

INSINUATIONS OF WOMANLY INFLUENCE: AN ASPECT OF THE CHRISTIANIZATION OF THE ROMAN ARISTOCRACY*

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Here is one of the laws of history: every event begins with a woman. It is the woman who confers life or death. It is in conformity with the nature of things that Helena should have converted Constantine. It is contrary to the nature of things that Constantine should have converted Helena.¹

While we may smile at the ruminations of a nineteenth-century bourgeois on the sexual politics of Constantine's conversion to Christianity, if we turn our attention for a moment from the Emperor to the Empire itself we will perceive that our own more scientific studies reflect a similar vision of Helena, refracted in the persons of pious matrons across the Empire. For we generally imagine the religious changes which swept the later Roman Empire as resulting from a fateful collaboration, that of a few unusually persuasive clerics with a multitude of devout Christian women, who enforced the views of their clerical friends at home, and shepherded their prominent husbands towards the once-only cleansing of baptism. The view has much to recommend it, and it has sparked some of the most interesting writing on late antiquity in recent decades, beginning with a celebrated contribution by Peter Brown to this journal.²

A recent study by Michelle Salzman, however, rightly attempts to dispel any patina of inevitability which may have accrued to this now familiar picture.³ The study redresses what has been a lacuna in the scholarship. While other claims of the literary sources regarding Christianization have been assessed against the evidence of the epigraphic record,⁴ equal caution has not been exercised where the literary sources on conversion through intermarriage are concerned. The results of Salzman's attempt to redress this imbalance are perhaps necessarily inconclusive, given the nature of the problem and the limits of our knowledge of the relevant epigraphic conventions. Yet the study does find a discrepancy between the impression drawn from the literary sources, and a low incidence of conversion through intermarriage attested in existing inscriptions.

A new reading of the literary sources for our understanding of the home evangelization practised by aristocratic women may therefore be timely. Salzman notes, for example, that even in the correspondence of Jerome — the *locus classicus* for the study of women as agents of Christianization — only once does a Christian woman's husband seem actually to have converted from polytheism to Christianity.⁵ Whether or not Laeta, the wife, was in fact responsible for the conversion remains an open question.

We must consider a sobering possibility: that we have learned very little about the agency of actual historical women from the texts in question, texts whose patterning of gender roles was subject to elaborate rhetorical stylization.⁶ The texts which bear on the agency of women as proponents of religious change during the later Empire have been read without sensitivity to their concealed rhetorical strategies. The present essay is intended to illustrate the kind of insight which an interest in these concealed strategies might offer to the study of religious change in the later Empire, and to the study of Roman women.

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¹ Ernst Hello, *Physionomies de saints* (1875), English trans. Virginia Crawford, *Studies in Saintship* (1903), 54, cited by Felice Lifshitz, 'Des Femmes missionnaires: l'exemple de la Gaule franque', *RHE* 83 (1988), 5–33. Hello's reference is to the account by Eusebius (*VC* III.47), according to which Constantine converted Helena, rejected in favour of the presumably later tradition preserved in Theodoret, *HE* I.18, according to which it was Helena who converted Constantine.

² Peter Brown, 'Aspects of the Christianization of the Roman aristocracy', *JRS* 51 (1961), 1–11, reprinted in idem, *Religion and Society in the Age of St. Augustine* (1972).

³ Michelle Renée Salzman, 'Aristocratic women: conductors of Christianity in the fourth century', *Helios* 16 (1989), 207–20, providing in addition a summary of the recent secondary literature.

⁴ e.g. R. Von Haehling, *Die Religionszugehörigkeit der hohen Amtsträger des römischen Reiches seit Constantins I. Alleinherrschaft bis zum Ende der theodosianische Dynastie (324–450 bzw. 455 n. Chr.)*, *Antiquitas Reihe III*, 23 (1978), whose evidence undermines the triumphalist accounts of Eusebius and Theodoret.

⁵ Jerome, *Ep.* 107.1, cited in Salzman, *op. cit.* (n. 3), 212.

⁶ See recently Averil Cameron, 'Virginity as metaphor: women and the rhetoric of early Christianity', in Averil Cameron (ed.), *History as Text* (1989), 184–205, on themes involving women as 'an ideal vehicle for rhetorical display' (p. 191).

Our initial premise is that Roman male discourse about female power served more often than not as a rhetorical strategy within competition for power among males themselves. A prevailing feature of the system of signs through which both men and women understood references to gender was its central interest in the character and actions of male groups and male individuals. Narrative treatment of the actions or intentions of women did not straightforwardly represent flesh-and-blood women themselves, but rather served to symbolize aspects of the tension to be found among men.⁷ This should not surprise us in a language system in which both speaker and audience were generically understood as masculine.

Building on this premise, this paper will attempt to demonstrate that texts which ascribe social or religious innovation to the influence of women on their male sexual partners cannot be read at face value. Rather, these ascriptions must be seen as attempts to assign value, whether positive or negative, to the decisions of men. Consequently, the texts which represent the conversion of the Roman aristocracy to Christianity as the result of womanly influence must be seen as attempts to defend, or to attack, the redefinition of the common good which is at stake in 'Christianization'. It is with the Roman understanding of the tension between the (male) individual and the common good that the investigation will begin.

I. REPRESENTATIONS OF MASCULINE SELF-MASTERY

The rhetoric of conjugal unity in antiquity served primarily as a means by which aristocratic families could broadcast the moral character of their menfolk, a point the significance of which has been missed by the much-discussed attempts of Paul Veyne and Michel Foucault to explicate the Roman rhetoric of affection between spouses. For Veyne,⁸ the male Roman aristocrat invented a rhetoric of conjugal love to compensate for his emasculation through the Augustan centralization of power. The shift from republican to imperial male is characterized in the following way:

Le premier sabre sans remords sa femme, ses servantes et ses pages, petits (*paedagogia, capillati*) ou grands (*exoleti*); le second, n'ayant pas d'ordres à donner à l'extérieur, dans la société globale, n'a pas non plus la force d'en donner à lui-même: il faut qu'il s'invente une morale conjugale et sexuelle...⁹

Foucault elaborated on Veyne's shift, noting an increased anxiety among Roman men about pleasure exacted from their subordinates, along with the emergence of an ideal of marriage as philosophical friendship paralleling the transfer of aristocratic 'maîtrise de soi' from an economy of controlling others to one of fulfilling duties to others.¹⁰

Neither proposal is entirely satisfactory for our purposes. Both authors have been criticized for their misapprehension of Roman sexuality as a business in which gender played no part.¹¹ Equally, both presume that philosophical discussions of conjugal affect were bound in an unproblematic manner to social reality, an assumption which has been questioned.¹² Our own problem will be to discover by what conventions and to what ends our various sources evoked conjugal affect.

⁷ In this essay, the terms 'man' and 'men' should be understood in their specifically masculine sense, i.e. in opposition to 'woman' and 'women'.

⁸ Paul Veyne, 'La famille et l'amour sous le Haut-Empire romain', *Annales: Economies Sociétés Civilisations* 33 (1978), 35-63.

⁹ *ibid.*, 37.

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*. 3. *Le souci de soi* (1984).

¹¹ Jo-Ann Shelton, 'Pliny the Younger and the ideal wife', *Classica et Mediaevalia* 41 (1990), 163-86, cautions against Foucault's neglect of the problem of the experience and self-representation of the women involved. On the

substantial secondary literature responding to both writers, see Jan Bremmer, 'Why did early Christianity attract upper-class women?', in A. A. R. Bastiaensen, A. Hilhorst, and C. H. Kneepkens (eds), *Fructus Centesimus: Mélanges offerts à Gerard J. M. Bartelink à l'occasion de son soixante-cinquième anniversaire* (1989), 45, nn. 20-1, and Averil Cameron, 'Redrawing the map: early Christian territory after Foucault', *JRS* 76 (1986), 266-71.

¹² Marcel Benabou, 'Pratique matrimoniale et représentation philosophique: le crépuscule des stratégies', *Annales: Economies Sociétés Civilisations* 42 (1987), 1255-66.

We still know very little about ancient marriage. What we know about affection between spouses can largely be summed up in the fact that families chose to publicize it. Yet from this minimum some suggestions can be drawn. The habit of publicizing marital concord, while already well established during the Republic,¹³ took on particular importance during the Empire, in part because of its usefulness to the emperor himself. From the beginning of the Principate, the harmony of the imperial family became a vital element in the propaganda of imperial power: '*concordia augusta* became the harmony between the Princeps and his wife (or mother), who embodied the deity as the female link between the Princeps and his male kinsmen.'¹⁴ Similarly, well-publicized marital concord could serve the interests of aristocratic families other than the imperial.¹⁵ In each case, to commemorate marital concord was to claim solidarity for a man's allegiances with other men.

The importance of the Roman rhetoric of marital concord lies in two aspects of Roman society: its competitiveness, and its acute consciousness of an opposition between a man's loyalty to the city and his pursuit of private interests or private pleasures. It was a widely acknowledged fact that the will of an individual (or alternatively, the corporate will of a family) was not infallibly harnessed to the common good. The credibility of a man's claim to self-mastery was important: private temptations constantly threatened to sway him from the common good and towards his own short-term benefit.¹⁶ The continuous deployment of insinuations about a man's private life, whether by friends or by enemies, served to index his moral sense and his self-control. This exercise in public relations was by no means frivolous. A man's ability manifestly to dissociate himself from the weaknesses which made for social instability was a critical element in his claim to power in competition with other men.

The public man had continuously to project his trustworthiness before a public eye well trained in discerning signs of weakness in body, mind, or will. He could expect his always numerous rivals to seize any opportunity to represent him as a bad bet in the perennially re-negotiated network of allegiances and interdependencies. His claim to honour needed constantly to be justified, both within the brotherhood of aristocratic men and in the larger arena of a society in which these were by definition a minority. His standing was subject to the flux of ascendancy between his supporters and detractors, and to a corresponding fluctuation in deployment of narrative.

Within this system, the temptation to sensual indulgence served as a potent narrative emblem of the unpredictable factor of private interest in the actions of public men. Sex and money were the two paradigmatic temptations to private interest which a public man would encounter, and the two were symbolically linked. This is why a classically trained Christian writer like Augustine classed sexual intemperance among the explicitly civic vices shunned by the virtuous *maiores*:

They took no account of their own material interest compared with the common good, that is the commonwealth and the public purse; they resisted the temptations of avarice; they acted for their country's well-being with disinterested concern; they were guilty of no offence against the law; they succumbed to no sensual indulgence.¹⁷

Jack Winkler has observed a similar phenomenon in Classical Athens:

... at all levels of practical morality and advice-giving we find the undisciplined person described as someone mastered or conquered by something over which he should exert control ... Whether choosing a general to save the city (Xen. *Mem.* 1.5.1) or a bailiff to manage the farm (Xen. *Econ.* 12.13), one wants a man who is the honorable master of his pleasures, not — by the logic of zero-sum competition — the shameful slave of them (*tais hêdonais douleuôn aischrôs*, Xen. *Mem.* 1.5.5).¹⁸

¹³ Richard Saller and Brent Shaw, 'Tombstones and Roman family relations in the Principate', *JRS* 74 (1984), 124–56.

¹⁴ Barbara Levick, 'Concordia at Rome', in R. A. G. Carson and Colin M. Kraay (eds), *Scripta Nummaria Romana: Essays Presented to Humphrey Sutherland* (1978), 217–33, 227.

¹⁵ An unpublished manuscript by Ann Kuttner of the University of Pennsylvania documents the use of Venus imagery to project the *concordia* of aristocratic marriage,

continuous from the early Empire into the Byzantine period.

¹⁶ See Helen North, *Sophrosyne: Self-Knowledge and Restraint in Classical Antiquity* (1966), on *sôphrosynê* as a guiding virtue of civic life in classical philosophy.

¹⁷ *Civ. Dei* v.15 (CSEL 40, 242).

¹⁸ John J. Winkler, *The Constraints of Desire: The Anthropology of Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece* (1990), 50.

In a culture characterized by 'zero-sum competition', a man's private pleasures were viewed as a legitimate reward of his position, but they were also understood as the grounds on which his reputation for self-control and good judgement would be contested.

Deft broadcasting of a man's temperate relations with women served to contain the plausibility of whatever insinuations his competitors could serve up, as they strained to infer from his private life an intemperance which might compromise the fulfilment of public duty. This ancient use of the representations of conjugal relationships may be understood as the elaboration of a restricted speech code for exploring the problem of self-control and temptation, a code in which exchanges about women were intended primarily to carry implicit meanings about men, which in turn were fully understood by all concerned.¹⁹

II. THE CLASSICAL RHETORIC OF WOMANLY INFLUENCE

A surprising proportion of the material on women preserved in our historical sources falls within the broad category of character evidence for or against men. This is all the more true for descriptions of — and exhortations to — the virtues of temperance among women, which tell us little about expectations for the private behaviour of the women themselves, and even less about the actual behaviour of historical women. Instead, they tell us about the protective cloak of signs by which families attempted to protect those of their male members under public scrutiny. The well-publicized modesty of women family members, suggesting as it did a prevailing family temper of scorn for unrestrained pleasures, could swing the balance of plausibility regarding a man's character.

This use of representations of women by families drew upon a wide cultural consensus. Roman and Christian literature shared an inherited interest in the social dangers which might be caused by the influence of women on men. Whether told in terms of Adam's expulsion from the Garden of Eden or of the downfall of a city sealed by the Judgement of Paris, both the Hebrew Bible and Greek epic had stressed the opposition between man's susceptibility to feminine attractions and his sense of duty, whether to the deity or to the social order. For writers of the Roman Empire, whether polytheist or Christian, the magnetism of this theme was twofold. On the one hand, to call attention to the power of women to sway the judgement of those under their spell served to stress the importance of self-control in an apposite male protagonist, and to warn of the danger to society should that self-control fail. On the other hand, to dwell on the problem of womanly influence was, while condemning its perniciousness, equally to engage the prurient interest of one's reader, the more so if the reader were male.

The rhetorical figure of womanly influence existed in both a negative and a positive version. The negative version styled woman as a seductress, bent on tempting a man by private allurements to a betrayal of public duty. The positive version dwelt on a man's licit relationships with female family members, whose soothing charm would ideally restore him to order when he had strayed, and persuade him to hear the voice of reason. A man represented as being in harmony with his legitimate wife was thus symbolically anchored to duty and to the cause of the common good.

Where the historians and moralists touch on the agency of women, they are quick to sound this theme. Plutarch's *Life of Antony* will serve to illustrate: his treatment of Antony's attachment to Cleopatra is a case study in the addiction by which a man subverts his political and military obligations, succumbing to the whims of the woman by whom he is bewitched. Plutarch dramatizes the resulting downfall by casting it in the midst of the life-or-death decisions of civil war. In a memorable scene, Plutarch presents Antony's preposterous handling of the battle of Actium. First, Antony chooses to fight the battle at sea in order to please Cleopatra — despite his far superior power on land — and then betrays his men by chasing after Cleopatra when she abandons the scene in mid-battle.

¹⁹ On implicit meanings, there is much to be learned from the cross-fertilization of scholarship on Christian origins with cultural and social anthropology in the past

decade, e.g. John G. Gager, 'Body-symbols and social reality: resurrection, incarnation, and asceticism in early Christianity', *Religion* 12 (1982), 345–63.

Here, Antony made it clear to all the world that he was following neither the sentiments of a commander nor those of a brave man, nor even his own: as someone said in pleasantry that the soul of a lover dwells in another's body, he was drawn along by the woman as if he had become incorporate with her and must go where she did.²⁰

It did not seem incidental to Plutarch that Antony's passion resulted in the needless squandering of human life. By contrast, at the point in the *Life of Antony* where Antony's marriage to Octavia is introduced, Plutarch adduces the Roman people's view of Octavia as a woman capable of bringing order and moderation not only to Antony's personal life, but in consequence to the Roman state:

Everybody tried to bring about this marriage. They hoped that Octavia — having, besides her great beauty, intelligence and dignity — would be so beloved by Antony (as such a woman must be) when they were married that she would be able to restore [political] harmony and salvage the situation entirely.²¹

That the marriage was not in fact successful in producing the hoped-for social stability attests that womanly influence was not so much a matter of the real historical effect of women on their husbands and lovers, but rather of narrative implication — in this case to heighten the drama of Cleopatra's destructive power by antithesis to Octavia's restorative moderation. What both figures have in common is their persuasiveness.

Plutarch's philosophical writing approaches the problem of persuasion, instability, and desire from another angle. The *Erôtikos* ironically re-stages Plato's *Symposium*, posing the question whether the *eros* that leads to the soul's ennobling can have anything to do with the passionate urges of the body. Its contribution to the debate is an absurdist delight in the hypocrisy of the very premise that men (even philosophers) can be induced to cast aside the pursuit of pleasure. The question is no longer whether the pleasures are acceptable as a consequence of the philosophical man's *eros*, but rather, whether the honest man may harness his inevitable pleasure-seeking to his philosophical purpose.²²

In Plutarch's view, the philosophical problem posed by pleasure lies in the irrational aspect of its ability to persuade. Yet the beloved's power to beguile the lover can serve the purpose of philosophy, if only one's passion be settled on the right object, preferably a chaste female to whom one has been joined in matrimony.

Just as poetry, adding to prose meaning the delights of song and metre and rhythm, makes its educational power more forceful and its capacity for doing harm more irresistible; just so has nature endowed woman with charm of aspect, persuasiveness of voice, and seductive physical beauty, and has thus given the licentious woman great advantages for pleasure and deceit, but to the chaste (*têi sôphroni*), great resources also for gaining the goodwill and friendship of her husband.²³

Pleasure does persuade, but to see its persuasion as necessarily evil is to miss a chance of abetting the good. The irony here is enhanced by men's over-estimation of themselves, and under-estimation of women. Since the person through whom pleasure is sought has an undue influence over her (or his) lover, the wise man should find himself a wife in whom the philosophical virtues can be encouraged, so that the inevitable moral influence of the beloved will be an influence for the good (a point borne out by Plutarch's advice on the education of a wife in the *Præcepta coniugalia*). In this kind of marriage, pleasure is safely yoked to chaste purpose. Plutarch seals his approval of the pleasures of conjugal life by recalling the legislation of Solon prescribing sexual intercourse between spouses at least once every ten days, 'as cities from time to time renew their treaties by a libation'.²⁴

²⁰ *Life of Antony* 66. 7.

²¹ *Life of Antony* 31. 4.

²² Plutarch's irony takes some of the sting out of two important first-century questions, whether the wise man should marry and whether within marriage sex for

pleasure (as opposed to procreation) is licit, discussed by A. C. Van Geytenbeek, *Musonius Rufus and Greek Diatribe* (1962), 67ff. and 71ff., respectively.

²³ *Erôtikos* 769B–C.

²⁴ *Erôtikos* 769B.

Again, what is really at stake is not desire *per se* but masculine character and reliability. The *Lives* warn of the political weakness from which a man could suffer if it were believed that his private life might sway him from his public duty, emphasizing the disaster to which such indulgence could lead for those foolish or weak enough to court it. The *Erôtikos* explores the philosophical aspect of desire and irrationality. In both cases, we are reminded that where women (and other objects of desire) are discussed, their appearance should be read as a sign that a man's character was in question, whether its virtue was to be defended, or its dissolution explained and illustrated. This would hold true all the more when the men and women in question were responsible for social and religious change. It is with this in mind that we turn to late antiquity, and to the rhetoric of Christianization.

III. CHRISTIANITY, ASCETICISM, AND CONFLICTING IDEAS OF MODERATION

The insinuations of womanly influence which abound in late Roman sources should not necessarily be read as reflecting accurately the agency of women in Christianization. Rather, the appeal to the topos of womanly influence should be understood as an element of cultural continuity with the earlier Empire. In fact, the frequent appearance of the topos is not confined to contexts where religious change was under discussion: at roughly the same time as the sources for Christianization which we will discuss, for example, Ammianus Marcellinus deploys the same topos to a variety of ends in his chronicles of political intrigue in the imperial court. What will distinguish Christian use of the topos is its ability to veil a change in the terms of the social order.

We have seen that in Book Five of his *City of God* Augustine dwelt with particular emphasis on vigilance for the city's well-being as he reviewed the traditional Roman ideal of immaculate conduct. The tensions of loyalty in the earthly city were especially vivid to Augustine, who saw as the defining force of human sin its tendency to draw the individual away from life-giving communion with other human beings, and into a sterile privacy of intent which could only exist in the absence of common purpose.²⁵ That Augustine came to shun the hope of an earthly city made whole by the reciprocity of its inhabitants should not lead us to under-estimate his sympathy for the civic aspirations of Graeco-Roman ethics. On the question of individual moderation and the common good, there was unanimity between late-fourth-century bishops and the philosophical tradition which informed them. What would come to divide them was a differing of views on how to define the elements of the question. The first was moderation, and the second the common good.

The late-fourth-century understanding of moderation was shaken by upheaval on the question (among so many others) of whether Christians should marry. The increasing prestige of the ascetic movement made it possible for a text like Jerome's *Adversus Jovinianum* (c. 393) to imply that *any* serious Christian would avoid marriage, and specifically to charge that the priests should know better than to engage in such a risky business. This argument was designed to clear a place for ascetics, and especially celibates, in the Christian clergy, challenging the consensus that had built up over the centuries around the leadership of a married clergy whose probity as householders served to index their sobriety and fitness for Christian authority.²⁶

Seen from a traditional Roman point of view, Jerome's driving emphasis on sexual abstinence must have seemed ambiguous. In the past, Seneca's advice to avoid the folly proper to love had been balanced by Musonius Rufus' warning that the philosopher must marry, or shirk a burden borne by the average householder, thus laying open to ridicule his claim of

²⁵ R. A. Markus has taken care to underline the coincidence of privacy and spiritual deprivation in Augustine's thought. On the result of this insight for Augustine's view of human community, especially in defining the particular calling of monastic communities, see now Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity* (1990), 78ff.

²⁶ The clergy's progress through minor orders to priestly service paralleled a progression of life stages: from

youth to marriage and the production of offspring, and ultimately to a continent married life once the passion of youth had been spent. On the tensions surrounding the promotion of the ascetic ideal among the western clergy, see Charles Pietri, *Roma Christiana*, Bibliothèque des écoles françaises d'Athènes et de Rome 224 (1976), 1, 684–721, and Daniel Callam, 'Clerical continence in the fourth century: three papal decretals', *Theological Studies* 41 (1980), 3–50.

presenting an *exemplum* to others.²⁷ Unchecked enthusiasm for ascetic practice could also give rise to a variety of social problems, especially since the desire of married women to emulate the prestige of virgins threatened the promotion of concord between husbands and wives.²⁸ An asceticism which in its least deeply considered aspects might encourage the married to disdain this concord must have been met with alarm by many, among them some who would otherwise have been sympathetic to the ascetic ideal.

To return to the question raised by Jerome — that is, whether a priest ought to marry — we will see that he raised the spectre of womanly influence in order to establish that the celibate were men of better sense than their married brethren. Here Jerome emphasized the unpredictability of marriage, drawing on a theme which appears frequently in wisdom literature, from Hesiod, who declared that a man could find neither a greater prize than a good wife, nor worse torment than a bad one,²⁹ to the *Book of Proverbs*, which classed an odious wife as one of the things which the earth cannot bear.³⁰ Jerome's comment on the latter passage establishes that a monk should be by definition a better priest than a married man:

See how a wife is classed with the greatest evils. But if you reply that it is an *odious* wife, I will give you the same answer as before: the mere possibility of such danger is in itself no light matter. For he who marries a wife is uncertain whether he is marrying an odious woman or one worthy of his love.³¹

Put simply, for Jerome the man who runs the risk of marrying is a man whose judgement cannot be trusted. A writer other than Jerome might have tried to take seriously the question of how men who married could ensure that they married women who would enhance their pursuit of wisdom — certainly men like Jerome knew their Plutarch.³² Instead, Jerome chose mockery. Jerome's rigorism, bent on extirpating the sexual urge altogether, was designed to subvert the philosophical tradition of the pursuit of moderation in favour of what many would have seen as a disturbingly immoderate alarmism.

Some years later, the *Theodosian Code* would address directly the awkward repercussions which reasoning like Jerome's could have for existing marriages among the clergy and the soon-to-be-ordained. It stipulated that the wives of men newly ordained to the priesthood 'must not be separated from their husbands, because those women who have rendered their husbands worthy for the priesthood, are suitable companions for the priests whom they have fostered'.³³ We can see from the correspondence of Paulinus of Nola that the issue was a live one. In or near 396, Augustine wrote to Paulinus, praising the latter's wife, Therasia, 'whom your letter has shown to us not as someone who leads her husband into dissipation, but as one who draws him close to the firmness of purpose that dwells within him'.³⁴ The praise takes on more colour if we remember that at or near this time Jerome was warning Paulinus that Therasia's company could be an obstacle to his ascetic progress.³⁵ In this particular case, we know the outcome: that Paulinus prized the view of Augustine over that of Jerome on this matter can be seen from his subsequent correspondence. In his *Letter 44* to Aper and Amanda, dated between 396 and 407, Paulinus characterized Amanda's chaste influence on her husband in words borrowed directly from Augustine's praise of Therasia.³⁶ Certainly, the notion that wives could furnish a source of moral edification to their husbands was well suited to the public careers of priests and especially bishops. That Paulinus perceived the resonance of this notion with the classical tradition of civic temperance may be inferred from his embroidery on Augustine's choice of the vices from which a pious wife might protect her husband: to dissipation, Paulinus added the explicitly civic vice of avarice.³⁷

²⁷ Musonius Rufus, *Reliquiae* 14.

²⁸ The most outstanding case-studies for this problem are the letters written by Pelagius to Celanthia (*CSEL* 56, 329–56) and by Augustine to Ecdicia (*Ep.* 262, *CSEL* 57, 621–31), two women whose attempts to impose continent marriage on their husbands had led to conjugal discord. On the authorship of the *Epistula ad Celanthiam*, see Robert F. Evans, *Four Letters of Pelagius* (1968), esp. 52–9.

²⁹ *Works and Days* 702–3.

³⁰ *Proverbs* 30.23.

³¹ *Adversus Jovinianum* 1.28 (*PL* 53, 250).

³² On Jerome's use of Plutarch, see Ernst Bickel,

Diatribe in Senecae Philosophi Fragmenta 1. *Fragmenta de Matrimonio* (1915), ch. 3. (I am grateful to Robert Lamberton for calling Bickel's discussion to my attention.)

³³ *Codex Theodosianus* xvi.2.44, Honorius and Theodosius to Palladius, Praetorian Prefect, 8 May 420.

³⁴ Augustine, *Ep.* 27 (*CSEL* 34, 97–8).

³⁵ Jerome, *Ep.* 58.6 (*CSEL* 54, 535–6); the letter is dated to 395 or 396: on dating, see Joseph T. Lienhard, S. J., *Paulinus of Nola and Early Western Monasticism*, Theophaneia 28 (1977), 99, and literature cited there.

³⁶ Paulinus, *Ep.* 44.3 (*CSEL* 29, 372).

³⁷ *ibid.*

Paulinus was not alone in connecting the problem of sexual moderation, represented by arguments for and against marriage, with the problem of civic moderation, represented by avarice and other forms of greed. For civically minded bishops, among them Augustine and John Chrysostom, the sins of the flesh were not always as troubling as the immoderation of men or families who would betray the common good for the sake of financial gain. Rather, the insubordination of the sexual urge offered a revealing symbol for the danger which any form of self-interest posed to the common good.³⁸

If sensual indulgence represented a turning away from community, it was avarice — understood as the refusal of prosperous citizens to contribute their share of the benefactions on which cities depended — which represented the civic ruin which such veering towards private interest could cause. Despite their lack of consensus on what constituted moderation where sex was concerned, when it came to money Christian writers were in substantial agreement with one another and with the classical tradition. Although Christian writers would eventually recast avarice as a betrayal of the needs of the Church rather than those of the city, it was the classical anxiety about betrayal of the city which lent the Christian usage its power.

In the case of John Chrysostom, avarice was one of the main themes in a career of increasingly passionate preaching on the socially destructive effects of greed. John's preaching approached marriage in terms which would have been familiar to Plutarch, taking particular care to advise young men and the parents of young women on the choice of bride or bridegroom. His sense of the possible obstacles to a well-made marriage dwelt less on lust than on money. His instinct was that parents cared less for moral probity than financial prospects as they arranged the marriages of their children, which would seal the family's standing for the next generation in a civic life veined by dynastic transmission of wealth and allegiance. Against this tendency, John posed his formidable irony.

What, then, is the reason for marriage, and on what account has God established it? Listen to Paul, saying, 'on account of fornication, let each man have his own wife' (1 Cor. 7:2). He did not say, for the sake of deliverance from poverty, or on account of the acquisition of means, but why? So that we might shun fornication, so that we might check lust, so that we might be yoked together in temperance (*sôphrosynêi*), so that we might please God . . .³⁹

Seen in this light, lust was a lesser evil, posing a straightforward danger whose remedy was known. Greed, on the other hand, could lurk behind the seemingly honourable concern for the welfare of one's family. Sexual desire would only constitute sin in cases where immoderate use deformed it to the likeness of greed, for the root of sin was not in the body but in the heart:

Desire is not sin, but whenever it slips into immoderation, not wishing to remain within the law of marriage but attaching itself to other men's wives, then the business becomes adultery, but not through desire: rather through excessive grasping where desire is concerned.⁴⁰

More explicitly than Plutarch, John saw sexual desire as an accompanying factor — rather than the cause — of the soul's internal conflict with the vices of intemperance and cupidity.

However, that it was a factor which held a particular rhetorical interest was not lost on him. Thus the wedding night itself became an occasion for the confrontation of philosophy not with sexual pleasure but with greed:

From that very night on which he first receives her into the bridal chamber, let him teach her temperance, gentleness, and the holy life, casting away all love of money at the beginning and from the very threshold.⁴¹

It was by this cultivation of temperance and open-heartedness, and not by anti-sexual causticities, that marriage could become a veritable school for virtue, a school second only to the desert. After lovingly describing a husband and wife in earnest debate over the spiritual

³⁸ For a ramifying explication of Augustine's use of the sexual urge as a symbol of the dislocation of the will, see Peter Brown, 'Sexuality and society in the fifth century A.D.: Augustine and Julian of Eclanum', in E. Gabba (ed.), *Tria Corda: scritti in onore di Arnaldo Momigliano* (1983), I, 49–70.

³⁹ *Quales ducendae sint uxores* (PG 51, 232).

⁴⁰ *Hom in Ep. ad Romanos 7:14* (PG 60, 508–9).

⁴¹ *Hom in Eph. 5:22* (PG 62, 145).

meaning to be drawn from the sermons they have heard in church together, Chrysostom concludes: 'if anyone marries in this way and on these terms, he or she will not be inferior by far to the monks, nor the married be inferior to the unmarried.'⁴²

IV. IMPUTATIONS OF WOMANLY INFLUENCE: A STRATEGY OF CHRISTIAN RHETORIC

Augustine and John Chrysostom saw the place of sexuality in classical terms: that is, sexual immoderation was the thing to be feared, and it was less pernicious *per se* than the failing in community which it might be seen to record. Both writers sought in the Christian family a suitable *locus* for Christian striving. Yet we will see that even civically minded bishops could find in the rhetoric of sexual moderation a tool for undermining the authority of men who had not professed celibacy. This is especially visible in Augustine's advice to the married, and his skill in shaming those of his correspondents who failed in this vocation as he understood it. We turn now to Augustine's handling of instances in which the view of charity and community held by his correspondents differed substantially from his own.

These letters constitute a novel use of the rhetoric of womanly influence, yet the innovation easily passes unnoticed, for it is an innovation not of form, but of intent. Augustine's letters give the impression of a perfectly ordinary use of the *topos*: in each case, it is implied that a married woman should use her modest charm to draw her husband towards the cause of reason should he stray. The trick is in Augustine's choice of what constitutes the cause of reason.

In his *Letter 262*, Augustine replied to a letter from the matron Ecdicia to himself, a letter in which she evidently complained about her adulterous husband. In her letter — now lost — Ecdicia seems to have chronicled her own exemplary conduct towards the same husband, a conduct which Augustine suspected might in fact have been more bullying than inspirational. Augustine's response reviewed Ecdicia's claims, inquiring after a possible cause-and-effect relationship between the wife's clumsily self-aggrandizing austerities and the husband's moral downfall.

Augustine presumed with Ecdicia that a Roman wife would make every attempt to seek eminence in virtue. He dissented, however, from her understanding of how virtue was to be understood. As Augustine saw it, by abandoning the virtues of feminine modesty Ecdicia's asceticism became a travesty of the Christian excellence to which it pretended. The letter's recurrence to the *topos* of womanly influence serves to underline this evaluation: by abandoning the pursuit of marital concord, Ecdicia became for her husband a spur to intemperance rather than a beacon of temperance. By holding forth the ideal of a wifely piety bent on the shared temperance to be practised by both spouses, Augustine reflected to Ecdicia the absurdity of her conduct. The invocation of the ideal wife as a persuader to temperance could serve as a goad by which the unsatisfactory Christian wife might be shamed; we will see below that the *topos* could serve equally for shaming the recalcitrant Christian husband.

In Ecdicia's case, the sequence of events seems from Augustine's letter to have been as follows. Having pronounced a unilateral vow of continence without consulting her husband, Ecdicia then adorned herself with widow's weeds in order publicly to document her own abstinence. Up to this point, the husband had acceded to her inclination out of respect for her pious intentions, however humiliating to him her awkward way of realizing them. However, there was worse to come. Ecdicia's scorn for marital concord led her to compromise even the parental duties which she and her husband shared.⁴³ (Here, Augustine relied for his information not on the letter which Ecdicia sent him, but on what he was able to extract from the letter's bearer).⁴⁴ We are told that in a gesture of pious liberality Ecdicia signed over a substantial portion of her wealth to passing monks, at a time when her husband was not present to object.⁴⁵ Augustine noted that the husband certainly *would* have objected, as the riches of

⁴² *Hom in Eph.* 5:22 (PG 62, 147).

⁴³ See Riccardo Orestano, *La struttura giuridica del matrimonio romano dal diritto classico al diritto giustiniano* (1951), 1, 261ff., on the concern of patristic writers to emphasize that a cessation of sexual union did not absolve the duty of spouses to preserve the *consensus*

which bound them in marriage. Here, Augustine is quite explicit: 'non enim, quia pariter temperabatis a conmixtione carnali, ideo tuus maritus esse destiterat', *Ep.* 262. 4 (CSEL 57, 624).

⁴⁴ *Ep.* 262. 5 (CSEL 57, 624).

⁴⁵ *Ep.* 262. 5 (CSEL 57, 625).

Ecdicia were expected to provide for their son and heir, who had himself (we are astutely reminded) shown no sign of being called to a life of renunciation. Augustine wryly cautioned that an ascetic must preserve against his or her own inclinations the inheritance of children left under his or her care: a fine distinction was to be made where immoderate virtue resulted in vice.

Augustine may have had in mind an episode from Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus*:

Many men and women of the highest rank, on the approach of death, brought him their children, both boys and girls, and entrusted them to him with all their property, considering that he would be a holy and god-like guardian . . . He patiently attended to the accounts of their property when their trustees submitted them, and took care that they should be accurate; he used to say that as long as they did not take to philosophy their property and incomes must be kept safe and untouched for them.⁴⁶

While Porphyry had defended his master's reputation against the straightforward possibility of a charge of graft, Augustine sought to shame Ecdicia by reminding her that even in pious liberality could be concealed a peculiar strain of cupidity, one precisely contradicting the spirit which ascetic practice was designed to foster.

Augustine could not hide a certain sympathy with the husband, who at this point lost his temper with Ecdicia and, despising her vow of continence, turned to adultery to resume his own sex life.⁴⁷ One senses in Augustine's reading of the husband's adultery that it is almost incidental, a physical expression of the sundering of the two spouses wrought by Ecdicia's scorn. Augustine criticized Ecdicia's behaviour on two counts, although both counts ultimately charged her with undermining marital concord by affronts to her husband's well-being and self-esteem. The first count was that her actions had been taken without offering her husband an opportunity to share in the credit for the good deeds, both in the case of her vow of continence and especially in the case of her financial largesse, where the goodness of the deed was possibly only superficial (and a second opinion might have led to a beneficial prudence). The second count was twofold, stemming not only from Ecdicia's readiness to disdain her husband as one insufficiently intent on religious heroism, but also from her artless unwillingness to conceal that disdain. Had she curried her husband's favour by cultivating the virtues of patience and humility, maintained Augustine, Ecdicia would certainly have been able to sway his will to her purpose by the enticements of wifely charm, a woman's most vital expedient for her husband's edification.

Then God would have been praised in your works, because they would have been accomplished in such trustful partnership, that not only the height of chastity but even the glory of poverty would have been yours.⁴⁸

The terms in which Augustine described this idealized partnership were those of his monastic writing: however limited his hopes for the *saeculum*, in practical terms Augustine meant the Christian family to strive for a communion no less deeply rooted in charity than that of his own monks.

It was in this sense that Ecdicia had been mistaken in cultivating what she understood as the ascetic virtues. Her unwillingness to coax her husband towards conformity with her ascetic hopes constituted a betrayal of the very goal of the ascetic life when she vaunted her spiritual prowess at her husband's expense. Further, her lack of tact made it impossible for her to win him to moderation as a good wife ought, moderation in this case being defined as the fulfilment of the ascetic programme to which the couple had originally vowed themselves. By invoking the figure of wifely influence, Augustine could suggest that if the path of moderation was not clear to her at the time, it must at least be obvious in retrospect both to her and to the wider audience which the letter might eventually attract. It is characteristic of Augustine's rhetoric

⁴⁶ *Life of Plotinus* 9 (trans. Armstrong).

⁴⁷ *Ep.* 262. 5 (CSEL 57, 625): 'Tunc ille detestans eos tecum et non dei servos sed domus alienae penetratores et tuos captivatores et depraedatores putans tam sanctam sarcinam, quam tecum subierat, indignatus abiecit. Infirmus enim erat et ideo tibi, quae in communi

proposito fortior videbaris, non erat praesumptione turbandus sed dilectione portandus . . .'

⁴⁸ *Ep.* 262. 5 (CSEL 57, 625): 'et laudaretur deus in operibus vestris, quorum esset *tam fida societas*, ut a vobis *communiter* teneretur non solum summa castitas verum etiam gloriosa paupertas' (italics my own).

that the letter itself stands as an exhibition piece for the persuasion it is intended to teach: compassionate, gently ironic, and substantially misleading.

For while Plutarch had been able to take as given a consensus among reasonable men on the ends to which wifely virtue should influence a husband, there could be no such consensus for an aristocracy whose sense of common good was challenged by religious change. While it was certainly a wife's duty and privilege to make her husband see reason, there was no longer a universally acknowledged *ratio* where religious matters were concerned. Augustine clearly saw it as his vocation to establish such a consensus, firmly rooted in moderation and in *mediocritas*, but it was only by rhetorical sleight of hand that he could suggest that for reasonable men it already existed.

In another pastoral encounter, we may watch Augustine approaching the Christian husband himself, again using the figure of wifely influence to draw attention away from the controversial nature of his own views, implying that his own intervention in the couple's affairs is merely to amplify the voice of reason. It is in his letter to the noble Firmus, a Christian catechumen married to a baptized Christian woman, that Augustine develops a rhetoric of shame to obviate logical discussion of how the common good should be defined. The letter is designed to suggest that for a man to make the commitment of Christian baptism should be as unproblematic as accepting the necessary tonic of a virtuous wife's influence. Firmus, like many men in Christian political families, put off baptism during his active career, perhaps in the knowledge that the offices he would fill might require acts prohibited to the baptised Christian; Augustine sought to exhort him to a mid-career baptism which might be seen as anywhere from politically crippling to civically irresponsible. It would have been possible to argue rationally that such a seeming willingness to compromise civic duty should actually be understood as a fulfilment of civic duty transformed by a new understanding of the common good, yet the more economical route for conveying this message was through the rhetoric of shame.

You men who balk at taking up such a great burden do not consider how easily you are bested by those women who have assumed it, who constitute the pious multitude of the chaste and faithful . . .⁴⁹

Augustine elaborated by singling out for mention the faith of Firmus' (anonymous) wife. Then, coming to the point:

I do not fear offending you if I exhort you to enter the City of God by the example of a woman: for if the thing is difficult, you must remember that the weaker sex has already arrived there; if instead it is easy, there remains no reason why the stronger sex should not already have arrived.⁵⁰

In reality, the piety of the anonymous wife of Firmus may have been as clay-footed as that of Ecdicia, but for the purpose of argument she is figured in terms which make her authority on behalf of reason all the more striking by her seeming deference. Most importantly, the figure of her noble-minded humility sets in motion the full power of a rhetorical device which by shame and irony was understood to check men from error. By the momentum of this device, it was possible to pass over the question of whether by choosing to defer baptism Firmus did indeed stand in error: that is, how error should be defined for the matter in hand.

Thus the rhetoric of womanly influence was calculated both to shame a husband into conformity with the norms established by a clerical mentor, and to shame a wife by implying that she had been unsuccessful in presenting an image of appealing humility. There were instances — as in the case of Ecdicia's husband — in which a man might be absolved from responsibility for his own actions, where a woman's influence had abetted his downfall. But in this extremity a man lost his standing in the brotherhood of reasonable men. (It was the spiritual mentor's prerogative — and not the wife's — openly to shame difficult husbands, for much was lost if the sacred venter of a man's *dignitas* was breached.) A man like Ecdicia's husband who was given to outbursts against his wife might receive sympathy from his peers, but he would lose the standing which gave him the authority to speak as reason's spokesman.

⁴⁹ *Ep.* 2*, 4 (CSEL 88, 11).

⁵⁰ *ibid.*

In the case of Firmus, we see Augustine working precisely to this pattern. The rhetorical shift here is that through the allusion to womanly influence Firmus is equated to the husband of Ecdicia, that is to a man whose moral weakness meant that he need the influence of a good woman, lest he be prey to a bad one. Thus, Augustine was able to avoid addressing the question which may have prevailed in the mind of Firmus: if a wife were to persuade her husband to a baptism which compromised his ability to fulfil public duties, was she acting on behalf of the common good, or was she not?

Those who wished to challenge Christian attempts to transform the social order could equally find a weapon in the topos of womanly influence. By suggesting that men who should know better were being snared into assisting Christian objectives through the intrigue of their wives, the figure of womanly influence could serve to warn of a danger posed by Christian immoderation to the city (and to the Empire). In his thirtieth *Oration*, the rhetor Libanius exhorted the emperor Theodosius to retreat from a policy which left unpunished the destruction of polytheist temples. Libanius asserted that the policy was an invention of the Praetorian Prefect of the East, Firmicus Maternus Cynegius, whose wife Acanthia was in league with the monks responsible for the destructions. Libanius summarized the situation for the benefit of Theodosius as follows:

If one examines things closely, the fault here is not yours, but belongs to the man [Cynegius] who deceived you, a perverse man and an enemy of the gods, both cowardly and avaricious . . . and among other things a man who is a slave to his wife (*douleuontos tēi gunaiki*), indulging her in all things and ceding to her will on all points. She, on the other hand, has made it a law for herself to obey in everything the instigators of those measures [against the temples], those men who wish to exhibit their great virtue by covering themselves in clothes of mourning and in sack cloth.⁵¹

Here we again encounter the theme of monks working their influence through the lady of the house, although this time Acanthia has taken pains to produce exactly the effect on her husband which Ecdicia was criticized for failing to produce: that is, she has found a way to make her husband enter completely into her will as if it were his own. The characterization of Cynegius as slave to the will of his wife is inversely proportionate to the exoneration of Ecdicia's husband by virtue of her misbehaviour. Yet here it is clearly designed to sound a warning of the potentially tragic result when a great man's judgement is in the power of a woman. Cynegius is well furnished with the civic vices, but it is his servitude to womanly influence which carries the rhetorical force. Acanthia is cast as a temptress, a Cleopatra to Cynegius' vile, besotted Antony. This makes painfully and memorably explicit the disastrous results for the *salus populi* to be expected from a programme of outrages to the divine good will.

This symbolic economy of womanly influence bore at best a tangential relationship to actual exchanges between women and men. To the late Roman mind it would have been clearly understood as a medium of claims and accusations — either of which might be more or less powerful if more or less plausible, but whose primary function was rhetorical rather than descriptive. Even among friends, representation was coloured by the purposes of argument. One wonders, for example, whether Ecdicia and Firmus, the recipients of Augustine's letters discussed earlier, would have recognized their own reflections in the surface of Augustine's narrative. Surely Ecdicia might have seen herself more clearly in the figure of the pious and noble-minded wife of Firmus than in his version of herself. (Indeed, she herself might have used the rhetoric of womanly influence rather differently to defend her actions against Augustine's charge, or to claim authority in dealing with her husband.) Had we not reason to doubt the connection, we might be tempted to suspect that the modest, anonymous wife of Firmus and the annoyingly fractious Ecdicia were in reality the same woman, described to differing ends and according to differing rhetorical modes.

What difference would a neutral party have seen between Libanius' invocation of Acanthia's reliance on monkish advisers and Augustine's of Ecdicia, criticized not for her intentions but for her gracelessness in carrying them out, or of the wife of Firmus, depicted as a positive influence acting in full agreement with the bishop on matters of substance and style? If womanly influence as a means for circumventing the intentions of prominent men was seen in

⁵¹ Libanius, *Oratio xxx (Pro Templis)*, 46.

some contexts as insidious rather than edifying, this had less to do with the means than with its ends. The consensus was that womanly charms should and could draw men closer to moderation and the pursuit of the common good. But where conflicting definitions existed of the common good, the good woman was in the eye of the beholder.

V. CHRISTIANIZATION AND THE RHETORIC OF WOMANLY INFLUENCE

We have seen in the topos of womanly influence an expressive rhetorical medium through which a man's conduct could be condemned or justified. The present essay is not intended to demonstrate conclusively that the conversion of married men by their wives was *not* an important factor in the Christianization of the Roman aristocracy; rather, it is designed to call attention to the historical questions which may be passed over by too conclusive a reading of sources like the above-studied letters of Augustine, which have been used as evidence for this kind of home evangelization. Yet we have still to address the important question with which we began. Why does the topos recur with such dramatic frequency in the literature of Christianization, if its appearance does not reflect an unusual degree of activity by women in the conversion and instruction of Christian men?

The answer to this question falls in two parts. On the one hand, the topos acquires a disproportionate importance in the reporting of historical events through its capacity for bearing implicit meanings and for sustaining narrative interest. This is a general principle. A second factor is specific to the late Roman period, and to the problem of Christianization. This second factor is an eruption in the balance of power among Roman men, from which the rhetoric of womanly influence could serve to distract attention. Indeed, we ourselves have been distracted from this eruption, for in straining to construe the agency of women in Christianization which our sources insinuate, we have been drawn away from a critical evaluation of the agenda of the sources. Not only have we learned little about women, but into the bargain we have been led to misread the dynamics of religious and cultural change in the later Roman Empire.

These changes were the result of competition between two groups of late Roman men: married men in positions of civic or cultural importance (some married to baptized women, some themselves baptized, others strictly polytheist) and celibate men, usually of lesser rank, who wished to advise the married. (The distinction would hold true particularly in the West.) It did not go without saying that the celibate had a privileged understanding of what it was to be Roman and Christian. Many husbands must have considered themselves properly Christianized, whether or not they shared the view that the requirements of the earthly city should in all cases defer to those of the heavenly as the celibate defined them. Only a retrospective theological bias can afford to understand 'Christianization' according to the terms defined by proponents of ascetic ascendancy.

In recent decades we have come closer to understanding the late antique religious context as a milieu of competing definitions. An aristocrat might banter with an eminent presbyter over whether it was necessary to abandon polytheism itself in order to embrace Christianity — a question-and-answer session which seems entirely in keeping with the eclectic spirit of the time.⁵² What we have come to refer to as the 'Christianization' of Western Europe was in fact the emergence from that milieu of one very specific brand of Christianity, one characterized by a deference to the ascetic ideal and an ambivalence about the classical vision of the city.

It is this Western construction of a new Christian identity which we will attempt to understand in new terms. Our tendency has been to retroject now familiar canons of religious affiliation (themselves derived from this new version of Christianity) into a setting whose religious fluidity was one of its distinguishing characteristics. This fluidity, which persisted for a time in spite of a sharp craving for boundaries on the part of some, meant that those who wished to distance Christians from their identity as Romans were not always in the majority.

⁵² The incident is recorded of Marius Victorinus and the presbyter Simplicianus by Augustine, *Confessions*

viii.2.3–5; for illuminating discussion, see Markus, *op. cit.* (n. 25), 27–9.

Where men of high standing were concerned, this was all the more so. As players in a religiously competitive environment, bishops knew that participation by the eminent would attract vital resources, along with the souls of a considerable entourage.⁵³ It was the business of celibates like Augustine and Ambrose to dissemble with these eminent citizens. Such men had their own experience in standing before the gods by a variety of priesthoods, which meant that they might balk at deferring in matters of religion to men whose credentials were not always so distinguished as their own.

The success of a vision of Christianity which privileged ascetic claims over civic standing would depend on how delicately the celibate handled this tension, as they challenged their eminent brethren in their traditional capacity as arbiters of the common good. At issue was the forging of a powerful new mode of male authority, powerful enough to challenge a long-held consensus on the nature of the common good. Hence, the usefulness of the rhetoric of womanly influence. In an impasse between men, the introduction of a third, female element diffused the ever-present consciousness of ranking among males — a de-stabilizing move which favoured the man who wished to undermine the status quo.

In many instances, the purposes of what in retrospect we refer to as Christianization were served by some occurrence — a magistrate's baptism, a mob's destruction of public property — whose result for the city understood in classical terms would at best be dubious. It was in the interest of those who wished to challenge traditionally held values, to obviate a direct comparison of the two notions of the common good. The danger was that once the substantive discussion was staged, men of reason would exert their own authority in determining how the common good might best be served. This meant a challenge to the necessity of innovations which would irreversibly change the face of the city, for there were those who viewed ascetic proposals as a wholesale betrayal of *romanitas*, not only unnecessary but even ill-advised. These traditionalists might themselves be committed Christians, whose culturally conservative brand of Christianity reflected not a reluctance to Christian purpose, but rather their sense of civic responsibility — and perhaps their disinclination fully to endorse the clergy's yen for power.

The rhetoric of womanly influence made it possible to gain an advantage over these men — while averting a confrontation over authority — by appeal to a mutual social fear. To characterize the nature of womanly influence in a man's private life, and his response to it, was to admit or disallow him as a speaker in rational discourse. Merely by invoking either figure of the topos, the luminous wife acting on behalf of the common good or the lurid temptress bent on its betrayal, a speaker could disingenuously imply that it went without saying whether or not a man's conduct was reasonable, and indeed how reasonable men would define the common good in a given instance. At its mildest, this strategy would cast an interlocutor's position as symbolically comprised by unreason. To imply that a man had been led astray by a bad woman, or had refused to listen to a good one, served as authorization for dismissing out of hand the objections he might raise to one's own agenda.

Further, since the good woman's wisdom had by definition to be expressed in a reluctant manner, it could serve as a peculiarly evocative token of the fragility of reason and community. The man who learned from the gentle counsel of modest women displayed a trustworthy conduct in the face of vulnerability which suggested that he could be relied upon to hear the voice of reason whenever it spoke. It follows, then, that to represent oneself as perceiving the wisdom of a man's own wife where he himself had failed to do so, was the most potent rhetorical gesture of all, compounding rhetorical victory with the threat of sexual betrayal.

This delimiting of authority through sexual tension certainly had consequences for the balance of power between Roman women and men, since women began the game at a disadvantage (by virtue of the requirement that their authority be clothed in a seeming disavowal). Yet among men, the fact that accusations and claims of womanly influence hovered at one remove from strict reference to reality lent to the rhetoric of womanly influence a vital adaptability, which explains its recurrent importance over the history of the classical city. In a social structure where power was based on competition and allegiance among

⁵³ Augustine's attempt at *Confessions* VIII.4.9 to apologize for the excitement caused by Marius Victorinus'

eventual public conversion to Christianity illustrates this point.

families, all men were by definition vulnerable to accusations of womanly influence, in that all men were equally dedicated to the urgent business of perpetuating the city through the generation of offspring. A common denominator among men was affiliation with at least one woman who could for the purposes of argument be represented as a temptress, just as most men had some female relative who could plausibly be represented as chaste if the occasion required.

This rhetorical economy lost its elasticity with the emergence of a new vision of the city, and of a new class of men. If the fundamental symbolic purchase for challenging a man's authority lay in his private life, the married aristocrat was at a disadvantage should he encounter in debate an opponent whose own private life was shielded by public profession of celibacy. Celibate men could themselves be charged with inappropriate sexual mixing — indeed, some of our information on women as agents of Christianization derives precisely from such charges against monks and other ascetics.⁵⁴ But on the whole, the celibate were rhetorically well placed to talk down to married men, even when these were their betters.

This rhetorical synergy in ascetic self-styling had far-reaching consequences for the West. Celibacy took an increasingly important place in the Christian idea of authority. The city was threatened not only by an increasing refusal of prominent citizens to renew its institutions by the generation of heirs. More damaging was the collapse of a consensus about what constituted sexual and civic moderation, and of the sense of mutual implication in the regeneration of the city which had allowed individuals and groups to check one another's excesses.

One might ask whether the celibate were conscious, when they insinuated that their married counterparts were compromised by susceptibility to womanly influence, that their own estate could claim relative invulnerability to counter-accusations drawn from the same lexicon. Equally, it is tempting to ask whether the married saw how their authority would be undermined by this subversive use of a powerful rhetorical current. While there is no reason to believe that either group understood exactly what was at stake, the persistent willingness of the celibate to dwell on the private life of the married suggests that they saw the advantage of their position. That the married saw the disadvantage of theirs is less certain. From their failure to design an effective counter-strategy when the rhetoric of womanly influence was turned against their own authority as a class, and against the city for whose protection it had been invented, we may infer that they did not.

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⁵⁴ On the genre, see Jacques Fontaine, 'Un sobriquet perfide de Damase: *matronarum auriscalpius*', in

D. Porte and J.-P. Néraudau (eds), *Hommages à Henri Le Bonniec: Res Sacrae* (1988), 177–92.