gods of the blood.[[262]](#endnote-262)

Puccini is not known as a poet of feminist protest, yet he is consistently moved by the tragedies of women’s sexual exploitation, the duality of female victimhood and female splendour. Love is toxic for women: that’s certainly a point you could draw out of a list of Puccini’s most beloved operas: *Madama Butterfly* and *Tosca*. It is toxic for men also (*Manon* *Lescaut).* But for whom is virginity toxic? The introduction of the ravished ancestor, a character unimaginable in Gozzi’s conception, gives Turandot a motive for her obsession. What in this stubborn woman counts as her most powerful weapon, her magic, her ability to float free from the constraints of earthliness? (Bloodthirsty as she is, she is also sublime and alluring, Puccini saw her, trailing after herself a parade of the dead, ghostly lovers devoted to her even from the ‘other side’.) Nothing she values more than her purity; nothing else makes her so invincible, so cruel, so much the spirit of requital and vengeance. Turandot the Pure is her title; purity, pure, appear ? times in the libretto. They never appear in Gozzi or Schiller. Redeemed through marriage, Turandot the Pure resigns her sovereignty. The sun is out, the moon is gone, the altar readied for bloody sacrifice is quickly converted to a bridal altar. In opera, that last preserve of feminine passion, the outcome of the war between the sexes is continually in doubt. Marriage or death? Ransomed or condemned? another execution? Bloodthirsty brides holding up the sheets in the morning? Men, it seems, don’t care. The risk made it exciting. Winning a woman who doesn’t want you is both dangerous and confirming.

Calaf, the stranger Prince from Astrakhan, is hypnotised by the cold silence Moon face of the Princess. He rushes to join the procession of those young men headed for decapitation: ‘Turandot or Death! Turandot or Death!’ Either will suit him. Death also is beautiful, he sings. “È pur bella la morte!” He doesn’t know enough about Turandot, or death, to know the difference. In Greece, the noble virgins under the knives of priests throw themselves into the hands of death too, but their bridegrooms did not metamorphosize. When death *is* the maiden, the result changes. Because of Calaf’s willingness to die for her, the Sleeping beauty awakes from the dark and the cold. Hatred becomes tenderness by the pressure of a kiss. Princess Turandot is both furious and delighted. That’s sexism speaking, the dog-eared wisdom of misogyny. ‘She wanted to do it all the time.’ But her amour propre got in the way.

It’s a male fantasy about virgins’ fantasies.[[263]](#endnote-263) “They talk of honour and integrity but they really want you to force them.” What does this attitude tell us about the hostility between men and women, the odds against their reconciliation in the conjugal bond? History keeps going as if there wasn’t really a problem. Literature and art, however, teach us to pause and wonder. Can marriage really happen? Is it only a compromise-formation between violence and indifference, between hatred and need? Rape, sacrilege, pride, revenge, and domination are good themes for opera, high-brow and low. On the stage haughty women strike imperious attitudes. Audiences like to watch Clytemnestras and Medeas show off the iron in their souls, remnants of an archaic state of affairs when the pious worshipped sibyls, virgins or witches.[[264]](#endnote-264) *That* was myth, regressive, superstitious, when primitives were in thrall to a mystified nature they could only imagine as feminine and inscrutable.[[265]](#endnote-265) Now that we are over magic, mot of the time women are not allowed to dominate. In *Turandot* a woman rules for a while through terror and strength of will. She murders every man who aspires for her hand, turning the Danaids’ one night efforts into a long-running melodrama. She is implacable, her subjects cry. She is adorable, her victims insist. But she gives up and gets married in the end.

The play starts with the rumour of an unattainable virgin goddess. It ends with a royal wedding. It is hard to think of an episode in Greek and Roman literature where such a reversal could be enjoyed. In the world of Greek myth, mortal virgins are the right raw material for sacrifice, or for marrying. Divine virginity is off-limits: serious, dangerous, touchy. A semi-divine figure like Turandot – absolute ruler, object of sexual fantasy – does not exist in the Classical period. Those who conspire against the virtue of an Artemis, an Athena or a Hestia get a sharp brush-off, or worse. The repercussions for those who assault those mortals bound to purity are also discouraging. Virginal priestesses who break their vows can be buried alive; punishment for their frailty must be severe because their honour at the sanctuary protects it from pollution and the city from calamity. But their celibacy belongs to their office; it is not a matter of personal choice when they are exempted from the profession of marriage. In the chronicles of the Olympians, the virgins Athena, Artemis and Hestia argued for their freedom, and Zeus, king of the gods, saw fit to give it to them. However what is possible for gods is not possible for humans: that’s what makes them gods. Goddesses have both the right to revenge and the privilege of the single life. They are thereby awesome and admirable. Mortal women who defend their chastity with homicidal intent cannot hope for such admiration. They are seen as monstrous and grotesque. It is not a question of equity but of genre. What divides the gods from us is a strict double standard. Self-protective moral rigidity in a goddess inspires us with respect and terror; for the Chinese Princess Turandot and her would-be sisters other conventions apply.

*Turandot* is a fairy tale. It holds out the possibility of an exception, a woman who thinks she is the Moon and looks as if she will get away with it. She should have known better. In folklore and mythology, the stubborn girl who won’t get married comes to a bad end, at least temporarily, as the Cashinawa myth revealed to Claude Levi-Strauss:

Once there was neither moon, stars, nor rainbow, and the night was totally dark. This situation changed because of a young girl who did not want to get married. She was called iaça [cf. Tupi jacy, ‘moon’]. Exasperated by her obstinacy, the mother sent her daughter away. The young girl wandered for a long time in tears, and when she tried to return home the old woman refused to open the door. ‘You can sleep outside,’ she cried. ‘That will teach you not to want to get married!’ The young girl ran frantically about in all directions, beat on the door, and sobbed. The mother was so infuriated by this behaviour that she took a bush knife, opened the door to her daughter and cut off her head, which rolled to the ground. Then she threw the body into the river.

During the night the head rolled and moaned around the hut. After wondering about its future, it decided to change into the moon. ‘In this way,’ it reflected, ‘I will be seen only from afar…The eyes of the decapitated woman became the stars and her blood the rainbow. Henceforth women would bleed each month, then the blood would clot and children with white bodies would be born to them. But if the sperm clotted, the children would be born white. [[266]](#endnote-266)

Although decapitated, which could be a disadvantage (and one the Moon-girl’s descendant Turandot exploits against her suitors), the resistant virgin in the myth wins a splendid transfiguration, bestowing great boons on the human race. From now on they will have lights in the sky at night, and the problems of conception and procreation seem solved, along with the puzzle of differently-coloured races. Shy virgins, the interpreter of myth explains, are a problem for communities; they cling to one extreme, the feminine axis, and refuse to mingle, which is to say, they do not participate in the exchanges that unite near and far, the close and the distant (and of course the male and the female). The opposite counterpart to the shy virgin is a twofold threat: the incestuous man or the promiscuous woman (symbolised by a rolling head). In-between, we are to understand, is marriage of the sort that Turandot and Calaf ultimately celebrate. In the play and opera, the end is presented as the best possible result for all concerned. The couple reigns supreme. A woman’s violent resistance to the marital yoke has been gloriously surrendered, a politically advantageous alliance between royal houses has unexpectedly been consummated. Rightful rulers regain their thrones. The cycle of vengeance is broken by love. A woman’s pride is salvaged by a man’s delicacy and a slave’s suicide. Secret names have come to light, old and justified resentments no longer look important. The war between the sexes reaches a temporary lull. Tartars and Chinese unite their empires. The executioner can take a well-deserved holiday. The crowd celebrates.

**2.8 The Meaning of the Maidenhead**

Few details of the sexual life of primitive people are so alien to our own feelings as their estimate of virginity, the state in a woman of being untouched. The high value which her suitor places on a woman’s virginity seems to us so firmly rooted, so much a matter of course, that we find ourselves almost at a loss if we have to give reasons for this opinion. (Freud, *The Taboo of Virginity. Contributions to the Psychology of Love*)

Turandot and the Argive murderesses represent extreme positions in the arguments women have had about marriage. Is marriage necessary? Is it desirable? What is it to be ‘possessed’ by men and what it might be to ‘live with them’ (The Greeks, who had notoriously no word for the state of marriage, made do with the term *sunokein*)[[267]](#endnote-267). In that sophisticated form of ironic romance called the Hollywood comedy of the 1930s and 1940s, modern women have many more options than the Danaid girls (money, education, driving licenses). Yet they still dither, change their minds, leap into the breach, and run away. Marry? Don’t Marry? It’s not invariably a question of finding the right man, the perfect match, the lover who can sustain both a conversation and a life of tenderness and care. It’s also, at least in this classic period of cinema when female stars briefly ruled the studio, a question about women’s identity and self-knowledge. The achievement of romantic comedy (recent Hollywood versions seem to have forgotten it to their discredit) depends on how successfully it can make us care about some of the problems interfering with the happy arrival at a state of comic or, in Northrop Frye’s word, ‘festive’ contentment. These would be problems having to do with the clash between men and women, with the manipulation and anxieties of sexual attraction and sexual barriers, and the viability of marriage, innocence and experience. They would have to do with compatibility and incompatibility, hope and disappointment, domination and submission.[[268]](#endnote-268) These are not trivial issues. That they belong in comedy as well as tragedy is central to my argument and my choice of literary examples. It is something I have learned from the work of Stanley Cavell, and which he learned from Frye. For Cavell, the genre of romantic comedy – from Shakespeare to Cukor – is the place to observe the way society juggles between obsession and indifference in its attitude towards women, and especially towards the problem of how women define themselves.[[269]](#endnote-269)

‘The issue of innocence’, ‘that ancient superstition’, as Cavell remarks, may seem too naïve for the glamorous and fast-taking heroines of movies like *It Happened One Night, The Lady* Eve, or *The Philadelphia Story.* In his book on the Hollywood comedies of remarriage, Cavell looks with some amusement at the way in which his preferred genre ‘pokes fun at the older problem of virginity; what used to be a matter of cosmic public importance is now a private matter of what we call emotional difficulty. We lived in reduced circumstances.’[[270]](#endnote-270) The symbolism of virginity, and the flurry of cultural or ideological excitement around it, speaks about the significance we place on crossing the threshold of sexual maturity – exiting childhood—now that we know (perhaps we still need to learn this from Freud) not to expect its accomplishment to happen in a single night. We pride ourselves on our sophistication; we think it no advantage to worry about the protection of sexual purity, modesty and ignorance. But are we really that different from the superstitious ‘primitive’ of Freud’s fantasies, aware that sexual intimacy is something to be approached more in dread than in laughter?

Phaedra could not resolve the contradictions of her position. She was at once adulterous and faithful, excessive and secretive, knowing and ignorant, grandchild of the Sun and woman of the interior and darkness. Her fantasies, Zeitlin argues, ‘attest to the slippage of the boundary between the chaste and the erotic.’ [[271]](#endnote-271) That slippage may be inevitable. Does it have to be a reason for regret? The difference between innocence and experience (and the possibility of their mutual co-existence) is central to Cavell’s philosophical rehabilitation of marriage. Or, more precisely, remarriage. Remarriage belongs to the comic. Here the comedy of ‘re-marrying’ differs in its conventions from the structural movement which has held comedy together since the days of the New Comedy of Plautus and Terence, a construction summarised by Northrop Frye:

What normally happens is that a young man wants a young woman, that his desire is resisted by some opposition, usually paternal, and that near the end of the play some twist in the plot enables the hero to have his will…the movement of comedy is usually a movement from one kind of society to another…The appearance of this new society is frequently signalized by some kind of party or festive ritual, which either appears at the end of the play or is assumed to take place immediately afterward. Weddings are most common…As the final society reached by comedy is the one that the audience has recognized all along to be the proper and desirable state of affairs, an act of communion with the audience is in order. [[272]](#endnote-272)

The final word of comedy, especially Shakespearean comedy, is, Frye remarks, ‘grace’. Inclusion drives out exclusion. Grace and inclusion preside over the ending of *The Winter’s* Tale, that most painful Shakespearean comedy of remarriage. In the other comedies, too, there are many things that the comic festivities would like to sweep under the carpet. Cavell acknowledges the purgatorial quality of the comic universe. There has been pain, betrayal, alienation. Those who once loved thought they hated. Then they loved again. Perhaps they will hate again? Moral markers had been hard to see. Virtue and purity looked like vice; innocence was unrecognisable. Between friends and lovers there had been so much doubt, so much interference, so many obstacles ridiculous as well as serious that the social order seemed to be damaged beyond repair, and all bonds of trust looked like worthless currency. Perhaps the comic turn is only necessary because everything that precedes it is so dismal, because there is so little to believe in. Comedy has to get us out of this sceptical hell.

It does so by a kind of magic – and sometime (as in the Shakespearean romances) the magic is literal, miraculous. More often, comedy’s therapeutic magic is the natural magic of welcome, that grace of hospitality that does not look for guarantees. We can all come in now. But not before separation, misunderstanding, and alienation have taxed our emotions and stretched our resources. The pleasures of comic resolution are not the simple satisfaction of expectations briefly thwarted, not the return to the social state of things we started with but, if Frye and Cavell are right, a ‘new’ covenant, a better organisation of things: ‘The achievement of human happiness requires not the perennial and fuller satisfaction of our needs as they stand but the examination and transformation of those needs.’[[273]](#endnote-273) Transformation does not just happen by our deciding it should happen. It must be achieved, and achieved generally at a price. There is rupture and pain in ‘making things new’. Romance, even romantic comedy, may exist in the atmosphere of magic and surprise, but it is not a simple wish-fulfilment fantasy. The path out into the sunlight and the party includes a path down, a descent into doubt, loss, amnesia and even sometimes a seeming death:

Whether romance begins with a hero whose birth is, as Wordsworth says, a sleep and a forgetting, or whether it begins with a sinking from a waking world into a dream world, it is logical for it to begin its series of adventures with some kind of break in consciousness, one which often incolves actual forgetfulness of the previous state...At the beginning of a romance there is often a sharp descent in social status, from riches to poverty, from privilege to a struggle to survive, or even slavery.[[274]](#endnote-274)

The constant yet plastic story-structure of romance, as Frye understands that, is a *mythos* the imagination requires.Romance likes things to be black and white, high and low; it likes to contrast two worlds, one above ordinary experience, one below it, so that the heroine or hero’s survival of the lonely and painful world (the ‘daemonic or night world’) can justify an induction into the idyllic world, no matter how implausible the parade of coincidences required to get us there. But comedy is less tolerant of a prolonged indulgence in the embrace of dream and wish. And it is less tolerance of infantile escapism, at least not as a way of life for adults. Comedy, as we know, tolerates, indeed welcomes, disillusionment. It rejoices in mockery, the discomfiture of moral pieties, especially priggishness. Its eyes are open to the messiness and complexity of sex. Does this mean it leaves no room for innocence? Not necessarily. For Cavell, the notion of innocence is up for revision: “One consequence of our sophistication is that if we are going to continue to provide ourselves with the pleasure of romantic comedies, with the this imagination of happiness, we are going to require narratives that do not depend on the physics of virginity but rather on the metaphysics of innocence.’[[275]](#endnote-275)

Although this Cavellian turn from the crudity of the ‘physical’ to the rich ambiguity of the metaphysical is for my purposes, just what the doctor ordered, it is perhaps too quick . This question of innocence is more persistent than it looks, and it proves to have some important things to tell us about problems that Cavell, and I, believe central to the work of philosophy as well as the flourishing of social relations. The most obvious link is to the question of knowledge, or better, the experience of knowledge and how that can be shared, how the existence and content of my mind can be part of the world for you, even part of your experience, despite the daunting impenetrability of something philosophy calls metaphysical privacy. Cavell recasts the old issues of epistemology – how do I know that I know? Can I trust my senses? Can I know the mind of another? – onto a terrain better called moral, insofar as scepticism is not just a professional deformation but a moral failing, a refusal to acknowledge and be acknowledged, a mean-spirited insensibility.

Enemies of the over-valuation of virginity are quick enough to denounce a comparable lack of generosity in militant chastity, which is, as Northrop Frye nicely puts it, ‘seldom likable’.[[276]](#endnote-276) In George Cukor’s 1940 romantic comedy, *The Philadelphia Story*, a divorced heroine is subjected to a series of trials, meant not to test her virginity but to unseat it. As she has been married, and has fled after some not entirely specified disappointment (only her husband’s drinking is mentioned) to return to her childhood home, we can assume she is not a maiden, literally speaking. But there are problems. It is something Cavell decides to call ‘psychological or spiritual virginity’ that Tracy has been unable to shed, and that may be interfering with her ability to be happy in marriage. Those bizarre rites of passage the Greeks prescribed– playing the bear, athletic and warlike running wild, hair cutting and male impersonation – seem to have been interrupted too early. Accusing of passing herself of as a ‘virgin goddess’, a Main Line Diana, Tracy Lord, played by Katherine Hepburn, finds her moral and epistemic confidence shattered. Unwilling to tolerate the failings of others, Tracy can grow into married womanhood only by falling.

As a Freudian would recommend, the perfection of maidenly narcissism – Tracy’s overly admirable sharpness of character and nobility of appearance – needs a bit of wounding. This is indeed what happens. Before she can seriously remarry, Tracy has to go astray and come back. Her ‘wonderful, marvellous, beautiful virtue’ is not allowed to survive intact, symbolically at any rate. *The Philadelphia Story*, a modern retelling of a *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, applies itself to the business of getting Tracy, its proud Titania, properly married and freed from a kind of ethical frigidity, or metaphysical purity, which the film calls ‘priggishness’. At the end of a bumpy, or Dionysian, night, from which she awakens, at least in her first confused suspicions, to sexual experience, she has sacrificed something we may, again provisionally, call unmarried, or Diana-like, independence. The film, read through Cavell’s eyes, ponders the question of the meaning of marriage as mutual acknowledgement, since what is required to ‘make’ a marriage is clearly something more than a man’s having the opportunity to have sex with his wife:

Our genre emphasizes the mystery of marriage by finding that neither law nor sexuality (nor, by implication, progeny) is sufficient to ensure true marriage and suggesting that what provides legitimacy is the mutual willingness for remarriage, for a kind of continuous reaffirmation, and one in which the couple’s isolation from the rest of society is generally marked; they form as it were a world elsewhere.[[277]](#endnote-277)

Marriage, as the life embarked on after the initial barrier of sexual innocence has been crossed, belongs on the side of acknowledgement and acceptance rather than Cartesian scepticism. That is, if it is successful, if the marriage is happy:. The aesthetic sign that such happiness has been secured is, for Cavell, less erotic than conversational – a life in words that can be shared, a community of consciousness. Against this background, virginity, if taken as the cult of the modest, shamefaced maiden, patroness of the private sphere, poses a problem: Virginity is, I’d even want to say, an epistemological problem, an invitation to solipsism: however splendidly mythology presents the figure of the virgin armed and quivered, the goddess of the wild or the pure vessel of Mariolatry, we detect more than a trace of narcissism, as Freud was not slow to point out. Or of a frigid arrogance, a fantasy of invulnerability or self-creation, as our sophisticated comedy for grown-ups lets us know.

I want to take this set of associations a bit further, although its full implications will not be visible until we turn to some of the post-Christian ordeals of chastity in the chapters that follow. One of the most disturbing features of sexual purity, as an ideal and a requirement, specifically of women, is its indemonstrability. How do I know that my wife isn’t a whore? Physical virginity is difficult enough to ascertain: Hellenistic doctors suggested urine tests; earlier experts, convinced that female bodies (on the inside) resembled bottles with two openings or ‘mouths’, thought a powerful scent could, in a sexually ‘opened’ woman, pass from one end to the other; the bloody sheet is widely popular as a proof, though not for the Greeks; the Middle Ages tried the experiment of dropping the female in dispute into a deep body of water to see if she would float. Fidelity in a wife is even more elusive, as Othello raged when he called for an impossible ‘ocular proof’. If men are maddened by the fact that the inner truth of sexual ‘honesty’ resists explicit confirmation, the situation is even more dire for women. Can innocence be knowable when its possession implies the absence of knowledge? What does it mean to believe in the existence of what cannot be seen? Can’t purity be counterfeit? But isn’t it precisely that which destroys all counterfeiting? The dilemmas have been known to drive suspicious lovers mad. Infidelity leaves some traces, or the profession of the private detective would lose its practical rationale. But how much knowledge is enough? Is knowledge really what is required?

The problem of innocence lost, even, more disturbingly, the problem of innocence violated within the very space of erotic exchange, introduces irony into the youthful world of romance. In Shakespeare’s late romances, the ‘problem comedies’ or tragicomedies – *The Winter’s Tale, All’s Well that Ends Well, Much Ado About Nothing, Cymbeline* – scepticism about a woman’s sexual virtue, grown rancid and absolute,  threatens to destroy all that makes life liveable, and human. *Othello* takes this doubt to a point from which there is no return, no rebirth possible. The powerful insight here is what Cavell has been pursuing in his philosophical work from *The Claim of Reason* to *Disowning Knowledge*  and *Contesting Tears* , his study of the melodramas of the ‘unknown woman’. Epistemological scepticism – the legacy of Descartes – is not some bizarre game of the philosopher’s over-heated imagination, driven to fanciful thought experiments that lose the texture of lived experience in a futile demand for perfection:

The skeptic can be cloaked as the thinker wishing to bring assertion to its greatest fastidiousness, refusing our knowledge as of the world, so refusing the world, because he cannot satisfy our apparently *pure* (his italics) demand for certainty.[[278]](#endnote-278)

Descartes found a way out, through God. Others were not so lucky. Cavell talks about the ‘disgust’ of the skeptic: less a disillusionment with his own limited powers of intelligence than with the world, its futility, its vulgarity, its inadequacy, its ‘commonness’. The skeptic is scared of a disappointment that seems inevitable, once the bar has been placed so high. He (and the skeptic, for Cavell, is pre-eminently masculine) is scared, or scarred, by his own disgust with the world, and he believes that his disgust is justified by certain outrages in particular. For Shakespeare’s tortured skeptics – here Hamlet and Leontes, as well as Othello and Claudio –those outrages belong to female sexuality: a mother’s precipitate welcoming of desire; her tangible involvement in the bearing of the children I cannot be sure are mine.

For a marriage to work, the fanaticism of such demands for certainty must be overcome. If it is not, that marriage suffers from a violation more toxic than any real adultery could ever be, an internal violation unlike the threat from the outside that torments the jealous spouse. But there are violations from outside that inflict the same erosion of confidence, violations like rape or mutual shunning, the freezing of intimacy by a refusal of one or both partners to communicate. Cavell connects the fragility of marital happiness to the horror caused by an addiction to unconditional or hyperbolic doubt, the kind of doubt that no assurance can heal. When this doubt is directed towards the loyalty of my spouse, it brings a kind of death within the marriage itself. This is what is wrong with the hyperbolic forms of sexual scepticism: its crushing of trust, its annihilation of the certainty of self – destroys innocence, maybe irrevocably.

But, because they are comedies, innocence will be brought back, recovered; the unforgivable will be forgiven. That is impossible, but these are comedies. The recovery of innocence is a recovery from moral cynicism but without the survival of naiveté. Thus it is what we can happily call a ‘second innocence’ or grown-up grace, or what Cavell calls the romantic ordinary – the world returned from its sceptical malaise, from its solipsistic and anxious exile. Philosophically, again in Cavell’s terms, this is represented by the return of the ordinary look and sound of things as that exists in human language, as if ordinary language, after a strained and exorbitant spell in the world of the metaphysical, where words, and thoughts, were bewitched by transcendence, has woken up to the daylight of the kitchen. What Cavell calls recovery, and remarriage, is what I am calling a second or sane, disillusioned innocence, where we return from the metaphysical to the everyday. It is what is achieved after going as far as you can go down the path of knowledge and doubt. Morally, it is what may be achieved when an unforgivable violation, a melodramatic destruction of trust, turns out to be something that can be forgiven.

It is hard to preserve the desire for innocence, the faith in the essential goodness and accessibility of the ordinary and the human. What is called for is a reconciliation with the way of the world­­, as when the Hegelian Geist overcomes the temptation of the ‘beautiful soul’ and the unhappy consciousness. Such a reconciliation poses difficulties for a reflective mind, a mind all too aware of disappointments and failures, a mind that has been married and divorced. That is why, in the movies Cavell talks about, the possibility of a suitable union with a man for an intelligent woman involves a sometimes violent rupture from an initial fantasy. As Cavell tracks this rupture in the Hollywood comedies he studies, the pattern he sees has the woman reject a first attempt at marriage and undergo a transformation sufficient to take her past the cruel No that is divorce, all the way to the qualified Yes that is the second chance: ‘I have described the genre of remarriage in effect as an undertaking to show how the miracle of change may be brought about and hence life together between a pair seeking divorce become a marriage.’[[279]](#endnote-279) In Shakespearean romance, the precedent for the structure of remarriage, this happens through the death, or apparent death, say the turning into stone, of a woman accused of unchastity, and her restoration to life, as if recovering her from a bad dream, which returns her to her marriage, but now not a painful and doubting marriage but a happy one. [[280]](#endnote-280)

My last example of the way literature, and myth, works out the tensions between innocence and marriage, between self-doubt and honour, independence and companionship, is, thankfully, the least dark: no suicides are threatened, no beheadings performed. If society is at risk unless it sponsors the passage into a reformed constitution, a new and ‘festive’ shape of life, then the dangers for this small scale American world are, relatively speaking, mild. …Nonetheless, the presence of myth, and mythic patterns, in this film/play permit larger claims, the largest of which is Cavell’s idea that it shows the heroine undergoing a kind of death and revival, ‘her death as goddess and rebirth as human.’[[281]](#endnote-281) *The Philadelphia Story* involves a syncope, a black out, an amnesiac episode that is at once convenient, safe, necessary, and, as one of its onlookers concludes, an awakening, a ‘coming-of-age’. Thus this black out, with all the mischief and ‘mess’ that can occur during it, is something to be welcomed, an essential moment in the recovery of second innocence, innocence after experience, in my terms. Yet the syncope in this film is also a test, a test of moral discrimination, a way of sorting the sheep from the goats. Tracy’s night of glorious drunkenness either ends in a wild episode of extramarital sex in the garden – or it doesn’t. It is quite likely to be viewed in the wrong way by the wrong man – or men like the disbelieving public in both my other films, and even the family of the Marquise – those who lack moral vision and are blind to everything but ‘breaches of common decency’, as Tracy’s cloddish fiancé insists. The heroine’s syncope can invite the most conventional and vulgar cynicism. How one interprets the unconscious, or, as in the this case, the lapses that allow the passage from innocence to experience and back again, can be very important.

Tracy Lord has passed her life as a paragon of aristocratic virtue, hauteur, beauty and wealth, a shining example of what her first husband , C.K. Dexter Haven, calls alternatively, an ‘American Married Maiden”, a ‘virgin goddess’, and an ‘unconquered citadel’. But she has a habit, when she has drunk too much champagne, of changing from priggish paragon to abandoned Bacchante, a transformation of which she, like Titania roused by Puck, remembers nothing the next day.

The definitive and clarifying instance of this habit occurs on the night before she is to enter into an ill-judged marriage. Swept up into a giddy flirtation with someone else’s boyfriend, Tracy spends a long and carnivalesque night, concluding with a naked swim and a kiss for the eye of the camera, and then—She does not remember.

The trials of this modern Queen are explained as arising from the fact that she is unable to admit her fallibility – she calls it her weakness-- or that of others. Because we know that the stakes in our investigations are those of chastity and the threats to it – for good or evil—we should not be surprised to hear that Tracy’s ‘imperfection’, the human stain she has been unable to admit, is desire, or more precisely, lack of desire. She had failed in her first attempt at marriage, it is suggested, because she had trouble not always being an untouchable goddess. The few times she was able to shed her veil of Diana, as it were, are times over which she draws a very thick veil indeed. Crudely, Tracy has a problem with sexuality.

Virginity, in the terms this film insists on, is a problem, an obstacle between us and our humanity, a threat not just to sensual fulfilment and happiness but to moral integrity and self-knowledge. Dexter, the husband she has been unable to accept as a lover, calls it the obstacle to her ‘becoming a first-class woman’ (as if there are classes in women?). Tracy’s ‘spiritual virginity’ is the subject of repeated lectures by the men in her life, father, ex-husband, friend. She is described as being unable to become ‘more of a person’, a being of flesh rather than bronze, until she has passed through this moment in which her virtue is in question. This particular moment is, as our understanding of the syncope should now allow us to see, a moment when her consciousness was suspended, until, for all intents and purposes, she has given up her virginity. For, although we are told, and given every indication that the men involved are ‘wonderful’, courteous and honourable—(of course the Count in Kleist’s story who saved and then raped the marquise Giulietta was famous as the most honourable and courteous man in Europe) --Tracy knows that her ‘wonderful, marvellous, beautiful virtue’ being still intact ‘is no thanks to her.’

At the end of the film, we see her basking in the glow of general admiration, having survived exposure to the ordeal of public examination of her virtue. Believing herself to have succumbed to a casual if agreeable seduction under the influence of alcohol, Tracy had claimed, with rueful pride, the title of ‘Miss Easy Virtue’. No longer a goddess on a pedestal, she describes herself to Dexter as an ‘unholy mess of a girl’. She is now allowed to take off the ‘veil of Diana’ and give up the dubious pleasures of holiness for the more tangible, if risky, pleasures of ‘mess’. Second innocence, the outcome of knowledge, experience, and loss, is not immaculate innocence. It is compatible with a bit of soil, a bit of dissension, and a certain amount of sexually amused bickering. Call that remarriage.

**Conclusion: Is virginity that ‘old superstition’? Marriage and Surrender**

In the terms of romance, and of comedy, the achievement of marriage averts madness. Dionysian temptations are acknowledged, even permitted their night of oblivion. The sophisticated husband, who values his wife’s intelligence more than her doll-like docility, has an intelligent response to her sexual escapades or her occasional flights from the enclosure of the domestic and conjugal yoke. He gives them an amused, knowing glance, and then moves on. Love can also be ironic, if it is grown-up love; it does not expect simplicity. It has a large vocabulary. We are not all Cary Grant. Or Oberon. But we don’t have to be as obtuse as Torvald Helmer, the patronizing ‘guardian’ of his doll-wife Nora. Before a woman is ready for marriage, she has to be ready for herself. If there is a ‘Bildungsroman’ designed specifically for the young woman in search of herself and a place in the world– the Maggie Tulliver, the Isabel Archer –this issue of the ‘right’ emergence from childish self-preoccupation is central to it. Rites of passage, ordeals to usher the initiate from immaturity to maturity, are central both to the romance plot and to the ancient religious surveillance of social life and its difficult transitions. And husbands have their appropriate place at the end of that journey towards maturity, not on the bridge to it. Until then, men and women may play with various forms of identity, acting out, as Cavell suggests, a return to childhood Just as licensed priests were entrusted with the dangerous task of defloration, so in fiction, a buffoon, or a poet, as Tracy’s one-night boyfriend is, can perform the work of presenting the goddess with her feet of clay, which she is now smart enough to recognise as happiness, or as desire. It will be a ‘virtue’ of the genre’s heroes and heroines, Cavell writes, ‘to be willing to suffer a certain indignity, as if what stands in the way of change, psychologically speaking, is a false dignity’.[[282]](#endnote-282) Remarriage comedy rejects innocence, but replaces it with a conversation that knows when to stop, what to leave unspoken in the face of a couple’s demand for grown-up independence, even for a certain escape from being known. (I think our movie suggests that in the exquisite tact of Cary Grant.)

Cavell entrusts Hollywood comedies of the 1930s with a very high standard of philosophic achievement. Remarriage comedies, he argues, represent a central case of the aspiration to self-transformation, an Emersonian theme Cavell has identified with the quest for the human, or further self, with the perfectionist desire. Perfectionism here should not be confused with the interest in making one’s life into a work of art, for that fails by emphasising the individual life at the expense of that of society. Marriage is the trope for the realistic and domestic *mise en scène* of moral perfectionism as Cavell understands that: its promise of happiness requires the individual to affirm the life of society, call that the alignment of private with public interests, of inner feeling and public visibility, the Romantic version of the Lockean social contract.

But Cavell adds something quite different to the practice of comic romance. The way he reads it, the romance form – quest, daydream, journey, and education -- does not shirk looking in the face of madness – into the abyss of metaphysical doubt which is normally reserved for tragedy or at least melodrama. In the noble face of the saviour, the perfect suitor, the knight who comes in the dark and disappears, our confused brides learn to recognise the taint of villainy, what the Marquise in Kleist’s tale calls the devil in the angel. The problem which philosophy depicts as metaphysical doubt, the state of exaggeration where language becomes exaggerated and empty, is represented in a different way in imaginative forms like myth, film and literature. Kleist’s virtuous Marquise von O, Tracy Lord and Trudy Kochenlocker in Preston Sturgess’s comedy *Miracle at Morgan’s Creek* are all survivors of a night of oblivion that steal a central portion of their identity away. If remarriage has a moral code, it is forgiveness; this is like the answer we are often tempted to give to the skeptic: Wake up. Get a Life. Cavell turns to Wittgenstein’s advice here: bring words back to their homeland in the everyday, give them a chance to be used and thus believed. In my darker cases, it is rape that needs to be forgiven, if ordinary life is to be redeemed. Even in the lighter cases, *The Philadelphia Story, Miracle at Morgan’s Creek,* there is darkness enough in the recurring presence of sexual transgression, distrust, social ostracism, betrayal and insult.

Let me finish by indulging even further, more blatantly, my allegory between philosophy and re-marriage. A philosophy that forgives metaphysical excess does not flee from the truths of scepticism (the truth of skepticism being the fear that our words don’t mean anything, or don’t mean what we say), nor does it remain mired in empty demands for purity. Philosophy as a romantic and ordinary occupation is still worth the trouble, although I would like to see its future as containing a few of the assignations with literature that it has neglected in its long and settled marriage to science. Philosophy, in its marriage to science, runs the risk of being patronised as well as bored. Spending time with the literary could be a refreshment to the argumentative mind, and even a serious recall to a ethic of necessary indecision. The virgin is, often, too rigid, too smug, and too averse to compromise. But the wife has different nightmares.

Nietzsche called the philosopher the man of tomorrow and the day after tomorrow. That suggests that it is the unfinished, the provisional, the suspension of final judgment which are relevant to the ethics philosophers need. This to me is something like philosophy’s commitment to a prolongation of naiveté, a refusal to become ‘too knowing’, too sophisticated, which saves philosophy from some of the excesses of the artworld or the newsmaking world of scientific research. In philosophy we are all amateurs. I think this is also the conclusion reached by the romantic comedies of remarriage. The time to make up your mind about people, Tracy Lord explains, is never. Forgiveness is the way comedy account for that suspension of the cruelty of the law and moral judgment. If remarriage is comic, it is because betrayal, falsehood and failure are, strangely enough, not the final word condemning human relations, or philosophical projects. In comedy, and in philosophy, we can always start again.

Neither philosophy nor literature, however, are the agencies most responsible for civilisation’s long case for and against the ‘sexual instinct’. Our great 19th century demystifiers of culture’s perverse successes, Nietzsche and Freud, have made very strong arguments indicting the ‘demands of civilization’ for their ill effects on the sexual happiness of human beings. Is there any point expecting sex to bring happiness and pleasure, at this stage of the game? Freud is not optimistic:

We may (writes Freud in 1912) be forced to become reconciled to the idea that it is quite impossible to adjust the claims of the sexual instinct to the demands of civilization; that in consequence of its cultural development renunciation and suffering, as well as the danger of extinction in the remotest future, cannot be avoided by the human race. This gloomy prognosis rests, it is true, on the single conjecture that the non-satisfaction that goes with civilization is the necessary consequence of certain peculiarities which the sexual instinct has assumed under the pressure of culture. (‘On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love’, *On Sexuality*, op. cit, 259)

Yet however often the ‘gloomy prognosis’ was delivered in the history of civilization, humans kept trying to pretend it could be averted. Law and love, order and desire, *should* be mouldable into a shape conducive to human flourishing. All it needed was a certain willingness on both sides to compromise. The urgencies of libido could be talked into accommodation and restraint, if they were promised licit opportunities for expression without intervention. The repressive weight of law and civilization could be distracted at key moments by producing the anarchic energies of eros in disguise, as was done through comedy, romance and joke-telling. Marriage was one resolution of the case civilization brought against what Freud calls the *Sexueltriebe*, and by far the most popular. The sex drive, which at its most unchecked ran families, friends and cities together and into conflict, could be tamed. Taboos against incest, fitful schemes for regulating promiscuity or punishing its results, were partially effective, especially in tandem with the preferred legal and social strategy, the conjugal confinement of desire. Another strategy has been less popular. But it has played a key role, as the next few chapters will show. This was the strategy favoured by several of the world religions. Instead of settling for a domesticated and regulated sexuality, why not ban it entirely? Sexual renunciation may not do much to avert ‘the extinction of the human race in the remotest future’, of which Freud warned in 1912. (Why he said ‘remotest’ is a mystery.) But Christianity was willing to take that risk.

**THE CHASTITY PLOT: PART II (THE GOD’S PART)**

**Chapter 3: In Search of a Sexual Ethic: Morality and Immorality in the Late Roman Empire**

*Eros* and *askesis* are, I think, the two major forms in Western spirituality for conceptualizing the modalities by which the subject must be transformed in order finally to become capable of truth. (Michel Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject,* 16)

**3.1 Behaving Yourself in Antiquity: Sex before Sublimation**

‘Sex was at the center of it all’. So begins a recent book on the ‘Christian revolution in sexual morality’.[[283]](#endnote-283) We are not wrong, the classicist Kyle Harper explains, to credit our confused beliefs about sexual practices – their value, their danger, their legitimacy – to the account of the ‘great watershed of Christianization’. The accusation is a familiar one. Christianity is ‘sex-negative’, to use Wilhelm Reich’s handy term. It promotes an asceticism unhealthy to most humans and turns the very taste of sensuality sour. Requiring of its adherents the avoidance of all sexual pleasures except those that serve the purposes of heterosexual procreation, Christianity preaches a ‘compulsive marital morality’, multiplying human misery and, in Reich’s view at least, lending generous support to authoritarian ideologies of every description.[[284]](#endnote-284) But was it unique in its animosity to the bedroom?

That Christians popularised inhibition is no myth. That they invented it is an exaggeration. Other systems of belief in antiquity had organised their forces to resist sexual license and excess. What is right to do and not to do with bodily appetites, practices and pleasures *was* certainly of great interest to the Greeks and Romans. The Hebrews who lived among them agreed. Social relations included relations to the doings and desires of bodies. These had to be conducted in the light of norms that the gods and the city held precious: some more strict, like those governing marriage and hospitality in the Near East among the Jews; some more flexible, like those judging sexual deportment between men and boys in Greek and Hellenistic circles. On the pleasures and dangers of sex the Greeks and Romans had a lot to say. Only intermittently did they codify their sexual prescriptions. Prostitution, adultery, corruption of the young and the free, these were at various times crimes that could get you into court, and in trouble. This is not, however, because Greece and Rome recognised the value of a liberal policy of leaving individuals’ private lives alone. A rhetoric of sexual propriety prevailed from the time of Plato’s *Laws* (published 348 BCE) or Aeschines’s *Against Timarchus* (346 BC) to Augustus’ legislation targeting adultery and promoting moral reform (9 and 18 CE) and Tacitus’ praise of the simple virtues of the past in comparison to 2nd century Roman habits (lax and voluptuous). Greeks and Romans might not have believed that fornication stained the soul. But they were comfortable with a discourse in which terms like shameful and unnatural were liberally thrown about.[[285]](#endnote-285)

Next to Christian sexual morality, the most highly developed of all cultural theories of the erotic is the ancient Greco-Roman understanding of bodies and pleasures, honour and defilement. Elaborated by philosophers, prescribed by medical authorities, manipulated by orators and politicians, and teased out by poets, this is a discourse on *eros* and its discontents that still haunts our inconsistently Christianised world. Yet calling it ‘a’ discourse is transparently incorrect. Greek and Roman ideas of sexual education, good manners, divine passion and bodily hygiene were numerous, and variable. Some were formal and some informal, some deferred to custom and convenience, others responded to visions of radical reform. Philosophy is supposed to clarify issues and establish distinctions in a logical manner. In the case of sex and its paradoxes, philosophers played a much more unpredictable role. Plato is the first name to think about, and the most formidable. The wild idea that erotic attraction could be the first step in arousing the soul to the love of philosophy, beauty and the good: this would never have occurred to anyone if it had not been for a Greek philosopher. Yet it was not an idea that won all hearts, or convinced the majority.

Plato’s fantasy that eros is a ‘factor in the growth of self-knowledge’ was unusual in his day and remains so in ours, despite its influence on Freud.[[286]](#endnote-286) It is worth pausing on the curious character of the Platonic proposal. For Plato and his heirs, knowledge *is* erotic. Sexual desire endows the world with a magic and a significance similar to the glimpses of essence that the Platonist recognises as hidden in the confusion of appearances. Ordinarily humans live in the world as if asleep. (The idea that normal consciousness is half-awake is a suspicion that goes back to Heraclitus.) Aroused by love, the more fortunate among humans cease to be contented with commonplace understandings and unexamined opinions. Only insight will quench their desires. From yearning for the attentions of those with beautiful bodies they pass to yearning for virtue itself, that brighter star which beautiful appearances foreshadow and intimate. This is the lesson Diotima and Socrates teach in Plato’s *Symposium.* The will is purified through desiring and even through desire’s failures; the mind turns from illusion and longs for metaphysical truth. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato has Socrates explain to Phaedrus that when someone who is sensitive to beauty sees a beautiful person, he is overcome with chills, fever, sweating and heat. In consequence the soul begins to push through the surface of the body, swelling and sprouting wings in the places where the impact of the beautiful has warmed and watered the roots of these feathery growths. (*Phaed*, 250d-251c) Thus sexual desire transfers its aim. From genital pleasure it turns to the purest of visions: from carnality (the body is agitated by lovely images to produce seed) to sublimation. Love enters through the eyes, fastens itself on what is seen, touched, tasted, then spends itself in philosophy, transferring itself from a world of sight to a world of recollection. This, then, is what Plato calls Venus.

Yet outside idealist philosophy colder eyes looked at sex and found its physiological and emotional upheavals difficult to reconcile with intellectual virtues. Easy accessibility of sex may have made it harder to endow the erotic with the divine powers Plato talked about. The Platonic dialogues themselves are sharply divided in their valuation: Plato does in some places see sex ‘as a positive element in human nature, a benevolent force in mankind’s psyche. But at other times Plato viewed sex as a distraction from the search for truth and beauty, a disturbing and negative feature of human experience, which men must learn to constrain within strict limits’. In the *Republic* and the *Laws*, the only place for sexual relations is within a procreative (and hence a heterosexual) relationship, contained by marriage (*Laws* 636b-c, 836a-c, 839a-b, 841b-e). Promiscuity, Plato decided, was bad. While many Roman philosophers and political pundits agreed, there was plenty of room for equivocation. There was not just one ‘double standard’ but many. Women, that is to say, respectable woman, must keep their sexual activities confined to their legitimate partners. Everyone else (that is to say, men, prostitutes, concubines, dancers, singers, slaves and other ‘commercial’ sex workers) operated under different rules, although fornicators and adulterers of the male sex could find themselves severely punished, through the law and under the guise of ‘self-help’ exercised by angry fathers or husbands.[[287]](#endnote-287) Particularly in Rome and its rich colonies, the fleshpots existed and flourished. An endless supply of sexual partners was provided by the slave trade; many slaves came on the market through conquest and defeat. Ambitious women from the non-respectable classes – those who were not entitled to wear the headband and the *stola* – used their good looks to acquire impressive fortunes or at least a nice run of expensive gifts and favours. In the Roman cities and households of late antiquity, a compound of gravity and laxity remains in play, challenging the modern taste for neat cultural categorisation since neither impulse – neither austerity nor license – absorbs the other. Perhaps it is this heterogeneity which makes pagan erotic idealism most unlike the Christian utopia of the monastery. Nothing in pagan literature is as monotone or as conflict-free as the calm, quiet conversations of virgins in white robes which the 3rd century Bishop of Olympus, St Methodius, will imagine as the Christian replacement of the Platonic drinking party. There were those who lobbied for restraint. Worldly pagans can also be cautious, abosrbing from their own experience or from traditional maxims that unbridled sexual indulgence leads to anxiety, care and unhappiness. Urges to sexual control and austerity did exist before Christians listened to St Paul praising the serenity of the eunuch or learned to idolise the self-composure of the virgin bride of Christ. A sexless sublime, on the other hand, was not on the cards.

Most significant is the fact that the discussion of eros at Rome, and the literature that celebrated or bewailed it, avoided absolutism. Some Stoics[[288]](#endnote-288) recommended monogamy, the relinquishment of pederastic pleasures, and subjugation of individual desire to the collective good; other Stoics advised the wise to treat marriage and procreation as preferred ‘indifferents’. Pederasty had its fans, although it was not treated with the respect the Greeks allowed it, and slave boys rather than pretty youths of good family, were the legitimate objects of desire.[[289]](#endnote-289) Non-fanatical detachment was popular with a number of the schools: Diogenes the Cynic famously advised those who want to avoid wasting time to skip energetic intercourse with women, which demands a lot of time, in favour of just doing it ‘with your hands’, leaving coitus for the uneducated public (*To Metrocles*, Epistle 44).[[290]](#endnote-290) Diogenes was unusual. Principled masturbation in public was not widely adopted. At the other end of the spectrum, there was considerable support in philosophic circles for the idea that love for a young man could be a refined form of friendship and could be cultivated as a way to avoid unstable emotions.[[291]](#endnote-291) Platonism was the most censorious in its ambitions: the utopian blueprint for the *Republic* imagined ways the need for reproduction could be administered by those who have only the best results for the political order at heart, leaving sentimental or passionate attachment out of the picture. By avoiding the familial structure, Plato’s system could create unprecedented and malleable psychic channels. In the *Republic*, the public sphere could exercise a a monopoly over nurture and feeling: service to the state could be conducted in the bedroom as well as on the battlefield. If the *Republic’s* ideals were realised, the more important members of society would forget even what it was like to have private sentiments, those obtrusive and unnecessary attachments all too blindly formed under the influence of desire or loneliness.[[292]](#endnote-292) Sexual needs needed to be met; but why shouldn’t they serve the needs of the *polis*? Diet can be programmed; the education of the young is programmed in almost any society that considers itself civilised. Why stop there? Eros is just as good a candidate for social planning. Plato’s ideas seem modest enough. But the call for a centralised control of eros and reproduction was one step too far. No leaders in the ancient world decided to take it on, even if Sparta was rumoured to come close. Overall, in the world of Greece and Rome as the philosophers interpreted that, what moderns call libido was acknowledged as a sovereign power but one that does not have to dictate human fates.

There is a flexibility in the sexual morality of pre-Christian antiquity that disappeared under the influence of opinionated thinkers in the Patristic age like Tertullian or Jerome. Self-control looked good to the pagans. Consecrated virginity and voluntary eunuchism did not. The space in which reflection on sexual conduct occurred was an earthly rather than a heavenly space; one’s reputation and standing could be damaged seriously by the intervention of others’ critical eyes or ready criticisms. But you were not always worrying about risking your eternal soul whenever you knocked on the door of a brothel. ‘For the Romans, being was being seen’, writes Carlin A. Barton in her recent study of *Roman Honour*. It was a culture of contestation, where one could prove oneself by endurance, performance, even self-dramatisation.[[293]](#endnote-293) Public visibility was important to Romans: if you were a member of the elite, there was always an audience around, ready to judge and to deride. Reputation was a form of cultural capital. Virtuous restraint gave you valuable credit, improved your chances of resisting attack and envy. It was, however, only one of the ways you could excel. Temperance, moderation and self-control were admirable; yet like all valuable things, they did not exhaust the field. There were other possibilities, other norms to compete with. There were solid married couples, praised and respected. And then there were orgies, brothels, slave boys to be penetrated, concubines to be kept, explicit art and poetry to enjoy. Collective social mores were meant to keep a curb on chaotic hedonistic behaviour; gossip, calumny, rumour helped society discourage freedoms felt to be harmful, grotesque or outrageous. If there was a single and all purpose estimation of sexual desire, no one seems to have known it.

Part of the reason for what the great ancient historian Peter Brown calls Romans’ ‘ benevolent dualism’, in which ‘extreme rigidity’ in some areas co-existed with tolerance and studied indifference,[[294]](#endnote-294) can be traced to the ancient picture of the human physical being. The medical discourses that made that picture a manifold and shifting scene were the work of physicians (operating without the constraints of clinical trials) who passed on to their eager clients a variety of complicated recommendations on the subject of health, well-being and disease. Ideology played a part, affirming convenient beliefs about the ‘biological’ inferiority of women and the inability of the low-born, such as slaves or rustics, to exercise the reflective mastery of the bodily impulses that marked the gentleman. Given the prestige of Hellenic civilization, it is not surprising that many of the assumptions about bodies and health were inherited by Rome from the Greek tradition, as was most of the science. From Hesiod to Seneca and beyond, ideals of well-bred masculinity were surprisingly tenacious. Norms of ‘masculine public deportment’ were reinforced by ruling-class education of the young; literature as well as oratory offered a well-articulated range of possibilities from the epicene (risky, but favoured by some dandies) to the bearded, bristling and virile (popular if old-fashioned).[[295]](#endnote-295) Just as good taste could be demonstrated in manners, public life and in rhetorical practice, it could be displayed in how one lives in one’s physical being (which Plato was known to call a ‘garment’ that wears out, *Phaedo*. 84c-88b). If the body was a suit of clothes, however, it was an odd one. Peter Brown introduces the ‘diffused sensuality’ of the late ancient body with a few cautions. We need to recognise how ‘disturbingly unfamiliar’ these long-ago bodies are:

‘The learned treatises of the age collaborated with ancient commonsense notions to endow the men and women of antiquity with bodies totally unlike those of modern persons. Here were little fiery universes, through whose heart, brain, and veins there pulsed the same heat and vital spirit as glowed in the stars…Potentially formless and eternal matter, the body was barely held together, for a short lifetime, by the vivid soul of the well-born man.’[[296]](#endnote-296)

Greeks and Romans had quite specific ideas about bodies and physiology. But those ideas are confused.[[297]](#endnote-297) Some believed women produce seed (the Stoics did not, but the Epicureans were inclined to speak of a female seed, as were Galen and the Aristotelians);[[298]](#endnote-298) others quite early acknowledged the the function of the ovaries. No one could figure out the point of the menses. Many agreed with Aristotle that a woman is a deformed male, analogous in most anatomical and phsyiological respects except colder and wetter and the product of weaker seed.[[299]](#endnote-299) The body is needy, messy, labile and pulled from one direction to another. Its appetites run to extremes. Only age can diminish its cravings. The body’s ‘tone’ is easily lost if the attention is not kept vigilant. Volatile and mutable, Greco-Roman bodies are physiologically in constant movement from dry to wet, cold to hot, relaxed to taut, and vice versa. Aristotle concluded that human bodies were better than those of other animals because human blood is at the same time hot, thin and pure (*History of Animals*, Book III 521a2 4). All the while the blood is palpitating it is corrupting and changing, condensing and discharging, in tandem with the other liquids: milk, sperm, marrow, which along with other ancient doctors Aristotle takes to be various concoctions of blood. Other medical authorities built on or rejected Aristotle as they saw fit, but the authors judged by Geoffrey Lloyd to be our ‘chief sources’ for ancient sciences of the body – Celsus, Galen, Soranus, Sextus – all mention three general conditions or ‘states of the body’: the constricted, the lax, and the mixed. Bodies were mixtures, where elements engaged in on-going exchanges, compounding, conflicting, and being dissolved, as pre-Socratic natural philosophers such as Empedocles and Anaxagoras speculated.[[300]](#endnote-300) And those mixtures could all too often be disturbed, lacking in equilibrium, hence all the diseases (mental and physical) from which humans suffer. Something is needed to govern and contain all these fluctuations and aberrant motions. But what? How to live well? Could the harmony of the elements assert itself ‘naturally’, without coercion? Was it a matter of shaping the self via medical, spiritual or philosophic care? Or was something more forceful needed, a regulative power within or without? One of the authors of the Hippocratic corpus, as Brooke Holmes explains, declares that

All living things are composed of fire and water, which master and are mastered, in turn, within a dynamic mixtures, just as in the external world (*Vict*. I 10, Li 6.484=134,13-20 Joly-Byl). Alcmaeon, a physicist active in the early fifth century who was perhaps also a physician, is reputed to have described health as an *isonomia*, “equal relationship,” of forces such as the wet and the dry or the bitter and the sweet: disease is the *monarkhia*, “single rule,” of one of these powers.[[301]](#endnote-301)

Medical regimens, by no accident, deferred to the logic of political organisation.[[302]](#endnote-302) The analogy went both ways, and continued to impress Roman adherents of various philosophical schools, Epicureans, Stoics and others. As Martha Nussbaum observes of the Greek world, ‘throughout the late fifth and early fourth centuries, Greek thinkers and writers were finding it incresingly easy to think of ethical/political argument as similar to medicine.’[[303]](#endnote-303) Was not health in the body kin to justice in the city? And the correct mixture of political alliances, power and friendship seemed a ready-made analogy for a well-tempered yet vigorous physical and mental life. But just as politics was a dangerous place, so was the body. It is because the human physical being is not uniform that it suffers pain. Bodies were unstable, prey to unruly and unpredictable forces, so they needed good regimens to rule them: those who inclined to autocratic models of politics might be quick to see the advantage here. Health and flourishing were a matter of shared responsibilities, distributed among a volatile but inter-communicating society of members: that was a view of the desirable body a democrat could love. Jean-Pierre Vernant describes the ‘inconstant’ mortal body, not (for the Greeks) ‘a group morphology of fitted organs in the manner of an anatomical drawing’:

The human body is ephemeral. This does not merely signify that, no matter how strong, how perfect it may appear to be, it is destined for decrepitude and death; but, in a more essential way, it means that since nothing in it is immutable, the vital energies it deploys and the psychological and physical forces it puts into play can remain in a state of plenitude for only a brief moment. They are exhausted as soon as they become active. Like a fire that consumes itself as it burns and must continuously be fed in order to keep it from going out, the human body functions in alternating phases of expenditure and recuperation.[[304]](#endnote-304)

‘Beneath our sense of well-being –  a sense, that is, of being an integrated whole – different constituent stuff are in constant flux.’[[305]](#endnote-305) Soul-doctors, faced with this unruly stuff, urged vigilance. The more sophisticated among their upper-class clients thought that education and breeding were a better option, one needing life-long practice and justifying the cultivation of the right philosophical friendships, where souls could correct, encourage and perfect one another and conduct be laid open to scrupulous examination. The soul has the potential to groom and refine, or at least the potential to do so to adult and male bodies, the bodies of the free and the citizen. Most treatises that recommended programs for health and fitness were also implicitly treatises about the public values of correct education, conduct and self-monitoring. Doctors and sages acknowledged the connection between fitness – which we could call self-governance – and the governance of others. The dominance of men over women and masters over slaves was assumed and also subject to ethical scrutiny. A proper man should not be womanish, a proper master should not be impetuously cruel to his subordinates. Decorum and discretion were popular qualities to be urged by good teachers on their pupils and good mentors on those seeking a dignified, philosophically-balanced life, especially in the Hellenistic period. In cultivating ‘seemliness’ (*decorum*) , advisors would (at least according to Stoic doctrine) be advancing preferences built in by ‘nature’, as Cicero explained in *De Officiis* (44BC):

From the beginning nature itself seems to have been thoroughly rational concerning our bodies: she has placed in sight those parts of our form and features that have an honourable appearance, but has covered and hidden the parts of the body thst are devoted to the necessities of nature and would have an ugly and dishonourable look. Nature’s very careful craftsmanship is mirrored in men’s sense of shame. For everyone of sound mind keeps out of sight the very parts nature has hidden, and makes an effort to obey necessity itself as secretly as possible. (*De Officiis*, Book I, 126-127)

Marcus Aurelius, writing to himself rather than for public edification, took a harsher line: our material being reveals an unsavory appearance when we observe it with a cool and rational mind. What is our body but a theater of decomposition? Matter breaks down continually into its crudest parts, and what looks like a lithe and attractive body is, at bottom, nothing but ‘water, dust, bones, stench’ *(Meditations*, IX, 36). Nature is ‘immense, inexorable, and imperturbable’; the way to be true to your own nature and character is to turn your attention, and your desires, away from ‘anything other than what is willed by the Nature of the All’.[[306]](#endnote-306) Men get excited about pleasure and cling on to life, as if putrefaction is not waiting for them at every turn; Marcus reminds himself that the sexual act (which Cicero notes we are right to want to hide) is nothing but ‘a commotion of the innards and a convulsive secretion of mucus.’ (VI, 13,1) Marcus tests the limits of human detachment from drives and desires. Just as, in Pierre Hadot’s words, ‘a short cloak and a hard bed were the symbols of the Stoic philosophical life’[[307]](#endnote-307), so ‘living rough’ with yourself could create a kind of freedom and purity within, an ‘inner citadel’:

Purify your judgments, so that nothing that is not ‘yours’ may become attached to you, so that you do not feel any suffering if it is snatched away from you. (IV, 1, 112)

For the philosopher (and the Stoic philosopher is the model), Marcus prescribes the severe scrutiny of every action, every thought and impulse:

The fundamental attitude of the Stoic philosopher was *prosoche*: attention to oneself and vigilance at every instant. For the Stoics, the person who is ‘awake’ is always perfectly conscious not only of what he *does* but of what he *is…*A person endowed with such consciousness seeks to purify and recitfy his intentions at every instant.[[308]](#endnote-308)

The best is to look on life from the standpoint of death. It is an exacting discipline, but not the expression of a shocked revulsion from the ‘stains’ of everyday life. All physical phenomena are natural and necessary; even the most repulsive can be seen through a rational gaze, knowing that it, like all the convulsions and troubles of life, will in its turn dissolve and give way. Anxiety and worry bring no benefits. When an intrusive fantasy and impulse disturbs the sereneity of the Stoic, it can also be dissected into its parts and its sting thereby removed. Why feel compulsion? Most Stoics preferred to think of sexual activity as natural and necessary, but a matter of moral indifference. Behaving well was not a question of following a code or avoiding specified transgressions, but preserving a dignified and rational bearing. Romans used the language of reticence and refinement with a confident abandon. These, at the very least, are to be admired. Cicero, perhaps the most admired of all the Latin writers on ethics and public life, notes in *De finibus* that the achievement of the Epicureans, suspected of making pleasure the only good worth having, is that they establish a very useful principle of ethical selection and conduct: ‘to forego pleasure for the purpose of getting greater pleasures’, to endure pain for the sake of escaping greater pains.’ (Book I, X) How serious, temperate and austere are these supposed champions of ease and sensual gratification, Cicero exclaims! They deserve the title of philosophers. Temperance, which all prudent men admire, is to be valued not for its own sake but for the mental health it bestows: like the other virtues (courage, justice, wisdom) it helps us avoid anxiety and sorrow. Austerity is good policy, even if it places one in the path of physical hardship and discomfort, for the evils of the mind are much more intense than those of the body. (*de finibus*, X, xvii) When an emperor, Marcus Aurelius, exhorts himself to modesty and denial, he is as meticulous as if he were the most sober of philosophers in sandals and shabby cloak. For others, considerations of honour and shame should keep the prudent alert to lapses in their self-control, endangered by any number of things from boys and girls to drink, food or anger. Faced with the evidence of sexual opportunism and brutality, a Roman should be quick to detect another threat, the hubristic arrogance of the despot.[[309]](#endnote-309) Power in one sphere slips far too easily into hunger for another, and the modern feminist’s claim that the sexual is the political would not be a surprise to a Roman. Good behavior reveals a character that is strong, well-trained enough to deserve the liberty and the authority that goes with responsible citizenship; libertinism is, finally, not very elegant; it can betray childishness, weakness of will, an incomplete awareness of what is shameful and what is not. Sexual virtue is one way a citizen can distinguish the honorable leader from the tyrant And the philosophers can help the citizenry refine their powers of discrimination.

The great Stoic teacher Epictetus (55-135 CE) addressed well-bred Romans. He wants to see them behaving as we would like to behave himself, with the will rather than the flesh in the guiding role. ‘Retract your fear and your desire from all matters that are out of your power and control. (*Enchir*. 2) ‘The way to be free is to look down on externals’. The goal is to never have an abject thought, nor to desire anything to excess.’ (*Enchir*. 21) And ‘concerning sex’, the advice is simple:

Stay as chaste as you can before marriage. If you do indulge, engage only in licit liaisons. Don’t be harsh or judgmental towards those who have sex; if you are celibate yourself, don’t advertise the fact. (*Enchir.* 33.8)[[310]](#endnote-310)

Restraint is the best. But you will only make yourself ostentatious and ‘unrestrained’ if you go on reproaching others for their indulgence. We are neither gods nor beasts, neither strange solitaries nor our own creations; the laws of nature and society that embrace other people embrace us as well. The life of the philosopher, although better than the common life, should still be coherent.[[311]](#endnote-311) We are part of a community, and not all its members will be as just and temperate as we would like to be. Moreover the begetting of children is an honorable and essential thing; to renounce all participation in sexual reproduction is to sever yourself from the city, to make yourself odd and, as the Stoic counsels, ostentatious. Epictetus taught in the times of Nero, Domitian, Musonius Rufus and Seneca. There were monsters of depravity among his contemporaries. There were also austere men and women as self-denying as the most zealous of the Christians or Essenes. Epictetus’ advice for a life without infamy or disruption was not fundamentally different from the advice a serious soul would have gotten from Socrates. Throughout the long spring and summer of the Classical and Hellenistic world, and as far back as Homer, the wise were expected to fear the dangers of *epithumia*  or *orexis* , the desires that run headlong to extremes. Even the not-so-wise paid lip service to the priority of a rational restraint over a chase for pleasure and sensation. Seneca spoke for decent and conventional high-mindedness when he addressed the question of conduct between men and women in his treatise *On Marriage* (of which only fragments survive): ‘A wise man ought to love his wife with judgment, not passion (*affectu*). He controls impulses of pleasure and does not rush headlong into intercourse; nothing is more shameful than to love your wife as if she was your mistress.’[[312]](#endnote-312) The quiet life will get you respect. It is also good for your health. Intense physical passion may have divine authorisation. Aphrodite is, after all, a powerful deity. In her guise as Venus, she was held by one tradition to be the ancestor of Augustus and his family. But the sane will view her with trepidation.

**3.2 Roman Eros and the Paradox of Prudery: Romance, Marriage and Virginity**

James Brundage, studying the origins of medieval European practices of love, marriage and sex, looks back on Rome and sees a mixed menu of prescriptions and tolerance. Stoic attitudes tended to be moralistic and austere. Others who wrote about bodily passions and indulgences were ‘decidedly’ more ‘matter of fact’.[[313]](#endnote-313) ‘Social and moral opprobrium’ was rarely visited on those sexual practices like prostitution and homosexuality which Christians were later to find shocking. But sex for the Greek and Roman was certainly a field where mistakes can be common and damaging to one’s social position. It was bad to be considered ludicrous, to be reckless was often a sign of stupidity. Why then risk your well-being and discretion by putting too much time or energy into your sexual pleasures? Despite a continued and generally unproblematic espousal of guarded tolerance, Rome had frequent outbursts of prudery. Rome was a society where sex was not a sin and even philosophers could extoll sensual pleasure as a necessity and at times a good. It is not a society we feel comfortable describing as prudish. Yet the pressure to regulate sexual activities came and went with a remarkable persistence. Why this was the case has been debated by scholars for some time.

The law’s interest in holding up occasionally strict and moralistic norms were apparently unaffected by any religious teachings or expectations, since official religion did not view sexual behaviour as a field in which piety could be determined or demonstrated. Traditional religion in Rome was polytheistic and discouraged the kind of ardent attachment to a personal, initiatory cult that could lead to flamboyant behaviour, self-immolation, mimicking divine deaths and resurrections, hysterical homages of the type known among the devotees of Isis or Sarapis.[[314]](#endnote-314) The mystery religions performed liturgies that involved penitential purification, and various kinds of abject conversions: to become identified with the deity, the aspiring follower of Osiris or Isis would fast, suffer go naked, be beaten, and abandon all everyday amours. It was such a bewildering passage from normal life to transformation, loss of identity and sanctification that Apuleius described in *The Golden Ass (Metamorphoses*). Such mysteries were, nonetheless, a minority pursuit. Those who followed the ways of their ancestors, and revered the gods of Olympus, took a more accomodating line to the co-existence of mortals and immortals, deities and humans and animals. One lived in a world that included the gods. It was defined by its history, its geography, customs and local economy – and so were the doings of the gods in their higher part of it. To be happy and successful in life, one needed the blessing of the gods, and one needed not to attract their attention too much, or via the wrong channels. Rites were solemn and secretive, or public and all-enclusive. But to think of religion as ‘what one does with one’s solitariness’, as 19th century European Romantics belived, would not make sense. There were philosophers who praised the values of retreat and self-examination. Lucky those, who had the leisure and education to hear the Socratic message: take care of yourself! For the rest, religion was part of public and family life. At a solemn wedding, it might be appropriate to Dionysus to attend, for Venus or Demeter to participate or watch with approval. Religion sanctioned the legitimate production of children born to fulfil their parents’ desires, and those of the city. And the power of sexual attraction was not neglected by the Olympians, as myth tells us and Ovid emphasises in his recounting of the erotic chases of the *Metamorphoses*. But piety and erotic excess did not see eye to eye.

Perhaps it was the awareness of life’s fragility that provoked a certain skepticism towards an unapologetically hedonistic life. Death came to all. Why spend too much of your time on a pursuit that so disturbingly mimicked the transience of all things mortal, passing as it does from excitement to performance to exhaustion in such a short period of time? The gods, being immortal, did not need to be careful in their erotic lives. But we cannot imitate them. As Brundage puts it: ‘The gods themselves would have run afoul of the law had they acted out their myriad adventures in the streets of Periclean Athens or Augustan Rome.’[[315]](#endnote-315)

The Romans, like many other peoples, loved to moralise. The Roman elite preferred to align themselves rhetorically with such upright paragons as Cato or the *exempla* Livy presents in his histories. Stoic teachers like Epictetus and the equally famous ‘Roman Socrates’, Musonius Rufus, were treated with grave respect. What they advised was, in Kyle Harper’s words, ‘a carefully studied indifference in a universe so vast that mankind’s pleasures were dwarfed by the unfathomable enormity of the heavens’.[[316]](#endnote-316) Excess, incontinence, *licentia* and *luxuria* all were threats to the image of the ‘good’ Roman who was faithful to the virtues of his ancestors. Decorum was aristocratic, a mark of the old families. Indeed, how else could you recognise a barbarian, an upstart, if not by their sexual insolence? Everyone knew about Lucretia, the perfect matron, who was assaulted by a lecherous despot, the son of a Tarquin, and in her suicidal sorrow, roused the Romans to revolt and return to Republican virtue. The wealthy and powerful will take advantage, and brave citizens must stand up to them, must denounce their *hubris* and punish their sexual arrogance. ‘The standard topoi of anti-tyrannical rhetoric’, Daniel Mendelsohn writes, included a list of outrages: deflowerers of virgins, defilers of the marital bed. [[317]](#endnote-317) Among the many sins of the despot, the power to force women to serve his pleasure is not the least, it is said in a debate about monarchy reported by Herodotus (Bk. 3, 80). The Greek superiority over the Persians was the point of the anecdote in Herodotus; Attic uprightness was something Rome liked to claim for itself too. Romans were not just superior in might and bravery, in wealth and engineering, in administration and architecture. They were superior in morals. Hence their right to rule the known world was a justified right, one they could only squander if they fell into bad habits of luxury and vice, like those that had evenutally weakened the Greeks after Alexander. And the Asiatics were even worse. Vanity, sexual indulgence, and effeminacy were ever-present dangers; the Greeks may have been wonderful at philosophy, literature and art, but Roman virtue and Roman virility trump Hellenic sophistication. And this is proved by their behaviour in the bedroom, which could even be the object of legislative control, as proved by the puritanical interventions of Augustus. A powerful city, Augustus believed, is only as powerful as the self-control of its sexual subjects.

The great public men of Rome, together with the women they married, saw definite benefits in the codes Augustus tried to enforce. In their preferred view of themselves, they were examples any moralist could admire. Moralists can be assumed to exaggerate. It is their right. In literature as in public oratory the picture presented of the libidinal habits of Imperial Romans is rather different. They could be lecherous, possessive, venal, obscene, dropping the important affairs of state or philosophy to chase after some pretty boy or girl that at bottom they despised, if we are to judge from writers like Martial (40-106 AD). But they could also be lovers wanting nothing better than to sigh and yearn and hear about how true love and gratified desire sends the best and the best looking into transports of bliss. An appealing example of the Roman taste for romantic fantasy is a popular prose form devoted to the charms of eros, the Hellenistic romance- novel of Achilles Tatius, Longus, Chariton, Heliodorus and Xenophon (2nd to 4th centuries CE). These novels are the original love-stories, the template from which popular fiction has borrowed ever since. All the heroines are as lovely as Aphrodite and as pure as Hestia; their male characters are just as handsome and virtuous, if a bit less clever and wily. Fortune plays with their fates, but somehow their resourcefulness carries them through, and even their stereotypical portrayals are charming:

The ancient romances are stories of eros, a consuming physical passion that binds two beautiful lovers, a young man and a young woman, in mutual attraction….The stories are set against the backdrop of a physically familiar but temporally irreal Greek past, what Bakhtin called “adventure time.” Eros is the driving force of the story, a force of nature that, unbeckoned, guides human destiny. The novels celebrate eros as a gift of nature; they ponde the stark mystery that replenishing the city with new generations should also be a source of the greatest pleasure. The romances are unhestitantly carnal: eros is the ecsatic joy of bodily friction. At the same time the eros they admire is a force that has been safely caged in matrimony – if just barely.[[318]](#endnote-318)

The narratives are full of danger, reversals, and sensational plot-turns, but sexual desire – youthful, by preference; mature, for comic effect – is always part of the mix. Divinity presides over the courtships and sometimes intervenes to fix their outcome. The gods bless the giddy intoxications of ardent, faithful and impetuous lovers. (*Eros*’s open-mindedness in the novels is, it must be noted from the start, limited. In these tales, the heterosexual couples have a better record of making it to a happy ending than their homosexual counterparts.) Love always wins. The protagonists struggle against catastrophe and despair. The readers, on the other hand, reap the rewards. ‘The Greek novel’, David Konstan writes, exalts a relationship of mutual love between equals as the basis for a marriage that can endure adversity and separation’.[[319]](#endnote-319) That pleasant prospect, Konstan argues, is the unexpectedly progressive politics of these fictions: escapist, perhaps, but at their best offering a stunning vista of what Konstan nicely callls ‘sexual symmetry’, a suprising equality of male and female. While rape stories were cautionary tales, warning of the need to keep democratic and moral principles alive, the romances dreamt of a world beyond tyranny, a world where mutual love fixes everything.

The novels’ flirtation with a religion of amorousness and passionate loyalty is unusual, an exception to the most of the Greco-Roman conventions governing what we now call ‘private life’. Erotic fulfilment is central to them, and is taken seriously, elevated to ‘nothing short of salvation’. Erotic fulfilment is a goal worth sacrificing for, fighting wild beasts and sadistic torturers for, disobeying parents and guardians for. Lovers who have lost one another will accept no consolation, no substitution. In their struggle to be re-united it is commonplace for them to come to the very borders of the grave – to be left for dead, to believe themselves dead, only to arise miraculously from the tomb itself, as Callirhoe, Leucippe and Apollonius’ wife do, and as their Shakespearean sisters Hermione and Thaisa do. True love inspires everyone decent who is witness to it with a sympathy and identification that a romantic novelist of the 19th or 20th century could envy. And true love deserves thrilling consummation: the sexual rewards of faithful lovers are to die for; the novelists do not usually risk graphic passages, but the description of the female orgasm and the particular sweetness of adolescent male kisses in Achilles Tatius’s thrill-packed *Leucippe and Clitophon* leave little to the imagination. Sexual titillation was something playful in the novels. But the presiding genius is sober. B.P. Reardon, introducing his edition of the novels, describes them:

Hero and heroine are always young, wellborn, and handsome; their marriage is disrupted or prevented by separation, travel in distant parts, and a series of misfortunes, usually spectacular. Virginity or chastity, at least in the female, is of crucial importance, and fidelity to one’s partner, together often with trust in the gods, will ultimately guarantee a happy ending. [[320]](#endnote-320)

The novels’ conception of the good life is conservative, as stylised in its own way as their syntax is. The passions they put into play are conventional and unchallenging: romance, ‘even at its best’ , Kyle Harper observes, ‘is a genre made of conventions’, put together with ‘prefabricated parts’.[[321]](#endnote-321) Virtuous heroines, their maidenly honour besieged, must despair and panic, but remain impossibly brave; pimps and procurers, slave-traders and greedy conmen, will conspire against the heroine and hero’s sexual integrity. Episode by episode, the typical narrative may run into excesses of all sorts, and transgressions will always seem about to happen. But by happy intervention or implausible accident, the fabric of society remains spotlessly intact, every social norm left in place. Structure trumps all; even infatuation plays by its rules. The regularity of the novel’s structure is simple to explain, since all the tales conform to the basic principles. A well-brought-up maiden, conspicuous for her virginal virtue, and her equally outstanding and sexually abstemious young suitor, are meant to be together; this is true despite the fact that their origins are often unknown, and their parentage in question. A thick fog of confusion and misinformation surrounds the young lovers, who must pursue what can seem hopeless quests to find each other again. But even the gods, the winds, and the lawless pirates cannot keep them from forging the alliances their families have so much to gain from. Where the romances will end up is clear to anyone who is familiar with their conventions. The explicit goal of the protagonists’ adventures is to allow wife and husband to meet in a chosen and socially sanctioned union. To keep the suspense high, many ostacles must delay that outcome. Many wild adventures made a final union of the lovers look unlikely. Families may have objected to their desires in the first instance; the hero and heroine may seem to be too poor or friendless to marry. But all hindrances are eventually removed, all resistance exposed as empty or misguided. Individual longing and social reproduction coincide. Young and inexperienced adolescents are transformed into happy and serious householders; their desires and pleasures have been the tools to the advancement of the common good. In this sense, the early fictions want to have it both ways. Sex is an arousing, exhilirating force. It motivates heroic, even absurd actions, immense sacrifices and impressive feats of endurance. But it is also a force easily tamed and domesticated. If sexual desire is construed as an anarchic, antisocial force that needs to be pressed down for the hard business of society to be transacted, then the romances are wrong in their manifest convictions. But if the romances are right, then the mad race for erotic happiness is well-designed for public benefits, without any need for harsh regulations or moralistic denunciations of hedonism. This message forms the serious and conservative thread that winds through the giddy plots; it ties man to wife, and individual to society. And it does so through the erotic, not against it.

The novels, then, offer an accommodating position. Eros may not be so imperious a god as to enjoy destroying weak humans. If he and his divine allies – Aphrodite, Hera, Artemis, Demeter, even Dionysus – are properly reverenced, Eros has no problem presiding over social concord and stolid tranquillity. The cult of marital romance turns the naïve young into parents and householders; it demands that virginity and chastity be honoured scrupulously, but it does not consider that ascetic renunciation is a necessary ingredient in that scrupulous observance. Consolidation and moderation, rather than sublime purity, are the values. And this reading of the novels’ poetics of stability corrects an over-emphasis on passion as transgression which has for a long time dominated the study of romance. Romantic love, which became newly visible as a subject for literary entertainment in Hellenistic Rome, was not dependent on anti-social transgression, as the troubadour tradition later suggested in medieval Europe. In the medieval myth of ‘courtliness’, the scene was differently painted. Passion was restricted to adulterous infatuation.[[322]](#endnote-322) Married people were not bothered by it. But the Greco-Roman love stories thought otherwise. If the ancient authors are indicative, then the prejudice associated with ‘courtly love’ is less universal than we thought. Indeed, from the evidence of the Hellenistic narratives, adulterous characters who long for extracurricular amours are not privileged: they are never allowed the raptures later literature would lend them, nor do they ever capture the sympathies of the reader, who is directed unerringly at the licit and faithful pair, superior in their beauty, their sensuous dynamism and their opportunities for reciprocally rewarding intercourse.

Mutual eros, that is to say, licit heterosexuality, leading to the decorous production of heirs and dependents, is said in the romantic novels of the 1st, 2nd and 3rd centuries to be protected by the gods. In Volume 3 of his *History of Sexuality,* MichelFoucault, alluding briefly to the romances *Chaereas and Callirhoe, Leucippe and Clitophon,* and *An Ethiopian Tale* writes that

One can nevertheless call attention to the presence, in these long narratives with their countless episodes, of some of the themes that will subsequently characterize erotics, both sacred and profane: the existence of a ‘heterosexual’ relation marked by a male-female polarity, the insistence on an abstention that is modelled much more on virginal integrity than on the political and virile domination of desires; and finally, the fulfilment and reward of this purity in a union that has the form and value of a spiritual marriage.[[323]](#endnote-323)

‘This new erotics’, Foucault continues (these are, sadly, almost the last words of the published *History of Sexuality*, and they read not like a conclusion but like the first few steps in a much bigger story) ‘organizes itself around the symmetrical and reciprocal relationship of a man and a woman, around the high value attributed to virginity, and around the complete union in which it finds perfection.’[[324]](#endnote-324) It is not a paradise of mutuality. It is still hierarchical, despite Foucault’s chivalrous nod to ‘symmetry’. But it is different.

What was this new idea? ‘A form of life, a shared existence, a personal bond, and a respective position of the partners in this relationship’; ‘an affection that could extend to the point of need and dependence’, one that could be ‘personal, intense and affective’ [[325]](#endnote-325), and be acknowledged to be such, in public and to the world; a sexual enjoyment that can be exchanged, where the two partners ‘separate after having given each other an equal amount of pleasure’,[[326]](#endnote-326) something precluded by the disparity with men between *erastes* and *eromenos*: this was the new and more complex schema of marriage, and it was less patronising than Xenophon’s. But one should not get carried away with matrimonial ethics. Rome was not romantic. It was certainly not feminist. Love was not a passion on which all joy and sorrow depends. Nor were women ‘emancipated’. Even the giddy romances of the Hellenistic period, the closest late antiquity gets to a literature with love as its dominant subject, were matter-of-fact in their depiction of sexual relations. Erotic experience in all its twists and turns, from gaze to daydream to kiss to conquest, is fascinating, and the author who knows how to ring the changes can get sensational effects. But however ‘sexy, witty and often bizarre’[[327]](#endnote-327) are these earliest examples of the Western novel, the author’s social standpoint (and this is true of all the novelists) remains conservative. Love trumps all, the novels demonstrated. Love crosses oceans and survives torture and near-rape. Love mysteriously reunites those who were always meant to be together. Love is the licensed adhesive of the cosmos, joining those whose passion has been purified by ordeal and loyalty and approved by the gods, mimicking in human lives the musical harmonies of the spheres. Yet love is interestingly lacking in class-blindness: beauty and sympathy are not enough. Love seems irresistibly to join those of comparable birth and compatible ancestry. And the solemn ritual of marital love is affirmed, not through the dictates or intrigues of powerful families or considerations of financial benefit, but through the potent literary construction of symmetrical desire.

The romance novels present an unusual case of social values reinforced through the canny determination of women: a first and in most respects unrepeated experiment for ancient society. This was a literature willing to operate with a gynocentric machinery of meaning and intention. Reciprocity in desire and devotion is the religion of the novels. Was it a widely practised one? Impossible to tell. But the power of the heroines in these stories is exceptional. Not fathers, not gods, not kings or warriors: it is the maidens who drive the plots. If innocence, titillation, sexuality and knowledge are what animates these stories and gives them their effervescence, their narrative momentum would be thin indeed without their strong female characters, for the ‘dominant structuring principle’ of the novel is sexual symmetry, a ‘counterintuitive’ symmetry between the genders that ‘struggles against the normative traditions’ of Greek and Roman culture.[[328]](#endnote-328) These earliest of all secular novels in any Western language cast beautiful young women and beautiful young men in the most important roles and stayed away from misogynistic caricatures. In the abiding and sincere infatuation their heroes and heroines feel for one another there is equality – they are both enamoured at first sight, of the same class, although that may take a while to discover – and they are equally in love, equally separated by fate and accident, equally silly, and equally subjected to outrageous misadventures, unwanted courtships, enslavement and risk.[[329]](#endnote-329) The writers of the novels (the earliest examples we know of the popular genre of the romance) acknowledged the great gifts of their spirited heroines – their loyalty, their chastity, their improvisational flair, their courage. We really don’t know what was responsible for this unusual sympathy for the female sex in an epoch where such sympathy was not an everyday affair. The romance novelists stand apart. Their literary colleagues, the well-connected urban poets at the heart and hub of civic culture, were less gynophiliac. Comic writers, satirists, and elite poets like Ovid, Propertius, or Catullus knew that they could always get a rise by vilifying women. The philosophers may talk as much as they like about the universal duty of marriage ‘for any human being who aims to live a life that is useful to those around him and to humanity in general’. Marriage is in harmony with nature’s order.[[330]](#endnote-330) Epicureans like Lucretius claimed to reject passionate love (a madness) on philosophical principles, while allowing for calm, even tepid marriages based on harmony of character, and descended into exorbitant diatribes on the disturbances of sexual passion, which ruin a man’s honour and his happiness.)

**3.3 Erotic Myth, Marital Idealism**

Romantic fiction exploited two features of readerly investment that often diverge: naiveté and self-consciousness, idealism and erotic amusment. Other forms of literary erotica in Rome gave different but equally compelling priority to the search for sexual intensities. They did so, however, at the cost of abandoning ‘sexual symmetry’ and, in the process, creating a different code and imaginative precedent for the literature of eros, creating sharp tensions between lovers idealised and lovers defamed, between rapture and abuse. This other code was the one that got the most traction, its features still dominating contemporary assumptions about the division of power in sexual relations, and (if many sharp readers are correct) shading our romantic expectations with a persistent sadness, often accompanied by misogynistic fears about the treachery and dissembling sexuality of women.[[331]](#endnote-331) Roman love poets who wrote just before and during the age of Augustus are an interesting case. They relied, in Paul Veyne’s words, on a new but long-lasting erotic mythology.[[332]](#endnote-332) Tibullus, Propertius and Ovid (one could include Catullus and Callimachus) invented a new character in the history of literature, the elegiac love-poet, the paradigm of the lover who complains, is whipped, and comes back for more:

His life is dedicated to love in the shape of service to a demanding, often cruel, not infrequently unfaithful mistress. The service he celebrates in a cycle of short elegiac poems in which both the relationship itself and the poetry inspired by it are written about in a manner best described as one of continuous critical assessment. Corresponding to this dual dedication is a rejection of ‘un-elegiac’ social and political values: marriage, public life, war, national and marital themes, the ‘grand’ genres of poetry, above all heroic epic.[[333]](#endnote-333)

Elegiac love was immersed in a fiction, but a potent one. It is unlikely that the poets were talking about erotic life as they knew it from experience. Tradition had as much to do with their ‘feelings’ as memories: the Greeks, as Paul Veyne reminds us, ‘had been singing of love, in many different rhythms, in either the first or the third person, for six or seven centuries.’[[334]](#endnote-334) To express the pleasures and pains of love required more time in the bookshelves than in the bedroom. But neither sincerity nor sociological accuracy are the measure of erotic truth:

Roman erotic elegy does not depict anything, and it does not require its readers to think of some real society. It takes place in a fictional world where the heroines are women of easy virtue, where reality is not referred to except in passing flashes – and hardly coherent ones at that.[[335]](#endnote-335)

It is pointless to wonder too much about the sincerity of the poet, or the degree to which the game of passion depicted corresponded to life in the more privileged precincts of Rome.[[336]](#endnote-336) Did many people decide, with the elegiac poet, that the only god and the only commander to obey was Love, that career, reputation, wealth and even political honour must be jettisoned when the mistress calls? It is unlikely. There is artifice and there is emotion. One does not preclude the other. ‘Roman erotic elegy resembles a montage of quotations and cries from the heart.’[[337]](#endnote-337) Unlike the naïve lovers of the Hellenistic novels or the exiled chivalric lovers of troubadour poetry, the speakers in these poems enjoy sexual congress but still suffer unhappiness. The occasional bliss with the impossibly alluring object of desire does not give any security of possession or fidelity: the lover is enslaved, and the beloved always withholds. ‘The ancients knew, like everyone else, that desire is will to power…’[[338]](#endnote-338) In society women looked powerless; they did not control their own lives or property; respectable women could not appear in public without a custodian. Yet here, in this make-believe, they were dominant, exacting, whimsically autocratic, imperious and sensual; their venality was kept just out of sight.) Being a woman’s dependent was shameful for a man, yet love’s imperative drove the besotted to just such humiliation. This is far from the Christian sentiments of the courtly poetics, for which erotic servitude is ennobling and purifying. Here, according to Veyne, the class entitled to dominate makes a point (or at least a convention) of voluntary abasement. And the service of love is performed not for a pure and inaccessible mistress, who inspires because of her chastity, but for a woman practised in the arts of seduction. Rome may not be prudish in its taste for the exhibitionism of the elegiac personae – all the dirty linen of non-conjugal sex is laid bare in intricate variations – but the suspicion of female desire here implied should teach us something about the nature of late antique moralism.

The ‘paradox’ represented by the erotic poets of Rome has been studied by Paul Veyne, in a book first published in France in 1983 at the same time his friend Michel Foucault brought out the last volumes of his influential *History of Sexuality*. Foucault had surprised many of his readers by the time he devoted to the Greeks and the Romans, their pleasures, their ethics and their surprising bouts of prudery. Veyne’s presence as an interpreter of Rome was, of course, no surprise (he was professor of Roman history in Provence and then at the Collège de France.) The connection between eros and society in antiquity was becoming a central theme for Veyne. But the case of the love poetry written in the late Republic and under the Empire presented a challenge. It was very difficult to establish any explicit sociological basis for the practices the love poets seemed to describe so vividly: who were these ‘cruel’ mistresses? Were they married women of the upper classes taking advantage of their freedom to pursue extra-marital intrigues? Were they professionals? Did the names – Corinna, Cynthia, Lesbia, Delia – refer to real women? Or was the whole thing an elaborate game? Veyne’s interpretation is speculative but not biographically inclined. The career of writers like Propertius, Tibullus, and Ovid depended on the assumption of an erotic worldliness shared by themselves and their sophisticated readers. They knew that the game they were playing would be amusing even if the stories they are telling ran a fine line between acceptable philandering (meaning sex only with those whose status made them unfree and not respectable) and cynical venality. The poets also pay tribute to the cruel and destructive power of Venus. Because the philosophy of dangerous eroticism was well in place, the poets could operate within a well-marked semiotic space. They could expect their audience to understand when they spoke of love as enslavement and passion as a tragic fate. And in the process they played to the fantasies of readerly bravado, giving lessons (as Ovid did) to novice seducers and girls who want to look attractive, analysing female hearts and vanities, creating a myth.

What the poets showed less interest in was virtue. It might be important to avoid exposure. The need for a chaste reputation is acknowledged, but only ironically. And the charming women for whom the poets compete seem very little concerned about shunning all other beds than the matrimonial. Nonetheless, their whims were devastating; their heart-breaking abilities were almost unlimited. This, Veyne suggests, tells us something about eros and virtue at Rome. Is passion less shattering just because its objects are promiscuous, economically dependent on the sex they sell? Manon’s Chevalier Des Grieux knew otherwise. Those who made their living from love could inspire erotic obsession and devotion, no matter how obvious was their lack of virtue. Like so much else in Republican and Imperial Rome, from clothes to muscle tone and pitch of voice, the concern for sexual probity was a class-privilege in Rome. The proper man governs himself ‘in his entire frame’, says Cicero.[[339]](#endnote-339) Upper class, respectable women, although not judged to be capable of such serious study of self-discipline, were expected to maintain high standards of decency and modesty if their status required it. That was not the expectation for their less privileged sisters. Chastity in Rome is not the duty of the freedwoman or slave. Nor is it the duty of the male citizen who is careful not to prey on the honest matrons, noble youths, or demure virgins.

It seems fair to say that not everyone in Rome was interested in being moral about sex. Erotic pleasures were high on the list of things worth living for. Entertaining, making full use of all that leisure has to offer, enjoying the sensual stimulations of public places and those whose profession involves display and solicitation: despite the scolding of philosophers, the privileged (the male privileged) thrived on the centrality of eroticism, as the images that survive make clear. Obscenity, licentiousness, deviance, lust, and Priapic humour, were all fit themes for poets and artists, for comedy and conversation, for gossip and graffiti. Not only is the penis talked about with great enthusiasm and graphic self-congratulation, but the organ itself, allowed a busy life of its own, does some of the talking, making its demands clear, complaining sometimes about the indignities it receives. Even the female genitals get a voice, in some of the rougher moments of Latin verse and invective, although female genitalia never escape disgust and are, in love poetry, ignored as if they did not exist.[[340]](#endnote-340) And the anus can receive lush tributes, if it belongs to a *puer* of the ideal age (15 to18, more or less).[[341]](#endnote-341) Satire targeted women and effeminates, and went into extravagant detail about the lewd behavior of everyone from respectable wives to prostitutes and high officials; Augustus’s daughter Julia was a favorite butt, and Mark Antony attracted the wildest and most amusing stories. Here is Cicero, Antony’s enemy, managing ‘to make a stable, lasting relationship sound far more reprehensible than prostitution’:

You took on a man’s toga and at once turned it into a whore’s. At first, you were a common prostitute, the price of your infamy was fixed – and not small either; but soon Curio turned up, drew you away from your meretricious trade and, as if he had given you a matron’s robe, established you in lasting and stable matrimony. No boy bought for sexual gratification was ever so much in the power of his master as you were in Curio’s.[[342]](#endnote-342)

Even inverted in service of the defaming of the political rival as it is here, matrimony- imagined as the proper distribution of gendered behaviour -- settles the argument. What makes Antony so repulsive is that he could submit himself to a ‘husband’, betraying his virility, a *mollis*. For a woman to do so would be suitable and seemly, for a man it is *contra naturam*  (Seneca, *Epistles.* 122.7-8*)*, and husbands who were known to be ‘henpecked’ were equally vulnerable to denunciation. Oral sex seems to have confused everyone, although Galen says that fellatio was less revolting than cunnilingus.[[343]](#endnote-343) Gender roles had a kind of moral magic, yet it is one not challenged by an adult male’s sexual susceptibility to adolescent boys, whose physical and psychological characteristics were feminine. (Adult men must have had affairs with other adult men, and humour alludes to ones known or suspected of doing so, but idealising literature has no space for them.) To maintain the clarity of gender, and to celebrate the famously more austere and chaste moral order ascribed to early Republican Rome, official discourse favoured the conjugal ideal. Uncontrolled sexuality disturbed the equilibrium of the state. Ambitious men, who like Caesar had dreams of playing with Rome as if it were a toy, were accused of sexual prodigality of a piece with their lust for domination: of Caesar it was said by Curio that he was ‘A man to every woman and a woman to every man’. As in any society, having unlimited sexual access is a perquisite of being a master. But to Romans, sexual avidity is also a warning siren. Old maxims insist that indulgence in sexual pleasure ruins the warrior spirit, that a true leader is ascetic. Caesar’s triumphs in lechery are linked to his defeat on the steps of the Senate, and to his delusions of omnipotence. Sex and power, drawn fatally to one another, continue in a union that is sometimes loose, sometimes tense. But so do sex and anxiety. How do you know when virility goes over the border into incontinence? Or seductiveness becomes effeminacy? Doctors warned that excessive sex could damage your health and sap your heat, something that wrestlers and athletes had long accepted. Could lust also ruin your mind?

Moralists who praised moderation and chastity, and doctors who counselled a tempering of the body’s lustful heat, were not talking to the deaf. The fact that the crudest and most salacious writing about sex (like that of Martial and even a lofty figure like Cicero) is invective, directed against a political, literary or personal opponent, registers the discomfort Romans felt (or thought they should feel) in the face of gross sexual immorality, lust, pederasty and rape. Hostile and obscene jokes would not be funny if the audience lacked any belief that some ways of being sexual could degrade, that sex could be humiliating or disgusting as well as fun.[[344]](#endnote-344) Venus was a deity. But she needed supplementation by Priapus. Rome tolerated prostitution, male and female, as a legal necessity, and supported an enormous and brutal trade in slaves to supply the flesh market. But no one thought it was anything to be proud of. Not so much immoral, in the opinion of the respectable classes, prostitution was squalid, or funny.[[345]](#endnote-345) Sex could be spoken about, depicted, mocked and exaggerated for effect, and even top-drawer men did not have to hide their patronage of brothels or their liaisons with concubines, (concubinage, indeed, satisfied most of the Roman criteria for appropriate sexual behavior).

The dangers of sexual desire, as Roman erotic poetry, comedy and epigram described them, are not to be located in the risks incurred by the soul; that sense of lust as a deformity was only recognised by the Romans’ successors, Christians distressed by what they learned to call ‘concupiscence’. Yet there were worries about the moral character of the sexually-besotted or sexually-bold. Sexual morals in the early Empire were loose, or so the Emperor Augustus concluded with a righteous display of puritan legislative meddling called the *lex Julia* and the *lex Poppea*. The emperor’s campaigns to clean up behaviour, especially among his own family and the aristocratic classes, ran into conflict with some of the favourite attitudes of the erotic poets. Worst of all was the exemplary punishment visited on Ovid, exiled until death either for having seen too much debauchery and adultery or because he wrote too much about them. Ovid’s milieu was, as Veyne put it, ‘characterized by freedom in morals taken as a right.’[[346]](#endnote-346) But the poet was not light-hearted about the sexual freedom he takes for granted. If he laments the cruelty and whimsicality of privileged loose amours, it is not just because they are expensive. It is because they hurt.

The complaints may be formulaic, the poet’s sentiments mannered, the mistresses may be courtesans, actresses, concubines, public women or slaves. But the suffering as well as the fascination must be acknowledged. The literary genres employed by Propertius, Tibullus, Ovid or Horace, whether erotic elegy or the satire, rested on a fiction aesthetically elaborated almost to the point of a religion. Of course it is hardly a religion of love on the Platonic or medieval model: it is ironic and self-mocking in the midst of its serious and pathetic complaint. The lover boasts even when he laments his degraded fate. It is true that his passions and his chasing after pleasure destroy his dignity as a patriot and a warrior. It is true that eros has been the downfall of nations and great families. But the lover worships his chains. Mistreated, cowed, cuckolded, he keeps coming back to the feet of his mistress, bringing gifts. Is this the story of how love for the beautiful transfigures the soul and nurtures the seeds of morality? No Platonic dialogue could do much with the erotic fiction the Roman poets claimed to subscribe to. The pleasures of Venus, Ovid writes in *The Art of Love* make a noble man lax, petulant and emasculated.[[347]](#endnote-347) It is far from the platonic images of the courtly love religion – this cult of eros does not ennoble or ‘fashion a gentleman’ . ‘For the troubadours’, writes Veyne, ‘the semiotics of inaccessible love rested on the Christian ideal of chastity; for the Roman erotic elegists, mournful love with easy women rests on the Greek and Roman idea that passion is a form of slavery.’[[348]](#endnote-348)

Like courtly love, the Roman erotic fiction is stylised, systematic in its rules and conventions. And these remain in place, the received wisdom of erotic philosophy until the Christians tried to throw cold water on it all: Sex wounds, the life of the libertine is anxious and full of upheavals: duties and moral principles are easily put off, tasks left unfinished, estates squandered. Love is a tyrant, whether requited or unrequited. Love is cruel and makes death look inviting. Love when it is hot trumps all; its happiness seems more important than power of money. Here is Propertius (I.14), translated by Paul Veyne:

What more is there to desire up to my final end? For when Love says no, who is pleased by riches? I have no more taste for anything if Venus is sulky, she who is strong enough to break a hero’s strength and to make a heart of iron suffer.[[349]](#endnote-349)

Roman erotic fiction allowed a fair amount of play-acting, construction of mythical personae, malice and make-believe. Its presentation of male and female characters were stereotypical, knowingly so. Its pretense of powerful males subjected to the whims of fickle male or female beauties looked as if the rigid rules of status in a competitive society were being undermined. Yet there was no will to reform behind the literary game: neither comedy nor lament expected to change public behaviour or expose exploitative practices. The poets were no scolding Stoics. Yet what they were talking about did remain in the never-never land of fantasy. It had elements of autobiography and social portraiture, and it had ramifications. Certainly the kind of scandals the poets alluded to in their verse did in ‘real life’ often bring down an arrogant high-flyer or enemy of those who wielded the weapons of sexual slander with skill. The poetical practice inverted social relations into erotic relations of power and manipulation, a strategy that has remained potent in literature, as can be seen from the obscene satires of 17th century England or 18th century France, or even, as I will suggest in later chapters, in the romances of Shakespeare. Erotic fiction was a permissible means to skewer a society and, later, a court, and to transfer observations about political and personal compromise, corruption or hypocrisy into the more ludic language of sexual mischief and obsession.

That its permissiveness was not absolute is proved by the fate of Ovid, who managed to take the sexual fiction too close to its imperial and high-placed original, Augustus’ court and in particular, Augustus’ daughter and granddaughter, Julia. Although a fiction, the literature of erotic mishap, enslavement and desperation was faithful enough to Roman mores, even to Roman fact, for it to strike home. There was plenty of sex in Rome. But it did not all take place below the radar of moral condemnation and public punishment. Rome may have been a playground for sexual adventures if you belonged to the right class and were not over fussy about your paramours. But class privilege did not save you from ruin and shame. And shame was a moral emotion that, in this period, was hitting inflationary records. Romans felt more disgust, more fastidiousness, more displeasure with themselves and others, more revulsion both moral and aesthetic, more (if you like) of the poison of self-consciousness than they believed themselves to have felt in the old, and more honourable past. Those who spoke for the Roman elite announced that the present was ‘grubby’ compared to the virtuous past, when Saturn supported justice in the human race: this is a point well made by Robert Kaster in his recent book *Emotion, Restraint and Community in Ancient Rome* (Oxford, 2005)*.* Given the decay of clear-cut standards of public and private behaviour that Romans in the Empire believed was their sad inheritance, so much the greater must be the attention a decent person should devote to the shades of *verecundia*  and *pudor* at play in every social action or relationship*,* to all the ways one’s reputation and integrity might be compromised or seen to be compromised. Sensitivity to disgrace was at a high: being misjudged, or suspected, or even just thought by others to be too loud and too ostentatious, could be crushing: exile or suicide could be appropriate if extreme reactions, but certainly a man or woman with the correct amount of *pudor*  will always be ready to blush, whether they know themselves to be in the wrong or not.

Historians and scholars have spilled much ink on the subject of the high Imperial ‘malaise’ that afflicted Roman civilization between the reigns of Marcus Aurelius and Constantine. Eric Dodds in a remarkable set of lectures given in 1963 spoke of this post-Augustan age as an ‘age of anxiety’, when the old models of the cosmos ceased to be reassuring and material decline began to wear away at the confidence of Romans that they were the dead centre of a knowable and manageable world.[[350]](#endnote-350) He meant spiritual anxiety. Dodds is particularly fascinated with the weariness and world ‘contempt’ of the Stoic emperor Marcus Aurelius. Life for Marcus, Dodds speculates, felt unreal; the sensible world was a miasma and all historical drama nothing but a vain shadow. There is a unity of all things, one that the god and reason have fashioned; it is the cosmos, and as a whole, it is good, indeed we are good to the degree that we conform our beliefs and ideas to it. But the external world, the world present in fits and starts to our senses, the world in which we struggle and fail, is untrustworthy. Marcus shared this sense of the unstable nature of all things natural and social with his philosophical predecessors and religious contemporaries (Gnostic, neoplatonic, Christian or Pythagorean). Despite this propensity to detachment, even pessimism, Marcus lived the life of action. The world may be a passing show. Our understanding may be far removed from the truth by which the cosmos is moved, yet we have no right to suspend our participation, if it is called for. And Marcus was so called, called to leadership and action. He was an unusual man. But for Dodds the entire era, from Late Stoicism to Early Greek and Latin Christianity, was darkened by similar doubts and anxieties: about the body and the passions, about the insignificance of human intentions in a universe governed by the indifferent stars or by powers we can never grasp. Even the powers that determine our feelings and actions are mysterious to us. Perhaps they are daemons. Perhaps we are mere playthings in a comedy from whose script we are excluded. Otherwise why would our appetites and desires push us around, rather than being judiciously chosen to serve best our interests and our happiness? If desire always wants too much – and persistently races after more than it can handle – then the human animal in whom desire plays such a large role must be seriously defective.

‘Insatiability’ is not just a manner of speaking. There are desires that by their very nature cannot be satisfied. This is a truth acknowledged in one after the other of the philosophical schools of antiquity; one would have to be very adventurous, or very paradoxical, to deny it. Accordingly the problem, and it is a broadly recognised one, is how to use the body and its pleasures without losing yourself in the process. The man who seeks pleasure above all else is a bogeyman who crops up again and again in Plato’s dialogues. He lives, Plato scolds in the Timaeus, like a silly incontinent animal, stuck in a vicious circle of filling and emptying (*Tim*. III.45).[[351]](#endnote-351) The Athenian democracy might refuse to impose strict regulations on citizens’ private lives, and this is a weakness an authoritarian moralist like Plato finds baffling (see his *Laws* 841a-e) , but Athens did expect honourable adults to behave with discrimination. Roman Stoics intensified the theme: the good life is a moral life, the Emperor Marcus Aurelius reminded himself, and a moral life consists of ‘appropriate actions’ (*ta kathekonta)* which are the ones in conformity with the will of Nature.[[352]](#endnote-352)

For a member of the Roman elite, who would have all the means and privileges to support a lifetime of sexual abandon, there are other objectives, other desires, more insistent than the desire for erotic release. Robert Kaster poses the question such a Roman would ask: how can I receive the ‘largest possible share in creditable attention (‘honor’) and experience the least possible discomfort from discreditable attention (‘shame’)?[[353]](#endnote-353) Stoics, Jews, Pythagoreans[[354]](#endnote-354) and Platonists advised those who wanted to live wisely to shun everything ignoble or degrading in the sphere of sex, and (except for the Jews) left room for a principled philosophic renunciation of *ta aphrodisia* (*Seventh Letter* of Plato, 335b). An honourable man will be ‘master’ of his pleasures, not their slave (Plato, *Laws*, 625).[[355]](#endnote-355) Asceticism had many fans in Rome, especially in the later Empire. It was popular both among members of traditional communities and enthusiasts for the new, fashionable cults arriving from Asia Minor and Persia.

Throughout the entire empire, in provinces and towns, we see that each local group has its own religious rituals and worships local gods. The Eleusinians worship Ceres, the Phrygians the Great Mother, the Epidaurians Asculapius, the Chaldaeans Baal, the Syrians Astarte, the Taurians Diana and the Gauls Mercury. The Romans, however, worship all the gods in the world. Their power and authority have encompassed the whole world, and they have extended their empire beyond the paths of the sun and the confines of the ocean itself. All the while they practice their god-fearing valor (*virtus religiosa*) in the field and strengthen their city with awesome religious rites, chaste virgins and many a priestly dignity and title.’ (Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 6)[[356]](#endnote-356)

That ‘chaste virgins’ were a good thing, religiously speaking, is a belief thoughtful Romans could endorse readily. It is taken for granted by the fictional upper-class heathen Caecilius in a conversation with a Christian friend, at least as such a conversation is imagined by the 3rd century Roman Christian Minucius Felix, a contemporary of Tertullian and a disciple of Cicero. Caecilius is disturbed by his friend’s beliefs: the religion of the Christians is foolish, superstitious, and philosophically incoherent. Christians are supposed to be guilty of incestuous, cannibalistic orgies as well as human sacrifices. They despise titles and ‘robes of honour’(8.5), and throw themselves into the path of torture or death.[[357]](#endnote-357) These are strange ways of showing your piety. Octavius, his Christian friend, defends his religion with spirit. The infamous rumours are unfounded, though similar practices to the orgies Caecilius describes did exist at the time. Ascribed to the Druids in an earlier century, human sacrifices were known near Carthage and in other Roman provinces in North Africa, where the gods honoured were said to be Ceres, Persephone and Saturn, who was fond of child sacrifices.[[358]](#endnote-358) ‘Tu quoque’, is Octavius’ rhetorical response to these slanders. Some Roman sacred places, he counters, are presided over by women famous for their adulteries. If a god needs men to cut off their shameful parts in order to guarantee their continence, this does not say much for the quality of Roman sexual virtue. (*Octavius*, 24) If you clean-living Romans want to talk about sexual modesty, we can wipe you off the floor. The Christians compete successfully all too successfully with the pagans on this account: ‘we gladly abide by the bond of a single marriage; in the desire of procreating, we know either one wife, or none at all…we temper our joyousness with gravity, with chaste discourse, and with body even more chaste (divers of us unviolated) enjoy rather than make a boast of a perpetual virginity of a body. So far as they from indulging in incestuous desire, that with some even the idea of a modest intercourse of the sexes raises a blush.’[[359]](#endnote-359)

Caecilius is so impressed that he instantly converts. Not all Romans were so easily swayed. But they did understand the sacral significance of sexual purity. The Flamen Dialis, the head priest who offered the sacrifices to Jupiter, is described by Ovid as the ‘chaste priest’ (*Fasti* , I, 587) (although he does have a wife); the goddess Vesta, whose main Roman festival the Vestalia occur on the Ides of June, ‘allows only chaste hands to touch her sacred things’; the living flame that she protects is also a virgin (*Fasti,* VI, 283-294)[[360]](#endnote-360). Her priestesses swear a vow of chastity, reflecting the purity of Vesta and the flame of the hearth.[[361]](#endnote-361) In the years before and after the Christian religion appeared on the scene, old and new Romans experimented with cults of various descriptions, with mystery religions and esoteric philosophies.[[362]](#endnote-362) Official Roman religion continued to enjoy its pre-eminence, enforced by the state. That did not prevent other gods like Cybele or Mithras or Isis from demanding tributes that classical sensibilities in an earlier age might have found outré. Sexual avoidance could be a requirement for specific periods of time, usually three days.[[363]](#endnote-363) At other junctures public nakedness or castration were seen as appropriate.[[364]](#endnote-364) Gods of flocks and herds, who protected shepherds and had a special care for the founders of Rome, made it a condition that their cult celebrations avoid the shedding of blood or the sacrifice of anything living. The Great Mother, also known as Cybele, whose worship is said to have migrated from Mount Ida to Rome, was honoured by marching bands of eunuchs beating drums and cymbals.[[365]](#endnote-365)

Nevertheless, despite the varied menu of religions on offer, principled asceticism remained a minority choice. Marriage, procreation and the licit uses of sexual pleasure were too important to society’s good order and functioning. To encourage higher standards and promote procreation, always a worry in Rome because of the infertility of the governing class[[366]](#endnote-366) , the emperor Augustus put through in 18 BC two important pieces of legislation, the *lex Iulia de maritandis ordinibus* and the *lex Iulia de adulteriis coercendis*, later supplemented by the *lex Papia Poppaea* which made celibacy very expensive.[[367]](#endnote-367) It is unclear how much effect these laws had on raising the moral tone in Rome, but they certainly made it clear how far the state was willing to go to

reintroduce conservative social values and control the social conduct of an upper class seen as more interested in pleasure and autonomy than in duty and community…Issues of marriage and reproduction that once had been mainly under the control of families now became, at least on paper, public and the purview of the community as a whole.[[368]](#endnote-368)

Augustus’ legislation made sexual misconduct a political issue. No longer left in the hands of families themselves, sexual shame was now also an affair for the criminal courts. Men who ‘dishonour the marriage-bed of another [man]’ or who ‘indulge their ineffable lust with males’ were subject to severe penalties, including death or exile, according to Justinian’s *Digest* whichsummarises this legislation 500 years after the fact. Seduction of a virgin or a respectable *matrona,* a freeborn youthor widow is also harshly punished, even if only men were allowed to bring adultery cases against their wives. Women had long enjoyed the right of divorce in Greece and Rome. But they were not considered eligible for the privilege (and the financial advantage) of bringing criminal accusations of adultery against their husbands, as one Cassia found out when she tried to apply the *lex Julia* to her own case.[[369]](#endnote-369) The emperor was a fan of conformity not of sexual justice or outraged virtue. In every respect, the Augustan reforms are a typical menu of moralising regulations, demonstrating the emperor’s interest in the bedrooms of his subjects as key to their behavior in other areas of life. But the most interesting of the stipulations is the insistence on prompt remarriages for widows or divorcees: the population should not remain unwedded, and financial rewards for having three or more children were considerable.[[370]](#endnote-370) According to Livy, Augustus read to the senate an old speech by the Republican censor Quintus Caecilius Metellus Macedonicus, which he undoubtedly thought made all the appropriate noises about the solemn duty of marriage:

If we could survive without a wife, citizens of Rome, all of us would do without that nuisance (*molestia*); but since nature has so decreed that we cannot manage comfortably without them, nor live in any way without them, we must plan for our lasting preservation rather than for our temporary pleasure.[[371]](#endnote-371)

Marriage, with all its annoyances, is the Greco-Roman norm, the fundamental building block of society.[[372]](#endnote-372) Cicero explained: ‘Because the urge to reproduce is an instinct common to all animals, society originally consisted of the pair, next of the pair with their children, then one house and all things in common. This is the beginning of the city and the seed-bed of the state (*seminarium rei publicae* ) (*de officiis* 1:54)[[373]](#endnote-373) Roman marriage was an institution whose prestige was high but whose contours were not always clear. There is *matrimonium*, a term that has in its scope the woman’s position in relation to marriage, rather than the man’s, as Susan Treggiari puts it in her *Roman Marriage: Iusti Coniuges* *from the time of Cicero to the Time of Ulpian,* and there is *coniugium*, marital union, which is the more common term. Their usage was not hard and fast, as Treggiari says:

It was necessary for the state that citizens should marry and produce new citizens. But no juristic definition of marriage has been passed down to us from the heyday of Roman jurisprudence.[[374]](#endnote-374)

The literature on Roman marriage is vast. Any sample will give only fragments of the picture; these are just a few rough strokes. Legal contracts were not required; nor were ceremonies or public affirmation, although they were common occurrences and often splendid.[[375]](#endnote-375) Dowries were a crucial component of the institution for the classes who had property, and negotiations between fathers and prospective grooms could be intense. In the form of marriage prevailing at the time of Augustus, marriage *sine manu,* the husband did not become the wife’s guardian, nor did he have jurisdiction over her property which, in the event of divorce returned to her and her family. People who considered themselves married were, for all intents and purposes, married, as long as their status (their *conubium*) allowed it: this legal right was denied to the underage, to close kin, to prostitutes and other *probrosae*, and excluded foreigners from marrying Roman citizens.[[376]](#endnote-376) Getting out of a marriage was simple. The prime reason for engaging in official matrimony – to produce legitimate heirs–– was not compelling in every instance since one could easily adopt an heir, or several, and disinheriting the children born of the marital bed was a not uncommon occurrence, incurring neither major disapproval nor the worry of expensive lawsuits.[[377]](#endnote-377) Among the propertied classes, a man who had reached the age of 60 without ever being married was rare, unmarried poets like Vergil and Horace enjoying perhaps a special perquisite of their profession.[[378]](#endnote-378) Yet a certain lack of modern sentimentality about marriage and its motives should not be taken to mean that the ‘affective marriage’ was unknown in late antiquity, or that conjugal virtue was simply the fantasy of philosophers.[[379]](#endnote-379)

As is always the case in history, we know most about the classes that counted. The senatorial and equestrian classes, citizens, free-born husbands and wives, and some well-off and enterprising freedmen, tell us most about themselves. They are the couples whose portraits we can still see. They were the sort who could afford to spend money on elaborate epitaphs designed to record the worth of a lost spouse for the appreciation of posterity. As they liked to portray it in the solemn inscriptions on family tombs, marriage was a moral and not just a formal arrangement. One could shine for one’s virtue here too. For Rome is a competitive society, and whatever you do well, other people should know about it.[[380]](#endnote-380) There were a number of avenues for self-promotion. Orators can celebrate political or military triumphs. If you were sufficiently outstanding, there would be historians and men of letters ready to devote appropriate language to your achievements. (They didn’t mind being paid for the favour.) Glory was pursued with ardour and intensity everywhere the Greeks and Romans left their cultural mark. Normally glory went with the explicitly ‘virile’ achievements, boldness if it is not excessive, fortitude, the will to grapple with peril and difficulty, ‘strenuous valor’ in the face of adversity.[[381]](#endnote-381) But looking back on a marriage from the sober vantage-point of mourning, as those who commissioned epitaphs for the memories of their spouses were doing, revealed a different collection of Roman values. These inscriptions are like a window into the way families wanted to display their moral property.

To judge from the epigraphy, the most highly honoured of the ‘moral properties’ families liked to present for the appreciation of the gods and posterity was *pudicitia*, the sexual integrity, dutifulness, loyalty and modesty a man hopes to find exemplified in his wife. Men also have and can lose their *pudicitia*, although reference to masculine *pudicitia* is far less common, since the broader term *pudor* covers the terrain of their ethical life more accurately. The complaint that a male shamelessly lacks *pudicitia* appears most often in invective or satire, and is used to attack a political foe whose immorality can be made to look outrageous; an obvious example is Aeschines, *Against Timarchus*. Another, rather interesting example is tale that Livy tells in his histories of Rome of a young man whose *pudicitia* is threatened. In a curious twist, the virtuous 19 year old Aebutius (who has a mistress of good and loyal character, despite her profession as prostitute) is being manipulated by his evil stepfather into joining the Bacchanalian rites. If he does so, his girlfriend announces with alarm, he will surely be corrupted, subjected to *stuprum*  from other men (one infers, penetrated by them and treated ‘as a woman’); she springs into action at the prospect of her lover’s potential slide into corruption, as this could endanger his future as a soldier and guardian of the Roman citizenry, for his *pudicitia*, so far intact despite his pre-marital sexual experiences, would in this scenario be violated. In the showpieces of the rhetoricians and in the school exercises assigned for would-be debaters, the association between modest sexual virtue and meritorious citizenship is made into a political maxim.[[382]](#endnote-382) *Pudicitia* is an important part of the moral heritage of the fatherland – a public good and a necessity for any society worth defending, as essential as life or freedom.Free males must protect the *pudicitia* of others – of women and the young – and at times, their own.[[383]](#endnote-383)

The rhetorical invocation of upright civic virtue and its disgustingly louche enemies aside, *pudicitia* to most Roman ears would have a feminine sound. *Pudicitia* is generally a virtue for females, that is, for free, well-born females. (Actresses, prostitutes, slaves and foreigners, alas, escape its net. Since they have no honour, they cannot be dishonoured.) An ideal husband will also be *pudicus* – sexually restrained, sober and modest, in other words, well-mannered. Man and woman bring their modesty together to their mutual relations, in an ideal marriage, says Plutarch in his ‘Advice on Marriage’ ( *Moralia, Praecepta Coniugalia* 10.139C), writing around 100 CE.[[384]](#endnote-384) More than an abstract moral quality, *pudicitia*  was important enough to be made into a goddess, a divinity created (a touch instrumentally) to reward and inspire mortal imitators, to give the crown to those who competed in the contest of *pudicitia*.[[385]](#endnote-385) A woman who defends her honour and her *pudor* with courage and resolve, a *pudica*, is a worthy contender in the race for heroic status; indeed, the Romans complimented women of this rank by granting them a ‘manly mind’, a *virilis animus*, like that ascribed to Lucretia, ‘*dux Romanae pudicitiae’* (‘the commander of Roman *pudicitia’*.)[[386]](#endnote-386) A chaste and modest wife protects her husband’s reputation as carefully as his household, so that he need not fear looking a fool. In turn, men are praised for the virtues they practice in marriage: patience, affection, and concord. Marital benevolence is admired in both sexes, and those who exemplify it deserve the gratitude of their city and their posterity.

Admittedly, tomb inscriptions are allowed to exaggerate in a flattering direction. But there is reason to believe that Romans did expect married love to be something more than an oxymoron. An ideal of marriage as an affectionate partnership, a *societas* or *homonoia*, stands out from a number of ancient sources, the most moving of which are letters written by husbands to wives (Augustus to Livia, Ovid to his wife, the younger Pliny to his third wife Calpurnia, Cicero to Terentia).[[387]](#endnote-387) The bulk of the relevant material comes from the long period of the Principate (27 BCE-284 CE). The piety it expresses need not be taken as an accurate representation of married life in Rome and the provinces. Like the language lovers use in courtship, what matters is not the truth of the claim but the fact that someone thought it worth saying. And many did. Certainly the official respect for women’s contribution to an upright and exemplary marital life implied little about the greater stake of Roman women in determining their lives and choices. There was no question of deliberately improving the condition of women, or allowing the public admiration for their good qualities as wives and managers to lead to any increase in their social freedoms and mobility. Yet there was something different in the attention paid to the couple, at least the upper-class couple. Hellenistic literary culture encouraged the translation of an ideal of affective, reciprocal friendship from the classical male-male prototype to a surprising scene of conjugality: not just the model household of deference and co-operation Xenophon prescribed but a *concordia* between a mutually desiring pair who suffer from each other’s absence, take immense pride in each other’s merits, and make no secret of their esteem and ardour. This, at any rate, was the self-representation Pliny chooses to present in his letters to Calpurnia towards the end of the first century BCE, the picture of a sophisticated and erotic marriage, aristocratic and individualistic, as Jean Hagstrum characterises it.[[388]](#endnote-388)

No period in history can make marriage into an idyll. Reflecting on marriage and respecting its equilibrium was something a few Greek philosophers and, in greater numbers, their Roman heirs recommended to their students and preached about to the literate public. The ‘goods’ of a virtuous marriage was a theme or *topos* of stoic *paideia*; Epicureans and Cynics, while less enthusiastic, gave it their attention. While the annoyances and distractions of wife and family was a traditional complaint, one exploited by later Christian writers looking to win men and women for the cause of virginity, most high-minded ethical experts considered the anti-marital skepticism could be overcome. Stoics favoured the discipline[[389]](#endnote-389) of marriage as a training ground for continence and temperance, as long as its practice and its pleasures did not unduly disturb the equilibrium of the well-tuned mind. To learn from marriage is a different education that the warrior received in battle or a colonial administrator receives on the job, but it has parallels. The choice of a spouse can be a revealing exercise in self-knowledge: losing your head over beauty, or selling yourself for money, betrays a weak character, and it foreshadows a bad marital experience. It’s a wife you are looking for, not a *hetaira* (Plutarch, *Coniugalia Praecepta* , 29.142C). Recognising a woman’s virtue requires more than the mechanical application of conventional criteria. It involves judgment: to be able to see that a spouse will be sympathetic, companionate, kind, compliant and faithful, and of course, *pudica*, is not mean achievement, although it may also be just a stroke of luck. The couple should be a genuine and sharing partnership: while the man should exercise control, he should do so not as the owner controls his property but as the soul controls the body, ‘by entering into her feelings and being knit to her through good will’. (33.142E) If a man trusts only his eyes or his counting fingers when picking a spouse, he has only himself to blame. (Plutarch, *Moralia* 138B-146F*, Coniugalia Praecepta*)

Roman philosophers close to the centres of power lectured the governing classes and later the emperors about correct conduct in marriage and love. Their motives were political. Marriage and the exemplary household was the best model for the good state. Domestic concord symbolises and reinforces the career of the virtuous citizen, whose justice at home is an important clue for his behavior in public. Civic piety asks of a man no less than Zeus, ‘protector of the family’ as he is called by the 1st century Stoic Musonius Rufus.[[390]](#endnote-390) Founding a family is pleasing both to Aphrodite and Hera. Marriage is patriotic. Even the sage (as eccentric as he might be) can benefit from a calm and rational partnership, as the Cynic Crates proved when he married a fellow philosopher, Hipparchia. And judicious sexual conduct mirrored political wisdom. Failure in one domain (luxury, rape, effeminacy) could imperil the other. There was nothing wrong in finding a youth or a woman attractive, in having erotic dreams and desires. All that was normal. Absent from antique moralism is any claim that sexual thoughts or sexual pleasures are evil, perverse or damaging to the soul. The problems only arise when one acts on them, and therefore it is important to know what one should and shouldn’t do and to have the will to adhere to one’s judgment. The affairs of Aphrodite are a proper object for my moral scrutiny. For it is in the context of public duties and the public good, that is, within a specific social framework, that the Roman moralistic discourse played its significant role. Above all, it helped to define the Roman elite, to communicate its values, to establish what could and could not be admitted as authentic prestige and status. Wealth, and how it is acquired, is always a tricky issue for traditional elites: virtue may not be guaranteed by distinguished ancestry, and ancient names have to fight with new money for public respect in the city. This was particularly true in Augustan Rome, which succumbed to periodic bouts of nostalgia for the good old ancient ways, when I would never be far wrong if I did as my ancestors did. Now, in this messier world, with conflicting cultural styles on offer, with an older aristocracy colliding with an increasingly autocratic line of rulers who brought their own and often odd retinues into power,[[391]](#endnote-391) who can be sure that those who boast of aristocratic status really ‘had ancestors’?

The bulk of moralising literature and rhetoric in Rome was in fact produced, as Catherine Edwards shows, by ‘new Romans’, not part of the old Roman nobility. They may not have had the ‘blood’. Often they were based in the provinces and could not rely on the civic identity ‘constructed within the medium of a face-to-face society’, as Kate Cooper puts it in her study of religious and social change in the late Empire. Other literary historians, equally struck by what seems to be an ‘erosion’ of the old way of life, point to the increased interest in questions of representation and identity, a shoring-up of the significance of the individual ‘as the close-knit communities of the classical and Hellenistic period give way to the more impersonal social matrix of empire’.[[392]](#endnote-392) Subjects of the empire who lacked the opportunities jealously guarded by the curial, senatorial and equestrian classes could not prove that they were the ‘big men’ of the day by rushing to argue in the Senate, or sending legions to endangered outposts. But they could show their solid contribution to civic harmony and their gratitude to the social order that had nourished them. How? By displaying themselves as exemplary partners in an exemplary household, by their marital virtue and sober distinction.

Virtue as a matter of policy? Contemporary students of the history of moral ideals who have lived through Marxist, feminist and Nietzschean critiques of ethical universalism would hardly be surprised at the sound of that. But in the philosophical arena, there is something jarring about the easy annexation of moral discourse by political interest. Moral judgment should be independent of political utility, Kantians believe. That was not the Romans’ view, although Stoicism often sounded as if it was tempted in that direction. Nor was it Socrates’ view: caring for the good, pursuing the improvement of your soul, should be the condition for leading a political life, not the exception. Why oppose the active and contemplative ideals when there are clearly ways to combine them? I will be a better man in public, more deserving of deference and compliance, if I am also a good man in private. Since matrimony and raising legitimate children are essential to the state, and the consolidation of estates through dowries and marital gifts is important to the economy, the flourishing of the licit and acknowledged heterosexual couple is something of political concern. That factor is what determines the shape of Roman moral thinking about the bedroom and what is done in it.

Rome gave, all in all, no free pass for uninhibited eros. Fathers wanted their daughters to be chaste, even after marriage; men still wanted to marry virgins; adultery was disgraceful, and showing excessive eagerness for sex was the sign of a whorish and despicable nature, in men as in women. Men might adore young males, but they married women. Whether social life on the ground always reflected these ideals is something we just cannot establish. Moralising texts, legal wrangles and oratorical declamation, give us a picture that is not dissimilar from that of Roman literature and art, whether comic or high-minded. But it is still just a picture. Pliny, after producing a flood of obscene verse and performing it in public, adopts the manners of the well-behaved gentleman, denying that there was any other motive to his output than light amusement and the desire to seem erudite.[[393]](#endnote-393) And considerations of one’s literary persona, one’s rhetorical effect, and the intoxicating sensation of authorship, means that textual evidence comes to us highly crafted and subject to stresses internal to the performance of writing itself. Catherine Edwards makes a sensible qualification in her study of *The Politics of Immorality in Ancient Rome* (1993):

We cannot get any close to the ancient Romans than the texts we read; we need to recognise that, for us, these highly rhetorical texts are Roman reality.[[394]](#endnote-394)

The evidence for a turn towards sexual moderation among the elites of the Empire is textual alone. The conclusions we can draw from it are limited. What we are able to see, as Edwards counsels, has been deliberately fashioned to promote certain lofty ideals, or at least to pay rhetorical tribute to them. Romans passed on the portraits through which they liked to be seen. But to approach such texts with an awareness of their literary pretensions and adept manipulation of conventions does not entail seeing them simply as masks, as deceptive or hypocritical fictions. The sober face of sexual moderation was a face considered worth showing off. If one could insult an opponent by accusing him or her of squalid venery, there must be something that passes as not quite kosher about sexual venery. All in the Roman bedroom is not light-hearted fun and games. If the rhetoric was occasionally over-wrought, the message in so many late antique texts was clear. Marriage was good for you. Philosophers in the ancient world could be verbose on the subject. Did anyone believe them? Michel Foucault is one modern critic who takes them seriously. ‘How to be married’ is a philosophic subject for him, not simply a description of social habits and trends as they wax and wane in history.[[395]](#endnote-395) The art of being married belongs to what Foucault classifies as the arts of existence, the great moral and social technologies that shaped or indeed created ‘the self’.[[396]](#endnote-396)

**3.4 How the Romans became Conjugal: the Veyne-Foucault Thesis**

Most historians of late antiquity, in describing the ‘revolution in sexual morality’ brought by Christianity, argue that this revolution did not come from outside. James Brundage is one of the firmest in resisting too much talk about ‘invention’ and radical departures: ‘Christian notions about sexual morals consisted in large part of ancient notions about proper behavior cloaked in a soutane rather than a toga…The attitudes and view of patristic writers about sexual morality were both original and derivative.’[[397]](#endnote-397) There was an extensive amount of ‘borrowing’. But there were also combinations, complex and nuanced ‘assemblages’, and applications that were new and strange, ‘singular’ in mixing Stoic ethical ideas with Hebrew religious beliefs about sexual purity, and touching the whole strange farago with hints of millenarist transformations, new births and re-created beings. In these and other respects the marital and sexual doctrines that developed in the Christian centuries built on a ground already nurtured and cultivated: it is possible to derive from late ancient ethics a conception of ‘self-making’ and self-perfecting that did require special attitudes towards the distractions of sex, hunger and other lowly appetites. Even the link between sexual renunciation and the salvation of the soul had some pagan precedents in the mystery cults.

If there was a ‘revolution’, it was prepared (as Kyle Harper puts it) within the ‘ancient thought-world that very slowly crumbled in upon itself.’ ‘The intellectual and political architecture’ of the central theological systems of the great Fathers ‘recognizably belongs to the ancient world’; if sexual morality was indeed changed in becoming Christian, that transformation was still an event within the life and history of the late ancient world, not a moment on the far side of a new civilization.[[398]](#endnote-398) Romans in the early to late Empire were getting more puritanical, or certainly their rulers and some of their philosophic and rhetorical advisors were pushing them in that direction. In the late 1st century, the senator and historian Gaius Cornelius Tacitus can write a book appealing to Imperial tastes and sympathies, which exhorts the Romans to remember their former and less corrupted *mores* by comparing themselves to the admirable if primitive Germans, who live in states ‘where all brides are virgins’, where women marry for life, where both women and youths come to sexual maturity late after lives spent healthily outdoors, dressed in rough cloaks over their naked but modest bodies. This simplicity and absence of ostentation, Tacitus suggests, should give the Romans a good example. The crude and rustic Germans, who would not laugh off a sexual disgrace, resemble their earlier, and better, moral selves. If these illiterates can know instinctively how to behave themselves sexually, without needing complex codes or punishments, why can’t the Latins?[[399]](#endnote-399)

Tacitus’s primitivism is an interesting symptom of a culture fearing its own moral decline. Emperors after Augustus veered hysterically between being poster boys for depravity (Nero, Caligula) and ‘watchdogs of public morality’, although often enough the two personae inhabited the same body.[[400]](#endnote-400) Paul Veyne and following him, Foucault, believe that this change in moral atmosphere is best described not as a victory for ‘repression’ but as an evolution towards the ‘conjugal’ model.[[401]](#endnote-401)

[…] during the second century A.D. a new code gradually took hold, in theory supplanting the older morality. Backed by medical myths (and bear in mind that ancient medicine had about as much scientific validity as medicine in the time of Molière), the new morality attempted to confine sexuality to marriage, even for young men, and encouraged parents to keep their sons virgin until their wedding day. To be sure, love was not a sin but a pleasure; the only trouble was that pleasure, like alcohol, is dangerous. For the sake of health, it was advisable to limit the amount consumed, and more prudent still to abstain altogether. This was not puritanism but hygiene.[[402]](#endnote-402)

Veyne’s theory of the ‘new’ Roman morality does not demand the introduction of the type of interior ‘authenticity’ that conventional histories of love associate with the Christian revolution. But it does insist that the outlines of paganism and Christianity should be ‘blurred’. And what made some Romans unsurprised by the intensity of Christian strictures against sexual laxity was a shift in the way status and agency were being experienced in the post-Augustan age. Why would this be the case? Veyne’s explanation begins from the priority of the civic. The city required order and deference in order to function smoothly. Producing an image of such order within the family had long been the obligation of the *paterfamilias*, who in earlier Roman times enjoyed not only respect but semi-absolute power (of life and death over his dependents *in potestat*e.) This authority of the father began to undergo certain strains at the time of Augustus, even if the change historians posit came at least 150 years later. As Veyne suggests, cracks appeared in the fused identity of civic man with private man. ‘Civic morality’ no longer covered all the duties and obligations a citizen under the Empire might acquire.

Veyne wonders if the men of this period simply could not handle it. On what could they base their right to rule? Things were different in the past: the audacity of the archaic warrior had no obvious limits, since any challenge was an opportunity, something an agonistic culture must be eager for. Similarly, the member of the senatorial class in Republican Rome was used to giving orders. His sexual behavior (boys, girls, free, dependents, whatever) would no more attract criticism than his decrees as master of the household and estate; he could punish whom he liked and for the reasons he elected. Augustine, looking back on the virtues and achievements of Rome, identifies the ‘*libido dominandi’* as one of its persistent temptations, a Roman failing that ‘makes men worse than the beasts in his cruelty or in his self-indulgence’. (*de civ. Dei*, Book V, 19). Veyne seems not to share Augustine’s distaste.

One does not have to identify with the hyper-masculine ethos of the idealised Roman past to notice that something was changing in the late empire that put pressure on the institution of marriage. Eros outside the precincts of marriage might have philosophical justification (as Plato and his imitators argued, using pederasty as their model). As a source of literary and even religious creativity, love that inflames the senses and drives even the well-tempered soul to heights of distraction is hard to compete with. But romance does not obviously coincide with conjugal arrangements: romantic love is impractical, while marriage is practical; romantic love is transient, violent, and prone to excess; marriage is the steady foundation of society, the source of dynasties and the guarantor of inheritance. Yet here in the autumnal days of antiquity, marriage started enjoying a different genre of compliment, represented as an erotically exciting prospect in popular literature (with 2nd and 3rd century novelists like Chariton and Longus) and a central concern of the well-rounded life (by philosophers like Plutarch and Musonius). Was affectionate marriage – Veyne talks about ‘the Roman ideal of love within marriage’ – replacing patriarchal domination? Veyne finds the very idea somewhat disheartening. Acknowledging Veyne’s ‘alarming sympathy for the psychology of sexual dominance’, the feminist ancient historian Kate Cooper adds some important – and critical – qualifications:

Paul Veyne introduced, nearly twenty years ago, the notion that it was not compassionate Christian apostles but dispirited pagan senators who first proposed a moral dimension to the exercise of patriarchal power in the ancient world…A change had indeed taken place around the turn of the eras, and its architect was not Jesus but Augustus….Put simply, the male Roman aristocrat had invented a rhetoric of conjugal love to compensate for his emasculation in the public realm. This was explained as an attempt to elicit affection from his wife as from his inferiors, where before he had exacted fearful subservience.[[403]](#endnote-403)

‘Emasculation’ is putting it strongly. The ideal paterfamilias in both the Roman Republic and the early Empire was privileged but also burdened by the expectations he inherited. He was to be a guardian, diligent in his stewardship of his property and his wife’s. The economy of city and empire depended entirely on the skill and management of private individuals, as there were no firms or corporations. Sometimes those individuals were female; often they were slaves. But the model was still firmly based on the old idea of the propertied ‘master’, head of a household, governor of himself and all that is ‘his’. A good father in the private sphere was also ‘paternal’ in the public sphere, as a benefactor financially and through service. He should add to his patrimony, not waste it, transmitting an improved estate to his heirs.[[404]](#endnote-404)

Without replacing most of the traditional institutions that made the social patterns of Rome a source of pride and a foundation for cultural expansion, a ‘new morality’ in Veyne’s view was chipping away at the venerable statues of paternal power. Perhaps young men did not have to remain under the rule of their elderly fathers; perhaps rich women could present themselves as something more than children; perhaps freedmen and women and even slaves were capable of the same moral discriminations as their past and present owners. Marriage, supported by Augustus’s puritanical laws, was promoted to a newly dignified position as an object of philosophical inquiry, a duty and a collective issue. Civic man – judged by his political activity and his presence as a voice in the public conversation – must also be uxorious man, attentive to his wife, a wife who might even be his best friend. ‘Had the couple arrived in the West?’ asks Veyne. ‘No. A merit is one thing, a duty another’. The exemplary husband and wife do emerge as objects of representation: beautifully painted and sculpted in all their dignity in attitudes that viewers can still see in the remnants from underground tombs of the 1st and 2nd century, they also appear in shadowy form at the end of the romantic Greek novels. Once the ardent and much-harassed lovers in those novels have achieved the goal which kept them sane throughout their wanderings and sufferings, they arrive at the longed-for union which the story teasingly deferred; like Odysseus and Penelope, they can finally disappear from the page. But represented as the culmination of such dramatic adventures, marriage is more than a contract to produce a few heirs: friendship, pleasure and moral excellence meet, and find their claims satisfied.

Romance, like most compensatory fantasies, expresses both a real desire and a way of escaping awkward reality. The ‘new man’ of Augustan Rome has lost the assurance and perhaps the public insouciance that made Romans over-act, in Augustine’s view. The new Roman is a ‘servant of the state’, not a competitive oligarch on the feudal model. (Veyne likes to compare the successful Roman public man to the Mafia *capo*.)[[405]](#endnote-405) Obliged to sue rather than usurp, he has to engineer a position by making deals and cultivating friends, through service and flattery in place of the ‘old’ heroic forms of action and worth. Therefore he needs to create a new species of discipline to impose on himself. It would be excessive to expect that this change in the distribution of power and privilege should be accompanied by the arrival of something like the famous Western notion of interior conscience, or private moral guide. Yet it is obvious that a different degree of self-scrutiny is called for in the marital climate of the post-Augustan Empire. Perhaps it is simplest to say that, at any time in history, the rulers do not always rule the same way, nor is their enjoyment of privilege a smooth and reliable possession. This does not meant that Romans contemporary with the life of death of Jesus Christ lived in an ‘age of anxiety’. But there are discriminations to be made. Under the Empire, powerful men who in previous generations would have operated almost under their own jurisdiction, recognised as civic equals in a class without rigid hierarchies, were re-defined as subjects of the Emperor. They might still be rich, probably even richer, yet their power to determine their own destinies in the political and social sphere was shrinking. Institutions like marriage, formerly a fairly private matter of negotiation between families, were becoming the business of the state; many more aspects of life fell under the law. According to Veyne, these changes influenced a greater focus on the private conditions of ’acting well’, and a greater interest in finding rational, persuasive grounds for duties and responsibilities that might in the past have passed without comment. How are my social duties explicable in terms of my relationship to myself? Does my management of my slaves or subordinates cause me to break my concentration in an outburst of anger or resentment? I may thereby risk damaging the valuable composure and internal serenity that differentiate the virile man from the hubristic one: I may be letting servitude creep into my inner sanctum. Out of the difference between the two marital ideals, Veyne makes a neat distinction between civic virtue and moral virtue: ‘The new moral code said: ‘Here are the duties of the married man,’ By contrast, the old civic code had said: ‘Marriage is one of the duties of the citizen.’”[[406]](#endnote-406) Veyne does not pretend that social domination was any less bruising in the later Empire. But the fact that it needed to be brought within, to be linked up with the movements of the soul, as stoicism in particular analysed those, was interesting. Patriarchal authority, still central to Roman life, might need moral justification.

The conclusion Veyne reaches is complicated. The Romans, compared to us, are both familiar and strange. ‘Acting well’ in private could be considered philosophically praise-worthy; dignity did not fly out the window when a man crossed his own threshold. There was much to be admired in the maintenance of concord and tenderness between the married couple (perhaps even between a man and his concubine.) But nothing here indicates that romantic love had set up its nest in the heart. We have not stumbled on an early version of the modern dream that the object of an individual’s sexual interest will also be the person most compatible in mind, taste and domestic habits. The Augustan era did encourage a different style of ‘good performance’. Private and personal self-governance – the sovereignty of the rational self, as Stoics liked to say––was a new and prestigious ideal. And this ideal lent far more credibility to what Veyne calls ‘the morality of the couple’,[[407]](#endnote-407) which, if it had as much purchase as he claims, represents a significant victory for Stoic ideology (which never tired of criticizing promiscuity and elevating the notion of a serene and rational marriage as the best ambiance for the cultivation of virtue.) To be an advocate for marriage was the new task of the citizen, according to Imperial ideology under Augustus. The city thrived, it was often said, as long as men ruled, sharing their governance at home with their wives. Adding consultation with a wife to the responsibilities of a head of household did not at one blow turn the tradition upside-down. But it began to raise doubts. Could there be, in nature or in the dictates of reason, any motive for an upper-class man with all his advantages to pay particular attention to his wife, to show strong and sympathetic sentiments towards his children, to find tenderness and companionship in his conjugal life, even to include physical fidelity among his virtues?[[408]](#endnote-408)

A ‘morality of the couple’, as Veyne puts it, was not what classical civilization would have expected. Yet there it was in Rome, already proposed by Seneca: ‘It was wicked for a husband to demand chastity from his wife and keep a mistress: having a mistress was a serious injury to a wife….A man who is wise will love his wife calmly and without passion…It is shameful to love your wife as if she were a mistress.’[[409]](#endnote-409) Husbands and wives could be friends, in the way the ancients understood friendship. A wife could offer tremendous support to her husband in his career, both political and moral. She could help him resist the winds of fortune and become equal to whatever life and gods decreed. In such a moral arrangement, infidelity would come as a discordant jolt; indeed even sex within the marriage should be rationed. Musonius Rufus, the famous Stoic of the first century, teacher of Epictetus, exiled under Vespasian, writing shortly after Seneca, demands chastity and restraint both from men and women. You may think you are completely in your rights to have sex with your slave or with a courtesan. You should be ashamed! One would not expect men to be less moral than women, or less capable of disciplining their desires, since men are the stronger in judgment. It would be like saying that the ruled are superior to the rulers![[410]](#endnote-410) And Plutarch, in ‘Advice to the bride and groom’ continues the high-minded tradition, praising marriage and conjugal sex as encouraging companionability, renewing the treaty and restoring affection in place of the otherwise unavoidable irritations in married life. Veyne draws from these and other sources his challenge to anyone who wants to write an interpretative history of the ‘birth’ of chastity out of the blood of Christianity:

To affirm, on abundant evidence, that late pagan morality was identical with almost all Christian morality is not to confound paganism and Christianity but to blur the outlines of both. There is no point arguing about these massive but flimsy inventions; rather, we must take them apart in order to study the more subtle mechanisms at work within them, mechanisms that do not correspond to traditional blueprints.[[411]](#endnote-411)

The marital ideal as an ‘art of existence’ is an opening-up of thought and uncertainty, and it is historically specific, negotiated by historical actors, not a solution applicable universally. In this case it is also class-specific:

Roman moralists of the late republic and early Principate seem to have found the vices of the poor uninteresting. The urban poor of their own day they considered naturally lacking in virtue.[[412]](#endnote-412)

Only the vices of the elite were dangerous to the health of the state; only these virtues could save it. With the approval of the upper classes, an ‘art of being married’ turns up in the discourse about morality, belonging to the set of excellences a well-rounded man possesses. Its benefits are affirmed by ancient rhetoric and philosophy (here not always in accord with ancient literature and art). But this high-minded conception of marriage would make no sense unless it was grounded in the patterns of social reproduction, demography, and economic activity. An art or aesthetics of existence is not an ideology, even in the Althusserian sense. Nor is it a moral doctrine as such. Rather it offers a way of thinking about the relationships one has, and how to move properly among them, critically and in practice. Pierre Hadot and, following him, Michel Foucault, re-introduce in this context the alluring notion of an ancient commitment to moral practice which appears to operate free of such notions as prescriptions, regulations or duties. Instead, they suggest, we should get used to the idea of an ‘art’ or technology of living well … its first relevance is to the individuals and groups for whom it can become a practice. Hadot is happy with the idea of a set of practices that help to define a spiritual direction; the term Michel Foucault would use here is ‘problematisation’.[[413]](#endnote-413) When a theme is problematized, it shows up as an incitement to think and re-order one’s experience. If Foucault is right, then the Roman upper classes would have found a new kind of demand affecting their conjugal relationships, changing the balance they had taken for granted, showing up rough patches in the self-understanding of husband and wife, public man and private woman. Marriage, has he puts it, was ‘problematised’.

Greece is more important than Rome to Foucault’s late volumes on sexual ethics and the lecture series within which he worked out these readings. But there are important parallels, and consequences which his analysis helps us to see. The ‘problematisation of the couple’, as Foucault puts it in his chapter ‘The Wisdom of Marriage’, in *History of Sexuality*, vol. 2, meant in ancient Greece that men who took seriously their own legitimacy as citizens also expected that entering into marriage would demand of them a certain moderation, a ‘marital austerity’ of an unspecific kind, but one that could oblige the husband to have no partners except his wife:

It was because he exercised authority and because he was expected to exhibit self-mastery in the use of this authority, that he needed to limit his sexual options…having sexual relations with his wife was the most elegant way of exercising his control.[[414]](#endnote-414)

Sober and thoughtful in his self-management as in the governing of his household, his family, his slaves and estate, and above all, his wife, the Classical Greek gentleman Foucault has in mind is the ideal of a small set of philosophers. In particular he is the ‘paternal pedagogue’ the Socratic disciple Xenophon was fashioning in his 4th century dialogue  *Oeconomicus*. Xenophon’s model is male-centered, with no apologies. And Xenophon pictures a good marriage as a long-lasting ‘scene of onstruction’. Everything in the Xenophonic conception of domestic and conjugal well-being depends on the male’s stature and authority; the wife he ‘brings into his house’ comes as a child (in Rome she would be even younger, the minimum age of marriage for girls being 12), unformed and ignorant, but ready to be trained and inclined towards obedience.

Equally fond of such images of serenity and marital ‘*dressage’* was the Greek-speaking Roman Plutarch writing a good five centuries later. Plutarch advised the husband to tailor the size and strength of his marital ‘reins’ to the nature of the horse: both parties in a couple agree, he explains, but the husband’s preferences ‘lead’. (*Coniugalia Praecepta* 11.139C) Plutarch was widely read. But Xenophon’s model for marital education had even more admirers: it was reprinted often over the next 1500 years and it is still imitated by the conduct literature of the British 17th and 18th centuries. An ideology of well-tempered marriage dominated the copious writings produced by moralists and would-be educators of women, anxious to monitor the thoughts, feelings, reading and speech of the gently-raised young girl who would become the ‘domestic woman’ of bourgeois Europe and the colonies.

Xenophon’s platitudes lived long and served any number of purposes. From Foucault’s perspective, they made just as much sense in Republican and Imperial Rome as in Athens. Foucault sees some fundamental continuities between classical Greece and late Rome as far as the conjugal ideal. Xenophon’s advice to husbands wishing to rule over a calm, practical and modest household was repeated even by stern Christian bishops like John Chrysostom in late 4th century Antioch, far from Athens or Republican Rome: marriage for the sober Christian couple could be a moral education, a contained community, private and enclosed, safe from the raucous spectacles and vulgar chasing after wealth and glory that so disfigured late ancient society, in the view of Chrysostom (Homily XII on Colossians)[[415]](#endnote-415). The Xenophonic portrait of disciplined serenity and order, somewhat adapted, contributed to the ‘traditional schemas of ethical valuation’ that still functioned, and it did so because it tallied with the favoured philosophy of the middle and late Empire: Stoicism.

The ancient historian Susan Treggiari has written what may be a definitive study on Roman marriage. She covers a 300 year period, from Cicero to Ulpian. Her conclusion in her chapter on *Coniugalis Amor*, after sifting through epitaphs, legal writings, letters and poetry, sounds a positive note. Love did exist in marriage. Lacking in the material she studies is ‘the domineering tone that Rome’s original patriarchal institutions might lead us to expect’. There is a lot of conventional and formulaic sentiment, but it appears that ‘falling in love is (at least from the time of Augustus) proper for a couple who are to marry each other.’ Finally, and it is not a small admission: ‘Rome’s particular (though not entirely original) contribution to the ideology of marriage was the ideal of the wife’s faithfulness to one man, the eternity of the bond, and the partnership of the couple.’[[416]](#endnote-416) Marital concord in Rome is not the ‘one flesh’ the Book of Genesis talks about. But it is a lot more than just a social and economic arrangement or a workshop for procreation. It has value in its own right, not as a poor substitute for paedophilia, or a means to the cementing of alliances between men and consolidating estates.[[417]](#endnote-417) Of course it is all of these. It is an economic arrangement, a contract between families, a way to strengthen and sustain the social order. It is also a careful and caring way of life. (There were even husbands who refused to divorce their barren wives!) Marriage has stature. And it has the capacity to serve as a testing-ground for human excellence. Romans liked to achieve. Their ‘greed for praise’, commented Augustine, who would know, was their highest and all-defining moral quality, for good or ill (*de civ. Dei* Book V, chapters 12-14). Positively, the desire for praise is a stimulus to live honourably, to put their narrow self-interest aside for the benefit of society, to win glory in the ‘earthly city’ (*de Civ. Dei* , Book V, 18) Here was one more place they could do so.

This point is not incidental to the story of Christian chastity and its remarkable rise. Classical Greeks, and then Romans under all regimes, took very seriously the way they appeared to others. Christians, as St Augustine pointed out with pride when comparing them to the high achievers among the pagans, are known for their insistence on the far greater significance of the inner, invisible performances:

Their master had taught the apostles not to be good in order to gain glory from men. He told them, ‘Take care not to perform your righteous acts in the presence of men, so as to be seen by them; or you will have no reward with my Father, who is in heaven’ (Matt. 6, 1) (*City of God*, Book V, 14)

By the time Augustine wrote this, the Christian ethics of otherworldly renunciation had triumphed. It had laid waste to the ancient world and all its splendour, undermining a venerable and sophisticated culture, one that still enjoyed a good relationship with its gods. This absurdity has provoked shock and repugnance since well before Edward Gibbon. Was its rise really all that remarkable? Veyne and Foucault’s revisionary history of love and marriage in the late Classical World and the late Roman Empire[[418]](#endnote-418) proposes that sexual morality was adopting a style of austerity before the Christians even dreamt of taking the reins.[[419]](#endnote-419) Reflective interest in marriage (what Foucault would call its ‘problematisation’) was the first noticeable shift in late ancient society as far as the relations of men to their bodies, pleasures and social duties. To be sure, Romans did not discover marriage as a social and philosophical issue. Greeks like Xenophon had put great care into explaining the masculine art of guiding and educating a wife; Aristotle had considered the possibility of friendship – that unchallengeable virtue of the right sort of man – between husband and wife, and not ruled the idea out of court.[[420]](#endnote-420) Imperial Rome went further. Indeed, the lean towards conjugal restraint had been building up for a long time, as Veyne argues:

But during the second century A.D. a new code gradually took hold, in theory supplanting the older morality. Backed by medical myths (and bearing in mind that ancient medicine had about as much scientific validity as medicine in the time of Molière), the new morality attempted to confine sexuality to marriage, even for young men, and encouraged parents to keep their sons virgin until their wedding day. To be sure, love was not a sin but a pleasure; the only trouble was that pleasure, like alcohol, is dangerous. For the sake of health, it was advisable to limit the amount consumed, and more prudent still to abstain altogether. This was not puritanism but hygiene. Conjugal pleasures were another thing entirely. They were part and parcel of the civic, and natural, institution of marriage and hence a duty.[[421]](#endnote-421)

Taking a rather skeptical attitude towards sexual laxity, the upper-class Roman discourse about marriage adopted many of the Stoic prejudices. Immoderation in the affairs of Venus could be a vice, as degrading to a man as cowardice or avarice; just as unbridled avarice could sap masculinity and threaten honour,[[422]](#endnote-422) so could libidinous excess turn a man effeminate (a *malakos*) and ridiculous[[423]](#endnote-423). A male who abandons himself to dissolution is monstrous, the semi-legendary deviant or *kinaidos*  of Greco-Roman infamy. It is always admirable to show strength of will. That is the sign of a master. The well-born are born and raised to dominate others; they must also dominate themselves. This is an ethical exhortation most aristocratic Romans could understand. Holding firm against the attacks of libido tempers and hardens a man, reviving in him those ‘good old virtues’ of his republican forebears. He must attend to his body scrupulously, and not allow his conduct to be careless or unseemly. As late as the reign of the ‘Apostate’ Emperor Julian, in 380, the great man himself (well past his rejection of Christian belief) shines in the eyes of his admiring biographer, the historian Ammianus Marcellinus:

Julian must be reckoned a man of heroic stature, conspicuous for his glorious deeds and his innate majesty. Philosophers tell us that there are four cardinal virtues: self-control, wisdom, justice, and courage; and, in addition to these, certain practical gifts: military skill, dignity, prosperity, and generosity. All these Julian cultivated both singly and as a whole with the utmost care.

To being with, he was so spectacularly and incorruptibly chaste that after the loss of his wife he never tasted the pleasures of sex, but kept in mind what we read in Plato about the tragedian Sophocles. When Sophocles was asked in extreme old age whether he still had intercourse with women he answered ‘No’, and added that he was glad to have escaped from slavery to so mad and cruel a tyrant as love. To strengthen this resolve Julian was in the habit of repeating a saying of the lyric poet Bacchylides, one of his favourite authors, to the effect that chastity adds lustre to a life of high ideals just as a good painter enhances the beauty of a face.[[424]](#endnote-424)

Female sexual restraint had always featured among the qualities it is decent and proper to admire. Now male sexual virtue acquired some of this aura. The second century’s ‘growing concern with manly deportment’ did not emerge by chance, like some sort of moral wildflower. There were historical developments that effected the traditional ruling classes of Rome, a decline in the numbers as well as the influence of the old nobility who had dominated the Republic, a rise in the visibility and confidence of the ‘new rich’[[425]](#endnote-425) in addition to the considerable diversion of interest towards the administrative possibilities of the colonies. Economic enrichment, ‘by any means necessary’, needed nonetheless to be bolstered by ‘dignity’; equally the possession of cultural capital in the form of *paideia* and the conscious mastery of ‘elite’ and ‘manly deportment’ were ways to prove one’s fitness to hold public office (itself a reliable route to wealth, through patronage rather than the modern curiosity of a salary).[[426]](#endnote-426)

A notable in the 2nd and 3rd century Empire was a public person, who needed to perform his role: if at the top ranks, to serve on the Senate; if slightly below, to be a generous and lavish patron of the city (a *euergetes*).[[427]](#endnote-427) The ideal man is a man of leisure, not obliged to work, cultivated and wealthy, able to help his friends and be liberal to others; his energies are well applied if used for political life, but they are not wasted if he invests them in philosophy. And it was from philosophy that the ‘newer code’ of conjugal morality, as Veyne describes it, derived the justification of its prescriptions. A rational person, in this novel ideology of the civic-minded household, recognises the merits of treating his wife with respect; conformity joins hands with good intentions, and with the help of Stoic high-minded self-importance, elevates a habit of tranquil marital co-existence into a lesson for excellence.[[428]](#endnote-428) Foucault, in a conversation with Richard Sennett about subjectivity, sex and private life, notes the staid view of monogamy popular in pagan philosophical texts, and remarks with a touch of relish: not much here that would surprise a Christian: ‘The so-called Christian morality is nothing more than a piece of pagan ethics inserted into Christianity.’ He quotes a passage from St François de Sales about the modesty of the faithful elephant, ‘who never changes his mate’, and has sex with her only once every three years (after which he carefully washes himself in the river.):

Everybody can recognize here the pattern of decent sexual behavior: monogamy, faithfulness, and procreation as the main, or maybe the single, justification for the sexual acts– sexual acts that remain, even in such conditions, intrinsically impure. Most of us are inclined, I think, to attribute this pattern either to Christianity or to modern Christian society as it developed under the influence of capitalist or so-called capitalist morality. But what struck me when I started studying the pattern is that one can find is also in Latin and even Hellenistic literature. One finds the same ideas, the same words, and eventually the same reference to the elephant. It is a fact that the pagan philosophers in the centuries before and after the death of Christ proposed a sexual ethic that was very similar to the alleged Christian ethics.[[429]](#endnote-429)

Veyne and Foucault are not alone in placing marital piety within a wider pagan ascetic culture, which included by the 2nd century the scattered Christian communities. Other students of the transition from pagan to Christian moralities are happy to note the continuities between the Roman conjugal ethic, as elaborated by rhetorical and philosophical moralists, and the qualified approval early Christians give to the ‘goods’ of marriage.[[430]](#endnote-430) For many who have been mapping ‘late antiquity’ as a looser, more encompassing cultural and historical space, the Veyne-Foucault thesis has much to support its core intuition. Pagan to Christian is not like night is to day, or freedom is to repression. Those otherworldly, self-denying followers of a crucified Messiah did not come out of nowhere. They ‘Christianized’ fundamental moral questions that were already there. The Hellenistic and Roman formation of an ascetic intellectual culture had much to do, albeit unintentionally, with the specific dynamics, strange as they are, of the Christian ‘drama of sin’. How could there not be an influence, for it is the philosophers of Greece and Rome – Plato, Plotinus, Cicero -- whose words are stocking the minds of Origen, Methodius, Gregory of Nyssa, Jerome and Augustine, not to mention Philo?

**3.5** **What Difference Did Christianity Make?**

But texts and the philosophers or theologians who write them cannot tell us everything. Real bodies were affected by the values, codes and representations their societies were transmitting. Yet how they were affected cannot simply be read off the moral vocabularies or descriptions of the ascetic life we find in texts. Pagans and Christians had different stories about the way their fears and desires fitted into the cosmos. For both, the fragility of human life needed to be dealt with at the level of the body and the level of society. But their proposals for how to do this were different:

That the body could be a metaphor for society was a commonplace in antiquity. That the body and its relationships were the arena in which the moral contest of life must take place was also nothing new. Yet, for Christians, ascetic and nonascetic, both commonplaces became peculiarly intricate topics of elaboration and controversy.[[431]](#endnote-431)

Peter Brown’s extraordinary *The Body and Society* (1988) describes the hopes and expectations of the pagan moralist, who had reason to warn of the dangers of raw and cruel passions, insatiable appetites, painful illnesses and anti-social obsessions such as the lust for money or glory. Any number of therapies could be devised. Yet where they ended up was a familiar place: ‘Like society, the body was there to be administered, not changed.’ Conformity was key. Excess and deviance could, with the most exacting discipline, be held in check. The ministry that Christians viewed as their duty to the world was to create a different kind of expectation: if the laws of nature could change, as they had with the astonishing event of the resurrection, then surely organized society and the human body assigned to serve it could also be transformed, even beyond recognition. Sexual renunciation as an anticipation of a heavenly interruption in earthly necessity was not simply an intensification or radicalisation of pagan asceticism. It was a ‘drastic alternative’.[[432]](#endnote-432) Yet it was one that took a while to bite in.

That proper, restrained, well-behaved marriage was society’s ideal form, the sanctioned arrangement of sexual life: this was no invention of eccentric Christians.[[433]](#endnote-433) Stoic and Epicurean teachers found in the 2nd century that their message was finally falling on fertile soil: it was possible to be discreet and rational in the affairs of sex: ‘The existence of conjugal love is no longer a happy accident, but a norm whose realisation is assumed.’ (Veyne, *La famille et l’amour* 110) A norm, however, is never absolute. Veyne and Foucault pick and choose their sources, with a certain bias towards the philosophic moralists in Foucault, and the picture they paint is of a late Roman society susceptible to what Eric Dodds earlier identified as ‘anxiety’. The culture Veyne and Foucault visit, with its sober worries about marriage, self-control, and fidelity to gender roles, is more austere than the bawdy Rome of the comic poets, pornographic art works, and medical treatises suggesting sexually eclectic positions.[[434]](#endnote-434) Marriage received both official respect and much personal investment, especially after Augustus elevated its dignity. There was, however, room outside. Free-born men, whether or not they paid lip service to the ideals an Augustus or a Marcus Aurelius wanted to support, enjoyed many sexual freedoms, having free hunting among any willing (or in the case of slaves, unwilling) women or youths who fell outside the class boundaries, although they could still be subject to censure for deceiving their wives – under one period of legislation, they had to pay her a fine. Sleeping with a concubine or an unfree woman or a servant or a performer was never adultery. Roman New Comedy makes this explicit: ‘As long as you abstain from bride and widow and virgin/ From freeborn youths and boys, love who you wish.’ (Plautus, *Curculio*  lines 37-38)[[435]](#endnote-435) If you don’t restrict your sexual desires to the permissible objects, the law may get you, and you could be disgraced, indeed you should be. If you are a decent person, you would at least blush. Only those without shame (v*erecundia*) would commit *stuprum* without stopping to think, and shaming is one way Romans believed they could influence public morality for the better.[[436]](#endnote-436) *Stuprum*  - that untranslatable crime which means something like debauchery or just ‘forbidden’ sex – is seriously frowned upon, and prosecutable: ‘The law stated that any man who had sexual relations with a young boy, a girl from a good family, or a widow, was guilty of *stuprum.*’[[437]](#endnote-437) But legally, no male who confined his sexual activity to suitable partners need worry too much about public condemnation or legal punishments.

Philosophers did teach a stricter standard of conduct, based on the notion that freedom in the mind was best cultivated by a studied detachment from the exigencies of the body. And this ascetic alternative appealed to those who wanted something more ambitious, special and individual; there was something aristocratic about it, it betrayed a literary taste and refinement; the ascetic, Veyne writes, was ‘morality’s dandy’. (111) Perhaps it is unsurprising to note that in the stratified Roman world sexual virtue, like ascetic elegance, was the privilege of the upper-classes, the citizen, the free-born, and sometimes the freedman or woman: the male or female who have the power to say yes or no to sex. (Those coerced into sex, say by being captured in war, do not lose their *pudicitia.*) It is for the patrician to be preoccupied with honor, and for his wife to guard her *pudicitia.* The notion that every person qua person has a moral life would be a strange notion for an ancient moralist to consider. To examine your conduct, be obliged to make choices by which you can be judged, to seek to improve your character: these are not activities that fall under the job description of an underling, someone without civic status or name. Generally speaking, Romans who have expressed an opinion on the matters tend to hold that no slave or courtesan or passive supplier of his master’s sexual demands is expected to display *pudicitia -* sexual modesty or chastity. Therefore no slave or courtesan etc. could be shamed, even if a slave who sleeps with a married woman can be indicted for adultery. ‘A free individual’, writes Rebecca Langlands in her book on *Sexual Morality in Ancient* Rome, ‘has a responsibility towards his or her own body, so that to allow someone else to use it is utterly inappropriate, a slave is merely an instrument of the master’s needs.’ (22) Shame was the great moral deterrent, and its force penetrated ‘right to the bones’, in Carlin Barton’s phrase. No teams of moral police were needed to supplement it.

The elitism of Roman virtue can chill modern readers. Are the poor morally disadvantaged? Did you have to be well-born to feel shame? Do you need to be free to fear infamy? How high up do you need to be to be a man or a woman of honor? If you don’t have a reputation, how can you lose one, and if you have no status, how can you have a reputation? Among the many gifts Christianity brought to the ancient world, one of the least controversial is that it made shame a universal condition. It also displaced glory from the public sphere where Greeks and Romans would expect it to shine. Only God knows if you are worthy, Jesus explained. Do your good deeds in private, under the cloak of anonymity. Don’t expect applause. Performing righteousness for the sake of approval is not righteousness at all. Hence the peculiar freedom, but also the peculiar invisibility, of Christian excellence. Such invisibility extends in a very precise manner to the performance of the newly magnified Christian virtue, abstinence. Abstinence tends not to flourish in a busy social environment. It is easier to sustain in solitude, and in a background that is minimal to the point of discomfort. The contest for excellence that the abstinent competes in is with the self, not others: the corruption of chastity and fasting by too vivid an awareness of the presence of others was a major worry for advocates of asceticism in the first four centuries of Christianity. Nothing is more damaging to chastity than vainglory, was a warning repeated over and over, indicating that the humility genuine asceticism required was frequently hard to sustain. It can help to come from nothing – Roman aristocrats could learn from the simplicity of the peasant-born hermits they found as their neighbours in the desert at Nitria.

For a true Christian, social background should not make a difference. Whoever you are, whatever you do, whatever rank your parents, whether slave or free, you too can give up sex and join the crowd of saints in the desert. When Christians took over asceticism, repression moved from high to low, a bit like the equally dramatic migration of physical exercise from ignominious labour to aristocratic game, something moderns and ancients have in common. Men of the wealthy or literate upper classes, even if not patricians, were the first to follow the lure of the hermit’s retreat; but the simple and the humble, especially lower-class women, were quickly at their heels. The other pillar of ascetic excellence – voluntary poverty and a near-starvation diet –– moved in the other direction. (When, converts to Christianity who were products of the Greco-Roman aristocracy, great heiresses like Melania and Olympias, moved to convents or the desert, they choose to live like Egyptian fellahin, on water, bread and lentils. In Christianity, deprivation became a style. The social equality it would seem to accompany logically did not, however, remain current.) Christian asceticism made ethics democratic. For a while.

Politically, the contrarian focus of Christian asceticism had long-term effects, probably contributing to the destabilisation or Roman society. The anchorite, who flees to the desert because the world is not a home, lives in his body a stunning lack of respect for the machinery and rewards of society. Yet he and his fellows, who include enthusiastic women feeling marriages and families, do create a society of their own. Asceticism created a rival power-base to the traditional centres of city and court. With its eyes fixed upon the invisible and the eternal, the ascetic system managed to make of itself a virtual mirror of the society it was replacing. And its social and economic innovations put many of the secular practices of the Middle Ages in the shade. Monastic institutions and communities, built not just inside caves but near cities and towns, were the more formalised version of the flight to the desert. They were a novelty of the late Empire, and a powerful, lasting one. (That their operation challenged the state’s authority, and represented a protest against monopolisation of power in the crown or Parliament is shown by the reckless intensity of the campaign against them much later, under the Tudors: dissolution of the monastic world was a critical step in the formation of the early modern state.)

Externally, a lot changed with Christianity. The question Veyne and Foucault want raised is this: was the mutation internal as well? Was it a change of rhetoric or a change of form? Is the Cross on the surface or within? Did Christianity change the tune or just transpose the piece into another key? Can we speak about a new kind of mental and physical being, a ‘desiring subject’, who is now the focus of Christian attention and ‘hermeneutical inquiry’, and who replaces the ancient ethical individual with his cares and concerns? Did Christianity invent interiority, to bring back Nietzsche’s old jibe? There is much that is attractive about the Veyne-Foucault thesis. Without getting entangled in ideological wars, it denies the old-fashioned ‘epistemological break’ between pagan and Christian sensibilities. Generations of historians who ‘compared’ pagan antiquity to Christian absorbed the propaganda put forward by Christian apologists and polemicists, which ‘deliberately misrepresented Christians as standing apart’ from the moral consensus.[[438]](#endnote-438) Veyne’s writings on Rome and Foucault’s on the history of sexuality and late antique ethics contribute to an intellectual project, one that anyone interested in the study of chastity must find exciting. That is the quest for the ‘making of late antiquity’ carried on since the 1960s and 1970s in academic departments of classics, ancient history and the history of Christianity. Before then, as Robert Louis Wilken writes in *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, (Yale UP, first published 1984) we had

A distorted view of the history of early Christianity. The historian of the Roman Empire, who by training and perspective could view Christianity within the larger historical picture, has seldom bothered to look at the Christian sources. The student of Christianity, who does know the sources and the unique problems of early Christian history, is usually familiar with the pagan sources only at second hand and has inflated the Christian part of the canvas beyond all reasonable proportions.[[439]](#endnote-439)

Christianity and paganism no longer live in different boxes, with the keys to the first allocated to the theologian and the second to the secular historian, social scientist and classicist. Even philosophers are allowed to roam more freely over this extended terrain. Which is all to the good. The French historians Veyne and Foucault offer a bracing account of the psycho-social evolution of manners and practices in the Roman world of the ‘High Empire’. This was an evolution that drew very near to the Christian preference for chastity and marital restraint. One could call it a ‘new pagan ethic’. For Veyne, it was this ethic which delivered to Christianity everything that seemed original in the way of moral content. All Christianity added was a set or priorities already put in place by Stoicism: the fondness for abstract doctrines of soul and body, the notion that virtues were ‘within’ and even most significant when invisible, and the appeal to a transcendent justification (Nature or God or Logos), even the affiliation of moral acts and prohibitions not with social status but with a more cosmic ontology. Christianity, Veyne writes, simply gave this ready-made ethics of the epoch its metaphysics and its ‘transcendental cover’.

It is a tempting corrective. I do not think, finally, that it will do. Nor did Foucault himself consider it illuminating simply to draw attention to the similarity in ‘basic principles’ detectable in Greek, Roman and Christian recommendations about the hazards of unrestricted sex and the benefits of moderation:

The prescriptions may be formally alike, but that actually shows only the poverty and monotony of interdictions.[[440]](#endnote-440)

It is true that in late Rome conjugality was enjoying a long period of cultural respect and even poetic glamorisation. Moralists found much to admire in the settled, morally upright household and the quiet concentration of the monogamous bedroom. So did those who aspired to political influence and literary renown. The repute of marriage as a legitimate site for upper-class self-approval was high: it could be a discipline, a school of moderation and temperance, a vehicle for the philosopher’s exercise of discretion and self-control. Marriage, of course, had always been crucial as a means to consolidate social power through alliances, procreation and the preservation of wealth. But the ideal of a conjugal virtue – allowing a discreet indulgence in bodily pleasures and encouraging the rational practice of friendship within the family household – this was something unusual. In this sense, the high-minded notion of rational and respectful marriage was flourishing in pagan cities and towns at around the time that Christians began making themselves obvious for their strictness and their austerity. Importantly, the stress on marriage differentiated late Romans from the classical Greeks they used to envy. Was it possible that relations between men and women could foster benevolence, or help to develop *sophrosyne*? Romans did not find the idea inconceivable. Indeed the same-sex love and friendship that the Greeks so admired was a minority taste in Rome. Hellenistic novels, popular with Greek-speaking citizens of Rome, playfully compared the charms of pederasty to the appeal of marriage. And, as Plutarch’s dialogue *Erotikos* and Achilles Tatius’s romance *Leukippe and Kleitophon*  concluded, the philosopher will be proved right if he defends marriage.[[441]](#endnote-441)

Matrons of the better families were commended for their learning as well as their virtue; they were not sequestered, and could even take part in political and economic affairs. As small steps were taken in the direction of women’s emancipation, and greater equality between the sexes began to be thinkable, sexual license and sexual luxury lost some of their earlier appeal. That we can say with some degree of confidence. But the gods still were friendly towards erotic love, as Plutarch had argued in his wholehearted praise of marital love in the late 1st century. Venus was a goddess not a demon, and affairs of the heart and the flesh were valuable elements in the full and enviable life, not marks of a diseased, corrupted nature. Christianity did not build on a moral foundation which needed only a few divine sanctions to become recognisably the temple of divine virginity. ‘Self-control’ was the operative term for pre-Christian sexual virtue – wisdom, discretion, and what moderns might call reciprocity. Stripping away all desires until the soul was left as impersonal and undemanding as an angel: that was a move no philosophical anthropology of the pagan world could make, or want to make. Sex needed watching; and philosophers could do a good job of explaining the hierarchy of values that might put erotic love in its proper place in the cosmos. But it did not need demonising. That mission was left for the early Christians to undertake. Why they did so is still unclear. That eros was damaged almost beyond recovery is something I do not want to deny. Between pagan *sophrosyne* and Christian chastity is a chasm that tests the tolerance of the most accommodating of minds.

**3.7 Going Cold Turkey: the Christian’s Holy War against Sex and the Birth of a New Purity**

Christianity spoke to and in favour of the sexless, the barren, and the eunuch. Its members soon included a new class of people -- the permanent or ‘dedicated’ virgin, the adult male ‘undefiled by women’, the spinster by conviction. Aline Rousselle, in her brilliant *Porneia: On Desire and the Body in Antiquity*, observes: ‘The extent to which virginity gained popularity among the upper classes of the Roman Empire at the end of the fourth century’ is ‘remarkable’.[[442]](#endnote-442) Rousselle does not exaggerate. This ideal, soon to become a feature of monastic practice and a structuring element in the monasteries’ institutional coherence, was at first – to an average pagan, just strange. In a few heady generations it had changed what is was to be a person, at least to be a person of value. Yet one must remember that those who became Christians were, and remained, Greeks or Romans, in all significant aspects. Christians were not a new species. They were practitioners of a new faith, a new cult. What they praised, and the models they presented for emulation and admiration, sounded rather different. And what they presented as oppressive, inhuman and enslaving included ways of life many Greco-Romans followed without too much awareness of impeding doom. Christians proclaimed that many of the social roles – chosen or imposed – that non-Christians took as obvious and inevitable were nothing of the sort: to be a prostitute was degrading, to be an adulterer (male as well as female) or even a concubine was depraved: a pederast, a dancer, an actor or a gladiator, was shameful and displeasing to the divine, rather than simply the luck of the draw for those born on the wrong side of the tracks or fallen on hard times.

On the competitive field of late ancient social life, such exceptions to the marital norm -- the unmarried, the retired widow, and the eunuch—could not hope for much in the way of social status. They were figures without *éclat*. Ignored or pitied, their presence could be embarrassing to families, a blot on the smooth functioning of the official social world, even a reason for disgrace. Poets had little to say about them; ethical and medical advisers used the continent and the abstinent only as examples of the dangerous extremes that could be found on the margins of normalcy. But here, in these small religious communities and congregations, the continent were treated with reverence, and their authority was contagious. Asceticism may have begun as a scattered, unofficial, niche practice for a few ardent Christians. There was something about it, nonetheless, that compelled attention. The more ascetics concentrated on their own dislike for the conspicuous and the showy, the more conspicuous they became. The mystique of ascetic unworldliness built up quickly. Between the 2nd and the 4th century C.E. proto-monastic experiments, organised communities large and small sheltering virgins, widows, and the celibate of both sexes probably had thousands and thousands of members.[[443]](#endnote-443) Sophisticated observers, and Roman officials, began to wonder. Was this a phenomenon worth analysing or just one of the many freak shows of the late Roman Empire? How could it such people become the stars of a new order? What converted an antisocial secession from the duties of social and sexual reproduction into a vocation for sanctity? How were the eunuch, the barren and the sexless to be re-interpreted as better than the rest of us, as admired pioneers in ‘the angelic life’? Through what combinations of circumstances could the saint, the martyr and the virgin replace the hero and the sage?

Sexual conduct had been a minor but basic theme for moralists, one that, say, Epictetus or Plutarch, like most ancient philosophers, touched on without offering anything new or startling in the way of transformation, The medical writers, Galen, Soranus, Hippocrates, had weighed in, some recommending more sex, some less, some cautioning about the unhealthy effects of prolonged virginity, some prescribing controlled abstinence. After a few centuries of Christian expansion the scene had changed dramatically. By 350 C.E. or earlier, the war against fornication was on. Sexual desire, something whose excessive influence had certainly been criticised by all Greek and Roman philosophers, now appeared in a different guise. It was, from root to branch, a problem, a source of suspicion. It was anarchic. It was malicious. It could mutate from form to form, shape to shape, plaguing the imagination and interrupting the believer at prayer, alone in his room, far from any visible temptation. Nocturnal emissions and lustful thoughts became a newly terrifying theme. What caused those pesky spasms, those arousing dreams and emissions disturbing the night-time rest of even the most sober person? Greek and Roman doctors had worried about them as well, offering many different explanations, ranging from digestive disorders to heaviness of the humors or coagulating accumulation of fluids.[[444]](#endnote-444) Sexual activity, in the medical diagnoses, could certainly be pathogenic. On the other hand, it could clearly be a source of ‘therapeutic effects’, as Foucault observes in his pages on Galen, Rufus and the other Hellenistic medical texts:

Its ambivalence made it capable of healing in certain cases. In others, on the contrary, it is likely to lead to illnesses. But it is not always easy to determine which of the two effects it will have: a question of individual temperament, a question, too, of particular circumstances and of the transitory state of the body.[[445]](#endnote-445)

When Christian converts headed into caves or joined in small single-sex communities in Palestine, Syria, Egypt and beyond, they were not looking for ways to improve their health or maintain their intellectual composure. They wanted to save themselves , and to achieve victory over the demons who ever tired to harassing and slandering the seeker of holiness. ‘Ambivalence’ would be far too weak a word to use for the pleasures of sex. The devil made use of sexual desire to tempt and capture the unwary Christian soul. Evil spirits invaded their beds at night, disturbing their dreams and polluting their bodies against their wills. The loveliest women, or even old hags, could suddenly offer themselves to upright believers, competing to corrupt them. Armour needed to be put on; vigilance had to be unending. Those who could extirpate the yearning from their minds and limbs were the lucky ones. It may be that God had conceded sexual desire to humans in order to ensure that they fulfilled the task of reproduction. This is what the Book of Genesis explained. But this was not his original plan. If we had remained faithful in the first instance, we would have known neither death nor lust. This was a view popular in the most radical circles of the early Christians, those called dismissively ‘encratites’ or, loosely, ‘gnostics’. But it was a tone that continued to reverberate among the orthodox as well: Tertullian, Ambrose, Cyprian, and Jerome. Matrimony, approved by the Creator, was created simply as a compensation, a favour to a race suffering from His disappointment and its painful consequences. Once the epoch of exile caused by the disobedience of Adam and Eve comes to an end, once humans are returned to the purity of their original condition, neither marriage nor sex (neither death nor childbirth) will be known any more. In the Gospel of Matthew, the kingdom of heaven is described as belonging to the children and the poor, and those ‘who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven’ (Mt 19:12). Just as the blessings of the world to come belong to the powerless rather than to the powers of ‘this age’, so the present and past realm of family and marriage is about to reach the end of its dominance. And if the ‘new’ arrives, why would the old order continue to rule?

And Jesus said to them, “The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage; but those who are accounted worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection of the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage, because they are angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection.” (Luke 20:34-36)[[446]](#endnote-446)

A new way of being! This was the prophetic strain Christians had derived from the few hints of the Gospels, expanded by four centuries of arguments and experiments within the different communities vowed to the new worship, communities that spread from the ascetic neighbourhoods of the Syrian desert to the more conventional cities of present-day Turkey, Greece, Gaul and North Africa. Some of the ascetic electricity was the contribution of the ‘heretics’ – Valentinius, Marcion, Tatian, Basilides and Julius Cassian – but a lot of it was blessed by the so-called orthodox, and glamourised by the popular stories of Antony, Paul of Thebes, and others. By the time of Saint Augustine (C.E.354-430) the trend was fully in place. Christendom had opted for a hierarchy of moral ideals that diminished the status of marriage, rendering it not without honour, not shameful in any way but definitely second-best. ‘This is so much greater than marriage as heaven is greater than earth, as angels are more sublime than people.’ (Pseudo-Athanasius*, de virginitate,* ch.45) Angels do not marry, nor do they need food and drink or a comfortable place to stay. Their nature is above flesh. So could yours be, if you aspire to this top-flight excellence. A restrained, abstemious married life was acceptable, for those who needed it. It had its legitimate place, and no one could condemn a Christian for choosing it. But the finest and the most rewarding was celibacy, taken on as a commitment whether from early youth, maturity or old age, whether preceded by sexual experience or in utter innocence.

It is this prejudice in favour of deliberate and permanent chastity that distinguished Christianity from its precursors and rivals. The idealisation of a life without sex put sex under a cloud. Our contemporary anxieties – are we sexual enough? Do our sexual practices make us normal or abnormal? – make no sense without this murky background. Christianity, whether or not we believe in it, is still pulling the strings.

The ‘tectonic shift’, or ‘watershed’, a fissure between the classical and late-classical world (up through 3rd century Rome) and the Christianised world of the 5th century, should not be underestimated.[[447]](#endnote-447) The rules of conduct can sound very similar. The language seems the same. But the logic has changed. Chistian Jambet, in his presentation to the January 1988 conference on ‘Michel Foucault, philosophe’, emphasises the discontinuity:

Foucault’s work insists on the break between the moralities of Ancient Greece and Rome and that of Christianity. There are communications and exchanges, transmissions and interminglings, but on the actual question of sexual ethics, Michel Foucault conceives of the movement between late Antiquity and the triumphant Christian world very precisely as a discontinuity. The concern for self which made it possible for the subject to ‘make himself empty for himself’ was replaced by the extortion of ‘confessions of the flesh’.[[448]](#endnote-448)

Christianity, with its metaphysics of freedom and its gaze fixed on a future in which social life as we know it would be annulled, did not just give the old morality a different logic and dress. It came into the world to destroy that world. And the battle against sex was one of the first weapons in its holy war.

For a Christian, sexual desire is a test the holy man must pass through even if it means divorcing himself from the erotic and familial relations most people consider essential; the same is true, perhaps even more so, for the holy woman. It is not the only test, and the dangers of concupiscence are much more sweeping and inescapable than the confident celibate can imagine. It took a reformed lover like Augustine to give the terrible news. The discord of sexuality is not to be pacified by a scrupulous attention to the body, no matter how painstaking and severe. Nor is the intellect a place the sufferer can flee to for respite from the rages of appetite. The dangers of concupiscence (*concupiscentia carnis*) represented not just the passing itch of sexual appetite but a ‘permanent flaw in the soul’.[[449]](#endnote-449) It all goes back to the Fall of Man. What the bitter urgencies of concupiscence tell us about is the self’s pathetic and homicidal turn against its own best and divinely decreed interests. Nature in us was indeed created good; sexual pleasure could well have accompanied the dutiful fulfilment of God’s procreative instructions. It is because of the will’s misuse of its freedom that sexuality became what it is now – compulsive, frenzied, corrupting, and smelling of death. If lust is shameful, and even many pagans seem to admit that, it is not because matter is evil, or the body is an alien prison, or sex is the work of demons, as Manichees and other extremists like the Tatianites believed. Orthodox Christians, in their struggle with the Gnostic study-circles, anticipated Augustine’s conclusions about libido and the will. But they stumbled when they tried to explain the psychology involved. It is not your average exegete who can come up with the power and penetration of an Augustinian thought.

Augustine’s ideas have become the stuff of our moral inheritance. It is important to remember how novel they were. For careful, self-critical pagans, desire was a problem but not a crisis. Lust was more in the nature of a hypertrophic development of a force otherwise necessary and natural and amenable to discipline, a force which can be controlled in mature or superior people, especially educated male people, as the Stoics taught. This was not enough for Augustine. Lust is shameful, Augustine concluded in his final and victorious fight against Julian of Eclanum, because it is the wound made in our body by our deliberate fault; it is a punishment for sin rather than a cause of sin. That this distortion in the human constitution is not simply the exceptional and pathological failing of perverse persons but the ordinary condition of fallen man was Augustine’s stern interpretation of Adam’s disobedience. Lust, because it is involuntary and imperious, as the male erection so vividly illustrates, is the clearest signifier of this distorted way of being. This was Augustine’s grim conclusion. Sexual desire was not in this respect unique:

Sexual desire was no more tainted with this tragic, faceless concupiscence than was any other form of human activity. But the very incongruities associated with the sexual feelings used the body as a tiny mirror, in which men and women could catch a glimpse of themselves. They saw themselves, from this unexpected angle, as God had first seen the fallen Adam and Eve, They were beings estranged from Him and from each other as surely as their own sexual feelings were now estranged from their own conscious selves.[[450]](#endnote-450)

Not every Christian thinker was as single-minded as Augustine in diagnosing the servitude of the will through the symptoms of sexual desire. More moderate voices like that of Clement of Alexandria explained that the reproductive desire could be exercised with prudence and devout joy without raising the shades of any darker memories. And the cult of dedicated virginity would make no sense if the reality of a free will were not available to those special heavenly creatures who offered up the purity of their bodies as a gage of their devotion to Christ. Virgins and the chaste escaped the universal sentence of all descendants of Adam and Eve, born with a servile will: theirs could be a virtue immune to violation, proclaimed Augustine in the *City of God*:

In the first place, it must be firmly established that virtue, the condition of right living, holds command over the parts of the body from her throne in the mind, and that the consecrated body is the instrument of the consecrated will. (Book I, 16)

Purity is a virtue of the mind, not the body (I:28). The one who has it truly will not lose it, no matter what violence is visited on her. Virginity was destined to a glorious if limited future among select women of the Greco-Roman world, who could hope for commendation and awe as tribute to their powers of renunciation, powers that caused a light of freedom and ethereal beauty to be lit in their names by such poets of continence as Methodius of Olympus. The virgins who had cut off the unnecessary branches tying them to the social world of their ancestors and families did indeed achieve a purity like that of the angels.

As I will argue below, there was room in early Christianity for a conception of chaste female perfection strong enough to undo the crime of Eve; the choirs of virgins could exist on earth as in heaven, and their example – especially if they confirmed it in the fires of martyrdom—was believed to be a foretaste of eventual redemption. Augustine was convinced that the stings of sexual desire were ineradicable in our present condition; congenital, modern medicine might say. Augustine was also more than a bit immune to the dazzling careers of ascetic women, and recorded no messages of enthusiasm or congratulation to the female virginal movement championed by a Jerome or a Gregory. All Christians can and should understand the value of the conversion of one’s earthly self into a self inflamed with love for God; there is nothing that different, or that extraordinary, about the practice of the consecrated female virgin: ‘The true sacrifice’, Augustine writes in Book X of *The City of God* , ‘is offered in every act which is designed to unite us to God in a holy fellowship.’ Certainly the consecrated Christian, whether monk or nun, ‘dies to the world’ in order to live for God. But for all of us, such sacrifice is possible on a daily basis: ‘Our body also is a sacrifice when we discipline it by temperance, providing that we do this as we ought for the sake of God.’ (chapter 6) Moving, as Peter Brown put it, ‘In a monochrome, all-male world’,[[451]](#endnote-451) Augustine saw little reason to make gendered distinctions in his indictment of lust and its disquiets: Adam and Eve had both sinned and no intensification of ascetic renunciation would turn women into men, or either into angels. Marriage, not ascetic unsexing, was compatible with grace and redemption. It could be the mirror among earthly social institutions of the peace and concord of the City of God. God had not created humanity to be sexless. What went wrong was a disease of the will, not of the flesh as such.

But there were others in the 3rd, 4th and 5th century Church who thought differently, both about marriage and about the supererogatory work of asceticism. As a number of the Patristic commentators on the Book of Genesis reminded the Christian penitent, God added sexual desire last to the human nature he had designed benevolently and with care. As a punishment for our disobedience he gave us this one drive to suffer from; in this they agreed with Augustine. As a compensation for our depleted condition, they went on, God gave us this one pleasure to ensure the physical immortality of our species, and to compensation, possibly, for the hard labour and disease we now inherited. Most good Christians could continue marrying and even remarrying, with a clear conscience. In this, they would be following to the letter the advice of the Apostle Paul, who was the final authority on these matters. A Christian marriage could be a little refuge of holiness and love in a trying world, a mirror within the walls of the home of the ‘marriage’ between Christ and the church (Ephesians 5:25-33). A loving husband ‘pays the marital debt’, as does a loving wife, neither withholding their body from the other except for short times, to engage in prayer or the like: ‘Let the husband render to his wife what is due her, and likewise the wife to her husband. A wife has not authority over her body, but her husband; the husband likewise has not authority over his body, but his wife. You must not refuse each other, except perhaps by consent, for a time, that you may give yourselves to prayer, and return together again lest Satan tempt you because you lack self-control.’ (1 Cor 7:3-6) Marriage and the sexual relation within it are, Paul tells the Corinthians, acceptable. His tone, however, lacks enthusiasm. Conjugal relations survive in the Christian community as a ‘concession’, not a commandment.[[452]](#endnote-452) Yet there would, fortunately, also be a few who were called to rise above the norm, to follow the heavenly career of total abstinence. Were they not free from the taint of perversity Augustine had located in the will? Could the isolation and strict obedience of the monk and the consecrated virgin not compensate for the failings of the rest of us?

**3.6 Pagan austerity, Christian virginity**

Pagan ascetics were hard on themselves. But they could afford self-congratulation if they managed to subdue the unnecessary impulses and superfluous emotional reactions which render the characters of lesser men so wavering and unreliable. In much the same way the strict master can congratulate himself when the behavior of his slaves or subordinates is beyond criticism. Such a ‘sovereign’ in his own domain can observe his own performances with a disinterested judiciousness, crushing if necessary any rebellious impulses, anything that threatens indulgence or arrogance, that might leave the soul sullied by the lashings of anger or the vulgarity of greed. The temperate and self-monitoring Roman who speaks in the pages of Musonius Rufus is not struggling with the ‘dark side’. He is seeking to regulate his desires, to make his inner soul as lucid, peaceful and free as possible, to limit the degree with which one is dependent on others or subject to external forces. And this applies to the libidinal self above all. Sexual excitements, like emotional longings or aesthetic experiences, can disturb the Stoic’s intellectual self-government (his *sophrosyne*)– not because they are the fleshly scars of original sin (as Augustine held) or because they arrive through divine or demonic vessels, seizing and possessing the soul (as some Gnostics believed) but because they are involuntary and the human will should be able to master them. ‘Freedom from excess’ means also rational self-sufficiency, and that is always at risk from the individual’s dependence on his own body. Any bodily activity, even the most innocuous, can be dangerous, inclining one to immoderation, as Epicetetus (Musonius’ pupil) stressed in the *Enchiridion*.

Musonian man is a rigorist, not a moderate. Austerity is his food and drink, and it is a healthy diet. Educated by Stoic precepts, the well-moulded pagan gentleman takes reticence and reserve in sexual matters to extremes, rationing intercourse to only those times and places conducible to procreation, denouncing the display of enthusiastic attraction to one’s wife as a sign of depravity rather than commendable uxoriousness: such a man is treating his wife like a whore:

All love of another’s wife is shameful; so, too, too much love of your own. A wise man ought to love his wife with judgment, not affection. Let him control his impulses and not be borne headlong into copulation. Nothing is fouler than to love a wife like an adulteress.[[453]](#endnote-453)

Yet Musonian man would not conceive of his devotion to moral perfectionism as part of the battle against the devils. Nor would he credit his ability to respond to the commands of reason and the logos to a divine dispensation, or believe that his ability to say No to the baser incitements of eros required the sacrificial death of his Saviour, whose tortured flesh ransomed the primordial debt of the entire species. Any educated Roman would (and did) view such an explanation for the ubiquity of sexual license as fanciful, a superstition. The righteous will stand firm against sexual temptation because they are righteous, and because they have chosen to live according to the norms of nature. Why would you need myth to justify rational norms and decent conduct? Concerns for health, protection of one’s reputation, and considerations of the pocketbook provide enough in the way of additional incentives, if one needs them.

The idea that you could be called to the bar and condemned not for the acts you do but for your thoughts and feelings, that just having a sexual nature is a mark against you, is an idea foreign to the most sensitive of pagan ascetics. Christians have learned something else. They have studied in a strange but compelling school. They have taken from it pessimism as well as hope, self-disgust as well as joy at the prospect of salvation. For a Christian, the mess of this world tells a very clear and ominous story. Our worldly misery is no accident. All pain and death could have been avoided, had humanity held fast to its original condition. And the dread secret about that primal betrayal has to do with sex: If lust was not the crime that alienated Adam and Eve from their Creator, it was the consequence of that crime. Sexual desire, from that primordial time on, provides the gate through which corruption gets its foothold in the soul of the sinner. This is the dialectic of law and grace described by the apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans. Paul comes with good news to tell the new Christian communities, and what he has to tell them is no compliment to their self-esteem. Their zealous attempts at righteousness and self-control have been unavailing; on their own they could not escape from the condition of the flesh, and the flesh (*sarx, )* is hostile to God.

Humanity’s slavery to corruption has turned out, fortunately, to be redeemable. God himself has paid the price for our manumission. (Rom 5:18-19; 8:1-17) In the age inaugurated by the coming of Christ humanity can be redeemed from its debt, though no thanks are due to human nature for its efforts at improvement: no matter how heroic, how morally strenuous, how scrupulously law-abiding, they have been useless. Humanity remained enslaved, living in the flesh and bound to the sins of the flesh, even with the Law, as Paul said. (Rom 7:5-10) Under the old dispensation lust (*epithumia,  )* owns me, I do not own it; for I do not know what I do, and the good I want to do I do not do, and the evil I do not want to do is what I practise. (Rom 7:17-20) I am a rebel, no matter how much I want to be obedient. Who can help me? There is another law at work within me, holding me enslaved to the law of sin in my members (Rom 7:23). Ethical striving (‘works’) fails unless the spirit has been reborn through the Spirit. Paul’s message was not directed towards ascetic perfectionism as such. He came not from a Stoic tradition of self-improvement but a Jewish tradition that never tired of warning an errant Israel of all its faults and weaknesses, most glaring of which was their ‘doubleness of heart’, their failure to approach God with the singleness and transparency of heart for which they should yearn.[[454]](#endnote-454) Other shapers of Christian thinking in the first few centuries agreed with Paul that the model for piety was not philosophical refinement but obedience to a greater principle, a Lord who called Israel and now calls again, with a promise of salvation. Supernatural grace, not my efforts, is required for moral improvement; God’s gracious concern is responsible for my good conduct, if indeed my conduct is good. No amount of intellectual exercise or self-examination will advance me any further towards holiness. The ‘work’ was done by God alone out of his mercy and love; mine is solely the choice to accept or reject it.

Many ambitious early Christians were inspired by the idea of ascetic struggle: against the world, against the body, against one’s own stubborn and disobedient nature. Asceticism on its own is, however, insufficient, even suspect if embraced uncritically. Ascetic striving needs taming and supervision just as much as its opposite, abandonment to the passions, needs to be squelched. Greatest of the dangers to the anxious seeker of salvation is the illusion of autonomy Christians early and late worried about the pride and over-confidence of those who believe that purity can be theirs through their own merits, or through a special illumination, or initiation. If the zealous Christian can achieve indifference to physical needs and temptations, all credit must go to God who has taken pity on his or her frailty. She or he has no business hoping to be congratulated.

So what has all of this to do with Aphrodite? Pious warnings against sexual indulgence are everywhere in antiquity. In this context, Christian morality did not, as Veyne and Foucault assert, invent anything. ‘What difference did Christianity make?’ was the question posed by Ramsay MacMullen in a famous article of 1986, citing a question of Edwin Judge’s: ‘What difference did it make to Rome to have been converted?’[[455]](#endnote-455) That Christians had nothing new to say in their ethical teaching was a complaint smart pagans made very quickly, and with justice: Here is Celsus, a Greek philosopher of the late 2nd century C.E., eclectic in his inspiration, learned both in Stoicism and Platonism: ‘There is nothing new or impressive about their ethical teaching; indeed, when one compares it to other philosophies, their simplemindedness becomes apparent.’[[456]](#endnote-456) Roman sexual morality was hardly monolithic in any event, as Rebecca Langlands points out with graphic examples. Pompous talk about the irrationality of ‘the appetites of the pleasures of sexual activity’ and ‘the harmful repercussions of excessive desire’ could cite Plato as expert witness.[[457]](#endnote-457) The same men who could sympathise with a husband who needed to beat his wife if he found her drinking or learned that she had been outside with her head uncovered could find it hysterically funny that fellow male Romans from the upper classes had died when having sex with young boys.[[458]](#endnote-458) Romans claimed to value sexual virtue, and the virtue they had in mind had many qualities in common with the virtue they found admirable once they had converted to Christianity. It wasn’t a case of the lax losing out to the strict. But the values of sexual abstinence and purity are re-affirmed on a rather different stage in a Christian world. Kyle Harper exaggerates when he insists that ‘in no sense should early Christian sexual morality be construed as an offshoot of Roman conservatism.’[[459]](#endnote-459) ‘No sense’ is too strong. ‘Public sexual ideology’ in the Augustan age certainly included a strong preference for modesty and duty. Late Stoic teaching on the purpose and normative status of sexual relations repeated conventional wisdom. It counselled that eros is acceptable under the constraints of heterosexual marriage, because marriage accomplishes many of the ethically valuable tasks society requires: husbands and wives develop mutual respect and friendship; they raise well-behaved children; their attachment helps to establish social cohesion and a standard of virtue. Musonius Rufus provided the most memorable description of the significance of marital virtue for the well-being of all: the marital household builds the ‘ramparts’ (*περιβολαι* ) for the city.[[460]](#endnote-460) The single male, presumably sexually immoral, is like an enemy within the community. Adultery will be shunned, writes Seneca, by anyone wise, man or woman. So what was different?

Harper is right to stress that Christian fascination with sexual purity has a cosmic or, as I would put it, a metaphysical significance not even a Platonist would readily identify. In Harper’s reading, which is very persuasive, what society was to the well-balanced Roman, the cosmos was to the perfectionist Christian. Sexual desire in the Christian world-view does not get its directions or its guiding principles from the needs and ideals of society, or at least the ‘society’ in play is one whose institutions are celestial and invisible. The debate about sexual virtue is re-staged, its voices given to different actors and its power imagined in very different terms. As it evolves in the history of ascetic ideals and practices in the first 5 centuries of Christianity, sexual desire acquires dramatic features, lurid linkages to demonic powers and jealous spirits, and a far more metaphysical presence than even Aphrodite could have wished.. Let me point this another way. Chastity, my subject, was learning its lines in a pagan schoolroom, in order to perform in a far more flamboyant way under the sign of the cross, when it gained the power to create saints, to defeat sorcery and death, to heal the sick and save the lost, and to march with the angels. To say that the performance was different, and the telos a new one, does not imply that the continuities are not powerful and even determinative.[[461]](#endnote-461) Shame did not disappear in order that guilt and sin could absorb all the demonic glory. There was already plenty of guilt in shame, if not the precise lineaments and dramatic personification of sin. And there was already the famous ‘inwardness’ that Niezscheans prefer to blame on Christian self-hatred. If we cannot convincingly portray the inner life of a sexually active Roman, it is because our historical documents are incomplete, not because that inner life did not exist.

The differences are just as interesting as the similarities. According to Foucault, the change was in the relation to truth: a Christian ascetic was constantly combing the material of his soul, pulling out sinful thoughts or weaknesses; his or her conduct might be perfect but God would know otherwise:

There is then a circular relation between self-knowledge, knowledge of the truth, and care of the self. If you want to be saved you must accept the truth given in the Text and manifested in Revelation. However, you cannot know this truth unless you take care of yourself in the form of the purifying knowledge (*connaissance*) of the heart.[[462]](#endnote-462)

Christianity, Foucault reminds his American audience in 1980, is a confessional practice. It is a religion that imposes on its practitioners the duty to confess, to search and find one’s faults, illusions, temptations, all that separates the subject from the truth. And you must make that discovery public (at least if you are a Catholic.)[[463]](#endnote-463) The Christian accepted the necessity for a second birth that would start the clock again. Christian converts, if they were sincere, wanted to be transformed, to discard the old way of being, to attach their lives to the life of Christ, to become one in that mystical body. Even in its highest Platonic flights, the pagan philosophical soul doesn’t have that in mind. It is looking for what Socratic questioning (not revelation) helped make clear: that, in the ‘mirror of the intelligible’, the soul can ‘recollect’ what it had once contemplated, and ‘recognize itself.’ The high-minded pagan ethic is missing a crucial piece of the sacramental background, and large chunks of the soteriological justification. To make self-denial into a blazing ideal, you need the association with sacrifice, indeed with martyrdom, which was never far from the forefront of Christian hopes. It is a different rhetoric, the rhetoric of sanctifying and ennobling virginity, but that is because it has a different religious experience to explain. Because of the willingness of their Lord to offer his body up for torture and death, Christians had a clear picture of the efficacy of suffering for salvation, and it was this picture they sought to imitate.

The temptation to build a bridge between Roman conservatism and Christian moralising is strong. Veyne, with a number of other historians, argues that pagans and Christians would agree in most of the content of their ethics. But the reasons they would give for respecting those ethics are far apart. Restraint and modesty are good for the health and well-being of the individual, said the philosopher and the medical writer. Restraint, sobriety, modesty and respectful, *pudica* companionship are good for society, said the jurists and imperial rhetors. Christianity, as we shall see in what follows, said something different. And some of its arguments must have appeared laughable to the sophisticated classes of Rome. What were devils and evil spirits, ghosts and phantoms, doing disturbing the apatheia of a reflective seeker of virtue? The psychic world of Christain asceticism was not only stormier than that of the pagans. It was also more fanciful, in a way that educated Greeks and Romans were prone to consider infantile and crude. Pagans and Christians had very different expectations of where their struggle for self-mastery would take them (a distinction Foucault indicates through his term ‘telos’.) Christians had been promised more than one ‘body’, more than one destiny. The Messianic idea had become real, but it broke history into half. In one aspect, the newly redeemed were creatures under the Law, and the Law’s dispensation endured even with the coming of the saviour. Human and creaturely, they were limited to one body, the same ‘prison’ of dust and flesh, weakness and finitude, than a pagan philosopher acknowledged as his own. But as granted a second life in the blood of Christ, Christians had a stake in a new body, that mystical body Christ shares with his Church, with the community of the faithful on earth and above.

Christians who set out for the desert to live in caves and practice self-denial believed that their ascetic ordeals freed the soul from the evil spirits and could even break the bondage to sin. Mortifying the body wins you a foretaste of heaven. These were beliefs that reeked of mythology. And such beliefs derived their plausibility from an eschatological fervour shared by Christians in the apostolic age. What matter the comforts of the body now that the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand? What value marrying or bearing children when time will soon have a stop? What advantage in earning the respect of society when those who speak with conviction can work wonders and cast out demons? Popular religion and philosophical speculation had, in later Greece and Rome, taken somewhat separate paths. They had little common ground for conflict or conflation. Yet philosophers deferred to public practice, and often counselled (to themselves or their students) respect for the gods, attendance at the festivals and participation in official sacrifices. Out of genuine piety or dislike for rocking the boat, wise philosophers recommended service to the established gods. and, except for the Epicureans, did not challenge their authority or coherence. The Greek-speaking Plutarch, in the first century CE, wove an inclusive net that included philosophical attitudes as part of what ‘holy living’ truly means. The gods, even those outside the state religion’s pantheon like Isis and Osiris, desire their devotees to gain a knowledge of themselves and of truth. (*Isis and* Osiris, 351d-352) Must such seekers of the truth leave the city behind and live on no nutrients except the word of God and the spirit of righteousness, foregoing pleasant dinners, interesting studies, and lively conversations? The steadily rationalist Plutarch eschewed any versions of such extremism. In the practices of Egyptian religion, in the teaching of rites of the admirable gods Isis and Osiris, a rational person can always draw out the philosophical elements of otherwise bizarre stories about the sun rising like a new-born infant from the lotus flower or Isis turning herself into a swallow, and whatever does not translate into a morally useful allegorical message, simply brush aside. ‘If you always perform and observe the established rites of worship, and believe that no sacrifice you can offer, no deed that you may do will be more likely to find favour with the gods than your belief in their true nature, you may avoid superstition which is no less an evil than atheism.’ (*Isis and Osiris* , 355e)[[464]](#endnote-464) Dedicated priests may observe intriguing customs of self-purification in these and other exotic cults now known to Romans like Plutarch; they may give up wine, fish and pork; they may shave their bodies and wear nothing but linen next to their skin. But sober men of learning, while certainly no atheists, will get their religion mediated through the ideas of Plato and Aristotle. (ibid., 375d)

Greco-Roman religion, at least in its traditional and official forms, offered no precedent for Christian beliefs in a community of the saints: even Jews did not imagine their fellowship in anything like that model. Indeed in the Roman Empire, there was no such thing as a single centralised and professional priestly institution, no hierarchy, no doctrinal debate. Religion was local and relied on the living voice of tradition, not the inscribed voice of hallowed texts. It was solemn, yes. But it did not seek to enter into every network and corner of the human mind, to examine the heart and to absorb the will. For such a will to absolute penetration, the ancient world had to wait for Christianity.

The difference between a plastic and an absolute map of religious infiltration helps, I believe, to explain the difference between an ideal of sexual self-control (*sophrosyne*) as what an ethically dignified person respects, and an ideal of immaculate purity, as what imprints the angelic nature into a human form. Christians who had been seized by the fever of renunciation began to speak of sex in terms unrecognisable either to a pagan or a pious Jew: sex was merely to be tolerated, if desire could not be wholly extirpated. As the means of reproduction, it had its place, but ideally it should be engaged in with little enthusiasm and as infrequently as possible. In some minds this grudging tolerance – the attitude St Paul made authoritative in his Epistles – was only a mask put on so as not to scare the weakest of Christians. Toleration of procreative sex within marriage could be extended unequally: the greater the restrictions one accepts, the closer one has come to the ideal. A true believer will recognise that all sex, not just the excessive or transgressive kind, is bestial if it involves lust. It is fornication, *porneia*, even when it takes place between members of a married couple intending to conceive. The Apocryphal Acts of John, a 3rd century text popular with the Manichaeans and Priscillianists, presents Jesus’s beloved disciple as horrified by the very notion of conjugal coupling:

Take also to heart the warnings of the blessed John, who when he was called to a marriage went there only for the sake of chastity. And what did he say? ‘Children, while your flesh is still clean and you have a body that is untouched, and you are not caught in corruption nor soiled by Satan, that most adverse and shameless enemy to chastity, know now more fully the mystery of conjugal union: it is a device of the serpent, a disregard of the teaching, an injury to the seed, a gift of death, a work of destruction, a teaching of division, a work of corruption, a boorish rusticity <….>, a second sowing of the enemy, an ambush of Satan, a device of the jealous one, an unclean fruit of parturition, a shedding of blood, a passion in the mind, a falling from reason, a token of punishment, an instrument of pain, an operation of fire, a sign of the enemy, the deadly malice of envy, the embrace of deceit, a union with bitterness, a morbid humour of the mind, an invention of ruin, the desire of a phantom, a converse with matter, a comedy of the devil, hatred of life, a fetter of darkness, an intoxication <….>, a derision of the enemy, a hindrance of life, that separates from the Lord, the beginning of disobedience, the end and death of life.[[465]](#endnote-465)

Certainly this absolutism was not universal. If you can, be the eunuch. If you are susceptible or socially obliged, marry and procreate. St Paul, we should remember, was not contemplating a world of bachelors and spinsters. Households and families were the seed-bed of good Christian commitment. Total abstention was defended by radical Christians like Tatian and Marcion, and by those who came to be called ‘Encratites’, ‘gnostics’ and, eventually ‘heretics’. It may have been the coherent response to Paul’s veiled scorn. But Christianity could not survive without its married and its parents. Rather than committing suicide, the Church kept the door open for a watered-down rite of sexual congress between lovers expected to keep the lights off and to pray before entering the bed. It is this ‘accommodationist’ relation to sexuality that the French historians are right to compare to the later Roman conjugal ethic. Why, then, would we resist accepting their thesis? Why, to put it another way, would a Christian of the 2nd to 5th centuries, perhaps one familiar with the teachings of the Stoics or the Platonists, have insisted that the imperative of sexual purity – whether or not it reaches the heights of obsession in an individual life – is not the same as the philosophic or social cultivation of temperance and sexual virtue? Why did Christians maintain that the universe is changed by the passion for innocence? Because the Christian virgin stands before God, ready to imitate in a lesser act of sacrifice the brilliant bloodshed of the martyr, while the ascetic sage stands before the court of social opinion or before conscience alone? Is the difference simply one of context – one a heavily-laden religious and symbolic context, the other a secular and moral one? Or is the experience of chastity as Christians began to imagine it one that was novel, indeed extremely strange, a detour in history and an aberration in the social record?

There are many reasons to interpret Christian chastity as a new concept that gradually took shape as the promised Kingdom of God did not materialise. From this perspective, chastity in the metaphysical form Christians began to conceive it was the product of an intense spiritual disappointment and a way of claiming the privilege of the chosen people which God had earlier associated with circumcision and the commands for ritual purity. Christians were to be sexually different from their neighbours. Unmarked in the flesh, yes, but presenting a visible ‘mark’ of cultural secession. Aspirants to the kingdom and salvation that Jesus had offered to the Jews who embraced reform and regeneration, those who awaited the return and the ‘full’ outpouring of the Holy Spirit first tasted in the resurrection experiences did not need to worry about family life and marriage. Where they were going, marriage was irrelevant. But if the event of consummation was to be delayed or brought within, living on in the community and the heart rather than in a final and conclusive divine act, then that readiness to renounce unnecessary attachments and desires could still be needed.

The messianic urgency of renunciation was something unknown to pagan ascetics. And so was the sense of acting on a great stage, with the heavens at one end and the darkness of the pit at the other. Pagan ascetics avoided such theatricality, as they avoided the excesses of display. Furthermore their actions did not make such an urgent claim on world-historical events: they were not concerned to bring history to an end, to overthrow nature and to defeat evil. Yet a certain mutual acknowledgment existed. The judicious doctor Galen in the latter part of the 2nd century called the Christianity he was able to observe in Rome one of the ‘philosophical schools’ because it recommended a similar way of life as that followed by those who ‘practice philosophy’:

For their contempt of death and of its sequel is patent to us every day, and likewise their restraint in cohabitation. For they [the Christians] include not only men but also women who refrain from cohabiting all through their lives; and they also number individuals who, in self-discipline and self-control in matters of food and drink, and in their keen pursuit of justice, have attained a pitch not inferior to that of genuine philosophers.[[466]](#endnote-466)

These Christians, Galen remarks with some amusement in the same passage, are odd philosophers. They can give no demonstrative arguments for their choices. They look like they live a life of virtue. But the motives they adduce to explain their virtue have little to do with reason. They get their faith from parables and miracles and, as his contemporary and admirer Marcus Aurelius complained, they subject the body to the commands of the soul out of ‘obstinacy’, agitated by a spirit of opposition. And in all the performance of virtue they present, argues Marcus, a civilised observer like himself must recoil from the ‘theatricality’. (*Meditations*, XI:3) Their behavior breathes the same air as the mystery cults, the groups who follow Mithras or Isis or Cybele, hoping just as the Christians do to be saved. And there is much to object to in the secrecy, the private nature of the worship in which Christians engaged in their houses, at night, reading scriptures and what not. This habit of furtiveness identifies the movement as something antisocial, incompatible with civic conformity, or so Marcus and Galen complained. The ‘genuine philosopher’, as Galen refers to him, would not entertain such fantasies. Even in his strictest practices, he has no room for such ‘stridency of self-expression’.[[467]](#endnote-467) Renouncing marriage, family life, child-bearing, and public service were, to a culture familiar with a variety of philosophic schools, eccentricities which a superior philosophic sensibility might justify (the 3rd century neo-Platonist Rogatianus, a well-known and wealthy Senator, gave up home, property, food and sleep to pursue his philosophic ideals). Romans fired by the idea of a spiritual life were never exactly in a majority. They had, certainly, a respected tradition to defer to. They were imitating the Greek models that went back to the fifth century BCE, and the principled anachronism was conscious. It was their own improvement that men like Rogatianus aimed for, not the improvement of sick humanity. Of course there were a few reformers who wanted to enlighten everyone. Socrates’ sense of mission was unusual, as was his martyrdom. A.D. Nock, the stellar scholar of early Christianity and classical culture, says this in his *Conversion* , published in 1933:

The philosophic movement in the main, as it proceeded in the fifth century, became more radical and through the dissemination of its ideas aroused popular antipathy at Athens, but it remained a professorial movement, ready to communicate its conclusions to disciples but not fired to free humanity or to lead it into truth. (165)

Compared to that, there is, in Nock’s view, the

‘religion of a prophetic movement in the first ardour of its founder…the individual stands before a choice which means either the renunciation of his past and entry into a kingdom, which is the promises made for it are true – and that cannot be proved or disproved– is wholly other here and will be wholly other hereafter.’ (5)

Prophetic religion had a will to proselytise. The promises made by Christainity to its converts were recipes for a re-invention of the self, and society. Everyone, believer or skeptic, is born itn he same way. But the convert is born a second time, into the path that leads to another nature, perhpas an immortal one. Christians were shown the route to a transformation of one’s creaturely being, a way to shorten the distance between human and angel, mortal and divine. Pagan asceticism claims to improve the individual who is progressing in virtue, as Plutarch put it, to make him morally and physically and intellectually ‘better’. Christian asceticism claim to make an ordinary individual into a new kind of being: the one who ‘dies’ to the past, to the here and now, will be reborn to the future, to eternity, to the Kingdom. Pagan moralists would have little to say about that. Why would you need to invoke a divine blessing for humans who, in the imitation of their saviour, choose to ‘sacrifice’ their flesh and their passions? It would not be obvious to a Seneca, an Epictetus or a Cicero. Nor would they view ‘this world’ as just a shadow and inadequate copy of the ‘true world’, the world of eternal gods. And much as they want to go on record extolling the advantages of sexual restraint, they share with their less moralising Greek and Roman neighbours an indifference to the ‘glory’ of a state of absolute sexual renunciation.

Consecrated chastity, one of the few ‘inventions’ Veyne and Foucault have to allow Christianity, is a medicine of a different order from the therapies of Stoics, Epicureans and Cynics. It is in a different league, its defenders insist, from the good and pious behaviour of the faithfully married. It turns a human into an angel. It is not just that its exhortation is more ‘strenuous’, as the American publisher and historian Henry Charles Lea put it in his 1867 *History of Sacerdotal Celibacy in the Christian C*hurch.[[468]](#endnote-468) The ‘palpable moral superiority’ it promises its practitioners is literally ‘out of this world’, thus including among its privileges the power to ignore or defy the social order.[[469]](#endnote-469) Virginity outstrips the most rigorous of human moral achievements as much as heaven exceeds earth. (John Chrysostom *On Virginity*, 11.1) He who practises perfect abstinence is like someone who can walk over coals without being burnt. (ibid., 27.1) These were not benefits associated with pagan temperance.

I do not want to over-state my case, or to encourage fantasies of Christian ‘exceptionalism’. There were some outside the Christian fold who did respond to the disembodied vision of ascetic transcendence: celibacy and sexual self-denial were practised among some Orphic sects, and among the Jewish sects called the Essenes who lived near the Dead Sea. To embrace renunciation was an unusual choice for the people of Israel. The recommendations of the Old Testament gave the pious little wiggle room outside marriage and procreation: fecundity was highly praised and virginity as a life-choice almost inconceivable. Jephthah’s daughter, doomed by her father’s vow to die a virgin and a burnt offer to the Lord, ‘bewails her virginity’ (Judges 11:37-40). For a woman to die without experiencing marriage and motherhood seemed a miserable fate: without those marks of honour and recognition, female identity languished, empty and even dishonorable.[[470]](#endnote-470) It was not all that different for men. The Prophet Jeremiah is described as a virgin and a celibate, who choses abstinence because of his distress over the calamity he foresees. To renounce marriage and the flesh is a sign of bitterness; to live in solitude (for a sociable Hebrew) testifies to the victory of death. There is no glory in virginity for the Jews:

Only one Old Testament figure is presented as unmarried by choice: Jeremias (Jer16:2). His decision may be understood as a symbolic acting out of the sterility about to befall Israel. The Old Testament had no word for bachelor.[[471]](#endnote-471)

Yet ascribing to Jews before Jesus a sunny, positive acceptance of sexuality would be a fantasy. Fertility is the ideal, not sexual pleasure, and the dependence of the former on the latter is a source of some disquiet. When Onan is instructed to ‘perform his duty’ to his brother’s widow, and does so by having sex while withholding his generative seed, the Lord strikes him dead immediately and with no apparent second thoughts (Gen 38:8-10). This divine hostility to non-procreative sex had profound implications for centuries of Jewish and Christian moral debate. Pleasurable sex has a stigma. Infatuation, as King David discovered, renders even the best of men weak, petty and egocentric. Seductive women return again and again in the Biblical stories to spread chaos and moral confusion. And adultery is a serious enough offense to be named in the Decalogue itself.

The Jewish awareness of an ambiguous link between sex and sinfulness continued into the periods of exile and dispersion, probably gaining new energy from gentile philosophers like the Platonists and the Stoics, with their suspicion of any impulse that disturbs the rational mind’s rule over us. Sex may be polluting, and priests should not bring its traces into the sanctuary; menstruation was unclean, and marital intercourse during the woman’s menses was often condemned (Lev 18:19). Palestinian Jews of the time of Paul and earlier were, according to Daniel Boyarin ‘powerfully ambivalent about sexuality’. Some Hellenistic Jews wrote with anxiety about the spirit of promiscuity, from which the desire for intercourse is rarely free. Where there is nature and the senses, says the *Testament of the Twelve* Patriarchs (late 2nd century BC), sin is always ready to pounce. Rabbinic Judaism was a religious formation arising in the second century, after Pauline Christianity had already established its own shape. It is plausible that the harder line on sexuality taken in the Rabbinic period of Judaism was already influenced by ‘theological and other challenges placed before it by Pauline Christianity’, as Boyarin suggests.[[472]](#endnote-472) If there were efforts on the part of those earlier Jews to resist these pessimistic views of sex, more ‘sex-positive’ views available in the years the good Pharisee Paul began his fateful religious education, there must also have been Jews susceptible to the idea that sex is sin, even that sin is of its very nature sexual.[[473]](#endnote-473) Certainly Philo, Paul’s contemporary, understood the war between temptation and purity, flesh and spirit in starkly dualistic terms, and the anxiety about sin did not exempt Hellenistic Jews well-read in philosophy. I do not want to claim that Christianity introduced an all-conquering dualism of sex against purity into a world ignorant of any such thoughts. What I want to claim is more modest, simply that sexual denial did not have for Jews or pagans the metaphysical or cosmic significance it had for the Christians. And the ascetic enthusiasms also animating Jewish and pagan populations were more restricted, seemingly indifferent to grand plans for the conversion of the planet. With groups like those Philo described – the Therapeutae or the Essenes -- the call to radical purity was secretive and exclusive; these were seekers of perfection who kept to themselves and treasured the mysteriousness of their code; it was not intended as a universal recommendations. It was for a few extremists, scattered communities on the edges of the Empire. Sexual renunciation remained a minority exercise until the circuits of social and civic normalcy were interrupted by a strange message coming from a small messianic movement inspired by the life and wonder-working of Jesus of Galilee.

Roman civilization did not, of course, succumb at the first rumours of a new sect. For a number of years the religion inspired by Jesus was just one more event on the fringes of the Eastern Empire, distracting an already fractious and unpopular Jewish community. Not even the flamboyant sufferings of Christian martyrs zealous for persecution did much to make the religion stand out. It was not showy, it could not boast a strong line-up of impressive rhetorical speakers, it seemed superstitious to the educated Romans and Greeks who took any notice of it. If it was a new form of philosophy, why did its language sound so naïve and its ideals so alien to the best classical traditions?[[474]](#endnote-474) Nietzsche, writing in the late 19th century well after the collapse of the Greco-Roman world was a *fait accompli*, keeps alive some of the contempt a bemused pagan might have felt at the excesses of Christian enthusiasm. In his book, *The Twilight of the idols* he rubs again at an old sore: that such an intellectually vacuous cult could annex an old and powerful Empire gives little comfort to anyone who cares about the health of our culture. Jesus’s religion of weakness and fatigue managed to oust the proud gods; celebrating the victory of the humble and the ignorant, Europe learned to pretend that aristocratic birth was as insignificant as the rich cultivation of the senses and the mind was useless. Just a few years before Nietzsche wrote his attacks on the great betrayal that is the Christian religion, the young Swinburne had published in England his poem *Hymn to Proserpine* in which these once famous lines appeared. Swinburne channels the legendary last words of Julian, Emperor and Apostate:

Thou hast conquered, O pale Galilean; the world has grown grey from thy breath;

We have drunken of things [Lethean](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lethe), and fed on the fullness of death.

The pale Galilean did indeed conquer. Nietzsche speaks tartly in his 1888 *Twilight of the Idols* about Christianity. What it is this long-lasting phenomenon? It offers us nothing but the ‘history of an error’. Even before Christ’s grey journey into death, there was fertile ground on which this error could grow. Greek philosophers were ignorant of the story of a crucified God had still flirted with spiritual fantasies. But they heard the seductive call of ‘Ideas’ from the Platonic Sirens, those immaterial vamps. Nietzsche sneers. Philosophy’s historical narrative is the record of a decline into idealism. It is not, Nietzsche thinks, that all desire for truth is bad. Such a desire is legitimately part of what it is to be a philosopher. Philosophers, after all, have unusual requirements. The conditions that support their flourishing may be curious but that is not too much of a problem, since they don’t need to be shared with the rest of us. The idea of a ‘real world’, a ‘true world’, is one of those specialised conditions conducive to the philosopher’s form of life. Philosophers are, more often than not, outsiders to the human condition, uneasy inhabitants of the common social world: if they come, like Socrates, from the lower orders, they outrage their peers because they are decadent and exaggerated, ‘unnatural’ in their useless quest for knowledge; if they trespass into the precincts of the nobility, they seem offensive because of their lack of discretion, their extreme and fanatic moralism. Better that they should sun society before they are shunned. Asceticism, a form of health for the unhealthy, is their safest element. In the introductory aphorism to *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche writes:

To live alone one must be an animal or a god – says Aristotle. There is a third case: one must be both – *a philosopher*.[[475]](#endnote-475)

Before it became generalised into an objective for all, the notion of a realm of truth (*Wahrheit*) was nothing outlandish or transcendent. It is never outrageous to fulfil one’s own needs, and the needs of the philosopher include this investment in self-satisfaction. Egotistical it may be, but it is not useless, nor yet a bid for the unknowable. ‘Since I spend my time thinking’, the philosopher might say, the place I occupy is the place of truth. The ‘real world’ is not elsewhere, but here, a ‘dwelling place’ that the wise and virtuous man devised for himself. The ‘idea’ of truth, in its infancy, is relatively simple, convincing, good to think with. The problem is that idealism doesn’t stay like that. Truth, or the ideal, or the ‘best place to be’, wanders out of reach. Philosophers begin to hint that truth is inaccessible, at least for the immediate moment. Offered such flattery, the ‘idea’ becomes vain. It is still accessible to special people, to the philosophic, the pious, the virtuous, the reformed. It now glistens with a further, more alluring lustre, but it is decidedly thinner and on the ethereal side: ‘more refined, more enticing, more incomprehensible’. What has happened? How did truth become a woman?

# CHAPTER 4

**The Sexless Sublime: ‘The dangerous mystique of continence’ and the new Ideal of Christian Virginity**

**4.1 A Nietzschean Introduction**

How the ‘real world’ became a fable… It is becoming more refined, more enticing, more incomprehensible; it is becoming female, it is becoming Christian. (Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, ‘History of an error’, 2)[[476]](#endnote-476)

Before truth could become a woman, it must have been a man. That is the story gestured towards in *Twilight of the Idols*. How sad is the spectacle of this insidious change of sex! The ‘history of an error’, Nietzsche calls it. His own version of the conjectural history of civilization reverses the Enlightenment’s view of it as the slow ‘education of the human race.’ (So titled, for example, by Lessing.) The Enlightened story is attractive. It flatters modern egos. Just as the child begins in infantile fantasy and credulity, so the species had to stumble along for quite a while before it was ready for reason and science. Myths and cosmic speculations prepared our minds in the lower classes of history, teasing us with erroneous versions of metaphysics, until such times as we could dispense with make-believe and swallow the harder stuff of tonic skepticism. The ‘leading strings’ of authority could then be cut, as Kant put it in his response to the question ‘What is Enlightenment?’ By the 19th century, strengthened by naturalism and positivism, we should have been collectively ready for the truth. Nietzsche does not agree. The situation is quite the opposite. Cultures, he explains, start strong and get weaker. That is what we call decadence. And Christianity, which seeks to ‘tame the beast man’ and ‘improve him’, is the dominant form of decadence in the modern world.

‘Improved’ and led into a monastery’, the old animal becomes sick and miserable, hating itself, suspicious of everything that is strong and happy. That is the refined ‘breeding’ Christian asceticism prides itself on[[477]](#endnote-477)*.* The road from ‘the oldest form of the idea’ to the newest form of the idea is a journey like the one Christ followed when he carried his cross to the hill of Calvary, but in reverse. The soul starts in a heaven of transcendent ideas and abstractions and ends up in the sunlight, at a high noon without shadows and evasions, having arrived at what Nietzsche calls the ‘end of the error’ and the abolition of the true world. But it takes a while. Truth begins in disguise and gradually sheds its coverings. Looking back, Nietzsche sees that there is a long history to this ‘longest error’, by which he means the mistaken view that there are two worlds, a real and an apparent. It is seductive, this prolonged but misguided picture of the two domains of reality, contrasting and hierarchical, one higher, one lower, one a world of essence and one a world of appearance, one ‘here’ and one beyond, one for intention and one for action, one for dreaming, one for being awake. As a model, the story-story universe employs what Northrop Frye calls a ‘vertical perspective’, as opposed to the horizontal perspective of comedy or realism. Metaphysics, then, like Christianity, is hooked on this ‘polarizing tendency’, as is the literary genre of romance, which borrows from the myth of angels and demons, the innocent and the corrupt.[[478]](#endnote-478) Any ‘cult of truth’, in Nietzsche’s view, includes such polarizing imperative, and bears as one of its less savoury gifts a message of disappointment. All on this side of the ‘real world’ is worthless. Caring about truth makes you an outsider among men, a gloomy spectator at someone else’s feast.

While it may seem as if the two-worlds fantasy has been around forever, it did have a beginning in time, as Nietzsche imagines, first drawing attention to itself when the Greeks invented the notion of a ‘sage’. The sage is the one who is the truth, who lives the truth, while others lack it. (*Twilight,* ‘History of an Error’, §1) The idea of the sage was not the worst of ideas. Nor were its consequences altogether deplorable. The picture was at least ‘sensible and persuasive’, its claim to credibility backed up by the authority of personal presence, by the radiance of virtue. Put into Greek, this meant that there are men who walk on the earth accompanied by a certain divinity, heroes of truth like Socrates, humans who carry their holiness around with them casually, who live like gods because they are wise. The wise man lives in a different world from the rest of us, even though for all intents and purposes it looks exactly the same.

But the wise man of Greek philosophy, the ascetic paragon who impresses even animals and plants, was not fated to govern forever. His replacement was a figure with a thousand-mile stare, a version of the philosophic animal convinced that there is never jam today, who wants things to be difficult and complicated, who rejects any hope of satisfaction and certainty. Metaphysical misery was a new kind of inner alienation, a Christian kind. Wherever the truth is, it seems to say, there I am not; wherever I am, there the truth is not. Anxiety is not a temporary disorder to be removed by a clearer understanding of what nature and the logos want of me. It is a permanent condition. For anything valuable must be elsewhere, and the rewards of holiness are only for those who have suffered, for those who exult in their own diminishment. When the ‘idea’, as Nietzsche puts it, ‘becomes Christian’, it has become tricky, subtle, unattainable. Like a woman who says ‘look but don’t touch’, it gets satisfaction from saying No. Is that ‘No’ the same as the ‘No’ to sensuality and life? Must the ideal offer itself only in an ascetic form? And does the ascetic ideal triumph by emptying voluptuousness of all its pleasure? Or does it do so by creating a new genre of excitements, negative ones, yes, but all the more fascinating, suitabl e for creatures who have lost touch with their instincts and, through their insatiable passion for truth, have become what he calls ‘decadents’, unnatural animals?[[479]](#endnote-479)

All psychological inventions of Christianity work toward this sick excess of felling, toward the deep corruption of head and heart necessary for it. Christianity wants to destroy, shatter, stun, intoxicate: there is only one thing it does not want: *moderation*. (*Human, All-Too Human* §114)

Nietzsche presents himself as both impressed and disgusted by the history of idealism. It does not have just one motive or one course of action; it rewarded at the same time that it punished and abased. It was nothing if not adaptable. The peculiar elaboration we know as metaphysics did not take an obvious or simple route. The ‘real world’ did not become a fable overnight. Nor did ‘refinement’ win the day without a struggle, or sensuality get the boot in a sudden flare-up of bad temper, when the hard work of intellectual inquiry felt like too much to do. This ascetic planet, which is what Nietzsche calls our civilization, was a long time in the incubation. Watching over its secret growth was a strict nurse in a Christian dress. She was responsible for ordering all the ‘enemies’ to leave the property. Her influence identified one by one all the wounds and defects of desire. Ascetic culture ended up a tough beast, but it began as a fragile one. Its Christian godparents never stopped worrying that fleshly temptations might seduce the weak organism as it struggled to mould itself into an angelic form. But angelism, in Nietzsche’s view, may be another name for sterility.

Unsurprisingly, it is the Christian religion, with its skepticism towards the ‘sinful desires of the mortal body’ (Romans 6:12-13), that Nietzsche identifies with the worst excesses of ascetic self-hatred. In every other culture, ‘eunuch’ was a term of abuse. Only here could one delight in one’s impotence. Christianity, as I will present in this chapter and the next, came to believe in the possibility of sexual renunciation on a universal scale. Dazzled by the notion of absolute purity, of a perfection that could banish the shame that otherwise infected out human condition, Christians embraced a conception of continence that could profoundly transform the character of human being and acting, not to say, of biology. As a religion, Christianity produced a number of novelties, many ingenious, some implausible. This one in particular was astonishing in its impracticality. Building on some intriguing hints in the philosophical schools of classical and Hellenistic cities, Christianity arrived at the suggestion that sex was dispensable. Eros, often viewed as a god, or at the every least a demon to be reckoned with, was in the ancient world a basic and foundational element of life. Without sexual reproduction, society could not continue, families would die out, estates go to waste, and nations shrivel. Even the immortal gods need sex. The Christians allowed themselves to imagine otherwise.

In the period between the travels of St Paul and the High Middle Ages, a new dream came to plague the souls of Europeans. That dream was what I will call ‘the romance of renunciation’. Its evolution was not entirely smooth. It won the hearts of its adherents (who were never the mass of Christian believers) in different degrees, and in different doses. While the more extreme degrees make for the livelier reading, the moderate forms of sexual refusal or avoidance are nonetheless compelling in their own fashion. I want, in the next two chapters, to explore the case for sexual renunciation as a mechanism with more than one intention. Engendering perfection was, as we shall see, its explicit objective. Producing cultural dissensus and symbolic rebellion was, however, at least as important. A large part of the intellectual and spiritual case for sexual abstinence has already been made, or so I hope, in the readings I have offered of the erotic and anti-erotic imagination in Greece and Rome. I have tried to uncover in a number of key texts and historical episodes the persistence of an ‘anti-marriage’ ideal, one that is at times sharpened (for Hippolytus, for the followers of Diana, for radical encratites, neoPlatonists, Gnostics and other outliers) by something else, by an awareness of the divine violence of virginity and a taste for the powerful fantasy of *innocence*.

The account I offer in the next two chapters will provide something further and probably more predictable. I will show how the old anti-conjugal ideals of sexual purity and otherworldly heroism were shaped and ultimately institutionalised under the patronage of Christendom. The visible forms of that institutionalisation will be (I assume) obvious to most. By the late Middle Ages an official Church with its capital at Rome had decided on compulsory celibacy for its clergy and its religious orders. (This was a step only fully taken in the 12th century although celibacy had long been preached to the higher clergy and most of the monastic orders.) Marriage could be allowed for most believers only if they conformed in their sexual practices to procreative, heterosexual and marital norms. So much is well-known and incontestable. The Church took up a few ambiguous pronouncements by its founder about the advantages of being ‘a eunuch for the kingdom of heaven’ and from them fashioned a cult of continence that darkened the very name of sex. The symbolic legacies of Christianity’s ‘romance with renunciation’ are, however, more ambiguous. Christian preference for abstention and sexual denial did not end the world, nor cut off the future of the human species. Sex and generation continued. But so did anxiety, misogyny, and a brand of erotic idealism that never properly adjusted to the sensuous reality of men and women (especially women).

Promoting the virgin as the ideal form of spiritual dedication, the superior instance of the moral life, created for Christian civilization a ‘two-story’ world of the pure and the impure, whose duality went far beyond the distinction between cloister and marketplace, between sanctuary and world. Chastity triumphed even when it was not practised. It influenced how men and women, rulers and the ruled, the privileged and the enslaved, the metropole and the colonies, thought about themselves; it influenced the practices of child-rearing and education (riddled with fears of infantile and adolescent perversity); it influenced dress and speech; in collaboration with other patriarchal prejudices against the public appearance of females, the cult of chastity prevented the emergence of women into the workplace, and into political life, on the excuse of protecting their modesty. Many of these notions of sexual shame and sexual probity did not require the baptism of Christianity to sustain their power and popularity. As the last chapter suggested, Greek, Roman and Jewish communities all insisted on the control of sexual activities and the suppression of erotic indulgence. Christian virginity, nonetheless, changed the plot. The pure maiden or the ascetic could now claim a much more elevated status – signs of the blessed world to come, emblems of holiness and transcendence, martyrs to the flesh. This peculiar inheritance – associating principled and perpetual sexual abstinence with the sacred and the sublime – was unknown in pre-Christian worlds. Sacred chastity is a new kind of magic.

In the remainder of this study, I will argue that the extremist ideals of a minority – a self-appointed elite infatuated with the ‘angelic life’ – became a central if submerged theme in European culture, feeding Western notions of moral excellence, shaping Western literature and aesthetics, controlling the limited way women could enter the political sphere, and infecting Western emotions with a toxic strain of guilt, anxiety and impossible idealism. My plans for this demonstration, however, are not as immense as they sound. The pathway into the early years of Christianity’s romance with renunciation that I provide is modest in scope. I am not going to deliver a full and authoritative history of Christian sexual ethics in its first period of cultural influence and development. Others have fortunately, produced much of that authoritative history, by the extraordinary scholarship in late ancient and medieval studies over the last 40 years. I stand on the shoulders of giants. My reckoning will be, from a historian’s point of view, incomplete and partial. I am interested in diagnosing the passion for continence as an event in the life of the European imagination. I am looking for its spirit and its flesh, its myths and its symbols, not for its causes and cures. Like Nietzsche I want to elaborate and reflect on the symptoms and self-justifications of an ascetic culture. If I find myself more sympathetic than Nietzsche wanted to be to this spirit and its flesh, it could be because the Christian turn away from eros reveals something that I believe is unavailable in any other context: it tells us something we need to know about the disorders of gender, and about the way those same disorders have shaped the special dilemma of femininity, a dilemma I think my sex still faces.

When Nietzsche called Christianity a ‘feminine condition’ he meant to be insulting. Do we have to accept his insults? The ‘mystique of continence’ is what I want to explore, but in a perspective informed by over a century of theoretical and practical engagement with the disorder of gender, a disorder for which religion must surely bear a large share of the responsibility. The Christian community, a new and strange association of unrelated persons claiming to be a body by its uncanny participation in the passion and death of its incarnated God, offered ancient Mediterranean society a new model of solidarity. Eventually, as we know, the Church found lasting accommodation with the Rome it began by resisting. But for its radical exponents – and they were substantial in number – it offered what Peter Brown in an essential article on ‘The Notion of Virginity in the Early Church’ calls ‘alternative forms of social grouping’, communities cohering not around marriage and the family, but through voluntary and mysterious choices of ascetic affiliation. Christians who chose to enlist in the corps of the continent had (in a sense) abdicated, retracted their involvement in the social contract. Those committed to virginity on principle, living as ‘abstainers’ on the outskirts of imperial and colonial society, were adhering to a different image of the soul and the body, of freedom and power and detachment: an ‘abnormal’ one, ‘largely because it was, by normal categories, profoundly asocial – it did not belong to society as naturally defined.’[[480]](#endnote-480) And this ‘abnormality’ – for how can human bodies withdraw from society? – meant that ‘one form of human solidarity’ was treated as dispensable: ‘the common bonds of society, expressed at their lowest common denominator in terms of sexual needs, of sexual joining, and of the natural forms of union that sprang from such joining: family, offspring, kin…for mere human beings, the impetus of the notion of virginity had been precisely to evaporate all such merely natural bonds.’[[481]](#endnote-481) And with ‘natural bonds’ went ‘natural reasons’ for men and women to continue their traditional norms of dependence and subordination. For the early Christians who warmed to the Patristic call to perfect purity, the old law of gender and the old laws of social slavery might become things of the past. As long as there were women and men, bound to one another in the chains of lust and dependency, this mortal earth will go on, exacting its penalties of suffering, illness, injustice and death. But if that carnal order could be overcome (and who was to say it couldn’t be?), neither time nor death would be the last word. Nor might the male sex be the automatic and assumed preference, the ‘first sex’ ruling and guiding the ‘second sex’. Adam and Eve lived under the old dispensation, the male as the head, the female as the subordinate. But humans who lived as angels did not belong to the old dispensation. Christ, the Prince of Angels, lived without sex, as far as we can tell. In some obscure way he also lived free of the conventional requirements of sexual difference, or so mystical readers of the salvation narrative suggested. Nietzsche allowed himself a philosopher’s mockery: what is truth was a woman? Wouldn’t that be absurd? Perhaps it has already happened. In Christianity, the truth took off its mortal body. It became female, it became incomprehensible, it became Christian.

**4.2 The Slander of Femininity: Going Down-Market with the Early Christians**

Nietzsche in the *Twilight* observes a philosophic ‘progression’ through six stations, in the course of which the passion for truth becomes increasingly pessimistic about its chances of finding fulfilment. By the end of the journey the metaphysical phantoms of early days are gone. The inquiring mind has acquired a taste for the erasure of the very idea of metaphysical truth. What has happened to the original model which opposed the ‘true idea’ to the ‘illusory idea’? It looks as if the very opposition between essence and appearance, depth and surface, was an unnecessary luxury. But before we get to this grey and evenly-illuminated dawn – a dawn without shadows, with nothing left hiding in the wings ­–there is a temporary halt. Distracted, caught by a beguiling image, the mind stops at a station where Christianity and femininity are in residence. Nietzsche, although he takes the time to describe this significant detour, claims to be unimpressed. In the murky atmosphere of this all-too-spiritual environment, men are teased by the withdrawal of that which they desire. Letting go of the ties that attach their feet to the ground and their bodies to matter, the Christians act as if they can simply float. The mind gets no sustenance here, nothing to dig itself into. If there is a real world that anyone can remember, it seems to have been pushed out of reach, at least for the moment. Where in this unclear milieu is the ‘Idea’, the goal the truth-seeker is supposed to be seeking? This is a world fit only for saints, for those who have repented and paid through suffering. For them something special is promised: the Idea that has temporarily gone away will come back in a form even more refined and mysterious, rewarding those who think they live in eternity and have forgotten this world and reason itself. The final Idea must be sublime, which is to say incomprehensible. It is so exclusive no one able to image it. One might protest here. The reward of the saints sounds inadequate. Virgins are supposed to gratify the martyrs in Paradise, for Islam. Shouldn’t the Christians have a final act at least as enticing?

Nietzsche’s tone is malicious. The ‘Idea’ was for a Greek something intellectually convincing, the mirror of the wise man fully at ease with himself. Anxiety begins with transcendence, or vice versa. The Christian seekers of truth don’t want to be rewarded. They prefer rejection to conquest, banishment to consummation; they invent in philosophy the masochistic gestures of the troubadour lover: Don’t have me, if you are worth having! The Idea has undergone a sea-change, or more crudely, Christianity has turned up at the auditions for the choir of castrati, offering itself as the most ‘spiritual’ and ghostly of the suitors for humanity. What if under the toga of the philosopher you found a set of body parts you did not expect? What if truth were a woman? For Nietzsche, the pathology of Christian asceticism has an intimate relationship to the disordering of the sexes. In this Christianity does little that is new. All idealism freezes desire. Whether inspired by a prosaic wish for ‘democratic enlightenment’ or a deliriously decadent yearning for suffering, all idealisms confront and fail to solve *the* problem: that humans do not like themselves very much. Seeking to inflame the spirit by proposing to it aims that get steadily more exacting, the ascetic ideal crushes the very will to act and achieve it claims to stimulate. Ascetics, Nietzsche writes in *Human All-Too Human* (1878), use self-torture for fun. It may combat the ‘general enervation’ which condemns them to boredom and torpor:

After having discovered in many of the more inexplicable actions, expressions of that pleasure in *emotion per se,* I would also discern in self-contempt (which is one of the signs of saintliness) and likewise in self-tormenting behavior (starvation and scourges, dislocation of limbs, simulated madness) a means by which those natures combat the general exhaustion of their life-force (of their nerves): they use the most painful stimulants and horrors in order to emerge, for a time at least, from that dullness and boredom into which their great spiritual indolence and that subordination to a foreign will described above have so often let them sink. (*Menschliches, Allzumenschliches*, 3: 140)[[482]](#endnote-482)

The logic is circular. One kind of pain is used to replace another. The game played with us by our sexual appetite is, however, not won by the cold strategist of denial. It is just that another, more circuitous game begins, introducing emotions equally powerful, equally imperious, but lacking the last option: the expenditure –the release – which sex justly claims as its gift.[[483]](#endnote-483) What rapture is there for the saint? One can enjoy one’s cruelty towards oneself for a while. But there is only so much you can do in the way of bodily mortification and denial before the instrument itself breaks down. No less is true of the less material forms of the perfectionist project. All contribute to the passivity and exhaustion of spirit. All are ‘nihilistic’.

Christianity …is in the profoundest sense nihilistic in that it denies this world and the natural values of the strong.[[484]](#endnote-484)

All reforming movements suffer from a similar inversion of values. The ‘good’ is the reaction-formation created by moralists to deny the obvious fact that nature favours brutality. Democracy, socialism and feminism are typical in their naïveté, insisting that domination is an accident of history and not a fact of nature, expecting that the war of the exploiters against the exploited can end. Perhaps they are sincere; perhaps the reality of hierarchy is a mystery into which they have not been initiated. For them an expectation of equality is the norm, but this is nonsense.[[485]](#endnote-485) How could men be so soft-headed? Is it a campaign to emasculate the world? There must be a woman in the plot. Only the lesser sex could have dreamt of socialism, democracy, solidarity, all the reforming campaigns with which the 19th century thought to save the world and raise the lowly. Such pseudo-solutions to the violent politics of nature reek of decadence. But it is unfair to blame only the moderns. The wild-eyed reformers of 1st century Galilee were no better in their tastes. Nietzsche repeats a traditional calumny. The ‘Jesus movement’ (as recent scholars have named the early mobilisation in the Eastern Roman empire that followed the death of Christ) was a lower-class tempest in a teapot. In all its features, Nietzsche implies, primitive Christianity was a classic agitation of the discontented. It appealed to women and slaves. What more can a civilised person say? Of course unlettered people are going to be gullible. Given a gospel that promises them immortality and promotes the sharing of all wealth and resources, why wouldn’t the poor and disadvantaged be enthralled?

Snobbism about the Christian ‘rabble’ didn’t have to wait for Nietzsche. It began immediately, even in the lifetime of Jesus of Galilee. The new few centuries kept up the mockery. Lucian the satirist of the early 2nd century CE makes fun of the Christian brotherhoods in his parodic ‘biography’ of a missionary and wonderworker, *The Death of Peregrinus*[[486]](#endnote-486)*.* The Greek philosopher Celsus in the later 2nd century was shocked by the tastelessness of this religion: a scandal, to worship a man who was arrested and died the shameful death of crucifixion. Who would be convinced but ‘the foolish, dishonourable and stupid, and only slaves, women and little children.’[[487]](#endnote-487) Much latter Friedrich Engels saw primitive Christianity as a religion for the dispossessed:

The history of early Christianity has notable points of resemblance with the modern working-class movement. Like the latter, Christianity was originally a movement of oppressed people: it first appeared as the religion of slaves and emancipated slaves, of poor people deprived of all rights, of peoples subjugated or dispersed by Rome.[[488]](#endnote-488)

Engels leaves the gender of the ‘oppressed people’ unspecified. But other observers have not been slow to link the socially insignificant to the lesser sex, and both to the population in which early Christianity found its members. The church historian Wayne Meeks draws some interesting conclusions about ‘the first urban Christians’: ‘By virtue of their birth, or their citizenship status, or their inclusion (or exclusion) from the various Roman *ordines,* many new Christians ranked low in the Greco-Roman prestige system.’[[489]](#endnote-489) Did women find a special relevance in the preaching of Christ?[[490]](#endnote-490) Certainly there were a number of women named in the letters of Paul (Priscilla, Phoebe, Julia, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, Junia, Apphia, Lydia and other ‘sisters’ and ‘friends’ who are ‘deaconesses’, fellow-workers, leaders of ‘house-churches’ (Rom. 16:1-12). There are women appearing prominently in the Book of Acts, in the Apocrypha and in the Gospels themselves. The texts from the Nag-Hammadi corpus are particularly attentive to the presence of women, although it is true that many of these figures are described as sinners, fallen far from their original integrity and virginity, and yet in the course of their stories (their ‘romances of the soul’) are restored to ‘knowledge’ and salvation.[[491]](#endnote-491) In the Gospel of Philip, fidelity and truth cluster around the figures of the three Marys: the mother of Jesus, the Mother of James and Joseph, and Mary Magdalene, companion of Jesus (*Gospel of Philip*, 59:7-10)[[492]](#endnote-492). Gnostic literature indeed differs from that of Jewish and Christian texts of the same period in its lavish use of feminine metaphors for the divine.[[493]](#endnote-493) Norea, a mythical figure who struggles with the ‘rulers of this world’ in *Hypostasis of the Archons,* is a virgin and a daughter of Eve, and perhaps the ‘mother’ of all the Gnostics.[[494]](#endnote-494)

Many episodes of the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles, from the 2nd and 3rd centuries, stage encounters between a charismatic apostle and a shocked (but often receptive) outsider. Frequently these outsiders are female, and – besotted – they do not long remain outsiders. They betray the men who are their guardians, to throw themselves into this ‘new age’ cult. The Apostles come to know where their market is: attracting men through their skills at healing, the miracles they perform, their bravery and intransigence, attracting women through other means. Some of these women are widows, some maidens, some bolting wives: Peter and Xanthippe, Peter and Eubala, Paul and Artemilla, Paul and Stratonice., and most famously, Paul and Thecla. As the editor of these apocryphal texts comments about Paul’s activities, ‘Evidently events thus took the same course at Philippi as at many other places: the preaching of continence met with success among the women, but aroused the men against the apostle.’[[495]](#endnote-495) And other versions of these romantic stories of the brave and persecuted apostles continue to emphasise their relations with female converts. The canonical Gospels show a keen awareness that Jesus was fishing for more than one sex: in some of the most popular stories in the canon, Jesus is portrayed with Mary and her sister Martha, with the Samaritan woman by the well, the poor widow with her two mites, the woman taken in adultery. He is linked in profound fellowship with Mary Magdalene. The texts on the margins of the canon are even more attentive to women: asking questions, leaving their homes, infuriating their husbands and fathers, even teaching, preaching and courting the fury of the state.

Beyond that, all is speculation. Reliable figures showing the proportion of women to men among the early congregations do not exist. To guess without any accurate demographic information, in the absence of sources or first-hand accounts of the early communities, is pointless.[[496]](#endnote-496) There is some evidence that women were teaching and preaching, that they enjoyed a freedom from attachments to fathers, spouses or children that their Jewish or pagan neighbors hardly knew, even that they were angling for authority. Certainly there were women performing clerical offices, consecrated women called deaconesses assisting bishops with women believers and catechumens.[[497]](#endnote-497) But were they more welcome in the churches than they had been in pagan cultic observation? Non-Christian women, writes Ramsay MacMullen, in the period post-200, ‘enjoyed access to a great range of activities, experiences and authority among traditional cults’, in which they could serve as priestesses and even preside on their own over cults and initiatory rites.[[498]](#endnote-498) Churches, like the synagogues before them, did not invite this prominent level of participation. Women were conspicuous among the charitable, giving to the poor, establishing sanctuaries for the sick:

The Christian church not only redefined the bounds of community by accepting a whole new class of recipients, it also designated a new class of givers. For women had been the other blank on the map of the classical city. It was assumed that gift giving was an act of politics, not an act of mercy; and politics was for men only. By contrast, the Christian church, from an early time, had encouraged women to take on a public role, in their own right, in relation to the poor: they gave alms in person, they visited the sick, they founded shrines and poorhouses in their own name and were expected to be fully visible as participants in the ceremonial of the shrines. By the end of the fourth century, the traditional view of the place of women in upper-class Roman society had come under strain.[[499]](#endnote-499)

Luke-Acts and Paul’s Letters mention women of means as benefactors of the ministry and of the churches: if they could hand over useful amounts of gold or supplies, it would be difficult to deny them a voice in church matters. And women accompanied the apostles and their descendants on their missions. More important than the number of women are the shifts in the way gender distinctions figure in the language of this new movement. Sometimes attention is drawn to sexual differences, at other times they are ignored; sometimes sexual difference is acknowledged as significant, at other times minimized in striking ways. The unsettling of sexual polarities relates, as we shall see, to the question mark placed by the preachers next to the ideas of marriage and the family. To be ‘male’ or ‘female’ matters if society and the city depend on biological reproduction. Mating (if it lasts, and if it is socially recognised) ties communities together, makes them last into the future. But did Christians need a future on this earth? Were their loyalties to the networks of kin and nation, to the generations to come from their seed and to the estates they wished to establish? Or were their loyalties to their immortal souls?

Both Jesus and Paul had spoken in favour of celibacy, although Jesus’s remarks are sparse and inconclusive. Their recommendations stood against an apocalyptic horizon: marriage and procreation might make sense in a world for which no end could be seen, but a different and more radical sexual ethic was appropriate to a community living in expectation of the coming reign of God, the *parousia.* In the world to come, our bodies will not be what they are now. Family and kinship will be irrelevant. Husband and wife will be words without meaning. To a question posed by the Sadducees, Jesus replies:

‘The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage; but those who are accounted worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection of the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage, because they are angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection. (Luke 20: 34-36)

And Mark’s Gospel makes the same point: “For when rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like the angels in heaven.” (Mark 12:25) In the Kingdom of God, Paul explains in the Letter to the Galatians:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Gal. 3:28)

The question of gender in early Christianity almost completely escaped the notice of generations of Church historians and scholars of antiquity until the 1960s, even when the connection between Christianity and class made a decided impact. That neglect is itself curious. For the statement from Paul’s Letter to the Galatians has great potential to provoke: There will be, in the better world to come, ‘neither male nor female’. But then, what? Will there be a third sex? Will the questionable female sex, those unreliable daughters of Eve, became sanctified as holy among the holy, or with the entire ‘race of women’ (as the Greeks preferred to conceive it) slip into irrelevance, once the function of wife and mother recedes in favour of the sister in Christ, the companion in arms? Church historians in the 19th and early 20th century choose to leave such issues unexplored, for the most part. The hierarchy of the Church was male; presumably it had always been implicitly male. Women had a role to play in the past, present, and future life of Christendom and no doubt useful talents to offer the Church, as anyone who studied the medieval flowering of powerful abbesses and headstrong female visionaries could not help but notice. But the fact that Christianity made sexual difference problematic, that it ‘placed a question mark after marriage, sexuality, and even the differentiation of the sexes’,[[500]](#endnote-500) did not echo for scholars in the past with the same resonance it has come to enjoy.

The question of sex and Christian origins will hardly sink into such insignificance in the future. Indeed, it was not invisible to the early Christians themselves, nor to their enemies. Members of the first churches were well aware of the challenge they offered to conventional codes of masculine and feminine behaviour. Gender-trouble was there from the start. One could read for many years in a library of Greek and Roman literature without noting the presence of women in the social and intellectual arena. A few women entered the Stoa; a few were probably visible around the Cynics and the Platonists; Pythagoreans would not even consider them as members. The voice of Roman poetry and political discourse is a masculine voice. The implied reader of pagan philosophy is a masculine reader. It is curious, then, to see the changes in language as well as practice from the start of the Christian campaigns. Wherever Jesus went, women are mentioned in his presence, or as joining a crowd. Women are the first people to discover the empty tomb (Mark 16: 1-8; Matthew 28:1-8; Luke 24:1-11; John 20: 1-18). It was a woman, Mary of Magdala, to whom Jesus first speaks after the resurrection (John 20: 1-19; Mark 16: 9-11). It is probable that women were among the first disciples.

It was men who ‘moulded’ Christianity, Gillian Cloke writes in her book about ‘woman and spiritual power’ in the Patristic Age, ‘*This Female Man of God’*. But there were ‘large numbers of extremely active women of high-profile piety at this time, some of them enormously wealthy, powerful and influential, the stars of their contemporary Christian stage no less than the men.’[[501]](#endnote-501) And it was not just upper-class women who were, adds Cloke, ‘ubiquitous’. There were the privileged celebrities: Macrina, Marcella, Melania the Elder, Melania the Younger, Olympia. Products of rich and powerful families, famous heiresses, these women prominent in the Christian communities devoted their fortunes, their houses and their time, sometimes giving their lives, often abandoning their children and spouses. There were also hermits whose names are unknown, benefactors and ex-slaves, educated and uneducated, wrinkled emaciated women in the desert living for years unvisited, sometimes passing as men. Sometimes these ‘holy women’ enter history because they were significant enough to be written about by ‘holy men’; their own writings do not exist; they had to depend on others to tell their stories, and there were reasons male leaders of the Church preferred to underestimate the participation of women. To cite just one vivid example, Augustine’s sister was the founder of a monastery for women, and pursued a life of service and spiritual achievement comparable to her famous brother’s, if not quite on the same world-historical plane. Her very existence is unmentioned by him; appreciation of her work figures nowhere in his immense body of writings, whether private letters, autobiography or publication.[[502]](#endnote-502) Just as obliterated is Ambrose’s sister, prominent in the same monastic career.

Even if historical evidence of the extent of female participation in early Christianity is sketchy, it is clear from many sources that the language of male and female has shifted. Sexual difference is a more slippery and symbolically loaded element in the way the new kingdom is imagined. In pagan philosophy, intellectual enlightenment may bypass the messiness of the gendered body: the sex of the soul is unspecified, even if the intellect sounds suspiciously as if it were formed in a masculine school. But salvation, the Christian hope for the soul, has a very different vocabulary. For Paul, Jesus was signified as the ‘Bridegroom’. His followers were his virginal ‘brides’ (2 Cor. 11:2). While the image had rich Scriptural authority – Israel is the bride of God as well as the fickle harlot (Isaiah 54); the bride in the Song of Songs awaits her spouse with joy and erotic excitement – it was also startling. Male converts must have wondered what this meant for their sexual status. Including all the Church in its scope - men, women, virgins, wives and widows­­– the metaphor turned the repentant, keen to leave their sinful lives for a better one, into a mystical army of the betrothed. They were promised an eternal and heavenly marriage in exchange for renunciation or sexual restriction on earth. Their white clothes might signify the purity they aspired to, but they were also appropriate for the celebration of a nuptial rite. How far was this rite expected to go? Church Fathers enlivened their ascetic exhortations with allusions to the embrace of both men and women by their divine Bridegroom: ‘The man who is courting the spiritual alliance’, writes Gregory of Nyssa, will want to show himself at his best, not decorated by his worldly wealth but with the treasures of his mind, taking for his ‘life-companion’ the wisdom that will embrace him, then ‘he may prepare himself in a manner worthy of such a love, so as to feast with all the joyous wedding guests in spotless raiment.’ Both men and women will be eager for such a marriage, Gregory explains, for the soul wants to ‘cleave to the undying Bridegroom’, and will not be as happy in a ‘marriage of this world’ (*de Virginitate*, 20). Erotic language was not spared: just as a young girl in secular society would want to keep herself a virgin for the greater pleasure of love with her licit partner, so the Christian will want to stay pure (or the widow avoid remarriage) in order to enjoy marriage to Christ.[[503]](#endnote-503) Just like his Father, Christ was of the male gender: his circumcision was carefully attended to by his (biological?) mother and (adoptive?) father. His intended companions were presumably female, as Judaism and its Christian off-shoot scorned same-sex marriage. Did that make Christian masculinity a strange condition? Was it shaped by its image of the mystical marriage of Lord to his Church into a sacred masquerade, a little too reminiscent of the cross-dressing ceremonies of the Galli and other worshippers of Isis, Cybele, or Astarte? What kind of men (and women) would this celibate and divine Bridegroom want to marry?

In an image that never ceased to delight Church Fathers from Tertullian on, the community of Christians – the Church that Jesus called into being as his beloved and his ‘remnant’ in the post-Pentecostal world – is the virgin bride of Christ. (Ambrose, *Epistle* LXIII)[[504]](#endnote-504). Therefore the Church is gendered female. She is the elect successor to the female Israel who so often disappointed God by her misbehaviour and sexual infidelity. Now if Christ is the Bridegroom, the eternal spouse whose love for his betrothed is so sensuously depicted in the Song of Songs, it makes sense that those who turn away from the world and its alliances for the sake of a non-corporeal bond should be themselves female. Virgins and holy women (widows, but also in some striking instances, reformed prostitutes, dancers, actresses and prominent wives of prominent pagans) are obvious candidates for this symbolic marriage (here showing a distinct departure from the Hebrew use of the idea, which finessed the gender of the betrothed, Jews not easily recognising the spiritual abilities of women.) According to John Bugge, Tertullian was the first to subscribe to this interpretation, ‘portraying’, in *De oration Christi* , the marriage between Christ as the Bridegroom and the virgins dedicated to chastity. Cyprian ‘applies the bridal idea almost exclusively to female virgins in his *De habitu virginum* ‘, and Jerome interprets the Song of Songs as a ‘foreshadowing of Christian female asceticism.’[[505]](#endnote-505)

It is noticeable that the language of the Song of Songs, which had been applied by Origen to the relation of Christ with the soul of every person, male or female, came, in the course of the fourth century, to settle heavily, almost exclusively, on the body of the virgin woman.[[506]](#endnote-506)

That a great ancient civilisation was ‘feminised’ by the bizarre new cult, emasculated by its ascetic excesses and its magical beliefs, was a fear already present among philosophical or cynical Romans. Their inheritors like Edward Gibbon or Friedrich Nietzsche think the decline still worth remarking on in the 18th and 19th centuries. To modern ears, especially those exposed to feminism, it is an unappealing characterisation, its misogyny hardly disguised. The association of piety and superstition with women was a staple of ‘advanced’ critics of the 19th century in particular. It explained away a number of embarrassing features that might otherwise detract from the reputation of a much admired culture. Could heroes on the Homeric scale really have believed in these rather undignified gods? And what about paragons of intellectual integrity like the Epicureans and the Cynics? It could not have been that educated and refined Attic race whose members so eagerly embraced the stories of miracles and exorcisms. Someone else must have allowed the inversion Nietzsche called a ‘herd morality’ to bury the glories of Rome and build churches over the ruins of the forum. If you don’t like religion, it’s a simple matter to associate it with those whose stake in reason and character is weaker than yours – like women. Feminists uncovering the religious activity of women in the first few centuries after the death of Jesus found similar stereotypes:

It was a commonplace in Greco-Roman antiquity that religion was woman’s business, and it was not a compliment. Strabo of Pontus in Asia Minor said it most clearly: “Women are the chief founders of religion (*deisidaimonia*)…women…provoke men to the more attentive worship of the gods, to festivals and to supplications, and it is a rare thing for a man who lives by himself to be found addicted to these things.”[[507]](#endnote-507)

It was not hard for upper-class pagans to transfer this social prejudice to the secretive congregations of Christian worshippers they began to hear of in the late 1st and 2nd centuries. Here is Celsus, whose testimony against the Christians is among the most famous:

Their [the Christians’] injunctions are like this: “Let no one educated, no one wise, no one sensible draw near. For these abilities are thought by us to be evils. But as for anyone ignorant, anyone stupid, anyone uneducated, anyone who is a child, let him come boldly.:…Moreover we see tat those who display their trickery in the market-places and go about begging would never enter a gathering of intelligent men, nor would they dare to reveal their noble beliefs in their presence; but whenever they see adolescent boys and a crowd of slaves and a company of fools they push themselves in and show off…In private houses also we see wool-workers, cobblers, laundry-workers, and the most illiterate and bucolic yokels, who would not dare to say anything at all in front of their elders and more intelligent masters. But whenever they get hold of children in private and some stupid women with them, they let out some astounding statements as, for example, that they must not pay any attention to their father and school teacher, but must obey them…the more reckless urge the children to rebel.[[508]](#endnote-508)

**4.3 Christianity and its ‘romance with renunciation’: From Eros to Angel?**

‘And when will there be an end of marrying? I suppose, when there is an end of living!’ (Tertullian, *De exhortatione castitatis*, 9)

‘Toward the heavenly light you too have been summoned, illustrious bride, and to the lifestyle of the angels, as also their companion on account of the brilliance of the lofty beauty of virginity and the perpetuity of the unending glory. Therefore, even angels honor the excellence of her (virginity’s) splendour as their equal. Even the Lord of the angels honors her as a spouse.’ (Pseudo-Athanasius, *De virginitate*, ch. 42

‘In the same way when he urges us not to live according to the flesh, lest we die, but to put to death the deeds of the flesh, in order to live, the trumpet that he sounds certainly makes evident the war in which we are engaged and inflames us to struggle keenly and put to death our enemy, so that it will not put us to death.’ (Augustine, *De continentia*, 3.9)

The movement inaugurated by the preaching of Jesus was influential first among Jews in the turbulent outposts of Palestine. Soon it was converting non-Jews as well in the first 150 years after Augustus. The message it brought came in the shape of an announcement that the Kingdom of God was at hand, that Israel would soon be free, not just of the yoke of Caesar but of all earthly rules and alliances.[[509]](#endnote-509) It promised salvation and new forms of life. It demanded that the lovers of God and of their neighbours forgive and forgive again. And, as it spread from Galilee to Rome and Corinth and Antioch, Carthage, and Damascus, in the years from 100-400 C.E.,[[510]](#endnote-510) many who were dissatisfied with conventional social, class and family arrangements had a chance to hear it.[[511]](#endnote-511) Listeners to the first Christian missionaries made up an audience whose character and composition we know a fair amount about from contemporary observers, some hostile, some merely curious. Many converts to Christianity came from the educated elite.[[512]](#endnote-512) (Neither Celsus nor Nietzsche were scrupulous in their demographic research.) But there were many others, who had various reasons to sever themselves from families and the dominant social environment. Some were poor, some were slaves or recent freedmen, some were itinerant, some were women, some were religiously restless or themselves charismatic, in love with the new possibilities of a prophetic vocation.[[513]](#endnote-513) The association of women with the Jesus movement was remarked as a demonstration of its spurious character, especially by antagonists like the 2nd century philosopher Celsus, who sneered at the disproportionate stake of women in this fringe cult of a saviour who relied on sorcery and magic. Women, conventional Greco-Roman wisdom assumed, were much more likely to be credulous.[[514]](#endnote-514) Such credulity can clearly cause problems for society. If female fascination with the ministry of these Jewish off-shoots were to continued unchecked, their adherence to their public and private duties and to the state religion could be threatened. Celsus does not mention the increased opportunities for a woman’s activities that the Christian habits of leaving home and family afforded. But the potential for social dissidence did not go unnoticed.[[515]](#endnote-515) (Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 3.44-49)

As the movement attracted more interest from those outside Judaism, strengthened by compelling missionaries like Paul, its ‘romance with renunciation’ blossomed[[516]](#endnote-516). Indeed this fondness for world-rejection and ascetic detachment may have been the secret of its success. In some respects the Jesus movement was not particularly unusual. Wonder-workers and healers were a fairly familiar phenomenon around the Eastern Mediterranean. Another small sect of itinerant miracle-believers from the tempestuous circles of Judaea would under normal circumstances attract very little attention. There were of course a number of unusual beliefs that the early Christians publicised, the most remarkable of which was the idea of a dying and rising God-Man whose intervention in human history could combat the finality of death. But the ascetic refashioning of the natural conditions of the body, and its partnership with a stubborn withdrawal from the values and pressure of the ‘world’, represented something else: a vision of an alternate life that must have sounded convincing to many people unsatisfied with the options on offer.[[517]](#endnote-517) It was a vision of a life where the constraints of gender seemed lighter or less significant, a life equal to that of the angels. ‘Do you grasp the value of virginity?’, Chrysostom writes to his flock in Antioch. ‘It makes those who spend time on earth live like the angels dwelling in heaven. It does not allow those endowed with bodies to be inferior to the incorporeal powers and spurs all men to rival the angels,’ (John Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, XI).[[518]](#endnote-518) And it was a vision of ascetic transcendence, where freedom from sexual desire was re-imagined as a kind of transformative magic, an empowering change in the old and weary make-up of the human creature.

Was it obvious in the early history of Christianity that sex would be so fatefully on the agenda? I suspect that the warning signs were inconspicuous. They were there, and in retrospect the future development seems well-prepared, but there was plenty of room for doubt. ‘Sex-Negativity’ was not the main event in the preaching of Jesus, nor in the missions of the Apostles. By medieval times the superiority of virginity was well-established, and ascetic elitism systematised in the monastic institutions. But the earliest Christians were divided, some indeed indifferent to the entire question of asceticism; there were other battles just as urgent as the fight for chastity, the ‘great war of continence’[[519]](#endnote-519). To ‘derive a consistently ascetic message from the Bible’, Elizabeth Clark notes in her history of asceticism’s rise to dominance of the Christian field, was a challenge for those early Christian writers who wished to find Scriptural authority for their ‘renunciatory program.’[[520]](#endnote-520) The movement that began around the charismatic figure of Jesus had other objectives. Its hopes for reform, for the kindling of a new life and a new way of living in community, only tangentially brushed up against the conventions of Jewish and Roman notions of sexual propriety. About these, as about many other things, Jesus spoke with a freedom and authority that was provocative. Jews, of course, were used to being accused of backsliding. The prophetic books of the Bible contained a copious diet of angry allegations, disappointed scolding, and threats to God’s fickle but still chosen Israel, the ‘virgin Bride’ who so often ‘plays the harlot’. Israel was a lax and unreliable lover of the deity; her infidelity was manifested in moral lassitude, failures in the performance of ritual and cult, and in centuries of obliviousness and complacency. While reminiscent of the sharp solicitude of the prophets, calling on the sinners to return and repent, Jesus’s tone was different. It was more enigmatic, more personal, even if his message was recognisable enough to any pious Jew who knew the tradition. Those who are sure they are adhering to the form and command of the Law, Jesus was saying, are failing to hear it properly, failing to love it in spirit and in truth. They let themselves off too easily. And the consequences are there to be seen: political impotence and disgrace for the Jewish nation, decline in prestige and independence, physical tribulations, diseases both physical and mental, sterility, madness and economic misery.

The inspired young reformer from Galilee was all too conscious of this disappointing state of affairs. He did not place his hopes in any of the political movements of the time, ones that were mobilizing at least some Palestinian Jews to revolt against the Empire. Like the Zealots and other insurgents from Israel’s stormy history of exile and frustration, he wanted the Jews to raise their standards, to cease being a compromised and downtrodden people. This would, in his view, require dramatic re-organising, both personal and collective. Jews were in a wilderness, but it was one they had made for themselves; they had built the pit, and the pit was moral. Straightforward political upheaval would be of no use. Only a transformation of the inner man would change it. Much of this call to reform was uncontroversial. Judaea had heard versions of it before. What was new was the radicalism of Jesus’s ethical demand. Equivocation has no place in the moral life. (Matt.5:29-30) There can be no excuses, no lukewarm approximations of fidelity to the ‘greatest commandment’, the commandment to love (Matt.5:44). Jesus’s clarification of the Mosaic precepts were simple, but rigorous. Reasonable discretion in matters of marriage and bodily purity was not good enough. Avoiding outright adultery was a sham if you could not keep yourself from lascivious private thoughts. Conformity to the strict letter of the law was no guarantee of excellence. What passed as respectable conduct too often shrouded, Jesus announced, a hard heart and a hypocritical disdain. The adulterous woman is not the shameful secret who should be expelled and hidden from view: she is you, she is everyone. Jews’ pride in their high moral standards was ridiculed. How are you honouring marriage and chastity if you allow divorce and polygamy? Divorce, approved as a convenience and a necessity by state and temple, is a contradiction of the God-given meaning of marriage. Wife and husband are no longer two; they have become one body. Only God can take them apart, not men. (Paul would apply this rigorist interpretation to denounce prostitution: In coitus, do you not join your bodies? Are you still pure if you have become part of a harlot?)

The specific recommendations Jesus wanted to give to his flock were few, and enigmatic. The urgency his adherents picked up from the call to change, and the speed with which events overtook them, led to a state of mind best described as apocalyptic. The time is short, as Paul was to re-emphasise 30 years after the departure of his leader. Concern for the fine details of relationships within the household and the bedroom would be a luxury that those on fire for the Kingdom of God cannot afford. Your kin, your brethren, your dependents on this side of the abyss that separates those mired in time and those redeemed from it, they may all be vanishing and shadows. There is little point in accumulating ethical credits for a world that could soon cease to exist. Marrying and giving in marriage, sexual virtue and its cultivation, may be concessions to a society that believes it will endure: those concessions are obsolete, if such endurance is a phantasm. Old moralities will not apply, in the presence of God. The stringency of Jesus’s preaching shifted the focus of attention away from the concerns of social reproduction and cultic purity, such as the Jews along with many of their neighbours understood those. A sharp wind from the heavenly future stirred up longings for a kind of independence from the demands of society and the body, an independence strong enough to cut all tired links to life as it has been known. Marriage was one of those ties. Society was made for the married and the producers of children, and they for it. Could human beings live elsewhere, where society’s norms did not apply?

The eschaton, as we know, was delayed. Apocalyptic fervour did not long remain a factor. But its decline did not erase the new dream of a sexless existence. On the path of Christian thinking about sex in the post-Apostolic age, there were a number of detours and eccentric adaptations as the Church gradually acquired, first, a place in the Roman world, and then, dominance. From being a persecuted minority Christians became a tolerated and then a triumphant majority, closely affiliated if not in many instances hand in glove with the imperial power. The story is not clear-cut. But there is one thing that emerges from it, a stress that is hard to overlook. Greco-Roman pluralism in sexual matters – the public accessibility of prostitutes, the inclusion of youths as desirable sexual objects, the easy accommodation of divorce and re-marriage – was doomed. Where moralists in the pagan world called for control and, for a few, dignified austerity, Christians went all the way for prohibition. Sexual excess was not simply shameful, to be avoided by rational and well-bred people. It was a sign of human nature perverted, of the rule of evil spirits, of unholiness and damnation. Aphrodite must be slain.[[521]](#endnote-521)

Once puritanism was let out of the bag it was hard to seal it up again. This is still true. For as long as Christian idealism has haunted the conscience of the west, finding a congenial home in the literature and in the art of Europe and its colonies, there has always been an audience for what Nietzsche rightly called the ‘slander against sensuality’. To appreciate the novelty of Christian asceticism it is useful to return to Nietzsche’s writings of the 1880s. Here the philosopher develops a hypothetical narrative about the twisted origins of moral ideas. With a malicious delight Nietzsche documents the absurdities of renunciation. The ascetic is placed under the harsh light of the psychologist, who is trained in the diagnosis of deviance. What are the symptoms displayed by the ascetic? They are found in his very success. The ascetic is a high-functioning but toxic form of life. Asceticism turns a deficiency and an emotional incapacity into an advantage all the world comes to envy, to the world’s discredit. Weakness is made to look like strength; denial to look like plenitude. Nature is pushed aside in favour of the unnatural. This is what the west calls ‘morality’.

Morality, all morality, not simply altruism and the ethics of disinterestedness, is really a mutation in the body of culture. The trouble is, this mutation is seductive. Christianity is only one of the many ‘slave mentalities’ to benefit from it. The ‘slave revolution in morality’, as Nietzsche describes that, triumphed under the sign of the ‘spirit’. The ‘spirit’ is an odd organ for the human organism. It does not seem to like the belly, and it particularly recoils from the genitals. As spirit sees it, natural man is vulgar man. The spirit has a low threshold of disgust and has very specialised requirements for its health: thinner air, a less robust diet, sedentary occupations, shaded rooms and bloodless ideas. Christianity arose as one of the spirit’s frequent historical victories in its war against life. It demonized what it called the ‘old animal’, the sensual man at ease in his own flesh and with his own appetites. When Nietzsche takes on Christianity in the First Essay of *Genealogy of Morality* he portrays it as adopting the Jews’ fight against nature and the human race. The Judeo-Christians had somehow mislaid the crude instincts of other more successful races. Their ill-tempered ‘*ressentiment*’ (GM I, 10) was the physiological reflex of a temperament unable to thrive in a healthily competitive milieu. It found a congenial atmosphere in a psychic condition best called masochism, a condition some might be tempted to ascribe to the early Christians in the desert. Slave morality digs out the most tenacious of all pleasures, the pleasure in pain. It reverses all common-sensical norms to make passivity and impotence seem noble and ‘pure’. This was the genealogy of ascetic values, the fatal darkening of our ‘ascetic planet’.

The Jews and their offspring, the Christians, discovered a new and even more dangerous kind of hatred, ‘the deepest and most sublime, indeed a hatred which created ideals and changed values’. Then they called that subtle monstrosity ‘love’.[[522]](#endnote-522) The Christians were the worst: they burned incense in front of ascetic ideals; they besmirched sexuality with their ugly creed of self-denial, and they made guiltiness into a deeply rooted human habit.[[523]](#endnote-523) Nietzsche’s campaign against asceticism was unrelenting. Some of its rancour must come from personal disappointment. How could proud Europeans like Schopenhauer and Wagner have fallen for this thin mess of sentimentality? Asceticism does not create better, nobler, more creative beings. It insinuates self-doubt in the strong and sterility in the fertile. But it should not be underestimated. Like any phenomenon of the reactive mind, asceticism is creative. Its energy rarely flags. Nietzsche did not predict the association between ascetic styles of conduct and modern capitalism that Max Weber made famous. But he did identify the tendency of ascetic scrupulousness to foster mediocrity. Asceticism was more dangerous to the flourishing of the human species than crime, illness, or greed, because it does not just attack a healthy organism, a living society, weakening its defenses and undermining its resolve. Asceticism, complains Nietzsche, has warped our taste and seduced our intellect. (*On the Genealogy of Morality*, Essay 3, §20-26) Any hope we can resuscitate our old, ‘natural’ selves is an illusion, one that sexual radicals and liberators from Rabelais to Reich continue to indulge.

If Nietzsche is right, Christianity won the battle for values before Constantine ever painted a cross on his battle flag. Undoing asceticism’s victory would mean undoing the human mind, in some fundamental way that the call for a Zarathustra does not accomplish. Science leaves the terrain of puritanism pretty much untouched; even feminism has done little more than muddy the waters, mixing demands for sexual liberation with demands for censorship. Sex had become too important to be ‘fixed’ by the forces of reason and good sense. This is something Nietzsche helped 19th and 20th century critics of morality to see. Enlightened faith in a naturalistic explanation of moral judgments failed to make much headway against the culture that had swallowed the ascetic pill. The belief that there was something intrinsically wrong with sexual pleasure would not go away. It was incoherent. But it was indelible.

So where does this leave us? Christianity made renunciation and denial exciting. Yet renunciation can only seem heroic if what it resists is similarly impressive. Nietzsche does not have a lot to say about the positive forces turned against themselves by the ascetic revolt. Probably the arc of exuberant desire, the violent urgency of eros, is harder to describe than the industrious economy of negativity. Nietzsche claims to be defending the good name of sensuality, yet in fact his imagination fails at the thought of it. He is not alone. Although we commonly assign love and passion as motivating causes for the activity of writers, the desire to put sex into words can just as often lead nowhere. Civilisation gas only intermittently arrived at a great poetry or prose that does justice to sensual experience or erotic arousal. What exists can be surprisingly repetitious. The strength of the emotion is no guarantee that the imagination devoted to it will avoid platitudes. Readers interested in the libido and its activities can be disappointed by the way that literature, which has been very adept in representing greed, envy, anger and ambition, is poor at representing lust. (Perhaps why pornography has a reputation for being boring.)

The period of late antiquity, into which Christianity intervened with its propaganda against eros, is an interesting case. It would be convenient to interpret late ancient attitudes towards sexuality as positive and relaxed, But as Veyne, Foucault and others have argued, the pleasant picture of pagan sensuality is full of holes. Drawing from a different tradition, that formed in the stricter styles of the Jewish Bible and Law, post-apostolic Christians developed a mythology of sex as something powerful, domineering, and possibly diabolical. Insults and denunciations became the normal language for speaking of sex. Preachers and theological writers were not shy in stirring up anxiety and distaste with their talk of acts and appetites as ‘defiling’ and polluting. Working on a susceptibility to shame that played (as we have seen in the last chapter) a considerable role in late Roman moral life, the Christians went to new lengths: sex was, in most cases, sinful. The original sin of the human race, banishing us from our original condition of felicity, is in some mysterious way bound up with sexuality.[[524]](#endnote-524) Sexual love in pagan antiquity, however girdled with expectations, taboos and norms, was not sinful, because sinfulness – as opposed to transgression, disgrace and shame – is not a Greek or Roman concept. Sex in pre-Christian antiquity did not represent the entrance of darkness into a world of light, the cosmic and existential wound that destroyed innocence and turned the will away from its intended objects. On the other hand, sex in the lands that spoke Greek and Latin was a complicated business. Visual art in Greece and Hellenistic Rome was frank about what sex looked like and the things it made people (and gods) do, whether bawdy or proper. Literature was less forthcoming, although Classical tragedy and Homeric epic certainly do not ignore the potential of eros to change human plans and intervene in the affairs of state, pushing even the gods to act against their best interests. For fifth century Athenians, who have told us the most about their ideals and prejudices, eros arises involuntarily in response to physical beauty, and it is very hard to resist its stimulus.[[525]](#endnote-525) Euripides’ *Hippolytus*  (see above, Chapter 1) begins with a declaration of the contradictory powers of *eros* : It ‘is beautiful and divine, sent by the gods. It is also a force of compulsion, stronger than fire or lightning that can lay waste the mind of the lover and, through that assault, do great and sometimes fatal damage to the object of that love.’[[526]](#endnote-526) Eros can make you mad; it is even itself a madness. It makes you suffer, but you still want to be its sufferer, Sappho says; love is a ‘silken fire’ (Poem 31); it is bittersweet; it can be, at its best, a sensuous ecstasy whose memory burns and delights.[[527]](#endnote-527) Doctors compare it to falling ill (and a Roman contributor to the demonization of eros, the Epicurean poet Lucretius, described its symptoms as desperate and degrading.)[[528]](#endnote-528)

Libido lays waste to the great houses and destroys dynasties (the Atreiads, Troy). In the literature of Hellenism, for which romantic adventures became a genre unto themselves, erotic love between men and women or men and men can spur marvellous acts of sacrifice and perseverance, can break up friendships, and disrupt regimes. Is it a kind of witchcraft? John Winkler points out what the ancient employment of ‘erotic magical spells’ can tell us about eros in antiquity:

Indeed it is the presence of so much venomous and malicious feeling in many of the erotic magical rites that offer twentieth-century readers such a jolt. ‘Love’ is certainly not the *mot juste*  for the scenes of bondage and humiliation that are acted out in the central group of procedures aimed at bringing a desired person to one’s bed; we can speak of this as ‘passion’, ‘lust’, or ‘desire’, but hardly as love (see David Halperin, ‘Platonic *Eros* and what Men call Love’). The vanilla connotations of ‘love’ for us include mutual delight and consent, harmonious and balanced tenderness, perhaps a certain loss of self in the great mystery of the beloved other; they do not include wishing discomfort, annoyance, profound inner turmoil, and pain on the body and soul of one’s beloved, as do the bulk of erotic incantations, both generis and prescription, found in the major collections of ancient ‘magic’ – the *Papyri Graecae Magicae* and *Defixionum Tabellae* . [[529]](#endnote-529)

Eros is not just messy and insistent. Ovid, the Roman poet who put more words towards the delineation of eros than any other writer in the ancient world, identifies its force with that of mutability and metamorphoses. Not only do mortals and immortals trespass into each others’ domains through it, but so do animals and humans, and monsters and humans. Eros is flux. Later poets followed his hint, even Platonists, according to Leonard Barkan: ‘the act of love itself, as Platonists from Plato to Spenser have understood, blurs distinctions by transforming the lovers into a hermaphrodite.’ Narcissus loses himself in pursuing his beloved, as does everyone in Ovid’s sexual landscape: ‘So were these two bodies knit in close embrace: they were not longer two, nor such as to be called, one, woman, and one, man. They seemed neither, and yet both.’ (*Metamorphose*s, 4:377-79)[[530]](#endnote-530) Bodies in love don’t preserve their separation, nor gender identity its integrity. Love is all over the place, as well as driving its victims out of their intended places and putting them in risky, forbidden embraces, encouraging adultery, playing with incest, mimicking rebellion and transgression. It is a proliferating phenomenon, unifying things that are properly held apart, blurring distinctions as well as bodies: this makes it a nuisance for the systematic thinker or the philosopher.[[531]](#endnote-531) The Greeks registered this slipperiness when they divided eros up under a team of patrons: Aphrodite rules married as well as adulterous love; Juno marriage alone; Eros, the winged god; satyrs, Pan, Bacchus, etc., all intervene with their special types of mania and arousal. Given such sanctions, erotic frenzy and mania could not be mere human constructions: they were inspired by gods, and no one should underestimate them.

Erotic passion causes suffering; it can ‘unman’ a manly man and expose anyone to ridicule and violation. But, however destabilising, it had a grandeur in Greek and Roman literature, if not in life or law. Philosophers were always cautioning against it which, if it were so trivial as a matter of simple hygiene, would hardly have had the force it did.[[532]](#endnote-532) Suspicion of sexual pleasure is hard to overlook in the literature and declamations of the Roman Republic and early Empire: being known for your indulgences in this are is shameful for a man or a respectable woman. Or at least that is what Catullus and Propertius and Ovid assume their readers will understand, even if they will be more amused and titillated than horrified by the description of the limitless lusts of the mistresses or enemies who are so colourfully vilified.[[533]](#endnote-533)

‘Our own culture’, writes Sir Kenneth Dover in his 1984 paper, ‘Classical Greek Attitudes to Sexual Behaviour’, has its myths about the remote past, and one myth that dies hard is that the ‘invention’ of sexual guilt, shame and fear by the Christians destroyed a golden age of free, fearless, pagan sexuality.’ Yet that myth has some truth behind it. ‘That most pagans were in many ways less inhibited than most Christians is undeniable.’ (20) Yet to keep that relative - and by no means uncritical – acceptance of the necessity and ineradicability of all things sexual gave the Greeks and the Romans a lot of supervising to do. The sexes were largely segregated. Distinctions of status and rank governed with great precision just who you could do what with, and where. Adultery was not treated leniently, and other offenses could attract heavy penalties. A society does not have to think that sex is sinful to want to control it; nor does public and political interest in the morality of sex mean that a world without sex is considered morally superior, desirable or possible. There is a difference, not just in ideology or symbolic rhetoric. When pagan bodies became Christian bodies, they were no longer the property of society but of God. The strain of the conversion was felt for a very long time.

The passage from pagan ‘constraint’ to Christian ‘sacred virginity’ is what I hope to make perspicuous. However thin it is in external events and grand, destiny-shaking spectacles, this is a passage that marks a break in history. A new shape of religious and moral life unveils itself, and so does a new and odd idea: that a sexual identity could be created by abjuring sex. Yet that novel type of sexual identity (‘holy asexuality’, if you like) is best understood as a new direction in the metaphysics of the subject, as more significant ontologically than for the history of sexuality, as a recasting of myth rather than a variation in the activities of the libido. Christian Gnostics, who moved freely in the domain of myth, provided the language and the images. The Gnostic movement is itself a hard phenomenon to pin down. Having many variants, and existing for a long period in history almost entirely through the attacks made on it by those who considered themselves guardians of Christian orthodoxy,[[534]](#endnote-534) Gnosticism mixed Iranian myths with Jewish mysticism and Greek philosophical speculation. It incorporated figures and symbols familiar to many Christians but added to them a dark and mysterious background of warring spirits and contradictory sayings, some promoting the attainment of truth and holiness through absolute abstinence, others recommending a freedom for the ‘knower’ from all rules and prohibitions. Gnostics used the language of magic as well as apocalypse. And their fantasies about the shame of sexuality were obsessive. In the accounts offered by Gnostic texts, the devils had gained control of this world; creation shudders under its slavery to the dark powers. And the devils use man’s sexual organs and appetites as the extension of their malevolent designs into the very interior of the soul. What could be done? It was all too easy to violate an interdict unawares; defilement was in your members before you even had formulated a sexual intention. For it seems that the defiling power of sexuality precedes any ethical code or system of actions and law. Here Paul Ricoeur is once again illuminating about the dread and terror of archaic ‘fault consciousness’, in particular as that relates to the sphere of sexual defilement and purification. Like the demons, sexual contagion is archaic, sexual impurity starting almost as a ‘material ‘something’ that transmits itself by contact and contagion’. What better way to avoid its taint than to abjure sex altogether, if that were possible. Communities may set up rules and rites

to remove the universal impurity of sexuality by marking out an enclosure within which sexuality ceases to be a defilement…At the end of the line on which we have just encountered the theme of the primordial defilement of sexuality, there appease the identity of purity and virginity: virginity and spotlessness are as closely bound together as sexuality and contamination.[[535]](#endnote-535)

Just as there are sacrifices, symbolic and literal, performed to cast out the agencies of dread and guiltiness, so there are figures whose special transcendence of the universal, fleshly condition equips them to be our surrogate sacrifices, our virginal ‘guardians’ against sin. The demons have no fear of our rational arguments, our ethical qualifications: they know all too well how to convert human desire for praise and achievement into the very weapons of spiritual destruction. But against the angelic simplicity of the virgin, even the cosmic forces of deception cannot prevail. Asexuality is a new soul and a new body, a creature previously unanticipated in the history of the world.

Like ‘virginity’, the term ‘asceticism’ admits of more than one meaning. In Christian gnosis *ascesis* has a distinctly cosmic and eschatological significance, as opposed to a merely personal one; it is the means of depriving the powers of darkness of their theatre of operations, the flesh and the desire for worldly attachments. So conceived, as a kind of ‘scorched earth’ policy of spirituality, asceticism prevents the demons from gaining a foothold in their assault against the soul.[[536]](#endnote-536)

The best name for this new identity, about which I am being only slightly hyperbolic, is the *angelic vocation*. Under its spell, human beings began imagining themselves as transcending ordinary mortal nature. If the angels could thrive in hosts and myriads, without needing the animal contrivances of generation, as Gregory of Nyssa put it, then why couldn’t the Christians adopt a practice of purity? After all, since Christ they are no longer suffering in the dark: they now know of their future destiny in the resurrection life, when they will be restored to the unaltered image and likeness of the Deity according to which they were first made. Fashioned as a compound of reason and irrationality, of intellect and matter, human nature can choose to cultivate its exclusively spiritual and contemplative side: like Plato’s aspiring souls with wings, Christians will live less and less attached to their bodies, more indifferent to the dread pull of time and death. And they will do so, wrote Gregory (with many others) when they realise they can dispense with the burdens and indignities of generation, sex and marriage.

Not that all Christians were ready for their wings. There were many, perhaps most, who had the sense to know that the angelic life was not for them. ‘The ascetic’, Peter Brown writes, could assert,

‘through singularly austere self-mortification, the visible , physical freedom of the body from the restraints of normal human living. By so doing, the ascetics were thought to have brought the vibrant energy of the angels through the half-translucent curtain that separated the unseen hosts of heaven from the physical world. Robed in the Holy Spirit, human flesh could do on earth what the angels did in heaven.’[[537]](#endnote-537)

But most Christians found that the flesh remained their covering, and earth their milieu. How could they live up to these exacting standards? Would the message of salvation really mean that the history of human generation was over?

Compared to pagan sexual morality, the Christian swerve against sexual reproduction tightened the bonds. Social pressure or the refined preference for personal modesty might make men and women more virtuous. There were some philosophers who agreed happily with a view very like the Christians, that marriage was a distraction, a bed of nails, a breeding ground for loss, pain and disappointment. Yet no philosopher, even the other-worldly Plotinus, went as far. Christians allowed themselves to imagine a universal exemption from the practices of sexual union and desire; philosophers at their most ascetic recommended continence for the special few, who would live treasuring their own purity surrounded by the majority happily proceeding to the marriages society sanctioned. The Christians had in mind a world that no one had ever seen: a vision of a future beyond the difference of the sexes, where marriage would be unnecessary, a dim memory. Their pretensions were breath-taking. But of course they took it that they had been promised the chance to return, in the flesh, to the image of God according to which their primal parents had been made. To a very small minority the heavenly vision of a sexless sublime, returning human nature to its prelapsarian innocence, could be best pursued by cutting off from the body any of those parts implicated in sexual errors. Anaphrodisiacs were another option.[[538]](#endnote-538) To others austere ascetic regimes would accomplish the same results – fasting, mortifying the body, moving far away from other human beings of both sexes, chasing and chastising every guilty thought. But for all, it seemed as if questions of sex, marriage and virginity were implicated in the way Christianity understood the new teaching about nature, grace an salvation. And the cultivation of a virginal life – with all its difficulties – was invested with a special and almost mystical aura.

An anonymous homily on virginity, written in Greek in Syria in the early 4th century,[[539]](#endnote-539) advises fathers that they should rejoice if their daughters express a desire to remain a ‘virgin for Christ’. Your young plant, the homilist explains, will be glorified like ‘a bunch of grapes amid thorns and briars’. In your undefiled daughter you have a real treasure; do not be careless in guarding her, make sure her comportment is measured, her appearance and gestures modest, her habits abstinent, her devotion to fasting strong and consistent; keep her at home, do not show her off to men, ‘do not allow anything wicked to approach the pure temple.’(2:18-21) Follow the discipline with your sons, ‘do not be remiss in persuading the males to sanctify their own bodies’ (58); turn them away from the passions of the flesh; persuade them of the value of virginity by describing the miseries of marriage. If your daughter chooses the virginal life and remains faithful to it, do not regret that her beauty is not being offered to a husband, for her Bridegroom is the eternal one, not the one who can die or remain absent, filling her life with worries and sorrow (49-56). The virgin is the pure and perfect fruit,

a sanctuary dedicated to God, temple of Christ, pure altar to the King, Holy Spirit become flesh, amulet of the law, student of the Gospels, pride of the Church of God, triumph over Eve’s transgression, revocation of banishment, reconciliation with humanity, bride of the Heavenly King, pledge of life.[[540]](#endnote-540)

If you, the parents, fulfil your office as priests to this immaculate temple, you too will be rewarded, ‘admitted to the bridal chamber of the heavenly kingdom’ (2.44). Just as temporal marriage of their young, involving complex negotiations for the upper classes, delivered status and security to the proud parents, so this betrothal to Christ will advance your credit in heaven. Your household, which guards this paragon, will shine.

The images the homilist uses to praise the privileged virgin, and exhort others to join the cause, are the same ones appearing in one after another of 4th century treatises on virginity. Once established, the rhetoric seemed too satisfactory to admit of much change. Virginity was ‘the perfect life’ and the tonic of immortality. It was reserved, perhaps, for a privileged elite. ‘These are our angels’, John Chrysostom says of the gaunt holy men living as solitary hermits in the mountains around Antioch in the 4th century. The elite was male and female, aspiring indeed to a state where sexual distinctions would not longer apply. Though the homilist addresses the young of both sexes, via their parents, it became soon clear that the female virgin had a special role. Her body was a temple in a literal manner: adapted in most cases to the natural and social function of conceiving and nurturing a child, if it renounced those offices it was open for a more sacred function, just as a house on the Sabbath is swept and washed (so the Jews believed) to serve as the proper dwelling place of the Lord. And the consecrated female virgin might undo centuries of attack on women’s carnal weakness. Her purity could wash clean millennia of sin and error. The virginal woman is the final reparation for the crime of Eve, her modesty and sexlessness undoing the stigma borne by the entire female sex. As a punishment for their ancestor’s weakness, women were suspected of sensuality, shame and incontinence. The homilist finds much to agree with in the traditional imputations against womankind. But the virginal woman marks an exception, an emergence from the history of shame, slander and treachery: no longer will one see a woman and say ‘Jezebel, Eve, Herodias’, The virgin, triumphing over the curse of Eve, shows that the sex can compete with males in the contest for self-control. *Sophrosyne* - the self-control and moderation cultivated by the ancient sage—operates in the world to protect the vulnerability of the wise and reflective from the uncertainties and tribulations of life. But *enkrateia* , the more extreme renunciation of the immaculate and virginal, shuts the world out entirely, living in the body as if within the walls of an sanctuary, as if this earth in all its reality had already passed away: the virgin is not a person but a temple.

This would become the ‘elite’ way of being a Christian, the exceptional calling that allowed undisturbed concentration on the love of Christ, the condition from which introduction into God’s presence could most readily occur. But did such a promotion of the elite form of the Christian life necessarily mean that the ‘rank and file’, who continued the conventional use of sex to reproduce and found families, were still bound to corrupt, even demonic practices? Some of the Patristic vitriol on the subject of the ‘filthiness’ of list and procreation is of course exaggerated for rhetorical effect, as any Roman orator would have advised: Your opponent is always a scoundrel, a dirty dog, selfish, impious and a liar. Any good lawyer would have a pile of insults handy for such disputations. And Fathers like Tertullian, Jerome and Basil fell easily into the prosecutorial mode. When an advocate for chastity wants to recruit, say, well-born maidens to a life of permanent virginity, he makes the alternatives look bad: marriage is full of woes, parenting a prolonged ordeal, admiration of your sexual charms doomed to dissipate, and sexual pleasure (graphically described to alarm the innocent) a brief, humiliating release. Yet if the struggle for continence is to look heroic, a noble exercise in overcoming a powerful foe, then sexual pleasure cannot be entirely belittled. If the sexual temperament of a prospective female, or male, candidate is lukewarm or temptation an insignificant and rare occurrence, then the triumph of chastity will be less dazzling.

Christian propaganda for virginity had to deal with these divergent aspects of the programme. Chastity is on the one hand the authentic and original state, what Adam and Eve would have enjoyed if they had not been corrupted. It is beautiful and pure, restoring human nature to the likeness of God. It is an imitation of Christ, himself a virgin. Just as an earthly husband wants his bride to be his alone, so Christ the spiritual and immortal bridegroom wants us to come to him untouched and autonomous. On the other hand, lust is a wily and persistent antagonist, one that the Christian must continue to fight as long as life on this earth continues. The Christian thinkers who wrote and preached in favour of dedicated virginity played on both registers, speaking with great sweetness and intimacy about the glorious stature the continent Christian achieves, while at the same time not sparing the brutality in describing all the temptations and disgraces of non-virginal backsliding. Christian chastity, it must be said at the outset, was never considered identical with physical integrity: a ‘virgin’ who has kept her body unavailable to sexual use is not a virgin if her mind and manners are ‘unchaste’; then she is a ‘false virgin’ and deserves cruel contempt from Christians. In the late 4th century St. John Chrysostom writes sternly of the virgin who ‘has reversed the meaning’ of virginity ‘by wearing the glory on the exterior but being entirely dishonoured within’:

Even if her body should remain inviolate the better part of her soul has been ruined. Her thoughts, What advantage is there in the walls having stood firm when the temple has been destroyed? Or what good is it that the place where the throne stood is pure when the throne itself is defiled? No, not in this way has her body escaped pollution.[[541]](#endnote-541)

To be a true virgin, John Chrysostom continues, is not a matter of sexual abstinence on its own. It involves a continuous struggle. ‘You need a soul fond of strife, one forceful and reckless against the passions. You must walk over coals without being burned, and walk over swords without being slashed.’ (*On* Virginity, 37) You must be a sound reasoner, unafraid of fasting and sleeplessness, alert and armed with arguments. ‘Our battle is against natural compulsions’, as ‘we emulate the life of the angels’ and ‘race with the incorporeal powers.’ (37) Another expert, Pseudo-Athanasius, wrote a Greco-Syriac treatise on virginity that synthesises many of the admonitions favoured in this genre: no true virgin cares for her looks or pays any heed to adornment; she renounces ‘all anxiety about worldly things’. For what use is it to preserve the integrity of the body if you have nor preserved the purity of the soul? (*On Virginity* , chapter 6) But if you do, you deliver a gift that is precious to all:

Let chastity and serenity rise upon her, just as those who are not steadfast, but debauched, will arise and be ashamed when they see her. Just as a good ointment and a precious liquid, even if put in vessels, fills those in the house with its sweet fragrance – not only those who stand within does its sweet fragrance delight, but all those outside it fills with its sweetness!—so too when the sweet fragrance of the virginal soul flows onto her body through chastity and serenity, the excellence that lies within is made manifest.[[542]](#endnote-542)

For the virgin’s body is a sacred vessel and an ‘altar’, as Ambrose emphasises(*De virginibus* 2.4.27). Indeed this is what all Christian bodies, virginal or not, should aspire to be, as the Apostle Paul insisted: ‘temples of God’ (I Cor. 6:19). Virginity in its Christian sense stands for a state of perfection, not a condition of the body or a temporary phase of inexperience, to be surrendered for the sake of an individual’s initiation into social adulthood. In many of the treatises devoted to the virginity gospel, widows or the married who have renounced sex are by most considered as virginal as their sexually inexperienced fellows. The crucial criterion is choice and commitment. The language of ‘altar’ and ‘temple’ and ‘sacrifice’, as well as that of the ‘sweet scent’ which purifies the house and all about it, shows that that the Christian advocates of chastity knew how to adapt to their own uses the Hebrew Bible’s connection of holiness to bodily purity, sin to pollution.[[543]](#endnote-543) Becoming a virgin is an act of the spirit. But it does mean that the flesh will have to be tamed. Christians were prepared to go to great lengths in their war against the flesh. Sexual desire is a dangerous force, something to be feared and guarded against. It is a burning fire, said Paul to the Corinthians, a restless and intractable ache that wants always more. If you cannot fight it, then you are much better off marrying and taming desire in the sober practices of the conjugal bed. Sexual attraction is ubiquitous and irrepressible, as Basil of Ancyra explores in his *Treatise on Virginity*: women’s bodies possess it to an inordinate degree, and it draws males to them as mechanically and irresistibly as a magnet draws iron filings (*De vir*, 3). Limiting yourself to an extreme diet can help, not only ‘cooling down’ and ‘drying out’ sexual desire but also helping to ruin your looks and make you less of a dangerous temptation. Staying awake rather than letting your limbs relax in the languor of sleep is also useful, especially if you pray continuously. For the heart needs to be strengthened through severity and vigilance. Corruption is waiting at all times and in all places: it can enter through the eyes, the skin, the lips, and very easily, through your thoughts, dreams and fantasies. Keeping very busy is a good idea, as is segregating yourself from the opposite sex, avoiding the sight and touch of your own body, and remaining inside. But if you can wean yourself from the excitement that female bodies bear – here not that different from young male bodies, as Paul acknowledges in his Letter to the Ephesians 5:5, and 1 Cor 6: 9-10 – then you are the lucky ones.

**4.4 Making the Two into One: Virginity and Gender**

‘It is good for a man not to touch a woman.’ (1 Cor 7:2)

Women for various reasons incarnate the power of sexual arousal in its undiluted form. Their bodies were little understood even by the most empirically-based medical experts of the ancient world. All this reproductive activity concentrated on the female body! The Hippocratics saw the female body as dangerously susceptible to impurity…the womb itself, in popular belief, had almost demonic powers.’[[544]](#endnote-544) Anything that potent could also be a site of menace and confusion. This sense of foreboding only intensified under the pressure of Christian anxieties about sexual excess. Because female bodies, no matter how unwittingly, bear the burden of temptation, males must continuously be on their guard. It is males who must take the lead in the campaign against sexual shame. Their powers of reason are incomparably greater, their social standing higher. The voices we hear raised in the arguments about chastity, renunciation, and ascetic excellence are male voices. Jovininian speaks out against the privilege of virginity; Jerome rises to a righteous fury; Julian of Eclanum argued for the Providential status of sexual desire and the power of human freedom; Augustine fought back in the name of the slavery of the will and the dark tendencies of irrepressible male appetite. Yet the bodies which are offered as glorious temples of innocence and purity, fit for a redeemed soul to inhabit and for Christ to espouse, are female bodies.

In the treatises and letters of the 3rd and 4th century Fathers, East and West, female virgins change the very nature of the human. The virgins who will fill the choirs praising God in his heavenly courts are female virgins, rarefied beyond any earthly kinship. No longer mothers and wives, these are figures of femininity who redefine the category, replacing all its traditional elements (carnal, reproductive, and economic, being a helpmate and yoke-fellow of man) with unfamiliar ones. Women, once they are introduced to the benefits of Christian celibacy, will be powerful allies and recruits. They have been destined for subordination and service. Can they discover a greater freedom and spiritual authority in lives of withdrawal, austerity, hardship and sexual abstinence? Many women thought they could.[[545]](#endnote-545) Perhaps the limits of their gender would be transcended when they entered a new community of love, undefined by any of the functions so far assigned to the female. Clement of Alexandria, late in the 2nd century, gave them reason to be optimistic (reasons quite possibly adopted from those Plato had advanced in redesigning the *Republic*’s post-gendered system):

Pregnancy and parturition belong to a woman as she is a woman and not as she is a human…As far as respects human nature, the woman does not possess one nature and the man exhibit another, but the same: also with virtue. If, consequently, a self-restraint and righteousness and whatever qualities are regarded as following them, is the virtue of the male, it would belong to the male alone to be virtuous and to the woman to be licentious and unjust. But it is offensive even to say this. Accordingly, women are to practice self-restraint and righteousness and every other virtue, as well as men, both bond and free; since it is a fit consequence that the same nature possesses one and the same virtue. (*Stromateis* 4.8)[[546]](#endnote-546)

In his First Letter to the church at Corinth, Paul addresses women who might be recruited for the cause of total continence by listing some of the aggravations the wife will experience in marriage. If a woman espouses God rather than an earthly husband, her mind and heart will be focussed without interruption or distraction. She could be free in a way pagan or Jewish wives can only dream of. When he addresses men his tone changes. Undoubtedly the higher choice would be to embrace a sexless existence. That, however, is not going to be easy. There are some whose temperament is well suited for it, or – better – who have the gifts for continence, strengthened by divine grace. For the others, sexual desire can continue to gnaw; sexual thought and fantasies can becloud the mind and shame the anxious Christian even if he refrains from acting on them. Paul here is assuming that those who will understand him are male. For them, a frank appraisal of the self is in order. How realistic is it for you to believe you can expunge sexual arousal from your constitution? Good intentions are useless if the urge to fornicate continues to hold its sway. If this describes you, the only valid response is to marry soon and conduct your marriage with sobriety and decency. The same applies is you are betrothed to a virgin. If her youth makes her restless with sexual desires, then do not keep her in an unstable state of denial: marry.

When he speaks to the Corinthians, Paul knows he has women and men in his audience. The first generation of the Christian ministry expected that males would be its leaders and its role models. But women’s co-operation mattered even more, since they held the reins of reproduction. Descendants of Eve, they had the power to reverse the old association between the female body and temptation. In the language spoken by the early Church, women were the ‘weak link’, the devil’s gateway’. Yet for that very reason they are the ones who can re-build the bridge between God and man. Daughters of Eve can become daughters of Jerusalem. Brides of men can become brides of Christ if only they would keep themselves out of men’s beds and minds, if only they would give up admiring their own bodies and making themselves desirable, if only they would stop enhancing their flesh with baths and scents, inviting with their glances and alluring with their movements.

By the time of the great flowering of Christian asceticism in the 4th and 5th century, the age of Melania the Younger, Macrina, Olympias, and the famous virginal ‘friends of Jerome’ like Paula, Blesilla and Eustochium, outstanding women had become a major part of the story. The 4th century was female virginity’s ‘golden age’, when the allure of continence became practically a fever, exciting and winning away daughters, wives and widows in the East and in the West, in Constantinople and Caesarea, Nicomedia and Antioch, Alexandria and Ancyra, Rome and Jerusalem. Of course, consecrating yourself or your daughter to a life of strict and austere celibacy was hardly a universal practice in ancient cities and communities. But it was an idea that inspired the pious and the spiritually ambitious. For just a minor sacrifice here and now, of a life that was often difficult, compromised or even miserable, you could be set aside for an undefiled communion with the Lord in silence and tranquillity. The training for chastity was, it must be said, exacting. Instructions to the naive virgin were stern. Purify the senses: keep yourself untouched by any unfitting sounds, sights, tastes, and smells; the hands are particularly vulnerable, as are the feet; make sure they are used never in violence or in greed but only ‘uplifted in prayer’ or reached out to help the needy. (Pseudo-Athanasius, *De vir.* ch. 21-25) You have been crucified to the world and all its bodily desires; keep your hair short and covered with a band and veil as symbolic of affliction and the pure life, your clothes ‘dark and mournful’, eating very little and without gusto. ‘It is shameful for the virgin to put on a tied sandal that is carefully decorated in order to attract the gaze of those who see her.’ The virgin’s footwear is provided not by shoemakers but by God, for the Gospel is an ‘incorruptible and enduring sandal’. (ibid., ch. 75-76) You could be useful – caring for fellow ascetics, giving your goods to the poor and needy, tending to the sick and old. And you could learn – studying the Bible, thinking on the holy truths, even learning to write in Latin, Greek and Hebrew as the great Marcella did. And in the long run, as a compensation for bowing out of the social routines of marriage, household management and childrearing, you would win the bridal crown of the most blessed spouse, the heavenly spouse of the divine Bridegroom. And all your friends, who had not chosen this holy career, will look on with envy after death when they see

holy virgins clothed in the garments of immortality, holding in their hands the Psalter that is engraved in their heats, singing the triumphant hymn of virginity, and wearing on their temples the wreaths of immortality in return for which they renounced the human groaning here below, dancing in front of Christ under the leadership of the angels, with delight arising in the merriment.[[547]](#endnote-547)

Such modest virgins, their eyes lowered, their voices subdued, might dance and win the affection of Christ in the hereafter. Here and now they lived at home, if their parents were in tune with the Christian concept of ‘household monasticism’, avoiding the conversation of strangers, encouraging others to join the cause. If home was not suitable, they might seek out the company of other dedicated virgins or widows and form collective households for support and protection. At times, other celibate males were part of these unconventional arrangements, and the anxiety set off by the ‘co-ed’ style of the virginal life – the community of the *agapatae*, as they were not always respectfully known – was considerable. Whether living privately with their families or in the new proto-monastic communities, female virgins became more and more visible, the subject of considerable discursive investment as the case for chastity built up steam, leading ultimately to the founding of large and successful communities in Egypt, Syria, Armenia, Turkey and Palestine. They also became more controversial. Why did women matter to the church? Why was their ‘burden of the flesh’ heavier? Because women are weaker, they are also more susceptible to the waywardness that goes with sexual license. Their bodies are more porous, more permeable. Hence they must lock themselves up even more tightly than men. Or be locked up.

Paul and his companions, when they were traveling around the coastal cities of Asia Minor, Greece and Syria, had to deal with questions about the social composition of their fellowship: married women often joined up as couples with their husbands (Priscilla and Aquila, Linus and Claudia) but other converts to the ‘touring’ movement[[548]](#endnote-548) were widows (prominent in Acts) and young women of an age to be married.[[549]](#endnote-549) Paul and his associates take particular care in how they guide the women attracted to their ministry. That care, and the responsibilities that accompanied it, would become more and more contested. Virgins in particular were a source of anxiety. If they too wanted to reject marriage, where were they to live? In communal households shared with other virginal males? In communities presided over by older and more responsible women, widows who were coming late to the career of virginity, or who were leaving marriages for this sexless form of fellowship? Was it safe for young women to attach themselves to an apostle like Paul, even a celibate one known for his chastity? What risks did this create for the group and the individual? What sort of tensions, and embarrassments, could the visible presence and patronage of women pose for a church that was trying to make itself more ‘mainstream’?

For male ascetics, female company, even the presence of a woman, was held to be particularly distracting. Years of hard spiritual struggle could be thrown away in a brief encounter, and even old and experienced monks were afraid…The construct of woman as sexual temptress, as desire personified, was apparently so powerful that even men committed to a life of prayer could not think of women as human beings with the same commitment. An abbess once said to the monk who had carefully avoided her sisters, “If you were a perfect monk you would not have looked at us, and you would not have seen that we were women.”[[550]](#endnote-550)

One encratic paragon, the Apostle Andrew, whose history is told in the 2nd or 3rd century Apocryphal Acts of Andrew, is described as travelling through Asia Minor and Greece, working miracles, banishing demons, fortifying his disciples with the example of his ascetic rigour and courage. No less impressive, if more irritating to his opponents, was his effect on women: Andrew was particularly good at converting women to virginity. In the view of the author of his romantic story, Andrew was the kind of spell-binding and charismatic male that elite Roman husbands particularly detested. Wherever he goes he attracts those ready to break free from the captivity of the body. Listening to him they find they want to secede from the world of marriage and procreation; they yearn to live in poverty and self-denial. Who are these converts? What is their social status? The Acts makes large claims for the success of the Apostle. He draws to the cause women from brothels and women from great families. Running from the ‘filth’ of sexual intercourse and the norms of their city and land, they become converted to sexual abstinence. For this new life is something extraordinary. It is said to be a way of being a ‘champion’ ( , or *athlete*)In Patras Andrew converts Maximilla, wife of the proconsul Aegeates, so that she refused to sleep with her husband and cares for nothing but her ‘inner husband’. Her husband is furious, and remonstrates eloquently with her: how could you, who had received so much from me, who warmed my bed and raised my children, love someone else more than me? Despite Aegeates’ threats, which are far from hollow (he gets Andrew executed), Maximilla runs to kiss the hands of the apostle who continues to solicit her for the unblemished chaste life of the consecrated virgin. Although her husband has the social superiority, Andrew’s moral superiority is the clincher. And he offers her the chance to heal both herself and him, to redeem them from the ‘ignorance or Eve’ and the ‘acquiescence of Adam’:

I know, Maximilla my child, that you are moved to resist the whole allurement of sexual intercourse, because you wish to be separated from a polluted and foul way of life….And I rightly see in you Eve repenting and in myself Adam being converted: for what she suffered in ignorance you to whose soul I direct my words are now setting right again because you were converted…For you yourself who did not suffer the same things have healed her (ie. Eve’s) affliction; and I by taking refuge with God have perfect his (Adam’s) imperfection: and where she disobeyed, you have been obedient; and where he acquiesced, there I flee…As Adam died in Eve because of the harmony of their relationship, so even now I live in you who keep the command of the Lord and who give yourself over to the state of your true being.[[551]](#endnote-551)

Virgins were ‘like the angels’; they were almost a bridge between human and divine, their fragile bodies were hardened through self-denial and simplicity. Like ‘the lamps’ in the parable of those who watch for the entrance of the bridegroom to the wedding feast (Luke 12:35-38), virgins keep watch through day and night for the benefit of those less firm. Their attentiveness is inextinguishable, ‘prepared and pure’, as irreproachable as the toughest Stoic in their guard against the passions.[[552]](#endnote-552) Theirs is the ‘stronger drink’, the elixir of permanent and voluntary virginity. ‘The branches of chastity’, writes Methodius of Olympus, perhaps the most lyrical of chastity’s celebrants, come from ‘a blessed and divinizing tree’. Methodius decided to give chastity the compliment of a Platonic setting. Imitating the literary structure in which Plato had placed his arguments about the ennobling powers of beauty and non-physical love, Methodius called his poetic dialogue a ‘Symposium’, and replaced Plato’s male philosophers with ten young girls gravely celebrating virginity’s victory over sin and death. The virgins took their discussion into the gentle world of nature. Adam and Eve’s disobedience, they explain, withered the blooms of Paradise. It was their greed for the new fruit that did it, and ascetics ever since have tried to curb their appetites, studying in fast and dietetic restrictions ways to make their stomachs immune to the desire for food. Men and women may have once been designed to help and serve one another. Early Christians expected great things from this form of abstinence. It may not have been anticipated that the battle against food would so decisively turn to another battle, the battle against sex, but that is what happened. The tree of life did indeed die. It will be made to bloom again, covered with more beautiful and more nourishing fruit. Those will be the fruits of chastity. (*Symposium* 9: 3-4) This was God’s intention, when he decided to help man advance further on the road to heaven, by imparting to him ‘the science of virginity’, so that he could learn to steer himself safely from storm to haven, to aim first for the less good – ‘continence within marriage’ – to the greater, virginity, ‘in which state men will train themselves to despise the flesh and come to anchor unafraid in the peaceful haven of immortality.’ (Logos 1, Marcella, 2)

Faith and wisdom are useful as guides to keep on the right track in life. But only one things can turn life into a foretaste of heaven, an apprenticeship in immortality. Other religions honor sexual restraint and modest reserve. Unique to Christianity is the curious belief in the spiritual benefits and ennobling powers of consecrated virginity. “Virginity’, writes John Bugge in a masterly book on the subject, was ‘until comparatively recent times the single most essential prerequisite for a life of perfection in Christianity.’[[553]](#endnote-553) Yet perfection had to be restricted. Christianity did not opt for a complete extirpation of the reproductive imperative. It chose, instead, to foster a special class, a celibate elite. Priests who administer the sacraments are unlike the parishioners whose spiritual well-being they supervise. Monks and nuns ‘represent’ us in the eyes of heaven, and are said to ‘guard’ the walls, making intercession through their purity and unworldliness. The rest of us worry about the things of the world. Those exempt from earthly duties, who ‘abstain from the privileges of marriage in order to be present at the appearance of God’, as Gregory of Nyssa put it, are imitating the special bearers of grace, figures like Moses, Elias, and Jesus.[[554]](#endnote-554) The rank and file of the Church, from the High Middle Ages until the Reformation, experienced sexual urges, looked for ways to satisfy them, and asked the Church to ratify their choices. The clergy remains aloof: unmarried and, in principle, sexually abstinent. In monasteries and convents the spiritually dedicated keep their bodies as pure sanctuaries, binding themselves in a different form of marriage, to the divine Bridegroom, or to the Church itself. Ennobling virginity is a Christian innovation. It is a notion unknown in the ancient world before the Christian churches and their preaching.

The language of purity received a jolt from an unexpected direction when it encountered the obsessive interest of early Christians in the supernatural beauty of absolute continence. Virtue, in the ancient world as a whole, was rarely so exclusive. It could be represented by a number of different figures: the prudent statesman, whose love for justice trumps any sneaking inclination towards personal glory; the heroic warrior, inspirational to other men, object of desire by other women and gods; the household paragon, mistress of domestic efficiency, decorum, and hospitality. A pure maiden could also be an ornament and an exemplar: such were Polyxena and Antigone, girls who sacrificed their womanly dreams for the sake of political action and ethical principle. In those cases it was important that the young noblewoman whose blood was spilled for the sake of family honour or national pride was also unmarried – not the property of anyone, a special and anomalous kind of person, occupying a thin wedge between childhood and maturity, between self-awareness and erotic agency. Virgins could be sacrifices; they could even rebel against the universal fate of womanhood; they could be (temporarily) warriors or priestesses or companions of men. But the idea that they might cling fiercely to their status as sexually off-limits was more troubling than admirable, as we saw in the case of the Danaids and other followers of Artemis. Why should the state of virginity be sacred? It might intimidate men, certainly; that is why young maidens, infatuated with their own independence, needed to be tamed, to work off their prickliness in the rituals of ‘the bear’, to expend those undomesticated energies so unsuitable to the quiet life of the household. But there was nothing glorious, for the Greeks or later, the Romans, about the fact that one could say, at the advanced age of 18 or 19 or even 30, that one had never ‘known’ a man.

Christian virginity demanded quite another level of respect. Not a mere accident of age or the expression of timidity, virginity was the crown, the supersession of ‘the Law and the Prophets’, as Domnina, one of the guests at Methodius’ banquet of virgins explained. By practising virginity the Christian becomes ‘espoused to the Word’, emancipated from the universal condemnation of flesh to dust and the generations of man to mortality ad loss: ‘By chastity hey have been emancipated from that commandment, *Earth thou art, and unto earth thou shalt return.*’(*Symposium,* Logos 10). If one chose virginity as a calling it meant one went on record as a battler in the cause of sexual renunciation. The race went to the perseverant. Ascetic enthusiasts in the Patristic period imagined the fight for virginity as a rigorous competition. Roman athletes competed in the arena for prizes, to great applause. Why shouldn’t Christians have their own playing fields? Their ambitious were equally serious. Abstinence was the first goal: once partially under control, your inclinations could be weaned away from the alluring objects that tempted others less austere. Abstinence became a habit, until the very thoughts that had seemed pleasant turned noxious or disgusting. It is useful to start by cultivating defenses through a negative indoctrination of the mind, by associating sex with weakness, with animality and undignified needs. Then there could, with care, emerge other habits, further level of liberation, as the training grew more effective and your rivals, the weaker contestants, dropped out. At another point in the debate the argument passes to Arete. Practicing chastity and virginity, she announces, will ensure that ‘all our members’ are preserved intact and untouched by corruption’. Not only the organs of generation will benefit, but the purity of the tongue, the eyes, the ears, the hands and the heart.[[555]](#endnote-555) The ‘unquenchable light of chastity’ will be kindled in the flesh, and the virgin will be prepared to meet her Bridegroom. (Logos 6) As the ambitious young maidens in Methodius’ dialogue are pleased to report, Jesus was a virgin. What higher goal could there be but to emulate his example?

There were women who took up the challenge with determination, dedicating their lives to the pursuit of an ideal that was increasingly specific: to become a saint, a divine human being:

Dedicated women came to be thought of as harbouring a deposit of values that were prized, by their male spokesmen, as peculiarly precious to the Christian community. Women with ascetic vocations emerged in upper-class circles, where they had the wealth and prestige needed to make a permanent impact on the Christian church.[[556]](#endnote-556)

One who succeeded in becoming a saint was Macrina (325-380), the daughter of a wealthy and distinguished family from Cappadocia. Her family had been Christians and landowners for several generations; both brothers became important figures in the early Church, one, Basil, Bishop of Caesarea (370-379) and promoter of monasticism, the other, Gregory, Bishop of Nyssa (371-395). Macrina was destined to be extraordinary. According to her brother, Gregory of Nyssa, who wrote a hagiographic story of her life and works in 383, even her birth demonstrated her vocation to the life of sacred virginity. Shortly before the birth of her daughter, indeed while she was in labour, Macrina’s mother had a dream:

She fell asleep and seemed to be holding in her hands the child still in her womb, and a person of greater than human shape and form appeared to be addressing the infant by the name of Thecla. (There was a Thecla of much fame among virgins.) After doing this and invoking her as a witness several times, he disappeared from sight and gave ease to her pain so that as she awoke from her sleep she saw the dream realized. This, then, was her secret name. It seems to me that the one who appeared was not so much indicating how the child should be named, but foretelling the life of the child and intimating that she would choose a life similar to that of her namesake.[[557]](#endnote-557)

Macrina became a teacher, a spiritual guide to other women, living quietly and apart from the politics of the Church. devoting her inheritance to the convent for women she established and ran at Annesi, in the hills of Pontus. Her physical integrity was only part of what made Macrina special. Yet the fact that her virginal body was manifestly something that had remained in its original and untouched state, a direct link to the purity of Adam and Eve before temptation arrived, demonstrated her closeness to Christ, her chosen ‘Bridegroom’. Other upper-class women, with fortunes like Macrina’s, had to marry: she was lucky enough to lose her fiancé to death before the wedding. Without retreating to the desert, or living a vagrant’s life as a pilgrim, this refined woman achieved the freedom she desired.

Among Christian congregations in many parts of the Eastern Mediterranean, North Africa, all over the late Roman world, young women were leaving their homes, sometimes taking their betrotheds, husbands, or brothers with them – and often, sensibly, bringing their female servants in tow, and signing up for the harsh conditions of the ascetic life. Most of them, it seems safe to say, stayed at home under the eyes of their parents or in combined households with other virgins. There were some, however, who threw caution to the winds, following men like Eustathius of Sebaste into unconventional communities where men and women lived ‘as brother and sister’, in chaste or spiritual marriages -as *syneisaktes*. [[558]](#endnote-558) These unusual choices aroused a lot of concern. Gossip went viral. The anomaly of a sexless union was difficult to believe. Those who championed it claimed that a male who could co-habit with women without falling victim to sexual temptation had climbed even higher than the average ascetic on the ladder of holiness. Others were scornful: how could this secret chastity be proved? Undoubtedly it was exploited. Young women who wished to hide the parentage of their illegitimate children began accusing anchorites.[[559]](#endnote-559) What was going on in these communities? Just how ‘loving’ were the agapaeic feasts of the Christians? Worried bishops met at synods to figure out how to crack down without weakening the fire of ascetic enthusiasm. Was it worth provoking the scorn and suspicion of outsiders who would be quick to interpret the abnormal Christian styles of behavior and social organisation as hypocritical alibi for fornication and impropriety?

From the very first days that followers of Jesus were exposed to the eyes and gossip of outsiders. The change of direction that the faithful called ‘conversion’ had every appearance of being a seduction. Rumours spread of libertine practices, clandestine rites involving orgies of promiscuous intercourse (the mysterious ‘love-feats’ or *agapae*), ritual murder of children, incest and cannibalism.[[560]](#endnote-560) Yet women, knowing the threats that would follow them – loss of reputation, contempt, the anger and rejection of their families, the moral stigma, the physical and sexual violence visited on female converts by their official and unofficial enemies – still joined up, ‘dedicating themselves’ and their virginity to God in vows that became more and more publicly registered and binding. To deal with the complications of these *virgines Deo dicatae*, canon laws came into being, written up in firm and rather fussy form at the Councils of Ancyra and Elvira in Spain in the early 4th century, and again at Nicaea (325). Before that time, virgins had already been besieged by treatises and letters, from famous bishops, interfering theologians and men of the church, attempting to regulate a way of life that had become popular, and warning about troubles to come if virgins took advantage of what seemed to be their freedom from the restricted, house-bound life of the carefully-tended Greco-Roman female.[[561]](#endnote-561) Now virginity was on the agenda to a startling degree.

‘During the fourth century’, writes Aline Rousselle in her *Porneia: on Desire and the Body in Antiquity* (Paris, 1983), ‘discussions of virginity became something of a fashion.’(132) Elizabeth Castelli gives a list (organised alphabetically) of the most important ones: Ambrose, *De Virginibus*; Athanansius, *De Virginitate Sive Ascesi*; Augustine, *De Sancta Virginitate*; Basil of Ancyra, *De Vera Virginitate*; Pseudo-Clement, *Epistolae 1-2 ad Virgines*; Eusebius of Emesa, *Homiliae* VI et VII; Gregory of Nyssa, *De Virginitate*; Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum* and *Ep.22*; JohnChrysostom, *De Virginitate*; Methodius, *Symposium Decem Virginem*. Beginning in the third century in Africa, they soon became a speciality of the times. It was a new genre with women primarily its subject and intended audience, for these were treatises on virginity and exhortative letters addressed to female virgins and widows. The women pictured by these Patristic authors conformed to ideals already fondly embraced by influential males of the Church: some were living at home, some were contemplating moving into communal households, some were already participating in the organisation and running of monastic establishments like those in Cappadocia, Palestine and Egypt, but most were wealthy and well-born. The treatises and letters were full of advice and caution, admonition, cheer-leading and even admiration. Women as ascetic paragons and consecrated virgins could ‘rise above nature’; they could be liberated from their lower condition and from the ‘sentence’ decreed for their sex since Eve’s disobedience. The laws of earthly passion, so demeaning, so destructive to the rule of reason, could be annulled in their cases, as Fathers influenced by Stoicism were quick to explain. They might escape the shame and weaknesses of their feminine nature, since ascetic stringency makes them more ‘manly’, despite their physical appearance.[[562]](#endnote-562) Even the gruff, self-involved Jerome occasionally turned full-blooded in his compliments to these remarkable women, especially once they were safely dead and no longer potential rivals to his authority. These discourses – all could be called ‘On Virginity’- can best be understood as propaganda; they are a bit like the recruiting literature sent out by colleges interested in attracting high-quality applicants. What they were promoting was the way of life of virginity as the more rewarding alternative to marriage.

Women took heed. There were many drawbacks to conjugal existence in the late Roman Empire. The passionate invocations of the beauty of virginity, and the plausibly bleak memoranda of the woes of matrimony, did not fall on barren ground. Female asceticism was one of the growth areas of the slow yet relentless ‘Christianizing of the Roman Empire’; it predated the formal development of a monastic institution, and it existed by its side, in diverse and often creative forms. Why did women find it so inviting? Partly because those who recommended it to them assumed that the rigours of sexual abstinence were not so taxing to females, we don’t know how much of a strain was experienced by women renouncing the normal pattern of feminine life. Young women who had never known the pleasures of sex would find it easiest; their conversion often took place right at the moment of marriage, when they struggled to escape the knot of consummation or to convince their husbands to join them in chastity. The dedication of these ‘untouched’ women, though praiseworthy and beautiful, did not represent as great an achievement as the self-mastery of women who had been married. On the other hand, the ills and degradation of sexual bondage was something Christians assumed would be readily recognised by women with years of exposure to its trials: prostitutes, who were one of the most notable groups of chastity-converts, and widows.

For scholars looking back on these indirect but eloquent sketches of an unconventional career for late ancient women, it is hard to resist the heady convergence of religion and sexuality. Virginity and monastic life, in whatever form that took, did offer an alternative to domestic life and the tyranny of the family. But how much should we believe our sources? Aline Rousselle’s skepticism about the mesmeric effects of the official chastity-gospel makes her a keen guide to some of the odder places on the map of asceticism, especially in those shadowy areas of that map assigned to the females. Roman girls, we must remember, were usually married at 12, Greek girls often earlier, before their first menstrual periods. Women of the Empire, who were ‘one of the principal forces in the transformation of the ancient world’[[563]](#endnote-563) could well have chosen the ascetic life in preference to a husband who was forced on them, often - or usually – much older, moved by repugnance or confusion in the face of a conjugal sex life for which they had little preparation. In the final pages of *Porneia: On Desire and the body in Antiquity*, Rouselle makes some interesting discriminations between the voluntary and less voluntary among the recruited to dedicated virginity. Males had been invited, if they had the support and gift for it, to embrace a spiritual circumcision[[564]](#endnote-564) or castration ‘for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven’. Perhaps what was offered to women, without the name, was a spiritual frigidity. Strong mothers who had reasons to be disenchanted with Roman matrimony and the ancient program for women were, in Rousselle’s surprising opinion, the rallying party for both unusual ‘paths’, urging their sons and daughters to stay off the sexual diet for the sake of a better and more rewarding independence:

Unless they had been set aside for a life of virginity by their parents, sometimes from birth, like the daughter of Melania the Younger, women were not in a position to understand the discourses on virginity which were written for them. As we have seen, these were discourses on marriage which based their arguments on the misfortunes of married women. If they had any appeal it was to mothers and not to young girls. It was the mothers who encouraged their daughters to take up a life of continence…Mothers who brought up their daughters to remain virgins or encouraged them to follow this path chose themselves to lead a life of continence if they were widows and tried to persuade their husbands to do the same if they were still alive…It must have happened fairly frequently among the Christians that a wife who was married, according to the Roman custom, well before the age of twelve, found in asceticism a reason for rejecting sexual relations….What might have been simply a short-lived phenomenon in an exploited Egypt came into contact both with male repugnance for marriage in Greek countries and with the aversion of the women of the Roman world to the legal and social conditions of marriage. Some men were able, through obedience, to develop the reflexes they needed to suppress the expression of desire. For the women of Greece and Rome exhortations to frigid but honourable conjugal duty made them into mothers who were quite ready to encourage their sons to adopt a completely new path. (188-89, 192, 198)

**4.5 Making Mary Male**

When Salome asked the Lord: ‘How long shall death hold sway?’ he answered: ‘As long as you women bear children.’ (Gospel according to the Egyptians)

They say that the Saviour himself said: ‘I came to destroy the works of the female’, meaning by ‘female’ desire, and by ‘works’ birth’ and corruption.’ (Clement of Alexandria *Stromateis,* III, 63)

That Christian celebration of virginity concerns women may now seem obvious. It was not always so. The flow of chaste women into the church is an interesting phenomenon, and it altered the shape of ascetic exhortation. For the asceticism-gospel was originally presented to men for men. Susanna Elm makes this clarification in her *Virgins of God: The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity:*

That ‘virgins’ are not always women, has also become clear. Grammatically, the Greek term *parthenos (*is of ambiguous gender, as long as it is not accompanied by an article. The canon of Ancyra as well as the homily referred to leave little doubt that men as well as women dedicated themselves to a life of virginity.[[565]](#endnote-565)

Ascetic renunciation made men more ‘masculine’, tougher, less receptive to the softening influence of women and the domestic sphere. Did it do so for women? Elm cites common fears about the perils of unrestricted (and unsupervised) female asceticism and the reactions of church fathers – Eusebius of Constantinople, Armenian bishops at Gangra, Athanasius. Influenced by controversial leaders, men and women in places like Syria, Cappadocia, and Carthage have taken *anchoresis* to extremes*.* Eustathius of Sebaste, a formidable ascetic, presided over groups of men and women who lived out a literal interpretation of the New Testament. Leaving families, marriages, property and political life, his followers were said to dress strangely in a unisex philosopher’s cloak as the Cynics did. They refused to pay taxes; they showed no respect for the official clergy and revised the procedures of worship as they saw fit. Social distinctions the rest of the world considered unimpeachable were treated by these groups as frivolities, obstructing the freedom and purity of the life of withdrawal. Authority meant nothing to them, and hierarchy had no place in the service of Christ. Slaves should be equal to masters, women to men; marriage should be abolished.

Most unconventional of all, women were ‘assuming the appearance of men’, cutting their hair short or even shaving their heads, wearing male clothes all ‘under the pretence of asceticism’.[[566]](#endnote-566) Even a mainstream Father like Basil of Ancyra subscribed to the radical view that ascetic chastity, when practiced by women, lessened the female aspects of the body, and made such women ‘through their virtue, like men, to whom they are already created equal in their souls’: ‘And while men through *ascesis*  become angels instead of men, so do women, through exercise (ςς ) of the same virtues, gain the same value as men.’ Both men and women, united in the incorruptible virginal life, have ‘castrated the female and male desires to cohabit’.[[567]](#endnote-567) If God made two distinct sexes out of one, this was a concession to the need for the earth to be peopled. In our time, after the Christian has broken through baptism the debtors-contract that made death and in the only real beneficiaries, the two may become one again. Given that sexual difference is structured around the complementary positions of masculine and feminine desire (Basil was a Freudian avant la letter), the renunciation of desire will create a strong and spiritual androgyne, a delighted eunuch who suffers from none of the liabilities of either sex. Indeed it was not just Christian sexual renunciation that could undo the feminine weakness of the ‘virginal soul’. Porphyry, the Neo-Platonist disciple of Plotinus, who wrote a stinging attack ‘Against the Christians’, could not be more explicit if he were a campaigner for transgender fluidity. He writes to his wife Marcella towards the end of the 3rd century, consoling her on their separation (in terms it is unlikely she found reassuring) and urging her to remain ‘pure and virginal’ in her soul as in her body. ‘Pure’, in this case, means ‘masculine’:

Thus the presence of my shadow, that visible phantom, will profit you not, and its absence will not pain you if you earnestly try to leave the body far behind…Do not consider yourself as a woman: *I am not attached to you as to a woman. Flee all that is effeminate in the soul as if you had taken on a man’s body*. It is when the soul is virginal and when the intellect is still a virgin that they produce the finest offspring. (my italics)[[568]](#endnote-568)

This was not the line taken by the great teacher and writer Clement of Alexandria, himself a married man and by his own account, almost as reserved in conjugal relations as was Porphyry. What makes Clement stand out in the fraught world of late 2nd century Christianity is precisely what Peter Brown calls his ‘cultural serenity’.[[569]](#endnote-569) Salvation is for the moderates as well, and the great illumination that Christians receive in their knowledge of the Word helps them shed their sins and their darkness:

There are not, then, in the same Word some ‘illuminated (gnostics) and some animal (or natural) men’: but all who have abandoned the desires of the flesh are equal and spiritual before the Lord. (*Ped.* 1.6)

Becoming a Christian, Clement believes, changes and transforms you. It need not make you a shrill and scolding radical, alienated from your society and the best elements of your culture. That very *Paideia*  so helpful to the spiritual disciplining of the excellent Greek and Roman could be recycled to suit the needs of a pedagogy for the new believers, grooming the Christian as carefully as his Stoic colleagues groomed their pagan subjects, bringing the new apprentices from ‘childishness’ to maturity with ‘decorous solace’ and even ‘divine sport’. (*Ped*. 1.5.22). Clement is comfortable with a language and tone a Stoic could love. Christians will not be gluttons or gourmets, yet their frugal diet will make them strong and healthy, and their moderate drinking will keep their tempers cheerful wihtout turning them into beasts. They will laugh, but not too much: relaxation can mix happily with seriousness, but even smiles should be disciplined, and frivolity avoided, as well as superfluous words and loud talk. Continence extends to the tongue, to money, use and desire, to repudiation of fancy clothes, ornaments, and all display. (*Ped* . 2.5; 2.8; *Strom.* III.1.4) ) Christians will not abuse the gifts of their Father, but they will use those gifts without undue attachment or fascination. Composure and discrimination, not abstention, marks the correct path. Excess in all things is a mistake. If you can, cover your hiccups and don’t scratch your ears, use a hard and even bed to sleep on. You will be fine. Clement’s carefulness extends, as we might expect, to sexual activities. Hyper-sensitivity to any suggestion of shame is, in his mind, inappropriate to the Christian: even the *pudenda* can be mentioned and employed, within limits. What is proper to the Christian lover is modesty, not embarrassment. (2.6) Against the heretics of his time, Clement believed he had to steer a careful path. Gnostic myths presented the material world as a sad travesty, a distorted copy of the pure and spiritual order. Although Valentinus, easily the most coherent of the Gnostics, praised human marriage as a mirror image and foretaste of the redeemed union of soul and spirit (see Clement, *Stromateis*, III.1.1), the conjugal bond worried many Gnostic teachers, and sexual intercourse looked frankly corrupt to the radicals.[[570]](#endnote-570) In opposition to these intense schools of thought, Clement felt it incumbent on himself to vindicate marriage, as something approved by the creator. Yet doubtlessly the best way to practise a Christian marriage would be to love your wife without any desire or passion, if possible. (*Stromateis* III, 48-58) In such a hope Clement works out guidelines for a conjugal life of minimal sensuality. The married man should enter the bed of his wife solemnly, steadily aware that the eyes of his Lord on on him at all times. *(Pedag*. 2.10) The lights are to be kept on, literally and figuratively. ‘Do not put off modesty when you put off your clothes’, Clement advises. And once we are passed onto another plane of holiness, chastity will replace the sober duties of marriage. It would be vulgar, in any case, to seek too vigorously pleasure and variety in sex. After all, God had been clear about its purpose: to provide children and to fill the earth. Marriage within the modest, reserved atmosphere of the Christian household could be not only a good but a means to spiritual improvement. Of course, the highest ‘ornament’ of the body is chastity (*Pedag*. 3.1). But a chastity pursued with excessive passion, as the Encratites do it, is not a compliment to heaven.

In his exhortation to his Christian flock, Clement was not ready to think beyond the categories of sexual difference. That the Gnostics did so, Clement recognised with great precision and considerable anxiety: they have, he complained, a hatred for the flesh:

Those who from a hatred of the flesh ungratefully long to have nothing to do with the marriage union and with reasonable food are both blockheads and atheists and exercise an irrational chastity like the other heathens. (*Strom.* III, 7. 60)

Marcion claimed that he could not even think about sex without being overwhelmed by a sense of nausea, and no member of the Marcionite church could marry.[[571]](#endnote-571) If this disgust is the reason a believer wants to abjure marriage and live abstinently, he is courting some dangerous errors, in Clement’s judgment. (*Strom.* III, 3.12; III, 2.12) Marcionites believe that nature is evil, hence that chastity is required because only by rejecting marriage can there be an end to birth and thus to the world itself. This is a theory that horrifies Clement as much for its weird moral conclusions as for its metaphysics, which denies all affirmative power to the loving Creator. Hating creation is not way to arrive at a commitment to sexual purity. Chastity can be ‘rational’ and it can be ‘irrational’. Despising sexual relations is the wrong motivation for continence. A Christian wants to be freed of spiritual and fleshly defilement through the acts of his redeemer, who has brought the opportunity of repentance and salvation. Yes, Clement continues in his arguments against the Gnostics and Encratites like Julius Cassian (*Stromateis* III, 91), Christ does say he comes to destroy the works of the female. By this he means he comes to call humans away from corruption and incontinence, to bring them from the ‘death that is sin’ to the life of holy restoration. Creation, birth, growth, marriage and death, have not ‘ended’; nor has the existence of two different sexes. When all things have been ‘achieved’, and the elect restored to their ‘proper condition’ (*Stromateis* III, 63), then we may speak of ‘desires being dead’; then the ‘outward man’ will have been dissolved, and the ‘inward man’ saved. Christ did not mean a denigration of women as such: woman is the mother of all life, righteous and unrighteous alike. Is not life that is disgusting, nor the body. These should be understood allegorically. Those who bear children and are bitter about it, wishing to have been as virgins or eunuchs, are displeasing God and misunderstanding love. Clement sees the faithful as remaining in a world under the same age-old patterns that the Stoics understand as persisting: what is new, what is liberating, is the same self-control the philosophers called for, and it can be practised in the same bodies given by God, male and female. The only difference is that now Christ has offered us the choice of a new dispensation: rationally, man and wife can live continently; with grace, they can live in no marriage at all, exempt from the law of lust. Neither femininity, nor birth, nor procreation, nor marriage, nor the body, are accursed. It is sin that is accursed. It is corruption that is corrupt. To the pure all things are pure. (*Strom.* III, 109). Even gender. When Gnostic tractates like the *Zostrianos* call on the ‘superior ones’ to ‘seek the unchangeable unborn state’ and to ‘flee from the madness and bondage of femininity’, choosing instead ‘the salvation of masculinity’, they are equating ‘polluted intercourse’ with femininity and what the Gospel to the Egyptians called ‘the works of the female’.[[572]](#endnote-572) Clement wants nothing to do with this attitude. Humans male and female are responsible for raising themselves out of the gutter of lust and excess. It is not their gender that will impair them, but the weakness of their commitment to the Lord and to the salvation of their souls. In his *Paedagogus* Clement asserts the likeness of male and female:

The virtue of man and woman is the same…one church, one temperance, one modesty; their food is common, marriage an equal yoke; respiration, sight, hearing, knowledge, hope, obedience, love all alike. (*Ped,* 1.4)

It is true that in ‘this world’, conjugal union is the norm. Through that institution alone, Clement argues, male and female are distinguished. But in the world to come, there will be a common life and a common salvation, hence marriage shall exist no more.

Clement’s corrections of radical attacks on marriage, the physical world and the sexed body are gentle, and leave the door open for a spiritual equality of male and female, once the present obstructions of flesh and mortality are overcome.[[573]](#endnote-573) Others laid down the law in no uncertain ways. Even in a religious movement that expects a new Creation and a new way of being, the law of gender is not so easily disempowered. Deviations against the ‘natural’ and divine-sanctioned law of female subordination could lead to serious trouble for the Christian communities; society does not like its traditional practices ignored. Most shocking of all was any hint by adventurous ascetics that their prefiguration of the resurrection state, ‘where there will be neither male nor female’, meant they were exempted from the explicit prohibitions against transvestism. Also worrying was the idea that female achievement in holiness could outstrip male. If masculinity is the privileged norm, and this is absolutely the case in the time and place we are talking about, the male victory in overcoming ‘the flesh’ will enjoy a higher commendation than that of the female. The highest rank, within early Christianity’s model of a religious Olympics, had been from the start the crown of martyrdom. As persecution was coming to an end, in fits and starts, this was no longer available. Could it be that he who fights and wins over his passions, who conquers with the help of grace the ‘law of his members’, had a right to be on a par – almost – with the brave Christians undergoing tortures, the flames, being hunting by wild animals, and the sword? The fate of Christian martyrs was horrifying: the process of humiliation, savage beatings, being stripped to the accompaniment of public jeering, the spectators cheering on the bloody attacks of the leopards, bears, lions and other hungry beasts, is not easily described. An average woman might be repelled by this as a route to sanctity.

But there were women who were not average, who defied the norms of conventional femininity in full awareness of what they were doing. One was the young noble matron Vibia Perpetua, author of one of the few accounts of early Christian heroism written by a woman. Perpetua was executed in the arena at Carthage on 7 March 203, accompanied by her Christian servant Felicity, who had just given birth and was still bleeding from the delivery, Perpetua herself having painfully weaned her infant son the day before. The account of their torture and triumphant ascent to martyrdom – their ‘victory’ -- breaks off the day before Perpetua’s death in the ‘games’: she describes a vision or dream where she, in preparing to fight by the procurator’s command against a brutal Egyptian, she was ‘stripped naked’ by the young men who were helping her, and ‘became a man.’[[574]](#endnote-574) Although she will die, she will have combatted the devil himself: from her vision she knows herself to be a true prophet and a victor.[[575]](#endnote-575) Women like Perpetua, and later, ascetic paragons like Macrina, sister of the distinguished ascetic bishops Basil of Caeserea and Gregory of Nyssa, Paula and Marcella, the friends of Jerome and wealthy benefactors of the virginal communities in Palestine, came from what one historian calls ‘the same social bracket, the senatorial top-drawer elite’.[[576]](#endnote-576) Praised for giving up so much that most Romans would have considered all that life has to offer at its best, they chose to enlist in a new order of womanhood. They were not priestesses, nor the companions of the apostles; nor were they the intriguing female followers of heretical movements (women prophets like Maximilla and Priscilla) whom orthodox bullies like Jerome or Epiphanius of Salamis stormed against.[[577]](#endnote-577) They were ‘holy women’. Austere renunciation of all desires, then, was an ideal for the female as well as the male. The Montanist religion, flourishing in 2nd century Asia Minor, was strong in its admiration for celibacy, and recommended fasting to stave off impurity: by many accounts, it was attractive to women, who are mentioned in Montanist inscriptions as prophesying and winning respect for their ascetic achievements. The possibility of a female stake in religious authority did not endear the Montanists to ‘catholic’ Christians, who condemned it as a heresy.[[578]](#endnote-578) Asceticism for women was a mixed blessing. Did it, as the non-Christian Porphyry thinks when he writes to his wife recommending to her a dedication to the purification of her ‘virgin soul’, make her femininity less of an obstacle? Did asceticism make ‘Mary male’, as it did Perpetua? Or neuter, an androgyne?

The ideal neuter state, as both neo-Platonists and Christians imagined that from the 2nd to the 5th centuries, reveals many more of the qualities of the male. In this prejudice they were recycling an old philosophic trope. Greeks in the classical and Hellenistic eras, unaccustomed to the idea of women who stand out for excellence of mind, had their own way of responding to the occasional challenge to the hierarchy of the sexes when raised by a Plato or a Cynic. The exceptional woman who thinks and reasons is probably sheltering in her composition an extra share of masculinity. Women who engage in philosophy, at least those who appear in a few philosophic texts like Xenophon’s *Oeconomikos* , are praised for having a ‘manly mind’ (*Oec.*9-10.1) Similarly, the exceptional woman who stands out in the contest of asceticism is portrayed as passing from one sex to another – as Perpetua does on the eve of her martyrdom – or as at least discarding a number of the marks of femininity. Masculine toughness was essential in the battle of holiness against sin and calumny, just as it was essential to the philosophic sage fighting distraction and irrationality. Through asceticism it was also available to women, whose deficient ‘wet’ bodies could also be rendered more ‘dry’ by their ascetic exercises and singleness of mind. The ascetic woman is a ‘manly woman’ – unsurprising, given that the deprivations of a rigorous asceticism would indeed interfere with menstruation, and ascetic women, anxious not to be a ‘temptation’ to men, often tried to make themselves look haggard, unattractive, and dirty. Female ascetics, according to Basil of Ancyra, would find their voices had grown more firm; other manuals on ascetic life or hagiographies of esteemed ascetic heroines point out how near they have come to men in their courage, their physical stamina, and freedom from undignified tears or cares for the body.

Yet the female of the ascetic tribe could not easily be released from their secondary status, much as Basil promoted their cause. Male virgins were the top, the crown of creation. Just as the leaders of the Apostolic community were men, despite some acknowledgment of Jesus’s intentions to leave a female disciple Mary in his place, the leaders in the campaign for sexless existence were the male writers, teachers, gurus, and bishops. They had the authority. They could travel freely, ask for money (often provided by rich women sympathizers), engage in polemic and disputation, and perform public works of healing. Even the spread of monasticism in the early Middle Ages, supported by towering figures like Cassian and Benedict, strengthened the masculine dominance of the highest ranks of asceticism, ‘the elite corps fighting as the vanguard of a Pantocrater Christ’, as John Bugge expresses it.[[579]](#endnote-579) The heroes of heaven in the Book of Revelation, the 144,000 redeemed from the earth who will fill the first ranks of the blessed around the throne of the Lord, ‘singing a new song’, are *males* ‘undefiled by women’ for ‘they are virgins’ (Rev.14:4) . Their perfection – they are ‘without guile’ – is related to their abstinence. Enthusiasts for strict male chastity, like Jerome, Ambrose, Gregory of Nyssa, or Athanasius, searched in the books of the Old Testament to find favoured figures before Jesus and John the Baptist who were also famous for living without sex: Elijah and Moses in the lead.

By the end of the 4th century the tilt towards female virginity had begun in earnest. It was women who were more affected by the ascetic preaching. It was women’s purity that Christianity had to secure. Women’s bodies, and their triumphant release from pollution through the elixir of virginity, were the symbol of a society transformed, the sign that its members could through conversion and baptism hope for an inviolable new being. The virginal body mattered. And it was women, those frail vessels of vulnerability and temptation, who could stand for the imminence of a rectified creation. They had, in Eve, been the cause of shame. Now they could pay back the debt. Masculine conversion to a life of continence was heroic, a badge of honour and defiance just as glorious to a Christian as the soldier’s sacrifice was to the pagan. But feminine conversion to dedicated virginity opened up a different dimension: a re-working of the natural and social order. It may sound an ambitious inference. But the mutual dependence of woman and society is hardly a novel thought in the world where Christianity was born. Pagans, Jews and Christians agreed in the basics: women were inferior, but essential. Woman stood for biological life, the needs and cares of the family, the reproduction of society. (As an anthropologist would put it, the exchange of women is to society what the circulation of the blood is to the living body. A virginal and wilfully sterile woman snaps the thread.) If she stepped out of these roles, the architecture of reality could well totter. The fidelity of women, like the health of their bodies, was necessary to the polis even if their participation in its administration and operations was considered irrelevant. Women’s honor is, further, a signifier of social well-being; her sexual transgressions can unleash a crisis reaching well beyond the walls of her own home, pulling down the walls of Troy or the temples of the gods. Woman’s sexual integrity, or lack of it, marks the body and the city. Kyle Harper captures the peculiar urgency of this signifying nexus in antiquity. (As will become obvious in later sections of this study, its symbolism remained potent well into modernity.):

The female body was a symbol beyond time and circumstance. Across ancient literature, the woman’s body stood as cipher, capable of expressing the most intensely fate beliefs about the order of the world. The stark *opposition* between purity and pollution, between honor and shame, was endlessly reworked….the woman’s body was an objective correlative for an entire state of being.[[580]](#endnote-580)

**4.5 Is marriage bad for you?**

The more Christians reflected on the ‘narrow gate’ (Luke 13.24) that controls the entry to the perfect mode of life, the more retention of virginity was to be seen as a mystery, a wonder, as nothing sort of miraculous. But such a marvel would have left most idealists in the ancient world puzzled. How did virginity and celibacy come to be venerated, valued more highly and praised more effusively than marriage and procreation, which, after all, were more useful? What lead to the strange state of affairs in the 4th century Roman world when a pious monk like Jovinian could be condemned for heresy for stating that, if you were a pious, principled and baptised Christian, it did not matter as far as your merit if you were a widow, a virgin or married? What made asceticism in its extreme forms a badge of nobility, and degrees of sexual renunciation, like degrees of bodily denial of food, sleeping, or comfort, the recognised criteria for religious achievement? Be the eunuch! Paul had made the suggestion with circumspection: a good thing, if you are like me. But for those who are differently constituted, something to avoid. And do not deny your spouse the pleasure of the bed, he continued, or if you do, make sure it is only for a brief time and by mutual agreement, to pray or do something else important. I have from the Lord, Paul said very clearly, no command concerning virgins (1 Cor 7:25). His fine distinction fell on deaf ears. For the next millennium the honourable state of marriage was treated with scorn by the loudest voices in the church. By 500 anyone who aspired to higher office was well advised to keep their distance even from their legally-wedded wives; by the Gregorian Reforms of the 11th century, clerical celibacy was assigned even to the lower orders of parish priests. The sacred army of the ascetics had won. Even in the teeth of the Protestant Reformation, the Council of Trent would affirm its hard-line position:

If anyone says the married state is to be preferred to that of virginity or celibacy, and that it is no better or more blessed to persevere in virginity or celibacy than to be joined in marriage: let him be anathema. (Session XXIV, 11 Nov. 1563, *Doctrina de sacramento matrimonii*, can.10)[[581]](#endnote-581)

Marriage, although not the bar to salvation that Priscillan and the Montanists had claimed, was meant to be for Catholics a second-best option. Certainly not sinful, for a Christian could be a decent representative of the faith even with a wife or husband and a brood of children. It was the heretics, Tertullian writes in *De monogamia* , who repudiate marriage now, in this day and age: the right to marry will be abrogated, Tertullian is sure, when the Paraclete arrives. Then we will all be as eunuchs. And creation will go back to the way it was in the beginning, according to the integrity of the flesh, like Christ, the virgin who ahs but one spouse, the Church. But it made getting to the upper ranks of sanctity all that much harder. Looking back from the reaffirmations of the Counter-Reformation and the present-day Catholic opposition to relaxing the rules of celibacy, it can look as if what James Brundage calls ‘a peculiarly Western sexual ethos’ was intrinsic to the success of the new faith from its earliest days. Yet it was not obvious all along the route that the anti-marriage camp would carry the day. If ‘Christian’, as Brundage writes,

means what Jesus of Nazareth is reported to have taught, then there is not much Christian teaching about sexuality to discuss. Jesus was in favour of marriage (although apparently he did not practice it) and he opposed adultery (which is a special case of his general condemnation of deception and infidelity. He also seems to have disapproved of promiscuity and commercial sex, although he scandalized some of his contemporaries by befriending prostitutes. But it remained for medieval Church authorities, confident of the authenticity of their own beliefs, to wrap their views on sex and the family in the mantle of Christian orthodoxy.[[582]](#endnote-582)

Even during the controversies over the propositions of Jovinian, which inspired the most vitriolic of all Jerome’s bad-tempered polemics, there were real and understandable fears expressed by many. As David Hunter has shown, the condemnation of Jovinian encouraged the very ascetic elitism that had caused the destruction of heretics like Priscillan of Avila and other radical encratites.[[583]](#endnote-583) It is, as Kate Cooper puts it, ‘[O]ne of the most interesting questions of ancient history: why did the early Christians alight on the ideal of virginity,’ when an intelligent, or even just a suspicious, Roman could see that its adoption would ‘undermine the very fabric of ancient society’?[[584]](#endnote-584)

It was such a different kind of idea of what human excellence could and should be, particularly if we add to the equation the fact that women – inviolate virgins, maiden martyrs, pious and self-sufficient widows - were now cherished members of the Christian community, essential to its flourishing and, in particular, to its financial health. A wife might be the highest status a devout Jewish woman could aspire to. Christianity offered a new possibility of social climbing: those who renounced marriage and childbearing were no longer to be pitied or scorned; they were candidates for the elect, ‘our angels’. The sociological reasons for the popularity of this new position are not hard to understand. But its symbolic resonances are more bizarre. What was it about this image of the untouched body, free from almost all ties to its social environment, that so bewitched the followers of this new Jewish sect? Why did the virgin enjoy such a peculiar exemption from the subservient condition of her sex? Peter Brown chooses the young Thecla, the imaginary disciple of St Paul from the Apocryphal Acts,[[585]](#endnote-585) as the key figure of this new, heroic ‘romance’ of virginity: A well-born girl from Iconium, near Antioch, she ran away from her home and her betrothed once she had heard the compelling words of Paul, caught in fragments as she sat hypnotised at her window. Convinced of the truth of this new teaching of virginity and the resurrection, Thecla followed Paul into prison, through the fire that could not burn her, throughout persecution and harassment, until, naked and condemned to the wild beasts in the amphitheatre at Antioch, she overcame the lions and bears and sharks and all skepticism, received the gift of teaching, and dwelt alone in a cave for 72 years, living on herbs and water. Thecla’s young body, writes Brown,

stood stunningly alone. To preserve her virginity meant to preserve an individual identity rooted in her physical body, because expressed in the state of physical intactness that she had carried with her from her birth. Thecla was not a role model that only Christian women were expected to follow. Her intact body spoke to both men and women. It was a condensed image of the individual, always threatened with annihilation, poised from birth above the menacing pressures of the world. [[586]](#endnote-586)

Continence was a virtue recognised by many upright pagans and even, as a dedication to extreme forms of the life of piety, by Hellenistic Jews. But rabbinic Jews, by far the largest party in the Jewish communities of Roman late antiquity, had a very different attitude to what Daniel Boyarin calls ‘carnality’: they invested moral and spiritual significance in the body, unlike the Hellenistic Jews, platonising angels, who invested it in the soul.[[587]](#endnote-587) Chastity before marriage was essential for women in Judaism, and the sanctions were severe. Abstinence from sexual relations, together with fasting, was expected during certain festivals (the Day of Atonement) and periods of mourning, and for as long as a month, to allow a married man to concentrate on Torah study. Many of the Jews in the Essene communities renounced marriage: in the burial sites at Qumran the remains of over 100 adult men have been found, but only a handful of women and children.[[588]](#endnote-588) But the idea that permanent virginity promoted you to a higher class of excellence, or could endow its practitioners with a special kind of integrity and heavenly authority, this could only have come as a surprise:

That it should have been this particular form of heroism, liked to a particular form of sexual renunciation – the preservation of a virgin state in the strict sense – which increasingly caught the imagination of all Christians, is a development we should not take for granted simply because it happened with seemingly unquestioned rapidity.[[589]](#endnote-589)

There are many ways to make oneself better, more concentrated, physically adept, outstanding in virtue or in the excellence of one’s discourse. Greeks, when they developed the idea of an ‘art of living’ (*techne tou biou*), made education a lifelong task, even if not many of those exposed to Greek ideals would feel called to the strenuous perfectionism of a Plato, an Epictetus, or a Plotinus. Christianity broadened the demand: there is no room in the heavenly kingdom for the faint-hearted, the halfway moralist, the temporiser. Do you want to be saved? Then give up sin, for sin is the disease that infects your being, making it coarse and unwholesome. Sexual relations may have been instituted by the Creator as a concession, when it became clear that humans would not abide in the paradisal condition where they lived like wise and simple children, brothers and sisters unaware of the provocation their anatomy presented. Yet those who are in a hurry to enter the kingdom of God can dispense with that knowledge, and its bruising reminders of our assignment to an endless cycle of generation and death, by voluntarily giving up the pleasures and pains that anatomy provides.. In the life to come, there will be neither female nor male, neither marrying nor giving in marriage. Why not speed up the process? Principled commitment to a sexless existence could restore the androgynous simplicity. Even better, it could promote the abstinent soul to a higher class of achievement. All Christians, writes Robin Lane Fox in his sweeping study from 1986, *Pagans and Christians*,

faced the same final test, but while the majority hoped only for a modest pass, a few aspired to congratulated honours.[[590]](#endnote-590)

If you can show you possess what St Paul had received from God, in Peter Brown’s words – ‘the prophetic gift of continence’[[591]](#endnote-591) – you too can share the undistracted life of the vanguard, free from anxiety about the affairs of the world, prepared to take flight at any moment when the shortness of time yields to ‘no time’, and ‘the form of the world passes away’ (I Corinthians 7: 29-30). The married and widowed will not be left behind, but you will be ahead of the march, in company with the angels:

From its very beginnings, Christianity has considered an orderly sex life to be a clear second best to no sex life at all. It has been the protector of an endangered Western species: people who remain virgins from birth to death.[[592]](#endnote-592)

The extent and the nature of disagreement about sexual desire among the early Christian communities and thinkers were not fully clear to the very Christians most interested in the topic. It was common to assume that all, except the wild-eyed gnostics were on the same page. But divergences were sharp. Soon they could not be denied. They emerged most concretely over the question of marriage and the debate about divine intention: did God mean to create two sexes or was it an accident? Might he be imagining other ways we could reproduce ourselves? Should marriage be respected or simply tolerated? Is it best to prohibit it entirely? Was chastity a greater achievement among those who had never felt the burnings of concupiscence, or did it require a battle within for its value to be secured? Could the union that God originally planned have been an asexual, spiritual marriage, a loving bond between ‘brother and sister’ but not to be consummated, perhaps like the marriage between Mary and Joseph?[[593]](#endnote-593)

To a large extent, these debates did not acquire their content or their argumentative shape from specific religious commitments but from the myriad philosophies of the Greco-Roman world, many held in great affection by the Fathers of the Church, even if their admiration had sometimes to be disguised. It is usually not hard to discern the philosophical allegiances hiding under the Christian veil. For example, a philosophically cosmopolitan defender of marriage, Clement of Alexandria, did not consider his views incompatible with the Christian idealisation of chastity. The product of a pagan family, born in the middle of the 2nd century and possibly in Athens, Clement put his heart into proving that the Church will do best if it drinks long and respectfully from the fountain of Greek philosophy. Those who take fright at Greek learning and logic are like children afraid of actors wearing masks, he writes in his book *Stromateis* , or ‘the Miscellanies’. With his love for the philosophers went a fierce impatience with the errors of the gnostic sects, who fail to recognise the benevolent genius of God the Creator and disparage both the world and human powers, denying the significance of free will and despising marriage in all its forms. Extreme asceticism, reasons Clement, insults the intentions of God who created Adam and Eve free to fall but also free to stand, competent to use their sexual make-up to just purposes as long as they remained obedient. Marriage could be no disgrace. Indeed the gnostic Valentinians, unlike the Tatianites, approved of monogamous marriage. But there were many extremists Clement has heard about who worry him gravely. If the radical ascetics misconceive married love and procreation, their crazy alter egos, the gnostic libertines, are even worse: the Carpocratians, who may have been wayward followers of Valentinus, practised principled promiscuity and held sexual partners in common. Both the contempt for marriage and the violation of it, Clement argues, come from too deep a pessimism. For Clement neither the material world nor the human will are tainted and unreliable: man can rise superior to nature; he can serve both his fellows in community and his God. Yet the highest form of life will still be a life sealed against the chaos of the passions. Sexual relations may be natural; here Clement agrees with the Stoic philosophers like Musonius and Epictetus. But are they necessary? Couldn’t a good married couple perform the dread act a few times, just to ensure their progeny and do their social duty, but without allowing lust and desire to settle into their souls? Couldn’t a commitment to continence accommodate a very limited experience of marriage, while cultivating in the pious couple an ardent friendship, a brotherly-sisterly love that will aid their salvation and inspire all who know them?

In general all the epistles of the apostle teach self-control and continence and contain numerous instructions about marriage, begetting children, and domestic life. But they nowhere rule out self-controlled marriage. Rather they preserve the harmony of the law and the gospel and approve both the man who with thanks to God enters upon marriage with sobriety and the man who in accordance with the Lord’s will lives as a celibate, even as each individual is called, making his choice without blemish and in perfection. (*Stromateis* III, 86)

For the goal, to persevere in the ‘contest for continence’, is the work of the whole man or woman, the achievement of a life, not the mere suppression of sexual activity. The Greek philosophers, Clement notes, teach the human ideal of continence as do the Christians, and that is well and good. Philosophy encourages us to fight against desire and not be subservient to it. But ‘our ideal’, he explains, is greater: ‘Our ideal is not to experience desire at all.’ (III, 7.57) And it is not purely sexual desire that is the problem. The contest Clement urges the Christian to engage in ‘ applies also to the other things for which the soul has an evil desire because it is not satisfied with the necessities of life. There is also a continence of the tongue, of money, of use, and of desire. (*Stromateis* III, 4; also 59) Stoic reserve or *apatheia,* he argued, is the best possible prophylactic against the dangerous effects of irrational libido as against all other corrupting desires. It is not the mechanism of procreation as such that is the problem, Clement argues: the gnostics who believe sexual reproduction is bestial and revolting are blaspheming against the creator. Marriage can be used rightly or wrongly, in chastity or in fornication, in obedience or in transgression. (104) Living sedately and with discretion in a respectable, appropriate marriage, a disciplined household of believing husband, believing wife, and their well-brought up children, would have been for Clement the ideal. Sexual relations would have their place, but a very limited and instrumental one, charged only with the responsibility for procreation, not pleasure or mutual love. Passions need not disturb the exemplary Christian, who is methodical in his monitoring of every detail of his life, as Peter Brown explains. ‘What mattered for Clement was that married intercourse should be approached in the Stoic manner, as a conscious action, undertaken in the service of God.’[[594]](#endnote-594)

Other voices in the early Church, Tertullian at Carthage in his pre-Montanist days, took a line that was compatible with Clement’s, if less elegantly expressed. “Of course we do not reject the union of man and woman in marriage’ , Tertullian writes in *Ad uxorem*

It is an institution blessed by God for the reproduction of the human race. It was planned by him for the purpose of populating the earth and to make provision for the propagation of mankind..We do not read anywhere at all that marriage is forbidden; and for the obvious reason that marriage is actually a good. The Apostle, however, teaches us what is better than this ‘good’ when he says that he permits marriage but prefers celibacy – the former because of the snares of the flesh, the latter because the times are straitened….It can be said that what is merely tolerated is never really good. (Ad uxorem, 1-3)

‘Every contest is a straining for the first prize’, Tertullian continues like the competitive Roman citizen he is. If you come in second, you have consolation, but you don’t have victory. Because of the weakness of the flesh, married couples have the right to ‘exercise the functions’ of the flesh. Yet they cannot help envying the better lot of those pious widows, who by remained continent, belong even while still on earth ‘to the household of the angels’. Yet Christians who marry other Christians can be assured that God has consented and the Church gives its blessing. (8) A century later, John Chrysostom, the ‘golden-tongued’ orator of the Eastern Church in Antioch and then (disastrously) in Constantinople, could say of marriage ‘it is a great mystery’, a bond ordained by God, that makes two into one, and ‘through the bridge of the child’ creates a single flesh made of three persons. Marriage is honourable, and must be entered in by Christians with great awe and sobriety: to be relinquished is all the pomp, the dancing and cymbals and ostentatious dress that pagans consider necessary to a wedding. Do not use the institution of marriage to chase wealth or attention or public admiration. That is wholly alien to its spirit. If you are arranging a marriage, invite only those of good character, and invite the poor. Before all the rest, invite Christ. (Homily XII on Colossians)[[595]](#endnote-595) Not everyone can be ‘crucified to the world’, Chrysostom explains helpfully. Those of a moderate degree of virtue – temperate, grave, in control of themselves, who care for and serve the poor (John’s particular concern), are also worthy of the highest admiration. It is of course good if you can abstain from marriage, but only if my doing so you are using your freedom to serve God; if you reject marriage out of a dislike or condemnation of the state, you are as guilty as the worst of the unbelievers. And a virgin who thinks she is ‘better’ than her married sisters, privileged to condemn marriage as accursed and impure, should be shunned.

False or vainglorious virgins dishonour the name of continence. Only a genuine vocation justifies disappointing family and city by throwing away everything to flee to the desert, or go on pilgrimage, or join a monastery. If you truly believe you have the gift for renunciation, why shouldn’t the privacy and seclusion of your bedroom be a sufficient sphere of operations for your virtue? If it is status or power you are secretly seeking, there is no piety in your sacrifice, only a fraud and a delusion. Most Christians will go further in the direction of purity by entering solemnly into a faithful and discreet marriage. The couple is united in spirit as in flesh; they will instruct and strengthen one another in the faith. They face difficulties and prosecutions together, share the consolations and have no secrets from one another. Tertullian prefers to picture them singing psalms and giving alms than paying the conjugal debt, so his hymn to the ‘beauty’ of Christian marriage is silent on the proper sexual exercises of the Christian couple, but in this treatise, before he joined the extreme ascetic Montanist sect, he gives no arguments to preclude sex within marriage.[[596]](#endnote-596) Marital sex is ‘permitted’. But one does not have to take advantage of a permission. He may regret the existence of the institution, as he seems to do in ‘An Exhortation to Chastity’, but he can see its point.

Married Christians would continue to do their duties in a modest and solemn manner. They would bear children, keep their episodes of sexual activity to a minimum, observe periods of abstinence, march on to middle age, and then step up the conditions of their continence, achieving with luck a post marital celibacy (Tertullian *De exhortation castitatis*  1-4, 10; *De monogamia*). If widowed, they would not seek to marry again:

We, however, who are deservedly called the *Spiritual* … consider that continence is as worthy of veneration as freedom to marry is worth of respect, since both are according to the will of the Creator. Continence honors the law of marriage, permission to marry tempers it; the former is perfectly free, the latter is subject to regulation; the former is a matter of free choice, the latter is restricted within certain limitations. We admit but one marriage, just as we recognize but one God…Now we no more outlaw marriage when we prohibit its repetition than we condemn food when we fast frequently. Prohibition is one thing, moderation another.[[597]](#endnote-597)

This gentle if rather bloodless conception of the ‘marital debt’ might have satisfied St Paul. It was nowhere radical enough for Gnostics and Manicheans, Tatianites, Montanists and Encratites, Marcionites and Valentinians, or for the semi-mythical apostles portrayed in the Apocryphal Acts who were so gifted at converting Roman women to the new and antisocial ‘doctrine of purity’, much to the dismay of their fiancés, husbands and fathers. (*Acts of Paul and Thecla*, *Acts of Peter*, 34) The radicals represented the extreme fringe of the virginity movement; for them any indulgence in the marriage bed would drive the soul back into the mud. Turning away from Clement’s accommodations to reality, ‘a younger generation of leaders were simply not interested in rethinking the issue of the sanctification of the married, as Clement plainly felt himself obliged to do.’ (Brown, 138-9) Those converted to what Brown calls ‘the dangerous mystique of continence’[[598]](#endnote-598) had a new slogan, and a new aesthetic of virginity. It was addressed to men and to women. It would reverse the scale of values ancient society took for granted. To be barren would no longer be a disgrace. To be ignorant of sexual passion, as young Hippolytus was, would no longer be tantamount to hubris and madness. There are some who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of God, said Jesus. If this calling is for you, then take it. Jesus made no further suggestions. But he left a large, yawning space open for a new and strange identity: Be that eunuch! :

The ideal of the untouched human body came to the fore. In the imagination of the time, it acted as a charged joining point of heaven and earth and, on earth itself, as the symbolic rallying point for a rapidly expanding church.[[599]](#endnote-599)

**4.5 The Chastity Plot Assessed**

**The** chastity plot was not, as the expression goes, ‘hatched’ by a cabal over a night’s conversation in a backroom. Powerful Church Fathers and haggard anchorites did not combine forces in an effort to make sex look bad. The genius of renunciation as a strategy and a way to signal spiritual superiority only became obvious over time; enthusiasm for it was never universal, even if it was certainly fervent. The plot developed piecemeal, inconsistently, and in separate episodes. No more than marriage was chastity designed as a ‘plot against women’. Women, nonetheless, have been the ones most affected by it. Men have earned admiration for their courage, their creativity, their practical cunning. Idealised womanhood has been burdened by an image almost entirely stripped of substance, energy, and action: an image of purity, as still and unchanging as that paragon of feminine excellence, Mary of Gallilee. Marina Warner describes her Catholic childhood, under the spell of dreamy ‘Mariolatry’, believing that the Virgin Mary demanded of her one thing above all, and that was sexual chastity. Of all the works of the devil, the most potent of his weapons is lust. ‘Tears of shame and embarrassment’ were the price paid by adolescents for having, scandalously, sexual feelings and ‘dirty’ thoughts, and more than shame, terror. Even then, Warner writes, ‘I sensed that the problem of human evil was more complex than concupiscence – at least in its narrow sexual definition.’ The Virgin’s myth was a paradox: solicitude and beauty for this most exemplary female, awe and honour for the one mortal whose claim to fame rests on her escape from the carnal condition that otherwise unites the human race; self-doubt and surveillance for the rest of the female sex. Mary could not have been a ‘holy’ mother and the Queen of Heaven – the only woman to sit at the side of the Father in glory – ­ if she had not been a virgin, untouched by men, immune to lust, never defiled in flesh or thought. If such is the ‘perfect human woman’, then ‘in that celebration’, ‘both humanity and women were subtly denigrated.’[[600]](#endnote-600)

There is no reason to acquit the virginity-ideal of this and other crimes. By calling it a ‘plot’, I do mean to accept its complicity in the denigration of women and the stubbornly persistent bad conscience about erotic desire that Freud, among others, crisply assigned to what he called ‘civilized sexual morality’. Idealising sexual abstinence, making a cult of innocence, usher in not only the worst tangles of psychological and aesthetic contradictions; they lend credibility to misogyny and antifeminism; they provide solace and support to the long history of male domination over women. The case against chastity would appear to be clear. Yet was the plot planned? There is no singular moment when the destiny of sexual renunciation in Christianity revealed its face; no myth of origins that can explain its emergence and rise to popularity. Over-determined, we could say. All too many reasons, none sufficient on their own. ‘Hatred of the body’ has been suggested now and again, by hostile critics and others puzzled by this peculiar innovation. To my mind, that is far too general; the beginning of a line of thought, not an end or summation. ‘Misogyny’ does not do much better, even when it is combined with a distaste for embodiment, as R. Howard Bloch and certain other feminist critics would suggest, believing that Church Fathers such as Tertullian, who thundered against female ornament, vanity and display, combined their ‘hostility towards woman with a more generalized horror of the flesh’:

**We cannot** separate the concept of woman as it is formed in the early centuries of Christianity from a metaphysics that abhorred embodiment.[[601]](#endnote-601)

‘Woman’; ‘a metaphysics hostile to embodiment’; ‘chastity’: it is easy to see why any enlightened, post-Nietzschean cultural critic would want to place these notions in what seems an obvious chain of causation and responsibility, and identify early Christianity as a culprit. But historically as well as doctrinally and conceptually, that would be too simplistic. The amazing work of Catherine Walker Bynum should make it hard to accuse Christianity of lacking a lively relation to everything bodily, material…Women were castigated by Tertullian of Carthage in a notorious phrase: the Devil’s Gateway. But in Christian communities across the late Roman Empire they were also held up as models of modesty, self-sacrifice, and commitment. Judaism and paganism had both assumed that women were the inferior sex. If anything, the early Christians were less rigid in their assumptions about gendered subordination. They accepted the Jewish teaching that God has appointed males to be the guardians of females, to hold the authority in household and in city. But the absorption of the dualist metaphysics many commentators take for granted as part and parcel of the Christian worldview was, if anything, inconsistent. Church fathers did not worry about femininity and its mysteries. They worried about humanity and its failures, its perversions, lies, and anger, its envy and ambition, its jealousy and arrogance. The case of women was not different in kind from the case of men. It was not their physical being as such that was shameful, but the uses to which they choose to put it. Lusts – just like all appetites and self-seeking passions ­– interfere with the Christian’s surrender of himself to God. Less the causes of the Christians’ unfreedom than the signs of it, the provocations and inclinations of our sensual formation can be conquered by a strong and unified mind. As St Paul and then St Augustine had gone to some lengths to explain, men and women are free or bound in accordance to their acceptance of grace. Augustine’s example is the most illuminating. A ‘dualism’ of soul and matter was the ‘error’ he had succumbed to in his fascination with Mani. It was not Christianity’s considered opinion.

Embodiment troubled a number of high-minded late ancient philosophers, neo-platonists and Pythagoreans as well Gnostic followers of Tatian and Julius Cassian, Marcion and Montanus. But to see Hellenistic philosophy, or that of early Christianity, as consumed by hostility to all flesh is an over-reading. Patristic denunciation of artifice and feminine cosmetics (Jerome was a master of that) is of a piece with Patristic endorsement of the simple and frugal life: here was an ideal, familiar from any number of Stoic and Cynic commonplaces, that the new believers could share with prestigious pagan philosophers. Such an embrace of a common moral and intellectual ground could be extended to the counsel bishops and missionaries offered to the converts: indulge as little as you can in the pleasures of the flesh and the senses; turn your affections to your spiritual and not your temporal future, to the wellbeing of your soul rather than that of your family or your body. Ascetic habits identify the follower of Christ with the simple life and sacrifice of the Lord. Hatred of the body and contempt for matter, by contrast, were blamed by the Fathers on the anti-orthodox teachings of the heretics. A more pertinent question would be: how did the generalization of ascetic attitudes – the opening-up of the philosopher’s exclusive club, as it were – help Christianity make converts? Peter Brown posited that Christian sexual abstinence was the ‘great equalizer’, making the lofty virtues of the philosophic ‘athletes’ available to the lowest and the least cultivated. Yet the battle for purity remained strenuous. Aspiring ascetics who feared backsliding might follow the example of their cave-dwelling heroes, fleeing the temptations of the city and human fellowship, hiding from the very sight and sound of women. Silence and the desert encouraged a more intolerant concentration on the ascetic’s struggle with him or herself, and the rhetoric of ascetic exhortation did not shrink from demonising those attachments and distractions left behind.[[602]](#endnote-602)

Did pagans turn to Christianity to end their enslavement to the flesh, or to cope with their distrust of women, their horror of the porous, liquid, disturbingly mutable female body? We can never know, and speculation about such motives is to my taste condescending, ascribing to ancient people a range of pathological fears we can never confirm. Better explanations become available if one takes advice from the anthropologists, who approach cultural changes with the same optic they bring to cultural forms in steady state. Behind the belief, look for the behavior and expect patterns of social behavior to display more continuities than discontinuities. Even the most extravagant of symbolic language and ritual must lead back, in one way or another, to the things humans do together, they way they make collective sense in response to experiences that might endanger or annihilate that ‘sense’. In this spirit, we can ask: what did the fuss about chastity *do* for groups of Greeks, Jews, Romans, Syrians and others who had been exposed to this new religious agitation, and wanted to join in?

**One** way of explaining the interest in sexual renunciation is to point to its functional utility, not in restricting the population or keeping fortunes from being frittered away in brothels or extra-marital liaisons, but in giving the signals through which a community can recognise itself. Sacred chastity could be the church’s bid for an identifying sign, a way of marking distinctions, distinguishing those inside the church community from those outside. When the great ancient historian Ramsay MacMullen asks: ‘How complete was conversion?’ in the 4th century, he notes the fluid and uncertain character of Christian practices even at the time of Augustine:

For Christianity had not developed its own particular way of doing everything. On many a corner even of religious life it had still to make its mark…How broad a conformity to the practices prescribed by the church was needed to make one a Christian? And what difference did conversion actually make anyway in the various zones and areas of life?[[603]](#endnote-603)

‘What difference did Christianity make?’ This remains the right question. To spread and take root, the new cult needed a number of things. Which ones were more important, historians have never been able to agree. Did it need to preach a distrust of sexual relations and physical desires? Certainly that distrust already existed, as our previous discussion of Greco-Roman ascetic writers demonstrated. Christianity added to the ascetic ‘plot’ a novel idea. What if marriage – the linchpin of social life – were unnecessary? What if the celibate life was superior and ennobling? Christians must be different from their neighbours and rivals. Being continent did not just make them ‘look’ difference – they could do that through simple clothes, communal homes, any number of unusual customs that early churches adopted. Some of those customs caught on, and were formalised: avoiding animal sacrifice and food sacrificed to the Roman gods, fasting at special times, the shared meal…others attracted a few, but did not make the cut. Sexual renunciation may not have been the most successful in helping to give definition to the new believers, but it was, in my view, one of the most significant of the religion’s innovations. If Christians needed to make visible their special relation to history, eternity and time, this was perfect. They expected a dramatic transformation, when God’s kingdom would replace the secular kingdom of this world and its powers: chastity was a way to live as if one were already an angel, unhampered by the heaviness of life, the obligations of posterity and estates, And chastity was a way to revive the purity of God’s original conception of human being: free from care and sin, sickness and death.

Christianity’s romance with sexual renunciation was not inevitable. That it was a successful romance, each member adapting to the other’s strengths and weaknesses, may have been a matter of opportunism rather than intention. Asked about the relative status of the married and the single, Christian leaders arrived at some broad lines of consensus: the virginal state was the highest, next were widows, and finally the married. But all were good. The three-story model of holiness represented a compromise between different camps, a way to slow down the gnostic powerhouse, which left untreated could have led to the abandonment of the Hebrew scriptures, hence the loss of the prophetic rationale for Christ’s mission as fulfilment of the longings of the earlier community, the realisation in Messianic time of God’s first covenant with Israel. Controversy and dissensus about all the key ingredients of the Christian confession were intense in early times, and the Christian policy about sex and marriage was no exception. Smart Romans, alerted to the dangers of the new movement, had concluded: these Christians are very good at hating each other. Leave them alone, and they will cancel themselves out. To avoid such terminal fracturing, equally smart Christian bishops worked out ways to accommodate both the ascetic rigorists and the less ambitious. Virginity is pleasing to God but so is sober marriage. The body was made by God, who designed even its sexual parts and purposes. The act itself is innocent and good in its purposes. It was the desire, rather, that is reprehensible and dangerous, and according to most Church Fathers, sex in our days is accompanied by desire only because we have been punished for the Fall. Yet desire itself is not sinful as much as unfortunate, one of the evils of creaturely life like headaches or mosquitos. Christians could attend decently to their marital duties without risking sin, as long as they don’t succumb to passion (even for their licit spouses.) Later, as we shall see with the extravagant poetics of medieval romance and courtliness, romantic passion is rehabilitated – or, as many critics argue, ‘invented’. Provençal lyricists protested to anyone listening: my love is chaste and blameworthy just because it is so single-minded, excessive, self-sacrificing and absorbing. Passion itself purifies. Innocence can return in the shape of *amour fou*, to the true lover who does not count the costs. Love is a religion.[[604]](#endnote-604)

As a foretaste of the kingdom of heaven extended to the early Christian, chastity could be loved and admired. As such, it was of course open to all who could, as Jesus said, receive it. Women whom pagan and Jewish cultures believed were fashioned to bear children and serve the males in their families, got a second chance. They were on a par with men in this respect. They too could be virginal and abstinent. Their bodies could be recovered for a different purpose, removed from the cycle of generation and increase, made ‘offerings to the god’ like the bodies of devout men school in ascetic purification. Chastity offered freedom and acceptance to special women. In many respects, as I have argued, Greek myth had already gone a long way towards justifying the special role of the virginal female; cult and oracles presented pure maidens and abstinent older women as possessing the power to serve a s medium and sacrifice. Their imagined ‘emptiness’ and their supposed ‘enclosedness’ – they had not been opened by a man, in the case of the virgin, or they had been removed from the domain of sex and fertility, in th e case of mature women who served the goddesses by specific, limited periods of purity. If there was any ligature between such religious offices and secular functions for women, neither Greeks nor Romans saw it. Chastity, most thoughtful pagans believed, was good because it demonstrates self-control. But that self-control, restraint and modesty were fully manifested and proven in the life of the virtuous married woman. A woman who eschewed marriage had nothing sublime about her. Goddesses were a different story. Mortals could not imitate them. Outside myth and cult, lifelong virginity did not inspire admiration as much as concern. Being a spinster was not a good idea; for the Jews, indeed, it was shameful. Greek and Roman doctors were of divergent views as far as the healthiness of prolonged virginity. Even the same medical expert was known to contradict himself. The author of the Hippocratic text, *Peri Parthenion*, ‘Concerning Virgins’ (late 5th or early 4th century BC), believed that female puberty was a difficult, unstable time, and best ended at first ‘ripeness’ (say, at the age of 14) by marrying her off. Pre-marital maidens have too much blood in their systems. Bearing children improves the ‘sponginess’ of the flesh.[[605]](#endnote-605) Galen argued that virginity was bad neither for men nor woman, and others believed that abstinent men were taller and stronger; yet retention of sprem can do great harm to the body. Soranus mentioned problems experienced by women with sexual experience choosing celibacy or obliged to become continent, but did not see that a virgin would have anything to worry about.[[606]](#endnote-606)

As role models for the Greek and Roman city, sexually self-controlled women enjoyed solemn respect; their image functioned as a site for political identification in the ideological struggles between republic and monarchy. Sexual immorality was a sign of despotic decline; what was wrong with the concentration of power in a few or a single hand was made clear by the potential for abusing and forcing women into sexual relations. Republican liberty found its emblem in the virtuous woman, the pudica, whose modesty and self-respect defied the licentious predator and rapist – in the stories of Lucretia and Virginia – the latter whose virtue was protected less by her own bravery than her father’s violent intervention. But the idea that suicide might be the right choice if you were threatened with sexual dishonour and coercion had entered the cultural consciousness, and it would play a significant part in the fashioning of a new, non-Lucretian myth: that of the virgin martyr, her blood spilled..the painstakingly described horrors of her torture, mutilation and death.

Virginity and violence, chastity and marriage to death, or in the Christian form, to a divine and non-carnal spouse, that is, the consecration to virginity as a marriage to immortality: these are the more flamboyant ingredients of the chastity plot. If the extravagant side of the chastity ideal were the only one in play, it would be hard to understand how female sexual purity became such an effective ingredient in the long and successful subordination of women to men. I have tried to describe the formation of the chastity ideal within early Christianity and the way it diverged from pagan models of exemplary behavior. At crucial moments in its formation, this ideal did make possible a freedom and autarchy for female Christians inconceivable for any but the most privileged and exception of pagan women. Allowing an ‘escape’ from marriage and social reproduction, dedicated virginity as a profession gave women somewhere else to go. They had honour; they were ‘holy women’, blessed, sometimes workers of marvels, controlling their own institutions. That power of self-determination possible through home or other monasticism was always contested, and in the Protestant Reformation, taken away. But the message is clear: consecrated chastity put women on a different footing.

And the remarkable vision of a virgin mother as bearer of the very Godhead played its own part in exalting one particular aspect of femininity: the asexual woman. This is certainly the most questionable of all the Christian innovations, an ideal difficult to take to heart. Its perniciousness must have been obvious well before feminists in the 19th century argued about whether sexual restraint (Wollstonecraft) or sexual freedom (the Utopian and Saint-Simonian feminists) was more conducive to women’s power and self-determination. ‘Feminising’ chastity must, overall, be judged as bad for women. The contradictions it created are what I will discuss in my final chapter, on Saint Clarissa and the impoverishment of secular chastity. Feminising chastity was also, I want to argue, bad for men. It created an unpalatable and incoherent object of desire: woman as beloved could be valuable only if she didn’t want to love you; barred from passion, she punishes your desire and rewards it only with resistance. If she does return and meet your desire, there must be something wrong with her. The damage wrecked by the chastity ideal on the erotic and affective lives of human beings is incalculable. It is in this sense that one does not exaggerate in saying: the chastity plot.

Was this what Christianity had in mind? Were the miseries of ‘civilised sexual morality’ at all noticeable to the founders and shapers of the virginity ideal?

**CHAPTER 5**

**The Pure and the impure (CHRISTIAN PASTORAL AND THE REVERSAL OF NATURE)**

**Purity, in everything, is rejection of and abstaining from multiple and opposite things; it is singling out and taking that which is natural and appropriate. This is also the reason why sex pollutes, for it is the coming together of female and male. (Porphyry, *On Abstinence*, Book 4, 262)**

**And how could the Soul lend itself to any admixture? An essential is not mixed. Or to the intrusion of anything alien? If it did, it would be seeking the destruction of its own nature. (Plotinus, *Enneads*, I.1.2)**

**5.1 Against Innocence: Dethroning the Angel**

One of the oldest myths is that of an original innocence. We started pure; impurity came later, by mishap or design. As a habit of thinking, this one is hard to shake. Early stages of anything – life, marriage, education – are straightforward and untroubled; what succeeds them, for better or worse, adds complications, mutations, qualifications. Pushed to an extreme, this becomes a prejudice in favour of inactivity. Resting inert may be unproductive. But at least nothing has been taken away, no perfection marred. ‘Bare earth is best’, says Wallace Stevens. Why add to a pristine condition? Yet innocence does not appeal to everyone. One philosopher who had no time for innocence, or indeed for anything that smacked of what he called ‘immediacy’, was Hegel. Hegel was a thinker of mediations. He preferred the complications. By performing any act at all, the self sunders what might have been whole. The simple certainty of immediate truth is given up, lost in the very moment of action. The self who acts is no longer an innocent self. ‘By the deed, therefore, it becomes guilt.’ Guilt is life. Or life is guilt. Otherwise you might as well be a stone. For Hegel there is nothing to be gained by holding back, so you might as well accept it: to act is to violate. Ethical innocence is non-action, a pointless and inconsequential clinging to an empty ideal of existence without content, without division:

Innocence, therefore, is merely non-action, like the mere being of a stone, not even that of a child (*Unschuldig is daher nur das Nichttun wie das Sein eines Steines, nicht einmal eines Kindes*)[[607]](#endnote-607)

What is it about innocence? For Hegel the very notion is vacuous. For anyone more sympathetic the charm of innocence is well registered in the tone and the allure of pastoral. ‘Pastoral’ refers to a poetics (rather than a lifestyle.) The literature of pastoral may speak of sheep and olive groves, of peace and immunity to the nagging pressures of ambition, wealth and struggle. Its mood is nostalgic; its ‘world’ a never-never-land’, a place of beauty and simplicity the poet claims to long for as a lost homeland, a memory.[[608]](#endnote-608) Once there was peace and plenty, once humans lived as simply as beasts, unaware of tension and alienation. Latin writers like Virgil and Theocritus established the conventions of grass and trees, water and fruitfulness: the *locus amoenus.* Here sheep may safely graze, unafraid of wolves; here lovers can lounge on the ground, spades and tractors out of sight, playfulness unscolded. The Book of Genesis put a garden as the birthplace of human and animal life, and surrounded it by four rivers: Pishon, Gihon, Hiddehit and Euphrates. The pastoral program is gentle, a vision of beginnings where conflict and correction remain off-stage. Pastoral is a literary genre, or better, a symbolic form, a mode, intimately bound up with a myth of the Golden Age. If pastoral’s foundational fantasy is to be credited, it was invented by shepherds, to ‘re-create themselves in their leisure whilst they fed their sheep’, as the 17th century critic René Ragrid puts it in his *Eclogues*.[[609]](#endnote-609) Pastoral is the ‘humble member’ of the schools of poetry; it has its counterparts in music, painting and philosophy. From its ancient forms, represented by Theocritus and later Virgil, to its revival in the Renaissance and the 17th century, its moral beliefs remained constant: rural pleasures are the true pleasures. The country is the soul’s homeland, the restorative elixir that brings tranquillity and a sense of the true order of things and their importance to a mind over-taxed by stimuli and distraction. Corruption is unknown here. In the timeless world of rural simplicity only eternal values prevail. It is the illusion only a city sophisticate who does not make her living on a hillside could cherish. Poetry might have come up with another way to unite elegance and simplicity, without nymphs weaving garlands and the entire bucolic apparatus.

Hegel sneers. But the art and literature of the West would be bereft without a pretty picture of this undisturbed condition, so unlike our own that we have pushed it way back in time. Once there was a garden where everything presented itself for the taking, where pain and discord were unknown. The Book of Genesis calls it ‘Eden’. The humans who inhabited it were like creatures in a ‘spiritual zoo’, Hegel adds ungraciously. Lacking in self-awareness , they could be called ‘innocent but hardly good’ (PhS, 467) But they were, he admits, at one with themselves. They just didn’t know it. They needed to fall. Only after a long wandering through many shapes and ruptures can the self return to itself and ‘digest the entire wealth of its substance’(PhS 492), recollecting all that it has been through. “Contrasted with the simplicity of pure consciousness…[..] .this reality is a plurality of circumstances which breaks up and spreads out endlessly in all directions, sideways into their connections, forwards in their consequences.’ (PhS 389) You can’t stay where you start from. To resist mixture, confusion, alienation, is to remain stupid, hypnotised by the monotony of immediacy. Turned into a moral stance, such an attitude is in danger of expiring on the altar of its own spotless perfection:

It lives in dread of besmirching the splendour of its inner being by action and an existence; and, in order to preserve the purity of its heart, it flees from contact with the actual world, and persists in its self-willed impotence to renounce its self which is reduced to the extreme of ultimate abstraction….The hollow object which it has produced for itself now fills it, therefore, with a sense of emptiness. Its activity is a yearning which merely loses itself as consciousness becomes an object devoid of substance, and, rising above this loss, and falling back on itself, finds itself only as a lost soul. In this transparent purity of its moments (*in dieser durchsichtigen Reinheit seiner Momente*) it is an unhappy, so-called ‘beautiful soul’, its light dies away in it and it vanishes like a shapeless vapour, dissolving into thin air. (PhS 399-400; PhG 483-4)

The pastoral mode is also a philosophic position, although a strange and self-dissolving one. Its image of purity is a powerful fantasy, and Hegel admits that. This myth of the beautiful soul untainted by actuality maintains its grip on the history of ideas. Better a life ‘evaporated’, evanescent (*verflüchtigen*) and abstract than a life stained by specificity or incriminated by decision. Such a fantasy recurs in every generation, in the avant-garde as among the classicists. As Hegel sees it, it turns up as the favourite ideal of the absolutist, poet or mystic, who prefers the impossible to the proximate and concrete: suffering from a desire that no object can satisfy, the absolutist prefers ‘unhappiness’, and earns from Hegel a title that sticks – ‘unhappy consciousness’, *unglücliches Bewußtsein* ‘. (PhS 126; PhG 163) The unhappy consciousness is hopelessly enthralled by its vision of emptiness, by the beauty of the white, the untouched, the transparent. But if there is one niche in culture specially designed to accommodate the dream of spotless perfection, that would have to be religion, and religion’s close relation, the ‘angelic imagination’ of the Platonists. Plato’s big idea, presented in the *Republic*’s allegory of the Line and the Cave, is that the intellect, withdrawn into its own abstractions, could fly directly to the truth, without passing the gate of the senses and the ambiguities of experience.

**5.2 The Angelic Vocation**

In the history of religion, such an intuitive intellect is usually reserved for angels. But even non-saintly intellectuals and some political radicals have been known to believe themselves superior to the humdrum way of the world. The ‘angelic vocation’, for those who fall under its spell, arouses a taste for a science of the absolute. Limits constrain us. Angels, created in time but with a being that is endless and free of spatial determinates, sweep across barriers that hold us back. Angelic intellection, explains Thomas Aquinas the Angelic Doctor, is immediate and intuitive. Ours is discursive and approximate. ‘Angelism’ borrows both from Aquinas’ hierarchical metaphysics and from Plato’s myth of the soul that grows wings. Pure Platonic intellects have their vision fixed solely on the radiance of the Ideas. Our senses are entangled by similitudes and reflections, metaphors and mirrors. This side of the upper heavens all is mixture. Generation keeps altering and adjusting the substance of these human animals who are meant to be guided by the reason which is their pride. Once admitted to a realm in which reason alone would be enough, surely the drawbacks of generation and biology could also be suspended. Angelic imaginations are puzzled by the mutability of the finite. So are idealist philosophers. The view from eternity beckons. Why shouldn’t philosophy satisfy this yearning? Its objective should be the provision of simple and immutable and self-evident propositions. We should want to be in the Sun, not the Cave. Some thinkers believe in a mind unimaginably lucid and a knowledge that would be universal and perfect, like God’s. Descartes, Jacques Maritain says, wanted such a science: “the very science of God and of the angels”.[[610]](#endnote-610) Nothing in his education measured up; perhaps only mathematics knew what certainty and clarity were. Everything else in history was a poor simulacrum of systematic knowledge , a chaos of ‘straggling villages’ and ‘badly proportioned cities’ instead of method and organization. *Discourse on Method*, Part II) If philosophy is to deserve the name, it needs to demand a more elegant and simple structure for knowledge. It must be clear. It must be certain. But is it possible? Is anything we can assert about human life or nature fit to withstand such a withering gaze? Shelley’s *Adonaïs* gives the canonical expression:

Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,  
Stains the white radiance of Eternity

Life will always stain. And there will be those who will go on finding its offerings too sordid. Spotlessness is an admirable aim – for a mop. Human beings are more likely to fall into a Pascalian shape: double, tangled, contradictory. Pascal saw ‘the misery that is man’ as inseparable from his greatness. Man is all these: the ‘repository of truth, sink of uncertainty and error, glory and garbage of the universe’ (*depositaire du vrai, cloaque d’incertitude et d’erreur, gloire et rebut de l’univers*) [[611]](#endnote-611) When he tries to be an angel, he makes himself into a brute. The angelic temptation in its Platonic form is a poisoned chalice, for Pascal and for a fellow traveller like Montaigne. Angelism is a constitutive obsession of the unhappy consciousness. It makes everyone who reaches for it dissatisfied. But it is also the engine of the sublime.

The angelic temptation is what the American poet Allen Tate castigated as a ‘hypertrophy’ if not a perversion: ‘It is the incapacity to represent the human condition in the central tradition of natural feeling’ and ‘the thrust of the will beyond the human scale of action.’ Angels disdain human carnality. That is all very well for them. But for us it would mean the destruction of the world. Angelic knowledge is perfect, hyper-rational, omniscient but, Tate objects, it ultimately exhausts itself ‘because in the end it has no real object; it is wedded to nothingness.[[612]](#endnote-612) Paradisal innocence, indeed, was a brief possibility before transgression made us what we are. Jews included as their founding myth the story of a Garden where there was no death and no work. How you evaluate this nostalgia for the primeval depends on your opinion of the history that superseded it. Some Jews and their Christian heirs were in no doubt: the demons have been in control. A cosmos balanced by the beautiful coherence of divine Logos, such as the one imagined by the Stoics, was to their minds a pathetically naïve notion, contradicted by every instance of pain and confusion, both natural and human. Mortals live in darkness. Their powers of reason are unreliable, their physical powers insignificant. Why wouldn’t anyone who can see realise that this condition is a far cry from the blessedness promised in the first days of Creation? History since the banishment from Eden is a history of corruption and decline. That the human race had lost its way, was the conclusion of early and late followers of Christ’s call to a new life. The Hebrew Prophets had already awakened Israel to the infamy of sin, to Israel’s bleak chronicle of disobedience and idolatry. Christians returned to the fray with new prophetic zeal, only now widening the circuit of judgment to a universal measure: all humanity is the race of Adam; all have betrayed; all require redemption. Human error was the cause of human misery. Like the rebel angels, we have lost our original stamp: our unity with purity and light. Once we radiated the image and likeness of the divine. Now Nature itself is ashamed of us; the ugliness of our soul disfigures our body and our society. But that can be corrected. We can, through God’s graciousness, become angels again, despite all our flaws, if we freely will to co-operate in the program of Providence. (Matt 22:30; Luke 20:35-36) And through continence the spirit, so long dulled or coarsened by sensual indulgence and intellectual confusion, can be reborn in God’s original image. This was the eschatological and paradisal hope of the great Christian champions of the angelic life – the orthodox (Origen, Clement, Gregory, Methodius) and the unorthodox (Tatian, Marcion, the anonymous authors of the Gnostic Gospels and Acts.)

Non-Christians also dreamt of the angelic life, the state of spiritual purity, but without the allegorical drama of the serpent and the wayward couple in their nakedness and their fig leaves. ‘Quite as much as Origen’, writes Peter Brown, ‘Plotinus was haunted by spiritual longing for the gracious beauty of the One.’[[613]](#endnote-613) Plotinus’s brilliant disciple Porphyry travelled from Tyre to the city of Caesarea to hear the famous Origen lecture. While Porphyry (then a young man) shared Origen’s passion for allegorical interpretations and had himself a mystical bent, he was not impressed by the Christian. The Biblical texts, which Porphyry studied with care, irritated him because of their contradictions and inconsistencies. There are many gods worth taking seriously in the Greek pantheon, Porphyry argued, and he was willing to expand their numbers to include human beings like Jesus who had apparently been elevated to a god after his death. But even Jesus worshipped and was subordinate to the one God who is above all, and whom Porphyry agreed that all the wise should worship. The flaw in the religion came from Jesus’ disciples, who tried to turn their teacher into something he had never claimed to be. Christianity was a superfluous religion (perfectly good and true religions were available in the Roman Empire.) Indeed it was less a religion than a superstition[[614]](#endnote-614). Porphyry argued instead for a religion dignified enough for a man of his philosophic calibre. It should dispense with the need for a historical mediator and for the founding myth of the Biblical religion, the myth of humanity’s fall into sinfulness through their father, Adam. Judaism and Christianity had cut off the route through which the soul could regain its pristine and perfect state, condemning the human race to degradation and servitude unless supernatural powers intervened. The Bible, Porphyry objected, left spirit enchained; lacking all respect for intellectual virtue, the Biblical religion could not understand what the purity of the philosopher could be. Plotinus, that god-like man, drew from the Platonic fountain a much deeper and richer insight: with the right discipline, the vigilant and purified soul might return to the realm of spirit, unhampered by the body and its needs.

Porphyry’s intelligent protest against the ‘monopolisation’ of soul-salvation by the presumptuous Christians is a key moment in the parting of the ways between Greco-Roman and Christian dreams of ascetic purity. Despite some mutual recognition, there are important differences in the character of what I am calling these two ‘angelisms’, the pagan and the Christian. And there are important differences in the practical consequences of their separate doctrines of perfectable purity. Called to the seat of final judgment by a divine and omnipotent authority, Christians had anxieties that philosophy could not alleviate. No amount of insight or contemplation would do the work of sundering a yoke that had made the frail, generative human body a slave of its perverse will (as Augustine and Paul believed) or of the demons in their clamour (as Gnostic myth-makers held.) In Adam’s fall the human condition acquired a kink that human efforts cannot undo. Purity and renunciation might make the soul less heavy, less truculent and disobedient: this was the best that could be expected from ascetic exercises of mortification, abstinence and humility. But to become ‘like the angels’ would take God’s supernatural grace, not man’s spiritual excellence. Sacrifice – to the point of the martyr’s ‘joyful death’ , seen as the final farewell of soul from body – imitated the unmatched obedience of the Son of God. It was the right image of the Christian understanding of transcendence.

Such violent metaphors would have been repellent to a neo-Platonist angel, however readily he could admit the shared commitments to abstinence and the pious advantage of cultivating indifference to the flesh. Even the incessant harping on lust and the appetites as proof that the unregenerate soul was mortgaged to shame struck such observers as Porphyry and Julian the Apostate as overkill. Porphyry himself was as inclined to ascetic celibacy as any man in history – a convinced vegetarian, he married at 70, but only to cultivate a companionship based on philosophic interests, no nonsense about children or sex – but the could find no coherence in the Christian theory that the weaknesses of the senses or the passions were due to a moral pollution traceable back to the eagerness of Adam and Eve to know more than they were allowed to know. For a Platonist, and for some philosophers influenced by Stoicism, the senses and the appetites were simply accidents, or perhaps misdirections of judgment. They were intrusive for the ordinary man and little problem for the superior man. One could happily do one’s duty for the city by having sex and reproducing, or eating moderately with one’s fellows, but these were transient matters, flickers on a more important horizon. The Christians, like the Jews before them, lived under the shadow of defilement: the senses and the organs might at any moment be maliciously usurped by Satan. Every detail of life was open to the eye of God. It was all too easy to be wrong. In the battle of the soul with corruption, angel and beast never ceased their antagonism. Only a leap outside the world itself, through the unexpected and undeserved intervention of a redeeming God, could restore the efficacy of the human will and the human reason. In this life the soul is confused – morally, metaphysically, psychologically. Apprised of the possibility of enlightenment, it awakes, remembering its better origins. What can a Christian do to become perfect? How can the great error that was the Fall of Man be undone? The curious form that Christian thinkers in the first four centuries gave to this problem is what interests me here. The image of God has been defaced, they argued. Those who believe and struggle for faith need more than the stuff they were born with: they need the lost image that humans once had. But to regain that innocent shape, they need to unravel the history of the world. To return to the Garden and see God as he wants to be seen, perhaps they need to give back the privilege he so generously offered then – the privilege of sexual love and reproduction. To be sublime, be a child again. Or even better, be the eunuch.

The strange search for an asexual sublime is my topic in this chapter. It is, I want to make clear, a deeply unHegelian search. In Hegel’s view, the Fall was the best thing that could have happened to the human race. All his instincts rebel against a conception of goodness that lacks the substance our moral lives need for their struggles. Without a constitutive tension, an appetite for the fray, perfectionist ideals will do more harm than good in a Hegelian cosmos. Eden is for the animals. Or, as Hegel’s student Heinrich Heine expressed the spirit of the new revolutionary age, better immanence than transcendence. Better a world we can see and taste than the ghostly delights of the fleshless. In a Feuerbachian spirit, Heine writes his satirical epic in verse “Deutschland: ein Wintermärchen”(1843). The failure of the German Revolutions of 1848 could not have been anticipated. The children of the Enlightenment had every reason to be upbeat. Let’s have new green peas for everyone, writes Heine, spring peas fresh from the pods, and leave heaven to the sparrows, unless the angels want it. Empty the celestial academics; make theology anthropology. It was a brilliant slogan, and the young Hegelians knew what they were doing when they coined it. But sublimity proved hard to eradicate.

**5.2. Purity Sacred and Profane**

Platonists, early and late, have never been satisfied with Hegelian earthiness or the worldly tolerance of thinkers like Montaigne, content to accept mutability, the pleasures and pains of ‘living in flux’. Repudiating, as Charles Taylor writes, ‘the superhuman standards so often held up by the moral tradition’, Montaigne scolds gently:

To what purpose are these heaven-looking and nice points of Philosophy, on which no humane being can establish and ground it selfe? And to what end serve these rules, that exceed our use and excel our strength?...Super-celestiall opinions, and under-terretriall manners, are things, that amongst us, I have ever seen to be of singular accord…It is mere folly, insteade of transforming themselves into Angels, they transchange themselves into beastes…Such transcending humours affright me as much, as steepy, high and inaccessible places.[[615]](#endnote-615)

Contempt for humanity’s natural being is the unpleasant consequence of such adventures in the steep places of the spirit, in Montaigne’s view. Better to know oneself, as messy as that is, than to chase the absolute. But spiritual pride can prove addictive. To compensate those who cannot bring themselves to love the world, there have always been a variety of philosophies and religions on offer. If the discord and heterogeneity of experience is too much, philosophy could be a therapeutic tonic, a cure for confusion. But ultimately the only state that guarantees an end to nature’s promiscuity and life’s compromises is death, to which philosophy is a close relative, as Vladimir Jankélévitch has argued.[[616]](#endnote-616) ‘Learning how to die’: this is how Socrates spoke of the soul’s education through philosophy in his last speech to his friends (*Phaedo*, 64d-66d, 67e). In this life, the soul is mingled with the body; after death they separate; philosophy speeds up the process:

Socrates: Do we believe there is such a thing as death?

Simmias: Most certainly.

Socrates: Is it simply the release of the soul from the body? Is death nothing more or less than this, the separate condition of the body by itself when it is released from the soul, and the separate condition by itself of the soul when released from the body?

Making dying the philosopher’s profession weakens the philosopher’s attachment not just to the body but the world. Outside the body, the soul would be free to pursue pure knowledge; it cannot be right, adds Socrates to the obliging Simmias, ‘for a philosopher to concern himself with the so-called pleasures of food and drink’, or to take any thought for the placement of his corpse after death. Disembodiment is not just a philosopher’s predilection. In a recent paper called ‘The Philosopher and the Chicken’ the historian of science Steven Shapin asked some wonderful questions about the early modern scientist’s body and relationship to the flesh. ‘The truth-seeker’, Shapin notes, ‘is someone who attains truth by denying the demands of the stomach and, more generally of the body.’[[617]](#endnote-617) The ascetic vein lies deep, and spreads far. For some, the quarrel with reality encourages a poetic or a reformist sensibility, one prepared to imagine possible ways in which things could be otherwise. For others, disappointment slips into contempt and compromise seems impossible: “world-rejecters”, Max Weber calls them, psychologically unsuited to accommodation in any form, even the Puritan choice of ‘antagonism to sensuous culture’ or systematic pessimism.[[618]](#endnote-618) Asceticism, Weber writes, turns with all its “force against one thing: the spontaneous enjoyment of life and all it had to offer.”[[619]](#endnote-619) Monastic withdrawal solves the problem in one way. But other conceptions of the ideal form of human being offer a different story. It seems difficult for human beings to surrender the hope for integrity. There are a number of ways to stage the troubled reunion of the ‘crooked timber of humanity’ and the transcendent good we are so often promised.

Where is perfection to be found? At the end or at the beginning? Was it an original condition, a unity that was unfortunately sundered, leaving us dispersed and incomplete? Or is it to be expected only at the consummation of all things, in the eschaton? Plotinus, in the 3rd century CE, represents the seeker of truth in a Platonic cartoon. Starry-eyed, gentle, homesick for the uncluttered atmosphere of the intelligible realm, Plotinus, his biographer Porphyry reports fondly, ‘seemed ashamed of being in the body.’ (*Life of Plotinus* 1.1) Reticent about his own origins, as Porphyry’s hagiography explains, Plotinus came from somewhere in Egypt, studied at Alexandria, lived the simplest of lives, celibate and vegetarian. His passion for a transcendent love – the primal beauty, the One ­– was intense:

Therefore we must ascend again towards the Good, the desired of every Soul…To attain it is for those that will take the upward path, who will set all their forces towards it, who will divest themselves of all that we have put on in our descent. (*Enneads*.I.6.7)

To approach the visionary goal of all desires, philosophic aspirants will undergo a process of conversion comparable to those of initiates into the Mystery cults: ‘There are appointed purifications and the laying aside of garments worn before, and the entry in nakedness”. Plotinus speaks in the language of allegory, but his expectations are concrete. The God contemplated by the enlightened is, like them, ‘Apart’, ‘Unmingled’, ‘Pure’ (*Enneads*, I.6.7). The soul, Plotinus taught, was meant to exist on its own, absorbing nothing but the intellectual love of God. Somehow mislaying its essential and immortal life, it has descended into the body, and pines for emancipation. *(Enneads* IV.8) Partnered to the body, ‘a deserter from the totality’(IV.8.4), the soul is in danger of absorbing the body’s habits of self-dissolution: a porous and tenuous thing, the body, always prey to assail from without.[[620]](#endnote-620) The body’s happiness is unreliable; the felicity of the soul, by contrast, knows no external challenges. Who wouldn’t want to trade in the lesser state for the greater? The inner man, Plotinus’s name for the individual soul, has a choice. He can continue to see himself as a split thing, a broken mirror troubled by phantoms, by the distorting fragments of carnality. Or he can, as a ‘Proficient’, cut away the body and be like a mirror smooth and shining (I.4.10); light and free, unencumbered by the multiplicity of burdens which plague consciousness (IV.3.32). To be one’s true self is a release from everyday consciousness and the constant business of attention: alone with the alone, there is nothing but purity and simplicity. This is a happiness that cannot diminish.

If the Platonic tradition of which Plotinus is a late and distinguished representative is correct, the rewards of intellectual purification are great. For the individual, that is. The sage who sees through the vanity of the world and its perishable glitter will value the less visible achievements of insight and virtue, modesty and self-control. For the community, on the other hand, it can be just as important to have something else: a shared conception of admirable behaviour, of what distinguishes the common from the noble, the average from the exceptional. Such conceptions, particularly in the Greek and Roman world, establish the patterns of what we tend to call moral values. It may be more accurate to call them aesthetic.

At the intersection of the moral and the aesthetic are certain ideas about what is clean and what is unclean, what is beautiful and what disgusting. Anthropologists, who study human behaviour through its symbolic expressions, have been the best guides to these ideas and their cultural effects. It is from social anthropology, practiced with great flair by a group of French scholars in the first half of the 20th century, that we learned that ideas do not exist in a vacuum nor are they exclusively the furniture of the individual mind. As Mary Douglas summarises their intuition, ‘the first logical categories were social categories…the social relations between men provide the prototype for the logical relations between things.’ [[621]](#endnote-621) Philosophers are known for their strong views about the moral and the aesthetic. But anthropologists pay more attention to the way ideas (that later appear, more cerebrally, in moral and aesthetic judgments) are initially collective tools for getting things done: classifying, establishing relations, issuing instructions, communicating, controlling, enabling. The implications of this intuition for the history of religious ideals and traditions are well worth exploring. The gods, as Durkheim suggested, are the collective thoughts of the community, its self-portrait in spirit and force. Why shouldn’t its moral maxims and conceptions of sublimity be also its patterns of self-definition, its ways of making boundaries between the in and the out, the permitted as opposed to the forbidden, whether these be forms of domestic conduct or forms of magic? What ends up, much later, as the beautiful versus the grotesque, the saintly versus the selfish, may have been once the edible vs. the inedible, the ‘us’ and the ‘them’.

Beginning with the comparativist speculations of William Robertson Smith and Sir James Frazer in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, imaginative theorists of religion and society reacted with enthusiasm to the suggestion that holiness and hygiene inhabit the same sphere. Initially it was hard to escape cultural condescension: the primitive does magic; we do sacraments; his protective behaviours are rigid and shadowed by irrational fears; ours are empirically grounded and amenable to rational analysis. The contrast between the primitive and us proved, however, hard to sustain. Victorian complacency, whatever its survivals in the colonial service, soon exhausted itself. To the critical generation that followed the First World War, that display of systematic savagery made nonsense of a belief in ethical superiority, much less a schema of cultural evolution. The ‘pompous patronage’ of Frazer, as Douglas puts it, gave way to the theories of Durkheim and later, to anthropologists and sociologists of religion influenced by structuralist theories of language. The mystique of the primitive migrated inward in movements like Surrealism and its avant-garde counterparts, towards the metropolitan unconscious rather than the exotic other. And the ‘exotic’ no longer looked so alien. This led to a shift in the understanding of purity and pollution beliefs, previously the favoured markers of pre-ethical cultures. By the time evolutionism in cultural theory was discredited, scholars of religion and also philosophy were taking their distance from the positivist schemata of Comte and so many others, which so confidently had divided the history of civilisation into four stages: myth, religion, philosophy, science. Savage theory replaced savage magic. Their terrors reappear in our existential anxieties. Freud and Levi-Strauss showed us the rationality of the irrational. And myth began to look like a kind of thinking.

Religion, even the most far-fetched and magical beliefs of non-literate ‘primitives’, is not madness. It is systematic, an organisation of an otherwise shapeless and unpredictable reality into patterns humans can recognise. If the unclean is dangerous, and the sacred is also dangerous, this does not mean that the religious believer who takes care to avoid both without proper precautions is stupid, or a victim of irrational dread: it means that his society has provided him with a classificatory structure capable of transforming the incoherent into the intelligible. To distinguish the pure from the impure is to know how to do something important. As Mary Douglas says, what is done by pollution beliefs is pre-scientific cultures is a type of universalizing and ordering that seems well beyond the powers of modern thinkers: “Our own culture has largely given up the attempt to unify, to interpenetrate, and to cross-interpret the various fields of knowledge it encompasses. Or rather, the task has been taken over by natural science.”[[622]](#endnote-622)

To see cultures as ‘communicating engines’ (Edmund Leach’s expression) uncovers, under all the variations of theology and moral code, the binary oppositions that link and demarcate, that exclude and legitimate.[[623]](#endnote-623) Anthropology, under the influence of structural linguistics, found more and more of these the more broadly it cast its net, categories of thought that provide direction for how to manage life and death, friend and enemy. Such categories of thought guide not just right and wrong conduct but usable and unusable things, good and bad words, benevolent and malicious gestures or postures. They are expressed in what Marcel Mauss called ‘techniques of the body’ and also in the formation of combat strategies and rhetorical conventions, in rules about writing poetry and in rules about whom to marry and whom to shun. Anthropologists and canny students of antiquity find such ideas articulated in myth, ritual practice and law. Their scope is great because they perform two functions in one blow, functions which modern thought likes to keep separate: they symbolize and they explain.

One of the richest of these ideas, or families of ideas, is that of purity, with its close relations to social anxieties about contagion, about defilement and purgation, about the barriers between insiders and outsiders. Purity is a word we use to talk about our concerns for hygiene. Things are healthy – safe- if they are pure; unhealthy – unsafe – if they are dirty and contaminated. Religion, however, makes this distinction more ambiguous: the sacred is the opposite of the profane, the ‘vulgar’. But sacred things and places can also be profaned, if extreme care is not taken. And proximity to the sacred can be catastrophic, for the unwary. To keep the sacred ‘clean’ means to observe the appropriate restrictions. It is what public religion requires and the gods, or spirits, or ancestors sanction. Sometimes it requires respect for a taboo - the priest is off-limits as a sexual object to his congregation in the Catholic Church; at other times it is the dangerous person, infected by the commission of violent or transgressive acts, who has to be protected and treated as sacred, as Oedipus was.[[624]](#endnote-624) “Pollution beliefs not only reinforce the cultural and social structure, but they can actively reduce ambiguity in the moral sphere.”[[625]](#endnote-625) And this is roughly what ritual practices of abstention and avoidance do: they ‘demarcate sacred places and times’, they ‘mediate a safe entry into, or communication within the sacred realm of the gods’, they ‘sanction the social order where sex and food had their normal places within household and city,’ as Richard Finn summarises his research into ascetic traditions in the Greco-Roman world. Yet none of these careful and symbolically potent abstentions constitute, as Finn continues, “an asceticism understood as a moral or spiritual training in the sense that Porphyry envisaged a discipline of soul and body for the good of the soul.”[[626]](#endnote-626)

Living philosophically, following the model of spiritual exercise the ancient world called *ascesis* and that Epictetus’ *Discourses* describe with inimitable clarity, can develop the individual’s self-control in relation to pleasures (*enkrateia*); it can build up endurance and resistance to deprivation or hardship (*karteria* ) ; by promoting withdrawal and solitude (*anchorein)* it can make you simpler, more rigorous, detached from the material and mortal world, more impassive, virile and independent. It can even make you saintlike, closer to a god, as Apollo recognised when, in Porphyry’s account, he welcomes the sage (*Life of Plotinus*, 22). Such achievements make good philosophy’s Socratic claim to help you ‘take care of yourself’ in the highest sense of the phrase. They can, in Plato’s extravagant imaginings, liberate the soul into its immortality. (*Phaedrus*  245d-e) What they do not do is to save cities, expel plagues or guide societies through periods of tension, crisis and disaster. The concerns of the ascetic may at times coincide with the social good: in the firing line or on long military campaigns, the ascetic’s discipline and hardiness becomes a pattern to imitate; the ascetic’s habits of self-denial can encourage identification with collective needs, or inspire sacrifice in the cause of solidarity and resistance. But the social man and the ascetic man are often not the same man, and they have been known to look at one another with suspicion. The ascetic is sublime in his indifference to the world’s irritations, but also sublime in his indulgence in an elevated kind of selfishness. Elitism was not a complaint ancient ascetics would have taken seriously. Those who can hear it, let them hear it. Not everyone should be a perfectionist, or a Platonist, for whom being good involves the power to see and know illuminated reality, a vision of the unchanging order.[[627]](#endnote-627) Philosophy is never going to be the medicine of the masses. It will take another form of cultural practice to pull perfection down from the thin air at the top of the mountain (that same air that inspired Montaigne’s scepticism) and put it to work in society. For that purpose philosophy has to defer to religion.

With religion, the discourse of purity moves onto a different and distinct terrain. Religion is the physician to the ills of the community. Ritual observances keep separations in societies clear; dietary laws, cultic fasts and festivals, sexual avoidance and incest taboos align the body to a community and its traditions. The language of philosophy and the language of cult appear to share some key notions. Yet their discrepancies are significant: a pure (*agnos*) man, in the religious context, is for the Greeks, like fire or water, possessed of a quasi-supernatural power to hallow, sanctify and purify (*katharein*).[[628]](#endnote-628) But philosophers, however inspiring they may be, are not miracle-workers; they are above such hocus-pocus. They do not compete with the gods. Their social function is quite distinct from that of the soothsayer or diviner or priest. Knowledge, not wonder, is their stock in trade.

When philosophers achieve insight into the true ideas of justice, or beauty, ideas which are themselves divine on Plato’s account, they do so by the exercise of thinking, rational thinking and judgment, not mystical rapture. A certain snobbism towards the credulous is detectable even in reports of the most charismatic of Greek and Hellenistic philosophers. At many levels, the role of religion is practical: it maintains social order; it satisfies the goes; it ensures the well-being of cities and individuals; it makes things happen. The goods of philosophic activity are found elsewhere, in the improvement of wisdom, the benefits of self-control. The opposite of a philosophically admirable man, from the point of view of most Greek and Roman ascetic schools, would be a man without restraint, irrational and petty. A philosophic adept – a sage, a wise man, even with all the mystical trappings of an Apollonius of Tyana or a Pythagoras – cannot replace earth with heaven, nor bring new life out of the old. For that we will have to wait for another variation on the form.

In doing justice to the meanings of purity, the history of philosophy relaxes its territorial claim. Diotima, in Plato’s *Symposium*, and Plotinus in his treatise on the Ideal, are philosophy’s visionaries. In their moving pictures of an exacting discipline of intellectual enlightenment, they express a longing for the life of thought as a kind of catharsis. It should be able to absorb the passions and beauties of fleshly entanglements, it should aim for the emancipation of mind from body. The soul, as Socrates explains in his great speech (‘the best and most beautiful palinode’, *Phaedrus* 257a) to the pretty young Phaedrus, can grow wings to fly aloft. It can return to its original winged state when it abjures the heavy attachments of things foul and disorderly:

Only a philosopher’s mind grows wings, since its memory keeps it as close as possible to those realities by being close to which the gods are divine. A man who uses reminders of these things correctly is always at the highest, most perfect level of initiation, and he is the only one who is as perfect as perfect can be. (*Phaedrus* 249c-d)

The soul consumed by lustful or unnatural pleasures forgets the beauty it had once known, in the time before it was incarnated in its bodily ‘shell’ (250c). Driven down by the murk with which it consorts, the soul loses the clarity of its senses: it does not see real beauty; it lacks shame; it is crippled by the incompetence of its physical driver; it fails to recognise genuine nourishment. As the metaphor explains, this soul has shed its wings. But exposed to the beauty of a human face or body, the dormant susceptibility of that soul begins to revive. This revival is what we call *eros*:

The stream of beauty that pouts into him through his eyes warms him up and melts the places where the wings once grew, places that were long ago closed off with hard scabs to keep the sprouts from coming back; but as nourishment flows in, the feather shafts swell and rush to grow from their roots beneath every part of the soul (long ago, you see, the entire soul had wings. (251b-c)

Carnal love – the pleasure of the eyes – is not a dead-end, a besotted embrace of the flesh at its most wayward and ephemeral. It can be an awakening, tugging at a long buried memory. What the soul remembers when someone is on fire with sexual desire is the joy of an original perfection, of a beauty belonging to the god it once loved: one loves in the beautiful boy the image of the god whose nature he calls to mind. (252e-253c). Erotic obsession may take the boy and his lover to bed. But even there the wings are beginning to sprout. Delight succumbs to discipline; the lovers explore friendship and understanding in the midst of their caresses, and modesty triumphs: they are ‘fully in control of themselves now that they have enslaved the part that brought trouble into the soul and set free the part that gave it virtue.’(256a-b) When death comes the lovers will not be parted, but will grow wings taking them on a sacred journey thanks to their love together.

Love – the Platonic variety– is an allegory for the quest of philosophy. Just as mistaken opinions can be corrected in the purifying wrestling match that is dialectic, leading through their own frustrations to the better notion that Socrates points towards, so corporeal desire can perform through its longings and excitements the movements that require a purified object of love. The body itches with the spurts of wings growing within. And the mind’s struggles demand a more satisfying vision, allotted at the top of the ladder, or on emergence from the cave. In Plato’s dialogues we find one conception of purity and its pursuit, and this conception continues to dazzle the philosophic tradition of the West, which retains a foothold in the Platonist camp and, with that, a belief that the essential orientation of thought is an ascetic one. The history of religions, and of myths and ritual practices, inclines to other interpretations. What matters to the lives of communities are how things stand with the gods, how humans fulfil their obligations to the powers that surround and menace them, how the needs of eating and growing and sex and war can be met with proper gravity and respect. Without attention to these concerns, success will be impossible. Purity has to do with conduct, but also with observing the forms. Neglect of the demands of purity – whether they apply to what food is prepared and eaten, what victims prepared for sacrifice, what acts of violence expelled, or which sexual relations can be performed and how – is cultural suicide.

With the Platonists and their fellow-travellers, purity consolidates its career in the history of philosophy. The Platonists will play an important if not always sympathetic part in the shaping of Christian chastity. The idea of purity is metaphysical in a strong sense of the word. It is also, as we shall see, deeply invested in the (de)-evaluation of physical life, life as that takes shape in the body and the senses. To think about beautiful souls as Hegel describes them – beings so rarefied that they cannot bear to exist – obliges us to think about just what is invested in imagining purity. Is death the only antidote to our muddiness and mingling? It does not seem too much to claim that as soon as we think about the invocation of the immaterial and ethereal we are also thinking about the material and the carnal. Interiority, to paraphrase Shelley, stains exteriority, and that is as it ought to be. We are not locked into our own private consciousness unless we are suffering from some cruel disease. The inner state, invisible to the public gaze, must find some way of making itself manifest. To externalise our thoughts, we use language. Other strata of interiority, deeper in the emotional undergrowth, are harder to retrieve from obscurity. For them we need machineries of meaning-production that go all the way from myth to moral philosophy, from magic to psychoanalysis.

One of these elusive feelings I am describing as obscure and difficult to retrieve is the feeling of fault: something is wrong, and it feels as if that ‘wrong’ is inside me. But it may not be so clear that anything palpable has happened, any transgression committed, or that any accusation has been made. The sense of fault or of deficiency - ‘fallibility’, in the phrase Paul Ricoeur uses to cover the wide range of phenomena belonging to ‘la faute’ – enters experience without clear borders.[[629]](#endnote-629) Vague and ill-defined, ‘inarticulate’,[[630]](#endnote-630) even if undeniably uncomfortable, it hovers unattached to any knowing intention of wrong-doing. A floating, quasi-archaic feeling of dread or impotence, this feeling is ‘pre-ethical’ in Ricoeur’s view. It can become ethical only after it is transferred onto something more definite. The primal, inchoate ‘schema of evil’ will be ‘taken up in new forms of feeling’. It will be ‘re-enacted’, Ricoeur says, in a symbolic form, ‘rationalised’ perhaps, connected to external and expressive Behavior, certainly incorporated into a universe of symbol and belief. [[631]](#endnote-631) Before that the impure is problematic because ambiguous. And what is ambiguous causes anxiety. The logic of religious phenomenology moves from the indistinct to the explicit. Shape always trumps the shapeless. If there is defilement, there must be purification. Without established structures to sublimate and locate the nagging dread of impurity, societies would be at a loss, unable to manage this amorphous threat that, in Ricoeur’s conception, can undermine the integrity of my being. Better that I should be punished, or banished, than live with this uncertainty. The rites of purity – individual, civic, obsessively personal – exist to tame the yawning negativity of defilement. Even if I will suffer under an accusation I may not entirely understand or deserve, at least I will be spared the impossible outcome: meaninglessness.

The idea of purity intervenes decisively in the way individuals and societies give meaning to bodies and, of particular interest to me, sexual bodies. Religion, more than any other social practice, has taken this task to its heart. Giving meaning to the needs and activities of the body, positively or negatively, is something religions have made their speciality. Material considerations of purity and impurity, of pure flesh and contaminated flesh, figured crucially in religious cult and ritual practices before the Platonists turned their eyes upward. But the peculiar nature of Platonic purity needs to be considered in a separate category from that of purity in religion. From the self-evacuating ‘impotent’ yearning that Hegel despised in the unhappy ideal of perfectionism grew something unknown in the cleansing and careful purification rituals of priests and worshippers across the Mediterranean…The activity of purification – called *katharmos* by the Greeks – is, as Plato explains, an aspect of the ‘science of division’.[[632]](#endnote-632) The priest washing his hands, (‘lustration’, in the technical vocabulary), changing his clothes, abstaining from food or drink or sex, is obeying the rules of purity for a purpose. He wants to keep the world properly in place, the boundaries between sacred and profane intact, the nature of the interactions between gods and men legitimate.

“Purification”, Robert Parker remarks, “is one way in which the metaphysical can be made palpable.”[[633]](#endnote-633) And the making-present of the metaphysical requires division, at the very least. Division creates barriers which in turn protect communal life from danger and disgrace. Communities invoke the sacred to confirm their identity as communities, closed against an alien outside, but unified through shared practices of self-definition and organisation. An important number of these shared practices, as Durkheim argued when he gave form to the field of religious sociology, have to do with relations between the sacred and profane, between those things whose power can render them untouchable if necessary and those agents who seek to administer or solicit that power. What can be touched and what can’t be has a lot to do with the social significance of purity and impurity. Sometimes it is people who fall under the ban, who become the pariahs, the untouchables, those whose mere presence pollutes. At other times it is places, or substances, or even words. Impurity, like purity, can slide between the domain of the ‘palpable’ and something less tangible – the metaphysical, the moral. In scholarly analysis, as in philosophic reflection, we may try to keep that slippage from getting out of control. But sometimes it is precisely that slippage which is enlightening.

In the case of ideals of sexual purity and sexual integrity the shifting claims of the metaphysical and the physical, the mythic and the moral, cannot be put in entirely different packages. Their meanings are interdependent, even if often awkwardly contradictory, and the histories of how these ideals have been valued in Western cultures has to take into account the weight of social regulations as well as the dreams of individual perfectionists. Real bodies and symbolic forms are not the same.[[634]](#endnote-634) Yet how we distinguish them is always up for grabs.

In the great religions of the Eastern Mediterranean society and the flesh spoke to one another through the symbolism of physical purity. ‘The sacred and the profane’, Marc Bloch writes, were in the Europe of the early Middle Ages ‘almost inextricably mixed’.[[635]](#endnote-635) Bloch makes this claim in reference to the confusion about the boundaries of secular law and sacramental practice. What belonged to the jurisdiction of the church? What to the laity? Did it even make sense to distinguish religious from non-religious obligations in a Christianised world where political authority required heavenly blessing, and life on earth was widely asserted as being merely a shadow and a blurred reflection of the life to come? In such an atmosphere the pressure on personal sanctity is almost unbearable. How can one ever know the status of one’s soul if it is never wholly clear which things, which behaviours, which thoughts, are subject to divine oversight and which are not? The Christians inherited from centuries of Jewish piety a way of dealing with this problem, a problem as much of hygiene as of more elevated forms of divination: ‘The holy’, as Peter Brown puts it, is ‘an enabling device carefully (if unconsciously) ground into a tool to resolve otherwise unbearable human conflicts.’ [[636]](#endnote-636) How the community deals with the sacred and the profane is a matter of great urgency. But there are those – saints, priests, the aristocrats in the realm of the spirit, those already living an immaculate life in preparation for the Kingdom of Heaven – who can make the social negotiations for us. As power in the Christian community became more hierarchical, holiness became a speciality: only those invested with supernatural authority can determine what is holy and what is not. Only they can relieve our anxieties about the secret and uncontrollable infections that can descend on human life because, as Brown explains, only they can ‘handle the holy’. [[637]](#endnote-637)

Clerical celibacy, a rather late addition to the church’s traditions, was Christianity’s step beyond the purity-requirements of Judaism. From a set of canons prepared by the African Council of Zella in 418 we hear the beginnings of what would become a dominant exhortation. It is true, the writers say, that priests and Levites married and had children. But when they presented themselves at the altar, or performed their offices in the temple, they refrained from sex with their wives. Our priests must be prepared at any moment to offer the sacrifice. They should abstain to be free for prayer. The continence of priests spreads the aura of the sacred more fully throughout the institution. Ritual purity defines the priesthood, as that has been inherited from the old cult. Now, given that the earlier dispensation ahs been ‘perfected’ and accomplished in the new, all the more unhampered should be the continence which holiness always preferred. From the fourth to the eleventh century, the preference for a ‘discipline’ of clerical celibacy remained strong in the church’s leadership. In that ‘great revolution’ called the Gregorian reform movement, the church finally decided. By the twelfth century it was clear. A cleric with a sex life is ‘anathema’. To be a servant of God required a sacrifice of the body’s destiny for sexual love and procreation. Handling, as one 9th century bishop puts it, ‘the immaculate body and blood of the Lord’, the servant of the altar, the wielder of the sacraments, will be a eunuch for Christ.[[638]](#endnote-638)

**5.3 Holiness and Denial: towards an Art of Disappearing**

Anthropologists who study comparative religions know a bit about the variety of uses to which ‘handling the holy’ can be put. Before the practices of piety were ways of securing the holy or propitiating the gods, they were ways of avoiding contamination. This hypothesis, familiar to historians of religion from the work of Mary Douglas, Paul Ricoeur, Robert Parker and others, puts dread about bodily impurity as the earlier, the elemental experience, before the concept of ethical inadequacy had time to make its claim. Holiness, we have learned, was a way of both separating and including the body, differentiating and transforming it. This insight remains pertinent to the interpretation of ascetic practices, early and late. Denial, we want to say, is never just denial: it is a way of creating meaning, giving pattern through exemption and exclusion to a physical being which might otherwise remain amorphous. Purification allows the body to be, in the words of the historian of religion Carl Olsen, ‘a model’ for a special kind of bounded system. ‘The body’, he continues, ‘is a natural symbol system’. Through the vocabulary of clean and dirty, pure and polluted, the body is marked by and for its social relations. A term like purity is ingenious, as Paul Ricoeur emphasises. It can express so neatly the oscillation between the physical and the ethical.[[639]](#endnote-639) This is something religions have exploited. To be close to the holy requires a special kind of cleanness. Without purification, most cults agreed, access to the sacred is problematic. A Greek in Homer’s time could not join in sacrifice or collective rites without ritual purification. Judaism was even more strict: the *Mikva’ot*, a section of the rabbinic Mishnah (composed in 220 CE), mentions the requirements of purity governing those who wish to study the Torah:

A *ba’al qeri* – literally, “one who has had an event,” a euphemism for one who has engaged in sex or had a nocturnal emission – may not pray or recite the biblical verses known as the Shema until after having immersed himself in a *miqveh* , a ritual bath.[[640]](#endnote-640)

The logic of purification is symbolic not empirical, even if it intriguingly mirrors modern hygienic practice. Contamination, miasma, dirt, pollution, must be avoided. But they can be avoided – just make sure the murderer undergoes a period of exclusion before returning to the temple; make sure the priestess doesn’t have sex on the altar; make sure the beast for the sacrifice nods its head; make sure the dishes used everyday are kept away from those used on the sabbath. Above all, keep out the contagious substance, which is more often than not blood (whether of the menstruating woman or the violent man), plus, at times, semen, tears, or the flesh of certain animals. If all these precautions are observed, the community and the world can be affirmed as pure, as worthy to be lived in and loved. We can justify our choices of what food disgusts and what food confirms the delicacy of our taste; we can explain to our own satisfaction what belongs in and what must be kept out. ‘Disgust is an emotion’, writes William Ian Miller. But it is more than an emotion. Like other emotions, it judges as well as reacts. Disgust is the badge of a particular social scenario that indicates the proper placement of high and low, grand and mean. Although its effects can be crudely visceral, it is no accident that it has long been seen as the civilising emotion, the proof of a passage from animal to human. Susceptibility to disgust means I have surrendered the promiscuous tolerance of infancy. The norms of the community have taken root in my flesh.[[641]](#endnote-641)

Of all the dangerously ambiguous conjunctions that can threaten the integrity of the community, producing disgust at best and disaster at worst, the most disturbing would be when sacred and profane become confused beyond distinction. As Emile Durkheim wrote in *The elementary Forms of the Religious Life*

Since the idea of the sacred is always and everywhere separated from the idea of the profane in the thought of men, and since we picture a sort of logical chasm between the two, the mind irresistibly refuses to allow the two corresponding things to be confounded, or even to be put in contact with each other; for such a promiscuity, or even too direct a contiguity, would contradict too violently the dissociation of these ideas in the mind. The sacred thing is *par excellence* that which the profane should not touch, and cannot touch with impunity.[[642]](#endnote-642)

‘Palpable’ indeed: the logic of ritual purity turns metaphysical proximity into something concrete, social and physical. If anthropologists and historians of religion are correct, purity did not originally have the association with an inner state, a form of moral or spiritual integrity. For a notion of inner dirtiness and the consequent needs for inner redemption we have to wait until the mystical and prophetic traditions, the diatribes of the Old Testament or the cults of Isis. Cultic purity is not moral purity: it is a social condition, dependent on the mechanisms of group practice and official sanction. And it does not attempt to penetrate into ‘the heart’. No matter how wicked or coarse I am, I can receive the benefits of purification; I too can be clean, clean enough to be included in the sacral life of my fellows, to be re-admitted. But I will hardly be eligible for the Platonist’s seal of approval. And here the oddities of what I am calling the Platonist’s ‘angelic imagination’ become obvious. For the Platonist, no amount of scrupulous behaviour or apotropaic diligence will deliver the salvation he seeks. What he wants is a higher class of being and knowledge – insight and truth, not social approval. The Platonist purist wants transcendence and, in a certain self-abasing mood, salvation from the ‘mortal trash’ (Plato’s term) and from all the uncertainties of a mixed condition. And, in the seraphic form of the Platonic metaphysical ideal, there is one very popular way to attain that transcendence: Rejection of the world. The contemplative withdraws from action on the grounds that worldliness itself is too often a source of corruption and temptation. But such an attitude breeds its own peculiarities. In the search for peace and composure, the contemplative allows himself to become indifferent to reputation and honour. Everything a cultivated classical aristocrat would have considered exemplary becomes grist for the mill of denial.

The angelic vocation, then, thrives on a certain idealisation of denial. And in the search for ever-more ingenious forms of denial, carnal corporeality becomes understood as one of the most dispensable aspects. The soul can fly free of the body, moving from one embodiment to another, suggested the Orphics and Pythagoreans. It was the Orphics, Plato remarks in the *Cratylus,* who invented the idea that the body - σωμα – is a prison - σημα . Because of its faults, the soul must atone, remaining bound in its jail until it has paid its debt. (*Cratylus,* 400c) The Orphic myth, writes Paul Ricoeur, is the original myth of the soul in exile. The soul’s origins were supernatural and divine. Now in this physical world it finds itself alien, a stranger. Its body is its tomb. Myth draws on this Orphic story, telling of those sinners who are punished in the after-world by experiences that repeat the trials of the body. As long as purification is not achieved, the soul will be born in its body-tomb again and again:

The play of reflection between hell and the body is at the center of the understanding of the body...The schema of exile...tends to make of the body the symbol of the misfortune of existence; For is there a more frightening idea than that which makes life a rebirth to punishment?...The interpretation of the ‘body’ as an instrument of reiterated punishment provokes, as a reaction, a new interpretation of the soul, which may be called ’puritanical’ with E.R. Dodds: the soul is not from here; It comes from elsewhere; It is divine; In its present body it lives an occult existence, the existence of an exiled being that longs for its liberation.[[643]](#endnote-643)

When Socrates admonishes Simmias and Cebes, he did not need to introduce to them a picture of the divine and disembodied soul that no Greek had ever imagined. If the Orphics took the idea of a soul’s death and rebirth from popular mythology, the basis for such beliefs must have already been familiar. What else was philosophy than an attempt to rationalise the myth of the exiled soul, a soul that can find its true home again through the purifying initiation into knowledge, through – one might say – *gnosis*? Pagan mysteries knocked on the door of an ‘other world’: salvation could come through dismemberment, said the followers of Dionysius, a violent but explicable releasing of spirit from body. Or philosophic truth could take the soul back to its divine form, redeeming it from ignorance and the tyranny of rebirth. Freedom for the soul is a home-coming, a return to the uncreated world, where neither desire nor pain can trip you up. The drama of life ends in eternity.

Christian angelology borrowed heavily from Hellenistic visions of spirit-beings. Nothing as sordid as a body for the heavenly assemblies of Christian iconography. In heaven the angels and the holy monks together “dance ballets” (*choreas agun*t), reported St John Damascene.[[644]](#endnote-644) Their lightness mocks our created clumsiness. Saints and mystics live on tears alone; for them, E.M. Cioran says, ecstasy replaces sexuality. Some saints go as far as to embrace the ideal of ‘decreation’, to use the term of the strange 20th century philosopher and activist Simone Weil. Recognising an affinity to the heretic logic of Marcion, who banished the Old Testament as a barbarous monstrosity and its patriarchal Creator as a malevolent demon, Weil, who was born in a Jewish family in 1909, struggled to identify herself with a Christianity so pure that its only example had died on the cross. The Jewish core of Christian teaching affirmed the value of God’s creation and the human form, body and soul, to which God had lent his own image. Weil and the Gnostic tradition she seems so often to revive thought otherwise. How could creation have been anything but a bad first draft, given the speed with which humans proved themselves depraved and ungrateful and the shabbiness of the human condition? Far from priding themselves on their descent from the Adamic fiasco, those who love God should want to empty out the cluttered field in which they only create unnecessary shadows, preventing his uncreated light from returning to itself.

Many mystics have found exaltation in the paradoxical idea of self-undoing. Weil offered one of the most analytically consistent, if psychologically terrifying, justifications of the beauties of impersonality. If only I could manage to disappear, Weil wrote, ‘to evaporate like water in the sun’. Now that we are born, with all respect to God for the gift, the best thing possible would be to give our muddled being back. ‘Necessity is the screen placed between God and us so that we cease to *be*.’[[645]](#endnote-645) To become perfect, in the exacting imagination of ascetics like Weil, in whom the line between a pathological anorexia and an intellectual absolutism is very thin indeed, is to be wholly detached, desireless, free of all possessions and wants. Can I do this while living in a body, in the company of others, for whom I care? Weil thought not: the goal of the quest for impersonality is the passage into non-being: “If only I go away, then creation and Creator will be able to exchange their secrets.”[[646]](#endnote-646) He emptied himself of his divinity in order to be with us. Now it is up to us to become nothing and so empty ourselves of our ‘false divinity’. As long as we exist, we obscure the light; we function that shadows hiding what God has hidden in the world. Enough of my wretched being! I am a blot on the universe, an unnecessary interruption.

I cannot conceive the necessity for God to love me, when I feel so clearly that even with human beings affection for me can only be a mistake. But I can easily imagine that he loves that perspective of creation which can only be seen from the point where I am. But I act as a screen. I must withdraw so that he may see it.

I must withdraw so that God may make contact with the beings whom chance places in my path and whom he loves. It is tactless for me to be there. It is as thought I were placed between two lovers or two friends. I am not the maiden who awaits her beloved, but the unwelcome third who is with two betrothed lovers and ought to go away so that they can really be together.

If only I knew how to disappear, there would be a perfect union of love between God and the earth I tread, the sea I hear….May I disappear in order that the things I see may become perfect in their beauty by the very fact that they are no longer the things I see.[[647]](#endnote-647)

Weil’s longing for self-cancellation is extreme, but in the archives of mysticism it is hardly unusual. Her view has a number of subscribers in the history of religion, not all of whom were heretical. European Judaism, for instance, proposed a similar idea in the 16th century, when Isaac Luria explained that the creation of the universe was ‘made possible by a process of shrinkage in God’, as Gershom Scholem puts it.[[648]](#endnote-648) The Lurianc idea introduces a new wrinkle into the esoteric kabbalistic tradition, which was at its liveliest in Spain, around Gerona and Toledo, in the 13th and 14th centuries. For most kabbalistic thinkers, the divine is utterly transcendent and inaccessible. The true Godhead could never besmirch itself by entering into relations with creation and creatures, or through revelation, and in its primal detachment remains *Ein-Sof*, infinite and hidden, turned away. God beyond God is pure nothingness. A “deus absconditus”, *Ein-Sof*  is not a busy Creator but “absolute perfection in which there are no distinctions and no differentiations, and according to some no volition”.[[649]](#endnote-649) But this secrecy is not destined to be permanent. Freely choosing to emerge and become manifest, the divine essence becomes entangled in time, a ‘cause of all causes’, as the philosophers would say.

Before Luria, the kabbalists preferred to explain this outward movement of God as a form of ‘emanation’. He shows himself in his mirrors, his pillars of light, his limbs, his vessels, his *Sefiroth*. All this is a mystery, but those committed to the life of study and contemplation may come to understand it, if their minds are illuminated by the divine flame.[[650]](#endnote-650) Luria, reshaping these theories of creation and cosmology, added a new idea: since “the very essence of *Ein-Sof* leaves no space whatsoever for creation, for it is impossible to imagine an area which is not already God”, creation can happen only if God withdraws back into himself.[[651]](#endnote-651) *Tsimtsum*, or ‘contraction’, ‘concentration’, ‘withdrawal’ or ‘retreat’, is what happens to God in order that we should come to be:

According to Luria, God was compelled to make room for the world by, as it were, abandoning a region within Himself, a kind of mystical primordial space from which He withdrew in order to return to it in the act of creation and revelation.”[[652]](#endnote-652)

Originally everything was God and God was everything. But to make available the free space of finite creatures, God inhales, constricting himself, and this leaving open a crack for evil to occupy. The perfect unity has been fractured. Now the powers of darkness can do their work. Happily, the exile of divine perfection need not last forever. Humans have been granted the chance to restore the pure beauty of the divine countenance and to make restitution. This, the task God left for the preferred species among all his creatures, is called the process of *Tikkun,* which means restoration or perfecting.[[653]](#endnote-653) God’s ‘contraction’ made my being possible, say the Kabbalists. Now it is up to me to return the favour. Simone Weil, who would abjure any connection with the Jewish tradition, repeats its central myth, a myth with echoes in the medieval thought of Christians like Eckhart and Marguerite Porete. Let me withdraw and become nothing, so that something that is ‘not-me’ may touch the nothingness that is divine. But there is a worry, which any orthodox Christian should be quick to recognise. Why, if God chose to create the world, should I attempt to undo his action? If he elected human flesh and blood as the medium of his redeeming appearance, and choose to share the vicissitudes of our condition, how can we presume to do him one better?

**5.4 Created Male and Female: Augustine and Human Imperfection**

Common to the Jewish and Christian stories of the origin of the world is the worry about evil. St Augustine’s anguish in Book VII of his *Confessions* is the classic statement. ‘Burning with anxiety”, he turns the thoughts over and over in his unhappy mind:

Where then is evil? What is its origin? How did it steal into the world? What is the root or seed from which it grew?...Where then does evil come from, if God made all things and, because he is good, made them good too? It is true that he is the Supreme Good, that he is himself a greater Good than these lesser goods which he created. But the Creator and all his creation are both good. Where then does evil come from?[[654]](#endnote-654)

Cosmic and human evil, natural evil or moral evil, however it is defined it can hardly be denied. Its presence needs somehow to be explained and possibly, with the right amount of contortions, justified. Could the Creator have intended nature to be so deeply flawed, so full of pain and loss? Or if not, was he too weak? “Could evil have existed against the will of God?”( *Conf* .V, 5) Augustine asks desperately. And was God, who knows everything, responsible for human perversity? Whether the plans for Adam and Eve included marriage and sexual relations (pleasurable or otherwise) was a subject of passionate argument for Jewish and Christian exegetes. The issue, as we shall see, dominated the theological arena in the age of Jerome, Jovinian and Augustine. It is impossible to understand Christianity’s interest in sexual purity and continence without referring to the Biblical background. And here things get complicated. The source is, as we might expect, the Book of Genesis. In its first lines there is a contradiction embedded in the doctrine of Creation itself. In the Priestly version of Gen: 1:1-2:3 ( called the ‘P’ text), Elohim, on the sixth day, after creating the rest of the animal world, in their varieties of male and female, choose not to make one but two sexes, and the plan was put into action all at once. In the second version, the Yahwist text (Gen: 2:4-23) God created a male human named Adam, then the animals, and then woman as an afterthought. The two forms of humanity represented by the couple given the top position in the Garden were much alike, but there were small and significant differences in their design.

All Jewish and Christian thinkers took heed of the puzzle posed by this twofold creation of the ancestors of the human race, none more energetically than Augustine. Even before his baptism and conversion to Catholic Christianity in 386, the brilliant and ambitious young man from the provinces was preoccupied with the meaning of creation. Attracted to the high-sounding theories of Mani and the nobility of philosopher-sages like Cicero and Porphyry, Augustine found the language of the Old Testament unappetising, its sentiments seeming to come from an unfamiliar world, and one he was not in a hurry to inhabit. Could an omniscient and omnipotent deity really have designed such a spectacle of discord and error? The Genesis account of the origin of evil, death and sexual difference made it difficult to understand how to save the reputation of God. As Augustine writes in ‘Against Julian’ (Book III,chapter 8-9), ‘How could God be the author of an evil?’ If He creates two sexes, their members, and their union of bodies, how could human sexuality be condemned as sinful? ‘The evil that is in man’, cannot be denied. Yet how could it be the result of a sexual embodiment which is from God alone?

Affirmation of Creation must preclude the kind of dualism that Mani taught, for which the two principles of darkness and light are born separate and mutually shunning, their mixture in our world (the ‘middle time’) representing a deep error that must be undone.[[655]](#endnote-655) Trying to free himself from the Manichaean theory of salvation he had earlier found so compelling, Augustine returns again and again to these themes in his commentary on the ‘Literal Meaning of Genesis’ and in his ‘Refutation’ of his former Manichee colleagues, a refutation he published in 388, well before the works of his maturity, the *Confessions* (397-401) and *The City of* God (413-437). For the Manichees despised the Book of Genesis as a naive and anthropomorphic portrayal of the divine, full of crude implausibilities, whose entire realist spirit was alien and incoherent to the philosophically mature. How could a good God create error and misery? Why would the divine be interested in the material world, which must have been the product of a hostile, darker force? Human souls were, indeed, conceived as images of divinity, but they have been trapped in material bodies. They still preserved a spark of the light, but their bodies, Mani taught, had been framed originally by the Prince of Darkness, and that bit of light needs to be rescued. If one avoided certain kinds of food, especially meat, the release of light was made possible. Sexual acts, however, only imprisoned that light deeper within. To win out against evil, procreation should be avoided, indeed everything associated with generation and material nature is to be viewed negatively. Only a God of love could have sent his son to atone for us, and that God had nothing in common with a Creator responsible for the cloying banality that is the ‘present world’. The Hebrew Bible, which recounted the barbarous deeds of this so-called Lord, must be a travesty, an insult to the refined intelligence, and Adam and Eve, far from being the beloved creatures of the true God, were fashioned by demons who had seen the image of God and knew how to travesty it.[[656]](#endnote-656) Or so the Manichees reasoned.

The young Augustine, enraptured by the wisdom and beauty of Cicero’s ‘exhortation to philosophy’, the *Hortensius* (see *Confessions*, III, iv, 7), felt a shock like that of the Manichaeans when he opened a Latin Bible.[[657]](#endnote-657) What was this book anyway, this crude story of a crude people? What had Israel got to do with redemption? Where was the spiritual enlightenment? Where was the elegance and taste? The style seemed primitive, the sentiments barbaric, the deity portrayed was a bully uninterested in his worshippers’ higher aspirations. Nothing in the Old Testament gave sustenance to the philosophic mind, Augustine concluded; it offered little but rigid regulations and bizarre myths, offensive to a sophisticated and educated mind. Much more coherent were the Manichees, whose doctrines Augustine’s biographer describes as ‘irresistibly mysterious’. [[658]](#endnote-658) The Manichaean missionaries Augustine encountered in Carthage in 371 C.E. had all the aura of a secret, esoteric society. They could foretell eclipses of the sun and moon, they had the skill to understand the movements of the heavens, the patterns of the stars, even though they were ignorant of mathematics and rational science (*Confessions*, V). And they rejected all self-indulgence, Augustine reports with admiration. Their lives were ascetic, their judgments exacting, and they scorned literalism in interpretation just as much as he did, saving their most withering contempt for the idea of God who takes on a human body and converses with men and women. Following their teacher, the Persian ‘Apostle’ Mani, who had been executed by the Persians in 276, they seemed to Augustine to understand the pain of our mixed condition. Against the seediness of human life they offered a route to salvation, a liberation of the spiritual man from the dark imprisonment of evil and matter. Mani, an austere and charismatic figure, claimed the authority of Jesus. And he added to the respect for the Christian Messiah a potent supplement of Gnostic themes

A vivid sense of man as a shameful mixture of two opposing forces...the good news, given by the Manichees, was that the visible world was a gigantic ‘pharmacy’, in which the pure essence of the ruined fragments of the Kingdom of Light would be ‘distilled’.[[659]](#endnote-659)

Christianity, whatever its attractions, had not catered so explicitly to the pessimism of the late Roman world. The religion of Mani, as Owen Chadwick puts it, ‘expressed in poetic form a revulsion from the material world’, and, in particular, a revulsion from the ‘baseness’ of sexual life, which was, to the Manichees, the invention of the devil.[[660]](#endnote-660) Interpreting the prophetic message and the passion of Christ to his own symbolic tastes, Mani expunged from the Christian teaching all elements of the Jewish Bible and history. The virginal Seth, rather than the married Adam, was the preferred ancestor. Female sexuality, never easily absorbed into the religions of the ancient world, did very badly in the hands of the Manichees. And many, if not all of the heroes of the Hebrew scripture, patriarchs, prophets, priests and kings, found themselves banished. Jesus himself remained. He could fit into Mani’s complex mythology. He was taken to be a symbol of humanity’s struggle between the Light and the Dark, the pre-eminent bearer (before the arrival of Mani himself) of all the sparks of divinity scattered throughout the world. But this Jesus was different from the Jesus of the Gospels. The Manichees wanted a Jesus who wanted nothing to do with Israel. This, however, posed a problem, because whose promise was he meant to fulfil? Whose covenant was he destined to restore? For the Manichees Jesus could not have been a Jew or a carpenter, or anything so banal. He could not have been a suffering servant who knew the pains of the flesh and shared them with us. Thus expurgated, most of what is most distinctive about the biography of the Christian Messiah seems to disappear in the Manichean white-wash.

As Augustine moved closer to the Catholic religion of his mother Monica, he began to be less persuaded by this Manichaean absolutism. Jesus was, after all, born from the womb of a mortal woman, a woman like other women. If our flesh is defiling, then his flesh is also defiled. How could the Son of God have been born from the womb of the Virgin Mary without his nature mingling with her flesh? (*Conf*. V, 10) Manichaeanism accepted only a certain version of Christianity, one that dispensed with the doctrine of Creation, the Jewish Law, and, as far as possible, without flesh and blood. Looking back, Augustine believes that what he found most sympathetic in the Manichaean rejection of the Old Testament was the alteration of all the passages that had, he complains, ‘been death to me’ when taken literally but, when read figuratively, delighted him. (V, 14) Figurative interpretation was just what the Manichees most appreciated. It helped them around all sorts of awkward issues. Divinity, they insisted, must be conceived as pure spirit alone. To affirm the visible universe as the work of such a spirit was implausible. Instead the cosmos was to be understood only symbolically. It looks real. But it is simply a theatre in which inner spiritual dramas are staged. Mani’s revelations were exotic. But they were evasive. Mani had tried to look away from the contradictions that the Bible depicts in every generation of human history. Gone in the religion of the Manichees was the vivid tension in the human will between obedience and disobedience, between the servile destiny of humanity in history and its hope for a redeemed world order. Manichaeanism averted its eyes from an oppressive past and a sin-ridden present, from the reality Jesus and Paul had forced the descendants of Adam to acknowledge, preferring to look instead at the skies. No longer troubled by the crucial ambivalence of the Biblical belief in a God who affirmed both the low and the high, body and mind, who both judged and loved, the Manichaean seeker after purity

would realize vividly that he was not free. He could identify himself only with a part of himself, his ‘good soul’. So much of him plainly did not belong to this oasis of purity: the tensions of his own passions, his rage, his sexuality, his corrupt body, the vast pullulating world of ‘nature red in tooth and claw’ outside him. All this weighed on him. It was obvious that what was good in him wished to be ‘set free’, to ‘return’, to merge again into an untroubled, original state of perfection – a ‘Kingdom of Light’ – from which it felt isolated.[[661]](#endnote-661)

For the Manichees, the Israelite Jehovah was a false god. Like all the other enemies of the Light and the good, this Jehovah needed to be exposed and defeated. As Manichaeanism saw it, the human heart is a small repetition of this cosmic battle. We, like the universe, are the playing-field of two incompatible wills. Evil arose from one side, and exercised a quasi-physical activity in the world. Goodness, and Light, came from the other side, with which the enlightened mind can become united. The Manichaean picture still exerts its appeal on many tempted by the idea of a war between good and evil. But it is foreign to the anthropology of a St Paul. Against the religion of Mani which he had loved, Augustine found the resources he needed for his counter-attack in St Paul, and above all in the First Letter to the Corinthians. In this Augustine was in good company: Church leaders since the end of the first century have propped their interpretations of the value of marriage, celibacy and fornication on this formidable text. What Paul himself meant has, however, never been totally clear. Nor have even the most energetic of scholars been able to agree about the context that motivated Paul’s intervention in 54 AD into local Corinthian controversies about asceticism and sex. Apparently, some members of the community at Corinth (the ‘church of the saints’) had determined (in Peter Brown’s words) to ‘undo the elementary building blocks of conventional society’ by renouncing marriage.[[662]](#endnote-662) Some of the children already born should commit themselves to remaining virgins their whole lives; some who were married to pagans should divorce. Undoubtedly in the crucial Chapter 7 of his letter to the church at Corinth Paul expressed a preference for celibacy as a Christian idea. Undoubtedly he also explained that marriage was permitted, and that it was a distinct advantage over fornication. These views were hardly controversial: they were commonplaces for philosophers and religious thinkers of the period, ingredients of a late ancient consensus about the good life as a rational and serious man should live it. What more Paul might have meant is the problem. Did he give orthodox legitimation to a strand of radical asceticism that had not been prominent in the teaching of Jesus? Did he start the church’s long history of unfriendliness to sex? Was his equivocal attitude towards marriage a concession to more extreme factions in the Christian community? Or was it more pragmatic and realistic, an allowance that needed to be set in the context of a specific apocalyptic urgency pressing down on the life of the believer in this world, whose time here is bound to be short and for whom the responsibilities of the married state are likely to be an impediment?[[663]](#endnote-663)

Paul was no humanist. Metaphysical dualism was not his concern,[[664]](#endnote-664) nor was a generalised lament about the sordidness of material life and the disappointments of the human condition. He had learned something from the Stoics and the Cynics of his culture. But he had learned even more from the Jewish prophetic tradition. He saw human being as prone to error, certainly, even as inclined to perversity. He saw bodies in their present condition as a mixture of elements, of *sarx, psyche* and *pneuma*. The present body is of the earth, earthly. It is in the body that humans are subject to death, because of their incorporation in the body of Adam (Cor 15: 21-22). In these bodies we are unhealthy, weak, easily led to idolatry and fornication. Paul sees a lot of trouble in the flesh. He sees a war between flesh and spirit, the demons and God. But he did not see the terror the Manichees saw in the flesh. He did not see a cosmic dualism, where matter or carnality as such is evil. What more did Paul see?

Here we need to distinguish between different uses of the modern concept of the body, for the Hebrews and the Greeks understood bodies and souls, the animate and the inanimate, from different perspectives. The organised and animate body, for which Paul uses the Greek (*soma)*, is what a Greek would understand as a union of form and matter. For the Greeks, generally speaking, the soul ‘inhabits’ or animates that body, personalising it and, for more than a few dualist philosophic types, chafing against its imprisonment. The ‘body’, in this sense, is a concept for which there is no equivalent in Hebrew thought, as John Robinson explains: “In the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament, LD) the Greek word translates no less that eleven Hebrew words (with cognates, thirteen), for none of which it is a true equivalent).”[[665]](#endnote-665) For the Hebrew, John Robinson argues, ‘(m)an does not have a body, he *is*  a body.’[[666]](#endnote-666) As the Old Testament scholar Johannes Pedersen put it: ‘The body is the soul in its outward form.’[[667]](#endnote-667) In flesh/body we live with others; in flesh/body we are called by God. The Hebrew word *basar* is the ‘body-term’ most commonly used in the Old Testament, and its Greek translation in the Septuagint is *sarx.* This is the flesh common in men and beasts. It represents the whole man ‘considered from the point of view of his external, physical existence.’[[668]](#endnote-668) The body can be hostage to death, or, in the wake of Christ’s saving act, it can be what Paul saw as a ‘resurrection body’, in which we share the suffering of Christ and, if delivered, his glory. In the very near future, ‘the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.’ (1 Thessalonians 4:16) Then the blessed will find their ‘lowly bodies’ changed to be like Christ’s ‘glorious body’. (Philippians 3:21) And we can anticipate that transformation even now: ever since Jesus in the body rose from the grave, the old laws (of nature) are not locked in their downward arc. Enmity to God, which began in the fateful fall of Adam and Eve, hardened human hearts and made impotent all our desires to be better. But these old laws of despair can now be suspended. The body, Paul writes to the Corinthians, ‘is sown in corruption; it is raised in in corruption; It is sown in dishonour; it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness; it is raised in power: it is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body….The first man is of the earth, earthy: the second man is the Lord from heaven…And as we have borne the image of the earthy, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly.’ (1 Cor 15: 42-49) Bondage to the flesh, and the frailty of the spirit, are images in Paul for the deeper problem of human resistance to the divine will.[[669]](#endnote-669) The body ‘according to the flesh’ is hostile to God, *because* ‘the mind of the flesh is enmity against God.’ (Rom. 8:7) But that mind can change. Living according to the flesh means living under the wrong powers, governed by the wrong principles, ‘taking care for the things of the world rather than the things of the Lord.’ (1 Cor 7:32f.) It does not mean succumbing to sensuality. It means arrogantly denying the creature’s dependence on God, being disobedient, believing that the human being on its own can be sufficient.[[670]](#endnote-670)

While the address to the church at Corinth reminds Christians of the stark contrast between the bound and free conditions, it also looks with excitement ahead to the ‘victory’ which is at hand. The old foundation was rotten; but it is passing away. Paul advises his followers to shun fornication, recognising that the body also ‘is the temple of the Holy Ghost’; both body and spirit should glorify God. (1 Cor 6: 13-20) The heavenly body in which we share now is a corporate body, of which we are all the limbs. We were bound in the body before to all of creation suffering under the humiliation of sin; our solidarity in grace with the body of the incarnate Christ. Some members of the community at Corinth, along with some Jews. Greeks and Romans converting to Christianity, found it difficult to accept that bodies after death could be resurrected. (1 Cor. 15:34) This is a worry for Paul:

But some man will say, How are the dead raised up? And with what body will they come?

Thou fool, that which thou sowest is not quickened, except it die: (1 Cor.35-36)

Some ‘fools’ at Corinth were frankly puzzled by the preaching of resurrection of the dead. What exactly was the nature of this body that would rise again? Will it be identical with the body known on earth? Paul, in this exchange, argues that it will not. When we plant seeds, they grow into flowers or plants, unlike the tiny seed from which they came both in appearance and character. Something has been changed, transformed, between the ‘body of the seed’ and its new grown body: the first has ‘died’ but the body raised up as plant in still the continuation of the seed. (1 Cor. 37-38) Paul then goes on to compare different types of body: there are celestial bodies, and terrestrial bodies, the glory of the sun differs from the glory of the moon. Our bodies, to complete the metaphor, are ‘sown’ as natural bodies. But when raised, the body is not longer a ‘psychic body (*soma psychikon*)’ but a ‘pneumatic body (*soma pnematikon*)’.(1 Cor. 15:44) The promise of the flesh resurrected, for which Christ is the ‘first fruits’ (1 Cor 15:20), implies that there can be a body with nothing of earth, flesh or even psyche. Where it had been weak, it will be strong; where it had been destructible, it will be indestructible; where it had been mortal it will be immortal. The body can be base. But it can also be glorious.

In this hope of glory and freedom, Paul was not diverging from the rabbinic belief in the resurrection of the dead, as Caroline Walker Bynum reminds us. Some Jewish texts declared that the seed could sprout again out of the very dust and rot of the tomb: our organs and parts will not have been ‘eaten’ by the earth; they will become available for transformation.[[671]](#endnote-671) A later Jewish expert on bodily resurrections used precisely Paul’s images of the grain of wheat, planted in the ground as a simple and naked seed, spouts in its ‘many coverings’ to explain how the dead, who are buried in their shrouds, will arise dressed properly, in their own clothes. The same Rabbi, Hiyya b. Joseph, is reported in the Babylonian Talmud cited Ps. 72.16 to confirm that ‘the just will blossom out of the city like grass of the earth’.[[672]](#endnote-672) Just as Christ gave his body to be shared in the Eucharist, it is that same body which joins us to the ‘One Body’ of the redeemed community. The difference between low and high, condemned and saved, is not that between two types of substances, a material and a spiritual, a corporeal and an ethereal, a natural and a supernatural. The difference is between two choices, one for sin and one for grace. It is in the body, Paul insists, that we were bound over to death’s dominion. It is in the body that we look forward to being free, to justification and salvation.

Paul’s thought takes issue with the assumptions of Hellenism. Like the Hebrew world from which he comes and in which many of his best readers believe he remained[[673]](#endnote-673), he cares about anthropology rather than metaphysics. Purification through conforming our minds to ideas of reason will not help us if we cannot change our lives, if we cannot overcome our worldliness, our weakness, our subjection to being ‘ruled by the flesh’. (See Rom. 8.4-7; 2 Cor.10.2) Our will remains enslaved, as a later reader of Paul (Luther) would put it, and that means we have not put off ‘the old body’ for the new (Col.3:9). What makes us miserable, as we surely are if not redeemed by grace, is that we err and continue to err, even though we would rather not do so. Our failing is not that we are corrupted by our constitution: it is not that we are bound with chains to a gross and corrupting matter, an object of contempt to the angels, as Gnostics suggested. We have a will, and we have the power to see that the law of God is good, and in the ‘inward man’, the spiritual man, we still may delight in the law. It is just that the law of the flesh is a contrary ‘law’, ‘warring in my members’, bringing about ‘the motions of sin’ (Rom. 7:5). Under the law of the flesh, sin has dominion, and death has us in its bonds. But since God has taken on a body in Christ, and died the death for us, the law of the flesh has lost its ultimate power over us. Bodies can become redeemed bodies: ‘If by the Spirit you mortify the deeds of the body (*sarx*), you shall live. (Rom 8:13)[[674]](#endnote-674) We can turn, and return. That is what conversion means. No matter what our makeup is ontologically speaking, we have a heart and a mind that can long for restitution, and if we are restored, the angels may envy us. Perversity may have us now, insofar as we walk in the tracks of Adam:

‘For while we were in the flesh, the motions of sin, which were by the law, did work in our members to bring forth fruit unto death…(Rom.7:5)

For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but *how* to perform that which is good I find not.

For the good that I would I do not, but the evil which I would not, that I do. Now if I do what I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me.

For I delight in the law of God after the inward man:

But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members.

O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death? (Rom. 8:18-25)

Death and sin have us now. Concupiscence deforms our will. The law of the flesh has us, insofar as we share in the condition of Adam. But it may not always have us.

**5.5 Beyond Dualism: The Body in Grace and in Shame**

Paul introduced a new theology, the theology of the body. This was the body suspended between life and death, the old and the new. Born in error, humans nonetheless possess a strong hope of correction. The body is not, as John Robinson explained in his remarkable monograph, *The Body: a Study in Pauline Theology* , ‘simply evil: it is made by God and for God.’(8-9) For Paul, as Augustine came to recognise, there is but one will. It can choose either way, for the better and for the worse. It is not an ontological plaything, gripped by forces beyond its control. It has the freedom and the power to escape corruption and servility, but only with the help of divine grace. And the Pauline view of human embodiment, which the convert Augustine came to endorse, was free of metaphysical dread. The human body – limbs, organs, heart and lungs, a body that is sexually desiring *and* capable of discipline and discretion – possesses the ability to attend to the wiser counsel of reason or the more degrading counsel of lust, to follow the way of perdition or the way of love. Created free, the body was blessed, and that is what Adam and Eve would have enjoyed. Yet that same body was free to be misled by the soul should the soul be perverse and unruly, to fall into self-destruction and depravity. The body we dwell in now, Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5, is an ‘earthly tent’, and while we are still in this tent, we sigh with anxiety, and do so rightly, because the unredeemed body exists under the sway of ‘the flesh’, sad in its mortality and its sexual neediness. But this same body can become transformed into a ‘resurrection body’.

While the notion of a body resurrected from the grave sounds dramatic, it was not as much a novelty as all that. Judaism certainly treasured the notion of an afterlife. Judaism before Paul, which in the Greco-Roman world shared common beliefs about the soul’s immortality, was of a number of minds about the body’s resurrection. Philo and other Platonizing Jews believing that the body entrapped the soul until death separated them. Pharisees believed that the resurrection of the dead was stated in the Torah[[675]](#endnote-675), a conviction which seems to be supported by the speaker in 2 Maccabees 7:10-11 who anticipates a literal resurrection of the same flesh and blood, hands and feet. The Sadducees denied resurrection, and that refusal provoked a fair amount of anger directed against them and others of like belief: according to the Sanhedrin, they ‘will have no share in the world to come.’ (Sanhedrin 10.1)[[676]](#endnote-676) Yet the Sadducees continued to supply most of the holders of the high priesthood at Jerusalem. After the destruction of the Temple, beliefs hardened. Rabbinic Judaism, according to Caroline Bynum, took a pious and literalist line: of course we have ever seen a cadaver rise up whole, perfected and pure; but who can deny that God, who can do anything, could raise the dead too?[[677]](#endnote-677) (insert: Tertullian and Irenaeus, literal conception of the continuity of the body, fragments re-assembled but recognisably an identity.)

The literalist version was not to Paul’s taste. His construction of the body has a rather different orientation, unfamiliar both to the literalist conception of 2 Maccabees and the philosopher’s conception of a difference between material and immaterial stuff. When he speaks of the coming ‘pneumatic body’, which is the old body ‘raised’, he argues that the corruptible substances of the body – the flesh and blood, the *psyche* and *sarx*  - will have been shed. What matters most is not some philosopher’s quibble about metaphysical identity or even the nature of what kind of change happened in the resurrection of the body. (will the substance of the body persist, or is it a matter of a different form shaping the elements in a new way?). What matters for Paul is the cry, vivid and exultant, charged with the prophetic beauty of Isaiah’s description of the ‘day of the Lord’, when the trumpet shall sound, the desert will bloom, the proud will fall and the iniquitous be punished (Isaiah 24-35). Everything, as the prophet says, will be changed: We will be changed, we will not sleep, all will change in a moment, in the wink of an eye. (1 Cor. 15:51-52) Perishable nature will put on the imperishable and the mortal will put on the immortal. This anticipated body may not be a body we have ever encountered. It would certainly exist at a higher level of substance, being closer to the celestial than to the earthly, perhaps closest to the bodies of the stars. However implausible the physiology and ontology here, one fact about the Pauline conception is important. The hope of resurrection exists for a purpose: to deliver to the believer a promise that freedom is possible. If Christ could live and die as flesh and be resurrected as divine, then Christians, who participate in this mystical corporate body of Christ, can have a new and glorious life where they used to have death and corruption. After Christ, the descendants of Adam can have two natures. One, still living out the history of Adamic man, is rightly afraid of sin and degradation. But the second nature looks ahead to a liberation on the cosmic scale. In the flesh, this dual being­–sowed in Adam, risen in Christ – lives already as if the ‘end times’ are at hand.[[678]](#endnote-678)

There is no cosmic power, enmeshed in dark matter, that can control us if we don’t want it to. And there is no corrupting power in our erotic impulses that can reduce us to cowering beasts. In itself neutral, the human libido can be loving or lustful, caring or cruel. It is our choice whether to make it one way or the other. Similar is the case for marriage, a central social institution of the Jewish as well as the Gentile world. Wedlock, with its strong web of responsibilities and obligations, involves those who are married in the local community, ‘busies’ the Christian with the work of the world. To forego it can give you a greater opportunity for spiritual freedom and agency: celibate, you are all the readier to live unbound by outward circumstances, to offer yourself up heart and soul to the call you have received. (1 Cor 7:32-34)[[679]](#endnote-679) If the Corinthians believe that only the celibate and the sexual ascetic can be saved, they are over-reaching. It is no sin to marry (1 Cor 7:28. 36). A Christian married to a non-Christian should remain married. An unmarried Christian should remain unmarried, unless sexual temptation is too strong, in which case it is better to marry. (1 Cor 7: 7-9) Equivocal at best, the Pauline view left marriage a possibility for the pious.[[680]](#endnote-680) He excluded too radical a reading of the objections to marriage: if one remains married, one does not sin. Peter Brown is characteristically generous in allowing some wisdom to what he calls Paul’s ‘blocking moves’. The sexual urges are certainly portrayed as dangerous, however it can be more dangerous to prohibit sex entirely. Confining it to a restricted and perhaps tepid expression within marriage, and turning into a ‘duty’ – for no spouse should deny satisfying their spouse’s desires – made a wedge between *porneia* – sex outside the law – and socialised, marital, procreative sex. A Christian can have sex, but they have to do it under a shadow, constantly aware of the threat of immoderate lust, in a spirit that expresses more fear than warmth. Paul’s ‘lopsided’ chapter on marriage and celibacy is hardly a heartfelt defence of the social institution of marriage, one which claimed then and continued to claim most of the adherents of the church. Celibacy was not for everyone, Paul is quick to insist. But it, rather than love in marriage, is the institution that inspires his enthusiasm and excitement. Marriage is OK, but continence and chastity (*enkrateia*  and *hagnia*) are so much better. If this is the message of chapter 7 of the First Letter to the Corinthians, it was a message that Christianity had to struggle with, and did so, as I have been arguing, in many contradictory ways. Paul’s terse ‘theology of marriage’ was Brown concludes,’ a negative, even alarmist strategy’ that left a ‘fatal legacy to future ages’.[[681]](#endnote-681) Yet for all its grudging equivocations, it did not surrender the field to the radical rigorism of sexual renunciation. Perpetual chastity was a commitment for those ready and ardent to take on the apocalyptic interpretation of the world. The married had no choice but to support the continuation of society: even their willingness to control and discipline sexual desire enabled the movement of generation to continue. Married households, in the towns and cities where Christians lived and worried, would perpetuate the human race, would maintain life into the next generation. The radical celibates would not. For them, ‘the continent body stood for a principle of reversibility’; the flow of life itself could be halted.’[[682]](#endnote-682) Paul was a leader with responsibility to guide and direct. He would praise those who, like himself, had the ‘gift’ of continence. They were the first fruits of the victory to come, when society as we have known it would cease to exist. Yet there was room for those who were (in their bedrooms) prolonging the ordinary times, who were (as they must know) less ‘blessed’ and more prone to distractions and worry. With the Pauline permission of sex and marriage, the Manichaean heresy lost its magic. But to realize this would take some time, both for Augustine and the rest of Christendom.

When Augustine moved to Milan in 384 to take up a post as Professor of Rhetoric, he had become disenchanted with Mani. But he found something much more exciting: Greek philosophy. In Platonism, he learned from the Milanese Christian Platonist Simplicianus, God and the Word have never been absent. (*Conf*; VIII,2) Neo-platonists had a comparable cosmological view to the more intriguing doctrines of the Manichaeans and Gnostics: a Demiurge, like the one described in Plato’s *Timaeus*(27c-44d)*,* crafted the universe, but while Plato’s world-craftsman designed his product to be good and complete, the Neo-Platonist’s Demiurge is more limited. Unflinchingly rationalist in their belief that unity and difference are permanently to be opposed, post-Platonic thinkers like Porphyry and Plotinus had no space in their imagination for a Divine Being that could be both pure and impure, eternal and temporal. The existence of the natural universe is a puzzle, given the transcendent status of Being and Form. All that is bodily is incomplete: it derives its form and impetus from outside itself. It is dependent and unstable. And yet the soul lives in a physical shape, in a physical world! Why were we burdened with this in-built drive towards the lower? Why did the soul have to fall into matter? To accommodate creation the Neo-Platonists reached for a philosophic model of reality that has proved remarkably difficult to eradicate: dualism.

It is hard to find a more thoroughly-going dualism than the grand theory presented in Plotinus’s *Enneads*. The One, the transcendent principle, contains all the Ideas and, in contemplating them, makes them possible as formative inspirations, ‘seminal reasons’. The cosmos in Plotinus is compared to a gigantic living organism, a ‘city with life and soul’ (IV.8.3) Matter ) on its own is simple passive and receptive; it is ‘Unmeasure’ and ‘Undetermination’ in the absolute, and nothing else can be the source of evil: Matter – dark matter, in the sense that it inclines towards non-being and deprivation - - is implicitly the undoing of all being, an aimless and motiveless tendency towards negation. Its ‘place is below all the patterns, forms, shapes, measurements and limits’. It has ‘no trace of good by any title of its own, but (at best) takes order and grace from some Principle outside itself, a mere image as regards Absolute Being but the Authentic Essence of Evil. Matter, which is, in Plotinus explains in the Fourth Tractate of the second *Ennead* (II.4.8) is

utter destitution – of sense, of virtue, of beauty, of pattern, of Ideal principle, of quality. This is surely ugliness, utter disgracefulness, unredeemed evil.

The divine being could have nothing to do with matter, which is void of shape, indeterminate, and in the absence of the Form-Idea, so indefinite as to be non-existent. Bodies, which have form and provide the habitation of the soul, are to be distinguished from shapeless matter. Given the dualism of Plotinus and the Neo-Platonists, a Christian sympathizer has only a few options. The correct response to the Biblical narrative of creation would be to side with Marcion and other dualist rivals to orthodoxy. For the Marcionites, an evil principle dictated the process of creation, a ‘god of this world’ (2 Cor 4:4) , but not of the better one. Yet the Book of Genesis triumphantly describes the actions of this creator as good, praiseworthy and blessed. What to do with it? For a consistent Hellenist, the answer was clear: throw out the earlier revelation as the work of the devil, shed all of Scripture before the coming of Christ. But that would be heresy. The entire mission of Jesus of Galilee, appearing as a fulfilment of the Scriptural narrative and prophecy, would be at risk. This is what Augustine had to conclude. Augustine, the convert, repudiating the doctrines he had once embraced, opposed the Manichaean contempt with a life’s work of interpretative ingenuity. Helped by a gift for turning the literal Biblical descriptions into fine figurative meanings, for hearing the spiritual in the fleshly words, he probed for the existential import of what looked to be mythical images. And for him, the crucial story of Genesis was not an account of the past but of the present. Adam and Eve met and erred now, in each of us; in their making we are made and will continue to be made; in their discovery of their nakedness we discovers ours; in their sin we sin. We live, like them, in the body and undergo the fate of all bodies, to die. We could have known happiness and lived for ever, ignorant of shame and regret. It was not our carnality, not our bodies, not our materiality, that was the problem: it was the acts of our mind. Disobedience began it, and helped to germinate within that inconstant heart of humankind a *perversity* , a corrupted will, which we can never on our own correct. But, in Christ, our bodies with our souls receive a second chance. The way to salvation takes us body and soul, fleshly and spiritual, for God became flesh and did not disdain our physical life. “The cause of sin arises in the soul, not in the flesh….The cause of our being weighed down *is not the true nature and substance of our body but its corruption*” . (my italics, CG, XIV, 3) We are fallen because of the culpable turning of our minds, not because of the material nature of our organs and limbs, our passions, our feelings. (XIV, 5) Freedom, not ontology, is the key. Augustine, recovering the poetry of Genesis, recovers an alternative to Platonic, Gnostic and Manichean dualism. (See *City of God* , Books XIII and XIV)

Augustine’s reasoning gave him an alternative to the ascetic distaste for marriage and conjugal love that was so popular among the other Church Fathers. It was not only heretics, Manicheans and Marcionites, who were disgusted by the robust materialism of the Old Testament. The creation of Adam and Eve and their destination for the marital bed proved a scandal for all enthusiasts of the angelic life, from the Essenes to Valentinus, Origen and after. It posed particular difficulties for Orthodox Christians, engaged in the wars against heresy that have provided so much stimulation for the Church from the very start. The gnostics among the early Christians spoke with all the conviction of a privileged and mysterious authority:  *they* were inspired directly by the spirit; the *others* relied on literal interpretations of Scriptural revelation that made God absurd and denied the power of the individual to access the truth through inner experience and illumination. *We*  hear with the ears of the mind; *they* with the ears of the body. For gnostics, Biblical myths, like that of Genesis and the Fall of Adam and Eve, needed to be interpreted allegorically. In the *Testimony of Truth*, a tractate discovered in the Nag Hammadi Codices (Codex IX, 3), the ‘Law’ is to be condemned because it has falsely instructed humans to marry and multiply, which defiles them. John the Baptist and the Son of Man, who introduce baptism, teach that being baptised in the waters of the river Jordan will cleanse the baptised from the desire for sexual intercourse, and bring ‘the dominion of carnal procreation to an end’ (30:29-32:3). The author (who may be the Alexandrian Julius Cassianus) fulminates against other wrong-headed gnostic teachers (‘heretics’) like Valentinus who do not sufficiently forbid ‘desire which is wicked’, and the filthy begetting of children: they pretend to follow Christ, but they are in fact children of Mammon ‘who is the father of sexual intercourse’. (68:7-9) The pure, who are free, are set apart from law and subordination; they pass through ‘the flaming fire that burns exceedingly’ and enter ‘the bubbling fountain of immortality’ (71:26-30, 72:28-30). Anyone who endorses marriage and procreation is speaking for the devil; if the God of Genesis was described as deceiving Adam through this nonsense, he is a malicious envier and not a real God.[[683]](#endnote-683)

Gnosticism had a fascination that appealed to the spiritually ambitious and the speculatively over-reaching in roughly the same measure. According to the gnostic myth, the enlightened spirit (possessed by the *pneumatics*, the elite who ‘know’, who are initiated into the ‘secrets’) is sadly not at home in this alien world: it longs to escape, to ‘strip off all foreign accretions and become reunited with the divine substance’.[[684]](#endnote-684) How could it in good conscience tolerate a mingling with the base secretions of generation? The spiritual wedding, the ‘undefiled wedding’ is a ‘wedding of truth and a repose of incorruption’, ‘a perfect light in an unnameable mystery’, and it was ‘consummated ‘before the foundation of the world’: this is the revelation, declares the *Second Treatise of the Great Seth* (found in the Nag Hammadi codices). ‘But it is not, nor will it happen among us in any region or place’; only in the spirit ‘will they be united in the friendship of friends forever.’[[685]](#endnote-685) The ‘nobility of the spirit’, like the angels, know that ‘Adam was a laughingstock, since he was made a counterfeit type of man’ (*Second Treatise* 62:30), as were Moses, the Prophets, and even John the Baptist. We, the blessed ones, ‘went forth from our home and came into being in the world in bodies’ (59:20-23), only to be hated and persecuted by the ‘fake Christians’, who are profane. The ‘visible Church’ was a sham, compared to the invisible community, known only to themselves and one another; these gnostic Christians do not need to believe what they are told, like their unenlightened brothers, nor to obey ignorantly like servants under the law. For their nature is identical to God’s.

Early Christianity included among the texts it circulated many strange and beautiful, but rather esoteric speculations. They vanished from the Church’s consciousness with the victory of the ‘orthodox’. The disputes were long and pugnacious. But the voices who won out were ones like Irenaeus, Jerome, Tertullian in his pre-Montanist period, Clement, and most aggressively Epiphanius the author of a detailed ‘Medicine Box’ to use against heresies. Their dominance meant that gnostic and encratic beliefs were condemned as ‘unapostolic’.[[686]](#endnote-686) Elaine Pagels, in the conclusion to her popular *The Gnostic Gospels*, catches the tone: ‘It is the winners who write history – their way.’ (142) Yet the orthodox foes of what they called heresy could not win unless they succeeded in overcoming the radical dualism that made the gnostic sects so seductive. ‘Many of the movements which we call Gnostic’, wrote the great scholar Arthur Darby Nock in 1948,

Like Manichaeism later, show the unshrinking application of Hellenistic ways of thought about the data of revelation, about good and evil, about the restriction upon a direct intercourse between the divine and the human. They show also a repugnance to the idea of full incarnation and an exaggeration of Pauline limitations of the validity of the Old Testament, a free play of cosmological and psychological and soteriological fantasy; a taste, again, for *mystères du verbe*, like those of the *Hermetica*, and a curious tendency to go to extremes of asceticism or of libertinism. (‘Christianity and Classical Culture’, now in A.D. Nock, *Essays on Religion and the Ancient World*, Vol. III, ed. Zeph Stewart (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), 676-681 (679)

The ‘curious tendency to go to extremes’ was part and parcel of what Christianity a live option in the first four centuries of Christianity’s erratic existence in a Roman Empire. Choices of how to live, how to organise a community, how to practice ritual, how to read, and how to think, were dizzyingly diverse. Some historians believe that the pressure of persecution helped the church to form itself in a more institutionally-coherent manner, foregrounding the need for structure and support, and for a leadership who could provide solace and discipline to its members. Fervour and agitation the members seemed well able to provide for themselves: there was no lack of candidates for martyrdom, a privilege that promised immediate salvation and gratified the religiously ambitious or ardent. But persecution by the Roman officials and imperial policies were sporadic and inconsistent. Some other method through which extraordinary Christians could distinguish themselves from the ordinary, through which they could become ‘perfect’ or mature (needed to be confirmed. As we have seen, that method was, for most, identified with ascetic disciplineand denial. But did ascetic excellence have to involve a repudiation of the Biblical teaching on the good of marriage, or the orthodox/Greco-Roman belief in the dignity of a moderate and restrained conjugal practice? How could a balance be struck between the excitements of the ‘dissident spiritual seekers’ (Pagels 1988, 60) and the everyday life of practical morality, the ‘good-enough’ version of Christianity? Could Catholics defend the faith against the ‘spiritual ferment’ of the gnostic sects?[[687]](#endnote-687) Was there a rigorism available to Christians that would satisfy the hunger for spiritual absolutes while not abandoning the essential goodness of the created world? Or was the logic of dualism, radically severing the ‘lower world’ from the divine upper world, in fact the most coherent philosophical response to the contradictions of existence?

Critics of gnosticism, even those who were unlike Christian bishops in confronting no immediate threat to their disciplinary authority, pointed out that the gnostic contempt for the world emptied out any space for human virtue as a practice of respect and concern between humans. Plotinus, who was neither Christian nor anything of a neophyte in the precincts of idealism and purity, reproached them for their misanthropy in terms that sound very like those of Pascal: wanting to be an angel is the quickest way to becoming like a beast. (The earliest pagan acknowledgment of the Christians, Tacitus’s *Annales* (XV.44) said that the ‘class of Christians’, well known for their ‘abominations’, were accused of ‘hatred of the human race’; accordingly Nero’s choice of them as a scapegoat for the burning of Rome was not unpopular. The gnostic distaste for our ‘merely carnal’ fellow beings may have been projected onto all Christians, perhaps deservedly, perhaps not.)[[688]](#endnote-688) Hans Jonas, one of the first scholars of the gnostic religion, calls Plotinus’s ‘polemic’ against the gnostics ‘exceedingly instructive’. He translates Plotinus, *Enneads* II.9.15 as follows:

What influence [do] their teachings have on the souls of their hearers and of those who are persuaded by them to despise the world and the things in it…Their doctrine…by *blaming* the Lord of providence and providence itself, holds in contempt all the laws down here and virtue which has risen among men from the beginning of time, and puts temperance to ridicule, *so that nothing good may be discovered in this world*…In fact only virtue can reveal God to us, as it progresses and becomes real in the soul together with insight. Without true virtue, God remains an empty word. (Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 266-67)

The gnostics, according to their orthodox opponents, blasphemed in believing themselves above all human laws and criteria, ‘beyond good and evil’- such things are for a gnostic the illusory snares of the Archons. They vilified God’s Creation in that they attempted not merely to transcend the world but to negate and cancel it. The gnostic God would not bother to intervene in the world shared by humans and animals, societies and oceans., the living and the dead. The gnostic metaphysics and theologies were inconsistent, their cosmologies fantastic but appealing. Some groups gave Eve and her daughters – women – particular privilege and honour, applauding her independent desire to become one with the divine: Eve was the spiritual principle, said one text, much wiser than her counterfeit, the carnal ‘Eve’ who disbelieved the serpent (the ‘Instructor’ who in the ‘Testimony of Truth’ gets to tell the story of Eden from his point of view). But most agreed with the more radical fringes of the orthodox Christian communities, that marriage was a concession if not an error, and the sexual drive could be ‘reversible’, as Peter Brown puts it in discussing the extreme anti-carnal views of Syrian Encratites, and the followers of Marcion and Tatian. Sexual need tied the seeker of salvation to the world of matter, which Marcion and many gnostics held to be the creation of a dark, alien God, not the God who is revealed in Christ. And marriage only tightened the bonds of enslavement to the conventions of society:

To renounce sexual intercourse was to throw a switch located in the human person; and, by throwing that precise switch, it was believed possible to cut the current that sustained the sinister *perpetuum mobile*  of life in ‘the present age’.[[689]](#endnote-689)

Converts to Christianity often believed, or were told to believe, that their past indulgences in sexual activity could be insignificant as long as they renounced from the moment of baptism, often bringing in their spouses or other family members into this new community of continence. Could they find a place for marriage in the blessed life? If not, how could the two legacies – the two covenants – be reconciled? How could the Genesis account, sanctifying the human community of man and woman and their procreative purpose, remain alive in the thin air of ascetic world-renunciation? And how could Christians continue to live in the cities and towns of the Roman world, whose vitality and success depended on the honourable institution of marriage and reproduction? What did the Christian promise of a life in the spirit have to say about this rude construction of social man and woman, of family, kin and property, about this long-incubated custom of deference to the authorities of this world, to princes and tax-collectors? Most important to combat was the slur against marriage, one of the gnostics’ prize Was marriage a means to the perfect existence or the single greatest threat to its attainment? If sexual desire and the sensuality human flesh is so inclined to was part of the divine blueprint, how can it be at the same time the cruel joke that corrupted our original angelic nature, as Ambrose, the powerful Bishop of Milan in the 4th century, and so many others held?[[690]](#endnote-690)

The problem posed by the Genesis account of creation seemed to place God himself in an awkward position, only to be rescued by sophisticated forms of theodicy like Leibniz’s. But before Leibniz rival theodicies like that of the Manichees and intricate cosmogonies schemes like those of medieval Jewish system-builders tried various ways to explain the persistence of evil and the apparent refusal of the deity to defeat evil once and for all. The philosophical theodicist and the radical mystic had the same objective: to reconcile the divine interest in the maximisation of perfection with the reality of divine tolerance for the deviant or rebellious, to find a way to make sense of the imperfect without destroying the prestige of perfection. It can be done, or so generations of Jewish and Christian apologists insisted; their ingenuity kept the belief in creation alive in the west until other pressures from science and comparative anthropology made it harder and harder for intellectuals to assert the plausibility and uniqueness of the revelation that legitimated orthodox belief. But before geology and other advances in science succeeded in weakening the standing of Scripture, the threats Christianity had to content with were more internal, even self-induced. On the one hand there was God’s explicit blessing of the human body, organ by organ, in its two forms, male and female (Gen 1:27-28). On the other hand there was the condemnation of this world, with its pettiness and mutability, so far from a spiritual ideal that our awareness of our divine ‘likeness’ seems a mean joke. And if there is one aspect of this twofold, internally riven condition that seems the cruellest, it is the existence of sexuality. Can humans aspire to wholeness and perfection if their appetites are so base? As rational souls, St Augustine argues, humans are created in the divine image and likeness. We have never totally forgotten that. But what do we have to do to renew ourselves, having ‘grown old in crime’, and become rejuvenated as we were meant to be? Cannot we find a way to live, and even to reproduce ‘without the disfigurement of lust’ (*corruptionis concupiscentia*), as Adam and Eve must have been intended to do in the Garden?[[691]](#endnote-691)

As Augustine sees it, exemption from the unclean condition was possible, and intended, for God’s chosen creatures. Adam and Eve could have continued in live in paradise and even known the bliss of peaceful, solemn intercourse, unhampered by involuntary urges and the shame they cause. “Wedded with honour and bedded *without spot or wrinkle* (Eph4:27),” Augustine describes the prelapsarian couple:

God granting this right to them if they lived faithfully in justice and served him obediently in holiness, so that without any restless fever of lust, without any labour and pain in childbirth, offspring would be brought forth from their sowing. ...They would have commanded at will the organs that bring the foetus into being, so that it would have been neither sown in palpitating heat nor brought forth in piteous pain.(*The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, Book IX, 3.6; 10: 18)

Reproduction without ruination was what was ordained for these perfect, unspoiled beings, if they had remained constant in obedience. Not only would their sexual lives have been wholly rational, just and serene, erections conveniently supplied in obedience to the will’s requests, just as the arm raises itself in response to a felt need to pick a glass off an upper shelf. Even more: without the dread wages of sin, they would have been immortal, their “ensouled” animal bodies converted without dying into ‘omething of a different kind’. (ibid.) The ideal for human being, if not a state of angelic impassivity, is changeless perfection, undistorted by any selfish will. Rather than the soul entombed in matter, soul would have had fashioned for itself a miraculous nature, a spiritual flesh.

**5.6 The Romance of Virginity: Two (or Three) Versions of Pastoral**

Flesh without taint: for Augustine that was the gift we had lost. In happiness, serenity and with no experience of pain, men and women in the Edenic condition could have given birth to blessed children, conceived piously and without the remotest hint of agitation or tension. Love without licentiousness, sex without pollution: Augustine’s is a singular vision of how the sexes could cohabit in a condition of perpetual innocence. And that is not all. There are other miseries troubling the physical and sexual lives of men and women absent in the Augustinian Eden, miseries that are less cosmic and theological – ones like remorse, impotence, embarrassment, jealousy and misogyny. If the Fall had not occurred, Augustine concludes, then our emotions would have been different. (In Eden the incestuous coupling of two beings sharing the same flesh might even make Oedipus redundant.) But now what hope do we have of returning through that closed gate to the garden? It is clear that, for the Christian thinkers of the fourth century, only vowed virginity deserved that privileged pastoral exemption. It was here that the ‘Paradise-myth’ (in James Grantham Turner’s felicitous expression) adds its peculiar twist on the conception of human nature. Human nature is flawed by carnal knowledge yet it is capable of returning to its pure and blessed shape. Everyone outside the virginal fold must know regret and shame. For concupiscence has damaged the human power to love, and has introduced a sour taste into our natural affections. Sweetness and light has gone out of love. Since our banishment, we yearn for love to reunite us with our lost innocence, and that is a cruel trick, because it is love itself that causes suffering and pain. The carnal pleasures we experience only remind us of how unreliable our moments of satisfaction are, how ambivalent and compromised are our erotic successes.

Christians before Augustine had imagined the struggle for purity as taxing and severe, even if its rewards were joyous. What they had missed was a convincing representation of a more idyllic kind of purity, the one we glimpse in Augustine’s speculations about prelapsarian life, and which Romantics associate with the natural condition, the world unspoiled by human interference. Where in a world where humans’ first act was to disobey and rebel, could innocence be found? Were we doomed always to know too much, regret too much? Or were the anxieties of experience amenable to therapeutic relief? Could humans return to an untroubled garden, where they neither sow nor reap, where divinity and nature meet and mingle? Pastoral was an infrequent entry into the mental life of early Christianity, whose successes were predominantly in an urban setting. But Arcadian ideals were, from the time of Theocritus (316-260 BC), aimed at an urban audience, who could appreciate the idyllis vision of life’s simplicity; if only one were a shepherd on the hillside rather than a troubled public figure or busy sophisticate (neither of which had ever tasted the joys of physical labour, in a natural setting or otherwise.) Virgil, writing the *Georgics* in homage to the elemental pieties and hard-working virtues of the farmer’s life, imagines the countryside as free of strife and envy, back-stabbing and treachery. This is Arcadia, and it is the place where the Golden Age of Justice invoked in Virgil’s Fourth Eclogue will return. Nostalgia for a simpler, uncorrupted experience was always entwined with a political intent and a moral critique. Arcadians know how to live without needing repression and erudition; their economies are sensible and straighforward, their physiques sturdy and healthy, their emotions direct.[[692]](#endnote-692) The Greeks, content to do without the Romantic ethos, had nonetheless a rich mythological tradition of the ‘bucolic’ world where animals roam with satyrs and demi-gods, and humans separated from their social roles can mimic a freer, less regulated mode of life, sharing the woods and meadows with shepherds and their flocks. Love as practised on these hillsides was fresh and natural, free of guilt, uncomplicated.

Complication, on the other hand, and contradiction,[[693]](#endnote-693) were of the very essence of the chivalric ideal as it is meant to have emerged in the southern French courts of the 11th century. This was a ‘religion of love’ that claimed to be modelled on the feudal system of service and obligation, yet added an elaborate device of rules, codes and exemplary conduct, all in the name of governing the lover’s subjection to his impossible Lady, whose word was law and whose whims must be obeyed abjectly.[[694]](#endnote-694) In courtly love, erotic obsession (as the formulae must assume it) has the power to refine that same appetite of the loins that piety and society will insist is degrading and to be kept in the dark. The courtly lover is above such vulgarities. His passion is virtue, and his lust is chaste. The paradoxes are deliberate, and irreducible. The lowly are exalted, loss is gain, painis pleasure, death is life. The lover flirts with idolatry, tunring his beloved into something sanctified and miraculous, yet also mocks the piety of hagiographies that depict the torments and struggles of mystical suitors of the divine. A poetic imagining – and loud announcing – of wishes that might indict one of dishonour instead does the opposite. Erotic sentiment (even the sexual act itself, teasingly described in some of the troubadours’ poems) passes through an intricate machinery of allegorical play, turning what ordinary minds would construe as shameful into something refined, esoteric., and deflected. The illicit status of the pleasures renounced – for the poet-suitor usually claims to be in love with a married woman who is out of his class –also seems to make this ideal of passionate love all the more romantic and spiritually exalting. At least in C.S. Lewis’s well-known thesis on the courtly love code as an idealization of adultery, the fact that this love cannot and must not culminate in marriage is what renders it free, noble, stylised and impossible, an enigmatic exception to the western devaluation of the female sex, and a long hymn in celebration of suspended action.[[695]](#endnote-695)

And the fiction of renunciation was part of chivalry’s serious play: just as the monks and clergy of the tenth to twelfth centuries were finding their obligations to celibacy ever more tightly extorted, so the courtly lover proved his value and nobility by the degree to which he could abstain and subjugate himself. C.S. Lewis provides the most celebrated (if contested) definition of the courtly sensibility:

This is love of a highly specialised sort, whose characteristics may be enumerated as Humility, Courtesy, Adultery, and the Religion of Love.[[696]](#endnote-696)

‘Ennobling love’ was a social ideal favoured by the aristocracy of the European Middle Ages: ‘It is primarily a way of behaving, only secondarily a way of feeling.’[[697]](#endnote-697) It distinguishes the fine from the not-so-fine, the courtly insider from the base outsider: ‘Only the courteous can love’, continues Lewis, ‘but it is love that makes them courteous.’ (ibid.) By any account, it was a literary artifice, bearing little resemblance to love affairs as they were conducted during the time of Ovid, Catullus, and the erotic poets of antiquity. The amorists of the Empire knew that love outside of marriage was a game, even a dangerous one. They could portray passion as both infuriating and amusing, a joke and a nightmare, and even if it was one of the greater enjoyments life could afford, still something without intellectual gravitas or religious potential. The mistresses they cajoled and swore at, who alternately invited them in for hours of delight and locked them out to entertain other lovers, were not perfect, sublime, aristocratic beings. They could be proud and brilliant, educated and sensitive. And they could also be not too much beter than whores. In the hands of courtly poets, such erotic games change more than their clothes.

‘Courtesy’ is what the true and faithful lover owes to his Lady, and no demand she makes can be too much. The Lady is not divine, but the lover is happy to pretend that she is, or nearly so, in what C.S. Lewis calls love religion as a ‘parody’ of the ‘real religion’.[[698]](#endnote-698) Like the Christian religion, the religion of love aims at absolutism. Good manners are crucial, but the pressure put on them is of an unusual kind. Rules are supposed to regulate the expression of the courtly passion, and ensure its pristine quality. The object of desire must be without imperfection or lack; she must be whole and complete unto herself.[[699]](#endnote-699) One loves her without expecting to be loved in return, offering to be her hostage and vassal, suppressing vulgar lusts and indeed willing her coldness, as Bernart de Ventadour writes in *Lancan vei*: ‘Let her by mo means love me with her body, that doesn’t fit. (50-51) How to remain constant in an erotic worship that defers consummation and rewards the faithful with pain and rejection? Are the poets alluding to an eros that ‘takes place at the border of the illicit’, all the while insisting on the significance of courtly chastity and reverence?[[700]](#endnote-700)

The puzzle of this courtly code has inspired a number of theories, the earliest of which was that of Violet Paget in the 1880s, suggesting that a surplus of landless noblemen, often young and underemployed, excluded because of their lack of estates from marriage, needed a function, or rather, needed a cultural cover for their otherwise dependent status as hangers-on at feudal courts, and found that in the poetics of chilvaric devotion.[[701]](#endnote-701) Courtliness arose where marriage could not. In this respect it is less surprising to notice the similarities between this teasingly extra-marital erotics and a devotional cult dedicated to the mystical love of the Virgin Mary, like that perfected by St Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) and the Cistercians. It is true that the soul on fire with the love of God or the Virgin cannot expect to have the physical consummation earthly lovers experience.[[702]](#endnote-702) But the ‘nuptial song’ in which Christ celebrates his marriage to the church, his Spouse, does promise to the soul who loves chastely a union in every sense of the erotic word: the rewarded lover receives a kiss from his mouth and a drink from his ‘sealed fountain’; neither the feet nor the hands of the divine lover are neglected. Bernard’s meditations on the Song of Songs address without flinching the carnality of the soul’s love for the God-Man. Did not God deliberatelt choose to come close to human sin the flesh ‘so that he could captures their affections’ by ‘first drawing them to the salutary love of his own humanity, and then gradually to raise them to a spiritual love.’ (*Sermon 20: 6-7*). No material marriage can compete with this. Christ binds himself to his earthly spouse, and she is transported, ‘sick with love’ (*Song of Songs*  5:8). In Bernard’s imagination, the individual soul mingles and converges with the mystical body of the Church and the figure of the Virgin Mary, waiting virtuously in her chamber. Marina Warner observes that in Bernard’s mysticism, ‘one expression of love – carnal desire – disfigures the pristine soul, but another expression of love – the leap of the soul towards God ­ restores the primal resemblance.’[[703]](#endnote-703) Bernard discovers a new use for personal and mystical love, which can attach itself to the heavenly femininity of Mary, a virgin who ‘bore love itself in her womb’; as she rises to the highest courts of Heaven, so goes his adoration with her; her union with her Son is consummated in eternity, just as he hopes his soul, affected by his love, will melt away and be poured into the will of God.[[704]](#endnote-704)

Romantic adoration of the sovereign Lady – the German term is ‘Frauendienst’ – has no place in marriage, which among nobles is often an alliance of properties and estates, a political confederation of interests in which the wife might bring immense advantages to her husband but her personal perfections did not count among these. Did feudal knights and ladies actually engage in the courtly rituals the poetry of the troubadours describe? Yet what sense does it make to insist on ‘innocence’ in connection with an erotic that famously privileges only the adulterous attachments?[[705]](#endnote-705) Perhaps because the courtly ideal, like the monastic model of life in community or in solitude, marshalled its energies against marriage and marriage’s attendant burdens of procreative productivity. Courtly love played with the ideal of love without an object, in which the beloved must always withhold, test, and demand, but never fully deliver.[[706]](#endnote-706) The pleasures of loving, of devotion and praise, were what *fin’amor*  was about, for the Occitans and Provencal poets: the myth of love’s obstacles and obstructions was essential to its charm; the suitor’s continence and self-denial were the very least he could offer his ‘friend’. What as if the joy of wanting outshone in any possible world the joy of possession. Courtly love was suspended fulfilment. Chivalric ‘desire’ was, as Gilles Deleuze has helped us to recognise, a curious and heterogeneous field of relations. From the tenth to the twelfth century poets perfected a dual language of ‘erotic chastity’ and ascetic transcendence of the flesh. Like the renunciations expected from a clergy now strictly enjoined to celibacy, the knightly poets claimed that their amorous worship of an unattainable Lady could purify and ennoble. The ‘service’ a courtly lover offered his ideal Sovereign had nothing to do with appetites of the body; the vanities and egotism of the Ovidian amorist had no place here. Passion so obsessively concentrated, so selfless and oblivious to mundane considerations or even hope of reciprocity, must transform the very nature of passion, transferring it to the realm of the symbolic, the sacramental, and the mystical. Courtly love is, in a way, a discipline’[[707]](#endnote-707). Defying the logic of sexual conduct, it neither repressed nor permitted, neither adulterous nor conjugal, but something in between. Any ‘real’, fleshly woman disappears, as René Nelli explains, in favour of an imaginary being, a symbol of amorous transcendence who sustains the fiction of purity and chastity under the most contrived of circumstances. Courtly romance ‘semi-Platonic’ dream of a longing infinitely extended, snatched away from the realities of sex and the flesh, and transferred... the world of the beautiful lady whose pursuit sanctifies the questing and courtly knight, in medieval romance; it is the world where animal and man lie down together, overseen by the good shepherd; where the birth of new life in the timeless garden happens magically, without the groaning of the flesh or the pain of labour, but rather as mysteriously as the phoenix re-animates itself in fire.

St Paul had a different ideal: not a paradisal return to innocence but a vivid and militant hope for what is to come at the time of the *Parousia*. A resurrected body in all its perfection, spiritual and glorious, this is what Paul envisages as the Christian’s victory over death, which will come with the fulfilment of the Kingdom, when the Lord returns in the fullness of time. Not a liberated spirit (*pneuma*), airy and immortal but shorn of any personalizing traits, but a body (*soma*) that would fully express our freedom and our redemption from evil, a body that would be neither male nor female, married or single. Pauline flesh redeemed is ever-living and incorruptible. It has survived the welcome death of the clinging, rotting, needy flesh (*sarx*) of Adam’s heirs, whose every move and every appetite awakened painful memories of their disinheritance. Can the human body be regenerated? Those who repudiated marriage and the ‘flood of the passions’ said it could:

And so God took pity on us in our plight, incapable as we were either of standing or rising again, and sent down from heaven that excellent and most glorious auxiliary, chastity, that we might bind out bodies to it, like vessels, and moor them in calm beyond corruption. (Methodius, *Symposium,* Logos 4: Theopatra)

This is the message of divine chastity celebrated in Methodius’s *Symposium.* Chastity, he writes there, is the sign now for the few of what could be for all. In this life our natural bodies are like fragile boats, buffeted by waves and ‘streams of wickedness’. But if we take up our ‘instruments of generation’ and ‘hang’ them up on the ‘branches of chastity’, they will remain dry and safe, free from being carried away along the ‘channels of incontinence’ or ‘like worms’ mingle with ‘purulence and putrefaction’. And this remarkable insurance against rot and damp corruption is provided by the divine and gracious gift of virginity, the ‘pure bond’ of chastity with which the faithful bride of the virgin Bridegroom seals up her soul. So the Greek Father Methodius of Olympus (who lived perhaps from 250-312 CE) imagined the perfected life of the glorious virgins. ‘Just as the bloody fluids of meat and all the elements which make for putrefaction are drawn off by salting it (eg, the meat), so too all the irrational desires of the body are banished from a maiden by the pious instruction she receives’. Her soul will be ‘salted’ with faith and truth, which purify and sting for her improvement; it will not start smelling or breeding worms. (*Symposium*, Logos 1: Marcella) Chastity ‘makes the flesh buoyant, raising it up and drying out its moisture and overcoming its sodden weight with a more powerful counter-attraction (Logos 8:4, Thecla).

Is chastity magical? What is the point of the apocalyptic and wonder-working fantasies inspired by the thought of virginity, especially the virginity of women, and especially that of young women? The desirable, Frye explains, is only at times identified with the moral. But when it is, this is a powerful incitement to romantic myth. In the literature of chastity, the denial of procreation, of the body’s delight in sexual play and passion, is taken to be a source not only of power – for denial can often be powerful – but of an alternative to physical fertility. The virgin ‘creates’. She leaps over the walls of death, and soars to the fields of eternity. In abstaining from one domain, she opens up another. She purifies, redeems and heals. Sexual humans give birth, and die. The virgin, who does not give birth, neither putrefies or decays, Methodius imagines. Her flesh is magical flesh, sacred stuff. Why is so much expected from bodily ‘integrity’, from a human avoidance of a human function? A ‘strong charge of sacred awe’, as Peter Brown puts it, surrounded the bodies of men and women ‘whose flesh had not been corrupted by sexual intercourse’.[[708]](#endnote-708) Austerity and abstinence were admired by pagans like Porphyry of Tyre, contemporary of Methodius and himself a vigorous practitioner of asceticism. With all his contempt for the mundane, however, Porphyry does not promote absolute sexual renunciation:

In this universe, a few vigilant souls might swim to shore, out of the swaying ocean of matter, to join their bodiless peers in their true homeland, beyond the stars. They would return to a world of the spirit where the inconvenience of possessing a body would be forgotten, as if it had never been. But the *cosmos* as a whole, and with it the human race, would continue forever: “misty and dim” to humans caught in the flesh, it was also “sacred and pleasing” in its harmonious immensity. In that cosmos, souls were destined to descend into matter ceaselessly, as the gods of “generative love” continued to weave the “sea purple garments” of new human bodies upon the ancient loom of the marriage bed. (Brown, 1988, 183,citing Porphyry, *Cave of the Nymphs*)

A self-controlled participation in marriage, so Porphyry held with his master Plotinus, was no obstacle to ascetic excellence. Young women in particular achieved no symbolic significance of superior standing by refusing their social duties to marriage and generation. Individual souls would indeed be improved by abstinence. But would the world be saved by such a defiance of society? Would the matter of the cosmos be excised in favour of an unmixed domination of the spirit? Porphyry, who attacked Christian beliefs with spirit and real knowledge, thought such an expectation was frankly absurd. Some of his Christian contemporaries, also entranced by Greek philosophy, could not agree.[[709]](#endnote-709) (Brown, 1988, 180-185)

Methodius, on the Aegean coast of Turkey, read Porphyry closely and with a sense of urgency. In response to Porphyry’s learned polemic he wrote *his* ownpolemic defending the Christians, sometime not long after 270 CE. Methodius had read Plato and Aristotle, and shows some engagement with the Stoics. Beyond that not much is known. His most famous text, *The Symposium: A Treatise on Chastity*, looks forward to a cosmos without the interference of sex. Platonists might picture the soul flying away from its material encumbrances, even ultimately re-joining the One in the eternal realm of the Ideas, freed from the burden of metempsychosis. But the virginal transcendence of the flesh has a different function. It is the virginal body with its miraculous mediation between heaven and earth that is the cure for our diseases, the brilliant image of our hopes, the luminous watch over our dark and downtrodden existence, holding fast until the coming of Christ’s true light. Their physical state – unique, transparent, undefiled – is a new kind of fertility, one the devil cannot touch. The virgin’s body is our vision of beauty, our prefiguration of reunion. Her innocence is a gift. And she is female, although a type of femininity hitherto unknown, on a par with the male, and beyond that.

In Methodius’s dialogue, Thecla, the virgin given the name of St Paul’s famous and martyred followers, applies Plato’s famous myth of transcendence to the virgin soul, whose ‘wings are impregnated with *parthenia* and thus can resist any earth-bound force pulling them towards the shadows and illusions of mundane appearances. ‘The wings of chastity soar aloft into the pure ether and to the life that is close to the angels.’ (Logos 8:2) The glorious virgins see with their own eyes the ‘Forms of Justice, Understanding and Peace’. Since Christ had brought back into creation the original human substance, untainted by sin, there has been a return of the power to display that first ‘image of God’ by means of which humans were modelled. ‘Christ the Archvirgin’ has put error to flight. (Logos 10:5) By practicing virginity the body can be rendered immortal and purified. It newly espoused not to men but to the Word. ‘By chastity’, one of Methodius’ symposiasts reports, ‘they have been emancipated from that condemnation, *Earth thou art, and unto earth thou shalt return*.’ (Logos 10:6) The self-discipline of the virgin, like the rock salt mixture that gives the salmon its extended and luscious life, is a ‘cure’ for nature’s sensual wastefulness. Learning the ‘science of virginity’ – every bit as demanding as the *padeia* of the strictest philosophers – allows the convert to progress in holiness, to ‘advance from incest to marriage and from marriage to fidelity and from fidelity to continence (*sophrosyne*) until the final perfection is reached: the safe harbour and peaceful haven of virginity. (*Symposium*, Logos 1:2)

Virginity is the 3rd, 4th and 5th centuries of Christian practice has its orators, its homilist, its propagandists and polemicists. It had also its stellar representatives, like Macrina, Melania, and Eustochium; its martyrs like Thecla; and among males, its heroes like Anthony, Origen, and the Hermit Paul. What it did not have was a literary form that suited it. That form did arrive, and it was Christian pastoral. Its most brilliant flowering did not arrive in the Patristic period I am studying. To appreciate the imagination of Christian pastoral we have to wait for the Middle Ages. But there were early experiments. As a literary novelty, Christian pastoral began to show what it was capable of even before Gregory, Athanasius, Ambrose and the other champions of virginity had weighed in on the superiority of continence for the ambitious Christian. To invent Christian pastoral required an imagination eager to feed on the Classical and on the Christian diets, someone who could wed Paul to the more appropriate partners in the Hellenic and Hellenistic camp. That honour went to Methodius, writing perhaps a century earlier than Gregory, Jerome and Ambrose, the Bishop of a Greek town in present day Turkey, a critic of Origen, and a martyr. Very little is known about Methodius. Jerome mentions him as a martyr and gives scanty details, but his evidence is second-hand and unreliable. ‘One of the most mysterious of the Church Fathers’, writes his translator.[[710]](#endnote-710)

What is not mysterious was his devotion to the ‘divine Plato’, as Victorian Britons liked to call him, and there is something proto-Victorian in Methodius’ fondness for the gauzy, the genteel, and the feminine. No Greek Father mentions Plato more often than does Methodius[[711]](#endnote-711) and he must have dreamt himself the Plato of the early Church. The *Symposium,* Plato’s debate about love around a dinner table, was his immediate source. Methodius took from that dialogue something of the taste for exaltation that makes Diotima’s speech unusual, leaving out only the humour, the disagreements, and the originality of Plato’s conception.[[712]](#endnote-712) His *Symposium* is not perfect. It is, in Brown’s words, a ‘muted idyll’ (185). Simon Goldhill, even less impressed, calls is a ‘didactic tract’ (Simon Goldhill, *Foucault’s Virginity*, 3) overly interested in regulation, and unlike the Platonic pastoral of the *Phaedrus*, too clumsy to handle graceful erotics or the transformations of innocence into sophistication. Yet with all these qualifications, it still makes sense to call *The Symposium* a pastoral, and to place it side by side with two other late ancient imaginations of idealised feminine love: Longus’s *Daphnis and Chloe*, and the miraculous career of the Virgin Mary, Mother of God. I will return to this triad of idealised femininity at the end of this chapter. But for now I need to defend the classification as ‘pastoral’.

Pastoral as a mode, fictional and thematic, favours simplicity: the joke that without a shepherd, no pastoral, may have fallen flat, but the association of pastoral poetry with a respect for simplicity and innocence as a basis for moral authority is a true association. Gardens and woods, fields and sheep, are meant to encourage modesty in the spirit, and discourage pretension or artifice. In some hands, a rustic atmosphere implies freedom from courtly and educated restraint; rustic worlds can be rough, comical, their sexual habits borrowed from those of the unreflective animals. Not so for pastoral: the manners of its inhabitants may be simple but they are not crude. The romantic pair who are the subjects of Longus’ *Daphnis and Chloe* …The beauty of unspoiled landscape protects the beauty of sentiments and the delicacy of feeling: what literature calls ‘the pathetic fallacy’ reigns here, moulding the mind to the contours of natural peace and composure, keeping fraud and violence out. Pastoral is an idealised landscape. But its ideals are not indiscriminate. The philosophical argument made by pastoral is a specific one. Virtue, it argues, does not need the strain of invention nor the stress of imposition and legal regulation; virtue is natural rather than conventional. Take away everything that corrupts and interferes, and the human world will be in harmony with the natural world:

All peoples who possess a history have a paradise, a state of innocence, a golden age; indeed every man has his own paradise, his golden age, which he recalls, according as he has more or less of the poetic in his nature, with more or less inspiration. Experience itself therefore supplies features enough for the depiction of which the pastoral idyll treats. For this reason it remains always a beautiful, an elevating fiction, and the poetic power in representing it has truly worked on behalf of the ideal. (*On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry* 211; Nisbet edition)

‘To make us look forward in hope’, not backward with the pain of loss: That is the moral force of pastoral’s idyllic airs and graces.[[713]](#endnote-713) It keeps alive a promise that poetry and the world of experience and action, as Paul Alpers glosses Schiller, can be connected, as the Germans of Schiller’s Classical period believed they had been in the Greek city-state. Christianity – the religion of transcendence and other-worldliness – was not considered a satisfactory substitute to the collapse of Hellenic harmonies. Hegel, like his contemporaries who were avid readers of Schiller, lamented the twisted and unsensuous mood the victory of Christ had brought into the world: innocence and experience, intelligence and play, could never again thrive as companions in the morbidly critical culture Christianity had introduced. Nothing merely human was good enough for a Christian. If all value is projected onto a heaven and a ‘beyond’, Hegel complained, then nothing is left here for us except alienation. Nature was empty of spirit and meaning; if not consigned to corruption and the ills of matter, it was reduced to a machine, a set of processes without intention or soul. Even virtue is impotent without the propping up of grace. To a mind like Hegel’s, a Christianised culture will inevitably misunderstand pastoral just as it can only fail to misunderstand the seriousness of play. The idea of an earthy paradise will seem wishful thinking; the vision of human life at ease with nature an avoidance of genuine complications and conflicts; the pastoral idyll an unsophisticated evasion of irony (and negativity.) Hegel as a young man was willing to sigh for the loss of Hellenism, and regret the priestly paradoxes of Christianity. But with maturity Hegel grew less sympathetic for the beautiful and ‘elevating fictions’. Alienation, he concluded, was the ordeal through which a full human culture must pass. The sensuously-beautiful cannot arrive directly for late-comers in history like us, as if it were a fruit ready to fall off a tree. We must work for our beauty. We can’t go back to Arcady for our innocence. The gates of Eden are barred.

Pastoral’s promise of a fullness without alienation or loss may be a philosophical absurdity. For literature, and the literature of religion, it is nonetheless a vigorous plant. Outside the garden of simplicity and peace, mortals are separated from immortals, natural beings from the gods. Only in paradise, or myth, do they co-exist, for only here, as the critic Northrop Frye explains, does the ‘analogy of innocence’ still obtain. Protected by innocence, humans can share a space with the gods, who become their friendly guardians, companions or teachers: ‘donors’, as the folklore-theorists say. In the pastoral romance, adults retain their childhood wonder, often by retaining ‘the virtue most closely associated with childhood and the state of innocence – chastity, a virtue which in this structure of imagery usually includes virginity.’ (AC, 151) Purity of heart will be one kind of literary ‘magic’ in the pastoral romance. But literal chastity is expected to deliver magic as well, to act like a purifying shield, or fire, or special power that gives the perfectly chaste an additional bravery and stamina, a weapon against evil and fraud, as Edmund Spenser understands by giving chastity to his Amazonian Knight Britomart, or Shakespeare by giving it to Miranda, to Perdita, or Marina, virginal girls threatened but strong. In the economy of literature, when charted by a map of archetypal modes like that of Northrup Frye, the pastoral ‘preserves the theme of escape from society to the extent of idealizing a simplified life in the country’. Pastoral is neither tragic nor ironic but ‘idyllic’, treating the social and human world as if it were intimately connected to animal and vegetable nature’. Its imagery, Frye writes, ‘is often used, as it is in the Bible’ for the theme of salvation’. (AC, 43) Natural idylls are to be found before the beginnings of civilisation, before its advantages as well as its disadvantages, as Friedrich Schiller said of the idyll in *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*.[[714]](#endnote-714) The Golden Age is their representative home, yet they can also be set in a time that is still out of our reach in the other direction, a time of future redemption or restoration, when freedom and honesty will have become normal and assumed. In Christian pastoral, we are no longer ravenous beasts tortured by sin, but gentle lambs, comforted and cared for by a good shepherd. Our green world of salvation on a hillside is not now, and not this world, but it is a scene in which we are invited to believe, to hope for, and to associate with the return of a loving god. The imaginary kingdom where all needs are met, where pain and scarcity do not infringe, where the romance between mind and world has finally been consummated: that could be the pastoral of the political economist, the philosopher, the dreamer. I suggest it has a firm and abiding relationship with the hopes of early and medieval Christian thinkers, and that their pastoral vision required an escape not just from society but from sex. Pastoral, as a classical literary form, took some of those burdensome vehicles of frustration and disappointment – work, need, love, social and economic demand – and put them at a gentle distance, softening them with the tenderness and indolence of a rustic setting, keeping time at bay, stilling movement. Music is the mode of pastoral, and it has the gift of turning work into play, passion into sentiment, and sadness into reverie. And Methodius sets music into the background of his leisurely, tranquil conversation of ardent but modest defenders of the cause of holy virginity: white-dressed maidens, carrying flowers, will play instruments and sing hymns. They are maidens who will remain maidens, persuaded and charmed by the gospel of sexual purity. Consecrated to their faith, committed to their little group, with no families or angry spouses in the vicinity, these are virgins who are living in a world of perpetual childhood.

The pastoral aesthetic has a special relationship to female innocence and to a myth I take to be the counter-myth to the accusation against Eve, the first mother of the human race. Eve, who for the ‘peoples of the Book’, Jews, Christians and Muslims, invented female vanity, female pride and female sexuality, is not the only representation of femininity in the Biblical tradition. While most women in that history come into view as wives, lovers, rulers or mothers, some are left less clearly-articulated, their position in the social order ambiguous or temporarily undefined. In Greek myth they would be nymphs, goat-girls, simple Arcadian Phebes who hang around groves. In more serious Greek genres they would be dutiful girls like Antigone, leading her blind father to a safe grove outside the city. They fill jars at a well, or greet strangers, or disappear into the shadows of a room. They are the girls, the maidens, the daughters: modest and self-contained, they slip by, at the margins of the narratives. For big events, they are unimportant. But in a less event-ridden mode, the lyrical *rallentando* that is pastoral, they are central.

The *Symposium*, or ‘the Banquet’, probably written between 270-290,is a pastiche of Plato. It is set in a landscaped estate, a villa outside the city on a steep hill, rich with gardens and fruit trees, at the center of which is a fountain springing up from a stream. The guests, invited there by the Lade Arete, was all women and all virgins; they gather and converse under the shade of a ‘chaste-tree’ (*agnos-castus*), a herb long thought to have anti-aphrodisiac (and abortificant) properties if its blossoms are carried, eaten, or brewed.[[715]](#endnote-715) After enjoying a (non-alcoholic) banquet, 11 of the ladies participate in a dialogue on the subject of chastity. After they have finished their ‘contest of words’, the crown for the best speech describing the virginal ideal is awarded to Thecla, who leads the circle of virgins in a hymn, composed by Methodius who probably also composed the music to accompany it.[[716]](#endnote-716) There are numerous allusions to Plato, in style as well as content, and echoes of Phaed*rus, Alcibiades, Hippias Major*, and of course the S*ymposium*. Although the philosophers’ banquet is the excuse for the dialogue, Methodius’s own mystical conceptions and his delight in allegory drew him again and again to a different dialogue, the *Phaedrus*. From the *Phaedrus*  he borrowed the pastoral setting, off in the peaceful, semi-suburban outskirts of the city, under the shade of some sympathetic trees – a plane tree and a fragrant chaste-tree, and by a spring. (*Phaedr*. 229b-230b) Philosophic pastoral is the genre to which the conversation between Socrates and Phaedrus about the soul, mania, love and oratory belongs. It was, Methodius must have noticed, ideal for suggesting the soul’s conversion to a love for spiritual beauty. Images from the myths with which Plato adorned his theory of the soul (the Cave, the Craftsman, the sprouting of wings) are adopted with a frank enthusiasm for the pleasures of symbolism and the mysteries of the allegorical mode. What was missing in Methodius, however, was the spirit of Plato’s dialogue on eros*.* There are no jugs of wine, no flute-playing girls. Instead of an elegant and urbane house, well-equipped and smoothly run for the benefit of the cultured ruling classes, the scene is a suburban garden.Appreciation of the beauty of young men makes no appearance, nor does any appreciation for the excitements of male achievement in the theatre, the political sphere, or war. The atmosphere is sedate and lofty. The drink on offer is water, the bodies are primly concealed in white dresses, and almost nothing is said about food. The guests at the banquet in Methodius’s scenario are women, young virginal women, and the love they compete to praise and expound is not erotic love, nor even the idealised love for the truth that Platonists aspire to, but virginal purity.

The speakers of Plato’s dialogue are invited to show off their knowledge of love; corrected by an oracular woman, whose lesson Socrates delivers, they quibble about the etiquette of power or age-difference in love, about passion versus friendship, about physical beauty versus wisdom as aphrodisiacs. Only men could have such a discussion. Nowhere in antiquity are privileged women presented with the opportunity to debate the meanings of love. It is important to the history of love in the West that when women finally do get the chance, they are invited to do so under the white veils of intact virgins. This would have seemed ridiculous to Plato. For the invited guests at Plato’s banquet, love begins in the flesh and is kindled by the senses. The soul desires what appears to it as good, and physical beauty entices the eye and the appetites, making us want, not just to gaze but to possess and enjoy. The movement towards that promised pleasure is what we call love, ordinarily speaking. But why do we love? Are we pained by an absence of that beauty, or are we attracted towards that which reminds us of ourselves, perhaps of something we have only tentative hold on as close as it is? Are we in search of a fullness we have lost, or a better form of what we already have and recognise? Plato’s guests speak about the loves they know, or about those they can describe with the inventions of the imagination. Carnal loves are inspired by lovely forms and bodies. The grasping of limbs and the exploration of skin makes the soul eager, hungry for more, unsure of its satisfactions. Yet love is also inspired by the qualities of those who become our beloveds. Many lovers assume those qualities are concrete, but they find they cannot understand them if they include only physical elements. Love turns to beauties of achievement, and admires the courageous, the eloquent, the intelligent. Lovable qualities are then revealed to be the screen, the adornment. What empowers the attraction is not what is possessed by the beloved, but a divine being who is manifest in the beauties of that which is loved. Love is possibly a god, possibly a demon, a cosmic power, or indeed a light, a flame, a crown.

The *Symposium* holds up as its secret a parable about the ladder of fleshly and spiritual loves, a ladder by which the lover might ascend to the non-empirical form, the light of beauty itself. Casting aside lesser rewards, the educated lover requires nothing less than philosophical illumination. The soul becomes what it loves. More precious than any partial beauty is the presence of the One. To approach its precincts, to experience beauty undivided where before only individual beauties were known, even to be joined to this sublime object in a state that cancels all separation, is something the lover of beauty longs for. That would be ecstasy. It is an image of transcendence that proved irresistible to religious mystics, and to the mystical wing of Christianity from the 3rd century to the late Middle Ages. Perhaps it had its sources in the Gnostic cults; the Alexandrian Church was particularly receptive to themes Gnostics found sympathetic. By the time the great Alexandrian Origen wrote his seminal *Commentary on the Song of Songs* the Gnostic suspicion that a perfected existence is a life of mind alone had insinuated itself into Christian sensibility almost irretrievably, and with it the Platonic preference for spirit over matter, the eternal over the temporal. If Plato could think about the return of mind into Mind, if he could portray (say, in the *Phaedrus*) the upward journey of the embodied soul as a search for its lost and disincarnate origins, so too could Christians with an education in the Greek and neoplatonic masters. If Plato could endow intellectual purification with an erotic glow, why couldn’t the same be an expectation for the pious Christian soul, whose heart’s desire must be what Origin, in his *Commentary* (1) described as ‘the truer, close, holier kiss which is said to be given by the lover, the Word of God, to his beloved, the pure and perfect soul’?[[717]](#endnote-717)

From Origen, active in the middle of the 3rd century, the Christian theology of spiritual apprenticeship acquired its form, and its core symbol – the mystical marriage. The *Song of Songs* described what looked like a real amorous encounter between a virginal betrothed and an ardent masculine lover. Shedding these fleshly obstructions, a mystical tradition attaching itself to the interpretation of this text translated the erotic terms into spiritual ones. There is great pleasure in the prolonged courtship of lovers who know their consummation will arrive: every type of foreplay, emotional and carnal, anticipation, caress, kisses and intercourse, deliver the bride and bridegroom into each other’s arms. between the divine lover, the Logos or Holy Spirit, and the pure and faithful soul who is his beloved. When interpreted by idealizing Christian readers, and indeed by comparable mystical readers in Judaism, the *Song of* S*ongs* seemed to speak of a union between the virginal and enamoured soul and her divine or otherwise mysterious beloved. Probably the apotheosis of this vein of interpretation arrived in the time of Bernard of Clairvaux, the Cistercian monk of the 12th century. Bernard imagined the invisible God wanting to be loved by carnal men in the flesh,

‘to converse with men as a man. He wanted to recapture the affections of carnal men who were unable to love in any other way, by first drawing them to the salutary love of his own humanity, and then gradually to raise them to a spiritual love.’ (*Sermon* 20:6-7)[[718]](#endnote-718)

Through the stages of love (or ‘charity’, Christian love), our carnal affection for Christ leads us to desire more; that the union with God ‘may be effected demand no less than that the soul itself shall be interiorly changed, purified, clarified, and restored to the likeness of its Creator.’ (Sermon on the Song of Songs, xxxi, 3-4)[[719]](#endnote-719)

Methodius’ uninhibited glorification of the virginal life had precedents. It rested on several generations of zeal for the practice of asceticism, as Christians in the late Roman cities differentiated themselves from their Jewish and pagan neighbours by advocating fasting, community of property or households, modesty in dress and language, avoidance of games, shows and sacrifices, and of course, sexual continence. What is interesting about Methodius’ dialogue is that virginity is not just one of the goods but the summit of all that can be imagined as good, the consummation of human perfectionism. All else pales in comparison to it. If not the *summun bonum,* it is the mirror of holiness. Holiness, here, is corporeal as well as intellectual. Through the life of immaculate chastity, the make-up of the human person can be changed. Not even skin, bones and muscles will continue in their original form. Lightness will replace heaviness, as the body becomes ‘dry’ and semi-transparent. From a natural and carnal being can be born a transformed one. The changes in physical constitution, produced by the healthy discipline of virginity, translated into spiritual metamorphosis. Human beings are put on the earth to progress, as far as they can, towards the contemplation of God, through knowledge and moral perfectionism. This was a picture of the Christian destiny that the charismatic Alexandrian Father Origen had done much to advance, and Origen’s guidance has endured in Methodius’s thinking, despite the objections he has raised to the earlier theologian’s teaching. In this indebtedness, Methodius was not alone: ‘Origen’s view of the spiritual struggle entered the bloodstream of all future traditions of ascetic guidance in the Greek and Near Eastern worlds.’[[720]](#endnote-720) Origen’s conception of intellectual spirituality, steeped in the neo-platonic atmosphere of Alexandrian theology, is here fused with another tradition of the human ‘becoming-divine’, one that teaches the weaning away from the body and its appetites as essential to the improvement of the individual and the restoration of the human race.[[721]](#endnote-721)

Practising chastity is equivalent to turning a human life into a sacramental one. In an image Methodius must have taken from Origen, virginity is the route to the angelic choirs. And it is a crucial element in the overall theological framework which Methodius assumes is shared by all Christians. The mysteries of virginity recapitulate the history of salvation: the earthly Adam, presumably a man with some sexual appetites, returns transformed by the cure of virginity, a boon only second to the gift by which he was ransomed from death and sin by Christ’s sacrificial mediation. Instead of Adam, we have the heavenly Bridegroom, now come looking for his ‘virgin bride’ (Logos 6:5, Agathe; and Logos7:8, Procilla). Through the preaching of Paul, the doctrine of consecrated chastity has arrived to overtake and supplement the previous social arrangements through which God allowed for marriage and even, in the far off past, incest and polygamy. With the coming of chastity, Christians can progress from mortality to immortality: the ‘wings of chastity’ will make the soul ‘soar into the pure ether’, to live close to the angels. (Logos 8:2, Thecla). Modest in their manners and in their consumption , these maidens are patient and gracious to one another, bestowing praise liberally but without hyperbole or showy displays of erudition and rhetoric. They make their speeches and sing their hymns (when the competition is complete) high up in the mountains, where gods and shepherds were meant to be found; the table is set in a garden, facing the east, and shaded by a large castus-tree.[[722]](#endnote-722)

Methodius’s curious text is one of a kind. It contributed only indirectly to the early Church’s preparation of an intellectual and emotional world safe for the consecrated virgin. As far as we can tell, imitators did not rush to offer similar poetic treatments of doctrinal debates. Was it original? In form its derivation from the Platonic and other philosophic dialogues was patent. The use it made of imagery already significant in Christian interpretations, especially of scripture, was elaborate but not radical. Perhaps the most successful was Methodius’s contribution of a stately and flowery language to honour the ‘nuptials’ of young women joining themselves in spirit and destiny to their heavenly spouse. The Gnostics of 2nd century Rome and Egypt, themselves masters of the labyrinthine uses of imagery, great ‘recovers’ of the ‘power of myth in the ancient world’,[[723]](#endnote-723) had already applied the Jewish motif of the mystical marriage between Sophia and God to the process of redemption: Sophia, the errant spouse, had rebelled against God and succumbed to the most unimaginably vile desires, leading her to create a grotesque material world, base and cursed by corruption. This is our world. Things are bad; yet as a Gnostic like Valentinius announced, hope was in sight. The ‘good God; has arrived to drive out the ‘bad’ God. The universe could be restored and the soul, imprisoned in its unsympathetic body, could return to its original purity. A re-marriage, like that of the repent Sophia to God the Father, could still happen. For some Gnostics, as Peter Brown argues, the ‘conjugal imagery’ current in the age was pushed beyond anything orthodox Christians wanted to allow. In the spiritual marriage the Valentinians proposed, the physical world with all its bonds was rendered obsolete. Sexual intercourse would cease to exist and, of course marriage. Even the duality of the sexes would be forgotten, as the female – the inferior and more matter-ridden – would be absorbed fully into the spirit. Otherness will disappear: in the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas, the disciples complain about the privileges a mere woman, Mary Magdalen, is enjoying as Jesus’s favourite: ‘Simon Peter said to them: “Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of life.” . Jesus sad, “I myself shall lead her and make her male.”’ No more need for the accommodation of men to women in the institution of marriage, or the erotic embrace. Body will have merged into spirit, in a mystical marriage that makes this world and its survival irrelevant.[[724]](#endnote-724)

Virginal consummation acquires an uncanny flavour in the extremist vision of Gnostic hostility to matter and sex. And Gnostic myth-making was sharply curtailed by the Church, in round after round of heresy-denunciation. But the image of marriage as a great mystery, transferred from the social realm to the heavenly, caught on.

To a large degree, it had good authority. The Gospel of John 3:29, relating the speech of John the Baptist, has John comparing himself to his master Christ: ‘He that hath the bride is the bridegroom’; I am only the friend of the bridegroom. The Pauline Letter to the Ephesians, in 5:22-23, uses the nuptial metaphor to defend an infamous subordination of women to men: just Christ is the head of the church, so the husband is the head of the wife. Methodius, to his credit, is not interested in the arguments about the inferiority of women, whether orthodox Pauline or heretical Gnostic. For him, women are more than fitted to serve in the first ranks of the holy. His adaptation of the nuptial imagery plays down the patriarchal insistence just as it lowers the wattage of the mystical vision. The ‘marriage’ of his virgins to their divine spouse is a privilege and a prize, not a burden and a chastisement. Like the marriage of the Shulamite to the Bridegroom in the Song of Songs, it promises ecstasy and adoration. And, like the new fashioned identity whose possibilities were the subject of experimentation among communities and small groups of ascetics in the first 4 centuries after Christ, virginal marriage represented freedom. Paul, in the First Letter to the Corinthians, had brought sharply into view the freedom of the unmarried woman, virgin or widow, who can devote herself unstintingly to God, in contrast to the lesser position the married woman, bound to the duties and worries of husband and family. The distinction was convincing. The rewards of virginal dedication could seem patent, to those who bothered to observe. And there were many, among women of all classes, seeking an alternative arrangement in their social and worldly lives as well as a greater stake in the blessings of the kingdom of God.

Pressed to explain such a swerve from time-honoured custom, for the allocation of he female sex to marriage and childrearing was a norm almost never challenged in the ancient world, Christians began to make use of the expression ‘bride of Christ’.[[725]](#endnote-725) Those who could handle this austere vocation, and live up to the demands of such public exposure and rigorous asceticism, had in effect chosen a different and more elevated bridegroom..[[726]](#endnote-726) Origen, even more inventive in the allegorical mode than Methodius, had already revived the sexual imagery used in the Old Testament for the turbulent relationship of Israel to the Lord: Israel, that virgin nation, was always falling short, sneaking around and chasing idols, sinking into ethical negligence and generally ‘playing the harlot’. Her spouse, always angry, was also always ready to forgive and start again. But the new, Christian Israel would be kept to a higher standard: her marital purity – that of the Church, the mystical body into which the Spirit had descended – must be immaculate.

Methodius’ prolific allegorical conceits did not receive much direct acknowledgment by Christian authors interested in directing or designing an ‘appropriate ascetic life’.[[727]](#endnote-727) The life of celibacy needed further consolidation. It was all very well to admire and imitate the ascetic secession from marriage and family, but how was it to be organised? Not everyone was an Antony of the desert; not many had the steely motivation or a Paul of Thebes, who Leaders had to emerge, guiding and inspiring the small or large groups enthralled by the ascetic example. How could they be organised? What kind of settlements were suitable: households, cloisters, caves? Should men and women, or younger and older, live under different roofs? Was there any different between the widow and the virgin, ignorant of all sexual experience? Could families stay together if they hankered after the ascetic call? Who was to govern, support and supervise members of the Christian communities drawn to such a life, with all their divergent and unfocused desires? Answers - of many different types -- would be proposed over the next 400 years, as programs for monastic rules and monastic discipline for men and women were offered by Pachomius, Basil of Caesarea, Benedict and others. Methodius was not one of them. His fantasy was the mirror of an afternoon spent in wonder and admiration for the magical potential of virginity: it was not a map for a way to live.

The mutual constitution of asceticism and monasticism is, of course, a big topic. My interests do not go that far into the complicated social and institutional histories, but I believe there is an intriguing correlation between the monastic ideal and the sort of fragile, indeed counter-cultural vision I am identifying with Christian pastoral, and also with its form of sublimated eroticism. Monasticism’s spread provided an explicit focus for the practice of chastity, but also its theology and its poetics. The cloister became the home for the spiritually ardent, especially those unaffected by the stronger forms of ecclesiastical ambition. It would be an authorised place for the exercise of renunciation and detachment, a way to recreate the desert on the outskirts of the social world. And that presence at the margins – in those regions Greek poets used to call the *chora*  - made monasticism an appropriate patron of the pastoral, as well as (of course) of permanent virginity. Without the monk’s devotion to the joys of contemplation and solitude, the alternative that Christian pastoral proposed would have remainedsimply a story that busy social beings liked to think about, not an image of perfection and human perfectibility.

This is a historical observation, but also an aesthetic one. Christian pastoral – a genre, but also a mode of imagination, a new symbolic structure --only reached its maturity and full bloom many years after Methodius, in the Latin Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Then it exploded. Christian thinkers from St Bernard and St Francis to Dante and Spenser rang the changes on the image of the blessed life as an idyll where human and animal, plant and thought, magic and the suspension of time, all come together. The place of their reunion is more important than anything else, for pastoral, as its name implies, cannot exist without the invocation of a bucolic world, without sheep and goats, without a landscape untouched by the business of cities and the preoccupation of citified men. For humans to enter the pastoral, they must reconnect with their shepherding ancestors, with those who are simple enough to play pipes by streams, linger on a hillside, or pick flowers all day.

Pastoral, conceived in a more speculative mood, is also a dream of innocence for the sophisticated. Theologians, too, could have fantasies of going rustic. What they remembered when they thought of green and innocent pasts was often an element that would not have disturbed a Theocritus or a Virgil, but nonetheless needed careful pruning if it was to survive into the Christian present. That was sex. By the conventions of pastoral as applied in the literature of Hellenistic Rome, of which a characteristic example would be Longus’s romance, *Daphnis and Chloe*, sex was both natural and symbolic. Urbane types, who were the ones destined to enjoy the fantasy of this mode, led lives in which sex was complicated, conflict-ridden, prey to intrigue and disappointment. But in a pastoral setting such excesses would fall away. Youth and maidens would learn from the animals. Their loves would be as fresh and as innocent as those of the birds. Could Christianity carve out a place for such an untroubled and approved eroticism? The chances were against it. For the flavour of eros to survive in the Christian pastoral, sex had to become something else. It had to become virginity. Shaken by their surrender to the serpent’s temptation, Adam and Eve become aware of their nakedness; they look for leaves to cover their genitals; they begin in shame to create civilization. After that fall, God had no choice but to set up for them the institution of marriage, and the cycle of reproduction and death. Eve was a virgin even when she basked in the favour of the Lord, for whom she would be the Mother of us all. But after her sexual awakening she had no place in the pastoral. Pain and exile were the lot of the descendants of Adam and Eve until Christ, the Arch-Virgin (Methodius) arrived to restore the pure image of God in man. His pastoral included passion and death, and a moment of despair in the Garden of Gethsemane. But what he promised looked as if God was offering us a way back. Only purity belonged in the garden. Could Christians live there?

In the literature and art of the Middle Ages, pastoral represents a revived Paradise, an earthly exception to the conflict-ridden world of history and decay, a green world reminiscent of the gardens of Adonis and the glades of Diana, now tamed and cleaned-up by a strict Christian discipline but still permitting the senses to enjoy all the benefits awarded to the natural world by a benevolent designer. More precisely, it is very often a garden surrounded by walls. ‘A walled garden is my sister, my spouse’, goes one of the speakers in the Song of Songs. Bliss happens in a garden, and in a secluded space, protected by soft breezes, made lyrical by the sounds of unhurried music, scented and serene. This is the milieu of the Old Testament book which had such an extraordinary history in the development of the allegorical mode, and indeed of medieval poetics. Traditionally, its authorship was credited to Solomon, and it was taken to be a wedding song, written by Solomon to celebrate his love for the Shulamite, a love not yet consummated but described – both by a female and a male speaker – in what seems to be a state of extended sexual arousal, certainly the most lyrical portrayal of erotic excitement in the ancient world.[[728]](#endnote-728) Sometimes called the ‘Canticle’ or the ‘Song of Solomon’, it was seized upon by Greek and Latin Fathers[[729]](#endnote-729) who were looking, consciously or not, for a physical correlative, a sensory sign, of the love Christ spoke about as the single and central meaning of his ministry. How to explain what Christ meant by love? How to give it its proper role in the theology of salvation? Were some members of the Church meant to be more single-minded and exemplary in their devotion to this work of love? And did that devotion imply the renunciation, for those who did aspire to the mystical communion this love promises, of lesser and competing loves, of loves of the body and the senses? Was virginity part of the theology of love? This was a challenge that Christian pastoral might have to address.

Methodius has little of Gregory’s philosophical originality, or Augustine’s brilliance. He did however have an instinct for the elegiac poetic form used by Greek poets like Theocritus and Virgil - worldly, sophisticated poets – to pretend that they could imagine nothing better than a life in which everything worldly and sophisticated was unknown. The pastoral was a fantasy of idyllic escape, but one that claimed for itself moral elevation rather than easy hedonism. Its joys were the joys of simplicity, joys to be found in the country, where innocence is all around and the ironies of experience or maturity are forbidden. Away from society, away from city and marketplace, true and authentic feelings revive. Hypocrisy is unnecessary; contestation and contradiction seem superfluous. The pastoral mode is a dream of eternal youth, with all the earnest sobriety of youth but without the clumsiness, the embarrassments, and the awareness of inadequacy. It is a blush that has nothing to blush for. When it is cultivated by the urbane, pastoral is like a memory of a state unappreciated except in retrospect, and so it becomes associated with the ‘primitivist’ illusion that civilization is a wound inflicted on a more trusting and uncorrupted nature.

To ambitious men of the Classical world, the silence and isolation of pastoral could not represent an option many would desire. ‘A flower that prefers not to be picked’, is how William Empson once described pastoral’s ‘trick’ of endowing social deprivation with the aura of inevitability.[[730]](#endnote-730) Pastoral makes an analogy between the botanical and the human, the world of animals and plants and the world of society, supposedly to the disadvantage of the social. Who wouldn’t rather be a shepherd or a simple rustic, knowing no institutions but those of the sun’s passage across the sky? The pastoral idyll offers a picture of escape from the irritations of agonistic life for those enrolled in its mesmerizing race for power and prestige. It offered an image of flight, of withdrawal and departure, which Christians were coming to identify with the vision of life beyond this earthly frame. And the rhetoric pastoral had developed, in its Roman use especially, was ingenious: it was counterpoised to the elaborate but artificial manners of ‘polished society’, where character was read by appearances and friendships were a matter of tactics. Urban life, on the other hand, is a challenge to a forthright soul; here transparency is a disadvantage. For the ‘world’ is itself a theatre, and what Christians call the ‘snares of this world’ resemble the illusions of the stage, those ‘theatrical shows’ that captivated the young Augustine (*Confessions* Bk. III, 2) only to insinuate a taste for falsity and illusion. The beauties in which the senses delight on the world’s stage are deceptive beauties. Nature, which offers its sensory array without guile and apparently without deliberation, is a better nurse, disclosing more accurately what the soul needs.

**Epilogue: Shepherds and Ladies**

The pastoral mode allowed sex to be held at a distance. Strife and stress make only ripples in a stream; loss may intrude, yet the final separation that is death can remain forgotten, just out of reach. It is always spring in the pastoral. Virginal flowers stay unplucked, as beautiful as ever. Bawdier paradises were known, even in Christian times: the poems collected sometime in the 13th century at a Benedictine cloister in Bavaria and called the *Carmina Burana* mock the ideals of sublimated love, for the monks who wrote these ‘songs’ knew that knights rape girls who herd flocks, and so do spoiled clerics, when they can spare time away from their incessant eating, drinking, and begetting of children. But the conventions of *fin’amors*, idealising love-service to a cruel mistress, enter into a few of the images of nature in its feminine tenderness. And others are pastoral through and through, like this one:

**XXV**

The earth now lays open her breast to spring mildness which she had closed up before the hard cold in winter’s fierceness. With spring comes the west wind in its sweet rustling; the north wind breathing cruelty now ceases to blow. Whom can this pleasant freshness of things allow to be silent?

Look, all things now declare spring with new burgeoning, now that the harmful cold has been repulsed by mild weather. The pregnant earth brings forth great beauty as its offspring, the sweet-smelling flowers of many colours.

The grove is dressed in foliage, already the nightingale sings, while the meadows are charming with various colours. It is sweet to walk through wooded places, sweeter to pluck lilies and roses, sweetest to dally with a lovely girl.

Rarely in Christian writing was Nature made so welcoming. These uninhibited monks had learned from literature and not from the pulpit. They allowed their imagination to linger on a place where lover and girl were fully at ease, free from admonishing eyes. In theological reflection on salvation, sin and human fallibility, such moments of blessed fecundity were rare. Pastoral ease and pleasure were not what first occurred to most theological minds. Theology had too many things that needed to be woven into a complex order: the Incarnate God, the threat of the demons, the particular union of substance and accident in the Trinitarian economy, the relations of time and eternity. The pious couldn’t rest and smell the flowers. They had to exhort themselves and others almost all the time. In the demanding work of Christian perfection, it was difficult to sustain the pastoral’s image of peace and plenitude. Except in one unusual area. A young maiden had been chosen by God to mother his child. Avoiding all mortal lovers, Mary of Galilee concentrated on the mystery of her womb and the care of the child she bore. Pictured in a garden, sheltered from the storms of the world, Mary was spring, fertile and gentle, blooming ‘immaculately’, as if generation could happen without sex, passion and even insemination. Her example was unique. She was ‘alone of all her sex’, the handmaiden of the Lord. Did this mean that the female sex had a second chance, restored to favour in the sanctified election of an ordinary young woman, exceptional only for what she hadn’t done. Mary was neither educated nor well-born. Her physical bravery was not conspicuous. The Gospels and Acts tell us nothing about heroic deeds or wise sayings. Indeed they say almost nothing about her at all, except that she rose to the occasion, enabling the remarkable event of the birth of God in human form, and accompanying that human God on part of his journey in the world. Mary’s profile is very thin. It is perhaps her emptiness as a character that allows so much to be invested in her. A maiden and a mother, she has no parallel among the virtuous symposiasts at Methodius’s banquet. A virgin imagined always with her child at her breast, except for the mournful occasion when she may have held him in death, Mary is the bridge through which humanity and divinity come back together. The ‘workshop of the union of natures’ she can contribute nothing of her own, lest she disturb that ‘untarnished vessel’ which is her body. Like nature in its mild pastoral aspect, she is a frame for all our fantasies, a mirror in which the desire for purity can behold itself.

Poetry and panegyric, otherwise kept on the fringes of monastic life, came into their own in the rapturous evocation of one pure and unreachable woman, the Mother of God. In the midst of a violent clash over the ontological status of the girl described by the Gospels as the virginal vessel in which God chose to bring his son to flesh, a priest from Constantinople named Proclus (c.390-446) ‘delivered a sermon on the Sunday of the Feast of Mary 429’. It is a wonderful text:

She who has called us here is the holy Mary;

The untarnished vessel of virginity;

The spiritual paradise of the second Adam;

The workshop of the union of natures;

The market-place of the contract of salvation;

The bride-chamber where the Word took flesh in marriage;

The living bush, of human nature, which the fire of a divine birth-pang did not consume…[[731]](#endnote-731)

1. Gilbert Murray, *Euripides and his Age* (New York: Henry Holt, 1913), 86. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Why hide it? To the upper class adolescent Eustochium, who had declared herself ready for a life of perpetual virginity, St Jerome wrote a letter full of the kind of  
   scurrilous humour and bitter satire unfamiliar to most sheltered young women in late 4th century Rome. But this young lady has chosen the ascetic life. She has reason to feel that ordinary standards don’t apply to her. Everyone else who thinks they are pious and chaste Christians, they are all whores and fakes. You are too good to mix with them, so watch out, their envy will plague you: “Learn from me a holy arrogance. Know that you are better than them all.” (*Letter 22.16)* [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. E.R. Dodds, “The Greek Shamans and Puritanism,” in *The Greeks and the Irrational*, (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1951), 139-140, 150, 154. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See Erich Segal, introduction to *Euripides: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1968), 1-12. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*, in *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, ed. Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs, trans. Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), §§10-13 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. The fullest discussion of *Sophrosyne* is Helen North, *Sophrosyne: Self-Knowledge and Self-Restraint in Greek Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1964). The first reference in classical poetry to feminine *sophrosyne* in the ‘limited significance’ of chastity (in archaic literature it appears as early as the 7th century BC) is made by Aeschylus’ character King Danaus in *The Suppliant Maidens*, in speaking to his daughters: he exhorts them to be ‘sophron’, by which he means modest, calm, self-controlled, but which they mishear as an insistence they must guard their chastity at all costs, even through unbalanced violence. See North, 36-38. I will discuss this paradox in Chapter 2. See also North, *From Myth to Icon: Reflections of Greek Ethical Doctrine in Literature and Art* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), especially Chapter 1,’The Mythology of Sophrosyne’: ‘The first and most widespread myth of masculine sophrosyne – found all over the world, not just in Greece – is that of the chaste young man who repels the amorous advances of an older, married woman.’ (33) She clarifies: ‘The sophrosyne desirable in the young male –orderly behavior, submission to authority – is always required of women, young and old alike, as Aristotle makes clear in the *Politics*, when he groups together the categories that share the kind of sophrosyne appropriate to those who are ruled ­– women, children, and slaves 91260a9-11). In addition, feminine sophrosyne includes chastity. The very existence of a distinction between masculine and feminine sophrosyne sheds light on one whole facet of ancient society.’ (47) [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. That *sophrosyne* is the typically female virtue of being prudent and restrained in erotic matters is assumed by the old father Iphis in Euripides’ *Supplices:* his daughter, Evadne,has lost her husband in the attack on Thebes (he was struck by a bolt of lightning), and now decides to jump to her death to join her husband in a final embrace. (*Supplices* 1063-1071). See Daniel Mendelsohn, *Gender and the City in Euripides’ Political Plays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 200-211. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. The two goddesses are set up in parallel, indeed mirroring, positions. To overlook one is to overlook the other, at least according to Justina Gregory (*Euripides and the Instruction of the Athenians*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997, 58-9): “The two goddesses have more in common than Hippolytus imagines. The poet repeatedly links them through imagery: the bee that traverses Artemis’ meadow at 77 reappears as Aphrodite’s emblem at 563-64, and the poet associates both goddesses with the sky, with destructive shafts, with cool water. He makes them speak the same language, and by the end of the play it will have become clear that the two goddesses share the same goals and methods.” But Artemis remains unsubdued, immune to the power of the love goddess. (*Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*, 16-20). Just as Aphrodite and Artemis frame each other, neither sufficient to themselves or free of everything they denounce in the other, so Phaedra and Hippolytus will turn out to be the mirroring parts of a mixed-up whole (the *parados*’s dustropos *harmonia* (161-164); see also Froma I. Zeitlin, *Playing the Other: Gender and Society in Classical Greek Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 238-9. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. In Homer, she receives that title too: *Iliad* 21.470. Some consider her barbaric, not Greek, or at least some of her avatars seem to be ‘foreign’, as Pausanias says of Laphirian Artemis, whose festivities involve huge burnt offerings of live game birds, bears, wolves, boars and fruit, plus a procession headed by the most beautiful virgin in a chariot drawn by yoked deer. (VII.18.7) [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. See Walter F. Otto, *The Homeric Gods: the Spiritual Significance of Greek Religion*, trans. Moses Hadas (London: Thames and Hudson, 1954), p.80-90. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., 88, citing Pausanias 6.23.8. Hippolytus is an idealist destined for disappointment, because the image he has of the world and the self is based on an impossibility: there is no simple and untroubled integrity, no such thing as a state or identity without division and mixture. The play, like Greek tragedy in general, agrees with the callow male adolescent that women represent this “ill-fitted composition” to an inordinate degree, their bodies and their moral senses being more porous and inconsistent than men’s. But shouldn’t that vulnerability increase the value of lifelong virginity for them, given that virginity symbolizes a self-containment and unbrokeness of composition that eros’s entanglements can only blur? Christianity certainly thought so: the process by which the original ideal of perfect chastity, preached to the moral elite of both sexes, becomes a feminine specialty will be described in the following chapters. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Girls that are no longer children but not yet women have posed a problem to many societies. The liminal status of the virgin in Israel, Greece and Rome goes well beyond the ideal Artemis may be thought to represent, and gives many headaches to fathers and those entrusted with the guarding of virgins. Tertullian, advocating the practice of veiling virgins in the Christian communities of the 2nd and 3rd centuries C.E., captures the ambiguity of the virginal state for women and their families. A virgin, he writes in *On the Veiling of Virgins*, 11, does not need to be veiled in early childhood but ‘from the time she begins to be self-conscious, and to awake to the sense of her own nature, and to emerge from the *virgin’s* sense, and to experience that novel (sensation) which belongs to the succeeding age…a virgin ceases to be a virgin from the time that it becomes possible for her *not* to be one.’ See Mary F. Foskett, *A Virgin Conceived: Mary and Classical Representation of Virginity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 51, and Mieke Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 42. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. *Mortals and Immortals*, p.198 (see next Footnote) [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Mortals and Immortals: Collected Essays*, edited and trans by Froma I. Zeitlin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p.197. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Is J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion,* abridged edition, Volume 1 (New York: Macmillan, 1922), 1-8. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. *Miasma*, or defilement, can pollute the unprepared just as it pollutes and makes a pariah out of those who commit murder, step unknowingly into sacred precincts, or suffer from a divinely-sent mania. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. J.E. Robson considers the debates about the existence of such feminine ‘rites of passage’ or initiations into puberty. For Vidal-Naquet, these rituals, the *arkteia* in Attica and perhaps others, can only be empty imitations of the male rites, since for boys, a change of status is involved when they make the journey from childhood, through this period of separation and ‘outsiderness’, into readiness for male citizenship. To what status can girls ascend, he wonders? But the passage from girlhood to menarche is a significant and even a dramatic one. That an adolescent girl would need first to become a wild animal before she can accept and fulfill her adult place in the household, as guardian and agent of reproduction, wife and mother, does not seem too extraordinary. It is important that the girl becoming a woman both know what it is like to be wild – in the state of nature – and tamed, and for this knowledge the transitional period of virginal ‘playing the bear’ provides an education, an exposure to the excitements of danger - life outside human life and the city – and the inevitability of civil integration. Potentially a danger to the man who would like to take her into his home and bed, girl, as so often said, is in need of taming. Robson cites Mary Douglas:

    …danger lies in transitional states, simply because transition is neither one state nor the next, it is undefinable. The person who must pass from one state to the next is himself in danger, and emanates danger to others.

    And he comments: “But what makes her young wildness dangerous, in particular, is what happens when she begins to menstruate: she can, of course, now conceive a child, ‘outside wedlock, that is with no respect for the *mores*  of civilized society. Such a wild union would be appropriate for animals, but not for civilized human beings…(…) Marriage is not only cognate with, but may be perceived as, the final state of the taming process begun by female puberty rites. At marriage, the girl rids herself of her animality and is now a wife or ‘tamed one’, since she has submitted to Aphrodite’s yoke.” Robson’s interpretation, which aligns with some of the arguments I want to make both in this chapter and the next, solves many of the problems that have confused other commentators on the Brauron rite and female initiation in Greece. (see his arresting paper, ‘Bestiality and bestial rape in Greek myth’, in Susan Deacy and Karen F. Pierce, eds. *Rape in Antiquity: Sexual Violence in the Greek and Roman Worlds* (London: Duckworth, 1997), 65-96 (p.70-73) [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. For a contemporary reference to these rites see Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*, 639-646; for later references, Pausanias’s description of the Brauron sanctuary is sketchy (I.33.1). I am indebted to Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood’s careful discussions in her *Studies in Girls Transitions* (Kardamitsa, 1988), 21-61. See Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *The Black Hunter: Forms of Thought and Forms of Society in the Greek World*, trans. Andrew Szegedy-Maszak (Johns Hopkins UP, 1986, pp.129-156, especially p.145-6. The rites at Brauron are the only ones Vidal-Naquet thinks parallel the initiation rites Greeks expected of boys entering the ephebia. Since girls don’t become citizens, what need do they have to pass through status-transition? Well, because the change from virginity to marriage is a change in status and in identity. Vidal-Naquet develops the argument also found in Walter Burkert (1985) that ‘hunting cultures’ conceived of virgin sacrifice as a sometimes necessary substitute for the body of the wild bear or buffalo; hunting ‘steals’ a life from the wild, and those divinities who protect the wild – Artemis above all – can take vengeance on the hunter for their crime; only a comparable sacrifice, as Agamemnon’s of his virgin daughter, can satisfy them Scholars had been puzzled for a long time about what was meant by ‘playing the bear’ at Brauron. ‘The myth’, Vidal-Naquet continues’, is not difficult to explain: in exchange for the very advance of culture implied by the killing of wild animals, an advance for which men are responsible, the girls are obliged before marriage – indeed before puberty – to undergo a period of ritual “wildness”.(146) [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion,* tr. John Raffan (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 151-2. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Victoria Wohl, Intimate Commerce: Exchange, Gender and Subjectivity in Greek Tragedy (University of Texas Press Austin, 1998), p.72. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Pausanias’ description of the sanctuary and rites at Troizen, in Corinth, was written sometime in the late 2nd century AD: ‘I have seen Hippolytos’s house’, he reports; one envies him. He saw also Hippolytos’s stadium ‘above it is the shrine of Peeping Aphrodite: whenever Hippolytos was exercising, Phaidea would watch him form up here and lust for him. Here as I said before, the myrtle still grows with perforated leaves. When Phaidra was in despair of any way to ease love she wantonly ruined the leaves of the myrtle’. The account of the Trozenian ritual is one of many but Pausanias’s has its own unreliable charm:

    ‘The Trozenians have a priest of Hippolytos consecrated for his whole lifetime, and a tradition of annual sacrifices, and there is another thing they do: every virgin girl cuts off a lock of hair for him before their marriage and brings it to the shrine to dedicate it. They will not hear of his death dragged behind the horses, nor show his grave although they know it; they believe that the Charioteer in heaven is their own Hippolytos, and that the gods have given him this honour.’ (Pasusanias, *Guide to Greece, Book I*I, 32.1-3). I am using the translation of Peter Levi, from the Penguin edition originally published in 1971. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Myth and Society in Ancient Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York: Zone, 1990), p.33; ‘Women in Classical Athens: Heroines and Housewives’, in Elaine Fantham, Helene Pet Foley, Natalie Boymel Kampen, Sarah B. Pomeroy, and H. Alan Shapiro, eds., *Women in the Classical World* (OUP, 1994), p.85. I discuss the conflation between sacrificial maidenhood and the blood-letting of the hunt in a later section of this chapter , see also Vidal-Naquet, N.14. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Zeitlin, *Playing the Other*, p.276. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. See the interesting discussion in Mendelsohn, *Gender and the City in Euripides’ Political Plays*, 52-55, and 137-223, on Demeter, marriage, fertility, violence and violation. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Ken Dowden calls this ‘Bremmer’s Principle’, with reference to J.N. Bremmer, ‘”Effigies Dei’ in Ancient Greece: Poseidon’ (1987), cited in Dowden, *Death and the Maiden: Girls’ Initiation Rites in Greek Mythology*, London and New York, 1989, p.37. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Vernant, ‘City-State Warfare’, in *Myth and Society in Ancient Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd, New York, 1990, p.34-35. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Zeitlin emphasizes the exchange of roles between Hippolytus and Phaedra, ‘his secret double’; : ‘his initiation into the world’ resembles ‘the experience of the female body.’ (*Playing the Other*, p.234-5.) In his mixture of masculinity and femininity, Hippolytus resembles another rebel, Cainis, a Lapith girl who responded to her rape by Poseidon by demanding to be turned into a man, and became one of the toughest, fearsome in battle, worshipping, it is said, only the sword, not the disreputable gods with their predatory designs on woman. Zeitlin writes of Caineus, as he became: “Who, one the one hand, might better defend women against rape than one who owes his present identity to the revulsion inspired by the forcible penetration of his once female body? Yet this hybrid/hybristes whose figure is a response to the exaggerated outrage of the obdurate virgin incarnates a hypermasculinity on the side of a warrior violence.” In this, Zeitlin continues, he is not unlike “those warrior women, the Amazons, who mix masculine with feminine traits and express in fullest form some of the most persistent anxieties on both sides about sexuality and the trauma it represents as the initiation into adulthood.” (‘Configurations of Rape in Greek Myth’, in *Rape: an Historical and Social Enquiry*, ed. Sylvana Tomaselli and Roy Porter (Oxford: Blackwells, 1986), pp. 122-151 (p.134). [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. The Amazons appear in art and myth as the polar opposites of the Greeks, like the giants and centaurs and other rude monsters. But exotic as they are, they are also close. Considered barbarians, they are still taken as wives or concubines; warriors, they defy the image of femaleness as docile and subordinate. Athenian myth, Zeitlin writes, “brings them into the very hear of Attica by having Theseus abduct their queen and transfer her to his territory. When he puts her aside in favour of a second wife, Phaedra, her Amazon sisters, in order to avenge her, leave their usual ground to invade Athens itself, meeting defeat finally on the sacred hill of the Areopagus by the Acropolis.” (ibid., p.135) [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Aristophanes has women attacking Euripides as a misogynist (*Lysistrata* 368-9) but the criticism acknowledges how he understands the constraints and troubles of their lives in Athens: *Frogs* (1049-53) [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. I am quoting here from Anne Carson’s free translation in *Grief Lessons: Four Plays by Euripides*, New York: NYRB Books, 2006), p.173. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Apollodorus, *The Library*, trans. Sir James G Frazer, (Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard University Press, 1921), vol. II: In consequence of the wrath of Aphrodite, for she did not honor the goddess, this Smyrna conceived a passion for her father, and with the complicity of her nurse she shared her father's bed without his knowledge for twelve nights. But when he was aware of it, he drew his sword and pursued her, and being overtaken she prayed to the gods that she might be invisible; so the gods in compassion turned her into the tree which they call smyrna (myrrh).Ten months afterwards the tree burst and Adonis, as he is called, was born, whom for the sake of his beauty, while he was still an infant, Aphrodite hid in a chest unknown to the gods and entrusted to Persephone. But when Persephone beheld him, she would not give him back. The case being tried before Zeus, the year was divided into three parts, and the god ordained that Adonis should stay by himself for one part of the year, with Persephone for one part, and with Aphrodite for the remainder. However Adonis made over to Aphrodite his own share in addition; but afterwards in hunting he was gored and killed by a boar. (Book III.14.4) On the story of Adonis, and the erotic festivals celebrated by Greek women in his honour, see Marcel Detienne’s fascinating *The Gardens of Adonis: Spices in Greek Mythology,* tr. Janet Lloyd (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Froma Zeitlin, *Playing the Other*, p.220. “No one else (with the exception of Artemis, Athena, Hestia) none of the blessed gods or human beings, can ever escape Aphrodite.”(*Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*, l. 34-35) [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. That Hippolytus is noble and heroic, not an abnormality destined to be rejected by his society, is a point made forcefully by David Kovacs, *The Heroic Muse: Studies in the* Hippolytus *and* Hecuba *of Euripides* (Baltimore and London:1987), p.29-31 and *passim.* That the particular intensity of his ‘nobility’ belongs to a reactionary and nostalgic strand in 4th century Athenian society, sympathetic to the oligarchy, is one of the ways Justina Gregory interprets the tensions within the central virtue of *sophrosyne*, at the time of the play a word with ‘unmistakable conservative overtones.’(62) Rosselli disagrees: it is the hoplite virtue. In a democratic society, Burkert argues, ‘men who behave as *semnoi* (as Hippolytus does, to the servant’s dismay) ‘risk being considered pompous and ridiculous.’(*Greek Religion*, 273) [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Gregory*,* p.56. Also E.R.Dodds, ‘Euripides the Irrationalist’(1929) in*The Ancient Concept of Progress and other essays on Greek literature and Belief* (Oxford, 1973), p.87. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. If I accept that the state of sexual innocence is something I cannot keep, I have assented to life’s mutability, and to the inevitable push of aging and maturity. Immortals don’t need such an acknowledgement . But it is fundamental to our knowledge of what it is to be human. The gods can steer us wrong here: as Apollo does when he tempts Admetus with the possibility of cheating death. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Jean-Pierre Vernant, ‘Introduction’, to Marcel Detienne, *The Gardens of Adonis*, p.xxxxix. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. That the play’s use of the two to destroy each other is not a trivial indictment of conventionality should be obvious. Froma Zeitlin brings out its more troubling concern with the antagonistic powers of eros: eros is the snare and the disease, binding those who resist being bound to one another, denying the autonomy of the self and the illusions of identity. See her extraordinary reading of the play, ‘The Power of Aphrodite: Eros and the Boundaries of the Self in Euripides’ *Hippolytus*’, in *Playing the Other: Gender and Society in Classical Greek Literature* (Chicago UP, 1996), esp. pp.222-234. Zeitlin’s collection of essays is one of the milestones in recent Classical studies. Its demonstration of the way Hippolytus and Phaedra live each other’s lives, die each other’s deaths, is a revelation. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. The famous command “think mortal thoughts” was considered its classic expression, and thus it is tantamount to ‘being sane’ , being in one’s right senses, but it can also imply an excessive resort to intellectual resources, or being heartlessly calculating, as in Jason’s way of being ‘sophron’. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. North, From Myth to Icon, 46. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Tellingly, it is associated with a woman, Penelope, in the *Odyssey* (32.11-13) [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Helen North, *Sophrosyne: Self;Knowledge and Self-Restraint in Greek Literature* (Cornell UP, 1966), p.21. It is first used to connote male as well as female chastity by Euripides (see North Note 105, p.76, and the passages she cites: *El.* 923, 1080, 1099; *Or*. 558, 1132; *Hel.* 47, 932, 1684; *Troad.*  1056; *Iphigenia in Aulis* 1159. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Since Aristophanes (*Thesmophor.* 9, 450-1; *Frogs.* 102) it has been commonplace to believe Euripides was influenced by the sophists who criticized both traditional piety and the assumption that words could have univocal meanings (North, 70); see also Mary Lefkowitz, ‘Impiety’ and ‘Atheism’ in Euripides’ Dramas’, in Judith Mossman, ed., *Oxford Readings in Classical Studies: Euripides* (OUP, 2003), p.102-121. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. North, From Myth to Icon, 35. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. A highly appropriate death (unlike Racine’s poisoning), since Artemis is associated with hanging and strangulation, by a curious set of equivalences, alluded to in the epithet *Artemis Apankhoumene* and a story Pausanias tells about the goddess’s worship at Kaphyae in Arkadia. Helen King, in her ingenious paper, ‘Bound to Bleed: Artemis and Greek Women’, argues that suicide by hanging is what one chooses to avoid the bloodshed or rape or unwanted defloration, hence it is what the daughters of Danaus threaten when they seek to escape their aggressive cousins (*Supp. 465)*. Artemis herself does not bleed; she who resists the transition to womanhood will be similarly hostile to the onset of menarche, with all its implications that she is ‘ripe’ for marriage, defloration and childbirth; also that her womb, her lower ‘mouth’, is open, to be closed ideally in pregnancy. Phaedra may regret the whole business. Should she have died before things got to this point? Hanging herself, King argues, is her fantasy of inverting the process. See King’s chapter in Averil Cameron and Annélie Kuhrt, *Images of Women in Antiquity* (London: Croom Helm, 1987), pp.109-127. Nicole Loraux began the discussion in 1981 with her paper on sexual difference and tragedy “Le lit, la guerre”, where she argued ‘to the effect that hanging was associated with marriage – or rather, with an excessive valuation of the status of bride (*nymphe*) – while a suicide that shed blood was associated with maternity…” (*Tragic Ways*, p.15) [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. See Nicole Loraux, *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman*, trans. Anthony Forster (Harvard UP, 1987), p.21f. If suicide in tragedy itself was a woman’s death, hanging was very common among woman older and younger – the choice of Jocasta, Antigone and Leda as well. It was looked on with displeasure and associated with dishonour: a ‘formless’ death, Loraux explains, ‘that one inflicted on oneself only in the utmost shame.’(p.9) [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. See Brooke Holmes, The Symptom and the Subject: the Emergence of the Physical Body in Ancient Greece (Princeton, 2010), pp.253-259. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. It is closely allied to Artemis, who is named ‘Aidos’ on a red-figured vase described by Otto, n.11, p.293. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. ‘*Aidos* (“shame’) is a vast word in Greek. Its lexical equivalents include “awe, reverence, respect, self-respect, shaefastness, sense of honour, sobriety, mdoeration, regrad for others, regard for the helpless, compassion, shyness, coyness, scandal, dignity, majesty, Majesty.” Shame vibrates with honour and also with disgrace, with what is chaste and with what is erotic, with coldness and also with blushing. Shame is felt befroe the eyes of others and also in facing onself.’ (Anne Carson, *Grief Lessons*, 163-164.) [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Barbara Cassin, ed. *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, translation edited by Emily Apter, Jacques Lezra and Michael Wood (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 1196. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Pseudo-Lucian (whoever he is, probably a 4th century imitator of Lucian) appropriates Phaedra’s point, with the same references to Hesiod, in the *Amores*, his mocking dialogue comparing the merits of pederastic and conjugal love. The immediate source may well be Achilles Tatius’s *Leucippe and Clitophon*, which has a lively and amusing rhetorical contest on the same subject. Hippolytus’s authority is invoked by the pederast in *Amores* to promote the idea of acquiring children by buying them at shrines and temples. This would be a much more rational alternative to the present necessity of intercourse, so humiliating and ‘unbeautiful’. The Loeb translation of the relevant passage in *Amores* is this: ‘For Shame too is a twofold goddess with both a beneficial and a harmful role.’(37) And the chronic ambiguity of love as a term is further bewailed in the comment on the Hesiod quote, to the effect that ‘passion’ () and ‘virtue’ () can be confused, since both *akoulasia* and *sophrosune* can be called erotic love. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. I am citing Hesiod from the Loeb edition. Hesiod, *Theogony, Works and Days, Testimonies*, tr. Glenn W. Most (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007). [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Or like the dual *eros* in Euripides’s *Stheneboea*. Bellerophon (no expert on the subject) declares: ‘There are two loves (*erotes*) bred on earth: one, which is most inimical, leads to Hades, but the love which leads towards morality and virtue (*sophronon ep’ aretan* ) is something men may envy, among whose number I may myself be (*Sthen.* 23-26) [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. Bellerophon shares Hippolytus’s fatal flaw, according to Pindar: he longs for things ‘far off’. See Jane Ellen Harrison *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (Cambridge UP, 1922), p.220. Euripides, in his play *Sthenoboea*, of which all but a fragment is lost, has him talk about his *sophron eros* (Frag. 16. 22-25, see previous Note). Bellerophon was famous for his chastity and also for his relationship to horses. Although Bellerophon was similarly threatened with death because of the false accusation of rape, the aggrieved husband was unwilling to take responsibility for the murder of a guest, and the young man eventually avenged himself against the slanderous queen. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. If, as we might have expected from such a plot, Aphrodite’s aim was to punish Hippolytus for refusing to honour her, why not affect *him* with an ungovernable passion – ideally a transgressive or ridiculous one, as Zeitlin suggests? Aphrodite is circuitous. Phaedra is used as a stand-in for Hippolytus. His destruction is worked, cruelly, through her, in order that the duality of both concepts – *eros* and *sophrosyne* - be more acutely observed. Greek civic ideology, in the 6th and 5th centuries, was committed to the notion that the virtues could co-operate, hence that the crucial practice of *sophrosyne* could not exclude any other good equally valued, like, in this instance, love. But that faith was delusional. *Sophrosyne* fails, in Euripides, because it kills the very momentum of *eros* – which is to say, its drive to loosen, extend, combine, and confuse. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. That Euripides is implying that Hippolytus secretly practices the Orphic mysteries has been suggested a number of times. His similarity to Orpheus is interesting. Jane Harrison says of the musician man-god torn to pieces by the Maenads ‘Orpheus was a reformer, a protestant; there is always about him a touch of the reformer’s priggishness; it is impossible not to sympathize a little with the determined looking Maenad who is coming up behind to put a stop to all this sun-watching and lyre-playing.’ (*Prolegomena* 461) ‘Always about him there is this aloof air, this remoteness, not only of the self-sufficing artist, who is and must be always alone, but of the scrupulous moralist and reformer.’(471) E.R. Dodds, however, doubts the Orphism of Hippolytus, in which he says he used to believe: ‘We really must not turn a bloodstained huntsman into an Orphic figure.’ (*The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley: California University Press, 1951), p.148. There is just not that much we can say with any certainty about what Orphism was, what was the content (if any) of its doctrines and psychology, where, when and how much it was practised. Better call both Orphic and Pythagorean beliefs ‘Puritan’, says Dodds, and leave it at that. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. Banished from the ‘long companionship’ (*homilia)* with his otherworldly virgin of which he was too proud, Hippolytus dies on a note of complaint (1440-1441). Has his goddess so little interest in him? Although she leaves vowing to avenge him and promising to erect a cult to this mortal, ‘dearest of all to me’, Artemis acknowledges that there was something hybristic in his demands, and that Aphrodite was within her rights to take offense. “For Aphrodite’s jealousy is not simply that of a woman when, in the play’s prologue (line 19), she characterizes the companionship (*homilia*) between man and goddess as too loft for a mortal…Greek piety was based on distance between man and god; it was Hippolytus’s error to have allowed his pleasure in proximity to the divine Huntress to overshadow this basic tenet. Companionship with a god, even on the ephebic trails of the forest, was at best inappropriate, at worst impudent.’(Nicole Loraux. ‘What is a Goddess?”, *A History of Women: From ancient Goddesses to Christian Saints*, vol. I, ed. Pauline Schnitt Pantel, Harvard, 1992, p.12); also see Mary Lefkowitz, *Greek Gods, Human Lives: What we can learn from myths* (Yale UP, 2003), p.156-159. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. English-speaking readers interested in Hippolytus will remember the comic festivities celebrating the wedding of Theseus and Hippolyta in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Shakespeare is in no doubt that marriage comes after madness; his virgins play therapeutic and redemptive roles, and then go happily to the altar, their virtue confirmed through trial and doubt. The exception is Isabella. I will turn to the Shakespearean teaching on marriage and virginity in a later chapter. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. Patrick Cheney, in a chapter on ‘Spenser’s Pastorals: *The Shepheardes Calendar*  and  *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe*, transkates Schiller’s theory of the sentimental, in *Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*, into a definition of pastoral. I will return to the significance of pastoral to the cult of chastity at the end of Chapter 6. For Cheney, see *The Cambridge Companion to Spenser*, ed. Andrew Hadfield (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001), 80-105 (84) [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. ‘This man of quondam violence and licentiousness’, Jean H. Hagstrum calls him. (*Esteem Enlivened by Desire: The Couple from Homer to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 312. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. On Attis, the consort of the Mother of the Gods and his other forms, including Osiris and Tammuz, see Mathew Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch: Masculinity, Gender Ambiguity, and Christian Ideology in Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 246-260. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. Zeitlin thinks there is something rather creepy about his unwillingness to meet ‘the other’s eye (or touch) in a human contact.’(266) Artemis, of course, also can’t be touched or looked at. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. “Normal 5th-century practice required, certainly, that the man who entered a sacred place or took part in a sacred ritual should be (*hagnos*), but this was a purely formal affair of observing taboos (of avoiding, or purging, pollution caused by such things as physical uncleanness or contact with some aspect of birth, sex, or death. Hippolytus’s requirement of *moral* purity is alien to the ordinary Greek cult until Hellenistic times; his insistence that the purity must be innate would be extraordinary even then.” (from the William S. Barrett commentary on his edition of *Hippolytos*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964, p.172. Hippolytus identifies himself with a way of being and acting that belongs to a powerful but traditional form of religious practice.

    This was not only a Greek preference. Not only in 5th century Athens but in Palestine, Egypt, and Babylon, anyone taking part in a sacred ritual was expected to be 'pure' and undefiled. As generally understood, this referred to the requirements of cleanliness, purgation through baths or abstinence from food, absence of contact with birth or death or sex, with blood or violence. Many ritual functions could only be performed by young boys or maidens who because of their age were necessarily pure. Any contact with the dead, and certainly any shedding of war in violence, war or sacrifice, excluded the violator from sacred things, and made their accidental presence fatal to the successful outcome of all rites, religious or civic. But cultic purity and moral purity are not the same thing. See Burkert on purity in his *Greek Religion*, p.269-272. Rudhardt’s discussion in *Notions fondamentales de la pensée religieuse et actes constitutifs du culte dans la Grèce classique* (Paris: Picard, 1992), p.28-32.; and Mary Douglas, ‘The Abominations of Leviticus’ *Purity and Danger: An analysis of the concepts of pollution and taboo* (London & New York: Routledge, 1966, 42-58; Douglas nicely understates: ‘One of the great puzzles in comparative studies of religion has been the reconciliation of the concept of pollution, or defilement, with that of holiness.’ (*Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology*, London & New York: Routledge, 1975, p.47. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, pp.74-84. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. Robert Parker, *Miasma: Pollution and Purification in Early Greek Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), p.3-12. [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. Yet religiously consecrated areas – *hiera* – are not off limits to the people: indeed they are much in demand as safe places to keep money and the civic treasury, as meeting places for assemblies, sanctuaries in times of fever or invasion. Some could only be used to the business of the cult, those at Delphi and Eleusis requiring exceptionally high degrees of respect. Cf. Jean Rudhardt, *Notions fondamentales de la pensée religieuses*, p.24-26. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. Parker, p.19, citing Hippocrates, *Morb. Sacr*. 148.55 ff.J., I.46 G. (‘On the Sacred Disease’); see also Rudhardt, 28: those who are excluded from sanctuaries come from several categories: murderers and those polluted by crimes, men who willingly prostituted themselves, women caught in adultery, and anyone who has just had sex without washing themselves. [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 8-9: the best book that has been and will be written on this topic. [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. Robert Parker, *On Greek Religion* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 40-63. [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
69. Zeitlin, *Playing the Other*, .247. [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
70. Although the bull is also a manifestation of Dionysus, who ‘leaps’ into the pure temple (cf. Marcel Detienne, *Dionysos at Large*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 55. [↑](#endnote-ref-70)
71. On the goddess:

    Behold her with your mind, and do not sit with your eyes staring in amazement.

    She is also recognized as innate in mortal limbs.

    Through her they have kindly thoughts and do peaceful deeds, calling her by the appellation Joy and also Aphrodite.

    Simplicius, *Commentary on Aristotle’s Physics* 158.1-159.4)

    In her languor, Phaedra is a stand-in for Aphrodite. On this languor, see Simon Critchley, ‘I Want to Die, I hate My Life – Phaedra’s Malaise’, in *Rethinking Tragedy*, ed. Rita Felski (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 170-195. [↑](#endnote-ref-71)
72. *The Homeric Hymns*, tr. Jules Cashford (London: Penguin, 2003), 85-97 (translation modified.) [↑](#endnote-ref-72)
73. Giulia Sissa, *Sex and Sensuality in the Ancient World,* tr. George Staunton(New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2008), 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-73)
74. See also Glenn Most, ‘Six Remarks on Platonic Eros’, and David M Halperin, ‘Love’s Irony’, in Shadi Bartsch and Thomas Bartscherer, *Erotikon: Essays on Eros, Ancient and Modern*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). But see Brooke Holmes, *The Symptom and the Subject* (Princeton, 2010), p.228ff: sometimes in Euripides a sickness is a sickness; ambiguously or interpreted by the characters as sent by the gods, other diagnoses, more down to earth, are not excluded and remain viable. [↑](#endnote-ref-74)
75. Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, New York: Dalkey Archive Press, 1998, 7-9. [↑](#endnote-ref-75)
76. . Another Greek love poet describes the pull of sexual attraction as ‘more melting than sleep or death’, and the comparison was apt enough to be repeated again and again. (Alkman 3: 61-62, cited Carson, *Eros*, 20. [↑](#endnote-ref-76)
77. Parker, *Miasma*, 74-103. [↑](#endnote-ref-77)
78. Giulia Sissa, Sex and Sensuality in the Ancient World, 37 [↑](#endnote-ref-78)
79. Giulia Sissa draws attention to the way ‘the traditional image of desire caused by a divine agent’ is ‘overturned’ or at least challenged by Medea’s claim to be the agent of her own emotions. Was it here, in this 5th century tragedy, that ‘love became secularised and ceased to be represented as a form of bewitchment?’ (ibid., 17) [↑](#endnote-ref-79)
80. Lucretius’s poem stands alone in the history of philosophy and literature. Both Virgil and Ovid confess themselves admirers; Montaigne recognised a kindred spirit. It is a vision that straddles antiquity and modernity and, according to Stephen Greenblatt, begins the ‘swerve’ into the modern world. Love is not its sole concern, by any means. Greenblatt’s recent book on the loss and return of Lucretius’s book summarises its ambitions:

    Divided into six untitled books, the poem yokes together moments of intense lyrical beauty, philosophical meditations on religion, pleasure, and death, and complex theories of the physical world, the evolution of human societies the perils and joys of sex, and the nature of disease. (Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011)182. [↑](#endnote-ref-80)
81. Paul Veyne, *Did the Greeks Believe in their Myths? An Essay on the Constitutive Imagination*, trans. Paula Wissing (Chicago and London: Chicago UP, 1988), p.1. The literature of eros, the poetry of passion and sacrifice, needs the gods; does it need myth? In the form of literature, is myth purified, stripped of its etiological pretensions? [↑](#endnote-ref-81)
82. Ibid., 113. [↑](#endnote-ref-82)
83. See the essays by David Sedley and Michael Erler in *The Cambridge Companion to Epicureanism*, edited by James Warren (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009) [↑](#endnote-ref-83)
84. Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve*, 98. [↑](#endnote-ref-84)
85. Ibid., p.58-59. [↑](#endnote-ref-85)
86. Sissa, Sex and Sensuality in the Ancient World, 48. [↑](#endnote-ref-86)
87. Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire,* Volume I and II, ed. David Womersley (London: Penguin, 1994), 495. [↑](#endnote-ref-87)
88. Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Edited and abridged by Hans-Friedrich Mueller (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 212. [↑](#endnote-ref-88)
89. Robert Parker, *On Greek Religion*, 252. [↑](#endnote-ref-89)
90. Mathew Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch*, p.20. [↑](#endnote-ref-90)
91. *Lucian*, vol. VIII, tr. M.D. Macleod, Loeb Classical Library 432 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967). [↑](#endnote-ref-91)
92. Kuefler, 36: ‘The poet Claudius Mamertinus elegantly described eunuchs as “exiles from the society of the human race, belonging neither to one sex nor the other.” (cited from Claudius Mamertinus *Gratiarum actio suo Juliano imperatori* (ed. D. Lassandro [Turin: Pavaria, 1992); trans. S Lieu [Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1986]) 19:4) [↑](#endnote-ref-92)
93. Kuefler, 32-33. [↑](#endnote-ref-93)
94. Kuefler, p.248. [↑](#endnote-ref-94)
95. Good and succinct descriptions of these lives can be found in Richard Finn, OP, *Asceticism in the Greco-Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), chapter 5, ‘Caveman, Cenobites, and Clerics’, 131-155. [↑](#endnote-ref-95)
96. An excellent scholarly introduction to these cultural opportunities, and their theoretical formulation by the Church Fathers, is Joyce Salisbury’s *Church Fathers, Independent Virgins* (London: Verso, 1991). [↑](#endnote-ref-96)
97. The Third Ecumenical Council, held at Ephesus in 431 A.D., met to address a bitter controversy between the bishop of Constantinople, Nestorius, who was supported by the Antiochians, and the supporters of Cyril of Alexandria, who had Rome on their side. The issue was the interpretation of the humanity of Christ. When he took form in Mary’s womb, was he still divine? In what sense can a mortal woman be said to give birth to the Godhead? Nestoriusm believed it was better to call Mary the *Anthropotokos*, for to call her ‘the Mother of God’ sounded heretical. How could God have a mother? After the Council sided with Cyril, Marian devotees in Constantinople took it as a sign in favour of the increased dignity and prestige of the Virgin Mary, in whom ‘God the Word was enfleshed and became man’, That this traditional assurance was a rather loose and opportunistic interpretation of the Council, which made no dogmatic decisions and did not produce the definition of Mary as Theokotos, is argued by Richard Price: ‘Theotokos: The Title and its Significance in Doctrine and Devotion’, in *Mary: the Complete Resource*, ed. Sarah Jane Boss (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 56-73. See also Miri Rubin, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2009), 41-49. [↑](#endnote-ref-97)
98. Julia Kristeva, ‘Stabat Mater’, in *Tales of Love,* tr. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 235. [↑](#endnote-ref-98)
99. Kristeva, 252. [↑](#endnote-ref-99)
100. Kristeva, 234-263. [↑](#endnote-ref-100)
101. Kierkegaard quotes Shakespeare in Schlegel’s translation: *Twelfth Night, or What You will*, Act I, scene V:

     Clown (Feste): Let her hang me! He that is well hang’d in this world need fear no colors. (l.5-6)

     And a few lines later:

     Clown: Many a good hanging prevents a bad marriage.(l.19-20) [↑](#endnote-ref-101)
102. As the Danaids say: (Suppl. 149-150): ‘May the chaste daughter of Zeus, the untamed one, rescue us, the untamed ones; may we escape unwedded and unsubdued’. [↑](#endnote-ref-102)
103. From *The Prose of Sir Thomas Browne*, ed. Nomran J. Endicott (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchr Books, 1967) *Religion Medici Second Part,* §9, 80. [↑](#endnote-ref-103)
104. Phèdre’s fatal languor sticks in our mind thanks to Simon Critchley (‘I Want to Die, I Hate My Life – Phaedra’s Malaise’, in Rita Felski, ed., *Rethinking Tragedy*, Johns Hopkins, 2008, p.170-195.. Whatever I haven’t learned from our conversations on these topics I learned from this marvelous essay. Phaedra’s yearning to ‘fly away’ is widely shared by tragic women who opt for suicide. The word for a flying sort of swinging, or a swinging sort of flying, is *aiora*, Nicole Loraux explains. The tragic heroine who hangs herself – Phaedra, Antigone, Jocasta (it is also the act threatened by the Danaids if they are not given sanctuary) – is choosing liberty, liberty in death. She is throwing herself into the void, as if in a deadly swing, to use Evadne’s words in Euripides’ *The Suppliant Women* (1045-47). She longs to become a bird, to exit ‘with a leap’, as Theseus says to Phaedra’s corpse: ‘A sudden leap (*pedema*) has carried you off to Hades’. The onlooker – however shocked – will also be impressed, Loraux suggests, because this act is quintessentially feminine: ‘the only ones to take flight are those who are too feminine.’ (Nicole Loraux, *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman*, trans. Anthony Forster, Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1986, p.19) [↑](#endnote-ref-104)
105. To be someone motivated by shame, sensitive to its violations, does not make me a puppet of convention, hostage to the approval or disapproval of others. The ‘actual ethical life’ of which shame was an important element is trenchantly described by Bernard Williams in *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1993), p.75-102. [↑](#endnote-ref-105)
106. For Lucien Goldmann, she is a faithful servant of the Hidden God, a true Jansenist heroine called to the tragic vision, in which what is great is the refusal itself: ‘that one moment when man becomes fully tragic by refusing the world and life.’ (*The Hidden God: A Study of the Tragic Vision in the ‘Pensées' of Pascal and the Tragedies of Racine*, trans. Philip Thody (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964), p.317, 327. Goldmann agrees with most readers of Racine’s play that Phèdre is great and Hippolytus ‘mediocre’ (374) The offspring of Heaven and Hell – her grandfather is the Sun, her father the Judge of the dead in Hades – Phaedra cannot finally make the compromises that pretend to allow a virtuous creature to live in the world. ‘It has often been rightly said that, on the stage, the character of Phaedra completely overshadows the other characters and deprives them of all value.’ (377) Hippolytus, Goldmann, says stands for the world which, in Racine’s Jansenist universe, ‘has no reality or value’. I want to argue that the opposite is true in Euripides’ play. Goldmann acknowledges as much. As he writes, if Hippolytus had met only Phaedra and not Racine’s invented love interest, Aricia, who he is perfectly willing to marry, then his flight would be properly Jansenist. It would be a refusal of life, the tragic heroism of a Christian ascetic. In my view, this is substantially true of Euripides’ hero. It is not remotely true of Racine, for whom Phèdre’s glory is achieved at the price of Hippolytus’. [↑](#endnote-ref-106)
107. Denis de Rougemont claims that Racine did: ‘*Phèdre* was written for Marie Champmeslé, who played the queen; and Hippolytus is Racine – Racine as he now wished to be: insensitive to the fatal spell.’ *Love in the Western World*, trans. Montgomery Belgion (revised edition, Princeton UP, 1983, ) p.203. De Rougemont blasts the play, blaming Racine – like the ‘race of troubadours’, like Plutarch and presumably Dante, -- for betraying love. Racine, he complains, is a traitor to eros. He allows divine love to destroy sensual, day to destroy night. In another modernising twist on the play, Jules Dassin has his wife Melina Mercouri play Phaedra to Anthony Perkins’s Hippolytus, who returns her love, a much more conventional outcome. (*Phaedra*, Greece/France, US,1966) [↑](#endnote-ref-107)
108. Goldmann, p.386. [↑](#endnote-ref-108)
109. See Froma Zeitlin, ‘Configurations of Rape in Greek Myth’, in Sylvana Tomaselli and Roy Porter, eds., *Rape: An Historical and Social Enquiry* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986, p.122-151, on the abduction by Theseus of the Amazon queen. The Amazons, for Zeitlin, ‘epitomize the extremes of barbarian exoticism by their status as women warriors; and by their identity as females they challenge the cultural conception of a docile femininity contrasted with a naturally dominant masculinity…(..) The myths may tell us how the Amazon is finally overcome, but she lives on as one of the most elaborated themes in Greek iconography, whether pictorial or sculptural; she lives on as one of the most persistent psychological elements of the mythic imagination that far outweighs, in my opinion, a certain pallid and complacent reductiveness that accompanies the now canonical explanations of the structures and functions of her myth that end in the message, ‘women must marry’, or ‘the social order must reassert the principle of male dominance on which it is founded….(…) her forced abduction on to Attic territory may have something more to tell us about the violence inherent in sexuality and marriage and about the nature of feminine response to the violation of its body’s boundaries.’ (135-6)

     There is, to be sure, another way to read the myth of Amazons raped by Greek heroes and state-founders, one less responsive to feminist insights and more indifferent to the sexually-charged meanings of these ubiquitous –and positively valued - depictions of sexual violence in antiquity. K.W. Arafat is representative of another school of interpretation. In his article on ‘State of the Art – Art of the State’, he studies Attic and Archaic red-figured vases, specifically those designed for public display, and argues for their political meaning: ‘rape is a metaphor for victory’, so when Theseus (in a number of Athenian vases from the late-6th to the mid-5th century) is represented abducting Antiope (the alternate name for the Amazonian queen), this ‘can be taken to reflect Athenian success against the Persians.’(109). See his chapter ‘State of the Art – Art of the State: Sexual violence and politics in late Archaic and early Classical vase painting’, in *Rape in Antiquity: Sexual Violence in the Greek and Roman Worlds*, ed. Susan Deacy and Karen F. Pierce (London: Duckworth, 1997), p.97-121. [↑](#endnote-ref-109)
110. Page DuBois, Centaurs and Amazons: Women and the Pre-History of the Great Chain of Being (University of Michigan Press, 1982), p.62-67. [↑](#endnote-ref-110)
111. Ibid., p.67. [↑](#endnote-ref-111)
112. The trouble with Amazons: Vernant, ‘City-State Warfare’, *Myth and Society in Ancient Greece,* trans. Janet Lloyd (New York, 1990), 23-24, and Froma Zeitlin, ‘Configurations of Rape in Greek Myth’, op.cit., 131-136. [↑](#endnote-ref-112)
113. Kathryn Schwarz, *Tough Love: Amazon Encounters in the English Renaissance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-113)
114. See Page DuBois, Centaurs and Amazons, p.7; Nicole Loraux, The Children of Athena: Athenian Ideas about Citizenship and the Division between the Sexes , trans. Caroline Levine (Princeton, 1993), p.75 [↑](#endnote-ref-114)
115. Vernant, ‘Introduction’ to Marcel Detienne, *The Gardens of Adonis,* p.xxxviii. [↑](#endnote-ref-115)
116. *The Ethical Fragments of Hierocles*, section 5, in Kenneth Sylvan Guthrie, ed. and trans., *The Pythagorean Sourcebook and Library* (Grand Rapids, MI: Phanes Press, 1988), 281-284. [↑](#endnote-ref-116)
117. Detienne, *The Gardens of Adonis,*.47. Detienne’s fascinating reading of the Pythagorean system of meaning is developed throughout his *Gardens of Adonis* *.* [↑](#endnote-ref-117)
118. See Diogenes Laertius’ report of the teachings of Pythagoras, *Lives* VIII. 8-10. [↑](#endnote-ref-118)
119. Pythagoras himself was happily married and raised a philosophically talented daughter, according to Charles Kahn, *Pythagoras and the Pythagoreans: a Short History*, (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett, 2001), 8, 75. [↑](#endnote-ref-119)
120. A love affair between a mortal man or woman and a divinity is clearly not uncommon: the ‘goddesses who slept with mortal men’ (Hesiod, *Theogony*, 974-1029)) are plentiful, over and above the busy Aphrodite (Demeter, Harmonia, Kallirhoe, Dawn, Thetis, Circe, all did it.) [↑](#endnote-ref-120)
121. Erwin Rohde’s very interesting account of the Orphics in his classic *Psyche: the Cult of Souls and Belief in Immortality Among the Greeks* , trans. W.B. Hillis (Kegan Paul: London, 1925), p.335-361, argues that Orphism was attractive just to the degree that it revived a ‘foreignness’ earlier imported with the Dionysus cult, in danger of becoming too assimilated and too ‘Greek’. Orphic doctrine held that the soul must free itself from the chains of the body, and death itself is insufficient to accomplish this liberation: the soul not yet purified undergoes repeated incarnations. [↑](#endnote-ref-121)
122. Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, p.296-301. [↑](#endnote-ref-122)
123. Importantly, both were ‘non-city’ religions. Dionysus, once assimilated into Greece, did get a cult to himself in the urban centers, the ‘City Dionysia’ above all, which sponsored the great dramatic competitions. [↑](#endnote-ref-123)
124. Louise Bruit Zaidman and Pauline Schmitt Pantel, *Religion in the Ancient Greek City*, trans. Paul Cartledge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p.174. [↑](#endnote-ref-124)
125. Harrison, *Prolegomena*, p.476. [↑](#endnote-ref-125)
126. ibid., 511, 516, [↑](#endnote-ref-126)
127. Burkert, *Greek Religion,*  p.293. [↑](#endnote-ref-127)
128. ‘simple, sensuous, and passionate’ - How Milton described the way he preferred poetry to be, in his reformed curriculum for the education of the young ( from *On Education*, 1644, in John Milton, *Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes, New York: Odyssey Press, 1957, p.637.) [↑](#endnote-ref-128)
129. “Milton brings to fruition what had been present but often allowed to remain only latent in Judaism and Christianity – an exalted love between the sexes.’ Jean H. Hagstrum, *Sex and Sensibility: Ideal and Erotic Love from Milton to Mozart* (Chicago and London: Chicago UP, 1980),p.24. [↑](#endnote-ref-129)
130. In Hagstrum’s view, the ordaining of mutual love between the sexes, both spiritual and physical, as ‘the cornerstone’ of the institution of marriage, was breathtakingly unprecedented: ‘marriage ‘before and since’ has been able to exist and even thrive without such a cornerstone. (ibid.) ‘His simple position was therefore extremely radical – that love creates marriage as the sun creates the day and that when love sets, it is night.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-130)
131. Daniel Mendelsohn, *Gender and the City in Euripides’ Political Plays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-131)
132. Campbell Bonner, ‘A Study of the Danaid Myth’, *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, vol. 13 (1902), 129-178 (137) http://www.jstor.org/stable/310344 accessed Dec.8, 2014 [↑](#endnote-ref-132)
133. Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 53. [↑](#endnote-ref-133)
134. Ibid., and also 148-149: ‘I have said before that the idea of innocence, indispensable to classical romance as a preoccupation with virginity, remains at issue in the genre of remarriage, where the status of literal or physical virginity is presumably no longer a question.’ I will return to Cavell and *The Philadelphia Story’s* ‘unique’ and blatant preoccupation with literal virginity, ro with ‘purity as chastity’ in the last section of this chapter. [↑](#endnote-ref-134)
135. Not a controversial claim. For brilliant treatments of these issues, see Frances Ferguson,’Rape and the Rise of the Novel’, in R. Howard Bloch and Frances Ferguson, eds. *Misogyny, Misandry, and Misanthropy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 88-112; Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel;Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding*  (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1957); Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); on the ‘two great instances of categorial instability that re central to the rise of the novel’ – generic and social, questions of truth and questions of virtue – see Michael McKeon, ‘Gneric Transformation and Social Change: Rethinking the Rise of the Novel’, in idem, ed., *The Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2000), 382-399, and idem, *The Origins of the English Novrel, 1600-1740* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1987) [↑](#endnote-ref-135)
136. GWF Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, tr. H.B. Nisbet(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), §§161 and 163. [↑](#endnote-ref-136)
137. That courtship is a ‘precarious time’, involving ‘testing’ as well as pleasure, ‘pregnant with possibilities of either the abortion or fulfilment of desire’ is an idea Jean Hagstrum credits to Shakespeare in the romantic comedies, and an idea Cavell has made relevant to his own genre of romance. See Hagstrum, *Esteem Enlivened by Desire*, 286. The comedy in the ‘romantic comedy’ can get tense, and this edge of menace, as well as malice, should not be forgotten in the ‘new society’ ushered in at the end by the marriage celebration, ‘a victory of the pleasure principle that Freud warns us not to look for in ordinary life’. (to use Frye’s formulation, see *A Natural Perspective*, 75-76.) [↑](#endnote-ref-137)
138. Derek Hughes, *Culture and Sacrifice: Ritual Death in Literature and opera* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 158. [↑](#endnote-ref-138)
139. Anne Carson, ‘Putting Her in Her Place: Woman, Dirt and Desire’, in David M. Halperin, John J. Winkler, and Froma I. Zeitlin, eds. *Before Sexuality: the Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World* (Princeton, 1990), 135-169 (135-136). [↑](#endnote-ref-139)
140. On this see Daniel Mendelsohn’s very interesting chapter, on Euripides’ *Suppliant Women*  (a different group from the Danaid suppliants at Argos: these are the mothers of Argive warriors, rebels who have falled in the attack on Thebes, who had followed Oedipus’ son Polyneices in his impious war against his own brother Eteocles. Just like Antigone, these women are suffering because they cannot bury their men, under a prohibition from Creon.). Mendelsohn’s chapter is called ‘Regulations of the Feminine’, and is unusually rich on the subject of marriage, horror, xenophobia, violation and femininity in relation to the Greek city and its politics. [↑](#endnote-ref-140)
141. Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 261, [↑](#endnote-ref-141)
142. ibid., 267-268. [↑](#endnote-ref-142)
143. See Simon Goldhill, Foucault’s Virginity: Ancient Erotic Fiction and the History of Sexuality (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 4-35, and John. J. Winkler, The Constraints of Desire: ; The Anthropology of Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece (New York: Routledge, 1990), 101-125. [↑](#endnote-ref-143)
144. Goldhill, Foucault’s Virginity, 36. [↑](#endnote-ref-144)
145. See Kathleen Coyne Kelly, Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages (London: Routledge, 2000), 127, 138; Sigmund Freud, The Taboo of Virginity (1918), in On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality, and other works, tr, and ed. James Strachey (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), 265. [↑](#endnote-ref-145)
146. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* , tr. and ed. H. M. Pashley (New York: Random House, 1989), 152, 154-5. [↑](#endnote-ref-146)
147. ‘When the old poets made some virtue their theme’, C.S. Lewis writes in a gushing dedicatory letter to Charles Williams, ‘they were not teaching but adoring, and what we take for the didactic is often the enchanted.’ The virtue Lewis alludes to is chastity. Its celebration by Milton (in *Comus*) had been explained to Lewis and a group of surprised undergraduates at Oxford by Williams, in a lecture Lewis is recalling when he writes his own *Preface to Paradise Lost* (1942). (I quote from the reprint edition, New York: Oxford University Press, 1961, v).

     Milton’s sympathy for chastity in *Comus* reflects his own youthful identification with the virtue. He was unhappy at Cambridge during his first undergraduate years, and remained contemptuous of his drunken and careerist fellow-students. ‘It is not hard to imagine the taunts that fastened the name “The Lady of Christ’s” on a slender, refined, defiantly chase, highly intellectual and artistically inclined adolescent.’ (Barbara Lewalski, *The Life of John Milton* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 31. Asked to write a humorous oration for a college festival (A ‘Sportive Exercise’), Milton wonders aloud why he has been made the ‘Dictator’ of a ‘Commonwealth of Fools’, and then alludes with some bitterness to his college nickname. ‘Some of late called me ‘the Lady’. But why do I seem to them too little of a man?...It is, I suppose, because I never brought myself to toss off great bumpers like a prize-fighter…or last perhaps because I never showed my virility in the way these brothellers do. But I wish they could leave playing the ass as readily as I the woman.’ (John Milton, *Complete Prose Works*, Vol. I, 1624-1642, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953, 277-286.) The editors of the *Prose Works* point out that Milton’s nickname was supposed by John Aubrey to have been inspired by his fair complexion. Milton’s own jokes suggest otherwise. That he took seriously his reputation for chastity is demonstrated in the 1642 *Apology for Smectymnus* , which I paraphrase: when I was a young man and at university, I loved the romances of knighthood, and the ideal of male nobility they expressed (eg., to defend to the death the ‘honour and chastity of Virgin or Matron’). I learned from Plato, from Dante and Petrarch, about the charm of chastity and love. I see no reason to be ashamed of my natural reserve and modesty. Unchastity in a man, Milton reflects, is even more ‘deflouring and dishonourable’ than it is in a woman. Yet marriage, he acknowledges, ‘must not be call’d a defilement.’ (Milton, *Complete Prose Works*, Vol. I, 890-893. [↑](#endnote-ref-147)
148. Comus had appeared to make the case for pleasure and excess in Ben Jonson’s Twelfth Night Mask of 1618, *Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue*. [↑](#endnote-ref-148)
149. In 1656 Margaret Cavendish, the Duchess of Newcastle and celebrated author, publishes *Assaulted and Pursued* Chastity, using the romance form. Its virtuous young heroine is forced to travel in dangerous parts (the ‘Kingdom of Sensuality’), and is mistreated by her landlady, who sells her to a brothel. The old bawd who runs the brothel deceives her, dresses her beautifully, ‘reading her lectures of Nature,’ which advise that she should use her beauty while she has it: ‘Nature hath made nothing vainly, but to some useful end’. Beauty is designed to serve procreation, as Nature ‘only lives by survivors. ‘Wherefor it is a sin against Nature to be reserved and coy…Nature is a great and powerful goddess, transforming all things out of one shape into another...wherefore follow her directions, and you shall never do amiss.’ (Margaret Cavendish, *The Blazing World and Other Writings*, ed. Kate Lilley, London: Penguin, 1994, p.48-50 [↑](#endnote-ref-149)
150. See John Rogers, ‘The Enclosure of Virginity: the Poetics of Sexual Abstinence in he English Revolution’, in *Enclosure Acts: Sexuality, Property and Culture in Early Modern England*, Richard Burt and John Michael Archer, eds. (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994), p.229-250: Rogers argues that the lady’s oratory in praise of ‘the pure cause of sustained virginity’ was radical, and radically incompatible with ‘the cultural expressions that surround it’ in the period (I would say, in any period). The mystical ideal of virginity was at odds with the norms of marriage otherwise approved by Protestant divines and political reformers. : ‘In the more radical spheres of revolutionary Puritan thought’, the admiration for virginity – which would have been expected to disappear with the Reformation’s attack on clerical celibacy and its hypocritical ideals – returned in a number of key 17th century figures, of which Milton is only one. ‘The maintenance of virginity was not only a convenient symbolic assertion of the isolate, liberal self; it could also be imagined, far more radically, as an actual historical precipitant for a spiritual, even political revolution. The new affirmation of the value of celibacy came to participate , much as it seemed to in the 1637 version of *Comus* , in the millenarian optimism charging the revolutionary aspirations of midcentury radicals.’(239) [↑](#endnote-ref-150)
151. Christopher Kendrick talks of Milton’s ‘chastity cult’ in ‘Milton and sexuality: A symptomatic reading of *Comus*’, *Re-membering Milton*, ed. Mary Nyquist and Margaret W. Ferguson, (New York & London: Methuen, 1987), 42-73. [↑](#endnote-ref-151)
152. Angus Fletcher, *The Transcendental Masque: an Essay on Milton’s* Comus, (Ithaca: CornellUP, 1971), 151, and on 150: ‘Milton writes about chastity continuously, in tracts on marriage, love, and divorce – even on freedom of speech and thought – and in his major poems, all of which deal with virtue as an effluence of chastity.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-152)
153. Lewis, *Preface to Paradise Lost*, 122-124, 121. [↑](#endnote-ref-153)
154. Comus is also quoting Leander in Marlowe’s *Hero and Leander*. [↑](#endnote-ref-154)
155. Kathryn Schwarz, ‘Chastity, Militant and Married: Cavendish’s Romance, Milton’s Masque’, *PMLA*, Vol. 118, No.2 (Mar. 2003), p.274. [↑](#endnote-ref-155)
156. Fletcher, The Transcendental Masque, 165. [↑](#endnote-ref-156)
157. *Comus*, line 787, in *John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose*, edited by Merritt Y. Hughes, p.108. [↑](#endnote-ref-157)
158. David Halperin, ‘Is There a History of Sexuality?’, *History and Theory*, 28 (1989), 257-94, and Pierre J. Payer, *The Bridling of Desire: Views of Sex in the Later Middle Ages* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 14-15, continuing the question raised by Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, tr. Robert Hurley (London: Allen Lane, 1978). Objections to Foucault’s history are numerous, but not as interesting as him; see David Cohen and Richard Saller, ‘Foucault on Sexuality in Greco-Roman Antiquity’, in Jan Goldstein,ed., *Foucault and the Writing of History* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994), 35-59. [↑](#endnote-ref-158)
159. See the sensible discussion in Mary K. Foskett, *A Virgin Conceived: Mary and Classical Representations of Virginity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 22-50. [↑](#endnote-ref-159)
160. Giulia Sissa, *Greek Virginity*, tr. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990) 76, 88-104.. [↑](#endnote-ref-160)
161. Joan Breton Connelly, *Portrait of a Priestess: Women and Ritual in Ancient Greece* , Princeton and Oxford, 2007, p.18. [↑](#endnote-ref-161)
162. Claude Calame, *Choruses of Young Women in Ancient Greece: their Morphology, Religious Role, and Social Functions*, rev. edition, trans. Derek Collins and Janice Orion (Rowan and Littlefield, Lanham, 2001), p.27. [↑](#endnote-ref-162)
163. Giulia Sissa, *Greek Virginity*, 77. [↑](#endnote-ref-163)
164. Giulia Sissa, ‘Maidenhood without Maidenhead: the Female body in Ancient Greece’, in David M. Halperin, John J. Winkler, and Froma I. Zeitlin, eds. *Before Sexuality: the Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World* (Princeton, 1990), p.337. [↑](#endnote-ref-164)
165. [↑](#endnote-ref-165)
166. Cited in Foskett, 26; Sissa’s discussion in on p.83 of *Greek Virginity*. [↑](#endnote-ref-166)
167. Sissa, *Greek Virginity*, p.84-86. [↑](#endnote-ref-167)
168. Sissa, *Greek* Virginity, 106. [↑](#endnote-ref-168)
169. Sissa, *Greek Virginity*, 105. [↑](#endnote-ref-169)
170. Helen King, Hippocrates’ Woman: Reading the Female Body in Ancient Greece (London: Routledge,1998) , p.23. [↑](#endnote-ref-170)
171. Loraux, *Children of Athens,* p.216; 224-230: Kreousa is a virgin still, intact despite rape – even despite marriage. [↑](#endnote-ref-171)
172. Claude Calame, *The poetics of Eros in Ancient Greece*, tr. Janet Lloyd (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 126. [↑](#endnote-ref-172)
173. Loraux, *Children of Athens* , p.83. [↑](#endnote-ref-173)
174. Loraux (1993), p.138. [↑](#endnote-ref-174)
175. We meet these sacrificial virgins everywhere, killed for any number of reasons, which boil down to one: to solve problems. See Pierre Brulé, *La Fille d’Athènes: La religion des filles à Athènes à l’époque classique. Mythes, cultes et société* (Paris, 1987, p.31-33. In the Hebrew world, see Mieke Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry*, p.93: ‘It is the multiple meanings of the concept of virginity and the contradictions, confusions, and conflations it entails that qualify the virgin daughter for the role of sacrificial victim. It is my contention that there is, indeed, an intrinsic bond between the idea of virginity, the competition between fathers and next-generation men, and the extreme violence that takes the form of ritual sacrifice.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-175)
176. See also Giulia Sissa, *Greek Virginity*, chap 4, and chaps 7-13. [↑](#endnote-ref-176)
177. Vernant, ‘City-State Warfare’, in *Myth and Society in Ancient Greece,* trans. Janet Lloyd (New York, 1990), p.34. [↑](#endnote-ref-177)
178. ibid., 34. [↑](#endnote-ref-178)
179. Helen King, *Hippocrates’ Woman*, 88. [↑](#endnote-ref-179)
180. Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Mortals and Immortals: Collected Essays*, edited by Froma I. Zeitlin (Princeton, 1991), p.210. [↑](#endnote-ref-180)
181. ibid., 215. [↑](#endnote-ref-181)
182. Jean Pierre Vernant, ‘Introduction’ to Marcel Detienne, *The Gardens of Adonis* , p.xxxxix. [↑](#endnote-ref-182)
183. See, among many, Louise Bruit Zaidman and Pauline Schmitt Pantel, *Religion in the Ancient Greek City* , trans. Paul Cartledge (Cambridge, 1992) [↑](#endnote-ref-183)
184. This is more fully covered in Helen King’s fascinating *Hippocrates’ Woman*, 77-79. King summarises Hippocrates’ diagnoses: ‘The problems start *ham ate kathodoi ton epimenion*, at the same age as the ‘going down of her menses’, in a girl who is otherwise ripe for marriage…Girls at puberty produce more blood than their body can use…This blood flows down, moving as if it were going to pass out of the body…But, in the girls described here, the blood is unable to leave, due to the closure of the ‘mouth of exist’…Due to the pressure of blood here, the *parthenos* exhibits a number of symptoms: she is delirious, she fears the dark, and she has visions which seem to compel her to jump, to throw herself down wells and to strangle herself. In the absence of visions she shows an erotic fascination with death; literally, ‘she welcomes death as a lover’ (*erai tou thanatou*).’ Hippocrates, King continues, has a one-fits-all prescription for this virginal suffering: ‘I order *parthenoi* to marry as quickly as possible if they suffer this. For if they become pregnant, they become healthy. If not, then at puberty or a little later she will be caught by this or by some other disease.’(78) [↑](#endnote-ref-184)
185. The phrase is R.D. Murray’s: *The Myth of Io in Aeschylus’* Suppliants, (p.69-70) cited in Zeitlin, ‘Playing’, p.155, N.88. [↑](#endnote-ref-185)
186. Jean-Pierre Vernant, , ‘Hestia-Hermès’, *Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs: Étude de psychologue historique*  (Paris, 1969/1996), English translation by Janet Lloyd and Jeff Fort (New York, 2008), p.171.; also in the same author’s ‘Oedipus without the Complex’, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece* trans Janet Lloyd (New york, 1988), p.99.; and ‘City-State Warfare’, *Myth and Society* , p.34. [↑](#endnote-ref-186)
187. Vernant, Mortals and Immortals, 202. [↑](#endnote-ref-187)
188. King, Hippocrates’ Woman, 83-94. [↑](#endnote-ref-188)
189. Ruth Padel believes that the use of women in state cults has something to do with male fear of women’s strangeness and ‘affinity with darkness’; they have, accordingly, greater divinatory powers. See ‘Women: Model for Possession for Greek Demons’ in Cameron and Kuhrt, eds., *Images of Women in Antiquity* (London and Sydney, 1983), p,8-14. [↑](#endnote-ref-189)
190. *Portrait of a* Priestess, p.10 [↑](#endnote-ref-190)
191. Vernant, ‘Hestia/Hermes’, p,174-5. [↑](#endnote-ref-191)
192. Zaidman and Pantel, Religion in the Ancient Greek City, 68. [↑](#endnote-ref-192)
193. Vernant, ‘The Pure and the Impure’, *Myth and Society*, p.127. [↑](#endnote-ref-193)
194. I am paraphrasing the survey of the ancient textual evidence from Fehrle, *Die* *kultische Keuschheit im Altertum* (Giessen, 1910, reprinted 1966), 112-123, [↑](#endnote-ref-194)
195. Fehrle, p.50. [↑](#endnote-ref-195)
196. Jean-Pierre Vernant, ‘Hestia-Hermès’, *Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs: Étude de psychologue historique*  (Paris, 1985/1996), p.17. [↑](#endnote-ref-196)
197. See also Jean Rudhardt, Notions fondamentales de la pensée religieuses, p.158-160. [↑](#endnote-ref-197)
198. Vernant, *Myth and Society*., p.170. [↑](#endnote-ref-198)
199. Robert Parker, *Miasma*, p.77. [↑](#endnote-ref-199)
200. Playing the Other, p.131. [↑](#endnote-ref-200)
201. Helene P. Foley, *Ritual Irony: Poetry and Sacrifice in Euripides* (Ithaca: Cornell UP,1985), p.21. [↑](#endnote-ref-201)
202. Calame, *Choruses of Young Women*, p.145: ‘The adolescent significance of the ballgame is already present in Homer in the scene in which Nausicaa, like Artemis surrounded by her nymphs, plays with her attendants; the consecration of the hairnet can be aligned with the consecration of hair by the Delian girls to the Hyperborean virgins, hypostases of Artemis…All the objects dedicated by Timareta are thus associated with adolescence. Their dedication to Artemis signifies for the young girl the end of the period they symbolize, and at the same time probably the transition to adulthood through marriage. The semantic constellation contained in these anonymous lines depicts the function of the cult of Artemis Limnatis as a preparation for the adolescent to adulthood. This image corresponds to the image of violence of which the girls celebrating Limnatis were victims.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-202)
203. Helen King, ‘Bound to Bleed: Artemis and Greek Women’, in Cameron and Kuhrt, eds, *Images of Women in Antiquity* (Beckenham, Kent: 1983), p.111, [↑](#endnote-ref-203)
204. On the stipulation of Pericles’ citizenship bill of 402/2 BC, which, together with the local habit of Athenians’’ busy interest in the private lives of others, made it essential that ‘no the least breath of suspicion should fall upon young girls with regard to their virginity, see W.K. Lacey, *The Family in Classical Greece* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1968). P.158-9. [↑](#endnote-ref-204)
205. Pierre Brulé, *Women of ancient Greece*, trans. Antonia Nevill (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), p.10. [↑](#endnote-ref-205)
206. Cf. Eugen Fehrle, op.cit., p.98-102. [↑](#endnote-ref-206)
207. As goddesses or creatures of the demiworld are described with their companions, tomboyish maidens or skittish, half-animal humans. [↑](#endnote-ref-207)
208. Froma Zeitlin, ‘Configurations of Rape in Greek Myth’, p.131. [↑](#endnote-ref-208)
209. ibid., p.125. [↑](#endnote-ref-209)
210. Marianne Moore, ‘blameless bachelor’, is representative of the Modernist aesthetic I associate with the ‘ascetic avant-garde’, in which company should be included Valéry, Weil, Mallarmé, Cage, and many others. (Their stories, which have informed my research in this book, will be told more fully in a project that will follow this one. I owe the reference to Moore’s poem, and the understanding of the chastity of her work and life, to Ellen Levy’s *Criminal Ingenuity: Moore, Cornell, Ashbery, and the Struggle between the Arts* (OUP, 2011) [↑](#endnote-ref-210)
211. Levy, p.xxii-xxiii. [↑](#endnote-ref-211)
212. On the Amazons I rely on Page DuBois: Centaurs and Amazons: Women and the Pre-History of the Great Chain of Being (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991) and now Kathryn Schwartz, Tough Love: Amazon Encounters in the English Renaissance (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000). [↑](#endnote-ref-212)
213. at least until the modern horror film. [↑](#endnote-ref-213)
214. Anne Pippin Burnett, Catastrophe Survived: Euripides’ Plays of Mixed Reversal (Oxford, 1971), p.1 [↑](#endnote-ref-214)
215. That such a possibility existed may be surprising to most students of marriage in the ancient world. But see Jean Pierre-Vernant: “We have evidence of another custom which also testifies to the existence of a state of crisis in the normal processes of matrimonial exchange. It is what the anthropologists refer to as *svayamvara*; the selection of a husband is left up to the free choice of the daughter. Here again historical evidence and legendary tradition overlap and are mutually illumination Herodotus tells us the story of Kallias. Victor at the Olympic and Pythian games and renowned for his sumptuous extravagance. However, the historian adds, he is chiefly admired for the way he behaved toward his three daughters. He settled very rich dowries on each of them and “gave each one to the man she elected to choose as a husband.” To leave the choice of a husband to the daughter herself, who ahs full powers to select the man she wants, is in some ways similar to the typically noble procedure of marriage by competition. The two themes are often presented as doublets, or are associated, in legend.” *Myth and Society in Ancient Greece*, p.71. [↑](#endnote-ref-215)
216. Marcel Detienne, ‘The Danaids among Themselves’, in *The Writing of Orpheus: Greek Myth in Cultural Context* trans Janet Lloyd (Baltimore, 2003), 37-49. [↑](#endnote-ref-216)
217. See Mieke Bal, Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges (Chicago and London, 1988), pp.41-93. [↑](#endnote-ref-217)
218. Calame, op.cit., p.145. [↑](#endnote-ref-218)
219. Detienne, The Writing of Orpheus, p.49 [↑](#endnote-ref-219)
220. ibid, 38. [↑](#endnote-ref-220)
221. Ibid., 38-39. [↑](#endnote-ref-221)
222. On the vexed question of why the Danaids run away from *this* marriage, or marriage in general, there are a number of critics weighing in; the issue is further complicated by the corruptness of the text at crucial passages, and the oblivious sexism of several generations of classicists (British, Germans and Italians seem equally susceptible). The most illuminating of a host of articles on the subject is J.K. MacKinnon, ‘The Reason for the Danaids’ Flight, *The Classical* Quarterly, New series, vol. 28, no. 1 (1975), p.74-82., who criticizes the ‘popular view that the Danaids suffer from an unnatural fear of marriage and excessive devotion to Artemis.’ Also relevant are A.F. Garvie, *Aeschylus’* Supplices: *Play and Trilogy* (CUP, 1969, p.215-225); R.P. Winnington-Ingram, *Studies in Aeschylus* (CUP, 1983), p.59-61; H.G Robertson, ‘ and  in Aeschylus’ Suppliants’, *The Classical Review*, vol. 50, no.3 (July 1936), p.104-07 : ‘The idea that the Danaids are war-like, man-hating Amazons has little basis in the text of the play and is derived from other sources of somewhat doubtful implications.’ (note 3, p.107); Franz Stoessl, ‘Aeschylus as Political Thinker’ *American Journal of Philology*, vol. 73, no. 2 (1952), p.113-139; Timothy Gantz, ‘Love and Death in the ‘Suppliants’ of Aischylos’, *Phoenix*, vol. 32, no.4 (Winter, 1973), p.279-287, is particularly harsh on the ‘perverse’ Danaids, who misunderstand the whole purpose of love and fertility and procreation, and are driven by a desire for blood; Chad Turner, ‘Perverted Supplication in Aeschylus’ (*The Classical Journal* , vol. 97, n.1. (Oct-Nov 2001), pp.27-50, finds them barbarous; Hedwig Spirt, ‘The Motive for the Suppliants’ Flight’, *The Classical Journal*, vol. 57, no. 7. (April 1962), p.315-317, thinks their obsession with virginity is ‘obtrusive’, but they relent and see the error of their ways by the end of the trilogy. [↑](#endnote-ref-222)
223. Unreadiness for marriage: a sequence of dramatic events opens their eyes, and frees them of their innocence, thus preparing them for the marriage they imagined they desired.. [↑](#endnote-ref-223)
224. The reliable popularity of my local cinema’s summer festival of ‘Pre-Code Movies’ demonstrates just how tenacious and attractive, in popular culture anyway, is the figure of the woman in protest against marriage. What distinguishes these sexy, sophisticated heroines of Hollywood glamour in the movies of 1931-33 from their immediate successors is precisely this: they want to have careers and they want to have fun, and they fail to see how marriage and domestic virtue are essential to their happiness and fulfillment as women. In a number of the movies (Ruth Chatterton in *Female* of 1933 is the genre’s epitome) the heroines follow the same course I describe in this chapter, from assertive or brittle independence to conversion and reconciliation/resignation. Alison Drake, Chatterton’s character, is a rich and promiscuous free spirit who runs a car company and refuses all proposals of marriage or even steady companionship until her principles are worn down by her ideal mate, the engineer Jim Thorne: Alison finally agrees to tie the knot, hands the business over to Jim, and has nine children. [↑](#endnote-ref-224)
225. Kathleen Coyne Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages* (London & New York: Routledge, 2000), talks about the renewed interest in ‘the paradox of bodily and spiritual integrity’ in on pp.1-16 and 119-141; see also Benjamin Kahan, *Celibacies: American Modernism and Sexual Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), which ‘traces the emergence of celibacy as a crucial social identity in the 1840s and charts the evolution of this social identity into a sexual identity, narrating the transformation of chastity from a traditional gender assignment to a sexual practice that is visibly the site of modernist innovation.’ (8) [↑](#endnote-ref-225)
226. Ernest Crawley, *The Mystic Rose: A Study of Primitive Marriage* (London: Macmillan, 1902), 320. [↑](#endnote-ref-226)
227. Ibid., p.347-349. [↑](#endnote-ref-227)
228. ‘If for a boy the significance of the rites of passage was to mark his accession to the condition of a warrior, for the girl who took part alongside him in these same rites, and who was also often subjected to a period of seclusion, the initiatory trials had the force of a preparation for marriage.’(Vernant, Myth and Society’, 34); see also Helene P.Foley, *Ritual Irony: Poetry and Sacrifice in Euripides* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 22. [↑](#endnote-ref-228)
229. Zaidman and Pantel, *Religion* *in the Ancient Greek* City, 29; Foley, *Ritual Irony*, 39; Albert Henrichs, ‘Human Sacrifice in Greek Religion: Three Case Studies,” in *Le sacrifice dans l’antiquité*, 195-235; and Jean-Louis Durand, ‘Greek Animals: Toward a Topology of Edible Bodies’, in Detienne and Vernant, eds. *The Cuisine of Sacrifice among the Greeks*, trans. Paula Wissing (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 87-105, for the precise and ‘logical’ details. (Only for those with strong stomachs). [↑](#endnote-ref-229)
230. Zaidman and Pantel, *Religion in the Ancient Greek City*, 38-39, 164-175. [↑](#endnote-ref-230)
231. Marcel Detienne, ‘Culinary Practices and the Spirit of Sacrifice’ in *The Cuisine of Sacrifice among the Greeks*, eds. Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, trans. Paula Wissing (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-231)
232. Hughes, Culture and Sacrifice, 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-232)
233. Ibid.,13-14: ‘Neither archaeology nor history suggest that Greek myths of human sacrifice preserve any trace of actual sacrificial practices…There are reports of Greek human sacrifice in the classical period. Archaeology has not provided any confirmation of this belief.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-233)
234. Nicole Loraux, Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman, 32 [↑](#endnote-ref-234)
235. Loraux, *Tragic Ways*, 37. [↑](#endnote-ref-235)
236. See R.P Winnington-Ingram, ‘The Danaid Trilogy of Aeschylus’, *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, vol. 81 (1961), p.141. [↑](#endnote-ref-236)
237. I quote from Apollodorus*’ Library* and Hyginus’ *Fabulae: Two Handbooks of Greek Mythology* , tr. R. Scott Smith and Stephen M. Trzaskoma (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 2007), 153. [↑](#endnote-ref-237)
238. A.F. Garvie, *Aeschylus’* Supplices: *Play and Trilogy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p.172-77. [↑](#endnote-ref-238)
239. Page DuBois, *Centaurs and Amazons,* Chapter III, especially p.83-86. [↑](#endnote-ref-239)
240. Freud, ‘The Taboo of Virginity’, in *On Sexuality: Three Essays on Sexuality,* Volume 7 of *The Pelican Freud Library*, tr. James Strachey, ed. Angela Richards (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), 265-283 (279). Further references to this text cited parenthetically. [↑](#endnote-ref-240)
241. See his compatible conclusions in the volume just cited, ‘On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love’ (1912), 247-260. [↑](#endnote-ref-241)
242. Claude Levi-Strauss, *Language and the Analysis of Social Laws*, in *Structural Anthropology*, tr. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (London: Penguin, 1968), 61. [↑](#endnote-ref-242)
243. Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884), in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd edition, ed. Robert C. Tucker (London & New York: W.W.Norton, 1978), 734-759. [↑](#endnote-ref-243)
244. See Aline Rousselle, ‘Body Politics in Ancient Rome’, in *A History of Women in the West*, vol. I: ‘From Ancient Goddesses to Christian Saints’, Pauline Schmitt Pantel, ed. (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1992), 302. [↑](#endnote-ref-244)
245. Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Myth and Society*, p.55. [↑](#endnote-ref-245)
246. François Lissarrague, ‘Regards sur le mariage grec’, in *Silence et fureur: la femme et le marriage en Grèce. Les antiquités grecques du Musée Calvet*, ed. Odile Cavalier (Avignon: Fondation du Muséum Calvet, 1996), 415-433. [↑](#endnote-ref-246)
247. Lissarrague, 416. [↑](#endnote-ref-247)
248. Lissarrague, 416-417, citing Aristotle and a text by one Pollux from the time of the emperor Commodus: classical and Hellenistic seem to be on the same page in the marriage practice manual. [↑](#endnote-ref-248)
249. Claudine Leduc, ‘Marriage in Ancient Greece’, in *History of Women*. Vol. 1, op. cit 235-297 (240). [↑](#endnote-ref-249)
250. Claudine Leduc, ‘Marriage in Ancient Greece’, 242-7, 265, 272-282, 285. [↑](#endnote-ref-250)
251. Vernant, *Myth and Society*, 34. [↑](#endnote-ref-251)
252. [↑](#endnote-ref-252)
253. Clément’s chapter on *Turandot* is called ‘Furies and Gods, or Wanings of the Moon’. It has a special reference to menstruation and to fears of blood, both flowing and blocked. Because a girl refused to get married, her mother chopped off her head and set it in the stars; from that time on women have bled once a month. Turandot’s story reminds Clément of a Cashinawa legend recounted by Lévi-Strauss. Although all the operas she reads have the prolixity of hysteric fantasies, this one has a remarkably extravagant menu: lunar death and fantasies of cannibalism, the dangerous virgin tamed in a pastiche of initiation mysteries, Greek paganism, human sacrifice and menstrual origins; Orientalist sadism; and colonialist anxieties. The mythic abundance would make a Frazer proud. Even a superficial tour of the opera catches some allusions Clément was too busy to bother with (the cruel virgin is invoked as having withdrawn from the earth, leaving it covered with endless snow, a blight that will not be relieved until the royal maiden re-appears and April can return.) Most important of all the symbolic associations is the linkage between virginity and a murderous power latent in non-human nature. The first time we see the Princess Turandot, Clément remarks, she appears elusively at her window, silent, inaccessible, beautiful and terrible. Turandot the Pure, ‘white as jade, cold as the sword’. Only when the moon rises does she make herself visible to the public, who are shouting for the taste of blood. “O severed head! O bloodless one! Come! Appear! Show yourself in the sky!” ‘O pale lover of the dead!’ One small gesture; Off with his head. This cool lady has murder on her mind. And all her victims are in love with her. [↑](#endnote-ref-253)
254. Jane Eldridge Miller, *Rebel Women*  (Chicago and London: Chicago UP, 1997), p.6 [↑](#endnote-ref-254)
255. Jules Michelet, *La sorcière*, first published 1862 (Paris, Flammarion, 1966) p.47-51 [↑](#endnote-ref-255)
256. Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 371-401 (especially 382, for the Huysmans passage.) [↑](#endnote-ref-256)
257. see Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, tr. and ed. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 76, 83. [↑](#endnote-ref-257)
258. Kracauer, *The Mass* Ornament, 76-77. [↑](#endnote-ref-258)
259. For two versions of this plot compare Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *The Princess* (1847), where high-minded maidens foreswear the company of men and Shakespeare, *Love’s Labour Lost* (1598), where the high-minded shunning is done by pure, noble young men. [↑](#endnote-ref-259)
260. ‘From Gozzi’s text to Schiller’s the shift of tone is striking. Gone is the local Venetian color: the dialect of the masks, the third enigma “il leone d’Adria”, and various touches of satire directed at the audience in the Teatro San Samuele..Schiller replaced the local folk texture of Gozzi with a decorous smoothness of undeniable charm, but a charm very different from that produced by Gozzi’s quirky shifts of level.” (William Ashbrook and Harold Powers, *Puccini’s*  Turandot: *the End of the Great Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p.51. [↑](#endnote-ref-260)
261. Tocqueville, traveling in early 19th century America, was struck by the freedom and frankness of young unmarried girls, and by the fact that their confidence in the public sphere evaporated once they became wives. French women had the opposite experience: expected to be silent and naïve until marriage, they stepped into a wide sphere of possibility after marriage. See Alexis de Toqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. Isaac Kramnick, tr. Gerald Bevan (London: Penguin, 2003) [↑](#endnote-ref-261)
262. On the mixed-up modernist notions of sex, degeneration, utopia and dystopia see, again, Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity*, a conenction forcefully stated on 187. That Darwinism both helped to pull women off the pedestal of household sainthood, but also served to feed cultural fears of female sexuality, is something Dijstra is right to stress. The ‘coming of the new Darwinian creed’ did not abolish male chivalry. But it could turn it towards odd configurations, heightening the supposed distinction between the sexes and creating a new cult of feminine ‘specificity’, identified with the spiritual, the intuitive, the childlike, and the ‘little’. [↑](#endnote-ref-262)
263. The three ‘masks’ – the comic characters of Ping, Pang and Pong – are appropriately made the mouthpiece of a prurience everyone else can pretend to overlook: ‘What is she? A female with a crown on her head! And a cloak with fringe! But if you strip her naked…she’s flesh! She’s raw flesh! It’s inedible!’ Sure, Turandot is grandiose. But a woman is a woman. ‘We can’t wait to see that Tigress, that ‘She-Marshall of Heaven’, surrender in the soft cushions of her bed: Glory to the beautiful, unclad body which now knows the mystery it was ignorant of!’ [↑](#endnote-ref-263)
264. Jules Michelet *La sorcière,* p.31 [↑](#endnote-ref-264)
265. see Adorno and Horkheimer, ‘Odysseus, or Myth and Enlightenment’, in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007) [↑](#endnote-ref-265)
266. C. Lévi-Strauss, *The Origin of Table Manners, Mythologiques, III* , tr. John and Doreen Weightman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 97. [↑](#endnote-ref-266)
267. Many have commented on the absence of a term in Aristotle to denote what he clearly recognises as ‘marriage’, leaving him (in *Politics* VII. XIV. 1) to shift around between ‘the union of the sexes’ and the ‘partnership’ of the sexes. He remarks in Book I. Part II of the *Politics*: ‘There is no exact term denoting the relation uniting wife and husband.’ (1253b 10) Jean-Pierre Vernant adds “ It is a remark that is illuminated by Emile Benveniste’s general observation that there is no Indo-European word for marriage.” *Myth and Society in Ancient Greece*, p. 60. The verb *sunokein* (to unite, to live together) comes closest to capturing the social reality of married life, sharing the duties of the household, raising legitimate children, honouring each other in death as in life. [↑](#endnote-ref-267)
268. I am drawing on Frye’s theories of the mythos of romance, in *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (first published 1957, Princeton UP; reprinted New York: Atheneum, 1967), p.186-206, and *A Natural Perspective* (New York, Columbia UP, 1965), especially pp.72-117. [↑](#endnote-ref-268)
269. “If the genre [of romantic comedy, LD] is as definitive of sound comedy as I take it to be, then this phase of the history of cinema is bound up with a phase in the history of the consciousness of women.” Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of* Happiness, 16. [↑](#endnote-ref-269)
270. Pursuits, 54. [↑](#endnote-ref-270)
271. Zeitlin, *Playing the* Other, 284. [↑](#endnote-ref-271)
272. Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, 163-164. [↑](#endnote-ref-272)
273. *Pursuits*, 4-5. [↑](#endnote-ref-273)
274. Frye, The Secular Scripture, 102-115 [↑](#endnote-ref-274)
275. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-275)
276. Frye, A Natural Perspective, 65. [↑](#endnote-ref-276)
277. *Pursuits*, 142. [↑](#endnote-ref-277)
278. Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 1987), 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-278)
279. Pursuits of Happiness, 23. [↑](#endnote-ref-279)
280. *A Winter’s Tale*, III, 2 (Hermione’s trial). Consider the parallel between this play and Kleist’s Marquise of O; lying behind both are the Greek dramas *Alcestis* and *Ion*. The loss of innocence is, in turn, associated ‘with both cases with a crisis of knowledge concerning the fact of a pregnancy, of doubt raised to the point of sceptical madness.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-280)
281. *Pursuits*, 141. [↑](#endnote-ref-281)
282. Pursuits of Happiness, 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-282)
283. Kyle Harper, From Shame to Sin: The Christian Transformation of Sexual Morality in Late Antiquity (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2013), 1-2. [↑](#endnote-ref-283)
284. See Wilhelm Reich, *The Sexual Revolution: Toward a Self-Governing Character Structure*, tr. Theodore P. Wolfe (London: Vision Press, 1951), 34-44; Freud’s essay on ‘”Civilized” Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness’ (1908) does not pinpoint Christianity as a particular contributor to the ‘injurious influences of civilization’, but its role in the thwarting of the sexual instincts is assumed. (in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, volume IX (1906-1908), tr. And ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1959) [↑](#endnote-ref-284)
285. John J. Winkler, *The Constraints of Desire; The Anthropology of Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 17-70; Catherine Edwards, *The Politics of Immorality in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Rebecca Langlands, *Sexual Morality in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Kathy L. Gaca, *The Making of Fornication: Eros, Ethics, and Political Reform in Greek Philosophy and Early Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 1-93. [↑](#endnote-ref-285)
286. See *Phaedrus* 251b-255e, *Symposium*  212a, Platonic doctrines which have not been ignored by commentators, see among many Shadi Bartsch, *The Mirror of the Self : Sexuality, Self-Knowledge, and the Gaze in the Early Roman Empire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), from which I have taken the quote about self-knowledge and eros (79). [↑](#endnote-ref-286)
287. See Aline Rouselle’s matchless *Porneia: On Desire and the Body in Antiquity*, tr. Felicia Pheasant (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), 77-106. (the list of allowed partners is on 82.) [↑](#endnote-ref-287)
288. One Hermeias, in his commentary on Plato’s *Phaedrus*, distinguished different Stoic positions on being in love. The Stoics, he says, believe there is more than one kind of sex. And here they show themselves more broad-minded than other philosophers: ‘Some supposed being in love to be just bad, like Epicurus, who defined it as an intense desire for sex (*aphrodisiac*) accompanied by a sting (*oistros)* and distress…The Stoics were formerly said to think that being in love was just one thing. But now I have heard of them too saying that it is of two kinds, one refined and one bad….It is an appetite (*epithumia*) and desire (*orexis*) for sexual intercourse (*sunousia*) according to Pausanias and to the tragedian who said, ‘Love (*eros*), you blow with two winds.’ (cited in Richard Sorabji, *Emotion and Peace of Mind: From Stoic Agitation to Christian Temptation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 280. [↑](#endnote-ref-288)
289. Shadi Bartsch is insistent that Roman males did not view the erotic love of adolescent boys as something that could be idealised. And Michel Foucault held a similar view about the decline of pederastic eros as a valued social and philosophic possibility. But the passionate and mutual loves between well-born young men in the Hellenistic novels seem to dispute her judgment: it is true that in Plutarch’s *Amatorius* the debate between boy-love and marriage is won by marriage, but it is a close competition. See ‘Eros and the Roman Philosopher’, in *Erotikon: Essays on Eros, Ancient and Modern*, ed. Shadi Bartsch and Thomas Bartscherer (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 73-74. [↑](#endnote-ref-289)
290. I quote from Abraham Malherbe’s edition of the *Cynic Epistles* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1977), 175; ‘Cynic attitudes towards sex’, comments William Desmond, ‘can be seen as at once more shameless and more moralistic than the norm. The Cynics were said to dislike the baths and man-boy love, and to tolerate but not enthuse about marriage, which was not neecssary to the good life as they undertsood that. Marriage and children adds expense, quarrels, and complications, and probably the best solution was for Cynics to form easy-going collectives, sharing women and child-raising, à la Plato’s *Republic.* (William Desmond, *Cynics*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 89-95. [↑](#endnote-ref-290)
291. Sorabji, Emotion and Peace of Mind, 280-283. [↑](#endnote-ref-291)
292. See Alvin Gouldner’s interesting reading of Plato’s ‘social theory’ in his classic *Enter Plato: Classical Greece and the Origins of Social Theory, Part II* (Neq York: Harper & Row, 1966) 66-67. [↑](#endnote-ref-292)
293. Carlin A. Barton, *Roman Honour: The Fire in the Bones* (Berkeley & London: University fo California Press, 2001), 58. [↑](#endnote-ref-293)
294. Brown, *Body and Society*, 29: ‘We are dealing with a society among whose upper classes areas of extreme rigidity coexisted with areas which immediately strike a modern reader as marked by a graciousness, a tolerance, and a matter-of-factness that vanished in medieval Byzantium and in the Catholic West. This peculiar juxtaposition of severity and tolerance made sense to thinking pagans in temrs of an image of the human person based on what may best be called a ‘benevolent dualism.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-294)
295. See Maud W. Gleason’s wonderful, *Making Men: Sophists and Self-Presentation in Ancient Rome* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995). That soft maleness and rough maleness were genuine social options, and not just part of the comic banter of the poets and satirists, is argued by Giulia Sissa, who sees them as representing different cultural ideals linked to historical moments in Roman private and public life: ‘When compared with the rude, robust, and rustic body of the original Roman, the Augustan citizen’s sober, athletic and elegant body, distinguished by a tan, impeccable hygiene and careful but not excessive attention, corresponds to a degree of softening which is still compatible with health, good looks and, above all, masculinity.’ (*Sex and Sensuality in the Ancient World*, 155. Shadi Bartsch sees far more censoriousness in Roman attitudes towards the dandy and his cohort, most notorious among them the *Socraticus cinaedus* or philosopher’s pansy. See her ‘Eros and the Roman Philosopher’, in *Erotikon: Essays on Eros, Ancient and Modern*, ed. Shadi Bartsch and Thomas Bartscherer (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 59-83. [↑](#endnote-ref-295)
296. Brown, *Body and Society*, xxxi, 27-31. [↑](#endnote-ref-296)
297. On the ‘referential indeterminacy’ of Greek anatomical terms see Geoffrey Lloyd, *Science, Folklore and Ideology: Studies in the Life Sciences in Ancient Greece* (London: Duckworth, 1983), 149-167. Galen, he writes, went a long way towards making the foundations more stable and standarised. [↑](#endnote-ref-297)
298. Ibid., 86-94. [↑](#endnote-ref-298)
299. I am summarising material splendidly gathered and analysed by Lloyd, *Science, Folklore and Ideology*, 58-111. [↑](#endnote-ref-299)
300. Ionian philosophy of nature is a large field, but one of the most delightful introductions to it remains F.M.Cornford, *Before and After Socrates* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932), 1-28. [↑](#endnote-ref-300)
301. Brooke Holmes, The Symptom and the Subject: The Emergence of the Physical Body in Ancient Greece (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 99 [↑](#endnote-ref-301)
302. And conversely, something common in Plato’s practice, as Foucault points out , of relating ‘political advice to the practice of medicine’, most famously in the *Republic*, Book IV, 425e. See Michel Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others*, *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1982-1983,* tr. Graham Burchill (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) [↑](#endnote-ref-302)
303. Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 52. [↑](#endnote-ref-303)
304. Jean-Pierre Vernant, ‘Dim Body, Dazzling Body’, tr. Anne M. Wilson, in *Fragments for a History of the Human Body*, Part One, ed. Michel Feher with Ramona Naddaff and Nadia Tazi (New York: Zone Books, 1989), 19-47 (24). Were Homeric Greeks fragmented aggregates of parts, composites ruled by flux? Most scholars have been critical of the more extreme view of the pre-Platonic Greeks held by Bruno Snell in 1953. Homer, he writes in *The Discovery of the Mind,* lacked a concept of a unified body, an individual-with-a-body continuous with what moderns think of as a ‘self’. Fifth-century Greeks knew about a thing called a ‘body’ or *soma*; Homer saw a plurality of parts, doing different things, having different functions, and known by different expressions: ‘The early Greeks did not, either in their language or in the visual arts, grasp the body as a unit…Of course the Homeric man had a body exactly like the later Greeks, but he did not know it *qua* body, but merely as the sum total of his limbs.’ (*The Discovery of the Mind in Greek Philosophy and Literature*, tr, T.G. Rosenmeyer (New York: Dover, 1982), 7-8. For philosophers, it has been hard to go past Bernard Williams’ dismissal of Snell (a ‘systematic failure’ and ‘anachronistic’, see *Shame and Necessity*, Berkeyel: University of California Press, 1993), 21-49. For someone of my generation, Snell’s book was exhiliarating, making the ancients strange and fascinating. Brooke Holmes, in *The Symptom and the Subject: The Emergence of the Physical Body in Ancient Greece*, 5-9, ‘recuperates some of the boldness of Snell’s approach’ while doing something more: embedding the *soma* more deeply in a history of ideas and practices.’ This she accomplishes brilliantly. While Snell argued that it was ‘the discovery of the mind’ that ‘imposed both an overarching unity on the aggregate of parts and a limit to the materiality of the self’ (30), that limit also registered by fifth-century theories about the soul’s independence of the physical body, Holmes stresses the tensions and vulnerabilities of the physical body as key to the ‘forging of the self’. The ‘physical body’ must struggle to maintain life against the constant threat of disorder, loss of self, and death’, demanding ‘constant care in order to maintain its integrity’; this physical life-self introduces a project of ethical self-care extending beyond individual questions of pain and health to the social world, a project whose active agent turns out to be the soul, *psukhe*. (36-37) Holmes shows how the model of the person she puts together from the medical writers and philosophers re-orients the old body-soul dualism for contemporary studies of Greek anthropology: ‘the physical body does not exist in isolation as an object of medical knowledge but demands to be reconciled with the socio-ethical domain.’(38) [↑](#endnote-ref-304)
305. Holmes, Symptom and Subject, 107. [↑](#endnote-ref-305)
306. Pierre Hadot, *The Inner Citadel: the* Meditations  *of Marcus Aurelius* , tr. Michael Chase (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 129ff., on the ‘discipline of desire’ in Marcus. [↑](#endnote-ref-306)
307. Ibid., 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-307)
308. Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* , ed. Arnold I/Davidosn, tr. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 130. [↑](#endnote-ref-308)
309. The Greeks passed on to Rome its belief that the *hubris* ‘commited against the sexual honour of the householder and his house is the most frightful’, as Demosthenes put it (cited by Nick Fisher, ‘The law of *hubris*  in Athens’ in *Nomos: Essays in Athenian Law, Politics and Society*’, ed. Paul Cartledge, Paul Millett and Stephen Todd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 123-138 (131). [↑](#endnote-ref-309)
310. From the translation by Robert Dobbin of Epictetus, *Discourses and Selected Writings* (London: Penguin, 2008) [↑](#endnote-ref-310)
311. I owe to Pierre Hadot, asd well as Foucault, these insights into the ideals of ‘philosophy as a way of life’. See *The Inner Citadel*, op.cit, chapters 7-10; Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life,* tr. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995); Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981-1982*, tr. Graham Burchell(New York: Plagrave Macmillan, 2005) [↑](#endnote-ref-311)
312. quoted in Susan Treggiari, *Roman Marriage:* Iusti Coniuges *from the Time of Cicero to the Time of Ulpian* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 215-216. [↑](#endnote-ref-312)
313. James A Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Sociey in Medieval Europe* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 22. [↑](#endnote-ref-313)
314. Tran tam Tinh, ‘Sarapis and Isis’, in Ben F, Meyer abd E,P, Sanders, ed., *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition, Volume Three: Self-Definition in the Greco-Roman World* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 101-117. [↑](#endnote-ref-314)
315. Brundage, 50. [↑](#endnote-ref-315)
316. Harper, From Shame to Sin, 21. [↑](#endnote-ref-316)
317. Mendelsohn, *Gender and the City*, 179. [↑](#endnote-ref-317)
318. Harper, *From Shame to Sin* , 197. [↑](#endnote-ref-318)
319. David Konstan, *Sexual Symmetry: Love in the Ancient Novel and Related Genres* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 107. [↑](#endnote-ref-319)
320. B. P. Reardon, Collected Ancient Greek Novels, 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-320)
321. Harper, 193-4. [↑](#endnote-ref-321)
322. The association of *fin’amors* or courtly love with an ‘idealisation of adultery’ has been assumed by many influential accounts of the ‘impossible loves’ of medieval literature, those favouring the Tristan and Isolde mould: to live together happily ever after is not an attractive option. But sublime and joyous death is. Probably this habit of interpretation began with C.S.Lewis’s *The Allegory of Love*: ‘Any idealization of sexual love, in a society where marriage is purely utilitarian, must begin by being an idealization of adultery.’ (*The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936), 13. In his 1946 book, Denis de Rougemont continued the trend: What the rhetoric of impossible love ‘quickens with noble emotion’ is the institution of extra-marital sex, a place for all sorts of experimentation with passion, domination and dependence, as even pre-Christian amorists like Ovid had argued. But in the 12th century feudal courts of Languedoc, a more exacting poetry of unhappy love arose, one that deprecates marriage as banal, a crude physical union with no potential for glorious flights and mystical devotion. (Denis de Rougemont, *Love in the Western World*, trans. Montgomery Belgion (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 76. The female ‘sovereign’ of the unhappy lover’s heart can crush or reward him. What she cannot do is to meet his desires more than half-way, and settle down with him, as the heroines of the Hellenistic novels are happy to do. [↑](#endnote-ref-322)
323. Foucault, The Care of the Self. The History of Sexuality, Volume Three, 228. [↑](#endnote-ref-323)
324. Ibid., 232. [↑](#endnote-ref-324)
325. Foucault, The Care of the Self, 78, 79. [↑](#endnote-ref-325)
326. Ibid., 220. [↑](#endnote-ref-326)
327. I quote from the blurb on the back cover of Simon Goldhill, *Foucault’s Virginity.* [↑](#endnote-ref-327)
328. Goldhill, Foucault’s Virginity, 142. [↑](#endnote-ref-328)
329. The significance of this symmetry receives sympathy and discrimination by David Konstan, *Sexual Symmetry*. [↑](#endnote-ref-329)
330. Or so Epictetus claims in his *Dialogue with an Epicurean*, Book II, Discourse 7, cited by Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, Volume 3, 155. [↑](#endnote-ref-330)
331. See, above all, R. Howard Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1991), indispensable in clarifying the paradox of purity: erotic transcendence glorified does not spare lovers from the worst visitations of despair and distrust. Instead the idealising myth of absolute love is dependent on a vivid consciousness of violence and death. Without death, Georges Bataille insisted, no eroticism; without hate, no love. [↑](#endnote-ref-331)
332. Paul Veyne, *Roman Erotic Elegy: Love, Poetry and the West,* tr. David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 67. [↑](#endnote-ref-332)
333. From E. J. Kenney’s Introduction to Ovid, *The Love Poems*, tr. A.D. Melville (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), xi. [↑](#endnote-ref-333)
334. Veyne, Roman Erotic Elegy, 28. [↑](#endnote-ref-334)
335. Ibid., 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-335)
336. Were the obsessive and emotionally exhausting love affairs their verses alluded to a product of poetic license or a familiar pursuit of free, leisured and sensual men and women? If the elite favoured a moralistic discourse for its capacity to define and delimit conduct for those who ‘can’ and those who (legally or morally) ‘cannot’, what status was enjoyed by the fictions of erotic rapture, by all the talk about the pain of loving, the enjoyment of beauty, the pleasures of conquest and courtship? Did the intense discourse about passion represent a protest against the moralism or hypocrisy of official Roman culture, or is it better understood as an element in what every society produces: inconsistencies of beliefs and practice, of ideal and reality, prohibition and privilege? And why, in the elegy, is the misery of erotic love prolonged for the maximum of refined effect? To make the Christian war against desire an easier campaign? [↑](#endnote-ref-336)
337. Veyne, Roman Erotic Elegy, 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-337)
338. Ibid., 138. [↑](#endnote-ref-338)
339. *Orator* 59, cited in Brooke Holmes, *Gender: Antiquity and its Legacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 118, and see her discussion of the practices and performances of masculinity, 110-125. [↑](#endnote-ref-339)
340. Amy Richlin, *The Garden of Priapus: Sexuality and Aggression in Roman Humor*, revised edition (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 26-80. [↑](#endnote-ref-340)
341. Richlin, *The Garden of Priapus,* is comprehensive. See in particular her chapter 5, ‘Literature Based on Invective’ (105-143), for the noisy genitals. [↑](#endnote-ref-341)
342. Cicero, Philippics, 2.44-45, cited by Edwards, *The Politics of Immorality in Ancient Rome ,* 64. [↑](#endnote-ref-342)
343. Edwards, 71. [↑](#endnote-ref-343)
344. Here I agree with Amy Richlin, *Garden of Priapus*, 32ff. ‘Erotic as well as moral ideals formed a positive extreme that Roman sexual satire deliberately countered.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-344)
345. Harper, 49. [↑](#endnote-ref-345)
346. Ibid., 81. [↑](#endnote-ref-346)
347. Ibid., 160-168. [↑](#endnote-ref-347)
348. Ibid., 86. [↑](#endnote-ref-348)
349. Ibid., 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-349)
350. E.R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965). [↑](#endnote-ref-350)
351. Giulia Sissa, *Sex and Sensuality*, 42. [↑](#endnote-ref-351)
352. Pierre Hadot, *The Inner Citadel: the Meditations of Marcus* Aurelius, tr. Michael Chase, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 188-190. [↑](#endnote-ref-352)
353. Robert Kaster, *Emotion, Restraint and Community in Ancient Rome* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 43. [↑](#endnote-ref-353)
354. Pythagorean treatises from Italian cities and Greek speaking colonies in the 3rd-2nd centuries BCE were strong, if formulaic, in their exhortations to chastity. For one addressed to women, see *Women’s Life in Greece and Rome: A Source Book in Translation* , Third Edition, ed. Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant, (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 161-162. [↑](#endnote-ref-354)
355. John J. Winkler, *The Constraints of Desire*, 45-70. [↑](#endnote-ref-355)
356. Cited from *Roman Religion A Sourcebook*  (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2002), 84. Juvenal, the Roman satirist of the early 2nd century C.E., thought the mélange of abstinence and excess in the worship of the Great Mother was ludicrous, but his sneering reference to the requirement for a woman to refrain from sex with her husband during the holy days sounds like it is based on first-hand experience. See ‘Satire 6’, in *Women’s Religions in the Greco-Roman World: A Sourcebook*, ed. Ross Shepard Kraemer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 43-4. The worship of Artemis, the virgin goddess of the hunt and childbirth, did specify, in at least some accounts, that her temples were forbidden to women who were not virgins. Or so Achilles Tatius suggests in his long and eventful romance, *Leukippe and Clitophon*: ‘From ancient days this temple had been forbidden to free women who were not virgins. Only men and virgins were permitted here. If a non-virgin woman passed inside, the penalty was death.’ (Book 7:13) The tale is translated by John J. Winkler, in *Collected Ancient Greek Novels*, ed. B.P. Reardon, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 267. [↑](#endnote-ref-356)
357. See also Judith Perkins, *The Suffering Self*, 23. [↑](#endnote-ref-357)
358. Aline Rouselle, *Porneia: On Desire and the Body in Antiquity*, tr. Felicity Pheasant (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), 108-115. [↑](#endnote-ref-358)
359. Minucius Felix, *The Octavius*, chapter 31, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 4: ‘Fathers of the Third Century’, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 173-198. [↑](#endnote-ref-359)
360. Ovid V, *Fasti,* tr. Sir James G. Frazer*,* Loeb Classical Library, n.253 (Cambridge; Harvard University Press, 1976) [↑](#endnote-ref-360)
361. John Scheid, ‘The Religious Roles of Roman Women’, in *A History of Women: From Ancient Goddesses to Christian Saints* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University press, 1992), 377-408 (382-384). [↑](#endnote-ref-361)
362. For the most mesmerizing account of Roman cults that would have offered flamboyant competition on even to the practices rumour had Christians performing in the stories Caecilius has heard, see Aline Rousselle’s chapter, ‘Salvation by Child Sacrifice and Castration’, in her *Porneia: On Desire and the Body in Antiquity*, tr. Felicity Pheasant (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), 107-128. [↑](#endnote-ref-362)
363. Kimberly B Stratton, ‘The Mithras Liturgy and *Sepher Ha-Razim*’, in *Religions of Late Antiquity in Practice*, ed. Richard Valantasis (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 303-321 (310); Ross Shepard Kraemer, *Her Share of the Blessings: Women’s Religions among Pagans, Jews, and Christians in the Greco-Roman World* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 27. [↑](#endnote-ref-363)
364. On the castrations for Baal and Attis, see Rouselle, *Porneia*, 121-128: ‘The act of castration had two meanings: the return to childhood, which makes the castrated male the perfect victim for Saturn, and the adult whose *pneuma*  can be purely psychic, since there can be no further loss of the vital seed…’ Elagabalus, who became emperor of Rome at the age of 14 in C.E. 218 and was assassinated at 18, grew up as the priest of the Syrian cult of Baal; he did not castrate himself but ‘tied up his testicles when celebrating the rites of Cybele and Attis’. (122) The Galli, priests of Attis, became eunuchs not to give up sexual activity but to forego generation. If Rouselle is correct, the aim of ritual castration was not to promote continence but to renounce fertility. [↑](#endnote-ref-364)
365. Valerie M. Warrior, *Roman Religion: A Sourcebook*  (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2002), 62-65. [↑](#endnote-ref-365)
366. See J.A. Crook, *Law and Life of Rome, 90 B.C.-A.D. 212* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), 111. [↑](#endnote-ref-366)
367. Bruce W. Frier and Thomas A.J. McGinn, *A Casebook on Roman Family Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 103, 110-120; Jill Harries, *Law and Crime in the Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 95-104; and Elaine Fantham, Helene Peet Foley, Natalie Boymel Kampen, Sarah B. Pomeroy, and H. Alan Shapiro, *Women in the Classical World* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 294-329; and Mary Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant, *Women’s Life in Greece and Rome: A Source Book in Translation*, 3rd edition (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 102-07. [↑](#endnote-ref-367)
368. Women in the Classical World, op.cit., 303. [↑](#endnote-ref-368)
369. Ibid., 105, citing a petition to the emperors Severus and Caracalla from C.E.197. [↑](#endnote-ref-369)
370. Women in the Classical World, 306. [↑](#endnote-ref-370)
371. Lefkowitz and Fant, *Women’s Life*, 103 [↑](#endnote-ref-371)
372. Frier and McGinn, *A Casebook*, 25. [↑](#endnote-ref-372)
373. Cited in Susan Treggiari, 207-208. [↑](#endnote-ref-373)
374. Susan Treggiari, *Roman Marriage:* Iusti Coniuges *from the Time of Cicero to the Time of Ulpian* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 8-9. (further citations parenthetically in the text) [↑](#endnote-ref-374)
375. See Sarah Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves*, who mentions on p154 two formal marriage ceremonies, the *confarreatio* , or sharing of spelt, and the *coemptio* , a pretended sale. These applied only to cases of marriage with *manus* , which had gone out of style by the time of Augustus. It surrendered the wife to her husband’s family, and made him her guardian. [↑](#endnote-ref-375)
376. See Jane F. Gardner, *Women in Roman Law and Society* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986), 31-64. [↑](#endnote-ref-376)
377. Paul Veyne, ‘The Roman Empire’, in *A History of Private Life from Pagan Rome to Byzantium* , ed. Paul Veyne, tr. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 5-233 (29). [↑](#endnote-ref-377)
378. Treggiari, *Roman Marriage*, 84. [↑](#endnote-ref-378)
379. ‘It appears that the nuclear family, and with it a tendency to lay stress on the affective bonds between husband and wife and parents and children, was already a well-established feature of Roman society, at least in the West.’ (Brown. *Body and Society*, 16) [↑](#endnote-ref-379)
380. A ‘success-culture’, Peter Brown calls it. (*The World of Late Antiquity, AD 150-750*, New York & London: WW Norton, pbk. Ed., 1989), 30. [↑](#endnote-ref-380)
381. Carlin A. Barton, *Roman Honor: The Fire in the Bones* (Berkeley & London: University of California Press, 2001), 34-87. [↑](#endnote-ref-381)
382. See Rebecca Langlands, *Sexual Morality in Ancient Rome*  (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), who uses many examples from Cicero to show this (281-286). [↑](#endnote-ref-382)
383. Langlands, 117-122. [↑](#endnote-ref-383)
384. Langlands, 302, 281-318. Cicero associates men’s *pudicitia* with civil life, libertas and cultivation of the gods. See also Treggiari, 106. Robert Kaster, in *The Shame of the Romans*, is clear: *pudicitia* is a narrowing of *pudor*, for in becoming a feminine virtue (sexual respectability) shame seems to have far fewer opportunities. To be sure, slaves can have no *pudor*, and the poor have only so much *pudor* as they can afford (Kaster, 5). [↑](#endnote-ref-384)
385. Langlands, 39-64. [↑](#endnote-ref-385)
386. This is the voice of the rather trite Valerius Maximus , author of a compendium of moral exempla in the time of Tiberius, but it is typical, and revealing. (*Facta et Dicta Memorabilia* , 6.1.1-2, quoted by Langlands, *Sexual Morality*, 142, and see her whole chapter on Valerius Maximus, 123-191) My sense is that Langlands relies too heavily in her characterization of *pudicitia* on this author, a rather average rhetor whose motivations do not rise much about the sycophantic, but the results are fascinating. [↑](#endnote-ref-386)
387. Cicero’s description of his love for his wife was rare for its time (1st century BC). See Sabine Grebe, ‘Marriage and exile: Cicero’s Letters to Terentia’, *Helios*, vol. 30, No. 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-387)
388. Jean H. Hagstrum, *Esteem Enlivened by Desire,* 111-112. [↑](#endnote-ref-388)
389. Reardon, Collected Ancient Greek Novels, 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-389)
390. Some of the virgins and wives raped by Zeus might have disagreed about his benevolence as ‘protector of the family’. Musonius’ compliment is cited by Kathy Gaca, *The Making of Fornication*, 86. [↑](#endnote-ref-390)
391. See Paul Veyne, ‘La famille et l’amour sous le Haut-empire romain’, *Annales ESC* 33 (1978), 35-63. [↑](#endnote-ref-391)
392. Kate Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 34, 36. [↑](#endnote-ref-392)
393. Richlin, Garden of Priapus, 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-393)
394. Edwards, The Politics of Immorality in Ancient Rome, 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-394)
395. Foucault does tend to leave out a few steps in his historical argument, choosing his instances selectively, and running together periods and sources. To claim that marital conduct is a philosophic subject is easier but doomed to circularity, if all your sources are philosophers (and canonical ones at that); he locates the imprint of this concern for the ethics of marriage in Athens (which is unlikely) and in Rome of the early and late Empire (a more obvious setting.) But his preoccupations are important ones. [↑](#endnote-ref-395)
396. ‘The art of being gay’ could be another one, but it is important to Foucault that no ‘homosexual identity’ as such is present in antiquity. Instead there is eros, and then there are its modifications, among which the privileged one in late antiquity is the more austere conjugal one (in his view) and then a variety of subordinate ones, in which pedophilia or idealizing love for youths is very prominent. Plato invented an erotics of male love that was famous and influential, especially in poetry. But it is unusual in the ancient world because it displaces sensuality rather than more conventionally urging the constraint of appetite, as Sissa argues on the basis of some detailed and persuasive readings of key texts. In this Platonic erotics makes available something Greeks and Romans would have found odd, and which only emerges in its own name after Christianity: the ennobling love for female beauty. Although this migrating from male to female of ennobling love – transforming the sensual into the ineffable -- is not one of Sissa’s concerns, it is a commonplace of cultural and literary thought. And it could support rather than weaken Foucault’s argument against distinct ‘types’ of sexuality : sexuality shorn of lust and refined into chaste idealization is available for males and females, lovers of their own sex and lovers of the opposite sex. The ‘experiences’ – a key concern for Foucault—are different but they are for all intents and purposes modifications rather than the indices of distinct social roles and identifications. The lover of boys and the lover of women are not different ‘beings’. But then neither are the brothel hound and the dreamer who longs chastely for an imaginary Lady, at least until the corrosive light of Christian perfectionism exposes them as such. That ‘how to be gay’ can lead to a number of aesthetics of existence seems obvious. See most recently the Foucauldian David M. Halperin, *How to Be Gay* and the dissident Leo Bersani, *Homos.*  [↑](#endnote-ref-396)
397. Brundage*, Law*, 3, 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-397)
398. Harper, *From Shame to Sin* , 238-239. [↑](#endnote-ref-398)
399. Langlands, 319-360. [↑](#endnote-ref-399)
400. Ibid, 362. [↑](#endnote-ref-400)
401. The ‘metamorphosis’ of sexual and conjugal relations, as Paul Veyne put it in 1978, left late Roman morality ‘identical’ with the Christian marital morality, yet without any actual impact of the Christian doctrinal preferences. Veyne exaggerates, partly in order to correct a popular misconception of the casual customs of the Romans in comparison to the fabled strictness of the Christians but more significantly, in his view, to correct the views he sees held by other ancient historians of the Roman family, who portray its changes (and decline) as an effect of the crisis of the aristocracy and the weakening of paternal power. (‘La famille et l’amour sous le Haut-Empire roman’, in Paul Veyne, *La société romaine* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1991), 88-130. For Foucault it is the stoic Musonius Rufus who best represents the Roman embrace of ‘conjugality’ – ‘the conjugalization of sexual relations that tends to localize legitimacy within marriage alone’, a phrasing that leaves the reader nostalgic for the brio and fluency of Foucault’s earlier writing style. If Musonius is the primary evidence, then the shift, if it is one, started in the 1st century, just after Augustus, indeed at the time of Nero! (see Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Vol. 3, The Care of the Self*. 150-185. [↑](#endnote-ref-401)
402. Veyne, History of Private Life, 24-5. [↑](#endnote-ref-402)
403. Kate Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 1-2. [↑](#endnote-ref-403)
404. Veyne, History of Private Life, 139-159. [↑](#endnote-ref-404)
405. Ibid., 96-7. [↑](#endnote-ref-405)
406. ‘The Roman Empire’, *History of Private Life*, 37. [↑](#endnote-ref-406)
407. ‘The Roman Empire’, op.cit., 36-37. Veyne adds in ‘La famille et l’amour’ of 1978, from which he extracted most of the points made in the *History of Private* Life, that this ‘replacement of statute by virtue and obedience by conjugal love’ was the combined work of Stoicism and Christianity, first rationalising and then internalising this shared moral material.’ (op.cit., 122-23) [↑](#endnote-ref-407)
408. ‘Germanicus’ father Drusus was remarkable in being physically faithful to his wife, and Cato in confining himself to his two wives. It was, naturally, rare for non-philosophers to claim that they had sexual intercourse only in order to breed children, but it is attested, though it need not be believed…It is even rare for a man to be praised for being satisfied with one woman at a time, *una contenus* .’(Treggiari, 235) [↑](#endnote-ref-408)
409. Treggiari, *Roman Marriage*, 216, citing Seneca, *de Ira* 2.28.7. [↑](#endnote-ref-409)
410. ibid., 221-222, citing Musonius Rufus, *On sexual indulgence* (*Peri Aphrodisioni,* XII); now accessible in Cora Lutz’s edition, *Musonius Rufus Stoic Fragments*, first published 1947, reprint New Delhi: Isha Books, 2013, 54-57. [↑](#endnote-ref-410)
411. Veyne, History of Private Life, 49. [↑](#endnote-ref-411)
412. Edwards, Politics of Immorality, 24. [↑](#endnote-ref-412)
413. The relations between *epimeleia heautou* (care of one’s self) and *tekhne tou biou* (the art of living*)* are explored throughout Foucault’s lectures of 1981-1982, collected as ‘Hermeneutics of the Subject’. For me, the readings of Plato, Epictetus, Epicurus, Marcus Aurelius, Seneca, Galen et al., in these lectures are more rewarding and persuasive as an account of what Foucault meant by ‘spiritual exercises’ and the ‘care of the self’ than the accounts in the later published texts of *History of Sexuality*. In showing in great detail when the ancients meant by philosophical exercises and their purpose, Foucault avoids that concentration on the ‘self’ at the expense of everything else, as the aim of thinking and cultivation, which worries Pierre Hadot, who takes issue with its relevance to the ancient thinkers. Particularly helpful to my thinking about the shift from Greco-Roman to Christian ideals is the lecture of 12 February 1982 (247-287). Or Hadot’s objections, see his ‘Reflections on the notion of ‘the cultivation of the self’, in *Michel Foucault Philosopher*, 225-232, and his important ‘Forms of Life and Forms of Discourse in Ancient Philosophy’, tr. Arnold Davidosn and Paula Wissing, in Arnold I. Davidson, ed. *Foucault and His Interlocutors* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 203-224. [↑](#endnote-ref-413)
414. Michel Foucault, *The Uses of Pleasure, The History of Sexuality, Volume Two,* tr. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1985), 151. As Giulia Sissa says, ‘It would be difficult to write a history of ancient sex, particularly one that covers the ancient world and early Christianity, without relating one’s own position to Michel Foucault’s. His presence is, to say the least, formidable.’ That is gracefully put, and also true. Acknowledging his power and brilliance does not, however, mean that his interpretations of ancient and early Christian notions of chastity and marriage are the ones to defer to. Nor are his other readings impeccable. Simon Goldhill has pointed to places in Foucault’s volumes on late antiquity ‘where systematic misreading seems to me to be more than usually debilitating to an argument’ (xii) One of those places, says Goldhill, is the reading of the erotics of the Greek novel where ‘Foucault’s treatment, however, also seems quite insufficient…his very understanding of what constitutes the discursive field here seems insufficient to me, that is, what the constitution of a normative discourse is, and how its boundaries are articulated.’ (*Foucault’s Virginity: Ancient Erotic Fiction and the History of* Sexuality, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995, 110) Compared to the best of the work in this field, Foucault is disappointing. That said, this is a field that been going through the roof in quantity and excitement precisely in the years since Foucault’s death; he cannot be blamed for lagging behind it. Sissa makes a number of criticisms of Foucault on antiquity throughout her book and in her conclusions: ‘He restricts the relevance of the care of the self to Hellenistic philosophy, reads classical philosophers as though they were doctors, sexologists or marriage councillors (sic), and completely ignores the arguments on the nature of desire that constitute the theoretical nucleus of the ethics of sexuality.’ (*Sex and Sensuality*, 195, 205) [↑](#endnote-ref-414)
415. Cf. Peter Brown, *Body and Society*, 312. [↑](#endnote-ref-415)
416. Treggiari, 258, 259, 261. In this paragraph I am paraphrasing Treggiari’s carefully documented work in her chapter, ‘Graeco-Roman Theories of Marriage’ and *Coniugalis Amor* in *Roman Marriage*, 205-261. [↑](#endnote-ref-416)
417. Pomeroy, *Goddesses* , 156. [↑](#endnote-ref-417)
418. To borrow Kyle Harper’s apt characterization: ‘Over the last generation, as the history of sexuality became one of the great scholarly enterprises, the popular story in which Christianity put an end to pagan freedom with the body was exposed as a caricature, at best…’ (In 1978) an article by ‘Paul Veyne exploded the myth that pre-Christian sexual culture was an uninhibited garden; in his strong reformulation, the Romans were already, long before Constantine’s celestial vision, pent-up lagan prudes who had sex timorously, at night, with their clothes on and the lamps off.’ (*From Shame to Sex*, 2) Harper adds an important correction: Veyne’s prudish couples do not hold up to examination. The lamps illuminating their love-making were lavishly decorated with erotic scenes. The reports of a sexual recession in Rome are seriously exaggerated, as Harper shows in detail and with some delight. There was a Christianization of sexual morality, that is true, but it happened much later, only being implemented in the 4th and 5th centuries. [↑](#endnote-ref-418)
419. Foucault, *Care of the Self,* Conclusion (235-240); Paul Veyne, ‘La Famille et l’amour sous le Haut-Empire romain’, 37. [↑](#endnote-ref-419)
420. Michel Foucault, *The Uses of Pleasure, The History of Sexuality, Volume Two,* tr. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1985),143-184. [↑](#endnote-ref-420)
421. Paul Veyne, *The Roman Empire*, tr. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 24-25 (=*A History of Private Life from Pagan Rome to Byzantium* , ed. Paul Veyne, tr. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 5-233 [↑](#endnote-ref-421)
422. Langlands, 134. [↑](#endnote-ref-422)
423. Musonius Rufus, *Lecture XII (Reliquiae XII)*: ‘No one with any self-control would think of having relations with a courtesan or a free woman apart from marriage, no, nor even with his own maid-servant. The fact that those relationships are not lawful or seemly makes them a disgrace and a reproach to those seeking them…there must be sheer wantonness in anyone yielding to the temptation of shameful pleasure and like swine rejoicing in his own vileness.’ I quote from Cora Lutz’s translation, published in *Yale Classical Studies* 10 (1947); reprint in *Musonius Rufus Stoic Fragments* (56). [↑](#endnote-ref-423)
424. Ammianus Marcellinus, *The Later Roman Empire, AD 354-378*, tr. Walter Hamilton (London: Penguin, 1986), 296. [↑](#endnote-ref-424)
425. See Arthur Darby Nock, *Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1933), 125. And see also Foucault: ‘And if one wishes to understand the interest that was directed in these elites to personal ethics, to the morality of everyday conduct, private life, and pleasure, it is not all that pertinent to speak of decadence, frustration, and sullen retreat. Instead, one should see in this interest the search for a new way of conceiving the relationship that one ought to have with one’s status, one’s functions, one’s activities, and one’s obligations. Whereas formerly ethics implied a close connection between power over oneself and power over others, and therefore had to refer to an aesthetics of life that accorded with one’s status, the new rules of the political game made it more difficult to define the relations between what one was, what one could do, and what one was expected to accomplish. The formation of oneself as the ethical object of one’s own actions became more problematic.’ (*Care of the Self* , 83-84) [↑](#endnote-ref-425)
426. Gleason, *Making* Men, xx-xix; and Veyne, *History of Private Life,* 95-115. [↑](#endnote-ref-426)
427. on euergetism, see Veyne, *Bread and Circuses: Historical Sociology and Political Pluralism*, tr. Brian Pearce (New York: Penguin, 1990) [↑](#endnote-ref-427)
428. Veyne, History of Private Life, 33-49 [↑](#endnote-ref-428)
429. Foucault, ‘Sexuality and Solitude’ in *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth*, *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault, 1954-1984, Volume One*, ed. Paul Rabinow, tr. Robert Hurley and others (New York: The New Press, 1997), 175-184 (179). Against Veyne and Foucault, Kate Cooper’s clarifications should be recalled. However temperate the ideal of the sage’s marriage in Rome, it did not share the ‘ideal of denial’ which was celebrated by Christian writers of the second to fourth centuries. (Kate Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride*: *Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity*, 44) [↑](#endnote-ref-429)
430. E.g., Elizabeth A. Clark, ‘Foucault, the Fathers and Sex’, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 56, No. 4 (Winter, 1988), 619-641 (622), accessed: 24/04/2014. [↑](#endnote-ref-430)
431. Wayne A. Meeks, *The Origins of Christian Morality: The First Two Centuries* (New Haven : Yale University press, 1993), 16. [↑](#endnote-ref-431)
432. Brown, *Body and Society*, 31, 32 [↑](#endnote-ref-432)
433. ‘Over the first few centuries of the common era’, (Kate Cooper writes) ‘pagans and Christians alike drew on a moral language of marital concord that had existed at least from the time of Augustus.’ (*Virgin and the Bride,* 3) [↑](#endnote-ref-433)
434. There have been numerous criticisms by classicists and ancient historians: Amy Richlin, *The Garden of Priapus: Sexuality and Aggression in Roman Humor*, revised edition (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), xv-xvii, and David Cohen and Richard Saller, ‘Foucault on Sexuality in Greco-Roman Antiquity’ in Jan Goldstein, *Foucault and the Writing of* History (London: Basil Blackwell, 1994), 35-59. James Davidson and James Porter (‘Foucault’s Ancient Ascetics’, in *Phoenix,* vol. 59, no. 1-2, Spring-Summer, 2005, 121-132), two other contemporary ancient historians, show a fair degree of irritation with Foucault’s involvement in the study of antiquity, Porter describing self-fashioning, a key concept Foucault wants to apply to ancient and modern subjectivity as ‘barely coherent’. Kyle Harper, on the other hand, gives Foucault a patient reading and, like all the classicists, recognizes how much current work in the field has been invigorated and directed (even if in disagreement) by Foucault. Harper is, nonetheless, unconvinced: on the key question of ‘Roman-era pederasty’ ‘Foucault’s judgments are simply misguided’ (*From Shame to Sin*, 24). Why does Foucault want to deny to late Rome the lively interest in pederasty it used to enjoy (its ‘philosophical divestment’)? James Davidson believes this is a function of his own complex relationship to his own sexuality. The connection between ancient pederasty and chastity – its fate, its philosophical and religious roles – is not doubt something worth exploring with more care than I can give. My aim is to shed some light on chastity and virginity as ‘female troubles’, to borrow John Waters’ phrase, already a dish far too large to swallow in one go. [↑](#endnote-ref-434)
435. Rebecca Langlands, *Sexual Morality in Ancient Rome*  (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 206. [↑](#endnote-ref-435)
436. See the very full account in Carlin A. Barton, *Roman Honor: The Fire in the Bones* (Berkeley & London: University of California Press, 2001). [↑](#endnote-ref-436)
437. Rouselle, *Porneia*, 78-83 (79). [↑](#endnote-ref-437)
438. Cooper, Virgin and the Bride, 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-438)
439. Robert Louis Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* 2nd edition (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2003) xviii. [↑](#endnote-ref-439)
440. Foucault, The History of Sexuality, Volume 2, The Use of Pleasure, 250. [↑](#endnote-ref-440)
441. Kate Cooper, The Virgin and the Bride, 26-87. [↑](#endnote-ref-441)
442. Rousselle, *Porneia*, 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-442)
443. Elizabeth A. Clark, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 18; Derwas J. Chitty, *The Desert a City…* [↑](#endnote-ref-443)
444. See Foucault, History of Sexuality, Volume 3, ‘The Care of the Self’, 105-116. [↑](#endnote-ref-444)
445. Ibid., 118. [↑](#endnote-ref-445)
446. A conversation with many consequences. On this theme, see (among many other) the stimulating work of Elaine Pagels, *Adam, Eve and the Serpent* (New York: Vintage, 1989). [↑](#endnote-ref-446)
447. Important re-interpretations of the profound revision of the moral subject can be found in Harper, *From Shame to Sex*, Introduction, Chapter 2, and Conclusion. [↑](#endnote-ref-447)
448. Christian Jambet, ‘The Constitution of the subject and spiritual practice: Observations on *L’Histoire de la sexualité*, in *Michel Foucault Philosopher*, tr. Timothy J. Armstrong (New York: Routledge, 1992), 233-247 (243.) [↑](#endnote-ref-448)
449. Brown Body and Society, 418. [↑](#endnote-ref-449)
450. ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-450)
451. Brown, Body and Society, 396. [↑](#endnote-ref-451)
452. John T. Noonan, *Contraception*, 42. [↑](#endnote-ref-452)
453. These are commonplaces of Stoic rhetoric, the source being Seneca, always good at applying the best lines of philosophy to his own ends. They survive only in Jerome’s citation, in *Against Jovinian* 1.49, cited by John T. Noonan, *Contraception,* 47. As Noonan also explains, the hostility towards desire that raged ‘unchastely’ even within the legitimate confines of marriage was not unique to Stoics. The philosophic Jew Philo of Alexandria interpreted Moses’ law on adultery as applying to ‘adulterous love within marriage’. (Noonan, 53) [↑](#endnote-ref-453)
454. See Brown, *Body and Society*, 36-38. [↑](#endnote-ref-454)
455. Ramsay Mac Mullen, ‘What Difference Did Christianity Make?’ *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, Bd 35, H.3 (3rd Qtr., 1986), 322-343 Accessed 14-03-2015 19:58 UTC; see also Mac Mullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), and Mac Mullen’s reference to Edwin Judge’s question to another scholar: ‘When I once told A.H.M. Jones that I wanted to find out what difference it made to Rome to have been converted, he said he already knew the answer: None.’ (E.A Judge, *The Conversion of Rome: Ancient Sources of Modern Social Tensions* (North Ryde, Sydney: Macquarie University, 1980) [↑](#endnote-ref-455)
456. Celsus, *On the True Doctrine: A Discourse Against the Christians*, tr. R. Joseph Hoffmann (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) [↑](#endnote-ref-456)
457. See Kathy L. Gaca, *The Making of Fornication: Eros, Ethics, and Political Reform in Greek Philosophy and Early Christianity* (Berkeley: University Of California Press, 2003), Chapter 2: ‘Desire’s Hunger and Plato the Regulator’, 23-58 (30, 39). [↑](#endnote-ref-457)
458. Langlands, Sexual Morality in Ancient Rome, 11. [↑](#endnote-ref-458)
459. Harper, From Shame to Sin, 85. [↑](#endnote-ref-459)
460. *Musonius Rufus: The Roman Socrates, Lectures and Fragments*, trans. Cora Lutz, *Yale Classical Studies* 10 (1947), 3-147, Lecture XIV, 10-11 accessed 26/07/2014 12:55 https://sites.google.com/site/thestoiclife/the\_teachers/musonius-rufus [↑](#endnote-ref-460)
461. See Foucault, *On the Government of the Living: Lectures at the Collège de France 1979-1980, ed.* Michel Senellart, tr. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Foucault, ‘Sexuality and Solitude’, in *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth*, *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault, 1954-1984, Volume One*, ed. Paul Rabinow, tr. Robert Hurley and others (New York: The New Press, 1997), 175-184 (178-179), and *History of Sexuality*, Vol 1, 155-6. [↑](#endnote-ref-461)
462. Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*: *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981-1982*, ed. Frédéric Gros, tr. Graham Burchill (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 254-256. [↑](#endnote-ref-462)
463. Foucault, ‘Sexuality and Solitude’, in *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth*, *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault, 1954-1984, Volume One*, ed. Paul Rabinow, tr. Robert Hurley and others (New York: The New Press, 1997), 175-184 (178). [↑](#endnote-ref-463)
464. I quote the translation by Frank Cole Babbit in the Loeb edition of Plutarch’s *Moralia*, Volume V (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936), 31. [↑](#endnote-ref-464)
465. ‘The Acts of John’, in *New Testament Apocrypha, Vol. Two: Writings Related to the Apostles, Apocalypses, and Related Subjects*, ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher, trans. R. McL. Wilson (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 159-60. John would not have been the ideal wedding guest. [↑](#endnote-ref-465)
466. Galen, in Walzer, Galen against the Jews and Christians, 15, cited in Wilken, The Christians as the Romans Saw Them, 80. [↑](#endnote-ref-466)
467. Nock, *Conversion*, 201. [↑](#endnote-ref-467)
468. On Lea and his work, see Edward Peters, ‘History, Historians, and Clerical Celibacy’, in Frassetto, ed., *Medieval Purity and Piety*, 3-21. Henry C. Lea. *The History of Sacerdotal Celibacy in the Christian Church* (New York: Russell& Russell, 1957). Lea’s book is learned, rich and readable, although free from all scholarly apparatus. [↑](#endnote-ref-468)
469. Cooper, The Virgin and the Bride, 56-61. [↑](#endnote-ref-469)
470. Lucien Legrand, *The Biblical Doctrine of Virginity* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1963), 19-20. [↑](#endnote-ref-470)
471. John T. Noonan, Jr., *Contraception: A History of its Treatment by the Catholic Theologians and Canonists*, enlarged edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 32. [↑](#endnote-ref-471)
472. Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-472)
473. Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 158-164. [↑](#endnote-ref-473)
474. A.D. Nock, Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo (New York: Oxford University Press, 1933), 187-253. [↑](#endnote-ref-474)
475. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden*, ed.Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Munich: Deutschen Taschenbach Verlag and Walter de Gruyter, 1988) volume 6, 59; *Twilight of the Idols/The Anti-Christ*, tr. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1969, 33. [↑](#endnote-ref-475)
476. Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden*, ed.Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Munich: Deutschen Taschenbach Verlag and Walter de Gruyter, 1988) volume 6, 80. [*Fortschritt der Idee: sie wird feiner, verfänglicher, unfasslicher, --* ***sie wird Weib, sie wird christlich’*]**  [↑](#endnote-ref-476)
477. ibid., 98-102, and 80-87. [↑](#endnote-ref-477)
478. Frye, The Secular Scripture, 53. [↑](#endnote-ref-478)
479. See Alenka Zupančič, *The Shortest Shadow: Nietzsche’s Philosophy of the Two* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003) 47-53. [↑](#endnote-ref-479)
480. Peter Brown, ‘The Notion of Virginity in the Early Church’, in Bernard McGinn, John Meyendorff, and Jean Leclercq, eds., *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century* (New York: Crossroad, 1985), 427-443, (429, 433). [↑](#endnote-ref-480)
481. Ibid., 435-438. [↑](#endnote-ref-481)
482. I use the translation of Marion Faber and Stephen Lehmann, *Human, Alltoohuman: A Book for Free Spirits* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 97. §§134-144 of Section Three ‘Religious Life’, dissect the saint and asceticism. The temptation to quote every line is hard to resist. [↑](#endnote-ref-482)
483. See Robert B. Pippin, *Nietzsche, Psychology, and First Philosophy* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 54-59; Bernard Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life: Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 143-147; Christopher Janaway, *Beyond Selflessness: Reading Nietzsche’s* Genealogy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), *passim.* [↑](#endnote-ref-483)
484. Malcolm Bull, *Anti-Nietzsche* (London: Verso, 2011), 58, quoting Nietzsche *Ecce Homo*, tr. R.J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), 79. [↑](#endnote-ref-484)
485. See, among many, his comments in *Twilight of the Idols*, 50 (Penguin edition, trans. R.J. Hollingdale, London, 1990) 115, or *The Will to Power* 95 (Spring-Fall 1887), and 125 (1885). [↑](#endnote-ref-485)
486. Celsus, *On the True Doctrine*: *A Discourse Against the Christians,* tr. R. Joseph Hoffmann (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 25. [↑](#endnote-ref-486)
487. Celsus, On the True Doctrine, 73. [↑](#endnote-ref-487)
488. In *Marx and Engels on Religion*, ed. Reinhold Niebuhr (New York: Schocken Press, 1967), 316, and see John. G. Gager, *Kingdom and Community: The Social World of Early Christianity* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1975). [↑](#endnote-ref-488)
489. Meeks, *First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 52-55, 72-73. [↑](#endnote-ref-489)
490. A survey of such ‘female attraction’ to Christianity over a number of centuries can be found in Monique Alexandre, ‘Early Christian Women’, in *A History of* Women, vol. 1, *From Ancient Goddesses to Christian* Saints, George Duby, Michelle Perrot and Pauline Schmitt Pantel, eds., Arthur Goldhammer, tr. (Cambridge, MA: Bellknap Press, 1992), 409-444. [↑](#endnote-ref-490)
491. Madeleine Scopello, ‘Jewish and Greek Heroines in the Nag Hammadi Library’, in Karen L. King, ed., *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 70-90 [↑](#endnote-ref-491)
492. in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, ed. James M. Robinson (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), 141-160. [↑](#endnote-ref-492)
493. A wide sampling of such material is discussed in King, ed., *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism*. [↑](#endnote-ref-493)
494. ibid., 239-275. [↑](#endnote-ref-494)
495. Wilhelm Schneemelcher, ed., *New Testament Apocrypha*, Vol. II: *Writings Relating to the Apostles, Apocalypses and Related Subjects*, translation ed. by R. McL. Wilson (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 228. [↑](#endnote-ref-495)
496. Ross Shepard Kraemer, the feminist historian of religion, cautions: ‘Yet material that seems on its face to point to the significant presence of women, such as stories in the canonical gospels, may in fact be deceptive.’ (*Her Share of the Blessings: Women’s Religions Among Pagans, Jews, and Christians in the Greco-Roman World*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, 128, also 130-139.) [↑](#endnote-ref-496)
497. Alexandre, ‘Early Christian Women’, 431-435. [↑](#endnote-ref-497)
498. MacMullen, Christianity and Paganism, 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-498)
499. Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Late Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1981), 46. Disagreement with the ‘common supposition’ that Christianity was attractively open ‘to two large categories of persons for whom paganism, in all its varieties, nowhere had much room: women and slaves along with the vulgar masses’ is registered by Ramsay MacMullen (*Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 7, especially Footnote 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-499)
500. Peter Brown, ‘East and West: The New Marital Morality’, in *A History of Private Life I, From Pagan Rome to Byzantium* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 297. [↑](#endnote-ref-500)
501. Gillian Cloke, This Female Man of God: Women and Spiritual Power in the Patristic Age, AD 350-450 (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-501)
502. Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*, new edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 17: ‘Yet we only know from passing references in the *Confessions* and from other works, that Augustine had at least one brother, Navigius, perhaps two sisters…’ (17) [↑](#endnote-ref-502)
503. This remarkable theme in theology as well as pastoral practice is covered thoroughly by Elizabeth A. Clark, ‘The Celibate Bridegroom and His Virginal Bride: Metaphor and the Marriage of Jesus in Early Christian Ascetic Exegesis’, *Church History*, vol. 77, No. 1 (March 2008), 1-25 accessed 10/01/2014 15:11 [↑](#endnote-ref-503)
504. Cited in Kathleen Coyne Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages*, (New York: Routledge, 2000), 42. [↑](#endnote-ref-504)
505. Bugge, *Virginitas*, 66. [↑](#endnote-ref-505)
506. Brown, Body and Society, 274 [↑](#endnote-ref-506)
507. Strabo, *Geography*, 7.3.4. cited in Kramer, *Her Share of the* Blessings, 3, who also mentions 2 Timothy 3:6-7, Jerome*, Against Vigilantius*, 6, and Juvenal’s *Satire* , 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-507)
508. From Origen’s *Contra Celsum*, tr, Owen Chadwick (Cambridge, 1965), cited in Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire (A.D. 100-400)* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1984), 37. [↑](#endnote-ref-508)
509. David Flusser, with R. Steven Notley, *The Sage from Galilee: Rediscovering Jesus’ Genius* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. R Eerdmans Publishing, 2007), 76-96. [↑](#endnote-ref-509)
510. Not necessarily through the deliberate mobilisation of missionary activity, as Ramsay MacMullen argues in *Christianizing the Roman Empire, A.D. 100-400* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1984), 34. [↑](#endnote-ref-510)
511. ‘Consonant with these intense eschatological beliefs, the Jesus movement advocated a radical interim ethic that had far-reaching ramifications for social roles, including those associated with gender distinctions.’ (Ross Shepard Kraemer, *Her Share of the Blessings*, 138.) [↑](#endnote-ref-511)
512. See, among many others, the introduction to *Porphyry’s Against the Christians*, ed. and tr. R. Joseph Hoffmann (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1994), 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-512)
513. Gerd Thiessen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth,* tr. John H. Schütz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 69-143; Stephen J. Patterson, ‘*Askesis* and the Early Jesus Tradition’, in *Asceticism and the New Testament*, ed. Leif E. Vaage & Vincent L. Winbush (New York: Routledge, 1999), 49-69. [↑](#endnote-ref-513)
514. If a third-century student of Plotinus, Porphyry of Tyre, can describe the teachings of Jesus and Paul as ‘quackery of the first rank’, as his English translator puts it (*Porphyry’s Against the Christians*, 68), who but silly women would take such stuff seriously? Or see the complaint of the philosopher Celsus, who lived during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, that Christians ‘want and are able to convince only the foolish, dishonorable and stupid, and only slaves, women and little children.’ (Celsus, *On the True Doctrine: a Discourse Against the Christians*, tr. R. Joseph Hoffmann, Oxford; Oxford University Press, 1987, 73)

     The ancient world did not have a uniform view about the incapacities of women. Dissent from a conventional misogyny should not be surprising. One important discussion of the relative virtues of men and women – intellectual as well as physiological – is Xenophon’s in the *Oeconomicus:* Socrates is here advising a well-intentioned husband, Critobulus, on estate management and the good management that connects man and wife:

     ‘For he made the man’s body and mind more capable of enduring cold and heat, and journeys and campaigns; and he therefore imposed on him the outdoor tasks. To the woman, since he has made her body less capable of such endurance, I take it that God has assigned the indoor tasks. And knowing that he has created in the woman and imposed on her the nourishment of the infants, he meted out to her a larger portion of affection for new-born babies than to the man. And since he imposed on the woman the protection of the stores also, knowing that for protection a fearful disposition is no advantage, God meted out a larger share of fear to the woman than to the man; and knowing that he who deals with the outdoor tasks will have to be their defender against any wrong-doer, he meted out to him again a larger share of courage. But because both must give and take, he granted to both impartially memory and attention (**); and so you could not distinguish whether the male or the female sex has the larger share of these. And Go also gave to both impartially the power to practice due self-control (**and gave authority to whichever is the better – whether it be the man or the woman – to win a larger part of the good that comes from it.’(vii, 23-28)

     And again, here is Socrates in Xenophon’s *Symposium:* ‘Women’s nature is really not a whit inferior to man’s, except in its judgment and physical strength.’ (ii, 9) (Xenophon, *Memorabilia, Oeconomicus, Symposium, Apology*, tr. E.C. Marchant and O.J. Todd, Loeb Classical Library, vol. 168, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1923) [↑](#endnote-ref-514)
515. See Ross Shepard Kramer, *Her Share of the Blessings*, 128; Joyce E. Salisbury, *Church Fathers, Independent* Virgins (London: Verso, 1991), 57-110; On Celsus and other observers of the behavior and aims of the Christians see Robert Louis Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw* Them, 94-125. [↑](#endnote-ref-515)
516. Elizabeth A. Castelli, borrowing a phrase from Peter Brown (who wouldn’t?): ‘Asceticism and History in Paul’, *Asceticism in the New Testament*, op.cit., 171-185 (178). [↑](#endnote-ref-516)
517. But compare John Bugge, *Virginitas*, 56-7.it is interesting to note that the first Christians saw *ascesis*  - essentially a pagan idea – as something quite different from virginity, which they considered not a matter of resolve at all but a *charisma,* a free gift of God….Still, the agonistic function of individual asceticism was more obviously retained within monasticism, where virginity as a necessary condition for combat against the personified forces of evil remained a literary theme well into the Middle Ages.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-517)
518. I quote from Sally Rieger Shore’s translation, *John Chrysostom, On Virginity* (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1983). [↑](#endnote-ref-518)
519. The phrase is from a 13th century manuscript by Peter the Chanter, from a text often attributed too Augustine in the Middle Ages. See Pierre J. Payer, *The Bridling of Desire: Vies of Sex in the Later Middle Ages* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-519)
520. Elizabeth A. Clark, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-520)
521. Harper, *From Shame to Sin* , 135. [↑](#endnote-ref-521)
522. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, tr. Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 14-37. [↑](#endnote-ref-522)
523. I am paraphrasing the argument of Essays 2 & 3 of *On the Genealogy of Morality*, tr. Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 58-85. [↑](#endnote-ref-523)
524. Bugge, *Virginitas*, 19: ‘We have seen, then, that as there is unanimity over the original sexual state of man among these Christian thinkers, there is also a certain like-mindedness about the nature of the original transgression and its tragic effects for the race. In a word, man’s first sin was somehow equivalent to sexual intercourse; its principal effects were death and sexuality itself. The idea is not found stated explicitly; rather, it remains recessive, something subscribed to which will not bear outright expression. Nevertheless, the proposition that “the original sin was sex” is a premise implicit in, and logically necessary to, the arguments these Fathers make over the nature of the first things. It takes the shape of a sustained intuition about the character of Christian perfection, and, as such, continues to exert an influence upon subsequent thought far beyond the point at which it would have been unacceptable as explicit doctrine.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-524)
525. See K.J. Dover, ‘Classical Greek Attitudes to Sexual Behavior’, in *Sexuality and Gender in the Classical World, Readings and Sources*, ed. Laura McClure (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 22-36. [↑](#endnote-ref-525)
526. Martha Nussbaum, ‘*Eros* and Ethical Norms: Philosophers Respond to a Cultural Dilemma’, in *The Sleep of Reason: Erotic Experience and Sexual Ethics in Ancient Greece and Rome,* ed. Martha C Nussbaum and Juha Sihvola (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2003), 55-94 (60). [↑](#endnote-ref-526)
527. As John Winkler makes clear in his ‘Double Consciousness in Sappho’s Lyrics’, in his *The* *Constraints of Desire: The Anthropology of Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece* (New York & London: Routledge, 1990), 162-187 [↑](#endnote-ref-527)
528. On Lucretius and the psychology of destructive love, see Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 259-279. [↑](#endnote-ref-528)
529. Winkler, ‘The Constraints of Desire: Erotic Magical Spells’, in *The Constraints of Desire: The Anthropology of Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece*  (New York: Routledge, 1990), 71-98 (72). [↑](#endnote-ref-529)
530. See Leonard Barkan, *The Gods Made Flesh: Metamorphosis and the Pursuit of Paganism* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1986), quotation and translation from p.57. [↑](#endnote-ref-530)
531. See Norman O. Brown, *Love’s Body*(Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 243-255. [↑](#endnote-ref-531)
532. Dover, op.cit., 29-30. [↑](#endnote-ref-532)
533. See Excursus 10, ‘The ‘New Woman’: Representation and Reality’, in *Women in the Classical World*, op.cit., 280-293. [↑](#endnote-ref-533)
534. See Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels,* (New York: Vintage, 1989), xxiv. Until the discovery of the codices at Nag-Hammadi, most of our knowledge of Gnostic views, and their hyperbolic repudiation of marriage, came secondhand, a main source being the passages in Clement of Alexandria’s *Stromata*. [↑](#endnote-ref-534)
535. Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 29. [↑](#endnote-ref-535)
536. Bugge, *Virginitas*, 56. [↑](#endnote-ref-536)
537. Brown, *Body and Society*, 330-331. [↑](#endnote-ref-537)
538. See John T. Noonan, Jr., *Contraception: A History of its Treatment by the Catholic Theologians and Canonists* (Cambridge, MA: Bellknap Press, 1986), 13-18 on use in antiquity, 202ff., on use in the Middle Ages. [↑](#endnote-ref-538)
539. The first translators of it, D. Armand and M.-Ch. Moons, dated it prior to the Council of Nicaea in 325. See Susann Elm, *Virgins of God: the Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 34. [↑](#endnote-ref-539)
540. I am quoting from the translation by Teresa M, Shaw, in *Ascetic Behavior in Greco-Roman Antiquity: A Sourcebook* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 30-43. [↑](#endnote-ref-540)
541. John Chrysostom, *On Virginity, Against Remarriage*, tr. Sally Rieger Shore (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1983), 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-541)
542. Pseudo-Athanasius, *On Virginity*, tr. David Brakke, *Corpus Scriptorum Chistianorum Orientalium* vol. 593 (Louvain: Editions Peeters, 2002), 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-542)
543. On these matters see Elizabeth Clark, *Reading Renunciation*, Chapter 8, ‘From Ritual to *Askesis’* (204-232). [↑](#endnote-ref-543)
544. Wayne Meeks, *The Origins of Christian Morality: The First Two Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 142. [↑](#endnote-ref-544)
545. Elizabeth Castelli’s ‘Virginity and its Meaning for Women’s Sexuality in Early Christianity’ (*Journal of Feminist Studies in* Religion, Vol. 2., No. 1 Spring, 1986, 61-88) asks the hard questions: ‘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?’(65) On the enthusiasm of women for Christian asceticism (we know nothing about what Greek or Roman women might have felt had they been given opportunities to study pagan philosophical asceticism), the official answer is that they were motivated by love of Christ, by proper humility, by the desire to perfect themselves. Yet advocates for virginity did freely expound the indignities of marriage (John Chrysostom is most eloquent, see *On Virginity* 51-72), the pains of childbirth, the sorrows of raising children, even the shame of being a sex object who all too soon loses youthful beauty and the attention it inspires: all in efforts to rouse virginal recruitment. [↑](#endnote-ref-545)
546. Cited in Jo Ann McNamara, *A New Song: Celibate Women in the First Three Christian Centuries*  (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1985), 96. [↑](#endnote-ref-546)
547. From the anonymous ‘Homily On Virginity’, probably from early 4th century Syria (translated by Susan Ashbrook Harvey, in *Ascetic Behaviour in Greco-Roman Antiquity: A Sourcebook,* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990, 29-43 (35) [↑](#endnote-ref-547)
548. Wayne A Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983), 82. [↑](#endnote-ref-548)
549. Jo Ann McNamara, *A New Song*, 31-34. [↑](#endnote-ref-549)
550. Gillian Clark, ‘Women and Asceticism in Late Antiquity: The Refusal of Status ad Gender’, in *Asceticism*, ed. Vincent L. Winbush and Richard Valantasis (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 33-48 (37). [↑](#endnote-ref-550)
551. *The Acts of Andrew,* in *New Testament Apocrypha*, volume Two, ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher, tr. R. McL. Wilson (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 101-151 (129-130) [↑](#endnote-ref-551)
552. See Methodius of Olympus, The *Symposium: a Treatise on Chastity*, trans. Herbert Musurillo, S.J. (New York: Newman Press, 1958), Logos 5 (Thallusa), 2-3. [↑](#endnote-ref-552)
553. John M Bugge, *Virginitas: an Essay in the History of a Medieval Ideal* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975), 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-553)
554. Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity,* in *Saint Gregory of Nyssa: Ascetical Works,* tr. Virginia Woods Callahan (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1967), 74. [↑](#endnote-ref-554)
555. Methodius of Olympus, The *Symposium: a Treatise on Chastity*, trans. Herbert Musurillo, S.J. (New York: Newman Press, 1958), Logos 11. [↑](#endnote-ref-555)
556. Brown, Body and Society, 163. [↑](#endnote-ref-556)
557. Saint Gregory of Nyssa, ‘The Life of Saint Macrina’, in *Ascetical Works*, tr. Virginia Woods Callahan, *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 58 (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1967), 164. [↑](#endnote-ref-557)
558. Giulia Sfameni Gasparro, ‘Asceticism and Anthropology: *Enkrateia* and ‘Double Creation’ in Early Christianity’, in *Asceticism*, op.cit., 127-146 (141); Elm, *Virgins of God: the Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 47-59; Dyan Elliot, *Spiritual Marriage….* [↑](#endnote-ref-558)
559. Rouselle, *Porneia*, 145. [↑](#endnote-ref-559)
560. Wilken, The Christians as the Romans Saw Them, 17-20. [↑](#endnote-ref-560)
561. Tertullian, *On the veiling of virgins*, early in the third century, is a pioneer, at least among documents that have survived. [↑](#endnote-ref-561)
562. Elizabeth Castelli, ‘Virginity and its Meaning’, 75-78. [↑](#endnote-ref-562)
563. Rouselle, *Porneia*, 193. [↑](#endnote-ref-563)
564. On the equation between the Jewish rite of circumcision, which marked the first covenant with God, and the Christian notion of a ‘spiritual circumcision’, marking the second, see the vivid meditations of Origen, expounded by Henri Crouzel (*Virginité et marriage selon Origène*, Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1962, 25-87). Commenting on Matt. 19:12, Origen called virginity ‘the true circumcision of the flesh’, returning the soul to its first form as it was in Paradise, or will be at the end of time. To be virginal is to act on the earth as if you no longer belong to it. But freedom from ‘the flesh’ is a state of mind rather than body. Origen was addressing men, whom he advised to avoid women. [↑](#endnote-ref-564)
565. The homily ‘On Virginity’ was formerly credited to Pseudo-Basil. [↑](#endnote-ref-565)
566. *Virgins of* God, 106-112; Castelli, ‘Virginity and its Meanings’, 75-76. [↑](#endnote-ref-566)
567. Elm, *Virgins of God*, 113-120. [↑](#endnote-ref-567)
568. Porphyry, *Letter to Marcella*, 33, cited in Rouselle, 187. [↑](#endnote-ref-568)
569. Brown, Body and Society, 124. [↑](#endnote-ref-569)
570. ‘The whole thrust of the antinomian current was to devalue marriage, to deprive marital relations of any particular purpose’, writes Jon Noonan apropos of the Valentinians, who were believed to practice promiscuous intercourse but to oppose procreation. (68) The orthodox opponents of these antinomian Gnostics recognised as much a threat in their excesses as in the sterility of the radical ascetics. Gnosticism was, however, a highly significant phenomenon; if it did not succeed in imposing its image on the future of Christianity, it did a lot to alter what that future would look like. By the time of the last of the Gnostic sects, in around the late 3rd century, the criticism of marriage had already infiltrated the Church in a decisive way. [↑](#endnote-ref-570)
571. From Henry Chadwick’s introduction to the Stromateis (Miscellanies), in Alexandrian Christianity: Selected Translations of Clement and Origen (19-21) [↑](#endnote-ref-571)
572. Frederick Wisse, ‘Flee Femininity: Antifemininity in Gnostic Texts and the Question of Social Milieu’, in King, ed., *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism*, 297-307. [↑](#endnote-ref-572)
573. See the clear summary in Noonan, *Contraception*, 60-85. [↑](#endnote-ref-573)
574. From ‘The Martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas’, in *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, ed. and tr. Hubert Musurillo (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), ch. 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-574)
575. Ross Shepard Kraemer, *Her Share of the Blessings*, 160-161. [↑](#endnote-ref-575)
576. Gillian Cloke, This Female Man of God: Women and Spiritual Power in the Patristic Age, A.D. 350-450 (London: Routledge, 1995), 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-576)
577. Gillian Cloke, *This Female Man of God*, 1-23. [↑](#endnote-ref-577)
578. Kraemer, Her Share of the Blessings, 157-173. [↑](#endnote-ref-578)
579. John M. Bugge, *Virginitas: an Essay in the History of a Medieval Ideal* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975), 57. [↑](#endnote-ref-579)
580. Harper, *From Shame to Sin* , 193. [↑](#endnote-ref-580)
581. Cited in David G. Hunter, Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity: the Jovinianist Controversy (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007), 7 (Note 9) [↑](#endnote-ref-581)
582. James A Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-582)
583. Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy and* Heresy, 87-170. [↑](#endnote-ref-583)
584. Kate Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 196), ix. [↑](#endnote-ref-584)
585. The Apocryphal Acts appeared in the second and third centuries. They have a fair share of gnostic ideas and images, and are said to reflect popular piety of the age, especially of the less educated. Telling of the journeys and adventures of Peter and Paul, Thomas, Andrew, John and many others, they are full of shipwrecks and miraculous rescues, reports of sorcery (some ascribed to Paul himself), last-minute escapes, exotic locales, improbably coincidences, sudden conversions, and such like. Stories of wives converted by the Apostles and rushing to keep their husbands out of their beds (even resorting to the old chestnut, the bed-trick) are particularly popular. Se the edition prepared by J.K. Elliott, based on the 1924 translation of M.R. James (*The Apocryphal New Testament* , Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993). [↑](#endnote-ref-585)
586. Brown, Body and Society 158. [↑](#endnote-ref-586)
587. Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1993), 5-60. [↑](#endnote-ref-587)
588. See Finn, *Asceticism*, ch. 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-588)
589. Peter Brown, *Body and Society,* p.158-159. [↑](#endnote-ref-589)
590. Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (New York: HarperCollins, 1986), 336. [↑](#endnote-ref-590)
591. Body and Society, p.56. [↑](#endnote-ref-591)
592. Lane Fox, 335. [↑](#endnote-ref-592)
593. This last possibility, devoutly seized upon by the practitioners of ‘spiritual marriage’, or *syneisaktism*, vigorously denounced by, among others, John Chrysostom, and Jerome in his letter 20:14, to Eustochium: ‘They often occupy the same bed, and yet they call us suspicious if we fancy anything amiss.’ For Chrysostom’s ‘refutation’ and attack on this practice, see the text and introduction in Elizabeth A. Clark, *Jerome, Chrysostom and Friends: Essays and Translations*  (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1979), 158-205. The Council of Ancyra tried to ban the practice: ‘We prohibit those who live together with men as if they were their sisters from doing so.’ And ten years later a similar canon was issued by the Council of Nicaea. See Susanna Elm, *Virgins of God,* 48-51, and Brown, *Body and Society*, 267.The re-emergence of the idea in a new and more subtle form came in the Middle Ages with Hugh of St. Victor, according to John Bugge, who sees it as a revival of encratic sympathies. (Bugge, *Virginitas*, op.cit., 84-87. [↑](#endnote-ref-593)
594. Brown, Body and Society, 133. [↑](#endnote-ref-594)
595. See also Chrysostom, *Homily XX* on Ephesians and *Homily XIV* on Timothy. [↑](#endnote-ref-595)
596. In his Montanist period, his attitude hardened: ‘To an unmarried man every women is ‘another woman’ as long as he is not married to her, and the selfsame action which makes one woman a wife makes another an adulteress. Marriage and fornication are different only because laws appear to make them so; they are not intrinsically different, but only in the degree of their illegitimacy. For what is it that all men and women do in both marriage and fornication (*stuprum* )? They have sexual relations, of course, and the very desire to do this, our Lord says, is the same thing as fornication.’(*De exhortation castitatis* 9) [↑](#endnote-ref-596)
597. Tertullian, *Monogamy,* in *Treatises on Marriage and Remarriage*, tr. William P. Le Saint, SJ (New York: Newman Press, 1951), 70, 104. [↑](#endnote-ref-597)
598. Brown, 1989. 138. [↑](#endnote-ref-598)
599. Ibid., 139. [↑](#endnote-ref-599)
600. Marina Warner, Alone of All her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Maryˆ (New York: Random House, 1976), xxi. [↑](#endnote-ref-600)
601. R. Howard Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 37, 39. [↑](#endnote-ref-601)
602. Brown, *Body and Society*, 60-61, 243; Bloch, 81-85, on the ‘biopolitics’ of Christian asceticism, which did offer greater equality to women, while also (according to Jack Goody) weakening traditional networks of kinship, inheritance, and property. [↑](#endnote-ref-602)
603. Mac Mullen, Christianizing the Roman Empire, 74. [↑](#endnote-ref-603)
604. I am paraphrasing C.S.Lewis, *Allegory of Love*, 14-17. [↑](#endnote-ref-604)
605. Helen King, Hippocrates’ Woman: Reading the Female Body in Ancient Greece (London: Routledge, 1999), 80-85. [↑](#endnote-ref-605)
606. Rouselle, *Porneia*, 66-74. [↑](#endnote-ref-606)
607. GWF Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: OUP, 1977), 82; *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, Theorie Werkausgabe (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970), 46. (Further references to this edition will appear parenthetically.) [↑](#endnote-ref-607)
608. See Annabel Patterson, *Pastoral and Ideology: Virgil to Valéry*  (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987) [↑](#endnote-ref-608)
609. *Eclogues cum Dissertatione de Carmine,* cited from the English translation by Thomas Creech (Oxford, 1684) by Paul Alpers in his *What is Pastoral?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 16-18. [↑](#endnote-ref-609)
610. Jacques Maritain, *The Dream of Descartes*, trans. Mabelle L. Andison (New York: F. Hubner & Co., 1944), 28. [↑](#endnote-ref-610)
611. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées,* ed and trans Roger Ariew (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 2005), 36; *Œuvres Complètes*, ed. Louis Lafuma (Paris: Seuil, 1963), 515. [↑](#endnote-ref-611)
612. Allen Tate, ‘The Angelic Imagination’, in *The Man of Letters in the Modern World: Selected Essays, 1928-1955* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1955), 113-132. [↑](#endnote-ref-612)
613. Brown, *Body and Society*, 158-189 (178). [↑](#endnote-ref-613)
614. I rely here on the fascinating chapter on Porphyry in Robert Louis Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, 2nd edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 126-163. [↑](#endnote-ref-614)
615. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 180-181, citing Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*, in the John Florio translation (New York: Modern Library, 1933), 896 and 1012. [↑](#endnote-ref-615)
616. Vladimir Jankélévitch, *L’Innocence et la méchanceté* *Traité des vertus III*, (Paris: Flammarion, 1986) 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-616)
617. Steven Shapin, ‘The Philosopher and the Chicken’, in *Science Incarnate: Historical Embodiments of Natural Knowledge*, ed. Christopher Lawrence and Steven Shapin (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 21-50 (22-25). [↑](#endnote-ref-617)
618. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1930), 105. [↑](#endnote-ref-618)
619. Weber, 166. [↑](#endnote-ref-619)
620. See the commentaries of Jankélévitch (*le pur et l’impur,* p.47 and *passim*), and Pierre Hadot, *Plotin ou la simplicité du regard* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997) [↑](#endnote-ref-620)
621. Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1973), 12,11. [↑](#endnote-ref-621)
622. Mary Douglas, *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology* (London & New York: Routledge, 1975), p.56. [↑](#endnote-ref-622)
623. Edmund Leach, *Genesis as Myth and other Essays* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969), p.8-11. [↑](#endnote-ref-623)
624. For these discriminations, which have kept generations of scholars excited since Robertson Smith wrote *The Religion of the Semites*, see the work of Mary Douglas, Mircea Eliade, Rudolf Otto, J.G. Frazer, and more recently Giorgio Agamben (*Homo sacer*), Robert Parker and Walter Burkert. [↑](#endnote-ref-624)
625. Douglas, Implicit Meanings, 54. [↑](#endnote-ref-625)
626. Richard Finn, OP, *Asceticism in the Greco-Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009), 18. [↑](#endnote-ref-626)
627. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 120-126. [↑](#endnote-ref-627)
628. See also Harold J. Stukey, ‘Purity in Fifth and Fourth Century Religion’, *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, vol. 67 (1936), 86-295. [↑](#endnote-ref-628)
629. I draw here on Ricoeur’s brilliant study, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967) [↑](#endnote-ref-629)
630. Ricoeur, 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-630)
631. Ricoeur, 7, 70-99, 347-357, and *passim*. [↑](#endnote-ref-631)
632. See Robert Parker, *Miasma: Pollution and Purification in Ancient Greek Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 18, citing Plato, *Sophist*, 226d. [↑](#endnote-ref-632)
633. Parker, 19. [↑](#endnote-ref-633)
634. The most influential thinking about the body and its symbolism is that of Mary Douglas. As she puts it in the Preface to *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*, “Most symbolic behaviour must work through the human body...The human body is common to us all. Only our social condition varies.” (New York: Pantheon, 1982), viii. [↑](#endnote-ref-634)
635. Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society,* trans. L.A. Manyon (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 320ff., cited in Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen, 1981), 118. [↑](#endnote-ref-635)
636. Peter Brown, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 319. [↑](#endnote-ref-636)
637. Society and the Holy, 326. [↑](#endnote-ref-637)
638. Quote from Bishop Theodulf of Orléans, cited in Mayke de Jong, ‘*Imitation Morum*: the Cloister and Clerical Purity in the Carolingian World’, in Michael Frassetto, ed. *Medieval Purity and Piety: Essays on Medieval Clerical Celibacy and Religious Reform* (New York & London: Garland, 1998), 49-80 (49). [↑](#endnote-ref-638)
639. Carl Olson, *Celibacy and Religious Traditions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 6-7; Paul Ricoeur. *The Symbolism of Evil* , trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 37. [↑](#endnote-ref-639)
640. Elizer Diamond, ‘“And Jacob Remained Alone”: The Jewish Struggle with Celibacy’*, Celibacy and Religious Traditions*, ed. Carl Olson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 41-64 942-3) [↑](#endnote-ref-640)
641. William Ian Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997) [↑](#endnote-ref-641)
642. Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1976), 40. [↑](#endnote-ref-642)
643. Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 279-305 [↑](#endnote-ref-643)
644. Quoted by Dom Jean Leclercq, O.S.B, *The Life of Perfection: Points of View on the Essence of the Religious State*, trans. Leonard J. Doyle (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1961), 26. [↑](#endnote-ref-644)
645. *The Notebooks of Simone Weil*, trans. Arthur Wills (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 401-2. [↑](#endnote-ref-645)
646. Notebooks, 422. [↑](#endnote-ref-646)
647. Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace,* trans. Arthur Wills (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 88-89. [↑](#endnote-ref-647)
648. Simone Pétrement, Weil’s friend and biographer, who is also a major scholar of Gnosticism, agrees. Weil’s theory of the divine withdrawal in the making of creation had its ‘analogue’ ‘in Isaac Luria, the sixteenth-century Cabalist, and, above all, in his disciple Hayim Vital. See Pétrement, *Simone Weil: A Life*, tr. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Pantheon, 1976), 497. Maurice Blanchot also refers to her closeness to the Jewish Cabbala: ‘Did Simone Weil, without knowing it, come under the influence of the Jewish religious traditions – particularly that of the Cabala – for which the secret name of God is the object of a special reverence and can even, through the contemplation and combination of letters, ecstatically engage us in the divine mystery?’ (Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, tr. Susan Hanson, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, 106-122 (110). [↑](#endnote-ref-648)
649. Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah*, (New York: New American Library/Meridian, 1978), p.89. [↑](#endnote-ref-649)
650. On the rich array of symbols connected to these doctrines, see Scholem, 88-128. [↑](#endnote-ref-650)
651. Scholem, 129-130. [↑](#endnote-ref-651)
652. Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1946), 261. [↑](#endnote-ref-652)
653. Scholem (1946), 260-275. [↑](#endnote-ref-653)
654. Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin, 1961), 138. [↑](#endnote-ref-654)
655. See Iain Gardner and Samuel N.C. Lieu, eds., *Manichaean Texts from the Roman Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 11. [↑](#endnote-ref-655)
656. Gardner and Lieu, 186. [↑](#endnote-ref-656)
657. Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, New Revised Edition (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2000), 31. [↑](#endnote-ref-657)
658. Brown, Augustine of Hippo, 35-49. [↑](#endnote-ref-658)
659. Brown, *Augustine*, 45. [↑](#endnote-ref-659)
660. Henry Chadwick, *Augustine*, New York: Oxford UP, 1986, 11-13. [↑](#endnote-ref-660)
661. Brown, Augustine of Hippo, 36. [↑](#endnote-ref-661)
662. Brown, Body and Society, 53. [↑](#endnote-ref-662)
663. As argued by Will Denning, *Paul on Marriage and Celibacy: The Hellenistic Background of 1 Corinthians 7* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Wm.B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2004), 207-219, ‘A Nonascetic Interpretation of Paul’. [↑](#endnote-ref-663)
664. ‘The hierarchy of body and soul, which linked man both to the gods above and to the animal world below in the benign and differentiated order of an eternal universe, concerned Paul not in the slightest.’ (Brown*, Body and Society*, 48) [↑](#endnote-ref-664)
665. John A.T. Robinson, *The Body: A Study in Pauline Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1952), 11. John Robinson was my tutor at Trinity College towards the end of his life; I did not appreciate his thinking then. I want to take this opportunity to express my gratitude. [↑](#endnote-ref-665)
666. Ibid., 14. [↑](#endnote-ref-666)
667. J. Pedersen, *Israel, its Life and Culture II* , p.171 (London: OUP, 1926), cited in Robert H. Gundry, *Soma in Biblical Theology, with Emphasis on Pauline Anthropology* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 120. [↑](#endnote-ref-667)
668. Robinson, *The Body*, 18. [↑](#endnote-ref-668)
669. Brown, Body and Society, 48. [↑](#endnote-ref-669)
670. Robinson, *The Body*, 25. [↑](#endnote-ref-670)
671. Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), p.1-58, but every page is riveting. [↑](#endnote-ref-671)
672. Cited Bynum, Note 9, 25. [↑](#endnote-ref-672)
673. See Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 31. [↑](#endnote-ref-673)
674. See Robinson, *The Body*, 42-48. [↑](#endnote-ref-674)
675. E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1977), 15; Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body*, 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-675)
676. E.P. Sanders, Paul and Palestinian Judaism, 134. [↑](#endnote-ref-676)
677. Bynum, 25. [↑](#endnote-ref-677)
678. Dale B Martin, *The Corinthian Body*, 123-136. [↑](#endnote-ref-678)
679. I am following here the interpretation of Will Denning, *Paul on Marriage and Celibacy: The Hellenistic Background of 1 Corinthians 7* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Wm.B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2004). [↑](#endnote-ref-679)
680. As David G. Hunter argues in Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity: The Jovinianist Controversy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 88-90. [↑](#endnote-ref-680)
681. Brown, *Body and Society*, 54-55. [↑](#endnote-ref-681)
682. Brown, Body and Society, 64. [↑](#endnote-ref-682)
683. See Elaine Pagels, *Adam, Eve and the Serpent* (New York: Vintage, 1988), 57-71. [↑](#endnote-ref-683)
684. Hans Jonas, The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity, 3rd edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 45. [↑](#endnote-ref-684)
685. *The Second Treatise of the Great Seth (VII, 2)*, tr. Roger A Bullard and Joseph A. Gibbons, in *The Nag Hammadi Library,* revised edition, James M. Robinson, ed. (New York: Harper Collins, 1990), 362-371 (369-70). [↑](#endnote-ref-685)
686. Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 102-118. [↑](#endnote-ref-686)
687. Hans Jonas, The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity, 3rd edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 31. [↑](#endnote-ref-687)
688. Tacitus quoted from *Documents of the Christian Church*, 4th edition, ed. Henry Bettenson & Chris Maunder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-688)
689. Brown, Body and Society, 85. [↑](#endnote-ref-689)
690. See Peter Brown, *Augustine of* Hippo, 500-501; Gary Anderson, ‘Celibacy or Consummation in the Garden? Reflections on Early Jewish and Christian Interpretations of the Garden of Eden’. *Harvard Theological Review* 82.2 (1989), p.121-148; a fuller treatment of these questions will be given in the second half of this chapter.?? [↑](#endnote-ref-690)
691. Augustine, ‘The Literal Meaning of Creation’, in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, Part I, vol. 13, *On Genesis* , trans. Edmund Hill, O.P. (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2002,), 235-236. [↑](#endnote-ref-691)
692. See also Terry Gifford’s useful little book in the Routledge Critical Idiom Series, *Pastoral* (New York: Routledge, 1999) [↑](#endnote-ref-692)
693. This is the theme of Sarah Kay’s important work: ‘Contradiction is central to the makeup of courtly literature, to the intellectual environment, and to its critical reception today.’ *Courtly Contradictions: The Emergence of the Literary Object in the Twelfth Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-693)
694. A vast literature. I have consulted Bernard O’Donoghue, *The Courtly Love Tradition* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1982); Joan M. Ferrante & George D. Economou, *In Pursuit of Perfection: Courtly Love in Medieval Literature* (Port Washington, NY: Kenikat Press, 1975); L.T. Topsfield, *Troubadours and Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975); C Stephen Jaeger, *The Origins of Courtliness: Civilizing Trends and the Formation of Courtly Ideals, 939-1210* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985); Sarah Kay, *Courtly Contradictions: The Emergence of the Literary Object in the Twelfth Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001); Jean-Charles Huchet, *L’Amour Discourtois: Les* Fin’ Amors *chez les premiers troubadours* (Toulouse: Privat, 1987), as well as the works by Lewis, Nelli, and Jaeger cited below. [↑](#endnote-ref-694)
695. Lewis, *Allegory of Love*, 1-43. [↑](#endnote-ref-695)
696. Lewis, Allegory of Love, 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-696)
697. C Stephen Jaeger, *Ennobling Love: In Search of a Lost Sensibility* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-697)
698. Lewis, Allegory of Love, 20. [↑](#endnote-ref-698)
699. R. Howard Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love*  (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 151. [↑](#endnote-ref-699)
700. Jaeger, *Ennobling Love*, 134. [↑](#endnote-ref-700)
701. On the roaming noble ‘youths’ and their unstable prospects – find an heiress, seek adventure, die young, play the game of courtly love, see Georges Duby, *The Chivalrous Society*, tr. Cynthia Postan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977): to avoid fragmenting inheritances, ‘most of the young men were kept in a state of celibacy and danger.’ (120-122); also Duby, *The Knight, the Lady and the Priest: The Making of Marriage in Medieval France* tr.Barbara Bray (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 216-226; [↑](#endnote-ref-701)
702. Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermons on the Song of Songs I*, tr. Killian Walsh (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1971), Sermon 4, iii, 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-702)
703. Warner, Alone of all her Sex’, 129. [↑](#endnote-ref-703)
704. Ibid., 130-133. [↑](#endnote-ref-704)
705. See René Nelli, *L’érotique des troubadours* (Toulouse: Édouard Privat, 1963), 64-65. [↑](#endnote-ref-705)
706. René Nelli, *Troubadours et trouvères* (Paris: Hachette, 1979). [↑](#endnote-ref-706)
707. Denis de Rougemont, *Love in the Western World*, 60. [↑](#endnote-ref-707)
708. Brown, Body and Society, 182. [↑](#endnote-ref-708)
709. Brown, *Body and Society*, 180-185. [↑](#endnote-ref-709)
710. Herbert Musurillo, S.J., in his Introduction to *The Symposium: A Treatise on Chastity*, n. 27 of *Ancient Christian Writers*( Ramsay, N.J.: Newman Press, 1958), 3-37. [↑](#endnote-ref-710)
711. Ibid., N. 34, p. 17. Some of the Platonic dialogues Methodius refers to are dubious ones (*Axiochus, Hippias Major, Alcibiades I*), but *Symposium, Phaedrus, Republic* and *Timaeus* figure explicitly. [↑](#endnote-ref-711)
712. Kyle Harper, *From Shame to Sin*, 80ff. it is a ‘Christian answer to Plato’s *Symposium*, in which the indulgent symposiasts of classical Athens have been replaced by ten female virgins.’ It is a ‘discussion circle on the merits of virginity’ – the platonic chariot of the soul can soar over the horizon only by lifting over the swamp of physical pleasures. The pure body is a sexually untouched body – it leaves this world and enters the values of immortality – wealth, honor, birth marriages are trifles in comparison. Marriage is a small thing compared to the glory of sexual abstinence. The ideological framework on which the Symposium rests is thoroughly Pauline. ‘Paul’s passing endorsement of continence as an optimal state, so gently embodied din his won example, has been expanded into a thoroughgoing devaluation of physical pleasure.’ (81) Virginity is a marvelous foretaste of salvation. The generative impulse is viewed by these young women as distasteful, purely physiological, and unidealised. Methodius could not condemn marriage. But its necessary companion – physical intercourse – teetered too close for comfort to the other kinds of physical corruption of p*orneia* as sin and depravation. ‘The *Symposium* of Methodius can be regarded as the last text of early Christianity. It reflects the authority of Paul’s words as a benchmark of Christian sexual morality. It gives poetic expression to an ascetic theology forced begrudgingly, to accommodate marriage as an acceptable institutions.’(83) [↑](#endnote-ref-712)
713. I rely heavily in this discussion on Paul Alpers’ great *What is Pastoral?,* especially pp.44-93. [↑](#endnote-ref-713)
714. Cited in Paul Alpers, *What is Pastoral* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 33. [↑](#endnote-ref-714)
715. Helen King, *Hippocrates’ Woman*, 86-88. [↑](#endnote-ref-715)
716. Musurillo’s Introduction, page 11, speculates that the hymn as well as the dialogue was produced for Methodius’ patron, ‘the Lady from Termessus’. [↑](#endnote-ref-716)
717. Cited in John D. Zizioulas, *The Early Christian Community*, in *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, ed. Bernard McGinn and John Meyendorr (New York: Crossroad, 1985), 23-43 (38). [↑](#endnote-ref-717)
718. *The Works of Bernard of Clairvaux*, volume Two, tr. Killian Walsh, OCSO (Cistercian Publications: Kalamazoo, 1971), 152. [↑](#endnote-ref-718)
719. Etienne Gilson, *The Mystical Theology of St. Bernard* tr. A.H.C. Downes (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1990), 93. [↑](#endnote-ref-719)
720. Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, & Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, 20th-anniversary edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 166. [↑](#endnote-ref-720)
721. On Origen in comparison to other understandings of ascetic transformation see David Brakke, *Athanasius and Asceticism* (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 145-149. [↑](#endnote-ref-721)
722. The chaste tree (*agnus*) appeared in pagan tradition as a symbol of chastity. Maidens celebrating the Thesmophoria at Athens scattered leaves of chaste trees while they slept; others brewed tea from the leaves, and that was meant to be anaphrodisiac. Methodius shares this belief or at least allows Theopatra to allude to it; the willow tree flowers, if mixed with water and drunk, will make you sterile, she explains. (*Symposium*, 4.3) See Pliny, *Natural History* 24.38.59, cited by Noonan, *Contraception*, 103. [↑](#endnote-ref-722)
723. Brown, 107. [↑](#endnote-ref-723)
724. Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, & Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, 20th-anniversary edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 111-121. [↑](#endnote-ref-724)
725. Susanna Elm, ‘Virgins of God’: The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 37, 49. [↑](#endnote-ref-725)
726. Here there may be an inheritance from Methodius in Ambrose’s use of marriage symbolism in his treatises on virginity, as Musurillo speculates in his notes (*The Symposium: A Treatise on Chastity*, tr. Herbert Musurillo, S.J. (New York: Newman Press, 1958), 169. [↑](#endnote-ref-726)
727. Susanna Elm, ‘Virgins of God’: The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 10-22. [↑](#endnote-ref-727)
728. Origen was one who decided that the book represented an Epithalamium, and his interpretation was widely adopted. (see Denys Turner, *Eros and Allegory: Medieval Exegesis of the Song of Songs* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1995), 84. [↑](#endnote-ref-728)
729. And above all, it was taken up with enthusiasm by Western monks. The richness of monastic readings of the *Song of Songs* is the subject of Denys Turner’s book, *Eros and Allegory.* [↑](#endnote-ref-729)
730. William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1950), 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-730)
731. I borrow the translation and the reference from Miri Rubin, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 44. [↑](#endnote-ref-731)