VIRGINITY UNVEILED: TERTULLIAN'S *VEILING OF VIRGINS* AND HISTORICAL WOMEN IN THE FIRST THREE CENTURIES A.D.

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"They who have heard Him [the Holy Spirit] prophesying even to the present time . . . bid virgins be wholly covered," concluded the second-century church father Tertullian in his sharply critical treatise *On the Veiling of Virgins*.[1] For those interested in examining historical women in the early church, Tertullian's treatise invites investigation. Questions emerge concerning whether Tertullian is adequately describing his social setting, creating a fictional type, or furthering an engendered trope intended to defame his opponents. Does Tertullian provide evidence of real virgins unveiled in local churches?

A simple surface reading of the text no longer satisfies, for we have become aware of the gender constructions underpinning much of the discussion about women in this time. An example from Celsus illustrates this point. Celsus declared that primarily women and children were attracted to Christianity. Earlier scholars took such claims at face value without considering the statement's rhetorical force.[2] Celsus writes: "[Christian teachers] get hold of children in private and some stupid women with them, and they let out some astounding statements, as for example, that they must not pay any attention to their father or school teacher but must obey them."[3] He asserts that Christian teachers are subverting social authority structures, and he uses women and children as *typoi* for those people, men included, who listened to what Celsus considered an absurd superstition. Celsus's rhetoric might include demographic information, but his main goal was to impugn Christians by associating them with negative gendered social stereotypes.

My preliminary conclusions to the question of whether Tertullian's work *On the Veiling of Virgins* offers us a window into real women's lives are tentative, but hopeful. I suggest that behind his censorious rhetoric there lies a group

[1]Tertullian, *On the Veiling of Virgins*, Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. 4, trans. S. Thelwall, The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Fathers down to A.D. 325, American ed., Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987). Unless otherwise noted, all references to the church fathers will be taken from the American edition. See also the translation by Geoffrey D. Dunn, *Tertullian*, The Early Church Fathers, ed. Carol Harrison (New York: Routledge, 2004).

[2]William H. C. Frend, "Blandina and Perpetua: Two Early Christian Heroines," 87-97, taken from *Les Martyrs de Lyon* (177): Lyon 20-23 Septembre 1977 (Paris: Editions du Centre Mational de la Recherche Scientifique): 167-177.

[3]Origen, *Contra Celsum* III.55.

whose behavior he finds threatening to his understanding of the Christian way of life and social world. This group represents not so much heretical thinking, but specific practices that Tertullian finds dangerous or improper. It is a second and more difficult step to show that Tertullian is justly charging this group with a false practice that includes women, because ancient male authors often used gendered arguments against other men with whom they disagreed. Moreover, because Tertullian's dilemma is so similar to Paul's discussion in 1 Cor 11 and 14, the reader cannot discount the possibility that Tertullian is creating a straw man to aid in his exegesis of Paul's passage. In that case, Tertullian would not reflect any specific historical situation, but actually would be constructing a setting as a literary maneuver to further his argument.

The first step in our inquiry is to examine broadly the questions of gendered arguments and *typoi* within the literary evidence of the ancient church. A second step highlights the dilemma faced by the church in self-identifying as the Bride of Christ. Kate Cooper's work will serve as a springboard for further discussion. A final step examines Tertullian's call for the veiling of virgins. At this point, we are faced with the question of whether Tertullian knows or has good reason to believe that certain Christian virgins are actually participating in their communities without a veil. By this point, I hope to show that it is at least possible that such a situation did exist historically.[4]

Gendered Society

Cooper in *The Virgin and the Bride* notes that "in a society premised on honor and shame [as were the Hellenistic and Roman cultures] rhetoric was reality."[5] She suggests that the ancient conventions by which gender-specific characteristics were assigned to men and women provide a window into male-female relationships, but, even more importantly, into the power relationships between men competing for social honor and prestige. Her conclusions follow a now standard understanding of the role of gender in creating social reality, developed in large part through the work of Sheri Ortner. In a ground-breaking article,[6] Ortner postulated that society in general connects men with rational thought and culture and labels women as irrational thinkers connected with nature.[7]

[4]In examining this aspect of women's history, I am not drawing any prescriptive conclusions for our modern/postmodern world.

[5]Kate Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 4.

[6]Sheri Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" in *Women, Culture, and Society*, ed. Michelle Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), 67-88.

[7]Karen Jo Torjesen suggests that the public/private split has its roots in the earliest democracy. In this system, political power was removed from the monarch and his or her family and placed in the hands of a few elite men. These men developed a new identity in the *polis*, distinguishing themselves from women and women's realm, the home ("In Praise of

Not only were women and men separated into different spheres in Tertullian's day, with men's public realm more highly valued, but also women were seen as the Other by men. Male authors exploited these perceptions, attacking their opponents as Other and giving them feminine traits. The opponent/enemy was depicted as irrational, unstable, lacking in courage, and self-control—he was, in short, a "woman." These charges were broadly accepted stock accusations, often delivered with no regard to actual circumstances. Ross Kraemer detects this phenomenon across pagan, Jewish, and Christian writings,[8] citing Chrysostom as a clear example of such practice. In his sermons *Against Judaizing Christians* (2.3.4-6), Chrystostom attacks husbands for their failure to control their wives' behaviors: "Now that the devil summons your wives to the Feast of Trumpets and they turn a ready ear to his call, you do not restrain them." Not only are they unable to control "their" women, these inadequate husbands display feminine traits. He declares that those Christian men who attend the synagogue are effeminate (*malakoi*) and resemble the softness characterized by women.[9]

For the church fathers such rhetoric could result in a special dilemma because the church portrayed itself as the virgin Bride of Christ.[10] Male members of the church negotiated between the gendered female image of submission in relation to God and the masculine ideal of their world. These concerns, however, focus specifically on how the category of "virgin" was used to explain real and ideal Christian women in the ancient world.

Images of Bride and Virgin

The church fathers and their audiences did not create the categories of "bride" and "virgin," nor did they employ these categories in a vacuum. We should suppose that what they said was understandable to their audience, even if they were reconfiguring or redefining those social roles. The larger cultural picture of marriage must come into focus in order to properly appreciate how the church fathers manipulated the categories of "virgin" and "bride" for their own purposes.

Noble Women: Gender and Honor in Ascetic Texts," *Semeia* 57/1 [1992]: 42-43).

[8]Ross Kraemer, "The Other as Woman: An Aspect of Polemic among Pagans, Jews and Christians in the Greco-Roman World," in *The Other in Jewish Thought and History*, ed. Laurence J. Silberstein and Robert L. Cohn (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 122-144.

[9]See Kraemer, 135-137, for a full discussion.

[10]Virginia Burrus explores the development of the Christian male's self-image as reflected in the masculine/male portrait of the Trinity: "If the horizon of human becoming is named in terms of Father, Son, and Spirit, this does not in itself make of God a male idol—but it does, as a matter of fact, construct both an idealized masculinity and a masculinized transcendence. For the Fathers, femaleness is allied with the stubborn particularity of created matter, against which the unlimited realm of supposedly ungendered divinity may be defined by theologians who have risen above their gender as well" (*Begotten, Not Made: Conceiving Manhood in Late Antiquity* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000], 185).

Cooper suggests that the discussion of marriage in Plutarch[11] and in Hellenistic romance novels[12] demonstrates a strong concern for the stabilizing influence of marriage within the life of the city. In Plutarch, the man's self-mastery (*sophrosyne*) is the most prominent and honorable virtue, and that which makes him a great citizen. But in each man there exists a tension between personal pleasure, such as that enjoyed between a man and a woman, and the good of the community achieved through self-discipline and restraint.[13] Marc Antony's lust/love for Cleopatra offers a classic example of failing to moderate these desires.

A man's honor could be attacked through charges, real or trumped-up, of his susceptibility to lust. To combat or prevent such accusations, a man might reinforce verbally his love for his wife and highlight her chaste lifestyle, therein demonstrating his (not her) trustworthiness. In this sense, the private life of the home became public, generating social honor for the patriarch. Cooper concludes that these public comments would have signaled to the community the family's attempt to restore honor or maintain its social standing.

Cooper identifies two implications for the study of women. First, it reduces the already meager sources on historical women because description of their behavior "is shaped rhetorically to suit a judgment of male character, [and] this means that their reflection of reality is distorted."[14] Supporting her claims from both the Hellenistic romance novels[15] and the closely related *Apocryphal Acts*, Cooper alleges that the woman becomes a rhetorical device, part of the narrative motif which pits two groups of men against each other for social control of the city. Cooper concludes: "If we assume for the sake of argument that whenever a woman is mentioned a man's character is being judged,—and along with it what he stands for—we can begin to see the rhetorical possibilities afforded by a female point of identification in a literature aimed at defending, or undermining, such sanctified Greco-Roman institutions as marriage, the family and even the city itself."[16]

[11]Plutarch, Ἐρωτικός 769B-C; *Life of Pompey* 1.4.

[12]Cooper looks at Chaereas and Callirhoe by Chariton, and Leukippe and Kleitophon by Tatius, and Daphnis and Chloe by Longus.

[13]Cooper, 5, comments that Plutarch's writings on marriage reflect a "rhetorical motif in the politics of self-representation and as a narrative resolution for the philosophical problem of pleasure and instability."

[14]Cooper, 13.

[15]Virginia Burrus suggests that issues of colonization should play a role in interpreting the ancient Romances ("Mimicking Virgins: Colonial Ambivalence and the Ancient Romance," *Arethusa* 38 [2005]: 49-88). She, 85, writes: "The romance is thus revealed as a field of ambivalent play, a literary 'contact zone' in which the interwoven discourses of empire and city, marriage and love, Greekness and nativity, are exposed as no more or less than the effect of mimicry—an exposure that calls into question any claims of 'original' authority. The result . . . is not an unambiguous political 'message.'"

[16]Cooper, 19.

Second, and somewhat ironically, Cooper adds that the social dynamic underpinning this rhetoric actually served to empower women. Discounting as anachronistic the Enlightenment's fixation on both individual autonomy and the public/private social dichotomy, Cooper argues that as the domus was the center of community life, and as women were at the center of the home, they therefore had tremendous, albeit informal, power[17] to shape the family's honor socially, politically, and economically. She notes that concentrating "on these distortions, . . . will afford a more accurate picture of how ancient women understood themselves."[18]

Cooper's discussion of the *Apocryphal Acts* raises important questions,[19] and her analysis is not without its critics. I am not convinced that we can discern these ancient women's self-understanding as mediated through a male author. Moreover, Shelly Matthews warns that Cooper's methodology, in fact, reduces women to mere signs or metaphors serving male rhetorical purposes in the texts.[20] Cooper's focus on textual representation of women, influenced by poststructuralist claims, relegates historical women to the margins. Matthews counters with Claude Lévi-Strauss's conclusion that women are both signs and producers of signs. She maintains that women are not only acted upon, but also are actors affecting their environment.[21]

In addition, Cooper fails to address adequately Tertullian's claim that "those women" read the *Acts of Thecla* as supporting the position that women could function as preachers and baptizers. Tertullian disagrees that women are eligible for teaching and baptizing positions in the church and he attempts to discredit the *Acts of Thecla* by asserting it was a later work written by a presbyter to honor Paul the Apostle (*De baptismo* 1.17, CC 1.291). Yet the phrase "those women" is not textually secure. Even if we could establish this reading, it is entirely possible that

[17]Margaret Y. MacDonald, *Early Christian Women and Pagan Opinion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 41-47. Karen Jo Torjesen ("In Praise of Noble Women,"*Semia* 57 [1992]: 50-51), points to Elizabeth Clark, who builds on Weber's theory of three types of power. Women were assigned that power based on their personal status, wealth, and family, not on their office or function. Weber called this traditional authority, which does not distinguish between public and private roles, and which works well in the ancient patronage system. See Elizabeth Clark, "Authority and Humility: A Conflict of Values in Fourth Century Femail Monasticism," in *Ascetic Piety and Women's Faith*, Studies in Women and Religion, 3 (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1986), 214.

[18]Cooper, 13.

[19]Virginia Burrus uses folklore techniques as a methodological entrance into the historicity of *Apocryphal Acts* (*Chastity as Autonomy: Women in the Stories of the Apocryphal Acts* [Lewiston: Mellon, 1987]). Most recently, she has explored identity construction from a postcolonial perspective in her "Mimicking Virgins," 49-88.

[20]Shelly Matthews, "Thinking of *Thecla*: Issues in Feminist Historiography," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 17/2 (2001): 50.

[21]Ibid., 51. She quotes Lévi-Strauss: "For words do not speak, while women do; as producers of signs, women can never be reduced to the status of symbols or tokens" (Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* [New York: Basic Books, 1963], 61).

Tertullian used "those women" metaphorically to discredit his male opponents. Again, Cooper declares that these women to whom Tertullian refers misunderstood the *Acts of Thecla*; they failed to perceive the political debate buttressing the narrative.[22] But how can she be sure that she has captured the author's intent? Her methodological approach, reinforced by poststructuralist perspectives, challenges the prospect of recovering authorial intent.[23] Also, why should Cooper's reading be privileged over a group of ancient Christian women? Finally, Cooper's analysis does not preclude the possibility that the text reflects historical content. Ironically, Cooper accepts as historical the group of women who read the *Acts of Thecla* "incorrectly" and the presbyter who is said to have composed the work. Matthews concludes that "not only is the *Thecla* text about 'authority and the social order,' as Cooper recognizes, but also, at least in its reception history, it had quite a lot to do with women."[24]

Tertullian takes seriously the ramifications of using the *Acts of Thecla* to formulate policy for women's participation in church leadership. He does not hesitate to present his own views on appropriate behavior for women in the church, as in his homily *On the Veiling of Virgins*, written in the first or early part of the second decade of the third century.[25] Just as the *Acts* genre presents problems of interpretation, so too the historian must filter Tertullian's rhetoric to discover traces of real women's lives and activities.

Tertullian's On the Veiling of Virgins

Issues of honor and shame factor extensively in Tertullian's homily, and we must not ignore this social construct or its ramifications within society. Tertullian also develops his argument in conversation with custom, to which he assigns a secondary status compared to both his interpretation of the "discipline of God" and his reading of Scripture, especially Paul. Tertullian combats the custom of unveiled virgins with several arguments that address both the practice itself and his underlying convictions concerning gender. He disputes the tradition of unveiled virgins as resting on the unstable foundation

[22]Cooper, 114-115, notes that "whereas the battle of the romantic heroine recorded in the *Apocryphal Acts* was waged for rhetorical purposes—to vivify the opposition between Christian otherworldliness and the networks of reproduction, kinship, and alliance of the *saeculum*—we have little evidence that the authors of the *Apocryphal Acts* considered the effect their heroines might have on the self-understanding and behavior of actual women."

[23]For this critique, I am indebted to Ross Kraemer's private communications with me concerning Cooper's work. Cooper, 65, recognizes the thin ice she is skating on when she comments that "to suggest that certain female readers discovered in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* a meaning incongruous with what was intended by the author may seem incautious . . . but that is just what Tertullian says."

[24]Matthews, 53.

[25]Geoffrey D. Dunn, *Tertullian*, in *The Early Church Fathers*, ed. Carol Harrison (New York: Routledge, 2004), 135.

of social custom. Tertullian is reflecting the standard Roman practice of adult women donning the matron's head covering to reflect their social status.[26] He asserts that the unveiled virgin is at odds with the fundamental reality of the female's subservient position *a propos* the male as established in creation. Thus he insists emphatically that a virgin is first and foremost a woman.[27] But at the end of the day, Tertullian is concerned with controlling women's status as it secures men's superior social status. His real disquiet is with the male leaders who are emasculated by their unveiled virgins.

Historical Women in Tertullian's *On the Veiling of Virgins*

Tertullian is forthright about the ambiguity surrounding the practice of veiling virgins. I have no reason to doubt that he is setting forth a fairly accurate assessment of the situation because he admits that those who differ with him on this custom are in agreement with him on matters of doctrine. His defensive tone suggests he represents a minority position. Moreover, it does not profit him to admit that the practice of unveiled virgins has a sizable following. It would suit his argument better to say that only a few permit the unveiled virgin, thereby lessening the impact of their numbers, and, by extension, their position.

From comments scattered throughout the treatise,[28] Tertullian presents a picture wherein veiled or covered virgins walk to church through their towns, but upon entering the church they remove their veils. Apparently, virgins followed the wider social custom of covering their heads, but not their faces as they mingled in public venues. Thus Christian virgins would look no different than other adult women in the marketplace. Like matrons, they too would be covered as the social custom dictated. In other words, no one would identify a virgin based on her attire.

Tertullian resists the practice of unveiling virgins in the church, and as part of his argument points to certain groups of women who veil both face and

[26]Bruce Winter writes: "The veil was the most symbolic feature of the bride's dress in Roman culture" (*Roman Wives, Roman Widows* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003], 78).

[27]Tertullian writes: "Proceed we, then, to the word itself. The word (expressing the) natural (distinction) is female. Of the natural word, the general word is woman. Of the general, again, the special is virgin, or wife, or widow, or whatever other names, even of the successive stages of life, are added hereto. Subject, therefore, the special is to the general" (*On the Veiling of Virgins*, chap. 4). See also Tertullian, *On Prayer*, chap. 22.

[28]See, e.g., *On the Veiling of Virgins*, chap. 13: "If on account of men they [virgins] adopt a false garb, let them carry out that garb fully even for that end; and as they veil their head in presence of heathens, let them at all events in the church conceal their virginity, which they do veil outside the church. They fear strangers: let them stand in awe of the brethren too; or else let them have the consistent hardihood to appear as virgins in the streets as well, as they have the hardihood to do in the churches. I will praise their vigour, if they succeed in selling aught of virginity among the heathens withal. Identity of nature abroad as at home, identity of custom in the presence of men as of the Lord, consists in identity of liberty. To what purpose, then, do they thrust their glory out of sight abroad, but expose it in the church?" See also ibid., chap. 2.

head. He claims that his call to veil the virgin's face has precedence in the Arab woman's veiling of her face and is found among other people groups, including those found "beneath this (African) sky" (chap. 2). His vagueness increases the suspicion that Tertullian is promoting a minority position.[29]

Tertullian's program encourages the virgin to cover her head and part of the face. He speaks about covering the virgin's forehead (chap. 3) and describes her hair as "being massed together upon the crown, it wholly covers the very citadel of the head with an encirclement of hair" (chap. 7). He maintains that when a girl comes of age and is a virgin, she must veil herself, that is, cover her head and face (chaps. 3, 7, 15, 17).

He puts forward that for some virgins his suggested type of covering matches their preference. He speaks about women having choices in marriage, and proposes that virgins might have the same choice in their attire. He writes that "the matter has been left to choice, for each virgin to veil herself or expose herself [or prostitute herself],[30] as she might have chosen, just as (she has equal liberty) as to marrying, which itself withal is neither enforced nor prohibited" (chap. 2). But female autonomy is far from his mind; rather Tertullian is at pains to demonstrate female subordination to men. This sentiment is clear from his language vilifying the woman as a prostitute who makes a choice contrary to Tertullian's ideal. Nor would Tertullian have been dissuaded from his position if no virgin veiled herself; their acceptance of his position does not ultimately affect its truth, as far as Tertullian is concerned.

It is difficult to tell from Tertullian's work whether the virgin has any special functions within the church, but he does speak about a widow's functions in his denunciation of a bishop's "promotion" of a young virgin to the office of widow (chap. 9).[31] He describes a widow as an older woman (at least sixty years old), who was previously married and probably with children. He remarks that they are qualified to counsel and comfort other women in that they too have "traveled down the whole course of probation whereby a female can be tested" (chap. 9). For Tertullian, a virgin is not qualified to give this counsel and comfort, and he concludes "nothing in the way of public honour is permitted to a virgin" (chap. 9).

In his condemnation of the bishop's decision to advance a virgin to the

[29]Dunn, 141, concludes that Tertullian is not speaking about a covering similar to the modern burka worn by some Muslim women. Instead, he is referring to the Roman shawl, which could be pulled up over the wearer's head but left the face exposed. I agree that Tertullian in places seems to reference only the Roman shawl or *palla*, but he also speaks about the face needing covering.

[30]Dunn, 181 n. 27, remarks that "this verb more commonly meant 'to be exposed to prostitution' or simply 'to prostitute oneself.' Tertullian's choice of words is very revealing."

[31]Tertullian hints that the bishop was searching for a way to offer relief for the woman. Tertullian also does not remark directly on the theological irony of declaring a virgin, wed to Christ, a widow!

office of widow, Tertullian is probably reflecting a historical event. His censure reflects the fluid lines between categories of women that the church fathers sought desperately to solidify. How distinct were the boundaries between virgin and chaste widow? From a symbolic framework, they are worlds apart, because the virgin is complete, whole, and unused, while the widow is secondhand, even damaged goods.[32] But in the social world, both are without men, and so perhaps lived similar lives or had similar needs.

Why did some (most?) churches allow virgins to attend church without the veil? Tertullian's answers—that both the men and the women who favor this practice are filled with impiety and lust—drip with rhetorical venom and so should be accorded little verisimilitude. We could postulate that these virgins wanted to distinguish their lifestyle from matrons and widows, both who engaged in sexual activity with their husbands. Or perhaps the vow of virginity offered a woman lower down on the social ladder a chance to rise above her station, as it were. Cooper reminds us that autonomy and freedom, treasured values today, were not benefits sought out in the ancient world. Instead, people looked for moral authority. She asks: "[W]ere women converting to asceticism for the sake of virtue or for the sake of being seen as virtuous?"[33] Asceticism was a wild card in the game of social rank and standing because it gave moral authority to those whose social rank would not otherwise allow for such prestige. Anne Hickey counters that social advancement was not the reason for asceticism's appeal, but rather its resolution of social and cultural ambiguities for women's roles in society.[34] Curiously, Tertullian speaks of the "virgins of men" as rivals (*aemulae*) of the "virgins of God" (chap. 3). If Tertullian is representing a historical situation, the language of "rival" supports Cooper, that women were vying for social power and prestige. Yet Tertullian implies that in many churches little attention was paid to whether or not a virgin would wear a veil, which might indicate that women were not competing against each other for honor.

In the specific case noted above about which Tertullian provides some detail, it seems that the financial need of the woman was paramount in the bishop's response. Tertullian censures the bishop for sponsoring the young virgin to the status of widow, "whereas if the bishop had been bound to accord her any relief, he might, of course, have done it in some other way without detriment to the respect due to discipline" (chap. 9). For this church at least, the office of virgin did not carry the same social provisions as did the office of widow, and so the bishop moved the woman to the category of widow. Tertullian charges that some

[32]Kathleen Norris offers a penetrating analysis of virginity and martyrdom in *The Cloister Walk* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996), 186-205.

[33]Cooper, 84.

[34]Anne Ewing Hickey writes: "At least within the monastic context, the expectational structure for the woman was clearly defined with respect to the foci of our analysis of cultural expectations." Hickey examined family/maternity, beauty, and education (*Women of the Roman Aristocracy as Christian Monastics* [Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1987], 110-111).

women choose to be virgins "because the brotherhood readily undertakes the maintenance of virgins" (chap. 14). This suggests that at least in some areas, the decision to pursue a life of virginity might be based in part on one's financial situation. Perhaps women needing economic assistance chose the path of virginity because they believed the church would find a way to care for their financial needs. It may also reveal that most of the virgins in the church were sufficiently wealthy to support themselves, and few needed the help offered by the "misguided" bishop noted above.

Can we draw any historical picture based on the opponent's voice in this homily? Tertullian declares that "the virgins of men" say 'We are scandalized . . . because others walk otherwise (than we do)'" (chap. 3). Tertullian lashes out at such logic, declaring it could lead to the incontinent demanding that the continent engage in sexual behavior! Instead, he asks why they do not decry as scandalizing the "petulance, the impudence, of ostentatious virginity." In this barb, he reveals his strongly negative opinion, and his sharp rhetoric raises questions whether he is reflecting accurately an actual debate or his opponents' position. However, he does address this same question in his earlier work *On Prayer*, where he points out the presence of unveiled virgins in the congregation (chap. 21). Attending to the same situation twice within a short time span presumably indicates the historical presence of unveiled and veiled virgins within the church.

Tertullian's Gendered Argument for Male Superiority

It may not be far off the mark to say that Tertullian is more concerned with how male leaders are directing their churches, rather than the actual apparel of virgins.[35] He is fundamentally disturbed that the choice for veiling is left to the women. He declares that as the power to discern grew within the church, the decisions about this issue became a litmus test for honor among leaders. To those leaders who left the decision up to the women in the church, Tertullian asserts that "the great adversary of good things" set to work among them. Tertullian denounces those male leaders who fail to lead "their" virgins in the ways of God (chap. 3). In fact, he goes so far as to indict them as rapists: "Every public exposure of an honorable virgin is (to her) a suffering of rape. . . . O sacrilegious hands, which have had the hardihood to drag off a dress dedicated to God!" (chap. 3).

He speaks about the veil for the married women as their "yoke," yet for the virgin, it is a symbol of her humility and passivity as a woman. The veil's purpose

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[35]L. Raditsa analyzes Tertullian's discussion about apparel through the psychoanalytical model ("The Appearance of Women and Contact: Tertullian's *De habitu Feminarum*," *Athenaeum* 63 [1985]: 297-326). Raditsa, 297, writes: "Tertullian concentrates on appearance because he senses it implies contact, not only social contact between men and women, but also contact with nature and God, and past, present, and future." The open appearance advocated by Tertullian identifies Christians publicly, which could lead to persecution (ibid., 308).

differs depending on a woman's social status. For a virgin, the veil hides her from the world of men and all the temptations therein, protecting the glory of her husband, Christ. Tertullian is especially concerned over the role the sense of sight plays in male lust. If the virgin covers her face, then the man cannot lust after her. Tertullian adds that the covered virgin is also prevented from the sensual sin of enjoying being looked at! The veil also prevents the sin of ostentatious behavior. For wives, it preserves their vows and modesty, reinforcing the fact that they are in submission to their husbands, their "head" or "power."

Tertullian makes the audacious claim that physical rape would not be as bad as the removal of the veil for a virgin, as the former comes of "natural office" (chap. 3). But removing the veil violates the spirit of her virginity, for "she has learnt to lose what she used to keep" (chap. 3). He claims that the virgin will feel exposed as she stands unveiled; this belief that she has already been sexually compromised by her uncovering will set her on the path to wantonness and impiety.[36] Church writings down through the centuries, however, have praised women who protected their purity/virginity on pain of death,[37] so I wonder whether Tertullian's female audience might have accepted his cavalier posture toward physical rape.

Tertullian further alleges that many unveiled virgins are in fact sexually active.[38] He spills much ink on their pregnancy, delivery, and the numerous healthy children they produce. He laments: "God knows how many infants He has helped to perfection and through gestation till they were born sound and whole, after being long fought against by their mothers! Such virgins ever conceive with the readiest facility, and have the happiest deliveries, and children indeed most like to their fathers!" (chap. 14). His concern is that by not mandating the veil, no one can tell if the woman is faithful to her virginity vow.

[36]Is Tertullian describing a female's orgasm when he writes in *On the Veiling of Virgins*, chap. 14, "she is tickled by pointing fingers, while she is too well loved, while she feels a warmth creep over her amid assiduous embraces and kisses. Thus the forehead hardens; thus the sense of shame wears away; thus it relaxes; thus is learned the desire of pleasing in another way!"? Is Tertullian revealing a commonly held understanding of female sexuality in which a woman's head represented her genitals, or was even a part of her genitals? Did the covering of the hair on her head symbolize the covering of her pubic hair? For a discussion on this issue, see Troy W. Martin, "Paul's Argument from Nature for the Veil in 1 Corinthians 11:13-15: A Testicle Instead of a Head Covering," *JBL* 123 (2004): 75-84. See also Dale B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

[37]Norris, 186-205.

[38]Tertullian indirectly makes this charge in *On the Veiling of Virgins*, chap. 3 when he describes the "virgins of men" as going about with their "front quite bare" that is, with their forehead exposed. Even more, these so-called virgins have the power to ask men "something," and this may have to do with requesting sex, if the mention of "forehead" parallels this vague statement. These "virgins of men" are apparently requesting that other virgins be restricted from wearing the veil, as it offends those who do not don it.

If the virgin broke her vow, Tertullian is convinced she would avoid at all costs revealing her lapse by taking up the matron's covering.

Tertullian plays on the gender stereotypes accepted in his world, that women have uncontrollable sexual appetites and cannot be trusted to maintain sexual purity. However, his main fear with unveiled virgins is that status boundaries are crossed without public evidence of the change. He wants matrons to look like matrons, and virgins like virgins, thus both groups must be veiled. The implicit charge to his opponents is that they permit a custom which allows "their" women to be sexually promiscuous without penalty. At bottom, Tertullian is not merely (or even primarily) attacking women, but the men who create and perpetuate dangerous social custom. By shaming their women, Tertullian is bringing dishonor on their leadership.

Would such accusations stick? Would an ancient audience be convinced that Tertullian's opponents are part of an "immoral" congregation? Given that image is reality, and that gendered social constructs assumed that women were promiscuous, it is entirely possible that his audience would be moved by his rhetoric against his opponents. Let me add, however, the possibility that Tertullian was writing to his own group and that his opponents never saw or heard his argument. Tertullian might be practicing a bit of self-identity building, wherein he is distinguishing himself from other "orthodox" communities, which, nevertheless, do things differently and are therefore suspect.

Furthermore, Tertullian is inconsistent in his attitude toward and rhetorical use of custom. He first admits that those churches "with whom we share the law of peace and the name of brotherhood" (chap. 2) differ on this issue of veiling virgins. Then he decries the custom as not based on Truth. But he goes on to defend his position by pointing to apostolic custom, and by noting that pagan social custom insists on at least covering the head, if not veiling the face. So he is selective in choosing among the various customs. He validates his interpretation of custom from his reading of 1 Cor 11 primarily (chaps. 4, 7, 8), from his claim of apostolic authority for his custom (chap. 2), and from a vision sent by the Holy Spirit (chap. 17).

In a treatise written probably just a few years before *On the Veiling of Virgins*, Tertullian uses an argument from custom to defend the behavior of a Christian soldier—but this time he applauds custom as pointing to Truth.[39] In *On the Military Crown*, he defends a local Christian soldier's refusal to don the victor's wreath as supported by Christian custom. Equally as interesting, in the work he cites the practice of biblical Israelite women veiling themselves as proof that custom is a guide for true practice. He highlights both Rebecca and Susanna as proper models of women covering their heads.[40] The examples of Rebecca and Susanna make it "sufficiently plain that you can vindicate the keeping of even unwritten tradition established by custom; the proper witness

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[39]Dunn, 135.

[40]Tertullian, *On the Military Crown*, 4.

for tradition when demonstrated by long-continued observance."[41]

His inconsistency in the use of custom weakens his argument, while the similar hermeneutics used by both Tertullian and his opponents makes the former's task much more difficult. Tertullian is at pains to insist that virgins belong first and foremost to the genus "woman" by using a grammatical-historical method stressing word study and vocabulary. His opponents apparently apply the same method, but arrive at diametrically opposite conclusions; this hints at an underlying difference in presuppositions. Do Tertullian's opponents understand that in the vow of virginity the female becomes male in some sense? Tertullian does not allude to it, but evidence from sources as diverse as Philo and the *Martyrdom of Perpetua* indicates that, for some writers, in specific situations women might fit male categories. Philo describes the *Therapeutrides* ("most of them aged virgins") as postmenopausal and thus male in some sense,[42] and Perpetua's vision ("My clothes were stripped off, and suddenly I was a man," chap. 10), illustrates the possibility of women ascending beyond their limited femaleness. Does Tertullian's argument reflect indirectly the early church's conversation about the precise category into which virgins might fall?

Tertullian insists that virgins do not lose their female character when they devote themselves as virgins to Christ, even though they have renounced the most characteristic qualities of their gender, namely, their lustfulness and openness to sex. But they remain women, according to Tertullian, because they still retain the quality of passivity that defines the female gender (chap.16). The veil was an important sign of that humility.[43] Tertullian's position on the submissive woman was shared by later church fathers. Augustine condemns the married woman Ecdicia for disposing of her wealth without the permission of her husband.[44] Both Ecdicia and her husband had taken vows of chastity, but her flagrant disregard for his leadership in all other areas of her life led him to break his vow and take a lover. Joyce Salisbury concludes that both Ecdicia's husband and Augustine "believed that her renunciation of sexuality did not mean that she was freed from other feminine obligations, primarily that of subservience."[45]

In some churches, it seems that the role of virgin was set apart and marked as distinct from that played by other adult women, the widow, and the wife. Much to Tertullian's chagrin, the unveiled virgin was applauded publicly and highly honored. Such praise, pouts Tertullian, belongs to men, for they are

[41]Ibid.

[42]Ross Kraemer offers an excellent summary of Philo's description of these women ("Monastic Jewish Women in Greco-Roman Egypt: Philo Judaeus on the *Therapeutrides*," *Signs* 14/2 [1989]: 342-370).

[43]Joyce E. Salisbury, *Church Fathers, Independent Virgins* (New York: Verso, 1991), 27-28.

[44]Augustine, Letter No. 262, in *Saint Augustine: Letters* vol. V, trans. W. Parsons (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1956), 261.

[45]Salisbury, 2.

superior to women: "Sure we are that the Holy Spirit could rather have made some such concession to males, if He had made it to females; forasmuch as, besides the authority of sex, it would have been more becoming that males should have been honoured on the ground of continency itself likewise" (chap. 10). Tertullian's biting rhetoric that male celibacy is more honorable than female virginity intimates his fear of social dislocation or reversal of proper gender roles latent in the practice of honoring virgins. Tertullian *a priori* accepts that God will give more honor to the man than to the woman. Since God did not give the male celibate a public sign or token indicating this honor, God would certainly not think to bestow upon women such a sign, in this case, the permission to go about in church without the customary veil. He shores up his claim with what is, in his mind, irrefutable evidence. He proclaims that continence for men is much harder to maintain than virginity for women: "The more their sex is eager and warm toward females, so much the more toil does the continence of (this) greater ardour involve; and therefore the worthier is it of all ostentation, if ostentation of virginity is dignity" (chap. 10). Apparently, men have a harder time resisting women and sex, but virgins who have never known sex's sweetness do not desire after it. Thus for Tertullian, "constancy of virginity is maintained by grace; of continence by virtue" (chap. 10).

At first blush, it may seem as though Tertullian is contradicting himself—stating that men have a harder time resisting sex, and in the same breath decrying the woman's propensity for promiscuity. Both are true, and are related to virtue and gender. For him, women are weak by nature, lacking the inclination toward virtue and rarely able to resist temptation. But men can aspire to virtue as they battle against their passions.

Conclusion

To conclude, I suggest that Tertullian opposes the practice of virgins unveiling themselves in the church for several reasons. First, he faults the practice as being inconsistent since the virgins veil themselves in public, but are unveiled at church. Second, he is offended by the potential for immorality he sees stemming from this practice. His concern is twofold, focusing on women's attire as being a reflection of their characters as women, and on men's threatened honor. He judges unveiled virgins to be contrary to God's discipline in that women are taking the lead in establishing practice. He insists on clear gender demarcation within the church; to step outside these heavily drawn lines is to invite sin and decadence. Third, Tertullian takes the opportunity afforded by the situation to promote his understanding of "male" and "female." He clarifies that all men are above all women by applying the categories of "glory" and "humility." He declares it discourteous (*inhumanum*)[46] that a woman would be given a special honor denied to men, and that men would "carry their glory in secret, carrying no token to make *them*, too, illustrious (chap. 10).

[46]Loeb translates *inhumanum* "sufficiently discourteous," while Dunn, 155, has "extremely rude."

Unveiled virgins provide Tertullian with the opportunity to address broader concerns, including his definition of "widow" and his interest in presenting the church as a political body rather than as a household.[47] Tertullian's effort to reinforce gender distinctions and reify status among groups of women might be due to an inherited confusion within the church over the definition of "widow."[48] It seems that some women claimed widowhood who, in fact, had never married. In the first quarter of the second century, Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, writes to the Smyrneans: "I salute the households of my brethren with their wives and children, and the virgins who are called widows."[49] If Ignatius was referring to women who were chaste like virgins, one would expect him to write "widows who are like virgins." Taking his words at face value, however, they indicate a group of young unmarried women who are functioning within the church in a manner similar to widows.[50]

First Timothy 5:9-14 may reflect a comparable situation. In 5:9, a widow is defined as being sixty years old and the wife of one husband. Most understand this passage as insisting on *univira* ("one husband in one's lifetime"), but the later charge in 5:14 for young "widows" to marry again presumably goes against the sentiments of 5:9. If, however, this passage signals a fluid definition of widow that included young unmarried women, then the apparent discontinuity goes away. In this reading, 1 Tim 5:14 encourages young women who are identified as widows (but who would be called virgins today) to marry for the first time and have children. Tertullian's disagreement with the bishop who enrolled the virgin as a widow could reflect the unstable category of "widow/virgin" in the early church. With a rhetorical flourish, he declares the virgin-widow is hardly a miracle (*miraculum*); she is a monster (*monstrum*, chap. 9).

Writing at the turn of the third century, Tertullian's arguments may reflect at least two transitions within the church. First, there is a shift from private house churches to a more public presence. Tertullian views the church as occupying public space. Thus women must apply rules of public comportment and dress instead of using those that were acceptable in private homes. Veils that are worn on the public walk across town are required in the public space of the church.[51] Second, his argument may reflect the emerging ascendance of virginity over chastity as the spiritual ideal. During the third century, the church elevated the status of virgin over the offices of widow. Those women who, through daily

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[47]Karen Torjesen writes: "From Tertullian's perspective the church was a legal body (*corpus* or *societas*) unified by a common law (*lex fidei*) and a common discipline (*disciplina*) ("Tertullian's 'Political Ecclesiology' and Women's Leadership," *Studia Patristica* 21 [1989]: 277-282).

[48]E.g., Tertullian speaks of a group of pagan women who serve the African Ceres and who leave their husbands to identify themselves as widows (*Ad uxorem* 1.6.4).

[49]Ignatius, *Smyrna* 13.

[50]Charlotte Metheun, "The 'Virgin Widow': A Problematic Social Role for the Early Church?" *HRT* 90/3 (1997): 289.

[51]Torjesen, 281.

devotion to husband and children, earned their reputation as spiritual guides were replaced by those who had never married, raised children, or cared for families. Charlotte Methuen notes that "as the orthodox church became more established . . . the spiritual authority of senior members of a congregation who had proved their faith over a number of years was assumed by those who had gained stature through the successful pursuit of the ascetic life."[52] Tertullian insists gender hierarchy must be maintained; a woman must not be awarded a high status simply because she is a woman, i.e., virgin. Only "real" widows may earn the privilege of high status.

Tertullian argues against male leaders of churches who fail to follow his rigorous agenda. But he also pleads with his female audience to listen to his words for the sake of the men in their lives because, he notes, "you are a danger for every age group" (chap. 16).[53] Thus Tertullian awards women tremendous (albeit informal) power even as he strips them of honor. Kathleen Norris recognizes this in the tales of virgin martyrs and remarks: "Once again (or, as ususal), a virgin martyr gives witness to a wild power in women that disrupts the power of male authority, of business as usual."[54] Tertullian sensed this disruption and sought to cover it up, literally.

[52]Methuen, 297.

[53]Dunn's translation, 160.

[54]Kathleen Norris, *The Cloister Walk* (New York: Riverhead, 1996), 200.