

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF TERTULLIAN'S *ON THE VEILING OF VIRGINS*

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by

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ABSTRACT

The theologian Tertullian (c.160-c.230 CE) was a prominent voice in early western Christianity, writing extensively about women. This thesis seeks to analyze his views on women as expressed in the treatise *De virginibus velandis* (*On the Veiling of Virgins*) and to situate these views in their greater Roman context. This analysis focuses on contemporary Roman, non-Christian attitudes toward women, including biological and social perspectives, rather than theology. The thesis contextualizes Tertullian's beliefs and offers specific examples of both incidences where elements of his thought may be traced, directly and indirectly, to contemporary non-Christian ideas, and places where that thought is in dialogue with or explicitly rejecting those ideas. The research here suggests that Tertullian was both influenced by Roman, non-Christian intellectual culture and explicitly rejected aspects thereof. Future analyses of his work should therefore acknowledge and utilize both Christian and non-Christian sources. Chapter One offers a brief examination of the relevant historiography. Chapter Two outlines the controversy in *De virginibus velandis*: whether or not virgins in the Carthaginian church should be veiled. Chapter Three discusses Greco-Roman philosophy and science and possible effects on Tertullian's arguments in *De virginibus velandis*. Chapter Four addresses Tertullian's development of a philosophy of womanhood which introduces specifically Christian elements of sexual shame and mature women as a threat to the continence of men. Chapter Five examines the Roman cultural significance of women's behavior and apparel, particularly veiling.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Mary Fellman received her Bachelor of Arts in History from Whitman College (Walla Walla, Washington) in May 2006. Her honors thesis, “The Sexual Characterization of Livia and Aggripina Minor,” also addressed issues of dress and behavior among the Roman elite.

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INTRODUCTION

The Carthaginian theologian Tertullian (c.160-c.230 CE) was a prominent voice in the development of western Christianity; indeed, the most prominent voice from that area and time period still extant. As such, his voluminous writings have been mined extensively for every sort of evidence, literary and theological alike. In particular, Tertullian's work has been cited as the foundation for later Christian misogyny.¹ Although the notion of Tertullian as misogynist has been much debated, there remain few studies attempting to draw more than general and somewhat superficial conclusions concerning his attitude toward women. The studies that exist tend to select statements made about women from each work, bringing them together out of context in order to make whatever point is intended.

This thesis obviously cannot examine each treatise Tertullian wrote completely, but I hope to situate and analyze one in particular in its context as the product of a Roman, educated man of the era, one who both drew from and was in conflict with his culture.² This will hopefully suggest several new avenues for further research and provide a more nuanced view of Tertullian and the complexity of his thought. Discussions of Tertullian's work have hitherto almost always examined it from a theological standpoint with little attention paid to non-Christian sources. While this perspective is without question valid and appropriate, I believe that a cultural approach to Tertullian's background may yield new insight into his thoughts on women in general. The treatise I will examine in depth is *De virginibus velandis* (*On the Veiling of Virgins*), with reference to other of Tertullian's works, particularly *De*

¹ See below, Chapter One. Also see Daniel L. Hoffman, *The Status of Women and Gnosticism in Irenaeus and Tertullian* (Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen, 1995), 147 and notes for an excellent summary.

² This thesis is based on my paper "Tertullian, Women, and Veiling," written winter 2006 for Dr. Eric Rebillard's seminar *Religious Authority in Late Antique North Africa*.

*oratione (On Prayer), De cultu feminarum (On the Apparel of Women), De exhortatione castitatis (On Exhortation to Chastity), and the Apologeticum Christi (Defense of Christ).*³

I hope to demonstrate overall that a thorough reading of *De virginibus velandis*, which takes into account not only Tertullian's theological background, but the greater Roman medical, philosophical, and social context for that background, will provide a new perspective on whether he can properly be labeled a misogynist. One scholarly camp, which might be called post-feminist, characterizes Tertullian as only the first in a long series of ancient theological writers attempting either to transform the original egalitarian roots of Christianity or to ensure that women would remain in a subordinate place. Another, which might be called apologist, offers analyses of Tertullian's writing intended to demonstrate his belief in the spiritual equality of men and women. This group tends to explain away any so-called "misogynist" tendencies with vague characterizations of the author as a product of his time and place--with little explanation of how these elements specifically affected his philosophy. It is my contention that both approaches neglect a greater question: what principles, theories, axioms, and truisms present in the intellectual and social culture of the ancient Mediterranean *as a whole*--not simply the Christian community of Carthage--influenced Tertullian's views of women? There is no doubt that Tertullian held views which strike a modern reader as misogynistic and that were cited by later religious authorities as justification for misogynistic practices in western Christianity; neither is there doubt that such views resulted from Tertullian's background, that he was unique or isolated in holding them, or that his misogyny was no more or less pronounced than that of his contemporaries.

³ Unless otherwise noted, all quoted Latin comes from the relevant *Sources Chrétiennes* edition and all English translation is from the *Ante-Nicene Fathers*.

The purpose of this thesis, therefore, is not only to attempt contextualization of Tertullian's "misogynism" in light of his status as an educated Roman, but also to offer specific examples of incidences where elements of his thought may be traced, directly and indirectly, to contemporary non-Christian ideas, and places where that thought is in dialogue with or explicitly rejecting those ideas.

As noted above, many modern scholars have concluded from Tertullian's writing that he was not only personally a misogynist, but that he represents a misogynistic trend in western Christianity as a whole. Chapter One offers a brief examination of the relevant historiography. Chapter Two outlines the issue at hand in *De virginibus velandis*: a controversy over whether or not virgins in the Carthaginian church should be veiled. This chapter examines the question of to whom the treatise was directed (that is, to all unmarried women in the church or only to a particular group of ascetic women) and situates Tertullian in the context of contemporary Christian asceticism, including his involvement in the Montanist movement. Chapter Three discusses Tertullian's arguments in *De virginibus velandis* that "virgins" should be included in the same social category as "women" and the reasons such arguments might be made necessary by greater Greco-Roman philosophy and science, which very definitely distinguished between the two groups. Chapter Four addresses Tertullian's development of a philosophy of womanhood which, while basically essentialist (like that of the non-Christian writers), introduces the specifically Christian elements of sexual shame and mature women as a threat to the continence of men. Finally, Chapter Five explains the broad Roman context for anxiety over the behavior and apparel of women, exploring the cultural significance of veiling as practiced by the community at large.

CHAPTER ONE: TERTULLIAN IN MODERN SCHOLARSHIP

Tertullian occupies a significant space in modern scholarship on the early church, yet his views on women have been generally subject to superficial analysis. The most prominent study of Tertullian, written by T.D. Barnes, makes virtually no mention of the role of women in his work.⁴ There is no comprehensive monograph devoted to examining women in Tertullian's writing; Daniel Hoffman's *The Status of Women and Gnosticism in Irenaeus and Tertullian* comes closest but focuses primarily on Tertullian's views on women as compared to those of Irenaeus and Gnostic sources.⁵

Regardless of this lack of comprehensive analysis, many scholars have discussed Tertullian in light of his views on women, however briefly. Even prior to the advent of second-wave feminism, he was frequently viewed as an extreme misogynist.⁶ The evidence supplied for this assertion is most usually a passage from *De cultu feminarum (On the Apparel of Women)*, which, in the words of F. Forrester Church, is "alone responsible for perhaps as much popular notoriety as Tertullian has ever been afforded."⁷ The passage in question (to which we will return later) is worth quoting in full: "And do you not know that you are (each) an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too. You are

⁴ T.D. Barnes, *Tertullian: a Historical and Literary Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985). The original book was published in 1970; Barnes's 1985 postscript does not address any feminist or apologist scholarship produced in the interim.

⁵ Daniel L. Hoffman, *The Status of Women and Gnosticism in Irenaeus and Tertullian* (Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen, 1995).

⁶ Misogyny for the purposes of this paper is defined as "hatred of or prejudice against women" (*OED*). I have chosen to retain the word due to its frequent use by modern authors quoted here. They may of course interpret misogyny differently, and it is worth noting that many of these scholars began their careers before the linguistic turn and the problematization of such terms.

⁷ F. Forrester Church, "Sex and Salvation in Tertullian," *The Harvard Theological Review* 68, no. 2 (1975), 83.

the devil's gateway: you are the unsealer of that (forbidden) tree: you are the first deserter of the divine law: you are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God's image, man . . ."⁸ Paul Monceaux wrote in 1901 that, for Tertullian, women were the devil's allies against men, and this perception prevailed in scholarship throughout most of the twentieth century.⁹ In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir quoted this passage in support of a misogynist interpretation of early Christian authorities; Derrick Bailey wrote that "such misogynic invective is characteristic" of Tertullian.¹⁰ Even a relatively positive reader of Tertullian described him as "no ordinary misogynist"--but a misogynist nonetheless.¹¹

Such views were embraced in turn by second-wave scholars of Christianity. For example, in her feminist reading of Christian origins, *In Memory of Her*, Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza wrote that Tertullian's theology "evidences a deep misogynist contempt and fear of women."¹² Citing the "devil's gateway" passage, Bernard Prusak described Tertullian as heir to a long tradition of Judeo-Christian sexism rooted in religious mythology.¹³ In this tradition, despite the hope of salvation held out to all

⁸ *De cultu feminarum*, I.1. Trans. *Ante-Nicene Fathers (ANF)*: "et Evam te esse nescis? Vivit sentential Dei super sexum istum in hoc saeculo: vivat et reatus necesse est. Tu es diaboli ianua; tu es arboris illius resignatrix; tu es divinae legis prima desertrix; tu es quae eum suasisti, quem diabolus aggredi non valvit; tu imaginem Dei, hominem, tam facile elisisti . . ."

⁹ Paul Monceaux, *Histoire littéraire de l'Afrique chrétienne depuis les origines jusqu'à l'invasion arabe, Volume I* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1901), 388.

¹⁰ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage, 1974), 167; Derrick Sherwin Bailey, *Sexual Relation in Christian Thought* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), 64.

¹¹ George H. Tavard, *Woman in Christian Tradition* (Notre Dame, IN; University of Notre Dame Press, 1973), 59.

¹² Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (New York: Crossroads, 1983), 55.

¹³ Bernard P. Prusak, "Woman: Seductive Siren and Source of Sin? Pseudepigraphal Myth and Christian Origins," in *Religion and Sexism: Images of Woman in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974), 105.

by Christ, “the ignominy and the need for expiation on the part of every woman” remained, and Tertullian was simply upholding the status quo.¹⁴

By contrast, other post-feminist scholars have attempted to refute such charges of misogyny or, failing that, to explain them. The earliest such attempt was a short article, “Sex and Salvation in Tertullian,” by F. Forrester Church.¹⁵ Church argued against extracting the sole statement from *De cultu feminarum* as proof of Tertullian’s misogyny and for placing it in the context of his broader “schemes of redemption,” as established in his corpus of work as a whole.¹⁶ Church concluded that, from a theological standpoint, the ancient author believed both sexes equal in their ability to attain salvation in Christ and freedom from death--although he qualified his assessment by noting that Tertullian was no “champion for woman’s rights as understood today.”¹⁷ The viciousness of the passage in question is merely a byproduct of his attempt to persuade his audience with a “pointed and highly rhetorical *ad feminam* argument.”¹⁸ According to Church, extracting and abstracting the “devil’s gateway” passage is “to mistake concern, here with respect to woman’s salvation, for belief, as inferred from the specific language through which that concern is expressed.”¹⁹ That is, Tertullian’s theological attention toward salvation for women should be understood as such, no matter how it is framed rhetorically. Other modern authors attempting to explain his apparent misogyny have taken a similar, theological approach.

¹⁴ Prusak, 105.

¹⁵ F. Forrester Church, “Sex and Salvation in Tertullian,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 68, no. 2 (1975): 83-101.

¹⁶ Church, 85.

¹⁷ Church, 100.

¹⁸ Church, 86.

¹⁹ Church, 100.

In “La Donna in Tertulliano,” Carlo Tibiletti argued that Tertullian’s thought--as expressed in the “devil’s gateway” passage --was “no more misogynist than the Old Testament”; it is difficult to say whether this is meant to rehabilitate Tertullian or to indict the Old Testament.²⁰ Tibiletti lists no fewer than ten points that one must bear in mind in order to comprehend Tertullian’s position fully, including “the ancient theological concept of woman’s responsibility relative to original sin” and “Tertullian’s austere and severe character, little inclined to sentimental effusions, and perhaps even incapable of gentleness or tenderness toward women . . .”²¹ This combination of theological study and psychoanalysis is ubiquitous throughout late twentieth-century scholarship.

Émilien Lamirande also took *De cultu feminarum* as the basis for his analysis of Tertullian’s views on women.²² He pointed out that Tertullian did not originate the practice of critiquing women’s apparel, nor should he be considered a sexist in the modern sense of the term--at least no more so than his contemporaries (again, a recurrent theme in apologist scholarship).²³ Finally, Lamirande concluded that to call Tertullian a misogynist implies an “aversion” to women not present in his work, at least as far as can be determined from *De cultu feminarum*.²⁴ While Lamirande is not a postmodernist, he does indicate the difficulty of using such culturally-loaded terms as “misogyny” when writing about the ancient world.

Several years later, Elizabeth Carnelley wrote a short response to some of the recent English scholarship on Tertullian and women, primarily that of Schüssler-

²⁰ Carlo Tibiletti, “La Donna in Tertulliano,” in *Misoginia e Maschilismo in Grecia e in Roma* (Genoa: *Istituto di Filologia Classica e Medievale*, 1981), 73.

²¹ Tibiletti, 93-94. Tibiletti does not cite Church, nor does he seem to be aware of the previous study.

²² Émilien Lamirande, “Tertullien Misogyne? Pour une Relecture du <<De cultu feminarum>>,” *Science et Esprit* 39, no. 1 (1987): 5-25.

²³ Lamirande, 22.

²⁴ Lamirande, 23.

Fiorenza, Barnes, and Church.²⁵ Church's analysis, she argued, fails to take into account Tertullian's views on sexuality.²⁶ The "things of this world"--material possessions, food, sexuality--were unimportant, and after death, in Tertullian's theology, there would be no sexual relations and, essentially, no sex; women and men would both be like the angels.²⁷ Carnelley attributed his hostility toward sexuality to Montanist influence, claiming that he was chiefly interested not in salvation (as Church asserts), but rather preoccupied with the coming of the next world.²⁸ Tertullian's involvement in the Montanist movement explains both his fear of sexuality--as expressed through exhortations to women--and his belief that women were equal in the body of Christ.²⁹

Scholars of Tertullian writing in the last decade of the twentieth century continued to analyze his works in much the same way as their predecessors. In 1991, Claude Rambaux attempted to give a general cultural background to the ancient author's views on women in "Le Jugement de Tertullien sur les femmes."³⁰ Although Rambaux only gave a superficial examination of possible Greek and Roman literary sources which may have affected Tertullian's thought, he represents one of the few modern attempts to explore such non-Christian influences. Ultimately, however, Rambaux's conclusions are similar to those of Tibiletti and Lamirande: Tertullian was neither solely responsible for any growth of misogyny in the western church nor as exceptional in his views as might be assumed.³¹

²⁵ Elizabeth Carnelley, "Tertullian and Feminism," *Theology* 42 (1989), 31-35.

²⁶ Carnelley, 32-33.

²⁷ Carnelley, 32.

²⁸ Carnelley, 34.

²⁹ On which involvement see below, Chapter Two.

³⁰ Claude Rambaux, "Le Jugement de Tertullien sur les femmes," *Vita Latina* 122 (1991): 2-20.

³¹ Rambaux, 14.

A little later, Earl Lavender, in an article called “Tertullian--Against Women?,” returned to the infamous passage from *De cultu feminarum*, arguing that its use represents the modern tendency whereby “historical documents are used rather than studied.”³² Lavender presented a reading of Tertullian’s work against his major scriptural influences (primarily Genesis 2 and 6, 1 Corinthians 11 and 14, and 1 Enoch). When placed in scriptural context this way, the “devil’s gateway” passage should be seen as an indictment of vain materiality, not women in particular; after all, men as well as women were susceptible to the “same wicked desire to please” through self-adornment.³³ At length, Lavender concluded, like Church, that Tertullian was primarily concerned with women’s salvation and that he held women to be spiritually equal to men.³⁴

As noted above, the most thorough modern examination of Tertullian’s views on women is Daniel Hoffman’s *The Status of Women and Gnosticism in Irenaeus and Tertullian*. Hoffman’s thesis, broadly speaking, was that women in Gnostic cosmology were not generally considered superior or even equal to men, nor did so-called “orthodox” writers (represented by Irenaeus and Tertullian) automatically denigrate women or their involvement in church work.³⁵ He concluded that “Tertullian’s views toward women, when considered within his own cultural and theological context, were not unusually negative, but were relatively positive.”³⁶ Although more extensive and detailed than the other arguments mentioned here, Hoffman’s was undertaken in the same way and arrived at more or less the same

³² Earl Lavender, “Tertullian--Against Women?” in *Essays on Women in Earliest Christianity, Volume Two*, ed. Carroll D. Osburn (Joplin: College Press Publishing Company, 1995), 333.

³³ Lavender, 346.

³⁴ Lavender, 356.

³⁵ Hoffman, 209.

³⁶ Hoffman, 148.

result. In agreement with Church and Carnelley, he used theological evidence to support his claim that Tertullian was not a misogynist (or at least, no more so than any contemporary).

The most recent study of Tertullian and misogyny is a 1996 article by Eva Schulz-Flügel, “Tertullian und das ‘Zweite Geschlecht.’”³⁷ Despite her title, Schulz-Flügel addresses the post-feminist scholarship on Tertullian only briefly. Her primary concern was an anthropological, rather than strictly theological, examination of Tertullian’s thought.³⁸ Although Schulz-Flügel’s approach is noteworthy for this reason alone, her conclusions were not particularly unique; Tertullian, she wrote, was inclined toward conservatism vis-à-vis women both by his status as a North African Roman and his Christianity, heavily influenced by the Old Testament.³⁹

It is apparent in this brief review of the relevant historiography that modern scholars of Tertullian tend to share an insistence on placing the author in his theological context. While some argue that Tertullian was not actually a misogynist, due to his apparent concern for the salvation of women, others argue that Tertullian was simply heir to the tradition of Paul and other conservative theologians and therefore no more or less misogynist than his contemporaries; some advance both arguments. This argument seems to me misplaced; it is impossible to say whether Tertullian was a misogynist in the modern sense of the term. Few scholars have sought to explain his “misogyny”--whether perceived or actual--with attention to the context of the greater Roman culture in which he lived and wrote. The most prominent exception is probably Rambaux; unfortunately, his analysis is brief and

³⁷ Eva Schulz-Flügel, “Tertullian und das ‘Zweite Geschlecht,’” *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 42 (1996): 3-19.

³⁸ She makes particular use of Brown’s *The Body and Society*, the *Metamorphoses of Apuleius*, and the work of Clement of Alexandria.

³⁹ Schulz-Flügel, “Tertullian,” 18.

lacking in detail, and he does not draw specific connections concerning our particular interest here: the association between Tertullian's background as a participant in (and reactant to) Roman culture and his attitude toward veiling.

This general neglect of Tertullian's social and cultural surroundings is no doubt partly due to misleading statements in Tertullian's own work; he famously wrote "*Quid ergo Athenis et Hierosolymis?*" (What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?)⁴⁰ That is, what does traditional philosophy (the underpinnings of a rhetorical education) have to do with Christian thought? As Barnes noted, however, Tertullian "used the benefits of a traditional education and the fruits of his pagan erudition to defend and propagate what he considered to be the truth."⁴¹ Thus any study of his work must properly be informed by an understanding of this "pagan erudition." At this point, it is apropos to mention that we do have access to writings by a direct, non-Christian contemporary of Tertullian: Apuleius. Lucius Apuleius Platonicus (c.123-125-c.180 CE) was also a north African Roman who received a traditional rhetorical education. Although Apuleius wrote no works directed specifically to women, his *Metamorphoses* does reflect some broad Roman stereotypes; as noted above, Schulz-Flügel used this work to suggest that Tertullian's characterizations of "good" and "bad" women are in the same vein.⁴² As far as I have been able to determine, no study of the function of dress in the *Metamorphoses* has been made.

None of the modern scholars have tackled the question of precisely why Tertullian paid so much attention to social issues concerning women, such as veiling and modest dress. Ascribing his motivations to theology alone ignores, for example, the question of why the "devil's gateway" passage appears in a work intended to

⁴⁰ Tertullian, *De praescriptione haereticorum* 7.9.

⁴¹ Barnes, 210.

⁴² Schulz-Flügel, "Tertullian," 8-9.

promote an essentially social aim, that of policing women's attire. In fact, it follows an indictment of women who do not dress as Eve did after the fall: "If there dwelt upon earth a faith as great as is the reward of faith which is expected in the heavens, no one of you at all, best beloved sisters, from the time that she had first 'known the Lord,' and learned (the truth) concerning her own (that is, woman's) condition, would have desired too gladsome (not to say too ostentatious) a style of dress; so as not rather to go about in humble garb, and rather to affect meanness of appearance, walking about as Eve mourning and repentant, in order that by every garb of penitence she might the more fully expiate that which she derives from Eve . . ." ⁴³

Furthermore, *De virginibus velandis* was directed to a specific controversy in the Carthaginian church which revolved entirely around the question of appropriate dress for women. An examination of the greater cultural as well as the theological context for Tertullian's commentary on women and their appearance seems called for; it would bring information critical to understanding this commentary to the scholarly debate. Therefore, we turn to the context of *De virginibus velandis*, Tertullian's involvement in asceticism and the Montanist movement, and his beliefs in general about the nature of women and their basis in the intellectual culture of the second-century Roman world.

⁴³ *Cult.*, I.1: "Si tanta in terris moraretur fides quanta merces eius expectatur in caelis, nulla omnino vestrum, sorores dilectissimae, ex quo Deum vivum cognovisset et de sua, id est de feminae condicione, didicisset, laetio rem habitum, ne dicam gloriosio rem, appetisset, ut non magis in sordibus ageret et squalorem potius affectaret, ipsam se circumferens Evam lugentem et paenitentem, quo plenius id quod de Eva trahit . . ."

CHAPTER TWO: TERTULLIAN AND ASCETICISM

Little is known about Tertullian's life. Barnes has argued persuasively against a conventional narrative which held that his father was a soldier and Tertullian himself a legal scholar who trained in Rome.⁴⁴ For our purposes, it is enough to note that he was of a background privileged enough to receive a good education and to remain in Carthaginian intellectual circles throughout his lifetime.⁴⁵ More should be said, however, about the content of a classical Roman education. The primary purpose of such an education was the production of a model citizen, capable of writing and declaiming with ease and eloquence.⁴⁶ To that end, after an elementary education in the basics of grammar, adolescent men were taught by a *grammaticus*, who led them in the study of poetry such as the *Aeneid*, or a *rhetor*, whose focus was oratory.⁴⁷ Greek and its literature were also studied by Romans. Tertullian's education seems to have included both the standard works--Virgil, Terence, Sallust, Cicero--and some that had by his time become obscure--Pliny, Tacitus, and Juvenal. In the *Apologeticum*, he makes reference to more than thirty authors (although of course it is difficult to say how far his knowledge of many extended).⁴⁸ In form, content, and style, his treatises often conform to the classical model. It seems reasonable to conclude that Tertullian had an excellent education which was similar to that any young man of means would have received in Carthage at this time.

⁴⁴ Barnes, 57.

⁴⁵ Barnes, 194.

⁴⁶ Nanette R. Pascal, "The Legacy of Roman Education," *The Classical Journal* 79, no. 4 (1984): 353.

⁴⁷ J. V. Muir, "Education, Roman," *The Oxford Companion to Classical Civilization*. Eds. Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

⁴⁸ Barnes, 196

As an educated man and skilled rhetorician, Tertullian contributed to the Christian community of Carthage through his writing.⁴⁹ He composed *De virginibus velandis* in response to a controversy in his particular Christian group over whether virgins should be veiled.⁵⁰ The Latin text is the second version of the treatise; the first, written in Greek, is now lost.⁵¹ Apparently, a group of young women in the Carthaginian church wished to attend church unveiled, a practice to which Tertullian objected. There is some dispute, however, about the identity of these young women.

The purpose of the work, Tertullian writes, is to demonstrate that “it is proper that our virgins be veiled from when they reach puberty”⁵² The word translated as “virgin” is the Latin *virgo*, which has a problematic lexical range. The problem lies, according to Eva Schultz-Flügel, in determining “to what degree *virgo* designates women dedicated to asceticism or in general young, unmarried girls.”⁵³ Some ancient Christian authorities, such as Jerome, believed that the injunction to veil was made to all young women.⁵⁴ Modern scholarship has often made the same assumption; for example, in his discussion of *De virginibus velandis* Timothy Barnes takes it for granted that Tertullian refers to all Christian women.⁵⁵ Yet the treatise itself is ambiguous.

⁴⁹ Barnes has debunked the notion that he was a priest (11); his other contributions are of course lost to us.

⁵⁰ Geoffrey Dunn, *Tertullian* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 136.

⁵¹ *De virginibus velandis*, 1.1. Trans. Dunn, *Tertullian*. The Latin text used here is that of *Le Voile des Vierges (De virginibus velandis)*, ed. Eva Schulz-Flügel (Sources Chrétiennes 424).

⁵² *Virg.*, 4.1: “virgines nostras velari oportere, ex quo transitum aetatis suae fecerint” (literally “from the time when they shall have completed the changing of their age”).

⁵³ Tertullian, *Le Voile des Vierges (De virginibus velandis)*, introduction, commentary, and critical text, Eva Schulz-Flügel; adapted with translation, Paul Mattei (Sources Chrétiennes 424), 14.

⁵⁴ Schulz-Flügel, *Voile*, 15.

⁵⁵ Barnes, 141.

The practice of Christian men and women living in deliberate celibacy seems to have begun very shortly after the death of Jesus (c. 30 CE).⁵⁶ In the west, by the fourth century CE, young women could be formally dedicated virgins in a ceremony that included a ritual veiling.⁵⁷ The exact circumstances in the second-century Carthaginian church are not known. We do know, however, from another of Tertullian's works, *De exhortatione castitatis* (*On Exhortation to Chastity*), that there were formal *ordines* of male and female virgins in Carthage at this time.⁵⁸ Near the end of *De virginibus velandis*, addressing his audience directly, Tertullian writes: "For you are promised in marriage to Christ to whom you have surrendered your flesh, to him you have pledged your maturity."⁵⁹ It seems reasonable to assume, at the suggestion of Geoffrey Dunn, that there was a specific group of young women in this Carthaginian congregation who were formally dedicated virgins.⁶⁰ The treatise taken as a whole, however, seems to be addressed to both these virgins and to Christian girls who had reached puberty but had not yet married.⁶¹ It is difficult to say how large the Christian community of Carthage was; it has been very tentatively estimated at about 0.35 percent of a population of 500,000-700,000 (or approximately 1800-2500 people).⁶² It is, of course, impossible to say how many of these Christians were young, unmarried women or how many of those in turn were formally consecrated

⁵⁶ Peter Brown, *The Body and Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 42.

⁵⁷ Brown, 260.

⁵⁸ *De exhortatione castitatis*, 13.4.

⁵⁹ *Virg.*, 16.4: "nupsisti enim Christo, illi tradidisti carnem tuam, illi sponsasti maturitatem tuam."

⁶⁰ Dunn, 140. There was no formal church hierarchy among Christians at this time, and there were multiple Christian groups in Carthage; hence I have attempted to use more neutral terms such as "community" rather than anachronisms such as "congregation" or "parish."

⁶¹ Dunn, 140.

⁶² Dunn, 5.

virgins. It is probably safest to say that the intended audience for this treatise was small, and that the number of women to whom it would apply directly is limited.

The assumption that the message of *De virginibus velandis* was intended to apply to all the Carthaginian virgins, not simply ascetic women, has been challenged, especially by Eva Schulz-Flügel. At some point prior to this treatise, Tertullian wrote another, *De oratione (On Prayer)*, which also addresses the issue of veiling.⁶³ In particular, chapters 21-22 are very similar to the argument made in *De virginibus velandis*, to the extent that it has been suggested that the latter treatise was an expansion of the relevant passages from *De oratione*.⁶⁴ Whether or not *De virginibus velandis* was directly based on *De oratione* is not the issue at hand, but a comparison of the two works raises some interesting questions. Both treatises mention three general categories of “virgins,” treated in the same order, who might potentially be considered exceptions to the general category of women who ought to be veiled: girls who have not reached puberty, ascetic women, and betrothed women.⁶⁵ In *De virginibus velandis*, the treatment of the second group is much longer and more detailed than that of the other two. Schulz-Flügel argues, based on her analysis of the structure of the text and its comparison with *De oratione*, that, rhetorically-speaking, much of the treatise pertains only to the veiling of ascetic women (that is, consecrated virgins).⁶⁶ It should therefore be understood as directed to these women.

Schulz-Flügel is undoubtedly correct in arguing that *De virginibus velandis* is addressed expressly to the dedicated virgins of Carthage, but the general arguments of the treatise do seem intended to apply to all unmarried women, as noted above. The young women going unveiled in the Carthaginian church were likely a specific

⁶³ Dunn and Schulz-Flügel are in agreement on the relative chronology of the treatises.

⁶⁴ Dunn, 136.

⁶⁵ Schulz-Flügel, *Voile*, 25. On such potential exceptions, see below, Chapter Four.

⁶⁶ Schulz-Flügel, *Voile*, 36.

assemblage of ascetic women, determined to act in accordance with what they believed to be their proper spiritual role.⁶⁷ In writing to this specific group, however, Tertullian makes an argument that relies on the inherent sexuality of post-pubescent women. If all such women, whether consecrated virgins or no, are a sexual temptation, then the rule of veiling applies to all such women.⁶⁸ The issue is not whether women should be veiled at all; it is whether a certain group of virgins can claim to be exempt from the obligation to veil enjoined on “women” (that is, the women/wives (*gynaikes*) of the Corinthian church).⁶⁹ Therefore, when Tertullian speaks directly to “virgins” in *De virginibus velandis*, he can be understood as speaking directly to the consecrated virgins of Carthage--but his argument also applies generally to those young women who are virgins but not ascetics.

This interpretation is supported by the treatise itself. First, as noted above, the opening invocation makes no apparent distinction between *virgines Dei* and ordinary virgins. Moreover, chapters 11 and 12 of the work specifically discuss women who have reached puberty but remain unmarried: “Therefore, if she is a virgin for as long as she is immature, she ceases [to be] a virgin when she is recognized as mature and, as not a virgin, is now subject to the law, just as also to marriage.”⁷⁰ Here there is no mention of any ascetic program; Tertullian is discussing virgins in general. Immediately after this passage, he notes that engaged women (who are virgins, but not ascetics) should be veiled, as was Rebecca.⁷¹ Finally, he refers to those women who are mature enough to be veiled, but are not engaged--“About the rest, that is those who are not engaged, let the delay of their parents, who give in out of poverty or anxiety,

⁶⁷ On which see below, Chapter Four.

⁶⁸ See below, Chapters Four and Five.

⁶⁹ See below, Chapter Three.

⁷⁰ *Virg.* 11.2: “Igitur si tam diu virgo, quamdiu acerba est, desinit virginem, cum matura cognoscitur, et ut non virgo iam legi applicator sicut et nuptiis.”

⁷¹ *Virg.* 11.3.

consider . . .⁷² Taken as a whole, these passages strongly suggest that, although the treatise was written in response to the actions of a specific group of consecrated virgins, Tertullian's intent was, among other things, to clarify that the injunction to veil applied to all post-pubescent women, regardless of their status as ascetics.

I will therefore proceed with the assumption that the arguments made in *De virginibus velandis* are intended to apply to the never-married women of the Carthaginian church as a whole, whether formally dedicated as virgins or simply not yet wed. Widows who did not remarry, even very young ones, are not included in the group; they would have worn veils from the time of their marriages and continued to wear them in widowhood. At any rate, Tertullian is very clear on who constitutes a widow in his perspective: "those women who have had one husband--that is married women--and who are over sixty . . ."⁷³

It should be observed at this point that Tertullian was probably involved with what is now called the Montanist movement, a second-century Christian "prophetic phenomenon," notable for its beliefs about the Holy Spirit.⁷⁴ Much has been written on Tertullian's role in the "New Prophecy" (as Montanists themselves referred to the movement), but most of it is irrelevant here. It is enough to note that *De virginibus velandis* is dated to his so-called Montanist period, due to its ascetic nature and references to the Paraclete.⁷⁵ There is no particular aspect to the arguments for veiling in *De virginibus velandis* that would indicate that Tertullian had a particularly pro- or anti-Montanist perspective on the issue. While his Montanism may have informed his

⁷² *Virg.* 11.4: "de ceteris vero, id est quae desponsatae non sunt, viderit aut parentum procrastination ex angustiis vel scrupulositate descendens . . ."

⁷³ *Virg.* 9.3: "praeter annos sexaginta non tantum univirae, id est est nuptae aliquando . . ."

⁷⁴ Christine Trevett, *Montanism: Gender, Authority, and the New Prophecy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 2-3.

⁷⁵ Dunn, 135. E.g. *Virg.* 1.4-7.

tendency toward asceticism, the way he expresses that asceticism in this treatise is very much in line with contemporary “orthodox” Christianity.⁷⁶

From a Roman societal perspective, the consecrated virgins of Carthage would contravene nature--deliberately thwarting the way things ought to be. Dedicated virgins (in the form of Vestal Virgins, for example) were not new to Roman society, but, as Peter Brown notes, these women were important because they were anomalies, not ideals: “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”⁷⁷ These non-Christian virgins did not disrupt the social order because they did not seek to contravene it. Furthermore, stories of such women in ancient sources tend to focus on the breaking of Vestal chastity; by flouting their sacred obligations, these women reinforced all the more strongly the consequences of non-conformity.⁷⁸

Some Christians, however, did not see conformity to the normal course of marriage, sex, and child-bearing as positive.⁷⁹ In *De exhortatione castitatis*, Tertullian writes, “renounce we things carnal, that we may at length bear fruits spiritual.”⁸⁰ Marriage itself was not sinful--as Tertullian agreed with Paul that it was better to marry than to burn--but children were not a desirable outcome: “For why should we be eager to bear children, whom, when we have them, we desire to send before us . . .

⁷⁶ The question of whether or not Tertullian was unorthodox or even a “heretic” is, of course, far beyond the scope and attention of this study.

⁷⁷ Brown, 9.

⁷⁸ Mary Beard, “Re-reading (Vestal) Virginité,” in *Women in Antiquity: New Assessments*, eds. Richard Hawley and Barbara Levick (New York: Routledge, 1995), 172.

⁷⁹ The debate over whether sex and childbearing were appropriate for Christians was of course not resolved in Tertullian’s lifetime. His writings suggest that he believed that Christians should remain celibate if possible.

⁸⁰ *Exhort. cast.*, 10.1 (*ANF*): “Renuntiemus carnalibus, ut aliquando spiritalia fructificemus.”

desirous as we are ourselves, too, to be taken out of this most wicked world . . . ?”⁸¹ Tertullian upholds celibacy and virginity as the standards to which Christians should adhere, and he holds continence in the highest regard: “Accordingly, ‘the best thing for a man is not to touch a woman’; and accordingly the virgin’s is the principal sanctity, because it is free from affinity with fornication.”⁸² From a Christian perspective, the mere presence of a dedicated virgin was therefore an asset to the community; a visible symbol of purity, modesty, and sexual continence. One later Egyptian writer even claimed that a virgin was the “salvation” of a household from material as well as spiritual threat.⁸³

Yet ancient Mediterranean society as a whole was focused on reproduction and child-rearing. It has been estimated that each woman would need to have had an average of five children to maintain the population of the Roman Empire.⁸⁴ To that end, a variety of cultural strategies evolved which promoted marriage and childbirth as the purpose of life for women. Among these strategies, discussed in more detail in the following chapter, was the societal categorization of an unmarried woman as unnatural, not truly a woman at all. The desire of some Christians to halt the cycle of birth and death produced consecrated virgins who were, to traditional Roman thought, the antitheses of women. This helps to explain Tertullian’s need to define virgins as real women, strongly apparent in *De virginibus velandis*. He could not do so by a traditional definition: “But since they use the name ‘woman’ in such a way that they

⁸¹ *Ad uxorem* I.5.1 (*ANF*): “Nam quid gestiamus liberos serere, quos cum habeamus, praemittere optamus . . . cupidi et ipsi iniquissimo isto saeculo eximi . . .” For more on Christian renunciation of the reproductive culture, see Brown.

⁸² *Exhort. cast.*, 9: “Ideo optimum est homini mulierem non attingere, et ideo uirginis principalis est sanctitas, quia caret stupri affinitate.” The quotation is from I Corinthians 7: 1.

⁸³ Brown, 264.

⁸⁴ Brown, 6, quoting Bruce W. Frier, “Roman Life Expectancy: Ulpian’s Evidence,” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 86 (1982): 213-251.

do not consider that that [term] is suitable except for her alone who has submitted [to a man], it falls to us to prove the appropriateness of this designation to the [female] sex as such, [and] not to relate [it] to [one] category of the [female] sex, in order that even virgins may also be counted as belonging to it.”⁸⁵ In the end, Tertullian arrives at a biological definition of women--but it is a particularly Roman definition, and one that deserves more attention.

⁸⁵ *Virg.* 5.1: “Sed quoniam ita mulieris nomen usurpant, ut non putent competere illud nisi ei soli quae virum passa sit, probari a nobis oportet proprietatem eius vocabuli ad sexum ipsum, non ad gradum sexus pertinere, quo communiter etiam virgines censeantur.”

CHAPTER THREE: TERTULLIAN AND THE BIOLOGY OF WOMEN

In *De virginibus velandis*, Tertullian argues that all virgins should be veiled. In making this argument, however, the author addresses a peculiar line of reasoning evidently made by the virgins themselves. According to the treatise, they claimed that since the Apostle Paul had made a distinction between virgins and women at First Corinthians 7, his injunction that “women” should be veiled at First Corinthians 11 applies only to them: that is, virgins are not women *qua* women.⁸⁶ Tertullian devotes a great deal of energy to debunking this claim, to an extent which is patently absurd to a modern reader. I believe, however, that recognition of this absurdity has led to neglect of its import. He writes: “Immediately it is put to us that no mention of virgins has been made by the apostle [Paul in the place] where he makes a ruling about the veil, but that only women were named, since, [it is argued,] if he had wanted virgins to be covered as well, he would also have written something about the virgins when the women were mentioned.”⁸⁷ Such an argument is flawed, says Tertullian, because Paul was perfectly capable of distinguishing between virgins and women: “For he who knew how to make mention of both types at another time--I mean [mention] of virgins and of women (that is, of [those who are, by definition,] not virgins)--for the sake of distinction, in these [passages] in which he does not name virgins, he shows their shared situation by not making a distinction.”⁸⁸ Tertullian proves this point with reference to the context of both passages in First Corinthians, but he is not satisfied with Paul as sole authority. Virgins *are* women, by virtue of their inclusion in the

⁸⁶ *Virg.*, 4.1.

⁸⁷ *Virg.*, 4.1 (Trans. Dunn, *Tertullian*): “. . . statim opponitur nobis nullam mentionem virginum ab apostolo factam, ubi de velamine praefinit, sed tantum mulieres nominates, cum, si voluisset et virgines tegi, de virginibus quo que cum mulieribus nominates pronuntiasset . . .”

⁸⁸ *Virg.* 4.2: “Qui enim sciebat in alias utriusque generis facere mentionem--virginis dico et mulieris, id est non virginis--, ex causa distinctionis, in his, in quibus non nominat virginem, non faciens distinctionem ostendit condicionis communionem.”

universal category: “Thus we too have been content with universal designations, which include the meaning of the particulars within them The designation in nature is ‘female’. Of the natural designation, that by genus [is] ‘woman’. Also, of the general [designation], that by species is ‘virgin’ or ‘married woman’ or ‘widow’ or however many [designations] are needed to cover the various stages of life.”⁸⁹

Tertullian’s argument in this latter passage is perfectly logical, yet the fact that it is made at all seems rather bizarre to a modern sensibility. Furthermore, as noted above, according to the treatise, the virgins themselves apparently argued that they were *not* women.⁹⁰ Clearly, a closer examination of the context in which biologically female humans could argue that they were not gendered women is in order.

The translation of both Latin and Greek into English is notoriously difficult with respect to gender. In ancient Greek, the word *gynē* is used to signify both “woman” (that is, adult female) and “wife” (the acknowledged legal partner of a man). To an English speaker, these categories are self-evidently distinct. To an individual writing or speaking in Greek, they were not.⁹¹ Latin is slightly less ambiguous; while the word *mulier* may stand for either category, *femina* (woman) and *uxor* (wife) are not necessarily synonymous.⁹² Nevertheless, Greeks and Romans shared some fundamental beliefs about how to describe and address women, enough that the Carthaginian virgins could point to the ambiguity of Paul. It should be kept in mind that Hellenistic Greek was the *lingua franca* of the eastern ancient Mediterranean and

⁸⁹ *Virg.* 4.4: “Sic et generalibus vocabulis contenti sumus, comprehendentibus in se specialium intellectum Naturale vocabulum est femina, naturalis vocabuli generale mulier, generalis etiam speciale virgo vel nupta vel vidua vel quot etiam aetatis nomina accedunt.”

⁹⁰ *Virg.*, 4.1.

⁹¹ Helen King, “Bound to Bleed: Artemis and Greek Women,” in *Images of Women in Antiquity*, eds. Averil Cameron and Amélie Kuhrt (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993), 110.

⁹² Tertullian remarks on this at *Virg.* 5.3.

was widely read and written among the literate elite of the west. In fact, Tertullian's first edition of *De virginibus velandis* was composed in Greek, and Geoffrey Dunn suggests that it may have been directed to the virgins themselves.⁹³ When many authors write of veiling, they refer to the social behavior of the ancient Mediterranean with reference to Paul and his Hellenistic culture, rather than to Tertullian.⁹⁴ Therefore, we may safely assume that Roman/Carthaginian and eastern Mediterranean culture held at least some aspects in common. Most obviously, Tertullian regards Paul as an authority not only on theology but on social behavior. His social prescriptions do not have the force of custom; they have the force of scripture.⁹⁵ Furthermore, Tertullian would have held certain precepts concerning the nature of women which were neither original nor wholly Roman.

According to ancient medical science and philosophy, women were essentially imperfect men.⁹⁶ This belief was based not only on philosophical and cultural theorization, but on a lack of genuine knowledge about feminine anatomy. In good health, women performed their own ablutions; in sickness or childbirth, other women assisted them.⁹⁷ Doctors could question and consult midwives but were generally denied the opportunity to examine their female patients; there are only two examples of a male doctor carrying out a vaginal examination in the entire Hippocratic corpus.⁹⁸

⁹³ *Virg.* 1.1, Dunn 179, n.1.

⁹⁴ For example, Dale Martin, "Prophylactic Veils," in *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), and Cynthia L. Thompson, "Hairstyles, Head-Coverings, and St. Paul: Portraits from Roman Corinth," *The Biblical Archaeologist* 51, no. 2 (1988): 99-115.

⁹⁵ *Virg.* 4.1.

⁹⁶ Brown, 10.

⁹⁷ Aline Rousselle, *Porneia: on Desire and the Body in Antiquity* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 25.

⁹⁸ Rousselle, 25. The *Hippocratic Collection* is a group of medical writings, ranging from about the sixth century BC to the first century BCE, the "basis for all the medical studies of antiquity" (Rousselle, 6).

Thus, as Aline Rousselle writes, male physicians “who had no knowledge of female anatomy or physiology, but fantasies only, used logical reasoning to construct a male science of the female body . . .”⁹⁹ In this context, women’s bodies remained mysterious, and scientists were free to construct them as imperfect inversions of their male counterparts. Aside from the obvious hierarchical implications of such thought, this left male doctors with peculiar anatomical ideas. There was a tendency among medical writers to ascribe various illnesses to the mysteries of feminine biology. The most famous is hysteria, which literally means “wombiness.”¹⁰⁰ Other problems less directly connected to the uterus still tended to affect women rather than men. This supposition can be seen in the *Peri Partheniōn*, a medical text from the Hippocratic corpus of the fourth or fifth centuries BC; especially affected by such particularly female ailments are “virgins who at the appropriate time for marriage do not take a husband.”¹⁰¹ The viewing of night terrors, for example, was caused by an accumulation of blood in the uterus after menarche (itself caused by lack of sexual activity). When this excess of blood forced its way into the heart and *phrenes* (an organ of thought somewhere near the lungs), the young woman went mad, even attempting suicide. Fortunately, there was a cure: “My prescription is that when virgins experience this trouble, they should cohabit with a man as quickly as possible. If they become pregnant, they will be cured. If they don’t do this, either they will succumb at the onset of puberty or a little later . . .”¹⁰² As Mary Lefkowitz notes, “the doctor offers as a cure social conformity, marriage, and pregnancy. The doctor proceeds on the assumption that the causes of mental disorders in young females are in

⁹⁹ Rousselle, 26.

¹⁰⁰ Mary R. Lefkowitz, “The Wandering Womb,” in *Heroines and Hysterics* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1981), 13.

¹⁰¹ The *Peri Partheniōn*, quoted in Lefkowitz, 14.

¹⁰² *Peri Parth.*, Lefkowitz, 15.

origin sexual; these women are seen first in terms of their reproductive role, and as controlled by their principal reproductive organ.”¹⁰³ This is true of Greek medical thought on the whole; as Rousselle notes, all the “women’s ailments” discussed in the *Hippocratic Collection* are treated with respect to the uterus.¹⁰⁴ Our concern here, however, lies not so much in the sexual origins of such illnesses but in their prescribed cure. In her discussion of the passage from the *Peri Partheniōn* quoted above, Helen King notes that the nouns used to describe female sufferers change in odd and seemingly contradictory ways, from the singular *parthenos* (unmarried girl) to the plural *gynaikes* (married women).¹⁰⁵ She suggests that these shifts are not random but emblematic of the intent of the treatise; by submitting to the prescribed cure and the social order, *parthenoi* become linguistic as well as physical *gynaikes*.¹⁰⁶

To these specifically Greek medical prescriptions, we may add the interesting observations of the later Soranus (himself Greek) about Roman beliefs.¹⁰⁷ Greek and Roman medical thought may generally be considered in the same context without undue distortion of either culture. To a Roman, “physician” was almost synonymous with “Greek”; the elder Pliny considered medicine a Greek profession.¹⁰⁸ Many influential Roman physicians were in fact Greek; for example, Galen, Tertullian’s older contemporary, served as court doctor to the Roman emperors Marcus Aurelius and Commodus.¹⁰⁹ There were some differences, however, such as those noted by Soranus, who “thought that only dissection would convince the Roman doctors that in

¹⁰³ Lefkowitz, 15.

¹⁰⁴ Rousselle, 24.

¹⁰⁵ King, 114.

¹⁰⁶ King, 114.

¹⁰⁷ Soranus seems to have been active in the late first/early second centuries CE, predating Tertullian by about a century.

¹⁰⁸ Amy Richlin, “Pliny’s Brassiere,” in *Roman Sexualities*, eds. Judith P. Hallett and Marilyn B. Skinner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 199.

¹⁰⁹ Rousselle, 6

a virgin the vagina was not normally sealed by a membrane stretching between the neck of the womb and the hymen. How, he asked, could the menstrual blood pass through the vagina of a virgin without causing the acute pain which was produced by defloration?”¹¹⁰ The difference in ages between Greek and Roman brides was responsible for this misconception. Soranus noted that Greek girls reached menarche without physical distress, even though they did not marry until puberty. In Roman, however, a social norm prevented empirical observation from affecting scientific thought: “The Romans refused to yield to this argument. In their society girls might be married at twelve, sometimes even younger, and were immediately deflowered, some of them becoming pregnant before they had had a menstrual period. The Romans were thus able to mistake for a universal anatomical feature what is in fact a rare malformation.”¹¹¹ Carthage was more than simply a Roman colony with norms imported from the city unaltered, but its upper class was solidly Romanized.¹¹² It should be noted that Tertullian was not a doctor and that these medical writings are unlikely to have been read frequently by laymen. As an educated man and one of Carthage’s intelligentsia, however, he would have been exposed to philosophy and debate on many topics.¹¹³ I include the medical writers here to demonstrate that discussion of the biology of women did take place in contemporary intellectual circles, if not necessarily those in which Tertullian participated personally. Returning to our

¹¹⁰ Rousselle, 27.

¹¹¹ Rousselle, 27. Brent Shaw has argued for marriages in the late teens among most Roman women but concedes that upper-class (and hence our literary and philosophical models) apparently did marry very young. See Brent D. Shaw, “The Age of Roman Girls at Marriage: Some Reconsiderations,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 77 (1987): 39.

¹¹² Joyce E. Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion: the Death and Memory of a Young Roman Woman* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 3.

¹¹³ Tertullian was an adult convert to Christianity and would therefore have considered Roman custom “normal.” He of course rejects certain aspects of that culture in his writing, even as he acknowledges that they may be typical of Roman behavior.

argument above, if Soranus' assertion about Roman doctors is true, it suggests that they might go further than their Greek counterparts in separating virgins from women. In such a medical philosophy, a virgin could not even begin the transition to womanhood without marriage (or at least defloration), which would prompt menarche.¹¹⁴ This is of course speculative, but it may provide some insight into Tertullian's lengthy defense of his assertion that virgins are women.

Theoretically, therefore, we have established a basis for a society in which virgins were *not* women; that is, they had not achieved the physical state necessary to become "women" in Greek sense of the word. King notes that menarche and even defloration were not enough to complete this transition: "The birth of the first child is particularly important in making the woman into a true *gynē* . . . and this is completed by the first lochia, the discharge from the uterus after childbirth When a woman dies in or just after childbirth she remains 'not fully a *gynē*' (Kaibel, 505.4), perhaps because she has not experienced the lochia."¹¹⁵ It was important that a woman become "fully a *gynē*" because unmarried women were dangerous as well as unhealthy. The social conformity prescribed by a doctor not only ensured that a virgin would become a woman, it kept her from becoming a social danger. To the Greeks, "all women start their lives conceptually 'outside' male society, but most are taken 'inside' through the process of maturation," and raising a girl child is analogous to breaking a wild filly to the saddle, with marriage the ultimate yoke.¹¹⁶ In such a society, the gap between dangerous, nubile virgin and controlled, reproductive woman should be as short as possible. For the Greeks, the space between *parthenos* and *gynē* was controlled by marriage; a Greek woman should be betrothed and married as soon

¹¹⁴ Rousselle, 33.

¹¹⁵ King, 121.

¹¹⁶ King, 111.

as she reached puberty.¹¹⁷ For the Romans, this gap was avoided by marrying their daughters while still very young, before they had reached menarche.¹¹⁸ In practice, such precautions were not always possible (hence the medical writings), but, conceptually-speaking, efforts to speed the transition from virgin to mother posed no problem to the greater Mediterranean culture, oriented as it was toward reproduction.¹¹⁹ To Tertullian and other ascetic Christians, however, it became a grave social dilemma.

¹¹⁷ King, 112.

¹¹⁸ See above, n.26.

¹¹⁹ Brown, 7.

CHAPTER FOUR: TERTULLIAN AND THE PARADOX OF VIRGIN WOMEN

Life in the ancient Mediterranean was, for most women, concentrated on marriage and the production of children. This can be seen in the linguistic and biological definitions of women given by philosophers and medical writers--and even in the writings of Tertullian, who supported a resistance to reproduction endorsed by some Christian groups,

In *De virginibus velandis*, the author concludes that virgins are women for essential, biological reasons. Unlike the medical writers of the time, however, his definition is particularly Christian. The starting scriptural point for Tertullian's argument is First Corinthians 11, where Paul writes that "a man ought not to have his head veiled, since he is the image and reflection of God; but woman is the reflection of man. Indeed, man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for the sake of woman, but woman for the sake of man. For this reason a woman ought to have authority on her head, because of the angels."¹²⁰ The aside "because of the angels" has long puzzled scholars ancient and modern.¹²¹ Tertullian, however, interprets this statement as a specific reference to the sexual appeal of women: "we read plainly that they [angels] have fallen from God and from heaven because of their desire for females . . ."¹²² This is a particular reading of Genesis 6, which describes the condition of the world just prior to the flood: "when human beings began to increase in number on the earth and daughters were born to them, now the sons of God, having seen the daughters of men, since they were beautiful took wives

¹²⁰ 1 Corinthians 11: 7-10, NRSV, with omission of added "[a symbol of] authority," not present in the Greek.

¹²¹ For comment and bibliography, see Dale Martin, "Prophylactic Veils," in *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

¹²² *Virg.* 7.2: "scilicet quos legimus a Deo et caelo excidisse ob concupiscentiam feminarum . . ."

for themselves from all whom they selected.”¹²³ This passage serves two purposes for Tertullian. First, it establishes that, although called women and wives, the daughters of men were virgins, as was Eve when created; “thus Adam [was] a man before the union of marriage, just as Eve too [was] a woman.”¹²⁴ He can play linguistic games as well as his opponents, and he proves that wordplay does not impede understanding Paul’s command as issued to virgins as well as married women. Second, the unveiled virgins are a threat to the community because they are a sexual temptation. If a woman can prompt the fall of angels, human men are in peril: “Therefore, a face which is so dangerous and which has cast scandals from here to heaven, ought to be shaded in order that, standing in the presence of God before whom it is accused of being responsible for the angels being banished, it may blush before the other angels also, and may restrain that former evil freedom of its own head, [a freedom] which now ought not be placed before the eyes of men.”¹²⁵ What makes a woman, in Tertullian’s view, is her sexual appeal, a point which we will revisit below. At any rate, virgins, if human, are women, subject to the law as prescribed by Paul and others, and subject to the headship of men: “if the head of a woman is a man, certainly [he is head] also of a virgin, from whom comes that woman who has been veiled in marriage, unless the virgin is a third division [of humanity], something strange with an

¹²³ *Virg.* 7.2, quoting *Genesis* 6.1-2. Although Tertullian quotes these verses in Latin, it is evident from his commentary that he was working from a Greek version of the text.

¹²⁴ *Virg.* 8.2: “Sic vir Adam ante nuptiarum congressum, quemadmodum et Eva mulier.”

¹²⁵ *Virg.* 7.3: “Debet ergo adumbrari facies tam periculosa, quae usque ad caelum scandala iaculata est, ut cum Deo adsistens, cui rea est angelorum exterminatorum, ceteris quoque angelis erubescat et malam illam aliquando libertatem capitis sui comprimat, iam nec hominum oculis offerendam.”

origin of its own.”¹²⁶ Since the law of veiling applies to all women, and virgins are women, virgins must veil.

Yet this reasoning might lead to another argument in favor of Tertullian’s opponents: if virgins are true women and not a “third division,” then surely they should be veiled from birth.¹²⁷ Tertullian, however, is too good a rhetorician not to anticipate this line of attack, and he takes care to correct the misapprehension. It is not simply as members of the genus women that virgins should be veiled; virgins are dangerous, but they are not dangerous from birth. They only become women (in the sense of needing to be veiled according to the Pauline injunction) at puberty, the beginning of the time when they attract sexual attention: “. . . without a doubt the law of veiling will be in operation from that age from which the daughters of men were able to draw desire to themselves and experience marriage. For a virgin ceases [to be a virgin] from the time when she is able not to be [one]. . . . Therefore, if she is a virgin for as long as she is immature, she ceases [to be] a virgin when she is recognized as mature and, as not a virgin, is now subject to the law, just as also to marriage.”¹²⁸ Here he draws a parallel between subjection to the law and subjection to marriage. This argument demonstrates Tertullian’s debt to his Roman cultural heritage; although his preference is for virginity over marriage, he uses the same standard as any secular Roman to establish the point at which the Christian principle becomes applicable to a young woman.¹²⁹

¹²⁶ *Virg.* 7.1: “*Si caput mulieris vi rest, utique et virginis, de qua fit mulier illa quae nupsit, nisi si virgo tertium genus est monstruosum aliquod sui capitis.*”

¹²⁷ *Virg.* 11.1.

¹²⁸ *Virg.* 11.2: “. . . sine dubio ab ea aetate lex velaminis operabitur, a qua potuerunt filiae hominum concupiscentiam sui adducere et nuptias pati; ex illo enim virgo desinit ex quo potest non esse . . . Igitur si tam diu virgo, quamdiu acerba est, desinit virginem, cum matura cognoscitur, et ut non virgo iam legi applicator sicut et nuptiis.”

¹²⁹ It is worth noting here that veiling in public was a regular Roman practice. See below.

As Tertullian has demonstrated that virgins are women, they are subject to the authority of men and of the law. It is unnecessary, therefore, for a virgin to undergo the external physical changes of defloration and childbirth to become a woman in Tertullian's thought; in fact, he advises parents to consider a mature unwed daughter equivalent to a wife: ". . . another hidden mother, nature, and another concealed father, time, have given their own daughter in marriage according to their own laws. Look upon that virgin of yours as already married--both her mind by expectation and her flesh by transformation . . ." ¹³⁰ One's own flesh, however, is not the only concern. Physical changes alone do not determine womanhood, but others' reactions to them.

As noted above, it is not simply age or even biology that makes a virgin a woman; it is sexual appeal. This is what prompts Tertullian to call for all mature women to veil. At this point, it seems relevant to consider the question of why any virgins would wish to go unveiled in the first place. Tertullian accuses them of attention-seeking: "The very desire of not keeping out of sight is not a modest [one]. She experiences something that is not proper to a virgin--the enthusiasm for pleasing, and men especially." ¹³¹ We know from this treatise that there was an order of widows in Carthage at this time, and certainly some desire to be associated with these women (who were seated in an honored place in the church) or to stand out from the congregation in some other way may have prompted this particular group of young women to go unveiled. ¹³² But there were also spiritual arguments to be made for removing one's veil.

¹³⁰ *Virg.* 11.4: ". . . alia in occulto mater, natura, et alius in latenti pater, tempus, filiam suam legibus suis maritarunt. Aspice nuptam iam in illam tuam virginem, et animam expectatione[m] et carnem transfiguratione[m] . . ."

¹³¹ *Virg.* 14.5: "Ipsa concupiscentia non latendi non est pudica. Patitur aliquid quod virginis non sit, stadium placendi, utique et viris."

¹³² *Virg.* 9.2.

Peter Brown suggests that the consecrated virgins of Carthage thought they had overcome the stigma of womanhood: “By renouncing sexual activity, they were thought to have broken the ‘sound barrier’ of sexual shame on which the traditional veiling of women was supposed to be based. Though fully adult women, they considered themselves free to abandon the veil that was held to externalize the sexual shame associated with women old enough to undergo the ‘common slur’ of the marriage bed.”¹³³ He cites an example from one of the apocryphal gospels wherein an ascetic woman explicitly links her unveiled status to her sexual continence.¹³⁴ But Tertullian rejected this reasoning; in his thought, sexual shame was part of the human condition, representative “of an unchanging and unchangeable human nature, forever subject to the facts of sex.”¹³⁵ The ability to remain a virgin, as Schulz-Flügel notes, depended entirely on the grace of God.¹³⁶ Furthermore, personal sexual continence did not mean one became a sexless being; the capacity to incite lust in others contributed to one’s own sexual shame. “*Mulieritas*, the state of a woman aware of her own sexual feelings and capable of inspiring sexual feelings in others,” began at puberty, and it was impossible for a woman past this point to escape it.¹³⁷ As a consequence, those who supported the Carthaginian virgins’ desire to remain unveiled must be doing so from base motives: “In fact, the eyes that will desire a virgin once seen, are the same kind as a virgin has who will desire to be seen. The same kinds of eyes desire each other mutually. To be seen and to see is of the same passion. Blushing upon seeing a virgin is as typical of a pure man as it is of a pure virgin if she

¹³³ Brown, 80.

¹³⁴ Brown, 81, quoting the *Acts of Judas Thomas*, 10.

¹³⁵ Brown, 81.

¹³⁶ Schulz-Flügel, *Voile*, 25.

¹³⁷ Brown, 81.

is seen by a man.”¹³⁸ It is not enough for a virgin to be physically pure; by these standards, she must be pure of thought. Paradoxically, however, to demonstrate purity of thought required a kind of public display, to which we will turn in the next chapter.

¹³⁸ *Virg.* 2.4: “Tales enim oculi volent virginem visam, quales habet virgo quae videri volet; invicem se eadem oculorum genera desiderant; eiusdem libidinis est videri et videre. Tam sancti viri est subfundi, si virginem viderit, quam sanctae virginis, si a viro visa sit.”

CHAPTER FIVE: TERTULLIAN, CHASTITY, AND CLOTHING

Kate Cooper suggests that when we read an ancient text, we may assume for argument that “wherever a woman is mentioned a man’s character is being judged--and along with it what he stands for.”¹³⁹ The modern scholar may be wary of making an apparently superficial assumption, but it should be borne in mind that exploitation of trope and stereotype to argue one’s case was standard ancient rhetorical practice.¹⁴⁰ As previously discussed, Tertullian, despite his protestations to the contrary, was very in dialogue with the classical rhetorical model.¹⁴¹ In *De virginibus velandis*, therefore, like any good Roman rhetor, he commits fully to the stereotype of women as inherently seductive and therefore dangerous to prove his point.

Tertullian takes as a given that women are by nature a sexual temptation and here promotes one specific behavior (veiling) which will control, but not solve, the problem. This is, as Cooper states, a tactic intended to “dissociate particular women from the stereotype of the gender as persuaders to vice, while leaving unchallenged the stereotype itself.”¹⁴² Why, however, does he not challenge the stereotype? That is, what about the belief that women were intrinsically hazardous was useful to him and why? When Tertullian was writing, Christianity was under attack, or at least so it seemed to Christians of the time. The persecutions which took the lives of north African martyrs (such as Perpetua) were fresh in the minds of the Christian community.¹⁴³ Furthermore, there was no formal church hierarchy--varied Christian

¹³⁹ Kate Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 19.

¹⁴⁰ Catharine Edwards, *The Politics of Immorality in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 10.

¹⁴¹ Averil Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 85. See above, Chapter One.

¹⁴² Cooper, 86.

¹⁴³ The extent of the persecutions is not known; indeed, they are known to us almost solely through Christian sources. It is enough for our purposes here, however, that

sects, some with wildly differing beliefs, were active across the empire.¹⁴⁴ To that end, Christian authors, Tertullian among them, sought to defend their beliefs and orthodoxy in various ways to the Roman empire at large. In fact, Tertullian's *Apologeticum* (*Defense*) is his best-known work today. Part of his rhetorical strategy in this work involves shaming Romans who criticize Christians for departing from ancestral custom. According to Tertullian, Christians are moral people in a society which has cast off the mores of its ancestors: "I would now have these most religious protectors and vindicators of the laws and institutions of their fathers, tell me, in regard to their own fidelity, and the honour and submission themselves show to ancestral institutions, if they have departed from nothing--if they have in nothing gone out of the old paths--if they have not put aside whatsoever is most useful and necessary as rules of a virtuous life."¹⁴⁵ In this respect, the behavior of Roman (non-Christian) women is particularly offensive: "I see now no difference between the dress of matrons and prostitutes. In regard to women, indeed, those laws of your fathers, which used to be such an encouragement to modesty and sobriety, have also fallen into desuetude . . ."¹⁴⁶ This argument as presented in the *Apologeticum* may help to explain several facets of *De virginibus velandis*.

these Christians believed absolutely in the existence and future possibility of such persecution.

¹⁴⁴ This includes the Montanist movement, of which Tertullian seems to have been a part. His writings seek not only to establish the validity of Christianity in general but of his version in particular.

¹⁴⁵ *Apologeticum*, 6 (trans. ANF): "Nunc religiosissimi legum et paternorum institutorum protectores et ultores respondeant velim de sua fide et honore et obsequio erga maiorum consulta, si a nullo desciverunt, si in nullo exorbitaverunt, si non necessaria et aptissima quaeque disciplinae oblitteraverunt."

¹⁴⁶ *Apol.* 6: "ideo et inter matronas atque prostibulas nullum de habitu discrimen relictum. Circa feminas quidem etiam illa maiorum instituta ceciderunt quae modestiae, quae sobrietati patrocinebantur . . ."

First, as noted above, Tertullian reinforces an ancient stereotype of women as inherently seductive where there was the potential to embrace a new view, informed by Christian beliefs about grace and redemption.¹⁴⁷ Aside from theological considerations, however, Tertullian lived in social milieu where prestige was based on competition--shaming one's opponents and trumpeting one's own rectitude. In this society, the aforementioned stereotype served the Christian community as well as it had their non-Christian predecessors.¹⁴⁸ The more accepted Christians became in Roman society at large, the greater their chances of complete ideological triumph--and, pragmatically, the greater their chances of avoiding further persecution. At this point in the second century, it seems that the Christian church was attracting larger numbers of converts from across the social spectrum, particularly the upper classes.¹⁴⁹ These of course included the women able to afford the cosmetic displays which so offended Tertullian, but, more importantly, these women also represented a social class which was accustomed to display as a function of morality. As part of this environment, Tertullian himself would have known the importance of moral visibility; if a man's political opponents attempted to publicize his personal foibles in an attempt to discredit him, "it was his task to undermine the plausibility of such revelations by a deft broadcasting of his probity."¹⁵⁰ When engaged in politics, such a man would display his faultless morals in order to portray himself as worthy of public office or imperial favors.¹⁵¹ Tertullian's *Apologeticum* was the same sort of moral parade, undertaken by one man on behalf of an entire social group. The goals of this work are

¹⁴⁷ See Brown, 80.

¹⁴⁸ Cooper, 86. On which, see below.

¹⁴⁹ Lavender, 344-345. The veracity of this assumption has been challenged, but it does seem that Tertullian represents the first generation of western Christians to write on behalf of their religion so extensively and persuasively in the classical rhetorical mode.

¹⁵⁰ Cooper, 13.

¹⁵¹ Edwards, 26.

obviously different than those of a man seeking office, but the strategy used to obtain them is the same.

Consequentially, Tertullian faced the same dilemma as any Roman politician: how to emphasize his probity (or that of the group he represented) as emphatically as possible. Like many such politicians, he turned to women. The use of one's female kin to publicize one's modest and temperate family life--and therefore one's integrity--was a common Roman strategy.¹⁵² For example, the emperor Augustus paid close attention to the upbringing and morality of his daughter and granddaughters and was said always to wear clothes woven by a woman of his family (demonstrating both his own simplicity and their virtuous industry).¹⁵³ The conduct of a prominent man's womenfolk continued to be viewed as a sort of moral barometer for his character throughout the empire.

Tertullian's own writing demonstrates this principle at work. In the earlier of his treatises *De cultu feminarum* (*On the Apparel of Women*), he explains to Christian women that they must be seen as not simply modest, but ostentatiously so.¹⁵⁴ He writes: "To Christian modesty it is not enough to *be* so, but to *seem* so too. For so great ought its plenitude to be, that it may flow out from the mind to the garb, and burst out from the conscience to the outward appearance . . ."¹⁵⁵ This distinction becomes even more marked when the dress of a modest Christian woman was contrasted with that of a typical Roman. Tertullian's accusation that there was "no difference between the dress of matrons and prostitutes" with respect to the non-

¹⁵² Cooper, 13.

¹⁵³ Suetonius, *Life of Augustus*, 64; 73.

¹⁵⁴ Tertullian wrote two treatises *De cultu feminarum*. The treatise traditionally identified as second is now considered to have been written earlier than the other (Barnes, 51).

¹⁵⁵ *Cult.* II.13.3 (trans. ANF): "Pudicitiae christianae satis non est esse verum et videri. Tanta enim debet esse plenitude eius ut emanet ab animo in habitum et eructet a conscientia in superficiem . . ."

Christian women of Carthage is no doubt an exaggeration, but it heightens his insistence that Christian women dress modestly all the more.¹⁵⁶ To adorn oneself with gold and silver was vainglorious ambition; to make up one's face and dye one's hair was prostitution--in the literal sense of "putting oneself forward."¹⁵⁷ In addition to going unveiled, according to Tertullian, the virgins of *De virginibus velandis* make themselves up like prostitutes. Only their lack of veils proclaims their virginity; in every other respect they dress as non-Christian women (and disreputable women at that): "Indeed, from the head they lay aside what they were; they change their hair and implant their coiffure with an outlandish hairpin, asserting open womanhood by parting their locks of hair from the front. And then they seek beauty advice from the mirror and they torment their more fastidious face with washing, perhaps they even falsify it with some rouge, fling a mantle around themselves, cram [their foot into] an oddly-shaped shoe However, the obvious preparations alone proclaim complete womanhood, but they want to act like a virgin with only the head naked, denying by one [item of] dress what they acknowledge by their total demeanour."¹⁵⁸ For

¹⁵⁶ *Apol.* 6. Being able to discriminate between respectable and disreputable women on the basis of dress was very important to Roman society at large, not simply the Christian community. (See below.)

¹⁵⁷ *Cult.* I.4.2. Two Roman terms for prostitute, *proседа* ("one who sits outside") and *prostibulum* ("one who is in front of an inn") make the link between exposure and disrepute clear; see Tom Hillard, "On the Stage, Behind the Curtain: Images of Politically Active Women in the Late Roman Republic," in *Stereotypes of Women in Power: Historical Perspectives and Revisionist Views*, eds. Barbara Garlick, Suzanne Dixon, and Pauline Allen (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992): 58 ff.

¹⁵⁸ *Virg.* 12.2: "A capite quidem ipso deponentes quod fuerunt vertunt capillum et acu lasciviores comam sibi inferunt, crinibus a fronte divisas apertam professae mulieritatem. Iam et consilium formae a speculo petunt, et faciem morosiores lavacro macerant, forsitan et aliquot eam medicamine interpolent, pallium extrinsecus iactant, calcium stipant multiformem Solae autem manifestae paraturae totam circumferunt mulieritatem, sed virginari volunt sola capitis nuditate, uno habitu negantes quod tot suggestu profitentur."

Tertullian in *De virginibus velandis*, the veil represents the essential difference between the dress of a respectable (Christian) woman and a prostitute.

It should be noted that these virgins went veiled in public; they only wished to remain unveiled inside the church, during services. Tertullian notes this, saying sarcastically “Why then do they hide their goodness outdoors when they parade [it] in the church?”¹⁵⁹ In this context, therefore, his concern is with the mores of the congregation and the “public” space of the church. There is further cultural resonance to veiling, however, that has to do with Roman society and history.

The veils rejected by the virgins of Carthage are the same as those worn by respectable Roman women; there would have been nothing unusual about them to mark out their wearers in public as Christians. These veils were not the Roman equivalent of a burka; they were rather light shawls or mantles which were worn about the shoulders in private and drawn up over the head in public.¹⁶⁰ Such mantels were known as *pallae*; the feminine equivalent of the masculine *pallium*, a Greek cloak.¹⁶¹ Tertullian in fact wrote a treatise *De pallio (On the Pallium)*. This text is extremely difficult, and its tone and intent is hard to determine. Corey Brennan, for example, has interpreted this work as an attempt to persuade Carthaginians toward Christianity which uses the *pallium* as a rhetorical device rather than promoting an actual change of clothing--they ought to change their *habitus* “in the sense of change their ‘attitude of mind,’” not their literal *togae*.¹⁶² This is merely one interpretation, however, and of

¹⁵⁹ *Virg.* 13.2: “Quo ergo foris quidem bonum suum abstrudunt, in ecclesia vero provulgant?”

¹⁶⁰ A.T Croom, *Roman Clothing and Fashion* (Charleston, SC: Tempus, 2000), 87. Tertullian actually refers to the veiling of non-Roman African women at *Virg.* 17.2.

¹⁶¹ Kelly Olson, *Dress and the Roman Woman: Self-Presentation and Society* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 33.

¹⁶² Corey Brennan, “Tertullian’s *De Pallio* and Roman Dress in North Africa,” in *Roman Dress and the Fabrics of Roman Culture*, eds. Jonathan Edmondson and Alison Keith (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 266.

interest here is the general connection drawn between one's clothing and one's lifestyle--in both *De pallio* and *De virginibus velandis*, external appearance can be seen as a display of inward morality.

For Tertullian, *pallae* occupied much the same place in Roman ideology as another piece of clothing, the *stola*. Although the word is often translated into English as "stole," *stolae* were actually sort of long dress worn by respectable Roman women in the late Republic. A *stola* was always long, covering the feet, and the front and back of the garment were connected by narrow bands across the shoulders (the *institia*).¹⁶³ It was worn over a tunic and other undergarments and served, ideally, as a visible symbol of the *pudicitia* (chastity, modesty, good conduct) of the Roman matron.¹⁶⁴ If a respectable woman was called to testify in the law courts, she could not be touched by an accuser, "in order that the *stola* might remain *inviolata manus alienae tactu* (unviolated by the touch of another's hand)."¹⁶⁵ By Tertullian's day the *stola* was evidently falling out of wear (although it remained a rhetorical symbol of *pudicitia* long afterwards).¹⁶⁶ In *De pallio*, he rails against this trend, writing that one will see on the streets of Carthage "what Cæcina Severus pressed upon the grave attention of the senate—matrons stoleless in public."¹⁶⁷ (The reference is to A. Caecina Severus's attempt in 21 CE to legislate the wearing of the *stola*.)¹⁶⁸ These women are not merely shameless due to neglect of the *stola*, though; "But now, in their self-prostitution, in order that they may the more readily be approached, they have abjured stole, and chemise, and bonnet, and cap; yes, and even the very litters

¹⁶³ Croom, 74.

¹⁶⁴ Olson, *Dress*, 25.

¹⁶⁵ Anthony A. Barrett, *Livia: First Lady of Imperial Rome* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 121.

¹⁶⁶ Olson, *Dress*, 31. See Tertullian, *De pallio* 4.9.

¹⁶⁷ *Pall.* 4.9 (trans. ANF): "quod Caecina Severus graviter senatui impressit, matronas sine stola in publico."

¹⁶⁸ Olson, *Dress*, 31-32.

and sedans in which they used to be kept in privacy and secrecy even in public.”¹⁶⁹

The *palla* in this context would have served a visual and functional purpose similar to that of the *stola*.¹⁷⁰ Like the latter, a *palla* concealed a woman’s body from view. Furthermore, since the *palla* required a woman to keep it in place with her hands (since it was not pinned or fastened), it marked its wearer as someone who did not engage in manual labor.¹⁷¹ In *De virginibus velandis*, the *palla*-as-veil functions the same way for Tertullian as the *stola* had for Cicero: the most prominent symbol of a woman’s chastity.¹⁷²

There does not seem to have been a single form of dress associated with Roman prostitutes, but ancient sources assert that respectable *matronae* were immediately and visually distinct.¹⁷³ While prostitutes were not compelled to wear the *toga*, they seem to have been associated with it in the popular mind; *togata* is frequently used as metonymy for a disreputable woman (as its counterpart, *stolata*, for a *matrona*).¹⁷⁴ This difference in dress represented more than a mere visual indicator of respectability. Augustinian legislation still in force in Tertullian’s day made it a criminal offence to commit an “attempt against chastity” by what we would call sexual harassment--lewd remarks toward, pursuit of, or physical interaction with a respectable woman.¹⁷⁵ A suit could only be brought, however, if the woman was

¹⁶⁹ *Pall.* 4.9: “At nunc in semetipsas lenocinado, quo planius adeantur, et stolam et supparum et crepidulum et caliendrum, ipsas quoque iam lecticas ac sellas quis in publico quoque domestice ac secrete habebantur, eieravere.”

¹⁷⁰ Olson, *Dress*, 36.

¹⁷¹ Croom, 74.

¹⁷² The reason Tertullian does not discuss the *stola* in *De virginibus velandis* is simple; the *stola*, as a dress rather than a wrap, could not be used to cover one’s head and so has no function as a veil.

¹⁷³ Olson, *Dress*, 50.

¹⁷⁴ Kelly Olson, “*Matrona* and Whore: The Clothing of Women in Roman Antiquity,” *Fashion Theory* 6, no. 4 (2002): 396.

¹⁷⁵ Jane F. Gardner, *Women in Roman Law and Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 117.

dressed appropriately: “Anyone who addresses young girls (*virgenes*), if they are dressed as slaves, appears to commit a lesser offence, and still less if women are dressed as prostitutes and not as respectable married women (*matresfamiliae*).”¹⁷⁶ Thus, a Roman woman’s reputation and safety could quite literally depend on what she wore, and the contrast between *stolae* and *togae* was more than simply visual.

With this association in mind, we turn back to *De virginibus velandis*.

Compare the passage quoted above, 12.2, with this one from *De pallio*: “And, while the overseer of brothels airs her swelling silk, and consoles her neck--more impure than her haunt--with necklaces, and inserts in the armlets (which even matrons themselves would, of the guerdons bestowed upon brave men, without hesitation have appropriated) hands privy to all that is shameful, (while) she fits on her impure leg the pure white or pink shoe; why do you not stare at such garbs?”¹⁷⁷ As the virgins who are virgins in name only adorn themselves, so does the madam. Furthermore, Dunn notes the oddity of one term in the passage from *De virginibus velandis*; the virgins “fling a mantle around themselves” (*pallium extrinsecus iactant*).¹⁷⁸ He points out that “women wore a *palla* rather than a *pallium*, so it is interesting to find this term, about which Tertullian wrote so much in *On the Pallium*, associated with women,” but he offers no explanation as to why.¹⁷⁹ I suggest that Tertullian had something of the symbolism of *palla* and *toga* in mind while writing this passage. As a prostitute of the Republic would wear a toga, perhaps a prostitute of imperial Carthage might wear the man’s dress of a *pallium* in rhetoric. The innuendo of prostitution is certainly present

¹⁷⁶ Ulpian, quoted in Gardner, 118.

¹⁷⁷ *Pall.* 4.10: “Et cum latrinarum antistes sericum ventilat et immundiorem loco cervicem monilibus consolatur et armillas, quas ex virorum fortium donis ipsae quoque matronae temere usurpassent, omnium pudendorum conscias manus inserit, impuro crure purum aut mulleolum includit calcium, cur istas non spectas?”

¹⁷⁸ *Virg.* 12.2.

¹⁷⁹ Dunn, 185 n.114.

in much of the treatise.¹⁸⁰ By demanding the right to remain unveiled in church, a virgin was essentially offering up her sexuality. In one passage of *De virginibus velandis*, Tertullian rhetorically equates being seen with sex: “The very desire of not keeping out of sight is not a modest [one]. She experiences something that is not proper to a virgin--the enthusiasm for pleasing, and men especially. However much you may wish she endeavour with her good intention, it is unavoidable that she be in danger by the exposure of herself, which she is transfixed by many untrustworthy eyes, while she is tickled by the fingers of those who point, while she is greatly delighted in [by others], while she glows during the ever-present embraces and kisses. Thus the brow is hardened, thus decency is eroded and loosened, thus she now learns to desire to please in a different way.”¹⁸¹ A true virgin, therefore, considers being unveiled an affront to her modesty: “Every confiscation [of the veil] of a virtuous virgin is the suffering of defilement.”¹⁸² The veil functions for Tertullian as mark of *pudicitia* and a means of its protection: “Put on the armour of decency, draw a stockade of reserve around, build a wall for your sex, [of the sort] that neither may reveal your eyes nor give access to [the eyes of] others.”¹⁸³

¹⁸⁰ See especially *Virg.* 3.1-5 and notes.

¹⁸¹ *Virg.* 14.5: “Ipsa concupiscentia non latendi non est pudica. Patitur aliquid quod virginis non sit, stadium placendi, utique et viris. Quantum velis bona mente conetur, necesse est publicatione sui periclitetur, dum percutitur oculis incertis et multis, dum digitis monstrantium titillatur, dum nimium amatur, dum inter amplexus et oscula assidua concalescit. Sic frons duratur, sic pudor teritur, sic solvitur, sic discitur aliter iam placere desiderare.”

¹⁸² *Virg.* 3.4: “Omnis publication virginis bonae stupri passio est.”

¹⁸³ *Virg.* 16.4: “Indue armaturam pudoris, circumduc vallum verecundiae, murum sexui tuo strue, qui nec tuos emittat oculos nec admittat alienos.” The association (primarily in the Greek world) of veils with city walls has been widely noted; see especially Martin, 234, and Michael N. Nagler, “Towards a Generative View of the Oral Formula,” *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 98 (1967): 304.

A virgin who keeps her head unveiled in church is, in effect, putting herself forward for the visual enjoyment of others. To a virgin who would rather retain her modesty, this suffering is worse than rape (“to suffer physical violence is less [terrible]”); a virgin who desires such exposure is not acting as she ought to be.¹⁸⁴ In *De virginibus velandis*, the virgins who wish to remain unveiled are mistaken, in Tertullian’s view, if they believe that their status exempts them from sexual shame. They are required to veil themselves, wearing the *palla* as an appropriate symbol of their status, not only as Christians, but respectable Roman women.

¹⁸⁴ *Virg.* 3.4: “vim carnis pati minus est.”

CONCLUSION

It is evident, as discussed above, that modern scholars generally fall into two groups when discussing the question of Tertullian's misogyny. Broadly speaking, the first group assumes that Tertullian was a misogynist in the modern sense of the word and characterizes him as such, often attributing to his writing misogynist ideals espoused by later Christians. The second, apologist group seeks to rehabilitate Tertullian as a believer in the spiritual equality of men and women; while they acknowledge that he was no "champion for woman's rights as understood today," they are by and large content with the assumption that Tertullian's notions of women were very much those "which occur in a society with inequalities between the sexes."¹⁸⁵

As stated earlier, I believe that these approaches, while insightful and legitimate, avoid the greater question of which principles and beliefs present in the intellectual and social culture of the ancient Mediterranean as a whole influenced Tertullian's views of women, and of how knowledge of those principles and beliefs can inform our study of those views. What then, may be said about Tertullian's views on women as expressed in *De virginibus velandis* and their potential origins in his education and background as an elite Roman?

I have discussed the circumstances of the writing of *De virginibus velandis*--the controversy over veiling in the Carthaginian church--and the question of to whom the command to veil applies. While it is impossible to state with complete certainty, I believe that a careful reading of the treatise suggests that Tertullian intended that all unmarried women should remain veiled in church, regardless of any formal commitment to an ascetic lifestyle or membership in an *ordo* of virgins. Furthermore, while Tertullian's general subscription to the Christian ethos of continence and avoidance of reproduction (and possibly his involvement in the Montanist movement)

¹⁸⁵ Church, 100; Lamirande, 23.

certainly contributed to his beliefs about the nature of women as expressed in *De virginibus velandis*, his thought was also influenced by those of non-Christian scientists and philosophers.

There was much discussion across the ancient Mediterranean on the biological, essential nature of women: what made a woman different from a man, and how could a man avoid becoming womanly?¹⁸⁶ Doctors and philosophers (categories which were, of course, not mutually exclusive) sought to map the anatomy of women in the absence of access to that anatomy, developing a theory of women which presented them as imperfect, inverted men. The biology of women remained mysterious and opaque, to the extent that, for example, Soranus could despair of convincing his Roman counterparts that menarche could occur prior to defloration. In this philosophical system, a virgin was not necessarily a true “woman,” as she lacked the status of wife and mother necessary to function as productive member of society. Virgins, conceptually, were something other.

For those Christians who sought to end the cycle of reproduction, however, virginity no longer represented a break with the natural order of things but instead an attempt to live on earth as it would be in heaven. In *De virginibus velandis*, we see the development of a rhetorical (and philosophical) strategy whereby the physical state of virginity was disconnected from an association with mental purity. Here, for Tertullian, virginity does not preclude sexual shame or status as a woman; “a virgin ceases [to be a virgin] from the time when she is able not to be [one].”¹⁸⁷ Consequentially, “womanhood” is no longer defined by one’s marital status, but by one’s sexual appeal to men, and veiling represents an acknowledgement of this appeal.

¹⁸⁶ On the latter anxiety, see Brown, 10.

¹⁸⁷ *Virg.* 11.2: “ex illo enim virgo desinit ex quo potest non esse”

This idea, however--that the apparel of women in general and veiling in particular should reflect their status in society--was not original to Christian thought or to Tertullian. I have explained the degree to which public display reflected on the character of an individual or group in Roman culture, and the degree to which this display could be accomplished via dress. Furthermore, some articles of clothing, especially the *stola*, the *palla* (used as a veil), and the *toga*, were especially culturally charged, to the extent that the adjectives *stolata* and *togata* served as metonyms for certain stereotypes of behavior. Tertullian's insistence that virgins be veiled is in accord not only with his reading of the scriptural tradition of Paul, but also in accord with the tropes of proper conduct disseminated in the ancient Mediterranean at large.

In constructing these arguments in *De virginibus velandis*, therefore, Tertullian was neither a blind follower of the dictates of his religion nor a rigid adherent to the standards of the society which surrounded it. We can see here a genuine philosophical attempt to reconcile the new world order of Christianity with greater Mediterranean beliefs about the nature of women. The question of Tertullian's misogyny is thus misplaced: we are unable to say whether or not he was a true misogynist in the modern sense of the world. His beliefs about women were informed both by the culture in which he lived and worked and the religion to which he converted. Culture and religion alike may have various misogynistic or pro-woman characteristics in common; I would suggest that the real interest lies in exploring the degree to which Tertullian accepted or challenged such principles and in so doing created his own philosophy. These influences should not be ignored or minimized without examining and explaining them.

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