

# VEXILLUM

the undergraduate journal of  
classical and medieval studies

Issue 5

2016

**Funding for *Vexillum* provided by  
The Medieval Studies Program at Yale University**

**Issue 5**

**Available online at <http://vexillumjournal.org/>**

# Defining Excellence: A Grid of Jerome's "Good" and "Bad" Virgin, Spouse, and Widow

MARIA S. E. JOHNSON  
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA

*By late antiquity, the status of women fell into three divisions: marriage, widowhood, or celibacy. In the eyes of intellectual early Christians, these states were not of equal merit. Specifically, Jerome viewed virginity as the most holy state, then widowhood, followed by marriage. However, his deprecation of marriage can appear so potent and his asceticism so extreme that modern scholars struggle to provide a balanced analysis of Jerome's works. The focus of scholars on these two aspects of Jerome's works restricts them from the wider spectrum of judgments Jerome has about the above three states. Analyzing his premier works on virginity — Letter 22, Against Jovinian, and Against Helvidius — I will show that Jerome offers readers not only a three-tier hierarchy, but also an elaborate "grid," identifying the "good" and "bad" virgin, spouse, and widow. Additionally, I will demonstrate the necessity for this detailed grid by arguing that its components were evident in Jerome's construction of Paula's chaste sanctity in his hagiography of her. The nuance and detail Jerome infuses into all of his works should be equally appreciated in his judgments on not only virginity, but also widowhood and marriage.*

---

## Introduction

Our physical world is full of easily understood opposites, such as light and dark and hot and cold. Even in the human world of thought, feeling, and emotion, the concept of opposites can help us make judgments and decisions. However, when the elements in question consist of the idea of lifelong virginity opposed to the idea of marriage, our judgments may be less easily obtained. Intellectual Christians of late antiquity such as Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, Jerome, Helvidius, and Jovinian debated the superiority or inferiority of lifelong virginity over marriage.<sup>1</sup> Another opposition lurks below the surface: the distinction not between perpetual virginity and marriage, but rather between the "good" virgin and the "bad" virgin, as well as the "good" spouse versus the "bad" spouse. Gregory of Nyssa, in his treatise *On Virginity*, uses

---

<sup>1</sup> For a general overview see Glenn Holland, "Celibacy in the Early Christian Church," in *Celibacy and Religious Traditions*, ed. Carl Olson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 67-83, and David G. Hunter, "Sexuality, Marriage and the Family," in *Cambridge History of Christianity Volume 2: Constantine to c. 600*, ed. Augustine Casiday and Frederick W. Norris (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 585-600.

this more nuanced opposition in order to construct an exhaustive hierarchy of holiness, with "good" virginity at the very top.<sup>2</sup> I find Jerome also has this wide spectrum of opinions in his own writings on virginity. By envisioning this as a grid, one can move away from a dichotomy towards something more sophisticated.<sup>3</sup> The grid, with its multiple headers, shows relationships and interactions between many different fields, which can clearly reveal the nuance of Jerome's opinions. How does Jerome use this grid? Why does he use it? What does this mean for Jerome's view of women? Exploring these questions, I will analyze Jerome's foremost works on virginity: *Letter 22, Against Jovinian*, and *Against Helvidius*.<sup>4</sup> I will show that, as he gives attention to not just virginity and chaste widowhood but also marriage, he presents the "good" and the "bad" model for each category through how one governs one's body and spirit. I will then show the application of this detailed grid by demonstrating its presence in Jerome's *Life of Paula*.

In late antiquity, the life paths of marriage, widowhood, or celibacy were part of one intertwined tapestry of society. Jerome strongly supported lifelong virginity and chaste widowhood, so his literature often does not reflect or speak positively of the diversity of practice in his own society. Jerome (c. 331 - 419), an Early Christian intellectual and ascetic, lived in Stridon, Rome, Antioch, Bethlehem, and, for a time, the Syrian Desert.<sup>5</sup> He wrote prolifically, concerning himself with biblical exegesis and translation within his commentaries and *Vulgate*. Additionally, he dealt with topics and questions on asceticism in his hagiographies, treatises, and correspondence.<sup>6</sup> His writings on virginity particularly captured the attention of his contemporaries and modern scholars alike. Most notably, Jerome held that a hierarchy was present within the Church, with voluntary virginity at the top, then chaste widowhood, and then marriage. Jerome

---

<sup>2</sup> Valerie A. Karras, "A Re-Evaluation of Marriage, Celibacy, and Irony in Gregory of Nyssa's *On Virginity*," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 13, no. 1 (2005), 112.

<sup>3</sup> See the Appendix for the grid mentioned here.

<sup>4</sup> Within the footnotes I will refer to *Against Helvidius* as "AH" and *Against Jovinian* as "AJ." Additionally, I will note any letters of Jerome as "Ep." and then that letter's number.

<sup>5</sup> For a bibliographic introduction of Jerome see Gunhild Vidén, "St. Jerome on Female Chastity: Subjugating the Elements of Desire," *Norwegian Journal of Greek and Latin Studies* 73, no. 1 (1998), 139.

<sup>6</sup> Some Christians separated themselves from the secular, non-Christian, world, practicing different degrees of extreme behavior — such as harsh fasting, especially long prayer or Bible reading vigils, disregard for bodily comfort, etc. — known as "asceticism" (from the Greek *askēsis*).

defended this view, as well as his program for an ascetic lifestyle, in two treatises: *Against Helvidius*, written in 383, and *Against Jovinian*, written in 393. He also maintained his views in his famous *Letter 22*, which has been informally titled “On Choosing the Life of Virginity.”<sup>7</sup> He wrote this letter to Eustochium, Paula the Elder’s daughter, in 384. Further, Jerome immortalized exemplars of chastity—those who adopted sexual abstinence either before or after marriage—in his hagiographies of Paul of Thebes, Hilarion, Malchus, Paula, and Marcella.<sup>8</sup> Jerome’s writings exerted enormous influence, especially *Against Jovinian*, and he is undoubtedly a crucial figure in the modern discourse on late-antique virginity.<sup>9</sup>

So much attention has been put on Jerome’s extreme asceticism that a one-dimensional view of Jerome’s hierarchy has formed. Clark describes the “anti-familial” strand in early Christian literature, and she shows how Jerome held a heightened zealotry in his views of asceticism compared with those even of Tertullian.<sup>10</sup> Steven Driver has charted the development of Jerome’s ascetical views in his epistles.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, scholars strongly stress Jerome’s aversion to first marriages.<sup>12</sup> Bernhard Jussen goes so far as to say Jerome believed that “marriage did not lead to salvation.”<sup>13</sup> Andrew Cain synthesizes current opinion with: “Jerome had heaped unqualified praise on virginity and seemed to condemn marriage as something intrinsically evil.”<sup>14</sup> Unquestionably, for Jerome marriage held a lower place compared to virginity; a strict

---

<sup>7</sup> Carolinne White, *Lives of Roman Christian Women* (New York: Penguin Books, 2010), 110.

<sup>8</sup> The *vitae* of Paula and Marcella were actually letters; therefore, they are quasi-hagiographies to be precise. For a bibliographic introduction of Jerome’s hagiographies, see Andrew Cain, “Jerome’s Epitaphium Paulae: Hagiography, Pilgrimage, and the Cult of Saint Paula,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 18, no. 1 (2010): 107.

<sup>9</sup> John Oppel, “Saint Jerome and the History of Sex,” *Viator* 24 (1993): 6.

<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth A. Clark, “Antifamilial Tendencies in Ancient Christianity,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5, no. 3 (1995); see also Elizabeth A. Clark, “Dissuading from Marriage: Jerome and the Asceticization of Satire,” in *Satire Advice on Women and Marriage: From Plautus to Chaucer*, ed. Warren S. Smith (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 154-81.

<sup>11</sup> Steven D. Driver, “The Development of Jerome’s Views of the Ascetic Life,” *Recherches de Théologie Ancienne et Médiévale* 62 (1995): 44-70.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, Twentieth-Anniversary Edition. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 377.

<sup>13</sup> Bernhard Jussen, “‘Virgins — Widows — Spouses’ On the Language of Moral Distinction as Applied to Women and Men in the Middle Ages,” *History of the Family* 7 (2002): 18.

<sup>14</sup> Cain, “Jerome’s Epitaphium Paulae,” 137 and 102.

hierarchy exists in his writings.<sup>15</sup> However, by honing in on Jerome's desire to demote marriage to such an extent, scholars restrict and oversimplify his sayings on marriage within his works on virginity. What is missing is what Valerie Karras has so successfully done for Gregory of Nyssa's *On Virginity*. She labored to present Gregory as a nuanced judge: "one must recognize that neither marriage nor virginity is monolithic for the Cappadocian father; *On Virginity* describes two types of both marriage and virginity, one 'bad' and one 'good' for each." I argue in this paper that Jerome's opinions have a nuance and subtlety akin to that which Karras has shown for Gregory of Nyssa's work. If we filter Jerome's premier works on virginity—*Letter 22, Against Jovinian*, and *Against Helvidius*—through the same flexible lens, we may find that he too offers this spectrum of good or bad possibilities for not just virgins, but also spouses and widows.<sup>16</sup> This results in a more elaborate hierarchy—a grid. This in turn helps him to construct his superior female saint to meet the required good and best features of his "grid." Although the end result of Jerome's works may be a polemic on the superiority of virginity, he offers us a healthy amount of commentary on all three life paths: virginity, marriage, and widowhood.

### The Grid

To begin, Jerome's definitions and conceptions of virginity, marriage, and widowhood are detailed and elaborate. Further, he breaks down each category into two separate subdivisions of "body" and "spirit."<sup>17</sup> Hereafter, I define this dichotomy as follows: "body" is what is physical, and "spirit" is thoughts,

---

<sup>15</sup> *Ep.* 22.2, 15; *AJ* 1.12, 13, and 15; and *Ep.* 123.11. For a full discussion of this basic hierarchy and its significance see Jussen, "'Virgins — Widows — Spouses.'"

<sup>16</sup> Jerome wrote these works intending for them to be copied and widely read. He even made references in future letters back to these works; see Cain, *The Letters of Jerome*, 101, e.g. *Ep.* 130.19. Jerome eagerly advertised his beliefs and mode of asceticism. J. N. D. Kelly marks this loud advertisement through these works as part of Jerome's "ascetical campaign," in *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 101. Andrew Cain suggests these works, when alluded to in other letters, convey a "Hieronymized model of piety" for others to follow, in *The Letters of Jerome: Asceticism, Biblical Exegesis, and the Construction of Christian Authority in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 74.

<sup>17</sup> For an example of Jerome's attention to this subdivision see *AJ* 1.13: *ut sit sancta et corpore et spiritu* (PL 23.0231A).

the spirit or soul, and even attitude.<sup>18</sup> Jerome's definitions of virginity, marriage, and widowhood serve as the foundation for the "grid" itself.

Lifelong virginity is a voluntary practice which eliminates the physical relationship between a man and woman in order to focus more attention on a spiritual relationship with Christ. Many men and women chose never to marry in order to devote themselves more fully to this lifestyle.<sup>19</sup> It is voluntary, because if the Lord had commanded it, then it would seem to condemn the practice of marriage.<sup>20</sup> Jerome believed that the voluntary nature makes the practice itself sweeter:

"The reward is greater when virginity is not compulsory but voluntary. If virginity had been obligatory, it would appear to detract from marriage."<sup>21</sup>

A negative view of sexuality also plays a role in this embrace of virginity. Jerome states in *Against Jovinian* that sexual relations themselves were not present before the Fall:

"As regards Adam and Eve we must maintain that before the fall they were virgins in Paradise: but after they sinned, and were cast out of Paradise, they were immediately married."<sup>22</sup>

Jerome's notion that Adam and Eve were virgins before the Fall is crucial, as Elizabeth Clark, Joyce Salisbury, and David Hunter have noted.<sup>23</sup> Through it, virginity becomes superior because it is a

---

<sup>18</sup> Joyce E. Salisbury, "The Latin Doctors of the Church on Sexuality," *Journal of Medieval History* 12 (1986): 279. Salisbury's definition, although similar to mine, is more concerned with the separation of the mundane, the body, from what is closest to heaven, the spirit. My concerns are somewhat broader. Patricia Cox Miller picks up on the distinction between the body and the "inner self," in "The Blazing Body: Ascetic Desire in Jerome's Letter to Eustochium," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 25, 36. However, she then pushes it to say Jerome lets go of the physical "body" for a "literary" ideal by means of Biblical metaphor, something which I am not trying to do here.

<sup>19</sup> The increasing popularity of this way of life in the fourth century even led to legal changes, such as Constantine revoking any penalties for women who remained celibate; see Hunter, "Sexuality, Marriage and the Family," 586.

<sup>20</sup> See Gillian Clark, *Women in Late Antiquity: Pagan and Christian Life-Styles* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 75.

<sup>21</sup> *quia maioris est mercis, quod non cogitur et offertur, quia, si fuisset uirginitas imperata, nuptiae uidebantur ablatae* (CSEL 54:171), Ep. 22.20; cf. AJ 1.12.

<sup>22</sup> *ac de Adam quidem et Eva illud dicendum, quod ante offensam in paradiso virgines fuerint: post peccatum autem, et extra paradysum protinus nuptiae* (PL 23.0235A), AJ 1.16.

<sup>23</sup> Elizabeth A. Clark, "Ideology, History, and the Construction of 'Woman' in Late Ancient Christianity," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 2, no. 2 (1994), 174; Salisbury, "The Latin Doctors," *Journal of Medieval History* 12 (1986),

prelapsarian state. Socially, the popularity of virginity for females stemmed from the personal autonomy it created.<sup>24</sup> However, it must be kept in mind that practicing virgins in late antiquity were in a distinct minority.<sup>25</sup>

From an exterior, bodily perspective, virginity is abstinence from sexual relations, specifically the overcoming of the sexual impulse which leads to sexual relations and marriage. Patricia Cox Miller articulates this as the "closed body" virgin, meaning that her body is both closed to an earthly spouse but also to the norms of the world.<sup>26</sup>

The interior perspective, the spirit, pertains to how the virgin uses her time and what her heart and mind pursue. Jerome emphasizes that since the virgin does not take the time to make an earthly husband happy, she therefore has "free time," which should all be spent with Christ.<sup>27</sup> In simple terms, one could say the virgin trades one husband for another, as Jerome emphatically believes that the virgin becomes the bride of Christ.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, he colors her time spent with Christ not just as pious but marital. He remarks that the "bridegroom" becomes "angry" if the virgin distracts herself with "worldly business."<sup>29</sup> The virgin's every thought is for her bridegroom: "Of what, then, does she that is unmarried and a virgin think? 'The things of the Lord that she may be holy both in body and in spirit.'"<sup>30</sup> In return for

---

281; and Hunter, "Helvidius, Jovinian, and the Virginity of Mary in Late Fourth-Century Rome," 68. See also John Moorhead, "Adam and Eve and the Discovery of Sex," *Parergon* 1 (1983), 1-12.

<sup>24</sup> Kate Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 73.

<sup>25</sup> Averil Cameron, "Virginity as Metaphor: Women and the Rhetoric of Early Christianity," in *History as Text: The Writing of Ancient History*, ed. id. (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 195, and Cain, *The Letters of Jerome*, 135.

<sup>26</sup> Miller, "The Blazing Body," 25.

<sup>27</sup> *Ep.* 22.21, cf. *Ep.* 123.5. This is taken from 1 Corinthians 7:34.

<sup>28</sup> E. Clark argues that Christ as the bridegroom "symbolically replaced the fiancé or husband that the female ascetic renounces here on earth," in "Antifamilial," 367.

<sup>29</sup> *saecularium negotiorum...sponsus...iratus* (CSEL 54:177), *Ep.* 22.24.

<sup>30</sup> *Quid ergo cogitat innupta et virgo? Quae Domini sunt, ut sit sancta et corpore et spiritu* (PL 23.0231A), *AJ* 1.13; Jerome directly quotes 1 Corinthians 7:34.



both a pious body and a pious mind, Jerome emphasizes the reward the virgin will receive.<sup>31</sup> For him virgins are the top of the hierarchy due to their extreme self-discipline and intimacy with Christ himself.

Virginity holds a central place in Jerome's discourses. Still, Jerome takes pains to stress he does not disparage marriage.<sup>32</sup> Jerome says simply that it is not a sin if a man marries, and that an honorable marriage has a certain status to it.<sup>33</sup> He adds that marriage has a place within the Church:

"The Church does not condemn marriage, but makes it subordinate; nor does she reject it, but regulates it."<sup>34</sup>

Marriage was under the umbrella of the Church; in this quotation Jerome defends it against critics who might truly disparage it.<sup>35</sup> Jerome, presumably in agreement with the Church, firmly places married individuals subordinate to virgins, yet he believes this is a respectable position that one should take pride in.<sup>36</sup> His hierarchy derives from his personal value system, but also from the reality that not everyone can be virgins: "Be not afraid that all will become virgins; virginity is a hard matter, and therefore rare, because it is hard: many are called, few chosen."<sup>37</sup> Marriage has its place; therefore, he defines it as carefully as he did virginity.

In fact, marriage was central to life in antiquity because, through it, children came about who would then carry on humanity itself and any accumulated wealth and property.<sup>38</sup> Predominantly, women

---

<sup>31</sup> *AJ* 1.37, 40.

<sup>32</sup> Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride*, 97.

<sup>33</sup> *AJ* 1.13; *habent enim et maritatae ordinem suum, honorabiles nuptias et cubile immaculatum* (CSEL 54:145-6), *Ep.* 22.2.

<sup>34</sup> *Ecclesia enim matrimonia non damnat, sed subjicit: nec abjicit, sed dispensat* (PL 23.0270A), *AJ* 1.40.

<sup>35</sup> Such as the Manichaeans. Jerome must defend himself against adhering to this heresy. See Kelly, *Jerome*, 184 and Cain, *The Letters of Jerome*, 33, 137-8 and Jussen, "'Virgins — Widows — Spouses,'" 18.

<sup>36</sup> *glorientur et nuptae, cum a uirginibus sunt secundae* (CSEL 54:168), *Ep.* 22.19.

<sup>37</sup> *Noli metuere ne omnes virgines fiant; difficilis res est virginitas, et ideo rara, quia difficilis: Multi vocati, pauci electi* (PL 23.0259C-D), *AJ* 1.36.

<sup>38</sup> Gillian Clark, "Do Try This at Home: The Domestic Philosopher in Late Antiquity," in *From Rome to Constantinople: Studies in Honor of Averil Cameron*, ed. H. Amirav and Bas Ter Haar Romeny (Leuven: Peeters, 2007), 153, and G. Clark, *Women in Late Antiquity*, 76.

of late antiquity had only one option: to marry.<sup>39</sup> Christianity welcomed marriage and benefited from the new worshippers and clergy members it produced.<sup>40</sup> Elizabeth Clark argues that the biblical Epistles present "respectable" models of marriage for pagan onlookers.<sup>41</sup> Subsequently, even with the rise in popularity of celibacy, figures like Augustine and Jovinian still held that marriage was very important. Augustine states that marriage is beneficial for "offspring, fidelity, and a 'sacramental bond.'"<sup>42</sup> Jovinian polemicizes that marriage is equal to virginity.<sup>43</sup>

The exterior perspective of marriage, for Jerome, consists of endless duties—the body doing something constantly for the spouse. In Jerome's opinion, at its heart marriage is sexual relations. Fornication led to the formation of marriage in the first place; now the man has to keep his own wife and render to her alone sexual relations as a "duty."<sup>44</sup> When a married woman was not fulfilling her duty to her husband, she was fulfilling household duties. Jerome depicts these duties as laborious, draining, and miserable. On three occasions he gives a detailed, demeaning description of the wife's daily life.<sup>45</sup> Jerome frequently observes that these married couples have no time left for God: their bodies keep their mind and heart away from Christ.<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> G. Clark, *Women in Late Antiquity*, 13.

<sup>40</sup> Brown, *The Body and Society*, 90.

<sup>41</sup> E. Clark, "Antifamilial," 371.

<sup>42</sup> E. Clark, "Antifamilial," 375. See also G. Clark, "Do Try This at Home," for an explanation of Augustine's idea of a philosophical marriage.

<sup>43</sup> E. Clark, "Antifamilial," 375; Hunter, "Helvidius, Jovinian, and the Virginity of Mary in Late Fourth-Century Rome," 51; see also Geoffrey S. Nathan, *The Family in Late Antiquity: The Rise of Christianity and The Endurance of Tradition* (New York: Routledge, 2002), for more beliefs and practices of marriage in late antiquity.

<sup>44</sup> For example, see *AJ* 1.34: *officio conjugali* (PL 23.0257B), see also *AJ* 1.7 and 13. In defense of this, Jerome cites 1 Corinthians 7:2: *propter fornicationes autem unusquisque suam uxorem habeat et unaquaeque suum virum habeat* (Gryson et al., *Vulgate*, 1775).

<sup>45</sup> *Ep.* 22.2, *AH*.20, *AJ* 1.47. Kelly notes that Jerome, when he pulled these descriptions from classical authors, knew they were exaggerated, in *Jerome*, 184. Notwithstanding, their significance lies in their impact on the reader.

<sup>46</sup> *Ep.* 22.21 and *AJ* 1.7.

The interior view of a marriage is togetherness, oneness: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.”<sup>47</sup> Equally, marriage is God’s divine pairing: God commanded that man and woman should be joined this way. Jerome feels compelled to respect God’s spiritual union in married couples. He gives full credence to the supremacy of marriage in the Old Testament, and he emphasizes its honorability and secondary glory in the New Testament.<sup>48</sup> Jerome notes that the Apostle Paul cannot go against what God has joined.<sup>49</sup> So, too, does Jerome imply his own inability:

“If virginity had been a command, it would appear to detract from marriage. It would have been extremely hard to force them against nature and to obtain by force that men lead the life of the angels; this would somehow have been to condemn something given as an established thing.”<sup>50</sup>

Marriage is “natural” since it is “established” by God. Jerome praises marriage as natural because it is God’s spiritual union. At the same time, he acknowledges the bodily disadvantage of marriage separating individuals from Christ.

Widowhood, a natural extension of marriage, was important to Jerome because it was an opportunity for individuals to convert to the life of sexual abstinence—chastity.<sup>51</sup> The Church itself was very concerned with widows; the Apostle Paul, in his epistle to Timothy, lays out in detail the care widows should be given.<sup>52</sup> Although Jerome may want an increase in the number of chaste Christians, he submits to the reality that some widows may get remarried. Certain widows were so young that the “fires of passions,” or lust, were still a concern. In that case, they could get remarried, becoming a spouse again.

---

<sup>47</sup> *quam ob rem relinquet homo patrem suum et matrem et adhaerebit uxori suae et erunt duo in carne una* (Gryson et al., *Vulgate*, 7), Genesis 2:24; Jerome cites this verse in *AJ* 1.5. For citations of the English translation used in this paper see “primary sources” in the bibliography.

<sup>48</sup> *AH* 1.22.

<sup>49</sup> *AJ* 1.12.

<sup>50</sup> *si fuisset uirginitas imperata, nuptiae uidabantur ablatae et durissimum erat contra naturam cogere angelorumque uitam ab hominibus extorquere et id quodam modo damnare, quod conditum est* (CSEL 54:171), *Ep.* 22.20; see also *AJ* 1.8.

<sup>51</sup> Though widowhood includes both widows and widowers, Jerome is most interested in widows.

<sup>52</sup> 1 Timothy 5:3-16.

Still, any widow could overcome lust and become chaste.<sup>53</sup> Nevertheless, the widow was inferior to the virgin, due to her corruption in experiencing sexual relations.<sup>54</sup>

Understanding the foundational definitions contributing to Jerome's view of virginity, marriage, and widowhood enables us to begin to see the depth of his thinking in these areas. I intend to interpret his comments on these practices by organizing them according to what made a "good" or a "bad" virgin, spouse, or widow. In forming my grid, I realize that Jerome did not construct this grid as the aim of his works, but instead had different goals, such as defending the maintenance of virginity.<sup>55</sup> I present this grid to enlighten Jerome's ideas, *not* restrict them; it is for the purpose of understanding the distinctions present in his writing on the subject.

### Virginity

The joining of a good body and good soul make the virgin great—"a virgin is defined as she that is *holy in body and in spirit*"—but when the body or the soul is "bad," the virgin is terrible.<sup>56</sup> Jerome despises "bad" virgins: "It would have been better for her to marry and to have walked in level places than to try to reach the heights and then to fall into the depths of hell."<sup>57</sup> Being a "bad" virgin hinged on the virgin's management of her body and soul. Jerome does not leave the virgin without instruction; as I will demonstrate, he clearly shows what is bad and what is good for a virgin.

A virgin who experiences sexual relations was considered "bad" in bodily terms. Jerome tries to warn and help Eustochium against the threat of losing her virginity. He says that the Devil has power

<sup>53</sup> AJ 1.14; Jerome cites I Timothy 5:14 in support.

<sup>54</sup> AJ 1.37, 40.

<sup>55</sup> Ideas of author intentions versus the power of the reader's view can be found in the "Author/ity" chapter of Jeffrey Nealon and Susan Searls Giroux, *The Theory Toolbox: Critical Concepts for the Humanities, Arts, & Social Sciences* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011); for an Early Christian discussion of authorship see Miller, "The Blazing Body," 23.

<sup>56</sup> *Virginis definitio, sanctam esse corpore et spiritu* (PL 23.0203D-0204A), AH.22 (English italics added). Jerome further parallels body and soul in Ep 22.38.

<sup>57</sup> *rectius fuerat homini subisse coniugium, ambulasse per plana, quam ad altiora tendentem in profundum inferi cadere* (CSEL 54:151), Ep. 22.6; cf. AJ 1.4 and Ep. 54.7.

against her through lust and the Devil wants virgins to fall.<sup>58</sup> The virgin needs to dash her lusty thoughts against the metaphorical rock of Christ.<sup>59</sup> Eustochium certainly heeded Jerome's warning, but others did not, and Jerome mentions them with the full weight of condemnation.

These "wives without being married" or "whores" tried to hide their sin.<sup>60</sup> They dressed like nuns but were "betrayed by their swollen belly."<sup>61</sup> Further, some pregnant "nuns" used drugs to abort their babies in order to hide their fornication. This easily could have resulted in their own deaths, thus committing an even worse sin in the process: "guilt of three crimes, namely their own suicide, adultery against Christ, and murder of their unborn child."<sup>62</sup> Jerome shares these remarks to Eustochium in order to warn her against keeping company with these women and to protect herself against becoming like them.<sup>63</sup> This warning equally serves as an example, though, allowing Jerome to showcase what a "bad" virgin really is.

How virgins ornamented themselves was a major concern for Jerome; it was an exterior indicator of holiness. Those virgins concerned with their luxurious attire were also concerned with going out, socializing, and, in Jerome's mind, seeking the attention of men.<sup>64</sup> The nicely dressed virgin, with her draped shawl and even her shiny shoes, held the attention of the lustful male gaze.<sup>65</sup> These improperly dressed virgins would see in the eyes of lustful men what the virgins themselves renounced.<sup>66</sup> Consequently, they were bad because they made themselves vulnerable to losing their virginity if they

---

<sup>58</sup> *Ep.* 22.11, 13.

<sup>59</sup> *Ep.* 22.6.

<sup>60</sup> *unde sine nuptiis aliud nomen uxorum?* (CSEL 54:161-2), *Ep.* 22.14; *facies meretricis facta est tibi* (CSEL 54:162), *Ep.* 22.13.

<sup>61</sup> *nisi tumor uteri et infantum prodiderit uagitus* (CSEL 54:161), *Ep.* 22.13.

<sup>62</sup> *trium criminum reae ad inferos perducuntur, homicidae sui, Christi adulterae, necdum nati filii parricidae* (CSEL 54:161), *Ep.* 22.14. See also G. Clark, *Women in Late Antiquity*, 46 and 86.

<sup>63</sup> Kelly, 101.

<sup>64</sup> Vidén, 146 and *Ep.* 22.13.

<sup>65</sup> See for example *Ep.* 54.7: *quid facit in facie Christianae purpurissus et cerussa? quorum alterum ruborem genarum labiorumque mentitur, alterum candorem oris et colli: ignes iuuenum, fomenta libidinum, inpudicae mentis indicia* (CSEL 54:473); cf. *Ep.* 117.7, where Jerome describes how each part of a virgin's luxurious appearance can inflame a man.

<sup>66</sup> *Ep.* 22.16.

yielded to the males' gaze. To Jerome, this potential situation was rooted in the wardrobe and makeup choices of the virgin. Miller notes Jerome's judgment of women extends to all parts of the woman's body: what they wear, eat, and drink; how they pronounce words; and even the color of their skin.<sup>67</sup> The interior of the "bad" virgin was simply a virgin uninterested in Christ:

"These are bad virgins, who are virgins in the flesh but not in the spirit, the foolish virgins who have no oil in their lamps and are shut out by the bridegroom."<sup>68</sup>

"No oil in their lamps" refers to the parable in Matthew 25:1-10 where five foolish virgins do not take oil for their lamps, whereas five righteous virgins do and are thus able to enjoy time with the bridegroom when he is ready. Virginité enables the virgin to be released from "duties" to an earthly spouse, but in return Jerome expects the virgin to seek out Christ, her bridegroom. "Bad" virgins neglect their spiritual duty not only to Christ as the bridegroom, but also to Christ as their Lord. The virgin may try to hide her bodily sins, but her spiritual neglect was direr to Jerome.

"Bad" virgins stood as warnings to "good" virgins. To be a virgin was not easy, but meeting the requirements outlined above made the virgin "good." Overcoming lust, important to virginité itself, came down to the virgin's ability to control her body.

First, the virgin needed to practice diligent fasting in order to distract herself from thoughts of lust.<sup>69</sup> Jerome strictly instructs Eustochium:

"It does not do you any good to go around with an empty stomach for two or three days, if you load it to a similar degree, if you make up for the fasting through satiety. The filled mind gets numb and the soil that is irrigated brings forth the seeds of lust."<sup>70</sup>

---

<sup>67</sup> Miller, 24 and G. Clark, *Women in Late Antiquity*, 110; see also Vidén, who discuss Jerome's view about appearance in light of Tertullian, in "St. Jerome on Female Chastity," 144-7 and 152.

<sup>68</sup> *istae sunt uirgines malae, uirgines carne, non spiritu, uirgines stultae, quae oleum non habentes excluduntur ab sponso* (CSEL 54:150), *Ep.* 22.5.

<sup>69</sup> See G. Clark, *Women in Late Antiquity*, 78, and Brown, *Body and Society*, 376.

<sup>70</sup> *nihil prodest biduo triduoque transmissio uacuum portare uentrem, si pariter obruitur, si compensatur saturitate ieiunium. ilico mens repleta torpescit et inrigata humus spinas libidinum germinat* (CSEL 54: 165), *Ep.* 22.17; English from Vidén, 151.

Gunhild Vidén suggests that this quotation implies that lust is within the body always. Furthermore, through fasting, the virgin is able to overpower the body's inclinations toward lust, to rid the body of lust's control.<sup>71</sup> Such an interpretation is insightful, but I would say that "weakness" additionally plays a critical role here. The virgin weakens herself through eating, the "mind gets numb," and that vulnerability allows the "seeds of lust" to spring up. The harsh diet was, to Jerome, a way for the virgin to keep some control over her body to prevent the "seeds of lust," hence keeping her holy.<sup>72</sup>

Second, the virgin's simple sackcloth attire guards against succumbing to lust. In the same way the "bad" virgin is weakened by dressing luxuriously, the simply dressed virgin is freed, uninterested in the gaze of lustful men.<sup>73</sup> Jerome makes a special point to mention that the virgin Demetrias wore rough clothing.<sup>74</sup> In her simplicity, Jerome believed she was better able to focus on Christ, caring not about the world and its fashions.

The bodily concerns were really secondary to those of the spirit for the virgin. Everything leads and connects to the virgin's spiritual relationship with her bridegroom, Christ. The Bible instructs Christians to take up the cross of Christ and, as a result, be ready to hate their father and mother.<sup>75</sup> Jerome intensifies this call:

"But it is not enough for you to leave your country: you must also forget your people and the home of your father; scorning the flesh, you must be embraced by the Bridegroom."<sup>76</sup>

---

<sup>71</sup> Vidén, 151; see also *Ep.* 130.10.

<sup>72</sup> Driver notes fasting evolved into a practice necessary for preserving chastity, though this was not Jerome's original belief, in "The Development of Jerome's Views of the Ascetical Life," 55.

<sup>73</sup> *AJ* 2.11.

<sup>74</sup> *Ep.* 130.5. He makes similar remarks about the virgin Asella and the widows Leah, Marcella, and Blesilla, see *Ep.* 23.2, 24.4, 38.4, and 127.3.

<sup>75</sup> Luke 14:26 and Matthew 16:24.

<sup>76</sup> *uerum non sufficit tibi exire de patria, nisi obliuiscaris populi et domum patris tui et carne contempta sponsi iungaris amplexibus* (CSEL 54:144), *Ep.* 22.1.

The virgin closed herself off from earthly ties, but in return had to be open to Christ in a way a female married Christian could not.<sup>77</sup> Jerome was deeply enthralled with this idea; he used erotic language to emphasize how intimate this relationship was:

"Then your Bridegroom himself will come to meet you and say, 'Rise, come, my love, my fair one, my dove, for look, the winter has past, the rain is over and gone.'"<sup>78</sup>

Scholars have critically analyzed this relationship and its origins.<sup>79</sup> However, I am concerned here with how it makes the virgin "good." Although the virgin may have a marital relationship with Christ as the bridegroom, the virgin seeking Christ in the first place benefited her spirit: the "good" virgin was the "good" Christian. The more the virgin sought Heaven, such as through incessant praying or reading of the Bible, the better she was, because she was ever closer to the desired result of her harsh lifestyle: to truly know and love Christ.<sup>80</sup> The spiritual heights of Heaven and true renunciation of the mundane was the desired result of lifelong virginity. Specifically, through the virgin seeking Christ, she grew spiritually so that she might accomplish a resultant spiritual union with Christ as her bridegroom.

### *Marriage*

Jerome's instructions are largely aimed at virgins, but he comments on marriage as well. He does this for two reasons: firstly, he gives honor to marriage; and secondly, he wants the virgins who encounter married women to know the "good" from the "bad."

---

<sup>77</sup> *Ep.* 22.26.

<sup>78</sup> *tunc et ipse sponsus occurret et dicet: surge, ueni, proxima mea, speciosa mea, columba mea, quia ecce hiemps transiit. pluuiam abiit sibi* (CSEL 54:209), *Ep.* 22.41, citing Song of Songs 2:10-11.

<sup>79</sup> See Cameron, "Virginity as Metaphor," 200 and Miller, 26-9; for Jerome specifically see Kelly, 102; Hunter, "Helvidius, Jovinian, and the Virginity of Mary in Late Fourth-Century Rome," 52-6; Cooper, *The Virgin and The Bride*, 79-80; Driver, 54-5; and Averil Cameron, "Early Christianity and the Discourse of Female Desire," in *Women in Ancient Societies: An Illusion of the Night*, ed. Léonie J Archer et al. (New York: Routledge, 1994.), 157-8 and 164.

<sup>80</sup> Jerome repeatedly praised his virgin's or widow's long prayer or scripture reading vigils: *Ep.* 23.2, 24.4, 108.15 and 27, 127.7, 130.7.



Jerome's externally "bad" married woman is similar to the attention-seeking virgin—that is, women who intend to marry purposefully to draw attention to themselves. After they marry, he still has great objections to women concerned with their appearance:

"The married woman has the paint laid on before her mirror, and, to the insult of her Maker, strives to acquire something more than her natural beauty. Then comes the prattling of infants."<sup>81</sup>

A woman who makes her body attractive to a man incites passions within that man which, carried out, lead to children. Certain clothing choices, which inevitably provoke the bubbling of passions, greatly upset Jerome. Even within marriage, passions led a woman to focus on the mundane, distracting her from the heavenly Christ.

Jerome also condemns spouses who commit adultery as "bad":

"Every day the blood of adulterers is shed, adulterers are condemned, and lust is raging and rampant in the very presence of the laws and the symbols of authority and the courts of justice."<sup>82</sup>

Married spouses overwhelmed with lust may sin in adultery, as numerous have.<sup>83</sup> Such "bad" spouses Jerome reduces to derogatory "beasts of burden," committing adultery on a very bodily, animal level.<sup>84</sup>

From a spiritual standpoint, a woman who marries a non-Christian is very "bad." The company a Christian keeps is vital, since a pagan might lead the Christian's spirit away from Christ. Jerome emphasizes this:

"Yet at the present day many women despising the Apostle's command, are joined to heathen husbands, and prostitute the temples of Christ to idols."<sup>85</sup>

---

<sup>81</sup> *Haec ad speculum pingitur, et in contumeliam artificis conatur pulchrior esse quam nata est. Inde infantes garriunt* (PL 23.0204A), AH.22.

<sup>82</sup> *Quotidie moechorum sanguis effunditur, adulteria damnantur, et inter ipsas leges et secures ac tribunalia flagrans libido dominatur* (PL 23.0259C), AJ 1.36.

<sup>83</sup> Jerome discusses what an adulterer was in AJ 1.14, where he cites Romans 7:2-3.

<sup>84</sup> *jumenta* (PL 23.0267A), AJ 1.39.

<sup>85</sup> *At nunc pleraeque contemnentes Apostoli jussionem, junguntur gentilibus, et templa Christi idolis prostituunt* (PL 23.0223C), AJ 1.10.

"The Apostle's command" refers to 2 Corinthians 6:14: "Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers."<sup>86</sup>

For Jerome, the spirit of the married woman, "the temple of Christ," was put at risk by the heathen husband. Each of these "bad" types of spouses as to be avoided and learned from.

Jerome's "good" spouse is not one exemplary ideal; rather, he offers suggestions and even detailed allowances to articulate what one might be. In highly idealized terms, Jerome wants the married couple to be chaste. He clearly states that married women should "imitate virgin chastity."<sup>87</sup> Jerome says that within the marriage itself,

"[h]usbands and wives are to dwell together according to knowledge, so that they may know what God wishes and desires, and give honor to the weak vessel, woman. If we abstain from intercourse, we give honor to our wives: if we do not abstain, it is clear that insult is the opposite of honor."<sup>88</sup>

John Oppel gives Jerome's yearning for "love" as expressed through "knowledge" as the reason for this zealous hope for untainted marriage. This is derived from Adam and Eve's original relationship as one of purity and thought.<sup>89</sup> In other words, Jerome urges that the married couple pursue spiritual knowledge and spend time with God, a lifestyle which cannot include sexual relations. Later on, he writes that a "layman, or any believer, cannot pray unless he abstain from sexual intercourse."<sup>90</sup> Vidén argues that the absence of physical relations allows the individual's spirituality to flourish by the couple separating

---

<sup>86</sup> *nolite iugum ducere cum infidelibus quae* (Gryson et al., *Vulgate*, 1794), 2 Corinthians 6:14.

<sup>87</sup> *Non negamus viduas, non negamus maritatas [Al. maritas], sanctas mulieres inveniri; sed quae uxores esse desierint, quae in ipsa necessitate conjugii virginum imitentur castitatem* (PL 23.0204C), AH.23.

<sup>88</sup> *Cohabitanes juxta scientiam, ut noverint quid velit, quid desideret Deus, ut tribuant honorem vasculo muliebri. Si abstinemus nos a coitu, honorem tribuimus uxoribus: si non abstinemus, perspicuum est honori contrariam esse contumeliam* (PL 23.0220B-C), AJ 1.7.

<sup>89</sup> Oppel, 11 and 17-8.

<sup>90</sup> *Si laicus et quicumque fidelis orare non potest, nisi careat officio conjugali* (PL 23.0257B), AJ 1.34. Jerome notes that this practice is derived from Old Testament purification laws, e.g. Leviticus 15.

themselves from the mundane.<sup>91</sup> This physical abstinence leads to spiritual growth and intimacy with God for the married spouse.

This chaste marriage is crucial and preferred, but, contrary to the opinion of Oppel, Jerome does make allowances for sexually active couples.<sup>92</sup> Vidén agrees with the latter interpretation by showing that Jerome defends married women whom he felt were pious.<sup>93</sup> Jerome exalts marriage, but with his own unique conditional:

“I praise marriage, I praise wedlock, but because they are presently producing virgins. I gather roses from a thorn bush, I find gold in the earth and pearls in shells.”<sup>94</sup>

One can sense some degree of reluctance here in his choice of “thorns,” “earth,” and “shells,” because married couples producing children compromise Jerome’s hope for chaste marriage. Jerome focuses on the “fruits” of the marriage. He concedes that the mother might raise her child to become a virgin. The married parent's role is illuminated by their necessity. They would need to be pious, devoted to Christ, and supportive of the virginal life. Therefore, for this allowance to succeed, the married parent would need to be a “good” spouse. Thus, Jerome permits a markedly different “good” spouse from his ideal chaste one.

The spiritual health of the spouse is critical; hence, Jerome asserts that both spouses should be Christians so the marriage can be “in Christ.”<sup>95</sup> Compared to the “bad” spouse married to a “heathen,” this “good” spouse would be able to pursue Christ. What made a “good” spouse is complex but it is strongly rooted in the unrestricted ability to pursue Christ.

---

<sup>91</sup> See also E. Clark, “Dissuading from Marriage,” 162.

<sup>92</sup> Vidén, 142; Oppel over-emphasizes Jerome's “sexless marriage,” in “Saint Jerome and the History of Sex,” 17.

<sup>93</sup> Vidén, 147.

<sup>94</sup> *Laudo nuptias, laudo coniugium, sed quia mihi uirgines generant: lego de spinis rosas, de terra aurum, de conca margaritum* (CSEL 54:170), *Ep.* 22.20, cf. *Ep.* 22.19, *AJ* 1.3, *AH*.21, and *Ep.* 130.8.

<sup>95</sup> *AJ* 1.10.

### Widowhood

The widow, a once-married but now single individual, appropriately concludes this grid. Jerome situates his discussion on the widow at the moment before she decides whether to marry again. To say the "bad" widow remarries may be an overstatement. Jerome understands that young widows remarry. After admitting that God does allow second marriage, Jerome encourages the widow to be concerned with "not what God permits, but what He wishes," namely chastity.<sup>96</sup> Permitted or not, Jerome has little nice to say of widows seeking remarriage. He phrases his complaints similarly to those he directs at the attention-seeking virgin or wife:

"Their lips so red that you would think they were looking for a husband rather than they had lost one."<sup>97</sup>

Here again the body is the focus.<sup>98</sup> The widow, wrongly, hunts the attention of earthly men. In the event this attention leads to remarriage, then Jerome becomes even harsher. In *Letter 123*, he says that a woman who remarries would be like the "unclean" animals of Noah's Ark. They are the weeds among the thorns.<sup>99</sup> Jerome takes issue with the widow giving into lust and thereby corrupting her body through sexual intercourse *again*. These "bad" widows are nothing more than lustful aspiring wives, as Jerome

---

<sup>96</sup> *Sed nos qui corpora nostra exhibere debemus, hostiam vivam, sanctam, placentem Deo, rationabile obsequium nostrum, non quid concedat Deus, sed quid velit, consideremus.* (PL 23.0263A), AJ 1.37. Jerome directly states that marrying once was better than bigamy and trigamy, AJ 1.10.

<sup>97</sup> *et rubentibus buccis cutis farsa distenditur, ut eas putes maritos non amisisse, sed quaerere* (CSEL 54:164), *Ep.* 22.16; cf. *Ep.* 123.3.

<sup>98</sup> Compare Jerome's lengthy visual description of the ornamentation of pagan widows: "faces painted with purple and wax, splendid silk dresses, sparkling jewels glittering gold" from Vidén, 148-9.

<sup>99</sup> *Ep.* 123.9, cited by E. Clark, "Dissuading from Marriage," 177. In *Letter 54* (chapter 4) he even relates remarriage to a dog returning to his vomit, referring to II Peter 2:22. Additionally, in *Against Jovinian* (1.15), Jerome notes that the "first Adam" was married once and Jesus (the "second Adam") was married not at all, and there was not a "third Adam" to represent men remarried. For a broader discussion on Late Antique distain for second marriage see Hunter, "Sexuality, Marriage and the Family," 588.

warns Eustochium: “I want you also to avoid anyone whom necessity has made a widow...their former ambition remains unchanged: it is only their clothes they have changed.”<sup>100</sup>

Widows that do choose to live abstinent and chaste lives could be “bad” if they were falsely chaste. Jerome warns Eustochium of these widows:

“These women, meanwhile, seeing that the priests need their support, become inflated with pride and, knowing what it is like to be under a husband’s authority, they prefer the freedom of widowhood. People call them chaste nuns but after a dubious dinner they fall asleep and dream of the apostles.”<sup>101</sup>

Jerome directly condemns the ill intent on the part of the widows. These quasi-nuns betray themselves by not fasting—“after a dubious dinner.” They become weakened and the “seeds of lust” mentioned above come through in “dreams of the apostles.” Such “bad” widows are to be avoided because they conduct themselves like fake virgins; they are not pious or worthy of emulation. Thus, the spirit of such women, without direct mention, could easily be inferred as sinking away from God and concerned with earthly things.

To Jerome, the “good” widow in actuality becomes an “adopted virgin,” since she had to imitate the virgin closely to be “good.”<sup>102</sup> Further, Jerome states: “let widows themselves be content to give the preference to virginity.”<sup>103</sup> However at the same time, Jerome employs chaste widows to seek holy widow exemplars, such as the Biblical Judith and Anna, to aid in their quest for holiness.<sup>104</sup> Spiritually, by

---

<sup>100</sup> *sed etiam eas fuge, quas uiduas necessitas fecit... nunc uero tantum ueste mutata pristina non mutatur ambitio* (CSEL 54:164), Ep. 22.16.

<sup>101</sup> *illae interim, quae sacerdotes suo uident indigere praesidio, eriguntur in superbiam et, quia maritorum expertae dominatum uiduitatis praeferunt libertatem, castae uocantur et nonnae et post cenam dubiam apostolos somniant* (CSEL 54:164), Ep. 22.16.

<sup>102</sup> AH.23. This explains why some instruction on the good behavior of virgins can be found in extraneous letters to widows and virgins alike. I distinguish between them where need be, but I cite any pertinent extraneous letters within my footnotes in the “virginity” section.

<sup>103</sup> *virginitatem sibi praeferri* (PL 23.0256B), AJ 1.33.

<sup>104</sup> See for example Ep. 79.10.

abstaining from sexual relations, the widow remains separate from an earthly partner and can seek Christ. The widow's spirit, therefore, was focused on seeking Christ and leaving mundane things behind.

The "good" chaste virgin, spouse, and widow are alike in many ways to Jerome. The beneficial effects of temporal and physical freedom from marital duties allow them to fully pursue Christ. A key difference presents itself, though. Jerome stresses that God could not make someone a virgin again.<sup>105</sup> Consequently, comments about marriage and widowhood must be read differently.

### **The Constructed *Life of Paula***

To say Jerome cared about these "good" and "bad" characteristics contributes little without showing their application. Jerome wrote hagiographies with the features of this grid evident. Further, he constructs the *Life of Paula* itself in order to have his subject meet the ideals of his grid. Many constructed hagiographies exist, as hagiographers freely admit their aims, and modern scholars have articulated the rhetorical frameworks used. Concerning female subjects, Averil Cameron has argued that male authors actively employed rhetoric in discussing their female subjects to comment on current social issues and meet idealized Biblical precepts.<sup>106</sup>

I will analyze the *Life of Paula* (*Letter 108*), written in 404, as a case study for Jerome's construction of excellence. Jerome himself would be hesitant to admit he "constructed" anything within his *Life of Paula*, a common trope in hagiography. He calls on Jesus and the angels as witness to his truthful "realistic portrait."<sup>107</sup> Andrew Cain, however, has shown that Jerome purposefully constructed saintly Paula as a worthy cult figure. Jerome does this so revenue might flow into the debt-ridden monastic community

---

<sup>105</sup> *Ep.* 22.5.

<sup>106</sup> Cameron, "Virginity as Metaphor." See also E. Clark, "Dissuading from Marriage," 166. For a fuller bibliographic introduction to rhetorization see David G. Hunter, "The Virgin, the Bride, and the Church: Reading Psalm 45 in Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine," *Church History* 69, no. 2 (2000): 281-3.

<sup>107</sup> *Ep.* 108.2, 15, 21; see Cain, "Jerome's Epitaphium Paulae," 121.

Paula had established.<sup>108</sup> At the same time, Jerome actively engages with the construct of her sanctity itself in order to conform her to the ideals of chastity within his grid.<sup>109</sup>

Paula was Jerome's benefactor and a widow with six children. As a widow, she moved to Bethlehem to lead a zealous, ascetic life and establish monasteries for men and women. It is the later ascetic portion of her life that is the focus and concern of Jerome. Keeping in mind both portions of Paula's life, though, Vidén makes the important observation that Paula is a hard figure to reconcile with ascetic ideals, since she was a very sexually active wife. Vidén suggests that Jerome dismisses her earlier life by stressing that she had to submit to her husband's desire to have a son, and therefore ended up giving birth to five daughters first.<sup>110</sup> In his hagiography, though, I will show that Jerome labors to present Paula as an admirably austerem chaste widow. He does this by strong manipulation, fitting Paula and even her family at times into the best features of his holy grid in order to present her as not just a worthy cult figure, but also an exemplar of chaste excellence.

Paula deeply respected asceticism. Jerome depicts her as so imbued with the chaste lifestyle that she taught it to young women and emphatically wanted her children to practice that lifestyle as well. Jerome deliberately stresses Paula's desire for others to lead the virginal lifestyle to such an extent that, when Paula's son Toxotius and his wife had a daughter, Paula's only comment about the baby was that she might become a virgin.<sup>111</sup> Toxotius' daughter becoming a lifelong virgin, which did happen, reflects Jerome's compromise that a sexually active couple may be redeemed through their child's perpetual virginity. Even though marriage does not play a direct role in any of Jerome's hagiographies, when it does come up, such as here, it certainly reflects the "good" version. Jerome wanted the reader to leave with a

---

<sup>108</sup> Cain, "Jerome's Epitaphium Paulae," 132 and 138.

<sup>109</sup> Cain (*The Letters of Jerome*, 78) agrees that this sort of characterization happens generally in Jerome's hagiographies: "He transformed his subjects, each in her own way, into idealized personifications of his ascetic ideology."

<sup>110</sup> Vidén, 148.

<sup>111</sup> *Ep.* 108.27.

strong sense of Paula's pure devotion to the virginal lifestyle. Jerome made a purposeful emphasis that speaks to his own desire to see Paula as wholly devoted to the practice of chastity.

When Paula became a widow, two reactions are apparent in the *Life*: Paula's own devastation and Jerome's exaggerated insistence that Paula was quite detached from her husband:

"When her husband died she herself nearly died of grief, and yet she devoted herself to serving the Lord in such a way that she almost seemed to have longed for her husband's death."<sup>112</sup>

Jerome starts this sentence with the realistic reaction of a widow mourning the loss of her husband, "nearly died of grief," but he feels compelled to add an idealized portrait of Paula passionately devoted to Christ. In other words, Paula was so separated from her earthly husband in serving the Lord that she even longed not to have the weight of that earthly marital relationship. Jerome imposes the ideals of chaste freedom and the pursuit of heavenly things at the moment when Paula was presumably grieving deeply. Jerome's own writings about Paula serve as our only source for historical information about her life.<sup>113</sup> Here in this one sentence Jerome presents two reactions, and we are left to discern which is closer to reality. Understanding Jerome's detailed opinions, though, helps distinguish between what are clearly Jerome's additions and what may have truly happened.

Jerome later writes that Paula said, "I who used to please my husband and the world, now I wish to please Christ."<sup>114</sup> He again casts Paula as renouncing a mundane husband to seek Christ, a spiritual husband. Christ replaced Paula's earthly husband. For Jerome, Christ was Paula's new bridegroom.<sup>115</sup> Jerome hints that Paula's original marriage has been replaced by this chaste spiritual one. Thus, whatever Paula really felt at this time is eclipsed by Jerome forcefully conveying Paula's "truer" desire to seek Christ.

---

<sup>112</sup> *postquam uir mortuus est, ita eum planxit, ut prope ipsa moreretur, ita se conuertit ad domini seruitutem, ut mortem eius uideretur optasse* (CSEL 55:310), *Ep.* 108.5.

<sup>113</sup> There is debate over whether several letters in Jerome's corpus were written by Paula herself, especially *Ep.* 46, see Cain, *The Letters of Jerome*, 37n, 95.

<sup>114</sup> *quae uiro et saeculo placui, nunc Christo placere desidero* (CSEL 56:326), *Ep.* 108.15.

<sup>115</sup> *sponsum* (CSEL 55:346), *Ep.* 108.28.



In order to stress the spiritual goodness of Paula, Jerome overemphasizes her separation from the world. Jerome states that Paula wanted to go into the desert alone, “disregarding her home, her children, her family, her possessions and everything connected with her worldly life,” in imitation of Antony of Egypt and Paul of Thebes.<sup>116</sup> Paula, however, did not truly leave her children, as we can see from Jerome’s own writings; once again, two Paulas are present. She kept in contact with them through letters, and her daughter Eustochium stayed very close to her side.<sup>117</sup> Additionally, Jerome writes in *Letter 39* that at the funeral of her daughter Blesilla, Paula was quite grieved and even fainted.<sup>118</sup> Such an emotional connection to her children is not in line with the stark, dismissive picture Jerome leads one to imagine in his hagiographic portrait. In having Paula imitate notable ascetic role models and exaggerating her own dismissal of everything in her life, Jerome molds her persona for the reader. Just as with Paula’s relationship to her husband, Jerome feels obligated to overplay Paula’s actions in order to imprint his idealism. He guides the reader to see Paula as the best “good” widow to accentuate her sanctity.

Although Paula was older when she adopted asceticism, Jerome diligently notes that she protected herself from the vulnerabilities a single woman might feel. She lived with like-minded women and did not interact with men other than those who were monks.<sup>119</sup> Hence, Paula remained strong against lust. Also, Paula exemplified harsh fasting, which was crucial for overcoming lust. Jerome mentions her fasting several times.<sup>120</sup> He adds that she taught the other girls to practice fasting in order to overcome lustful inclinations.<sup>121</sup> Paula’s own passions had probably subsided by the time she became an ascetic, but

---

<sup>116</sup> *non domus, non liberorum, non familiae, non possessionum, non alicuius rei, quae ad saeculum pertinet, memorsola - sidici potest - et incommutata ad heremum Antoniorum atque Paulorum pergere gestiebat* (CSEL 55:311), *Ep. 108.6*. Antony and (to a lesser extent) Paul of Thebes were ascetic role models. *Life of Antony*, written by Athanasius, was widely read and influential; whereas, *Life of Paul* by Jerome has been considered by scholars as nothing more than a competitive stunt, thus largely fictional.

<sup>117</sup> *Ep. 108.26, 27*.

<sup>118</sup> *Ep. 39.6*, cited by Cooper, 68-9.

<sup>119</sup> *Ep. 108.14*. E. Clark mentions that Jerome puts great importance on women living together due to their weakness, she cites *Letter 130*, in “Dissuading from Marriage,” 166.

<sup>120</sup> *Ep. 108.1, 11, 15, 17, 20*.

<sup>121</sup> *Ep. 108.20*.

in order to present her as an example of chaste excellence, Jerome describes her actions against her supposed lust, actions that younger virgins might mimic.<sup>122</sup> Paula's exemplary conduct, as described by Jerome, made her worthy to be considered holy. After all, she and her family must live up to Jerome's standards for Paula to be considered excellent by his definition.

In conclusion, I have sought to point out two things: one, that a free-standing polemic on what makes a good or bad virgin, spouse, and widow is evident in the writings on virginity of Jerome; and two, that Jerome uses this grid when constructing his "excellent" Paula. Jerome wrote his letters and treatises as an educational experience for the reader. He took his observations on women's practices and formulated an elaborate grid of what he felt was "good" or "bad." This grid serves to inform the reader as to what is to be emulated and what is not. Following the "good" practices was so important to Jerome that he manipulated his female subjects' actions within his hagiographies to meet his own standards. Appreciating Jerome's subtlety and acknowledging his hearty discussion on marriage and widowhood in his works on virginity should impact discussion on Jerome: his thinking was multi-dimensional, as should be our discussion of his hierarchy.

---

<sup>122</sup> Oppel notes Jerome's understanding of the "hot" fires of passion within young females and how they "cool" later in life, in "Saint Jerome and the History of Sex," 151.

**Appendix***The Grid*

	Bad	Good
<b>Virginit</b>		
Body	Practicing false chastity	Practicing harsh fasting to subdue lust
	Ornamented for attention	Simply dressed, unconcerned with attention
Spirit	Uninterested in Christ and Him as the Bridegroom	Seeking Christ, especially as the Bridegroom
<b>Marriage</b>		
Body	Seductive	Chaste
	Adulterous	<i>or</i> Raising a perpetual virgin
Spirit	Married to a heathen	Married to a Christian
<b>Widowhood</b>		
Body	Caving to remarriage	Remaining chaste
	Practicing false chastity	
Spirit	Far from Christ	Close to Christ

## Bibliography

### Abbreviations

PL *Patrologia Latina*

CSEL *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*

NPNF *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*

### Primary Sources

Jerome. *Adversus Iovinianum*. In *PL*, vol. 23, col. 205-282.

----- *Against Jovinianus: Book 1-2*. In *Jerome: Letters and Select Works* (NPNF 6), edited and translated by Hon. W. H. Fremantle, Philip Schaff, and Henry Wace. Buffalo: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999.

----- *De Perpetua Virginitate B. Mariae, Adversus Helvidium*. In *PL*, vol. 23, col. 181-206.

----- *Epistola XXII*. In *Sancti Eusebii Hieronymi Epistulae. Vol. 1: Epistulae I-LXX* (CSEL 54), edited by Isidorus Hilberg, 144-211. Vienna, 1910.

----- *Epistola LIV*. In *Sancti Eusebii Hieronymi Epistulae. Vol. 1: Epistulae I-LXX* (CSEL 54), edited by Isidorus Hilberg, 466-85. Vienna, 1910.

----- *Epistola CVIII*. In *Sancti Eusebii Hieronymi Epistulae. Vol. 1: Epistulae LXXI-CXX* (CSEL 55), edited by Isidorus Hilberg, 306-51. Vienna, 1912.

----- *Letter 54*. In *Jerome: Letters and Select Works* (NPNF 6), edited and translated by Hon. W. H. Fremantle, Philip Schaff, and Henry Wace. Buffalo: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999.

----- *Life of Paula the Elder (Letter 108 to Eustochium)*. In *Lives of Roman Christian Women*, edited and translated by Carolinne White, 71-108. New York: Penguin Books, 2010.

----- *On Choosing a Life of Virginity (Letter 22)*. In *Lives of Roman Christian Women*, edited and translated by Carolinne White, 109-48. New York: Penguin Books, 2010.

-----, *The Perpetual Virginity of Blessed Mary: Against Helvidius*. In *Jerome: Letters and Select Works* (NPNF 6), edited and translated by Hon. W. H. Fremantle, Philip Schaff, and Henry Wace. Buffalo: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999.

### Secondary Sources

Brown, Peter. *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, Twentieth-Anniversary Edition. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008.

Cain, Andrew. "Jerome's Epitaphium Paulae: Hagiography, Pilgrimage, and the Cult of Saint Paula." *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 18, no. 1 (2010): 105-39.

-----, *The Letters of Jerome: Asceticism, Biblical Exegesis, and the Construction of Christian Authority in Late Antiquity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Cameron, Averil. "Virginity as Metaphor: Women and the Rhetoric of Early Christianity." In *History as Text: The Writing of Ancient History*, edited by Averil Cameron, 181-205. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990.

-----, "Early Christianity and the Discourse of Female Desire." In *Women in Ancient Societies: An Illusion of the Night*, edited by Léonie J Archer, Susan Fischler, and Maria Wyke, 152-68. New York: Routledge, 1994.

Clark, Elizabeth A. "Antifamilial Tendencies in Ancient Christianity." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5, no. 3 (1995): 356-80.

-----, "Dissuading from Marriage: Jerome and the Asceticization of Satire." In *Satire Advice on Women and Marriage: From Plautus to Chaucer*, edited by Warren S. Smith, 154-81. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005.

-----, "Ideology, History, and the Construction of 'Woman' in Late Ancient Christianity." *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 2, no. 2 (1994): 155-84.

- Clark, Gillian. "Do Try This at Home: the Domestic Philosopher in Late Antiquity." In *From Rome to Constantinople: Studies in Honor of Averil Cameron*, edited by H. Amirav and Bas Ter Haar Romeny, 153-72. Leuven: Peeters, 2007.
- . *Women in Late Antiquity: Pagan and Christian Life-Styles*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993.
- Cooper, Kate. *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996.
- Driver, Steven D. "The Development of Jerome's Views of the Ascetic Life." *Recherches de Théologie Ancienne et Médiévale* 62 (1995): 44-70.
- Holland, Glenn. "Celibacy in the Early Christian Church." In *Celibacy and Religious Traditions*, edited by Carl Olson, 67-83. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Hunter, David G. "Helvidius, Jovinian, and the Virginity of Mary in Late Fourth-Century Rome." *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 1, no. 1 (1993): 47-71.
- . "The Virgin, the Bride, and the Church: Reading Psalm 45 in Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine." *Church History* 69, no. 2 (2000): 281-303.
- . "Sexuality, marriage and the family." In *Cambridge History of Christianity Volume 2: Constantine to c. 600*, edited by Augustine Casiday and Frederick W. Norris, 585-600. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014.
- Karras, Valerie A. "A Re-Evaluation of Marriage, Celibacy, and Irony in Gregory of Nyssa's *On Virginity*." *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 13, no. 1 (2005): 111-21.
- Kelly, J. N. D. *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies*. New York: Harper & Row, 1975.
- Jussen, Bernhard. "'Virgins — Widows — Spouses' On the Language of Moral Distinction as Applied to Women and Men in the Middle Ages," *History of the Family* 7 (2002): 13-32.
- Miller, Patricia Cox. "The Blazing Body: Ascetic Desire in Jerome's Letter to Eustochium." *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 1, no. 1 (1993): 21-45.

Moorhead, John. "Adam and Eve and the Discovery of Sex." *Parergon* 1 (1983): 1-12.

Nathan, Geoffrey S. *The Family in Late Antiquity: The Rise of Christianity and the Endurance of Tradition*.  
New York: Routledge, 2002.

Nealon, Jeffrey and Susan Searls Giroux, *The Theory Toolbox: Critical Concepts for the Humanities, Arts,  
& Social Sciences* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011)

Oppel, John. "Saint Jerome and the History of Sex." *Viator* 24 (1993): 1-22.

Salisbury, Joyce E. "The Latin Doctors of the Church on Sexuality." *Journal of Medieval History* 12 (1986):  
279-89.

Vidén, Gunhild. "St. Jerome on Female Chastity: Subjugating the Elements of Desire." *Norwegian Journal  
of Greek and Latin Studies* 73, no. 1 (1998): 139-57.

White, Carolinne. *Lives of Roman Christian Women*. New York: Penguin Books, 2010.