

Virginitv Discourse and Ascetic Politics in the Writings of Ambrose of Milan

by

Ariel Bybee Laughton

Department of Religion
Duke University

Date: _____

Approved:

Dr. Elizabeth A. Clark, Supervisor

Dr. Lucas Van Rompay

Dr. J. Warren Smith

Dr. J. Clare Woods

Dr. Zlatko Pleše

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in
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Ambrose, bishop of Milan, was one of the most outspoken advocates of Christian female virginity in the fourth century C.E. This dissertation examines his writings on virginity in the interest of illuminating the historical and social contexts of his teachings. Considering Ambrose's treatises on virginity as literary productions with social, political, and theological functions in Milanese society, I look at the various ways in which the bishop of Milan formulated ascetic discourse in response to the needs and expectations of his audience. Furthermore, I attend to the various discontinuities in Ambrose's ascetic writings in the hope of illuminating what kinds of ideological work these texts were intended to perform by the bishop within Milanese society and beyond.

In the first part of this dissertation, I consider the mechanisms of language and rhetoric promoting virginity in context of the Nicene-Homoian debate, highlighting the fluidity and flexibility of ascetic language in the late fourth century. While in his earliest teachings Ambrose expounds virginity in ways that reflect and support a Nicene understanding of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, his later ascetic writings display his use of anti-Homoian rhetoric in order to support his virginal ideals when they are challenged by Jovinian and others. In the second part, I examine some of the various ways in which the bishop formulated his teachings of virginity in response to the complaints and criticisms of lay members of the Christian community in Milan and elsewhere. I scrutinize the bishop's rhetorical expositions of Biblical figures such as Mary, Eve, the bride of the Song of Songs, and the Jews as a means of furthering his ascetic agenda, and consider his adaptation of a female voice to avoid incurring further

criticism. Finally, I consider the role that the bishop's ascetic interests may have played in the so-called Altar of Victory controversy of 384. Largely at stake in Ambrose's dispute with the Roman senator Symmachus, I argue, were the rights and privileges of the Vestal Virgins, a well-established pagan ideology of virginity whose continued prominence and existence was largely unconscionable to the bishop. Ambrose's involvement in the controversy was partly attributable to his interest in ensuring the restriction of Vestal privileges as he perceived the cult to be in direct social and ideological competition with Christian virginity. Together, these three parts attempt to demonstrate the highly fluid and flexible nature of virginity discourse in the late fourth century and to draw attention to some of the socio-theological negotiations that took place as the cult of virginity gained increasing prominence in the Christian church.

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Dilectus meus mihi et ego illi (Cant. 2.16).

Introduction:
The Gift of Bees

From birth, it seems, Ambrose of Milan was destined to be teacher *par excellence* of Christian virginity. In his history of the bishop's life, Paulinus of Milan recounts a miraculous encounter between the infant Ambrose and a swarm of bees which bore record early on that it would be so. As the baby lay in his cradle in the courtyard of his father's house, a cloud of bees suddenly approached, covering his face and flying in and out of his mouth as his parents watched nearby. The bees did no harm but were merely "implanting the honey-combs of his later works, which would proclaim the heavenly gifts and direct the minds of men from earthly to heavenly things." From this event, Ambrose's father predicted that his son would be something great.¹

Paulinus likely borrowed this miraculous event from the famous *vitae* of other esteemed men of the ancient world in order to enhance the prestige of the bishop of Milan. According to their biographers, Plato and Sophocles had both been alighted upon by bees while yet in their cradles.² Yet Paulinus also may have had in mind Ambrose's particular praise of the bees in his *De virginibus* many years earlier:

Let, then, your work be as it were a honeycomb, for virginity is fit to be compared to bees, so laborious is it, so modest, so continent. The bee feeds on dew, it knows no marriage couch, it makes honey. The virgin's dew is the divine word, for the words of God descend like the dew. The virgin's modesty is an unstained nature. The virgin's produce is the fruit of the lips, without bitterness,

¹ Paulinus of Milan, *Vita Ambrosii* 2.3 (in Michele Pellegrino, ed., *Paolino: Vita di S. Ambrogio [Verba Seniorum 1]* (Rome: Editrice Studium, 1961), 53-54).

² See Ebenezer Cobham Brewer, *A Dictionary of Miracles: Imitative, Realistic, and Dogmatic* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1894), 368-369. Brewer notes that a similar event is included in the seventh-century life of Isidore of Seville.

abounding in sweetness. They work in common, and their fruit is in common. How I wish you, my daughter, to be an imitator of these bees, whose food is the flower, whose offspring is collected and brought together by the mouth.³

For writers of the ancient world such as Ambrose and Paulinus, the bee symbolized not only eloquence and pedagogical skill but also the model ascetic life. Modest, industrious, virginal, and living communally, the bee represented an ideal to which each Christian virgin should aspire. In his account of the chaste bees alighting upon the mouth of the infant Ambrose, Paulinus may have envisioned their bestowal of the honey of the sweet and heavenly teachings of the virginity that the bees modeled in both body and practice. After all, few in the fourth century had preached the ascetic life with more eloquence, dedication, and urgency than the bishop of Milan.

From the time of his ordination in 374 until his death in 397, Ambrose's dedication to the ascetic cause, and its particular perpetuation among Christian women, was unwavering. The first official treatise of his career as bishop, *De virginibus* (377), was dedicated exclusively to the praise of female virgins with the hope of recruiting other Christian women to the ascetic life. Three subsequent treatises in his corpus, *De virginitate* (378), *De institutione virginis* (392), and *Exhortatio virginitatis* (394), continued this initial project in various ways, always with attention to the exaltation and

³ Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.8.40-41 (Gori, I, 140): *Fauum itaque mellis tua opera componant: digna enim uirginitas quae apibus comparetur, sic laboriosa, sic pudica, sic continens. Rore pascitur apis, nescit concubitus, mella componit. Ros quoque uirgini est sermo diuinus, quia sicut ros dei uerba descendunt. Pudor virginis est intemerata natura. Partus uirginis fetus est labiorum expers amaritudinis, fertilis suauitatis. In commune labor, communis est fructus. Quam te uelim, filia, imitatricem esse huius apiculae, cui cibus flos est, ore suboles legitur, ore componitur.*

Perhaps Ambrose was influenced by Virgil here not only in his assertion of the chastity of both bees and virgins but in their production of their fruits with their mouths: "Most you shall marvel at this habit peculiar to bees—That they have no sexual union: their bodies never dissolve lax into love, nor bear with pangs the birth of their young. But all by themselves from leaves and sweet herbs they will gather their children in their mouths, keep up the kingly succession and the birthrate, restore the halls and the realms of wax." (Virgil, *Georgics*, 4.97-202).

promotion of female virginity. His letters are also liberally infused with this ascetic agenda. To bishops, congregations, and emperors, Ambrose defended virginity's superior blessedness and the special privileges of Christian virgins.⁴ Among these, his letters to the emperor Valentinian II in 383 against the pagan senator Symmachus (*Ep.* 72-73) are especially remarkable for their outspoken assertion of the Christian virgin's superiority to all pagan practitioners of virginity. Throughout Ambrose's career, the bishop promoted female asceticism to the highborn and lowly, the rich and the poor, the Christian and pagan alike.

Reared in Rome by his widowed Christian mother and his elder sister Marcellina, a consecrated virgin, Ambrose's investment in the ascetic cause was probably personal in some respects. Marcellina's auspicious veiling ceremony, performed by the bishop of Rome Liberius on Christmas Day, and her acts of ascetic discipline would long remain with Ambrose and would shape his own perceptions of virginity for years to come.⁵ At the same time, Ambrose may have perceived in the promotion of virginity an avenue to political, social, and theological ascendancy. While women's asceticism was the subject and focus of much of his ascetic writing, women were by no means Ambrose's only, or perhaps even primary, audience. The works of Christian thinkers and writers such as Jerome, Zeno of Verona, and Augustine of Hippo demonstrate their familiarity with, and

⁴ The most important of these include *Ep.* 72, 73, 56, 57 and *Ep. extra coll.* 14, 15. All numbering of Ambrose's letters refers to the CSEL edition [CSEL 82.1-4].

⁵ Ambrose addressed *De virginibus*, his first and most lengthy treatise on virginity, to his sister. While composed two decades after her veiling ceremony, he recalls at length the teachings of Liberius given on the occasion of the veiling (3.1.1-3.3.14 [Gori, I, 204-220]) as well as Marcellina's own impressive bodily mastery and simple ascetic life (3.4.15-20 [Gori, I, 220-224]). For more on Marcellina, see Chapter 1, note 26.

approbation of, Ambrose's writings on virginity.⁶ The bishop of Milan made a name for himself among men throughout Italy and beyond as a champion of female asceticism.

Virginity was a subject through which Ambrose might display to colleagues his rhetorical skills and intellectual powers. At the same time, Ambrose gathered around himself a "family" of daughters drawn from Christian communities throughout northern Italy.

Consecrated under his hand, these women bound together bishop and community and stood as visible markers of episcopal prestige. Thus Ambrose's interest in the promotion and preservation of female virginity may be understood as a promotion and preservation of himself in many ways.

I. Approaching Ambrose

In his writings on virginity, Ambrose formed and reformed the meaning and position of virginity within Christianity in a number of significant, lasting ways. At the same time, he constructed these writings on virginity within various cultural, social, religious, and political circumstances that determined their structure and content to a significant extent. This dissertation examines Ambrose's writings on virginity, especially his four treatises on the subject, with attention to some of the people and circumstances

⁶ While later in life Jerome has little that is complimentary to say about Ambrose, Neil Adkin has noted the influence of Ambrose's *De virginibus* on Jerome's famous *Ep. 22* to Eustochium (Adkin, "A Note on the Date of Ambrose's *De virginitate*," *Athanaeum* 81[71].2 (1993): 644-647). David Hunter has noted the roots of Augustine's doctrine of original sin in some teachings of Ambrose's *De institutione virginis* and his other ascetic writings (Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity: The Jovinianist Controversy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 200). Yves-Marie Duval has noted the influence of Ambrose's *De virginibus* upon Zeno's *De continentia* (Duval, "L'originalité du *De uirginibus* dans le mouvement ascétique occidental: Ambroise, Cyprien, Athanase," in *Ambroise de Milan: XVIe centenaire de son élection épiscopale*, ed. Y.-M. Duval [Paris: Études augustinienes, 1974], 61-64). On the lasting post-mortem influence of Ambrose, see Neil McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan: Church and Court in a Christian Capital* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 368-377.

surrounding the composition of his texts and the ways in which they affected the bishop's ideas and rhetoric. Yet I do not wish simply to reiterate historical timelines and events. My intention is to consider first and foremost the various self-representations of the bishop in his texts, responding to and revising the community around him.

In his *Ambrose of Milan: Church and Court in a Christian Capital*, Neil McLynn was the first to argue that Ambrose is, as a historical figure, “strangely inaccessible” on account of the controlled, highly stylized way in which he presented himself both in life and in his writings.⁷ McLynn's monograph, therefore, examines “the circumstances and forces which helped to mould [Ambrose's] façade, rather than [making] a search for the ‘inner man’ behind it.”⁸ My own approach begins with the similar assumption of the bishop of Milan's historical inaccessibility and a desire to understand the various social and political forces behind Ambrose's elaborate self-stylization in his writings. Yet I press McLynn's query further, considering not only how Ambrose's persona—and, by extension, his writings—were shaped by external forces but also how such constructions were intended to engage in different kinds of social and theological work within the community for which they were written. In pursuit of this goal, I consider his writings as “discourse”—as rhetoric and argument constructed within a particular socio-cultural location with the intention of furthering an agenda—in order to illuminate further the discursive site of production of his writings. Thinking of the bishop's writings as discourse, I register some of the important social and theological “work” virginity may

⁷ McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, xviii.

⁸ McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, xiii.

have performed for the bishop among the body of his listeners as well as to suggest to what extent his audience influenced the form and execution of his ascetic ideology.

In this approach to Ambrose's ascetic writings, I follow other scholars such as Elizabeth Clark, who has argued that late antique texts may be profitably read as literary productions rather than fact-based documents and that a text has "socio-theological" functions within the community in which it was produced.⁹ Clark has suggested the usefulness of various theoretical approaches to patristic texts of Late Antiquity, including:

(1) an examination of "authorial function" that calls into question attributions of intention and context; (2) symptomatic and Derridean readings that attend to the gaps, absences, and aporias in texts; (3) ideology critique, especially helpful in unpacking the early Christian writers' representations of various "Others," including women.¹⁰

These "mental tools" that Clark has suggested guide a good deal of my analysis of Ambrose's ascetic writings in this dissertation. Emphasizing the importance of text and context, I examine Ambrose's ascetic texts as products of both the bishop's ascetic agenda as well as the desires and expectations of the fourth-century congregation for whom they were composed. The various gaps and absences of Ambrose's ideology of virginity, I argue, display a good deal about the social, political, and theological contexts of their composition. Furthermore, my consideration of the roles played by various "Others" who appear in the texts, and their various literary functions, reveals a good deal about the master writer skillfully rendering their appearances.

⁹ See Elizabeth A. Clark, *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 158-161, 178-181.

¹⁰ Clark, *History, Theory, Text*, 170.

II. Scholarship on Ambrose and Virginity

The approach I have just outlined varies widely from the ways in which other scholars have approached Ambrose's treatises on virginity over the past sixty years. In general, Ambrose's works on virginity have received far less attention than those of his contemporaries Jerome and Augustine, and these works on virginity have been read most often in conjunction with the views of other Fathers as a means of formulating broad portraits of fourth-century virginity.¹¹ In these endeavors, Ambrose's first treatise, *De virginibus*, often has been used as the exclusive and exhaustive source for the bishop's teachings on women's asceticism. Likewise, scholars such as Yves-Marie Duval and Virginia Burrus have given in their work almost exclusive attention to *De virginibus*.¹² While others such as David Hunter, Kim Power, and Michaela Zelzer have considered

¹¹ For example, Elizabeth Clark, "Ascetic Renunciation and Feminine Advancement: A Paradox of Late Ancient Christianity," in *Ascetic Piety and Women's Faith: Essays on Late Ancient Christianity* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen, 1986); Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Mothers of the Church: Ascetic Women in the Late Patristic Age," in *Women of Spirit: Female Leadership in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Rosemary Reuther and Eleanor McLaughlin (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979); Jo Ann McNamara, "Muffled Voices: The Lives of Consecrated Women in the Fourth Century," in *Medieval Religious Women, Vol. 1: Distant Echoes* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1984); Gillian Clark, "Women and Asceticism in Late Antiquity: The Refusal of Status and Gender," in *Asceticism*, ed. V.L. Wimbush and R. Valantasis (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

¹² See Duval, "L'originalité du *De uirginibus*," 9-65; Virginia Burrus, "*Begotten, Not Made*": *Conceiving Manhood in Late Antiquity* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000), 134-152; Burrus, "'Equipped for Victory': Ambrose and the Gendering of Orthodoxy," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 4.4 (1996): 461-475; Burrus, "Reading Agnes: The Rhetoric of Gender in Ambrose and Prudentius," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 3 (1995): 25-46.

Ambrose's other treatises on virginity in their writings to some extent, none has examined these writings in context of each other.¹³

While several excellent editions of Ambrose's treatises on virginity have been published in the last century, few serious studies of these writings have been made.¹⁴ To date, all are unpublished dissertations and theses. In his "La virginité selon Saint Ambroise," (1952), Raymond D'Izarny summarized and categorized some of the general themes that appear in Ambrose's writings on virginity in an attempt to organize the bishop's ascetic teachings into a singular, systematic theology of virginity.¹⁵ William J. McCawley took a very similar approach in brief thesis, "Virginity in the Writings of Saint Ambrose," of 1960.¹⁶ Jeanne-Aimée Taupignon's "Les écrits d'Ambroise de Milan sur la virginité: recherche d'un principe d'unité" (1992) examined Ambrose's writings on

¹³ See David Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Hunter, "The Virgin, the Bride, and the Church: Reading Psalm 45 in Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine," *Church History* 69.2 (2000): 281-303; Hunter, "Clerical Celibacy and the Veiling of Virgins: New Boundaries in Late Ancient Christianity," in *The Limits of Ancient Christianity*, ed. William E. Klingshirn and Mark Vessey (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 139-152; Kim Power, "From Ecclesiology to Mariology: Patristic Traces and Innovation in the *Speculum Virginum*," in *Listen, Daughter: The Speculum Virginum and the Formation of Religious Women in the Middle Ages*, ed. Constant J. Mews (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 85-110; Power, "The Rehabilitation of Eve in Ambrose of Milan's *De Institutione Virginis*," in *Religion in the Ancient World: New Themes and Approaches*, ed. Matthew P.J. Dillon (Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert, 1996), 367-382; Michaela Zelzer, "Das ambrosianische Corpus De virginitate und seine Rezeption im Mittelalter," in *Studia Patristica XXXVIII*, ed. Maurice F. Wiles, Edward Yarnold, and P.M. Parvis (Leuven: Peeters, 2001), 510-523.

¹⁴ Among the notable editions of these treatises that have been published in the past century are Franco Gori, ed., *Verginità et vedovanza: Tutte le opere di Sant'Ambrogio* 14/1, 2 (Milan: Biblioteca Ambrosiana, 1989); Domingo Ramos-Lissón, ed., trans., *La virginidad; La educación de la virgen; Exhortación a la virginidad* (FP 19); Ramos-Lissón, ed., trans., *Sobre las vírgenes y Sobre las viudas* (FP 12); Peter Dücker, ed., *De virginibus = Über die Jungfrauen* (FC 81); Ignazio Cazzaniga, ed., *S. Ambrosii Mediolanensis episcopi De virginibus libri tres* (Torino: B. Paraviae et Sociorum, 1948); Cazzaniga, ed., *De virginitate: liber unus* (Torino: B. Paraviae et Sociorum, 1954); Maria Salvati and Paolo Barale, ed., *Sant'Ambrogio: Scritti sulla verginità* (Torino: Società editrice internazionale, 1958).

¹⁵ Raymond D'Izarny, "La virginité selon Saint Ambroise" (Ph.D. dissertation, Lyon, 1952).

¹⁶ William J. McCawley, "Virginity in the Writings of Saint Ambrose" (S.T.L. thesis, St. Mary's Seminary [Baltimore, Maryland], 1960).

virginity to demonstrate the ongoing presence of baptismal language and imagery and its relationship to the bishop's ascetic theology.¹⁷ Kim E. Power traced the thematic recurrence of fertility and garden imagery in the bishop's ascetic treatises in her 1997 dissertation, "The Secret Garden: The Meaning and Function of the *Hortus Conclusus* in Ambrose of Milan's Homilies on Virginity".¹⁸ In her "Virginidad y Espíritu Santo: líneas para una pneumatología de la virginidad: aproximación literaria y teológica a las obras ambrosianas sobre la virginidad" (2001), Carmen Alvarez Alonzo considered Ambrose's virginity treatises in order to suggest a connection between Ambrose's pneumatology and his theology of virginity.¹⁹ In shorter articles and chapters, other scholars such as Hervé Savon and Domingo Ramos-Lissón have pursued similar goals, seeking to identify themes and teachings essential to Ambrose's thought throughout his writings.²⁰

While each of these projects has made significant contributions to modern scholarship on the bishop of Milan and early Christian asceticism, they have embraced similar methodologies. All have sought to identify (to borrow from Taupignon's title) *un*

¹⁷ Jeanne-Aimée Taupignon, "Les écrits d'Ambroise de Milan sur la virginité: recherché d'un principe d'unité" (Ph.D. dissertation, Université de Paris IV: Paris-Sorbonne, 1992).

¹⁸ Kim E. Power, "The Meaning and Function of the *Hortus Conclusus* in Ambrose of Milan's Homilies on Virginity" (Ph.D. dissertation, La Trobe University, 1997).

¹⁹ Carmen Alvarez Alonso, "Virginidad y Espíritu Santo: líneas para una pneumatología de la virginidad: aproximación literaria y teológica a las obras ambrosianas sobre la virginidad" (Ph.D. dissertation, Universidad Pontificia Salesiana, 1991).

²⁰ See Domingo Ramos-Lissón, "Le binôme liberté—virginité dans les écrits exhortatifs de saint Ambroise sur la virginité," in *Studia Patristica XIX: Historica, Theologica, et Philosophica, Critica et Philologica*, ed. Elizabeth A. Livingstone (Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 467-474 and also his "'Referamus ad Christum': comme paradigme aux vierges dans les Traités sur la virginité de Saint Ambroise" in *Studia Patristica XXVIII: Latin Authors (Other than Augustine and His Opponents), Nachleben of the Fathers*, ed. Elizabeth A. Livingstone (Leuven: Peeters, 1993), 65-74; Hervé Savon, "Un modèle de sainteté à la fin du IV^e siècle: la virginité dans l'oeuvre de Saint Ambroise," in *Sainteté et martyre dans les religions du livre*, ed. Jacques Marx (Brussels: Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 1989), 21-31. See also Kim E. Power, "Ambrose of Milan: Keeper of the Boundaries," *Theology Today* 55.1 (1998): 15-34.

principe d'unité in Ambrose's works, or underlying themes and principles that determined the shape and content of the bishop's ascetic theology throughout his writings. While these are interesting and important endeavors, the concern for flowing themes and principles often results in the flattening of inter- and intra-textual dissonance. Such works tend to unify and harmonize Ambrose's theology of virginity at the expense of that which is inherently inconsistent in his thought.

In contrast to these previous studies that have sought to organize and harmonize Ambrose's teachings on virginity, I will demonstrate the disjointed and constantly-evolving nature of his ideas throughout his career as he tailored his ascetic rhetoric to the varying social and political needs of himself and of his Christian congregation at Milan. While the communal aspects of his writings on virginity—their composition with a mind to and in response to other people—is a guiding principle throughout my assessment, this approach will allow some of the gaps and inconsistencies of his ascetic theology to surface. Themes, rhetoric, and literary devices appear, disappear, and sometimes reappear in different form as the bishop negotiates with other members of Greco-Roman society—Christian and non-Christian alike—for orthodoxy, personal prestige, and the place of virginity in society.

III. Overview of Chapters

In the first chapter of this dissertation, I consider Ambrose's formulation of ascetic language in the context of the fourth-century debate over the nature of God. While members of his Christian congregation, and the Christian community at large, were divided over Trinitarian issues in the earliest years of his career, the young bishop

formulated his teachings on virginity in ways which indirectly expressed allegiance to the so-called Nicene position: he affirmed the absolute unity of God the Father and God the Son, opposing the Homoian or “Arian” position that the Son of God was only “like” the Father. This embedding of Trinitarian language within the rhetoric of virginity allowed him to avoid directly addressing a matter that would have been objectionable to the significant Homoian contingent of his clergy and congregation. Later in his career, after this Nicene formulation of the unity of God was more firmly established as orthodox throughout the Roman empire, he reiterated pro-Nicene argumentation within his discussion of virginity in an attempt to link opponents of asceticism with Homoian heresy. The bishop styled both virginity and Trinitarian discourse to serve his personal social and theological agendas.

The second and third chapters evaluate more broadly the evolving nature of Ambrose’s theology of virginity throughout the course of his career, mapping his ideological negotiation of an ascetic program for women within Milanese society of the fourth century. In Chapter Two, I evaluate Ambrose’s argumentation in his earliest treatise, *De virginibus*, in light of the social and theological climate of fourth-century Milan. In light of these considerations and subsequent response in *De virginitate*, I suggest some of the objections possibly raised to the extreme ascetic propositions of *De virginibus*. While in his earliest treatise on virginity the bishop showed great enthusiasm for a virginal ideal that challenged the common gender and family structures of society, his subsequent treatise on the subject reveals that his advocacy of such unconventional female behavior had discomfited many among his congregation. In response, he largely abandoned the shocking stories of early Christian female martyrs that had composed

much of the text of his first treatise and turned to Biblical teachings to find support for his virginal ideals. Ambrose uses the image of the virgin-bride of Christ, drawn from earlier Christian exegesis of the Song of Songs, to infuse the role of the virgin with cultural normativity while simultaneously enhancing his own social and theological authority. Although the bishop of Milan was unwilling to compromise his central theological tenets presented in his first treatise, he nevertheless refined his rhetorical articulation of female virginity in *De virginitate* to the tastes of Milanese Christians who were yet enmeshed within the traditional ideological boundaries of Greco-Roman culture.

In Chapter Three, I trace the continuing rhetorical refinement of his ascetic teachings into his later treatises, *De institutione virginis* and *Exhortatio virginitatis*. In this chapter, I consider some of the additional rhetorical strategies the bishop employs in these writings to sustain his ascetic program. These strategies include the bishop's close association of virginity with salvation, his creative readings of the Biblical characters Eve and Mary, his literary invention of the Jews, and his assumption of a female voice with which to teach. A decided replacement of martyr stories with scriptural interpretation, I argue, is designed to domesticate some of the more unsettling aspects of female virginity for an audience in which its practice was largely unestablished and in which marriage and children were the norm for women. With each of his rhetorical innovations, Ambrose sought to establish virginity's superiority to married life and to affirm the central location of virgins within the community of the church while at the same time placating those who found his ascetic teachings excessively denigrating of the married Christian majority.

In Chapter Four, my examination of Ambrose's treatises on virginity in Chapters One through Three contributes a new perspective to a much-studied issue in Ambrose's

episcopacy. The final chapter of this dissertation discusses the bishop's 384 dispute with the Roman senator Symmachus. Symmachus had petitioned the emperor numerous times to restore the Altar of Victory to its traditional place in the Roman senate house and to reinstate certain pagan rights and privileges. Virgins and virginity-language play a central role in the rhetoric of Symmachus's petition (his *Relatio* 3) and Ambrose's two corresponding letters (*Ep.* 72 and 73). Following Rita Lizzi Testa's conclusion that the dispute of 384 almost exclusively concerned the restoration of the Altar of Victory and the rights and privileges of the Vestal Virgins,²¹ I argue that Ambrose's involvement in this dispute may to some extent be attributable to his heavy ideological investment in Christian female asceticism. For the bishop of Milan, the Vestal Virgins, virgin priestesses of Vesta and central, highly-visible symbols of pagan virginity in Roman culture, represented an ideology of virginity that stood in competition with Christian virginity. His employment of certain language and imagery in relation to virginity in his writings and his attribution to Christian virgins of certain virtuous qualities and characteristics such as fertility and voluntary poverty paralleled older Roman claims on behalf of the Vestals. As the practices of Christian virgins grew in visible resemblance to those of the Vestal Virgins in the late fourth century, Ambrose was anxious to differentiate between the two groups as strongly as possible.

Each of these chapters aspires to contribute something interesting and valuable to the large body of modern scholarship on the bishop of Milan. Reconsidering some well-studied events in Ambrose's history in light of his ascetic agenda, I argue for virginity's surprising importance in aspects of his life that have generally been considered unrelated

²¹ Rita Lizzi Testa, "Christian Emperor, Vestal Virgins and Priestly Colleges: Reconsidering the End of Roman Paganism," *Antiquité Tardive* 15 (2007): 251-262.

to his ascetic program. By revisiting Ambrose's writings on virginity with a theoretical framework attentive to the literary nature of such texts, I hope to illuminate some aspects of fourth-century intellectual culture while also displaying something of the astounding flexibility of both ideas about Christian virginity and language about virginity in the fourth century. Fluid and ever-evolving, the Christian virgin and her virginity were places where meaning could be made in accordance with the needs of both bishop and society.

Chapter One

Virginity and Post-Nicene Controversy: Against the Heretics

Much recent modern scholarship has treated Ambrose's importance in the transmission and translation of Greek trinitarian theology to the Latin-speaking West. For example, in his *Ambrose of Milan and the End of the Arian-Nicene Conflicts*, Daniel Williams has examined in detail the bishop's role in the formulation of a Latin neo-Nicene theology. Yet he does not deal with the position of Ambrose's treatises on virginity in this endeavor.¹ Likewise, Christoph Marksches gives only cursory attention to these treatises in his recent extensive study of Ambrose's trinitarian theology, making very brief remarks upon *De virginibus* and *De virginitate* alone.² Although most modern authors largely cite the later *De fide* as Ambrose's first significant engagement with the trinitarian theological issues at hand, others like Gaetano Corti have acknowledged Ambrose's clearly Nicene commitments in his earlier works *De Cain et Abel* and *De paradiso*.³

¹ See Daniel H. Williams, *Ambrose of Milan and the End of the Nicene-Arian Conflicts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995). Williams lists references to some pro-Nicene passages on p. 129, n. 5.

² Christoph Marksches, *Ambrosius von Mailand und die Trinitätstheologie* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1995), 106-109.

³ Gaetano Corti, "Lo sfondo dottrinale Ambrosiano del concilio di Aquileia," in *Atti del colloquio internazionale sul concilio di Aquileia del 381*, *Antichità Altoadriatiche* 16 (Udine: Arti grafiche friulane, 1981), 55-56.

In general, modern scholars consider *De virginibus*, *De virginitate*, *De viduis*, *De paradiso*, *De Cain et Abel*, *De Noe*, and *De excessu fratris* as predating the composition of *De fide*. See J.-R. Palanque, *Saint Ambroise et l'Empire Romain: contribution à l'histoire des rapports de l'Église et de l'État à la fin du quatrième siècle* (Paris: E. d' Boccard, 1933), 493-495 and A. di Berardino, ed., *Patrology*, iv: *The Golden Age of Latin Patristic Literature from the Council of Nicea to the Council of Chalcedon* (Westminster, Md.: Christian Classics Inc., 1983), 153-156, 167-168; *Verginità et vedovanza: Tutte le opere di Sant'Ambrogio*, 14/1-2, ed. Franco Gori (Milan: Biblioteca Ambrosiana, 1989), 62-63, 67, 69-70. Williams and Marksches both follow this dating. Hervé Savon gives a summary of attempts to date Ambrose's work and raises some questions about Palanque's dating of *De fide* in particular in her

The first task of this chapter will be to reposition Ambrose's first episcopal composition, *De virginibus*, and his succeeding work, *De virginitate*, in context of the conflicts over the nature of God at the end of the fourth century. Doing so will not only allow us to gauge their pertinence to theological conflict but also suggest something about how the language of virginity might service the creation of Nicene orthodoxy. It is hardly coincidence, I will suggest, that discourse about perpetual virginity was on the rise at the same time that the Nicene trinity was becoming the orthodox understanding of God in the western empire.

In order to contextualize these treatises, I will begin by tracing the broader contours of the Nicene-Homoian debate and Ambrose's personal involvement in the conflict throughout his career. In this study, I will not refer to the theological opponents of the more "Nicene" ideas about God as "Arians". I do this for two reasons. First of all, as many modern scholars have noted, many early Christian writers and thinkers who found themselves labeled "Arians" were often significantly at odds with Arius's ideas as well as with each other.⁴ Furthermore, most "Arians" in the late fourth century had little familiarity with Arius himself and would have likely denied any personal identification with his ideas.⁵ Instead, I will designate those Latin theologians who in general tended to

"Quelques remarques sur la chronologie des oeuvres de Saint Ambrose," in *Studia Patristica X*, ed. Frank L. Cross (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1970), 156-160.

⁴ See Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), chapter 5 (pp. 105-130) which deals with the creation of "Arianism" in the mid-fourth century.

⁵ See Maurice Wiles, "Attitudes to Arius in the Arian Controversy," in *Arianism After Arius: Essays on the Development of the Fourth Century Trinitarian Conflicts*, ed. Michel R. Barnes and Daniel H. Williams (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), 39-42.

assert that the Son is like (*homoios*) the Father and who largely rallied around the so-called Ariminum creed that designated him as such as “Homoians”.⁶ Secondly, a rejection of the specific terms “Arian” and “Arianism” allows a clearer view of the way in which polemical discourses are constructed in general and leads us to question the purposes for which such labels might be employed within the specific socio-political framework of fourth-century Milan. When I speak of “Arians” or “Arianism” in this chapter, I do not wish to connote a set of general or specific beliefs about the nature of God but rather intend to draw attention to the rhetoric itself as reflective of fluctuating socio-political agendas. To speak of “anti-Arianism” from the mid-fourth century on seems in fact redundant; the label of Arianism itself is one only used from Athanasius’s time in a negative sense and with largely pejorative purposes whenever it is employed.⁷

The second part of this chapter will attempt to position Ambrose’s first official treatise, *De virginibus*, and his subsequent piece, *De virginitate*, in context of the Nicene-Homoian conflicts in the Latin West. Although Ambrose was mainly concerned at this point with consolidating his own untried intellectual and ecclesiastical authority as bishop of Milan, we may nevertheless still detect something of his own commitments to so-

⁶ I am largely following both Williams and Neil McLynn’s practices here, although both alternately use “Arians” as well. See Williams, *Ambrose of Milan*, chapter 1 and McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan: Church and Court in a Christian Capital* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 3 n. 7. As another alternative, Lewis Ayres regroups “Arians” as “Eusebians” in order to suggest anyone who would have found any common ground at all with Arius or his most prominent supporters, Eusebius of Nicomedia or Eusebius of Caesarea. See Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy*, 52. Marcia Colish employs the term “anti-Nicene” in her “Why the Portiana? Reflections on the Milanese Basilica Crisis of 386” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 10.3 (2002): 361-372. “Homoian”, “Eusebian”, and “anti-Nicene” all work well to distance these thinkers from “Arianism” and the polemical purposes inherent in this term.

⁷ See Rebecca Lyman, “A Topography of Heresy: Mapping the Rhetorical Creation of Arianism,” in *Arianism After Arius*, 45-46. For a good summary of the some of the rhetorical uses of Arianism in the many centuries since the fourth, see Michael Slusser, “Traditional Views of Late Arianism,” in *Arianism After Arius*, 3-30.

called “Nicene” ideals in these treatises. While reluctant at this point to openly challenge the strong Homoian contingent of his clergy and congregation, he finds strategic ways to support and sustain certain visions of trinitarian orthodoxy that would not have been acceptable to many of his listeners. Christian virginity, and especially Marian virginity, become important for him in this endeavor. In these treatises, he draws upon both the virgin and the Virgin as foils for an intellectual formulation of the triune God of Nicea, attempting to give this version of orthodoxy the fortification of the prestige and blessedness that he assumes belongs to holy virginity.

More than a decade and a half later, Ambrose’s earlier rhetorical stylings of the holy trinity are again connected to virginity in his *De institutione virginis*. This time, however, anti-Homoian heresiology comes to the aid of a virginal ideal that is under attack. A widely-acknowledged intellectual and political authority by this time, Ambrose is largely freed from the burden of episcopal rivals; instead, he invokes language and scripture heavily infused with trinitarian meaning to connect ascetic critics to earlier Arian rivals. Within a cultural context in which actual Homoian opponents have been largely defeated, Ambrose is able to position certain understandings of Mary’s virginity, and ultimately his entire ascetic agenda, as prerequisites of proper Nicene orthodoxy. Faced with the criticisms of Bonosus, Jovinian, and other opponents of ascetic superiority, Ambrose defends his particular vision of the Mother of God’s perpetual virginity, and the preeminence of virginity in comparison to marriage, as a thoroughly trinitarian matter. Well-established rhetoric on the nature of God is employed to confirm the blessed status of Mary and all virgins as “God-bearers” and to reiterate the importance of a perpetually-closed womb for all who would be so.

I. From East to West: Trinitarian Debate in Fourth-Century Milan

According to Paulinus, Ambrose's ancient biographer, Ambrose's election as bishop of Milan was miraculously agreed upon by both Nicenes and Arians in a singular moment of remarkable harmony.⁸ Yet from there, much of Ambrose's career as bishop of Milan is styled as a mission against heresy of Arianism and its numerous proponents. As a catechumen, Paulinus claims, Ambrose insisted upon baptism by the hand of a Nicene bishop "for he was carefully guarding against the heresy of the Arians."⁹ Many of the public triumphs of his ecclesiastical career are modeled as victories over a constant Arian threat. For example, he successfully struggles for control of the Portian Basilica with the wicked Arian empress Justina and the "insane Arians."¹⁰ Later, Ambrose's discovery of the bones of the martyrs Protasis and Gervasius is doubted by "Jewish" Arians, but, in Paulinus's estimation, this miraculous happening still works to decrease the power of Arianism in Milan.¹¹

As part of the many public successes of Nicene orthodoxy, many miracles occur in and on account of the bishop's presence that serve to confound Arians and Arian heresy. A young girl from among the Arians is struck dead the day after she attempts to

⁸ Paulinus of Milan, *Vita Ambrosii* 2.6 in Michele Pellegrino, ed., *Paolino: Vita di S. Ambrogio [Verba Seniorum 1]* (Rome: Editrice Studium, 1961), 56-58.

⁹ Paulinus, *Vita Ambrosii* 2.9 (Pellegrino, 62).

¹⁰ Paulinus, *Vita Ambrosii* 3.13 (Pellegrino, 68).

¹¹ Paulinus, *Vita Ambrosii* 3.14-6 (Pellegrino, 70-74).

pull him down from his tribunal.¹² An Arian man is suddenly possessed by an unclean spirit and confesses the unity of the Trinity as Ambrose taught it.¹³ A similar dissident congregant is converted to the Nicene faith when he sees an angel whispering into the bishop's ear during a sermon.¹⁴ Two Arian chamberlains in Gratian's service are killed in a carriage accident for failing to keep their promise to return to Ambrose's presence and learn of the true incarnation of the Lord.¹⁵ For Paulinus, Ambrose is not only a bastion of Nicene orthodoxy but a divine scourge to all those who would stand against it.

More than twenty five years later, perhaps Ambrose's career did seem like one life-long theological battle resulting in a miraculous triumph over Arianism.¹⁶ But it is more likely that Paulinus's historical musings better reflected his current concerns for the resurrection of some Homoian doctrines and new Arian opponents in the form of the empire's increasingly prominent barbarian allies.¹⁷ Whatever prominent role Ambrose of Milan was to play ultimately in the fourth-century theological controversies over the nature of God, it is far more likely that he approached his ecclesiastical appointment in 374 with some trepidation, reluctance, and perhaps even humility. For nearly twenty

¹² Paulinus, *Vita Ambrosii*, 3.11 (Pellegrino, 64-66).

¹³ Paulinus, *Vita Ambrosii* 3.16 (Pellegrino, 74).

¹⁴ Paulinus, *Vita Ambrosii* 3.17 (Pellegrino, 74).

¹⁵ Paulinus, *Vita Ambrosii* 3.18 (Pellegrino, 74-76).

¹⁶ Paulinus's biography of Ambrose is thought to have been written either around 412-413 or at the later date of 422. See Émilien Lamirande, *Paulin de Milan et la Vita Ambrosii* (Paris: Desclée, 1983), 7, 21-24 for a most persuasive argument for the former dating, and Angelo Paredi, "Paulinus of Milan," *Sacris Erudiri* 14 (1963): 206-230 for a summary of arguments and modern authors who support the later date.

¹⁷ McLynn notes that by Paulinus's time the "[Homoian] doctrines that Ambrose had once dismissed with a brusque anathema were once more in the air." See McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan, 372-373* and Williams, *Ambrose of Milan*, 105 n. 7.

years previous, Auxentius, the former bishop of Milan, had been an important figure in the anti-Nicene movement in the west and the recently-deceased bishop cast a long shadow over the episcopal see which Ambrose was inheriting.

Despite several external attempts to anathematize him and drive him from his bishopric, Auxentius had steadily supported Homoian theology in Milan and consistently maintaining his see for nearly twenty years—no small feat for any bishop, Nicene or Homoian, during the fourth century. His uninterrupted reign from 355 to 374 had been one of the most lengthy and important for the anti-Nicene cause in the western empire. The numerous anathemas of councils in Gaul, Spain, and Italy had no noticeable impact on Auxentius's power in Milan. Despite attempts by Filastrius, future bishop of Brixia, and the formidable Hilary of Poitiers to remove the bishop, Auxentius held his position as bishop of the second most powerful see in Italy and aggressively pursued an anti-Nicene agenda both within and without the borders of his own bishopric.¹⁸ As the successor of Auxentius, Ambrose had to work to gain the support of a congregation and clergy that was still largely Auxentius's.¹⁹

Williams has argued persuasively that the theological commitments of Auxentius and other Homoian Christians in the West were largely represented by the so-called Homoian or Ariminum creed of 359/360.²⁰ Reiterating the supremacy of the Nicene creed and roundly condemning Arius, adoptionism, ditheism, and the temporal generation

¹⁸ My summary here of Auxentius's episcopacy relies heavily upon both Michel Meslin, *Les Ariens d'Occident, 335-430* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1967), 44-58 and Williams, *Ambrose of Milan*, 76-83.

¹⁹ McLynn, casting into doubt Paulinus's claim that Ambrose's election had been unanimous, notes that Ambrose's appointment did not give him the authority to replace Auxentius's largely-Homoian clergy as some bishops received. See McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 54.

²⁰ Williams, *Ambrose of Milan*, 11.

of the Son,²¹ the creed excluded the language of *ousia* and *homoousios* and also confessed that “the Son was like the Father” while excluding the controversial phrase “in all things.” The Son of God was professed to be unlike other creatures, ambiguous as to whether he was a creature himself or not.²² This creed, approved by Auxentius of Milan and many other prominent anti-Nicenes, becomes critical later on to the establishment of a more distinctive Homoian identity in the West.²³

As we will see, some of the elements of the Ariminum creed, or slightly skewed versions of them, appear and reappear in Ambrose’s writings against those he blatantly terms “Arians” as well as those guilty of other brands of heresy. A young man from a Christian aristocratic family in Rome, Ambrose claimed some indirect family ties to the Nicene bishop of Rome, Liberius, and was thus more likely by his upbringing to look unfavorably upon the Homoian inclinations of Auxentius of Milan.²⁴ Yet as a young bishop, he tread lightly at first among these theological landmines of the Milanese episcopacy. Without doubt, the persistent Nicene-Homoian issues were at the heart of the social discontent that Ambrose, as a young city magistrate, was sent to quell, and which ultimately led to his election as bishop. His supposedly unanimous election recorded by both Paulinus and Rufinus of Aquileia suggests that he was assumed to be a

²¹ This is largely Duval’s thesis in Yves-Marie Duval, “Une traduction latine inédite du Symbole de Nicée et une condamnation d’Arius à Rimini: Nouveau fragment historique d’Hilaire ou pièces des Actes du concile?” *Revue Bénédictine* 82 (1972): 7-25.

²² Williams, *Ambrose of Milan*, 25-29 and Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy*, 160-161.

²³ Williams, *Ambrose of Milan*, 36-37.

²⁴ McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 35-36 and Williams, *Ambrose of Milan*, 82. Williams argues that under Auxentius’s episcopacy the Homoian see of Milan was becoming increasingly embarrassing to the growing power of the Nicene bishops of Rome. Ambrose’s ties to Liberius, bishop of Rome, will be discussed at length at a later point in this chapter.

candidate either neutral or very accommodating in his theological affiliations.²⁵ It was most likely both ignorance of the finer points of trinitarian argumentation as well as reluctance to trouble the precarious peace between these factions that left the bishop without a written word for the first two years of his office.

II. *De virginibus* in Nicene-Homoian Debate

For the subject of his first official treatise as bishop of Milan, *De virginibus*, Ambrose chose virginity and addressed his writings to a virgin, his sister Marcellina at Rome.²⁶ Neil McLynn has suggested that such a choice was made out of reluctance to directly confront his opponents in the continuing controversy over the nature of God.²⁷ McLynn, Williams, and others have noted that Ambrose's explicit engagement with Homoian theology and the so-called Arians does not appear until his later composition of *De fide*.²⁸ I will argue that *De virginibus* is nevertheless reflective of the surrounding Trinitarian conflict in some important ways. Although Ambrose does not engage in a specifically Arian rhetoric or argue overtly against Homoian ideas, this treatise contains

²⁵ Paulinus's account of the unanimity of Ambrose's election corresponds to that of Rufinus of Aquileia in his *Historia Ecclesiastica* 11.11 (GCS 2.2, 1018-1019).

²⁶ Very little is known of Ambrose's sister Marcellina. *De virginibus* was dedicated to her and contains a few of the bishop's remarks on her induction to the virginal life by the bishop Liberius (3.3.1 [Gori, I, 205-206]). Ambrose dedicated at least three other letters to her (*Ep.* 20, 22, 41) dealing with various theological and political issues but that provide little information on her life. She apparently lived in the company of other virgins at Rome (Ambrose, *Ep.* 56.21[CSEL 82.2, 96]). Paulinus of Milan cites Marcellina as one of his sources for his later biography of Ambrose (Paulinus, *Vita Ambrosii*, 1.1 [Pellegrino, 50]). McLynn has suggested that Marcellina was responsible for the wide dispersion of Ambrose's *De virginibus* at Rome; see McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 60-61.

²⁷ McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 60.

²⁸ See McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 102-106; Williams, *Ambrose of Milan*, 128-129; Angelo Paredi, *Saint Ambrose: His Life and Times* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1964), 176.

his earliest written statements on the nature of God and represents his first attempt to establish himself as a theological authority in Milan.

As Duval has noted, Ambrose's *De virginibus* was profoundly influenced by Athanasius's first *Letter to Virgins*,²⁹ a treatise infused with anti-Homoian ideology. Much of the language and structure of the treatise are replicated and adapted by Ambrose for his own purposes. For example, Athanasius had asserted earlier the necessity of knowing one's Bridegroom correctly to the virgins of his flock:

If your bridegroom were a human being, it would be possible for you to ask your parents or your relatives about him, what kind of person he was, and you would be uncertain about him ... Inasmuch as you have sought the superhuman glory and desire to join yourselves in Christ, it is necessary for you to become acquainted with him not through simply anyone, but through the people who speak about God just as the Scriptures do.³⁰

Like Athanasius, Ambrose found a treatise on virginity to be an appropriate place to speak on Trinitarian matters. "For it is fitting, O virgin, that you should fully know him whom you love, and should recognize in him all the mystery of his divine nature and the body which he has assumed."³¹ Although Ambrose is clearly following Athanasius in his own assertion here, he avoids the heresiological language of his predecessor. He dilutes Athanasius's more direct jab at theological opponents—those who are just "anyone" and who speak of God in ways others than scripture purportedly does—into a

²⁹ Yves-Marie Duval, "L'originalité du *De uirginibus* dans le mouvement ascétique occidental: Ambroise, Cyprien, Athanase." in *Ambroise de Milan: XVIe centenaire de son élection épiscopale*, ed. Y.-M. Duval (Paris: Études augustiniennes, 1974), 29-53.

³⁰ Athanasius, *Ep. virg.* 1.37 in David Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 286.

³¹ Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.8.46 (Gori, I, 146).

more mild recommendation that a virgin know the mysteriousness of her Bridegroom's nature and body.

Indeed, it seems almost enough for Ambrose that the audience of *De virginibus* merely understand that the Trinity is both divine and mysterious. Throughout most of the text, he makes only a few brief remarks on the subject. The true virgin, lifted from life on earth into heaven, would find the Word of God awaiting her in the bosom of the Father.³² Ambrose asserts the virginal life as the heavenly life first introduced to earth when the Lord joined together Godhead and flesh without any confusion or mixture at his coming.³³ Christ, the figure of God, equals the Father fully in his nature and thus expresses the whole which he took from the Father.³⁴ Christ has both human and divine natures and existed before being born of the Virgin.³⁵ Ambrose offers these bits of theology only sporadically and casually, either assuming much of his audience or merely avoiding the detailed explanations many of his points seem to demand. Instead, he focuses upon practical instructions for virgins and stories of those who exemplified the virginal lifestyle.

It is only in the final book of *De virginibus* that Ambrose engages with trinitarian theology at any significant length:

He was born after the manner of men, of a Virgin, but was begotten of the Father before all things, resembling His mother in body, His Father in power. Only-begotten on earth, and Only-begotten in heaven. God of God, born of a Virgin, Righteousness from the Father, Power from the Mighty One, Light of Light, not

³² Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.3.11 (Gori, I, 110-112).

³³ Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.3.13 (Gori, I, 116).

³⁴ Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.8.48 (Gori, I, 148).

³⁵ Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.8.46 (Gori, I, 146).

unequal to his Father, nor separated in power, not confused by extension of the Word or enlargement as though mingled with the Father, but distinguished from the Father by virtue of His generation... If, then, Christ is the Power of God, was God ever without power? Was the Father ever without the Son? If the Father of a certainty always was, of a certainty the Son always was. So He is the perfect Son of a perfect Father ... Perfect divinity does not admit of inequality.³⁶

Here we may perceive a reiteration of basic creedal language combined with some general pro-Nicene concerns for the status of the Son as coeternal, equal to, and perfectly unified in power with the Father while unique in his status as Only-begotten. Yet Ambrose dilutes the potency of this probable Nicene statement in some important ways. Most noticeable is his avoidance of strong affirmative language in favor of weaker negative descriptors of what Christ is *not* with respect to his equality with the Father. Ambrose posits that the Word is not unequal (*non impar generantis*) to the Father and that the Godhead does not admit inequality (*inequalitatem non recipit*). With such phrasing, he avoids any direct affirmation of their equality; he sidesteps the forum of Homoian-Nicene debate and its intricate, theologically-sophisticated discussions about exactly what the Word's equality with the Father entailed.

Ambrose also avoids involvement in this controversy through a clever act of ventriloquism. The bishop maintains that the teachings of the aforementioned passage were not his own; he claims to be merely reiterating the words which Liberius, bishop of Rome, spoke upon the occasion of the veiling of Ambrose's sister, the virgin Marcellina, a number of years before. Duval has noted a parallel between Ambrose's supposed

³⁶ Ambrose, *De virg.* 3.1.2, 4 (Gori, I, 208-212): *Hodie quidem secundum hominem homo natus ex uirgine, sed ante omnia generatus ex patre, qui matrem corpore, uirtute referat patrem: unigenitus in terris, unigenitus in caelo, deus ex deo, partus ex uirgine, iustitia de patre, uirtus de potente, lumen ex lumine, non impar generantis, non potestate discretus, non uerbi extensione aut prolatione confusus, ut cum patre mixtus, sed ut a patre generationis iure distinctus sit. ... Si igitur uirtus dei Christus, numquid aliquando sine uirtute deus? Numquid aliquando sine filio pater? Si semper utique pater, utique semper et filius. Perfecti ergo patris perfectus est filius. ... Inaequalitatem non recipit perfecta diuinitas.*

quotation of the words of Liberius and Athanasius's quotation of Alexander of Alexandria to teach virgins about the Trinity in his first *Letter to Virgins*. Both seem to borrow a well-established ecclesiastical figure to serve as mediator for their own ideas. Although Ambrose claims to be merely quoting the teachings of another bishop, it is likely that at least some of the assertions and sentiments expressed in Liberius's voice actually reflect his own personal ideas.³⁷

Even if we may better understand the presence of Alexander and Liberius as mediators of Ambrose's own personal ideas, we may nevertheless profitably explore the social, political, and theological significance of these mediatory choices. Alexander was Athanasius's predecessor to the see of Alexandria and the bishop over the priest Arius with whom he came in conflict sometime between 318 and 322 over the nature of God. He was also one of those directly responsible for Arius's excommunication at the Council of Nicea in 325.³⁸ As such, he probably seemed a natural choice when Athanasius sought for a well-known face for his anti-Arian rhetoric. In his speech, "Alexander" begins by emphasizing the unity of the Son and Father in substance and glory and the Son's status as Word, Wisdom, and Power.³⁹ Yet Athanasius seems consistently, explicitly concerned to answer Homoian theologians by stressing the continued equality of the Father and Son despite the Son's appearance in flesh and to condemn those who say that the Word was created, came into existence after the Father, or was foreign in any way to the substance

³⁷ Duval, "L'originalité du *De virginibus*," 50-51.

³⁸ See Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy*, 15-20.

³⁹ Athanasius, *Ep .virg.* 38 (Brakke, 286).

of the Father.⁴⁰ Unlike Ambrose's Liberius, "Alexander" expounds in lengthy detail the intricacies of the mysterious relationship between the Father and Son. He warns that virgins--and, in turn, others--will be misled by those who lie against the Bridegroom by purposely misunderstanding the Son's relationship with the Father, or do not speak about the triune God "just as the scriptures do" by teaching specifically Homoian doctrines.⁴¹

Athanasius employs the previous bishop of Alexandria as the upholder of truth in the face of Arian heresy in other of his writings beyond this letter. For example, in his *Contra Arianos*, written in 339/340, Athanasius attributes a certain series of opinions in contemporary debate to Arius. Arius, in turn, is modeled as a heresiarch who was the direct successor to the devil himself.⁴² In order to highlight Arius's evil, Athanasius erects an idealized portrait of Alexander who stands for righteousness in an epic struggle between good and evil. As Rebecca Lyman has argued, the construction of the truth and holiness of Alexander in the face of Arian error and evil has an important socio-political function; it allows Athanasius to claim personal authority as the disciple and true successor of Alexander whose job it is to reveal the error of Arian heresy in turn and consolidate his position as the bishop of Alexandria.⁴³

⁴⁰ Athanasius, *Ep .virg.* 37-43 (Brakke, 286-288).

⁴¹ Athanasius, *Ep .virg.* 37, 42 (Brakke, 286, 288).

⁴² Athanasius, *Apologia. contra Arianos* 1.1-2 (PG 25, 248-252).

⁴³ Lyman, "A Topography of Heresy," 53-55. See also Charles Kannengiesser, *Athanase d'Alexandrie, évêque et écrivain: une lecture des traités* Contre les ariennes. (Paris: Éditions Beauchesne, 1983), 119-120.

If we can assume that Athanasius' *First Letter to Virgins* was composed in 339 as David Brakke has asserted,⁴⁴ we may date this appearance of Alexander contemporary to his appearance in *Contra Arianos*. These treatises were composed close to the period in which Athanasius had only recently returned from exile and was struggling to consolidate his episcopal power in Alexandria. It is no coincidence that these were the years in which Athanasius began to refer openly to his theological opponents as "Arians," and that "Arianism" as a separate, heretical movement took shape in his writings. In formulating a specific set of anti-Arian teachings and placing them in the mouth of Alexander, Athanasius established a set of ideological positions as natural to Arius while tying a radically contrasting one to the see of Alexandria. Then Athanasius, showing himself the true "heir" of Alexandrian theology, was able to consolidate his own claim to the bishopric.

It seems likely that Ambrose's use of Liberius was inspired by Athanasius's rhetorical construction of Alexander. Ambrose, however, does not employ Liberius's voice to the extent or to the ends that Athanasius does Alexander's. In Liberius's voice, Ambrose expresses concern to instruct virgins in correct trinitarian doctrines. But unlike Athanasius, the Milanese bishop seems less interested in situating himself as the heir of pro-Nicene orthodoxy than in simply establishing himself as an intellectual, social, and ecclesiastical force to be reckoned with. His very choice of Liberius as a mouthpiece for his ideas about the nature of God reveals something of this.

Ambrose was in a position somewhat similar to that of Athanasius when he composed *De virginibus*. As the new bishop in a city rife with Trinitarian tension, his

⁴⁴ For the dating of Athanasius's *First Letter to Virgins*, see Brakke, *Athanasius*, xvi and 268.

personal theological authority was largely unestablished. Furthermore, his hold on the see itself was somewhat tenuous. As noted earlier, the figure of the Homoian Auxentius probably still loomed large in the minds of many of his clergy and congregation. Yet Ambrose's pro-Nicene commitments ruled out the possibility that he might style himself Auxentius's theological heir in the way that Athanasius had attempted with Alexander over forty years earlier.

Liberius, on the other hand, was an excellent choice for a bishop who wished to establish his own authority without personally challenging the Homoian faction in Milan. First of all, Ambrose could already claim some indirect association to the powerful Roman bishop through his sister Marcellina, who had received the virginal veil from his hands. His quotation of Liberius in *De virginibus* is intended to highlight this prestigious connection. Ambrose recalls for his audience in detail the day in which his sister Marcellina received the veil from the hands of the blessed bishop in the splendor of St. Peter's as many holy virgins waited and vied for her blessed attention and companionship,⁴⁵ touting the fame and popularity of his own family. Then, on Liberius's established authority rather than his own, Ambrose lightly touches upon issues of trinitarian importance without drawing attention to himself or engaging in local theological argumentation. Such a display seems intended to enhance Ambrose's status as a well-connected, well-informed theologian rather than a champion of pro-Nicene orthodoxy.

In light of these considerations, it is not surprising that Ambrose's Liberius approaches trinitarian controversy with a much lighter hand than Athanasius does,

⁴⁵ Ambrose, *De virg.* 3.1.1 (Gori, I, 204-206).

dwelling upon issues of Father and Son only briefly, superficially, and even reluctantly.⁴⁶ Much of his language merely reiterates standard creedal language without sophisticated, nuanced explanations such as those offered by Athanasius. Instead, “Liberius” is eager to show off his knowledge (albeit superficial and largely unimpressive) of some of the christological debates of the time. He briefly and generally touches upon some standard pro-Nicene ideas such as the unity and coeternal nature of the Father and Son but then also alludes broadly to the errors of other perceived heretics such as Marcellus of Ancyra and Photinus.⁴⁷ The explicitly heresiological language of Athanasius’s passage is missing; Arians do not seem to be targeted any more than other theological factions. The only group Ambrose seems to specifically target in *De virginibus* are those who may be troubled when they read that the Lord took upon himself a body of pain, and perhaps they are invoked only to create space for the bishop to display his knowledge of older, well-established Latin rhetoric against adoptionism.⁴⁸ Ambrose is clearly not as interested in rooting out heretics and confounding false doctrines as much as he wishes to show his

⁴⁶ Athanasius’s Alexander speaks about Trinitarian concerns for almost three times as long as Ambrose’s Liberius. See Athanasius, *Ep. virg.* 36-45 (Brakke, 286-288). Ambrose concludes his briefer “quotation” with *haec quantum ad fidem* (“so much as to the faith”), possibly indicating to those who may be weary of or in disagreement with him on this subject that he this kind of argumentation is only peripheral to his work. See Ambrose, *De virg.* 3.1.4 (Gori, I, 212).

⁴⁷ Ambrose, *De virg.*, 3.1.2 (Gori, I, 208). While not separated in power, Ambrose says that Father and Son are also not confused, extended, or enlarged in the generation of the Son; this was common Latin understanding of the teachings of Marcellus of Ancyra, his disciple Photinus, and other “monarchians”. Marksches also ties this teaching as anti-Valentinian. See Marksches, *Ambrosius von Mailand*, 108 n. 136 and also Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, 127-8, 134-5.

⁴⁸ In *De virg.* 3.5.22-23 (Gori, I, 226-228), Ambrose addresses those who may be “troubled at reading that the Lord took a body of pain,” implying a pseudo-adoptionist audience. Although some pro-Nicene fathers opposed Photinus and Marcellus because they seemed to imply adoptionism, it is more probable that Ambrose is not responding to any real or perceived threat in his community as much as simply following the standard Latin argumentation that earlier western theologians such as Lactantius and Novatian had developed before him. For a good summary of the development of western anti-adoptionism, see Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy*, 70-76.

own learned engagement in trinitarian theology in general as well as his prestigious connection with the blessed Liberius.

As with Athanasius' choice of Alexander, Liberius was a significant choice for Ambrose because of the Roman bishop's personal political history. Although generally pro-Nicene, Liberius had proven himself doctrinally flexible when politics demanded it. He succeeded Julius as bishop of Rome in 352 and at first tried to establish neutrality between pro-Nicene and Homoian factions in his policies and also by renouncing Athanasius. Before long, however, his views changed; he openly expressed support for Athanasius and began resisting the emperor Constantius's pro-Homoian policies. As a result, he was forced into exile in 355. In 358, Liberius was allowed to return to Rome after he again renounced Athanasius, claimed communion with Auxentius and other Homoians, and signed the Sirmium Manifesto or "Homoian" Creed of 351. After his return to Rome, he reinstated some of his previous anti-Homoian policies and procedures but was able to hold his see perpetually thereafter until his death in 366.⁴⁹

Although Liberius seemed more sympathetic to the pro-Nicene viewpoint in general, he was clearly an astute politician willing to make ideological sacrifices to maintain his authority in Rome. For Ambrose to quote such an ecclesiastical politician was perhaps an expression of his own commitment to hold peace between the two factions, or at least to not interfere openly with opposing groups, when personal power was at stake. Drawing upon Liberius's voice as one of authority allowed Ambrose to imply some alignment with the pro-Nicene faction without making any open declaration

⁴⁹ For a summary of these events in Liberius's career, see Meslin, *Les Ariens*, 38-42. See also Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy*, 136, 177 (n. 26), 178.

of war upon the anti-Nicene contingent in Milan or elsewhere.⁵⁰ The young bishop was more interested in impressing upon his audience the breadth of his knowledge and intellect rather than his personal beliefs about the nature of God.

Thus far, we have discussed Ambrose's employment of small, vague bits of trinitarian theology and the literary device of a mediatory voice to make an impression and perhaps gently pledge a personal, and yet nonbelligerent, allegiance to pro-Nicene ideas in *De virginibus*. In this treatise, we may also perceive him to be working out the beginnings of what will later become a fully-developed ideology of virginity that corresponds to a kind of anti-Homoian politics. Ambrose saw the potential to affirm the Nicene faith through certain expositions of virginity itself. In virginity, Ambrose found a subject both transcendent and earthly and a language flexible enough so that he might venture to explain the triune God. For example, virginity could be used to reflect upon some of the more mysterious elements of God's nature:

And what is virginal chastity if not purity free from stain? And whom can we judge to be its author if not the immaculate Son of God, whose flesh saw no corruption, whose godhead experienced no infection? Consider, then, how great are the merits of virginity. Christ was before the Virgin, Christ was [born] of the Virgin. Begotten indeed of the Father before the ages, but born of the Virgin for the ages.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Liberius was probably the prudent choice for Ambrose on account of other factors as well. While Liberius had died in 366, rival factions in Rome were arguing over the election of Liberius's successor when *De virginibus* was composed in 377. One group supported Ursinus, a deacon to Liberius, while the other supported Damasus, who ascended to the see in 378. Not wishing to embrace the Homoian Auxentius nor show allegiance to either contender before the issue was settled, Ambrose may have had few other relatively neutral episcopal voices in which he could speak.

⁵¹ Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.5.21 (Gori, I, 122-124): *Quid autem est castitas uirginalis nisi expers contagionis integritas? Atque eius auctorem quem possumus aestimare nisi immaculatum dei filium, cuius caro non uidit corruptionem, diuinitas non est experta contagionem? Videte igitur quanta uirginitatis merita sint. Christus ante uirginem, Christus ex uirgine, a patre quidem natus ante saecula, sed ex uirgine natus ob saecula.*

Christ--immaculate, uncorrupted, and uninfected—is both God and archetypal virgin, both father and son to the Virgin, both preceding and resulting from virginity. The merits of the virginal Christ are here modeled as the merits of virginity itself. Styling a Son who preexists his earthly mother and is coeternal with his divine Father, Ambrose is perhaps purposely ambiguous about whether Christ gives merit to virginity through his own divine trinitarian status or whether virginity itself empowers the Word and propels him into his divine and exalted position. Either way, Ambrose is forging a link between the orthodox position of the divine Word and true virginal chastity, making them increasingly interdependent. While the Son of God glorifies virginity by authoring it in himself, the merits of virginity may also serve to reinforce his divine status.

For example, Christian virgins replicate God the Word's assumption of an "unmixed" human body.⁵²

Who then can deny that this mode of life [virginity] came down from heaven, this life which we don't easily find on earth until God came down into the members of an earthly body? Then a Virgin conceived, and the Word became flesh that flesh might become God. ... After the Lord, coming in our flesh, joined together the Godhead and flesh without any synthesis or mixture, then the practice of the life of heaven spreading throughout the whole world was implanted in human bodies.⁵³

Here virginity is tightly intertwined with the incarnation of God. The Lord, joining God and flesh at his coming, is the heavenly originator of virginity and widely dispersed its practice when on earth. Affirming the incarnate Word's unmixed nature,

⁵² Cf. Athanasius's teachings on virginity. See Brakke, *Athanasius*, 18.

⁵³ Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.3.11, 13 (Gori, I, 112, 116): *Quis igitur neget hanc uitam fluxisse de caelo, quam non facile inuenimus in terris, nisi postquam deus in haec terreni corporis membra descendit? Tunc in utero uirgo concepit et uerbum caro factum est, ut caro fieret deus. ... At uero posteaquam dominus in corpus hoc ueniens contubernium diuinitatis et corporis sine ulla concretae confusionis labe sociauit, tunc toto orbe diffusus corporibus humanis uitae caelestis usus inoleuit.*

Ambrose connects this orthodox understanding of God to the dispersion of the practice of virginity throughout the earth, perhaps suggesting that the Lord's unconfused being established the original pattern for virgins who also seek to keep themselves "unmixed" with their flesh through their abstinence and ascetic discipline.⁵⁴ Thus holy Christian virgins, untainted by any mingling of their souls with the flesh, might serve as a reflection of the Nicene God's unmixed divine and human aspects.

In *De virginibus*, Ambrose begins to formulate a theology of Christ's particular espousal to virgins and to the Virgin in particular. Mary is represented as the quintessential Christian virgin, the embodiment of ascetic virtue who lives in seclusion, fasts consistently, ponders scripture, sleeps only a little, and acts with complete modesty in all situations.⁵⁵ Since Christ is understood to be the spouse of all Christian virgins, he is thus also a marital companion to this exemplary Virgin herself.⁵⁶ As we will see, this novel reading of the Virgin as mother, daughter, and spouse of Christ in *De virginibus* positions Mary as a unique socio-theological space throughout much of Ambrose's career.

In this triple manifestation, Ambrose employs the Virgin as a foil to his theological reflections upon the nature of a God who is eternal while temporal and

⁵⁴ Although Ambrose never makes a more explicit connection between the Son's unmixed nature and the virgin's unstained spirit and flesh, he readily identifies virgins with the angels of heaven who are joined to the Word (Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.3.11 [Gori, I, 112]). In fact, chastity is the defining characteristic of angels for Ambrose: "For chastity has made even angels. He who has preserved it is an angel; he who has lost it a devil" (Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.9.52 [Gori, I, 150]), and it is incontinence that caused some angels to fall from heaven into the world (Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.9.53 [Gori, I, 152]).

⁵⁵ Ambrose, *De virg.* 2.2.6-15 (Gori, I, 168-176).

⁵⁶ "Christ was before the Virgin, Christ was of the Virgin ... Christ is the spouse of the Virgin ..." (Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.5.21-22 [Gori, I, 124]). For the general espousal of Christian virgins to Christ, see *ibid.*, 1.7.37 (Gori, I, 138); 1.11.62 (Gori, I, 160); 2.2.16 (Gori, I, 176), 2.6.41-2 (Gori, I, 200), 3.1.1. (Gori, I, 206), and also the example of Agnes (1.2.9 [Gori, I, 110]; 1.3.11 [Gori, I, 110]).

begotten without being made. Virginia Burrus has noted some important connections between Ambrose's Nicene theology and this incarnation of the Virgin Mary as a symbolic figure in *De virginibus*. Burrus sees in Ambrose's initially stated intention to "announce the family of the Lord" in this treatise a desire to talk literally about the very generation of Christ. And in speaking on the subject of virginity, she posits, he is doing exactly this.⁵⁷ All the virgins of his narrative and the virgins he addresses are collapsed into the iconic figure of the Virgin herself. Then Ambrose may use the Virgin to discuss Christ's nature. In her triple roles as daughter, mother, and wife to God in his narrative, the Virgin reflects a Christ that is all at once a father, a son, and a husband. Burrus asserts that this "singularly promiscuous Virgin, by repeatedly coupling with the divine Man (but never in the same position!), miraculously gives birth to the triune God of Nicene faith."⁵⁸

For Burrus, the Virgin's various bridal partnerings with the Spirit, the Son, and the Father throughout *De virginibus* also emphasize the very oneness of God.⁵⁹ To this end, Ambrose even allows the Father to "borrow" the womb of the Virgin to testify to the mystery of the eternal generation of the Son from the Father: "He it is whom the Father begat before the morning star, as being eternal, he brought him forth from the womb (*ex utero generavit*) as the Son ..."⁶⁰ Speaking ambiguously about the owner of this womb that bears Christ (and more blatantly attributing it to the Father in later works), Ambrose

⁵⁷ Virginia Burrus, "*Begotten, Not Made*": *Conceiving Manhood in Late Antiquity* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000), 142. Burrus is referring here to Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.1.4.

⁵⁸ Burrus, "*Begotten, Not Made*," 143-144.

⁵⁹ Burrus, "*Begotten, Not Made*," 144-145.

⁶⁰ Ambrose, *De virg.* 3.1.3 (Gori, I, 210).

finds space to discuss the miracle of Christ's eternal generation from an incorporeal, invisible Father.⁶¹ In his later, more overtly polemical works, Burrus sees the Virgin serving as both a symbol of the church and the foil for an "Arian" threat that he formulated to draw attention away from pressing local concerns.⁶² In short, the Father, Son, and Spirit are constantly "playing" the Virgin in Ambrose's writings.⁶³

III. *De virginitate* in Nicene-Homoian Debate

After Ambrose's extensive exposition of the graces and holiness of the Virgin in *De virginibus*, it is almost surprising that no traces of this Nicene Marian figure can be found at all in Ambrose's *De virginitate*, a shorter treatise published not long thereafter.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Burrus, "Begotten, Not Made," 150, cf. Burrus's discussion of the Father's "stolen womb" in *De Fide* on 158.

⁶² Burrus, "Begotten, Not Made," 136, 152-167.

⁶³ Burrus, "Begotten, Not Made," 166.

⁶⁴ There is a good deal of debate over the exact dating of *De virginitate*. Palanque, Cazzaniga, Paredi, McLynn, Adkin, and others assign to the treatise earlier dates ranging from 377 to 379, while Wildebrand, Dassman, Gori, Power, and others date its composition to sometime between 378 and 392 on account of its greater sophistication and probable reliance upon Origen. For arguments favoring the earlier dating, see Palanque, *Saint Ambroise*, 494-495; Paredi, *Saint Ambrose*, 142-143; McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 63-64.

I am persuaded to date this treatise to 377 or 378 by the clear, responsive nature of Ambrose's arguments in *De virginitate* to concerns raised by *De virginibus*, a matter which will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter. Furthermore, Neil Adkin has marked Jerome's familiarity with Ambrose's *De virginitate* in the former's *Ep. 22*, further suggesting the earlier composition of Ambrose's treatise. (See Adkin, "A Note on the Date of Ambrose's *De virginitate*," *Athanaeum* 81[71].2 (1993): 644-647.)

The Origenist "sophistication" marked by Power and others seems unoriginal, undeveloped, and largely superficial in *De virginitate* and thus seems to be feature more likely born from the young bishop's desire to impress and overwhelm rather than an acquired theological acumen. Ignazio Cazzaniga argues that *De virginitate* was considered to be an appendix to *De virginibus* on account of the manuscript tradition's general failure to attribute to the former a distinctive title. (See Cazzaniga, *S. Ambrosii Mediolanensis Episcopi de Virginitate liber unus* (Turin: Paravia, 1954), xvii-xxii.)

For a summary of arguments on the matter, see Michaela Zelzer, "Das ambrosianische Corpus De virginitate und seine Rezeption im Mittelalter," in *Studia Patristica XXXVIII*, ed. Maurice F. Wiles, Edward Yarnold, and P.M. Parvis (Leuven: Peeters, 2001), 515-520 and Zelzer, "Quam dulcis pudicitiae fructus: Gli scritti Ambrosiani sulla verginità," *La Scuola Cattolica* 125 (1997): 813-816.

Mary is mentioned only once as the one who conceives and bears the Son of God as a sweet fragrance.⁶⁵ Although Ambrose may have been working toward some exposition of Nicene orthodoxy in *De virginibus*, he seems to set this theme aside temporarily in favor of more pressing social matters. Public challenges to the ascetic ideology he had developed therein now demanded his immediate response.⁶⁶

In an attempt to cool the flames of the fire he had started, Ambrose constructed in *De virginitate* what McLynn has called “a masterpiece of evasion.”⁶⁷ After a brief personal defense of his ascetic program, Ambrose spends a large portion of the work (sections 45-88) immersing his audience in the heady language and imagery of the Song of Songs as a kind of diversionary tool. The result is a mystical and somewhat disjointed exegesis that seems less intended to teach doctrines than to impress upon the Milanese community their bishop’s intellectual erudition and his absolute authority in matters both theological and social. This motive is further suggested by his probable reliance upon both Origen’s and Hippolytus’s commentaries on the Song of Songs in his exegesis.⁶⁸ Mystical and complex, these commentaries were impressive displays of the earlier

⁶⁵ Ambrose, *De virgt.* 11.65 (Gori, II, 56).

⁶⁶ The exact nature and events of this public opposition to Ambrose’s ascetic ideology will be discussed at length a subsequent chapter.

⁶⁷ McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 63.

⁶⁸ Some aspects of Ambrose’s understanding may have been gleaned from Origen’s commentary and homilies on the Song as well. While many of Origen’s theological ideas had become largely controversial during the fourth century, writers such as Ambrose still were able to glean from his work some of the less innocuous bits for their own interpretations. On the fourth-century controversy over Origen, see Elizabeth A. Clark, *The Origenist Controversy: The Cultural Construction of an Early Christian Debate* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

writers' extensive exegetical talents.⁶⁹ Ambrose follows their sophisticated expositions of the soul's relationship to her heavenly Bridegroom to divert attention from the present controversy and instead speak about a more politic subject: the blessedness of the ascetic life in general.

Although intended to impress and divert, *De virginitate* displays some of the same trinitarian preoccupations of *De virginibus*. Ambrose's single most explicit foray into trinitarian theology comes by means of a mystical digression from Song of Songs 5.5 ("I arose to open to my beloved, and my hands dripped with myrrh, my fingers with liquid myrrh, upon the handles of the bolt"). Virginité "opens" one to Christ in order that the virgin may receive the fragrance of the ever-blooming Word.⁷⁰ The lush imagery of hands overflowing with a costly, perfumed ointment leads Ambrose beyond the virtues of virginité into an exposition of fragrant unguent as a metaphor for Trinitarian unity.

Predictably, his interpretation of this metaphor is highly fluid and ambiguous. At first, the fragrance of myrrh is the scent of Nicodemus's faith as he brings ointments for the body of Christ, and the scent emitted by every soul who believes.⁷¹ But then it is the

⁶⁹ Franco Gori argues for Origen's influence on this reading in Gori, ed., *Verginità et vedovanza II*, 74. See also Ernst Dassmann, "Ecclesia uel anima: Die Kirche und ihre Gliederung in der Hoheliederklärung bei Hippolyt, Origenes und Ambrosius von Mailand," *Römische Quartalschrift für christliche Altertumskunde und Kirchengeschichte* 61 (1966): 121-144, and McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 64. Hugo Raher has registered the striking parallels between Ambrose's interpretation of the Song in *De virginitate* and Hippolytus's commentary on the Song of Songs. See Rahner, "Hippolyt von Rom als Zeuge für den Ausdruck θεοτόκος," *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie* 59 (1935): 73-81.

The Song of Songs was considered a more advanced text by many early Christian writers. For example, Origen begins his commentary on the Songs with a warning that such scripture was not to the understanding of all Christians: "It behooves us primarily to understand that, just as in childhood we are not affected by the passion of love, so also to those who are at the stage of infancy and childhood in their interior life—to those, that is to say, who are being nourished with milk in Christ, not with strong meat ... it is not given to grasp the meaning of these sayings." [Origen, *Comm. in Cant.* prologue, 1.4 (SC 376, 83)].

⁷⁰ Ambrose, *De virgt.* 9.62 (Gori, II, 54).

⁷¹ Ambrose, *De virgt.* 11.61-2 (Gori, II, 53-4).

Word itself who is an unguent that does not decay. “This unguent has always existed, but it was with the Father, it was in the Father. It emitted its fragrance to the angels and archangels, enclosed, as if in a container (*vas*), by heaven itself.”⁷² Ambrose in this way affirms the unity and coeternity of the Father and Son but then turns to limit the fragrant potency of the Word to heavenly realms until the moment when the Word flows forth from the Father. For Ambrose, the Word manifests himself as the Son when the Father’s own abundance is manifest, either when the Father opens his mouth and speaks forth the fragrance of the Word or when the heart of the Father overflows with the Word.⁷³ In this way, the Word is the manifestation of the Father’s own fragrant nature.

As the Son, and the Father through him, is made manifest to humankind, the Holy Spirit is breathed outward and diffuses himself into the hearts of humankind as a manifestation of God’s love.⁷⁴ The Holy Spirit now steps forward to take the role of the sweet fragrance that was once in the Father as the Word and is now in the Son. The Son, now embodied as though in a container, is no longer the fragrance itself but seems to contain the fragrance which he pours out as the hour comes.⁷⁵ Mary was anointed prior to the coming of the Son with this same unguent, conceived of it, and bore the Son of

⁷² Ambrose, *De virgt.* 11.63 (Gori, II, 54).

⁷³ Ambrose, *De virgt.* 11.63 (Gori, II, 54), cf. 15.94 (Gori, II, 74).

⁷⁴ Ambrose, *De virgt.* 11.63 (Gori, II, 54).

⁷⁵ Ambrose, *De virgt.* 11.64 (Gori, II, 56).

God as a result.⁷⁶ Likewise, Ambrose continues, this unguent was also that which was spread upon the waters and sanctified them in the beginning.⁷⁷

In this reading of the Trinity inspired by heady scents of myrrh radiating from the Song of Songs, Ambrose suggests the mysterious unity and coexistence of the divine. In *De virginibus*, the bishop had described the transformation of the ascetic body through similar olfactory imagery drawn from the Song of Songs and other Biblical texts.⁷⁸ Here such imagery is turned toward a more trinitarian purpose. The Son appears as an overflowing of the Father's own substance, the sweet breath of his mouth, just as the Holy Spirit flows forth as breath from the Word. Fragrant unguent serves as the single Nicene *ousia* that unites Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as one.

As in *De virginibus*, Ambrose here employs language styling Christian virgins as brides of Christ. In *De virginitate*, this idea is even more fully developed through an exposition of the Song of Songs.⁷⁹ By the late fourth century, the Song of Songs had a long and complex exegetical history. Early Christian writers such as Hippolytus had taken cues from church-bride imagery in Ephesians in order to read the Song as an allegory for Christ's relationship with his Church.⁸⁰ Origen's writings had taken and

⁷⁶ Ambrose, *De virgt.* 11.65 (Gori, II, 56).

⁷⁷ Ambrose, *De virgt.* 11.65 (Gori, II, 56).

⁷⁸ Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Scenting Salvation: Ancient Christianity and the Olfactory Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 167-168. Harvey cites *De virginibus* 1.7.39 and 2.2.18 where Ambrose finds both a sweet odor in the mortification of the virginal body and the divine fragrance of Christ in its very incorruption.

⁷⁹ On Ambrose's specific development of the bride-of-Christ motif in his works on virginity, see Raymond d'Izarny, *La virginité selon Saint Ambroise I* (Ph.D. dissertation, Lyon, 1952), 12-29.

⁸⁰ Only fragments of his commentary are now extant. See Hippolytus, *Des Kommentars zum Hohenliede* (GCS 1, 344-374).

expanded this allegorical reading in order to construct a dialogue between Christ and the individual soul based on the scriptural narrative.⁸¹ Fourth-century theologians such as Athanasius, Basil, and Gregory of Nyssa increasingly associated this Song-inspired bridal imagery with Christian virginity.⁸² Authors such as Ambrose, familiar with the Latin “bride of Christ” tradition as well as Origen’s works on the Song, adopted such imagery in their own expositions to construct for virginity a privileged relationship with Christ.⁸³

As the Virgin works as a mirror for the correct formulation of the Trinity in *De virginibus*, so do ordinary Christian virgins, who are in *De virginitate* also modeled as brides of Christ. They seem to have a similar function to Mary in passages of this treatise. Virgins are to bring forth their own vessels that they may be filled with the

⁸¹ See Origen, *Comm. in Cant.* (GCS 33, 61-241) and *Hom. in Cant.* (GCS 33, 27-60).

⁸² On the Song of Songs in fourth-century ascetic discourse, see Elizabeth Castelli, “Virginity and its Meaning for Women’s Sexuality in Early Christianity,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 2 (1986): 61-63; Brakke, *Athanasius*, 52-55; Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1988), 274-276; F.B.A. Asiedu, “The Song of Songs and the Ascent of the Soul: Ambrose, Augustine, and the Language of Mysticism,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 55 (2001): 299-317. Teresa Shaw, *The Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 248-249, n. 103, gives a good bibliography of several early Christian writers who employed “bride of Christ” imagery as does Elizabeth Clark, “The Celibate Bridegroom and His Virginal Brides: Metaphor and the Marriage of Jesus in Early Christian Exegesis,” *Church History* 77.1 (2008): 13-18.

While the Cappadocian fathers become an influence not to be underestimated in Ambrose’s thought, *De virginitate* probably reflects the bishop’s direct encounter with Origen’s writings rather than some acquisition through Cappadocian writings. In 378 when *De virginitate* was composed, Ambrose would not yet have been familiar with Gregory of Nyssa’s important commentary on the Song of Songs since it was not composed until a year or two before the Gregory’s death in 394. See Richard A. Norris, “The Soul Takes Flight: Gregory of Nyssa and the Song of Songs,” *Anglican Theological Review* 80.4 (1998): 517-519.

⁸³ Tertullian was the first identifiable Latin author to term virgins “brides of Christ” (*De resurrectione carnis* 61.6 [PL 2, 884], *De virginibus velandis* 7 [PL 2, 898-899]), and this tradition is present in Cyprian and beyond. See A.G. Hamman, “Ascèse et virginité à Carthage au IIIe siècle,” in *Memoriam Sanctorum Venerantes: Miscellanea in Onore di Monsignor Victor Saxer*, ed. Martin Klöckener (Roma: Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Christiana, 1992), 507.

On Ambrose’s familiarity with Origen at this time, see McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 64 and Goulven Madec, *Saint Ambroise et la philosophie* (Paris: Études augustinienes, 1974), 121-124. Madec notes Ambrose’s reiteration of Origenist teachings to respond to Platonic arguments.

mystical unguent of Christ and to close their vessels discretely by their integrity and humility so that Christ, the Bridegroom, does not flow away. Yet as brides they are to await the breath of the Holy Spirit upon the bridal couch who comes to gather their holy fragrances, and he responds to their beseeching as the Bridegroom in the language of the Song of Songs in turn.⁸⁴ Virgins are to cleanse the innermost parts of their houses so that the Holy Spirit may dwell therein, but Christ also visits the corporeal houses of these virgins frequently and never abandons them.⁸⁵ Although we find no traces of Burrus's "promiscuous" Mary, we see some "promiscuity" among humble Christian virgins who take both the Holy Spirit and the Word as a Bridegroom. These virgins take two spouses of God--the Son and Holy Spirit--whose roles are often interchanged throughout the text to further suggest trinitarian oneness and unity. (Perhaps being spouse to the Father is something Ambrose holds in reserve for the Virgin alone.)

Ambrose does not, however, develop any full or consistent trinitarian theology in *De virginitate*. For example, the Holy Spirit is read as the north wind who blows the fragrance of the bride's garden so that the Word will come to it.⁸⁶ Christ knocks at the door and will enter in not alone but rather with his Father.⁸⁷ The virgin who rids herself of the cares of her flesh will be able to see both Christ and the Father since Christ sits at his right hand.⁸⁸ The careless duality of many of Ambrose's statements reflects the

⁸⁴ Ambrose, *De virgt.* 12.69 (Gori, II, 58-60).

⁸⁵ Ambrose, *De virgt.* 13.78 (Gori, II, 64). Cf. 9.51 (Gori, II, 46-48).

⁸⁶ Ambrose, *De virgt.* 10.54 (Gori, II, 48).

⁸⁷ Ambrose, *De virgt.* 11.60 (Gori, II, 52).

⁸⁸ Ambrose, *De virgt.* 13.82 (Gori, II, 66).

superficiality of his engagement with trinitarian theology in this text. In addressing the rich mystical relationship between the virgin and God, he seems more concerned to overwhelm personal critics with his own erudition than to expound Nicene theology in any systematic way. As with *De virginibus*, virginity in *De virginitate* provides an ambiguous rhetorical space for Ambrose to muse upon these theological issues while avoiding open confrontation with Homoian opponents in Milan.

IV. Building the Bishopric of Milan: Ambrose, Intellectuals, and Emperors

It was not until around 392 that Ambrose composed his next formal treatise on virginity, *De institutione virginis*.⁸⁹ The social and political circumstances surrounding Ambrose's composition and publication of this treatise were markedly different than those he faced when he had set out to write his first authoritative works in 377 and these new circumstances are key to understanding the socio-cultural functions of *De institutione*. The bishop had evolved from a young and untutored Roman administrator into a widely-known scholar, politician, and defender of Christian orthodoxy. Rather than giving a detailed political and social history of Ambrose's rise to power in the late fourth century, I will in this section attempt to review only a few of the key events of his career that seem most indicative of this personal evolution in order to set the stage for his composition of *De institutione*.

From the beginning of his episcopal career, Ambrose labored hard to establish himself as a man of intellectual authority in the eyes of his Milanese flock. Perhaps the

⁸⁹ For this generally-accepted dating of *De institutione*, see Gori, I, 78; Palanque, *Saint Ambroise*, 542; F. Holmes Dudden, *The Life and Times of St. Ambrose* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935), 2; Paredi, *Saint Ambrose*, 432.

best witness of his successes in this endeavor is Augustine of Hippo. In his *Confessiones*, Augustine claims that it was while listening to the learned bishop preach (probably around the mid-380s) that he first imagined that the Catholic faith could be “intellectually respectable.”⁹⁰ Ambrose seemed to be a “holy oracle” who was able to illuminate the knottier mysteries of scripture that Augustine himself had not yet been able to untangle.⁹¹ He was impressed by how Ambrose was consistently found reading to himself in his public chambers, and imagined that the reason the bishop often did not stop even when visitors came in but persisted silently in his studies was so that he might not have to pause to explain the difficulties of the text to the less enlightened minds around him.⁹² McLynn perceives in this practice a purposeful display of erudition on the part of the bishop.⁹³

Beyond intellectual reputation, it is clear that Ambrose had achieved a good deal of social and political prestige within Milan by the time Augustine was among his congregants. The young teacher from Hippo was not only deeply impressed by the bishop’s scholarliness but also by his elevated worldly position; Augustine spoke with admiration of how Ambrose seemed to enjoy the respect of many powerful people in the community, noting the great difficulty of gaining a private audience with the bishop because of the many crowds of people who came to him on business.⁹⁴ By the time of

⁹⁰ Augustine, *Confessiones* 5.14.24 (CCL 27, 71).

⁹¹ Augustine, *Conf.* 6.3.4, 6.4.6 (CCL 27, 76-77).

⁹² Augustine, *Conf.* 6.3.3 (CCL 27, 75-76).

⁹³ McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 57.

⁹⁴ Augustine, *Conf.* 6.3.3 (CCL 27, 75-76).

the composition of *De institutione virginis* in the early 390s, the people approaching him on business seem to include those in regions extending far beyond Milan itself. In the 380s, Damasus, the bishop of Rome, petitioned Ambrose to intercede with the emperor against the pagan senator Symmachus in blocking the reinstatement of the Altar of Victory in the Senate house and the reinstatement of certain pagan subsidies in Rome.⁹⁵ The Spanish bishops Priscillian and Hydatius traveled to Milan and sought his audience (and influence) for their causes.⁹⁶ Likewise, Ambrose seems to have acquired status by this time among church leaders as far away as Macedonia; at the death of Acholius of Thessalonica, his clergy and people wrote Ambrose in Milan to inform him of their bishop's passing and to introduce his successor, Anysius, to the Milanese see.⁹⁷ Ambrose seems to have established himself as both an intellectual and a politician of importance well beyond his see in northern Italy.

It was likely the perceived intimacy between Ambrose and the Roman emperors that contributed most to his elevated political position among the elite of both church and state throughout the empire. As his letters and treatises demonstrate, Ambrose corresponded regularly with emperors throughout his career.⁹⁸ Perhaps his greatest political talent lay in his ability to cultivate the perception of imperial favor—to style himself as an intimate and advisor to the emperor before an audience—regardless of whatever actual relationship he held to the ruling court. For example, Ambrose

⁹⁵ Ambrose makes note of Damasus's petition in *Ep.* 72.10 (CSEL 82.3, 14).

⁹⁶ Sulpicius Severus, *Chronicorum* 2.48-9 (SC 441, 336-338).

⁹⁷ Ambrose, *Ep.* 51 (CSEL 82.2, 160-167).

⁹⁸ Among Ambrose's extant letters are at least sixteen addressed directly to emperors: *Ep.* 25, 30, 72, 73, 75 (CSEL 82.1-2); *Ep. extra coll.* 1a, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12 (CSEL 82.3).

masterfully spun his interactions with Gratian to reflect the young emperor's dependence upon his counsel and wisdom. Although much recent scholarship has argued convincingly that Gratian's request that Ambrose write *De fide* is best interpreted as a demand that Ambrose personally defend himself in light of the accusations of local opponents in Milan, Ambrose obscures these circumstances. Though he is actually in this weaker position of self-defense, the bishop later frames Gratian's demand instead as the young emperor's request for instruction at the hands of a superior spiritual advisor upon whom he is dependent.⁹⁹

Ambrose and his ancient biographers often claimed such extensive personal influence for the bishop with Gratian and also later with Valentinian II and Theodosius; such claims have largely been called into question by modern scholars.¹⁰⁰ To whatever extent these claims reflect reality or not, Ambrose's direct interactions with the later emperors reflect his status as an important political player on an empire-wide level. We may perceive something of the personal political power he had obtained in his increasingly-bold interactions with imperial authority. For example, around and during Holy Week of 386, Ambrose directly challenged the authority of Valentinian II and his mother, the empress Justina, by refusing multiple times to hand over a Milanese church building to the emperor and his Homoian court for their Easter celebrations. The success of his blatant defiance of imperial authority reveals much about the weak position of the

⁹⁹ Pierre Nautin, "Les premières relations d'Ambroise avec l'empereur Gratien," in *Ambroise de Milan*, ed. Duval, 238-243; McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 98-99; Williams, *Ambrose of Milan*, 141-144. McLynn further speculates that perhaps *De fide* and the supposed pomp that surrounded its formal presentation to the emperor represent a staged claim upon imperial favor for both Italy and the Nicene vision of a fully consubstantial Christ. See McLynn, *op. cit.*, 105.

¹⁰⁰ For example, see McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 79-80, 155-6, 339-40, 358-60; Dudden, *Life and Times*, 386-389; Palanque, *Saint Ambroise*, 202-204.

young Valentinian but also the markedly-increased status of the bishop of Milan among both his Milanese congregants who stood by him throughout the siege of the building and, we may assume, those of great political and religious significance in the regions around them. Justifying his actions in the name of Nicene orthodoxy, Ambrose had established for himself a position of authority that was by this time strong enough to challenge, and defeat, the imperial will.¹⁰¹

The bishop's later conflict with the more powerful emperor Theodosius over the so-called massacre at Thessalonica reveals even more of Ambrose's increased social and political authority during a later period. In 390, the citizens of the Macedonian city purportedly rioted against the imperial troops stationed in the city and murdered their commander. Although the details of what happened next are largely uncertain, it is clear that the government response to this episode was immediate and devastating to the city; large numbers of civilians were killed in retaliation.¹⁰² Although Theodosius' direct responsibility for the massacre is unclear, he nevertheless received a bold rebuke from Ambrose who refused to celebrate the Eucharist in the presence of the emperor until he

¹⁰¹ For a summary of these events, see Michaela Zelzer, preface to Ambrosius, *Epistolarum liber decimus*, ed. Zelzer, CSEL 82.3: xxv-xxxviii; Palanque, *Saint Ambroise*, 139-181; McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 181-196; Ernst Dassmann, *Ambrose von Mailand: Leben und Werk* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2004), 92-108; Williams, *Ambrose of Milan*, 203-217 and also his "Ambrose, Emperors and Homoians in Milan: The First Conflict over a Basilica," in *Arianism after Arius*, ed. Barnes and Williams, 127-146. Marcia Colish makes an excellent summary of much of the modern scholarship and several of the most current debates surrounding this event in her "Why the Portiana?" 361, n. 2.

¹⁰² Sozomen, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 7.25.1-13 (FC 73.3, 926-932); Paulinus, *Vita Ambrosii*, 3.24 (Pellegrino, 84-86); Theodoret, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 5.17 (GCS 44, 306-307); Rufinus, *Historia ecclesiastica* 11.18 (GCS 2.2, 1022-1023). Of these historians, Sozomen gives the fullest account of the conflicts leading up to these events. It is Rufinus alone who recounts the famous tale of the horrific massacre of thousands of citizens in the city's circus, an event highly questioned by modern scholars such as McLynn who finds the circus the more likely scene of the death of the military commander that lead up to this event. See McLynn, 308.

had made full penance for the deed.¹⁰³ Remarkably, Theodosius seemed to comply with Ambrose's demands, confessing tearfully and performing public penance before the entire Milanese church.¹⁰⁴

As McLynn has argued, this religious spectacle was very politically advantageous to an emperor wishing to reclaim a reputation for justice and mercy in the face of serious public outcry.¹⁰⁵ Yet it must be acknowledged that Ambrose's free speech and stubborn denial of religious rites to Theodosius represent an impressive public success for the bishop as well. That Ambrose held enough status and prestige to rebuke the emperor strongly must have been impressive enough to his audience; that the emperor actually seemed to be complying with the bishop's demands when he appeared humble and penitent for his actions at Thessalonica later on undoubtedly only enhanced Ambrose's reputation further. Although the later accounts of this episode seem to exaggerate the bishop's role in Theodosius's repentance, it is nevertheless telling that Milan was deemed a fitting locale for the performance of this empire-wide event and that Ambrose was considered by this time to be the appropriate ecclesiastical recipient of the imperial penance. Milan was now clearly among the greatest of cities, and Ambrose among the greatest of the ecclesial politicians of his age. Whether Ambrose's claims to a special intimacy with the emperor are substantiated by this event or whether it represents mere

¹⁰³ Ambrose, *Ep. extra coll.* 11.6 (CSEL 82.3: 212-218).

¹⁰⁴ Rufinus, *Historia ecclesiastica* 11.18 (GCS 2.2, 1022-1023), Sozomen, *Historia ecclesiastica* 7.25.1-2 (FC 73.3, 926-928).

¹⁰⁵ McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 326-330.

public posturing for both figures, the bishop's reputation was undoubtedly enhanced by this episode in his lifetime as it was beyond it.¹⁰⁶

V. From Homoians to Arians: *De fide* and Beyond

As part of establishing his own intellectual, theological, and political import, Ambrose spent many years cultivating a common ideological enemy for Catholicism: the so-called "Arian" heresy. Despite his early reluctance to become directly involved in the debates over the nature of God, as reflected in *De virginibus* and *De virginitate*, he seems to have been drawn into a more serious and direct engagement with Trinitarian issues between 378 and 380.¹⁰⁷ Around this time, Ambrose produced a lengthy treatise in four books on the nature of God entitled *De fide*, most likely in response to some Homoian critics at Milan who professed to the emperor to be representatives of the true "catholic" faith that an impious Ambrose was stifling.¹⁰⁸ As requested (or demanded¹⁰⁹) by the emperor Gratian, Ambrose set out for the first time with the explicit intention of

¹⁰⁶ Perhaps the greatest proof of this enhancement to Ambrose's reputation is the exaggeration of his involvement in Theodosius's penitence is contained in Sozomen's account: "After the death of Eugenius, the emperor went to Milan, and repaired towards the church to pray within its walls. When he drew near the gates of the edifice, he was met by Ambrose, the bishop of the city, who took hold of him by his purple robe, and said to him, in the presence of the multitude, Stand back! a man defiled by sin, and with hands imbrued in blood unjustly shed, is not worthy, without repentance, to enter within these sacred precincts, or partake of the holy mysteries. The emperor, struck with admiration at the boldness of the bishop, began to reflect on his own conduct, and, with much contrition, retraced his steps." See Sozomen, 7.25.1-2 (FC 73.3, 926-928).

¹⁰⁷ On the unclear dating of *De Fide*, see Marksches, *Ambrosius von Mailand*, 166-176. McLynn follows Gottlieb's assertion of a later date of 380; see Gunther Gottlieb, *Ambrosius von Mailand und Kaiser Gratian* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1973), 31-35 and McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 102 n. 90, 104-5 n. 94. Williams follows Palanque in his earlier dating of the treatise to 378. See Williams, *Ambrose of Milan*, 129-130, 140 and Palanque, *Saint Ambroise*, 498.

¹⁰⁸ For this argument, see Gottlieb, 42-44. Gottlieb connects the composition of Ambrose's *De fide* to his opponent Palladius's *Apol.* 84.

¹⁰⁹ See above and note 94 for more on the circumstances of the composition of *De fide*.

articulating a statement of the orthodox position on the nature of God which would directly challenge the arguments of the Homoian contingent in Milan. Many of his following works, most notably *De Spiritu Sancto* (381), also addressed to Gratian, engage in similar anti-Homoian argumentation, continuing to dispute variant understandings of scripture and to affirm the strict unity of the Trinity laid out in *De fide*.

Ambrose's first and primary concern in most of his writings on Trinitarian issues was to maintain the absolute unity of the divine essence:

Now this is the declaration of our Faith: that we say that God is One, neither dividing His Son from Him, as do the heathen, nor denying, with the Jews, that He was begotten of the Father before all worlds, and afterwards born of the Virgin ... nor believing, with Arius, in a number of diverse Powers, and so, like the benighted heathen, making out more than one God.¹¹⁰

Ambrose affirmed that the divine nature is common to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, rejecting the argument that a plurality of names may reflect any plurality of being.¹¹¹ In *De fide*, however, he is most concerned to ensure that the Son not be divided from the Father in any way. Not two gods, the Father and Son are of equal primacy, preeminence, and coeternality, and there is no separation in power or nature between them.¹¹² He rejects any distinctive ordering existing among the Trinity or any difference in the time of creation between the Father and Son that might lead to the perception that the Son is in some way inferior to or comes into existence after the Father; the Son and

¹¹⁰ Ambrose, *De fide* 1.1.6 (FC 47.1, 144): *Assertio autem nostrae fidei haec est, ut unum Deum esse dicamus: neque, ut gentes, Filium separemus: neque ut Judaei, natum ex Patre ante tempora, et ex Virgine postea editum denegemus ... neque ut Arius, plures credendo et dissimiles potestates, plures deos gentili errore faciamus.*

¹¹¹ Ambrose, *De fide* 1.1.8 (FC 47.1, 146).

¹¹² Ambrose, *De fide* 1.1.6-9 (FC 47.1, 144-146).

Father are both endless and eternal in their unified nature.¹¹³ In *De Spirito*, he turns greater attention to affirming the equal, unified, and coeternal nature of the Holy Spirit with the Father and Son, denying again that their difference in names is reflective of any disunity in their substance.¹¹⁴

“We say, then, that there is one God,” he argued, “not two or three Gods, this being the error into which the impious heresy of the Arians doth run with its blasphemies.”¹¹⁵ In contrast to the soft maxims and implications of *De virginibus* and *De virginitate*, the language of *De fide* and these subsequent works seemed “nothing less than a full-scale attack against western Arianism, denigrating it as the worst of heresies and as an enemy to the truth.”¹¹⁶ *De fide* represents the first time that Ambrose employs not only directly anti-Homoian argumentation but also explicitly anti-“Arian” discourse. As Athanasius had done years before him, Ambrose models Arius as the originator of a number of heretical teachings concerning the Trinity.¹¹⁷ In *De fide* (and later in *De Spirito*, *De incarnatione*, and other writings) the bishop collapses many of the numerous and diverse Homoian arguments in circulation in the fourth century together and traced them to a common “Arian” source. Then, in turn, these supposedly “Arian” teachings

¹¹³ Ambrose, *De fide* 1.8.54-7, 1.9.58-61 (FC 47.1, 180-188); cf. *De incarnationis Dominicae sacramento* 9.89-105, 10.106-15 (PL 16, 876-882).

¹¹⁴ Ambrose, *De spiritu sancto* 1.3.40, 43 (CSEL 79.9, 30-31) et al.

¹¹⁵ Ambrose, *De fide* 1.1.10 (FC 47.1, 146).

¹¹⁶ Williams, *Ambrose of Milan*, 129-130. Williams argues that this treatise represents a “sudden and dramatic reversal” in Ambrose’s previous policies concerning the Homoian faction in Milan.

¹¹⁷ Ambrose, *De fide* 1.1.6; 1.6.44-45; 1.7.48; 1.8.56-57; 1.16.105; 1.18.119; 1.19.123-131; 2.6.49; 2.13.117; 3.14.114; 3.16.132; 4.9.97; 4.10.131; 4.11.150; 5.1.24; 5.3.47; 5.8.103-104; 5.17.211; 5.19.228-238 (FC 47.1-3); cf. *De spiritu* 1.16.164 (CSEL 79.9, 84-85); 2.12.142 (CSEL 79.9, 142); *De incarnationis Dominicae sacramento* 9.91-92 (CSEL 79.9, 268).

were classified in relation to those of other previously-condemned groups such as Eunomians, Photinians, and Manichees, and could then be more easily dismissed as heretical.¹¹⁸

Ambrose's virulent attack on Homoian theology and "Arianism" was not limited to his writings. In 381, Ambrose persuaded the emperor Gratian to authorize an official theological council at Aquileia where he headed the excommunication of supposedly "Arian" leaders Palladius, Secundianus, and Attalus, further aligning himself theologically with Theodosius' pro-Nicene policies in the eastern empire and widely establishing himself as a stalwart champion of Nicene orthodoxy.¹¹⁹ As part of the proceedings, Ambrose brought forth a famous letter of Arius and demanded that the accused deny any belief in its contents. Although Palladius protested during the proceedings that he had never seen and did not know Arius at all,¹²⁰ he nevertheless rejected the common Nicene distinction drawn from Philippians 2.6-8 between "the form of a servant" and the "form of God" in the incarnate Son of God, and affirmed the Incarnation as a demonstration of the Father's superiority to the Son, reasoning that the true God (*verum deum*) could not assume flesh.¹²¹ When Palladius and the others refused

¹¹⁸ Williams has made these arguments specifically about *De fide* although Ambrose clearly employs similar tactics in many of his other writings. See Williams, *Ambrose of Milan*, 145-7, and Williams, "Polemics and Politics in Ambrose of Milan's *De fide*," *Journal of Theological Studies* 46.2 (1995): 519-520.

¹¹⁹ See Williams, *Ambrose of Milan*, 154-184; McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 124-149; Palanque, *Saint Ambroise*, 78-95; Dudden, *Life and Times*, 199-206. Williams argues that Books 3-5 of *De fide* were written in response to Palladius's response to the first two books of the treatise. See Williams, "Polemics and Politics," 523-528.

¹²⁰ *Gesta concili Aquileiensis, Acta* 14 (CSEL 82.3, 334).

¹²¹ *Gesta concili Aquileiensis, Acta* 35-40 (CSEL 82.3, 347-351).

to renounce these ideas, the bishop labeled them heretics in his report to the emperors and tied them to the already-condemned Arius.¹²²

Accusations of “Arianism” and Homoian ideas served as Ambrose’s justification in ongoing conflicts with the court of Valentinian II and his mother, the empress Justina, and were especially prominent in the quarrel over the basilicas of Milan in 385/6. As mentioned previously, Ambrose refused multiple times during this period to turn over one of his Milanese basilicas, probably the Portiana, to the Homoian imperial court for their Easter worship services, even withstanding physical siege on the premises at certain points. Although largely a political struggle over power and authority between bishop and emperor, Ambrose frames this conflict as one between Catholic orthodoxy and “Arian” heresy. In a letter to Valentinian, Ambrose justifies his actions by declaring his steady devotion to the rule of Nicea in contrast to the Homoian creed of Ariminium, accusing “Arian” contenders for the basilica of kinship with Jews and pagans in denying Christ’s divinity and considering him a creature.¹²³ “Would that it were clearly evident to me that the Church would not be handed over to the Arians!” he languished. “I would then willingly offer myself to the wishes of your piety.”¹²⁴ Ambrose’s congregants seemed also to have understood this conflict with imperial authority as a contest between Nicene orthodoxy and dangerous Homoian heresy; Ambrose records some mob violence

¹²² *Gesta concili Aquileiensis, Acta* 2.4-6 (CSEL 82.3, 319-20).

¹²³ Ambrose, *Ep.* 75.13-14 (CSEL 82.3, 78-9).

¹²⁴ Ambrose, *Ep.* 75.19 (CSEL 82.3, 81).

on the part of his supporters against an “Arian” priest they encountered in the public square.¹²⁵

VI. The End of Homoianism in Milan?: *De institutione virginis*

The following years (386-7) seem to indicate a significant diminishment of Homoian power and influence in Milan. With the invasion of Italy by the pro-Nicene emperor Maximus in 387, Valentinian II was forced into exile in Aquileia and the remaining Homoians at Milan lost the imperial patronage they had enjoyed. Furthermore, Ambrose’s “discovery” of the remains of the martyrs Gervasius and Protasius around the same period seemed to bestow very significant divine ratification upon Ambrose’s episcopacy and the Nicene Catholicism he preached.¹²⁶ Daniel Williams has argued that these two events, supplemented by Theodosius’s final ascension to power in the west in 388 and his ensuing anti-heretical legislation, signify an end to any significant Homoian influence in Milan.¹²⁷ Williams cites as evidence that neither Rufinus, Paulinus, nor Ambrose himself have anything to say about Arian presence in

¹²⁵ Ambrose, *Ep.* 76.5 (CSEL 82.3, 110-111). Paulinus (*Vita Ambrosii* 3.13 [Pellegrino, 68]) later construes these events entirely as a manifestation of the insanity of the Arians who, “inflamed with greater madness ... tried to break into the Portian Basilica.” Miraculously, the soldiers sent to take the building are suddenly converted by God, profess the Catholic faith with the congregation, and allow the people to peacefully enter and worship.

¹²⁶ Williams, *Ambrose of Milan*, 218-223.

¹²⁷ Theodosius’s advance guard kills Maximus and his son in Aquileia in 388 and enters Milan to establish his court in Maximus’ former capital. In May 389, he issued an anti-heretical edict which forbade public or private gatherings of heretics, including followers of the Ariminum creed, and expelled them from all cities and villages. See *Codex Theodosianus* 16.5.20.

Milan or any continued conflict between Homoians and Nicenes after 386, interpreting such silence as signifying the end of Ambrose's Homoian troubles.¹²⁸

Williams' argument, however, becomes problematic in light of the strong presence of anti-Homoian argumentation in Ambrose's later *De institutione* of 392:

But some say that it is read: "Go, baptize the people in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit (Matt. 28.19)," and they argue that he named the Father in the first place, the Son in the second, and the Spirit in the third. It is not possible that because the Gospel says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God," (John 1.1) it indicated his inferiority to the Father, since first it related that the Word of God always was and had been in the beginning?¹²⁹

Ambrose once again launches into a lengthy and detailed diatribe (§65-78) against an ambiguous "they" who support ideas he has earlier condemned and associated with Arianism: the inferiority of the Son to the Father and the Holy Spirit to the Son, the plurality of God rather than his absolute singularity, and the preexistence of the Father in contrast to the Son, among many others. Although Williams admits that Homoian writers continue to produce homiletical, exegetical, and polemical literature into the fifth century, he does not acknowledge or account for why such clearly anti-Homoian argumentation appears once again in this work of Ambrose around 392.¹³⁰

As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, anti-Homoian language was employed in both *De virginibus* and *De virginitate* not for the purpose of directly

¹²⁸ Williams, *Ambrose of Milan*, 230-231.

¹²⁹ Ambrose, *De inst.* 10.65 (Gori, II, 160): *Sed dicunt lectum: Ite, baptizate gentes in nomine patris et filii et spiritus sancti et obiciunt, quia primo patrem nominavit, secundo filium, tertio spiritum. Numquid ergo, quia dicit Euangelium: In principio erat uerbum, et uerbum erat apud deum, inferiorem significavit patrem, quia primo uerbum dei in principio semper esse ac fuisse memoravit?*

¹³⁰ See Williams, *Ambrose of Milan*, 230.

confronting the Homoian contingent at Milan but rather to confirm the young bishop's personal intellectual and theological authority as he struggled to consolidate his precarious hold on the see of Milan. Following this line of argumentation, which harmonizes with Williams' assertion that the Homoians had already ceased to be an issue for some time beforehand, we may speculate that Ambrose's language continues his previous attempt to expand his personal socio-cultural position. Such an explanation, however, for the anti-Homoian rhetoric of *De institutione* does not seem to suffice. As has been shown, Ambrose's personal reputation as a figure of great social, intellectual, and political import was clearly well-established by this time and the bishop had little need to further impress upon the minds of his congregants his familiarity with Trinitarian theological debate. Furthermore, the depth of his argumentation against Homoian views in *De institutione* in contrast to the superficiality of his engagement with similar issues in his earlier virginity treatises suggests a greater investment in the current theological issues at hand.

It seems more likely that some Homoian groups actually continued to be problematic in Milan through the end of the fourth century. To modify somewhat Williams' previous observation, there is little evidence beyond *De institutione* to suggest that such groups or individuals continued to be personally troublesome to Ambrose or presented any significant political or theological competition to the well-established, government-endorsed Nicene church of the 390s. For this reason, it will prove fruitful to question some of the further rhetorical possibilities of Ambrose's employment of anti-Homoian language in its socio-theological context. To what ends might one employ such argumentation beyond refuting the claims or arguments of an actual Homoian opponent?

One important feature of this anti-Homoian argumentation in *De institutione* is that very little of it seems to be original. For the majority of his exposition, Ambrose recycles past ideas and scriptural interpretations from his earlier treatises that have dealt more overtly with Homoian ideas. For instance, his concern for the absolute coeternality, glory, and unity of the Trinity manifest so strongly in *De fide* is the first and foremost feature of his writing in *De institutione* as well:

He is one, because the Son is the only begotten of God. He is one, because he is the only one, since it is written that “he alone unfolded the heavens and walks on the sea just as on land” (Job 9.8). For this one is not second because he is first; he is not second because he is one ... One God the Father and one Son of God and one Holy Spirit, just as it was written ... For God the Father is one, and the Son of God is one. One and one, because they are not two Gods ... And the Spirit is one, because the unity of the Trinity has no distinct order, no distinct time.¹³¹

Ambrose immediately draws forth a number of scriptural references that he had previously used time and again elsewhere to defend this triune God: 1 Corinthians 8.6 (“One is God the Father, through whom all things are, and we are in him, and one is the Lord Jesus Christ through whom all things are and we are through him”),¹³² 1 Corinthians 12.11 (“For one and also the same Spirit works all these things ...”),¹³³ and John 10.30 (“The Father and I are one”).¹³⁴ Ambrose invokes Matthew 28.19 (“Go, baptize the

¹³¹ Ambrose, *De inst.* 10.64 (Gori, II, 158-160): *Unus est, quia unigenitus dei filius, unus, quia solus, ut scriptum est quia expandit caelum solus et ambulat sicut in terra super mare. Hic ergo non est secundus, quia primus est; non est secundus, quia unus est. ... Unus deus pater, et unus dei filius, et unus spiritus sanctus, sicut scriptum est. ... Unus ergo pater deus, et unus dei filius. Unus et unus, quia non duo dii. ... Et unus spiritus, quia unitas trinitatis est non ordine distincta, non tempore.*

¹³² Ambrose, *De inst.* 10.64 (Gori, II, 158), cf. *De fide* 1.1.6, 1.3.26, 4.8.92, 4.11.139, 5.3.45 (FC 47.1-2); *De spiritu* 1.2.29, 1.3.32, 1.3.46, 2.9.85, 3.11.84 (CSEL 79.9).

¹³³ Ambrose, *De inst.* 10.64 (Gori, II, 158), cf. *De fide* 2.6.47-48, 4.8.92 (FC 47.1-2), *De spiritu* 1 prol.18, 3.19.144 (CSEL 79.9).

¹³⁴ Ambrose, *De inst.* 10.64 (Gori, 158), cf. *De fide* 1.1.9, 1.5.40, 1.17.111 (FC 47.1); *De spiritu* 3.17.121 (CSEL 79.9, 202).

people in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit) to reemphasize the singular “name” of the three, an argument he had made time and again with the same scripture in both *De fide* and *De Spirito*.¹³⁵ John 1.1 (“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God”) is brought forth once again to argue the absolute coeternality of the Father and Son.¹³⁶ He again rejects subordinationism of the Son to the Father and the Holy Spirit by arguing for the impossibility of the order seemingly Ephesians 5.5 (“In the kingdom of Christ and God ...”) and Luke 4.18 (“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, therefore he has anointed me, he has commanded me ...”).¹³⁷ As in *De fide*, Ambrose argues that the resurrection of Christ proves that he is indeed one with God; he resurrects for all and no other resurrects him (Gen. 49.9) just as he had promised to do in John 2.19 and 21 (“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it ... But he said this concerning the temple of his body”).¹³⁸ Ambrose alludes to his argument over Philippians 2.6-8 with Palladius at the Council of Aquileia, once again affirming that the

¹³⁵ Cf. Ambrose, *De fide* 1.1.8 (FC 47.1, 146), 1.1.10 (FC 47.1, 146); *De spiritu* 1.13.132 (CSEL 79.9, 72), 2.8.71 (CSEL 79.9, 115), 3.19.147-148 (CSEL 79.9, 212-213).

¹³⁶ Ambrose, *De inst.* 10.65 (Gori, II, 160), cf. *De fide* 1.8.56-7 (FC 47.1, 182), 1.19.123 (FC 47.1, 238), 2.2.29 (FC 47.2, 268), 5.1.18 (FC 47.3, 598), 5.9.117 (FC 47.3, 678); *De virg.* 3.1.2 (Gori, I, 208-210); *De spiritu* 1.11.120 (CSEL 79.9, 66-67).

¹³⁷ Ambrose, *De inst.* 10.65 (Gori, II, 160). On Eph. 5.5: cf. *De fide* 3.12.101 (FC 47.2, 428-30). On Luke 4.18: cf. *De fide* 3.12.101 (FC 47.2, 428-30) and *De Spiritu* 1.9.103-4 (CSEL 79.9, 60), 3.1.7 (CSEL 79.9, 152).

¹³⁸ Ambrose, *De inst.* 12.77 (Gori, II, 166), cf. *De fide* 3.2.14 (FC 47.2, 364), 3.4.28 (FC 47.2, 374), 4.1.8 (FC 47.2, 466).

Son suffers no inequality in comparison with the Father just because he took upon himself the form of a servant.¹³⁹

Perhaps Ambrose was once again facing challenges from Homoian opponents in Milan and drawing from his usual arsenal of scriptural argumentation to silence them. But the unoriginality and repetitiveness of the majority of his argumentation draws into question that he was actually rebutting the contentions of new opponents, suggesting instead that this rhetoric has some other function within the text. Furthermore, Ambrose never overtly mentions Arius in *De institutione*, nor does he ever define the ambiguous “they” as Arians living within the community. This is an unusual practice for the bishop; since the composition of *De fide*, he had shown no reluctance to invoke openly the name of the archetypal heretic or to label contemporary Homoians as Arians. To hold back from repeating this invective at this particular point in time, when the pro-Nicene Theodosius was firmly entrenched as sole emperor and his anti-Arian legislation had seen the large-scale demise of Homoian power, seems as though it would have been largely out of character for Ambrose.

Perhaps Ambrose’s argumentation suggests something of the larger power of anti-Homoian argumentation in context of the time and place in which he invoked it. By 392, Ambrose had spent many years establishing his own authoritative position while also arguing against the Homoian “Arians” of Milan, establishing “Arianism” but also anti-Homoian language as a kind of *lingua franca* within the socio-cultural ideology of Milan, and erecting certain Nicene exegetical traditions as the new literal meanings of certain

¹³⁹ Ambrose, *De inst.* 1.6 (Gori, II, 112-114), cf. *Gesta concili Aquileiensis, Acta* 35-40 (CSEL 82.3, 347-351).

passages of scripture.¹⁴⁰ I wish to suggest that with or without the presence of any actual Homoian opposition, anti-Homoian rhetoric lived on in the socio-cultural imagination of Milan. Ambrose's anti-Homoian language continued to hold a very real ideological currency at this time, such that he could readily utilize it against non-Homoian opponents of other stripes who could not be clearly written off as followers of Arius per se or condemned as Arian heretics under the imperial laws, but whose various arguments could nevertheless be weakened through more subversive associations with the now well-established Homoian heresy.

Who then were these non-Arian neo-Homoians with whom Ambrose seems concerned? The subject matter of *De institutione* at large, holy Christian virginity, and its significant concern for the perpetual virginity of Mary in particular, may suggest something about why Ambrose chose to revisit such argumentation at the place and time in which he did. The fourth century saw much debate over the status and position of the Church's virgins. Fathers such as Ambrose and Jerome heavily advocated the superiority of virginity to the average married lives of Christians, extolling the greater rewards of ascetics in both this life and the life to come, while critics of the ascetic program protested such hierarchies. In this debate, Marian virginity was a greatly-contested idea; both its parameters and its meaning were subject to much heated discussion. Ambrose and other ascetics often interpreted the Virgin in ways that not only advocated an adoption of the ascetic life, but more broadly asserted the superiority of Christian virgins

¹⁴⁰ For this idea, I owe much to David Dawson's *Allegorical Readers and Cultural Revision in Early Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992). Dawson explores how "literal" meanings of scripture are made and remade in response to social and cultural needs and may be used in cultural revision. See Dawson, 3-8.

to their married counterparts. On the other hand, opponents of these ideals, such as Helvidius, Bonosus, and Jovinian, raised objections to such applications of Marian virginity. By the late 380s, such writers were posing some significant theological challenges to Ambrose's ideas about both virginity and the Virgin that the bishop could not simply ignore.

As previously discussed, from his earliest works onward, Ambrose was a great advocate of the virginal life and expounded frequently upon the superior blessedness of those who forwent traditional marriage to become brides of Christ. In *De institutione*, the virgin's vow of chastity is treated similarly; Ambrose likens virginity unto Abel's sacrifice of the firstlings of his flock and claims that it complies with Paul's recommendation that each man preserve his virgin (1 Cor. 7.37-8).¹⁴¹ The virgin is superior on account of her vows, although in dedicating her life she is only paying that which is rightfully owed to God by all his children.¹⁴² As in *De virginitate*, the heady imagery of the Song of Songs provides Ambrose a framework in which to praise her privileged status as a bride of Christ.¹⁴³

In *De institutione*, Ambrose does not hesitate to claim the Virgin Mary as the strongest evidence for the superior blessedness of the lives of virgins.¹⁴⁴ This chapter previously has noted Ambrose's stylization of Mary as an exemplar of consecrated

¹⁴¹ Ambrose, *De inst.* 1.2 (Gori, II, 110).

¹⁴² Ambrose, *De inst.* 1.1 (Gori, II, 110).

¹⁴³ Ambrose, *De inst.* 1.2-6 (Gori, II, 110-112).

¹⁴⁴ Charles William Neumann has discussed in much greater detail how important the Virgin Mary was to Ambrose's theology throughout the bishop's career in his exhaustive work on the subject. See Neumann, *The Virgin Mary in the Works of Saint Ambrose* (Fribourg, Switzerland: University Press, 1962).

Christian virginity in *De virginibus*. In his very first writings, he attributed to Mary an exhaustive list of ascetic virtues readily mirroring his ideal fourth-century Christian virgin. Humble and obedient before her elders, she also fasted frequently, mingled with the poor and needy, slept little, dressed modestly, and preferred the solitude and privacy of her home.¹⁴⁵ “This is the likeness of virginity,” Ambrose asserted. “For Mary was such that her example alone is a lesson for all.”¹⁴⁶ In his later *Expositio in Lucam*, probably written around 390, the subject of Mary’s perpetual virginity comes to the forefront for the first time in his work and Ambrose spells out this teaching more explicitly as having endured not only before and after her parturition of the Son of God but also in the very act of giving birth (*in partu*) to him as well.¹⁴⁷ Mary was spared the “corruption” of sexual intercourse or childbirth because her womb was never physically opened.¹⁴⁸ Thus he is able to defend and strengthen the ascetic claim upon Mary as the exemplar of life-long celibacy.

In *De institutione*, Ambrose deals once again with the issue of Marian virginity for a similar purpose. His defense is made against those who deny that the virginity of Mary persevered after Christ’s birth.¹⁴⁹ “We have preferred to say nothing about this

¹⁴⁵ Ambrose, *De virg.* 2.2.7-10 (Gori, I, 168-174).

¹⁴⁶ Ambrose, *De virg.* 2.2.15 (Gori, I, 176). It should be noted that in this styling of Mary he is largely following Athanasius’s *Ep. virg.* 12-17 (Brakke, 277-279).

¹⁴⁷ David Hunter traces in detail the development of Ambrose’s *virginitas in partu* ideology in his *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity: The Jovinianist Controversy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 198-204 and Hunter, “Helvidius, Jovinian, and the Virginity of Mary in Late Fourth-Century Rome,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 1.1 (1993): 58-60.

¹⁴⁸ Ambrose, *Expo. Luc.* 2.55-57 (CCL 14, 54-56). This is an interesting contrast to Ambrose’s earlier assertion in *De virginitate*. that virgins must open to receive the ungent of the Word and then close their vessels tightly by their behaviors so that it does not escape (Ambrose, *De virgt.* 12.69 [Gori, II, 58-60]).

¹⁴⁹ Ambrose, *De inst.* 5.35 (Gori, II, 136): *fuerunt qui eam negarent virginem perseuerasse.*

sacrilege for a long time, but since the subject matter calls it to the forefront, so that even a bishop is accused of this error, we cannot leave it uncondemned.”¹⁵⁰ This latter reference has generally been considered by scholars as a reference to Bonosus, bishop of Sardica or Naissus.¹⁵¹ Little is known of Bonosus’s teachings other than that which can doubtfully be inferred from Ambrose’s *De institutione* and also the *Epistula de causa Bonosi* of disputed authorship.¹⁵² The *Epistula*, written to summarize a council at Capua in 393, only explicitly condemns the teaching that Mary bore children other than Christ, implying that Bonosus had taught that she held a regular marital relationship with Joseph after Jesus was born.¹⁵³ If one can assume that Ambrose’s reference in *De institutione* was to Bonosus, little may be deduced with much certainty other than that Bonosus seemed to Ambrose to deny that Mary’s virginity “perservered” (*perseuerasse*) or was perpetual, an allegation possibly alluding to the same ideas condemned in the *Epistula*, but more specific details of his denial remain unclear since he is never alluded to again in the treatise. Bonosus is a good candidate for the bishop Ambrose mentions in *De institutione* on account of the dating of the council, the fact that he was a bishop accused

¹⁵⁰ Ambrose, *De inst.* 5.35 (Gori, II, 136).

¹⁵¹ See Neumann, *The Virgin Mary*, 212; Gori, II, 137 n. 69; Daniel Callam, “Clerical Continence in the Fourth Century: Three Papal Decretals” *Theological Studies* 41.1 (1980): 7-8. For the summary of the debate over Bonosus’s see, see Neumann, *op. cit.*, 206-11.

¹⁵² The *Epistula de causa Bonosi* was long attributed to Siricus, bishop of Rome but then later attributed to Ambrose by Neumann and others (Neumann, *The Virgin Mary*, 205, n.1). Zelzer and others have disputed Ambrose’s definite authorship of the letter, finding greater cause to once again attribute it to Siricus. See Zelzer, CSEL 82.3, prol., XXX-XXXI.

¹⁵³ *Ep. de causa Bonosi*, although not generally thought now to be Ambrose’s writing, is printed among his letters as *Ep.* 71.3 (CSEL 82.3, 8-9). Cf. Helvidius’s teachings as laid out by Jerome, *Contra Helvidium* 4-19 (PL 23, 195-213).

of some kind of Marian heresy, and also the *Epistula*'s mention of Bonosus's direct appeal to Ambrose, implying the bishop's familiarity with Bonosus and his teachings.¹⁵⁴ But no definite conclusions may be drawn concerning the extent to which Bonosus may have inspired Ambrose's apology on Marian virginity in *De institutione*. The others he refers to as having denied the perpetual virginity of Mary may be profitably considered as well.

Around 383, Jerome refuted the teachings of a certain Helvidius in Rome who had, according to Jerome's assertions, taught that Joseph and Mary had a marital relationship after the birth of Christ which included sexual relations and the production of more children.¹⁵⁵ Helvidius's Marian agenda seemed to center around a more general rejection of the superiority of Christian virginity to marriage, a proposition to which Jerome rigorously objects.¹⁵⁶ Although Helvidius's teachings are similar to those of Bonosus, the earlier date of Helvidius's struggle with Jerome, and the fact that Ambrose never implies any acquaintance with Helvidius's work or Jerome's earlier controversy at Rome with Helvidius in any of his writings, make it unlikely that he had Helvidius in mind when he composed *De institutione*. However, I suggest that Helvidius's teachings are part of a larger ideological current which moves another important opponent, Jovinian, into Ambrose's circle of acquaintance by the early 390s.

Jovinian is far more likely to have been among those who, having denied the perseverance of Marian virginity, inspired Ambrose's defense in *De institutione*.

¹⁵⁴ *Ep. de causa Bonosi* 71.2 (CSEL 82.3, 8).

¹⁵⁵ Jerome, *Contra Helvidium* 4-19 (PL 23, 195-213).

¹⁵⁶ Jerome, *Contra Helvidium* 20-22 (PL 23, 213-216).

Although none of Jovinian's own writings are extant, it is clear from the writings of his opponents that he found consecrated virginity problematic and took special issue with certain ascetic notions of Mary's virginity. A former monk and outspoken opponent of ascetic superiority, he first appeared in Rome in the early 390s critiquing the ascetic piety of the Roman clergy who seemed to him to denigrate marriage in their favoritism of celibacy.¹⁵⁷ In 393, Jovinian fled to Milan after being condemned in Rome and was there also condemned by a synod of bishops in the same year. Ambrose, reporting on the Milanese synod to Siricius, bishop of Rome, charged Jovinian with preaching against the different degrees of blessedness in both this life and the next that ascetics laid claim to as well as the merits of fasting.¹⁵⁸ Furthermore, to Ambrose's great disgust, Jovinian had denied the virginity of Mary *in partu*; he purportedly claimed that while she had been a virgin when she conceived of the Holy Spirit, she was not a virgin in bringing him forth.¹⁵⁹

Jovinian, on the other hand, seems to have accused Ambrose of Manicheism. Augustine alleges that this accusation arose from Jovinian's misunderstanding of Ambrose's teachings on Mary's *virginitas in partu* that seemed to imply for Jovinian that Christ was merely a phantom, having no true physical humanity or normal human

¹⁵⁷ Hunter, *Marriage*, 17. Jerome's treatise refuting Jovinian, *Contra Jovinianum* (PL 23, 221-354) gives greatest evidence for Jovinian's anti-ascetic teachings but excludes any mention of his Marian doctrine Ambrose later objects to so strongly.

¹⁵⁸ Ambrose, *Ep. extra coll.* 15.2, 10 (CSEL 82.3, 303 & 308). Jerome's treatise refuting Jovinian, *Contra Jovinianum* also gives evidence for similar anti-ascetic teachings of Jovinian. For example, see 1.40 (PL 23, 280).

¹⁵⁹ Ambrose, *Ep. extra coll.* 15.4 (CSEL 82.3, 310): *Virgo concepit, sed non virgo generavit*. Hunter notes that Ambrose is the only one of Jovinian's critics who cites this as one of his heretical teachings. The bishop spends more than half of his letter refuting this perceived heresy. See Hunter, *Marriage*, 22.

birth.¹⁶⁰ But Hunter has argued that Jovinian seems to have objected to the very narrowness of application that Ambrose's interpretation of Mary allowed for; the perpetual Virgin Mary that he had modeled as the ideal Christian virgin excluded the possibility that she might serve as a model for all Christians, unmarried and married. Any exclusive claims of the virgins of the church upon the Mother of God likely offended Jovinian's notion of the inherent equality and worthiness of all baptized Christians.¹⁶¹ Augustine confirms Hunter's argument elsewhere, associating the accusation of Manicheanism with the hatred of or forbidding of marriage and childbirth.¹⁶²

Because of the standard 392 dating of *De institutione*, most modern scholars have assumed that Ambrose did not know Jovinian until 393 when the latter came to Milan after his condemnation in Rome.¹⁶³ Yet Ambrose's connections at Rome must not be underestimated,¹⁶⁴ and there is much evidence in the treatise to suggest that the bishop was well-apprieved of some of the ideas and sentiments similar to those of Jovinian that were disturbing the ranks of the elite ascetics of Rome before 393.

¹⁶⁰ The accusation of Ambrose's Manicheanism and these explanations for it are Augustine's. See Augustine, *Contra Iulianum* 1.2 (PL 45, 1051-1052) and *Confessiones* 5.10.20 (CCL 27, 68-69).

¹⁶¹ See Hunter, "Helvidius," 51-53, 57 and Hunter, *Marriage*, 203-204.

¹⁶² See Augustine, *Contra Faustum* 30.6 (PL 42, 494-496).

¹⁶³ Among these are Zelzer, CSEL 82.3, prol., CXXVIII; Gerhard Rauschen, *Jahrbücher der christlichen Kirche unter dem Kaiser Theodosius dem Grossen : Versuch einer Erneuerung der Annales ecclesiastici des Baronius für die Jahre 378-395* (Freiburg im Breisgau : Herder, 1897), 378-81. Although Neumann, advocates the earlier date of 390 for Jovinian's condemnation at Rome (Neumann, *The Virgin Mary*, 142-154), most scholars agree that 393 seems a more likely date since Jerome seemed unaware of Jovinian's ecclesial condemnation when he finished his *Contra Jovinianum* that same year. See Hunter, *Marriage*, 16-17.

¹⁶⁴ Among Ambrose's preserved letters are ample correspondences from bishops in Rome and other regions of Italy where Jovinian had likely been teaching beforehand. One notable source of Ambrose's information about happenings in Rome was likely his sister Marcellina; although three of his letters to her have been preserved (*Ep.* 76, 77, *Ep. ex. coll.* 1) none of her letters are extant. As previously noted, she is thought to have been responsible for the circulation of many of Ambrose's writings in Rome; see note 26 above.

While *De institutione* spends some time addressing the only specified heresy of Bonosus—that the Virgin bore children after bearing Christ—it also reaffirms Mary’s exclusive role as a model for virgins, providing Ambrose’s most lengthy and in-depth defense of Mary’s *in partu* virginity and confirming the superiority of the virginal life to married life, both propositions that clearly contradicted the teachings of Jovinian. Mary is portrayed as the originator of all Christian virginity through whom Christ descended in order to call many to the practice.¹⁶⁵ For Ambrose, the illustrious Virgin raised up not only the symbol of sacred virginity but also the pious standard of immaculate integrity, Christ.¹⁶⁶

Ambrose lists various scriptural arguments that supposedly disprove her continued virginal state after the birth of Jesus, rejecting such notions as that the scriptural appellation of the word *mulier* (woman or wife) to Mary in John 2.4 implied her engagement in marital relations after her parturition of Jesus,¹⁶⁷ that Joseph had thought to denounce her because she was discovered as not a true virgin even before their marriage,¹⁶⁸ and that the Lord had “brothers” in the literal sense as some had surmised from scripture.¹⁶⁹ “Or truly did the Lord Jesus choose his mother who could pollute the celestial palace with male seed,” he queries, “as though she was one for whom it was impossible to preserve virginal modesty--she by whose example the rest are provoked to

¹⁶⁵ Ambrose, *De inst.* 5.33 (Gori, II, 134).

¹⁶⁶ Ambrose, *De inst.* 5.35 (Gori, II, 136).

¹⁶⁷ Ambrose, *De inst.* 5.35-36, 6.41 (Gori, II, 136-138, 142).

¹⁶⁸ Ambrose, *De inst.* 5.37-40 (Gori, II, 138-142).

¹⁶⁹ Ambrose, *De inst.* 5.35, 43 (Gori, II, 136, 142).

a devotion to chastity, as though she were of the sort that she should divert the gift when the intention was that others be inspired by her?"¹⁷⁰ The bishop rejects any actual marital associations between Mary and Joseph, sexual or otherwise. Instead, she is affirmed as the archetype of virginal chastity and the exclusive model of the Church's virgins, a lofty standard of Christian virginity to which all members of the community are called.

The bishop vigorously defended this lofty virginity of Mary before and after Christ's birth but also during the actual event itself:

Therefore, Mary is the gate through whom Christ entered into this world. When brought to light by virginal parturition, he did not break the original seal of virginity. The barrier of chastity remained undefiled and the signs of integrity endured inviolate when he whose loftiness the world could not sustain came forth from the Virgin.¹⁷¹

Ambrose makes extensive usage of the image of the closed temple gate mentioned in Ezekiel 44.1-3 to expound the closed nature of Mary's womb. Although Ezekiel reserves the privilege of opening and passing through the gate for the prince, Ambrose glosses over this exception; instead, his Virgin is perpetually closed and not opened even by Christ passing through her. Instead, her womb will remain closed both after and during the Lord's passage. Furthermore, he asserts Mary's exclusive position as the only childbearing virgin; her womb is the only one through which offspring can pass and yet still not lose its natural barrier of virginity.¹⁷²

¹⁷⁰ Ambrose, *De inst.* 6.44 (Gori, II, 144).

¹⁷¹ Ambrose, *De inst.* 8.52 (Gori, II 152): *Porta igitur Maria, per quam Christus intrauit in hunc mundum, quando uirginali fusus est partu, et genitalia uirginitatis claustra non soluit. Mansit intemeratum septum pudoris, et inuiolata integritatis durauere signacula, cum exiret ex uirgine, cuius altitudinem mundus sustinere non posset.*

¹⁷² Ambrose, *De inst.* 8.53-57 (Gori, II, 152-156).

In *De fide*, Ambrose had labeled “Arians” those who had mixed the mysterious divine generation of the Son with generation of the flesh and thus improperly attributed the lowliness of humanity to the nature of the unified God. In *De institutione*, his earlier anxiety for the absolute unity of the Father and Son is reiterated as a concern for the divinity of the Son in the face of his possible mixture with lowly flesh through human parturition. Ambrose displays particular interest in this earlier “Arian” heresy and specifically Christological aspects of earlier Homoian teaching become the foil for his ascetic argumentation. The bishop asserts his interpretation of Marian virginity by styling it as the natural conclusion of orthodox understanding of the divinity of Christ.

If Christ is truly God, Mary’s virginity must be both perpetual and miraculous for Ambrose. His lengthy refutation of the ambiguous “they” who seem to teach Homoian doctrines is set within exposition of the Virgin as Ezekiel’s gate. For it is none other than the unified Nicene Lord, who is one and within whom there is no second, that crowns all virgins who keep their gates shut and their gardens closed.¹⁷³ Ambrose reiterates at length his prior arguments supporting this Trinitarian vision, then argues once again for the sealed and holy gate of Mary’s perpetual virginity. Christ resurrects for all and needs no other to raise himself after death since he is God; it is this glorious king of Israel and no one lesser who passes through Mary’s gate, a king who sat in the royal court of the virginal womb when the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. Mary replenishes the world in bringing forth nothing less than Salvation himself who sits within her

¹⁷³ Ambrose, *De inst.* 10.63-64 (Gori, II, 158-160).

immaculate vessel.¹⁷⁴ Marian virginity is set as a prerequisite to correctly understanding Christ as God.

Trinitarian scriptural exegesis also serves elsewhere in *De institutione* to forward this argument. In order to maintain Mary's exclusive position as a model of complete, closed virginity, Ambrose upholds the perpetual chastity of the Virgin with scripture and argumentation that less overtly challenges supposedly-Homoian ideas but are nevertheless designed to invoke previous debates over the nature of God. In his explanation of Matthew 1.25 ("He did not know her until she brought forth her son"), he references Isaiah 46.4 ("I am God, and while you grow old, I am") and Matthew 26.64 ("...From now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Father ...") to liken Mary's perpetual virginity to the eternal, unchanging nature of God and the perpetual place of the Son at the right hand of the Father, argumentation that had been key in earlier debates over the Son's coeternality with the Father.¹⁷⁵

As previously noted, much of Ambrose's lengthy Trinitarian affirmation in *De institutione* is directly drawn from his earlier works, especially his *De fide*. He adds only one significant original argument for his views on the Trinity in *De institutione*. Ambrose cites 1 Cor. 15.47 ("The first man that came upon the earth was earthly, the second man that came from the heavens was celestial") as a basis for heretical argumentation that Christ is second or lesser in his divinity than the Father. Ambrose is quick to clarify that Christ is only referred to as second in this case because he is the

¹⁷⁴ Ambrose, *De inst.* 12.77-80 (Gori, II, 166-168).

¹⁷⁵ Ambrose, *De inst.* 5.38 (Gori, II, 138-140). For Ambrose's earlier arguments centering around the eternal place of the Son at the right hand of the Father (Matt. 26.64, Mark 14.62, Luke 22.69), see *De fide* 2.12.102-105 (FC 47.2, 324-328) and *De spiritu* 2.1.19 (PL 16, 777-778).

second Adam who humbles himself in order to raise all again in the resurrection; he is nevertheless the first and last and is not second in any way with respect to his divinity.¹⁷⁶ There seems to be no exegetical precedent in Ambrose's work, nor in the Greek or Latin tradition, for this scriptural argumentation for the primacy of Christ.¹⁷⁷ Although this may suggest some new Homoian opposition to dominant Nicene views, perhaps Ambrose's inclusion of this argument may be better understood as a further allusion to his earlier positioning of Mary as the second Eve in the same treatise: "Come therefore Eve, now Mary, who for us raised up not only the incentive of virginity, but also raised up God." Mary, the recapitulation of both Eve and Sarah, exceeds both for Ambrose by bearing God while still preserving her immaculate virginity.¹⁷⁸ Although coming after Adam and Eve, neither Christ nor Mary is to be thought of as being second in any way. Again, Ambrose seems to allude to an inseparable connection between correct Christological understanding and the position of Mary as perpetual virgin and God-bearer.

Furthermore, Ambrose is prepared to argue that fully comprehending the Virgin's chastity actually exceeds the importance of holding a correct understanding of Christ's divinity. Mary was married to Joseph because it was more important to the Lord that no one doubt her chastity than that all understand the miracle of his birth.¹⁷⁹ Her impeccable modesty was of such importance to Christ that he testified to it from the holy cross by

¹⁷⁶ Ambrose, *De inst.* 11.72-73 (Gori, II, 162-164).

¹⁷⁷ My findings here are confirmed by Gori, II, 165 n. 135.

¹⁷⁸ Ambrose, *De inst.* 5.33 (Gori, II, 134). Irenaeus of Lyons seems to have been the originator of the idea of Mary as the second Eve in the Latin tradition. See his *Adversus haereses* 3.22.4 (SC 211, 438-444).

¹⁷⁹ Ambrose, *De inst.* 6.42 (Gori, II, 142).

commending her into the care of John.¹⁸⁰ In fact, the accomplishment of her miraculous virginity *in partu* even outshines the resurrection of Christ, Ambrose argues; both Elijah and Elisha had previously performed resurrections before Jesus, but never before and never after has a virgin been able to give birth!¹⁸¹

As a further device, Ambrose invokes similar language of mixture and mingling important to earlier Trinitarian debate to affirm Mary's virginity.¹⁸² In *De virginibus*, he had condemned the heresy of those claiming that the Word was merely mingled (*mixtus*) with the Father in some way.¹⁸³ The Father and Son do not "mingle" their plurality (*admiscuit pluralitatem*) nor sever the unity of their divine substance.¹⁸⁴ It is the Arians who, like Jewish merchants, mix (*miscent*) the divine generation of the Son with the human and thus attribute to God's greatness what properly belongs to the lowliness of human flesh.¹⁸⁵

These negative connotations of the language of mixture and mingling are then later invoked in *De institutione* to guard Mary's impeccable virginity; Ambrose rejects

¹⁸⁰ Ambrose, *De inst.* 7.48 (Gori, II, 146-148).

¹⁸¹ Ambrose, *De inst.* 5.39 (Gori, II, 140).

¹⁸² Language of mixing and mingling may have entered Ambrose's thought by way of Gregory Nazianzen's writings against the Apollinarians with which Ambrose was most likely familiar. Gregory rejected the Apollinarians' alleged understanding that God became perfect man by the mixing or mingling of the divine Logos with the flesh. (See Gregory of Nazianzus, *Ep.* 101, 102 [PG 37, 176-201]). He did not, however, use such language in reference to the relationship of the Father and Son in either a positive or negative sense. Warren Smith has found such language to stem directly from Ambrose's own concern to preserve a distinction between divine and human natures in Christ. See J. Warren Smith, *Christian Grace and Pagan Virtue: The Theological Foundation of Ambrose's Ethics* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

¹⁸³ Ambrose, *De vir.* 3.1.2 (Gori, I, 208-210). As previously mentioned, he is likely referencing the ideas of Marcellus of Ancyra and Photinus here. See n. 47.

¹⁸⁴ Ambrose, *De fide* 5.3.45 (FC 47.3, 622).

¹⁸⁵ Ambrose, *De fide* 3.10.65 (FC 47.2, 404).

Joseph's reception of her as his wife (Matt. 1.24) as implying that Mary underwent a mixture (*admixture*) with the masculine at this juncture.¹⁸⁶ Mary brought forth Christ as a virgin without the mingling or mixture of bodily sexual intercourse (*commixtione corporeae consuetudinis*).¹⁸⁷ When she conceived, "the grace of the divine will took that which was of the flesh from the Virgin without any mixture (*admixture*) with the seed of man," and thus Mary "crowned" the Lord by forming him and bearing him without any operation of her own, as her perpetual virginity affirms.¹⁸⁸ Ambrose invokes a vocabulary with some perceivable anti-Homoian connotations to tie those who reject Mary's perpetual virginity with earlier Trinitarian heresy.

Ambrose's exposition of Mary's perpetually unblemished virginity ultimately affirms the high status of the Church's virgins. Her perpetually closed womb testifies that each virgin is a closed garden and sealed fountain held in exclusive reserve for the Bridegroom's coming.¹⁸⁹ As a perfect type of the Church whose divine maternity is prophesied by the Song of Songs, Mary's special relationship with the Bridegroom is something to which only virgins may aspire.¹⁹⁰ Likewise, virgins are exhorted to follow Mary in being both a dry vessel and a cloud raining the grace of Christ over the earth,¹⁹¹ implying a further promise of virginity's more lofty spiritual fruitfulness. Those who

¹⁸⁶ Ambrose, *De inst.* 6.41 (Gori, II, 142).

¹⁸⁷ Ambrose, *De inst.* 14.88 (Gori, II, 172).

¹⁸⁸ Ambrose, *De inst.* 16.98 (Gori, II, 178).

¹⁸⁹ See Ambrose, *De inst.* 8.57-9.58-62 (Gori, II, 156-158).

¹⁹⁰ See Ambrose, *De inst.* 14.87-8 (Gori, II, 170-172). Ambrose neatly avoids dubbing Mary the bride of Christ by understanding the imagery of the Song of Songs as the "mysteries of her maternity" rather than marriage. See *ibid.*, 14.87-15.94 (Gori, II, 170-176) for this entire reading.

¹⁹¹ Ambrose, *De inst.* 13.81-82 (Gori, II, 168).

seek to be numbered among the company of other virgins rather than people of the ordinary world may even consider themselves to be attendants to the exalted Virgin herself.¹⁹²

Through various rhetorical strategies, Ambrose revived the threat of Homoianism in the minds of his readers in a time and place in which it most likely did not exist in any significant way. His liberal usage of language and argumentation tied to earlier Trinitarian debate suggests that he instead intended to address those who cast doubt on the perpetual virginity of Mary, tying opponents such as Bonosus and Jovinian to earlier Homoian opponents who had been condemned by both church and government and largely silenced by the time of *De institutione*'s composition. Although he does not openly name these critics as associates of Arius or Arianism in *De institutione*, his language seems meant to represent critics of his vision of Marian virginity, and of Christian virginity in general, as a serious threat to orthodox, imperially-sanctioned Nicene understandings of God. Ambrose's efforts in this matter have been so successful throughout time that some modern scholars have been led to suggest that the heresy of Bonosus must have exceeded his mere exclusion of Mary's virginity *post partum* and stemmed instead from an incorrect Christological understanding.¹⁹³

I have argued, however, that this is most likely what the bishop intended his readers to assume but is not clearly the case. Positioning *De institutione* in context of a period in which not only Bonosus but also Helvidius and Jovinian were critiquing both

¹⁹² Ambrose, *De inst.* 17.113 (Gori, II, 192-194).

¹⁹³ See Callam, 7. Callam draws this conclusion largely from *De institutione*. His argument that this may be inferred from Bonosus's comparison to the Jews in the *Epistula de causa Bonosi* and from later writers who connect the Bonosians to Photinus seems desensitized to larger rhetorical trends in the works of many late ancient heresiologists.

Marian virginity and virginal superiority in general allows us to suggest that something more was at stake than the mere refutation of Homoian groups that had been rendered impotent for some years. It was the larger implications of Mary's absolute perpetual virginity that seem to have been at stake for Ambrose. Maintaining the superiority of the Church's virgins in this life and in the life to come largely depended on maintaining the Virgin forever immaculate and untouched, exalted and ethereal, the exclusive property of the church's ascetic elite who strove to live the life of the angels while yet on earth.

VI. Conclusion

Throughout his career, Ambrose drew connections between his ascetic ideology and Trinitarian theology. *De virginibus* displays both his earliest ideas about virginity as well as his loyalties to more Nicene views of God. He treads lightly in this latter endeavor, primarily placing broad, superficial Trinitarian arguments in the mouth of Liberius to avoid possible controversy with the prominent Homoian contingent at Milan. Ambrose's greatest agenda at the beginning of his career was to consolidate his own position of power and authority as the new Milanese bishop, and the lengthy legacy of his Homoian predecessor Auxentius made such political maneuverings expedient for the new bishop. Ambrose's formulations, however, of the Virgin Mary and of Christian virgins in general seem to reflect indirectly an ambiguous portrait of a unified Nicene God—the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost who each serve as partners in turn to the mother, daughter, and spouse of the Virgin and virgins in general. Virginity, and Marian virginity in

particular, serve as flexible linguistic space for veiled argumentation over God's nature and ultimately allow Ambrose to support God's absolute oneness without overtly attacking Homoian sympathizers in his community.

Although largely responding to critics of his ascetic program in his subsequent *De virginitate*, Ambrose also takes the opportunity to explore vaguely the Nicene trinity, invoking language and imagery from the Song of Songs to express the one God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Although he makes little use of Mary in this treatise, Christian virgins here are used to support the mysterious oneness of divinity. Nevertheless, the ambiguity of his metaphor seems intended to overwhelm and impress rather than teach doctrine.

By the later composition of *De institutione*, the bishop's personal circumstances were markedly different. By 392, Ambrose had established himself as an intellectual, social, and political authority within Milan, as especially demonstrated by his various interactions with the emperors Gratian, Valentinian II, and Theodosius. In this consolidation of personal power, his position as a defender of Nicene orthodoxy in the face of Homoian threat played an important part. Unlike his first treatises on virginity, his *De fide* openly attacked those who sympathized with the Ariminum creed and labeled them as "Arians," drawing associations for the first time in his work between Homoian theologians and the long-deceased presbyter Arius who had been roundly anathemized by this time. In modeling himself as a great opponent of "Arian" heresy, Ambrose was able to assert significant political power against opponents, as displayed both by his prominence in the excommunication of Palladius at the Council of Aquileia and also his

famous refusal to cede the Portian basilica to the emperor Valentinian II and his Homoian court.

Ambrose's significant increase in personal power and status, when coupled with the fall of Valentinian and his successor Theodosius's unfailing political support of the Nicene contingent, have led such scholars as Williams to conclude that Homoianism had lost any significant influence in Milan by 386. But an account must be made for the significant anti-Homoian polemic that once again appears in *De institutione* several years later. A lack of evidence for continued Homoian opposition in Milan, the very unoriginality of his Trinitarian arguments, most of which can be traced directly back to his earlier *De fide* and *De Spiritu*, and his reluctance to label his opponents as "Arians" in this treatise all suggest that anti-Homoian language had a more complex socio-theological function within Milanese culture which may be profitably explored.

I have argued that the late fourth-century debates over virginity—and especially Mary's perpetual virginity—provide a fruitful context for understanding the appearance of this Trinitarian discourse. By the early 390s, opponents such as Bonosus, Helvidius, and Jovinian were challenging proponents of virginal superiority such as Jerome and Ambrose and their exclusive claims to the Virgin Mary as a model for and advocate of their lifestyle. Ambrose responded by affirming in detail Mary's perpetual virginity before, after, and also during her parturition of Jesus, ultimately verifying the privileged position of all Christian virgins as well. In order to support these arguments, he rhetorically bound them to orthodox understandings of the divinity of Christ, drawing upon well-established anti-Homoian rhetoric to associate opponents of Mary's perpetual virginity with the taint of earlier Arian heresy. Ambrose invoked language and scripture

commonly employed in earlier decades against Homoian opponents in order to marginalize Jovinian and other anti-ascetics who were openly questioning the superiority of the virginal life and ultimately the claims to authority of those who espoused it.

Although Ambrose initially uses virginal discourse as a way of formulating and supporting Nicene views of God, he later finds potential in similar Trinitarian discourse to support a model of virginity that has come under fire. In this chapter, I have attempted to illuminate this paradox in order to draw attention to the very flexibility of virginity and anti-Homoianism as discursive sites for Ambrose. Like all language, these discourses fluctuate according to place and time, responding to the needs of both the bishop and his community, engaging in a kind of cultural work that either affirms or revises the current status quo. In subsequent chapters, I will further probe the malleability of Ambrose's writings by considering how virginity language may interact with other discourses such as anti-Judaism and anti-paganism to perform different socio-theological functions in fourth-century Milan.

Chapter Two

Negotiating Virginité in Milan, Part I: *De virginibus* and *De virginitate*

In the previous chapter, I have discussed aspects of the Nicene-Arian conflict which caused a good deal of disturbance in Milan throughout Ambrose's administration and suggested some of the ways in which languages of Homoian heresy and virginité interacted to various ends in Ambrose's writings throughout the end of the fourth century. When the bishop was appointed to the episcopal see in 375, he found himself not only in the midst of a theological conflict over differing beliefs in the nature of God but also in a socio-political battle between ecclesial and lay authority. While the various struggles between Ambrose and the Roman emperors have been well-documented elsewhere, I wish to consider both here and in the subsequent chapter some of the more mundane negotiations of power between Ambrose and his lay congregation at Milan as he attempted to formulate a theology of virginité.¹ This chapter will examine in particular some aspects of *De virginibus* in relation to Ambrose's following treatise on virginité, *De virginitate*, with the goal of highlighting some of the transformations the bishop's arguments underwent as he grappled with negative response to his first writings.

Such a project may seem somewhat rudimentary as much has been written by modern scholars on the subject of Ambrose's ascetic theology. A great deal of this work, however, has sought to harmonize the bishop's ideas on the subject, giving the

¹ The classic political histories of Ambrose's administration include F. Homes Dudden's *The Life and Times of Saint Ambrose* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935), Jean-Rémy Palanque's *Saint Ambroise et l'Empire romain* (Paris: E. de Boccard, 1933), Gunther Gottlieb's *Ambrosius von Mailand und Kaiser Gratian* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1973), and more recently, McLynn's *Ambrose of Milan: Church and Court in a Christian Capital* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

impression that Ambrose's teachings reflect a unified theology of virginity. They have paid little attention to the various ways in which his ascetic ideals fluctuated throughout the course of his career.² In contrast to such readings, this chapter and the subsequent one will consider these treatises with sensitivity to the numerous changes present from one to the next, respecting the complexity of the process of theological development. Reading with attention to inconsistency rather than unity reveals that Ambrose's writings on virginity are not a homogenous and stable body. Rather, they are a series of loosely-bound texts that reflect the constant evolution of his ideas and arguments throughout the course of his career in response to the needs and demands of his Milanese congregation. The main goal of this chapter and the next is to examine Ambrose's development of particular discursive and reading strategies as he responded to critics of virginity and sought to situate virgins ideologically in an honored and institutionalized position within the church. Ultimately, Ambrose shielded himself from criticism and won the praise and loyalty of his audience by bringing virginity into line with fourth-century Christian culture and society in northern Italy.

As I have argued earlier, the young bishop seems to have chosen the subject of virginity both as a platform for communal unification and a way to indirectly discuss a

² See Raymond D'Izarny, *La virginité selon Saint Ambroise* (Ph.D. dissertation, Lyon, 1952), Domingo Ramos-Lissón, "Le binôme liberté—virginité dans les écrits exhortatifs de saint Ambroise sur la virginité," in *Studia Patristica XIX: Historica, Theologica, et Philosophica, Critica et Philologica*, ed. Elizabeth A. Livingstone (Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 467-474 and also his "'Referamus ad Christum': comme paradigme aux vierges dans les Traités sur la virginité de Saint Ambroise" in *Studia Patristica XXVIII: Latin Authors (Other than Augustine and His Opponents), Nachleben of the Fathers*, ed. Elizabeth A. Livingstone (Leuven: Peeters, 1993), 65-74; Hervé Savon, "Un modèle de sainteté à la fin du IV^e siècle: la virginité dans l'oeuvre de Saint Ambroise," in *Sainteté et martyre dans les religions du livre*, ed. Jacques Marx (Brussels: Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 1989), 21-31; Kim E. Power, "Ambrose of Milan: Keeper of the Boundaries," *Theology Today* 55.1 (1998): 15-34; Calogero Riggi, "Fedeltà verginale e coniugale in S. Ambrogio," in *Humanitas classica et sapientia christiana: scritti offerti a Roberto Iacoangeli*, ed. Sergio Felici (Rome: Libreria Ateneo Salesiano, 1992), 175-202.

Nicene vision of a triune God, an idea which likely seemed to him more at risk at that time and place than the undoubtedly blessed institution of virginity. Yet the underlying assumption of his *De virginibus*--namely that the life-long sexual continence of women was universally acknowledged to be praiseworthy by most Christian lay people in northern Italy by 377--seems to have been a serious overestimation of the value of virginal rhetoric to Milanese Christians at the time of this, his first composition. Shortly after its circulation (and the composition of *De viduis*, its companion piece addressed to widows), the bishop wrote a second lengthy treatise on virginity, *De virginitate*, in which he vehemently defended himself against numerous objections to his initial ascetic program.³

In his biography of Ambrose, Neil McLynn suggested that the young bishop encountered some trouble among his Milanese congregation since his initial teachings on virginity were perceived as a challenge to the traditional family power structures of Roman society. Taking McLynn's suggestion as a starting point, this chapter will highlight in greater detail the radical nature of Ambrose's teachings in *De virginibus* by examining some of the ways in which these first teachings were unacceptable to his audience. Looking at his nearly contemporary composition, *De virginitate*, it becomes clear that at least some of the Christian Milanese were deeply distressed by many of the theological and social implications of the virginal lifestyle, suggesting that virginity (as expounded by the bishop) was not yet the familiar, respected institution it would become in later years. Read together, *De virginibus* and *De virginitate* reflect not only the young bishop's initial inexperience and unfamiliarity with the dispositions of his Milanese

³ For a discussion of the dating of *De virginitate*, see Chapter 1, note 63.

congregants, but also display something of the evolution of his ascetic theology in response to the needs and demands of his audience. The bishop emerged as an outspoken proponent for the virginal life but one limited by the ideological confines granted him by the people who listened to him preach.

I. Ambrose's Congregation

Before treating the interactions between the bishop and his audience, it is profitable to consider briefly the character of Ambrose's Milanese congregation. Even though the city of Milan had been an episcopal see since at least the mid-third century, it was still largely on the frontiers of Christianity at the time of Ambrose's appointment.⁴ The ecclesiastical history seems not to have been distinguished before the end of the fourth century. Paredi has noted that the history of the Christian church in Milan before Ambrose's time consists of little more than a list of bishops, with no remarkable Christian history.⁵ Ambrose's predecessor Auxentius had gained some repute on account of his pro-Homoian doctrines, but the fact that he maintained his see for two decades in spite of pro-Nicene activism throughout the empire may suggest the relative unimportance of the Milanese see at the time of Ambrose's ascension to the episcopacy.⁶

A further suggestion of Milan's relative insignificance as a Christian city comes from the Christian teacher Ausonius. Passing through Milan in 379 (a few years after

⁴ Rita Lizzi Testa has traced the slow and uneven spread of Christianity in northern Italy from the mid-third century to the early fifth. See Testa, "Christianization and Conversion in Northern Italy," in *The Origins of Christendom in the West*, ed. Alan Kreider (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2001), 47-95.

⁵ Angelo Paredi, *Saint Ambrose: His Life and Times*, trans. M. Joseph Costelloe (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1964), 102-104.

⁶ On Auxentius, see Chapter 1, 20-22.

Ambrose's appointment to the see), Ausonius recorded the beauty and prevalence of Milan's pagan temples and statues, its famous baths dedicated to Hercules, and its circus, theater, and its amphitheater.⁷ Although a Christian himself, and despite much evidence that Christian buildings also were part of the urban landscape by this era, Ausonius fails to mention the presence of any of these edifices.

While perhaps insignificant as a Christian city well into the fourth century, Milan held increased political significance throughout this period as a seat of Roman imperial power in the West.⁸ Such new political importance may have been responsible for an increase in the number of Christians at Milan during his episcopate.⁹ At least some of Ambrose's congregation was known to have been directly connected to the imperial government in the city. Among the numbers of the Milanese Church at different times were Ponticianus, an *agens in rebus* of the state, Nicentius, the former *tribunus et notarius*, Verecundus, the Roman *civis* and *grammaticus*, who brought Augustine to his rural estate at Cassiciacum, and Manlius Theodorus, the famous politician of Gratian's

⁷ Born in Bordeaux near the year 310, Ausonius became tutor to the emperor Gratian later in life and served as Praetorian Prefect in Gaul in 378 and as consul in 379. See Ausonius's epigram on Milan, *Ordo urbium nobilium* in Paredi, *Saint Ambrose*, 99.

⁸ With the organization of the Diocletian tetrarchy in 293, Milan was chosen by Diocletian's colleague Maximianus as the official seat for the emperor of the Western part of the empire. The city retained this privilege (with some short interruptions) until 404 when the capital was transferred to Ravenna. See Paredi, *Saint Ambrose*, 98-99.

Testa argues for the singular significance of this relocation of the political administration for the spread of Christianity in Milan and throughout northern Italy. See Testa, "Christianization and Conversion," 47.

⁹ Excavations of Ambrose's cathedral have shown the building to be quite large, with a capacity of nearly 3,000 people. See Richard Krautheimer, *Three Christian Capitals* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 76. Craig Satterlee, *Ambrose of Milan's Method of Mystagogical Preaching* [Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2002], 116) assumes from this that Ambrose inherited a very large audience from his episcopal predecessor, but we must be cautious in using the projected dimensions of this edifice to project data on the Christian presence in Milan. Perhaps the building was not constructed to accommodate actual church-attending Christians but rather to display the prestige and power of the Church in Milan with the hope of attracting more to its ranks.

court and writer, and his aristocratic sister Daedalia, a consecrated virgin.¹⁰ These illustrious figures indicate the strong presence of the Roman upper classes in the church at Milan during Ambrose's time, people of similar education and social status as the bishop himself.¹¹

While more is known of such upper-class members of Ambrose's congregation at Milan, Ambrose's congregation seems to have resembled congregations in other large Roman cities with respect to a mixed social composition in which the nobility and gentry attended church in the company of common freemen and slaves. While the upper classes constituted a very visible and powerful presence in the church, it is clear from certain events that the lower classes played a significant part in the Milanese church as well. For example, a mob of Christians, probably from the lower classes, purportedly played an important role in the bishop's election.¹² The bishop also depended heavily upon the support of a similar group in his standoff against the Homoian emperor Valentinian II and his mother Justina. The bishop mentions merchants, tradesmen, beggars, and women

¹⁰ A young and as-of-yet unbaptized Augustine of Hippo was also present after 384. See McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 220-223.

¹¹ On the class and status of Ambrose's family, see McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 31-35. McLynn disputes Palanque's and Mazzarino's claims that Ambrose was by birth a member of the highest ranks of the aristocracy.

While more is known of the upper-class members of Ambrose's congregation at Milan, Ambrose's congregation seems to have resembled congregations in other large Roman cities with respect to social composition, where both the nobility and gentry attended church in the company of common freemen and slaves. While the upper classes were clearly a visible and significant presence in the church, it is clear from certain events—for example, the bishop's election by a mob of lower-class Christians and the support of a similar group in his standoff against Valentinian II and Justina in the Portian basilica—that the lower classes were a powerful presence as well. Despite variances in socio-economic standing, all the Christians of Milan were united in important ways with respect to time and culture and thus we may venture some generalizations about morals, standards, ideas, and traditions that may have triggered responses to Ambrose's teachings on virginity. On the composition of Ambrose's congregation, see Craig A. Satterlee, *Ambrose of Milan's Method*, 116-120; McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 220-225.

¹² On the mob at the bishop's election, see Rufinus of Aquileia, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 11.11 (GCS 2.2, 1018-1019) and Paulinus, *Vita Ambrosii* 6 (Pellegrino, 56-57).

along with palace officials, imperial clerks, agents of affairs, royal attendants, and other men of high rank as Christians affected by the emperor's ensuing punishments and restrictions.¹³

In Milan, where pagan temple and Christian basilica mingled, the Christians of Ambrose's congregation embraced the newer ideas of the church while often remaining deeply enmeshed in the more ancient Roman social and cultural institutions. It is such an audience as this to which Ambrose offers his first written efforts in praise of holy virginity.

II. Ascetic Assumptions: *De virginibus*

For McLynn, the young bishop almost accidentally stumbles onto the subject of virginity as he struggles to find a suitable subject other than the Nicene-Homoian debate for his first official treatise.¹⁴ In such a scenario, Ambrose's career begins with an act of pure diversion and his discovery of virginity as a useful subject for the establishment of his personal power and authority seems accidental. McLynn's assumption discounts what was probably a genuine enthusiasm for the subject. Raised in Rome by a pious widow and his virginal sister Marcellina whom he remained close to throughout his life, Ambrose probably held strong positive views of the ascetic life even before his ascension to the see.¹⁵ Perhaps he has his own family somewhat in mind when he declares at the

¹³ Ambrose, *Ep.* 76.2-7, 13 (CSEL 82.3, 108-112, 114-115).

¹⁴ McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 60.

¹⁵ Paulinus claims that Marcellina had made her vow of virginity together with a female friend, suggesting that perhaps Ambrose had contact with other dedicated virgins as well in his early life. See Paulinus, *Vita Ambrosii* 2.4 (Pellegrino, 54).

beginning of *De virginibus* his intention to extol virgins who are “the family of the Lord,” those chosen from among frail humanity to be the earthly family of divinity.¹⁶ Abasing his own qualifications to attempt such a project, he nevertheless presses forward with a zeal instilled in him by upbringing as much as political circumstance.

Whatever his motivation for writing on virginity at this time, it is clear that Ambrose had been reading a variety of ascetic literature prior to 377. As mentioned previously, Duval has located numerous similarities between *De virginibus* and the work of other ascetic writers of the Latin church. The treatise, for example, borrows heavily from Cyprian’s *De habitu virginum*.¹⁷ In addition, Duval has suggested Ambrose’s familiarity with some of the ascetic writings of Tertullian and Novatian’s *De bono pudicitiae*.¹⁸

In addition to a familiarity with some earlier Latin authors, Ambrose also demonstrates from an early date an acquaintance with the work of Athanasius. *De virginibus* relies most heavily upon Athanasius’ first letter to virgins, following closely the Alexandrian bishop’s ideas and even rhetoric.¹⁹ It was possible, however, that

¹⁶ Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.1.4 (Gori, I, 104). McLynn also finds Ambrose’s self-confessed hesitation and modesty in the opening sections of *De virginibus* to be suspiciously excessive. See McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 52-53.

¹⁷ Yves-Marie Duval, “L’originalité du *De virginibus* dans le mouvement ascétique occidental Ambroise, Cyprien, Athanase,” in *Ambroise de Milan: XVIe Centenaire de son élection épiscopale*, ed. Duval (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1974), 21-29.

¹⁸ On the possible influence of Tertullian, see Duval, “L’originalité du *De virginibus*,” 25, 27 n. 104, 34 n. 130, 37 n. 139. On Novatian, see *ibid.*, 12, 25.

Duval has also found parallels between Zeno of Verona’s *De continentia* and *De virginibus*, especially in the matter of their Marian ideologies, but suggests that the Veronese bishop’s writing is best understood in context of Ambrose’s first two treatises on virginity rather than as a preceding influence. See Duval, “L’originalité du *De virginibus*,” 61-64.

¹⁹ Duval, “L’originalité du *De virginibus*,” 29-51.

Ambrose was familiar with these writings because of his connections to the ascetic community at Rome rather than to an eastern source. According to Jerome, Athanasius had played a critical role in the Roman widow Marcella's adoption of ascetic living. Athanasius, and later his successor Peter, came to Rome in exile and purportedly taught Marcella the "discipline of virgins and widows" and of the hermit Antony and the monasteries of Pachomius.²⁰ Athanasius' writings may have come somewhat into fashion among the Christian upper classes of Rome during this era, accounting for Ambrose's familiarity with them.²¹

Perhaps it was his reading of the works of these Christian writers that convinced the young bishop that virginity was first and foremost an "ancestral virtue" of the Christian church, a legacy passed down from the unsullied virgin-martyrs of earlier generations to the present day. For Ambrose, it was its long and distinguished Christian heritage that made virginity binding upon the current generation.²² Therefore, Ambrose sets forth in *De virginibus* a long series of exemplary Christian virgins from the past to

²⁰ Jerome, *Ep.* 127.5 (CSEL 56, 149-150).

²¹ While Ambrose's familiarity with Athanasius's letter to virgins may have been possible only through his knowledge of Greek, there is evidence that an early Latin version of Athanasius's *Vita Antonii* was in circulation in the West well before the 380s. See Henricus Hoppenbrouwers, *La plus ancienne version latine de la vie de S. Antoine par S. Athanase: Étude de critique textuelle* (Nijmegen: Dekker & Van de Vegt, 1960), xiii-xv.

Zeno of Verona was also advocating virginity in northern Italy during the same time as Ambrose, but seems to have had little influence on the bishop of Milan during this early period. Duval dates Zeno's *Tractus I (De continentia)* to the time of *De virginibus* and *De virginitate*, but finds Ambrose's lack of interest in defending Mary's chaste marriage and perpetual virginity (a subject to which Ambrose will warm greatly later on in his *De institutione virginis*) to indicate his unfamiliarity with Zeno's treatise. See Duval, "L'originalité du *De virginibus*," 61-64.

²² Ambrose, *De virg.* 2.1.2 (Gori, I, 166).

demonstrate the holiness of virginity and its proper accoutrements.²³ Agnes, the Virgin Mary, Pelagia, Thecla, and other unnamed virgins are brought forth as examples of holy continence from previous generations. Each is used to impress his audience with the loftiness and blessedness of the virginal life. For Ambrose, such virgins exemplify purity that is free from the corruption of the flesh.²⁴ Their practice reflects that of the angels in heaven who neither marry nor are given in marriage and it earns the companionship and special guardianship of angels.²⁵ With their continence, they demonstrate a superior ability to rule over the pleasures of the body, thus becoming brides to the heavenly Bridegroom who first instituted the practice of virginity: “You are the bride of the Eternal King ... having an unconquered mind, you are not taken captive by the allurements of pleasures, but rule over them like a queen.”²⁶ For Ambrose, Christian virgins possess not only a virgin body but also a virgin mind; these dual qualifications of “true” virginity negate the achievements of any pagan practitioners of virginity such as the Vestal Virgins and priests of Pallas.²⁷

²³ Female martyrs were popular and well-established subjects for sermons by Ambrose’s time. See Gail P. C. Streete, *Redeemed Bodies: Women Martyrs in Early Christianity* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2009), especially chapters 3-4.

²⁴ Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.5.21 (Gori, I, 124).

²⁵ Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.3.11 (Gori, I, 110-112). Cf. 1.3.13 where Ambrose calls virginity *vitae coelestis usus* (“the practice of the life of heaven”); in 1.9.48, he styles virgins as “heavenly beings”; in 1.9.51, Ambrose awards virgins special angelic guardianship. Ambrose even suggests in 1.9.52-53 (Gori, I, 150-152) that angels and devils are made by preservation of and loss of virginity respectively.

²⁶ Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.7.37 (Gori, I, 138): *Sponsa es regis aeterni ... inuictum animum gerens ab inlecebris voluptatum non captiua habetis, sed quasi regina dominaris.*

Some of the other notable passages in *De virginibus* containing “bride of Christ” imagery include 1.2.9, 1.3.11, 1.12.62-64, 2.2.16, 2.6.41-2, 3.7.34. On Christ’s origination of the practice of virginity, see 1.5.21-22 (Gori, I, 121-123).

²⁷ Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.4.15 (Gori, I, 120), 2.2.7 (Gori, I, 168-170), 2.7.24 (Gori, I, 184-186). The Vestal Virgins and priests of Pallas are one and the same group. See Chapter 4, note 82.

Of course, pagan practitioners of sexual continence are not the only people who fall short of this standard. Ambrose finds married Christians hopelessly encumbered by the troubles of married life.²⁸ While claiming not to discourage marriage in his praise of virginity, he nevertheless touts the undeniable superiority of those who remain virgins: “I do not discourage marriage, but recapitulate the advantages of holy virginity. The latter is the gift of few only, the former is of all.”²⁹ To further his point, Ambrose in great detail gives a grim portrait of the many miseries of married life for women—the pains and burdens of childbearing, the temptation of fleshly marital pleasures, slavery to one’s husband, excessive concern for one’s looks, and many others—that impede their achievement of holiness in both body and spirit.³⁰ Because of these many advantages of holy virginity, married persons “must of necessity confess they are inferior to virgins,” he reasons.³¹ God judges the virgins to be loveliest of all on account of their beautiful souls and so makes them even more fruitful than married women. The pure soul of the virgin has many more offspring than any married woman since it loves all as its own children and is freed from the distresses and deaths that marriage brings.³²

For Ambrose, the virgin surpasses not only all married women but also married men. In *De virginibus*, the bishop attributes to virgins a transcendence of the bonds of female flesh; he suggests that women in fact may become “superior to their sex” through

²⁸ Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.7.34-36 (Gori, I, 134-136).

²⁹ Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.7.35 (Gori, I, 136): *Non itaque dissuadeo nuptias, si fructus uirginitatis enumero. Paucarum quippe hoc munus est, illud omnium.*

³⁰ Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.6.24-30 (Gori, I, 126-132).

³¹ Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.7.35-36 (Gori, I, 136).

³² Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.6.30 (Gori, I, 130-132).

its practice.³³ While man is the head of the woman, he reasons, no one but Christ is the head of the virgin.³⁴ Perhaps it for this reason that Ambrose finds no fault in young girls who dedicate themselves to virginity against the wishes of earthly authority figures such as parents. “It is a good thing, then,” he asserts, “that the zeal of parents, like favoring gales, should aid a virgin; but it is more glorious if the fire of tender age even without the incitement of those older than its own self burst forth into the flame of chastity.”³⁵

Although Ambrose deems desirable parents’ approval of their daughters’ choice of perpetual virginity, the bishop finds even more laudable those young women who are not provoked to such a life by the zeal of their parents but rather desire it on their own in spite of their parents’ disapproval. The bishop rebukes mothers who have been holding back their daughters from consecration, arguing that daughters who are allowed by law to choose their spouses ought to be allowed to choose God instead.³⁶ He further shames these unwilling parents by speaking of the many “barbarians” of Mauretania who travel far to become consecrated virgins in Milan.³⁷

In spite of his rebuke to unwilling parents, Ambrose directs most of his persuasive speech on this matter toward young women pondering virginity themselves. To those

³³ Ambrose, *De virg.* 2.5.35 (Gori, I, 196). Virginia Burrus has argued that Ambrose ultimately minimizes virginity’s threat to conventional gender roles and turns them to his own advantage in this treatise. See Burrus, “Reading Agnes: The Rhetoric of Gender in Ambrose and Prudentius,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 3.1 (1995): 30-33, 43-46.

³⁴ Ambrose, *De virg.* 2.3.29 (Gori, I, 188-190).

³⁵ Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.11.62 (Gori, I, 160): *Bonum itaque, si uirgini studia parentum quasi flabra pudoris aspirant, sed illud gloriosius, si tenerae ignis aetatis etiam sine ueteribus nutrimentis sponte se rapiat in fomitem castitatis.*

³⁶ Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.10.58 (Gori, I, 156).

³⁷ Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.10.59 (Gori, I, 158).

who fear the loss of their dowry or inheritance should they disobey their parents, he offers as comfort the promise of a heavenly Spouse whose wealth exceeds that of any father and who gladly accepts poverty as the most superior of all bridal gifts.³⁸ Virgins may anticipate the future realms of heaven as a patrimony and reward for their sacrifice of earthly possessions.³⁹ Those who are not yet persuaded by the promise of such a lofty heavenly rewards may be reassured that their earthly inheritance will still be theirs as well; after all, Ambrose reasons, who has ever really lost her father's inheritance over a desire for chastity? Parents will surely relent once their anger has cooled.⁴⁰ As evidence, he recounts an episode in which a young girl takes refuge in a church and begs for virginal consecration against the wishes of her family. With her head below the right hand of the priest and standing over the holy altar, she rebukes her relatives who try to dissuade her by speaking of the riches, power, and prestige of the heavenly Bridegroom she wishes to espouse.

When the others [relatives] were silent, one burst forth abruptly: 'If your father were alive, would he allow you to remain unmarried?' Then she replied with more religious feeling and more restrained piety: 'And perhaps he is gone so that no one can hinder me.' Her answer concerned her father, but was a warning concerning this relative that he made good by his own speedy death. So the others, fearing the same for themselves, began to assist rather than hinder her as before, and her virginity involved not the loss of property due to her, but also received the advantage of her integrity. You see, maidens, the reward of devotion, and be warned, parents, by the example of transgression.⁴¹

³⁸ Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.11.62 (Gori, I, 160).

³⁹ Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.11.64 (Gori, I, 160).

⁴⁰ Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.11.63 (Gori, I, 160).

⁴¹ Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.12.66 [65-66] (Gori, I, 164): *Silentibus ceteris unus abruptius: Quid si—inquit—pater tuus uiueret, inuuptam te manere pateretur? Tum illa maiore religione, moderatiore pietate: Et ideo fortasse defecit, ne quis impedimentum posset adferre. Quod ille responsum de patre de se oraculum maturo sui probauit exitio. Ita ceteri eadem sibi quisque metuentes fauere coeperunt, qui impedire*

Ambrose gives a dire warning to family members who try to restrain a young girl from committing herself virginity: God will punish, possibly even by death, those who would be obstacles to her holy consecration. The Lord alone is at the head of the virgin. While for Ambrose relatives have no right to impede a girl who wished for the life of virginity, he briefly remarks elsewhere in *De virginibus* on what parents who will support a young girl's righteous ambition may hope for. The virgin becomes a spiritual offering on behalf of her whole family. She appeases God and her good works merit the forgiveness of her parents' sins.⁴²

Throughout this exposition, Ambrose forges a strong connection between the virginity he praises and Christian martyrdom, another legacy of previous Christian generations. Almost all of the major virginal exemplars he discusses are found among the ranks of the holy martyrs as well. The bishop's treatise begins with Agnes, a young virgin who suffered martyrdom at the tender age of twelve. For Ambrose, she draws courage and resolution to become a martyr from her virginity. Although many desired to marry her, Ambrose reports, she refused to be unfaithful to her heavenly Spouse who had chosen her first and hastened the executioner on to the completion of his deed. "You

quaerebant, nec dispendium debitarum attulit virginitas facultatum, sed etiam emolumentum integritatis accepit. Habetis, puellae, deuotionis praemium. Parentes, caute offensionis exemplum.

⁴² Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.7.32-33 (Gori, I, 134). Franca Ela Consolino remarks upon the tension between Ambrose's assertions about the virgin's independent status and a parent's offering of a daughter as a sacrifice in her "Modelli di comportamento e modi di santificazione per l'aristocrazia femminile dell'occidente," in *Società romana e impero tardoantico*, ed. Andrea Giardina (Rome: Laterza, 1986), 1:277-278.

have then in one victim a twofold martyrdom,” Ambrose asserts, “of modesty and of religion. She both remained a virgin and she obtained martyrdom.”⁴³

Ambrose finds another worthy example for would-be Christian virgins in an unnamed virgin at Antioch who is persecuted for her profession of Christianity and virginity. Denied that which she piously hopes for most—a death sentence leading to her martyrdom—the virgin is sentenced to a brothel where her holy chastity is placed in peril. In response to her prayer, a soldier hoping to become a martyr switches places with her in the brothel to preserve her chastity. When he is brought out to be punished, the virgin comes forth and contends with him, wishing to receive the martyrdom herself: “I avoided disgrace, not martyrdom ... And if you deprive me of death, you will not have rescued but circumvented me,” she argues, fearing not only that she will lose the martyr’s crown but also that her chastity will come under peril once again if she lives.⁴⁴ In the end, both the soldier and the virgin become martyrs.⁴⁵ In Ambrose’s narrative, the virgin actively seeks martyrdom when the alternative is a loss of her chastity.

Perhaps the bishop’s most dramatic example of a virgin-martyr in this treatise is Pelagia, another young woman who chooses martyrdom when her chastity is endangered. Answering his sister Marcellina’s question about whether a virgin might be justified in ending her own life to escape the loss of her chastity, Ambrose sets forth the example of the achievements of Pelagia to demonstrate the worthiness of such an act. Arrayed in a

⁴³ Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.2.9 (Gori, I, 110): *Habetis igitur in una hostia duplex martyrium, pudoris et religionis: et virgo permansit et martyrium obtinuit.*

⁴⁴ Ambrose, *De virg.* 2.4.32 (Gori, I, 194): *Ego opprobrium declinaui, non martyrium tibi cessi ... Quodsi mihi praeripis mortem, non redemisti me, sed circumuenisti.*

⁴⁵ The full account is given in Ambrose, *De virg.* 2.4.22-33 (Gori, I, 182-194).

bridal dress, Pelagia drowns herself with her mother and her sisters in a river when the threat of rape seems imminent. In spite of scripture's prohibition of suicide, Ambrose finds the acts of Pelagia and her family permissible and even admirable as they were proving with their deaths their absolute devotion to their chastity by offering themselves as sacrificial victims.⁴⁶

Although not a martyr in the most literal sense, Ambrose also brings forth the example of Thecla to teach virgins "how to be offered" (*doceat immolari*). When she avoids marriage and is condemned to death for refusing to submit to nuptial intercourse, she is stripped and thrown naked to the lions. But Thecla had made her body so holy through her practice of virginity that even wild, ravenous beasts refused to devour her, Ambrose asserts. Virginity is so admirable that even lions admire it.⁴⁷ Although Thecla escapes the wild beasts in his narrative, Ambrose still proclaims her a martyr, finding a new martyrdom announced not in actual death but in the disciplined body of a Christian virgin.⁴⁸ "For virginity is not praiseworthy because it is found in martyrs, but because it

⁴⁶ Ambrose, *De virg.* 3.7.32-35 (Gori, I, 234-238). Ambrose cites no specific scriptural passage to justify his position, but he subsequently makes brief reference in 3.7.38-39 to the virgin martyr Sotheris, who he claims as a familial ancestor, as a further example of this principle. Augustine, Ambrose's most notable pupil, comes to the opposite conclusion in *De civitate dei* 1.16-18 (CSEL 40.1, 30-34). For Augustine, women who lose their chastity through the forcible acts of someone else bear no blame and suffer no loss of purity so for them to commit suicide is to murder the innocent and bring guilt upon one's soul. He finds fault with the classic Roman *exemplum virtutis* Lucretia, directly challenging current conceptions of female honor and the value of violent death (see Dennis Trout, "Re-Textualizing Lucretia: Cultural Subversion in the City of God," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 2.1 (1994): 53-70).

⁴⁷ Ambrose, *De virg.* 2.3.19-20 (Gori, I, 180-182).

⁴⁸ Elizabeth Castelli discusses the process by which the figure of Thecla is produced as the paradigmatic woman martyr despite her earlier traditional status as an ascetic evangelist and apostle in her *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), pp.134-156.

itself makes martyrs,” he claims.⁴⁹ Ambrose attributes to virginity a transformative role as potent as literal death on behalf of Christianity.

III. Criticism of *De virginibus*

It is clear from Ambrose’s subsequent treatise on virginity, *De virginitate*, that not all of his listeners found virginity to be the universally-praiseworthy institution he perhaps envisioned it to be. Composed later in the same year as *De virginibus*,⁵⁰ *De virginitate* displays little of the innocent enthusiasm for virginity of the first treatise; here the bishop takes on a more explicitly apologetic tone.⁵¹ In many ways, Ambrose’s second treatise on virginity shows a keen self-consciousness that was not present in his first. In place of *De virginibus*’s initial protests of humility and unworthiness is now a façade of righteous indignation veiling occasional theological concessions and corrections.⁵² Where Ambrose’s first treatise on virginity was filled with a humble (if

⁴⁹ Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.3.10 (Gori, I, 110): *Non enim ideo laudabilis virginitas, quia et in martyribus reperitur; sed quia ipsa martyres faciat.*

⁵⁰ Ignazio Cazzaniga asserts that *De virginitate* entered circulation as an appendix of *De virginibus*. See Cazzaniga, *S. Ambrosii Mediolanensis episcopi de uirginitate liber unus* (Torino: Paravia, 1954), *Preface*, pp. 19-23. McLynn follows Cazzaniga in *Ambrose of Milan*, p. 63. Gori rejects this assertion because of the placement of *De viduis* as the fourth book and *De virginitate* in various manuscripts of *De virginibus*, confirming *De viduis*’s earlier composition (Gori, I, intro. p. 70). For a more general discussion of the dating of *De virginibus* and *De virginitate*, see Chapter 1, n. 3 and n. 63.

⁵¹ McLynn has a different understanding of the change in Ambrose’s tone between his first and second treatises to virgins. For McLynn, the young bishop seemed largely hesitant and unsure of himself in *De virginibus* whereas he displays a good deal of newly-acquired confidence in *De virginitate*, manifest most clearly in his more sophisticated explanation of Plato with Origenist writings and in his clearly hyperbolic claim on the lowliness and ignorance of the fisherman Apostles (McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 64). I, on the other hand, attribute his more confident tone to his defensive standpoint rather than to some newly-found intellectual confidence. Facing criticism and even overt challenge to his authority, the young bishop was not likely to affect humility and timidity as he may have in the first treatise.

⁵² On Ambrose’s elaborate staging of self in *De virginibus*, see McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 53-57 and Virginia Burrus, “*Begotten, Not Made*”: *Conceiving Manhood in Late Antiquity* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000), 140-152.

affected) enthusiasm for his subject, his second is mainly apologetic in tone, responsive to criticisms and questions of his congregation raised by the first.

I do not accuse anyone publicly, though I am here to defend myself. For we have been accused and unless I err, many of our accusers are among you. I prefer to refute their ideas rather than to betray their identities. Here is what has produced my unpopularity, my ‘crime’: that I recommend chastity. If anyone here does not accept this gladly, he betrays himself.⁵³

Ambrose frames the criticisms of all of these alleged opponents as a single accusation: that he encourages people to become virgins. Although it is possible that the bishop is actually being accused of supporting virginity, it is more likely that he is here simplifying multiple criticisms of his ascetic program into a single broad critique that he feels he can respond to with greater confidence: the question of virginity’s value in general. Thus he may shield himself from the questions that actually may have been at hand about episcopal authority, virginal superiority, and his own behavior.

At the same time, this general defense of virginity he constructs may also suggest that its practice was not as ingrained within the culture of Christian Milan in 377 as Ambrose seems to have assumed in *De virginibus*. Asceticism clearly was not unknown in the region by Ambrose’s tenure as bishop. Martin of Tours had journeyed to Milan in 357 and founded a small monastery around 356 before being forced from the city by Auxentius shortly thereafter.⁵⁴ Augustine mentions a monastery existing outside of the

⁵³ Ambrose, *De virgt.* 5.24 (Gori, II, 23): *Nec quemquam publice arguo, sed me ipsum defensatum uenio. Accusati enim sumus, et, nisi fallor, accusatores nostri plerique de uobis sunt. Horum ego affectus redarguere malo quam personas prodere. Criminis autem inuidia haec est quia suadeo castitatem. Qui hoc non libenter accipit, ipse se prodit.*

⁵⁴ Sulpicius Severus, *De vita beati Martini* 6 (PL 20, 163-164).

city walls during Ambrose's episcopacy, perhaps the same group founded by Martin some years earlier.⁵⁵ However, as Testa has argued, the term *monasterium* in this period was generally used in reference to a small group of hermits rather than to institutional buildings. Thus Martin's "monastery" may have consisted of little more than himself and perhaps one or two companions.⁵⁶ The existence of the monastery outside of the walls of Ambrose's Milan was unknown to Augustine until only shortly before his conversion to Christianity, suggesting that the group was neither famous nor well-established. It may have only become "full of good brothers" (as Augustine claimed) under Ambrose's care.⁵⁷

While there is little information about female asceticism in Milan before Ambrose's time, there is some indication of practice in the region. Eusebius, bishop of Vercelli, to whom Ambrose attributes the establishment of the first group of ascetic clerics in northern Italy,⁵⁸ wrote from his exile in the east to *sanctae sorores* near Vercelli around 360.⁵⁹ However, an anonymous ancient biographer of Eusebius claimed that the bishop introduced the practice of female virginity in the area but taught "the strong monastic life" to men. His distinction between the practices of the two sexes may

⁵⁵ Augustine, *Confessiones* 8.6.15 (CCL 27, 122-123). The suggestion that both Sulpicius Severus and Augustine are referring to the same monastery is Testa's. See Testa, "Christianization and Conversion," 66.

⁵⁶ Testa, "Christianization and Conversion," 67.

⁵⁷ Augustine claims to have been ignorant of the monastery's existence until a conversation with one Ponticianus, a Christian court official and African compatriot of Augustine, shortly preceding his famous episode in the garden: *Et erat monasterium Mediolanii plenum bonis fratribus extra urbis moenia sub Ambrosio nutritore, et non noveramus.* (Augustine, *Confessiones* 8.6.15[CCL 27, 122-123]).

⁵⁸ Ambrose, *Ep. ex. coll.* 14.66 (CSEL 82.3, 270).

⁵⁹ Eusebius of Vercelli, *Ep.* 2.11.1 (CCSL 9, 105).

suggest that women who practiced virginity had not yet been invited to gather into independent communities as men may have been.⁶⁰

Such a conclusion seems to correlate with the practice of other ascetic women in the region. In a letter dating to 374, slightly before Ambrose's appointment as bishop, Jerome mentioned two virgins in Aquileia who lived with their widowed mother and clergymen brothers and practiced their discipline in private while helping to maintain the household.⁶¹ Virgins in Milan probably followed a similar pattern, living at home among other family members throughout their lives and remaining largely under the supervision of their parents.⁶² Ambrose himself perhaps suggests that such domestic arrangements were the common mode of living for virgins in the 370s; in his reading of Mary as the model of Christian virginity in *De virginibus*, he finds her living at home with her family and never traveling abroad without the companionship of her parents.⁶³

Much of Ambrose's ascetic message may have sounded new in many respects to the Christians of Milan accustomed to this pattern of virginal living. The domestic arrangements of these virgins living at home seem quite at odds with the ascetic lifestyle advocated by the new bishop. While discouraging parents from allowing their daughters to leave their homes to be married,⁶⁴ Ambrose is quick to praise the many virgins who he

⁶⁰ Pseudo-Maximus, *Sermones* 83 (PL 57, 611-614). Testa assumes that women were gathered into independent communities by Eusebius as well, but there is no evidence to indicate that female asceticism took this pattern before Ambrose's time. See Testa, "Christianization and Conversion," 68.

⁶¹ Jerome, *Ep.* 7.6 (CSEL 54, 30). The Maurist edition dates this letter to around 374, making these women largely contemporary with the beginning of Ambrose's episcopacy.

⁶² See Duval, "L'originalité du *De virginibus*," 24-26, and McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 61-63.

⁶³ Ambrose, *De virg.* 2.2.9 (Gori, I, 172).

⁶⁴ Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.7.33 (Gori, I, 134).

alleges are leaving behind their families and flocking from the regions of Placentia, Bononia, and Mauritania to be consecrated under his hand in the city of Milan.⁶⁵ The true virgin, “forgetful of her father’s house,” is now to depart from the private domain of her familial home and venture forth to seek out the house of Christ.⁶⁶ In *De virginibus*, Ambrose advocates a consecration ceremony in which young girls come before the church to make their vows and the bishop bestows their consecration in a very public manner, a clear assertion of the church’s ownership and authority over virgins in an era when, despite formal ceremonies of consecration, they still belonged to their parents’ physical domain.⁶⁷

Beyond his assertions of the ecclesiastical authority and the virgin’s new proper physical location, we may perceive more specific aspects of *De virginibus* that his audience may have taken issue with. For example, McLynn has noted that much of the language and ideas of *De virginibus* have a distinctively foreign flavor reflective of the bishop’s own Roman origins. Ambrose’s upbringing and education at Rome—rather than his brief time in Milan—along with his connection to the Roman ascetic community through his sister Marcellina seem to have largely determined many of his practical and theological assumptions about virgins in this treatise. For example, his appraisal of

⁶⁵ Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.10.57-61 (Gori, I, 156-160).

⁶⁶ Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.10.61 (Gori, I, 158-160).

⁶⁷ McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 63. On the veiling of virgins, see Nathalie Henry, “The Song of Songs and the Liturgy of the *velatio* in the Fourth Century: From Literary Metaphor to Liturgical Reality,” in *Continuity and Change in Christian Worship: Papers Read at the 1997 Summer Meeting and the 1998 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society*, ed. R.N. Swanson (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1999), 18-28; David G. Hunter, “Clerical Celibacy and the Veiling of Virgins: New Boundaries in Late Ancient Christianity,” in *The Limits of Ancient Christianity: Essays on Late Antique Thought and Culture in Honor of R.A. Markus*, ed. William E. Klingshirn and Mark Vessey (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 139-152.

virgins as queenly brides of Christ and companions of such lofty company as angels are ideas he probably acquired from Tertullian and Cyprian whose works had originated far to the south.⁶⁸ His association of virgins with women of high status and great influence strongly evokes images of ascetics in Rome such as Melania the Elder and also Marcella, who, as mentioned earlier, was purportedly inspired to virginity by the Alexandrian's ascetic teachings. Ambrose may have been familiar with some of these women through his sister Marcellina, who may have been a part of Marcella's ascetic circle.⁶⁹ As members of the wealthiest and most privileged classes of Roman society, such women enjoyed much power and privilege by birth alone, which was enhanced by their later professions of sexual continence. Some became independent patrons, teachers, and associates of some of the most prominent figures of the Christian church.⁷⁰

Through language and imagery, Ambrose reformed Milanese virginity according to the writings of Athanasius, Tertullian, and Cyprian and in the image of the famous ascetics of Rome with whom he was probably familiar. According to the young bishop, a virgin in Milan too could claim a lofty and distinguished pedigree since the native country of chastity was heaven and her distinguished ancestor was virginity's author, the

⁶⁸ Duval discusses the influence of Tertullian and Cyprian on these ideas in his "L'originalité du *De virginibus*," 27-28, 37 n. 139.

For Cyprian's indebtedness to Tertullian in matters of virginity, see E.W. Watson, "The *De habitu virginum* of S. Cyprian," *Journal of Theological Studies* 22 (1921): 363-367 and Rose Bernard Donna, "Notes on Cyprian's *De habitu virginum*: Its Source and Influence," *Traditio* 4 (1946): 399-407.

⁶⁹ This link is suggested only hypothetically by Jerome's request in a letter to the virgin Asella at Rome (*Ep.* 46.7) that she convey his regards to a Marcellina who may plausibly be identified as Ambrose's sister. See McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 61.

⁷⁰ On the privileged, independent lifestyles of ascetic Roman women such as Melania and Marcella, see Elizabeth A. Clark, "Ascetic Renunciation and Feminine Advancement: A Paradox of Late Ancient Christianity," in *Ascetic Piety and Women's Faith*, ed. Clark (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1986), 175-208.

very Son of God.⁷¹ She could even claim royalty as the bride of the Eternal King himself who was rich, noble, and powerful.⁷² While the fashion at Rome and elsewhere, such exorbitant stylings most likely sounded foreign and hyperbolic to the virgins of northern Italy who led much more modest and private lives.

In *De virginitate*, Ambrose seeks anew to defend the lofty status of virginity but makes far fewer “foreign” assumptions about its status in his new Milanese church. Instead, he applies weighty scriptural exegesis to bolster his previous claims. In *De virginibus*, he had touched only lightly upon New Testament scripture in support of his ascetic agenda, more frequently citing obscure and poetic passages from the Hebrew Bible.⁷³ The lives of the martyrs had served as his main authoritative texts for his exposition of the virginal life. In contrast, Ambrose presses hard upon the New Testament in *De virginitate* in order to root virginal living in the scriptural tradition.⁷⁴

In his second treatise on virginity, the bishop leaves behind the narratives of the virgin-martyrs in favor of select teachings of Jesus and Paul which support virginity’s goodness and demonstrate its lofty institutional pedigree. Ambrose also makes much of Jesus’ teachings to the Apostles in Matthew 19.10-13 (“There are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” etc.) to show how

⁷¹ Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.5.20 (Gori, I, 122).

⁷² Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.7.37 (Gori, I, 138), 1.12.64 (Gori, I, 160).

⁷³ For example, *De virg.* 1.5.23-24 (Gori, I, 126-128) is the single passage in this lengthy treatise in which Ambrose cites parts of 1 Corinthians 7. He does so briefly to argue that it is better to preserve one’s virginity than to marry.

⁷⁴ Ambrose’s greater interest in scriptural interpretation may be a result of his growing acquaintance with Origen’s scriptural exegesis. On Origen’s influence on Ambrose’s Song of Songs language in this treatise, see Chapter 1, 40-41.

virginity was set forth as a good from the beginning of Christianity by Jesus himself.⁷⁵ Jesus' saying that little children constitute the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 19.14) also applies to virgins who maintain their childlike innocence and, being untouched by corruption, have the grace of their integrity intact.⁷⁶ Ambrose demonstrates that virginity was founded upon Jesus' teachings as evidenced in holy scripture.

By supporting virginity with scripture, the bishop sought to ground its practice firmly within the Christian tradition and thus remove any feeling of foreignness lingering about his ascetic program. But Ambrose's scriptural interpretation in *De virginitate* also indicates he was responding to some members of his congregation who found the bishop's praise of virginity excessive and even deprecating of the institution of marriage.⁷⁷

As previously discussed, the bishop in *De virginibus* had not only extolled virginity but had also bemoaned at length the plight of married women who were subject to the servitude of birthing and rearing children as well as the distractions of households and the whims of authoritarian husbands. The onerous burdens of childbearing and childrearing and the subjection to the will of one's husband are frequent themes again in *De viduis*, his treatise on widows that almost immediately had followed the composition

⁷⁵ Ambrose, *De virgt.* 6.28-29 (Gori, II, 32).

⁷⁶ Ambrose, *De virgt.* 6.30 (Gori, II, 32-34).

⁷⁷ Hunter has noted that asceticism's rejection of marriage and reproduction was perceived as a threat to the continuation of civic life in the Empire by some critics, resulting in Ambrose's (probably unsuccessful) defense of its social value, namely, that populations grow where there are the most virgins, and that through a virgin salvation came to all the Roman world. See Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity: The Jovinianist Controversy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 61.

of *De virginibus* in 377.⁷⁸ Strongly ascetic scriptural exegesis fills this treatise as well. For example, the bishop reads 1 Cor. 7.23 (“You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of human masters.”) as a specific admonition against becoming enslaved again in a marriage relationship.⁷⁹ He casts any reason a widow may present for remarriage as a mere excuse:

You no longer have any reason for marrying ... Do not say, “I am destitute.” This is the complaint of one who wishes to marry. Do not say, “I am alone.” Chastity seeks solitude; the modest seek privacy, the immodest seek company. ... But you wish to marry? It is permitted. The simple wish is no crime. I do not ask the reason. Why make up one? If you think your purpose is good, say so; if it is unsuitable, be silent. Do not blame God or your relatives, saying that you need protection. I only wish you were not in such need of willpower!⁸⁰

Refuting every rationalization for remarriage, he strongly reprimands any widow desiring to do so as weak and immodest and allows no reason for it beyond a personal weakness or an implicitly inappropriate desire.⁸¹ Although directed toward widows rather than virgins this time, such anti-marital rhetoric and sentiments most likely exacerbated the discontent with Ambrose’s similar statements in *De virginibus*.

⁷⁸ Ambrose, *De viduis* 13.81 (Gori, I, 312). Most scholars assign the composition of *De viduis* to an earlier period than *De virginitate*. See Gori, *Verginità e vedovanza* (Milan Biblioteca Ambrosiana, 1989), 67; Paredi, *Saint Ambrose*, 142; Antonio Nazarro, “Il *De viduis* di Ambrogio,” *Vichiana* 13 (1984): 276; Palanque, *Saint Ambroise*, 456.

⁷⁹ Ambrose, *De viduis* 11.69 (Gori, I, 301).

⁸⁰ Ambrose, *De viduis* 9.57-58 (Gori, I, 292): *Sublata est tibi causa nubendi ... Ne dixeris: ‘Destituta sum.’ Querela nupturae est. Ne dixeris: ‘Sola sum.’ Castitas solitudinem quaerit; pudica secretum, impudica conuentum. ... Sed uis nubere. Licet. Non habet crimen simplex uoluntas. Causam non quaero. Cur fingitur? Si honestam putas, fateri; si incongruam, sile. Ne accuses deum, ne accuses propinquos, quod praesidia tibi desint; utinam non desit uoluntas!*

⁸¹ This specific passage probably addresses the widow to whom Ambrose later references in *De virgt.* 8.46 as one whom he has reprimanded in another treatise and now wishes to make peace with. See McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 64-65.

In *De virginitate*, Ambrose revised his interpretation of some key scriptural passages he had drawn forth to praise virginity in *De virginibus* in ways that sounded less deprecatory of marital life. This revision is most apparent in his rereading of sections of 1 Corinthians 7 in the second treatise. While the bishop uses it once again to reiterate the bonds and burdens of married life, he discusses these burdens only briefly and in less extreme terms in *De virginitate*. He employs 1 Corinthians 7.34 (“For the unmarried woman or virgin is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit; but the married woman is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please her husband”) in support of his previous exposition of the many troubles of matrimony in his first treatise. But here he chooses terms drawn from scripture to describe the constraints of marriage:

Who could be so far removed from the truth as to condemn marriage? But who is so foreign to reason as not to perceive the bonds (*uincula*) of marriage? ... The bonds of marriage are a good thing, but they are bonds nonetheless ... Marriage is a good thing, but it is borne as a yoke (*iugum*) nonetheless, and sometimes a worldly yoke, as when a wife would rather please her husband than please God. But the wounds (*uulnera*) of love are good too, preferable to kisses.⁸²

In *De virginibus*, Ambrose had decried the many troubles (*molestiae*), miseries (*miseriae*) and torments (*tormenta*) of matrimony.⁸³ Here he softens his language, rejecting such starkly pejorative terminology for milder, scripturally-based imagery of bonds and yokes. Marriage, a manifestation of the “wounds of love,” is also a good, he concedes. Later, he asserts that no one who chooses marriage ought to defame celibacy

⁸² Ambrose, *De virgt.* 6.31, 33 (Gori, II, 34-36): *Quis enim tam auersus a uero, qui nuptias damnet? Sed quis tam alienus a ratione, qui coniugii onera non sentiat? ... Bona igitur uincula nuptiarum, sed tamen uincula ... Bonum coniugium, sed tamen a iugo tractum, et iugo mundi, ut viro potius cupiat placere quam deo. Bona etiam uulnera caritatis et osculis praeferenda.*

⁸³ Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.6.25-30 (Gori, I, 128-132).

while no one who remains single ought to condemn marriage.⁸⁴ But elsewhere the bishop merely concedes that it is no sin to marry and reiterates again the many difficulties and drawbacks of marriage that make a life of celibacy preferable and that justify his zeal for virginity. After all, marriage often leads to warfare and contention while virginity never does, he concludes.⁸⁵ Ambrose somewhat softens his previously sharp critique of marriage, affirming that there is no wrong in it. However, he declines to extol its merits, leaving the question of whether there is much good in marriage when virginity is so clearly superior an option.

Similar softening of anti-marriage rhetoric is also manifest in Ambrose's reinterpretation of Matthew 20.30/Mark 12.25 ("they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like the angels in heaven"). In *De virginibus*, the bishop employed this scriptural passage to defend his positioning of virgins as the companions of angels and brides of the immaculate Son of God who lived a life superior to those around them while allowing a place for married Christians in the afterlife.⁸⁶ Ambrose returns again to this scriptural verse in *De virginitate* but gives it a broader interpretation, less strictly-ascetic interpretation. He links virginity more explicitly to the life all will lead in the resurrection, a blessed state available to everyone that virgins now anticipate with their lifestyle.⁸⁷ The bishop slightly opens the exclusive ascetic interpretation his first reading to clearly incorporate those who are not virgins as well. While he maintains the

⁸⁴ Ambrose, *De virgt.* 6.34 (Gori, II, 36).

⁸⁵ Ambrose, *De virgt.* 7.35 (Gori, II, 36).

⁸⁶ Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.3.11 (Gori, I, 110-112).

⁸⁷ Ambrose, *De virgt.* 6.27 (Gori, II, 30-32).

preeminence of virginity, he also suggests that the married might also aspire to the life of angels in the resurrection.

Such reinterpretations of scripture were designed to soften the sharply ascetic language of *De virginibus* and thus placate those who felt he had denigrated marriage. But the bishop's most pressing concern when he wrote *De virginitate* was to defend his involvement in the personal affairs of a certain young woman in his Milanese congregation. His "crimes" concerning the affair, he claims, are two-fold: advocating the practice of virginity and also forbidding consecrated virgins to marry.⁸⁸ Shortly after the publication of *De virginibus*, Ambrose had attempted to stop a certain family of his congregation from arranging a marriage for a daughter who had previously been designated to a life of Christian virginity. Is he to be condemned, he asks, for doing no more than prohibiting an illicit marriage (*nuptias illicitas*)?⁸⁹

If so, John the Baptist may be indicted for the same fault ... Recall to your mind the real cause of his martyrdom. Here is what, without a doubt, caused his martyrdom: 'It is not lawful,' he said, 'for you to have her as wife.' If this was said of the wife of a man, how much the more of a virgin consecrated to God?⁹⁰

Ambrose assumes John's voice and thus transforms a scriptural prohibition against incest into a defense of virginity as well as his own involvement in a family matter.

⁸⁸ Ambrose, *De virgt.* 5.25 (Gori, II, 28).

⁸⁹ Ambrose, *De virgt.* 3.11 (Gori, II, 20). This incident is not mentioned elsewhere in Ambrose's corpus or in Paulinus's biography but can be inferred from the bishop's remarks in *De virgt.* 3.10-11, 5.26.

⁹⁰ Ambrose, *De virgt.* 3.11 (Gori, II, 20): *Vocent ergo in eandem culpam etiam baptistam Ioannem. ... Quam vero causam aliam habuit ille martyrii repetite animo. Causa illius passionis certe haec fuit: Non licet, inquit, tibi eam uxorem habere. Si hoc de uxore hominis, quanto magis de uirgine consecrata?*

In *De virginibus*, Ambrose had encouraged Milanese virgins to assert their independence, as many of their Roman counterparts did, in matters of sexual renunciation. The bishop's high praise of virginity in conjunction with his low opinion of the marital state supported his argument that virgins held a status superior to the married around them, including parents and other family members. The bishop had asserted time and again that the preservation of virginity trumped the importance of maintaining the traditional family relationships of Greco-Roman society. As we have seen, he encouraged young virgins to challenge parental authority in matters of marriage, at least when their consecrated virginity was at stake.

Such teachings seem to have been at least partly responsible for the censure that he responds to in *De virginitate*. At Ambrose's word, the young woman with whose affairs he became involved was unwilling to leave the virginal lifestyle even though her father was attempting to force her to marry. Ambrose supported her refusal, again asserting a young woman's right to choose God as her spouse just as she could choose any husband, and further encouraged her to live the life of virginity.⁹¹

Ambrose's teachings represented a sharp revision of the social relationships that most often determined customs such as marriage in Italy and further suggest why some critics perceived asceticism as a threat to the well-being of civic life in the Empire.⁹² In general, the Roman family was patriarchal in nature and the laws and customs of Rome reflected and protected this order. Women, especially those of the upper classes, were

⁹¹ Ambrose, *De virgt.* 5.26 (Gori, II, 30).

⁹² See Elizabeth A. Clark, "Ascetic Renunciation and Feminine Advancement: A Paradox of Late Ancient Christianity," *Anglican Theological Review* 63.3 (1981): 241-242.

largely valued for their marital and reproductive potential as their marriages were often a means of formulating various political and economic relationships between families. The choice of if, when, and whom to marry was a family decision rather than an individual one, generally involving multiple members of one's family. A woman's consent was required to legalize the marriage and she may have been allowed to express her preferences in some cases, but she was generally a passive participant in marriage negotiations. Ultimately, the decisions concerning her marriage would rest with her father or another senior member of her family who negotiated the betrothal and whose approval was required by law to make the marriage valid.⁹³ The bishop's assertion of a young woman's ultimate authority to reject marriage ran counter to established customs and challenged the common social practices of Roman society.⁹⁴ Although Ambrose could present examples of headstrong young virgins from among the revered martyrs, his suggestion that overt disobedience of one's parents was not only permissible but actually meritorious and therefore desirable in some circumstances may have rankled those accustomed to wielding authority over lives of these young women. His threat of divine

⁹³ On Roman marriage customs, see Susan Dixon, *The Roman Family* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1992), 62-65 and Judith Evans Grubbs, "'Pagan' and 'Christian' Marriage: The State of the Question," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 2.3 (1994): 362-364.

Ambrose suggests in *De virg.* 1.11.58 that by law a young woman was permitted to choose whom she would marry. Despite Ambrose's appeal to this opportunity, familial expediencies and parental authority probably determined a woman's "choice" and compelled her to consent to the parental choice in most cases.

⁹⁴ Despite the ongoing patriarchal control of marriage into Late Antiquity, Clark has cautioned against the propagandistic nature of the harsh and repressive portraits of marriage expounded by many early Christian writers who wished to steer women away from marriage. See Clark, "Antifamilial Tendencies in Ancient Christianity," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5.3 (1995): 368.

vengeance against those who question or interfere with this rebellious consecration most likely silenced some but intensified the displeasure of others.⁹⁵

In addition, such teachings may have been construed by some as the unwelcome intrusion of church authority into the private sphere of the family. Although Ambrose claims that bishops had always had the right to involve themselves in issues concerning both celibacy and matrimony,⁹⁶ marriage itself was still largely a secular matter in the fourth century. Christians generally followed nuptial rites similar to those of their non-Christian counterparts of Greco-Roman society, including parental negotiations, betrothal ceremonies, and the signing of contracts.⁹⁷ Before Ambrose's time, there is little evidence for the church's involvement in the Christian marriage ceremony at all. It is only toward the end of the fourth century that it becomes customary in some parts of the empire for couples to seek nuptial blessings at the hands of a priest.⁹⁸ Nevertheless, Ambrose asserts his own authoritative voice as bishop in the realm of family matters, encroaching on traditional parental authority concerning a daughter's fate.

⁹⁵ For some of Ambrose's critics, virginity threatened not only the social order but also the very existence of the humanity. Ambrose finds it needful to defend virginity's practice against those worried about its detrimental affects on the population of the human race. The bishop points to the churches of Alexandria and Africa to show how areas in which virginity has been a long-established practice are not decreasing in population but rather increasing on account of their widespread commitment to virginity. See Ambrose, *De virgt.* 7.36 (Gori, II, 38).

⁹⁶ Ambrose, *De virgt.* 5.26 (Gori, II, 30).

⁹⁷ Grubbs, "'Pagan' and 'Christian' Marriage," 388-389.

⁹⁸ Grubbs, "'Pagan' and 'Christian' Marriage," 389; David Hunter, *Marriage in the Early Church* (Eugene, Oreg.: Wipf & Stock, 2001), 27. Hunter cites Ambrosiaster as making the first clear reference to a formal nuptial blessing bestowed only upon first marriages circa 380.

III. The Disappearance of the Virgin-Martyr

A related aspect of *De virginibus* may have fostered further unease among his congregation. As previously noted, Ambrose expended a good deal of energy recounting stories of Christian virgin-martyrs in *De virginibus* with the hope that such narratives might inspire current Christians to a greater enthusiasm for virginity. In a time and place in which actual Christian martyrdom had become obsolete, the bishop sought to give meaning to the martyrs of the past by positioning virginity as the new manifestation of that martyrdom. He encouraged young virgins to hope for a glory similar to that of Agnes, Thecla, and Pelagia through sexual renunciation, attributing to virginity the power to transform one into a living martyr.

However clever this linguistic endeavor, we may question the degree of its practical success within the cultural context of Milan. Despite his initial assertions that virginity itself a new martyrdom, the bishop never presses this idea explicitly in any of his subsequent writings. While *De virginibus* is saturated with tales of virgin-martyrs, Ambrose largely omits these figures from his later treatises on virginity. Only brief passing mention is made of Agnes, Pelagia, and Thecla in the rest of his corpus. For example, in a letter to the priest Simplicianus, he compares the practices of various pagan philosophers to Christian ascetic practice, touting these virgin-martyrs as exemplars of a superior brand of Christian philosophical living in their longing for death and ascension of the steps of virtue.⁹⁹ To further this argument, Ambrose attributes to Pelagia a brief (and otherwise unattested) monologue in which she declares her purity to be a product of

⁹⁹ Ambrose, *Ep.* 7.36 (CSEL 82.1, 61).

pure wisdom and her body to be servile, of no use, and happily abandoned in death.¹⁰⁰

Thecla is cited elsewhere in his letters as evidence that even lions will not violate sacred virginity.¹⁰¹ Ambrose mentions Agnes in his *De officiis* as a venerable martyr who traded her life to protect her virginity and thus merited immortality.¹⁰² Thecla receives only passing mention in *De virginitate* as a virgin who was notable for her virtue rather than her age, but next to these brief allusions, the much-extolled virgin-martyrs of *De virginibus* are largely forgotten.¹⁰³

How may we account for this striking silence? Martyrdom stories had a long and distinguished pedigree in Christianity by Ambrose's time, but there was still much that was not only fascinating but also disturbing to the late fourth-century mind about martyrdom. The great popularity and wide dispersion of martyr narratives in early Christianity demonstrates that not every Christian had courage in the face of death; this is at the heart of what made those who died for Christianity famous and their stories popular among the membership of the church. Martyrs inspired not only reverence and wonder but also anxiety and suspicion among listeners.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰ Ambrose, *Ep.* 7.38 (CSEL 82.1, 62).

¹⁰¹ Ambrose, *Ep. ex coll.* 14.34 (CSEL, 82.3, 252-253).

¹⁰² Ambrose, *De officiis* 1.41.204 (in Ivor J. Davidson, *Ambrose: De officiis* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001], I, 236).

¹⁰³ Ambrose, *De virgt.* 7.40 (Gori, II, 40).

¹⁰⁴ Castelli asserts that martyrs “inspire ambivalence, anxiety, fear, and loathing because of their radical refusal of the dominant systems of rationality, meaning, and value, which they oppose, but also—and perhaps more tellingly—because of their compulsion to align themselves with power through the paradoxical repudiation of self and will.” See her *Martyrdom and Memory*, 200, and also Castelli, “The Ambivalent Legacy of Violence and Victimhood: Using Early Christian Martyrs to Think With,” *Spiritus* 6.1 (2006): 1-24.

Women martyrs seem to have held a particular fascination for early Christians. Figures such as Perpetua and Thecla who could endure the horrors of the arena were considered to have demonstrated virtue and courage which defied the limitations of what women were commonly thought to possess, leading their second and third-century biographers to consider them superior to their sex, or even masculine and virile on account of their acts. By the fourth-century, however, writers began to reimagining these figures as models of passive female virtue. Virginia Burrus has shown how Ambrose's reading of Agnes in *De virginibus* reveals something of the process by which female martyrs were remodeled in this period into docile and passive virgins of the church where once they had been strong, virile heroines. In this way, Burrus argues, Ambrose seeks to minimize asceticism's threatening destabilizing effect on gender roles as well as to renegotiate the categories of masculinity and femininity, transforming female martyrs into models for a kind of feminized male asceticism. Furthermore, virginity is associated with the "seductively heroic drama" of martyrdom in order to defend the church's right to move young girls out of the realm of marriage.¹⁰⁵ Burrus's understanding of the transformation of female martyrs into exemplars for male ascetic practice seems affirmed by the fact that most of Ambrose's later references to named female martyrs occur in works written specifically to male priests.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Virginia Burrus, "Reading Agnes: The Rhetoric of Gender in Ambrose and Prudentius," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 3.1 (1995): 30-33, 44-46. See also Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999), 74-81.

¹⁰⁶ *Ep.* 7 in which two references are found is addressed to the priest Simplicianus and *De officiis* to a larger body of male priests. *Ep. ex coll.* 14 is directed to the body of the church at Vercelli but seems nevertheless to address its male clergymen in general. *De virginitate* is the exception to this rule, but the reference to Thecla is so brief and vague that it is rendered completely innocuous.

Yet despite the allegedly seductive and heroic stance of martyrdom, we must be aware that this supposed minimizing of asceticism's threat to established gender roles was a complex intellectual endeavor. This subtle rhetorical reconstruction was probably beyond the reaches of the majority of his lay listeners who were still unsettled by Ambrose's standing assertions of Christ's ability to change the sexes and of the superiority of young virginal girls to the rest of their sex.¹⁰⁷ Whatever Ambrose's implicit ideological aspirations may have been, his vision of the virgin-martyrs he extolled continued to include numerous behaviors which nevertheless would have given pause to the family of any aspiring virgin. The virgin-martyrs that Ambrose eagerly extolled in *De virginibus* continued as a display of both unusual independence as well as blatant disregard for familial authority in their active pursuits of virginity and of martyrdom. Although most maidens of Agnes' age could barely stand their parents' angry looks, Ambrose had boasted, this young virgin boldly rejected the marital offers of the many who desired her and stands fearless and defiant before her executioner.¹⁰⁸ Thecla defied her fiancé and incurred his rage for her desire to guard her virginity.¹⁰⁹ The parents of Ambrose's nameless Antiochene virgin were conspicuously absent; the young girl lived the life of virginity without the protection of family and courageously faced the persecutions of the men who desire her by herself. Pelagia's mother was the sole parental figure who appears in these martyr narratives, and she acted only in a secondary role. Only after Pelagia has made the decision to die rather than lose her

¹⁰⁷ Ambrose, *De virg.* 2.4.31 (Gori, I, 192), 2.5.35 (Gori, I, 196).

¹⁰⁸ Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.2.9 (Gori, I, 110).

¹⁰⁹ Ambrose, *De virg.* 2.3.19 (Gori, I, 180-182).

chastity and has dressed in costume does her mother appear to offer Pelagia and her sisters as a sacrifice.¹¹⁰ While martyrs were admirable in general, many of their behaviors may not have been so when contemplated from the private perspective of one's own household. Parents and husbands, traditional authority figures in the community, were largely unimportant or disregarded by these young women facing martyrdom in their pursuit of the virginal life. No guardian is consulted, no family member heeded, in the decision of the virgin-martyr to espouse perpetual virginity or persevere on the path to martyrdom, and the bishop himself touts this most unfilial, even anti-social, behavior as admirable in his recounting of the virgin-martyrs.

Secondly, Ambrose used the stories of virgin-martyrs to press a starkly ascetic agenda that may have seemed excessive to some readers. As previously noted, some seem to have complained that his enthusiasm for virginity denigrated marriage. His inclusion of the virgin-martyrs probably contributed to this critique. Many of these tales in their earlier forms contained strong anti-marriage sentiments that Ambrose did not attempt to play down. For example, Elizabeth Castelli has noted how the second-century *Acts of Paul and Thecla* is strongly ascetic in character and blatantly condemns marriage. The fifth-century *Life of Thecla*, however, "blunts" the strong ascetic message of the original story by carefully promoting virginity in ways which do not condemn marriage.¹¹¹ This critical transformation in the literary history of the martyr suggests that readers of the intervening centuries perceived a strong anti-marriage current within this

¹¹⁰ Ambrose, *De virg.* 3.7.35 (Gori, I, 238).

¹¹¹ Elizabeth Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 151.

martyr story that became increasingly unacceptable over time and was altered by the fifth century.

For some of Ambrose's audience, the very mention of Thecla or other virgin-martyrs in *De virginibus* may have seemed to be an endorsement of a starkly ascetic anti-marriage agenda if these figures had not yet been reconfigured to collude with the emerging theology of orthodox marriage. Boyarin notes that Ambrose's retelling of the story of Thecla in *De virginibus* closely parallels the version given in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* with respect to its emphasis on virginity as the defining characteristic of conversion to Christianity, rather than a belief in Christ, a rejection of pagan gods, or a refusal to worship the emperor.¹¹² In *De virginibus*, his correspondence between the second-century text and Ambrose's version may suggest that the more marriage-friendly reading of Thecla's story Castelli has noted does not yet exist by the end of the fourth century. Nevertheless, there may have been some strong dissatisfaction among his readers and others in the church with Thecla's current configuration which resulted in changes manifest in the fifth-century version.

Ambrose's reading of Agnes may have carried similar anti-marriage connotations for his Milanese audience. Differences between Ambrose's fourth-century account of Agnes and Prudentius's fifth-century poem on the martyr in his *Peristephanon* may suggest that the former telling is a particularly pro-ascetic version which was soon to fall out of favor among lay persons. According to Ambrose, Agnes is persecuted and martyred specifically because she will not disown her virginity by consenting to be

¹¹² Boyarin, *Dying for God*, 86-87. See also Virginia Burrus, *Chastity as Autonomy: Women in the Stories of the Apocryphal Acts* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1987), 43-44.

married, implying a strong dichotomy between the good of virginity and the evil of marriage; the martyr's final confession is one only of virginity's superiority.¹¹³ In Prudentius's slightly later fifth-century account, however, this sharp ascetic message is somewhat blunted; Agnes is praised for her virginity but she is sentenced to a brothel and ultimately martyred because she refuses to make sacrifices to pagan idols, leaving open the possibility that marriage might be meritorious to some extent as well.¹¹⁴ Perhaps it is on account of such factors as these—the radical behaviors of the martyrs, and the anti-marital tone of Ambrose's ascetic teachings—that virgin-martyrs are largely abandoned in Ambrose's writings after *De virginibus*.

In *De virginitate*, the bishop refrains not only from the stories of the virgin-martyrs but from almost any association of virginity with martyrdom. The virgin daughter of Jephthah from the Hebrew Bible is briefly mentioned to allow Ambrose to speak of the importance of keeping one's vow to God, but he does not press the association between her virginity and her death.¹¹⁵ The bishop makes only one explicit reference to a connection between martyrdom and virginity, and this section exists only in partial form at the end of what is considered by some scholars to be a long interpolation comprising the majority of ¶14 to 23 and the first few words of ¶24 of the text.¹¹⁶ This section deals largely with the resurrection of the Lord in John 20.11-17,

¹¹³ Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.2.7-9 (Gori, I, 106-110).

¹¹⁴ Prudentius, *Peristephanon* 14.13-16 (CSEL 61, 427).

¹¹⁵ Ambrose, *De virgt.* 2.5-6 (Gori, II, 16-18).

¹¹⁶ Raymond D'Izarny was the first to make this claim in his introduction to *La virginité selon Saint Ambroise I* (Ph.D. dissertation, Lyon, 1952), n. 14. Gori provides a summary of the various scholarship which has identified this pericope as an interpolation in his introduction to Gori, ed., *Virginità et vedovanza: Tutte le opere di Sant'Ambrogio* 14/1, 2 (Milan: Biblioteca Ambrosiana, 1989), 72.

exhorting virgins not to doubt its reality, and giving a figurative reading of the narrative concerning Mary Magdalene's visit to the tomb of the resurrected Christ. Because this passage does not seem consistent with the flow of Ambrose's argumentation in the treatise, D'Izarny, Gori, and others have argued that it is an interpolation positioned between what was once a single continuous phrase.¹¹⁷ The query of "How long will the patience of the priests refrain from vindicating the sacrifice of virginity, even to the point of death if that be necessary?" which concludes ¶13 strongly suggests to some a continuation in theme with the "as when, to bypass other things, virgins are prepared to die to preserve their integrity" of ¶24.¹¹⁸ Ambrose turns to a different subject immediately following this fragment sentence in ¶24, further suggesting that the sentence is out of its original context. Gori argues that the intervening resurrection-themed passage is undoubtedly Ambrose's work but was in fact a distinct homily given by the bishop on another occasion and was accidentally inserted at a later time into this treatise by a copyist.¹¹⁹ Since the pericope is clearly of the bishop's authorship, however, and since Ambrose is known to have vetted and organized much of his own written work later

¹¹⁷ D'Izarny, introduction to *La virginité*, n. 14. Gori, *Verginiá e Vedovanza I*, p. 72.

¹¹⁸ *Et potest esse patientia sacerdotum ut non vel morte oblate, si ita necesse est, integritatis sacrificium vindicetur* (*De virgt.* 3.13) [Gori, II, 22] and *quando, ut alia omittam, pro integritate seruanda mori uirgines sunt paratae* (*De virgt.* 5.24) [Gori, II, 88].

¹¹⁹ Gori, *Verginiá e Vedovanza I*, pp. 72-73. Gori argues that the resurrection pericope must be Ambrose's own work because its problematic mention of two Marys is explained at greater length in Ambrose's *exp. Luc.* 10.147-161. Clearly such a claim merits further investigation elsewhere.

in life,¹²⁰ we must consider that the bishop himself may have been responsible for the insertion of this section into his work.

In contrast to Gori and D'Izarny, Monica Zelzer has taken a more cautious approach to this supposed interpolation, arguing that the resurrection passage may have been in fact an intentional digression on Ambrose's part despite the sudden change in subject it represents. She finds ample precedence for this practice in Ambrose's earlier writings.¹²¹ If the passage was either inserted by the bishop later on (a theory not inconsistent with the arguments of D'Izarny and Gori) or if it is actually original to the text, its abrupt placement suggests that it may have played a particularly important function for Ambrose. The bishop's closing question in ¶13 ("How long will the patience of the priests refrain from vindicating the sacrifice of virginity, even to the point of death if that be necessary?") may suggest that he had suffered some approbation not only for praising virginity in general but also for his previous explication of it in terms of sacrifice and martyrdom and his inclusion of many stories of radical virgin-martyrs who suffered death to avoid being deprived of their chastity.

This thesis is further substantiated by the bishop's immediate turn toward a new subject—the resurrection of Christ—which immediately follows. The break in rhetorical flow, so odd that it has led D'Izarny and Gori to conclude the resurrection section must be an interpolation, arrives suggestively between passages asserting the necessity of preserving the sacrifice of virginity even unto death. In contrast to *De virginibus's*

¹²⁰ Monica Zelzer describes Ambrose's careful collation of his letters into ten volumes in her "Plinius Christianus: Ambrosius als Epistolograph," in *Studia Patristica XXIII*, ed. Elizabeth A. Livingstone (Leuven: Peeters, 1989): 203-208.

¹²¹ Zelzer, "Das ambrosianische Corpus De virginitate und seine Rezeption im Mittelalter," in *Studia Patristica XXXVIII*, ed. Maurice F. Wiles, Edward Yarnold, and P.M. Parvis (Leuven: Peeters, 2001), 516.

enthusiastic praise of the virgin-martyrs, Ambrose does not put forth exemplars or even mention the names of the martyrs he had previously presented for inspection. Instead, he is quick to turn from the morbid perils of sacrificial virginity to the glorious resurrection of Christ which virgins merit to see first. He applies dizzying layers of rich imagery, figurative exegesis, and complex explanations of Trinitarian unity upon the scriptural text of John to impress upon his audience the blessedness of holy virginity and, even more importantly, the profundity of his own intellect.¹²² He returns only briefly to conclude that Christ is truly God to virgins who are prepared to die to preserve their virginity,¹²³ as though he had been making this point all along but in language too lofty to be grasped by his audience.

This carefully-crafted diversion seems intended to defend, or at least draw attention away from, the “sacrifice” which he had likened perpetual chastity to and the implicit necessity of one’s dying to preserve it. The martyrdom imagery and language that had largely characterized his description of virginity in *De virginibus* are minimized, suggesting that such explications were unfavorable to some members of his Milanese congregation. This also may suggest an additional reason for the surprising absence of virgin-martyr figures in this treatise and elsewhere. In *De virginibus*, their stories had been employed largely to forge the intellectual associations between virginity and martyrdom that Ambrose seems reluctant to press in *De virginitate*.

IV. The Virgin Bride

¹²² Ambrose, *De virgt.* 3.14-4.23 (Gori, II, 22-28).

¹²³ Ambrose, *De virgt.* 5.24 (Gori, II, 28).

As discussed earlier, the bishop's turn from the *gesta martyrum* leads him to an increased engagement with scripture in *De virginitate*. This shift probably reflects not only the needs of Ambrose's audience but also his increasing acquaintance with the writings of the Greek Biblical scholars of the East. Ambrose's *De paradiso* and *De Cain et Abel*, both composed close to the same time as *De virginitate*, also show the bishop's increased focus on Biblical exegesis, an aspect of his work probably attributable to his new-found familiarity with, and indebtedness to, the writings of both Origen and Philo of Alexandria.¹²⁴ Leaving behind the figure of the virgin-martyr he had relied so heavily upon in *De virginibus*, Ambrose developing the motif of the virgin-bride of Christ through reading of scripture to shield himself from the complaints of angry parents and

¹²⁴ David T. Runia gives an excellent summary of Philo's influence upon Ambrose, cataloguing specific probable borrowings throughout Ambrose's corpus, in his *Philo in Early Christian Literature* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 291-311. On Philo's particular influence upon *De paradiso*, see Hervé Savon, *Saint Ambroise devant l'exégèse de Philon le Juif* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1977), 25-54; Marcel Poorthuis, "Who is to Blame: Adam or Eve?: A Possible Jewish Source for Ambrose's *De paradiso* 12, 56" *Vigiliae Christianae* 50.2 (1996): 125-135; Enzo Lucchesi, *L'usage de Philon dans l'oeuvre exégétique de Saint Ambroise* (Leiden: Brill, 1977). On Philo and Origen in Ambrose's *De Cain*, see Hervé Savon, "Saint Ambroise critique de Philon dans le *De Cain et Abel*," in *Studia Patristica XIII*, ed. Elizabeth A. Livingstone (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1975), 273-279; Vincenzo Messina, "L'esegesi tropologica presso i padri e le bibliche figure di Abele e di Caino in Ambrogio ed Agostino," in *Studia Patristica XV (pt.1)*, ed. Elizabeth A. Livingstone (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1984), 187-188; Christoph Markschies, "Ambrosius und Origenes: Bemerkungen zur exegetischen Hermeneutik zweier Kirchenväter," in *Origeniana Septima*, ed. Wolfgang A. Bienert and Uwe Kühneweg (Leuven: Peeters Press, 1999), 533 n. 51, 566-567.

Ambrose's acquaintance with Greek writers may have increased in Milan with the help of the priests Sabinus of Piacenza and Simplicianus, who, although older, later succeeds Ambrose as bishop of Milan. Both seem to have served as mentors to the young Ambrose. Sabinus attended the council at Rome in 371 and subsequently carried its edicts (condemning the current Homoian bishop of Milan, Auxentius) to Athanasius in Alexandria and then continued to Caesarea to visit Basil before returning to Milan. He returned with several letters from Basil and perhaps brought with them writings from the bishops of the East as well, perhaps accounting to some extent for Ambrose's acquaintance early in his career with the works of Athanasius, Basil, Origen, Philo, and others. Simplicianus encouraged Ambrose's early attempts at scriptural exegesis and allegorical interpretation, as is witnessed by several letters the bishop addressed to him. See Testa, "Christianization and Conversion," 79.

While the Cappadocian Fathers also influence Ambrose's writings to a great extent, such influence is not apparent until a later date than 378. The earliest example of their obvious influence is probably in Ambrose's ample borrowing for his treatise *De Spiritu Sancto*, composed in 381, from Basil of Caesarea's treatise of the same name. See Carla Lo Cicero, "Prestiti basiliani e cultura latina in Ambrogio," in *Cristianesimo latino e cultura greca sino al sec IV*, ed. Arnaldo Marcone et al. (Rome: Institutum Patristicum "Augustinianum", 1993), 245 and Paredi, *Saint Ambrose*, 191.

the offended married. Although he had made several passing references to the virgin's espousal to Christ in *De virginibus*, this line of argumentation comes to its full fruition for the first time in *De virginitate*.¹²⁵

As noted in the previous chapter, a good portion of this treatise (§§45-88) comprises an extended allegorical reading of the Song of Songs in which the Christian virgin is styled the bride of Christ, an interpretation that is by no means original to Ambrose's works but which already had a long history by the late fourth century.¹²⁶ Following McLynn's argument, I suggested earlier that such a reading was likely employed so that Ambrose might impress upon his audience his scholarly and theological erudition while drawing attention away from the many criticisms of his ascetic program that were currently plaguing him.¹²⁷ Here I would like to suggest some further functions of this weighty and mystical reading. While the bishop does intend to awe his listeners with his profound understanding of the Song of Songs, his choice of "bride of Christ" rhetoric to do so is not a random one. Such language is chosen specifically to address issues which are under discussion in *De virginitate*.

First of all, his interpretation of the Song of Songs further contextualizes virginity within the authoritative realm of scripture. To his more extensive employment of the New Testament to demonstrate the worthiness of the practice Ambrose also adds further witness from the Hebrew Bible to justify his zeal for his subject. Laying aside the martyr

¹²⁵ For examples of such references in *De virginibus*, see 1.2.9, 1.3.11, 1.5.22, 1.6.31, 1.7.37, 1.9.46, 1.9.52, 1.12.62, 2.2.16, 2.6.41-42, 3.1.1, 3.7.34.

¹²⁶ For the history of this interpretation of the Song of Songs, see Chapter 1, 40-42.

¹²⁷ See Chapter 1, 37 and 42.

texts, Ambrose draws upon the authority of scripture to witness to virginity's loftiness and to silence his critics.

Second, such language provides virginity with a position within the existing socio-cultural order of Milan. Clark has noted that such readings allow for the positive associations of marriage held by ancient Romans to continue to "hover over" the metaphor itself.¹²⁸ In utilizing such language, Ambrose drew upon the honored status of traditional marriage in the Roman socio-cultural milieu to bolster the status of virginity. As a "bride," albeit a heavenly one, the virgin stands close to the realm of normative Greco-Roman womanhood rather than in radical opposition to it, as did the masculinized virgin-martyrs. Furthermore, bride of Christ imagery styled virginity as simply a transcendent form of marriage, placing the two in a close, complementary relationship.¹²⁹ The bishop may in this way endorse virginity freely and simultaneously find good in marriage, an answer to critics who found in his earlier ascetic enthusiasm a denigration of the marital state.

While Ambrose had praised virgins in the first treatise for spurning marriage and defying their parents' wishes in order to pledge themselves to virginity, virgins are praised in the second treatise for awaiting their marital union with the Bridegroom in seclusion and silence. "Learn to bolt your door during the hours of the night; may no one discover it to be opened readily. Your Bridegroom himself desires that it be closed when he knocks. . . . Why do you concern yourself with anything else? Speak to Christ alone,

¹²⁸ Elizabeth Clark, "The Celibate Bridegroom and His Virginal Brides: Metaphor and the Marriage of Jesus in Early Christian Ascetic Exegesis," *Church History* 77.1 (2008): 8.

¹²⁹ Clark has noted something similar in the metaphor of the celibate Bridegroom which often goes hand in hand with bride of Christ interpretations: "It held 'marriage' and 'celibacy' in a creative tension that reflected the Church's need to affirm the worth of each. See Clark, "The Celibate Bridegroom," 8-9.

converse with Christ alone,” Ambrose asserts.¹³⁰ As the bride, the virgin is to spend her time in silent prayer and meditation as she passively waits to receive her Bridegroom at his coming.¹³¹ After all, Christ does not wish to hear discourses from her.¹³² Such “bride of Christ” language allows the bishop to commend to virgins attitudes of modesty and submission, behaviors conforming far closer to socio-cultural norms than most examples he had employed previously. For example, the bishop interprets the Song to teach that virgins should never be found in public places:

Christ is not found in the market place or in the city squares. Indeed, she could not find him in the market or the squares, she who said, ‘I will rise now and go about the city, in the market and in the squares; and I will seek him whom my soul loves. I sought him, but found him not; I called him, but he gave no answer.’ Therefore, by no means let us seek Christ where we will not find him ... Let us flee the squares. For not only is it a danger to have not encountered him whom you were seeking, but also because frequently there is harm in seeking him where it was not appropriate: if you have sought him in the house of men who falsely assume for themselves the name of teacher, if you have looked with more shamelessness than modesty.”¹³³

Unlike the famous ascetics of Rome, the virgin-bride should not be well-known; she must never been seen strutting through the streets and conversing widely with

¹³⁰ Ambrose, *De virgt.* 13.80 (Gori, II, 66): *Ianuam quoque tuam disce temporibus obserare nocturnis: non facile quisquam patentem reperiat. Sponsus ipse uult clausam esse cum pulsat ... Quid tibi cum ceteris? Soli Christo loquere, soli fabulare Christo.*

¹³¹ Ambrose, *De virgt.* 12.68 (Gori, II, 58).

¹³² Ambrose, *De virgt.* 13.84 (Gori, II, 68).

¹³³ Ambrose, *De virgt.* 8.46-47 (Gori, II, 42): *Non in foro, non in plateis Christus reperitur. Denique nec illa eum in foro et in plateis potuit reperire, quae dixit: Exurgam, ibo et circuibo ciuitatem, in foro et in plateis, et quaeram quem dilexit anima mea. Quaesiui eum et non inueni eum, vocaui eum et non obaudiuit me. Nequaquam igitur ibi quaeramus Christum ubi inuenire non possimus. ... Fugiamus plateas. Non enim iniuria tantummodo est non inuenisse quem quaeras, sed etiam plerumque ubi non oportet quaesisse, uulnus est: quaesisse in domibus uirorum qui sibi falso doctorum nomen assumunt, quaesisse procacius quam uerecundius.*

others.¹³⁴ Modeling virgins as brides, Ambrose instructs them to conform to proper wifely behaviors befitting any Greco-Roman woman.¹³⁵ Such a radical restyling may reflect the bishop's desire to placate those enflamed by his earlier praise of virgins' radical and independent behaviors.

In addition to teaching proper behavior to virgins, Ambrose uses this "bride of Christ" reading in his attempt to secure the perpetual celibacy of the virgins in his community. As discussed earlier, at some point between the writing of *De virginibus* and *De virginitate*, the bishop had apparently played a part in blocking what he considered to be the nuptials of a dedicated virgin in spite of the wishes of her parents. Ambrose seems to have come under some criticism for his involvement in this incident and defended his involvement vigorously. As previously noted, the majority of northern Italy's virgins probably lived at home among their families at this time and, as such, their lifestyles remained vulnerable to the authority of their parents. In order to justify his own actions as well as to prevent the marriages of such virgins in the future, the bishop is anxious to affirm the solemnity and irrefutability of a "vow" present in the virgin's espousal of virginity. From scripture, he cites the example of Jephthah as a righteous parent who sacrifices his daughter in order to keep a vow to God.¹³⁶ "What then? Do we approve of

¹³⁴ Ambrose, *De virgt.* 13.83 (Gori, II, 66-68).

¹³⁵ Brakke notes that these ideals probably did not reflect the behaviors of real Greco-Roman wives but nevertheless reflect Greek and Roman philosophical ideals as well as household codes of the New Testament. See David Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 75.

¹³⁶ Ambrose, *De virgt.* 2.5 (Gori, II, 16).

it? I, more than all, do not. But although I disapprove of parricide, I cannot help noting the formidable fear of breaking an oath.”¹³⁷

Ambrose’s later extended reading of the Song of Songs furthers this endeavor. Virgins are bound to the heavenly Bridegroom through sensuous language suggestive of sexual union to emphasize the reality of the marital relationship: “This is how Christ has desired you, Christ has chosen you. The door being open, he enters, and one who has promised that he himself will enter cannot deceive. So embrace whom you have sought; approach him to be filled with light; hold him and ask him not to depart quickly, pleading with him not to go away.”¹³⁸ After a virgin has put off her tunic of flesh and extended her hands to Christ, “then, from within your body, O virgin, do you grasp pleasure, and you are sweet to yourself and agreeable, with no hint of the displeasure sinners often feel.”¹³⁹ With highly eroticized language, Ambrose impresses upon his audience the reality of the marriage bond between virgin and Bridegroom in order to justify his earlier involvement in blocking the marriage of a virgin as well as to preclude parents from

¹³⁷ Ambrose, *De virgt.* 2.6 (Gori, II, 16-18): *Quid igitur? Hoc probamus? Minime gentium. Sed tamen, etsi parricidium non probo, aduerto praeuaricandae metum et formidinem sponsionis.*

¹³⁸ Ambrose, *De virgt.* 12.72 (Gori, II, 62): *Talem te Christus desideravit, talem te Christus elegit. Aperto itaque ingreditur ostio; neque enim potest fallere, que se ingressurum esse promisit. Complectere igitur quem quaesisti. Accede ad ipsum et illuminaberis. Tene illum, roga ne cito abeat, obsecra ne recedat.*

¹³⁹ Ambrose, *De virgt.* 12.73 (Gori, II, 62): *Capis ergo, uirgo, ex interiore tuo corpore uoluptatem, et ipsa tibi dulcis, ipsa tibi suavis es, et ipsa tibi, quod peccantibus saepe contingit, non incipis displicere.*

Kim Power also notes the implicitly sexual nature of Ambrose’s imagery as he encourages the virgin-bride to open her spiritual womb to his “sword” that she may be inseminated with virtue. See Kim E. Power, “The Sword of the Word: An Aspect of Mystical Marriage in Ambrose of Milan,” in *Studia Patristica XXXVIII*, ed. Maurice F. Wiles, Edward Yarnold, and P.M. Parvis (Leuven: Peeters, 2001),

forming any other marital agreement on behalf of their virgin daughters living within their homes.¹⁴⁰

Despite Ambrose's emphasis on the "vow" of virginity implicit in the life of every virgin, Ambrose and other bishops of the late fourth century were the first known to perform formal veiling rituals for virgins. This spectacle, the physical manifestation of the ascetic bride of Christ interpretation, not only discouraged parents from arranging marriages for their daughters but also enhanced the status and prestige of the bishop before his Milanese audience.¹⁴¹ Styling the young woman as a "bride", the bishop performed a veiling ceremony strongly resembling a Roman wedding which bound the virgin to Christ and to the church.¹⁴² She was thus formally removed from the control of her parents while the bishop now claimed parental rights of supervision, affirming his new status as *paterfamilias* by claiming use of familiar terms such as "daughter" and "father."¹⁴³ Through this quasi-sacramental ceremony, the virgin was reborn as both the bride of Christ and the daughter of the church under Ambrose's powerful and authoritative hand.

Such an endeavor was in part designed to crush theological competition.

Ambrose was sensitized to the presence of "false teachers" in the city and was anxious to

¹⁴⁰ Brakke has suggest that "bride of Christ" interpretations of virginity played a similar role in Athanasius's ascetic writings. See Brakke, *Athanasius*, 52-54.

¹⁴¹ Hunter, "The Virgin, the Bride, and the Church: Reading Psalm 45 in Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine," *Church History* 69.2 (2000): 284; McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 66-68.

¹⁴² Nathalie Henry has suggested that the consecration ceremony included a liturgical reading of the Song of Songs in the late fourth century. See Henry, "The Song of Songs and the Liturgy of the *velatio*," 18-28.

¹⁴³ Hunter, "The Virgin, the Bride, and the Church," 288-289. The best and most extensive work on the veiling ceremony is still René Metz, *La Consécration des vierges dans l'église romaine* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1954).

keep virgins from falling under their influence to the detriment of his own authority.¹⁴⁴ After warning virgins away from the marketplace, Ambrose admonishes them to seek Christ in private through meritorious deeds and noble actions. “Therefore, where is Christ being sought?” he asks. “Undoubtedly in the heart of a prudent bishop.”¹⁴⁵ I have noted in the previous chapter the mixed theological nature of Ambrose’s church at Milan. Still in his first year of his episcopacy, the bishop was wary of the Homoian contingent of both his congregation and clergy. The noted Homoian Julian Valens seems to have been present in Milan and stirring up opposition during Ambrose’s early years in the episcopacy.¹⁴⁶ Furthermore, Ursinus, a leader among Luciferian dissenters, was in Milan causing trouble for the bishop until his exile to Cologne in 375/6.¹⁴⁷ Ambrose positions himself as bishop in contrast to such false teachers who populate the city squares, drawing on the image of the desert to further contrast his *own* simplicity and lowliness to the discordance and iniquity of the false teachers of the marketplace. It is in the bishop’s own contrite heart—tempered by hard labors and heartfelt sorrow—that the beloved Bridegroom is found growing as a fruitful tree in the wilderness, and the bride rejoices as

¹⁴⁴ Ambrose, *De virgt.* 8.46-47 (Gori, II, 42-44). The false teachers that Ambrose alludes to may refer to the various factions present in the city which plagued the bishop for many years to come. However, Ambrose’s diatribe against the marketplace is strongly reminiscent of Athanasius’s prohibition of virgins to be involved in public activities such as pilgrimage and the baths for fear that they would be deceived by false teachers of Arianism and other heresies. See Athanasius, *Ep. vir.* 1.13-15; 2.15-18, 30 and Brakke, *Athanasius*, 70-75.

¹⁴⁵ Ambrose, *De virgt.* 9.50 (Gori, II, 46).

¹⁴⁶ McLynn, 57-59, Daniel Williams, *Ambrose of Milan and the End of the Nicene-Arian Conflicts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 136-138. Valens was bishop of Illyricum who was exiled from his see, came to Milan, and became the head of the Homoian opposition there.

¹⁴⁷ Williams, *Ambrose of Milan*, 137-138. McLynn has argued that Ursinus was not part of the Homoian dissent despite the later “smear” of Arianism which Ambrose applies to him in a 381 letter to Gratian (*Ep. ext. coll.* 5.2-3 [CSEL 82.3, 183-184]). See McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 58-60.

she finds him there.¹⁴⁸ Ambrose uses this metaphor to turn virgins from other teachers and toward his own authority.

The virgin-bride of *De virginitate* stands in stark contrast to the virgin-martyrs and Roman aristocratic ascetics which Ambrose envisioned in his *De virginibus*. While earlier he had been anxious to laud the valor and heroism of headstrong, independent virgins, he now abandons such radical exemplars of female behavior in favor of the more socially-acceptable model of the virgin-bride. A concession to the married, she speaks for both the good of Christian marriage as well as asceticism's mystical transcendence of it. Modest and silent, she displays "wifely" behaviors conforming to the social norms of Greco-Roman society. More broadly, we may perceive within this ascetic interpretation of the Song of Songs a further attempt on Ambrose's part to assert his own authority as bishop over virgins within domains both public and private. Modeling the virgin as a bride of Christ, the bishop turns the virgin away from other teachers. While he no longer advocates the flight of virgins from the authority of their parents to seek refuge at the altar of the church as he once had, Ambrose nevertheless removes her ideologically from the realm of her parents' authority. The virgin is left in the home of her parents but placed within a relationship so lofty that they dare not tamper with it.

V. Conclusion

While many of the young bishop's teachings in *De virginibus* were *de rigueur* among certain circles to the south, they may have sounded to his Milanese audience somewhat foreign, extreme, or even threatening to the social order and customs of Milan.

¹⁴⁸ Ambrose, *De virgt.* 9.51-52 (Gori, II, 46-48).

In *De virginitate*, Ambrose retreats somewhat from strong assertions of virginal preeminence and independence, some strictly ascetic scriptural readings, and blatant discourse on the evils of marriage. Leaving behind the narratives of virgin-martyrs as well as most of his other earlier associations of virginity with martyrdom, he finds it useful to his ascetic agenda to more fully develop the bridal imagery of the Song of Songs in order to fashion virgins as brides of Christ. By means of this figural reading strategy, he is able to tame some of the more socially-threatening aspects of virginity. At the same time, Ambrose is able to strengthen virginity's status in the church on the authority of scripture. He gives virginity a pseudo-traditional ideological position in the existing socio-cultural structure of Milan, bolstering his own position of authority as bishop with regard to virgins and securing the perpetual virginity of young female virgins still subject to the whims of parents and other family members.

While Ambrose's initial teachings on virginity encountered considerable criticism, his second treatise on the subject reveals the beginnings of his long and successful career in socio-theological politics. While the core elements of his ascetic theology—namely, the pronounced blessedness of the church's virgins and virginity's marked superiority to marriage—remain largely unchanged between the two treatises, *De virginitate* represents a significant shift in how he presents such precepts to his audience. After what was probably a surprising and somewhat humiliating response to *De virginibus*, Ambrose found himself more strongly attuned to the social and cultural climate of Milan and began molding his virginity discourse in response to the needs and demands of his audience. The next chapter will explore this evolution further through a

discussion of his two later treatises on virginity, *De institutione virginis* and *Exhortatio virginitatis*.

Chapter Three

Negotiating Virginitate in Milan, Part II: *De institutione virginis and Exhortatio virginitatis*

In the previous chapter, I have considered Ambrose's two earliest treatises on virginity, *De virginibus* and *De virginitate*, in light of their relationship to each other and to various social and political issues surrounding the practice of virginity. While the young Ambrose extolled virginity with much zeal in *De virginibus*, his assumption of this message's success among his Milanese congregation reveals something of his naivety and unfamiliarity with the attitudes and concerns of his people. That his first teachings were met with strong opposition by some members of his audience is apparent in his second treatise on the subject, *De virginitate*, whose publication closely followed that of the first.

Much of *De virginitate* was dedicated to placating critics of his earlier teachings by modifying the presentation of his ascetic message. While Ambrose continued to uphold the blessedness of virginity and its superiority to marriage, he largely retreated from his initial assertions of young girls' independence and his verbal support of those who wished to choose virginity as their profession against the wishes of their families. In addition, the bishop toned down much of the lofty rhetoric of virginity more familiar to Rome than to Milan at this time, fully leaving behind all references to the virgin-martyrs that had permeated his first treatise. Instead of relying upon the *gesta martyrum*, he turned more fully to scripture to strengthen his ascetic argumentation in *De virginitate*. Ambrose softened much of the blatantly anti-marriage message of the earlier treatise,

describing matrimony in the scriptural terms of *uincula* and *uulnera* rather than dwelling on its *tormenta* and *miseriae* as he had earlier. Furthermore, he adopted the bridal imagery of the Song of Songs to reform his earlier socially-disruptive model of the virgin into the silently submissive and retiring bride of Christ. The bishop nevertheless continued to defend his own involvement and expand his authority in matters traditionally pertaining to the private family, claiming virgins as the rightful property of the church.

This consideration of Ambrose's first teachings provides an ideological context for a discussion of his two later treatises on virginity, *De institutione virginis* and *Exhortatio virginitatis*. Positioned in relationship to his earlier works on virginity, these later treatises reveal the further refinement of Ambrose's sensitivities to the social needs and expectations of his Milanese community. As his ascetic program becomes more elaborate and systematic in his later years, he develops reading and rhetorical strategies that allow him to maintain virginity's superior and preeminent place within the church, while only minimally disparaging marriage and tempering some of the more socially-subversive aspects of the virginal lifestyle to which his audience had initially objected.

In Chapter 2, I discussed the importance of anti-Homoian rhetoric to Ambrose's maintenance of virginal superiority in *De institutione*. In this chapter, I wish to look at some of the additional rhetorical approaches the bishop employs in both this treatise and his subsequent *Exhortatio virginitatis* to sustain his ascetic program. These strategies include Ambrose's establishment of virginity as the paradigm of salvation, his creative reconsideration of Biblical characters such as Eve and Mary, his literary invention of the Jews, and his assumption of a female voice with which to teach. Each of these

innovations serves to establish the superiority of virginity to married life and to affirm the central location of virgins within the community of the church while placating critics of his ascetic program.

I. Setting a Later Stage for Virginity

After *De virginitate*, Ambrose did not compose another full-length treatise on virginity for nearly fifteen years.¹ In Chapter 2, I discussed the bishop's evolution into a figure of social and political import over this intervening period. While relatively unknown and unschooled in both Christian doctrine and ecclesiastical diplomacy in 378, Ambrose had gained significant repute as a scholar, politician, and defender of Christian orthodoxy beyond the borders of Milan during the following decade and a half. By 392, he claimed a privileged relationship to three emperors and had built a significant reputation for himself which extended even beyond Rome to Spain, Macedonia, and other far-off parts of the empire.²

Because of the lapse in time between *De virginitate* and *De institutione* and also the lack of other sources on the matter, it is difficult to ascertain what immediate response, if any, was made by his Milanese audience to his revised views on virginity or to gauge the success of the particular rhetorical and reading strategies he employed in *De virginitate*. In 384, Jerome praised Ambrose's treatises on virginity without restraint in Rome. "In these, he has poured forth his soul with such a flood of eloquence that he has

¹ In *De institutione* 2.15 (Gori, II, 122), Ambrose says that he has already spoken on virginity's merits "in numerous books" (*frequentibus libris*). While his remark may refer directly to the three books which comprise *De virginibus* and the one of which *De virginitate* consists, it may also allude to more writings on the subject which are no longer extant.

² For further discussion of the bishop's transformation during these years, see Chapter 1, 43-48.

sought out, set forth, and put in order all that bears on the praise of virgins,” Jerome announced.³ But Jerome, a celibate priest and a strong advocate of asceticism himself, held little in common with the lay members of Ambrose’s flock to the north. It is apparent from Ambrose’s writings of the 380s and 390s that critics continued to challenge his assertions of virginity’s superiority to marriage over this period, suggesting that his blunted ascetic teachings and “bride of Christ” interpretation of the Song of Songs in *De virginitate* were not completely successful at placating those who felt that the bishop denigrated marriage and reproduction. In a letter from this time addressed to the priest Constantius, Ambrose reaffirms that the continual generation of the human race ought not to be neglected by most people, but asserts the adherence of Jesus and his disciples to the superior law of chastity which not all can follow. His assertion suggests that questions continued among his congregation about asceticism’s value to the civic life of the community.⁴ Ambrose was clearly holding fast to his original understanding of virginity’s preeminent status in spite of his concession that it was not for most people.

It is also clear that bishop continued to position himself as an advocate for Christian virgins, even when his involvement encroached on the traditionally private realm of family relationships. Several years after his composition of *De virginitate*, he became involved in a dispute between one Maximus and his sister-in-law, Indicia, who

³ Jerome, *Ep.* 22.22 (PL 22, 106). Jerome’s enthusiasm for Ambrose’s work soon soured, as evidenced by his multiple criticisms of the bishop scattered throughout his writings. For example, see Jerome, *Interpretatio libri Didymi de spiritu sancto*, praef. (PG 39, 1631-1632); *Interpretatio homiliae Origenis in Lucam*, praef. (PG 13, 1799-1800); *Commentariorum in epistolam ad Ephesios*, praef. (PL 26, 539-540). See also Neil Adkin, "Jerome on Ambrose: The Preface of the Translation of Origen's *Homilies on Luke*," *Revue Benedictine* 107 (1997): 5-14 and Adkin, "Ambrose and Jerome: the Opening Shot," *Mnemosyne* 46 (1993): 364-400. Ambrose seems to have weathered Jerome’s criticisms passively (see McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, xiv).

⁴ Ambrose, *Ep.* 69.16 (CSEL 82.2, 185-186).

was a consecrated virgin living with him and his wife near Verona. Maximus, with the support of some of his friends, had accused Indicia of violating her virginity and demanded that she be examined by a midwife to prove her chastity was still intact.⁵

Although Verona was outside of his episcopal jurisdiction, Ambrose had held a public trial and condemned the examination of the virgin's chastity. This act simultaneously reversed the earlier decision of Syagrius, bishop of Verona, who had upheld the justice of the virgin's inspection, probably out of reluctance to challenge the authority of Maximus over his household.⁶ Ambrose had no such scruples about interceding on the virgin's behalf against the patriarchal head of house. Since holy virgins belonged to God alone, He was personally insulted when a virgin's chastity was violated through such an inspection, the bishop argued.⁷ Maximus's accusation had led to the virgin's bodily examination and thus he was responsible for compromising the sacred modesty of God's own property. Indicia's brother-in-law was required to correct his error before receiving the sacraments of the church once again.⁸ The bishop of Milan's decision was a renewed assertion of divine—and thus ecclesiastical—authority over virgins even within the households of their families. Inherent to his defense of the virgin Indicia was also a defense of the ascetic hierarchy he wished to maintain.

⁵ For the bishop's account of these happenings, see Ambrose, *Ep.* 56 (CSEL 82.2, 84-97) and *Ep.* 57 (CSEL 82.2, 98-111).

⁶ Ambrose, *Ep.* 56.17-21 (CSEL 82.2, 93-96).

For modern analysis of this event, see François Martroye, "L'Affaire Indicia: Une sentence de saint Ambroise," in *Mélanges Paul Fournier* (Paris: Société d'Histoire du Droit, 1929), 503-510; Vratislav Busek, "Der Prozess der Indicia," *Zeitschrift der Savigny-Stiftung für Rechtsgeschichte* (Kanontistische Abteilung) 29 (1940): 447-462; John C. Lamoreaux, "Episcopal Courts in Late Antiquity," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 3.2 (1995): 160-161.

⁷ Ambrose, *Ep.* 57.19 (CSEL 82.2, 111).

⁸ For the sentence, see Ambrose, *Ep.* 56.24 (CSEL 82.2, 97).

Ambrose worried that allowing the precedent of physical examination by a midwife might unfairly place the burden of proof upon the church's virgins, prompting further unfounded accusations and bringing disrepute upon the institution as a whole.⁹ To maintain its superiority, virginity needed to remain above all suspicion and exempt from the defiling corporeal examinations common to married women.¹⁰

Critics of Ambrose's ascetic program continued to voice their opposition after *De virginitate*. Nearly a decade after the composition of his first two treatises on virginity, Ambrose complained to the bishop Siricius at Rome about the "savage howling" (*agrestis ululatus*) of certain dissenters who rejected the superiority of perpetual chastity to marriage and asceticism's greater degree of blessedness in the afterlife.¹¹ Although the bishop was clearly concerned with the teachings of the priest Jovinian in this letter,¹² he seemed distressed by the numerous "wolves" who threatened the flock of Christ, suggesting the presence of multiple opponents to his ascetic ideals—perhaps even among the laypeople of his own congregation. The narrow ascetic interpretation of the Song of Songs he had advocated in his *De virginitate*, in which the bride's lofty status as the spouse of Christ was understood as pertaining solely to the church's virgins, had upheld the rigid hierarchy he had first proposed in *De virginibus*. Furthermore, his explication of Mary's perpetual virginity, especially his advocacy of the Virgin's virginity *in partu*, served to strengthen this ascetic vision by definitively severing Mary from the ranks of

⁹ Ambrose, *Ep.* 56.5 (CSEL 82.2, 86-87).

¹⁰ In contrast, the earlier Cyprian had approved of the physical examination of dedicated virgins to verify their intactness. See Cyprian, *Ep.* 62.4 (PL 4, 369-370).

¹¹ Ambrose, *Ep. extr. coll.* 15.2-3 (CSEL 82.3, 303-304).

¹² See Chapter 1, 63-65.

the married and the reproductive.¹³ But such understandings excluded the married majority of the church and competed for theological dominance with more inclusive readings of scripture.¹⁴

Jovinian probably drew support from some members of the clergy but also from a significant number of lay dissenters whose ideas resounded with his teachings. Although a celibate priest, Jovinian purportedly upheld the absolute equality of all baptized Christians and denied the superiority of the virgin to the married. Therefore, he probably rejected the exclusive interpretation of the Song of Songs that Ambrose and other ascetic writers of the day offered in which the bride-bridegroom relationship was understood to pertain not to the entire body of the church but rather to its virgins alone. For him, such teachings would have seemed to deny the worthiness of marriage, thus alienating married Christians from the singular body of the church.¹⁵

II. Virginité and Salvation

Although Jovinian taught mainly in the vicinity of Rome, it is clear that his teachings concerned the bishop of Milan. Ambrose's vehement condemnation of Jovinian's teachings in his letter to Siricus in the late 380s may suggest that some members of his own congregation at Milan were sympathetic to Jovinian's ideas or held

¹³ On Ambrose's development of Mary's perpetual virginity and his engagement with Jovinian over the matter, see Chapter 1, 65-73.

¹⁴ See Clark, "The Celibate Bridegroom," 16.

¹⁵ Jerome, *Contra Iovinianum* 1.3, 1.37, 2.19 (PL 23, 239-240, 296-299, 355-356). See Hunter, "The Virgin, the Bride, and the Church," 283-284 and Hunter, "Hunter, "Helvidius, Jovinian, and the Virginité of Mary in Late Fourth-Century Rome," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 1.1 (1993): 50-61; Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity: The Jovinianist Controversy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 31-35.

similarly negative views of ascetic hierarchy. Clearly, Ambrose was not insensitive to the complaints and criticisms of many who, over the years, found his theological system anti-marriage and his asceticism detrimental to the well-being of society.¹⁶ While generally unwilling to compromise his ascetic ideals, the bishop gradually developed and refined his discourse in various ways in order to placate the critics of his teachings.

In chapter 2, I discussed Ambrose's defense of Mary's *virginitas in partu* and, by extension, the post-mortem hierarchy of ascetic blessedness it implied in his *De institutione virginis* of 392. For the bishop, I argued, the perpetually-intact virginity of Mary and her status as the exclusive role model for the Church's virgins implied the primacy of virginity in both this life and the next, answering critics such as Jovinian who doubted the superiority of the Church's virgins to its laypeople.¹⁷

But this was only one aspect of his multi-faceted defense against opponents of his ascetic program. David Hunter has noted the bishop's later assertion of the total absence of sex in the economy of salvation. For Ambrose, virginity becomes the very "paradigm" or "touchstone of salvation," a theological feature that may account further for Jovinian's particular discontent with the bishop's teachings.¹⁸ Reiterating some of Hunter's arguments and expanding on them, I wish to suggest that this development in Ambrose's thought corresponds to the bishop's increasing need to maintain the superiority of

¹⁶ In addition, Ambrose was probably aware of the stir caused in Rome by Jerome's inflammatory letter to Eustochium (Ep. 22) of 384 in which the latter had advocated asceticism and denigrated the corruptions of marriage and Roman society to such a great extent that his friends were forced to defend him. This strong public reaction to Jerome's ascetic teachings may have influenced the way in which Ambrose approached the composition of his later works on virginity.

¹⁷ See Chapter 1, 61-73.

¹⁸ David L. Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity: The Jovinianist Controversy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 200, 204.

virginity without openly denigrating marriage. He develops a doctrine of salvation implicitly dependent upon virginal integrity as his freedom to openly criticize marriage is increasingly restricted by his critics.

In both *De virginibus* and *De virginitate*, Ambrose openly pressed the superiority of virginity to marriage. While virginity was extolled in the highest terms and strongly recommended, marriage was disparaged in detail. But the lengthy lists of the pains and hardships of marriage and childbearing which had marked these earlier treatises on virginity are conspicuously absent from *De institutione*. Rather than grudgingly conceding to the goodness of marriage while emphasizing its many burdens, he makes virtually no references to the “earthly” marriage bond at all in this treatise. His only concern with actual matrimony is to refute those who think that Mary’s marriage to Joseph was more than a contractual agreement—that is, that their marriage was never physically consummated.¹⁹

While the absence of lists of marital woes in *De institutione* may be due to Ambrose’s primary interest in protecting the perpetual virginity of Mary, it may also indicate a shift in rhetorical strategy. Instead of reiterating the inferiorities of marriage as a means of making virginity more appealing, Ambrose now seeks to elevate virginity by associating it more closely than before with Christian salvation. Rather than attempting to appease Jovinianist sympathizers in his congregation who found his previous ideas anti-marriage, he justifies his assertions of ascetic superiority by strengthening virginity’s connection to the achievement of Christian salvation. This was an idea present to some

¹⁹ Ambrose, *De inst.* 5.40-8.57 (Gori, II, 142-156). In *De inst.* 5.42, Ambrose claims that Mary’s marriage was permitted by God after she was pregnant since “the Lord preferred that others doubt about his birth rather than doubt the modesty of his mother”.

extent in his earlier writings. For example, Ambrose links sexuality to sin and salvation to sexual purity in his *Expositio in Lucam* when he argues that Jesus avoided the common transmission of human sinfulness through sexual intercourse because of his virginal conception, just as the Virgin avoided sin through the maintenance of her *virginitas in partu*.²⁰

Virginitas's critical role in the economy of salvation comes to its fullest fruition in his later *De institutione*. "Illustrious therefore is Mary, who raised up the symbol of sacred virginity and lifted up the pious standard of immaculate integrity for Christ. ... All are called to the cult of holy virginity by Mary," Ambrose asserts.²¹ For the bishop, Mary's miraculous virginity is understood to be a universal call to celibacy, the standard to which *every* Christian should rally. Ambrose's general invitation implies that the celibate life is not only blessed but also necessary for all Christians. After all, it is virgins who receive the richest of all gifts possible: those who, like Mary, do not fall short in their virginity they have the promise that they shall not fail and will have an eternal place in the domain of the Lord.²²

In the virgin, the spirit and the body stand in perfect harmony, the exterior being agrees with the interior being, and the old man—the body of sin—dies in favor of the new because the will of unruly flesh is removed.²³ The virgin not only represents the

²⁰ See Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy*, 201-204.

²¹ Ambrose, *De inst.* 5.35 (Gori, II, 136): *Egregia igitur Maria, quae signum sacrae uirginitatis extulit et intermeritae integritatis pium Christo uexillum leuauit. ... Omnes ad cultum uirginitatis sanctae Mariae aduocentur exemplo ...*

²² Ambrose, *De inst.* 6.45 (Gori, II, 144).

²³ Ambrose, *De inst.* 2.11-13 (Gori, II, 118-120).

reconciliation of these various dichotomies, she also symbolizes the perfect harmony of mind, soul, and body:

Perhaps someone should say: Why do you speak of three, since scripture has this: 'For where there are two or three joined together in my name, there I am in the midst of them'? Also here the reason is made clear, for the same Apostle says: 'Let the same God of Peace sanctify you in full, so that all your spirit, your soul, and your body be preserved without blame in the day of the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.' For where these three elements are preserved whole, there is Christ in the midst of them, he who governs and guides these three within and orders them in lasting peace. Therefore, the virgin preserves whole before others these three elements so that she gives no grievance to her sacred virginity and is without offense, without wrinkle, without stain ...²⁴

Ambrose understands virginity not as a *means* of bringing the body into harmony with the soul and spirit but rather as the *manifestation* of well-ordered, balanced perfection in body, spirit, and soul. He borrows the language of Ephesians 5.26-27 (referring to Christ's cleansing of the church to be presented as his bride "without a spot or wrinkle ... so that she may be holy and without blemish") to create a parallel between virginity and holiness and to further press his exclusive association of the virgin with the bride of Christ. It is the virgin—she who is well-ordered in mind, soul, and body—who will be preserved in the day of the Lord's coming.

Furthermore, the bishop draws liberally on bridal imagery from both Ephesians and the Song of Songs to erect virginity as the standard of Christian salvation in *De institutione*:

²⁴ Ambrose, *De inst.* 2.14-15 (Gori, II, 120-122): *Fortasse dicat aliquis: Quid de tribus dicis, quoniam sic habet scriptura: Vbi enim sunt duo uel tres congregati in nomine meo, ibi ego sum in medio eorum? Hinc quoque ratio manifesta est; quia idem apostolus dicit: Ipse autem deus pacis sanctificet uos per omnia, et integer spiritus uester, et anima et corpus sine querela in die aduentus domini nostri Iesu Christi seruetur. Ubi ergo tres isti integri, ibi Christus est in medio eorum, qui hos tres intus gubernat et regit ac fideli pace componit. Haec igitur tria integra prae caeteris in se uirgo custodiat, ut nullam det sacrae uirginitatis querelam et sit inoffensa, sine ruga, sine macula ...*

Protect therefore your handmaid, Father of Charity and Glory, so that she may hold the barrier of purity, the sign of truth, as a closed garden and a sealed fountain, that she will know how to cultivate her field as the holy Jacob cultivated it, that she might reap even the sixty and also the hundred of the fruit. . . . Let her find him whom she has loved and hold him, lest she send him away before she receives the sweet wounds of love, which are better than kisses. Let her always be prepared night and day with all the spiritual attention of her mind, lest the Word should come upon her sleeping at any time. And since the Beloved wishes to be looked for often so that he may test her affection, let her follow after him running, let her faith emerge, let her soul travel forth from the body toward your Word and be united with God. Let her heart awaken and let her flesh sleep so that it does not begin awakening wickedly to sin.²⁵

Once again reading the virgin exclusively as the aspiring bride, Ambrose sets forth the “lock” of chastity as the prerequisite for reception of and unification with the heavenly Bridegroom. The flesh must sleep so that ascendance with the Word may be possible. Chastity and the grace of a salvific marriage with Christ are naturally linked for Ambrose at this point, even though the bishop does not link Mary, first among virgins, to bride of Christ imagery in the Song of Songs in this treatise. He prefers instead to dwell upon her kinship to virgins with respect to her perpetually closed “gate”.²⁶

²⁵ Ambrose, *De inst.* 17.111 (110-112) (Gori, II, 188-192): *Tuere igitur ancillam tuam, pater caritatis et gloriae, ut quasi in horto clauso et fonte signato teneat claustra pudicitiae, signacula ueritatis, agrum suum colere nouerit quem colebat sanctus Iacob, et sexagesimos ex eo centesimos quoque fructus capessat. Inueniat quem dilexit, teneat eum, nec dimittat eum, donec bona illa uulnera caritatis excipiat, quae osculis praeferuntur. Semper parata noctibus et diebus toto spiritu mentis inuigilet, ne umquam uerbum eam inueniat dormientem. Et quoniam uult se dilectus eius saepius quaeri, ut exploret affectum, recurrentem sequatur, exeat fides, et anima eius in uerbum tuum peregrinetur a corpore, ut adsit deo, uigilet cor eius, caro dormiat, ne male incipiat uigilare peccatis.*

²⁶ Ambrose, *De inst.* 8.52-9.62 (Gori, II, 152-158). In chapter 1, I discussed how Ambrose styles the Virgin as the spouse of Christ in *De uirginibus* in order to reflect the unity of the Trinity (pp. 34-36). However, as the “bride of Christ” metaphor in relation to virgins is developed more fully in his writings, he seems to back away from his first assertion of Mary’s espousal to Christ. Mary is not called or suggested to be the bride of the Word in either *De uirginitate* or *De institutione*. This shift may be attributable to the increasingly erotic nature of the language used to describe the relationship of the virgin bride to the Bridegroom.

In addition, Hunter has noted the important role of Ambrose's Mariology in his development of a theology of salvation partially dependent upon virginity. In his *Expositio in Lucam*, Mary's perpetual virginity—virginity before, during, and after the partuition of Jesus—is modeled as a prerequisite for the birth of Christ's pure body as well as the baptismal birth of the church and so the Virgin's unblemished virginity is made essential to the mystery of salvation itself.²⁷ Furthermore, the bishop makes frequent use of the traditional Eve-Mary parallel to associate marriage with the fall of humankind and virginity with salvation. For example, in his later *Exhortatio virginitatis*, he claims that Jesus cancelled the sin of the earlier married woman through his later birth from a virgin.²⁸ Mary, the epitomal teacher of virginity, does not fail or fall short of exaltation by a loss of virginity after the birth of the Lord.²⁹ Elsewhere, Ambrose also associated the grace of baptism with Marian virginity and the adoption of a celibate lifestyle. For the bishop, the waters of baptism cooled the carnal passions since the Spirit descends as it did upon Mary at the moment of Christ's conception.³⁰

In Ambrose's theology, it is the girl who does not marry that may "receive in her womb that of the Holy Spirit, and pregnant by God may give birth to the spirit of salvation."³¹ Hunter has noted that in the bishop's thought "the virginal Christ, the virgin

²⁷ Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy*, 201-204. Hunter is largely reading Ambrose's *Expo. in Luc.* 2.55-7 (CCSL 14, 54-6).

²⁸ Ambrose, *Exhort. virg.* 26 (Gori, II, 218); *Ep. extra coll.* 14.36 (CSEL 82.3, 304); cf. *Ep. extra coll.* 14.33 (CSEL 82.3, 252) See Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy*, 202.

²⁹ Ambrose, *De inst.* 6.45-7.46 (Gori, II, 144).

³⁰ Ambrose, *De mysteriis* 3.13 (SC 25bis, 162), 9.59 (SC 25bis, 192).

³¹ Ambrose, *Exhort. virg.* 17.109 (Gori, II, 188).

Mary, the virginal Church, and the consecrated Christian virgin merged into a unity that virtually excluded the average, married Christian.”³² Indeed, Ambrose’s suggestion of virginity’s centrality in the economy of salvation for all Christians had very negative implications for marriage. Most importantly, it placed marriage in a severely inferior position and left little room for the merits of the married Christian, a teaching for which he had been criticized time and again during the course of his career.

Yet perhaps such strategic readings of virginity and salvation were the means by which the bishop embedded his somewhat-radical theology of virginity more firmly within the established teachings of the church. Ambrose suggested that virginity was not only a superior lifestyle to marriage for this life but was actually critical to salvation. In this way, the bishop ensured the virgin’s central position within the Church and affirmed the superiority of those who practiced it. Furthermore, this equation negated any need for him to reiterate argumentation against marriage. The galling burdens and cumbersome chains of marriage, fixtures of his first two ascetic treatises, are no longer present in *De institutione* to kindle the resentment of those who objected to his earlier anti-marital rhetoric.³³ For Ambrose, the establishment of virginity’s central role in the ultimate salvation of humankind left further discussion of marriage’s worldly evils unnecessary.

III. Redeeming Eve

Despite his increasing dedication to the idea that virginity was critical to the achievement of salvation for every Christian, Ambrose was sensitive to the opinions of

³² Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy*, 204.

³³ See Ambrose, *De virginibus* 1.6.24-31 (Gori, I, 126-132) and *De virginitate* 6.31-34 (Gori, II, 34-36).

his married audience and the criticisms of Jovinian, who probably took great exception to the bishop's alignment of virginity with salvation.³⁴ In *De institutione*, Ambrose's concern for these listeners is most clearly manifest in his remarkable treatment of the Biblical figure Eve. Although the goodness of virginity (and thus the Virgin Mary's absolute and perpetual virginity) is clearly the subject of this treatise, he treats the Biblical first woman and spouse of Adam at great length as well. This exposition is the only work in Ambrose's corpus in which the bishop makes a decidedly positive, even apologetic, reading of Eve.

While the Genesis narrative regarding Adam and Eve had been the subject of some of Ambrose's other writings before *De institutione*, his interpretations had manifest most often the influence of the long-standing Christian tradition of interpreting Eve as the "devil's gateway", the cause of sin and suffering in the world and a symbol of unbridled passion and irrationality.³⁵ For example, he applied figural readings of the Biblical narrative more than once to draw moral lessons about the importance for humans (Adam) to avoid the temptations of pleasures and passion (Eve) for Christians.³⁶ In works dating later than *De institutione*, Ambrose compared Eve to Mary in order to contrast original

³⁴ Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy*, 204.

³⁵ Clark traces some of this tradition in "Devil's Gateway and Bride of Christ: Women in the Early Christian World," in Clark, ed., *Ascetic Piety and Women's Faith: Essays on Late Ancient Christianity* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1986), 25-27, 30-33.

³⁶ For example, see Ambrose, *De paradiso* 2.11, 15.73 (PL 14, 149; 178-179); *Ep.* 34.4, 11, 17 (CSEL 82.1, 233, 235, 238). Elizabeth Clark summarizes Ambrose's various readings of Adam and Eve in her "Heresy, Asceticism, Adam, and Eve: Interpretations of Genesis 1-3 in the Later Latin Fathers," in Clark, ed., *Ascetic Piety and Women's Faith: Essays on Late Ancient Christianity* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1986), 354-357.

sin, which comes through the acts of the married woman, to the work of salvation which comes through the merit of virginity.³⁷

In light of these considerations, it is significant that Ambrose seems concerned in *De institutione* to avoid such readings and to defend Eve from similar arguments as those he himself had made earlier. Women are often blamed for bringing sin into the world, he admits, but men are to blame in this matter as well. In fact, if one were to examine the beginning of humankind, one can see the merits of woman as well as how she receives grace while in the human condition.³⁸ Ambrose reads the story of Adam and Eve as an affirmation of the worthiness of womankind rather than a justification of woman's subjection to man.

As Clark has noted, Ambrose's reading of the Genesis narrative in *De institutione* reflects a far greater commitment to follow a more literal sense of the Biblical text than most of his previous readings. Clark has argued that this choice is made in light of the charges of Jovinian and other opponents who found his earlier figural understandings of Adam and Eve to be "Manichaean," seeming to denigrate the goodness of actual reproduction and thus all of God's creations.³⁹ Thus the bishop addresses such passages as Genesis 2.18 ("It is not good for a man to be alone") in a positive manner and confirms

³⁷ Ambrose, *Exh. virg.* 4.26 (Gori, II, 218); *Ep. extra coll.* 15.3 (CSEL 82.3, 304), 14.33 (CSEL 82.3, 252). See also Hunter, *Marriage*, 202, 226. As Clark has noted, such pejorative readings of Eve were used commonly as justification for various restrictions of women's freedoms and participation in both church and society. See Clark, "Devil's Gateway," 30-33.

³⁸ Ambrose, *De inst.* 3.16 (Gori, II, 122).

³⁹ The report of Jovinian's charge of Ambrose with Manicheism is given by Augustine. See his *Contra Julianum* 1.2 (PL 45, 1051-1052); *Confessiones* 5.10.20 (CCSL 27, 68-69); *Contra Faustum* 30.6 (CSEL 25, 754-755) and also Hunter, "Helvidius," 57; Hunter, *Marriage*, 203-204. Clark notes that Ambrose returns this epithet with little reason (Clark, "Heresy," 358-359).

that women may be saved through childbearing. For Clark, this rereading of the Adam and Eve narrative in *De institutione* ultimately serves as an elaborate backdrop for his lengthy defense of Mary's perpetual virginity.⁴⁰

Clark's arguments merit further evaluation at this juncture. For most of *De institutione*, Ambrose's primary interest clearly lies in defending Mary's eternally-sealed womb, and his appeal to Eve serves to reinforce this argument in some instances. Reading Ephesians 5.31-32 ("a man shall leave behind father and mother and cling to his wife," etc.) as well as Genesis 3.20 (which Ambrose cites as "and Adam called the name of his wife Life [*Vitam*]"), the bishop reads Eve as a symbol of the divine mystery of the Church upon whose account Christ descends and through whom eternal life is conferred,⁴¹ a close parallel to his interpretation of Mary in this treatise.⁴² Eve is established as a prefiguration to Sarah who also pays the debt of sin through childbirth and thus is freed to counsel her husband.⁴³ Sarah, in turn, bolsters the superiority of virginity as manifest in Mary: "If she [Sarah] in bearing a type of Christ [Isaac] merits to be listened to, how much did her sex progress which produced Christ, even while

⁴⁰ Clark, "Heresy," 356-357.

⁴¹ Ambrose, *De inst.* 3.24 (Gori, II, 128).

⁴² Virginia Burrus has registered Ambrose's ambiguous espousal of the Virgin to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in *De virginibus* 1.5.21-22 in her "*Begotten, Not Made*": *Conceiving Manhood in Late Antiquity* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000), 142-144. Throughout much of his work, however, Ambrose seems reluctant to read Mary as the Church when the latter is understood in a marital relationship with the Bridegroom of the Song of Songs, even when such an understanding may have served his rhetorical purposes well. Perhaps this later reluctance reflects his audience's poor response to the implied mother-son marital relationship. In *De inst.* 14.88-89 (Gori, II, 172-174), the bishop designates Mary as a figure of the church in the "mysteries" of her maternity alone and not with respect to the members of her body (*membra corporis*), perhaps hoping to protect her from the implication of a physical relationship with the Bridegroom.

⁴³ Ambrose, *De inst.* 5.32 (Gori, II, 132-134). One may contrast this to Jerome's earlier argument in favor of celibacy that Abraham was commanded to listen to Sarah only after she ceased to perform the functions of a woman (Jerome, *Contra Helvidium* 20 [PL 23, 228]).

preserving its virginity!”⁴⁴ Mary is modeled by the bishop as the new Eve who brings forth both God and the standard of virginity to Christianity.

Perhaps Ambrose’s unique reading of Genesis may be illuminated to a greater extent by the charge of Manichaeism thrown at Ambrose by Jovinian. While it is unclear precisely what Jovinian meant by this epithet, Hunter has noted that “Manichaeism” was a very malleable term by the late fourth century and was used widely to attack a number of different heresies with supposedly encratic ideas such as the dislike of marriage and of women.⁴⁵ Ambrose’s notable defense of woman through his reading of Eve may have been an attempt to counter some charge of misogyny inherent in the accusation of Manichaeism, if the term was broadly understood to include a number of encratic beliefs and ideas by Ambrose’s time.⁴⁶ Reading Genesis 2.18 (“It is not good that man be alone”), the bishop asserts that man is not found to be praiseworthy until after he receives the companionship of woman, affirming the necessity of woman to the human race.⁴⁷ Woman, a brave soldier, dutifully executes her penal sentence of childbirth and receives freedom, grace, and well-being.⁴⁸ While admitting that the first woman was indeed a temptation to man, Ambrose chides men who “find fault with the work of the divine craftsman” rather than with themselves for being overly-pleased by the beauty of

⁴⁴ Ambrose, *De inst.* 5.33 (Gori, II, 134): *Si typum Christi illa pariendo a uiro meretur audiri, quantum proficit sexus qui Christum, salua tamen uirginitate, generauit!* Cf. Chapter 1, note 176.

⁴⁵ David Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy*, 203.

⁴⁶ Augustine, who is the one who recorded Jovinian’s charge of Ambrose’s “Manichaeism,” strongly associated Manichaean heresy with hatred of marriage and reproduction. See Augustine, *Contra Adimantum* 3.3 (CSEL 25, 118), *Contra Secundinum* 21 (CSEL 25, 939), *De nuptiis et concupiscentia* 2.3.9 (CSEL 42, 260-261), and *De Genesis aduersus Manichaeos* 1.19.30 (PL 34, 187).

⁴⁷ Ambrose, *De inst.* 3.22 (Gori, II, 126).

⁴⁸ Ambrose, *De inst.* 4.29 (Gori, II, 130).

women's bodies.⁴⁹ In these concerns, Ambrose clearly demonstrates a desire to distance himself from "Manichean" heresy.

While Ambrose's reading of Eve directly refuted some of Jovinian's supposed accusations, it may have played an even greater role within the immediate community at Milan than in the vicinity of a far-off opponent. Our earlier consideration of the bishop's two earlier treatises on virginity suggests that by the early 390s teachers such as Jovinian who taught the equality of the married and the celibate were merely fanning the flames of an older controversy in Milan. As noted earlier in this chapter, critics of the bishop's ascetic enthusiasm had questioned his views on the value of marriage and the blessedness of virginity from the beginning of his episcopacy.

In *De institutione*, he again addresses these concerns. Although Ambrose cannot resist applying the figural reading of Ephesians 5 to identify Adam and Eve as symbols of Christ and the church,⁵⁰ he nevertheless reads their marriage in a more literal sense throughout most of the treatise.⁵¹ Directly before launching into a vigorous defense of Mary's perpetual virginity, the bishop offers somewhat mundane advice to lay people on what kind of wives they should be seeking and then warns them to avoid through fasting the temptations that their wives can offer.⁵² Ambrose recommends to his audience the

⁴⁹ Ambrose, *De inst.* 4.30 (Gori, II, 130-132). *Non possumus reprehendere diuini artifices opus, sed quem delectate corporis pulchritude, multo magis illa delectet uenustas, quae ad imaginem dei est intus, non foris comptior.* This is similar to his subsequent exhortation in the same section that these men should follow the examples of the many women who are fasting and praying daily in order to rid themselves of sin, just as the first man once followed woman in erring.

⁵⁰ See Ambrose, *De inst.* 4.24 (Gori, II, 130).

⁵¹ Ambrose, *De inst.* 4.28 (Gori, II, 130).

⁵² Ambrose, *De inst.* 4.30-31 (Gori, II, 130-132).

practice of chaste marriage in which husbands and wives remain together but practice continence, creating a way in which the married might also take part in the ascetic life.⁵³ Eve and Sarah, both redeemed through actual childbearing (as opposed to his earlier spiritual interpretations of their parturitions⁵⁴), are praised in conjunction with the Virgin in a way that affirms the latter's superiority but yet does not exclude the married and reproductive from the ranks of paradise. This reading of Eve and Sarah represents a greater effort on the bishop's part to speak not only to the virgin but also to the married members of his audience and to provide them with a place of honor (albeit not equal honor) with virgins within his vision of the afterlife.

Some of Ambrose's arguments on Eve not only confirm the goodness and necessity of woman but even establish her very superiority to man. For example, the bishop finds that woman was made from the formed substance of man while man himself was made only of unformed mud.⁵⁵ Ambrose finds additional justification for woman's goodness in Eve's simple confession to God of her wrongdoing without trying to escape blame—in comparison to Adam's flustered accusation of his wife.⁵⁶

It is possible that such lengthy and enthusiastic praise of woman may reflect some specific desire on the part of the bishop to curry favor with certain female listeners. As

⁵³ Kim Power has argued that Ambrose is advocating continent marriage to married listeners in this passage. (See Power, "The Rehabilitation of Eve in Ambrose of Milan's *De institutione virginis*," in *Religion in the Ancient World: New Themes and Approaches*, ed. Matthew Dillion [Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert, 1996], 379-380.) This may be the first time in which Ambrose advocates married chastity, further evidence that he is attempting to open up the ascetic life in some way to married people.

⁵⁴ For examples of his figural reading of Eve's and Sarah's childbearing, see his *De Cain et Abel* 1.2-4 (PL 14, 183-185), *De fuga saeculi* 8.47 (PL 14, 436-437), *De Abraham* 1.61 (PL 14, 302). Ambrose also gives spiritual readings to the childbearing of Isaac's wife Rebecca (*De Isaac vel anima* 4.18 [PL 14, 362]).

⁵⁵ Ambrose, *De inst.* 3.23 (Gori, II, 126).

⁵⁶ Ambrose, *De inst.* 4.27-28 (Gori, II, 128-130).

previously mentioned, some of the richest and most powerful members of the church in the fourth century were women. Jerome, John Chrysostom, and other ecclesiastical authorities enjoyed the close personal friendship and patronage of such women.⁵⁷

Although there is little indication that Ambrose held such close relationships with women beyond his own sister Marcellina at Rome,⁵⁸ the bishop, a consummate politician, would have well-understood the value of cultivating the patronage of other wealthy and influential females, the majority of whom were probably married women and widows.

Earlier in his career, he had been less solicitous of the favor of these women. Ambrose had spoken strongly against the remarriage of a certain widow in his *De viduis*, summarily dismissing all her reasons favoring a second marriage and attributing the woman's desire to marry again to her lack of willpower alone.⁵⁹ In *De virginitate*, he mentions this same widow in passing, briefly extending the hand of reconciliation to her but failing to apologize for his strongly-worded warning about the hardships of remarriage or for the public humiliation he likely caused her.⁶⁰ In *De institutione*, however, Ambrose offers a reading of womanhood that probably was welcomed by most women. In his reading of Eve, he lauds women who, while not necessarily virgins, are not only equal but also superior to their male counterparts in their behaviors, practices, and even their creation. Such praise may have been intended to invite the patronage and

⁵⁷ On the female friendships of Jerome and John Chrysostom, see Elizabeth A. Clark, "Friendship Between the Sexes: Classical Theory and Christian Practice," in *Jerome, Chrysostom, and Friends: Essays and Translations*, ed. Clark (Lewiston: Edwin Mellon Press, 1982), 44-48.

⁵⁸ On Marcellina, see Chapter 1, note 26.

⁵⁹ Ambrose, *De vid.* 9.58 (Gori, I, 292).

⁶⁰ Ambrose, *De virgt.* 8.46 (Gori, II, 42-44). See also McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 64-65.

friendship of women. That gaining the favor and friendship of women in the Christian community was the aim of his more positive reading of women in *De institutione* may be suggested by the invitation he received the following year from one Juliana, a widow of no small means and most likely of some social standing, to dedicate the basilica she had funded in Florence and consecrate her daughter to the life of virginity.⁶¹ The bishop displays in his writings some familiarity with Juliana, her children, and the situation of her family.⁶² However, there is little evidence beyond this to suggest that Ambrose's appeal to Eve had the effect of bringing him into favor with other influential women.⁶³

For Kim Power, the bishop's redemptive reading of Eve is more specifically aimed at ascetics. Power reads Ambrose's interpretation of Eve as an attempt to establish female virgins and widows as exemplars of piety on par with male ones. She finds in his reading a progressive reinterpretation of womanhood in which the traditionally androcentric view of Eve is challenged and new social relationships based on ascetic women's rights and equalities are established.⁶⁴

Clearly, the bishop is seeking to revalorize the state of woman through his redemptive reading of Eve and thus avoid charges of misogyny and misogamy. At the same time, I wish to suggest that such lavish praise of woman actually may have served

⁶¹ Paulinus of Milan records this event in his *Vita Ambrosii* 27.1 (in Michele Pellegrino, ed., *Paolino: Vita di S. Ambrogio* [Rome: Editrice Studium, 1961], 90).

⁶² See Ambrose, *Exhortatio virginitatis*, 1.1, 2.10-3.13 (Gori, II, 198, 206-210).

⁶³ While the virgin Daedelia, sister to the esteemed and wealthy aristocrat-politician Manlius Theodorus, was among Ambrose's congregation at Milan and her tomb, adjacent to the graves of the esteemed martyrs Victor and Satyrus, suggests her prominence in the community, nothing of Ambrose's extant corpus suggests that the bishop sought her favor or her association. On her conspicuous burial-place, see Pierre Courcelle, "Quelques symboles funéraires du Néoplatonisme latin: Le vol de Dédale: Ulysse et les Sirènes." *Revue de Études anciennes* 46 (1944): 65-93.

⁶⁴ Kim Power, "The Rehabilitation of Eve," 381-382.

as a form of patronization that reiterated and solidified traditional gender boundaries rather than challenged them. As I have posited above, Ambrose's first writings on virginity presented an ascetic vision at odds with the socio-cultural structures of Milanese society in many respects. Traditional social boundaries were challenged by his adoration of the virgin-martyrs who often acted in independent, subversive, or "masculine" ways, as well as by his promise that virgins might surpass their sex through chastity.

Although the bishop draws upon the Song of Songs in *De virginitate* to refashion virgins into submissive brides of Christ, his redemptive reading of woman's state in *De institutione* may represent a further attempt to tame the gender-transgressive aspects of virginity that seem to have alarmed some members of his audience a decade and a half before.⁶⁵ While Eve had been the expression of woman's inherent inferiority, weakness, and vulnerability to sin, Ambrose now revalidates Eve and thus womanhood as an acceptable and even venerable state, negating the need for ascetic women to surpass or overcome it through radical behaviors such as those demonstrated by the martyrs. Furthermore, he deems womanhood an appropriate status for both the laywoman and the ascetic by blurring the distinction between Eve and Mary. Rather than contrasting the two as a means of effecting a further distinction between marriage and virginity, Eve is now styled as the forerunner to Mary.⁶⁶ He connects both figures as one positive manifestation of womanhood, the later superior to the prior but both meritorious. The state of woman, endowed by Ambrose's reading with inherent devoutness, dedication,

⁶⁵ See Chapter 2, 117-126.

⁶⁶ Ambrose, *De inst.* 5.32 (Gori, II, 132). See Chapter 1, note 176.

and humility which comes less readily to man, is no longer a state to be surpassed but one to be embraced by even the holiest of virgins.

To this end, Ambrose not only praises Eve, he also simultaneously denigrates man. “We often accuse the feminine sex since it brought in the cause of sin, and we don’t consider how much more just is the accusation if it is thrown back at us.”⁶⁷ While Adam was deceived by a lowly woman, Eve was deceived by a superior creature, the wise serpent, which gives her a greater excuse for sinning.⁶⁸ Furthermore, Ambrose asserts that Eve’s punishment for her sin—that she would be cursed to bear children and be ruled over by her husband—is lesser than Adam’s punishment (“From the earth you are and you will go into the earth”). “Since Adam, who learned from the Lord God, could not serve him, how can the woman who learned from the man serve him? If the voice of God did not convince him, how can a human voice convince her?”⁶⁹ While seemingly laudatory of woman, each of these praises simultaneously reinforces some sexual stereotypes. Ambrose shames male listeners with assertions of Eve’s moral superiority to Adam in ways that simultaneously cast woman as inherently inferior to man in intellect, understanding, and accountability and thus he reiterates common cultural stereotypes while nevertheless asserting the traditionally proper position of women—both laypeople and ascetics—within the paradigm of womanhood.

⁶⁷ Ambrose, *De inst.* 3.16 (Gori, II, 122): *Accusamus autem plerumque femineum sexum quod erroris causam inuexerit, et non consideramus quanto iustius in nos obiurgatio retorqueatur.*

⁶⁸ Ambrose, *De inst.* 4.25 (Gori, II, 128).

⁶⁹ Ambrose, *De inst.* 4.26 (Gori, II, 128).

In Ambrose's redemptive reading of Eve, we may perceive a further step in the transformation of female virginity.⁷⁰ Once lauded by the young Ambrose for its ability to help women transcend their sex,⁷¹ the bishop now positions female virginity definitively within the ideological realm of womanhood. Rather than advocating equality of the sexes, Ambrose rehabilitates the state of woman through Eve as a means of strengthening traditionally-held gender differences that sustain the intellectual and moral inequality of women. While he had once flirted dangerously with the gender-ambiguous behaviors of the virgin-martyrs, he now directs his praise toward women whose conduct and characteristics mimic the sexual mores of Greco-Roman society. Such adaptation of the common social norms into the traditionally fluid paradigm of virgin sexual identity reflects the social expectations of his audience. Furthermore, it may be understood as a small ideological concession in light of his other uncompromising claims of virginity's lofty, even salvific, superiority and Mary's miraculous perpetual virginity in this treatise.⁷² While the bishop was unwilling to concede the equality of virginity and marriage and thus allow that the Virgin may have ever been "opened" through childbirth, he pronounces a domesticated, more thoroughly "female" vision of virgins for his congregation.

⁷⁰ Virginia Burrus argues that Ambrose's reading of Agnes in *De virginibus* demonstrates the way in which female martyrs were remodeled into passive and docile virgins in the fourth century. (See Burrus, "Reading Agnes: The Rhetoric of Gender in Ambrose and Prudentius," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 3.1 (1995): 30-33, 44-46.) For my summary and discussion of Burrus's argument, see Chapter 2, 110-111.

⁷¹ See Ambrose, *De virg.* 2.4.31 (Gori, I, 192), 2.5.35 (Gori, I, 196).

⁷² For my discussion of Ambrose's development of Mary's *virginitas in partu* in this treatise, see chapter 1, 64-72.

IV. Revisiting Martyrdom

As previously mentioned, Ambrose increasingly moves toward an understanding of Christian virginity as a universal prerequisite to salvation. While Ambrose's unique reading of Eve in *De institutione* links the first woman to Mary in significant ways, Mary becomes an increasingly important figure in Ambrose's linking of virginity to salvation. Her unblemished virginity, absolute and untarnished in every way, ensured her preservation from sin, suggesting to every Christian the importance of virginity in the economy of salvation.

Perhaps most innovatively, Ambrose links Marian virginity to the mystery of salvation by means of a rereading of the Biblical crucifixion narrative. For Ambrose, Mary's brave vigil at the cross of Jesus proves that her chastity was clearly virginal rather than married in nature:

The mother stood before the cross, and while men fled, she stood untroubled. See that the mother of Jesus, who did not change in character, could not have changed to the other modesty [of marriage]. She observed with pious eyes the wounds of her son through whom she understood the future redemption of all. The mother stood not unworthily before the spectacle, she who did not fear the executioner. The son paid on the cross, the mother offered herself to the persecutors. If it is this thing alone--that she prostrated herself before her son--the state of her piety ought to be praised, since she was unwilling to outlive her son. But if truly she wished to die with her son, then she wished to rise together with him, not ignorant of the mystery--that she had begotten him that would rise. Likewise, knowing that the son died for the good of all, she hoped that perhaps by her own death she might add something to the common welfare. But the passion of Christ was not in need of any assistance ... Therefore, how can integrity be taken away from Mary who, while the apostles fled, did not fear the tortures but offered herself up to the dangers?⁷³

⁷³ Ambrose, *De inst.* 7.49-50 (Gori, II, 148-150): *Stabat ante crucem mater, et fugientibus uiris stabat intrepida. Videte utrum pudorem mutare potuerit mater Iesu, quae animum non mutauit. Spectabat piis oculis filii uulnera, per quem sciebat omnibus futuram redemptionem. Stabat non degeneri mater spectaculo, quae non metuebat peremptorem. Pendebat in cruce filius, mater se persecutoribus offerebat. Si hoc solum esset, ut ante filium prosterneretur, laudandus pietatis affectus quod superstes filio esse nolebat; sin uero ut cum filio moreretur, cum eodem gestiebat resurgere, non ignara mysterii quod genuisset resurrecturum. Simul quae publico usui impendi mortem filii nouerat, praestolabatur si forte*

Ambrose turns his reader from the suffering on the cross to the suffering taking place *before* the cross. Empowered by her immaculate integrity, Mary waits calmly and bravely at the cross from which even the apostles flee. There she performs a kind of affective martyrdom through her remarkable performance before the suffering of her son. Mary offers herself to the persecutors, stands, kneels, and prostrates herself before the cross, looks with clear understanding upon what she is witnessing, and hopes for death that she may too suffer with Christ and thus receive salvation. In Ambrose's reading, Mary's virginity also drapes her in the garb of martyrdom, fueling within her to a belief so firm in Christ's resurrection and her own post-mortal salvation that she hopes for death even as she witnesses it. Not only does she hope for the glorious reward of a martyr but she even offers herself as an assistant to Christ in his suffering on behalf of all humankind. Ambrose hints at the Virgin's extraordinary participation in the process of salvation.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Ambrose's presentation of the virgin-martyrs and his association of martyr sacrifice with virginity in *De virginibus* seem to have been ineffective rhetorical strategies since such martyr accounts and language were largely abandoned in his subsequent treatise and in almost all of his extant writings. This absence, I argued, is most likely attributable to the particular issues such martyr accounts

etiam sua morte publico muneri aliquid adderetur. Sed Christi passio adiutore non eguit, sicut ipse dominus longe ante praedixit: Et respexi, et non erat adiutor; et attendi, et nemo suscipiebat; et liberabo eos brachio meo. Quomodo ergo extorqueri potuit integritas Mariae, quae fugientibus apostolis supplicia non timebat, sed ipsa se offerebat periculis? Cf. Ambrose, *Ep. extra coll.* 14.110 (CSEL 82.3, 294) where Ambrose's wording is almost identical, suggesting that he copied this passage from *De institutione* into his later letter to the church at Vercelli in 396.

presented for his audience, namely their challenges to established hierarchies of power and gender as well as their strong anti-marital messages.

It is important to note that the only virgin exemplar from *De virginibus* who persists throughout the remainder of Ambrose's works is Mary.⁷⁴ It is not merely coincidence that in *De virginibus*, Mary appears in the style of the modest and unassuming Christian virgin.⁷⁵ Of all the virgins Ambrose extolled in his first treatise, Mary alone was not associated with martyrdom in any way. Instead, the bishop drew upon the Virgin to serve as an example of proper comportment for contemporary Christian virgins.⁷⁶ In contrast to the defiant and independent virgins who fill the other pages of *De virginibus*, Mary was portrayed as modest, silent, retiring, restrained, and submissive. She spent her days reading, fasting, and praying for the poor and never ventured into public except to go to church in the company of her parents or other relatives. For Ambrose, the fact that Mary was found alone when the angel came to salute her testifies of her modesty and purity.⁷⁷ It is she who will bring faithful Christian virgins forward and commend them to the Lord, their true Bridegroom.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ For the most extensive review of Mary's presence in Ambrose's works, see Charles William Neumann, *The Virgin Mary in the Works of Saint Ambrose* (Fribourg, Switzerland: University Press, 1962). While somewhat dated and written from a decidedly confessional point of view, Neumann's work is nevertheless well-documented and quite exhaustive.

⁷⁵ See chapter 1, 34-44.

⁷⁶ Ambrose was not the first early Christian writer to extol Mary as the ideal model for virgins. Neumann names Athanasius and Alexander of Alexandria among those who held this idea earlier and who probably influenced Ambrose's thought. See Neumann, *The Virgin Mary*, 5-31.

⁷⁷ Ambrose, *De virg.* 2.2.6-15 (Gori, I, 168-176).

⁷⁸ Ambrose, *De virg.* 2.2.16 (Gori, I, 176-178).

Unlike Agnes, Pelagia, Thecla, and the others, Mary was not styled as a martyr in *De virginibus*. Her virginity alone is never here spoken of as a sacrifice or “martyrdom.” For Ambrose, the Virgin was worthy of the highest adulation on account of the remarkable “fruitful” virginity she manifested in her miraculous parturition of God.⁷⁹ The fertility and fruitfulness of virgins becomes a central theme of *De virginitate* as well. Although Mary is mentioned only in passing in this treatise, the miraculous fruits and flowers of virginity’s closed garden become one of Ambrose’s most enduring motifs throughout his work.⁸⁰

It is only in *De institutione* that Ambrose reads Mary’s virginity in context of martyrdom and sacrifice. The bishop focuses the crucifixion narrative upon the Virgin’s performance at the foot of the cross, proclaiming her eternally virginal on account of the courage she demonstrates in the face of death and suffering, explicitly connecting virginity to the suffering of martyrdom and salvation. Through Mary, the bishop redefines martyrdom in service of virginity in a way in which sidesteps the disturbing extremism of the virgin-martyrs while making use of their unique status and mystique. The Virgin acts the role of the living martyr who experiences martyrdom affectively through a unique and vicarious participation in the suffering of Jesus. For Ambrose, this act is enabled by untarnished virginity alone. The bishop claims the rights, privileges, and status of the martyrs as the exclusive property of the Church’s virgins through his reading of the Virgin at the cross of Christ.

⁷⁹ For example, see Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.8.40-43, 1.9.44-46, 2.2.11 (Gori, I, 140-142, 142-146, 174).

⁸⁰ For example, see Ambrose, *De virgt.* 6.34, 10.54, 12.69, 13.80 (Gori, II, 36, 48, 58-60, 66); *Exhort. vir.* 5.29-30 (Gori, II, 220-222). See also Kim E. Power, “The Secret Garden: The Meaning and Function of the *Hortus Conclusus* in Ambrose of Milan’s Homilies on Virginity,” (Ph.D. diss., La Trobe University, 1997).

At the same time, Mary not only represents the possibility of martyrdom through virginity but also a redefinition of the appropriate behaviors and attitudes of such virgin “martyrs.” In contrast to the defiance and independence demonstrated by the earlier virgin-martyrs that he had lauded in *De virginibus*, the Virgin kneels in silence and meekness at the foot of the cross, quietly hoping that she may be noticed by the persecutors but never seeking to draw attention to herself. Unlike the earlier virgins who had left behind home and defied family to become martyrs for Christ, Mary does not leave her husband to join the household of John at the cross. Christ made John custodian of her miraculous chastity by Christ since she had never known any actual marriage to Joseph, the bishop asserts.⁸¹ Ambrose presents Mary in a similar fashion to his first description in *De virginibus*, but now he infuses modesty and meekness into the role of the martyr through her example. Virginity is defined once again as a living martyrdom, enhancing the status of virgins within the Church, but at the same time, the new “martyr-virgin” is admonished by Mary’s performance to follow a set of behaviors which conform to more traditional models of female behavior, including humility, silence, and acquiescence to the guardianship of men.

While Ambrose’s reading of Eve redeems womanhood and binds together both the married and virginal alike, his exposition of Mary maintains the distinct and elevated status of virgins and the necessity of virginity for salvation. At the same time, the Virgin Mary provides a model for a more domesticated kind of martyrdom and advocates female behaviors more in line with the expectations of Greco-Roman society than some of his earlier exemplars. Thus Ambrose’s Mary serves to both maintain the superiority of the

⁸¹ Ambrose, *De inst.* 7.48 (Gori, II, 146-148).

ascetic lifestyle and its lofty ascendance to salvation while nevertheless affirming the persisting “femaleness” of woman ascetics and advocating their conformity to societal norms.

V. Borrowing Juliana

As discussed in the previous chapter, *De virginibus* and *De virginitate* both reflect something of the opposition Ambrose faced on account of his outspoken support for the right of young women to pursue the virginal lifestyle independent of the wishes of their families. Part of his agenda in *De virginitate* was to secure the status of virgins as select “brides” of Christ and thus remove them ideologically, if not physically, from the hands of parents who may wish for their marriages instead. This “bride of Christ” language, as well as much of the imagery and rhetoric from the Song of Songs which inspired it, continues throughout Ambrose’s later works on virginity.⁸² However, this theme is only part of his later reconceptualization of the role of the family regarding female virginity. Dedication of one’s life to virginity is increasingly portrayed as a family matter, and the pertinence of a virgin to families both biological and ecclesiastical is emphasized.

While earlier in *De virginibus* he had lavished praise upon girls who left behind their families to come to Milan for consecration,⁸³ Ambrose reverses this argument in *De institutione*. It is those daughters who marry that actually leave their families behind for

⁸² For example, see Ambrose, *De inst.* 1.3-6, (Gori, II, 110-114), 9.58-62 (Gori, II, 156-158), 17.107-111 (Gori, II, 186-190), 17.114 (Gori, II, 194) and *Exhort. virg.* 5.28-29 (Gori, II, 218-220), 9.58-60 (Gori, II, 244-248), 10.62 (Gori, II, 248-250).

⁸³ Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.11.60-61 (Gori, I, 158). While Ambrose’s arguments in this treatise largely support virginity against familial preference, he is not unwilling to offer parents some incentive for allowing the consecration of their daughters. The virgin’s merits may redeem the faults of the parents and be their pledge and offering to God. See *De virg.* 1.7.32 (Gori, I, 134).

strangers, while virgins are always with their families, the bishop argues.⁸⁴ Ambrose simultaneously broadens the boundaries of what might constitute “family,” styling himself the *paterfamilias* over his flock. He commends his “daughter” (*filia*) Ambrosia to God with a sacred, or fatherly, affection (*pio affectu*) to the life of virginity.⁸⁵ While his other “daughters” leave home and marry, he feels particular paternal affection (*paternae pietatis necessitudine*) for this daughter who is staying “home” to become a virgin.⁸⁶

While expanding the traditional boundaries of family to include bishop and church, he is careful nevertheless to fully incorporate the literal family members of a virgin’s family in her dedication to the celibate life. His first praise of virginity in *De institutione* seems directed toward the family of the virgin rather than in praise of the virgin herself. The parental “sacrifice” of a daughter to the life of virginity is likened to the offering of Abel of the firstborn from among his sheep. Ambrose’s praise of those who have done well in their resolve to preserve their women as virgins as Paul has advocated (1 Cor. 7.37-38) seems to extend praise to those surrounding the virgin who allowed or made possible her consecration.⁸⁷ Ambrose portrays the virgin’s dedication as

⁸⁴ Ambrose, *De inst.* 1.1 (Gori, II, 110).

⁸⁵ The virgin Ambrosia who was consecrated on this occasion was the niece of Eusebius, bishop of Bologna, who was a great friend of Ambrose’s. It was Eusebius who aided Ambrose in his miraculous “discovery” of the bodies of Vitalis and Agricola in a Jewish cemetery near Bologna in 393. See Gori, *Ambrose*, 143.

⁸⁶ Ambrose, *De inst.* 1.1 (Gori, II, 110).

⁸⁷ Ambrose, *De inst.* 1.2 (Gori, II, 110). This rhetorical strategy will be even further developed in *Exhortatio virginitatis*, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

an act performed by a family and within a family in contrast to his earlier defense of a virgin's independence from the realm of the family.

Ambrose's concern to reconcile the biological family with ascetic practice reflects a larger ideological development among many early Christian writers in the fourth and fifth centuries. For example, Andrew Jacobs has traced a good deal of rhetorical reconciliation between asceticism and family in the writings Hilary of Poitiers, Ambrose, John Chrysostom, and others.⁸⁸ He notes in Ambrose's *Expositio Psalmi* the bishop's reinterpretation of scripture commonly used by ascetics such as the assertion that one is to hate mother and father as he leaves them behind for Christ (Luke 14.26) in light of the scriptural command to honor parents (Exodus 20.12) and the condemnation of those who curse parents (Lev. 20.9) with a view to neutralizing the anti-familial message of the first.⁸⁹ Furthermore, Rebecca Krawiec has identified the increasing popularity of pro-familial discourse in ascetic rhetoric during this period among writers such as Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, and Shenoute who for different reasons each find spiritual value in the biological family.⁹⁰ Works such as Gregory's *Vita Macrinae* demonstrate how the

⁸⁸ Andrew S. Jacobs, "'Let Him Guard Pietas': Early Christian Exegesis and the Ascetic Family," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 11.3 (2003): 265-281.

⁸⁹ Jacobs, "'Let Him Guard Pietas,'" 270 n. 15. See Ambrose, *Expositio in Psalmum* 118.15.22 (PL 15, 1417-1418).

Similarly, in his *Expositio in Lucam*, the bishop understands Luke 14.26 as pertaining to those who embrace Christianity in defiance of Gentile parents (*Expositio in Lucam* 7.146 [CCL 14, 265]). Jacobs notes in this interpretation a historicizing of this scripture and its meaning. This explanation removes the contemporary pertinence of the scripture, he argues, by strongly evoking a scenario which applied more to first-century Christian families than fourth-century ones. See Jacobs, "'Let him guard pietas,'" 270-272.

⁹⁰ Rebecca Krawiec, "'From the Womb of the Church: Monastic Families,'" *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 11 (2003): 283-307.

fleshly family may be positively viewed as a support for the ascetic life rather than an impediment to it.⁹¹

Like Gregory, Ambrose increasingly understands the potential of the biological family to help rather than hinder the ascetic life. This is most strongly manifest in his final treatise on virginity, *Exhortatio virginitatis*. In 393, Ambrose left Milan to visit some of the nearby Italian provinces. After a brief stay at Bologna, he continued on to Florence where he was invited to consecrate both a new basilica erected by a wealthy local widow, Juliana.⁹² Her daughter was also to be consecrated to a life of virginity at the service.⁹³ *Exhortatio virginitatis* was delivered upon this dually-important occasion and reflects the bishop's further development of pro-familial discourse in service of asceticism.

In this treatise, mother, rather than bishop, teaches her children about the ascetic life. The bishop's sermon includes a lengthy monologue (§13-53) of the widow Juliana's purported teachings to her children on the subject of virginity.⁹⁴ However, the bishop's lack of demonstrable familiarity with Juliana beforehand and the familiar rhetoric and themes of her supposed discourse suggest that Ambrose had in fact commandeered her

⁹¹ Krawiec, "From the Womb of the Church," 296-301.

⁹² The building Ambrose consecrated in Florence was probably the basilica of San Lorenzo, which served as the episcopal seat of the city before this honor shifted to the basilica of Santa Reparata in the ninth century. This is strongly suggested by Ambrose's assertion that Juliana's only son, Laurentius (Lorenzo) was named after the martyr to whom the basilica was being dedicated (*Exhort. vir.* 3.15 [Gori, II, 210]).

⁹³ Paulinus attributes Ambrose's journey to a wish to avoid the arrival of the new emperor Eugenius to Milan. Eugenius had conceded to Symmachus and others the restoration of the Altar of Victory after Ambrose had argued strongly against this for many years prior. See Paulinus, *Vita Ambrosii* 8.26-27 (Pellegrino, 88-90).

⁹⁴ This "Juliana" monologue takes forty of the ninety-four paragraphs into which the treatise is divided in Gori's edition (Gori, II, 198-271).

voice to speak about the subject matter at hand. By doing so, Ambrose is able to construct a discourse that is simultaneously pro-family and pro-ascetic.⁹⁵

As discussed previously, the bishop had encountered some trouble earlier in his career for his unwelcomed intrusion into matters generally considered familial and private. In *Exhortatio virginitatis*, the figure of Juliana gives the bishop a voice within the boundaries of the traditional Roman family as he assumes the traditional role of Roman *materfamilias*. Lovingly gathering her four children around her, his “Juliana” exhorts her son and daughters in turn to dedicate themselves to virginity and thus follow her example as one consecrated to asceticism. She encourages them to renounce their worldly inheritance as a means of honoring the intentions of their deceased father who, while rich in material possessions, was more so in grace and faith.⁹⁶

Throughout her monologue, Juliana appeals to the filial piety of her children and the honor of the family to persuade her children to asceticism. Her son, Laurentius, is admonished to remember his filial debt to his parents and the good name of his house by following the scriptural admonition to not give his honesty to a woman (Prov. 31.2-3). He must honor the vow made by his father and mother when they gave him the name Laurentius and repay the martyr who has loaned him that name by dedicating himself to

⁹⁵ My analysis of Ambrose’s adaptation of Juliana’s voice owes much to the previous work of Elizabeth Clark who has demonstrated how early Christian writers have often assumed women’s voices as their own for various social and theological purposes. See Clark, *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 173-181; Clark, “The Lady Vanishes: Dilemmas of a Feminist Historian after the Linguistic Turn,” *Church History* 67.1 (1998): 1-31; Clark, “Ideology, History, and the Construction of ‘Woman’ in Late Ancient Christianity,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 2.2 (1994): 155-184.

⁹⁶ Ambrose, *Exhort. virg.* 3.13 (Gori, II, 210).

virginity.⁹⁷ He is to choose to follow the God of his fathers in this if he too would inherit the “tribunal of honor and heredity” (*tribunal honoris et hereditatis*).⁹⁸

With respect to her daughters, Juliana speaks of their already tainted state. Having no father, they are already shamed. Taking a husband would only degrade them further, making them slaves with no one to appeal to for help.⁹⁹ Speaking of her own shame at having neither the help of a husband or the grace of virginity now, Juliana urges them to take up the virginal life:

How much do I wish that I had never come to this condition! Nevertheless, you can excuse your father, console your mother, if you exhibit in yourselves that which we have lost. This thing alone of our marriage will not be displeasing—if our work will have progressed by means of you. I think that to be the mother of a virgin is the same as if I should possess virginity ... your chastity absolves my errors.¹⁰⁰

Again, she depends on a sense of familial duty to draw her children toward the life of virginity. Through Juliana, Ambrose promises to parents of virgins certain vicarious blessings of virginity, including remedies for the “error” of marriage. While yet the defenseless and abandoned widow, Juliana assures her daughters that their promises of virginity would guarantee that she would always be taken care of, honored, admired by those around her, while now she is pitied by them.¹⁰¹ As a mother to virgins,

⁹⁷ Ambrose, *Exhort. virg.* 3.14-15 (Gori, II, 210).

⁹⁸ Ambrose, *Exhort. virg.* 3.16 (Gori, II, 210-211). Ambrose seems to be alluding to 1 Sam. 2.7-8 in this passage but transforms the wording significantly to emphasize its appeal to honor and heredity.

⁹⁹ Ambrose, *Exhort. virg.* 4.20 (Gori, II, 214).

¹⁰⁰ Ambrose, *Exhort. virg.* 4.25-26 (Gori, II, 218): *Quanto mallet in hos numquam uenisse usus! Potestis tamen excusare patrem, abluare matrem, si quod in nobis amissum est, in uobis repraesentetur. Hoc solo nos coniugii non paenitebit, si uobis labor noster profecerit. Proximum putabo matrem esse uirginum ac si uirginitatem tenerem ... uestra quoque integritas meos soluat errores.*

¹⁰¹ Ambrose, *Exhort. virg.* 4.27 (Gori, II, 218).

she may even reasonably expect to be venerated as the “royal court” of chastity, a clear allusion to Ambrose’s earlier stylings of Mary whose venerable womb held the original author of virginity.¹⁰² She connects her childrens’ choices of marriage or virginity as determinants of parental shame and honor.

Juliana closes her lengthy exhortation by returning to the dramatic narrative of Jephtha’s daughter (Judges 11.30-39) who shows her filial piety by fulfilling her father’s promise to God with her own blood.¹⁰³ “Consider, children, what you owe to the wishes of your parents. We opened our mouths to God: the vow is the will of parents. We have asked, you will fulfill it.”¹⁰⁴ The term *officium pietatis*, a term traditionally emphasizing for Romans the obligations owed to one’s family, is appealed to in order to portray virginity as the obedient and dutiful choice, a decision that sustains familial honor and paternal *dignitas*.¹⁰⁵

Speaking as Juliana, Ambrose utilizes family relationships and traditional notions of shame and honor to further the ascetic cause. Furthermore, Juliana’s voice allows the bishop to speak again on the central tenet of his ascetic program which he had largely avoided expounding in *De institutione*: the superiority of virginity to marriage. Although a frequent theme in his first two treatises on virginity, his third treatise, tempered by the

¹⁰² Ambrose, *Exhort. virg.* 4.27 (Gori, II, 218). On Mary’s womb as the “court” of chastity see Ambrose, *De inst.* 12.79 (Gori, II, 166), 17.105 (Gori, II, 186). Cf. Jerome, *Ep.* 22.20, where Jerome calls the mother of a virgin the “mother-in-law of God” (PL 22, 103-104).

¹⁰³ Ambrose, *Exhort. virg.* 8.51-52 (Gori, II, 238-240). Cf. Ambrose, *De virgt.* 2.5-6 (Gori, II, 16-18).

¹⁰⁴ Ambrose, *Exhort. virg.* 8.51 (Gori, II, 238): *Considerate, filii, quid uotis debeatis parentum. Aperuimus ad deum os nostrum: uotum est uoluntas parentum. Nos orauimus, uos soluite.*

¹⁰⁵ On *officium pietatis*, see Alfred Berger, *The Encyclopedic Dictionary of Roman Law* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1953), 630.

critique of those who had found his teachings to be derogatory of marriage and his ascetic vision exclusionary, shied away from anti-marriage rhetoric and avoided explicit comparisons between the two institutions.

But sharp and unapologetic argumentation against marriage and for the superiority of the virginal life is reintroduced in *Exhortatio virginitatis* through the mouth of Juliana. While conceding that she is recommending virginity rather than requiring it, the widow teaches her children that the virgins may expect a better reward in heaven than the married.¹⁰⁶ Juliana explains that Jesus' teaching in Matthew 19.11 ("Not everyone understands this teaching, but only those to whom it has been given") as an indication that only a few elite truly understand the superiority of virginity and thus practice it.¹⁰⁷ Surely Paul would not have become God's chosen vessel if he had been hindered by the concubinage of marriage. If even the apostle found it necessary to abstain from marriage so that he not be deprived of his gifts and opportunities, Juliana contends, surely it is right that her children to do likewise.¹⁰⁸

Through Juliana, Ambrose is free to praise the noble and exalted status of virginity with little attention to the preservation of marriage's goods. Virgins live the life of angels while still among men since they do not experience the trials and slavery of the flesh nor the contagion of worldly preoccupation.¹⁰⁹ It is the virgin alone who receives the palm of general salvation in scripture, Juliana argues, as she can be seen in the form

¹⁰⁶ Ambrose, *Exhort. virg.* 3.17 (Gori, II, 212-214).

¹⁰⁷ Ambrose, *Exhort. virg.* 3.18 (Gori, II, 214).

¹⁰⁸ Ambrose, *Exhort. virg.* 4.22-23 (Gori, II, 216).

¹⁰⁹ Ambrose, *Exhort. virg.* 4.19 (Gori, II, 214). On virginity as the life of angels, cf. his earlier argument in *De virginibus*, 1.9.52-53 (Gori, I, 150-152).

of Mary (mother of the author of virginity), the Church, the daughter of Zion, the city of Jerusalem, and the bride of the heavenly Bridegroom. “The virgin does not only pass by but also passes beyond the one who hastens to a spouse,” she reasons. “She passes beyond the world, passes beyond it to Christ.”¹¹⁰

Throughout *Exhortatio*, Ambrose’s Juliana relies heavily upon scripture to show virginity’s superiority to marriage. She extends the lush garden imagery of the Song of Songs through which Ambrose had frequently extolled virginity in other treatises in order to include a pejorative vision of marriage. While virginity, the closed garden of chastity, brings forth a choice vine from within its sealed walls, “marriages are just as the seedbeds of plants in which frequently there is frost. Therefore, just as do vegetables, they quickly fall to the ground and begin to rot unless old age imposes an end to them or continence lifts them up to perfection.”¹¹¹

Juliana also teaches her children that Mary may be understood as the “light cloud” (*nubem leuem*) referred to in Isaiah 19.1 since she was never weighed down by the burdens of marriage, while those who take on the burdens of marriage receive their marriage veils as though being covered by heavy clouds, and receive the stifling heaviness of conception in their wombs.¹¹² Virginity reflects the state of Adam and Eve before their sin, while marriage is a concession for the post-Fall world which leaves

¹¹⁰ Ambrose, *Exhort. virg.* 5.28 (Gori, II, 218-220).

¹¹¹ Ambrose, *Exhort. virg.* 5.29 (Gori, II, 220): *coniugia uelut olerum plantaria sunt, in quibus frequens gelu est; et ideo sicut holera herbarum cito cadunt atque marcescunt, nisi finem imponat senectus aut ad perfectum euehat continentia.*

¹¹² Ambrose, *Exhort. virg.* 5.31 (Gori, II, 222), 6.34 (224-226). If Ambrose is borrowing this interpretation of Mary as a light cloud from an earlier writer, I have been unable to locate an original source for it in extant materials.

spouses “something among themselves to be ashamed of.”¹¹³ For “Juliana”, it is the virgin and not the bride who can confess as David did (Psalms 73.26) that the Lord is her portion.

Such scriptural arguments for virginity’s superiority are further enhanced by Juliana’s station as a woman, widow, and mother. Ambrose’s affectation of her voice allows the bishop to speak to young women considering virginity as one who knows firsthand of the woes and hardships of marriage. Beyond expressing her own sense of loss at no longer having any claim on virginity, Juliana may speak with supposedly-firsthand knowledge of the chains (*vincula*) of marriage, the wrongs of husbands, and the inconveniences and abuses which fall most heavily upon woman and leave her with no independent power over herself.¹¹⁴ Wives of means are property as though slaves who are bought and are valued only for the gold they bring into their marriage.¹¹⁵ She sternly warns:

Daughters, I have tested the troubles of the bond, the indignations of marriage, even under a good husband. Even under a good spouse, I was not free since I served a man and labored so that I might please him. The Lord was merciful and made him the minister of his altar. Immediately, he was taken away from me and from you, perhaps by the mercy of the Lord, because he could not qualify for it as a husband.¹¹⁶

¹¹³ Ambrose, *Exhort. virg.* 6.36 (Gori, II, 226-228): *Nam utique nunc, licet bona coniugia, tamen habent quod inter se ipsi coniuges erubescant.*

¹¹⁴ Ambrose, *Exhort. virg.* 4.20-21 (Gori, II, 214-216).

¹¹⁵ Ambrose, *Exhort. virg.* 4.23 (Gori, II, 216).

¹¹⁶ Ambrose, *Exhort. virg.* 4.24 (Gori, II, 216): *Experta sum, filii, labores copulae, coniugii indignitates, et sub bono coniuge, nec tamen sub bono marito libera fui: seruebam uiro, et laborabam ut placerem. Miseratus est dominus, et fecit altaris ministrum, continuoque et mihi et uobis raptus est, et fortasse, miserante domino, ne diceretur maritus.*

The widow recalls that her marriage had been so burdensome that she rejoiced when her husband was called into service in the church which required him to give up all sexual activity.¹¹⁷ Through Juliana, Ambrose constructs a powerful first-hand testimony from a female perspective of the difficulties and trials of marriage that most likely declared the superiority of virginal life more loudly to young women than the teachings of an aged and unmarried career clergyman could.

Because of Juliana's position as matriarch in her family, Ambrose is also afforded an opportunity to advocate the independent behavior of virgins that he had praised at length in *De virginibus*:

There are many temptations. ... Therefore the scripture says: "They tested him in temptation and they reviled him upon the waters of the contradiction of Cades" (Deut. 33.8). Virginitas is tempted by many suitors, and when the virgin has wished to persevere, they have come forth to speak against her. The suitor speaks against her and, having been refused, curses her. Whether virgin or widow, the unmarried woman seems to be in disgrace. For Cades is unmarried, she who is holy in body and spirit, and she who has been dedicated to the Lord who left behind her relatives, and she does not do the will of those who are in the habit of saying, "You owe us grandchildren, daughter."¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ Ambrose seems to imply here that a married man could renounce wife for the priesthood. On the subject of celibacy and priests in the church during Ambrose's time, see Jean-Paul Audet, *Mariage et Célibat dans le service pastoral de l'Église: Histoire et orientations* (Paris: Editions de L'Orante, 1967), 130-133.

¹¹⁸ Ambrose, *Exhort. virg.* 7.45 (Gori, II, 234): *Multae tentationes sunt; ideoque ait scriptura: Tentauerunt eum in tentatione et maledixerunt ei super aquam contradictionis Cades. Tentatur uirginitas a plerisque petitoribus, et cum uoluerit uirgo perseuerare, existunt qui contradicant. Contradicit petitor et refutatus maledicit. In opprobrio esse uidetur innupta uel uirgo uel uidua. Cades enim innupta est, quae est sancta corpore et spiritu, et domino se dicauit, quae reliquit parentes, et non facit uoluntatem eorum qui solent dicere: "Debes nobis, filia, nepotes."*

Ambrose's scriptural quotation seems to be a combination of both Deuteronomy 33.8 (*quem probasti in Temptatione et iudicasti ad aquas Contradictionis*) and 32.51 (*quia praeuicari estis contra me in medio filiorum Israhel ad aquas Contradictionis in Cades*). Ambrose follows a Latin translation that, as the Vulgate, translates the Hebrew place names Massah and Meribah while leaving Cades (Kadesh) untranslated.

Juliana constructs for the contemporary virgin a scenario which strongly recalls the stories of Thecla, Agnes, and other virgin-martyrs Ambrose had extolled in *De virginibus* but had found it expedient to abandon thereafter. While not facing imminent death, the exemplary virgin yet becomes the victim of rebuffed suitors, defies the wishes of parents, and suffers shame and humiliation for her dedication to God. As matriarch and family member, Juliana is permitted the liberty to encourage acts of parental defiance as she speaks to her children where Ambrose, as bishop and outsider, had earlier suffered criticism for doing so.¹¹⁹

In the guise of Juliana, Ambrose gains access to the authority and status of the widow within her family and in the larger Christian community at Florence. In contrast to his earlier writings that styled family life at odds with virginal living in many respects, Ambrose in *Exhortatio virginitatis* understands the private family as a vehicle for ascetic advocacy within the larger boundaries of the church. At the same time, speaking as Juliana allows Ambrose to press virginal superiority and denigrate married life while avoiding many of the criticisms that had plagued him earlier in his career. While he largely declines to laud virginity and discourage marriage in his own voice in this treatise, as Juliana he does so freely and at great length.¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ For criticism of his earlier use of virgin-martyrs as exemplars and for his unwelcomed advocacy of virginal independence, see Chapter 2, 108-117.

¹²⁰ Speaking as Juliana, Ambrose also draws in language and imagery that may also have sounded too “Manichean” for Jovinian and other critics. For example, see Ambrose, *Exhort. vir.* 6.34 (Gori, II, 224-226): *Eritis profecto si ableuet virginitas onera conditionis et tenebras huius limosae carnis illuminet* (“You will be successful if virginity gets rid of the burdens of the human condition and illuminates the darkness of this dirty flesh”). His teaching elsewhere that virgins know no contagion of the world because they are stripped of the weakness of the flesh and reach their minds toward God (Ambrose, *Exhort. virg.* 4.19 [Gori, II, 214]) may suggest the influence of both Philo, Origen, and Plotinus’s thought. See Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 3 Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual*

VI. Inventing Jews

While the bishop was clearly concerned to uphold his ascetic program, this was not his only, or even primary, objective in writing *Exhortatio virginitatis*. At the forefront of his mind on this occasion seems to have been some anticipated or realized controversy concerning relics that he recently had played a part in recovering. In his possession when he came to Florence were wood and nails found with the purported bodies of the martyrs Agricola and Vitalis in a graveyard near Bologna. According to Ambrose's account, the resting place of the martyrs had been revealed to the bishop of Bologna in a dream, and Ambrose had aided him in retrieving the bodies from their burial places in a nearby cemetery for reburial under the altar of the basilica at Bologna.¹²¹

It is likely that the bishop was bracing himself against personal criticism for his involvement in this discovery, if he was not already experiencing it, when he dedicated the basilica at Florence. After all, this was not the first time that Ambrose had been involved in a supposedly-miraculous discovery of martyrs that drew serious negative responses from many in the Christian community. In 386, Ambrose had unearthed the supposed remains of two other martyrs, Gervasius and Protasius, in the Hortus Philippi. The martyrs' *inventio* evoked suspicion and disapproval almost immediately.¹²² First of

Renunciation in Early Christianity (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 348-349 and Goulven Madec, *Saint Ambroise et la philosophie* (Paris: Études augustinienes, 1974), 52-60, 110-132.

¹²¹ Paulinus, *Vita Ambrosii* 8.29 (Pellegrino, 92-94).

¹²² For a detailed account and analysis of this event, see Ernst Dassmann, "Ambrosius und die Märtyrer," *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 18 (1975): 49-68; Vincenza Zangara, "L'*inventio* dei corpi dei martiri Gervasio e Protasio: Testimonianze di Agostino su un fenomeno di religiosità popolare," *Augustinianum* 21 (1981): 119-133; McLynn, 211-215.

all, the purported remains of the martyrs conveniently appeared on the day following the Milanese congregation's demand that their bishop consecrate with holy relics the basilica he had just constructed.¹²³ Second, the bishop ordered his men to dig around one of the most prominent monuments in the city, the *memoria* of the martyrs Nabor and Felix, a sacrilege which had apparently frightened even his own clergy.¹²⁴ Third, the remains of the martyrs were confirmed and identified through the sudden exorcism of some self-identified victims of demonic possession who came forth at Ambrose's request and also by the recollections of old men who remembered hearing the martyrs' names and seeing stones inscribed with them in the area at an earlier date.¹²⁵

At least some critics of Ambrose's discovery moved in the highest circles of society. In a letter to his sister Marcellina, the bishop wrote of the immediate skepticism of "the usual ones" (*qui solvent*), those who are in the habit of opposing him, who found no merit in the martyrs.¹²⁶ According to Paulinus, the most outspoken of these was the dowager empress Justina and many of her associates at the palace who ridiculed the bishop's supposed discovery and accused him of having hired witnesses to lie about their demonic possessions to verify the martyrs' bones.¹²⁷

¹²³ According to Ambrose's account, the congregation demanded that the Basilica Ambrosiana be consecrated in the same way he had consecrated the basilica in Romana, dedicated to the apostles, which was endowed with a large collection of imported relics. Ambrose replied that he would do so if he could find some martyrs' relics. See Ambrose, *Ep. 77.1* (CSEL 82.3, 127).

¹²⁴ Ambrose, *Ep. 77.1-2* (CSEL 82.3, 127).

¹²⁵ Ambrose, *Ep. 77.2* (CSEL 82.3, 128) and *77.12* (CSEL 82.3, 134) and Paulinus, *Vita Ambrosii* 5.14 (Pellegrino, 70-72).

¹²⁶ Ambrose, *Ep. 77.16* (CSEL 82.3, 136).

¹²⁷ Paulinus, *Vita Ambrosii* 5.15 (Pellegrino, 72). On Ambrose's rocky relationship with the empress Justina, see Jean-Rémy Palanque, *Saint Ambroise et l'empire romaine* (Paris: E. De Boccard, 1933), 139-142 and Daniel H. Williams, *Ambrose of Milan and the End of the Nicene-Arian Conflicts* (Oxford:

However “usual” and recurring the criticisms of such figures as the dowager empress, they were nevertheless impossible to ignore. In his account of this episode addressed to his sister, Ambrose labored arduously to defend himself from the accusations of those at the palace. The bishop validated his unconventional search in the holy ground of the Hortus Philippi by claiming he had been given a vision of the location of the bones immediately after promising his congregation that he would install some martyrs’ relics in a new basilica at Milan if he could find some.¹²⁸ Furthermore, Ambrose repeatedly asserted that it was no less than God who laid bare the graves of the holy martyrs and not himself, framing his actions in light of divine approbation.¹²⁹ As witness to the identity of the martyrs, he reminded his congregation of their own miraculous experiences with the powers of the relics that were brought forth from the graves.¹³⁰

On the other hand, the bishop drew upon terminology important in fourth-century debates over the nature of God to frame his opponents as recognizable heretics. The bishop termed “Arians” those who denied the power of the relics he had discovered and the many miracles they have wrought. In this way, he connected a lack of faith in the martyrs to a lack of faith in Christ and a misunderstanding of the true nature of God, placing his critics outside the boundaries of what would have been recognized by most as

Clarendon Press, 1995), 126, 202-203, 208-210. Williams traces Justina’s literary creation as a heretical *femina monstrosa* in contrast to the orthodox Ambrose in the later writings of Augustine, Rufinus, Zosimus, Socrates, and Paulinus.

¹²⁸ Ambrose, *Ep.* 77.1-2 (CSEL 82.3, 127).

¹²⁹ For example, see Ambrose, *Ep.* 77.7, 10 (CSEL 82.3, 130-131; 132).

¹³⁰ Ambrose, *Ep.* 77.9, 17 (CSEL 82.3, 131-132; 136-137).

orthodoxy in Milan. Ambrose drew upon the accumulated social value of anti-Arian rhetoric in Milan to demonize those who deny the status of his discovery.¹³¹ While even the devils cast out from people by the martyrs' power confess the Trinity, he argued, the Arians do not admit it.¹³² Paulinus later recalled how one of these "Arian" critics gets his deserved come-uppance. While listening to the bishop preach, the man was suddenly possessed by an unclean spirit, confessed both the martyrs and the Trinity, and was promptly drowned in a pond by his cohorts for such a betrayal.¹³³

While such anti-Arian rhetoric comprises much of his defensive strategy in this letter, Ambrose also associated his critics and doubters with the Jews who had no faith in the miracles of Jesus in scripture. The bishop reviewed the story of the man blind from birth who Jesus healed (John 9) but whose claims on behalf of Jesus were doubted by the Jews, concluding from this story that current unbelievers in the martyrs' relics were in a worse state than the Jews were since "their obstinacy is more hateful than that of the Jews. When they [the Jews] were in doubt, they asked the parents [of the blind man]. These others ask in secret and openly deny. No longer do they [the Jews] disbelieve the work, but the Author."¹³⁴

While Jews are far less important than Arians in Ambrose's defense of the martyrs' discovery in 386, they become central to his rhetorical strategies in his *Exhortatio virginitatis* several years later when the bishop brought wood and nails from

¹³¹ In Chapter 1, I discuss the rise of anti-Arian/anti-Homoian rhetoric in Milan during Ambrose's episcopacy and his usage of such discourse in defense of virginity in *De institutione*.

¹³² Ambrose, *Ep.* 77.19-20 [19-22] (CSEL 82.3, 138-139).

¹³³ Paulinus, *Vita Ambrosii* 5.16 (Pellegrino, 74).

¹³⁴ Ambrose, *Ep.* 77.18 (CSEL 82.3, 137).

the purported graves of Agricola and Vitalis near Bologna.¹³⁵ Christian virginity and the virgins of the church play an important role in this endeavor as they engage in a paradoxical relationship with Judaism.

Probably recalling the complaints and criticisms that had accompanied the events of 386, Ambrose seems to anticipate problems with his most recent acquisition of relics and thus takes a defensive standpoint from the beginning of *Exhortatio*. In the opening paragraph, he terms the holy nails and wood he bears *apophoreta*, small gifts given at a banquet, which he has brought as tokens of Christian triumph (*triumphalia*) to Florence in recompense for his own shortcomings.¹³⁶ Painting himself as the conquering hero entering Florence in triumph, the bishop is quick to name the enemy who has recently been conquered: “The Jews campaigned to have fellowship with the servants of the burial, the servants of the Lord whom they denied.” Ambrose alleges that the martyrs had been buried in a Jewish graveyard, and that the removal of their remains was merely a pious collection of “the rose from among the thorns”:¹³⁷

We were surrounded by the Jews while the holy relics were carried away. The people of the church were present, cheering and rejoicing. When they saw the martyrs, the Jews said, “The flowers appear on the earth.” The Christians said, “The time for cutting has come,” and “He who reaps receives the wage. Others have planted and we gather the fruits of the martyr.” And again the Jews, hearing the cheering voices of the church, said among themselves, “The voice of the turtledove has been heard in the land.” ... When we collected the nails [of the martyr], it was as though the martyr called to the people of the Jews: “Thrust your

¹³⁵ McLynn argues that the Jews replace the Arians in the later *inventio* of the martyrs because Ambrose was unable to take on his enemies in the imperial court directly at the current time for numerous reasons. See McLynn, 349.

¹³⁶ Ambrose, *Exhort. virg.* 1.1 (Gori, II, 198). Cf. Ambrose, *Ep.* 77.12 where he speaks of the martyrs Gervasius and Protasius: *quia ipse martyr esse non mereor hos vobis martyres acquisivi* (“Since I myself am not worthy to be a martyr, I have secured these martyrs for you”).

¹³⁷ Ambrose, *Exhort. virg.* 1.7 (Gori, II, 202).

hands into my side, and do not be unbelieving, but faithful.” We collected the triumphant blood and wood of the cross.¹³⁸

The bishop portrays the removal of the martyrs’ remains as a triumph over the Jews, who stand by marveling at the power of the martyrs. Overwhelmed by this manifestation, the Jews look on passively as their cemetery is plundered and marvel as the bodies of the blessed martyrs are exhumed. Using the language of the Song of Songs, Ambrose artfully constructs a scenario in which the Jews peacefully surrender the martyrs’ remains into superior hands.

The bishop’s account of the martyrs’ exhumation is suspect on many levels. McLynn has registered Ambrose’s stylization of Jews and Christians as though choirs responding to each others’ songs. Employment of Biblical language is clearly a higher priority to the bishop than giving an accurate account of events in this treatise. For McLynn, the Jews are intended as a foil for Christian blessedness just as the Arians had in his writings of 386. They were therefore “incidental victims” in what he terms a “sacrilegious commando raid” on their graveyard at Bologna.¹³⁹

But the Jews of Bologna may have been figural rather than actual victims in this incident. While there is some evidence to suggest that there was a Jewish presence in

¹³⁸ Ambrose, *Exhort. virg.* 1.8-9 (Gori, II, 202-206): *Circumfundebamur a Iudaeis, cum sacrae reliquiae eueherentur. Aderat populus ecclesiae cum plausu et laetitia. Dicebant Iudaei: Flores uisi sunt in terra, cum uiderent martyres. Dicebant Christiani: Tempus incisionis adest. Iam et qui metit, mercedem accipit. Alii seminauerunt et nos metimus martyrum fructus. Iterum audientes Iudaei uoces plaudentis ecclesiae, dicebant inter se: Vox turturis audita est in terra nostra. ... Clamare martyrem dices ad populum Iudaeorum, cum clauos eius colligeremus: Mitte manus tuas in latus meum, et noli esse incredulus, sed fidelis. Collegimus sanguinem triumphalem et crucis lignum.*

¹³⁹ McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 348-349.

northern Italy at this date, the Jewish community was probably extremely small.¹⁴⁰ The bishop of Milan probably had no contact with or consciousness of this group.¹⁴¹

At the same time, Ambrose's own writings abound with Jews. As previously mentioned, the Jews figure prominently with Arians in his defense of his role in his earlier discovery of martyrs in 386. As the doubters of Jesus, they are akin for him to those who doubt the miraculous discovery of Gervasius and Protasis. McLynn and Maria Doerfler have both noted the pervasive anti-Jewish rhetoric of Ambrose's *Expositio evangelii secundum Lucam*, which was composed throughout the 380s. For McLynn, the Jews in Ambrose's *Expositio evangelii secundum Lucam* are better understood as characters drawn from scripture rather than from the bishop's personal experience. They serve to provide a negative foil for Christianity in the bishop's writings.¹⁴² Similarly, Doerfler finds striking connections between the Jews Ambrose presents in his writings on Luke and various heterodox groups of Christians in the fourth century, suggesting that the Jews had an important rhetorical role in the bishop's writings that did not necessarily correspond to any reality.¹⁴³

¹⁴⁰ Shlomo Simonsohn has noted that the earliest archeological evidence for Jews in northern Italy is the presence of three Jewish tombstones from the fifth and sixth centuries in the region of Milan, suggesting that Jewish presence in the area during Ambrose's time was extremely limited. The first clear archeological evidence for of living near Bologna does not appear until the fifteenth century. See Simonsohn, *Jews in the Duchy of Milan, vol. I: 1387-1477* (Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1982), xiv, 23.

Maria Doerfler has noted that the Jewish community at Milan was so small that it had no resources to rebuild the synagogue in the city when it was destroyed. See Doerfler, "Ambrose's Jews: The Creation of Judaism and Heterodox Christianity in Ambrose of Milan's *Expositio evangelii secundum Lucam*," (unpublished seminar paper), 1-2.

¹⁴¹ McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 304. Doerfler also observes Ambrose seemed to be completely uninterested in any Jews he may have encountered. See Doerfler, "Ambrose's Jews," 2.

¹⁴² McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 304.

¹⁴³ Doerfler, "Ambrose's Jews," 3-5.

By the composition of *Exhortatio virginitatis* in 394, the Jews were a well-developed literary trope in the bishop's writings. While we cannot completely rule out the possibility that there was an actual Jewish graveyard at Bologna and that Jews truly were present at the *inventio* of the martyrs, the bishop's frequent usage of figural Jews and figural Jewishness in his earlier writings draws into question their prominent place in the events described in *Exhortatio virginitatis*. As the Jews of the *Expositio*, the Jews of *Exhortatio virginitatis* may have served significant literary functions for the bishop.

By asserting the "Jewishness" of the graveyard, the bishop justifies his controversial invasion of holy burial ground by deeming it an unworthy spot for the burial of holy Christian martyrs. Since the Jews denied the Lord, they have no claim on the burials of his servants Agricola and Vitalis, Ambrose argues.¹⁴⁴ The large group of Jews who subserviently respond to the Christians' singing may have intended to downplay further the controversial nature of the martyrs' discovery. The Jews' passive behavior and the peaceful transfer of the martyrs from Jewish to Christian hands may have been designed by the bishop to downplay communal unrest provoked by his invasive spoiling of graves. This peaceful scene may also have been intended to confirm the reality of the relics; the power of the martyrs' bones is further manifest in their ability to unite the community and heal dividing wounds. Furthermore, the bishop uses these Jews to shame Christians who doubt the authenticity of the martyrs' relics by showing

¹⁴⁴ Ambrose, *Exhort. virg.* 1.7 (Gori, II, 202-204).

how even the Jews, who do not confess Christ, recognize the reality and power of these martyrs.¹⁴⁵

The Jews in *Exhortatio* probably suggest Ambrose's socio-political agendas rather than actual Jewish presence and involvement in the martyrs' purported discovery. But why does the bishop choose to employ Jews rather than the Arians who had featured so prominently in his similar self-defense of 386? McLynn has suggested that Ambrose was now in more tenuous political circumstances and could no longer risk antagonizing "Arian" opponents in the imperial court as he earlier had.¹⁴⁶

While politics were clearly at play, Ambrose's specific choice of the Jews as literary opponents may have been inspired not only by political expediencies but also by Origen's writings.¹⁴⁷ As previously noted, Ambrose relied heavily upon the Alexandrian's work in several of his writings.¹⁴⁸ In *Exhortatione virginitatis*, the bishop clearly follows some of the Alexandrian's distinctive spiritual interpretations of the Hebrew Bible. The most obvious example of this is Ambrose's reading of the Levitical priesthood as a prefiguration of Christian ascetic practice. Origen had linked the Levites to the one hundred forty-four thousand of John's apocalypse "who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins (Rev. 14.4) and explained the first-fruits the

¹⁴⁵ Ambrose, *Exhort. virg.* 1.8 (Gori, II, 204-206). Ambrose continues further on to argue that "even the demons recognize them [the martyrs]." (Ambrose, *Exhort. virg.* 2.9 [Gori, II, 206]), a probable allusion to Mark 3.11 where demons fall down before Jesus and confess that he is the Son of God.

¹⁴⁶ McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 349.

¹⁴⁷ Roger Gryson has suggested Ambrose's dependence upon both Origen and Philo in his understanding of the Levites as prefigurations of Christian ascetics. See Gryson, "Les Lévités, figure du sacerdoce véritable, selon saint Ambroise," *Ephemerides theologicae lovanienses* 56 (1980): 89-112 and Gryson, "L'interprétation du nom de Lévi (Lévite) chez saint Ambroise," *Sacris erudiri* 17 (1966): 217-229. See also Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy*, 222-224.

¹⁴⁸ See Chapter 1, 36-37, 40-41; Chapter 2, 118 and note 124.

Levites were required to offer on behalf of the people as an indication of virginity's superiority to married life.¹⁴⁹ Drawing upon Origen's explanation of the Levites' symbolic significance, Ambrose makes much of Deuteronomy 33.8 ("give to Levi his loyal ones") to advocate the virginal lifestyle:

Give, therefore, to Levi his loyal ones. For truly, what is there other than pure virginity which guards the seal of modesty and the natural gate of integrity? For truly, when through the experience of matrimony a young girl is deflowered, she has lost that which was her own since it is mixed with something foreign. For when we were born we received this from the Creator; we are not changed into this state by being deprived of marriage. Therefore, give to the loyal Levi the first ones of the priests, to loyal Aaron, to loyal Melchizedek his loyal ones, those that he [God] himself has preserved, and not those who carry out the enjoyment of this world, so that he may recognize his work and that natural sign inviolate and intact in you.¹⁵⁰

Ambrose reads in the Israelite dedication of firstborn sons to the Levitical order a prefiguration of the preservation of virginity, which he deems the primal state of humankind. Virgins who are not deprived of their "native, natural gate" through marriage are likened to the "loyal ones" dedicated to Levi, Aaron, and Melchizedek who are not subject to the expedencies of the world.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁹ Origen, *Hom. in Numeros* 11.3 (PG 12, 647). Cf. *Hom. in Jesu Nave* 17.2 (SC 71, 376). See also Elizabeth A. Clark, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 110.

¹⁵⁰ Ambrose, *Exhort. virg.* 6.35 (Gori, II, 226): *Date ergo Leui ueros eius. Quid tam uerum quam intemerata uirginitas, quae signaculum pudoris et claustrum integritatis genitale custodit? At uero cum usu coniugii iuuenula defloratur, amittit quod suum est, quando ei miscetur alienum. Illud enim uerum quod nascimur, non in quod mutamur, quod a creatore accepimus, non quod de contubernio assumpsimus. Date ergo uero Leui, illi sacerdotum principi, uero Aaron, uero Melchisedech ueros eius, quales ipse condidit, non quales saeculi huius usus efficit, ut opus suum in uobis et illud genitale signaculum inuiolatum atque integrum recognoscat.* Cf. Ambrose, *Exhort. virg.* 5.32, 6.34, 6.39, 6.41 (Gori, II, 224-226, 230, 232).

¹⁵¹ Ambrose furthers his argument that virginity is the first and natural state by arguing that virgins represent a version of Adam and Eve predating their fall and expulsion from paradise. See *Exhort. virg.* 6.36 (Gori, II, 226-228).

Perhaps it is from Origen that Ambrose had learned something of the rhetorical value of not only the Levites but also the Jews. In his writings, Origen frequently had emphasized the spiritual and transcendent nature of Christian ascetic practice by contrasting it to a worldly and carnal Judaism.¹⁵² For example, he interpreted God's commandment of circumcision to Abraham as a call to bodily chastity and worldly renunciation. The actual physical circumcision of the Jews was, in comparison, "unseemly, detestable, disgusting," a clear manifestation of the Jews' inability to understand God's true intent. Origen's worldly and depraved Jews serve as a foil for pure and ethereal Christian virgins.¹⁵³ Elsewhere, Origen contrasts Paul's ascetic discipline and spiritual understandings of scripture to the licentiousness of the Jews who read Biblical promises of spouses and children too literally.¹⁵⁴

Ambrose follows Origen in his construction of this dichotomy between heavenly virgin and worldly Jew. In the figures of Cain and Abel, the bishop finds a witness for virginity's superiority to marriage. While the second son, a type for the virgin, clings to

While Ambrose clearly borrows and adapts several of Origen's interpretation of scriptural figures such as the Levites in *Exhortatio*, his understanding of the passage concerning Jephthah and his daughter in Judges 11 stands in stark contrast to Origen's. While Ambrose draws forth this story to praise both the filial piety of the daughter and the devotion of the father, Origen firmly asserts that the Holy Spirit had not persuaded Jephthah to make such an absurd vow (*ἀτοπος ευχήν*) but that the Israelite was solely responsible for it (Origen, *Selecta in Iudices* [PG 12, 949]).

¹⁵² Several scholars have noted this theme in Origen's writings. Most recently, Susanna Drake has discussed Origen's association of Judaism with carnality and literal readings of scriptural texts in contrast to superior Christian chastity and spiritual interpretations of scripture. See Drake, "Sexing the Jew: Early Christian Constructions of Jewishness" (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 2008), 87-139.

¹⁵³ Origen, *Hom. in Genesis* 3.6 (GCS 6, 46-47). For a more in-depth discussion of Origen's anti-Jewish rhetoric in this passage, see Drake, "Sexing the Jew," 110-116.

Ambrose was clearly aware of Origen's spiritual interpretation of Jewish circumcision as a prefiguration of Christian chastity. See Ambrose, *Ep.* 69.12, 26 (CSEL 82.2, 184, 191-192).

¹⁵⁴ Origen, *Hom. in Lucam* 39.3-4 (SC 71, 452-454). See also Drake, "Sexing the Jew," 124-125.

God and depends faithfully upon him, the first clings to worldly and “Jewish” possessions.¹⁵⁵ For Ambrose, both the Levite and the Christian virgin are special possessions of Christ who lay no claim upon earthly things.¹⁵⁶ To further explicate the ethereal nature of virginity, the bishop contrasts the Levites, who claimed no earthly portion of property but a heavenly one, to the daughters of Zelophehad (Num. 27.1-7) who came forward to claim worldly property in their father’s stead. “These daughters are those in whose mouth there is no word, nor is there any truth in their conversation, just as in the people of the Jews, who did not wish to confess the Jesus Christ, Son of God, to be God.”¹⁵⁷

As a further promotion of difference between the virgin and the Jew, Ambrose employs contrasting personified images of Church and Synagogue. Attributing to the Synagogue the dialogue of Song of Songs 1.7 (“tell me ... where you pasture your flock?”), he decries the perfidy of the Jews who now jealously seek to encroach on the honored place of the Church. But the Synagogue cannot be among virgins, he reasons, for she is a married woman and so is subject to the curse of Eve’s fall.¹⁵⁸ The Synagogue will drink the cup of the Lord’s wrath at the last day while the Church will not since the

¹⁵⁵ Ambrose, *Exhort. virg.* 6.36 (Gori, II, 228).

¹⁵⁶ Ambrose, *Exhort. virg.* 6.41 (Gori, II, 232).

¹⁵⁷ Ambrose, *Exhort. virg.* 6.37 (Gori, II, 228): *Quae utique in illis est, quibus non est uerbum in ore ipsorum, nec in sermone eorum ueritas, sicut in populo Iudaeorum, qui nolunt Christum Iesum deum dei filium confiteri.*

Philo of Alexandria’s interpretation of Cain and Abel as a flesh/spirit dichotomy has clearly influenced Ambrose’s reading of scripture. Vincenzo Messina discusses this in detail in his “L’esegesi tropologica presso i padri e le bibliche figure di Abele e di Caino in Ambrogio ed Agostino,” in *Studia Patristica XV (pt. 1)*, ed. Elizabeth A. Livingstone (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1984), 187-188. Ambrose’s association of the Jews with Cain and worldliness, however, is presumably not drawn from the works of this Jewish writer.

¹⁵⁸ Ambrose, *Exhort. virg.* 10.66-67 (Gori, II, 253).

Jews are already partaking of the wine of carnal debauchery and worldly pride while Christian virgins abstain from such corporeal corruptions.¹⁵⁹ Inferring from scripture that the Jews broke out in laughter during the Passion of the Lord, Ambrose determines that the same laughter will scorch the Synagogue forever. Christian virgins are to avoid such gross impiety.¹⁶⁰

Following Origen's cue, Ambrose creates anti-Jewish discourse by explicating Christian virginity in contrast to Jewish carnality and worldliness. As in *De institutione virginis*, the bishop sets virginity as the very standard and touchstone of Christianity in *Exhortatio virginitatis*. For Ambrose, the triumph of the church is symbolized by the purity and spirituality of the Christian virgin. This heavenly being is intended to stand in sharp contrast to the Jews, who are portrayed as licentious, mundane, impious, and corrupt. Such stylizations, I argue, are part of an elaborate evasion related to his controversial "discovery" of the bones of Agricola and Vitalis. After his initial suggestion of a Jewish cemetery and a Jewish audience at Bologna, the bishop denigrates the Jews throughout this treatise in order to reinforce the unworthiness of those who originally had the supposed relics in their possession. Christian virginity plays a central role in Ambrose's defense of his discovery and removal of the martyrs' bones. The Church, exemplified by the Christian virgin, has superseded the carnal corruption of the people of the Synagogue and thus is infinitely more deserving of the presence of the precious relics the bishop has found.

¹⁵⁹ Ambrose, *Exhort. virg.* 12.81 (Gori, II, 262).

¹⁶⁰ Ambrose, *Exhort. virg.* 11.75-76 (Gori, II, 258).

At the same time, the bishop's stark differentiation of virginity from Judaism, of the Church from the Synagogue, solidifies the prominent place of virginity within Christianity and ensures the ideological superiority of virginity to marriage. His strong association of virginity with Christianity draws a connection between marriage and Jewish carnality and worldliness. This argument, however, is also largely masked by the diversion of Jewish corruption.

VII. Conclusion

In conjunction with chapter 3, this chapter has considered some of the numerous discursive strategies Ambrose utilized in his establishment and expansion of his ascetic program for women. Looking specifically at his final full-length treatises on virginity, *De institutione virginis* and *Exhortatio virginitatis*, we may view the evolution of ascetic rhetoric more clearly attuned to the needs and expectations of the lay members of his audience who, while Christians, were also entrenched in the cultural commitments of fourth-century Greco-Roman society.

While the bishop continues to advocate the superiority of virginity to marriage and the privileged position of the virgins among the ranks of the church, he employs various readings of scripture to temper some of the more theologically- and socially-disturbing features of his earlier treatises. While largely abandoning anti-marital rhetoric in *De institutione*, he increasingly understands virginity as the paradigm of Christian salvation. Utilizing language and imagery from Ephesians and the Song of Songs, Ambrose associates virgins alone with the bride of Christ figure. Such stylings negate

the need for negative rhetoric concerning marriage as virginity becomes the very definition of the perfected human.

Another element in the bishop's refinement of his ascetic program is his re-reading of the Biblical character Eve. While his earlier assessments had largely denigrated her role in the fall of humanity, Ambrose speaks apologetically on behalf of the matriarch and, by extension, of womankind. This revised reading likely reflects the bishop's desire to deflect the verbal barbs of Jovinian and other local critics who found his ascetic teachings derogatory of both marriage and women. At the same time, Ambrose's redemption of Eve may also be understood as an attempt to tame the gender-transgressive aspects of earlier ascetic practice. By revalorizing womanhood, the bishop negates the virgin's need to overcome her sex and transgress the societal boundaries by which females had traditionally been bound. Similar moderation of virginity's sexually-subversive aspects is visual in the bishop's reinterpretation of martyrdom through his reading of the Virgin in *De institutione*. By styling Mary as the epitomal virgin and would-be martyr, and emphasizing her submission, modesty, and humility before the cross, he aligns the role of the female virgin-martyr with the common cultural expectations of his audience.

While Biblical women are important figures in Ambrose's reinvention of virginity, so is a contemporary one. In *Exhortatio virginitatis*, Ambrose borrows the voice of the Roman matron Juliana in order to position virginity as a matter of filial piety. Speaking as Juliana, the bishop is also able to decry marriage and praise asceticism at length as one who knows from personal experience. At the same time, the façade of

Juliana protects him from the criticisms of his ascetic zeal that he had endured earlier on in his career.

In similar fashion, the Jews serve to deflect criticism of the bishop's activities and also bolster the bishop's claims to virginity's superiority. Following Origen, the bishop interprets the Jews of scripture as worldly and carnal in contrast to pure and ethereal Christian virgins. While this interpretation of Jewishness is designed to support Ambrose's controversial discovery and removal of the remains of martyrs from a Jewish cemetery, it conversely reinforces virginity's lofty status in the church and its position as the very touchstone of Christian salvation. By constructing a common enemy in the Jews for his Christian listeners, Ambrose defends his involvement in the inventio of the martyrs while simultaneously supporting the ascetic program he had long advocated.

While Christian virgins are rhetorically engaged to highlight the worldliness of the Jews in *Exhortatio virginitatis*, they also serve to highlight elsewhere the depravations of pagan virgins whose practices constitute a competing ascetic ideology that must be defeated or subsumed. In the following chapter, I will explore at greater length Ambrose's deployment of virginity as a discourse of differentiation between Christians and pagans.

Chapter Four

The Veil and the Fillet: Virginity against the Pagans

The breast of Symmachus was animated by the warmest zeal for the cause of expiring paganism, and his religious antagonists lamented the abuse of his genius, and the inefficacy of his moral virtues. . . . But the hopes of Symmachus were repeatedly baffled by the firm and dexterous opposition of the archbishop of Milan; who fortified the emperors against the fallacious eloquence of the advocate of Rome.

--Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*

In the previous chapters, I have considered a number of Ambrose of Milan's ascetic reading strategies in context of various challenges presented to him by different groups of Christians. In this chapter, I wish to highlight the bishop's readings of Christian virginity in light of non-Christian opposition by reexamining his involvement in the so-called Altar of Victory controversy of the late fourth century.

A good deal has been written over the past centuries about the struggle between pagan and Christian groups over the Altar of Victory. Much of this scholarship has focused on Ambrose of Milan's involvement in this dispute and used his letters as sources to reconstruct his relationships with Symmachus and the emperor Valentinian II. In such assessments, Ambrose has often been credited with a very significant role in the failure of Symmachus's objectives.¹ The result has often been an overestimation of the bishop's general political influence in the matter. More recently, scholars have shown

¹ In addition to Gibbon, see also Angelo Paredi, *Saint Ambrose: His Life and Times* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1964), 230-235; Jean-Remy Palanque, *Saint Ambroise et l'Empire Romain: contribution à l'histoire des rapports de l'Église et de l'État à la fin du quatrième siècle* (Paris: E. d' Boccard, 1933). F. Homes Dudden reports that "in the encounter with the pagans Ambrose had won a decisive triumph." See his *Saint Ambrose: His Life and Times* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1935), 267.

that the bishop's participation in the controversy was probably more limited and his influence on the emperor's decision much more modest than once previously thought.²

Nevertheless, Ambrose's brief involvement in this decade-long debate is an interesting feature of the bishop's career. From 382 to 392, Symmachus submitted to the imperial court six petitions on behalf of the senate seeking a restoration of the Altar of Victory and some pagan religious privileges that had been revoked by imperial legislation. Symmachus's first petition, carried by a delegation to the Gratian's court at Milan in 382, was blocked; Ambrose had presented to the emperor a petition signed by numerous Christian senators, forwarded to him by the Roman bishop Damasus, who supported his legislation and threatening to stop attending the senate if his measures were revoked.³ In 384, Symmachus submitted a second petition to the new western emperor Valentinian II seeking largely the same ends. Ambrose wrote two letters (*Ep.* 72 and 73) to the young emperor against the senator's petition.⁴ Yet despite Ambrose's later claims, the bishop's influence upon the emperor's decision seems to have been negligible.⁵

Valentinian II replied negatively to the petition of 384 before he had received either of

² For example, see Neil McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan: Church and Court in a Christian Capital* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 166-167, 264; Cristiana Sogno, *Q. Aurelius Symmachus: A Political Biography* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 46-51; Rita Lizzi Testa, "Christian Emperor, Vestal Virgins and Priestly Colleges: Reconsidering the End of Roman Paganism," *Antiquité Tardive* 15 (2007): 251-262; Klaus Rosen, "Fides contra dissimulationem: Ambrosius und Symmachus im Kampf um den Victoriaaltar," *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 37 (1994): 29-36.

³ Ambrose, *Ep.* 72.10 (CSEL 82.3, 15-16). Ambrose also may have been responsible for Gratian's refusal even to give an audience to the senatorial delegation. See Symmachus, *Relatio* 3.1 (CSEL 82.3, 21-22).

⁴ These numbers refer to the CSEL edition of Ambrose's letters. In the PL, these letters are numbered 17 and 18 respectively.

⁵ In a later letter to Eugenius, Ambrose claims that his letters, read aloud to the emperor and several distinguished members of the court, persuaded Valentinian to do what his Christian faith demanded of him. See Ambrose, *Ep. extra coll.* 10.2 (CSEL 82.3, 205-206).

Ambrose's letters, suggesting that the bishop played a brief and merely confirmatory role in a dispute between the senate and the emperor.⁶ While Symmachus and the senate directed four additional petitions to succeeding emperors Eugenius and Theodosius over the following eight years, there is little evidence that Ambrose ever involved himself in the matter again.⁷

Ambrose's brief involvement in this controversy has most often been understood as a manifestation of the bishop's inherent zeal for the Christian faith and distaste for the ongoing practices of paganism by scholars of generations past.⁸ More recently, scholars such as McLynn have interpreted Ambrose's letters to Valentinian II as self-serving assertions of personal prestige and authority.⁹ While Ambrose's motive for writing to Valentinian II may have been no more than to simply strengthen the resolve of a very young emperor in the face of strong senatorial pressure or simply to make himself look good, I wish to consider in this chapter the ascetic dimensions of the Altar of Victory documents in order to suggest an important connection between this dispute and the bishop's burgeoning program for virgins in Milan. When Symmachus and Ambrose each address the emperor in 384, virgins—both pagan and Christian—play a significant part in

⁶ Ambrose, *Ep.* 73.1 (CSEL 82.3, 34).

⁷ Despite Palanque's assertion (*Saint Ambroise*, 119) that Ambrose was behind the initial formulation of Gratian's anti-pagan measures, Ambrose denies that he had proposed that subsidies for pagan temples be removed (Ambrose, *Ep. extra coll.* 10.2 [CSEL 82.3, 205-206]). McLynn strongly supports Ambrose's claim, attributing this legislation to the "Christian careerists" of Gratian's entourage. See McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 151.

⁸ For example, see Palanque, *St. Ambroise*, 133-134; Paredi, *Saint Ambrose*, 228: "... He [Ambrose] had consecrated his entire life to Christ. He could not remain indifferent to the moral degradation in which so many were languishing, as if Christ had not come also for them. He, therefore, did not hesitate to act."

⁹ McLynn, 166-167, 264. According to McLynn, the letters, book-ending Symmachus's *relatio* in Ambrose's corpus, were "designed specifically to create the illusion that he defeated Symmachus upon the latter's own terms."

the argumentation that is presented. While the Altar of Victory is under debate, Symmachus's petition of that year is largely concerned with a suspension of the rights and privileges of the virgin priestesses of Vesta, one of the oldest and famous cults of pagan Rome. Ambrose rigorously objects to a restoration of traditional privileges to the Vestal Virgins who are not only a central symbol of pagan Rome but also represent a virginity perceived to be in direct competition with his own ascetic ideology.

In the first part of this chapter, I will review the letters of Symmachus and Ambrose to register the specific arguments of each concerning the Vestal Virgins, highlighting especially the ways in which Christian virginity serves as Ambrose's answer to Symmachus's claims on behalf of the Vestals. Then I will consider Ambrose's arguments in relation to the attitudes of earlier Christian writers toward the Vestals, attributing his departure from earlier Latin writers to both his primary loyalty to Athanasius as well as his increasing awareness of the growing practical and ideological resemblances between Christian virgins and Vestal Virgins in the late fourth century. In the final part of this chapter, I will suggest some of the ways in which Ambrose's ascetic program paralleled the practices of and ideology associated by Symmachus and other Romans with the cult of Vesta in order to further account for the bishop's strong objection to Symmachus's seemingly modest petition. While the Vestal Virgins are a particularly important marker of paganism in general for Ambrose, they also represent for Ambrose an ideology of virginity with significant and long-standing cultural importance that competes with the bishop's ideology of Christian virginity. Thus he vigorously rejects any claims of money or merit on their behalf.

I. Symmachus, the Altar of Victory, and the Vestal Virgins

Several historians have discussed at length the significance of the removal of the Altar of Victory from the Roman senate house in the 390s in context of the larger, on-going competition between paganism and Christianity in the western empire.¹⁰ The altar and the golden statue of the goddess Victory that it bore had been prominent fixtures of the senate house since the first century B.C.E. Romans claimed the statue of winged Victory from the city of Tarentum at the defeat of Pyrrhus of Epirus in 272 B.C.E. In 29 B.C.E., Augustus erected the monument in the *Curia Iulia* in honor of the Roman defeat of Antony and Cleopatra at Actium two years earlier and decorated it with spoils from Egypt. The altar remained in the senate house until 357 when the Christian emperor Constantius II banned pagan sacrifice and removed it from the building. When Julian (“the Apostate”) became emperor in 361, he restored the altar to its traditional place. Despite Julian’s short reign, the altar remained in the senate house until 382 when Gratian had it removed once again and absorbed its funds into the imperial treasury. In 393, the usurper Eugenius restored the altar to the *curia* yet again, but with his defeat at Theodosius’s hands the following year, the altar was removed permanently.¹¹

¹⁰ Some of the most recent of these include Klaus Rosen, “Fides contra dissimulationem,” 29-36; Michaela Zelzer, “Symmachus, Ambrosius, Hieronymus und das römische Erbe,” in Elizabeth A. Livingstone, ed., *Studia Patristica XXVIII* (Louvain: Peeters, 1998), 146-157; Richard Klein, *Der Streit um den Victoriaaltar. Die dritte Relatio des Symmachus und die Briefe 17, 18 und 57 des Mailänder Bischofs Ambrosius* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1972); Cristiana Sogno, *Q. Aurelius Symmachus*, 45-50; Albrecht Dihle, “Zum Streit um den Altar der Viktoria,” in Willem den Boer, ed., *Romanitas et Christianitas : studia Iano Henrico Waszink* (Amsterdam: North Holland Publishing Company, 1973), 81-97; Boniface Ramsey, *Ambrose* (London: Routledge, 1997), 29-31; Timothy D. Barnes, “Augustine, Symmachus, and Ambrose,” in Joanne McWilliam, ed., *Augustine: From Rhetor to Theologian* (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1992), 7-13.

¹¹ Klein, *Der Streit*, 3-16 gives an excellent summary of the historical events surrounding the Altar of Victory controversy.

The Altar of Victory, a central symbol of Roman dominance, is often considered to be the original spark of religious controversy at this moment. Yet far more than the loss of an altar was at stake for both pagans and Christians involved in this long dispute. From Constantius II on, Christian emperors gradually chipped away a thousand years of traditional Roman *religio*, culminating in Theodosius's edict of 392 forbidding most forms of non-Christian worship, including private religious rites.¹² Constantius II's removal of the altar had included not only a ban on pagan sacrifices but also the closure of some pagan temples and punishments for those classified as soothsayers and magicians.¹³ Julian's reinstatement of the altar had included a revival of pagan sacrifice and the restoration of many pagan temples, but Gratian restored at least some of Constantius II's anti-pagan legislation during his reign. Among his most significant anti-pagan measures, many of which were probably put into place in late 382, were a rejection of the traditional imperial title of *pontifex maximus*, the highest-ranking authority in state religious practice, the removal of the altar and statue of Victory in the senate house, a suspension of the long-standing public support that had maintained the Vestal Virgins, and an absorption of the Vestal temple treasury into the imperial coffers.¹⁴

The ultimate fate of the Altar of Victory is largely unknown. Symmachus's final petitions concerning the altar date to 403 or 404, suggesting that it survived for some time after its final removal, but was probably dismantled or destroyed soon after since there is no mention of its existence after that time.

¹² *Codex Theodosianus*, 16.10.12. (SC 497, 442-446).

¹³ *Codex Theodosianus* 16.10.1-2, 4, 6 (SC 497, 426-429; 430-432; 434).

¹⁴ On Gratian's rejection of the title *pontifex maximus*, see Alan Cameron, "Gratian's Repudiation of the Pontifical Robe," *Journal of Roman Studies* 58 (1968): 96-102. On his refusal of support to the Vestals and his absorption of their temple treasury, see Symmachus, *Relatio* 3.11-14 (CSEL 82.3, 27-28).

As noted earlier, the senate responded to Gratian's mandates of 382 with a series of petitions over the following ten years. The most famous of these was Symmachus's 384 petition presented as an official *relatio* or correspondence with the emperor. It has been preserved in both Symmachus's corpus as *Relatio* 3 and among the letters of Ambrose.¹⁵ In this petition to Valentinian II, the Vestal Virgins have a particularly prominent role. Their virtues, especially their virginity, and their public religious function serve a central role in Symmachus's argumentation for a restoration of pagan rights and privileges.

First and foremost, Symmachus's *relatio* is designed to appeal strongly to the honor of the imperial family. The restoration of the Altar of Victory to its place in the senate house and the return of subsidies to public religious practice are framed as matters of filial duty. For the instruction of Valentinian II, Symmachus invokes an image of the elder Valentinian looking down upon the dishonor of the pagan priesthoods and blaming himself for his sons' violation of established custom.¹⁶ Likewise, the senator exhorts Valentinian II to reverse Gratian's anti-pagan measures as a means of protecting his brother from the infamy of bad choice.¹⁷

But Symmachus's rhetorical strategies in this letter involve not only an appeal to traditional family honor but to the *mos maiorum* of the Roman people in general. Symmachus impresses upon Valentinian his responsibility as protector of sacred Roman tradition. The emperor is duty-bound to protect the laws and oracles of the homeland and

¹⁵ While I use the version of Symmachus's petition preserved in Ambrose's corpus as *Ep.* 72a in CSEL 82.3, I refer to it in this chapter and throughout these notes as *Relatio* 3.

¹⁶ Symmachus, *Relatio* 3.20 (CSEL 82.3, 32).

¹⁷ Symmachus, *Relatio* 3.20 (CSEL 82.3, 32-33).

to uphold the teachings of the ancestors. In fact, the senator suggests, the emperor is permitted nothing contrary to the custom of his ancestors (*mos parentum*).¹⁸ Valentinian must uphold the religious situation that has been most beneficial to the common good in the past: the imperial practice of the traditional rites, or at least a toleration of their practice.¹⁹ While the emperor may have abandoned the ancient practices himself, he can at least give back the traditional accoutrements of the Senate so that they may be passed on to future generations as they were inherited by the present one.²⁰

In Symmachus's appeal to the *mos maiorum* of Rome, the Vestal Virgins become a focal point in Symmachus's argument for the restoration of traditional religious practice. For the senator, the support of the Vestals is one of the "old payments" (*subsidia vetera*) that even the stingiest of Roman emperors have guaranteed in the past.²¹ All the misfortunes of the Roman people, including famines and poor harvests, have arisen from a failure to honor adequately the Vestal Virgins and other ministers of the gods with adequate support and befitting privileges.²² "When was the oak ever shaken for human usage, when were the roots of weeds ever pulled up, when did fruitfulness on all sides desert the land, despite its failures from year to year, when provisions were shared by both the people and the sacred virgins?," Symmachus asks.²³ While imperial

¹⁸ Symmachus, *Relatio* 3.2 (CSEL 82.3, 22-23).

¹⁹ Symmachus, *Relatio* 3.3 (CSEL 82.3, 23).

²⁰ Symmachus, *Relatio* 3.4 (CSEL 82.3, 24).

²¹ Symmachus, *Relatio* 3.11-12 (CSEL 82.3, 27-28).

²² Symmachus, *Relatio* 3.15 (CSEL 82.3, 29-30).

²³ Symmachus, *Relatio* 3.17 (CSEL 82.3, 31).

support for the Vestals and other public priesthods began as an imperial gift, it has become through custom a right that must be honored for the welfare of the empire.²⁴

For Symmachus, the virginity of the Vestals is particularly important to the well-being of the Roman state. Their chastity represents a consecration of the body, and through it, the self, to the greater public good. The senator sees their vows of continence as a benefit to all because they provide “celestial defenses” (*caelestia praesidia*) to sustain the empire by procuring the favor of divine powers.²⁵ The support the senator wishes to see reinstated—the *stipendium castitatis* (stipend for chastity)—enables the virgins to dedicate their time to performing their priestly duties on behalf of the state. In this way, their chastity staves off the “barrenness” of famine and ensures a plentiful harvest year after year.²⁶ Yet while the emperor’s refusal to support their sacred chastity threatens the continued prosperity of the empire, it does not degrade the honored status of the Vestal Virgins but rather enhances it. According to Symmachus, those who withdraw their financial support of the Vestals actually “contribute that much more to their praiseworthiness, since in fact the virginity that is dedicated to the public weal increases in merit when it lacks a reward.”²⁷ The nobility of their chastity is only enhanced, he argues, when their service is without monetary compensation. The senator makes much use of the powers and merits of Vestal virginity to argue for the restoration of public support to this institution.

²⁴ Symmachus, *Relatio* 3.18 (CSEL 82.3, 32).

²⁵ Symmachus, *Relatio* 3.14 (CSEL 82.3, 29).

²⁶ Symmachus, *Relatio* 3.15-16 (CSEL 82.3, 30-31).

²⁷ Symmachus, *Relatio* 3.11 (CSEL 82.3, 28).

Symmachus speaks at length about the importance of the “old ways” of worship, especially the preservation of the Vestal stipend, in the continued preservation of the state. From these and other passages, some modern scholars have assumed that Gratian’s reforms had broadly suspended funds and privileges to several, or even all, pagan priesthods under his jurisdiction, suggesting a widespread persecution of pagan practices.²⁸ In a recent article, however, Rita Lizzi Testa has reviewed the documents pertaining to Symmachus’s petition to Valentinian II in an attempt to reconstruct the exact nature of Gratian’s anti-pagan measures of two years prior with some surprising results. Taking into consideration such factors as language, custom, and Roman law, Testa argues that Symmachus’s petition pertains almost entirely to the rights and privileges of the Vestal Virgins rather than to those of pagan priests, altars, and temples in general.²⁹ Testa’s analysis of the senator’s requests leads her to conclude that Gratian’s anti-pagan legislation of 382 probably targeted the Altar of Victory and the priesthood of the Vestal Virgins exclusively, suggesting a much smaller set of reforms than many modern scholars have previously considered.³⁰

²⁸ For example, see Palanque, *Saint Ambroise*, 117; Hans von Campenhausen, *Ambrosius von Miland als Kirchenpolitiker* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1929), 167; J.H.W.G. Liebeschuetz, *Ambrose of Milan: Political Letters and Speeches* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005), 61; André Chastagnol, *La Préfecture urbaine à Rome sous le Bas-Empire* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1960), 157-160. Testa gives a more exhaustive list in her “Christian Emperor, Vestal Virgins and Priestly Colleges,” 252, notes 2-9.

²⁹ Testa, “Christian Emperor, Vestal Virgins,” 255-257.

³⁰ Testa, “Christian Emperor, Vestal Virgins,” 254. Testa’s recognition of Symmachus’s almost-exclusive focus upon the rights and privileges of the Vestal Virgins is sound. The methodological approach, however, that leads her to conclude that Gratian’s anti-pagan legislation must have encompassed little else than Vestal suppression is somewhat problematic. For example, she completely rejects Ambrose’s letters as a source worth considering:

“... It is clear that neither Symmachus nor Ambrose provide totally reliable witnesses. Nevertheless, the value of their texts is very different for the reconstruction of Gratian’s measures. If we take the approach of reading the *Third Relatio* and the two of Ambrose’s letters in context of an ideal

Testa's conclusions may have important implications for Ambrose's involvement in the controversy. If the Vestal Virgins were at the heart of Gratian's reforms and Symmachus's petitions, they may also suggest further reasons for the bishop's active engagement in the Altar of Victory dispute. While the Vestals may have symbolized for some the continuance of pagan worship in the fourth century, they also represented the most visible and long-standing cult of virginity in the western Roman world. For nearly a thousand years, dedicated female virgins had maintained the sacred flame of Vesta, the Roman goddess of the hearth, since Rome's earliest times. The institution of the cult was traditionally attributed to Numa Pompilius, the second king of Rome, in the seventh century B.C.E. According to tradition, Vesta had spurned the amorous advances of Neptune and Apollo in order to remain virginal. To honor her chastity and virtue, Numa chose four young female virgins to serve as her priestesses.³¹ This number varied

debate between Symmachus and Ambrose, that is exactly as Ambrose wanted those texts to be read, we are lead to take an incorrect perspective. We will forget that Ambrose's letters ... were rhetorical pieces where the bishop selected what it seemed more convenient to say or not ... in order to achieve specific goals. ... On the contrary, the *Third Relatio* was an official document, which the Urban Prefect wrote by the Senate's appointment, with the sole purpose of obtaining the re-establishment of those pagan privileges Gratian's measures had suppressed ... What he asked to restore had to be exactly what Gratian had cancelled. In this sense, only Symmachus's *relatio* can provide reliable information as to the subjects of Gratian's measures. Ambrose's passages are relevant only with a view to finding out to what extent he manipulated terms and topics in order to obtain more privileges for his Church, while he set about convincing the Emperor to refuse the Senate's requests."

Testa discounts Ambrose's letters as sources for Gratian's reforms on the basis of his possible ecclesiastical motivations but fails to recognize the highly-constructed, rhetorical nature of Symmachus's petition. As an aspiring politician composing a politically-charged, highly-stylized public document, his own personal motivations must be drawn into question, not to mention his literary strategies and stylings. Second, while the significance of Ambrose's correspondence with Valentinian II must not be overestimated in context of the larger debate at hand, they nevertheless may correctly suggest that Gratian's anti-pagan measures had been broader than Symmachus's petition may suggest. Testa's suggestion that Symmachus was bound to ask only for the pagan privileges that Gratian had suspended overlooks the fact that the senate may have been seeking only the restoration of only part of the privileges pagans had previously enjoyed as a means of compromise.

³¹ Plutarch, *Vita parallelae: Numa* 9.5-10.7 (In *Plutarch*, vol. 1, ed. Bernadotte Perrin, Loeb Classical Library [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1923], 339-345). Dionysius of Halicarnassus theorizes that

throughout different periods of Roman history, but by Ambrose's time, the cult was comprised of seven virgin priestesses.³² Until the reforms of Christian emperors in the fourth century C.E., the Vestal Temple, located in the heart of the Roman Forum, and the virgins who lived there had been maintained largely by public funds.³³

Virginity was the first requirement of the Vestal order. In order to be worthy for the service of Vesta, it was mandatory that a young girl be undefiled by the act of sex and demonstrate no other bodily imperfection.³⁴ The Vestal Virgins were chosen for the priesthood between the ages of six and ten and then served for a term of at least thirty years.³⁵ Although they were free to marry once their service had ended, supposedly only a few took this opportunity and those who did were so unhappy in marriage that they inspired the others to remain constant in their virginity until death.³⁶

From the instigation of the cult, Vestal Virgins enjoyed extraordinary social and legal privileges that set them apart from other Roman women around them. Mary Beard

“the custody of the [Vestal] fire was committed to virgins, rather than to men, because fire is incorrupt and a virgin is undefiled, and the most chaste of mortal things must be agreeable to the purest of those that are divine” (*Antiquitates Romanae* 2.66 [in Earnest Cary, *Dionysius of Halicarnassus: Roman Antiquities*, vol. 1, Loeb Classical Library [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1937], 503).

³² Dionysius Halicarnassus reported the expansion of the Vestal priesthood to six in his time (*Antiq. Rom.* 2.67 [Cary, I, 507]). Ambrose cites seven Vestals at his time in his *Ep.* 73.11 (CSEL 82.3, 40).

³³ Plut. *Numa* 10.2 (Perrin, 343). While there were certain periods in Roman history in which the Vestal Virgins did not receive some public funding, these were few. As noted above, Symmachus alludes to a time in which the public neglect of the Vestal temple led to famine.

³⁴ Aulus Gellius, *Noctes Atticae* 1.12.2-3 (in P.K. Marshall, A. *Gellii: Noctes Atticae* I [Oxford: Clarendon, 1968] 61). According to Aulus Gellius, girls with speech or hearing defects were not permitted to become Vestal Virgins.

³⁵ Dionysius Halicarnassus, *Antiq. Rom.* 2.67 (Cary, I, 507); Plutarch, *Numa* 10.1 (Perrin, 342-343).

³⁶ Plutarch, *Numa* 10.2 (Perrin, 343); Dionysius Halicarnassus, *Antiq. Rom.* 1.76, 2.67 (Cary, I, 253-255; 507).

has attributed this to their continent bodies. As desexualized beings, they were given rights and privileges that had generally been reserved solely for men in Roman society.³⁷ When the Vestal Virgins went outside, they were preceded by lictors with faces, a privilege reserved for only male magistrates.³⁸ Under the earliest Roman kings, women of all ages were under some form of male guardianship. The Vestal Virgins, however, were given special autonomy from the beginning of the cult's existence.³⁹ As symbols of Rome and its people, they were emancipated from any legal relationships to men. As mentioned previously, they held property and made wills in their own right as men did.⁴⁰ During later centuries, women were generally prohibited from athletic displays and matches in the theater, but Augustus assigned the Vestals reserved seats facing the tribunal of the praetor, who presided over the games.⁴¹ Although regular women were

³⁷ Mary Beard, "The Sexual Status of Vestal Virgins," *Journal of Roman Studies* 70 (1980): 17. See also Mary Beard, "Re-Reading Vestal Virginité," in Richard Hawley & Barbara Levick, eds., *Women in Antiquity: New Assessments* (London: Routledge, 1995), 166-175. In the former article, Beard argued for the importance of the desexualized Vestal body for the attainment of "masculine" privileges. Nevertheless, in her later article, she rejects the notion that the Vestals functioned as symbolic men in Roman society.

³⁸ Plutarch, *Numa* 10.3 (Perrin, 343). The lictor was a symbol of sacred power; only certain magistrates had right to its company. Most priests and tribunes traveled without this emblem. See Staples, *From Good Goddess*, 45.

³⁹ According to Plutarch, the Vestals had the right to make a will during their father's lifetime and to conduct their own business affairs from Numa's instigation of the cult. See Plutarch, *Numa* 10.3 (Perrin, 343).

⁴⁰ Aulus Gellius, *Noctes Atticae*, 1.12.9 (Marshall, 61). See Parker, "Why Were the Vestals Virgins?," 72-73.

⁴¹ Suetonius, *Vita Divi Augusti* 44.3 (in *C. Suetoni Tranquilli opera, vol. I: De vita Caesarum libri VIII*, ed. Maximilianus Ihm [Leipzig: Teubner, 1908], 196).

excluded from the Roman court system, a Vestal Virgin had the right to appear in court and serve as an instrument in a Senate investigation.⁴²

While such privileges made them in some senses more socially akin to Roman men than to women, Beard has rejected the notion that Vestals were “token men” in Roman society. Instead, she has argued that the special privileges Vestals enjoyed were the side effects of their removal from the reproductive realm of womanhood through virginity. Taken as young women into the order before beginning puberty and then, under the restriction of celibacy, never given the opportunity to mature into sexual creatures, the Vestals occupied a non-sexual, undeveloped state throughout the term of their service rather than a “masculine” one. They did not exist as females or pseudo-males but rather outside of all traditional Roman gender categories, a state of ideological desexualization. Dwelling within this state of neither traditional womanhood nor manhood, the Vestal Virgins were set apart and transformed into beings capable of fully representing Rome and its people in relationship to the gods and performing the rites that would ensure the well-being and prosperity of the entire state.⁴³

Beard has also registered some of the ways in which the Vestal office was infused with this powerful cultural ambiguity beyond just its requisite virginity. Their common dress was the *stola*, a wide band of color sewn onto the tunic indicating that the wearer was a matron. The Vestals had the right granted by Augustus to a *matrona* with three children to make a will and to conduct their own business affairs. At the same time, they

⁴² Deborah F. Sawyer, *Women and Religion in the First Christian Centuries* (London: Routledge, 1996), 126.

⁴³ Beard, “The Sexual Status of Vestal Virgins,” 17, 19-22.

wore their hair in the *sex crines* or “six curls”, the traditional style of brides on their wedding days. These and other characteristics suggest that they were neither daughters nor matrons but in fact both. In this way, they defied traditional Roman social categories of wife and daughter and achieved a somewhat “magical” status in society.⁴⁴ The cult of Vesta was distinguished not only for virginity and its accompanying privileges but by the highly-ambiguous social position of its priestesses.

Sacrosanct, highly visible in the community, and (in general) perpetually virginal, the Vestal Virgin posed significant ideological competition to the cult of Christian virginity which Ambrose wished to promote. The bishop pleads with the emperor in the hope of winning favor not only for Christianity but also for the ascetic cause.

II. Ambrose and the Vestal Virgins

Ambrose’s negative attitudes toward the Vestal Virgins are reflected to some extent in both of his letters to Valentinian II against Symmachus. Like Symmachus, he appeals strongly to the emperor’s sense of familial honor in his first letter as a means of waylaying any sense of religious toleration in the young emperor. The bishop admonishes Valentinian II to emulate the piety of his brother Gratian and his father Valentinian I, who both will rebuke him harshly should he fail to uphold previous anti-pagan decrees.⁴⁵ “Hence, O emperor, since you realize that you will be doing injury to

⁴⁴ Beard, “The Sexual Status of Vestal Virgins,” 16. See also Robin Lorsch Wildfang, *Rome’s Vestal Virgins: A Study of Rome’s Vestal Priestesses in the Late Republic and Early Empire* (London: Routledge, 2006), 13-16; and Parker, “Why Were the Vestals Virgins?,” 71-72.

⁴⁵ Ambrose, *Ep.* 72.15-16 (CSEL 82.3, 18-20).

God first and then to your father and brother if you decree such a thing,” Ambrose contends, “I entreat you to do what you know will profit your salvation before God.”⁴⁶

Toward the end of the epistle, the bishop threatens the emperor with serious ecclesiastical disassociation should he grant Symmachus’s requests:

What will you reply to the bishop when he says to you: “The Church does not seek your gifts because you have adorned the temples of the pagan gods with gifts. Christ’s altar refuses your gifts because you set up an altar to idols. For yours is the voice, yours the hand, yours the approval, yours the deed. The Lord Jesus rejects and refuses your service because you offered service to idols, for he said to you: ‘You cannot serve two masters’ (Matt. 6.24). The virgins consecrated to God do not enjoy your privileges but the virgins consecrated to Vesta lay claim to them. ...”⁴⁷

Ambrose warns that the church will not receive the emperor’s gifts if he gives altars, temples, and subsidies to the worship of pagan gods, a thinly-veiled threat designed to secure the emperor’s compliance if appeals to his Christianity and family honor are unsuccessful. As part of this argument, the bishop contrasts Christian virgins to the virgin priestesses of the goddess Vesta. While the former virgins represent the pious and appropriate worship of Christ, the latter symbolize the service of a “second” master”: the pagan gods, whose temples and idols are an abomination. The two groups are set in stark contrast to each other as Ambrose attempts to persuade the emperor to stay the privileges of the pagans.

⁴⁶ Ambrose, *Ep. 72.17* (CSEL 82.3, 20).

⁴⁷ Ambrose, *Ep. 72.14* (CSEL 82.3, 17-18): *Quid respondebis sacerdoti dicenti tibi: ‘Munera tua non quaerit ecclesia, quia templa gentilium muneribus adornasti? Ara Christi dona tua respuit, quoniam aram simulacris fecisti. Vox enim tua, manus tua et subscriptio tua opus est tuum. Obsequium tuum dominus Iesus recusat et respuit, quoniam idolis obsecutus es; dixit enim tibi: ‘Non potestis duobus dominis servire.’ Privilegia tua sacratae deo virgines non habent et vindicant virgines Vestae.*

In consideration of the significant symbolic power of the Vestal virgins in Roman culture, Ambrose's reference to the cult as a marker of pagan worship is not surprising. Scholars have noted the ways in which the cult was structured to set apart the Vestal Virgins as highly visible symbols of the pagan Roman state and its citizens.⁴⁸ The goddess Vesta herself had symbolized the city for the poets and historians of Rome.⁴⁹ In the goddess's stead, the Vestals prayed on behalf of the people of Rome and tended the public hearth of the city to ensure that the eternal fire signifying the empire's well-being was never extinguished. The Vestal Virgin was, by her vow, consecrated to carry out the sacred pagan rites of Rome on behalf of its people.⁵⁰ The Vestal temple, a prominent and striking figure in the heart of the Roman forum, was the storehouse for important state documents.⁵¹ Furthermore, Holt Parker has connected the Vestal's "unpenetrated" virgin body and the unpenetrated walls of Rome, arguing that Vestal virginity both symbolized and guaranteed the inviolability of the (pagan) Roman state.⁵²

At the same time, I wish to argue that the Vestals were not merely a useful symbol of pagan Rome in general for Ambrose. The Vestal Virgins became a particular target of the bishop's invective here and elsewhere in his writings not merely because their celibate lifestyle made them an easy foil for Christian virginity but also because they

⁴⁸ Ariadne Staples, *From Good Goddess to Vestal Virgins* (London: Routledge, 1998), 129-130, 135, 137, 143 and Holt N. Parker, "Why Were the Vestals Virgins? Or the Chastity of Women and the Safety of the Roman State," in Bonnie MacLachlan and Judith Fletcher, eds., *Virginity Revisited: Configurations of the Unpossessed Body* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 68-69.

⁴⁹ Parker, "Why Were the Vestals Virgins?," 69. Parker refers to the writings of Livy, Vergil, and Horace as examples.

⁵⁰ See Aulus Gellius, *Noctes Atticae* 1.12.13-14 (Marshall, 62).

⁵¹ See Parker, "Why Were the Vestals Virgins?," 69.

⁵² Parker, "Why Were the Vestals Virgins?," 69.

represented a powerful and pervasive ideology of virginity in the minds of the Roman people. As mentioned earlier, Vestal virginity was the most long-standing, prestigious, and highly-visible virginity tradition in the Latin West before the rise of Christian virginity.⁵³ Born and educated in the city of Rome, Ambrose would have been acutely aware of the cult of Vesta and the ideology of virginity that it represented. For the bishop, Vestal Virginity represented a competing ideology of virginity whose socio-ideological position needed to be negated and subsumed by the institution of Christian virginity.

As previously mentioned, in his first letter to Valentinian II, Ambrose drew a sharp contrast between Christian virgins and the Vestal Virgins as part of his argument against the restoration of pagan privileges. While Valentinian II had received and replied negatively to Symmachus's petition before he received this missive from Ambrose, the bishop drafted a second, lengthier reply to the *relatio* that he addressed to the emperor. Justifying this seemingly superfluous action, the bishop cites in his opening paragraph a need for enduring caution in the matter as well as his desire to respond to specific statements in Symmachus's appeal.⁵⁴

It is clear that at least some of Ambrose's continued concern with Symmachus's *relatio* is attributable to the senator's assertions about the Vestal Virgins. The bishop cites three specific objections to Symmachus's arguments at beginning of his second letter that suggest this much: that Rome asks for her ancient cults, that subsidies should

⁵³ Some other pagan cults in Italy, such as the Salian priests, the priests of the Magna Mater, the Seven of the Banquets, the worshippers of the Bona Dea, devotees of Isis, and the priests in charge of the Sibylline Books also practiced religious celibacy to some extent. Few of these, however, required life-long dedication or absolute virginity as did the cult of Vesta.

⁵⁴ See Ambrose, *Ep.* 73.1-2 (CSEL 82.3, 34-35).

be given to the Vestals and other priests, and that famine resulted when the subsidies of the priests were denied.⁵⁵ While the second of the three propositions the bishop lists clearly refers to the Vestals, the third, I would argue, also constitutes an opposition to Vestal virginity in a more indirect way.

First of all, the bishop opposes the return of public subsidies to the Vestals by arguing for the inferiority of a virginity compensated by money. “Let the Vestal Virgins, he [Symmachus] says, have their immunity. Let those say such a thing who cannot believe that a gratuitous virginity is possible. Let those who have no trust in virtue stimulate it with money.”⁵⁶ In response to Symmachus’s assertion of the Vestal’s noble and honorable physical poverty, Ambrose draws forth images of luxuriousness and sumptuousness to characterize the excessive lives of the Vestals: the fancy adornments that they wear about their heads, their luxurious purple garments, the lavish litters they are carried upon by numerous attendants, the large sums of money they receive, and their other numerous privileges. He asserts that these things are all payments made to the virgins in exchange for their chastity.⁵⁷ Ambrose makes much of the Vestal stipend and the significant social privileges of the virgins to suggest that their chastity is empty of virtue and suspect. Furthermore, he suggests that the small number of Vestal Virgins implies that the pagans have trouble recruiting to the cult’s ranks even with such extravagant incentives.⁵⁸ The bishop conveniently forgets that only a select few were

⁵⁵ Ambrose, *Ep.* 73.1 (CSEL 82.3, 34).

⁵⁶ Ambrose, *Ep.* 73.11 (CSEL 82.3, 40): *Habeant, inquit, vestals virgines immunitatem suam. Dicant hoc qui nesciunt credere quod posit esse gratuita virginitas, provocent lucris qui diffident virtutibus.*

⁵⁷ Ambrose, *Ep.* 73.11 (CSEL 82.3, 39).

⁵⁸ Ambrose, *Ep.* 73.11 (CSEL 82.3, 40).

allowed to hold the office at one time in order to set up the subsequent contrast he wishes to draw between the Vestals and Christian virgins.

The bishop attributes to those who seek the restoration of the Vestal stipend a lack of understanding, an awed disbelief even, at the thought that some (Christian) women would espouse virginity without thought for compensation. He directs the attention of these unbelievers more fully to the exalted virgins of the Church:

Let them lift up the eyes of their mind and their body, let them look upon the community of purity, the people of chastity, the assembly of virginity. No fillet adorns their head but rather a veil ignoble for wear but noble for chastity. The allurements of beauty they have not sought out but renounced. Not for them the tokens of dignity; no opulent dishes but the practice of fasting; no privileges, no money; all such things you might consider as advantages to be renounced while exercising a public office, but the desire for them is stimulated as the office is being exercised. Chastity is increased at its own cost. Virginity cannot be purchased at a price nor be possessed except by the pursuit of virtue. Purity cannot be bid for as it were at an auction for a sum of money and on a temporary basis. Chastity's first victory is to overcome the desire for possessions, because a yearning for money represents a trial for purity.⁵⁹

The bishop encourages the non-Christian to employ both intellectual and corporeal perception to perceive the "community of purity" that is the virgins of the Church. Symmachus had likened the fillets (*vittae*) that adorned the heads of the Vestals to the ornamentation of leisure provided by the stipend that allowed them to perform their

⁵⁹ Ambrose, *Ep.* 73.12 (CSEL 82.3, 40-41): *Attollant mentis et corporis oculos, videant plebem pudoris, populum integritatis, concilium virginitatis. Non vittae capiti decus, sed ignobile velamen usui, nobile castitati; non exquisita sed abdicata lenocinia pulchritudinis, non illa purpurarum insignia, non luxur deliciarum sed usus ieiuniorum, non privilegia, non lucra; omnia postremo talia ut revocari studia putes dum exercentur officia, sed dum exercetur officium studium provocatur. Suis castitas cumulatur dispendiis. Non est virginitatis quae pretio emitur, non virtutis studio possidetur; non est integritas quae tamquam in auctione nummaria ad tempus licitatur compendio. Prima castitatis victoria est facultatum cupiditates vincere, quia lucri studium temptamentum pudoris est.*

sacred duties.⁶⁰ Ambrose rejects the Vestal fillet as a crass adornment, asserting the superiority of the ignoble veil worn by Christian virgins. The humility of Christian virginity exceeds the virtues of the Vestals in every way.

On the other hand, the bishop associates Vestal virginity with vanity, luxury, and precarious virtue that decreases on account of the very privileges the office entails. If the “first victory” of true chastity is to conquer the desire for worldly possessions, the virginity of the Vestals is impure and largely voided of all meaning. Furthermore, the temporary nature of Vestal virginity robs it of its virtue.⁶¹ Reiterating his opinion that true chastity needs no monetary compensation, he styles Vestal virginity as chastity “purchased at a price” or “bid for as it were at an auction,” perhaps attempting to connect the Vestals to common prostitutes.⁶²

His second redress of Symmachus’s ideology concerning the Vestals involves the senator’s assertion that proper maintenance of the priesthoods, and especially of the Vestal priesthood, was intimately tied to the well-being of the Roman people.⁶³ While the bishop’s response refers to the impotency of the pagan priesthoods more broadly, he nevertheless confirms that the debate concerns the sustenance of only a few pagan priests,

⁶⁰ Symmachus, *Relatio* 3.11 (CSEL 82.3, 28).

⁶¹ Cf. Ambrose, *Ep.* 73.11 (CSEL 82.3, 39).

⁶² On the other hand, Ambrose considers both the impossibility of offering monetary remuneration to all virgins and the unfairness of offering grants only to Vestal virgins (*Ep.* 73.12 [CSEL 82.3, 41]).

⁶³ Testa affirms that Symmachus’s description of the rights being denied the priests that brought on the famine were those belonging almost exclusively to the Vestals. See Testa, “Roman Emperor,” 259-260.

suggesting that he understood that Symmachus's pleas in this instance were largely on behalf of the Vestals.⁶⁴

Ambrose's rebuttal attempts to replace divine explanations for the fluctuating harvest with natural ones. Mocking the senator's claim that severe famine had resulted when these priests had been neglected, Ambrose interprets this incident as a common occurrence attributable to natural causes. "Indeed, when before did the harvest mock the prayers of the greedy farmer with its empty straw and the green crop sought in the furrow disappoint the expectations of rustic folk?" he asks, downplaying the severity of famine as merely the exaggerated expectations of the provincial lower class.⁶⁵ Furthermore, he argues, one can clearly see that no ill has come from the restrictions upon pagan worship of the previous years. While the harvest of the previous year was admittedly sparse, the earth has provided an overabundant yield in the current year throughout the empire's many provinces.⁶⁶ Only those who are unaware of "human ways" (*humanis usibus*) would be stunned that each year brings changes in the yield of the harvest.⁶⁷

The bishop explains away with appeals to nature and humanity what Symmachus attributes to divine forces in order to contest the miraculous power of the Vestal function. Following common cultural ideology concerning the Vestal Virgins, the senator had

⁶⁴ On the debate's pertinence to the Vestals in particular, see Ambrose, *Ep.* 73.18 (CSEL 82.3, 45): "But what justice is there in lamenting that sustenance is denied to a few priests while they themselves would refuse it to everyone, when the punishment would be harsher than the misdeed?"

Assuming that Ambrose both read and understood Symmachus's petition, it seems likely that the bishop wanted to fashion the *relatio* as a larger-scale appeal for pagan rights because it made his arguments more persuasive by making the threat of a pagan resurgence larger and more ominous than a simple restoration of the Vestal stipend.

⁶⁵ Ambrose, *Ep.* 73.17 (CSEL 82.3, 44).

⁶⁶ Ambrose, *Ep.* 73.20-21 (CSEL 82.3, 46).

⁶⁷ Ambrose, *Ep.* 73.20 (CSEL 82.3, 46).

argued for their central role in procuring the fertility of Roman land year after year. But for the bishop, the powers of fertility and fruitfulness belong to the Church alone, which causes the earth to blossom and bloom with the flowers and fruits of the true faith.⁶⁸

“Hence too the faith of souls is our harvest; the grace of the Church is our vintage of merits, which from the foundation of the world flourished in the saints but in this last age has been spread out among the peoples ...”⁶⁹ For Symmachus, the Vestals represented the *mos parentum*, the ancient traditions that needed to be maintained in order to assure Rome’s continual well-being. In response, Ambrose emphasizes the fruitful harvest that comes at a later time under the superior cultivations of the Church.

III. The Fathers on Vestal Virginit

Whatever Ambrose’s other agendas in his letters to Valentinian II, it is clear that the bishop found Symmachus’s claims to the virtues of virginity and poverty on behalf of the Vestal Virgins to be especially egregious. For the bishop, there was no admissible value or honor in Vestal virginity, and it must thoroughly be distinguished from Christian virginity. This is a feature of Ambrose’s thought that sharply, and significantly, distinguishes him from many of the earlier Latin writers of Christianity.

Before the fourth century, extant references to Vesta and the Vestal Virgins among Christian writers are few and brief. The third-century African bishop Arnobius condemns Christians who continue to maintain perpetual fires within their homes, as

⁶⁸ Ambrose, *Ep.* 73.25-26 (CSEL 82.3, 47-48).

⁶⁹ Ambrose, *Ep.* 73.29 (CSEL 82.3, 48-49).

though to worship Vesta.⁷⁰ Likewise, his student Lactantius mentions an esteemed woman who was put to death along with the empress Valeria who had a daughter who was a Vestal Virgin, probably to suggest that the woman was of a noble rank in society rank in society.⁷¹

Elsewhere, Lactantius reiterates Ovid in theorizing that Vesta was considered a virgin and attended by virgin priestesses because she was incorruptible fire and thus could never reproduce, only consume, and could never become corrupted.⁷² He refers to a pagan rite in which the Vestals cast images of men made of straw from a bridge in honor of Saturn.⁷³ In another passage, Lactantius ridicules the legend that Vesta's virginity was miraculously preserved by the fortuitous braying of an ass, finding it shameful that this was the only reason why she was not defiled.⁷⁴ Yet his concern is for the general refutation of pagan religious practice. Lactantius's writing displays little interest in the cult of Vesta as a particular entity or in the unique chastity of the Vestals.

⁷⁰ Arnobius of Sicca, *Adversus gentes* 2.67 (PL 5, 918-919).

⁷¹ Lactantius, *De mortibus persecutorum* 40 (PL 7, 256).

⁷² Lactantius, *Divinarum institutionem* 1.12 (in Eberhard Heck and Antonie Wlosok, *Lactantius: Divinarum Institutionem Libri Septem* [Munich: K.G. Saur, 2005-2009], I, 55-56).

⁷³ Lactantius, *Div. Inst.* 1.21 (Heck and Wlosok, I, 92). Lactantius is probably referring to a festival that took place each year on May 15, the Ides, when straw effigies (*argei*) were cast by the Vestal Virgins from the Sublician Bridge into the Tiber. The origin and meaning of this ceremony is little understood. Sarolta Takács has argued for its connection to the Lemuria festival in which offerings were made to deceased family members who were still wandering the earth, suggesting that perhaps the straw dolls represented a gift to those wandering dead who had no ancestral link to the living. See Takács, *Vestal Virgins, Sibyls, and Matrons: Women in Roman Religion* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), 46-47.

⁷⁴ According to legend, Vesta had laid herself down to sleep on the ground after a festival honoring the Magna Mater and Priapus came toward her with the intention of raping her. The braying of an ass nearby awakened her and she escaped the attack. See Ovid, *Fasti* 6.342, (In *Ovid*, Volume 5, ed. G. P. Goold, Loeb Classical Library [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989], 345).

Tertullian seems to have been the earliest Christian author to have made more than a passing reference to the virginity of the Vestal Virgins. In his treatise to his wife, he speaks on the importance of avoiding remarriage after one's spouse has died. While admitting that this requirement is difficult for Christians, he draws attention to pagans who, "in honor of their own Satan, endure sacerdotal offices which involve both virginity and widowhood." Among these are those who are appointed on account of their virginity to keep watch over the eternal fire of Vesta in the company of "the old dragon himself."⁷⁵ At the same time, Tertullian recognizes in the Vestals and other celibate pagan priests a virginity that ought to be praised and honored even though they are strangers to the true faith. For Tertullian, such examples of pagan virtue represent an elaborate damning trick of the devil since these admirable unbelievers will yet compound the guilt of Christians who cannot even abstain from a second marriage.⁷⁶ Furthermore, in his *De monogamia*, Tertullian names the Vestal Virgins among the judges of Christians at the last day. The absolute continence of the pagan priests will condemn those who preferred to marry again rather than to "burn" for the sake of their faith.⁷⁷

Tertullian praises the Vestals for their virginity in order to shame Christians who feel that perpetual widowhood after a single marriage is unbearable. Yet he does not hesitate to praise the Vestal Virgins on their own merit and attribute to them a significant standing in the afterlife on account of their admirable chastity. His most overt negative reference to the Vestal cult is found in his apology against paganism, where he denies

⁷⁵ Tertullian, *Ad uxorem* 1.6 (PL 1, 1284).

⁷⁶ Tertullian, *De exhortationis castitatis* 13 (PL 2, 928).

⁷⁷ Tertullian, *De monogamia* 17 (PL 2, 953).

that Roman ascendancy is attributable to the existence of and favor of the pagan gods secured through traditional religious ritual since such Roman cults postdate the success of the Roman people.⁷⁸

Tertullian's close contemporary, Minucius Felix, took a much different view of the virtues of Vestal virginity. In his *Octavius*, modeled as a discourse between a pagan and a Christian, his Christian protagonist ridicules the notion that Rome's adopted pagan gods such as the Thracian Mars, Diana of Tauris, or the Idaean Mother, helped the Romans conquer their own original peoples and homelands, unless it is possible that virginal chastity and priestly religion was greater in Rome. With respect to the Vestals, he finds this is impossible.

... Among very many of the virgins unchastity was punished, in that they (doubtless, without the knowledge of Vesta) had intercourse too carelessly with men. And for the rest their impunity arose not from the better protection of their chastity, but from the better fortune of their immodesty. And where are adulteries better arranged by the priests than among the very altars and shrines? Where are more panderings debated, or more acts of violence concerted? Finally, burning lust is more frequently gratified in the little chambers of the keepers of the temple than in the brothels themselves.⁷⁹

For Minucius, Vestal virginity represents an elaborate sham. He portrays the Vestal Virgins as sexually promiscuous and the sacred domain of the Vestals as little more than a well-concealed brothel where they prostitute themselves.⁸⁰ Unlike Tertullian, who found something noble and admirable in the virginity of the Vestals,

⁷⁸ Tertullian, *Apologeticus pro Christianis* 25-26 (PL 1, 431-432).

⁷⁹ Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 25 (PL 3, 319), translated in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 4 (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1890-1900), 188.

⁸⁰ While Minucius alleges that several Vestals had been punished for their loss of chastity, Staples argues that only two clear cases in which a Vestal was ever punished for unchastity are recorded in extant Roman histories. See Staples, *From Good Goddess to Vestal Virgin*, 136.

Minucius draws their chastity into question, alleging serious sexual misconduct, in order to argue for the absurdity of the Roman gods and the irrelevance of the Roman cults for the well-being of the state.

While Minucius's virulent allegations, and his probable audience of both pagans and Christians, place him apart from the other writers of his age, the "false" virginity of the Vestal Virgins becomes an apparent theme among some Latin writers speaking exclusively to Christians by the late fourth century. Closely following Tertullian's writings, Jerome denigrates pagan continence as the "damning chastity" of the devil in contrast to "the saving chastity of the gospel." At the same time, Jerome argues that Vestal virgins and the virgins of Apollo, the Achivian Juno, Diana, and Minerva all demonstrate that even among pagans continence is esteemed. Such chaste priests and priestesses bring condemnation upon Christians who find that they cannot abstain from a second marriage, he argues.⁸¹

As with Tertullian, the Vestals represent for Jerome the deceptive imitations of the devil but also serve as a shaming device for would-be incontinent Christians. Jerome continues in a similar vein in his defense of virginity in his treatise against Jovinian. He asserts the superiority of virginity to marriage by recounting how even among pagans it has been held in the highest esteem. For Jerome, the live burial of the Vestal Virgin Munitia, for purportedly violating her chastity, bears witness that the loss of virginity is a serious crime even among pagans. Furthermore, he recounts the legend of the Vestal Claudia who miraculously proved her true chastity by drawing aground with her girdle the ship containing the image of the Magna Mater that had become stranded and could

⁸¹ Jerome, *Ep.* 123.8 (CSEL 56, 81-82).

not be moved by a thousand men. These and other examples prove that the pagans too held marriage in little esteem.⁸² For Jerome, such pagan admiration for chastity shames Jovinian and others who doubt the superior value of Christian virginity. At the same time, Jerome is clear to delineate between Christian and pagan virginity. Correct faith, which is the special characteristic of Christians, must be possessed as well as bodily chastity so the Vestal Virgins and Juno's widows may not be numbered with the saints in heaven.⁸³ In most of Jerome's writings, the Vestal Virgins function as further evidence for the superiority of virginity to marriage. While yet a "false" virginity in that it lacks the validation of true faith, it is nevertheless considered meritorious by Jerome.

While Jerome's writings display a clear knowledge of the earlier writings of the Latin fathers concerning the Vestal Virgins, Ambrose's writings seem strikingly original in comparison to this earlier tradition. Rather than reiterating pagan virginity as a familiar shaming device for those contemplating the life of Christian virginity, he rejects any similarities drawn between Christian and pagan virginity outright.⁸⁴

Who alleges to me as praiseworthy the virgins of Vesta, and the priests of Pallas? What sort of modesty is that which is not of morals but of years, which is appointed not forever but for a term? All the more reprobate is that integrity in which the corruption is put off for a later age. Those who have set an end for virginity teach that their virgins ought not to persevere and cannot. What sort of religion is that in which modest maidens are to be immodest old women? Nor is she modest who is bound by law, and she immodest who is set free by law. O the mystery, O the morals, where obligation imposes chastity, where authority is given for lust! And so she is not chaste, who is constrained by fear; nor is she honorable who does not seek it without recompense; nor is she pure who, exposed each day to the outrage of licentious eyes and lascivious looks. Privileges are

⁸² Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum* 1.41 (PL 23, 225-226).

⁸³ Jerome, *Adv. Jov.* 1.11 (PL 23, 270-271).

⁸⁴ Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.4.14-19 (Gori, I, 118-122).

conferred upon them, payments are offered to them, as if it were not the greatest evidence of wantonness to sell one's chastity. That which is promised for a price is given up for a price, is awarded for a price, is considered to have its price. She who is accustomed to selling her chastity does not know how to redeem it.⁸⁵

Like Minucius Felix, Ambrose's objective is to paint the Vestals as false virgins. But rather than focusing upon their sexual promiscuity and the disrepute of their temple, he emphasizes the temporary nature of their chastity and their monetary motivations. The bishop finds their corruption in the fact that their virginity is not life-long but only for a specified period. He also asserts the immorality of those who are compelled to chastity by state law rather than personal conviction since fear is no honorable motivation for the life of virginity. Ambrose alludes to the highly-public appearances of the Vestal Virgins, finding such wide visibility to be morally corrupting. Like Minucius, the bishop paints Vestal virginity as a form of prostitution, but not because the Vestals themselves are sexually lascivious. Rather, he finds lewdness in that they have made their vows of virginity in exchange for money and exemptions. Such virginity, temporary, compulsory, public, and materially-motivated, is no virginity at all for Ambrose.

While Tertullian and Jerome found it most useful to praise the cult of Vesta to bolster the lofty status of Christian virginity in their ascetic writings, Ambrose finds

⁸⁵ Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.4.15 (Gori, I, 118-120): *Quis mihi praetendit Vestae uirgines et Palladii sacerdotes laudabiles? Qualis ista est non morum pudicitia, sed annorum, quae non perpetuitate, sed aetate praescribitur? Petulantior est talis integritas, cuius corruptela seniori seruat aetati. Ipsi docent uirgines suas non debere perseuerare nec posse, qui uirginitati finem dederunt. Qualis autem esta illa religio, ubi pudicae adulescentes iubentur esse, impudicae anus? Sed nec illa pudica est quae lege retinetur, et illa impudica quae lege dimittitur. O mysteria, o mores, ubi necessitas inponitur castitati, auctoritas libidini datur! Itaque nec casta est quae metu cogitur, nec honesta quae mercede conducitur, nec pudor ille qui intemperantium oculorum cotidiano expositus conuicio flagitiosis aspectibus uerberatur. Conferuntur immunitates, offeruntur pretia, quasi non hoc maximum petulantiae sit indicium castitatem uendere. Quod pretio promittitur pretio soluitur, pretio addicitur, pretio adnumeratur. Nescit redimere castitatem quae uendere solet.*

nothing praiseworthy in Vestal virginity and does not use it to any similar purpose. His greatest concern is to differentiate Christian virginity from the similar lifestyles of non-Christian practitioners, especially the Vestals. “How much stronger are our virgins, who overcome even those powers which they do not see; whose victory is not over flesh and blood, but also over the prince of this world, and ruler of this age!” he boasts.⁸⁶

Ambrose distinguishes between those who merely conquer the flesh through sexual abstinence and those who conquer evil in body and spirit by their virginity as well as their adherence to the true faith.

The bishop attributes to Christian virginity a second, spiritual dimension in response to those who tout the merits of Vestal virginity. Ambrose adopts this idea not from the Latin tradition but rather from Athanasius’s writings.⁸⁷ In Athanasius’s first *Letter to Virgins*, the Alexandrian bishop had asserted the impossibility of virginity’s existence among those who were ignorant of God.⁸⁸ He also had questioned the validity of a virginity which was designated only for a certain period of life and that was imposed upon an individual rather than chosen by through free will.⁸⁹ But Athanasius was anxious to catalogue for his Christian audience the many visible sexual deviances of the pagan priests and philosophers. For him, the purported chastity of pagans was most

⁸⁶ Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.4.19 (Gori, I, 122).

⁸⁷ The importance of Athanasius’s first *Epistula virginibus* to Ambrose’s *De virginibus* has been discussed at length in Chapter 1, 24-32.

⁸⁸ Athanasius, *Ep. virg.* 1.4 in David Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 275.

⁸⁹ Athanasius, *Ep. virg.* 1.6 (Brakke, 276).

easily disproved by their pregnancies, adulteries, illegitimate children, effeminacies, prostitutions, and other impure and wanton behaviors.⁹⁰

While Athanasius's letter was clearly the inspiration for Ambrose's writings on pagan virginity in *De virginibus*, Athanasius had mentioned solely in passing that the only ones called virgins by the Roman people were the priests of Pallas.⁹¹ While the Alexandrian bishop referred to this priesthood while listing numerous other pagan idolatries, Ambrose seizes upon this reference, clarifying its direct correspondence to the cult of Vesta for his Roman audience and making them the focus of his own anti-pagan invective.⁹² While he avoids such blatant sexual slander as Athanasius engages in, it is clear that Ambrose is especially anxious to degrade the virginity of this particular cult.⁹³

IV. Virginities in Competition

Unlike Tertullian and Jerome, who used the Vestal Virgins in their writings almost exclusively to promote the superiority of chastity to their Christian audiences, Ambrose aims to nullify their claims to virginity in *De virginibus*. This objective goes hand in hand with his later goal to render Vestal continence completely impotent in his

⁹⁰ Athanasius, *Ep. virg.* 1.5-6 (Brakke, 275-276).

⁹¹ Athanasius, *Ep. virg.* 1.5 (Brakke, 275).

⁹² While Ambrose names both the *Vestae uirgines* and the *Palladii sacerdotes*, he was referring to the same group of women. In addition to the sacred fire of Vesta, the Vestal temple in the Roman forum contained a revered statue of Pallas Athena (the *Palladium*) that the Vestals also tended, making them priests of Pallas as well as of Vesta. See Mary Beard, John A. North, and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome, Vol. 1: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 3.

⁹³ Ambrose alludes briefly in later paragraphs to the Phrygian rites and the orgies of Bacchus to show the general immodesty of pagan worship and argue for the impossibility of virgins among them and then reiterates a story borrowed from Athanasius about how a certain Pythagorean virgin would not reveal a secret but was yet overcome by lust even in her intellectual discipline. See Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.4.16-18 (Gori, I, 120-122).

debate with Symmachus. Earlier, I discussed the long-standing significance of the Vestal Virgins as symbols of the Roman state and their particular importance as markers of pagan tradition and customs in the ancient world. For this reason alone, the bishop may have been eager to refute the value and status of the Vestals. For Ambrose, the superior chastity, poverty, fasting, humility, and numbers of the church's virgins signified the triumph of Christianity over paganism at large.

On the other hand, it is useful to consider some of the striking ways in which Ambrose's ascetic program resembled some features, functions, and cultural ideas about the Vestal Virgins in Roman society. In Chapter 2, I discussed the bishop's advocacy of a more institutionalized model of asceticism than that which had previously been common in the regions around Milan. While most virgins had practiced their lifestyles within their family homes, and thus to some extent under the *potestas* of their parents, Ambrose encouraged virgins to leave behind the family home and take refuge in the church where the bishop would play the most authoritative role in their lives.⁹⁴ While little evidence exists for female ascetic communities before Ambrose's time, the bishop boasted in *De virginibus* of the many virgins who had already left their parents' houses to "press into the houses of Christ" with the intention of laboring with their hands for their own support.⁹⁵

This more institutional model of ascetic practice is not dissimilar to that of the Vestal Virgins in some striking ways. As noted earlier, the Vestals lived independently

⁹⁴ See Chapter 2, 97-98.

⁹⁵ Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.11.60 (Gori, I, 158). While there is no evidence of women's extra-domestic ascetic practice in Milan before this time, some men had already gathered into monasteries. See Chapter 2, 32-33 and Rita Lizzi Testa, "Christianization and Conversion in Northern Italy," in *The Origins of Christendom in the West*, ed. Alan Kreider (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2001), 66-67.

from their families and in a community whose quarters were adjacent to their temple in the Roman Forum. While emancipated from the control of their families in this visible way, they nevertheless were removed from the supervision of a male family head and repositioned under the supervision of a male religious head. According to custom, the Vestal Virgin was taken by the Pontifex Maximus into the cult and remained under his control in many significant ways. For example, the Pontifex disciplined any unruly Vestals, physically beating them.⁹⁶ He also acted as the primary executioner if a Vestal defiled her sacred chastity.⁹⁷ Vestals had to seek the permission of the Pontifex and other male priests for certain activities.⁹⁸ Thus in at least some respects, the Pontifex's role mimicked the traditional roles of husband and father.⁹⁹

In addition, Ambrose's writings are the earliest attestation of formal veiling rituals for those embarking on the life of virginity, suggesting that the bishop of Milan was among the earliest of Latin bishops to advocate such ceremonies.¹⁰⁰ In these rituals, the bishop played a central role in the adoption and consecration of a virgin into divine service, establishing the church's ownership and authority over her.¹⁰¹

⁹⁶ Plutarch, *Numa* 10.4 (Perrin, 343).

⁹⁷ Plutarch, *Numa* 10.7 (Perrin, 345). Sawyer regards the strict and severe punishment for their loss of chastity as further evidence of strong male control over their lives (Sawyer, *Women and Religion*, 128).

⁹⁸ For example, Symmachus reports that the chief Vestal in 384, Coelia Concordia, and the other Vestals had to seek the permission of the male pontifices to erect a tribute statue. See Symmachus, *Ep.* 2.36.2 (in *Lettres [de] Symmaque*, ed. Jean Pierre Callu [Paris: Société d'Édition "Les Belles Lettres," 1972], 179).

⁹⁹ See Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins*, 37-39.

¹⁰⁰ See Nathalie Henry, "The Song of Songs and the Liturgy of the *velatio* in the Fourth Century: From Literary Metaphor to Liturgical Reality," in R.N. Swanson, ed., *Continuity and Change in Christian Worship: Papers Read at the 1997 Summer Meeting and the 1998 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1999), 19.

¹⁰¹ See Chapter 2, 123-125.

While different in style and in liturgy, this ceremony was not dissimilar to the public, highly-formalized ceremonies in which young women were consecrated to the Vestal office and removed from the authority of their families by the Pontifex Maximus. In a public, highly-formalized ceremony, a young girl was “taken” (*capiat*) into the cult and consecrated to virginity as the Pontifex Maximus led her by the hand away from her parents and, calling her *Amata* (“Beloved”), pronounced her specifically consecrated to carry out the sacred rites of Vesta on behalf of the Roman people.¹⁰² The development of the Christian ceremony in the fourth century probably reinforced similarities between Christian virgins to Vestal Virgins for some.¹⁰³

While formal veiling ceremonies served to sever family ties of both Vestals and Christian virgins, they also signal the unique and privileged status of the sexually-continent within Roman society. As previously discussed, the Vestal Virgins had enjoyed extraordinary social and legal privileges from the instigation of their cult. By the late fourth century, some Christian ascetic women led comparable lives of prestige and advantage on account of their sexual renunciation. In Rome, this was especially apparent

¹⁰² Aulus Gellius, *Noctes Atticae* 1.12.13-14 (Marshall, 62). According to Aulus, the Pontifex’s specific words were: *Sacerdotem Vestalem, quae sacra faciat, quae ius siet sacerdotem Vestalem facere pro populo Romano Quiritibus, uti quae optima lege fuit, ita tel, Amata, capio* (“I take you, Amata, to be a Vestal priestess, who will carry out sacred rites that it is the law for a Vestal priestess to perform on behalf of the Roman people, on the same terms as her who was a Vestal on the best terms.”). Aulus alleges that the new Vestal was always called “Amata” because it was the traditional name of the first Vestal taken. Some scholars have questioned whether a young woman may have traditionally been called “Beloved” by the Pontifex because of some of the pseudo-marital dynamics of their relationship. See Beard, “The Sexual Status of Vestal Virgins,” 14.

¹⁰³ The similarity between these formalized ceremonies was first suggested by Nathalie Henry in her “A New Insight into the Growth of Ascetic Society in the Fourth Century AD: The Public Consecration of Virgins as a Means of Integration and Promotion of the Female Ascetic Movement,” in *Studia Patristica XXXV: Ascetica, Gnostica, Liturgica, Orientalia*, ed. Maurice F. Wiles, Edward Yarnold, and P.M. Parvis (Louvain: Peeters, 2001), 107.

among the aristocratic classes. While high-born Christian ascetics such as Paula, Eustochium, Asella, Marcella, Melania the Elder, and Melania the Younger dedicated themselves to chastity, renounced their riches, and donned plain clothing, they continued to enjoy many of the benefits of their wealth and social standing while also gaining the freedom to travel, the leisure to engage in various intellectual pursuits, the right to manage their own affairs, and additional social prestige and theological authority.¹⁰⁴ As the Vestals were set apart from society by their unique dress, so were these Christian women who, despite their biographers' frequent protestations of modesty and seclusion, seemed to have moved about quite often in the world.¹⁰⁵ Like the Vestal Virgins, these Christian widows and virgins enjoyed numerous benefits on account of their desexualized state. Surely they bore for some fourth-century Romans a notable resemblance to the Vestal Virgins. Ambrose, intimately connected to these Roman ascetics through his sister Marcellina, would have been well aware of such comparisons.¹⁰⁶ The high visibility of some Christian ascetics—coupled with the fact that many of them were mere

¹⁰⁴ See Elizabeth A. Clark, "Ascetic Renunciation and Feminine Advancement: A Paradox of Late Ancient Christianity," in *Ascetic Piety and Women's Faith*, ed. Clark (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1986), 175-208.

¹⁰⁵ One of the best examples of these ascetics is the Christian widow Marcella who, according to Jerome's account, "seldom appeared in public and took care to avoid the houses of great ladies, that she might not be forced to look upon what she had once for all renounced" (Jerome, *Ep.* 127.4 [CSEL 56, 148-149]). At the same time, Jerome recounts that she continued to run a large, prosperous household in Rome, entertained in her home some of Christian society's most illustrious figures, and spearheaded a very public refutation of the Origenists in Rome (see Jerome, *Ep.* 127.3, 5, 9 [CSEL 56, 147; 149; 152]). Christian ascetics such as Melania the Elder and Paula, also aristocratic Roman widows, traveled freely between Rome and various locations in the Middle East. On Melania, see Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* 46 and 54 (PTS 51, 643-646, 662-666). On Paula, see Jerome, *Ep.* 108.6-14 (CSEL 55, 310-325).

¹⁰⁶ Marcellina, a consecrated virgin, lived at Rome and corresponded closely with Ambrose throughout her life. See Chapter 1, note 26.

widows rather than lofty virgins of Christ—may have heightened the bishop’s sense of competition between Christian ascetics and the Vestal cult.

Beyond these visible similarities, Ambrose’s expositions of Christian virginity also resembled some common cultural ideology and rhetoric concerning the Vestal Virgins. As Symmachus’s *relatio* demonstrates, the virginity of the Vestal was understood to imbue her with a purity and holiness that enabled her to secure divine favor on behalf of the Roman people.¹⁰⁷ In Ambrose’s writings, virginity’s intercessory powers are also touted. As I have argued earlier, a young woman’s avowal of virginity is with increasing frequency explained by Ambrose as a vicarious sacrifice on behalf of her family, especially her parents.¹⁰⁸ “You have heard, O parents, in what virtues and pursuits you ought to train your daughters, so that you may have those by whose merits your faults may be redeemed. ... The virgin is a sacrificial offering to God for her mother, by whose daily sacrifice the divine wrath is appeased.”¹⁰⁹ Some years after Ambrose’s conflict with Symmachus, he strongly encourages the widow Juliana’s children to take up virginity as a means of absolving their mother’s errors.¹¹⁰ Ambrose attributes to Christian virgins the ability to secure God’s favor for their families in a

¹⁰⁷ Symmachus, *Relatio* 3.11, 14 (CSEL 82.3, 27-28; 29). See also Robin Lorsch Wildfang, *Rome’s Vestal Virgins: A Study of Rome’s Vestal Priestesses in the Late Republic and Early Empire* (London: Routledge, 2006), 55; Testa, “Christian Emperor, Vestal Virgins,” 255.

¹⁰⁸ See Chapter 3, 158-169.

¹⁰⁹ Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.7.32 (Gori, I, 134): *Audistis, parentes, quibus erudire uirtutibus, quibus instituere disciplinis filias debeatis, ut habere possitis quarum meritis uestra delicta redimantur. ... Virgo matris hostia est, cuius cotidiano sacrificio uis diuina placatur.*

¹¹⁰ Ambrose, *Exhort. virg.* 4.25-26 (Gori, II, 216-218). Cf. 8.51-52 (Gori, II, 238-240).

manner similar to the way in which the Vestal Virgins did on behalf of the Roman people for Symmachus and others.

While a symbol of purity and divine intercession, Vestal virginity also represented a kind of fruitful sterility for Romans, a diversion of bodily fertility into the well-being of the state. Several scholars have noted this symbolism in the thirty-year term of their virginity. Spanning from just before a girl began puberty until the twilight of her reproductive years, the Vestal vow of chastity essentially entailed the sacrifice of the fertile period of a woman's life for the good of the larger community. The welfare of the state of Rome was dependent upon the maintenance of the sacred flame of Vesta and the rituals associated with her cult. In order to guarantee continual prosperity and stability, Vestal virgins sacrificed their reproductive powers and channeled their fertility into the constant regeneration of the Roman state and the renewal of its generations.¹¹¹ Their artificial infertility made them powerful intercessors for others seeking the blessings of fertility.¹¹² The Vestal fire, symbolic of both sexual purity and procreative power, was an inherent part of the ideology surrounding Vestal Virginity.¹¹³ Symmachus's petition to

¹¹¹ Beard, "The Sexual Status of Vestal Virgins," 14; Elaine Fantham et al., *Women in the Classical World: Image and Text* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 235; Staples, *From Good Goddess to Vestal Virgin*, 147; Takács, *Vestal Virgins*, 70. Plutarch gives further evidence of the power of renewal the Vestals possessed: "When they [the Vestal Virgins] go out ... if they accidentally happen to meet a criminal being led to execution, his life is spared" (Plut. *Num.*, 10.3 [Perrin, 343]). The power of regeneration which they possessed was so great and inherent within them that a criminal coming near them was cleansed and forgiven of his crime.

For an opposing view, see Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins*, 8-9, 26-28. Wildfang argues that the Vestal fire was not a symbol of fertility but rather of purity and sterility. Mary Beard's argument that fire was a symbol of both fertility and sterility in the ancient world, accounting for the liminal position of the Vestal Virgins in Roman society, is more persuasive. See Beard, "The Sexual Status of Vestal Virgins," 24, note 99.

¹¹² Sarolta Takács has interpreted the Vestals' participation in some Roman religious rites as a means of interceding for the state and individuals seeking prosperity and fertility. See Takács, *Vestal Virgins*, 42, 47.

¹¹³ Staples, *From Good Goddess*, 149.

Valentinian II strongly attests to the continuing fertile and procreative powers of the Vestal Virgins in Roman mind into the fourth century C.E. The senator argues that Gratian's abolishment of financial support for the cult, which would lead to its dissolution, would lead to years of famine and barrenness while a reinstatement of the Vestal stipend would ensure plentiful harvests for the empire.¹¹⁴

Ambrose frames the senator's argument as superstitious and illogical. Yet this strong opposition may be linked in some way to the bishop's own rhetoric and understanding of the Christian virgin's potent fertility. In Ambrose's writings, it is the *Christian* virgin who, in her chastity, is the true embodiment of fertile and reproductive virginity that yields fruit and brings grace to all around her.¹¹⁵ In his writings, he frequently praises the virgin as a fertile garden where the fruits of virtue are grown and guarded.¹¹⁶ While Vestal virginity ensures the communal harvest, the Christian virgin may hope to cultivate and reap within herself the hundred and sixty of the fruits of the fields like Jacob of old.¹¹⁷ Fertile virginity, "having closed the walls of chastity in which

¹¹⁴ See above, 178.

¹¹⁵ Peter Brown noted that in Ambrose's writings "the virgin's body was an object charged with powerful, conflicting associations. It was at one and the same time static and dynamic. Precisely because the normal, sexual associations of a woman's fecundity had been renounced in them, the bodies of virgins were calculated to conjure up, in the mind of believers, all that was most 'untainted,' and so most unambiguously exuberant, in the notions of fertility, of continuity, and of creativity." (See Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1988], 363.

¹¹⁶ Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.9.26, 45 (Gori, I, 128, 144); *De virgt.* 10.54, 12.69 (Gori, II, 48, 58-60); *De inst.* 9.60 (Gori, II, 158).

¹¹⁷ Ambrose, *De inst.* 17.111 (Gori, II, 190).

persist the undefiled seal of chastity, brings forth greater fruit” than that of marriage.¹¹⁸ Likewise, Ambrose likens the virgin to the honeybee that feeds on the divine word of God and produces sweet fruit.¹¹⁹ The flocking of virgins to the altars of the church for consecration is for the bishop a manifestation of the church’s own fruitfulness and prosperity.¹²⁰

For Ambrose, Christian virgins brought safety and prosperity the world around them. Rebuking those who blame the zeal for celibacy for the human race’s shrinking population, he claims that those places where commitment to virginity is highest are blessed with the greatest populations, while smaller numbers of virgins result in smaller cities (such as Milan, the bishop laments).¹²¹ Furthermore, chastity staves off the wars and murders marriage has brought upon civilizations in the past that have led to a smaller population. “Where chastity dwells, such griefs disappear because there religion will flourish and fidelity be safeguarded.”¹²² Mary, the “symbol of sacred virginity,”¹²³ conferred the benefits of her miraculous integrity upon John the Baptist by fortifying his body *in utero* with the ointment of her presence for three months.¹²⁴ In such writings,

¹¹⁸ Ambrose, *Exhort. virg.* 5.29 (Gori, II, 220).

¹¹⁹ Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.8.40 (Gori, I, 140).

¹²⁰ Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.11.59-60 (Gori, I, 158). Ambrose’s understanding of the virgin’s fertility and fruitfulness is not an idea entirely his own. Much of the garden and bridal imagery in his work may have been borrowed from the Song of Songs commentaries of Origen and Hippolytus. On the influence of these authors on Ambrose’s writings on virginity, see Chapter 1, 40-41.

¹²¹ Ambrose, *De virgt.* 7.36 (Gori, II, 38).

¹²² Ambrose, *De virgt.* 7.35 (Gori, II, 36).

¹²³ Ambrose, *De inst.* 5.35 (Gori, II, 136).

¹²⁴ Ambrose, *De inst.* 7.50 (Gori, II, 150).

Ambrose claims for Christian virgins powers of prosperity and regeneration similar to those traditionally attributed to Vestal virginity.¹²⁵ Thus he takes strong exception to Symmachus's claim that the Vestal Virgins are sources of seasonal plenty and societal well-being.

In his appeal to Valentinian II, Symmachus had also claimed that the Vestals lived in moderate poverty as a rule and that the restoration of the traditional *stipendium castitatis* would merely provide the leisure time for them to attend to their duties. Their dedication to public service despite any support became even more meritorious when the *stipendium* was withheld because then their virginity was lacking a reward.¹²⁶ Ambrose vigorously protests the alleged poverty of the Vestals by reviewing in detail their money and privileges and by contrasting them to the austere "community of purity" of Christian virgins in which no opulence or worldly advantage is found.¹²⁷ It is critical to the bishop's earlier arguments in *De virginibus* that the virginity of the Vestals was in fact "hired for a price" and thus not valid.¹²⁸

At the same time, the bishop wishes to assert Christian asceticism's exclusive claim upon the virtues of poverty and self-denial. Throughout his work, he closely connected the blessings of the virginal life to those of ascetic poverty. In his instructions to his clergymen, he touted poverty, hunger, and pain as aids in the pursuit of a holy

¹²⁵ According to Ambrose, virginity's regenerative powers also extend to the sanctifying of an unholy place. In *De virg.* 2.3.26 (Gori, I, 186), he claims that a holy virgin forced into a brothel is not contaminated by the ill-fame of the place but rather her chastity does away with the ill-fame of it.

¹²⁶ See above, 179. Of course, this portrayal of the Vestals as spartan and self-sacrificing lifestyle may in fact reflect Symmachus's adoption of philosophical or even Christian ideals on behalf of the priesthood.

¹²⁷ See above, 186-188.

¹²⁸ See Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.4.15 (Gori, I, 118-120) and above, 188.

life.¹²⁹ Those brothers who are poor, he argued, show more gratitude when they receive than others who are rich and make the Lord their recompense to others.¹³⁰ Among the blessed Virgin Mary's virtues, the bishop had praised her lack of faith in uncertain worldly riches.¹³¹ Likewise, Ambrose later exhorted Julia's children to follow the example of their blessed father in renouncing riches since faith is the true "dowry" of virgins.¹³² Virgins are to divest themselves of all physical finery and ornament their souls inwardly since he who is poor before the world is rich before God.¹³³ Ambrose encouraged virgins to take no thought of the wealthy dowry they stand to lose if they defied their parents to take the veil of virginity since a chaste poverty was much superior to any bridal gifts she might have received. Those who practiced virginity in poverty could expect to have a wealthy Spouse in Christ.¹³⁴ While he once mentioned faith as a prerequisite for true virginity, he emphasized at greater length the relationship of true virginity to material renunciation in his work.

Because the blessedness of the Christian virgin's voluntary poverty was a recurring theme throughout his work, Ambrose took umbrage at Symmachus's claims to the humble destitution and blessed voluntary service of the Vestal Virgins. The senator's suggestion that Vestals lived in poverty and that Vestal virginity would persist without

¹²⁹ Ambrose, *De officiis* 2.4.15 (in Ivor J. Davidson, *Ambrose: De officiis* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001], I, 276). Cf. 1.12.46 (Davidson, I, 142).

¹³⁰ Ambrose, *De officiis* 2.25.126-127 (Davidson, I, 336-338).

¹³¹ Ambrose, *De virg.* 2.2.7 (Gori, I, 168-170).

¹³² Ambrose, *Exhort. virg.* 3.13 (Gori, II, 210).

¹³³ Ambrose, *Exhort. virg.* 10.64 (Gori, II, 250).

¹³⁴ Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.11.62 (Gori, I, 160).

being subsidized by money jeopardized the Christian ascetic's claims of superiority to non-Christian practitioners of virginity. Thus Ambrose recounts in great detail in both *De virginibus* and his letter to Valentinian II the extensive privileges, subsidies, and luxuries enjoyed by the Vestals. Their virginity is falsified through their continued enjoyment of worldly goods.

V. Conclusion

While Ambrose's participation in the Altar of Victory controversy was limited, his two letters to Valentinian II opposing Symmachus's petition suggest much about his attitude toward non-Christian varieties of virginity in the Roman world. The Vestal Virgins, the most established and visible pagan practitioners of virginity in Rome, constituted a particular challenge to Ambrose's ideology of Christian virginity. Shifts in ascetic lifestyle and ceremony during the late fourth century brought Christian virginity precariously in line with pagan practices, necessitating a stronger disavowal of cults such as the Vestal Virgins. In contrast to most earlier (and even some contemporary) Christian writers, Ambrose refuses to concede any merit of the Vestals and other pagan priests in support of his ascetic program and instead portrays their virginity as invalid and lacking in essential virtue.

In this chapter, I have focused upon Ambrose's specific attitudes toward the Vestal Virgins to the general exclusion of other pagan cults. At the same time, I have not wished, by focusing on a small, singular, elite group of virgins, to overemphasize Ambrose's particular rancor toward a singular pagan cult. While the bishop was particularly keen to refute the "true" virginity of the Vestals, he found unfavorable the

idea that almost any true virginity existed prior to the advent of Christianity. Throughout his writings, he emphasizes the status of Jesus as the true author of virginity. “Who then can deny that this mode of life has its source in heaven, which we don’t easily find on earth, except since God came down into the members of an earthly body?”¹³⁵ While willing to concede that Elijah and Miriam were virgins among the Hebrews, he understands both as types of Christ and the Church respectively, claiming for Christianity through typology any “true” virginity preexisting the miraculous virgin birth of Jesus.¹³⁶ Pagan cults, falling well outside of the Bible narrative, merited no such rhetorical redemption for the bishop.

At the same time, the Vestal Virgins were a natural target for a theologian such as Ambrose who was both thoroughly tied to the culture and society of the city of Rome and also so dedicated to promotion of the ascetic movement. Those less connected to Rome, such as Jerome, were more inclined to use the Vestals to promote the ascetic cause by reading them into the history of the practice of virginity.¹³⁷ Ambrose, a strong advocate for asceticism yet thoroughly Roman, was more intent to create difference between pagan and Christian virgins than to support the ascetic cause through such creative re-readings of history.

¹³⁵ Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.3.11 (Gori, I, 110-112). Cf. 1.5.21 (Gori, I, 122-124).

¹³⁶ Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.3.12 (Gori, I, 112-116). He is following Athanasius in this too, although Athanasius is willing to concede a larger number of virgins existing among the Hebrews than Ambrose is. See Athanasius, *Ep. virg.* 1.7 (Brakke, 276).

¹³⁷ As Jerome uses pagan virginities to bolster up his ascetic program, Symmachus’s *relatio* spends a good deal of time emphasizing similarities between pagan and Christian worship as a means of arguing for their common value. See Clifford Ando, “Pagan Apologetics and Christian Intolerance in the Ages of Themistius and Augustine,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 4.2 (1996): 188-190.

In this decision, he seems to have had great influence upon Augustine, who follows Ambrose in a complete rejection of Vestal merit and an emphasis upon their differences from Christian virgins. A generation after Ambrose and Jerome, Augustine reiterated Ambrose's full rejection of the Vestal Virgins and expanded some of his argumentation. Furthering Ambrose's assertion that true faith was requisite for true chastity, he concludes that even Christian women who are married more than once are preferable to Vestals and all other heretical virgins.¹³⁸ The Vestal Virgins are false imitators whose practice of virginity in no way takes away the value of Christian virginity anymore than false pagan sacrifice took away the value of typological Hebrew sacrifice.¹³⁹

The Vestal Virgins become an especially frequent subject of Augustine's anti-pagan invective in his *De civitate dei*. While he concedes that no temple in Rome is considered more sacred than that of Vesta, he understands the Vestal fire as an epitomal metaphor for the continuance of pagan worship.¹⁴⁰ Like Ambrose, Augustine rejects the holiness and power traditionally attributed to the Vestals, giving evidences of their impotence and the impotence of the gods in general in times of crisis.¹⁴¹ He ridicules the absurdity of the mythology of Vesta and draws into question the virginity and purity of the goddess and her priestesses by associating Vesta with Venus, patron of harlots and

¹³⁸ Augustine, *De nuptiis et concupiscentia* 1.5 (CSEL 42, 216).

¹³⁹ Augustine, *Contra Faustum* 20.21 (CSEL 25, 564).

¹⁴⁰ Augustine, *De civitate dei* 3.28 (CSEL 40.1, 455-456), 2.29 (CSEL 40.1, 107).

¹⁴¹ For example, see Augustine, *De civitate dei* 3.7 (CSEL 40.1, 116), 3.18 (CSEL 40.1, 142).

prostitutes. Augustine contrasts the non-reproducing virgins of Vesta to the superior and miraculous fertility of the Virgin who gave birth to the Lord.¹⁴²

Augustine's writings about the Vestals are extensive, and like Ambrose's take an unvaryingly negative position on Vestal virginity. They lack, however, the bishop of Milan's specific anxiousness for the ascetic cause. By the early fifth century, the Vestal Virgins no longer presented any significant competition to Christian virgins. The Vestal fire had been extinguished and the cult disbanded permanently in 394 at Theodosius's orders.¹⁴³ Augustine's *De civitate dei* sought to eliminate the remaining vestiges of an ideology already in decline with the pagan empire around it.

¹⁴² Augustine, *De civitate dei* 4.10 (CSEL 40.1, 176). Only in one instance does Augustine take a relatively neutral, possibly positive, position on Vestal virginity: in his argument for the reality of miracles in the conclusion of his work. Varro's account of a Vestal Virgin who proves the persistence of her maligned virginity miraculously fills a sieve of water at the Tiber and carries it before her judges without spilling a drop. For the bishop, this proves that miracles are believed even among the pagans. See Augustine, *De civitate dei* 22.11 (CSEL 40.2, 617).

¹⁴³ Zosimus records that the niece of Theodosius I, Serena, boldly entered the Vestal temple at this time and removed a necklace from the statue of the goddess and placed it around her own neck. An old woman, the last of the Vestal Virgins, appeared and rebuked Serena for her impiety, calling down punishments upon her head. Serena was thereafter plagued by dreams of her own untimely death. See Zosimus, *Historia nova* 5.38.2-4 (in François Paschoud, *Zosime: Histoire Nouvelle* [Paris: Société d'Édition "Les Belles Lettres", 1986], III, 56-57).

Conclusion

Just as the modern world, the ancient world was filled with symbols and imagery of female sexuality. From the imposing Parthenon statue of the virgin goddess Athena in Athens to the famous multi-breasted Diana of Ephesus, women's blatantly sexualized (or asexualized) bodies were visible everywhere in the Greco-Roman world. In the city of Rome, the winged virgin goddess Victory stood over the sacrificial altar in the meeting place of the senators, a stark contrast to the sensuous Venus Erycina, patroness of prostitutes, whose temple stood nearby on the Capitoline. In their temple at the heart of the Roman forum, Vestal Virgins guarded the well-being and prosperity of the Rome for over a thousand years with the potent and fertile chastity of their bodies, while not far away, in the infamous *Coelimontana* district of the city, numerous prostitutes serviced Rome's citizens in government-licensed brothels.

Christian virginity was born into a world in which female sexuality already had meanings and symbolic power in political, social, and religious spheres. In this dissertation, I have attempted to reconstruct a small part of the process by which Christian sexual renunciation was established amidst these preexisting ideologies and eventually came to replace some of them. Ambrose of Milan's writings on virginity demonstrate the bishop's struggle to establish a discourse about women's sexual renunciation that refuted the value of similar non-Christian practices and institutions that were already established while subsuming the powerful language and ideas that had sustained those institutions over time. His understanding of Christian virginity's precarious place in relation to competing virginal ideologies such as Vestal virginity, I

have argued, may suggest a more specific motive for his limited involvement in the so-called Altar of Victory dispute of the early 380s.

While my final chapter was devoted to the competition of Christian and pagan virginites, this dissertation has focused mainly upon Ambrose's development of virginal ideologies in the face of Christian opposition. Many of the bishop's greatest challenges to his ascetic program were presented by critics within the Christian church. Some lay Christians grounded in the social structures of Greco-Roman society found his initial advocacy of non-domestic, extra-familial ascetic practice disruptive, his exemplary virgin-martyrs extreme, and his insistence upon virginity's superiority to marriage degrading and dangerous to society.

To these critics, he responded in part by tailoring his teachings to the social norms and standards of Greco-Roman society. At the same time, he appealed to scripture, and thus to the "Christian" persona of the Christian Roman, to bolster the fundamental principles of his program. In his second treatise, *De virginitate*, many of Ambrose's strongly-ascetic readings of scripture were abandoned in favor of more inclusive interpretations. The radical virgin-martyr disappeared in favor of the subdued virgin-bride of Christ. This tempering of ascetic rhetoric is even further manifest in his later treatises, *De institutione virginis* and *Exhortatio virginitatis*. Eve, often read by Ambrose and other Christian writers as a symbol of marriage's inferior and fallen state, was praised in response to Jovinian and other critics who found Ambrose's ascetic enthusiasm derogatory toward marriage. At the same time, she is connected to both Sarah and Mary as a guarantee of marriage's honorable place in the afterlife as well as a reiteration of the female ascetic's proper place within—and not outside of—the state of womanhood. The

bishop finds ways to integrate the family into his ascetic program, as is demonstrated by his creative adoption of the widow Juliana's voice. And Ambrose resurrects the virgin-martyr in his work in the guise of the Virgin Mary who, while not actually suffering for death, experiences it vicariously, and thus models a less disruptive, more socially-acceptable form of martyrdom. Virginité, closely aligned with Christian salvation, is modeled as an inherent, indispensable part of Christianity, while doubters deny the testimony of scripture, of parents, of the Virgin, and become even as the Jews and the Homoians who doubted Christ.

Beyond highlighting many of Ambrose's ideological evolutions, I have also wished to suggest something about the discourse of virginité in the late fourth century. Ambrose's writings on virginité demonstrate that the language of virginité could be infused with different meanings according to need and circumstance. When Ambrose faced opposition from various Homoian contingents throughout Italy in the earlier years of his career, the language and imagery of virginité provided him with a vehicle to express his pro-Nicene sentiments without openly challenging Homoian listeners. Later on, when anti-Homoian rhetoric was well-established in Milan and the Homoian contingent had been largely silenced, the bishop defended his ascetic program, and the perpetual virginité of Mary in particular, by associating his theological opponents with the taint of Homoian heresy. Discourse about virginité, flexible and fluid, could be used and reused by the bishop to different ends according to his present needs.

While Ambrose wrote a great deal on asceticism, it is nevertheless impossible to do more than guess at the extent to which the bishop of Milan's life-long promotion of female asceticism was motivated by sincere personal convictions in the superior

blessedness of virginity or its inherent importance to the salvation of mankind. I do not wish to dismiss such possibilities out of hand. Yet the significant limitations of historical inquiry and the additional resistance of Ambrose's carefully crafted public persona make such inquiries less useful to the modern historian. Instead, I have attempted to demonstrate in this study the value of approaching Ambrose's writings with questions concerning authorial self-representation and the social, political, and theological "logic" such writings might have in context of the community in which they were written.¹ My evaluation in this dissertation of Ambrose's ascetic writings through such a lens has been by no means exhaustive, and much good work is yet to be done in this direction.

In general, this study of Ambrose's writings on virginity has aimed to draw attention to the largely unexplored landscape of Ambrose's corpus on virginity, and especially to his later three treatises. No complete English translation has ever been made of his final treatises, *De institutione virginis* and *Exhortatio virginitatis*. His second treatise, *De virginitate*, has undergone only one modern English translation and is in need of a second.² The general unavailability of these three treatises in English, I believe, is the main reason why they have been largely overlooked by many English-speaking scholars. Critical editions containing both the Latin text and English translations of these works would be a great addition to scholarship concerning Ambrose of Milan as well as fourth-century ascetic practice.

¹ See Neil McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan: Church and Court in a Christian Capital* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), xiii and also my introduction, 4-6.

² Daniel Callam's translation, *Saint Ambrose: On Virginity* (Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada : Peregrina Publishing, 1980), while useful, is not widely available. Furthermore, his English translation is not without some serious issues and his edition does not include the Latin text.

This study has attempted to suggest some avenues for future exploration of Ambrose's treatises on virginity as well. While I have considered the bishop's attitudes toward the Vestal Virgins in Chapter Four, an examination of his writings on the asceticism of other non-Christian practitioners of bodily continence is due elsewhere. While he never engaged in any public or famous dispute with non-Christian philosophers, he draws aspersions upon the chastity of the Pythagoreans and others in *De virginibus* and elsewhere.³ Was he merely reiterating the writings of Athanasius, or does his selective borrowing of this passage from the Alexandrian bishop suggest the presence of ascetic philosophers, additional competitors of Christian virginity, within the community? How may Ambrose's personal affectations of the mantle of philosophy (for example, his blatant imitation of Cicero in his composition of *De officiis*) have contributed to his writings on philosophical asceticism?

In addition, Mary's miraculous participation in the suffering and death of Christ in *De institutione* is a passage that deserves further analysis.⁴ Is this reading of her affective martyrdom original to Ambrose's work, or was he possibly inspired by the writings of others? How does this development fit into the larger history of the ideological transformation of martyrdom into virginity, the "living martyrdom," in the third and fourth centuries? What influence does Ambrose's notion of affective suffering have upon other ascetic writers? In addition to this, Ambrose's suggestion of Mary's important role in the process of humankind's salvation—not only as the bearer of Christ, but as a participant in his redemptive sacrifice—is another interesting avenue for further

³ Ambrose, *De virginibus* 1.4.17-18 (Gori, I, 120-122).

⁴ Ambrose, *De institutione virginis* 7.49-50 (Gori, II, 148-150).

exploration. In what ways is this original to Ambrose's thought, and in what ways may Ambrose be contributing to a larger body of thought on the Virgin perhaps already present in the fourth century? These questions, and many others, await further exploration in works to come.

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BIOGRAPHY

Ariel Bybee Laughton was born on May 2, 1976 in St. George, Utah. She attended the University of Utah from 1994 to 1996 before serving a Spanish-speaking mission for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Spokane, Washington from 1997 to 1998. In April 1999, she earned Bachelor of Arts degree in History from Brigham Young University. She did graduate coursework in ancient history and languages at Brigham Young University from 1999 to 2002 and was selected for the Classical Summer School of the American Academy of Rome in 2001. In 2002, she entered the doctoral program in Religion at Duke University and completed her Master of Arts degree in Religion in May 2006. In addition to the full fellowship she received from the Graduate School at Duke University during her doctoral studies, she also held a Duke Women's Studies Dissertation Research Fellowship (2007-2008), a Duke Graduate School Dissertation Summer Research Fellowship (2007), and a Hugh W. Nibley Fellowship from Brigham Young University (2008-2010). She received a Religious Education Research Grant from Brigham Young University for three consecutive years (2007-2010) and various awards from both the Department of Religion and the Department of Women's Studies at Duke to attend conferences in both fields. Since 2008, she has held an appointment as Visiting Scholar in the Department of Religious Studies at Rice University.