

## Marriage as a Social Good: Origen of Alexandria and John Chrysostom, Revisited

---

### 1. *Marriage as a Social Good*

“For a life to count as a good life”, Sarah Ahmed points out, “it must return the debt of its life by taking on the direction promised as a social good”.<sup>1</sup> A “good life” therefore charts a certain course, embraces some dreams as dreams-come-true, and proceeds along pathways recognizable as productive, responsible, and valuable, not only to the one-who-lives but also to those observing that life. In the process, a life offers gestures of return to family, community, ancestor, and nation, knitting together a world where “the good” goes unnoticed as a social process at all.<sup>2</sup> Marriage has been one of these recognizable social goods, a measure of personal and social happiness in both antiquity and today. In the Middle America I knew growing up, for example, a young woman’s wedding day was “the happiest day of your life”, and a little girl might grow up flipping through her parents’ wedding album, cautiously peeping into the cedar chest that holds the satin wedding dress, and dressing dolls in white.<sup>3</sup> Though the circumstances were very different, perhaps a Roman girl living in Egypt prepared for her future happiness in similar ways, anticipating the day when her father would sign a marriage contract on her behalf, in the presence of seven male witnesses.<sup>4</sup> And perhaps

- 1 S. AHMED: *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2006, 21.
- 2 “The familiar takes shape by being unnoticed” (S. AHMED: *Queer Phenomenology*, 37).
- 3 Cf. S. AHMED: “Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness”, in: *Signs* 35/3 (2010), 577: “For example, the child might be asked to imagine happiness by imagining happy events in the future, such as the wedding day, the ‘happiest day of your life’. The very expectation of happiness might be what gives us a specific image of the future.”
- 4 I am thinking of the example of a second-century marriage contract from Arisinoë, Egypt, P. Mich, inv. 508 + 2217, verso: “[ - - - Nomissianus] in accordance with the Julian law, [which has enacted concerning marriage arrangements, has given his] maiden [daughter] Zenarion in marriage for the sake of begetting [children and M. Petronius Servillius has taken her as his wife]; and to him he has promised and has given (by way) of dowry everything [that is written below for the same, above-mentioned (daughter)]: of land inherited from his father... in clothing by valuation [a tunic and a light mantle and a Scyrian cloak for the value of 430 Augustan drachmai], and as additional gifts, a tunic and an [old] light mantle, [and a Heratianon, and a striped garment(?), and a bronze Venus] and a bronze flask (of the value) of 48 drachmai, [and a mirror and a chest...and two oil flasks and another flask] in weight 7 ¼ minae, [and a small wooden box, an easy chair, a perfume box, a basket, and] the paternal

those who heard the Johannine story of the wedding at Cana thought not only of its spiritual implications but also about the good wedding parties they had attended (John 2,1-12). Marriage – as a shifting contractual, legal, institutional, metaphorical, and ideological instrument – is and has been one socially acceptable container for sexual congress, though terms, practices, and assumptions associated with this particular “gesture of return” are far from constant.<sup>5</sup>

The anti-marriage stance of many of the writings associated with the early Jesus movement therefore remains quite odd, expressive of an anti-world standpoint that, if consistently practiced, was capable of bringing about the awaited eschaton, irrespective of divine involvement. The legacy of this stance, worked out and through by Jesus followers and Christians into the present day, remains a hallmark of what “being Christian” came to mean and has meant, despite the vast array of responses to enigmatic sayings like “there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 19,12) or “in view of the impending crisis, it is well for you to remain as you are” (1 Cor 7,26).<sup>6</sup> As Paula Fredriksen reminds us in her recent study of the apostle Paul, “monogamous marriages, sexual self-discipline within marriage, love of community, community self-governance, [and] support for the poor” were “ethics idealized by Jews about Jews” and widely shared by “pagans” as well.<sup>7</sup> Jesus’s demand that his followers abandon property and kin in order to follow him – remembered by the gospel writers in sayings about the flood (“They were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark,” Matt 24,38) and in the claim that, at the resurrection, there is no marriage at all (Matt 22,30; Mk 12,25; Lk 20,34) – were both preserved and moderated in light of these shared values.<sup>8</sup>

[slave] Heraida. [Likewise M. Petronius Servillius also said that he himself had contributed as dowry gifts of his own two paternal iugera of grain land located] near the village of Philadelphia [in the place - - -].” Edited with English translation at University of Michigan Library Digital Collections, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/a/apis/x-2378/508v.tif> (accessed 30.09.2020).

- 5 M. FOUCAULT’s multi-volume *History of Sexuality* traces changes in subject-self-sex relations from antiquity to the present day: *Histoire de la sexualité*, Paris: Gallimard, 1976 (English trans. by Robert Hurley: *History of Sexuality*, New York: Random House, 1978); *Le Souci de Soi*, Paris: Gallimard, 1984 (English trans. by Robert Hurley, *The Care of the Self*, New York: Pantheon, 1985); *L’usage des plaisirs*, Paris: Gallimard, 1984 (English trans. Robert Hurley: *The Use of Pleasures*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1985); and now *Les aveux de la chair*, ed. F. Gros, Paris: Gallimard, 2018. Foucault’s work provoked a number of close studies of ancient flesh, bodies, and desire, including A. ROUSSELLE: *Porneia: On Desire and the Body in Antiquity*, trans. F. Pheasant, Oxford: Blackwell, 1988, and P. BROWN: *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, New York: Columbia, 1988. Further discussion below.
- 6 On “eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven”, see in particular M. KUEFLER: *The Manly Eunuch: Masculinity, Gender Ambiguity, and Christian Ideology in Late Antiquity*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001. The bibliography on Paul’s injunction that Christ-followers should “remain as [they] are” is immense. For an overview, see J. KNUST: *Unprotected Texts: The Bible’s Surprising Contradictions about Sex and Desire*, San Francisco: HarperONE, 2011, 81-94 (with bibliography).
- 7 P. FREDRIKSEN: *Paul: The Pagan’s Apostle*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017, 117.
- 8 P. FREDRIKSEN: *From Jesus to Christ: The Origins of the New Testament Images of Jesus*, 2nd ed., New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000, 128. Also see J.W. KNUST: “Marriage, Adultery, and

The rejection of marriage as a personal and social good – it is a distraction, children are a burden, and the end is at hand – denied sexual congress a “proper” context and yet was also a basis for social and personal reimagining. If human marriage is not – always, often, ever – a social or a personal good, what is it *for*?

Later Christians responded to this question in various ways, with some re-affirming the value of disciplined sexual monogamy within marriage, others rejecting marriage altogether, but most looking for some kind of compromise that conceded the good of marriage and yet embraced perpetual virginity for those able to take on its more rigorous demands. As Elizabeth Clark argued in *Reading Renunciation*, over the course of the second- to fifth-centuries, “early Christian communities were increasingly stratified and hierarchalized by an axiology – a theory of value – of ‘difference’ centered on ascetic renunciation”.<sup>9</sup> This axiology, organized around an ascetic/householder binary as opposed to (to offer a modern example) some theory of a homosexual/heterosexual divide,<sup>10</sup> became the landscape upon which Christian cultures could be mapped and the Christian self could be known.<sup>11</sup> Patristic critique of the heavy toll of fleshly marriage – its supposedly unique capacity for burdening bodies, souls, and lives with the constraints of material existence – invited speculation about other kinds of bodies and other sorts of lives, re-placing one kind of future orientation with another. An eternal life in which the soul is united (finally) in an embrace with the divine, anticipated by a life of rigorous ascetic discipline, was most often portrayed as the privileged course. Practiced chastity between husband and wife was offered as a secondary but possible option with equally significant theological implications.

Even so, the fourth- and fifth-century recalibration of Christian subjectivity into its new, imperial guise provoked a significant re-theorization of marriage as a relationship to the self and to the state. Michel Foucault’s recently published (though not recently written) *Les aveux de la chair* puts it this way: Responding to practical pastoral duties, bishops like John Chrysostom faced the double pressure of reinforcing both the ascetic ideal and the traditional social forms that contradicted it.<sup>12</sup> In the process, newly positive valorizations of the married life emerged, such that an earlier Greek “use of pleasures” and an earlier Christian valorization of virginity were reconfigured into an “ethics of the flesh”<sup>13</sup> capable

Divorce”, in: B.H. DUNNING (ed.): *The Oxford Handbook of New Testament, Gender, and Sexuality*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019, 522-538.

9 E.A. CLARK: *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999, 5.

10 E. SEDGWICK: *The Epistemology of the Closet*, 2nd rev. ed., Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008.

11 Compare Sedgwick: “What *was* new from the turn of the century was the world-mapping by which every given person, just as he or she was necessarily assignable to a male or female gender, was now considered necessarily assignable as well to a homo- or hetero-sexuality, a binarid identity that was full of implications, however confusing, for even the ostensibly least sexual aspects of personal existence” (E. SEDGWICK: *The Epistemology of the Closet*, 2).

12 M. FOUCAULT: *Les aveux*, 261-267.

13 In the *Use of Pleasure*, Foucault argues that Christians struggled with an Other when combatting desire but, the ancient Greeks waged a contest within: “The conceptual link between the

of preserving symmetry between the monastic and the matrimonial life.<sup>14</sup> Marriage became an art (*tekhne*) of relating to the self that avoided fornication (*porneia*) and disciplined excessive desire (*epithumia*, *hēdonē*, *concupiscentia*) even while long-held social principles like “natural” inequality, gender complementarity, and the necessity of an affectionate link between spouses were retained. This shift from the more clearly anti-marriage stance of Origen of Alexandria to the matrimonial theology of John Chrysostom therefore charts a transition from a homo-social world of ascetic discipline to matrimonial/monastic structures validated on the basis of sexual, self, and state surveillance. Making room for the social good of marriage, this “axiology of difference” no longer spun around sexual renunciation in quite the same way.

## 2. *Origen of Alexandria: The “Flesh” of Scripture and the Perfection of Spirit*

Stories about marriage, passages about weddings, and instructions regarding married life found in the “sacred writings” are central to Origen’s presentation of the love affair between the soul and Christ.<sup>15</sup> “Christ wishes to espouse you also to himself”, Origen promised in a homily on Rebecca at the well, for example, a soul “which does all things patiently, which is so eager and undergirded with so much learning, which has been accustomed to draw streams of knowledge from the depths, can itself be united in marriage with Christ”, he continued, so long as, like Rebecca, it “draws from the water daily” by visiting the *ekklēsiai* regularly, drinking from the “wells of the Scriptures” and carrying home a vessel filled with the waters of the Spirit (*Homilies on Genesis* 10.2.4).<sup>16</sup> Other readings of weddings, marriages, and bridal scenes make similar claims. In *First Principles*, for example, Origen interprets the jars of water at the wedding of Cana (John 2,1-12) as an indication that the Scriptures as a whole contain three levels of meaning

movement of concupiscence, in its most insidious and most secret forms, and the presence of the Other, with its rules and its power of illusion, was to be one of the essential traits of the Christian ethics of the flesh. In the ethics of the *aphrodisia*, the inevitability and difficulty of the combat derived, on the contrary, from the fact that it unfolded as a solo contest: to struggle against ‘the desires and the pleasures’ was to cross swords with oneself” (68). In *Les aveux*, Foucault credits Tertullian with initiating this transition (78-95).

14 M. FOUCAULT: *Les aveux*, 281.

15 On the scriptural character of Origen’s writings, see R.E. HEINE: *Origen: Scholarship in Service of the Church*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007 (Christian Theology in Context) and P.W. MARTENS: *Origen and Scripture: The Contours of the Exegetical Life*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

16 ORIGEN: *Homiliae in Genesim* 10.2, in: P. HABERMEHL (ed.): *Homilien zum Hexateuch in Rufins Übersetzung: Die Homilien Zu Genesis*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012 (Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten Jahrhunderte, New Series; 17), 154-156, hereafter GCS New Series 17, and ORIGEN: *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, trans. R.E. Heine, Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1982 (Fathers of the Church; 71), 159-161, hereafter FC 71.

(flesh, soul, and spirit), but some passages contain only two (4.2.4).<sup>17</sup> That there were six jars is also significant: the number six “may reasonably allude to those who are being purified in the world”, he points out, since the world “was made in six days, a perfect number” (*First Principles* 4.2.5).<sup>18</sup> Similarly, a commandment about washing one’s garments becomes, in a homily on Exodus, a reminder that one should approach “the wedding banquet” of the soul and Christ in a “holy and sanctified” state (*Homily on Exodus* 11.7).<sup>19</sup> In Origen’s writings, the fact of marriage, stories about marriage, and the presupposition that marriage is a desired outcome were refashioned such that the idea of “marriage” became instead a training ground for human-divine intimacy. Human-human intimacy, especially through sexual congress, was no longer a social good, though was grudgingly tolerated for those who could not pursue a celibate life.<sup>20</sup> For the time being, however, other forms of human companionship remained essential: “visiting the well” necessarily included attending the *ekklēsiai* where the Logos could be encountered and, among the faithful, spiritual perfection could be sought, if not fully realized. As Origen explains near the close of his homily on Rebecca, “meditating on these words” and perceiving the deeper sense and meaning, one “will find a marriage worthy for God; for the soul is united with God” (*Homily on Exodus* 11.5).<sup>21</sup>

The social consequences of this argument are earthly as well as heavenly: once sexual congress is set aside, human-human intimacy may be found in shared intimacy with a heavenly Other, offering a more perfect communion rooted first in a communion with the divine. As Virginia Burrus and Stephen Moore explain in their analysis of patristic exegesis of the Song of Songs, allegorical exposition plunged interpreters like Origen “into the arms of another love, a male lover, God or Christ”. By avoiding the female “bride” Shulamith and reveling instead in a male-dominated and male-dominating “erotics of deferral”,<sup>22</sup> “fathers” like Origen and Gregory of Nyssa re-oriented and universalized their desires within a never-ending quest for fulfillment in the arms of a divine lover.<sup>23</sup> Readers like

17 ORIGEN: *De principiis* 4.2.4, in: H. GÖRGEMANNS/H. KARPP (eds.): *Origenes: Vier Bücher von den Prinzipien*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1976 (Texte zur Forschung; 24), 708, and G.W. BUTTERWORTH: *Origen On First Principles, Being Koetschau’s Text of the De Principiis Translated into English, Together with an Introduction and Notes*, New York: Harper & Row, 1966, 276.

18 H. GÖRGEMANNS/H. KARPP (eds.): *Origenes*, 712-14; G.W. BUTTERWORTH: *Origen On First Principles*, 278.

19 ORIGEN: *Homiliae in Exodum* 11.5, in: M. BORRET (ed.): *Origene: Homélie sur l’Exode, texte latin, introduction, traduction et notes*, Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1985 (Sources chrétiennes; 321), 350, hereafter SC 321. At that dinner, the believer “shall eat from the flesh of the lamb” and “drink from the cup of salvation”, FC 71, 365.

20 P. BROWN: *Body and Society*, 146, 149-50, 160-77.

21 SC 321, 340; FC 71, 366.

22 V. BURRUS/S.D. MOORE: “Unsafe Sex: Feminism, Pornography, and the Song of Songs”, in: *Biblical Interpretation* 11 (2003), 24-52.

23 Also see E. PAGELS: “The Shape-Shifting Bride: Reflection on Race and Ethnicity in Origen’s Exegesis of the Song of Songs”, in: S.A. HARVEY/N.P. DESROSIERS/S.L. LANDER et al. (eds.): *A Most Reliable Witness: Essays in Honor of Ross Shepard Kraemer*, Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2015, 223-242.

Origen never quite took on the role of the “bride”, however; the marriage was not consummated, at least not in this lifetime, and practices of spiritual adornment were pursued instead.<sup>24</sup> One “social good” of allegorical interpretation was therefore the establishment of ascetic male homosocial bonds at the expense of the bride, the woman, and the wife – the fleshly, not the spiritual kind – who were positioned as foils to a delayed but ever anticipated spiritual achievement coded as “male”. In Peter Brown’s words, for Origen, not belonging to married society meant “to belong more intensely to others” and to become part of “a great communion of human and angelic beings” instead.<sup>25</sup>

Origen’s advice to actual wives in a homily on Lot’s daughters make this dynamic clear. Concerned that hearers, lured by a “bare letter”, fleshly reading of Genesis, will be appalled by the daughters’ actions, he rebukes both the fleshly reading and their fleshly actions:

Let the married women examine themselves and see if they approach their husbands for this reason alone, that they might receive children, and after conception desist ... But some women, for we do not censure all equally, but there are some who serve passion incessantly, like animals without any distinction, whom I would not even compare to the dumb beasts. (*Homily on Genesis 5.4*)<sup>26</sup>

In other words, Lot’s daughters, recognizing in their father “a manly soul”, desired posterity, not pleasure, and so – unlike their mother, a figure of “concupiscence” – they undertook only what was strictly necessary. An *ad hominem* attack against married women therefore provided an alibi for the actions of Lot’s comparatively chaste daughters – what they did pales in comparison to those passionate women who “like animals” pursue pleasure with their husbands at home. But the real lesson of the story can be found in spiritual, not fleshly, fecundity, Origen concludes: “If you wish to beget, beget in the spirit, since ‘he who sows in the spirit, of the spirit shall reap life everlasting’” (*Homily on Genesis 5.6*).<sup>27</sup> Desire for human posterity may be acceptable, but desire for unity with Christ is more productive, aiming as it does for a restoration of a primordial dignity that has been lost. In the meantime, the social good of corporate worship and intensive study of the Scriptures provides the sustenance required for the long journey of the soul to its final fulfillment in the *apokatastasis*, the restoration of all to the Good.<sup>28</sup>

24 Such a deferral preserved human maleness and desire both. Gregory of Nyssa offers one example of such a quest: “true satisfaction...consists in constantly going on with her question and never ceasing her ascent, seeing that every fulfillment of her desire continually generates another desire” (*Homilies on the Song of Songs 12.13,69-70*). Cited and discussed by V. BURRUS/S.D. MOORE: “Unsafe Sex”, 45-46.

25 P. BROWN: *Body and Society*, 171.

26 GCS New Series 17, 94-95; FC 71, 117.

27 GCS New Series 17, 99; FC 71, 120.

28 As Peter Brown puts it, “physical pleasure was a pale and bland displacement of true feeling, a deflection of the spirit’s huge capacity for delight into the dulled sensations of the body” (P. BROWN: *Body and Society*, 173). On *apokatastasis*, see I.L.E. RAMELLI: *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis: A Critical Assessment from the New Testament to Eriugena*, Leiden: Brill, 2013



Such a theology of marriage offered compensations to those whom, for whatever reason, resisted its charms.<sup>29</sup> It also provided a warrant for a homosocial world in which wives (who, by means of ascetic discipline and a martyr's commitment, might also become "men"<sup>30</sup>) were no longer necessary for the upbuilding of the "assemblies" (*ekklesiai*), a striking contrast to other, more familiar civic *ekklesiai*. In Greek cities like Alexandria and Caesarea where Origen lived, assemblies in their political guise were composed of male citizens (*kurioi*) and, by extension, their households (their wife, children, and slaves), whose interests the assemblies protected. Among these assemblies, social continuity was sought not in bonds of faith linking the "brothers and sisters in Christ", but in enduring kinship relations (real or fictive) among the productive free citizens of the city. In such a context, actual marriages were essential to the good of the cities (*polei*). At stake, then, was what social good actually *is*, what social good ought to be pursued.<sup>31</sup>

### 3. *The Kurioi and Marriage as the Social Good*

As David Konstan has pointed out, the Greek *polis* "imagined itself as a collection of individual households, each presided over by a male head, or *kurios*, and each related to others through ties of kinship and marriage".<sup>32</sup> This perspective is reflected in inscriptions, funerary stele, surviving marriage contracts, philosophical, moralistic, and historical writings, and also in a set of lengthy

(Supplements to *Vigiliae Christianae*; 120); IDEM: "Christian Soteriology and Christian Platonism: Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and the Biblical and Philosophical Basis of the Doctrine of Apokatastasis", in: *Vigiliae Christianae* 61 (2007), 313-356; and P. TZAMALIKOS: *Origen: Philosophy of History and Eschatology*; Leiden: Brill, 2007 (Supplements to *Vigiliae Christianae*; 85).

- 29 See E. CASTELLI: "Virginity and its Meaning for Women's Sexuality in Early Christianity", in: *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 2/1 (1986), 61-88.
- 30 See E. CASTELLI: "I Will Make Mary Male': Pieties of the Body and Gender Transformation of Christian Women in Late Antiquity", in: *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, New York: Routledge, 1991, 29-49; S. COBB: *Dying to Be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr Texts*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2008 and G. CLOKE: *This Female Man of God: Women and Spiritual Power in the Patristic Age, 350-450*, London: Routledge, 1995.
- 31 Arguments against marriage are also found in "pagan" literature, particularly in the context of satire and comedy, where wives are described as destroyers of (male) happiness. Philosophers were also dissuaded from marriage, which was depicted as a distraction; see the helpful overview by B. FEICHTINGER in her essay, "Change and Continuity in Pagan and Christian (Invective) Thought on Women and Marriage from Antiquity to the Middle Ages", in: W.S. SMITH (ed.): *Satiric Advice On Women and Marriage: From Plautus to Chaucer*, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2005, 182-209.
- 32 D. KONSTAN: *Sexual Symmetry: Love in the Ancient Novel and Related Genres*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994, 179. Konstan is interested in the Greek novels and their subtle challenge to this model, their pursuit of what he calls "sexual symmetry" between the hero and heroine of the romance. Nevertheless, this "symmetry" remains socially productive; feelings of love cement "a sense of solidarity or cohesiveness within the civic community", and reinforce "political ties with a more personal bond between families" (220).

fictive tales recounting the perils of a Greek hero and heroine who fall in love, face multiple dangers, and, at the end, unite in marriage. Known among contemporary scholars as “the Greek romance novels”,<sup>33</sup> the popularity of these works of prose fiction was at a peak during Origen’s lifetime. Indeed, the Christian *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles* may have been composed, in part, as a direct counterpoint to them.<sup>34</sup> These *Acts* present literary inversions of the teleological plotting of the romance novels; rather than concluding with the “happy ending” of marriage, as the novels do, instead the *Apocryphal Acts* recount the heroic and remarkably successful efforts of the apostles at promoting celibacy among the marriageable Greek men and women they encounter (especially the women); their success leads local officials to persecute both the apostles and those who accept their teachings.<sup>35</sup> From the perspective of the novels, however, marriage itself is the “happy ending”, an illustration of the positive results of a proper education (Greek *paideia*) for the protagonists,<sup>36</sup> a confirmation of the values of self-control, endurance, and fidelity,<sup>37</sup> and a reaffirmation of the civic responsibilities taken on by the urban elite.<sup>38</sup>

The dramatic ending of Chariton’s *Chaereas and Callirhoe* offers one vivid example: Finally reunited after their adventures, the hero and heroine return to their city of Syracuse and are invited to “go to the assembly” to share what happened. Those assembled cheer them both, listen attentively to Chaereas’s oration, and accept his recommendation to grant citizenship to those who assisted him in rescuing Callirhoe.<sup>39</sup> Meanwhile, Callirhoe “went to Aphrodite’s temple, placed

- 33 Surviving “novels” from the first three centuries of the Common Era include Achilles Tatius’s *Leucippe and Clitophon*, Chariton’s *Chaereas and Callirhoe*, Heliodorus’s *Ethiopian Story*, Longus’s *Daphnis and Chloe*, and Xenophon of Ephesus’s *Ephesian Story*, as well as others that survive in fragments. Collected and translated by B.P. REARDON (ed.): *Collected Ancient Greek Novels*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989. For discussion, see S. SWAIN: *Hellenism and Empire: Language, Classicism, and Power in the Greek World, AD 50-250*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996, 101-131.
- 34 See especially K. COOPER: *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996.
- 35 Cf. P. BROWN: *Body and Society*, 155-158.
- 36 R.F. HOCK: “The Educational Curriculum in Chariton’s *Callirhoe*”, in: J.-A.A. BRANT/C.W. HEDRICK/C. SHEA (eds.): *Ancient Fiction: The Matrix of Early Christian and Jewish Narrative*, Atlanta: SBL, 2005, 15-36.
- 37 T. WHITMARSH: *Narrative and Identity in the Ancient Greek Novel: Returning Romance*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, 6-10. Whitmarsh argues that these novels partook in a broader “rise in conjugal ideology” that “stressed the virtues of marriage in a variety of media (epigraphy, literature, and philosophy)...and a growing celebration of self-control, endurance, and fidelity” (9).
- 38 Set in the past, Romans are conspicuously absent from these stories, and the perils faced by the hero and heroine take place in the *chora* (“countryside”), on the sea, or in the lands of the “barbarians” (S. SWAIN: *Hellenism and Empire*, 109-118).
- 39 Chariton, *De Callirhoe narrationes amatoriae* 28. B.P. REARDON (ed.): *Charitonis Aphrodisiensis de Callirhoe narrationes amatoriae*, Munich: K.G. Sauer, 2004 (Bibliotheca scriptorium Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana), 147: “They are worthy to be citizens of Syracuse – let us have that voted! A decree was passed, and they took their places at once as members of the assembly”, trans. B.P. REARDON (ed.): *Collected Ancient Greek Novels*, 124.



her hands on the goddess's feet, placed her face on them, let down her hair, and kissed them. "Thank you, Aphrodite!" she said ... Do not separate me from Chaereas again, I beg of you; grant us a happy life together, and let us die together!"<sup>40</sup> In Origen's homilies, the Christian *ekklesiai* are designed to foster bonds among the brothers and sisters "in Christ" as they regularly attend "the festivals", listen to the words of scripture, and seek fulfillment in unity with the divine. In Chariton's Syracuse, the assembly decides who is worthy to join in citizenship, distributes prizes to those who provide benefactions, and offers praise and acclamation to whomever perseveres in the upbuilding of *kurioi*, their long-standing kinship, and the religious and marital relations that keep their city going. To Origen, the soul's true end is to be found in mystical unity with Christ; to Chariton, the pleasures of *aphrodisia*, when marshalled to the good of the city and enjoyed between two young, free, and married lovers, ends in the flourishing of both city and self.

Origen's anti-marriage position also offers a striking contrast to the intrusive marriage policies of Roman imperial administrations. By the third century, moralizing marriage policies were a well-established aspect of Roman hegemony: as *pater patriae* ("father of the fatherland") emperors were expected to involve themselves in the intimate lives of their subjects, a model initiated by the Augustan marriage legislation and maintained well into late antiquity.<sup>41</sup> During Origen's own lifetime, the Emperor Caracalla had granted Roman citizenship to nearly every free citizen living within imperial borders, extending the reach and weight of Roman marital legislation (and Roman legislation more generally) more fully into the provinces.<sup>42</sup> A series of rescripts written by the third-century emperors (or their secretaries) and preserved in the *Codex of Justinian* illustrates the importance of marriage legislation to performances of imperial sovereignty.<sup>43</sup> The emperor, by serving as the ultimate arbiter of household affairs, was available to his subjects for the upbuilding of marriage practices and property arrangements and therefore of the empire as well, as these rescripts presuppose.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Important bibliography includes: S. TREGGIARI: *Roman Marriage: Iusti Coniuges from the Time of Cicero to the Time of Ulpian*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991; J.E. GRUBBS: *Law and Family in Late Antiquity: The Emperor Constantine's Marriage Legislation*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995, and S.E. PHANG: *The Marriage of Roman Soldiers (13 BC-AD 235): Law and Family in the Imperial Army*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2001 (Columbia Studies in the Classical Tradition; 24).

<sup>42</sup> This is the *constitutio Antoniniana*. As Lukas de Blois explains, "The penetration of Roman law in the provinces, which had been underway since the early Principate, will now have got more momentum; the common element of all the empire's inhabitants increasingly will have been Roman law, which became a kind of *ius commune*, next to local custom and law." See L. DE BLOIS: *Image and Reality of Roman Imperial Power in the Third Century AD: The Impact of War*, London: Routledge, 2019 (Routledge Studies in Ancient History), 48.

<sup>43</sup> I have consulted the edition with translation by B.W. FRIER et al. (ed.): *The Codex of Justinian: A New Annotated Translation*, with parallel Latin and Greek text based on a translation by Justice Fred H. Blume, 3 vol., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

Though busy with the economic and military disasters that characterized the “third-century crisis”, the emperors who ruled during Origen’s day regularly weighed in on marital disputes, affirmed the value of marital affection, and mediated between fathers and their married children. Alexander Severus, for example, emperor from 222 until his assassination on the Danube by his own soldiers in 235, advised one Melitia about how to obtain a dowry,<sup>44</sup> helped Maxima resist the opposition of her husband’s father to their marriage,<sup>45</sup> and informed a gentleman by the name of Aquila that he could not sue his wife’s father for monies expended during this wife’s illness, but he could demand that the father pay for the costs of her funeral from her returned dowry.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, in 239 the Emperor Gordian III clarified imperial policy regarding marriage between a provincial woman married to a Roman administrator: the children are legitimate if the marriage endures after the husband steps down from his position, Gordian explained to the petitioner Valeria.<sup>47</sup> The same year that Gordian offered this ruling, the Persians attacked Dura Europos, leading the Romans to construct a massive earthen embankment to protect the city, a project which buried the local synagogue, the Christian house-church, and a shrine to Mithras, among other buildings.<sup>48</sup> Perhaps Origen’s *ekklesiai* met in similar sorts of house churches in Alexandria or in Caesarea, though no such building survives. The Emperor Decius, famous for initiating the persecution that led to Origen’s tortures,<sup>49</sup> issued similar rescripts, including a judgment that permitted a *matrona* named Urbicana to

44 “The same Augustus [Alexander] to Melitia. If you have *curatores* and they fail to constitute a dowry (for you) from your property, once you approach the provincial governor you will prevail upon them to provide what is becoming to a respectable person. Posted April 15, in the consulship of Agricola and Clemens. (230)” CJ 5.37.9; B.W. FRIER et al. (ed.): *The Codex of Justinian*, 1300-1301.

45 “The same Augustus to Maxima [Emperor Alexander Augustus]. If, on the facts as you state them, the father of your deceased husband, in whose power (*potestas*) the latter stood, did not oppose your marriage though he knew about it, you need not worry that he refuses to acknowledge his grandson as his own. (228)” CJ 5.4.5; B.W. FRIER et al. (ed.): *The Codex of Justinian*, 1745.

46 “The same Augustus to Aquila. What you spent on your sick wife, you may not recover from your father-in-law, but should charge it to your affection. As to her funeral, however, if you spent anything on this account with the intent to recover, you rightly sue her father to whom her dowry returned. Posted October 25, in the consulship of Agricola and Clemens. (230)” CJ 2.18.13; B.W. FRIER et al. (ed.): *The Codex of Justinian*, 517.

47 “Emperor Gordian Augustus to Valeria. Even though, in violation of standing imperial instructions (*mandata principum*), a marriage (with an administrator) took place in a province with the consent of the woman, nevertheless, if, after (the husband) has stepped down from his post, she should continue to be so minded, the marriage becomes valid. And for that reason, a reply to a request for legal advice (*responsum*) from Paul, a man very learned (in the law), holds that their children are legitimate, being begotten and born in a valid marriage. August 21, in the consulship of Gordian Augustus and Aviola. (239)” CJ 5.4.6; B.W. FRIER et al. (ed.): *The Codex of Justinian*, 1109.

48 L. DE BLOIS: *Image and Reality*, 62. On Dura Europos, see <http://media.artgallery.yale.edu/duraeuropos/dura.html>.

49 Described by Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.39, G. BARDY (ed.): *Eusèbe de Césarée: Histoire ecclésiastique*, Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1955 (Sources chrétiennes; 41), 141-142, hereafter SC 41. Translation by R.J. Defarri: *Eusebius’s Ecclesiastical History, Books 6-9*,

retain her dowry, despite her husband's debts to the state.<sup>50</sup> In 251, Decius was killed on the Western frontier, together with most of his army.<sup>51</sup> Meanwhile in Palestine, Origen succumbed to torture and died.<sup>52</sup>

Of course, we cannot know what provoked Origen to devote his life so avidly either to Christian scholarship or to ascetic rigor. According to Eusebius, he was motivated by a Christian zeal he had inherited from his martyr father, but these remarks are colored by the requirements of the genre *encomia*, Eusebius's own rhetorical projects, and a historical distance of about sixty years.<sup>53</sup> Still, Origen's surviving intellectual corpus leaves no doubt about his dedication to overcoming what he viewed as the tragic fall of rational souls into heavy material bodies, his intention to find unity with God through Christ, and his determination to apply the best of Greek learning to Scriptures he regarded as Christian.<sup>54</sup> His life as a scholar-ascetic also gave him enviable access to a world of books, learning, pupils, and patronage, despite his affiliation with a barbaric superstition that led, ultimately, to his fleshly demise.<sup>55</sup> The pleasures of this kind of life suited him and others like him perhaps, as together they participated within a broader tradition of forgoing marriage for the purposes of study, student-teacher and scholar-scholar intimacy, and an ascetic discipline designed to offer liberation for the soul. As Peter Brown puts it, an advocate of "wild" Platonism, Origen sought "the sharpness of sensual experience" in the "primordial intensity" of a communal life with the divine.<sup>56</sup>

Such goals were not unique to Christians, though the desire to commune with saints, martyrs, Christ, and the angels was distinctive. "For the blessed few", Daniel Boyarin observes, human longing develops, finally, "into contemplation of the form of Beauty itself", a longed-for blessing that goes back at least as far as Plato.<sup>57</sup> From this perspective, the marriage bed can never offer access to the

Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1955 (Fathers of the Church; 29), 65-69, hereafter FC 29. For further discussion, see L. DE BLOIS: *Image and Reality*, 64-66.

50 "Emperor Decius Augustus and Decius Caesar to Urbicana. It is appropriate that your claim on your dowry (i.e., for its return) is stronger than that of the State, to which your husband subsequently became indebted. Posted on June 8, in the consulship of Decius Augustus and Gratus. (250)" CJ 5.12.9; B.W. FRIER et al. (ed.): *The Codex of Justinian*, 1173.

51 L. DE BLOIS: *Image and Reality*, 68.

52 EUSEBIUS OF CAESAREA: *Ecclesiastical History* 7.1; SC 41, 166; FC 29, 92.

53 EUSEBIUS OF CAESAREA: *Ecclesiastical History* 6.2; SC 41, 83-86; FC 29, 4-8.

54 "It must needs be that the nature of bodies is not primary, but that it was created at intervals on account of certain falls that happened to rational beings, who came to need bodies, and again that when their restoration is perfectly accomplished these bodies are dissolved into nothing so that this is for ever happening." ORIGEN: *First Principles* 4.2.8, in: H. GÖRGEMANN/ H. KARPP (eds.): *Origenes*, 724 and G.W. BUTTERWORTH: *Origen On First Principles*, 285.

55 A. GRAFTON/M.H. WILLIAMS: *Christianity and the Transformation of the Book: Origen, Eusebius, and the Library of Caesarea*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006, and A. CARRIKER: *The Library of Eusebius of Caesarea*, Leiden: Brill, 2003.

56 P. BROWN: *Body and Society*, 172-173.

57 D. BOYARIN: "Friends without Benefits: Or, Academic Love", in: M. MASTERSON/ N.S. RABINOWITZ/J. ROBSON (eds.): *Sex in Antiquity: Exploring Gender and Sexuality in the Ancient World*, London: Routledge, 2014, 519.

rarified, more excellent intimacy of the soul with the divine, an orienting of desire (*eros*) that Boyarin detects across philosophical, Christian, and rabbinic discourses; the interplay of corporeal versus non-corporeal passions were advanced among circles of educated men who enjoyed an “intensely homoerotic (but desexualized) male-male spiritual boding over the seeking of wisdom”. “The mere physical *eros* of sex with women and procreating children”, Boyarin concludes, could never compete with this higher goal.<sup>58</sup> Desire for divine-human intimacy and the pursuit of some higher truth in the company of like-minded others advanced the social good of friendship and learning, but all too often at the expense of women, who were invited only insofar as they, too, become “male”.

#### 4. *Women, Men, and the Lure of Sexual Restraint*

Though not the primary audience of Origen’s homilies and commentaries, it is clear that women were also pursuing spiritual advancement by means of renunciation and the rejection of earthly marriage. The *Apocryphal Acts*, as we have already observed, celebrate this fact. The *Acts* are fictions with only a tenuous relationship to actual events; still, they speak to an imaginary world under which lies a demonstrable fact: female sexual renunciants played an active role in defining “Christian-ness” both before and after the advent of Constantine. By the fourth and fifth centuries, to offer just a few examples, John Chrysostom’s regular correspondence with Olympias,<sup>59</sup> Jerome’s close ties to Paula and Eustochium,<sup>60</sup> Gregory of Nyssa’s appreciation for his sister Macrina,<sup>61</sup> and the activities of Melania the Elder, Melania the Younger, and her husband Pinianus, with whom

58 D. BOYARIN: “Friends without Benefits”, 531.

59 JOHN CHRYSOSTOM: *Lettres à Olympias*, ed. A.-M. Malingrey, Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1947 (Sources chrétiennes; 13). Trans. by David C. Ford: JOHN CHRYSOSTOM: *Letters to Olympias*, Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2016. On the relationship between Chrysostom and Olympias, see W. MAYER: “Patronage, Pastoral Care and the Role of the Bishop at Antioch”, in: *Vigiliae Christianae* 55/1 (2001), 58-70 and, W. MAYER: “Constantinopolitan Women in John Chrysostom’s Circle”, in: *Vigiliae Christianae* 53/3 (1999), 58-70.

60 On Jerome and his circle of women friends, see esp. E.A. CLARK: *Jerome, Chrysostom, and Friends: Essays and Translations*, New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1979 and B. FEICHTINGER: *Apostolae apostolorum: Frauenaskese als Befreiung und Zwang bei Hieronymus*, Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1995 (Studien zur klassischen Philologie; 94). Also see P.C. MILLER: “The Blazing Body: Ascetic Desire in Jerome’s Letter to Eustochium”, in: *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 1/1 (1993), 21-45, and B. FEICHTINGER-ZIMMERMANN: “Paula, Eustochium und Blesilla und die mulier amarior morte: Die Frau als hochgeschätzte Partnerin und verachtetes Prinzip”, in: *Hieronymus als Exeget und Theologe: Interdisziplinäre Zugänge zum Kobalettkommentar des Hieronymus*, Leuven: Peeters, 2014, 191-211.

61 GREGORY OF NYSSA: *De vita Macrinae*, in: GRÉGOIRE DE NYSSE: *Vie de Sainte Macrine*, ed. P. Maraval, Paris Éditions du Cerf, 1971 (Sources chrétiennes; 178), and A.M. SILVAS: *Macrina the Younger, Philosopher of God*, Turnhout: Brepols, 2008 (Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts; 22). See further: G. FRANK: “Macrina’s Scar: Homeric Allusion and Heroic Identity in Gregory of Nyssa’s *Life of Macrina*”, in: *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 8 (2000), 511-530.

she shared a commitment to celibacy,<sup>62</sup> attest to the importance of female sexual renunciates to Christian self-presentation. Close practical and literary collaborations between female and male ascetics, announced in published letter collections and hagiographies, celebrated these female saints and their contributions to the good of their families, cities, and the Christian Roman empire more broadly. As Chrysostom put it in a homily on Romans, “among the ancients, if any were found practicing virginity, it was quite astonishing. But now [virginity] is scattered over every part of the world ... [and] now in villages and cities there are hosts of martyrs without number, consisting not of men only, but even of women”, a teaching, Chrysostom asserted, that was anticipated by Paul when he preached of the “newness of the Spirit” (*Homily 12 on Romans*).<sup>63</sup>

At least initially, these “virgins” lived at home and in homes. As Susanna Elm has shown, the earliest monasticism, especially for women, was largely domestic: women answered the call to celibacy within households, adopting the roles of “virgin daughter”, “virgin widow”, and even “virgin wife” with the support of fortunes they controlled and managed.<sup>64</sup> “Virgin daughters like Eustochium pursued her vow of celibacy within the monastic household of her mother, the “virgin widow” Paula, an important patron of Jerome.<sup>65</sup> Similarly, John Chrysostom’s close companion and patroness Olympias founded a monastery in her house adjacent to the Great Church (later Hagia Sophia) in Constantinople; her *cubiculariae* (namely, her female slaves) were enrolled as perpetual virgins at the same time, and thus Olympias was able to preserve her substantial retinue of slaves even as she (and they) pursued the life of renunciants.<sup>66</sup> As their bishop, John offered these women instruction, visiting their monastery home often. The virgins ensconced in Olympias’s house-monastery also likely attended services at the Great Church, standing near the front of the women’s section and listening to the

62 *Vita Melaniae*, in: E.A. CLARK: *The Life of Melania the Younger: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary*, New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1984 (Studies in Women and Religion; 14). For further discussion, see C.M. CHIN/C.T. SCHROEDER (eds.): *Melania: Early Christianity through the Life of Christianity*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017.

63 JOHN CHRYSOSTOM: *In epistulam ad Romanos* 12.4, in: J.-P. MIGNE: *Patrologiae cursus completus (series Graeca)*, vol. 60, Paris: Migne, 1857-1866, 499, trans. in J. PARKER: *The Homilies of S. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on the Epistle of S. Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1841, 192. As Peter Brown puts it, Chrysostom’s aim “was to rob the city of its most tenacious myth – the myth that its citizens had a duty to contribute to the continued glory of their native Antioch by marrying. Instead, he repeatedly told his Christian audiences that their bodies belonged to themselves, and no longer to the city” (P. BROWN: *Body and Society*, 307).

64 S. ELM: *‘Virgins of God’: The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994.

65 Jerome’s praise for ascetic women as “noble” was tied to their status as wealthy “nobles,” their “noble” vow of chastity, and the “noble” way they employed patronage to support the churches and monasteries. See M.R. SALZMAN: “Competing Claims to ‘Nobilitas’ in the Western Empire of the Fourth and Fifth Centuries”, in: *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 9/3 (2001), 359-285, at 370.

66 During his Constantinopolitan period, Wendy Mayer points out, John was living “in close proximity to a composite household in which there resided some ten to twenty women with a vast amount of wealth at their disposal”; W. MAYER: “Constantinopolitan Women”, 267-68.



bishop's preaching. If so, they provided a striking, visual performance of continence during the liturgies held there. Retinues of virgins dwelling in the alternative household of a monastery were soon fixtures the daily life of late antique Christians, and not only in Constantinople. Still, there was one sort of virgin that neither John Chrysostom nor the vast majority of his contemporary bishops were willing to tolerate: "virgin wives", celibate women who were cohabitating with celibate men not their kin, the infamous *subintroductae*. In the context of the dimorphic monastic-marital economy Chrysostom promoted, the mixing of the matrimonial with the ascetic life was no longer possible.

### 5. *Christian Marriage as a Social Good*

The practice of "spiritual marriage", in which a celibate man and a celibate woman or women, each of whom is devoted to Christ, live together and assist one another in their pursuit of divine wisdom may be attested as early as Paul's Corinth. According to Eusebius of Caesarea, the practice attracted its first official rebuke in the late third-century, when Paul of Samosata's custom of living with young women for the sake of shared virginal discipline scandalized the churches of Antioch.<sup>67</sup> Condemned at a synod in 267-268 CE, the Antiochenes called these women γυναῖκες συνείσακτοι ("women brought into the house to live together with men"; Latin *subintroductae*) leading to the label *syneisaktism*.<sup>68</sup> Both Paul of Samosata and the practice were heavily censured, despite the synod's acknowledgement that "he does nothing licentious". No writings by those who either engaged in or supported *syneisaktism* survive. Nevertheless, as Elizabeth Clark has argued, the attraction of such an arrangement is not difficult to imagine. As we have already observed, the view that women can "become men" or at least "manly" by means of ascetic rigor was well-established; no early Christian writer would deny that the souls of women are capable of ascending into the arms of Christ and, with Christ's help, of pursuing "manly" virtue. *Syneisaktism* offered a logical extension to the shared pursuit of "manly" souls and, in Clark's words, provided "a unique opportunity for friendships which involved a high degree of emotional and spiritual intimacy", a cross-gender form of "Platonic

67 The phenomenon was first addressed in modern scholarship by H. ACHELIS: *Virgines Subintroductae: Ein Beitrag zum VII. Kapitel des I. Korintherbriefs*, Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1902.

68 EUSEBIUS: *Hist. eccl.* 7.30.12: "And his women, the *subintroductae* (τὰς δὲ συνείσακτους αὐτοῦ γυναῖκας), as the Antiochenes call them, and those of the presbyters and deacons among his followers, with whom he co-operates in concealing this and other incurable sins...How many have fallen by procuring *subintroductae* for themselves, so that, even if one should grant him that nothing licentious is committed, he should at least have been on his guard against the suspicion that arises from such action, lest he scandalize someone, and induce others to imitate him" (SC 41, 217-18; FC 29, 146). Eusebius is the source for this condemnation, though the practice was condemned by later councils as well (see B. LEYERLE: *Theatrical Shows and Ascetic Lives: John Chrysostom's Attack on Spiritual Marriage*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001, 81).

love”.<sup>69</sup> Blake Leyerle offers other possible rationales: the practice was a handy alternative to monastic life, especially when there was no suitable monastery nearby, and “spiritual marriage” afforded the reciprocal benefits of male protection for celibate women and practical assistance for their celibate male hosts.<sup>70</sup> Those who engaged in it, she observes, may have been motivated by a desire to pursue ascetic discipline even more intensely than their gender-segregated counterparts.<sup>71</sup>

Chris de Wet finds another, less obvious reason for the practice: the demand that renunciates also renounce slaveholding. Living in a household without slaves – most often, slaves were freed to become co-ascetics, as in the example of Olympias and her *cubiculariae* – meant that the free ascetics were forced to take on menial tasks themselves, and “spiritual marriage” meant that the tasks associated with each gender could be completed efficiently and spread equally among the members of the household. This aspect of *syneisaktism* offended Chrysostom deeply.<sup>72</sup> Calling the men engaged in the practice “women-slaves” (*gynaikodouloi*), the bishop shamed them for their “slavishly” passive service to the women,<sup>73</sup> which included taking on the roles of *oikonomos* (household manager), *epitropos* (overseer or guardian of the women in the household), and *agoraios* (manager of the woman’s affairs). Free men ought not to take on such demeaning positions, Chrysostom insisted, since doing so transformed them into “womanly” men. He employed similarly degrading labels for the *subintroductae*; they are “prostitutes” (*pornai*), he claimed, since they dare to cohabit ( *synoikeo*) with a man other than their husband, father, or brother, and, like female slaves, they make themselves vulnerable to the sexual advances of the men with whom they live.<sup>74</sup> It is better, he concludes, for proper Christian households, those with a *kurios* and subordinates, to maintain one or two slaves; avoiding luxury is a worthy goal, but by sharing slaves Christian *kurioi* preserve their station, retain a system of surveillance capable of “protecting” the women in their households, and provide mutual care for fellow slave-owning brothers in Christ.

69 E.A. CLARK: “John Chrysostom and the *Subintroductae*”, in: *Church History* 46 (1977), 171-185.

70 B. LEYERLE: *Theatrical Shows*, 82.

71 “Their motivation seems to have sprung in part from the conviction that true asceticism was experienced only in the presence of desire – as other ascetics might fast for the entire forty days of Lent always within sight and easy reach of food and water” (B. LEYERLE: *Theatrical Shows*, 77).

72 C. DE WET: “Revisiting the *Subintroductae*: Slavery, Asceticism, and ‘Syneisaktism’ in the Exegesis of John Chrysostom”, in: *Biblical Interpretation* 25 (2017), 58-80.

73 JOHN CHRYSOSTOM: *Contra eos qui apud se habent subintroductas virgines* (*Against those men who cohabit with virgins*) 6.34-38, in: J. DUMORTIER: *Saint Jean Chrysostome: Les cohabitations suspectes*, Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1955, 44-94; *Homily on Matthew* 62.6, discussed by C. DE WET: “Revisiting the *Subintroductae*”, 69.

74 “When day breaks and both [men and women] must arise from bed, watch out! Be on guard! [The virgin] cannot set foot into the outer room without trepidation, for often when she enters she runs the risk of rushing headlong into the naked body of a man” (*Quod regulares feminae viris cohabitare non debeant* [*That women under vows should not co-habit with men*], 1.1-5, in: J. DUMORTIER: *Saint Jean Chrysostome: Les cohabitations suspectes*, 95-137), translated and discussed by C. DE WET: “Revisiting the *Subintroductae*”, 73.

Michel Foucault's account of Chrysostom's matrimonial theology offers yet another reason for his strong objection to sexual renunciation within the household: the re-valorization of matrimonial life as a valid Christian profession of equal (or nearly equal) value to virginal sexual renunciation. Like Paul, Clement of Alexandria, and even Origen before him, Chrysostom found the value of marriage not in procreation but in the management of desire (*epithumia*, *hēdonē*, *conupiscentia*) and its undesirable outcomes (*porneia*, *moicheia*, *fornicatio*, *adulterium*);<sup>75</sup> regular conjugal relations were therefore a reciprocal obligation of the married couple that, in Chrysostom's analysis, participated in the virginal life not through continence but through reuniting the substance of creation.<sup>76</sup> Marriage was a specific *tekhnē* of mutual labor in the avoidance of *porneia* and a direct counterpart to the virginal life, both of which anticipated the redemption of the flesh. Foucault's analysis therefore suggests a further rationale for the strong condemnation of the *subintroductae*: functional symmetry between the marital and the monastic life demanded sharp differentiation between what the matrimonial and the ascetic life could possibly include. Both *tekhnai* anticipate the final redemption of creation in their differing orientations to fleshly desire, but one has the duty of strict renunciation and the other of sexual congress.

In Chrysostom's homilies, the householder/ascetic binary has therefore been resolved in such a way that traditional male/female and free/slave distinctions are upheld and reinforced. As Foucault puts it, "the accents may shift but the fundamental themes endure."<sup>77</sup> These forms of ascetic practice do not so much trouble the social good of hierarchical marriage as confirm it.<sup>78</sup> Preaching to the faithful in Antioch, for example, John reiterated what he took to be standard Pauline good advice: "A slave can be taught submission through fear but even he, if provoked too much, will soon seek his escape." Yet a wife, "the mother of one's children, should never be fettered with fear and threats, but with love and patience. What kind of marriage can there be when the wife is afraid of her husband? What sort of satisfaction could a husband himself have, if he lives with his wife as if she were a slave?" (*Homily 20 on Ephesians*)<sup>79</sup> From this perspective, a marriage is a partnership of near-equals and the superior party, the man, should not need

75 M. FOUCAULT: *Les aveux*, 279.

76 Ibid. 258: "Elle autorise un art des relations entre mari et femme qui fait face à la *tekhnē* de l'existence virginale et, sans prétendre en rejoindre jamais la hauteur, lie fait jusqu'à un certain point équilibre."

77 Ibid. 260: "Certain accents sont modifiés, la plupart des développements plus amples, les valeurs de charité plus soulignées. Mais on retrouve les mêmes thèmes fondamentaux."

78 On the complexity of presentations of desire in John Chrysostom's rhetoric, see B.H. DUNNING: "John Chrysostom and Same-Sex Eros in the History of Sexuality", in: C. DE WET/W. MAYER (eds.): *Revisioning John Chrysostom: New Approaches, New Perspectives*, Leiden: Brill, 2019, 638-69. As Dunning points out, in Chrysostom's sermons on Romans, "a traditional model of status and masculinity perdures, albeit in a recontextualised form" (663).

79 *John Chrysostom: On Marriage and Family Life*, trans. C.P. Roth/D. Anderson, Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003, 47.

to beat his wife to prove it.<sup>80</sup> John therefore maintained a civic Christian good by encouraging house-holding male *kurioi* to uphold of relations of domination and submission capable of charting fleshly human bodies ontologically and practically. The goods of human intimacy were thereby apportioned across monasteries, including those that had once been households, desert habitations transformed into wildernesses of miraculous spiritual discipline, and bishop ascetics, each of whom witnessed to the eternal life to come, but without troubling older views of “life-as-it-is”. In Chrysostom’s writings, marriage was and is a social good, necessary to the upbuilding of the Christian community’s sexual as well as ecclesial self-discipline while also and equally anticipating the virginal life to come.<sup>81</sup> Even so, necessary order was maintained by a wrathful father who, on analogy with the divine Father, kept his subordinates in line.

## 6. *Universal Sex*

Marriage law, Judith Butler has argued, provides a structuring apparatus through which “desire and sexuality are ratified, justified, known, publicly instated, [and] imagined as permanent, durable”; in the process, “personal desire acquires a certain anonymity and interchangeability, becomes, as it were, publicly mediated and, in that sense, a kind of legitimated public sex”.<sup>82</sup> Legitimated public sex has been beneficial for those with access to it; Melitia, for example, was able to obtain a dowry, Valeria had her children recognized as legitimate, and Urbicana was not forced to pay her husband’s debts. Even in antiquity, however, not everyone had access to such recognitions: Prior to a reversal of policy by the Emperor Septimius Severus, for example, no Roman soldier could marry, any children he fathered were illegitimate, and any provincial woman he impregnated had no avenue of redress if she was abandoned.<sup>83</sup> As a rule, slaves never had access to legal marriage, as Olympias’s example and Chrysostom’s words further illustrate.<sup>84</sup> Yet, as funerary stele, inscriptions, and even imperial rescripts indicate, such laws did not and do not govern the paths that human intimacies can take or the shared bonds that longing can form. Soldier-provincial marriages, slave-slave, slave-master, and

80 J.A. SCHROEDER: “John Chrysostom’s Critique of Social Violence”, in: *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 12/4 (2004), 413-442.

81 Resignifying the value of marriage, in Peter Brown’s memorable description, Chrysostom shifted the reason for marrying but not its basic structures: young free men and women entered into marriage to avoid “the sexual dangers that lurked in the young body” and not out of “a sense of duty to the civic community” (P. BROWN: *Body and Society*, 308-309).

82 J. BUTLER: “Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?”, in: *Differences* 13/1 (2002), 17.

83 Yet, as Sarah Phang has documented, soldiers were establishing *de facto* marriages and families long before the ban was lifted and, even after, marriages were discouraged in light of the perceived burdens of civic life (S.E. PHANG: *The Marriage of Roman Soldiers*).

84 Olympias did not consult with her chambermaids before consigning them to a life of virginity; their bodies were hers to dispose of. Similarly, John’s anxiety about the naked men the *subintroductae* might encounter in the house likely replays what must have been a common household scenario: the encounters between slaves and masters interested in sexual contact.

slave-freedman marriages may not have been legally recognized, but they clearly took place. The Christian *subintroductae* controversy highlights another gap between law and the diversity of the kinds of intimate partnerships human beings might form. Ecclesiastical law sought to suppress the practice, but often to no avail.<sup>85</sup> “Marriage”, as an intimate partnership through which good can be sought, has long exceeded “marriage”, the publicly recognized and recognizable institution through which bodies are sorted, organized, and granted political as well as ontological status, and in diverse ways.

The marriage metaphor, so important to the theological speculation of Jesus followers and later Christians, has offered another way of conceiving the obvious gap between what human beings have wanted and what legal marriages have been able to achieve, but at a cost: when the divine is imagined as “male”, ontologically if not actually, and purified souls as also “male”, women in their “femaleness” are pushed to the margins of salvation. Similarly, matrimonial/monastic symmetry allowed for two very different modes of pursuing a common life, but not without consequences either for those men and women who might have preferred to seek virginal redemption together or for slaves, who continued to be subjected to the whims of masters.<sup>86</sup> The fact of legal marriage in its many forms provoked both the dream of human-divine marriage and generative a way of imagining what unity with the divine might be like. Marriage metaphors and matrimonial theologies, however, have neither made nor unmade the very real implications of this institution for those from whom such a gesture of return is expected, nor have they compensated those who are denied access to this privileged, legitimated “public sex”. “The happiest day of your life” may well be a wedding day, but it may not be. Intimate partnership along the way, however, makes us human.<sup>87</sup>

85 Legislation against it continued for over a century (see B. LEYERLE: *Theatrical Shows*, 80-83).

86 Slavery produced the idea of freedom, and vice versa, enabling both metaphors and embodied modes of constraint. P. DuBois: *Slaves and Other Objects*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, 200.

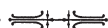
87 “Deviation leaves its own marks on the ground, which can even help generate alternative lines, which cross the ground in unexpected ways. Such lines are indeed traces of desire” (S. AHMED: *Queer Phenomenology*).



## SUMMARY

**Marriage as a Social Good: Origen of Alexandria and John Chrysostom, Revisited**

As Elizabeth Clark has shown, early Christian theories of marriage spun around an “axiology of ‘difference’” that employed sexual renunciation as its central axis. In the gap between an idealized marriage of the soul and Christ and the actual marriages of most believers, sexual congress emerged both as a generative metaphor and a key validation of human-human and human-divine marriage. This essay revisits Clark’s famous argument by reconsidering the homilies of two Greek Christian writers: Origen of Alexandria and John Chrysostom. Origen’s imaging of marriage is first presented. He envisioned a future “marriage” between the soul and Christ, seeking release in the dissolution of the bounded self. Marriage operates in his texts as the ideal image of human-divine union. Actual marriage, with the necessarily involvement in conjugal activity, is best avoided so that one’s desire can be lifted beyond the physical to the transcendent love of Christ. His imagery centers on the male ascetic, and women can access this divine union to the degree that they participate in these manly virtues. The essay then turns to John Chrysostom. He also celebrated the celibate dedication to Christ and Christ alone, but he developed a place for marriage in the path of holiness. He thus reaffirmed the good of human marriage as beneficial even as he celebrated the superior self-control of virgins. For Chrysostom, while the ascetic life lifts one beyond specific social and gender concerns, those Christians who live in the world should conform to these concerns. Thus, marriage becomes a way of living out one’s maleness and femaleness in the proper way. The article concludes by reflecting on how neither re-evaluation of marriage’s central meaning overturned the quotidian practices associated with marriage as a legal instrument; marriage legislation was perceived to be a principal duty of emperors and civic assemblies both before and after the advent of Constantine. Chrysostom’s recalibration of the duties of marriage within the newly Christian state preserved this dynamic while also re-emphasizing a strict, gendered dimorphism that disallowed non-marital forms of male-female intimacy.



Jennifer Wright Knust is Professor of Religious Studies at Duke University. Author of *To Cast the First Stone: The Transmission of a Gospel Story* (with Tommy Wasserman, Princeton, 2018), *Unprotected Texts: The Bible’s Surprising Contradictions about Sex and Desire* (HarperONE, 2011), and *Abandoned to Lust: Sexual Slander and Ancient Christianity* (Columbia, 2005), she studies early Christian texts, their contexts, and their receptions from multiple angles, with a particular focus on rhetoric and gendered discourse. Her numerous articles, book chapters, and edited books address the materiality of texts, the intersection of Christian practices with other ancient religions, and the ethics of interpretation in ancient as well as contemporary contexts.