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Holy Mother, Dead Child:
Christian Asceticism, Renunciation, and the Making of Holy Women
in the sixth-century *Life of Matrona of Perge*

By

Anysia Metrakos

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the
Graduate Division
of the
University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Susanna Elm, Chair
Professor Diliaana Angelova
Professor Maria Mavroudi
Professor Carlos Noreña
Professor Christopher Hallett

Summer 2021

Abstract

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“Holy Mother, Dead Child: Early Christian Asceticism, Renunciation, and the Making of Holy Mothers in the *Life of Matrona of Perge*” explores the impact of maternal asceticism on marriage, child mortality and the family economy in the sixth century Greek life of Matrona of Perge, an aristocratic matron and mother who abandoned her family and life of luxury to live as a eunuch monk (and later abbess) in Constantinople. Matrona’s renunciation of her family culminates in the death of her young daughter Theodote, who is presented in the text as a sacrificial offering to her mother’s religious vocation and sanctity. Theodote’s abandonment and death serve as catalysts for Matrona’s transformation from matron to eunuch monk to spiritual mother and abbess.

This dissertation combines a literary analysis and adapted translation of the *Life of Matrona* with careful study of legal, religious, and cultural shifts in the fifth and sixth centuries to reveal a significant interaction between ascetic literature and changes to the family in late Roman culture. As women gained increasingly more rights over their children, dowries, and property in the fifth and sixth centuries, one sees this financial independence play out in the hagiographies of ascetic mothers. The crux of the conflict between the family and asceticism in the *Life of Matrona* and other contemporary hagiographies of holy mothers was not merely the renunciation of kin, but the rejection of traditional female roles, the destruction of the household, and the redistribution of wealth and property away from the family and toward the Church and monastic foundations. Wealthy matrons who left their families for a monastic life broke apart not only their biological families, but also their households and property, redistributing coin, estates, and slaves outside of the family inheritance economy. For Matrona of Perge and other wealthy Late Antique ascetic matrons like Melania the Younger, the renunciation and dismantling of family and home resulted in their canonization and veneration as saints in the Church from Late Antiquity onwards. The *Life of Matrona* and other contemporary hagiographies present child mortality as a vital step on the path to holiness for ascetic mothers.

*Στη γιαγιά και στον παππού μου,
με αγάπη*

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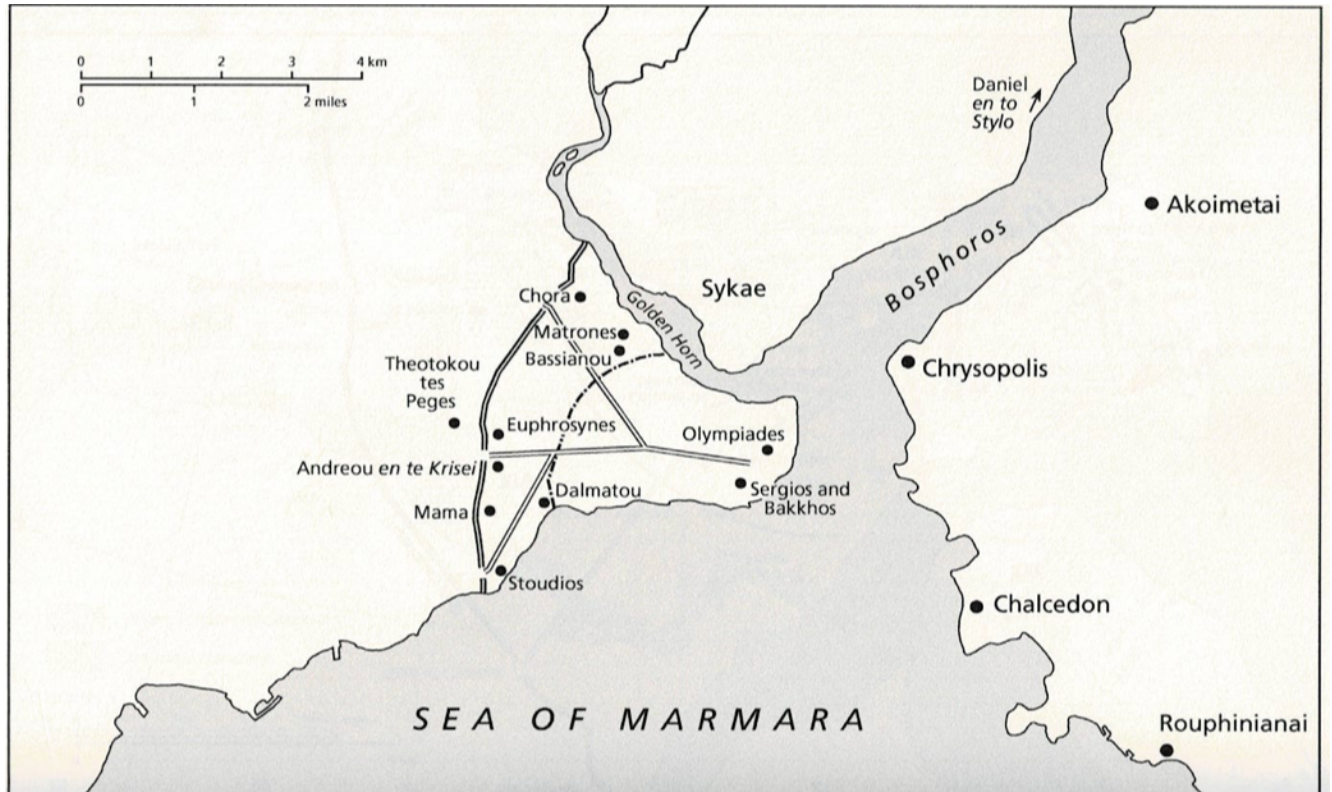


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Introduction

*What shall I say of the sudden mortal end of both my dearest younger children, remarkable for their beauty and intelligence, upon whom I looked with sweetness, good hopes for them being poured round my heart?*¹

Theodore Metochites, Poem XV (fourteenth century)

*My innards are all twisted up, my heart is rent asunder, and I am everywhere falling into pieces, pushed deeper into depression by the memory of her... I now go about life dejected and gloomy and, hardy differing from a dead man, lament the loss of one so dear to me, I go to her grave and call upon the one who lies there. Then I return, striking my chest, and am quite beside myself.*²

Michael Psellos, Funeral Oration for his nine-year-old daughter Styliane (eleventh century)

In the sixth century *Life of Matrona of Perge*, a wealthy aristocratic matron abandons her husband Dometianos and young daughter Theodote to live an ascetic life first as a eunuch in a men's monastery and later as an abbess in fifth century Constantinople. While living as a monk, Matrona receives word that Theodote has died, but instead of mourning the child, "<the blessed one> felt joy rather than grief, because she was set free of concern for <the child>".³ Comparing Matrona to Abraham, the hagiographer characterizes Theodote's abandonment and death as positive events which establishes her mother's sanctity by freeing her of maternal obligations and earthly ties. The text reinforces the positive value of familial renunciation and child mortality in the making of holy women by having Matrona's disciples mirror her actions, leaving unwilling husbands and neglecting children, even onto death. The *vita* portrays the deaths of these children as beneficial to their mother's religious vocations, but how could abandoned and dead children contribute to the holiness of Christian women? Paul's first letter to Timothy indicated that a mother's salvation depended upon raising her children well.⁴ If a Christian mother rejected her children, the basis of her salvation, how then could she attain sanctity and renown?

Voices from Greco-Roman antiquity and Byzantium describe the loss of a child as the bitterest human suffering. From Cicero's overwhelming grief following the death of his beloved daughter Tullia⁵ to Michael Psellos' eulogy for his nine-year-old daughter Styliane in the

¹ Trans. in Alice-Mary Talbot, "The Death and Commemoration of Byzantine Children" in *Becoming Byzantine: Children and Childhood in Byzantium*, ed. Arietta Papaconstantinou and Alice-Mary Talbot (Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks and Harvard University Press, 2009), 283.

² Trans. Anthony Kaldellis, *Mothers and Sons, Fathers and Daughters in Byzantium* (Notre Dame, 2006), 136-37.

³ *Life of Matrona of Perge* 10.

⁴ Paul's I Timothy 2:15 stated that women would be saved through childbearing, though the exegesis of several Church Fathers questioned such a literal interpretation of this passage. Elizabeth Clark, *Reading Renunciation*, 113-14, 140, 194, 353-54, 356-58.

⁵ Cicero's grief is well documented in both his private letters to Atticus and his public writing: *Letters to Atticus* 12.14-21, 23, 25, 27-31; *Tusculan Disputations* III. Cicero's now lost *Consolation* survives in fragments. See Han H. Baltussen, "Cicero's *Consolatio ad se*: Character, Purpose, and Impact of a Curious Treatise" in *Greek and Roman Consolations. Eight Studies of a Tradition and its Afterlife* (Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2013).

eleventh century⁶, bereaved parents, no matter how illustrious or eloquent, expressed common feelings of despondency, incessant weeping, and pain “stronger than any consolation.”⁷ In late fourth century letters and homilies, John Chrysostom (d. 407) described the death of children as an “inconsolable sorrow” for bereaved parents, comparing their suffering to martyrdom itself.⁸ While Chrysostom had a stoic view of death and mortality in general, as Blake Leyerle has shown, he understood that the deaths of children were “the most intolerable” “and “inconsolable suffering” for their families.⁹ He vividly describes a parent mourning over the corpse of their beloved child, highlighting each bodily feature that ceases to function: “This mouth no longer speaks, these eyes no longer see, these feet no longer walk, but all are going to corruption.”¹⁰ In his words of counsel and encouragement to parents, and mothers in particular, Chrysostom’s acknowledged the highly valued place children held within Late Roman families as sources of joy and continuity. Since affectionate mothers would even grieve if their children were absent from a meal,¹¹ serious illness in a child caused despair among fathers and mothers alike,¹² and death of a beloved child was akin to death for the parents themselves. With such examples of maternal devotion promulgated by one of Late Antiquity’s most famous bishops, why would child abandonment and mortality be celebrated in hagiography?

An abundance of textual and material evidence from papyri to epitaphs, portraits to poetry, point to the deep affection Greco-Roman parents and relatives had for children, caring deeply about their well-being and futures.¹³ Children were an integral art of the late Roman

⁶ See Brigitte Pitarakis, “The Material Culture of Childhood in Byzantium”, in *Becoming Byzantine: Children and Childhood in Byzantium*, ed. Arietta Papaconstantinou and Alice-Mary Talbot (Dumbarton Oaks, 2009) 167- 251.

⁷ Cicero, *Letter to Atticus* 12.

⁸ Chrysostom, *Homily on Job* 64.4 (PG 59.347); *Homily on Philipians* 8.4 (PG 62.245); *Letter to Theodorus* 5 (SC 117.70); *Homily on Colossians* 8.5; see Maria Doerfler, “The Sense of an Ending: Childhood Death and Parental Benefit in Late Antique Rhetoric”, in *Studia Patristica Vol. LXXXI: Health, Medicine, and Christianity in Late Antiquity*, ed. Markus Vinzent, Jared Secord, Heidi Marx-Wolf, and Christoph Marksches (Leuven: Peeters, 2017), 153-160, here 155-7, and ead., *Jephthah’s Daughter, Sarah’s Son: The Death of Children in Late Antiquity* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019), 20, 132-33, 139, 163. See also Xueying Wang, “John Chrysostom on the Premature Death of Children and Parental Grief”, *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, Vol. 27, no. 3 (Fall 2019), 443-463.

⁹ Chrysostom, *Homily on Ephesians* 10.3 (PG 62.79) and *Homily on Job* 62.4 (PG 59.347), trans. and discussion in Blake Leyerle, *The Narrative Shape of Emption in the Preaching of John Chrysostom* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020) 77-82. See also Chrysostom, *Commentary on Job* 1.21,23, 3.1 (SC 346.136, 140, 198) and Wang, “Chrysostom on the Premature Death of Children”.

¹⁰ Chrysostom, *Homily 2 Corinthians* 1.6 (PG 61.390). Trans. Leyerle, *Shape of Emption*, 78.

¹¹ Chrysostom, *Homily on the Statues* 9.3.

¹² Chrysostom, *De beato Abraham* 2 (PG 50.740), trans. Tonia, *Abraham in the Works of John Chrysostom*, 190. Discussed in Leyerle, 82; on a mother’s pain and the Maccabean mother, see Doerfler, *Jephthah’s Daughter, Sarah’s Son*, 127-143.

¹³ Much evidence for affection for children appears in funerary contexts. For Byzantine funerary inscriptions denoting affection towards children, see G. Kiourtzian, *Recueil des inscriptions grecques chrétiennes des Cyclades: De la fin du IIIe au VIIe siècle après J.-C.*, Travaux et mémoires du Centre de recherche d’histoire et civilisation de Byzance. Monographies 12 (Paris 2000), 167, no. 97. For hagiographic examples of parents’ concern for children’s education and health, see A. Kiousopoulou, *Χρόνος και ηλικίες στη Βυζαντινή κοινωνία: Η κλίμακα των ηλικιών από τα αγιολογικά κείμενα της μέσης εποχής (7ς - 11ς αι)*, Ιστορικό αρχείο ελληνικής νεολαίας 30 (Athens, 1997), 67-73. See discussion on page 90.

family and its survival into the next generation, embodying the “good hopes”, ambitions, and continuity of their family legacies. Infant and child mortality, however, were unavoidable hardships for almost every family: 35-50 percent of children died before the age of ten in the Roman Empire and roughly 50 percent of Byzantine children died before the age of fifteen.¹⁴ While ancient and medieval writers approached this harsh reality in varying ways, moralists consistently praised parents who did not mourn to excess and sought alternative ways to console parental grief.¹⁵ In Late Antiquity, Christian exegetes and homilists often framed the deaths of children in positive contexts by highlighting the parents’ suffering as a form of martyrdom; losing a child, however painful, brought one closer to God, provided the loss was borne appropriately.¹⁶ In hagiography, deaths of children and kin are often met with rhetorical expressions of joy (or grief turned to joy) on the part of the saint; the loss of a child could even merit parental salvation.

Until recently, scholarship on the family in Late Antiquity has argued that Christianity had little effect on the Roman family, largely dismissing or overlooking the impact of Christian asceticism on family life and kinship structures.¹⁷ However, over the past decade, scholarship on children and childhood in Late Antiquity and Byzantium has begun to explore the interaction of children and family dynamics with Christianity in greater depth.¹⁸ Thus far only a handful of

¹⁴ See Tim Parkin for a summary of scholarship on mortality rates: Parkin, “The Demography of Infancy and Early Childhood in the Ancient World” in *The Oxford Handbook of Childhood and Education in the Classical World*, ed. Judith Evans Grubbs and Tim Parkin (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 40-61; On life expectancy, see Évelyne Patlagean, *Pauvreté économique et pauvreté sociale à Byzance, 4e-7e siècles* (Paris, 1977), 95-100; Angeliki Laiou, *Peasant Society in the Late Byzantine Empire: A Social and Demographic Study* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), 293-4.

¹⁵ The Stoic Anaxagoras, after being informed of his son’s death, famously replied “I knew he was mortal when I fathered him.” Diogenes Laertius 2.31, trans. Konstan, *The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks*, 253; Plutarch, *Tiberius Gracchus* 1.4-5 and *Caius Gracchus* 19.2-3, in *Plutarch’s Lives*; See also Ps. Seneca, Rem. Fort. 13.1 and discussion in Leyerle, *Shape of Emption*, 77.

¹⁶ Maria Doerfler, “The Sense of Ending”, 155; see also Chapter 3 in Doerfler’s, *Jephthah’s Daughter, Sarah’s Son*.

¹⁷ Foundational studies on the family in Late Antiquity include Evelyne Patlagean, “L’enfant et son avenir dans la famille byzantine (IVe-XIIe siècles)” (1973) and *Pauvreté économique et pauvreté sociale à Byzance 4e-7e siècles* (Paris: Mouton, 1977) and Brent Shaw, “The Family in Late Antiquity: The Experience of Augustine” (1987). While the discussion of asceticism and the family was first taken up by Peter Brown in *Body and Society* (1988) and Elizabeth Clark (*Ascetic Piety and Women’s Faith*, 1986, and “Antifamilial Tendencies in Ancient Christianity”, 1995), most studies on the impact of Christianity on the family have disregarded asceticism. Geoffrey Nathan’s book on the family in Late Antiquity (the only book-length overview of late Roman family life to date) dismisses the impact of asceticism on family life outright. Geoffrey Nathan, *The Family in Late Antiquity: The Rise of Christianity and the Endurance of Tradition* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 120-32; Kate Cooper’s *The Fall of the Roman Household* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) discusses in detail the impact of Christianity on the Roman family in the West, but she says little about how asceticism specifically influenced and changed family structures.

¹⁸ See e.g. Cornelia Horn and John Martens, “*Let the Little Children Come to Me*”: *Childhood and Children in Early Christianity* (2009); Cornelia Horn and Robert Phenix (eds), *Children in Late Ancient Christianity* (2009); A Papaconstantinou and Alice-Mary Talbot (eds), *Becoming Byzantine: Children and Childhood in Byzantium* (2009); Leslie Brubaker and Shaun Tougher (eds), *Approaches to the Byzantine Family* (2013); Sabine Huebner and Geoffrey Nathan, *Mediterranean Families in Antiquity: Households, Extended Families, and Domestic Space* (2016); Christian Laes, Katariina Mustakallio, and

articles have touched on children's roles within the Church and the impact of asceticism on the family.¹⁹ Ville Vuolanto's book *Children and Asceticism* (2015) is the first book-length study to embrace this subject, but Vuolanto focuses chiefly on rhetorical family roles adopted by Church Fathers to describe monastic groups (i.e. not actual biological families) and on prominent families whose children become ascetics when they reach adulthood. Vuolanto says very little about the impact of parental asceticism on children in Christian literature, for he is primarily interested in "spiritual" continuity strategies employed by families whose earthly legacies were not continued by progeny.²⁰

A closer look at patristic literature, hagiography, and Roman law from the fourth through sixth centuries, however, reveals that rise of asceticism brought about new ways of defining biological family relationships, rescripting the roles of mother, father, and child in the wake of familial renunciation. While the majority of late Romans, both Christian and pagan (among others), married and had children, asceticism nevertheless made its way into the homes and daily lives of some of the empire's wealthiest and most prominent families (including the Anicii, Valerii, and Furii) and even imperial households.²¹ Prominent churchmen encouraged wealthy Christians to reconsider traditional family structures and to redistribute their property away from family interests and towards the Church, promising salvation and treasure in heaven to those who could part from their earthly property. Wealthy families relied on children to inherit and ensure the survival of their family lines, and this patrimony was protected under Roman law.

Late Antique hagiography consistently portrays the abandonment and death of children as spiritually beneficial for elite ascetic parents, especially mothers. While maternal paths towards asceticism vary in the texts, the underlying message in the lives of Matrona of Perge and her disciple Athanasia, Melania the Elder and Younger, Paula, and Athanasia of Alexandria is consistent: salvation for wealthy matrons is best found in the rejection (however gradual) of wealth and traditional female roles and that the ascetic life is inconsistent with biological motherhood. Children must ultimately be left behind, but the outcomes for the children of ascetic mothers in Late Antique texts were often fatal. The deaths of children in the hagiographies of the later fifth and sixth century are often depicted favorably as catalysts for stricter parental asceticism and salvation. The dying children function as sacrificial offerings, establishing the sanctity of pious mothers; freed from the burdens and grief of biological motherhood, the

Ville Vuolanto (eds), *Children and Family in Late Antiquity: Life, Death, and Interaction* (2015); Christian Laes and Ville Vuolanto (eds), *Children and Everyday Life in the Roman and Late Antique World* (2017); also relevant chapters in Judith Evans Grubbs, et al (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Childhood and Education in the Classical World* (2013).

¹⁹ Béatrice Chevallier Caseau, "Childhood in Byzantine Saints' Lives" (2009); Richard Greenfield, "Children in Byzantine Monasteries" (2009); Cornelia Horn, "Raising martyrs and ascetics: a diachronic comparison of educational role-models for early Christian children" (2009); Caroline Schroeder, "Children and Egyptian Monasticism" (2009), "Child Sacrifice in Egyptian Monastic Culture: From Familial Renunciation to Jephthah's Lost Daughter" (2012), *Children and Family in Late Antique Egyptian Monasticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Ville Vuolanto, "Choosing Asceticism: Children and Parents, Vows and Conflicts" (2009).

²⁰ Vuolanto does mention briefly that children were regarded as a burden to ascetic life, but he cites only letters from Church Fathers encouraging childless widows not to remarry and brings no examples from hagiography into his discussion. Vuolanto, *Children and Asceticism in Late Antiquity: Continuity, Family Dynamics, and the Rise of Christianity* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015), 190.

²¹ E.g. Pulcheria.

wealthy ascetic mother is able to keep her inheritance, gifting her time and resources to the Church, build monasteries, and raise up spiritual children.

Children occupied a paradoxical space in early Christianity and within Late Antiquity more broadly. Throughout antiquity, child abandonment and infant exposure were ways to dispose of unwanted children.²² With the approval of the *paterfamilias*, an infant could be put in a public place either to be picked up and fostered by a passerby, or to die. Those children who were picked up were almost always raised as slaves.²³ While reasons for exposure and abandonment varied, poverty was most often the motivating factor.²⁴ Despite the romanticized tales of happy reunions between abandoned children and parents in ancient novels such as Longus' *Daphnis and Chloe* (second century AD), very few cases of abandonment had such outcomes. In *Daphnis and Chloe*, the hero and heroine were both abandoned in infancy, and after happily reuniting with their fathers, each father explains that he abandoned them to preserve family wealth.²⁵ The Stoic philosopher Musonius Rufus (d. 95 AD) lamented how parents, even of wealthy families, would expose a child rather than split up the patrimony:

*What appears terrible to me is that some people, not even having the excuse of poverty, but being well-off and some even rich, nevertheless presume not to nurture their children, so that the children born previously may be better off. They impiously contrive the prosperity of their children by the murder of their siblings; that is, they destroy their brothers and sisters, so that the earlier children may have a greater share of the inheritance.*²⁶

Roman inheritance laws stipulated that the family patrimony must be divided equally among all legitimate children (unless one was explicitly disinherited), thus making larger families less desirable. Like earlier moralists, Christian writers condemned the practice of abandonment while also alluding to its prevalence in Late Antique culture.²⁷ Clement of Alexandria and others

²² The earliest surviving reference to infant exposure in the Greco-Roman world is a clause in Gortyn's Great Law Code in Crete (ca. 450 BC), Col. III.44-IV.17, text and translation in R.F. Willetts, *The Law Code of Gortyn* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter and Co., 1967), 41-42. For an overview of sources from antiquity through the medieval era, see Emiel Eyben, "Family Planning in Graeco-Roman Antiquity", *Ancient Society* 11-12 (1980-1981), 5-82, and John Boswell, *The Kindness of Strangers: The Abandonment of Children in Western Europe from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988).

²³ The cost of raising an *expositus* is evidenced by the wealth of wet-nursing contracts found in Roman Egypt. See Keith Bradley's work, "Wet-Nursing at Rome: a Study in Social Relations" in *The Family in Ancient Rome: New Perspectives*, ed. Beryl Rawson (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 201-29, and *Discovering the Roman Family: Studies in Roman Social History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 13-36; Evans Grubbs, "Hidden in Plain Sight: Expositi in the Community", in *Children, Memory and Family Identity in Roman Culture*, ed. V. Dansen and T. Späth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 293-310; "Infant Exposure and Infanticide" in *The Oxford Handbook of Childhood and Education in the Classical World*, ed. Grubbs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

²⁴ Boswell, *The Kindness of Strangers*.

²⁵ Longus, *Daphnis and Chloe* 4.24, 36.

²⁶ Musonius Rufus, *Reliphiae* 15B, cited in Hopkins, *Death and Renewal* (1983), 96.

²⁷ For scholarship on abandonment, see Harris, "Child-Exposure in the Roman Empire." *Journal of Roman Studies* 84 (1994), 3-8; Kyle Harper, *Slavery in the late Roman World, AD 275-425*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011): 396, 416-23; Vuolanto, "Selling a Freeborn Child: Rhetoric and

worried about infant exposure leading to prostitution and that men might unknowingly commit incest in brothels.²⁸ Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa describe how parents abandoned and sold their children into slavery during a famine in late fourth century Cappadocia.²⁹ Lactantius noted that Christian morality largely overlapped with Roman family morality, except regarding the practice of infant exposure and the double standard of infidelity for men and women. Citing hunger as the primary reason for exposure and abandonment, Lactantius demanded abstinence of those for who could not afford to take care of their children.³⁰

Christian emperors in Late Antiquity were the first to impose empire-wide sanctions against infant exposure, though these laws sought largely to penalize the exposor, not necessarily to aid the exposed. Constantine's law in 331 made reclamation of children knowingly exposed by their parents virtually impossible, regardless of their birth status; a freeborn *expositus* could be rescued and raised as a slave without penalty on the part of the rescuer and without hope of reclamation on the part of the birth parents.³¹ Valentinian I took a different approach in 374: "Each person is to rear is his own offspring. And if he thought it ought to be exposed, he will be liable to the punishment which has been decided."³² While scholars have debated the nature of this "punishment", suggesting the loss of paternal claim on the child, the law could in fact lead to capital punishment, since one month prior Valentinian had decreed this for infanticide.³³ A Western law of Honorius in 412 involved the Church directly by requiring the signature of a local bishop to witness the rescue of an *expositus*.³⁴ Justinian's edict of 529 attempted to cement the Byzantine attitude towards the practice of exposure by proclaiming that all *expositi*, whether born to free or slave mothers, were freeborn and could not be enslaved. However, in practice,

Social Realities in the Late Roman World", *Ancient Society*, vol. 33 (2003), 169-207; *ibid.* "Infant Abandonment and Christianization of Medieval Europe" in "Infant abandonment and the Christianization of Medieval Europe", in *The Dark Side of Childhood in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages: Unwanted, Disabled, and Lost*, ed. Katariina Mustakallio and Christian Laes (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2011), 3-19; Evans Grubbs, "The Dynamics of Infant Abandonment: Motives, Attitudes and (Unintended) Consequences", in *The Dark Side of Childhood* and, "Infant Exposure and Infanticide".

²⁸ Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogos* 3.3.21 and *Stromata* 2.92-93; Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 27, 29; Minucius Felix, *Apologetical Works* 31.4..

²⁹ Basil of Caesarea, *Hexameron* 8.6; *Homily* 6.4; *Hom. 2 in ps.* 14.4; *Hom. in illud Luc., destruam* 4, with Holman 2001: 68-9. Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Makrina* 36-38, PG 46:988b; see also Gregory of Nazianzus, *Letters.* 5.38, 3.55, 4.43.

³⁰ Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* 6.20.18-25 and 6.23.23-30. Judith Evans Grubbs notes that this is the only instance where Lactantius counseled celibacy within marriage. He appears to have had a more moderate view on the role of sexual relations within marriage, advocating for intercourse even when procreation was impossible. See discussion in Judith Evans Grubbs, *Law and Family*, 88-94, esp. 92

³¹ This law bears similarities to Constantine's law in 329 allowing the sale of newborn children by their parents. *Codex Theodosianus* 5.10.1; *Codex Justinianus* 4.43.2). The idea that a person of free birth (*ingenuitas*) could become a slave went against long standing Roman laws and cultural values, however, as Evans Grubbs has pointed out, the lines between free and slave were colored by a variety of ambiguous legal statuses.

³² *Codex Justinianus* 8.51.2, text in Evans Grubbs, "Infant Exposure and Infanticide".

³³ *Codex Theodosianus* 9.14.1; M. B. Fossati Vanzetti, "Vendita ed esposizione degli infanti da Costantino a Giustiniano", *Studia et Documenta Historiae Iuris* 49 (1983), 213-15.

³⁴ *Codex Theodosianus* 5.9.2; Tate, "Christianity and the Legal Status of Abandoned Children in the Later Roman Empire", *Journal of Law and Religion* 24 (2008), 123-41, here 122-4.

this law did little to limit infant exposure and reclaiming *expositi* as slaves, and thus prompted Justinian to decree a more severe penalty for those who enslaved foundlings: death.³⁵

Despite cultural and religious sanctions against the practice of abandonment, children are frequently left behind in ascetic literature, particularly in the fifth century.³⁶ For pious parents, as Vuolanto has noted, “There is only positive value attached to leaving children behind.”³⁷ In the late Roman and medieval world, monastic communities could function as places of asylum for abandoned children. Augustine wrote about nuns who rescued exposed infants, baptizing them and raising them in North Africa.³⁸ In the *Life of Makrina*, Gregory of Nyssa describes girls living in Makrina’s community as having been rescued during a famine as they were “prostrate along the highway at the moment of starvation”.³⁹ Children in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* were often brought to monasteries during times of financial hardship.⁴⁰ Evidence from papyri and ostraca from the sixth through eighth centuries highlight the transactional nature in which children functioned in Egyptian monasteries; in many cases, these texts indicate a monastery’s direct ownership of a child for the purpose of providing unpaid labor, sometimes for life. Ville Vuolanto, April Pudsey and others have argued that in late Roman and Coptic Egypt, monasteries created an option for families with children they could not care for and who might otherwise have been abandoned.⁴¹ While the selling of children was illegal, families could pledge their children to a lifetime of service in a particular monastic community. Eighth century donation documents from the Monastery of Phoibammon provide evidence of this

³⁵ *Codex Justinianus* 8.51.3; Justinian, *Novel* 153 ; Fossati Vanzetti 1983, 223-4.

³⁶ A certain Dionysia abandoned her husband, children, and house for the shrine of St. Thekla (fifth century), *Miracles of Thekla* 46, ed. Gilbert Dagrón, *Vie et miracles de Sainte Thècle*, *Subsidia Hagiographica* 62 (Bruxelles: Société des Bollandistes, 1978), 284-412, here 409. Palladius’ *Lausiac History* has several prominent examples, including Paul the Simple, who left his wife and children for the desert when he learned his wife had a lover and Innocent: Palladius, *Lausiac History* 22.1 and 44, circa 420 (ed. Bartelink, 118 and 214-216); Sulpicius Severus, *Dialogues* 1.22.1-2, ed. J. Fontaine, Sulpice Sévère, Gallus: *Sialogues sur les vertus de saint Martin*, *Sources chrétiennes* 510 (2006), 188-190 (circa 404); John Cassian, *Conferences* 21.8-10, (ed. Petschenig, 1179c-1184a, dated to 426-428). See discussion in Ville Vuolanto, “Choosing Asceticism: Children and Parents, Vows and Conflicts”, in *Children in Late Ancient Christianity*, ed. Cornelia B. Horn and Robert R. Phenix (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009; Caseau, “Childhood in Byzantine Saints Lives”.

³⁷ Vuolanto, “Choosing Asceticism”, 287.

³⁸ Augustine, *Letters* 98 (CSEL 44).

³⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Makrina* 36-38 (PG 46:988b); ed and tr. Pierre Maraval, Grégoire de Nyssa, *Vie de Sainte Macrine*, SC 178 (1971), 256-265; tr. Virginia Woods Callahan, *Saint Gregory of Nyssa: Ascetical Works*, *Fathers of the Church* 58 (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1967), 182-183.

⁴⁰ During a famine, Abba Carion’s wife brought their two children to his monastery at Sketis, demanding support. While his daughter refused to stay, Carion’s son Zacharias joined the monastic community. *Apophthegmata Patrum*, Carion 2, PG 65:249-252

⁴¹ Pudsey, “Children in Late Roman Egypt”, 218; Tonio Sebastain Richter, “What’s in a Story? Cultural Narratology and Coptic Child Donation Documents” *Journal of Juristic Papyrology* 35 (2005); Ville Vuolanto, “Selling a Freeborn Child: Rhetoric and Social Realities in the Late Roman World”, *Ancient Society* 33 (2003), 175-6.

phenomenon,⁴² as well as various anecdotes in hagiography.⁴³ This practice of *oblatio* was a Christian phenomenon that offered an alternative to the exposure of infants.⁴⁴ In sum, infant exposure and child abandonment were still widely practiced in Late Antiquity, despite censure from the Church and increased restrictions in Roman law.

Elite holy widows such as Melania the Elder or Paula, however, could legally leave behind their children and create a separate life for themselves, as long as their children's inheritance and future life were placed under the guardianship of a close male relative. Despite leaving their children in culturally appropriate ways,⁴⁵ the literature on their renunciation highlights the shock of their relatives and mutual pain between mother and child upon separating. In these texts, the children are at once obstacles to asceticism and the sacrificial foundation upon which the sanctity of holy mothers is built. For ascetic women with living husbands like Matrona or Melania the Younger, forsaking family and familial obligations has more devastating outcomes: as these holy women spurn their husbands and occupy themselves with asceticism, their children die.

Despite the public veneration of these women as saints of the Church, ecclesiastical canon law strictly forbade abandoning one's husband and children. At the Council of Gangra (340), a number of canons directed at ascetics threatened violators with excommunication if they were to forsake their spouses and children "under the pretense of asceticism."⁴⁶ Many Church Fathers urged pious matrons not to spurn their husbands and instructed both mothers and fathers on the proper way to raise their children in the Church; careful child rearing became an "*obligatio* consistent with familial *pietas*."⁴⁷ The role of Christian motherhood in particular was emphasized as essential to the spiritual education and general wellbeing of children.⁴⁸ And yet, throughout the ascetic literature of the fifth and sixth centuries, one finds holy men and women

⁴² Leslie S.B. MacCoull, "Child Donations and Child Saints in Coptic Egypt", *Eastern European Quarterly* 13 (1979), 409-415; Ariette Papaconstantinou, "Notes sur les actes de donation d'enfants au monastère de Saint-Phoibammon", *Journal of Juristic Papyrology* 32 (2002), 83-105; Schroeder, "Children in Early Egyptian Monasticism", 332-335; Richter, "What's in a Story?", 243, 251-3.

⁴³ John of Lycopolis advised a visitor to donate his son to the monastery when he turns seven years of age. John of Lycopolis, *History of the Monks of Egypt* I.10.

⁴⁴ John Boswell, "*Expositio* and *Oblatio*: The Abandonment of Children and the Ancient and Medieval Family", *The American Historical Review*, vol. 89, no. 1 (February, 1984), 10-33; Mayke de Jong, *In Samuel's Image: Child Oblation in the Early Medieval West* (Leiden: Brill, 1996).

⁴⁵ Maria Doerfler, "Holy Households", 75.

⁴⁶ Council of Gangra Canons 1, 9, 10, 13, 14, and especially 15: "If anyone shall forsake his own children and shall not nurture them, nor so far as in him lies, rear them in becoming piety, but shall neglect them, under the pretense of asceticism, let him be anathema." See discussion on 85-86, 122-23.

⁴⁷ In brief, Chrysostom, *On Vainglory and the Right Way for Parents to Bring Up their Children*, Homily 9 (*Homilies on First Timothy*), Homily 21 (*Homilies on Ephesians*); Augustine, *Letters* 262; Jerome, *Letters* 66, 107; Paulinus of Nola, *Letter* 13; Paulinus of Pella, *Eucharisticus* 2.219-44; Sidonius Apollinaris *Letter* 5:16:5; for a discussion on raising children, see Nathan, *Family in Late Antiquity*, 142-154, quote from 143.

⁴⁸ Augustine, *Homily* 10.4, *De cura pro mortuis gerenda* 7; Ambrose, *Letter* 63; Paulinus of Pella, *Eucharisticus* 2.63-7; Jerome, *Letter* 107; Aelius Donatus, *Commentary on Terence* 594-5. Ambrose and Augustine, among others, encouraged breastfeeding and discouraged the common use of *nutrices* as a way for mothers to bond with their children early-on (a sentiment echoed from Plutarch). Ambrose, *Letter* 63; Augustine, fragment in Bede, *Commentary on I Thessalonians* 2; Plutarch, *Moralia* 496A. See also Carole Monica Burnett, "Mother-Child Bonding in the Greek and Latin Fathers of the Church" in *Children in Late Antiquity*. Ed. Cornelia B. Horn and Robert R. Phoenix (2009).

whose very sanctity is established by leaving their families and abandoning or neglecting their children – even to death.

This dissertation explores the impact of maternal asceticism on marriage, child mortality and the family economy in the sixth century Greek life of Matrona of Perge and in contemporary vitae of other elite holy mothers who renounced family life to live as continent ascetics. While the *Life of Matrona* is familiar to Byzantinists and references to Matrona appear (often in passing) in discussions on monasticism and gender, her vita has garnered little attention beyond these subjects.⁴⁹ To date, no study has used this text to explore the role of marriage and family or the ways child mortality shaped the identity of holy women in Late Antiquity, transforming biological mothers into spiritual ones, and transferring maternal property outside of the family line and towards the Church. My analysis of the *Vita Matronae* relies on a new translation adapted from Jeffrey Featherstone,⁵⁰ which underscores the language of sacrifice found in Matrona's familial renunciation, abandonment and death of Theodote, and her relationships in the text with her spiritual family and disciples. Against the backdrop of the legal, religious, and cultural shifts in the fifth and sixth centuries, this vita and other lives of holy mothers reveal a significant interaction between ascetic literature and changes to the family in late Roman culture, particularly the central role of mothers in building (and breaking) nuclear and spiritual families. In the fourth through sixth centuries, women gained increasingly more rights over their children, dowries, and property, and this financial independence is featured prominently in patristic writing and hagiography. The conflict that emerges between the family and asceticism in the *Life of Matrona* and other contemporary hagiographies of holy mothers is not merely the renunciation of kin, but the rejection of traditional female roles, the destruction of the household, and the

⁴⁹ Apart from Jeffrey Featherstone's translation and Cyril Mango's accompanying introduction in Alice-Mary Talbot's (ed.). In *Holy Women of Byzantium: Ten Saints' Lives in English Translation* (1996), the following studies all focus on questions of gender: Peter Brown, *Body and Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 270, 272-4; Sarah Insley, "Dressing up the Past: Fictional Narrative in the *Life of Matrona of Perge*", In *Medieval Greek Storytelling: Fictionality and Narrative in Byzantium*. Ed. Panagiotis Roilos (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2014); Eva C. Topping, "St. Matrona and her Friends: Sisterhood in Byzantium" in *Kathegetria: Essays Presented to Joan Hussey for her 80th Birthday*, ed. J. Chrysostomides (Camberley, 1988), 211-24; K. Bennisser, "Gender and Sanctity in Early Byzantine Monasticism: A Study of the Phenomenon of Female Ascetics in Male Monastic Habit, with a Translation of the *Life of Matrona [Vita Altera]*", Ph.D. dissertation, Rutgers University, 1984; Roland Betancourt, *Byzantine Intersectionality: Sexuality, Gender, and Race in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 91-96. Stavroula Constantinou, *Female Corporeal Performances: Reading the Body in Byzantine Passions and Lives of Holy Women* (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2005), 92ff and "Male Constructions of Female Identities: Authority and Power in the Byzantine Greek Lives of Monastic Foundresses", in *Female Founders in Byzantium and Beyond*. Ed. Lioba Theis, et al. (Wien: Boehlau, 2014), 43-62; Linda Jones Hall, *Roman Berytus: Beirut in Late Antiquity* (Routledge, 2004), 166-71; Claudia Rapp, "Figures of Female Sanctity: Byzantine Edifying Manuscripts and Their Audience" in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, Vol. 50 (1996), 313-344; also brief mention in Amelia R. Brown, "Psalmody and Socrates: Female Literacy in the Byzantine Empire" in *Questions of Gender in Byzantine Society*, ed. Bronwen Neil and Lynda Garland (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013) 62; Also.; passing mention in Kathryn M. Ringrose, "The Byzantine Body" in Judith M. Bennett, Ruth Mazo Karras (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁵⁰ While the translations of the *Vita Matronae* in this text are my own, they are nonetheless informed by my prior reading of Featherstone's translation. *Life of Matrona of Perge*, trans. Jeffrey Featherstone in *Holy Women of Byzantium: Ten Saint's Lives in English Translation*, ed. Alice-Mary Talbot (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1996).

redistribution of wealth and property away from the family and toward the Church and monastic foundations. Wealthy matrons who left their families for a monastic life broke apart not only their biological families, but also their households and property, redistributing coin, estates, and slaves outside of the family inheritance economy.

The dissertation proceeds thematically to examine how Matrona's renunciation of wealth and family permeated all aspect of her ascetic career and established her as a holy woman. While there is significant overlap of themes and between the chapters, each draws on different sociocultural, religious, dogmatic, and legal developments to contextualize the narrative action of the vita within its historical period and literary genre. The first chapter lays out the various textual sources on Matrona and a brief overview of early Constantinopolitan monasticism, highlighting Matrona's monastic legacy in the imperial city. The second, third, and fourth chapters explore the renunciation of marriage, children, and the redefinition of motherhood in the fifth century. The fifth and final chapter discusses gender and clothing in the vita, connecting the familial renunciation of holy women with expanded notions of gender and authority in Late Antiquity. What emerges from this study is a new emphasis on motherhood in the fifth century. While the fourth century has long been characterized by a preoccupation with "the virgin and the bride,"⁵¹ the fifth century shifts this emphasis towards maternity: as changes in late Roman law brought mothers to the forefront of their homes and families, so too did the rise in veneration of the Virgin Mary bring a virginal mother to the forefront of Christian salvation. For ascetic mothers, their holiness is founded on the loss and sacrifice of their families, be it before or after entering a religious life. In ascetic discourse, mothers become indispensable in the economy of salvation; their children are portrayed as sacrificial victims to maternal salvation.

⁵¹ Kate Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

Chapter 1:

Matrona of Perge: Hagiography, Historiography, and Monastic Legacy in Byzantine Constantinople

The *Menologion of Basil II*, an eleventh century liturgical manual of the lives of saints organized by feast day, contains a brief account life of Matrona of Perge with an accompanying illustration of the saint (Cod. Vaticanus Graecus 1613, fol. 169) (Fig. 1). Matrona, a fifth and sixth century ascetic and founder of a convent in Constantinople, stands with her arms outstretched toward heaven. Depicted in dark robes and with her back towards the city walls of (presumably) Constantinople, Matrona faces the wilderness.⁵² Her eyes are large and alert as a golden ray from heaven reaches towards her outstretched hands. Without reading the life of this female ascetic, the viewer of this image could easily infer her monastic vocation, positioned as a link between city and desert, heaven and earth.⁵³ Despite the nearly four centuries between Matrona's life and the writing of the *Menologion*, Matrona's appearance in this imperial liturgical calendar illustrates her continued significance and veneration as a founder of one of Constantinople's most important and long-lasting female monastic communities. Missing from this icon, however, are any clues to the more colorful and identifying aspects of Matrona's story, namely that she renounced her life of luxury, abandoned her courtier husband and child, lived as a eunuch in a men's monastery in Constantinople, wandered through the Holy Lands working miracles, battling demons, and gaining disciples before founding her own convent in Constantinople adjacent to that of her spiritual father Bassianos. As an abbess in Constantinople, Matrona courted imperial patrons, advised empresses, and defied both emperor and patriarch in

⁵² Unlike nearly all other images of female ascetics in the *Menologion of Basil II*, Matrona is presented in a contrapposto position, with arms outstretched in prayer, but not *en face*; instead of being presented with a generic architectural background, Matrona is positioned between city and desert, and this is no accident. Vessela Anguelova's dissertation "The Sound of Silence: Sacred Place in Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Devotional Art" argues that the *Menologion of Basil II* was one of the first manuscripts to depict saints with backgrounds that reflected their occupations. The only other female ascetic to be presented in a similar manner in the *Menologion of Basil II* is the fourth century abbess Domnika of Constantinople, who founded a monastery in the city with the assistance of patriarch Nektarios (381-397), (Cod. Vaticano Graeco 1613, fol.); on the *Life of Domnika* [BHG 562], see the edition of T. Ioannou, *Μνημεῖα Ἀγιολογικά*, (Venice 1884), 268–284, with brief references in Stavroula Constantinou, "Male Constructions of Female Identities: Authority and Power in the Byzantine Greek Lives of Monastic Foundresses", in *Female Founders in Byzantium and Beyond*. Ed. Lioba Theis, et al (Wien: Boehlau, 2014) and Peter Hatlie, *The Monks and Monasteries of Constantinople, c. 350-850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 73.

For other manuscript representations of Matrona, see British Library Add MS 36636 fol. 54r (though the icon in the online digitized version of the manuscript is almost impossible to see due to its placement in the margin close to the binding); Marciana gr. Z. 586.

⁵³ Footnote on the role of the ascetic as intermediary between God and man; Matrona in particular functions as link between city and desert in her vita: her stint at the abandoned temple in Syria where she battles demons and women (Christian and pagan) pour out of the city in droves to visit her and join her;

her vocal defense of Chalcedonian orthodoxy against Zeno's *Henotikon*, all while dressed in distinct male monastic garb.⁵⁴

Sixth Century Vita Matronae (vita prima): Timeline and Manuscripts

Matrona was born c. 430 in Perge, Pamphylia, on the southern coast of Asia Minor. Her lengthy sixth century vita outlines the major events of her life and provides enough context to recreate an approximate timeline. After receiving a good education, Matrona was married (probably between the ages of sixteen and eighteen) to a man named Dometianos. At twenty, she gave birth to a daughter named Theodote and the family moved to Constantinople, where, according to the vita, Dometianos took a position as a *λαμπρός ἀνὴρ* in the imperial court of the Emperor Marcian, a position occupied by men of senatorial rank.⁵⁵ While living in the imperial city, Matrona developed close relationships with two consecrated widows, Susanna and Euphemia, and began a vibrant liturgical life, attending frequent all-night vigils and devoting herself to almsgiving, to the neglect her home, husband, and appearance. Matrona's frequent absences aroused suspicion in Dometianos, whose growing abuse spurred Matrona to abandon her marriage and child entirely and devote herself to a religious life. With the help of her two friends, Matrona cut her hair, disguised herself as a eunuch, and took the man's name Babylas.⁵⁶ Leaving her young daughter Theodote in their care, Matrona escaped her husband and joined the strict ascetic community of Bassianos, a Syrian ascetic who built a monastery in Constantinople c. 450. Matrona spent three years as a monk in Bassianos' monastery, until her identity was revealed to Bassianos in a dream. Dismissing Matrona from his monastery, Bassianos promised to support her in her religious vocation. Before she became a woman "again,"⁵⁷ Matrona was freed from any potential renewal of maternal responsibilities by the sudden death of her daughter. From Constantinople, Matrona traveled to Emesa (Homs, Syria), where she briefly joined a women's monastic community, but after publicly healing a blind man before a large crowd, Matrona drew the attention of Dometianos, who came from Constantinople in search of her. To evade him, Matrona fled through the Holy Lands, narrowly missing him as he followed "like a Lacedaemonian dog"⁵⁸ at her heels, before settling in a demon-filled temple outside Beirut. Living as a semi-anchorite, Matrona successfully cast out demons, gaining the attention and admiration of people from Beirut who came out in droves to seek her blessing and counsel. From her temple abode, Matrona catechized, baptized, and educated in the manner of a priest, gathering about her a community of disciples, both nuns and lay people.

⁵⁴ The *Henotikon* (482) was an edict of the emperor Zeno to unify the Church following division caused by the Council of Chalcedon. See pages 22-26 for a detailed discussion.

⁵⁵ *Life of Matrona* 14. Cyril Mango explains that the expression *λαμπρός ἀνὴρ τοῦ κομητάτου* has a technical meaning, with *λαμπρός* indicating the title *λαμπροτάτος* (Latin *clarissimus*) and *κομητάτος* designating a member of the emperor's household and chief ministers who always accompanied the emperor when he was "on the move". Mango, 34 n. 61. On the rank of *clarissimus*, see Christopher Kelly, *Ruling the Later Roman Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009) 18, 72-75, 77-78, 146.

⁵⁶ On the significance of this name, see 105n547.

⁵⁷ *Life of Matrona* 7.

⁵⁸ *Life of Matrona* 14. The expression "Lacedaemonian dog" appears in Curtius' *Historia Alexandri Magni* 2.7.11/2.7.33 (manuscript α and β , respectively) (as cited by Mango, 34 n64), but it also appears in Hesychius of Sinai's *De temperantia et virtute* 3.11, where the nous seeking virtue is compared to a Lacedaemonian dog seeking a hare.

Around 470 Matrona returned to Constantinople and received a blessing from Bassianos to establish a convent adjacent to his monastery. By divine inspiration, Bassianos bestowed on Matrona and her sisterhood male monastic garments, making them distinct among the nuns of the imperial city. In Constantinople, Matrona courted and counseled imperial patrons, including the empress Verina and Euphemia (the daughter of the emperor Marcian), as well as the wives of consuls and other courtiers. Through these connections and a generous endowment from her spiritual daughter Athanasia, Matrona was able to build up a large convent in the XIV region of the city, just outside the Constantinian walls (Fig. 2).⁵⁹ Matrona lived and served her community until her death c. 510/515, after living for nearly a century.⁶⁰

Richly (and curiously) detailed, this sixth century life is one of the longest Byzantine lives of a female ascetic. Written by a monk⁶¹ from Bassianos' monastery in the mid-sixth century, the text survives in full in one eleventh century manuscript (A) and partially in two other manuscripts from the tenth (V) and twelfth centuries (P).⁶² The text has a *terminus post quem* of 543 based a reference in the text to the construction of the Church of St. Mary the New in Jerusalem, which was dedicated that year.⁶³ Additional evidence for a date in the sixth century can be found in references to datable monuments and miracles in Constantinople and Jerusalem. Further, the style of the Greek is consistent with other contemporary lives of saints from Constantinople, mirroring the language and style of the *Life of Daniel the Stylite* (BHG 489) and

⁵⁹ XIV was known for its open land and many ecclesiastical and aristocratic residential complexes, cemeteries, parks and fields. Pinpointing the exact location of the convent is difficult. The text describes it as an estate called Severiana, owned by the Antiochian, wife of the patrician Sphorakios (consul in Constantinople around 452 who, the text reminds, constructed a church to the martyr Theodore) that was adjacent to Bassianos' monastery. The convent is known to have been very close to the Shrine of St. Lawrence, which was built by the empress Pulcheria and completed in 453, located in the Regio X of the city, close to the Golden Horn and near the Gate of St. Theodosia (present day Ayakapi). The Matrones were unable to receive the bread ration, however, suggesting that the convent was perhaps just outside the Constantinian walls. While the orientation of the Matrones is unknown, its location near the Golden Horn and descriptions of the size of its property and height indicate that it might have had sea-views, a highly prized feature in elite residences in Constantinople. *Life of Matrona* 33, 46; Ken Dark, "Houses, Streets and Shops in Byzantine Constantinople from the Fifth to the Twelfth Centuries", *Journal of Medieval History* 30:2, 88. Regarding the church of St. Lawrence, see Janin, *Eglises CP*, 303-4; A. Berger, *Untersuchungen zu den Patria Konstantinupoleos* (Bon, 1988), 530. Mango and Featherstone, 53 n. 100; Dilia Angelova, *Sacred Founders: Women, Men, and Gods in the Discourse of Imperial Founding, Rome through Early Byzantium* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), 156. On real estate in the Golden Horn, see Paul Magdalino, "Maritime Neighborhoods of Constantinople: Commercial and Residential Functions, Sixth to Twelfth Centuries", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 54 (2000), 210, 217.

⁶⁰ *Life of Matrona* 52.

⁶¹ While Eva Topping has suggested that the author of the vita might have been one of Matrona's nuns, this viewpoint is ruled this out since the author uses masculine participles to refer to himself throughout the vita. The author of the text was most likely a monk at Bassianos' community based on his intimate knowledge of the layout of both Bassianos' monastery and Matrona's convent, as well as his indication of a close personal relationship with the saint (*Life of Matrona* 48). Topping, "St. Matrona and her Friends", 211-24; Mango, "Introduction" in Talbot (2006), 14.

⁶² The manuscripts of the *vita prima* are as follows : *Edita ex codicibus Parisiensi* 1819 (= A), *Vaticano gr.* 807 (= V), *Vatic. Palatino* 80 (= P). — Cf. *supra*, p. 787, n. 13.

⁶³ See Mango's introduction to the *Life* in Talbot (2006), 15; also Insley, "Dressing Up the Past", 68 n. 66.

the *Life of Hypatios* (BHG 760) attributed to Kallinikos, two major Constantinopolitan hagiographies from this period that have been well studied.⁶⁴

Referred to in scholarship as the *vita prima*, this life served as the basis for two eleventh century Byzantine metaphrastic texts, shortened versions of the original *Life*, which are found in several important manuscripts, including the *Synaxarion of Constantinople* and the aforementioned *Menologion of Basil II*.⁶⁵ The simultaneous circulation of both the sixth century *vita* and the later metaphrastic versions lends a special significance to Matrona's story, since the Byzantine metaphrastic movement usually resulted in the loss of the earliest versions of saints' lives.⁶⁶ While the *vita tertia* is significantly shorter than the other two lives, the *vita altera* is still lengthy and provides details not found in the *vita prima*, as will be discussed in later chapters. Curiously omitted from the *vitae*, however, are any mentions of Matrona's active involvement in the religious politics of the imperial city, details that come to light in Late Antique historiographic sources that refer to her.

Matrona of Perge in Byzantine Historiography

Matrona's role as a prominent public religious figure in fifth and sixth century Constantinople has been well established outside of the hagiographical tradition. She appears in contemporary and later Byzantine historiography including the *Historia Ecclesiastica* (c. 520) and *Historia Tripartita* (c. 525) of Theodore Lector, both of which predate the *vita prima*. Further, she appears in Theophanes the Confessor's *Chronographia* (c. 815) and in later Byzantine chronicles.⁶⁷ Matrona is also mentioned in a fragmentary hymn attributed to Romanos the Melodist (d. 556), and two collections of hymns were written for her feast day dating to the ninth and eleventh centuries respectively.⁶⁸ Matrona was deeply involved in the religious politics of Constantinople during her lifetime as an outspoken critic of monophysitism, supporter of Chalcedonian Christianity, and an active opponent of the *Henotikon* and imperial interference in dogmatic disputes. In order to contextualize Matrona's place in the religious politics of Constantinople, one must first understand the foundations of monasticism in the imperial city.

⁶⁴ Mango, "Introduction", 15.

⁶⁵ Hippolyte Delehaye, editor of the three independent *Lives of Matrona* for the *Acta Sanctorum Vita Sanctae Matronae, Acta Sanctorum* Novembris III (1910) 790b-823f has Greek texts of *vita prima*, *vita altera*, and *vita tertia*. Greek text of the *vita altera* also available in PG 116.920-54.

⁶⁶ Insley, 69. for more information on the metaphrastic movement, see Schiffer, "Metaphrastic Lives and Earlier Metaphraseis of Saints' Lives", in *Metaphrasis: Redactions and Audiences in Middle Byzantine Hagiography*. Ed. C. Høgel (Oslo, 1996).

⁶⁷ Theodore Lector (Anagnostes), *Historia Ecclesiastica* (c. 520), fragments preserved in Theophanes the Confessor; *Historia Tripartita* (c. 525) 129.16-27; Theophanes the Confessor, *Chronographia* (c. 815) I, 141.19- 142.5; George Kedrenos, *Compendium Historiarum* (c. 1050), I, 628.3-6.

⁶⁸ The subject matter of these hymns will be explored in a later article with an English translation. Romanos the Melodist, *Hymn* no. 89 in P. Maas and C.A. Trypanis (eds.) *Sancti Romani Melodic antica dubia* (Berlin, 1970); ninth century hymns preserved in Enrica Follieri, *Initia Hymnorum Ecclesiae Graecae*, vol V, Pt. 2 (Vatican City, 1960-1966), 237; eleventh century hymns preserved in Germano Giovannelli, *Gli Inni Sacri di S. Bartolomeo Iuniore* (Bardia Sacra di Grottaferrata, 1955), 57-62.

Early Monastic Founders of Constantinople

Monasticism in Constantinople developed in the latter half of the fourth century, relatively late compared to other urban centers.⁶⁹ The spiritual leaders behind these early foundations, the Syrian ascetic Isaac of the Dalmatou and the wealthy widowed deaconess Olympias, were two of the city's most prominent and influential ascetics. Though their personal backgrounds and community organization differed vastly, both Isaac and Olympias helped to shape early Constantinopolitan monasticism and the interactions between monks, clergy, elites, and emperors in the imperial city. Together, their communities, as well as other major monastic groups such as the Akoimetai and Dios faced off against bishops and emperors in the dogmatic disputes of late-fourth and early fifth century Constantinople.⁷⁰ These communities of monks and nuns contributed to the monastic ideals embodied and espoused in the *Life of Matrona*, a monasticism that was distinctly urban, vocal, independent, mobile, and politically engaged in both civil and ecclesiastical issues, as scholarship on Constantinopolitan monasticism has shown.⁷¹

Isaac was an outspoken Syrian ascetic who gained fame for prophesizing the death of the Emperor Valens (d. 378) and for playing an instrumental role in driving John Chrysostom (d. 404), the archbishop of Constantinople, into exile. Arriving in Constantinople around 370⁷² with the purpose of swaying the emperor towards Nicene Christianity, Isaac famously stalked and berated Valens at the gates of the city, actions for which the ascetic was beaten and thrown into prison.⁷³ After the emperor's death following the battle of Adrianople,⁷⁴ however, Isaac was freed and quickly became a much-sought after holy man in the imperial city. Upon Theodosius' accession to the throne, Constantinopolitan elites began patronizing Nicene ascetics in an attempt

⁶⁹ Hatlie, *Monks and Monasteries of Constantinople*, 62-3.

⁷⁰ While there were many other monastic communities that likely contributed to the ideals expressed in the *Vita Matronae*, little is known about most of these early Constantinopolitan monasteries beyond their names, especially for female monasticism. Hatlie (2007).

abbess Domnika of Constantinople, who founded a monastery in the city with the assistance of patriarch Nektarios (381-397). (Cod. Vaticano Graeco 1613, fol.); the *Life of Domnika* [BHG 562].

⁷¹ Daniel Caner, *Wandering Begging Monks: Spiritual Authority and the Promotion of Monasticism in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Peter Hatlie, *The Monks and Monasteries of Constantinople, c. 350-850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

⁷² Hagiography claims that Isaac was the first monk of Constantinople, but the city's first monasteries were founded in the mid-fourth century (c. late 330s) by the bishop Makedonios and deacon Marathionios, two "semi-Arian" elites with ties to Eustathius of Sebaste. Little is known about this early phase of monasticism which Hatlie calls a "false start", as their communities appear to have ended rather abruptly after Makedonios was deposed from his episcopal office as archbishop of Constantinople in 360. Hatlie, *Monks and Monasteries*, 62-65; Caner, *Wandering, Begging Monks*, 190-191; Dagron discusses how Constantinople's early Arian monasteries were later ignored by the hagiographic tradition, establishing Isaac's primacy. Gilbert Dagron, "Les moines et la ville: Le monachisme à Constantinople jusqu'au concile de Chalcédoine (451)", *Travaux et Mémoires* 4 (1970), 231-38.

For Eustathios of Sebaste's connections to Marathionios, see Sozomen, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 4.27.4; Elm, *Virgins of God*, 111-12.

⁷³ *Life of Isaac* (BHG 956) 246b-247f; also discussed briefly in Hatlie, *Monks and Monasteries of*, 67 and Noel Lenski, *Failure of Empire: Valens and the Roman State in the Fourth Century AD* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002) 261-2.

⁷⁴ Theophanes the Confessor, *Chronicles* I.65.9-24; Theodore Lector 75.8-13 Sozomen, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 6.40.1 and Theodoret, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 4.31.

to display their piety.⁷⁵ Isaac's reputation as a holy man secured him the patronage of key imperial courtiers who built him hermitages on their estates and lavished wealth on the ascetic. On the estate of Saturninus (consul in 383),⁷⁶ Isaac built the Dalmatou monastery (see location on Fig. 2), a lasting and influential institution named after his successor and spiritual disciple Dalmatios.⁷⁷ Isaac used his elite connections to gather alms for the city's monks and poor, securing his position as both an important monastic benefactor and a spiritual leader par excellence of both the city's monks and nobility.⁷⁸ As Daniel Caner put it, Isaac was the "central link in a chain of patron-client relationships that ran from the city's palaces down to its streets."⁷⁹ Even the emperor Theodosius himself was said to have sought Isaac's counsel.⁸⁰

When John Chrysostom became archbishop of Constantinople in 398, he challenged Isaac's position by openly shaming Isaac's solicitation of alms as unbecoming for a monk. Sozomen remarked:

*[John] would praise and respect those who stayed quietly practicing philosophy in their monasteries, and while he took exceeding care that these might not be harassed and might have their daily necessities, he reproached rebuked those who went outdoors and appeared in the city, on the grounds that they were insulting philosophy.*⁸¹

Chrysostom attempted to break the chain of Isaac's patron-client relationships by establishing himself as the protector and nurturer of the city's monastic communities and arranged for the exile two of Isaac's most important patrons, Saturninus and Victor (consul 369).⁸²

Isaac and his network of monks and patrons retaliated, and with the help of the Alexandrian bishop Theophilus (385-412), drove Chrysostom into exile. When Chrysostom was recalled from exile following the Synod of the Oak in 403, Isaac's monks started a riot in the city's Great Church, the result of which killed several supporters on both sides. Ultimately Chrysostom lost out to the powerful persuasion of Isaac's allies and left the imperial city for good in 404.⁸³

⁷⁵ Caner, *Wandering, Begging Monks*, 192; Neil B. McLynn, "A Self-Made Holy Man: The Case of Gregory Nazianzen" *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6 (1998), 480-82.

⁷⁶ Saturninus was a former officer of Valens, and his estate was just outside the Constantinian walls, near the Psamathian district, some three miles from the city center. Saturninus eventually gave Isaac full legal rights to the property because his community continued to grow. *Vita Isaacii* 4.16. For the location of the monastery, see Janin, » *La géographie ecclésiastique de l'empire byzantine 1:3 Les églises et les monastères* (Paris: Institut Français d'Études Byzantines, 1953), 86-89.

⁷⁷ For Isaac's foundation of Dalmatou, see *Life of Isaac*, BHG 956d, 9.279-13, 282; Hatlie, *Monks and Monasteries of Constantinople*, 67 and Caner, *Wandering, Begging Monks*, 192.

⁷⁸ *Life of Isaac*, (BHG 956) 252b; Caner, *Wandering, Begging Monks*, 194.

⁷⁹ Caner, *Wandering, Begging Monks*, 196.

⁸⁰ *Life of Isaac*, (BHG 956) 252a.

⁸¹ Sozomen, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 8.9.4. trans in Caner, 169-70. ed. Bidez-Hansen, 362.

⁸² Caner, *Wandering, Begging Monks*, 194, 197; Sozomen, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 8.9.4; Callinicus, *Vita Hypatii* 11.5; for Chrysostom's role in the exile of Isaac's patrons, see Alan Cameron and Jacqueline Long, *Barbarians and Politics at the Court of Arcadius* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 164-66, 234-36.

⁸³ Despite Chrysostom's exile and death in 407, his memory and image were posthumously rehabilitated in Constantinople in 438, and the church histories of Socrates, Sozomen, and Theodoret written between the late 430s and 450 all favor Chrysostom. See the following works of Wendy Mayer for more

Isaac's powerful legacy was characterized by outspokenness and action, defiance toward emperor and hierarch and firmly rooted within the social and spiritual networks of the imperial city. Isaac exemplified the holy man of action who cultivated elite patrons for the benefit of the city's poor, while also establishing and enriching his own monastic communities.

If Isaac can be characterized as the male founder of Nicene monasticism in Constantinople, Olympias stands as his female counterpart and the founder of the imperial city's first formal female monastery.⁸⁴ Born in the 360s to a family of consular rank, Olympias became one of the most famous female ascetics of the fourth century.⁸⁵ Orphaned at a young age, Olympias received an excellent education under the supervision of Theodosia, the cousin of Gregory of Nazianzus who was bishop of Constantinople from 379-381.⁸⁶ Olympias was married in 384 or 385 to Nibridius (prefect of Constantinople in 386) but was soon widowed by his death less than two years later.⁸⁷ Instead of remarrying at the behest of Theodosius,⁸⁸ Olympias began an ascetic life and used her vast wealth to enrich the Church and its clergy.⁸⁹ Her early role as an ecclesiastic benefactress gave Olympias a certain degree of influence and prestige among the major Church Fathers of her day who came from far and wide to court her favor and financial

information on this subject: "The Making of a Saint. John Chrysostom in Early Hagiography", in *Chrysostomosbilder in 1600 Jahren: Facetten der Wirkungsgeschichte eines Kirchenvaters*, eds. Martin Wallraff and Rudolf Brändle, AKG 105 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008), 39-59; "Media Manipulation as a Tool in Religious Conflict: Controlling the Narrative Surrounding the Deposition of John Chrysostom", in *Religious Conflict from Early Christianity to the Rise of Islam*, eds. Wendy Mayer and Bronwen Neil (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 151-168; "Biography and Chronology" in *Chrysostomika II*, ed. Sever Voicu (Rome: Augustinianum, 2012);

⁸⁴ While communities of female ascetics existed in the city prior to and during the lifetime of Olympias, the Olympiades was "likely the first, best organized, and most prominent" of these communities. Hatlie, *Monks and Monasteries*, 72-74, 96.

⁸⁵ In addition to her hagiography, Olympias is mentioned in Palladius' *Dialogue* and *Lausiac History*, Sozomen's *Historia Ecclesiastica*, and she also appears in the fourteenth century church history of Nikephoros Kallistos. Elizabeth Clark, *Jerome, Chrysostom and Friends: Essays and Translations* (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1979) 108-109.

⁸⁶ Malingrey suggests that Gregory of Nazianzus might have supervised Olympias' education himself. "Introduction" in John Chrysostom's *Lettres à Olympias*. Ed. and trans. Anne-Marie Malingrey, SC 13 (Paris, 1947), 15.

⁸⁷ Nibridius was prefect of Constantinople in 386, and prosopographical evidence indicate that he was much older than Olympias, who was his second wife. His son from his first marriage married a young woman Salvina of Jerome's acquaintance, and Jerome mentions Nibridius and his first wife. Clark, *Jerome, Chrysostom and Friends*, 110n25-26 citing Jerome, *Letter* 79.1. Interestingly, Salvina ended up joining Olympias' convent. See also John Matthews, *Western Aristocracies and Imperial Court, A.D. 364-425* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 109.

⁸⁸ Theodosius tried to force Olympias into marriage and even had her property put under guardianship for a time as a punishment. *Life of Olympias* 3; Palladius *Dialogue* 61. Theodosius is mentioned as a relative of Olympias' in her hagiography.

⁸⁹ Indeed, Olympias' wealth was so great that Chrysostom urged her to stop pouring out her wealth indiscriminately, "as if into the sea". Chrysostom *Homily 6 on Hebrews*. 11.4 (PG 63.96) referenced in Hatlie, *Monks and Monasteries*, 174. See also Blake Leyerle "John Chrysostom on Almsgiving and the Use of Money", *Harvard Theological Review* 87 (1994), 44-46.

support.⁹⁰ The archbishop of Constantinople was particularly favored by Olympias' generosity; according to Palladius, Olympias "maintained" bishop Nectarius so much so that "he took her advice even in ecclesiastical affairs" and ordained her a deaconess while she was still young.⁹¹ Following her ordination, Olympias constructed a large monastery on her family's property adjacent to the Great Church (Hagia Sophia) and the episcopal palace at the heart of Constantinople (Fig. 2).⁹² This close proximity to the episcopal church and residence gave Olympias' community a unique connection to the bishops of the city and a close view of the ecclesiastical disputes of the early fifth century. Following Nectarius' death in 397, John Chrysostom was elected bishop of the imperial city, and he and Olympias established a life-long relationship of mutual support.⁹³ As bishop, he was the only outsider permitted to enter the walls of Olympias' cloistered community, and he visited frequently to instruct the sisters, several of whom he ordained as deaconesses to serve in the Great Church.⁹⁴

Olympias' convent seems to have been unique among other early monastic foundations in Constantinople. The Olympiades were an elite community inaccessible to outsiders, consisting of 250 women composed of noblewomen (several of whom were Olympias' own relatives) and a great number of their servants and slaves.⁹⁵ Hatlie suggests that the monastery was no more accessible to outsiders than the imperial palace or patriarchal court.⁹⁶ Nevertheless, despite the cloistered nature of her monastery, Olympias and her nuns were not impervious to the on-goings of the imperial city. When John Chrysostom was driven into exile, Olympias championed his

⁹⁰ Some of Olympias' friends and recipients of her generosity included Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, even the Alexandrian bishop Theophilis (Chrysostom's rival). Clark, *Jerome, Chrysostom, and Friends*, 113-115.

⁹¹ Palladius, *Dialogue* 61. Trans. in Clark, *Jerome, Chrysostom, and Friends* 111-12. Clark suggests that Olympias was likely no more than thirty years old when Nectarius ordained her, while the canonical age was sixty during this time, as mentioned in Basil of Caesarea, *Letter* 199.24 and the *Codex Theodosianus* 16.2.27.

⁹² Janin, *Les églises et les monastères* 381.

⁹³ Olympias continued to support Chrysostom in exile with enough resources for him to give generously to the poor and even to ransom some prisons of Isaurian bandits. Sozomen, *HE* 8.27; Palladius, *Dialogues* 37. See Wendy Mayer, "Constantinopolitan Women in Chrysostom's Circle", *Vigiliae Christianae* 53 (August 1999), 265-288.

⁹⁴ *Life of Olympias* 7-8. For a summary of Chrysostom's pastoral care, see Mayer and Allen's introduction to *John Chrysostom* (Routledge: New York, 2000), 46-52.

⁹⁵ As far as we know, no similar monastery existed in Constantinople during this time: the few other contemporary glimpses of female monasticism in the city come from the *Life of Domnika* and references to convents founded by Isaac and others (no specifics given, however) and these communities did not reflect the elite-family model seen in Olympias' convent. This is not to say that other such elite foundations did not exist during this time, but if they did, we have no knowledge of them. Wendy Mayer emphasizes that the original fifty women of Olympias' convent were her own *cubiculariae* or chambermaids. The vita also indicates that upon entering the convent, nuns had to turn over their property to the monastery, and this would include their slaves. Mayer, "Constantinopolitan Women in Chrysostom's Circle", 268. *Life of Olympias* 6 (SC 13, 418, 9-16). It is unclear whether these servants and slaves became full members of the monastic community (i.e. nuns) or if they served the community. Probably both, I imagine. There is no mention if the slaves were manumitted.

⁹⁶ Hatlie, *Monks and Monasteries*, 98.

return and as a result, was heavily fined and exiled following her refusal to acknowledge Chrysostom's successor Arsacius.⁹⁷

Chrysostom's struggle with Isaac revealed the power and sway of an urban holy man against his rival. The struggle of the Church to make sense of these emerging monks, their monasteries, and patrons was also felt on the imperial level. With growing concern for establishing orthodoxy and limiting the problematic wandering, begging, protesting, and political involvement of monks, Theodosius issued a law in 390 ordering monks to live in deserted places and not cities.⁹⁸ Though this law was repealed just two years later,⁹⁹ it nevertheless reflects early anxieties about the status and mobility of urban monastics vis-à-vis ecclesiastical and imperial authority, concerns that did not dissipate in the coming centuries. Matrona of Perge's hagiography and historiographical sources express this ongoing tension in the decades following the Council of Chalcedon, as monastic groups banded together to protest emperors and bishops in defining Christian orthodoxy. Two themes emerge from this council that are reflected in Matrona's sources: the sacred role of the Virgin Mary as the Mother of God, which increased the status of women within Christianity, and attempts by emperors and bishops to confer and control monastic activity and legitimacy.

Fifth Century Councils and their Aftermath

The fifth and sixth centuries witnessed major changes to monasticism in Constantinople. The monastic foundations of the later fourth century grew substantially amidst an influx of migration to the imperial city. Monks and holy men from across the empire poured into Constantinople to protest ecclesiastical issues and imperial policies and to trade desert for city by divine inspiration.¹⁰⁰ Hagiographical sources, historiography, and secular and canon laws point to an ongoing engagement between monk and magistrate, ascetic and bishop, holy man and emperor during the major events of this era, the most important being the aftermath of the councils of Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451) and the long and embittered conflict that ensued over the two natures of Christ. The attributes associated with Isaac in the later fourth century were shared by his successors in this new era: the major fifth century monks of Constantinople were characterized by "ferocious independence"¹⁰¹; they were outspoken and politically engaged, patronized by aristocrats and emperors, and not above using the disciples under their care to further their own interests and challenge the authority of the bishops of Constantinople. Novel forms of monasticism cultivated in the Eastern Empire began to make their way to the imperial city in the figures of Hypatios of Rouphinianai (d. 446), Alexander of the Akoimetai¹⁰² (arriving

⁹⁷ Sozomen, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 8.24; Palladius notes in *Dialogues* 14 that upper-class women who were deaconesses were told by the city prefect Optatus to communicate with Arsacius or pay a fine of 200lbs of gold. Clark, *Jerome, Chrysostom, and Friends*, 115.

⁹⁸ *Codex Theodosianus* 16.3.1. This law is discussed in Caner, *Wandering, Begging Monks*, 199, and Hatlie, *Monks and Monasteries*, 67, and Cyril Mango, *Byzantium: The Empire of New Rome* (1980), 112.

⁹⁹ *Codex Theodosianus* 16.3.2.

¹⁰⁰ A few of those who were divinely instructed to go to Constantinople included Matrona, Daniel the Stylite, Alexander Akoimetos.

¹⁰¹ Peter Brown highlights "ferocious independence" and "constant symbiosis" with urban life as distinct features of Syrian asceticism. Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity", *Journal of Roman Studies* vol. 61 (1971), 82.

¹⁰² Born on one of the Aegean islands, Alexander was educated in Constantinople and worked in the imperial administration before answering a divine calling to the Syrian desert. In Syria he gathered a large

in Constantinople in 424), Dalmatios of the Dalmatou (d.ca. 435), Bassianos of the Bassianou (Matrona's spiritual father), Markellos of the Akoimetai, and Daniel the Stylite (d. 493). After establishing their ascetic credentials in the East (almost always in Syria),¹⁰³ these ascetics made their way to Constantinople where they founded influential monastic communities that had an impact on both the ecclesiastical debates of the age and imperial policy. Like Matrona, each of these ascetics survive in hagiographical and historiographical sources due to the impact they had on Constantinopolitan society beyond the walls of their communities. As the vita of Alexander Akoimetos articulates, they feared "neither imperial authority, nor the threats of magistrates, nor the accusations of the populace nor the wicked recommendations of bishops," but were themselves independent actors and forces.¹⁰⁴

Hypatios of Roushinianai proved to be one of the fifth centuries most successful abbots who managed to cultivate a community widely respected and supported by the imperial family. Born in Phrygia c. 366, Hypatios came to Constantinople and founded the monastery of the Roushinianai at the turn of the fifth century. Instead of seeking alms and spending his time on the streets of Constantinople, Hypatios' monks labored for their living in the hinterland of the city.¹⁰⁵ From 436, Hypatios was recognized as the "father" of all the monks of Constantinople and as the advisor of Theodosios II.¹⁰⁶ When the eparch Leontios attempted to restore the Olympic games at Chalcedon (c. 434), Hypatios rallied the monks of Constantinople to publicly protest the games, and their efforts proved successful, despite the censure of local bishops.¹⁰⁷ Hypatios opposed Nestorius prior to the Council of Ephesus (431), famously prophesizing the

following of monks and cultivated the unusual practice of ceaseless psalmody. Known as the "Sleepless", Alexander descended on the imperial city in 424 with nearly one hundred disciples. According to Callinicus, Alexander's community was not well received; the holy man would apparently shame magistrates if he saw them doing "something reprehensible", and as a result he was banished from the city. When his monks sought refuge around the Apostles shrine of Peter and Paul (modern Kadiköy), the bishops of Constantinople and Chalcedon, under order of the city magistrates, sent mobs to attack the monks and drive them from the shrine. With the help of Hypatios, the emperor's sister Pulcheria sent her own soldiers to intervene and protect Alexander and his monks. Though Alexander eventually left and founded a monastery at the mouth of the Bosphorus, his successor Markellos proved more successful in balancing public opinion and helped to establish the monastery as one of the most prominent in Constantinople. On Alexander's birth and education, see *Life of Alexander Akoimetos* 5-6, trans. Caner, 253-54 and 253n26. For Alexander's banishment, see Callinicus, *Vita Hypatios* 41, discussed in Caner, 126-127. Hatlie sees Alexander and the Akoimetai as an example of a community that went too far.

¹⁰³ Peter Brown's foundational article on the holy man in Roman society notes that the majority of "ascetic stars" come from Syria. Though Egypt has long been regarded as the "cradle of monasticism", Syria, and later on Asia Minor and Palestine, became the origin point for the urban holy man par excellence. Brown argues that the holy man in Egypt did not impinge on society around him to the extent of ascetics in other provinces. Brown, "Holy Man in Late Antiquity", 82.

¹⁰⁴ *Life of Alexander Akoimetos* 3, trans. Caner, 251.

¹⁰⁵ Roushinianai was a suburb of Constantinople on the Sea of Marmara southeast of Chalcedon.

¹⁰⁶ For Hypatios role as the "father of monasteries in Constantinople", see Callinicus, *Vita Hypatios* (BHG 760) 23.146.2-3. For his role as the spiritual father of Theodosius II, see *Vita Hypatios* (BHG 760) 37.226.1-228.1.

¹⁰⁷ Callinicus, *Vita Hypatios* (BHG 760) 33.214.1-218.16, discussed in Hatlie, *Monks and Monasteries*, 111-112.

bishop's downfall and, according to Nestorius himself, encouraging the city's monks against the bishop.¹⁰⁸

Though Nestorius was strongly supported by emperor Theodosios II, when Constantinople's most influential monks marched through the city protesting the events of the Council of Ephesus¹⁰⁹ (431), the emperor eventually had Nestorius condemned, especially after the cloistered abbot Dalmatios of the Dalmatou (the successor to Isaac and former member of the imperial guard) left the confines of his monastery for the first time in almost fifty years to protest.¹¹⁰ Nestorius (428-31), like Chrysostom, had come to Constantinople from Antioch with a reputation for both great eloquence and an intolerance for heresy. He quickly put himself at odds with the local monastic communities, however, by forbidding all but the spiritual leaders of monasteries from moving about outside their communities, and he harshly punished those who acted in a manner unbecoming of monks.¹¹¹ A bitter relationship developed between him and Dalmatios, who at that time held the title of "father of all monasteries" and the "first of archimandrites" in Constantinople. Nestorius' controversial opinions regarding the nature of Christ's incarnation, however, made the bishop an easy target for the abbot's ire. When Nestorius was called to settle a debate concerning the proper title of the Virgin Mary, he opted against the popular choice of *Theotokos* – "the God-bearer", a title which emphasized the divinity of Christ and the Virgin's active participation in both the incarnation and Christian salvation, and instead chose a compromised title, *Christotokos*, which implied that Mary held Christ, but not God himself, within her womb. Soon after, however, Nestorius began to preach against the use of *Theotokos*, causing an uproar among clergy, monastics, and imperial supporters of the Virgin's cult in Constantinople such as Pulcheria.¹¹² By speaking against the term *Theotokos*, Nestorius called into question both the full divinity of Christ and the popular veneration of Christ's mother in Christian worship.¹¹³ Clergy who preached against Nestorius' creed were subject to brutal beatings and put in an ecclesiastical prison, as detailed by a certain archimandrite Basil.¹¹⁴ When the Council of Ephesus was called to settle the issue, Nestorius was charged with heresy. A letter written by Dalmatios "in the name of the entire clergy of Constantinople"¹¹⁵ was read by the members of the council, and Dalmatios even forced a

¹⁰⁸ For Hypatios' prophesy, see Callinicus, *Vita Hypatios* 32.3. Nestorius complained that monks with "strange manners" had "disturbed the emperor's mind" and turned Theodosius II against him. Nestorius, *Liber Heraclidis* 2.1, trans. Driver and Hodgson, 271-72. For a discussion on Nestorius' downfall under the influence of Constantinople's monks, see Caner, *Wandering, Begging Monks*, 212-223.

¹⁰⁹ An awful lot takes place during this council. Not sure how much detail I should go into...

¹¹⁰ Hatlie, *Monks and Monasteries*, 91-92.

¹¹¹ Barhadbeshabba 'Arbaya, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 21, ed. with French translation François Nau (PO 9.528-29). Barhadbeshabba was a sixth century Nestorian bishop of Halwan (Persian Mesopotamia) and as Caner asserts, his account may have been based on Nestorius' lost *Tragoedia*. Discussed in Caner, *Wandering, Begging Monks*, 212-14 and particularly 213n25.

¹¹² Nestorius, LH 1.2, discussed in Caner, *Wandering, Begging Monks*, 215-216; Brian Croke, "Ariadne Augusta: Shaping the Identity of the Byzantine Empress", in *Christians Shaking Identity from the Roman Empire to Byzantium: Studies Inspired by Pauline Allen*, ed. Geoffrey D. Dunn and Wendy Mayer (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 298.

¹¹³ On the Virgin's veneration in Constantinople, see discussion on pages 64-66.

¹¹⁴ Basil petitioned the emperor, and this document is preserved in *Acta Conciliorum Oecumenicorum* 1.1.5. trans. in Caner, *Wandering, Begging Monks*, 216.

¹¹⁵ *Vita Dalmatios* (BHG 482), 705c-709f; Council of Ephesus t. i. vol. i, pt. iii, 14.11-15.7 and t. i. vol. ii, pt. iii, 95.12-96.2. Discussed in Dagron (1970), 232-3, 266-9; Saradi, "Constantinople and Its Saints

meeting with Theodosius II himself to help sway the emperor against the bishop.¹¹⁶ Twenty years later, the Council of Chalcedon (451) would affirm the title of Theotokos and seek to establish rules defining and confining monasticism, attempting to take away the political power and independence of monks by placing them under the direct authority of local bishops. These events played a substantial role in defining the legitimacy of ascetic mothers and abbesses

Council of Chalcedon was called by the emperor Marcian (r. 450-457) regarding the Christological views of Eutyches, one of the leading monks of Constantinople who asserted that Christ's humanity was not consubstantial with that of common men but was in essence "unique". For this viewpoint, Eutyches was branded a "monophysite" by his opposers, who attacked Eutyches network of "pseudo-monks" in Constantinople.¹¹⁷ The result of the council condemned Eutyches and instituted was a series of canons regulating monastic life. The canons from this council were disciplinary and reveal the first large-scale attempt by the Church and emperor to delineate monastic legitimacy.¹¹⁸ Marcian himself sponsored the fourth canon which definitively put monks under the direct authority of bishops:

*Let those who truly and sincerely adopt the solitary life be considered worthy of the appropriate honor. But since some have used the monastic cover to throw church and civil affairs into confusion, moving indiscriminately around the cities, even making it their business to establish monasteries for themselves, let no one construct or establish anywhere a monastery or house of prayer against the will of the city's bishop; but let those who pursue a monastic life in each city and village be subordinate to their bishop, and let them embrace tranquility and attend to fasting and prayer alone, persevering in those places to which they have withdrawn. Let them neither aggravate nor participate in ecclesiastical or temporal affairs by leaving their monasteries, unless they be permitted at some time by the bishops of the city through pressing need... Whoever should transgress this our decision we decree to be excommunicated, lest he blaspheme the name of God. But the bishop of the city must make the necessary provision for the monasteries.*¹¹⁹

This canon spelled out legitimate and illegitimate behaviors for monks, directly addressing monastic political involvement and forbidding monks from participating in church or civil affairs without the expressed permission of their bishop. Instead of concerning themselves with the affairs of church and state, monks were to "embrace tranquility and attend to fasting and prayer alone". This canon sought to determine a monk's vocation and duty vis-à-vis his bishop, firmly

(IVth-VIth c.): the Image of the City and Social Considerations", SMi, n.s. iii 36 (1995), 90-1; Caner, *Wandering, Begging Monks*, 212-23; Hatlie, *Monks and Monasteries*, 69.

¹¹⁶ *Life of Isaac* (BHG 956D) 27.289-90; *Vita Dalmatios* (BHG 482) 700e-704d; Council of Ephesus t.i. vol. I, pt. ii, 65.20-66.9 and i. vol. ii, pt. iii, 89.4-9;

¹¹⁷ Faustus petitioned the Council to check the credentials of Eutyches' monastic supporters: *Acta Conciliorum Oecumenicorum* 2.1.2. Discussed in Caner, *Wandering, Begging Monks*, 236.

The term "Monophysite" is problematic, because it implies a definitive theology, and many anti-Chalcedonians whom one might call "monophysites" did not necessarily share the same Christology. On the problematic nature of using the term "monophysite", see V. L. Menze, *Justinian and the making of the Syrian Orthodox Church* (Oxford, 2008), 2-3.

¹¹⁸ Prior attempts to regulate monastic behavior consisted of local synods which addressed specific local issues and the imperial legislation which never seemed to stick. Hatlie, *Monks and Monasteries*, 38.

¹¹⁹ Ed. Périclès-Pierre Joannou, 72-74. Trans. in Caner, *Wandering, Begging Monks*, 206.

establishing not only bishops' authority over monastic communities in their dioceses, but also bishops' responsibilities to provide for monasteries in their cities. Canon 4 was instrumental in establishing monastic legitimacy that would influence both secular and canon law on monasticism for centuries.¹²⁰ However, this canon had little impact on quelling monastic involvement in politics; the role of monks was still subject to definition and revision throughout the sixth century and beyond.¹²¹ The next century after Chalcedon brought about a serious rift within the Church and among monastic communities in Constantinople. When the monophysite usurper Basiliscus came to the imperial throne in 475, he was met with hostility by Bassianos, the Akoimetai, and Daniel the Stylite, who famously descended his column to participate in political demonstrations against the emperor.¹²² Interestingly, however, it was not Basiliscus' favoring of monophysitism, but rather the emperor Zeno's (476-91) lukewarm stance toward it in his *Henotikon* (482) that caused the most conflicts between emperors, bishops, and monastics in the later fifth and early sixth centuries, and led to Matrona of Perge's public rift with the bishop Makedonios, as will be discussed shortly.

The Henotikon and Matrona

In 482 Zeno signed an edict of "unity" (*Henotikon*) with bishop Akakios (d. 489) as an imperial amendment to the Council of Chalcedon (451), hoping to "bridge the gap" between Chalcedonians and Monophysites and unify the Church.¹²³ The Council of Chalcedon had affirmed the dual nature of Christ as fully man and fully God. This once and for all elevated the Virgin Mary to the rank of Theotokos as the mother of God, bringing a mother to the forefront of Christian salvation and helped to legitimize the roles of spiritual mothers within the Church, a subject I will discuss in more detail in the third chapter. Further, the Virgin's veneration in Constantinople was promoted heavily by imperial women such as Pulcheria, Verina (Matrona's spiritual daughter), and Ariadne, who appropriated the Virgin's maternal authority in establishing their own imperial identities.¹²⁴ Those who opposed the decision of Chalcedon, including large swaths of Christians in Egypt and the Near East, were branded "monophysites", including the bishops of Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem. Despite espousing Chalcedonian orthodoxy himself, Zeno hoped to bring moderate monophysites and Chalcedonians back into communion with one another and unify the Church. The result of the edict was far from successful and managed to both further alienate Chalcedonians and Monophysites and create new divisions within those groups.¹²⁵ The pro-Chalcedonian monasteries in Constantinople, notably the communities of Bassianos, Matrona, Dios, and the Akoimetai held firm against

¹²⁰ Caner, *Wandering, Begging Monks*, 207. For influence of this canon on secular law, see Leo's policy in 471 forbidding monks from wandering in cities (*Codex Justinianus* 1.31.29) and Justinian's *Novella* 123.41-42 (542). For more information, see Charles Frazee, "Late Roman and Byzantine Legislation on the Monastic Life from the Fourth to the Eighth Centuries", *Church History* 51 (1982), 272-74.

¹²¹ Hatlie, *Monks and Monasteries of Constantinople*, 40-41.

¹²² *Life of Daniel the Stylite (BHG 489)* 72-84; Hatlie, *Monks and Monasteries of Constantinople*, 125.

¹²³ Evagrius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 3.16. J. Bidez and L. Parmentier, eds. *The Ecclesiastical History of Evagrius with the Scholia* (London: Methuen, 1898), 114-15; Hatlie, *Monks and Monasteries*, 117.

¹²⁴ See discussion on pages [ADD PAGES]

¹²⁵ Hatlie, *Monks and Monasteries*, 117, 126; John Meyendorff, *Imperial Unity and Christian Divisions. The Church, 450-680 AD* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminar Press, 1989), 194-202; *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, 42-3.

Akakios, and as a result suffered under a wave of persecutions in the 480s.¹²⁶ The *Henotikon* was upheld by emperor Anastasios I (491-518),¹²⁷ who attempted a further reconciliation under bishop Makedonios in 498-99.¹²⁸ The *Chronographia* of Theophanes the Confessor (815) includes an important story from Theodore Lector's *Historia Ecclesiastica* (c. 520) that mentions Matrona and her convent along with the monasteries of Bassianos, the Akoimetai, and Dios, as part of the Chalcedonian opposition to Makedonios' reconciliation:

In this year Makedonios, at the emperor's instigation, attempted to unite the monasteries of the capital that had seceded because of Zeno's Henotikon. Being unable to do this, he advised the emperor to call together the resident bishops and to affirm in writing what had been excellently laid down as doctrine at Chalcedon. This was done by means of a written protocol. He urged the monasteries to unity, in particular the monastery of Dios, that of Bassianos, the monastery of the Sleepless Ones [Akoimetai], and that of Matrona – for these especially had separated from those that accepted Zeno's Henotikon and eagerly submitted to banishment. Because of their resistance, Makedonios decided to leave them to their own course of action rather than instigate a persecution against them. The holy Matrona, who was still alive and refused communion along with the nuns at her monastery because of Zeno's Henotikon, demonstrated numerous miracles, with Chrysaorios, a deacon of the Church, putting pressure on her. A certain Sophia, too, who was notable among the nuns and who suffered greatly, showed remarkable endurance.¹²⁹

¹²⁶ Evagrius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 8.119.24, trans. 325-9; Pseudo-Zachariah of Mitylene, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 5.9.125; Theophanes the Confessor I, 131.23-5 and 132.20-6, trans. 203-4; Theodore Lector 120.21-121.20. Hatlie suggests that these persecutions withered the number of monks in these monasteries. Hatlie, *Monks and Monasteries*, 117.

¹²⁷ Anastasios was a strong supporter of Severos of Antioch and an overt anti-Chalcedonian. Severos' visit to Constantinople in 508-9 brought some 200 Monophysite monks from Antioch, as well as many Chalcedonians to protest. Evagrius, III, 33.131.20 -132. 19, trans. 342-4; Theophanes the Confessor, 152.6-29, trans. 233; Theodore Lector, 136.21-7; Hatlie, *Monks and Monasteries*, 120.

It is worth noting that unlike her husbands Zeno and Anastasios, empress Ariadne remained a staunch Chalcedonian. Ariadne's mother Verina famously visited and sought counsel from Matrona, asking for her prayers for her daughter (*Life of Matrona of Perge* 32). Brian Croke, "Ariadne Augusta: Shaping the Identity of the Early Byzantine Empress" in *Christians Shaping Identity from the Roman Empire to Byzantium: Studies Inspired by Pauline Allen*, eds. Geoffrey D. Dunn and Wendy Mayer (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 310.

¹²⁸ Meyendorff, *Imperial Unity and Christian Divisions*, 196-206.

For a study on the relationship between Chalcedon and the formation of the Henotikon, see Hanns Christof Brennecke, "Chalkedonense und Henotikon. Bemerkungen zum Prozess der östlichen Rezeption der christologischen Formel on Chalkedon" in *Chalkedon: Geschichte und Aktualität: Studien zur Rezeption der christologischen Formel von Chalkedon*, eds. J. van Oort and J. Roldanus (Leuven, 1997), 24-53. and reprinted in *Ecclesia est in re publica: Studien zur Kirchen- und Theologiegeschichte im Kontext des Imperium Romanum* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2007), 259-290.

¹²⁹ Theophanes the Confessor I, 141.19- 142.5, trans. Mango, 218; Theodore Lector, 129.16-27; George Cedrenus (Kedrenos), *Compendium Historiarum*, I, 628.3-6

Interestingly, in 511 Anastasios I and Ariadne refused communion with Makedonios, and patriarch was soon after exiled. Croke (2015), 310. Pseudo-Zachariah of Mitylene, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 7.8 (CSCO 39.41-38). See also Geoffrey Greatrex, "The Fall of Macedonius Reconsidered", in *Studia Patristica*, vol.

This passage reveals key insights about Matrona and her community: their staunch Chalcedonian stance regarding the Theotokos¹³⁰ and the mention of Matrona's community as the only female monastery along with the those of Dios, Bassianos and the Akoimetai, three of the most prominent male monastic communities in Constantinople during this period.¹³¹ The fact that Matrona and her community were listed "under banishment" beside these other eminent institutions demonstrates the significance of Matrona's convent among the monasteries of Constantinople. Further, Theophanes provides details about Matrona's reaction to Makedonios' support of the *Henotikon*, while no further mention is made about the male monasteries: Matrona's banishment appears to be self-imposed: Matrona actively "refused communion along with the nuns at her monastery". Further, when the deacon Chrysarios was "putting pressure on her", seemingly to relent, Matrona "demonstrated numerous miracles", corroborating her vita's characterization of her as a wonderworker. The chronographer further mentions "a certain Sophia", who was perhaps one of Matrona's disciples, indicating that the abbess was not the only nun to suffer and show endurance under patriarchal pressure.¹³² Matrona's community might have garnered more attention from ecclesiastical authorities for their novel practice of wearing men's monastic clothing, an important aspect of Matrona's spiritual identity that will be explored in chapter 4. Perhaps, unlike the cloistered Olympiades, the Matrones in their male schema and closely affiliated with the Bassianoï, might have been more visible than other female monastics of Constantinople and might have moved more readily between male and female monastic circles, as the *Life of Matrona* suggests.¹³³

Interestingly, Matrona's sixth century vita says very little about her involvement in ecclesiastical affairs, merely hinting at her "dreadful" struggles as an abbess and the "upheaval of the most holy churches", and not mentioning her opposition of the *Henotikon* at all.¹³⁴ Perhaps this omission was due to her relationship with Zeno and Anastasios' mother-in-law, the former empress Verina, as will be discussed in chapter 3. Regardless, this fragment closely ties Matrona's involvement in the religious politics of the later fifth century within the tradition of previous urban ascetic founders in Constantinople who set a precedent for antagonism between monastics, bishops, and emperors.

When the *Henotikon* was revoked by Justin I in 519, the state of monasticism in Constantinople was politically charged and fractured. Justin and his successor Justinian took an active interest in monasticism, but it was under Justinian that new developments and monastic reforms began to take place. The reforms that Justinian legislated proved effective in defining, endowing, and protecting monasteries across the empire. Justinian's *Novellae* united the fourth

44, ed. J. Baun, A. Cameron, and M. Edwards, and M. Vinzent, papers presented at the 15th International Conference on Patristic Studies, Oxford 2007 (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 125-29.

¹³⁰ Insley suggests that perhaps the reason it was so important for Matrona's community to appear so staunchly pro-Chalcedonian in this early historiographical fragment was because both Matrona and her convent adhered to heterodox ascetic practices. Insley, "Dressing Up the Past", 61.

¹³¹ Insley, "Dressing Up the Past", 61. For the importance of the Akoimetai and Dios monasteries in Constantinople, see Hatlie 2007, 62-89; On the Akoimetai, see Caner 2002, 126-57.

¹³² Curiously, Hatlie takes this passage to mean that Matrona's nuns were not, in fact, on her side in the rift between the abbess and Makedonios: "Indeed, she [Matrona] may have even come to blows with the very community which she had founded," but Hatlie provides no further details regarding this interpretation, simply citing Theophanes and Theodore Lector. Hatlie, *Monks and Monasteries*, 116.

¹³³ *Life of Matrona* 1, 29-30, 50-51.

¹³⁴ *Life of Matrona* 18, 50.

canon of Chalcedon with language of glowing admiration for monasticism while also including a long list of guidelines regarding monastic affairs.¹³⁵ While fully endorsing Chalcedonian Christianity himself, Justinian nevertheless did not prohibit the foundation of new monophysite churches and monasteries in the imperial city and even assisted his wife Theodora in patronizing monophysite monks.¹³⁶

Conclusion

Matrona's significance as a religious and historical figure during her lifetime and beyond is demonstrated in a variety of sources including hagiography, historiography, and hymnography. These texts emphasize Matrona's role as a distinctly Constantinopolitan abbess, spiritual mother par excellence, and Late Antique holy man. Matrona is highly versatile in her ability to adapt to different ascetic struggles, environments, relationships, and power dynamics. As a monastic founder in the imperial city, Matrona fits uniquely into both male and female monastic paradigms, and perhaps this speaks to her popularity and the longevity of her community: Matrona's vita positions her as a bridge between male and female monastic founders by taking on aspects of both: like the deaconess Olympias, Matrona was an aristocratic woman with ties to the imperial court; she used this position to her advantage in building her convent and attracting disciples, but unlike Olympias, Matrona did not use her own fortune to build her monastery. Rather, like Isaac of the Dalmatou, through her relationships with imperial patrons, Matrona courted donations and spiritual children, allowing her to found one of Constantinople's largest convents which continued to function and promote her cult through at least the twelfth century.¹³⁷ Also like Isaac, Bassianos, and the other male monastic figures of early Byzantine Constantinople, Matrona established her spiritual legitimacy in the desert of Syria by working miracles, fighting demons, and gathering disciples prior to founding her convent. Through her vehement support of the canons of Chalcedon and the status of the Virgin Mary as Theotokos, Matrona not only aligned with the major prominent men's monastic communities of Constantinople but perhaps even exceeded them in her zeal, as Theodore Lector suggests. Matrona, thus, approaches Constantinople with a double reputation, as an aristocratic matron renunciant and a "wonder-worker" who established her spiritual credibility in Syria and as a prominent and vocal monastic founder in the imperial city who participated in affirming the orthodoxy of Chalcedonian Christianity.¹³⁸ Further, Matrona's vita provides a window into women's monastic life in early Byzantine Constantinople. With few surviving sources on convents in early Byzantine Constantinople, the *Vita Matronae* richly details the convent's buildings, grounds, liturgical practices, clothing, and economic foundation.

Despite spending the majority of her ascetic career as a prominent abbess in Constantinople, Matrona's most identifying features in the surviving sources are her abandonment of her family and brief tenure as a eunuch monk. Dressing as eunuch for part of her religious career put Matrona into an established hagiographical trope of female ascetics who spent part of their lives as men.¹³⁹ The limited scholarship on Matrona's life has discussed little else beyond this aspect

¹³⁵ Justinian, *Novels* 5, 76.1, 117.12, 123.36-41; 133.1-5.

¹³⁶ John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History* III, 35.125.30-126.19. Hatlie, *Monks and Monasteries*, 47.

¹³⁷ *Synaxarion of Constantinople* 203.53-54. Mango, "Introduction" in Talbot (2006), 16.

¹³⁸ *Life of Matrona* 33.

¹³⁹ The lives of female saints who lived as men were a popular subgenre of Byzantine hagiography with around eleven lives surviving from the early Byzantine period (most between the fifth and seventh

of her story.¹⁴⁰ However, Matrona's shifting gender identity and clothing are dependent on her renunciation of family and, in particular, the death of her daughter and rejection of her husband, as will be detailed in the following chapters.

centuries). Major examples appear in the *Synaxarion of Constantinople* including Pelagia of Antioch, Theodora of Alexandria, Anna, Apollinaria, and Matrona. Insley, 66. See also Patlagean, "L'histoire de la femme déguisée en moine et l'évolution de la sainteté féminine à Byzance", *Studi Medievali* (s. 3) 17 (2), 1976. See discussion on pages 66-67 and 124-25.

¹⁴⁰ See footnote 49.

Chapter 2

Runaway Wives, Wicked Husbands: Marriage, Money, and Renunciation in the *Life of Matrona*

Everything that women have discovered of modest behavior (sophron) I practiced diligently in the house of Hector. First, whether or not there is anything blameworthy in a woman's conduct, the very fact that she goes out of the house draws criticism. I let go all longing for this and stayed in the house. I did not admit within my walls women with their clever talk but was content to have within myself a good teacher, my own mind. I kept my tongue quiet and my gaze tranquil before my husband. I knew where I ought to be the winner over my husband and where I should yield the victory to him.¹⁴¹

(Euripides, *Trojan Women* 645-656)

τῇ μὲν γὰρ γυναικὶ κάλλιον ἔνδον μένειν ἢ θυραλεῖν.

Thus for the woman it is more seemly to stay indoors than to be outside.

(Xenophon, *Oeconomicus* 7.30)

This chapter explores marriage and the roles of spouses in the *Life of Matrona of Perge*, looking at the way spousal relationships are articulated and manipulated to create new avenues for female Christian piety. The vita's paradoxical model of feminine sanctity centers around wives and mothers who leave behind their traditional roles as family caretakers to become ascetics, abandoning husbands and children for their own salvation. This act of rejecting family life is intrinsic to the sanctity of these women; marriage, at least for Matrona, is presented as a martyrdom of sorts, which provides a means of purification (through suffering) as well as justification for abandonment. While marriage is not presented positively in the vita (Matrona literally describes her married life as serving "sin"), the point of the vita is not to scorn marriage itself but rather bad husbands who try to impede their wives' spiritual vocations. The vita illustrates that such husbands lose everything in their attempt to control their wives, including their children, property, position, and, in the case of Matrona's husband Dometianos, even his humanity. Money matters and the deception and manipulation of husbands play key roles in securing independence for Matrona and her spiritual daughter Athanasia; as they sacrifice family and lives of luxury to secure salvation, these same things are ripped from their husbands' grasps,

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*ἃ γὰρ γυναικὶ σώφρον ἔσθ' ἠύρημένα,
ταῦτ' ἐξεμόχθουν Ἐκτορος κατὰ στέγας.
πρῶτον μὲν, ἔνθα (κἂν προσῆ κἂν μὴ προσῆ
ψόγος γυναικῖν) αὐτὸ τοῦτ' ἐφέλκεται
κακῶς ἀκούειν, ἥτις οὐκ ἔνδον μένει,
650 τούτου παρείσα πόθον ἔμιμνον ἐν δόμοις:
ἔσω τε μελάθρων κομψὰ θηλειῶν ἔπη
οὐκ εἰσεφρούμην, τὸν δὲ νοῦν διδάσκαλον
οἴκοθεν ἔχουσα χρηστὸν ἐζήρκουν ἐμοί.
γλώσσης τε σιγῆν ὄμμα θ' ἤσυχον πόσει
655 παρείχον: ἤδη δ' ἄμ' ἐχρῆν νικᾶν πόσιν,
κείνω τε νίκην ὧν ἐχρῆν παριέναι.*

Euripides, *Trojan Women* 645-656, Loeb ed. and trans. David Kovacs (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 81.

despite desperate attempts at retaining them. Ultimately, what is at stake in the text is authority and spiritual agency between spouses; wicked husbands are only made more ridiculous for standing between their wives and their heavenly Bridegroom and risk losing everything if they insist on interfering.

The first part of this chapter will examine feminine virtue from antiquity and how *Matrona* fits into and departs from traditional modes of *sophrosyne*. It is important that *Matrona* is portrayed as a *sophron* wife, just falling short of the Greco-Roman standard for perfection, making her husband's abuse and suspicion all the more absurd. I will look at Gregory of Nazianzus' funerary oration for his sister Gorgonia (*Oration 8*) to show how *Matrona* is modeled after Gorgonia in ways beyond the obvious. From there I will move on to a literary analysis of wives and husbands in the *Life of Matrona*, looking at the ways in which Dometianos and Athanasia's husband in particular are reminiscent of the wicked husbands in the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles and how their representation and treatment comes into conflict with Roman and ecclesiastical canon law. A close examination of the narrator's voice, as well as *Matrona* and Athanasia's descriptions of their husbands' characters and actions are of particular interest and provide a complex and often inconsistent reading of the *vita's* events. Voices and gender roles fluctuate as spouses grasp for authority and independence in the wake of family dissolution and financial ruin.

Sophrosyne as a Virtue of Elite Women

Helen North's 1977 article "The Mare, the Vixen, and the Bee: Sophrosyne as the Virtue of Women in Antiquity" outlined the layers of meaning behind female *sophrosyne* and its literary origins in archaic and classical Greek literature.¹⁴² Despite an emphasis on the early origins of this virtue, North opens her paper with a brief discussion of Julian's *Encomium to the Empress Eusebia* (*Oration 3*), wherein the future emperor praises his predecessor's wife as a woman of philosophy and the living image (*ἄγαλμα*) of divine Sophrosyne who surpasses even Penelope in her wifely devotion.¹⁴³ North's mention of Julian provides a chronological trajectory for *sophrosyne* as the pinnacle of feminine virtue, a notion echoed by his contemporaries and rivals, particularly Gregory of Nazianzus.

From the archaic period onward, Greek literature defined feminine virtue as staying cloistered within the home, speaking little, and not causing grief to one's husband, as epitomized by the Homeric Penelope.¹⁴⁴ By the fifth century BC the word *sophrosyne* was used to define a

¹⁴² North, "Sophrosyne as the Virtue of Women" 35-48, here 35, 37.

¹⁴³ Julian, *Oration 3*.104C-D, 3.114B-C, 3.123A-C. Discussed briefly in North, "Sophrosyne as the Virtue of Women", 35 and Susanna Elm, "Gregory's Women: Creating a philosopher's Family" in *Gregory of Nazianzus Images and Reflections*, (eds.) Jostein Børtnes and Tomas Hägg (Museum Tusulanum Press, University of Copenhagen, 2006), 188. For scholarship on Julian's relationship with Eusebia, see Shaun Tougher, "The Advocacy of an Empress: Julian and Eusebia", *The Classical Quarterly*, Vol. 48, no. 2 (1998), 595-599; Liz James, "Is there an Empress in the Text?: Julian's Speech of Thanks to Eusebia" in *Emperor and Author: The Writings of Julian the Apostate*, (ed.) Nicholas Baker-Brian and Shaun Tougher (Swansea: The Classical Press of Wales, 2012).

¹⁴⁴For Penelope as the model of feminine *sophrosyne par excellence* and traditional virtues, see Anne-Marie Vérilhac, "L'image de la femme dans les épigrammes funéraires grecques" in *La Femme dans le monde méditerranéen I*, ed. Anne-Marie Vérilhac (Lyon : Persée, 1985), 85-112, here 86, 90-112. See also Elm, "Gregory's Women", 187.

wide range of virtues and ideal behaviors for elite Greek women, including modesty, chastity, temperance, soundness of mind, devotion to one's husband and children, and care for the home. For over a millennium *sophrosyne* was upheld as the “principal *virtus feminarum*” of the Greco-Roman world, which personified the ideal wife and defined expectations for model feminine behavior.¹⁴⁵ While the definition of *sophrosyne* as a virtue of men changed over time, taking on different shades of meaning from Homer to the Church Fathers, feminine *sophrosyne* remained remarkably consistent, as evidenced by a wealth of inscriptions and texts praising “good” women throughout Greek literature.¹⁴⁶ In the fourth and early fifth centuries AD, the same cultural expectations and meanings associated with feminine *sophrosyne* in antiquity were still being maintained in epitaphs, encomia, letters, and sermons. When Gregory of Nazianzus and the emperor Julian wrote of the *sophrosyne* of women, they applied the word as the highest praise to describe the perfect women of their kin groups, aristocratic women devoted to family, as well as philosophy. By the later fifth century, however, *sophrosyne* became a descriptor of ascetic women, women who left behind their families, who made a life for themselves outside of the home, apart from their husbands and children. These ascetic women were all members of the elite, senatorial classes. Endowed by their hagiographers with *sophrosyne*, such as Melania the Younger (d. 439) or Matrona of Perge (d. c. 510), they were visible and vocal in society and known as rejectors of their previous lives as aristocratic matrons.

Matrona, whose very name signifies marital status, is described early on in her vita as a wife who cultivated “piety and *sophrosyne*” and exemplified the ideal Greco-Roman traits of modest feminine comportment, but she was not a wife who stayed at home, much to the grief of her husband, preferring to be in the shrines of the martyrs and churches - houses of God - rather than the home of her husband Dometianos. Dometianos took Matrona's nightly absences to indicate that she was *ἐταιρίζεσθαι* – associating with *ἐταῖραι* (courtesans) or acting as a courtesan herself.¹⁴⁷ While her hagiographer singles her out as the epitome of matronly modesty, the

In antiquity, virtue was highly gendered. See Annette Huizenga's *Moral Education for Women in the Pastoral and Pythagorean Letters: Philosophers of the Household* (Brill, 2013), for a study on conceptions of feminine virtue within philosophical circles from the Classical period through early Christianity.

¹⁴⁵ While the earliest literary associations of *sophrosyne* with feminine virtue appear in tragedy in the fifth century BC [e.g. Euripides' *The Trojan Women* (645-656)], Helen North has shown how allusions to feminine *sophrosyne* extend back to Semonides of Amorgos in the seventh century BC and his diatribe against women; the “bee woman”, Semonides' only example of a good wife, bears all the qualities associated specifically with *sophrosyne* in the fifth century. While Semonides does not use the term *sophron*, he does use the related verb *sophronein* to describe the behavior of a “good wife”, indicating that there already existed a general association between *sophron* and female virtue. Helen North, “The Mare, the Vixen, and the Bee: Sophrosyne as the Virtue of Women in Antiquity”, *Illinois Classical Studies*, vol. 2 (1977), 36, 38, 40.

¹⁴⁶ *Sophrosyne* held different cultural meanings when applied to women or men, and many aspects of this *arete* applied exclusively to men. *Sophron* men and male *saophrosyne* (Homeric) in Homeric literature indicated mental soundness, foresight, and acting with propriety. In the fifth century BC, however, these terms also take on a moral component regarding male sexual conduct, as well as political associations. North “Sophrosyne as the Virtue of Women”, 35, 37. For an in depth look at male *sophrosyne* see North's monograph *Sophrosyne: Self-Knowledge and Self-Restraint in Greek Literature* (Ithaca, 1966). See also Aristotle, *Politics* 1259b-1260a and a discussion in Huizenga, 8.

¹⁴⁷ *Life of Matrona* 3: οἰόμενον τὴν μακαρίαν ἐταιρίζεσθαι. Greek text from (BHG 1221) *Acta Sanctorum Novembris* 3, ed. H. Delehaye (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1910), 790-813.

unadorned wife bedecked with humility and *sophrosyne*, Matrona's own husband feared that she was the very antithesis of the *sophron* wife: the *aphron hetaira*, a "lady friend" who "trades gifts" with male admirers.¹⁴⁸ Confusion, deception, abuse, and the frequent reversal of gender roles between spouses are recurring themes in the marriages of Matrona and Dometianos and her disciple Athanasia and her husband. Whereas Matrona and Athanasia are presented as pious, albeit calculated and absent wives and mothers who are consumed by a burning desire for Christ, their husbands are petty, abusive, and emotional brutes. The husbands are always one step behind their ascetic wives, never in full possession of the facts or knowledge of events, and continuously deceived or undermined by their wives, their wives' friends, and their own servants. Matrona and Athanasia represent an antithesis of the Penelopean ideal: while cunning like the Homeric Penelope, Matrona and Athanasia use their intelligence to deceive and abandon their husbands and children in exchange for a more ideal suitor - Christ. Under Matrona's instruction, Athanasia "cleverly deceived her husband" so that she could bring "the work of asceticism to perfection."¹⁴⁹ Marriage for Matrona and Athanasia is presented as a form of martyrdom, a suffering that is experienced and then overcome in order for these women to obtain perfection and salvation. To justify leaving their Christian husbands, gender roles between spouses are variably expanded and exchanged: as wives become manly and ascetic, husbands become jealous, irrational, and violent.

Marriage in the Vita

At a glance, the *Life of Matrona* seems to provide a dim view of Christian marriage and family life and their incompatibility with asceticism: wives deceiving husbands, children dying following maternal abandonment and asceticism, and families broken apart, all in pursuit of a Christian religious life.¹⁵⁰ At several points in the text Matrona even counsels her disciples on how to separate themselves from their families.¹⁵¹ A closer look at marriage and the role of spouses in the *Life*, however, reveal a conscious negotiation of established cultural norms. Christian teaching on marriage is challenged by the extraordinary behavior of the holy women in the *vita*, justifying their familial renunciation with bad husbands (or relatives, in the cases of Matrona's virgin disciples) who seek to impede their spiritual calling and stand in the way of their salvation. As the hagiographer indicates, however, it is this very escape from such husbands, families, and lives of luxury that provide the foundation of holiness for these ascetic women.

The portrait of marriage crafted in the text is complicated and contradictory: episodes between spouses narrated by the hagiographer are later retold by Matrona from a different perspective, leaving out critical information and supplying new details to better highlight Dometianos' cruelty, ridiculousness, and his elite status. As a Christian nobleman in the imperial court, Dometianos was a man of some importance with considerable reach, and thus Matrona's renunciation of him would be inexplicable, if not for his abuse. Dometianos' elite status is further

¹⁴⁸ On *hetairai* in Late Antiquity and the difference between courtesans and prostitutes, see Kyle Harper, *From Shame to Sin: The Christian Transformation of Sexual Morality in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 47-48.

¹⁴⁹ *Life of Matrona* 39, quotes from 47.

¹⁵⁰ This subject of child abandonment and mortality is discussed in the fourth chapter.

¹⁵¹ *Life of Matrona* 19-21, 39.

significant, because it plays into existing themes in ascetic literature of pious women pursued by wicked, albeit elite men, as discussed below. As Kate Cooper summarizes:

The literature of asceticism from its earliest traces made it a virtue for a woman to have a husband or fiancé of questionable character – her asceticism would then be all the more heroic because of the obstacles posed – although the literature did in fact prefer that the bad man should come from an excellent family.¹⁵²

Status, even in the wake of spousal abuse, was of the utmost importance. While the narrative voice leaves out any hint of domestic violence, Matrona’s later recollection of Dometianos’ cruel treatment of her to Bassianos justifies her abandonment of her husband. The reader is left with the understanding that Matrona, Athanasia, and others’ abandonment of their families and homes was exceptional and quite literally “beyond nature itself.”¹⁵³ To contextualize these exceptional ascetic women, the hagiographer introduces various other noblewomen who ask Matrona to pray for their families and to give advice on how to love their husbands and children and how to best care for their homes, thus not altogether dismissing the traditional role of the wife, mother, and housekeeper.¹⁵⁴ Further, Matrona acknowledges the value of this role by offering advice on how to improve matronly virtues as wives, mothers, and caretakers of large households. Nevertheless, the ideal model touted in the text through the example of Matrona and Athanasia is that of the elite, continent matron who exchanges family and fortune to become a bride of Christ.

Brides (of Christ) in Late Antiquity

Much scholarly attention has been devoted to the ascetic virgins and widows in ancient Christianity and the role of the *sponsa Christi* – the bride of Christ who epitomized the Christian ideal in Late Antiquity and beyond.¹⁵⁵ While less scholarly emphasis has been placed on married female ascetics with living spouses,¹⁵⁶ much work has been done on ecclesiastical debates

¹⁵² Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride*, 86-87.

¹⁵³ *Life of Matrona* 3: τῆς φύσεως αὐτῆς ἀνώτερον ὄντως.

¹⁵⁴ *Life of Matrona* 26, 32.

¹⁵⁵ For scholarship on ascetic virgins, widows, and the *sponsa Christi*, see Susanna Elm and Barbara Vinken (eds.), *Braut Christi: Familienformen im Spiegel der Sponsa* (Brill, 2016); Elm, “The *Sponsa* and the *Sponsa Christi*: Variations of the Late Roman Marriage Plot” in *Saeculum* 68/II (2018); Elm, *Virgins of God: the Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); Kate Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride*; Cooper, “Bride of Christ, the ‘male woman,’ and the female reader in Late Antiquity” in *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe*, (eds.) Judith M Bennett and Ruth Mazo Karras (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Dyan Elliot, *The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell. Metaphor and Embodiment in the Lives of Pious Women, 200-1500* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2012); David G. Hunter, “The Virgin, the Bride and the Church: Reading Psalm 45 in Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine” in *Church History* 69 (2000), pp. 281-303; Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity: The Jovinianist Controversy* (Oxford, 2007), esp. 225-230; Christine Steininger, *Die Ideale Christliche Frau – virgo-vidua-nupta – Eine Studie zum Bild der idealen christlichen Frau bei Hieronymus und Pelagius* (University of Munich Dissertation, 1995); Brown, *Body and Society*.

¹⁵⁶ The notable exceptions to this include scholarship on Melania the Younger and her husband Pinian who lived in celibacy after the deaths of their children, and the various hagiographies of couples who lived in “spiritual” or celibate marriages, including Julian and Basilissa, Andronikos and Athanasia, and

regarding marriage and family life, especially in connection with the impactful changes in civic and canon law in the fourth-sixth centuries. Beginning with Constantine, these legal changes constituted a significant restructuring of marriage contracts and family law, the result of which increased the importance of the bride and the role of mothers in the Roman family.¹⁵⁷ With the establishment and regulation of the *arrhae* and *donatio ante nuptias* (a down payment to ensure an engagement and the engagement gift, both made by the bridegroom), betrothals became significant financial investments for potential bridegrooms and bolstered the economic importance of bride.¹⁵⁸ Both parties contributed to a communal fund consisting of the bride's dowry (*dos*) and the bridegroom's gifts of the *arrhae* and *donatio*, both of which became the property of the bride and could exceed the value of the dowry. Kyle Harper characterizes the expansion of the *donatio ante nuptias* over the fourth and fifth centuries as perhaps "the most important structural change in the family during this period" because these gifts acted as a form of "insurance", since they went directly to the bride and not her family; if a marriage was called off, these bridal gifts were forfeited by the groom and such gifts could be recalled up to four times their value by the offended party.¹⁵⁹ John Chrysostom was a particularly strong opponent of this system of exchange, arguing that marriage was more than a business transaction, especially when a man could gamble his entire fortune and future in the attempt of an advantageous match.¹⁶⁰ Justinian gave women further access to these funds by increasing the rights of women over their dowries; if a husband proved to be "insolvent", his wife could reclaim her dowry for herself, alienating her husband's rights to the property.¹⁶¹ Further, Justinian improved upon Constantine's legislation of the *bona materna*, which gave mothers the ability to pass their inheritance directly to their children, bypassing their husbands entirely.¹⁶² Legislation

Galaktion and Episteme. Elizabeth Clark, *The Life of Melania the Younger: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (New York: Mellen Press, 1984); Catherine M. Chin and Caroline T. Schroeder (eds.), *Melania: Early Christianity through the Life of One Family* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016); Anne Alwis, *Celibate Marriages in Late Antique and Byzantine Hagiography: The Lives of Saints Julian and Basilissa, Andronikos and Athanasia, and Galaktion and Episteme* (London; New York: Continuum, 2011).

¹⁵⁷ Judith Evans Grubbs, *Law and Family in Late Antiquity: The Emperor Constantine's Marriage Legislation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) and *Women and the Law in the Roman Empire: A Sourcebook on Marriage, Divorce and Widowhood* (London: Routledge, 2002); Antti Arjava, *Women and Law in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Joëlle Beaucap, *Le statut de la femme à Byzance, 4e-7e siècle, Vols. 1-2* (Paris : Boccard, 1990-1992); Kyle Harper, "Marriage and Family" in *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*, (ed.) Scott Fitzgerald Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 667-714; Elm (2018), 267-270; Kate Cooper, *The Fall of the Roman Household* (Cambridge, 2007); Nathan, *The Family in Late Antiquity*; Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity: The Jovinianist Controversy* (Oxford, 2007).

¹⁵⁸ Arjava, "Women and Law", 56; Elm (2018), 269; *Codex Theodosianus* 3.16.2 (421).

¹⁵⁹ Harper, "Marriage and Family", 667 n. 4-5, 690; Arjava, "Women and Law", 55-56 and n.95; *Codex Theodosianus* 3.5.10-11; 3.6.1 (380, Eastern empire); 3.10.1 (409, Western); *Codex Justinianus* 5.1.5 (472 East).

¹⁶⁰ John Chrysostom, *The Kinds of Women Who Ought to be Taken as Wives (Quales ducendae sint uxores)* 1, 3-5 (PG 51: 226-232), discussed in Harper, "Marriage and Family", 667-668.

¹⁶¹ Arjava, "Women and Law", 60, n.106-107; *Codex Justinianus* 5.12.29-30 (529); 5.13.1; 8.17.12; *Institutes* 4.6.29.

¹⁶² Prior to Justinian, as Antti Arjava points out, fathers could still exploit the *bona materna* without legal repercussions, despite laws intended to protect his children's interests. Arjava, "Women and Law", 99-104; *Codex Theodosianus* 8.18.1 and 8.18.3 (334); Justinian, *Novels* 117.1 (542); Elm (2018), 268.

protecting the property of children was accompanied by patristic rhetoric emphasizing the role of mothers in the salvation of their families.¹⁶³ The established title of “Theotokos” (God-bearer) for Mary, the mother of Christ in the Councils of Ephesus (432) and Chalcedon (451) further bolstered the cultural status of maternity in the later fifth century.¹⁶⁴ Nevertheless, many of the theologians who praised mothers as the guardians and cultivators of their families’ religious education and spirituality also encouraged and celebrated maternal renunciation.¹⁶⁵

With these cultural and legal shifts regarding betrothal, marriage, and motherhood in mind, a closer reading of hagiography, particularly the lives of married ascetics, illustrates a reworking of the Late Roman “marriage plot”¹⁶⁶ and the role of mothers, in which a holy woman - who is at once a wife to a mortal husband and mother of children - could also be a virginal bride of Christ. Such paradoxical portraits of the married woman/virginal bride reveal a fluidity of meaning and negotiation of expression regarding chastity, as Susanna Elm and Barbara Vinken explain:

*Zugleich waren Mütter, Witwen und verheiratete Frauen unter ihnen, die mit ihren Ehemännern in einer „heiligen Ehe“ lebten; ihre Jungfräulichkeit war mehr eine Frage der geistigen Einstellung und der Verkörperung der Schrift als ein physischer Zustand.*¹⁶⁷

In order for this paradoxical existence of the matron/ mother and bride to be reconciled, however, one must ultimately be sacrificed or transcended and replaced by the other. This process is readily articulated in Gregory of Nazianzus’ *Oration* 8 for his sister Gorgonia. As the

¹⁶³ This will be discussed in detail in the following chapter. Augustine, *Homily* 10.4, *De cura pro mortuis gerenda* 7; Ambrose, *Letter* 63; Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orations* 7-8; Chrysostom, *On Marriage and Family Life and Address on Vainglory and the Right Way for Parents to Bring up their Children*; Paulinus of Pella, *Eucharisticus* 2.63-7; Jerome, *Letter* 107; Aelius Donatus, *Commentary on Terence* 594–5. Ambrose and Augustine, among others, encouraged breastfeeding and discouraged the common use of *nutrices* as a way for mothers to bond with their children early-on (a sentiment echoed from Plutarch). Ambrose, *Letter* 63; Augustine, fragment in Bede, *Commentary on I Thessalonians* 2; Plutarch, *Moralia* 496A. See also Carole Monica Burnett, “Mother-Child Bonding in the Greek and Latin Fathers of the Church” in *Children in Late Antiquity*, (ed.) Cornelia B. Horn and Robert R. Phoenix (2009).

¹⁶⁴ For an overview of Mary styled as “Theotokos” in patristic rhetoric and iconography, particularly in connection with imperial imagery, see Diliiana Angelova, *Sacred Founders: Women, Men, and Gods in the Discourse of Imperial Founding, Rome through early Byzantium* (Berkeley: University of California press, 2015), 234- 259. Angelova sums up, “Mary’s status as Theotokos elevated the status of women in general.” *Sacred Founders*, 243. See also Cooper (1998), 31-43; Stephen J. Shoemaker, “Mary at the Cross, East and West: Maternal Compassion and Affective Piety in the earliest Life of the Virgin and the High Middle Ages”, *Journal of Theological Studies* Vol. 62, no. 2 (2011), 137 and “A Mother’s Passion: Mary at the Crucifixion and Resurrection in the Earliest Life of the Virgin and its Influence on George of Nikomedeia’s Passion Homilies” in *The Cult of the Mother of God in Byzantium: Texts and Images*, (eds.) Leslie Brubaker and Mary B. Cunningham (Farnham, 2011), 5367.

¹⁶⁵ Maria Doerfler, “Ascetic Absentees: Late Ancient Reading Strategies in Pursuit of the Maternal Ideal”, forthcoming.

¹⁶⁶ Elm, “The *Sponsa* and the *Sponsa Christi*”.

¹⁶⁷ *At the same time, there were mothers, widows, and married women among them who lived in a "holy marriage" with their husbands. Her virginity was more a question of spiritual attitude and the embodiment of Scripture than a physical condition.* Susanna Elm and Barbara Vinken, “Introduction” in *Braut Christi*, 16.

first Christian hagiographical text in praise of a woman, Gregory's oration created a model of the ideal Christian matron who married the Greco-Roman virtue of *sophrosyne* with asceticism; the results of such virtue and *askesis* were transformative, allowing Gorgonia to unite marriage and celibacy, moving beyond her role as a wife and mother and becoming a bride anew.¹⁶⁸

Gorgonia as the Model Christian Matron

In Gregory of Nazianzus' funeral oration for his sister Gorgonia, the theologian lists the ideal qualities for a married Christian woman. Drawing on traditional feminine virtues harkening back to Homer,¹⁶⁹ Gregory weaves together the Graeco-Roman ideal of the dutiful wife, mother, and housekeeper with Christian asceticism to create a new model of feminine virtue in the figure of Gorgonia as a noble matron, mother, and ascetic. Gregory singles out Gorgonia's pinnacle virtue as *sophrosyne*, the modesty, self-control, chastity, and soundness of mind that defined the ideal wife in antiquity.¹⁷⁰ As "the most multifaceted of all the Greek virtues,"¹⁷¹ *sophrosyne* carried a cultural meaning beyond any simple translation of the word; for women specifically, the meaning of *sophrosyne* extended to all aspects of a woman's comportment, from her manner of speech (or rather her silence), gait, clothing, adornment, and hair style to her devotion to her husband and children and her visibility inside and outside the home. In the words of Kyle Harper, *sophrosyne* - and its Latin equivalent *pudicitia* - "implied both an objective fact and a subjective mode of being; it was a state of body and a state of mind."¹⁷² *Sophrosyne* was at once a continual "set of social performances, a collection of 'doings'";¹⁷³ "to seem chaste", after all, was as essential as "to be" chaste itself.¹⁷⁴ The truly *sophron* wife was one entirely devoted to her husband and the care of her family, who blushed with modesty when addressed, was rarely seen outside the home, and even more rarely heard. As Gregory eulogized, Gorgonia was the idea wife in all these respects.

Discussing Solomon's Proverbs praising the good and loving housewife, Gregory contrasts Gorgonia's activity as a woman "engaged honorably at home and loves her husband" (*οἰκουρίαν γυναικὸς καὶ φιλανδρίαν*) with the woman who "wanders abroad [Prov. 7:11], who is uncontrolled and dishonorable" (*καὶ ἀντιτίθησι τῇ ἔξω περιπλανωμένη, καὶ ἀκρατήτῳ, καὶ ἀτίμῳ*) [Prov 6:26]. Like Solomon's good wife, Gorgonia "performs her duties with manly courage, her hands constantly at the spindle as she prepares double cloaks for her husband" [Prov 31:14-19, 22].¹⁷⁵ Gorgonia's *sophrosyne* is also due to her seclusion and uncommon modesty. Later on in

¹⁶⁸ Though the influence of Gregory's oration on other authors' praises of female Christian piety has not been sufficiently explored, Virginia Burrus is quick to point out that within a decade after Gregory's oration, Gregory of Nyssa and Jerome wrote texts praising and memorializing Christian women. Virginia Burrus, "Life After Death: the Martyrdom of Gorgonia" in *Gregory of Nazianzus Images and Reflections*, ed. Jostein Børtnes and Tomas Hägg (Museum Tusulanum Press, University of Copenhagen, 2006), 153.

¹⁶⁹ Susanna Elm, "Gregory's women", 187.

¹⁷⁰ See footnotes 142-44.

¹⁷¹ North "Sophrosyne as the Virtue of Women", 35, 37.

¹⁷² Harper, *From Shame to Sin*, 41.

¹⁷³ Kate Wilkinson, *Women and Modesty in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 18.

¹⁷⁴ Seneca the Elder, *Controversiae*, 2.7.9, referenced by Harper, *From Shame to Sin*, 41.

¹⁷⁵ This reference to Gorgonia's continuous engagement with the spindle was a key Greco-Roman aspect of female *arete*. Wool-working (*ἐπιουργία*, *lanificium*) was "a sort of synecdoche, standing for everything that might be considered 'woman's work'" in a household and was directly associated with wifely

the oration, Gregory retells how Gorgonia was crushed in a grisly (and apparently well-known) chariot accident: “Although crushed and mangled internally and externally in bone and limb, she would have no physician... because she shrank from the eyes and hands of men, guarding her modesty even in suffering.”¹⁷⁶ Gregory recounts how unbelievers were scandalized that a just woman could suffer such serious injuries, but this shock turned to amazement by her unexpected recovery at the hand of God.¹⁷⁷ While her modesty is praiseworthy, Gorgonia’s seclusion is almost lamentable to Gregory: “Who was ever more worthy to be seen, yet was seen less and kept herself more inaccessible to the eyes of men?” (*Τίς μὲν ἦν φαίνεσθαι μᾶλλον ἀξία; Τίς δὲ ἦττον ἐφάνη, καὶ ἀπρόσιτον ἐτήρησεν ἑαυτὴν ἀνδρῶν ὄψεσιν;*).¹⁷⁸ To help divert unwanted gazes, Gorgonia dressed herself with great simplicity, shunning the latest fashions in hair style and never adorned herself with jewelry or cosmetics.¹⁷⁹ From antiquity, an excessive interest in fashion and adornment, and the use of cosmetics in particular, was seen by moralists as a rejection of the traditional feminine role: woman obsessed with dress had no time for husband and household and displayed at once “inherent frivolity and intellectual weakness”;¹⁸⁰ the use of makeup was particularly reproachful, for it advertised a deceitful character brimming with potential unchastity.¹⁸¹ As Kelly Olson summarizes, “Dress and beauty were an index of the mind and character of the wearer, the speech of the body.”¹⁸² Gorgonia’s simple appearance

devotion, appearing prominently in Roman epigraphy with the traditional formula *domum servavit, lanam fecit*. North notes the phenomenon on Greek and Roman monuments to link feminine virtue with wool-working. North, “Sophrosyne as a Virtue of Women”, 41. Christian virgins and widows were expected to spin wool for those in need (*Didascalia apostolorum* 3.7; Chrysostom, *Instruction and Refutation Directed Against Those Men Cohabiting with Virgins* 10). This association with wool-working and virtue was such a pervasive image of feminine devotion that the earliest representations of the Virgin Mary depict her holding a spindle or distaff in scenes of the Annunciation (e.g. detailed scene of the Annunciation on the left side of the triumphal arch of Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome, from the early fifth century, which depicts the Virgin enthroned and dressed as a bride of Christ, clothing motif specific to this era and exhibited in Sant’Apollinare, Ravenna). Though not referred to specifically as *sophrosyne*, Gregory of Nyssa describes his sister Makrina as a woman who likewise remained cloistered in the home and was distinguished for her wool-working. Gregory of Nyssa reserves his uses of *sophron* and *sophrosyne* in the *Life of Makrina* for their male relatives, namely their father (4.15), who chooses for Makrina a fiancé distinguished for his *sophrosyne* (4.16), and their brother Naukratios (9.3). For Makrina’s seclusion and skill at wool-working, see chapter 4 of the *vita*. Gregory of Nyssa, *Vie de sainte Macrine*. Sources chrétiennes 178 (Paris, Editions du Cerf, 1971). Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 8.8, trans. Cox Miller, 278-79; Huizenga, “Moral Education,” 196.

¹⁷⁶ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 8.15. trans. Cox Miller, 279.

¹⁷⁷ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 8.15.

¹⁷⁸ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 8.8 Trans. Cox Miller, 279.

¹⁷⁹ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 8.10.

¹⁸⁰ Kelly Olson, *Dress and the Roman Woman: Self-Presentation and Society* (London: Routledge, 2008), 80.

¹⁸¹ Despite the fact that cosmetics and makeup were used abundantly in the later Roman world, their use was strongly censured by Christian and non-Christian moralists alike. For a detailed account of the anti-cosmetics tradition in Greek and Roman antiquity and a comprehensive account of scholarship on this subject, see Olson *Dress and the Roman Woman*, 59-68. For a brief discussion on Pelagius and cosmetics, see Wilkinson, 38-39.

¹⁸² Olson, *Dress and the Roman Woman*, 80; see also Kelly Olson, “Matrona and Whore: Clothing and Definition in Roman Antiquity” in *Prostitutes and Courtesans in the Ancient World*, (eds.) Christopher A. Faraone and Laura K. Macclure (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 186-204, esp. 199-200.

advertised her virtue to her viewer, making “a spectacle of her very modesty”¹⁸³; but the best evidence for her *sophrosyne*, Gregory argues, is found in her role as the savior of her family.

Gregory opens his praises of Gorgonia by describing her incomparable *sophrosyne* and the surprising results of her perfection of this virtue: Gorgonia’s *sophrosyne* “surpassed all the women of her own day, not to mention those of old who were greatly famed for modesty” *τοσοῦτον ὑπερῆρε τὰς κατ’ αὐτὴν ἀπάσας, ἵνα μὴ λέγω τὰς παλαιὰς, ὧν ὁ πολὺς ἐπὶ σωφροσύνη λόγος*) to such a degree that she herself avoided the spiritual disadvantages of marriage and “united the loftiness of [celibacy] with the security of [marriage] (*καὶ εἰς ἐν ἀγαγεῖν, τῆς μὲν τὸ ὕψος, τοῦ δὲ τὴν ἀσφάλειαν*)”.¹⁸⁴ Gorgonia’s *sophrosyne* allowed her to blend the virtues of marriage and celibacy without any disadvantages, putting her in a realm otherwise unaccounted for between both states of existence. She was able to do this, Gregory assures, because “she was modest without being proud, blending the virtue of marriage with celibacy, showing that neither of these binds us completely to or separates us from God or the world.” (*καὶ γενέσθαι σώφρων ἄνθρωπος, τῷ γάμῳ τὸ τῆς ἀγαμίας καλὸν κεράσασσα, καὶ δείξασσα, ὅτι μὴθ’ ἕτερον τούτων ἢ Θεῷ πάντως, ἢ κόσμῳ συνδεῖ, καὶ δίστησι πάλιν*).¹⁸⁵ Further, Gorgonia’s devotion to her husband and family did not interfere with her devotion to God, but rather allowed her to serve one by serving the other:

*Although she was tied according to the flesh, she was not on that account separated from the spirit, nor because she had her husband as her head did she ignore her first Head [1 Cor 11:3]. When she had served the world and nature a little, to the extent that the law of the flesh willed it, or, rather, He who imposed this law on the flesh, she consecrated herself wholly to God.*¹⁸⁶

Οὐ γὰρ ἐπεὶ σαρκὶ συνήφθη, διὰ τοῦτο ἐχωρίσθη τοῦ πνεύματος· οὐδ’ ὅτι κεφαλὴν ἔσχε τὸν ἄνδρα, διὰ τοῦτο τὴν πρώτην κεφαλὴν ἠγνόησεν· ἀλλ’ ὀλίγα λειτουργήσασα κόσμῳ καὶ φύσει, καὶ ὅσον ὁ τῆς σαρκὸς ἐβούλετο νόμος, μᾶλλον δὲ ὁ τῆ σαρκὶ ταῦτα νομοθετήσας, Θεῷ τὸ πᾶν ἑαυτὴν καθιέρωσεν

Gorgonia’s service to her husband is reflected as a service imposed by God: she served “the world and nature a little, to the extent that the law of the flesh willed it, or, rather, He who imposed this law on the flesh” (*ἀλλ’ ὀλίγα λειτουργήσασα κόσμῳ καὶ φύσει, καὶ ὅσον ὁ τῆς σαρκὸς ἐβούλετο νόμος, μᾶλλον δὲ ὁ τῆ σαρκὶ ταῦτα νομοθετήσας*).¹⁸⁷ After this service had been rendered and children were born, she was rewarded and able to “consecrate herself wholly to God” and continence (*Θεῷ τὸ πᾶν ἑαυτὴν καθιέρωσεν*). She was successful in this endeavor, Gregory assures, because she had first convinced her husband of her views, just as she had encouraged his prior conversion to Christianity. Converting her husband to continence was Gorgonia’s “most beautiful and noble action” (*Ὁ δὲ κάλλιστον καὶ σεμνότατον*), and this excellence is heightened by “beautiful fruit of her union”: Gorgonia’s uxorial devotion and motherhood allows her to dedicate to God her children and grandchildren, “her whole family and

¹⁸³ Burrus, “Life After Death”, 159.

¹⁸⁴ Gregory Nazianzus, *Oration* 8.8 trans. Cox Miller, 277-78.

¹⁸⁵ Gregory Nazianzus, *Oration* 8.8, trans. Cox Miller, 278.

¹⁸⁶ Gregory Nazianzus, *Oration* 8.8 trans. Cox Miller, 277-78.

¹⁸⁷ Gregory Nazianzus, *Oration* 8.8 trans. Cox Miller, 278.

household” “instead of her single soul”.¹⁸⁸ She is spiritual guide of her husband and children, and as such, the perfect mother, “an exemplar of every excellence to her children” (*ὀπόδειγμα καλοῦ παντὸς τοῖς ἐξ ἑαυτῆς προστήσασα*).¹⁸⁹

However, despite her *sophrosyne* stemming from her role as a model wife and mother, Gregory says very little about Gorgonia’s husband and children. As Virginia Burrus has pointed out, Gregory brushes past her husband and children, because he recognizes Gorgonia’s true husband as Christ. After ensuring her family’s salvation, Gorgonia devotes herself entirely to Christ and asceticism.¹⁹⁰ When she becomes seriously ill, her physical sufferings and subsequent baptism constitute a sort of martyrdom and rebirth. Gregory describes her baptism (and her whole life prior) as the cleansing and perfection of her body and soul, which, in essence, restores her virginity. After her baptism, she consecrates her “whole body” to God and obtains her husband’s own perfection, so that she would not depart this life “half-perfected”.¹⁹¹ Her deathbed scene is thus one in anticipation of marriage: surrounded by her mourning husband, children, friends, and relatives, Gorgonia prepares for her new bridegroom Christ.¹⁹²

As the earliest hagiographic text praising a Christian woman,¹⁹³ Gregory’s oration articulates the developing ideals for Christian women and the inherent paradox of the matron-turned-Bride of Christ spanning both the Eastern and Western Empire in Late Antiquity.¹⁹⁴ The challenge carefully negotiated in this oration was how to explain the holiness of a married woman, an elite wife and mother who obtained salvation through traditional modes of *sophrosyne* that were heightened (and highlighted) by asceticism, illness, and the eventual replacement of her husband with Christ through baptism and death. Gregory crafts a narrative in which the bride of a mortal man, a mother of children, could become a virginal bride of Christ through suffering, baptism, and renunciation, a pattern partially mirrored in later vitae, including the *Life of Melania the Younger* and the *Life of Matrona*. Church Fathers throughout the third-sixth centuries sought an explanation and path for salvation for married people during an era when asceticism and virginity were championed as the primary paths to salvation, and marriage and family life were often disparaged as lesser, lower callings (and, by some heterodox theologians, outright rejected).¹⁹⁵ Gregory’s orations on his own family indicate that married

¹⁸⁸ Gregory Nazianzus, *Oration* 8.8 trans. Cox Miller, 278.

¹⁸⁹ Julian in his *Encomium to Eusebia* likewise associates *sophrosyne* to devotion to one’s children and their welfare. Julian, *Oration* 3.110C.

¹⁹⁰ Burrus, “Life After Death”, 164.

¹⁹¹ *Αὐτῇ μὲν οὖν ὑπόγειον τὸ τῆς καθάρσεως καὶ τελειώσεως ἦν ἀγαθὸν, ἣν κοινήν δωρεάν, καὶ δευτέρου βίου κρηπίδα παρὰ Θεοῦ πάντες λαβόντες ἔχομεν. Μᾶλλον δὲ πᾶς ὁ βίος κάθαρσις ἦν αὐτῇ καὶ τελειώσις: καὶ τὸ μὲν τῆς ἀναγεννήσεως εἶχεν ἐκ τοῦ Πνεύματος, τὸ δ’ ἀσφαλὲς ταύτης ἐκ τῶν προβεβιωμένων. Καὶ μόνη σχεδὸν ἴν’ εἶπω τολμήσας, σφραγίς, ἀλλ’ οὐ χάρισμα ἦν τὸ μυστήριον. Ἐν δὲ τοῖς πᾶσι προστεθῆναι ζητοῦσα τὴν τοῦ ἀνδρὸς τελείωσιν (βούλεσθε γράψω τὸν ἄνδρα συντόμως; ἀνδρὸς ἐκείνης, καὶ οὐκ οἶδ’ ὅ τι χρὴ πλέον εἰπεῖν), ἴν’ ὄλω τῷ σώματι Θεῷ καθιερωθῆ, καὶ μὴ ἐξ ἡμῶν ἀπέλθῃ τετελεσμένη, μηδ’ ὑπολείπηται τι τῶν ἑαυτῆς ἀτελῆς, οὐδὲ ταύτης διαμαρτάνει τῆς δεήσεως παρὰ τοῦ θέλημα τῶν φοβουμένων αὐτὸν ποιοῦντος, καὶ εἰς πέρας ἄγοντος τὰ αἰτήματα.*

Gregory Nazianzus, *Oration* 8.20:

¹⁹² Burrus, “Life After Death”, 156.

¹⁹³ Elm, “Gregory’s women” (2006), 187, from Marie-Ange Calvet-Sebasti (ed), Grégoire de Nazianze, *Discours 6-12* (1995), 38.

¹⁹⁴ See footnote 12.

¹⁹⁵ For heterodox traditions regarding marriage, see David Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity: The Jovinianist Controversy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

people were not excluded from Christian perfection and *hagneia* - his *Oration 7* presents his parents as paragons of virtue - but he does imply that marriage must ultimately be left behind in some capacity to obtain true holiness and perfection; the virginal body must be spiritually restored.¹⁹⁶

Matrona of Perge is such an example, who's own virtues as a *sophron* matron closely mirror Gorgonia's, except in one major aspect: Matrona ultimately chooses not to serve her husband and child and remain at home. As Matrona wanders throughout the Near East, fleeing Dometianos, one cannot help but think of Gregory's echoing of Solomon's disgust for the "woman who wanders abroad", causing her husband grief. But, while Gorgonia's devotion was necessary to convert her husband and children and ensure their salvation, Dometianos is already Christian. As a Christian, however, he is a bad husband and a brute. Without illness to put off her husband, Matrona must find other means to escape marriage and family responsibilities and devote herself to Christ: running away from her duties as a wife and mother and disguising herself as a eunuch monk. The remainder of the chapter explores the renunciation of marriage in the *Life of Matrona*.

Matrona as a Sophron Matron, Unwilling Wife

In the *Life of Matrona*, we encounter the saint already as a young, aristocratic wife and mother and are quickly told that this status provides the backstory to her asceticism and sanctity. In the same sentence, the hagiographer describes Matrona's birth to noble parents in Perge, Pamphylia, her education, marriage to Dometianos, the birth of her daughter Theodote, and her ultimate abandonment of "everything" and sacrifice of the child (which will be discussed in detail in the following chapter):

Now, once she had received the customary upbringing and a liberal education from her parents, and had come to the age of marriage, she was united with a man by the name of Dometianos, and became the mother of a daughter by the name of Theodote; and indeed, as we shall show presently, abandoning everything, she was to give her to God.

τυχοῦσα δὲ τῶννεομισμένων τροφείων καὶ ἀγωγῆς ἐλευθέρας ὑπὸ τῶν γεννησαμένων, ἐλήλυθε καὶ εἰς ὄραν γάμου. Καὶ συνάπτεται ἀνδρὶ ὀνόματι Δομετιανῶ, γίνεται δὲ καὶ μιᾶς παιδὸς μήτηρ, ὀνόματι Θεοδότης· Θεῶ γὰρ αὐτὴν δέδωκεν πάντα καταλιποῦσα, ὡς αὐτόθεν ἐπιδείζομεν.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁶ Gregory of Nazianzus' connection between *sophrosyne* and *hagneia* is explicit in several of his writings, especially his *Peri Hagneias* and *Carmina Moralia* 45 wherein personifications of both virtues appear before him (PG 37). This connection between *sophrosyne* and *hagneia* is also mentioned in Methodios of Olympia's *Symposium*, wherein the speakers Markella and Thalia expound on whether *sophrosyne* designates continence in marriage (1.2) or that marriage is a substitute for true *sophrosyne* which is equated to *hagneia* (3.10). Discussed in North, "Sophrosyne as a Virtue of Women", 338-40.

¹⁹⁷ *Life of Matrona* 2.

We have no glimpse of Matrona’s childhood, apart a brief mention of her “liberal education”,¹⁹⁸ no portrait of a pious upbringing,¹⁹⁹ no fervent early desires for chastity suppressed by obedience to domineering parents, a theme readily visible in the hagiographies of holy women from Late Antiquity and Byzantium.²⁰⁰ Instead, the hagiographer is more interested in establishing Matrona’s piety and *sophrosyne* as a young matron:

*After her marriage, [Matrona] was humble and moderate, taking no care whatsoever for the adornments and cosmetics that worldly women are accustomed to use, cultivating instead manners of piety and sophrosyne.*²⁰¹

μετὰ τὸν γάμον ἄτυφός τε καὶ μέτριος γέγονεν, κόσμου μὲν παντὸς καὶ καλλωπισμοῦ,
ὡς ἔθος ἐστὶ κεχρηῆσθαι γυναιξὶ
φιλοκόσμοις, παντελῶς ἀμελήσασα, σεμνότητι δὲ καὶ σωφροσύνη τοὺς ἑαυτῆς
ἐμπρέπειν σπουδάζουσα τρόπους·

Matrona is first described in the same terms as Gorgonia, matching the Greco-Roman ideal of the good wife: she is humble (*ἄτυφός*) and moderate (*μέτριος*), shunning cosmetics and adornments and cultivating the manners of piety and *sophrosyne*. However, shortly after this description, we see a quick departure from the model obedient wife:

She neglected all indulgence of the body, neither bathing nor allowing intercourse with her husband, being mindful of the blessed Paul’s saying that those that have wives should be as though they had none. [I Cor. 7:29]

¹⁹⁸ Matrona’s education becomes relevant later on in Beirut where she teaches young women to read. *Life of Matrona* 19.

¹⁹⁹ A common theme in Byzantine hagiography, as attested by Béatrice Chevallier Caseau, “Childhood in Byzantine saints’ Lives” in *Becoming Byzantine: Children and Childhood in Byzantium*, (eds.) Aretta Papaconstantinou and Alice Mary Talbot (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009). See also D. Abrahamse, “Images of Childhood in Early Byzantine Hagiography”, *Journal of Psychohistory* 6 (1979), 497-517.

²⁰⁰ Prominent examples include, Olympias (*BHG* 1374-1375), Makrina (Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Makrina* 5, *BHG* 1012), Melania the Younger (Gerontius, *Life of Melania the Younger*, *BHG* 1241), and in the lives of later prominent Byzantine saints including Athanasia of Aegina (*BHG* 180), the tenth century Thomais of Lesbos (*BHG* 2454), and the Empress Theofano (*BHG* 1794), among others. For a discussion on parental opposition to asceticism presented as a literary *topos* well established by the fourth century, see Ville Vuolanto, “Choosing Asceticism: Children and Parents, Vows and Conflicts” in *Children in Late Ancient Christianity* (eds.) Cornelia B. Horn and Robert R. Phenix (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 255-291, here 259-268.

Cyril Mango assumes the absence of information on Matrona’s early life to be a lack of interest and ignorance on the part of the hagiographer, who did not take the trouble to fill out this section with the “usual commonplaces”. Notes in the Featherstone translation of *Life of Matrona in Holy Women of Byzantium*, (ed.) Alice-Mary Talbot (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1996) 19 n.25.

²⁰¹ *Life of Matrona* 2.

καὶ τῆς κατὰ τὸ σῶμα ἡμέλειθεραπείας, μήτε λουτρῶ κεχρημένη μήτε τῷ ἀνδρὶ συνάπτεσθαι ἀνεχομένη, τὸ καὶ οἱ ἔχοντες γυναῖκας ὡς μὴ ἔχοντες ὧσιν φρονοῦσα, τὸ παρὰ τοῦ μακαρίου Παύλου εἰρημένον, διὰ τὸ μῆκος τοῦ λόγου ἔῶ λέγειν πλατύτερον.

This passage is curious for several reasons. By late Roman standards, disregarding one's toilette could be admirable²⁰², but spurning one's husband was reprehensible.²⁰³ Matrōna's refraining from bathing can be configured positively, as bathing houses in particular were viewed with suspicion as places of immodest activity,²⁰⁴ and other ascetic women likewise avoided bathing.²⁰⁵ However, Matrōna's neglect of her husband stands in direct opposition to both cultural expectations for wives and the teachings of most Christian writers on the role of sexual relations within marriage.²⁰⁶ Here the quote from Paul's epistle to the Corinthians is deliberately misrepresented (or misunderstood?) in the text, to the point of irony for the reader well versed in scripture. I Corinthians 7 famously chides women not to deny their husbands for "the wife does not have authority over her own body but yields to her husband" (I Corinthians 7:4) and also forbids women from leaving their husbands (I Corinthians 7:10), stating that women are bound to their husbands as long as they live (I Corinthians 7:39).²⁰⁷ A husband and wife cannot deprive the other except with consent, and even then, Paul warns, only for a short time lest they be tempted into sin (7:5). Paul states explicitly that those who marry have not sinned (7:28), and the phrase quoted in the *Life of Matrōna*, that those that have wives should be as though they had none (7:29), refers to Paul's forewarning that the world would soon be coming to an end. These short passages from I Corinthians were discussed at great length by the majority of early Christian writers, who used Paul's message to define expectations for Christian marriage and to

²⁰² See previous discussion on the use of cosmetics and adornment, 10-11.

²⁰³ From the standpoint of Roman medicine and philosophy, withholding sex from one's husband could have negative effects on the regulation of the body which could poison the body and dull the mind. The Church Fathers also warned against the dangers of living in this way Harper, *From Shame to Sin*, 57-59.

²⁰⁴ Especially where mixed bathing was concerned, baths could be "notorious dens of venal sex". Harper, *From Shame to Sin*, 42, 47; See also Garrett Fagan, *Bathing in Public in the Roman World* (Ann Arbor, 1999), 26-29; Fikret Yegül, *Bathing in the Roman World* (Cambridge, 2010).

²⁰⁵ As a young bride, when Melania the Younger's parents would send her to the baths against her will; going out of obedience, she would not bathe but merely splash water in her eyes and would bribe with gifts those who accompanied her so they would not tell what she had done. Gerontius, *Life of Melania the Younger* 2. Olympias likewise abstained from bathing as much as possible, but when she needed to for health reasons, she would bathe wearing a shift. *Life of Olympias* 13. Athanasios of Alexandria gave strict instructions regarding the proper way for virgins to bathe: only out of necessity and within a basin, shunning public baths. Athanasius, *Letter 2, To Virgins*. 13-15, trans. David Brakke, *Athanasius and Asceticism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 297-98; Elliot, *The Bride of Christ*, 40. And Jerome likewise agreed that consecrated virgins and widows should avoid bathing or bathe in private. Jerome *Letters* 45.4, 107.8, 11.

²⁰⁶ For example, Augustine, *Letter 262 to Ecdicia*, *De bono coniugali* 4.4, *De gratia Christi* 2.34.39; Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 3.15.96.1-2 and 3.18.107.5; Chrysostom regarded procreation as "natural", a "gift from God", and to lessen bodily passions: *On virginity* 19.1 and 25; *Against Fornication* 3 (PG 51, 213); *Hom. 59 Matt.* 7, PG 58,583; *Hom. 62 Matt.* 2 (PG 58,597); *Hom. 19 I Cor.* 6 (PG 61, 160); *Hom 2 Eph.* 3 (PG 62,20); pleasure can be "chaste", *Hom 7 Matt* 7 (PG 57.81). See Elizabeth Clark's discussion of I Corinthians 7 in *Reading Renunciation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 264-329, but especially 270-277.

²⁰⁷ Clark, *Reading Renunciation* 270-277.

illustrate the superiority of virginity: Jerome, Ambrose, Augustine, and Chrysostom cite 7:3-4 to characterize sex within marriage as a form of “bondage”, “servitude”, “paying a debt”, and even “slavery”, since the bodies of married persons belong to their spouses and are subject to their spouses’ needs.²⁰⁸ Basil of Caesarea cited 7:4 to forbid married men from leaving their wives for monasticism without consent.²⁰⁹ Sexual desire was largely regarded as “natural” and permissible within marriage (albeit unenthusiastically), provided the couple did not live wantonly.²¹⁰ Most Fathers interpret Paul’s advice *that those that have wives should be as though they had none* (7:29) to emphasize the importance of chastity and continence in contrast to the teachings of the Old Testament command to “be fruitful and multiply (Gen. 1:28).²¹¹ Paul was not encouraging husbands to separate from their wives, but rather that spouses gradually sow the seeds of chastity into their marriages, much in the manner of Gorgonia and her husband: that is, usually after they had given birth to sufficient numbers of children to ensure the continuity of the family.²¹²

In suggesting that Matrona took Paul’s advice and lived as though she had no wife, the hagiographer positions Matrona in the masculine role in her marriage to Dometianos. This gender reversal explains some dynamics of Dometianos and Matrona’s relationship; Dometianos’ violent and jealous behavior towards Matrona throughout the *vita* stems from his inability to trust or control her, and his lack of husbandly authority extends to a lack of masculine *sophrosyne*. Dometianos can no more control Matrona than he can his own passions, leaving him not only emasculated but unhuman – a “wild beast” and “dog”. The tension between husband and wife comes to a head after the couple move to Constantinople.

Though the circumstances of the move to Constantinople are unclear, the hagiographer indicates that Matrona had “well-made plans” that were secret from her husband prior to their arrival in the imperial city. Once there, Matrona became noticeably absent from her home, occupying herself with continual vigils and fasting:

Once arrived in the imperial city, she hastened to the sanctuaries of the saints; and therein she remained, not only by day but also by night, in prayer and vigils, humbling her body with fasting, that it might be obedient to the pious designs of her soul.

²⁰⁸ Jerome on marriage as “bondage”, *Against Jovinian* 1.7 (PL 23, 230); Ambrose on marriage as “servitude”, especially for women, *Exhortations on Virginity* 4.21-23 and 10.62; Augustine on “pay a debt”, *Letters* 127.9 and 262.2; marriage as “slavery”; Chrysostom, *Hom. 19 I Cor. 1* (PG 61, 151) and *On virginity* 40.2; Clark, *Reading Renunciation*, 275-76 and 293.

²⁰⁹ Basil of Caesarea, *Regulae fusius tractatae* 12 (PG 31, 948), however, as Elizabeth Clark points out, husbands wishing to leave their wives may cite Luke 14:26 as a way out: “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.” Clark, *Reading Renunciation*, 257 n75.

²¹⁰ Chrysostom, *Hom 5 Tim. 2* (2:11-14) (PG 62, 689); Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 3.15.96.1-2; Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Orations* 4.25 (PG 33, 488); Augustine, *De bono coniugali* 10.11 and 20.23, *De nuptiis et concupiscentia* 1.14.16, *Opus imperfectum* 1.68.4-5. Clark, *Reading Renunciation*, 277-282.

²¹¹ Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem* 5.7.8 and *Ad uxorem* 1.3.2; Paulinus of Nola, *Letter* 25.7; Methodius, *Symposium* 3.13; Jerome, *Letters* 52.16 and 123.5-6, *Comm. Eccles.* 3:5, and *Adversus Helvidium* 20; anonymous *Admonitio Augiensis*; Pelagius, *Comm. I Cor.* 7:29; Augustine, *De coniugiis adulterinis* 2.12.12, *De nuptiis et concupiscentia* 1.13.14-15.

²¹² Jerome, *Commentary on Matt.* 3; Pseudo-Basil, *De virginitate* 9.18; Athanasios, *Letter* 1 to Virgins.

Γενομένη δὲ ἐν ταύτῃ τῇ βασιλευούσῃ πόλει, πρὸς τὰς τῶν ἁγίων ἔτρεχεν ἀλλάς· ἐν αἷς οὐ μεθ' ἡμέραν μόνον ἀλλὰ καὶ νύκτωρ διετέλει προσευχομένη καὶ ἀγρυπνοῦσα καὶ νηστεΐαις ταπεινοῦσα τὸ σῶμα, ὡς ἂν πειθήνιον ἢ τοῖς εὐσεβέσι βουλευμασι τῆς ψυχῆς.²¹³

Under the guidance of a spiritual mother Eugenia, who appears throughout the vita, Matrona begins her ascetic career of nightly vigils, fasting, and caring for the poor. The latter she performs “in secret from her husband” (*λανθάνουσα οὖν τὸν ἄνδρα*), concealing her charity.

Bad Husbands I: Dometianos' Abuse and Spousal Asceticism

Matrona's frequent absences, however, do not go unnoticed by Dometianos. The following part of the story is told from two perspectives, first the narrator's summary of events, which is later expanded (and changed) when put into Matrona's words as she defends her actions to her spiritual father Bassianos:

Now while the blessed Matrona was doing these things, great sorrow seized her husband Dometianos, who was carried away by absurd ideas and thought that the blessed one was keeping company/living the life of a courtesan because of her frequent visits at the all-night vigils. For this reason a struggle arose between them, Dometianos preventing her to go to the services and the blessed Matrona constraining him to allow her to do this. After many days and with many words she persuaded him, and she made haste to the church of the Holy Apostles.

Τούτων δὲ γινομένων παρὰ τῆς μακαρίας Ματρώνης, πολλή τις λύπη τὸν ταύτης ἄνδρα Δομετιανὸν κατεῖχεν, εἰς ἀτόπους ἐννοίας ἀπαγόμενον καὶ οἰόμενον τὴν μακαρίαν ἑταιρίζεσθαι διὰ τὸ συχνάζειν αὐτὴν ἐν ταῖς παννυχίσι. Ὅθεν ἀγῶν ἀμφοτέροις ἐκ τούτου καθίστατο, Δομετιανῶμὲν γὰρ κωλύοντι αὐτὴν ἀπιέναι ἐν ταῖς συνάξεσι, τῇ δὲ μακαρία Ματρώνη ἀναγκαζούση αὐτὸν συγχωρεῖν αὐτῇ τοῦτο διαπράττεσθαι. Ἐπὶ πολλὰς ἡμέρας πολλοῖς λόγοις πείσασα αὐτόν, τὸν τῶν ἁγίων Ἀποστόλων φθάνει οἶκον.²¹⁴

In this first account, Dometianos is presented as a husband struck with grief by a wife whose nightly absences he attributes to associating with or acting as a *hetaera* (courtesan),²¹⁵ despite the fact that Matrona does not match the description of a courtesan.²¹⁶ Nevertheless, Dometianos is

²¹³ *Life of Matrona* 2.

²¹⁴ *Life of Matrona* 3.

²¹⁵ It is worth noting that several pious women of Greek hagiography started out their lives as *hetairai* including Pelagia of Antioch and Maria, the mother of Theodore of Sykeon (*Life of Theodore of Sykeon* 3).

²¹⁶ For Roman distinctions in dress between *matronae* and courtesans/prostitutes, see Olson, “Matrona and Whore”, 186-204. Olson argues that ancient authors from all periods and genres were “adamant that whores and matrons were sartorially distinct and immediately distinguishable from one another”; though in her conclusion, Olson indicates that these differences were not always immediately apparent, as noted in the *Digest of Justinian* 47.10.15.15. Olson, “Matrona and Whore”, 196-197, 201.

There certainly exists a theme of holy women (often in disguise) whose purity is suspected and challenged. This might be a stretch, but perhaps the confusion of Matrona for a courtesan could be a literary illusion to the lives of other holy women who were disguised as monks and accused of seducing

within his legal rights as a husband to be concerned by her nightly absences, as wives were not to spend the night outside of their homes without their husband's permission.²¹⁷ Dometianos responds by forbidding her from going to services, but after "many days and many words", Matrona is able to persuade him to relent. Relating the event to Bassianos, she details Dometianos' abuses to her during this period, which sheds further light on Dometianos' anxieties and the couple's troubled relationship:

I... had become the wife of a man and the mother of a child. But wishing to serve God rather than marriage and sin, I would depart to the all-night vigils of the holy martyrs. However, my husband would prevent me, at one time insulting me, at another fighting and striking/beating me, and at times he even threatened me. Seeing these things and suffering from him at every turn, I was despondent, I wailed, I cried and called upon God night and day that He might soften his heart and fulfill my desire. When I did these things and acted thus, I considered entering a women's monastery, but I knew that if I did so, I should not escape the notice of my husband; and unless I did this [i.e., escaped notice by disguising myself as a monk], I should bring affliction upon myself and the monastery. For my husband would have refused nothing to bring evil and distress upon me, as I have said, and the monastery...²¹⁸

Ἐγώ... ἐγενόμην ἐνὸς ἀνδρὸς γυνή καὶ μιᾶς παιδὸς μήτηρ· δουλεύειν δὲ Θεῷ μᾶλλον ἢ γάμῳ καὶ ἀμαρτία βουλομένη εἰς τὰς παννυχίδας τῶν ἁγίων μαρτύρων ἀπήειν· ὁ δὲ ἀνὴρ μου ἐκόλυέν με ποτὲ μὲν ὑβρίζων, ποτὲ δὲ μαχόμενος καὶ τύπτων, ἔστι δὲ ὅτε καὶ ἀπειλῶν. Ταῦτα ὀρώσα καὶ πάσχουσα ἐφ' ἐκάστης ὑπ' αὐτοῦ, ἠθύμουν, ἐστέναζον, ἔκλαιον, παρακαλοῦσα τὸν Θεὸν νυκτὸς καὶ ἡμέρας τούτου μὲν τὴν καρδίαν μαλάζαι, ἐμοῦ δὲ τὴν ἐπιθυμίαν πληρῶσαι. Ὅθεν ταῦτα ποιοῦσα καὶ πράττουσα ἐσκεπτόμην ἐν μοναστηρίῳ γυναικῶν εἰσελθεῖν, ἀλλ' ἦδειν, εἰ τοῦτο ποιήσω, τὸν ἄνδρα μου οὐ λανθάνω, μὴ λανθάνουσα δὲ θλίβω καὶ ἐαυτῇ καὶ τῷ μοναστηρίῳ προεξένουν· ὁ γὰρ ἀνὴρ μου οὐδὲν παρητεῖτο τῶν εἰς κακίαν καὶ διαστροφήν φερόντων ποιῆσαι καὶ ἐμοί, ὡς εἴρηται, καὶ τῷ μοναστηρίῳ.

Matrona's words are telling of the hagiographer's perspective on her marriage: being married to Dometianos and being the mother of a child was serving "marriage and sin" and *not* serving God.²¹⁹ When Matrona attempted to depart for night services, her husband would abuse her with insults, blows, and threats, and her words here imply that Dometianos knew of her desire for the religious life, as she feared he would find her if she escaped to a women's monastery. In her

young women and fathering children, such as Maria/Marinos (BHG 1163/ BHO 8) or Eugenia of Rome. Lampsides edition of fourth-seventh century text, *Ἅγιος Εὐγένιος ὁ πολιούχος τῆς Τραπεζοῦδος*, Ἀθήνα: Ἐκδόσις Παμποντιακῆς Ἐνώσεως, 1984: 53-75. Accessed through <http://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/Iris/Cite?5086:001:0>.

²¹⁷ This was a of Theodosius II but only received in the Eastern Empire. *Codex Justinianus* 5.17.8 (449).

²¹⁸ *Life of Matrona* 8.

²¹⁹ This sentence is highly reminiscent of the prayer of Maximilla in the *Apocryphal Acts of Andrew* where she pleads God to rescue her from her husband's "filthy intercourse", keeping her "pure and chaste, giving service only to you, my God". *Passion of Andrew* 14, trans. in Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride*, 47.

despondency, Matrona cried out to God to soften Dometianos' heart so that she could fulfill her desire, knowing that Dometianos "would have refused nothing to bring evil and distress" upon her and the convent she entered. In Matrona's version of this episode, there is no mention of Dometianos' anxiety over her being a courtesan, an accusation that would seem ridiculous given her active asceticism and humble appearance. Rather, one could almost infer the opposite, that her dress embarrassed him, perhaps advertising Matrona's commitment to chastity and continence in a showy manner, similar to Augustine's criticism of Ecdicia.

Augustine's famous *Letter* 262 to Ecdicia, a wealthy matron, chastised her for bringing about her husband's adultery through her own imprudent and brash asceticism: Ecdicia vowed unilateral continence without consulting her husband and dressed as a widow, thus shaming her husband with a public display of her disregard and hence disobedience to him. Further, she gave away their son's inheritance to some passing monks without her husband's blessing. Augustine argues that these acts, done without her husband's agreement, cost Ecdicia any spiritual benefit she might have received from her efforts.²²⁰ Kate Cooper implies that Ecdicia's act was perhaps not uncommon among married women hoping to gain some spiritual renown by a public display of withholding conjugal rights from their husbands.²²¹ This stance on withholding sex and renouncing marriage for spiritual benefit has a literary precedent in the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles, where married women under the guidance of an apostle renounced their very unwilling husbands and suffered martyrdom. Dated between the second and fourth centuries, the Apocryphal Acts and their teachings on continence provided "influential models for female piety" for centuries.²²² Regarded as an inversion of the Greek romance, key episodes in the Acts focus on women leaving their earthly marriages to be united with Christ. In the *Acts of Xanthippe and Polyxena*, the young wife Xanthippe is inspired by the teaching of Paul and announces to her husband Probus her intention to live in chastity; Probus laments bitterly:

Alas, how wretched was the day on which I was married to Xanthippe. If only I had died and not seen her! I shall pray to the God of Paul. Perhaps he will do to me also what is fitting, so that I may not become a reproach in the world, being rejected by her."²²³

Probus has "not even the consolation of a child from her but only... grief upon grief".²²⁴ In the *Acts of Andrew*, married life is described by the apostle as "foul and filthy".²²⁵ When Andrew's disciple Maximilla declares her desire to live in chastity apart from her husband Aegeates, Andrew prays that God would protect her "from this disgusting pollution [intercourse]" and

²²⁰ Augustine, *Letter* 262. See also Augustine, *Letter* 127 and the anonymous *Letter to Celantia* 28 for the necessity of both spouses agreeing to continence. Clark, *Reading Renunciation*, 275.

²²¹ Cooper, *The Virgin and Bride*, 114, 122; For a further discussion on this letter, see Cooper, "Institutions of Womanly Influence", 158-60 and *The Virgin and the Bride*, 106-7.

For the martyr Anastasia and the women of the *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, their husband troubles began when they ceased sexual relations with their spouses. Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride*, 112.

²²² The dating of the Apocryphal Acts is insecure, and Cooper looks to Schneemelcher's introduction to his *New Testament Apocrypha* (1992), 75-86. Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride*, 46.

²²³ *Acts of Xanthippe and Polyxena* 20, trans. Cox Miller 174-5

²²⁴ *Acts of Xanthippe and Polyxena* 6, trans. Cox Miller, 168.

²²⁵ *Acts of Andrew* 37.

“cause her to sleep apart from her visible husband and wed her to her inner husband”.²²⁶ When the unsuspecting Aegeates overhears Maximilla praying for him, he praises her devotion, unaware that Maximilla’s true prayer is to be rescued from her husband’s “filthy intercourse” and be kept “pure and chaste”, giving service only to God.²²⁷ Maximilla’s avoidance of her husband Aegeates makes him suspect her of a secret affair.²²⁸ The more she refuses her husband, the more he desires her and becomes desperate for reconciliation. Aegeates’ misery ends in suicide brought on by insanity from his wife’s rejection of him.²²⁹ As Cooper highlights, Maximilla is a wife who does not persuade her husband to her cause, but rather drives him mad and abandons him, not unlike Matrona would proceed with Dometianos.²³⁰

Matrona’s “many words” eventually appease Dometianos, who allows her to leave the house, and she uses her first chance to escape by running to the Church of the Holy Apostles.²³¹ At the church, Matrona begs the apostles to deliver her from her “vain life” [*ἐκ τοῦ ματαιίου βίου τούτου*] and that she be deemed worthy to serve Christ [*ἀξιωθῆναι δὲ δουλεύειν αὐτῷ*]. Matrona’s petition to the apostles mentions her husband as the cause of her troubles: “Soften the heart of my husband, for it is he who hinders and thwarts me.” [*καταμαλάξατε τὴν καρδίαν τοῦ ἀνδρός μου, ὅτι αὐτός ἐστιν ὁ κωλύων καὶ ἐμποδίζων με*].²³² Leaving the church, Matrona takes refuge in the home of the pious widow Susanna and makes plans with Eugenia on how to leave her husband and daughter. Matrona knows that she must escape Dometianos’ notice, otherwise he will prevent her from her goal. [*Μήποτε πράγματα παράσχη ὁ Δομετιανὸς τῇ λαμβανούσῃ με μονῇ καὶ κωλύσῃ με τοῦ σκοποῦ τῆς μου*].²³³ As Matrona recalls later to Bassianos, God led her to a men’s monastery through a dream: she dreamed that Dometianos was chasing and threatening her, and when she was about to be overtaken and hurt by him, certain monks rescued her.²³⁴ Matrona takes this dream to mean that she should enter a men’s monastery to hide from Dometianos, but this dream also gives her a glimpse of her later life on the run from her husband once her identity at the men’s monastery is revealed. The threat of domestic violence is ever-present in the text until Matrona becomes as an abbess.

After Matrona’s true identity as a woman is revealed at Bassianos’ monastery and knowledge of her existence there becomes the talk of Constantinople, Dometianos hastens to Bassianos, demanding his wife:

And after he had run around to other monasteries, he came running like a wild beast to the monastery of the blessed Bassianos, shrieking with violence and shouting loudly and beating at the doors with stones, saying, “Give me my wife.

²²⁶ *Acts of Andrew* 16.

²²⁷ *Acts of Andrew* 14, discussed in Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride*, 47.

²²⁸ *Acts of Andrew* 23. Indeed, as Kate Cooper has pointed out, a theme of the Apocryphal Acts are the triangles between the newly converted woman desiring continence, her marriage partner, and the apostle. Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride*, 51.

²²⁹ *Acts of Andrew* 65.

²³⁰ As Cooper points out, all known advice of Christian clergy to married women indicates the reverse: “wives married to insufficiently Christianized husbands were expressly forbidden to neglect the opportunity their influence gave them to serve the Church.” Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride*, 64; see also Cooper, “Insinuations of Womanly Influence”, 158-162.

²³¹ Built by Constantius II (337-361), the Church of the Holy Apostles housed the imperial mausolea.

²³² *Life of Matrona* 3.

²³³ *Life of Matrona* 4.

²³⁴ *Life of Matrona*, 8.

*Give me my hope. Give me my consolation. For Whom God has joined together, let no one put asunder [Matt 19:6].*²³⁵

ἔδραμεν ὡς θῆρ ἄγριος εἰς τὸ τοῦ μακαρίου Βασιανοῦ μοναστήριον μετὰ τὸ καὶ ἄλλα μοναστήρια περιελθεῖν, βίαια κράζων καὶ μεγάλα βοῶν καὶ τὰς θύρας λίθοις κόπτων καὶ λέγων· Δότε μοι τὴν γυναῖκά μου, δότε μοι τὴν ἐλπίδα μου, δότε μοι τὴν παραμυθίαν μου· οὐδὲ γὰρ ὁ Θεὸς συνέζευξεν, ὑμεῖς μὴ χωρίζετε [Matt 19:6].

This passage confirms that Dometianos had been privy to Matrona's desires, and as she predicted, he would not rest until he found her, visiting all the other monasteries [presumably in Constantinople]. Further, the image of Dometianos presented here is somewhat convoluted: he is at once a "wild beast", "shrieking with violence" in a manner similar to the demons Matrona battles in Beirut,²³⁶ and beating the monastery doors with stones, but he is also a man endowed with rational speech, accurately quoting the Gospel and making a demand deemed reasonable by canon law.²³⁷ He then accurately accuses Eugenia of being Matrona's guide and leading her to the monastery, something Eugenia vehemently denies; the text here blurs the events to make Dometianos appear more ridiculous, suggesting that Dometianos was unreasonable to suspect Eugenia of aiding his wife's escape.²³⁸ The monks of the monastery likewise deny that there was a woman in their community and mock Dometianos:

Wherefore, since as you are a man, if ever such a bad one, we shall receive you: for, as is said, this is a monastery of men, and is called such. If you do not know this, go and the whole city will confirm this to you." Hearing these things Dometianos pricked more with passion and burned with anger, inasmuch as he had nothing reasonable to reply or to do, since he had been told that it was a eunuch that they had received and that he was no longer among them, and he went away hanging his head and distressed.

Οθεν καὶ σέ, ἐπειδὴ ἀνὴρ εἶ, κἂν τοιοῦτος ἦ, δεχόμεθά σε· ἀνδρῶν γὰρ ἐστίν, ὡς

²³⁵ *Life of Matrona* 10.

²³⁶ Leslie Dossey, "Wife Beating and Manliness in Late Antiquity", *Past & Present* no. 199 (May, 2008), 3-40, 20.

²³⁷ The canon 14 of the Council of Gangra (340) forbade women from leave their husbands for asceticism. Separation and divorce in the late fifth and sixth centuries were complicated; laws fluctuated and Church Fathers disagreed over Christian justifications for divorce. Kyle Harper notes that in the fifth century, the Eastern empire was generally more liberal and in favor of unilateral divorce, and spouses could separate from each other with little cause and few (if any) penalties. In the Western empire, following the law of 421 (*Codex Theodosianus* 3.16.2), a woman could divorce her husband without cause, but in doing so she would lose both her dowry and nuptial gift; if she divorced her husband on the grounds of a minor cause, the woman would lose some property and could not remarry; following a major offense, a woman could divorce her husband without a loss of property, but she could not remarry for five years. Following the extension of the Theodosian Code in the Eastern Empire in 439, Theodosius II repealed these penalties and reinstated a system of free divorce (*Nov. Theod.* 12). As Harper notes, this "liberal attitude" toward divorce prevailed in the East into the reign of Justinian, but following the plague of 542, Justinian outlawed consensual divorce (*Nov. Just.* 117.8-10) altogether, though this was later repealed by his nephew Justin II in 566 (*Nov. Just.* 140). Harper, "Marriage and Family" 676-677, 680.

²³⁸ *Life of Matrona* 10.

εἴρηται, τὸ μοναστήριον τοῦτο καὶ ὀνομάζεται· εἰ δὲ ἀγνοεῖς, ὕπαγε καὶ πᾶσα ἡ πόλις διαβεβαιοῦται σε περὶ τούτου; Ταῦτα ἀκούσας ὁ Δομετιανὸς πλεον μὲν τῶ θυμῷ ἐκεντεῖτο καὶ τῇ ὀργῇ ἐξεκαίετο, μηδὲν δὲ εὐλογον ἔχων ἀποκριθῆναι ἢ ποιῆσαι, διὰ τὸ ἀκοῦσαι εὐνοῦχον εἶναι ὃν ἐδέξαντο καὶ τοῦτον αὐτὸν μὴ εἶναι ἐν αὐτοῖς, ἀνεχώρησεν κεκυφὸς καὶ ἀνιώμενος.

The scene is almost comical: Dometianos is called “ever such a bad” man as Bassianos’ monks mockingly offer to receive him into their community, reiterating that their community is for men, as any sensible person in the city knows. Dometianos leaves humiliated and seething. The intervention of Matrona’s friends and fellow monks on her behalf is indicative of larger attitudes against wife beating in the Late Antique East and community involvement to protect women from physical abuse.

As Leslie Dossey has shown, for most of the fifth and sixth centuries, wives in the Eastern Empire had legal and social recourse against spousal battery.²³⁹ John Chrysostom, who considered wife beating to be the height of hybris,²⁴⁰ describes how friends and neighbors would run to the assistance of a woman being beaten; the social shame upon the husband would be so severe following such violence that “it would be better for the earth to open up on the man... rather than he let himself be seen at the agora afterwards.”²⁴¹ Papyri from Late Antique Egypt provide evidence for the punishment of abusive husbands and community involvement in protecting and advocating for injured wives to magistrates.²⁴² While wives were prohibited from divorcing abusive husbands in the later sixth century, Dossey cites Matrona’s vita as a hagiographical example of community support, as her friends assist in disguising her as a eunuch, lie about their acquaintance, and belittle Dometianos in the process. Dometianos’ interaction with the monks of Bassianos’ monastery further stirring up his anger and determination to find Matrona, which drives the plot for the next half of the vita.

With Bassianos’ blessing, Matrona enters a women’s monastery in Emesa (Homs, Syria), but her growing fame as a miracle worker and holy woman soon reaches Dometianos in Constantinople. Arriving at her monastery in Emesa, Dometianos attempts to gain access to Matrona by sending notes through noblewomen and “requesting to do obeisance to her, making a pretense of supplication and contriving treachery in the pretext of honor” [ἀξιῶν προσκυνῆσαι αὐτήν, εἰρωνικῆν τινα ἰκετεῖαν πλαττόμενος καὶ προσχήματι τιμῆς τὴν ἐπιβουλὴν μηχανώμενος].²⁴³ His appearance is described to Matrona, who quickly recognizes him to be her husband and tells the women she will meet with him in their company after seven

²³⁹ Dossey, “Wife Beating and Manliness”. This chapter does not do justice to the theme of domestic violence within the vita; I will return to this subject in later work.

²⁴⁰ Chrysostom, Homily on I Corinthians 26.7 (PG 61.222); Homily on the Ephesians, 20.7 (PG 62.144); Dossey, “Wife Beating and Manliness”; Joy A. Schroeder, “John Chrysostom’s Critique of Spousal Violence”, *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, vol. 12 (2004); Arjava, *Women and Law*, 130-3; Beaucamp, *Le Statut de la femme à Byzance*, ii, 321-3; Nathan, *Family in Late Antiquity*, 103-5.

²⁴¹ Chrysostom, Homily on I Corinthians 26.7 (PG 61.222), trans. Dossey, “Wife Beating and Manliness”, 8. Libanius shares a similar sentiment in his *Declamations* 26.47.

²⁴² Sources cited in Dorsey, “Wife Beating and Manliness”, 14 n.50: *Sammelbuch griechischer Urkunden aus Ägypten*, i, no. 4658, 2.11-13 (Arsinoe, fifth or sixth century); Beaucamp, *Le Statut de la femme à Byzance*, ii, 95; *Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, vi, no. 903 (fourth century); *ibid.*, 1, n. 3581 (fourth or fifth century); *Griechische Urkunden der Papyrussammlung zu Leipzig*, no. 39 (Hermopolis, 390 AD); *ibid.*, no. 41 (Hermopolis, fourth century).

²⁴³ *Life of Matrona* 13.

days. Dometianos eagerly awaits the meeting, anticipating the day “as a great feast”, but during this time Matrona escapes to Jerusalem. When her fellow nuns are confronted with her departure, they lament that a “powerful demon” [δαίμων ἰσχυρὸς] must have shaken her and taken her from their convent.²⁴⁴ Dometianos makes countless inquiries about her and, “because her fame made her conspicuous everywhere” [ἡγὰρ φήμη πανταχοῦ φανεράν ἐποίηι], he easily traced her to Jerusalem, where he promised a handsome reward for the person who could point her out to him.²⁴⁵ Once in Jerusalem, Matrona’s appearance is highly conspicuous: she is very tall, fine, and pale, and wearing a hair shirt.²⁴⁶ Dometianos offers a large reward to the person who can lead him to Matrona and solicits a group of women to track her down for him. In the Church of the Anastasis, Matrona sees Dometianos in the crowd; she keeps her gaze downward and approaches him, bending down as if to pick up a stone just as he passes her and escapes unnoticed. Soon afterward, however, she is approached by the women searching on Dometianos’ behalf, who describe him to Matrona as “a certain illustrious man of the emperor’s suite” [ποτε τοῦ κομητάτου λαμπρὸς ἀνὴρ].²⁴⁷ This is the only instance where Dometianos’ elite status is specified, illuminating his role and position in the imperial court. Matrona tells the women to wait three days before she will meet him and attempts to escape to Mt. Sinai during this time, but Dometianos recognizes her message as “a ruse and a trick” [ὑπέρθεσις καὶ χλεύη], and he makes inquiries to track her down “like a Lacedaemonian dog trained in the hunt” [ὥσπερ τις κύων λακωνικὸς καὶ εἰς θήραν δεδιδαγμένος].²⁴⁸ When Matrona learns that Dometianos is almost upon her, she is “seized with great fear” and changes her attire, dwelling in a demon filled temple outside Beirut and

choosing to be devoured by demons or beasts rather than fall into the hands of her husband. For she said, “Demons are not strong enough to harm me, who serves God, and if I truly and piously pursue <virtue>, the beasts perhaps will respect me; but if my husband gets hold of me, he will be more cruel than demons and beasts.

έλομένη μᾶλλον ὑπὸ δαιμόνων ἢ θηρίων ἀναλωθῆναι ἢ εἰς τὰς χεῖρας τοῦ ἀνδρὸς αὐτῆς περιπεσεῖν. Ἔλεγεν γὰρ ὅτι· δαίμονες Θεῶ δουλεύουσάν με ἀδικῆσαι οὐ δύναται, θῆρες δὲ τὴν ἀρετὴν, εἰ γνησίως [περιπεσεῖν δαίμονες γὰρ φησιν οὐ μὴ με ἀδικήσωσι Θεῶ δουλεύουσάνθηρες δὲ εἰ τὴν ἀρετὴν γνησίως P.] καὶ εὐλαβῶς μετέρχομαι, τιμήσωσιν ἴσως, ὁ δὲ ἀνὴρ, εἰ χειρώσεται με, καὶ δαιμόνων καὶ θηρίων πικρότερος ἔσται.²⁴⁹

This passage characterizes Dometianos as baser than beasts and demons. While Matrona is sure of God’s protection from the latter creatures, her faith does not extend to protection from her husband, and this perhaps stems from the fact that Matrona knows Dometianos has the right to

²⁴⁴ *Life of Matrona* 13.

²⁴⁵ *Life of Matrona* 14.

²⁴⁶ *Life of Matrona* 14.

²⁴⁷ *Life of Matrona* 14. See footnote 55.

²⁴⁸ *Life of Matrona* 14. The expression “Lacedaemonian dog” appears in Curtius’ *Historia Alexandri Magni* 2.7.11/2.7.33 (manuscript α and β, respectively) (as cited by Mango, 34 n64), but it also appears in Hesychius of Sinai’s *De temperantia et virtute* 3.11, where the nous seeking virtue is compared to a Lacedaemonian dog seeking a hare.

²⁴⁹ *Life of Matrona* 14.

claim her. Later in the *vita*, Matrona has a dream where male personifications of Alexandria, Antioch, and Constantinople vie for her hand in marriage; she refuses them all stating, “I have made a promise unto God to remain pure, and on His account I have renounced my lawful husband” [τῷ Θεῷ γὰρ καθυπεσχόμην ἀγνεύειν, δι’ ὃν καὶ τὸν νόμιμόν μου ἄνδρα ἤρνησάμην] and “I have dedicated myself to God” [τῷ Θεῷ ἐμαυτὴν ἀνέθηκα].²⁵⁰ Matrona acknowledges that she has left her power, “lawful”, but abusive husband in pursuit of the heavenly Bridegroom.²⁵¹ Matrona is not Gorgonia, she does not lead her husband and children toward enlightenment (Dometianos is already Christian, after all), but rather drives him mad “like a Lacedaemonian dog” in her rejection of him. In this aspect, it seems as if Matrona is the antithesis of Gorgonia: she does not obtain her salvation through securing her family’s but rather by forsaking theirs. As the hagiographer seems to suggest, perhaps Dometianos is beyond saving? But this is complicated by the fact that he is also presented as a Christian, prominent courtier, and a lawful husband with the law on his side. Dometianos’ representation throughout the *vita* is inconsistent, as the narrator and Matrona relay events differently, positioning Dometianos as Matrona’s antagonist but one who is alternately pitiable and despicable, a madman with rational speech, seeking his wife, but to a violent end. Though Matrona’s anxiety over separating herself from Dometianos drives her movements and actions for over half the *vita*, all mention of him in the text ceases after her return to Constantinople. Prior to her arrival, she worries about him causing trouble for her again in the imperial city, and this makes his sudden disappearance from the text all the more surprising. Matrona’s return to Constantinople marks a shift in the *Life*, wherein Matrona is free to focus on the founding and financing of her monastery.

Bad Husbands II – Athanasia’s Husband and Money Matters

Matrona’s disciple Athanasia provides a different glimpse into an ill-fated marriage based on mutual distrust and financial inequality. Athanasia is portrayed as a young, wealthy mother with a large estate who is married to a man of weak character and lesser property. Athanasia first appears in the text following Matrona’s return to Constantinople and foundation of the convent. Athanasia and her sister come upon Matrona’s monastery by chance, drawn in by the sound of the nuns’ singing following a visit to the shrine of St. Lawrence. The two sisters meet Matrona, and Athanasia is instantly “wounded by divine longing”²⁵² to such an extent that she renounces her family, immense wealth, and “vain life” on the spot, refusing to leave Matrona’s side.²⁵³ This announcement caused her sister “fright and anxiety”, and her response to Athanasia is revealing of Athanasia’s tenuous relationship with her husband:

²⁵⁰ *Life of Matrona* 25.

²⁵¹ Council of Gangra (340), Canon 14: “If any woman shall forsake her husband, and resolve to depart from him because she abhors marriage, let her be anathema.” ed. J.D. Mansi, *Sacrorum conciliorum nova et amplissima collection* (Florence and Venice: 1798), vol II, 1104.

It is worth reiterating that during the time the *Life of Matrona* was written (in the mid-to-late sixth century), Justinian outlawed consensual divorce. Nov. Just. 140 (566); Harper, “Marriage”, 677; see also Ronald McCail, “Three Byzantine Epigrams on Marital Incompatibility”, *Mnemosyne* 21 (1968), 76-78.

²⁵² *πόθῳ θεῖῳ τραθεῖσαν* is likely inspired by the line in the Song of Songs 2.5 in the Septuagint: “I am wounded with divine love” (τετραωμένη ἀγάπης ἐγώ) . For a discussion of this phrase in hagiography, and, in particular, how it was first employed in the *Life of Melania the Younger*, see Kristi Upson-Saia, “Wounded by Divine Love” in *Melania*, ed. Catherine M. Chin and Caroline T. Schroeder (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2016), 86-98.

²⁵³ *Life of Matrona* 38.

Did I not give your husband promises concerning you? Was it not perhaps because your husband knew beforehand what you were about to do that he prevented you going? What has suddenly come over you? Why do you seek to pierce me with temptation? How can I leave without you? If I were to leave, what defense would I give concerning you? Keep your desire to yourself, and guard your intention in your heart.... only come now with me: spare me troubles and worries. Put your house in order: persuade your husband first, and abandon not your good goal.”²⁵⁴

Οὐχὶ ἐγγύας δέδωκα τῷ ἀνδρὶ σου περὶ σοῦ; οὐ προειδῶς τάχα τὸ τί ἡμελλες ποιεῖν ὁ ἀνὴρ σου διεκόλυέν σε προελθεῖν; τί σοι ἐγένετο ἐξαιφνης; τί με σπεύδεις πειρασμῶ περι πείραι; πῶς ἔχω ἀπελθεῖν ἐκτός σου; τί δὲ καὶ ἀπελθοῦσα ἀπολογήσομαι ὑπὲρ σοῦ; ἔχε τὴν ἐπιθυμίαν σου ἔνδον καὶ φύλαττε τὴν πρόθεσίν σου ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ σου· ...μόνον νῦν ἐλθὲ μετ’ ἐμοῦ· ἀπάλλαζόν με πραγμάτων καὶ φροντίδων· διάθου τὸν οἶκόν σου καλῶς· πείσον τὸν ἄνδρα σου πρότερον, καὶ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ σοῦ σκοποῦ μὴ ἐκστῆς.

Like Dometianos, Athanasia’s husband is wary that his wife is looking for ways to leave him, and Athanasia’s sister is responsible for ensuring their return from visiting the shrine, a visit that the husband clearly tried to prevent. What is also worth noting, however, is the suddenness of Athanasia’s conversion and her sister’s surprise. Both sisters beseech Matrona for assistance, and the abbess takes the side of Athanasia’s sister, urging Athanasia to return home for the time being:

“Go, child, in the meantime back to your house with your sister, and put yourself to the test, but do not reveal your desire to your husband. If this thought remains in you, then may God’s will be done. For the desire for God, my child is like a seed which comes up directly but does not straightaway bear fruit.”²⁵⁵

Ἔπαγε τέως, τέκνον, εἰς τὸν οἶκόν σου μετὰ τῆς ἀδελφῆς σου καὶ δοκίμασον σεαυτὴν καὶ τῷ ἀνδρὶ σου μὴ φανερώσης τὴν βουλήν σου· καὶ ἂν ἐπιμένῃ ἐν σοὶ ὀλογισμὸς οὗτος, τὸ τῆνικαῦτα τὸ θέλημα τοῦ Θεοῦ γένηται· ὁ γὰρ τοῦ Θεοῦ πόθος, τέκνον, σπόρω ἔοικεν εὐθέως μὲν ἀνατέλλοντι, οὐκ εὐθέως δὲ καρποφοροῦντι·

Urging Athanasia not to reveal her plan to her husband, Matrona continues by indicating that Athanasia’s sudden spark of divine love and desire for asceticism was not unusual or marvelous, but that she would need to prove her character before attempting a religious life, reminding Athanasia of her youth and life of luxury:

“For you are young and the fire of bodily desires burn within you, and the flower and beauty of bodily form blooms in you. You are adorned with great wealth, and now you have/cling to a husband, you are of a noble lineage, and you have acquired much property, your body is delicate and weak, you are served in every wise by handmaidens and attendants. Asceticism, my child, is for one who serves, not one who is served.”²⁵⁶

²⁵⁴ *Life of Matrona* 39.

²⁵⁵ *Life of Matrona* 39.

²⁵⁶ *Life of Matrona* 39.

νεωτέρα γὰρ εἶ και τὸ πῦρ τῆς σωματικῆς ἐπιθυμίας καιόμενον ἐν σοὶ φέρεις, ἐπανθεῖ δέ σοι ἀκμή και τὸ τῆς σωματικῆς πλάσεως κάλλος· πλούτῳ κομᾶς πολλῶ, ἀνδρὶ νῦν προσωμίλησας, τὸ γένος περιβλεπτον ἔχεις, περιουσίαν μεγάλην κέκτησαι, τὸ σωματίόν σου τρυφερόν ἐστίν και ἀσθενέστατον, πάντη ὑπόδουλίδων και παιδῶν ἐξυπηρετεῖσαι· ἡ δὲ ἄσκησις, τέκνον, ὑπηρετοῦντός ἐστίν, οὐχ ὑπηρετουμένου.

Matrona’s reproof casts Athanasia as a pampered matron who clings to [literally “holds or has intercourse with”] her husband. The use of *προσωμίλησας* hints at an on-going conjugal relationship between Athanasia and her husband, which is further supported by Matrona’s description of Athanasia’s body as still burning with bodily desires and blooming with beauty.²⁵⁷ Her visit to Matrona’s convent, however, inspires a dramatic change in Athanasia’s lifestyle, which has permanent repercussions for her family: while she is occupied with asceticism, her only child dies²⁵⁸ (this will be discussed in detail in the following chapter) and the her marriage unravels.

When Athanasia visits her country estate during the harvest season, her husband stays behind in Constantinople and breaks into Athanasia’s money chest, stealing a sack of gold with the help of an unwilling slave. The scene is described with great drama: as the husband and slave come down the front stairs of the house, the money-sack bulging out behind them, they are caught red-handed by Athanasia’s chief stewardess; when the stewardess attempts to intervene, the husband shouts angrily at her and takes the sack outside the gate of the estate.²⁵⁹ Athanasia’s husband did this because “he was a squanderer” [*κακοδάπανος γὰρ ὦν*] who did not have “enough for himself”.²⁶⁰ Informed of this treachery by her stewardess, Athanasia quickly returns home, where her slaves report how her husband forced them to be accomplices in his theft.²⁶¹

The loyalty that Athanasia’s slaves show her by reporting her husband’s doings is reminiscent of John Chrysostom’s criticisms of unequal marriages, especially where a poorer man married a wealthy woman.²⁶² Chrysostom believed that the natural result of such unions would be a reversal of gender roles, as the wife would inevitably rule her husband and his own servants would make fun of him behind his back; if such a husband should every try to assert his authority, the slaves would balk, “Who does he think he is? What did he have before he came here?” and even “Shouldn’t I check first with your wife? Doesn’t everything belong to her?”²⁶³

²⁵⁷ *Life of Matrona* 39.

²⁵⁸ *Life of Matrona* 41.

²⁵⁹ *Life of Matrona* 42.

²⁶⁰ *Life of Matrona* 42.

²⁶¹ *Life of Matrona* 42.

²⁶² Unequal marriages, where one partner had more wealth and/or status than the other, were a matter of great social anxiety in Late Antiquity and a common occurrence. Harper, “Marriage and Family”, 691; Beaucamp, *Le statut de la femme a byzance* (1990), 273 ; Evans Grubbs, “Marriage and Family Relationships in the Late Roman West” in *A Companion to Late Antiquity*, (ed.) P. Rousseau (2009), 202-206.

²⁶³ John Chrysostom *Hom in Matt.* 73.4; see also *On Virginity* 53.6-21; *De non it. Conj.* 4.239-49; *Hom in Ephes.* 20.3, 20.9, *Hom. 19 I Cor.* 1 (PG 61, 152), as well as a discussion in Blake Leyerle, *Theatrical Shows and Ascetic Lives: John Chrysostom’s Attack on Spiritual Marriage*, 73.

Harper notes that Chrysostom’s sermons on the dangers of rich wives provide an “acute social observation” of Late Antique society, as the family “was shaped, profoundly, by its material context”. Harper, “Marriage”, 692; Chrysostom, *Quales ducendae sint uxores*, 4 (PG 51:231); Douglas O’Roark,

Certainly this is the response of Athanasia’s slaves to her husband’s actions, as the text suggests that all the property mentioned – gold, land, and the slaves themselves – belong to Athanasia specifically and not her husband. From a legal standpoint, a wife’s possessions (*παράφερνα*), including her dowry, were hers alone and could not be touched by her husband without her consent.²⁶⁴ Athanasia uses her husband’s theft as a “reasonable pretext for separation” and “she lived alone, as having turned her back on him” [*ἰδίαζεν ὡς ἀποστρεφόμενη αὐτόν*] but it is some time before they separate.²⁶⁵ During this period prior to her separation from her husband, Athanasia gifts the monastery with a daily supply of bread,²⁶⁶ a gesture highly appreciated by Matrona, and following which Matrona begins to pray “without ceasing” for Athanasia and her husband to separate. Athanasia slowly converts her husband to her purpose:

*Being troubled, she did not give up at every opportunity for her husband to release her. Sometimes she would say, “I cannot live together (be married) with you, who are bad (mean/poor/common) of character and lecherous and rush to unlawful deeds,” and at other times she would promise to give him much money if he would be willing to release her with goodwill. For she feared lest, if she left him and withdrew straightway, she should be subject to the judgment of the Lord that says: Whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causes her to commit adultery [Matt 5:32]; for that which is asked of the woman is asked also of the man. Furthermore, if she were to leave, she would cause no small trouble for the monastery receiving her, for he would search for her, and she refused to leave him heedlessly. Whereupon, admonishing him for a time, she brought him to agree with her good purpose, with the assent and cooperation of our Lord Jesus Christ.*²⁶⁷

καὶ τῷ ἀνδρὶ ἐνοχλοῦσα καθ’ ἐκάστην ἀπολῦσαι αὐτὴν οὐκ ἐνεδίδου, ὅτε μὲν λέγουσα · Οὐ δύναμαί σοι συνοικεῖν, φαύλῳ ὄντι τὴν προαίρεσιν καὶ λάγνῳ καὶ πρὸς πράξεις ἀθεμίτους ὠρμημένῳ; ὅτε δὲ καὶ ὑπισχνουμένη διδόναι αὐτῷ χρυσίον πολὺν εἰ βουληθεῖ εὐγνωμόνως ἀπολύειν · φοβουμένη γάρ, μὴ ἐάσασα αὐτὸν ἀναχωρήσει ἀμέσως καὶ ὑποπέσει τῇ τοῦ Κυρίου ἀποφάσει τῇ λεγούσῃ · [Matth. 5:32.] ὅστις ἐὰν ἀπολύσῃ τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ παρεκτὸς λόγου πορνείας, ποιεῖ αὐτὴν μοιχευθῆναι — τὸ γὰρ ἐπὶ γυναικὸς εἰρημένον καὶ ἐπὶ ἀνδρὸς εἴρηται, — καὶ ἀναχωρήσασα δὲ οὐ τὸ τυχόν πρᾶγμα τῷ ὑποδεχομένῳ αὐτὴν μοναστηρίῳ παράσχοι, ἐκείνου ἐπιζητοῦντος αὐτὴν, ἀσκόπως καταλεῖψαι αὐτὸν οὐκ ἠνείχετο· ὅθεν

“Close-kin marriage in Late Antiquity: The Evidence of Chrysostom”, *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 37 (1996), 405-406.

²⁶⁴ *Codex Justinianus* 5.14.8 (450). Judith Evans Grubbs, *Women and the Law in the Roman Empire: A Sourcebook on Marriage, Divorce, and Widowhood* (London: Routledge, 2002), 116-117.

Interestingly, Justinian’s *Novels* stipulate that a poor husband had little claim on his rich wife’s property, but a poor wife could claim her rich husband’s property as her own. *Novels* 117.5.

²⁶⁵ *Life of Matrona* 42. Mango notes, however, that under Justinianic law, a husband’s theft of his wife’s property was not listed as sufficient grounds for divorce. *Novels* 117.9 in *CIC* 3:558-60 in Mango, 57 n.105.

²⁶⁶ As Mango points out, Matrona’s convent was apparently not entitled to the free bread ration in Constantinople, probably due to the fact that the property was a *proasteion* outside the Constantinian walls. Mango 57 n. 106.

²⁶⁷ *Life of Matrona* 44.

ἐπινεύσει καὶ συνεργία τοῦ δεσπότητος ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ πολλῶ καιρῶ νοουθετήσασα αὐτὸν ἐποίησεν αὐτὸν συνθέσθαι τῷ ἀγαθῷ αὐτῆς σκοπῶ.

Through a series of reproofs, entreaties, and bribes, Athanasia's husband eventually agrees to separate from her. Here we see the complement of Matrona's departure from Dometianos, as differences in their circumstances merit different responses: Athanasia bides her time, being careful not to cause trouble for the convent and not to drive her husband toward sin; she justifies doing so with a scriptural passage that inverts spousal gender roles yet again, placing Athanasia in the masculine role of the husband responsible for his wife's sin if put off unjustly. Athanasia's promises of money in exchange for her release are of particular interest and are highly reminiscent of the *Life of Melania the Younger*, wherein Melania offers her young husband money in exchange for her chastity, a deal he adamantly refuses again and again.

The Sophrosyne of Melania the Younger

When Melania the Younger is described in the prologue of her Greek *vita*²⁶⁸ as possessing *sophrosyne*, it is not her wifely devotion that is being referenced, but rather her desire for continence.²⁶⁹ Shortly after their marriage, Melania proposes to her husband Pinian that if he agrees to live with her in *sophrosyne*, she will allow him to be the master of her property:

*If, my lord, you are willing to practice chastity along with me and live with me in marriage according to the law of continence, I contract you/give you authority as the lord and master of my own life.*²⁷⁰

Εἰ μὲν βούλει, φησὶν κύριέ μου, ἀγνεύειν σὺν ἐμοὶ καὶ κατὰ τὸν τῆς σωφροσύνης συνοικισθῆναί μοι νόμον, καὶ κύριόν σε καὶ δεσπότην τῆς οἰκείας ζωῆς ἐπιγράφομαι

The use of *οἰκείας* carries significant economic implications, referring to Melania's household goods and family property, as Melania elaborates:

*If this seems burdensome to you, and if you do not have the strength to bear the burning passion of youth, just look: I place before you all my possessions; hereafter you are master of them and may use them as you wish, if only you will leave my body free so that I may present it spotless, with my soul, to Christ.*²⁷¹

εἰ δὲ τοῦτό σοι ἐπαχθὲς καταφαίνεται καὶ οὐκ ἰσχύεις ἐνέγκαι τὴν πύρωσιν τῆς νεότητος, ἰδοὺ πρόκεινται σοι ἅπαντά μου τὰ ὑπάρχοντα ὧν ἐντεῦθεν ἤδη δεσπότης γενόμενος χρῆσαι καθὼς βούλει, μόνον τὸ σῶμα μου ἐλευθέρωσον, ἵνα τοῦτο σὺν τῇ

²⁶⁸ The Greek *vita* of Melania the Younger is largely believed to have been written before the Latin one, and dates most likely to the mid fifth-century (c. 452). For a complete discussion on the dating of the *vita*, see Elizabeth Clark, "Introduction" in *The Life of Melania the Younger: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary*, 1-24.

²⁶⁹ This is likewise the meaning of *sophrosyne* in the *Life of Julian and Basilissa*, dated between 431-600. Alwis, 6.

²⁷⁰ *Life of Melania the Younger* 1.

²⁷¹ *Life of Melania the Younger* 1, trans. Clark, 28.

ψυχῆ μου ἄσπιλον παραστήσω τῷ Χριστῷ κατὰ τὴν ἡμέραν ἐκείνην τὴν φοβερὰν·
οὕτω γὰρ πληροφορήσω τὴν κατὰ Θεόν μου ἐπιθυμίαν.

Melania offers Pinian control of her vast fortune, positioning this as a reasonable exchange for preserving her *sophrosyne*. Pinian offers a compromise, agreeing to live in chastity after they produce two children to inherit their possessions, a decision Melania begrudgingly accepts; nevertheless, she “kept trying to flee and to leave him all her possessions.”²⁷² The *sophrosyne* Melania practices is not the feminine virtue associated with the “good” wife, but rather the masculine self-restraint of a Late Antique philosopher or theologian, and curiously, a virtue that can be bought for a price. Though Melania was unsuccessful in bribing her own husband, she “yearned so exceedingly for *sophrosyne* that by money and admonitions she persuaded many young men and women to stay clear of licentiousness and an impure manner of life.”²⁷³ Though she could not preserve her own body untouched, Melania purchases the *sophrosyne* of others. Like Athanasia, Melania has a spiritual turning point after visiting a shrine of St. Lawrence on his feast day, and following this visit Melania’s children quickly die, leaving her free to pursue a religious life and dispose of her property.²⁷⁴

Athanasia’s separation from her husband under the pretext of asceticism was recognized as a legitimate reason for divorce under Justinian.²⁷⁵ After her separation from her husband, Athanasia frees some of her slaves, encourages others to take up the religious life along with her, and retreats to Matrona’s monastery with the remainder of her property. Arriving at the convent, she offers everything to Matrona herself, asking the abbess to be the sole steward of her possessions. Though initially refusing this request, Matrona eventually agrees to become to guardian and administrator of Athanasia’s estates, distributing the revenues to monasteries across the Eastern empire and retaining fortune enough to build walls around the convent as well as a large building with chapels and other facilities, whose architectural details are described in the *vita*.²⁷⁶ Despite having other wealthy and imperial patrons,²⁷⁷ Athanasia’s estates are essential to the completion of Matrona’s convent, and Athanasia’s sanctity is secured through her largess. No mention is made of Athanasia’s virtues as a wife or nun, apart from her “extraordinary piety” and

²⁷² *Life of Melania the Younger* 4, Clark trans. 29.

²⁷³ *Life of Melania the Younger* 29, Clark trans. 47.

²⁷⁴ *Life of Melania the Younger* 5-6.

²⁷⁵ A law from 535/6 allowed marriages to be dissolved into divorce if one spouse chose to live in monasticism, and this is of particular interest, as the *Life of Matrona* has a *terminus post quem* of 540: “Divorce takes place without blame whenever either the husband or the wife enters monastic life, and desires to live in chastity; for another law of Ours specially provides that either a man or his wife, who devotes himself or herself to a monastic life, is authorized to dissolve the marriage, and separate from his or her consort by serving a notice by way of consolation. And whatever the parties may have agreed upon in the case of the death of either, as set forth in their marriage contract, shall endure to the benefit of the abandoned wife or husband. The reason for this provision is, that wherever anyone embraces a different mode of life from that of his or her companion, he or she is considered to have died, so far as the marriage is concerned.” Justinian, *Novels* 22.5, trans. Scott, *The Civil Law*, Cincinnati, 1932.

²⁷⁶ *Life of Matrona* 45-46.

²⁷⁷ The monastery’s estate near the Theodosian walls was gifted to Matrona by a patrician woman Antiochiane out of gratitude for restoring her health, and Matrona is also visited and supported by the empresses Verina and Euphemia, wife of Anthimus, the Augustus in the West (467-472). Further discussion of the monastery’s founding and construction can be found in the final chapter of the dissertation. *Life of Matrona* 32-36.

humility; further descriptions of her virtues and character, while essential to Matrona's profile, are not fleshed out. After relaying Athanasia's conversion story in over nine chapters of the vita, the hagiographer remarks that the only reason Athanasia is included in the life at all is to show how God used her to answer Matrona's prayers for financial help in establishing her convent.²⁷⁸

Despite the negative marriages of Matrona and Athanasia, the *Life of Matrona* also provides glimpses into the lives of noblewomen and "freewomen" (ἐλεύθεραι - meaning "wives" in this period)²⁷⁹ who come to Matrona for advice and consolation regarding the care of their families. When these women are informed of Matrona's plan to leave Beirut for Constantinople, they lament bitterly that they are losing their mother and teacher who instructs them not only on spiritual matters but also on the everyday concerns of wives and mothers: "Who will speak with us concerning love for a husband, love for children, and godly housekeeping?" (τίς ἡμᾶς διαλέξεται περὶ φιλανδρίας, περὶ φιλοτεκνίας καὶ οἰκουρίας θεοφιλοῦς;).²⁸⁰ While this seems strange advice for Matrona to give, considering her own rejection of such traditional domestic female roles and spousal abuse, nevertheless, it appears that her advice and prayers regarding children and husbands and even housework were not only requested but depended upon by her married female disciples.²⁸¹ While Matrona is not shown encouraging the rejection of traditional women's roles for these women, nevertheless, their relationships with Matrona draws them away from their families. As Matrona prepares to depart for Constantinople, several of these freewomen journey with her on the pretext of visiting their children who work in the imperial city; however, once they arrive, these freewomen chose to remain with Matrona for some time, visiting Bassianos with her and making sure Matrona is established in the city before attending to their children:

Such was their affection for her, and so much did they revere her and hold her in all honor, that they deemed her establishment more important than the circumstances of their own children. For they thought, "Now that we have been saved through her prayers, we are able to see our children afterwards."

τοσαύτην γὰρ ἔσχον πρὸς αὐτὴν στοργὴν καὶ οὕτως αὐτὴν ἠδοῦντο καὶ διὰ πάσης τιμῆς ἠγῶν, ὡς καὶ προτιμῆσαι τὴν αὐτῆς ἀποκατάστασιν τῆς τῶν ἰδίων τέκνων συντυχίας, λογισάμενοι ὅτι τὰ μὲν τέκνα καὶ μετὰ ταῦτα δυνάμεθα ἰδεῖν, ἀφ' οὗ διὰ τῶν εὐχῶν αὐτῆς ἐσώθημεν.²⁸²

Matrona's significance in the lives of these women, their affection for her, and their personal concern for salvation takes precedence over their children, a theme echoed in the motherhood of Matrona herself and Athanasia; the desire for God draws mothers them away from their families and children, and this theme will be the subject of the following chapter.

²⁷⁸ *Life of Matrona* 47.

²⁷⁹ This word can also mean "widow", though that application is less likely here given the context of such freewomen asking advice concerning husbands. Lampe, *Lexicon* s.v. ἐλευθερος, A.6; Mango, 40 n74.

²⁸⁰ *Life of Matrona* 26.

²⁸¹ However, in addition to counseling these women on how best to care for their families and homes, Matrona also teaches them to "scorn this temporary, vain life and not at all prefer it to the coming everlasting life" (τοῦ μὲν προσκαίρου καὶ ματαίου καταγελᾶν βίου, τῆς δὲ μελλούσης καὶ μενούσης ζωῆς μηδὲν προτιμᾶν). *Life of Matrona* 26, 32, 33.

²⁸² *Life of Matrona* 31.

Conclusion

In Late Antiquity, “marital concord was seen as the responsibility of the wife, and if conjugal unity was breached, it was the wife who is accountable.”²⁸³ As Cooper illustrates in the *Liber ad Gregoriam*, an anonymous handbook for a Latin-speaking Christian matron, the wife who remains faithful, obedient, and devoted to her husband is worthy of praise, while the wife who scorns her husband is ungodly:

*“You will be blessed if, standing in front of the tribunal of Christ on that day [of judgement], you are able to say, “Here, Lord, is the man whom you ordained should be my husband: I guided him by so great a compliance of manner that he never held out against my will...” how ungodly, how very bitter it will be if, God forbid, being bound by the ties of certain sins, he should complain before the Judge, “The woman whom You gave to me, she herself has made a spirit of fury and anger hold sway in me, and made me sin by her continual scorn. It is through her that I have fallen into this crime... her worthlessness has caused this sin, her haughtiness has caused that one” (8)*²⁸⁴

According to this standard in the *Liber ad Gregoriam*, Gregory of Nazianzus’ Gorgonia would be held up as the epitome of the good, *sophron* wife, while Matrona would stand in opposition to this model, as a wife who “made a spirit of fury and anger hold sway [in her husband]... by her continual scorn.” Nevertheless, it is this departure from the model of the “good” Greco-Roman wife that makes Matrona saintly. Like Melania the Younger and the heroines of the Apocryphal Acts, Matrona is part of a more radical group of ascetic literary women who reject their biological and cultural roles as *matrones* in favor of spiritual motherhood; the major difference for Matrona and Athanasia, however, is that they abandon living children for this vocation. Perhaps tellingly, once Matrona and Melania renounce their married lives, they are no longer referred to as women possessing *sophrosyne*; rather, *sophrosyne* becomes personified in the *Life of Matrona* by her disciple of the same name,²⁸⁵ and in the *Life of Melania the Younger*, *sophrosyne* is the chastity of others which can be purchased for a price. As this feminine virtue transforms into “manliness of purpose” for these holy women, money matters stand at the root of both their marital troubles and sanctity. Matrona gives alms in secret from Dometianos, and when she leaves, he offers a great reward to the person who can lead him to her. In Theodore Lector’s description of Matrona in *his Ecclesiastical History* (c. 525), which predates the vita, he writes that Matrona was famous for having “abandoned her home, her wealth, and her husband”, privileging Matrona’s abandonment of her property and wealth ahead of her familial renunciation.²⁸⁶ Athanasia’s wealth is essential to the building projects of Matrona’s convent, and her money stands as a great temptation for her impoverished husband, who steals from her and at first refuses bribes to dissolve their marriage, fearing divorce will further ruin him. Melania offers Pinian all of her vast property in exchange for living in continence, and though he

²⁸³ Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride*, 131.

²⁸⁴ *Liber ad Gregoriam* 8 Trans. Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride*, 131.

²⁸⁵ Matrona’s first disciple is named Sophrone in all manuscripts except for the Vaticano gr. 807 manuscript, which refers to her as “Sophrosyne”. Sophrone is first introduced in Chapter 19, and she plays a supporting role in assisting Matrona in founding the convent in Constantinople.

²⁸⁶ Greek text in *Theodoros Anagnostes. Kirchengeschichte*, ed. G.C. Hansen (Berlin, 1971), 109.3-6.

refuses, she is later able to use her wealth to purchase the chastity of others. These acts of rejecting (while still retaining) and redistributing wealth and family are intrinsic to the sanctity of these women.

The tension being negotiated in the *Life of Matrona* is not merely wives rejecting their husbands to become brides of Christ, but rather the rejection of wealth, status, children, and the destruction of the household in favor of a Christian life so austere it was censured by canon law and the teachings of the Church Fathers. The text threatens bad husbands who hinder their ascetic wives' vocations with the loss of everything Late Antique society held dear, even the loss of their own sanity and humanity, as exemplified by the character of Dometianos. Nevertheless, there is a cost too for these wives who abandon even such "bad" husbands and their families, and this loss is expressed pointedly in the separation from their children. Children become the ultimate sacrifice for ascetic mothers on the paths towards holiness, and while painful, this sacrifice becomes a moment of metamorphosis for the holy mother. Through her sacrifice and asceticism, the holy woman's maternity is expanded and redefined in spiritual terms to include both male and female attributes, transforming her into "both mother and father."²⁸⁷

²⁸⁷ *Life of Matrona* 19, 38.

Chapter 3

“This Holy Woman is Both Mother and Father to Me”: Defining Ascetic Motherhood in the Fifth Century Christian Discourse

*For giving birth is not the defining characteristic of a mother, for that is a matter of nature; instead, a mother's defining feature is raising her child, for that is a matter of choice.*²⁸⁸

(John Chrysostom, *Homily on Maccabees*)

In Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Makrina* (380/3), Gregory describes the ascetic life of his sister and her role as the spiritual guide of their family: Makrina encouraged and facilitated the ascetic transformation and religious vocation of her siblings and relatives, instructing her mother and siblings and counseling (and occasionally admonishing) her famous episcopal brothers Gregory and Basil of Caesarea.²⁸⁹ As an ascetic virgin who built a monastic community around their family home, Gregory's Makrina took on a wide range of roles and responsibilities within her family, becoming all things to those under her spiritual direction. Following the death of her father, Makrina assisted her mother Emmelia in the running of the household, the management of their estates, dividing up of the patrimony,²⁹⁰ and raising and educating her younger siblings.²⁹¹ While Emmelia and Makrina's relationship is first described in the text in mother-child terms, with Makrina so attached to her mother's hip that Emmelia claimed she had never left the womb,²⁹² Makrina's gradual taking on of her mother's household responsibilities and estate management and Emmelia's dedication to a religious life under Makrina's instruction reverses this relationship: “the virgin became her mother's guide” in the ascetic life, “weaning” Emmelia of luxuries and comforts.²⁹³ Gregory's Makrina becomes “father, teacher, guide, mother, counsellor in every good”²⁹⁴ to her siblings, mother, the widows and virgins living in her ascetic community, and also the many lay people that seek her counsel and intercessory prayers. Makrina is even described rescuing girls exposed as infants, raising them within her community

²⁸⁸ Chrysostom, *Homily on Maccabees*. trans. Mayer with Neil, 141-142.

²⁸⁹ For a superb discussion on Makrina's asceticism, family life, and community, see Elm, “*Virgins of God*,” 78-104; see also Philip Rousseau, “The Pious Householder and the Virgin Chorus: Reflections on Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Macrina*,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 13 (2005), no. 2, 165-186.

²⁹⁰ According to the *Life*, the family owned property in several provinces and paid taxes to three different governors. 966A; 970B. Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Makrina* 5.16-50 and 10-11. For a discussion of Makrina as the domestic assistant to her mother, and relationships between mothers and daughters see Vuolanto, *Children and Asceticism*, 192-195, 200-201. See also Susan Ashbrook Harvey. “Sacred Bonding: Mothers and Daughters in Early Syriac Hagiography,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* vol. 4 no. 1 (1996), 51.

²⁹¹ Makrina is even described snatching Peter away from his wet nurse. Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Makrina* 10-11.

²⁹² Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Makrina* 962C, 964D.

²⁹³ This reference to weaning is all the more striking as Emmelia is described as nursing Makrina from her own breast, despite having a wet nurse, highlighting the close bond between mother and daughter. The *Life of Makrina* 970B-C.

²⁹⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Makrina* 10-11 [check reference]; see discussion in Elm, *Virgins of God*, 101.

and becoming their mother in all respects.²⁹⁵ Makrina's metamorphosis from pious, virginal daughter into a "mother" with spiritual authority over both her own mother, clerical brothers, and spiritual children is paradigmatic of ways motherhood was reconceived in the lives of Late Antique holy women. Kinship structures, Roman cultural expectations of motherhood, and gender norms shift throughout these texts, presenting new models of virginal or continent Christian motherhood, wherein asceticism becomes the prerequisite for spiritual maternity.

From the fourth and fifth centuries, female ascetics largely functioned as familial intercessors and offerings in Christian literature, depicted as dedicating their bodies to God and directing their prayers on behalf of the *oikos*. As Church Fathers encouraged parents to consecrate their daughters to perpetual virginity, they promised spiritual returns not only for the virgin and her family, but even their extended family and neighbors.²⁹⁶ This role of female ascetics as offerings and intercessors was not limited to the consecrated virgin, but was also applied to pious widows and even continent married women, wherein their motherhood became a central aspect of their piety. Patristic writers emphasized the role of mothers as essential to the spiritual education and general wellbeing of children and the family,²⁹⁷ and like Gregory of Nyssa, often cited their own mothers, sisters, and grandmothers as exemplars of maternal love and Christian piety, blending ascetic virtues with traditional Greco-Roman values of feminine *sophrosyne*. Though the praising of one's mother and female relatives was ultimately self-promoting,²⁹⁸ these sentiments nevertheless highlighted the central role of mothers as driving

²⁹⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Makrina* 36-38, PG 46:988b; ed and tr. Pierre Maraval, *Grégoire de Nyssa, Vie de Sainte Macrine*, Sources chrétiennes 178 (1971), 256-265.

²⁹⁶ Jerome, *Letter* 66.3, on the only benefit of reproduction was producing virgins for the Church; *Letter* 107 to Laeta on how to raise her daughter Paula (granddaughter of Jerome's close friend Paula the Elder) as a consecrated virgin; *Letter* 128 to Gaudentius on how to raise his infant daughter Pacatula, who was dedicated to virginity; Eusebius of Emesa, *Sermon* 7.24 on how a virgin daughter was "a good guardian at home" and benefited her family and neighborhood. Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity* 13.3. Basil of Caesarea's *Letter* 199, however, cautioned parents from forcing their daughters towards a life of virginity against their will. Phyllis B. Katz, "Educating Paula: A Proposed Curriculum for Raising a Fourth Century Christian Infant" in Cohen, Rutter (eds) *Constructions of Childhood in Ancient Greece and Italy*, Athens 2007, 115-27; Joan M. Peterson, "The Education of Girls in Fourth-century Rome" in Wood (ed.) *The Church and Childhood* (Cambridge, 1994), 29-37; Vuolanto, *Children and Asceticism*, 192-195, 200-201.

²⁹⁷ Augustine, *Confessions* 3.4.8; Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Makrina* 3; Gregory of Nazianzus, *Carmina* 2.1.1.445-54, *Oration* 7.5-8; Basil of Caesarea, *Letters* 204.6 and 223.3 For scholarship on this subject, see Ville Vuolanto, "Family Relations and the Socialisation of Children in Autobiographical Narratives of Late Antiquity" in *Approaches to the Byzantine Family*, ed. Leslie Brubaker and Shaun Tougher (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2013), esp. 59-63; Carole Burnett, "Mother-Child Bonding in the Greek and Latin Fathers of the Church" in *Children in Late Ancient Christianity*, ed. Cornelia B. Horn and Robert R. Phenix (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009); Cornelia Horn, "From the Roman East into the Persian Empire: Theodoret of Cyrrhus and the Acts of Mar Mari on Parent-Child Relationships and Children's Health" in *Children and Family in Late Antiquity: Life, Death and Interaction*, ed. Christian Laes, Katariina Mustakallio, and Ville Vuolanto (Leuven: Peeters, 2015); Nathan, *Family in Late Antiquity*, 149-55. See also Clarissa W. Atkinson, *The Oldest Vocation: Christian Motherhood in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), for a study on motherhood as a social construct (mainly in the Medieval West).

²⁹⁸ Elm, "Gregory's women", 190-191; Nathan Howard, "Preserving Family Honour: Gregory of Nyssa's Life of Macrina as Theological Polemic" in *Approaches to the Byzantine Family*, ed. Leslie Brubaker and Shaun Tougher (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2013), 91-105.

forces of Christian education and conversion within their homes and as powerful intercessors on behalf of their relatives. Monica prayed tirelessly for Augustine's conversion.²⁹⁹ Gregory of Nazianzus' mother Nonna and sister Gorgonia converted their husbands and raised their children in the Church; Gregory describes Nonna's endless prayers for him and how she dedicated him as a newborn to God following a dream.³⁰⁰ Makrina, as previously mentioned, was credited with educating her family in both philosophy and asceticism, inspiring the religious careers of her brothers Basil and Gregory, their mother, and other siblings, and even started a convent within their family home; as the spiritual leader of her family, Makrina surpassed her mother as the maternal head of the family.³⁰¹ John Chrysostom's mother Anthousa devoted herself to his education and pious upbringing, even if she was unenthusiastic about his ascetic aspirations.³⁰² Theodoret of Cyrrhus describes his mother introducing him to saints and inspiring his ascetic career even before his birth.³⁰³ Melania the Elder converted many of her relatives, not just to Christianity, but to lives of strict asceticism and continence³⁰⁴; her own granddaughter Melania the Younger followed closely in her footsteps, convincing her husband to live as continent ascetics and converting her aging pagan uncle to Christianity, among others. These examples illustrate a flexibility of maternal roles within the Christian family: a wife could become the spiritual mother of her husband, or a daughter the spiritual guide of her own mother and brothers. Such spiritual relationships with one's own kin reimagined the ways in which Late Antique Christian families could define themselves and their legacies.³⁰⁵ While producing heirs to continue family lines was still considered an essential duty among late Roman Christian families, patristic writers and elite ascetics fashioned new kinship structures wherein spiritual relationships surpassed and replaced biological ones. Even mothers - the most essential family figures and guardians of familial morality - could be redefined along ascetic lines through the raising of spiritual progeny.³⁰⁶

²⁹⁹ Augustine on his mother: *Confessions* 3, 4, 7-8, 9-13, 17. For Ausonius on his grandmother and aunt, see *Parentalia* 5.9-10, 6.12, 25.9-10.

³⁰⁰ Gregory of Nazianzus on his mother Nonna and sister Gorgonia, see *Orations* 7.4-8 and 8., *Carmen* 2.1.1, 11, 51-96, 98, 118-122, 434-444. On Gregory's relationship with his mother, see Raymond Van Dam, *Families and Friends in Late Roman Cappadocia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 88-93.

³⁰¹ Gregory of Nyssa on his sister Makrina and mother Emmelia, *Life of Makrina* 2-5, 7, 11, 13, 20; Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa's brother, likewise wrote about their mother and grandmother, the elder Makrina: *Letters* 204.6, 210.1, 223.3.

³⁰² By her request, Chrysostom put off his asceticism until after his mother's passing. This is discussed later on in the chapter. Chrysostom, *On the Priesthood* 1.5.

³⁰³ Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *Religious History* 9.9-10, 9.15 and 13.16-17.

³⁰⁴ Melania the Elder persuaded her niece Avita and her husband Apronianus to live in continence;

³⁰⁵ Ville Vuolanto, *Children and Asceticism* (2015), esp. 147-203.

³⁰⁶ For the essential role of mothers in Roman society, see Suzanne Dixon, *The Roman Mother* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988).

Spiritual Motherhood

Hagiographical texts and patristic writing indicate that the Christian concepts of motherhood were not limited to biological relationships and could be expressed spiritually.³⁰⁷ Many holy mothers from the fourth and fifth centuries such as Melania the Elder, Paula, Melania the Younger, and Matrona of Perge, had both biological and spiritual children. Nevertheless, these texts also indicate that for holy mothers, their spiritual maternity was contingent on separating themselves or altering their relationships with their biological children. A vital step in their transformation from matrons into Brides of Christ and spiritual mothers was to forfeit their biological motherhood through this separation.³⁰⁸ Childbearing and child-rearing were costly commitments of time and resources, both in a monetary and spiritual sense; a child could be “such a burden” to a woman desiring a religious life and a distraction from her ascetic vocation.³⁰⁹ While leaving behind one’s children for personal pursuits was not a regular (or generally acceptable) practice among Roman mothers, it became an *askesis* and source of spiritual strength in the hagiographies of Late Antique holy mothers. However, despite separating from their children, elite ascetic women rarely cut ties with their families; often, they remained in close contact, encouraging the religious vocations of their relatives, and built-up spiritual patrimony – treasure in heaven – for their kin through the construction of churches, monasteries, fostering spiritual children (many of whom were their own relatives), and charitable largess.

Matrona of Perge, therefore, stands apart from other aristocratic ascetic women in her utter renunciation of her biological family. Instead of guiding her husband Dometianos or other relatives towards asceticism, Matrona abandons them entirely, giving her daughter Theodote away to be raised by her friend Susanna, and cutting all ties with her home. Matrona replaces her kin with a new spiritual family: Eugenia becomes her spiritual mother, the abbot Bassianos her father, Christ is her Bridegroom, her fellow monks at Bassianos’ monastery are her brothers; Susanna and other unnamed nuns at Emesa become her sisters, while her lay and monastic disciples from Beirut and Constantinople become her children. Indeed, Matrona even finds a replacement for herself in Susanna, by making Susanna Theodote’s new mother. Thus, even though she abandoned her life as a matron and mother, motherhood is the foundation of Matrona’s sanctity and a theme that both bookends and permeates her vita. As Matrona’s hagiographer makes clear, she is holy *because* she was an “affectionate mother”³¹⁰ who guided the religious lives of the women (and men from Bassianos’ adjoining monastery) who lived within the monastic community she founded; the saved souls of her spiritual progeny secured

³⁰⁷ Family metaphors used to define spiritual relationships, and monastic leaders were already referred to as fathers and mothers by the early fourth century in both the Eastern and Western empire. For a detailed discussion on this subject, see Vuolanto, *Children and Asceticism*, 69-79 and 74 on spiritual motherhood.

³⁰⁸ Paula was perhaps an exception to this rule, as she took her daughter Eustochium with her to found a convent in Jerusalem. This is discussed on 96-98.

³⁰⁹ Jerome gives voice to Melania the Elder in a letter to Paula on familial renunciation, saying that the deaths of Melania’s family freed her from a great burden: *expeditious tibi seruitura sum, domine, quia tanto me liberasti onere. Letter 39.5 (CSEL. 54: 305)*. For more letters by Jerome on the burdens of childbirth, illness, and raising children, see *Letters 22.2, 49 (48).14, 19; 50.5; 54.4-5; 107.13; 127*. See also Ambrose’s *Letter 20 to Marcellina concerning virginity 1.6*, which indicates that the more children a woman has, the more suffering she endures.

³¹⁰ *Life of Matrona 1. Διαβαίνει δὲ καὶ πρὸς ἡμᾶς πόθῳ καὶ φρονήσει καὶ προνοίᾳ μητρὸς φιλοστόργου.*

Matrona's sainthood, and as the *vita* indicates, Matrona's protection and intercessions extended over her community even after her death.³¹¹ Numerous stories in the *vita* show the maternal love, counseling, and prayers Matrona poured over her spiritual children and her concern for their spiritual and bodily well-being. Matrona is depicted feeding, clothing, healing and education the nuns in her care "as a mother"; in turn, her disciples regard her as "both mother and father", and even dearer than their own families, parents, and children. Indeed, Matrona's influence over her disciples is such that she supersedes all other relationships in their lives – in short, replacing their kin entirely.³¹² This central theme of Matrona's maternal role parallels cultural, religious, and legal shifts in Late Antiquity which redefined motherhood along both biological and spiritual lines.

Mothers in the Late Roman Law and Society

The importance of mothers within the Christian family developed within a larger socio-cultural shift towards the nuclear family, which resulted in an increase in the rights of mothers over their own children, dowries and property through the restructuring of the *bona materna*.³¹³ While mothers occupied important roles in Greco-Roman families, prior Roman law stipulated that widows had no *potestas* over their children or their children's property. Children belonged to their father's family, and he (or the child's guardian or tutor) was responsible for safeguarding his offspring's patrimony until they came of age.³¹⁴ Under Augustus, the *ius liberorum* was the primary means for a free Roman mother to achieve an increased legal status, but she had to bear three living children (or four if she was a freedwoman).³¹⁵ The *ius liberorum* gave mothers inheritance rights and freed them from lifelong male legal guardianship, but these laws were abolished by Constantine in 320, affectively liberating women from the need to procreate to attain legal advantage.³¹⁶ Constantine instituted laws to safeguard the inheritance of children passed from their mothers, called the *bona materna* or "maternal goods", which consisted of a mother's property designated at the time of her marriage, including her dowry and pre-nuptial gifts.³¹⁷ Though fathers (and other relatives) were forbidden from exploiting this maternal

³¹¹ *Life of Matrona* 1, 50-51.

³¹² For example, the nun Sophrosyne forsaking her family, Athanasia's devotion to Matrona over her husband and daughter, and the mothers of Beirut who follow Matrona to Constantinople and do not attend to their own children. *Life of Matrona*, 19, 26, 31, 38, 41-42, 44.

³¹³ Susanna Elm, "Die sponsa Christi und der marriage plot – eine neue Rolle für Frauen und ihre Entwicklung im spätrömischen Reich" in *Braut Christi*, 32-33; *Codex Theodosianus* 8.16.1, 3.2.1; Judith Evans Grubbs, *Law and Family*, 118-119; Antti Arjava, "The Survival of Roman Family Law after the Barbarian Settlements" in *Law, Society and Authority*, LA (2001), 39; Patlagean, 1986, 427.

³¹⁴ Legal age of adulthood was 25, though minors could be released from this guardianship earlier if they displayed maturity. *Codex Theodosianus* 2.17.1.1 (324). Evans Grubbs, *Women and the Law*, 23.

³¹⁵ Gaius, *Institutes* I.145, I.194. Evans Grubbs, *Women and the Law*, 38.

³¹⁶ Arjava, *Women and Law*, 77.

³¹⁷ *Codex Theodosianus* 3.8.2. Several scholars argue that Constantine's laws on the *bona materna* were not new ideas but rather reflective of a long-standing Roman principles of the function of maternal property as something separate from the paternal. John Crook, "Women in Roman Succession" in *The Family in Ancient Rome: New Perspectives*, ed. Beryl Rawson (Ithaca, NY: 1986), 77; Michel Humbert, *Le Remariage à Rome: Étude de l'histoire juridique et social* (Milan, 1972), 401-5; Evans Grubbs, *Law and Family*, 116.

property under Constantinian law (“use and possession, but not actual ownership”)³¹⁸, concern over protecting the *bona materna* was reiterated by Theodosius, Theodosius II, and Justinian, highlighting the importance of maternal property and its preservation as the inheritance of children.³¹⁹ Justinian, in particular, gave mothers the ability to pass their inheritance directly to their children, bypassing their husbands entirely.³²⁰ Mothers also obtained more rights in determining their children’s futures in Late Antiquity. While elite Roman widows often assumed guardianship-type roles over their children, Theodosius I put into law what was already a culturally acceptable practice, by allowing widowed mothers legal guardianship over their children if they did not remarry.³²¹ These laws and others developed by Justinian in the sixth century illustrate a socio-cultural change in the way mothers were perceived within their families and communities. As women gained more rights over their children and property in the fifth century, these changes paralleled shifts in the representation of imperial women and their promotion of the cult of the Virgin Mary and her essential role in Christian salvation theology.

Marian Veneration in Constantinople and the Contradictory Ideal of the Virginal Mother

Ecclesiastical developments around the role and veneration of the Virgin Mary and her promotion by imperial women contributed to broadening the place of women in Christianity with a new emphasis on motherhood. As Marian veneration began to take shape liturgically in the second half of the fourth century,³²² Christian theologians wrote and preached about her unique role as both virgin and mother. While the earliest patristic writers focused on Mary’s virginity as the source of her virtue, fourth century Greek Fathers such as Athanasios of Alexandria, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus emphasized Mary’s motherhood by referring to her as *Theotokos* (the God Bearer). This title underscored her “Divine Maternity”³²³ as essential for human salvation: without the Incarnation, there was no Resurrection.³²⁴ Gregory

³¹⁸ Evans Grubbs, *Women and the Law*, 229.

³¹⁹ Prior to Constantine, the *bona materna* would automatically go to the paterfamilias (the father of her children or other legal guardian) until the children either became of age or when he died. *Codex Theodosianus*, 3.7.3 (428); Arjava, *Women and Law*, 98-105; Evans Grubbs, *Women and the Law*, 220-21.

³²⁰ Prior to Justinian, as Antti Arjava points out, fathers could still exploit the *bona materna* without legal repercussions, despite laws intended to protect his children’s interests. Arjava, “Women and Law”, 99-104; *Codex Theodosianus* 8.18.1 and 8.18.3 (334); Justinian, *Novels* 117.1 (542); Elm, “*Sponsa and the Sponsa Christi*”, 268.

³²¹ *Codex Theodosianus* 3.5.11 (380), 3.17.4 (390), 3.16.2 (421), 8.18.1 and 8.18.3 (334); Justinian, *Novella* 117.1 (542), *Institutes* 4.6.29; *Codex Justinianus* 5.12.30 (529) and 5.12.29-30; 5.13.1; 8.17.12.; Evans Grubbs, *Women and the Law*, 113-14, 231.

³²² Stephen Shoemaker remarks that lay piety towards the Virgin “frequently stood well in advance of dogmatic developments”. Shoemaker, *Mary in Early Christian Faith and Devotion* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2016), 166, 238.

³²³ Shoemaker, *Mary in Early Christian Faith and Devotion*, 167 n4.

³²⁴ Athanasios of Alexandria, *On Virginitiy* 3 (PG 28, 256); *Against the Arians* 3, 29, 31 (PG 26, 385, 388-89); *On the Incarnation of the Word* 8 (PG 25, 209); Basil of Caesarea, *On the Holy Generation of Christ* 5 (PG 31, 1468 B); Gregory of Nyssa, *Letter* 3 (PG 46, 1024 A). John Chrysostom, however, was less interested in the Virgin’s divine role. See summary in Shoemaker, *Mary in Early Christian Faith and Devotion*, 168.

of Nazianzus, in particular, aligned the use of the term “Theotokos” with orthodox belief. In a letter to the priest Kledonios, Gregory explains the necessity of Mary’s role:

*If anyone does not admit that holy Mary is Mother of God (Theotokos), he is cut off from the Godhead. If anyone claims that Christ merely passed through Mary, as if passing through a channel, but denies that he was formed within her in a divine way (because there is no intervention of a man), and in a human way (that is, according to the laws of conception), he is equally godless. If anyone says that a man was formed first, who only afterwards was clothed with divinity, let him be condemned. For that would not be a generation of God but a denial of divine generation.*³²⁵

This early groundwork highlighting Mary’s paradoxical motherhood and its essential role in the economy of salvation became part of Christian doctrine in the fifth century with the Councils of Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451). While the title of “Theotokos” was not universally accepted,³²⁶ the fifth and sixth centuries witnessed a flourishing of literature, homilies, hymns, liturgical festivals, and iconography of the Virgin. Constantinople became a “Theotokopolis”,³²⁷ a city famous for its Marian devotion and the promotion of her cult by imperial women such as the empresses Pulcheria, Verina, and Ariadne.³²⁸ Verina, the wife of Leo I who is mentioned in the *Vita Matronae* as one of Matrona’s spiritual children, built two important churches to the Virgin in the imperial city at Blachernai and Chalkoprateia.³²⁹ At Blachernai, Verina made a home for Constantinople’s first relic of the Virgin - her belt or mantle - which directly tied the power of the empress to Christ’s mother and the holiest of women.³³⁰ While earlier ecclesiastical iconography of the Virgin, such as her representation in the late fourth century church of Santa Maria Maggiore (Fig. 3), represented her as a Bride of Christ, in the fifth and sixth century her imagery became increasingly maternal and imperial. As Mary gained more prominence in Christian doctrine and worship, her iconography mirrored the development of her role. Images of the Virgin enthroned, holding the Christ child and flanked by angels became popular iconography types, gracing the apses and walls of sixth century churches from the Basilica Euphrasiana in Poreč, Croatia (Fig. 4) and the Basilica of Sant’ Apollinare in Classe in Ravenna

³²⁵ Gregory of Nazianzus, Letter 101, PG 37, 177 C-180 A, trans. Gambero, in *Mary and the Fathers of the Church: The Blessed Virgin Mary in Patristic Thought* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1999), 162.

³²⁶ See discussion in Chapter 1 on the role of the Theotokos in establishing orthodoxy in Constantinople.

³²⁷ See Averil Cameron, “The Theotokos in Sixth-Century Constantinople,” *The Journal of Theological Studies*, vol. 29, 1 (April 1978), 79-108; Cyril Mango, “Constantinople as Theotokopolis,” in *Mother of God: Representations of the Virgin in Byzantine Art*, ed. Maria Vassilaki (Milan, 2000); Nicholas (Maximos) Constas, *Proclus of Constantinople and the Cult of the Virgin in Late Antiquity: Homilies 1-5* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 59-60.

³²⁸ For the connection between imperial women and the virgin, see Kenneth Holum, *Theodosian Empresses: Women and Imperial Dominion in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 156; see also Brian Croke, “Ariadne Augusta: Shaping the Identity of the Early Byzantine Empress”, esp. 297-98.

³²⁹ While both of these churches have been attributed to Pulcheria, Verina was likely the builder. Croke, “Ariadne Augusta”, 298; Liz James, “Making a Name: Reputation and Imperial Founding and Refounding in Constantinople” in *Wiener Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte* 60/61 (2011/12): 65–68.

³³⁰ Stephen J. Shoemaker, “The Cult of Fashion: The Earliest Life of the Virgin and Constantinople’s Marian Relics” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 62 (2008), 53-74.

(Fig. 5) to Egyptian tapestries (Fig. 6).³³¹ At Santa Antiqua in Rome, early sixth century frescos depict the virgin as empress (Fig. 7), lavishly adorned as the “Queen of Heaven”, emphasizing her role as the Mother of God. Mary’s imperial virginity and maternity were also brought to life in the fervent preaching of Proclus of Constantinople (d. 446) and Romanos the Melodist’s (d. 556) Akathistos Hymn. In the words of Proclus, Mary was the “pride and glory of womanhood” for she was “at once both mother and virgin”, occupying two contradictory states that had been idealized for over a century in Late Antique Christian rhetoric.³³² Mary’s ability to occupy two contradictory roles of virgin and mother was indicative of the ways Late Antique society constructed notions of identity by layering roles on top of each other. As discussed in the previous chapter, the idea that a woman could be a wife and mother of children and yet also a continent Bride of Christ was a contradictory state of being that could only be reconciled in the figures of holy women. Gorgonia could still be a wife and mother of children, but also a bride preparing to meet her heavenly bridegroom. Makrina could be a virgin, “widow”³³³, and mother. Even the virgin martyr Thekla, famous for renouncing her fiancé to follow the apostle Paul, is styled a “mother” in her fifth century vita, the *Life and Miracles of Thekla* by raising an orphan boy “as her own nursling” and becoming “defender, protector, mother, and teacher” of the city of Seleukia.³³⁴ The Virgin Mary is a special case, however, as her maternity is contingent on her virginity; she could not be “Theotokos” without her virginal status. Through Mary, chastity, whether of body or mind,³³⁵ and maternity became closely linked attributes of Late Antique female piety. However, holy mothers were not limited to feminine modes of representation. Asceticism expanded notions of gender, identity, and even the body itself. Just as one’s virginity could be spiritually restored through ascetic desire, so could the identity of a holy woman be both male and female (a “female man of God”), a matron and a eunuch, a mother and a father.

Manly Mothers in Ascetic Literature

While Matrona’s motherhood is maintained through the raising of spiritual children, her maternity, like her appearance, undergoes a transformation. As Matrona transitions from an aristocratic wife and mother into a eunuch monk and later abbess, her gender identity and performance³³⁶ seem to bend with the clothing she dons,³³⁷ communicating her spiritual

³³¹ On imperial representation of the Virgin, see Angelova, *Sacred Founders*, 235-259. See also Ally Kateusz, *Mary and Early Christian Women: Hidden Leadership* (London: Springer International, 2019).

³³² Proclus of Constantinople, *Homily 1*. Text in Constan, *Proclus of Constantinople*, 59.

³³³ After the death of her fiancé, Makrina refused to enter into another engagement, claiming that she was now a widow and could live the remainder of her life in virginity. Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Makrina*, 964 C-D.

³³⁴ *Life and Miracles of Thekla* 6.1-5 and 11.19-20 in Scott Johnson, *The Life and Miracles of Thekla: A Literary Study* (2006), 129 and 149-150. This Greek vita dates to c. 470 AD and is roughly ten times longer than its foundational, second century text the Acts of Paul and Thekla. See Johnson, *The Life and Miracles of Thekla*, 5 and a full discussion of the dating of the text in Gilbert Dagron, *Vie et Miracles de Sainte Thècle: Texte grec, traduction, et commentaire*. *Subsidia Hagiographica* 62 (Brussels, 1978), 17-19.

³³⁵ Susanna Elm and Barbara Vinken, “Introduction” in *Braut Christi: Familienformen im Spiegel der Sponsa*, eds. Susanna Elm and Barbara Vinken (Brill, 2016).

³³⁶ For the performativity of gender, see Judith Butler’s seminal work, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, 1990).

³³⁷ This subject of gender and clothing will be discussed in detail in the final chapter.

authority through a variety of changing roles. Matrona's characterization in the text as a "manly woman" is addressed at the very start of the vita and reinforced by her clothing, speech and actions, unveiling a new kind of maternal role that is "both mother and father" to her disciples. Indeed, Matrona's gender performance extends quite literally beyond the male-female binary, both during her time living as a eunuch monk and in the hagiographer's description of her body and clothing as resembling an angelic being, a body that is neither male nor female.³³⁸

An abundance of scholarship over the past few decades has explored this role of the "manly woman" (*γυνή ἀνδρεία*) in early Christian literature, revealing that ascetic behaviors transformed some gender expectations for elite Christian women, allowing for more personal freedom through engagement in activities traditionally reserved for men.³³⁹ As hagiography and patristic writing show, wealthy female ascetics could move more readily outside of the home, distribute property, and engage with holy men and bishops. The descriptions of ascetic women in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* and numerous hagiographies of ascetic virgins and matrons reflect this broadening out of gender notions for Late Antique Christian women. Such texts often give voice to the ascetic self-identifying as "male" or viewed by others as such.³⁴⁰ Until recently, scholarship on ascetic women tended to highlight their manly virtues and attributes, discussing the ways in which male authors constructed models of female Christian piety around masculine paradigms. However, as Maria Doerfler has shown in her analysis of the *Life of Melania the Younger*, ascetic mothers did not lose their maternal attributes, despite renouncing their families and becoming "female men of God".³⁴¹ Indeed, a closer look at the Late Antique holy woman reveals not simply the rejection of traditional female roles but rather their appropriation towards the construction of a spiritual family, one in which the holy woman's role is not limited to the ideals of feminine *sophrosyne* in Late Antiquity, but rather extends to include a wide range of virtues, identities, and behaviors connotated both female and male. This inherent fungibility of holy mothers in Christian literature is readily seen, as previously mentioned, in the Virgin Mary as both virgin and mother or Gorgonia as a *sophron* matron and noblewoman who restored her virginity through spiritual desire. "Becoming male" was not the rejection of a female, maternal identity but rather the adding on of manly roles, virtues, and authority to make the holy woman all things to her spiritual family.

³³⁸ *Life of Matrona* 13-14, 19, 22, 33, 38, 51.

³³⁹ Elm, *Virgins of God*; Gillian Cloke, "This Female Man of God": *Women and Spiritual Power in the Patristic Age* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995); Margaret MacDonald, *Early Christian Women and Pagan Opinion: The Power of the Hysterical Woman* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 28-29; Stephen J. Davis, "Crossed Texts, Crossed Sex: Intertextuality and Gender in Early Christian Legends of Holy Women Disguised as Men", *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 10 (2002); Elizabeth 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*, eds. Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub (New York: 1991), 29-49; Hannah Hunt, "Transvestite Women Saints: Performing Asceticism in Late Antiquity" (2019).

³⁴⁰ *Apophthegmata Patrum Alphabetical Collection*, Sarah 9 (ed. PG 65.420); Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Makrina*, ; Gregory of Nazianzus on Gorgonia's manly soul, *Oration* 8.14 (ed. PG 35.805); Paulinus of Nola describing Melania the Elder, Letter 29.6 (ed. CSEL 29.251).

³⁴¹ Maria Doerfler, "Holy Households" in *Melania*, ed. Catherine M. Chin and Caroline T. Schroeder (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), 69-81.

Patristic Perspectives on Christian Motherhood

Like the *sophron* wife discussed in the previous chapter, the ideal Christian mother had her roots in antiquity as a woman devoted to her children, husband, and home. Maternal devotion in particular was considered a natural and universal phenomenon and was thought best expressed not by emotional displays of affection, but rather in the careful rearing of a child, the cultivation of his education and virtues, and safeguarding his inheritance. Roman motherhood had long been idealized in the stalwartly figure of Cornelia, the daughter of Scipio Africanus and mother to the Gracchi, who famously faced her sons' deaths with emotional restraint. Cornelia's perfection lay not only in her extraordinary composure but the fact that her love for her sons was expressed in cultivating their education and civic virtues.³⁴² What Cornelia supplied for the Roman ideal, the Maccabean mother provided for the Judeo-Christian; the Maccabean mother was featured prominently in an abundance of homilies on motherhood and martyrdom in the fourth century, linking these two states of being in a Christian context and emphasizing that the love for God ought to come before love for the family.³⁴³ Such stories, however, in no way diminished the central role of mothers within the Christian family, but rather served to elevate their status as fundamental to the salvation of their children. Church Fathers praised the indelibility of the mother-child bond which they believed started from infancy (and even in-utero) and encouraged breastfeeding as a pious act of connection between mother and child.³⁴⁴ Hagiographic literature, too, often referenced breastfeeding or anecdotes about nursing as a way to highlight the pious upbringing of future saints, as the "pure milk" of a noble mother was thought to transmit virtues as well as nutrition to her children. Gregory of Nyssa, for example, recounts how his mother Emmelia nursed her own children, despite having a wet-nurse for them.³⁴⁵ By the fifth century,

³⁴² Plutarch, *Tiberius Gracchus* 1.4-5 and *Caius Gracchus* 19.2-3, in *Plutarch's Lives*, ed. and trans. Bernadotte Perrin (Loeb, vol. 10), 146-7 and 240-41. See also Suzanne Dixon, *Cornelia: Mother of the Gracchi* (London: Routledge, 2007).

Seneca entreated his own mother Helvia to follow Cornelia's example following his exile. Seneca, "To the Mother Helvia, On Consolation", in *Seneca: Moral Essays*, ed. and trans. Basore (Loeb, 1965, vol. 2), 416-489. Burnett, "Mother-Child Bonding," 77-79.

³⁴³ The role of the Maccabean mother in patristic literature is discussed in the following chapter.

³⁴⁴ Ambrose and Augustine preached about the importance of breastfeeding as a way for mothers to bond with their children, calling for an end to the popular use of *nutrices*. This sentiment about breastfeeding was echoed from Plutarch. Ambrose, *Letter* 63; Augustine, fragment in Bede, *Commentary on I Thessalonians* 2; Plutarch, *Moralia* 496A. References to the Virgin Mary nursing Christ can be found in the *Protoevangelion of James* 19:2 and in the Gospel of Luke 11:17, and in Byzantium, the images of the Theotokos Galaktotrophousa ("she who nourishes with milk") were a popular iconographic type. Brief discussion and summery of sources in Brigitte Pitarakis, "The Material Culture of Childhood in Byzantium" in *Becoming Byzantine: Children and Childhood in Byzantium*, ed. Arietta Papaconstantinou and Alice-Mary Talbot (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2009), 210-13. For more information on breastfeeding in Byzantium, see Chryssi Bourbou and Sandra J. Garvie-Lok, "Breastfeeding and Weaning Patters in Byzantine Times: Evidence from Human Remains and Written Sources" in *Becoming Byzantine: Children and Childhood in Byzantium*, ed. Arietta Papaconstantinou and Alice-Mary Talbot (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2009), 65-84.

³⁴⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Makrina*, 962 C. Augustine makes several references Monica nursing him in *Confessions* 1.6.7, 3.4.8. For a discussion on breastfeeding in Byzantine hagiography, see Béatrice

the Roman ideal of devoted, stoic motherhood was now infused with Christian spiritual meaning, expanding the role of the *materfamilias* from guardian of the home and cultivator of familial and civic virtues to include the spiritual education of her family. A Christian matron's goal was not merely to raise citizens of Rome, but citizens of God.

In homilies, letters, and hagiographic texts from the fourth and early fifth century, patristic writers preached of the instrumental role of Christian mothers shaping the lives of their families and communities.³⁴⁶ In the *Confessions*, Augustine portrays his mother Monica as the ideal matron: she was a dutiful wife and doting mother who was ever anxious for her son's education, career, marriage, and most importantly, his salvation: "I cannot adequately express what were her feelings towards me, and how much more she struggled to give me spiritual birth than when she had given birth to me physically."³⁴⁷ Their powerful mother-child bond is described in detail in the *Confessions*,³⁴⁸ but Augustine portrays Monica's maternity as extending beyond her care for her children. Through her fervent prayers and counsel, she gradually converted her husband, sons, and "the whole house" to Christianity, becoming "a mother of us all".³⁴⁹ Gregory of Nazianzus similarly praised his sister Gorgonia as the "common counselor" of both her family and larger community:

*Who could be keener in intellect than she who was known as the common counselor not only of her own family and those of the same people and one fold, but also of all those about her, who regarded her suggestions and recommendations as inviolable law? What was more sagacious than her words, more prudent than her silence?... who knew better the things of God, both from the divine oracles and her own understanding?*³⁵⁰

Gregory saw Gorgonia's counseling and charity as closely tied to her maternal role, both for her "needy relatives" and to those outside of her home. Quoting Job 29:15-16, Gregory explains: "She was an eye to the blind, and a foot to the lame, and a mother to orphans."³⁵¹ Despite elsewhere praising Gorgonia's cloistered existence,³⁵² here Gregory praises the far reach of Gorgonia's maternal charity beyond the confines of her children and *oikos*, allowing her to become "a mother to orphans" and "an eye to the blind".

In a homily on I Timothy, John Chrysostom points to the multi-generational spiritual impact mothers could have on their families by raising pious Christian daughters:

Chevallier Caseau, "Childhood in Byzantine Saints' Lives" in *Becoming Byzantine: Children and Childhood in Byzantium*, ed. Arietta Papaconstantinou and Alice-Mary Talbot (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2009), 141, 147-48.

³⁴⁶ See footnotes 11-16. For mothers in hagiography as the driving forces behind their children's religious careers, see Fotis Vasileiou, "The Death of the Father in Late Antique Christian Literature" in *Approaches to the Byzantine Family*, ed. Leslie Brubaker and Shaun Tougher (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2013), 81.

³⁴⁷ Augustine, *Confessions* 1.11.17, 2.3.6, 3.11.19-20, 5.7.13, quote from 5.9(16), trans. Loeb, 6.1.1., 8.12.30, 9.9.22.

³⁴⁸ Augustine, *Confessions* 2.3.8, 5.8.15, 5.9.16, 6.13.23

³⁴⁹ Augustine, *Confessions* 9.9(22).

³⁵⁰ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 8.11, trans. (Catholic University Press, 1953), 108.

³⁵¹ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 8.12 (Catholic University Press, 1953), 109.

³⁵² Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 8.8 Trans. Cox Miller, 279.

*Before everything educate them to be pious, moderate, to think little of wealth, to remain unadorned. So give them in marriage. If we mold them so, you will save not only them but also the husband to intends to take her in marriage, not just the husband but also the children, not just the children but also the descendants.*³⁵³

Pious daughters could save their husbands, future children, and, in short, ensure the salvation and Christian legacy of their families through future generations. Additionally, a daughter who thinks “little of wealth” and is “unadorned” would also make a practical manager of the home. The benefits of good childrearing thus had an impact on the practical, moral, economic, and spiritual future of families. According to Chrysostom, devout mothers (and fathers) deserved the utmost respect and obedience. In a homily on the Gospel of John, Chrysostom says that children “must give them [parents] everything that is their due, and place them before all others, in return for their giving them birth, rearing them, and supplying a thousand other crucial things.”³⁵⁴ Chrysostom followed this advice in his own life; despite his early desire for asceticism, his widowed mother Anthousa persuaded him to put off his monastic vocation until after her death, lest she lose her only son and comfort.³⁵⁵ Chrysostom idealizes his mother’s devotion towards him, describing both her affection and the financial and emotional struggles she endured to provide for his education and protect his inheritance. Anthousa was admired not only by her son, but those outside of their family, including Chrysostom’s tutor Libanius.³⁵⁶

Model Ascetic Mothers: Melania the Elder and Paula

These examples of ideal Christian motherhood followed more traditional models of *sophrosyne*, as these mothers remained steadfast supporters of their families and invested in their spiritual and worldly success. However, new models of motherhood emerged in the later fourth century of elite ascetic widows who forsook their families for asceticism. Melania the Elder and Paula provide contemporary examples of elite widows who left their children in Rome to found ascetic communities in the Holy Land.³⁵⁷ Despite this geographical distance, Melania and Paula remained in close contact with their families and maintained a powerful influence over both their spiritual lives and material concerns. When Melania the Elder returned to the West after nearly twenty-five years of asceticism in Egypt and Jerusalem, she was enthusiastically welcomed by her relatives: Paulinus of Nola, a relative of Melania’s, describes how their kin crowded around to see and touch her, regarding her as the “mother” and “pride” of their extended family.³⁵⁸ Upon her return to Rome, Melania converted many of her relatives to lives of continence and strict

³⁵³ Chrysostom, *Homily 9 on I Timothy* (PG 62.547), trans. Douglas O’Roark, “Parenthood in Late Antiquity: The Evidence of Chrysostom”, *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 40 (1999), 80.

³⁵⁴ Chrysostom, *Homily 85 on John 3* (PG 59.461-62), trans. Blake Leyerle, “Appealing to Children”, *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2 (Summer 1997), 258 n.100. See also *Homily 21 on John 2* (PG 59.131), *Homily 21 on Ephesians 1* (PG 62.149), *Homily 35 on Matthew 1* (PG 57.407), *Homily 10 on I Thessalonians 3* (PG 62.459); *Homily 4 on Genesis 3* (PG 54.597).

³⁵⁵ Chrysostom, *On the Priesthood 1.5* (PG 48:621-692), trans. with intro Graham Neville, *Six Books on the Priesthood*; John Chrysostom [Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1984, 38-39.

³⁵⁶ Chrysostom describes his tutor Libanius’ admiration for her. Chrysostom, *To a Young Widow 2*.

³⁵⁷ Melania the Elder and Paula’s abandonment of their children will be discussed in detail in the following chapter.

³⁵⁸ Paulinus of Nola, *Letter 29.12*.

asceticism, including her niece Avita and her husband Apronianus (along with their children) and likely inspired the renunciation of her granddaughter Melania the Younger.³⁵⁹ Further, Palladius describes how Melania the Elder's son Publicola and relatives kept her well-funded, so that after she exhausted her moveable property, she could continue to lavish family wealth on church-building, monastic foundations, and charitable giving; this financial support suggests a cordial relationship between the ascetic and her relatives as well as Melania's influence over them and their purses.³⁶⁰ Paula likewise remained closely connected to her biological family – too closely, in Jerome's opinion. Through Jerome's correspondence with Paula and her daughter Eustochium, he praises the widow's renunciation and largess but laments that her concern for her children did not dissipate, despite her distance from them.³⁶¹ This biological connection between mother and children, however, expands into a spiritual relationship as Paula becomes the spiritual mother of her virginal daughter Eustochium and granddaughter Paula the Younger, whom her son Toxotius sends to Bethlehem for his mother to raise as an ascetic.³⁶²

Fathers, Mothers, and the Expansion of Gender

Notions of fatherhood were also changing in the later fourth century. While in antiquity manliness (*virtus*) was closely tied to producing biological children,³⁶³ in the lives of Late Antique holy men, both pagan and Christian, a new emphasis emerged on philosophical fatherhood, a paternity based on producing children of the mind which encompassed both paternal and maternal characteristics. This idea of a holy man taking on a rhetorical maternal role stemmed from antiquity, where philosophers described themselves as “giving birth” to knowledge and even “impregnating” their students with virtue.³⁶⁴ Such expressions of rhetorical pregnancy were so pervasive that Aristophanes' *Clouds* pokes fun at them by suggesting that a philosopher could likewise “miscarry an idea”.³⁶⁵ Christian asceticism called for men to transcend their humanity, and through the mastering of bodily passions, transform their masculinity into something angelic and, at times, even *feminine*.³⁶⁶ When Gregory of Nazianzus described his relationship to his congregations in Constantinople and Nazianzus, he referred to himself as both father and mother to his communities, blending the nurturing attributes of motherhood with the authority of spiritual fatherhood; through his paternity and maternity,

³⁵⁹ Paulinus of Nola, *Carmina* 21.66-71 and 21.313-329.

³⁶⁰ Palladius, *Lausiaca History* 46, 54.2.

³⁶¹ Jerome, *Letter* 108.5, 21

³⁶² Jerome's *Letter* 107 to Laeta (the wife of Toxotius and mother to little Paula) advises the family to send the child as soon as she is weaned to be raised with her ascetic grandmother and aunt Eustochium.

³⁶³ Susanna Elm, “Gregory's women”, 171-73. Fatherhood also played a central role in defining Byzantine notions of manliness. See Megan McLaughlin, “Secular and Spiritual Fatherhood in the Eleventh Century” in *Conflicted Identities and Multiple Masculinities*, ed. Murry, (1999), 25-43.

³⁶⁴ See David Leitao, *The Pregnant Male as Myth and Metaphor in Classical Greek Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

³⁶⁵ Aristophanes, *Clouds* 135-37.

³⁶⁶ Gillian Clark, “The Old Adam: The Fathers and the Unmaking of Masculinity” in *Thinking Men: Masculinity and its Self-Representation in the Classical Tradition*, ed. Lin Foxhall and J.B. Salmon (Routledge, 1998), 170-182. See also Mary Harlow's “In the Name of the Father: Procreation, Paternity and Patriarchy” in that same volume, 155-169.

Gregory could acquire “the fullest kind of humanity possible”, becoming all things to his people.³⁶⁷

The role and purpose of mothers and fathers in Late Antiquity were thus in flux, redefined by the cultural, legal, and Christian ideological shifts from the later fourth century onwards.³⁶⁸ By the fifth century, Christian motherhood was in new territory, walking a line between traditional modes of *sophrosyne* and the ascetic ideals of continence. The title of “mother” could be equally applied to mothers of biological children and those who gave birth by “spiritual labor”, cultivating ascetic virtues and raising up spiritual progeny.³⁶⁹ Patristic writers speak of the superiority of this “spiritual childbearing”: in the words of Chrysostom, “If you desire children, you can get much better children now, a nobler childbirth and better help in your old age, if you give birth by spiritual labor.”³⁷⁰ Further, the idea that one could become *more* of a mother by rejecting biological children in favor of producing spiritual offspring is abundant in both patristic literature and hagiography. As sources on the power of holy men in Late Antiquity hagiography have shown, the more an ascetic rejects the world, the more he is sought out; the more he rejects and mortifies his body, the dearer his body becomes to his disciples.³⁷¹ As the *vitae* of Matrona and the Melanias indicate (among others), as holy women distance (or attempt to distance) themselves from biological children and kin, their maternity become the subject of great desire, often both by their families and by those who seeking spiritual guidance and healing. Matrona is pursued relentlessly by her husband Dometianos and later is sought out with equal fervor by fellow monastics, lay disciples, imperial patrons, and ascetic novices. Melania the Elder’s family and friends flock to her for spiritual guidance upon her return to the West.³⁷² Melania the Younger counsels empresses, aristocrats, nuns, and converts her relatives “as a mother”.³⁷³ From these sources, it appears that the reward for maternal renunciation is motherhood restored and transformed, becoming a mother not of the body, but of the soul.

³⁶⁷ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Carmina* 2.1; Elm, “Gregory’s Women, 171-73.

³⁶⁸ Judith Evans Grubbs, *Law and Family in Late Antiquity: The Emperor Constantine’s Marriage Legislation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) and *Women and the Law in the Roman Empire: A Sourcebook on Marriage, Divorce and Widowhood* (London: Routledge, 2002); Antti Arjava, *Women and Law in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Joëlle Beaucap, *Le statut de la femme à Byzance, 4e-7e siècle, Vols. 1-2* (Paris : Boccard, 1990-1992); Kyle Harper, “Marriage and Family” in *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*, (ed.) Scott Fitzgerald Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 667-714; Elm (2018), 267-270; Kate Cooper, *The Fall of the Roman Household* (Cambridge, 2007); Nathan, Geoffrey, S. *The Family in Late Antiquity: The Rise of Christianity and the Endurance of Tradition* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity: The Jovinianist Controversy* (Oxford, 2007).

³⁶⁹ Origen, *Homily* 39 on Luke 3-4; Chrysostom, *On Marriage and Family Life*, tr. C.P. Roth and D. Anderson, 85-86. Consecrating one’s daughter to perpetual virginity was a way of combining these virtues, as Gregory of Nyssa makes clear in *De virginitate* 13.3.

³⁷⁰ Chrysostom, *On Marriage and Family Life*, tr. C.P. Roth and D. Anderson, 85-86.

³⁷¹ Theodoret of Cyrillus, *Life of Simeon Stylites the Elder; Life of Simeon Stylites the Younger*; Athanasios of Alexandria, *Life of Anthony* 16.10; Eunapius of Sardis, *Lives of the Philosophers*, 492; Philostratus, *Lives of the Sophists*, 490. See also Anthony Eastmond, “Body vs. Column: the Cults of St. Symeon Stylites” in *Desire and Denial in Byzantium*, ed. Liz James (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), 87.

³⁷² See discussion on 127-28.

³⁷³ Gerontius, *Life of Melania the Younger*.

“Good” Mothers in the *Vita Matronae*

In the *vita prima*, Matrona’s motherhood is constructed by the hagiographer as a central and essential component of her holiness. From the start of the text, the hagiographer refers to Matrona as an “loving mother” who raised up a spiritual children so “bedecked with the cultivation of virtue” that Matrona herself surpassed all prior ascetic women.³⁷⁴ Indeed, her motherly concern and care for her community was thought to extend even beyond her death, as the narrator (a monk from Bassianos’ joint monastery) makes clear: “She [Matrona] comes to us still [after death], with the longing/love and understanding and foresight of an affectionate/loving mother.” [*Διαβαίνει δὲ καὶ πρὸς ἡμᾶς πόθῳ καὶ φρονήσει καὶ προνοίᾳ μητρὸς φιλοστόργου*].³⁷⁵ The mutual love between Matrona and her disciples permeates the *vita*’s anecdotes. As mother superior, Matrona fulfills the needs of her community, praying and providing for her nuns and spiritual children with miraculous outcomes. In turn, her spiritual children’s fervent attachment to her is so great that they regard her not merely as a mother but as a replacement for their own families, forsaking husbands, children, parents, and community to live by her side. Despite her own familial renunciation, Matrona is portrayed by her hagiographer as a *good* mother, highlighting both her biological and spiritual motherhood as fundamental to her sanctity. In order for Matrona to become an ascetic and a “mother, father, and sister”³⁷⁶ to her disciples, however, she must first cease to be a biological mother to her daughter Theodote.

Matrona’s biological motherhood is laid out in the text in the briefest to terms, and is foregrounded from its very first mention with her abandonment of her daughter, explaining that after “she became the mother of a daughter by the name of Theodote... abandoning everything, she was to give her to God.” [*γίνεται δὲ καὶ μιᾶς παιδὸς μήτηρ, ὀνόματι Θεοδότης· Θεῷ γὰρ αὐτὴν δέδωκεν πάντα καταλιποῦσα*].³⁷⁷ Theodote is not mentioned again until just before Matrona’s departure for Bassianos’ monastery, when Matrona decides to give the child to her companion Susanna to raise. This moment of decision and exchange is depicted as a surrender of both child and maternal identity:

“She considered all concerning the child Theodote. Then the blessed Matrona spoke something worthy of Abraham and truly beyond nature itself: “Let there be nothing in common between me and my children/the contents of my womb/feelings/affections,” she said, “but let the honest Susanna take my child; and let the ascetic life sustain me.” The blessed Susanna took the child Theodote and filled the place/role of her mother.

*ἐσκοπεῖτο πρὸ πάντων τὰ περὶ τῆς παιδὸς Θεοδότης. Ἡ δὲ μακαρία Ματρῶνα ἀβραμιαῖόν τι καὶ τῆς φύσεως αὐτῆς ἀνώτερον ὄντως φθεγξαμένη· Μηδὲν ἔμοι καὶ τοῖς ἔμοις σπλάγχνοις ἔστω κοινόν, ἔφη, ἀλλὰ Σωσάννα ἡ γνησία λαμβανέτω τὸ ἐμὸν παιδίον· ἐμὲ δὲ ἡ ἄσκησις τρεφέτω. Καὶ ταῦτα οὐ μέχρι ῥημάτων ἴστατο μόνον, ἀλλὰ καὶ αὐτοῖς τοῖς ἔργοις παρεδίδοτο. Ὅθεν λαβοῦσα ἡ μακαρία Σωσάννα τὸ παιδίον Θεοδότην, τήντης μητρὸς τάξιν ἐπ’ αὐτὸ ἐπλήρου.*³⁷⁸

³⁷⁴ *Life of Matrona* 1.

³⁷⁵ *Life of Matrona* 1.

³⁷⁶ *Life of Matrona* 38.

³⁷⁷ *Life of Matrona* 2.

³⁷⁸ *Life of Matrona* 3.

Matrona is depicted here “considering all” concerning her child, showing some anxiety over Theodote’s care and their separation. Then, as if by divine inspiration, Matrona’s concern dissipates, and she speaks her renunciation, leaving “nothing in common” between herself and her daughter. While this passage and its sacrificial connotations will be discussed in full in the following chapter, what is of central importance here is that Matrona’s words and actions are characterized in the text as *unnatural* for a mother. Immediately after coming to this decision, Matrona cuts her hair, dresses as a man, and takes the name Babylas, becoming “a man both in garb and purpose”.³⁷⁹ This separation from Theodote marks Matrona transformation from a matron into a eunuch monk, expanding her internal and external ascetic identity to incorporate manly clothes and characteristics. However, despite her masculine attire and rejection of her daughter, the text insists on Matrona’s maternity. While she ceases to be a mother to her biological daughter, Matrona nevertheless exhibits more conventional maternal behaviors in her care for her disciples.

Matrona as Spiritual Mother

Matrona’s devotion and concern for her spiritual children is expressed through traditional modes of motherhood, as she feeds, clothes, and cares for the spiritual and physical needs of her community. As Maria Doerfler has shown in her analysis the *Life of Melania the Younger*, Late Antique holy mothers, even if they renounced family and traditional female roles of wife and housekeeper, often maintained their maternity by functioning as mothers to their spiritual children. Despite despising her former life as a wife and mother, Melania the Younger is depicted in her *vita* actively mothering both the nuns in her convent and lay people who seek her healing and aid. Doerfler highlights in particular Melania’s preoccupation with feeding, nurturing, nursing the sick back to health, and worrying about the bodies and souls of her followers.³⁸⁰ Matrona’s spiritual motherhood is similarly constructed: several key miracles involve Matrona praying for or being gifted with the necessary property, funds, transportation, and even food to support her sisters.³⁸¹ The gifting and consumption of food, particularly blessed bread,³⁸² is frequently mentioned in the text as a way of communicating and sanctifying spiritual parent-child relationships. Receiving blessed bread from her spiritual father Bassianos, Matrona feeds this *eulogia* to her sisters at Emesa and Constantinople, as well as her lay female disciples, and even the empress Verina.³⁸³ These moments of exchange and consumption signify a bond between the giver and consumer, consecrating the relationship between spiritual parent and child

³⁷⁹ *Life of Matrona* 8.

³⁸⁰ Gerontius, *Life of Melania the Younger*, 29, 41, 61. Doerfler, “Holy Households”, 69-81.

³⁸¹ While living outside Beirut, Matrona has a miraculous supply of water and greens, despite the land being dry. *Life of Matrona* 16-17. The soon-to-be novice Athanasia sent a few *nomismata* to a bakery so that the Matrones could receive daily bread, leading Matrona to pray for Athanasia unceasingly so that she might be able to leave her husband and join their community. *Life of Matrona* 43-44.

³⁸² Known as *eulogia* bread (later *antidoron*), this bread was blessed by a priest but not consecrated for the Eucharist. In the *Life of Matrona*, this bread blessed by Bassianos is highly prized and sought after by Matrona and her disciples, and Matrona rations her blessed bread while in Syria. *Life of Matrona* 10, 13, 43. See note in Mango and Feathersnote, 46n82; G. Galavaris, *Bread and the Liturgy: The Symbolism of Early Christian and Byzantine Bread Stamps* (Madison, Wisc., 1970), 109–66.

³⁸³ *Life of Matrona* 11, 13, 29-32, 38, 43.

through eucharistic bread.³⁸⁴ The gift of this blessed bread holds particular significance in the *vita*, as not all who ask for this *eulogia* are deemed worthy of its consumption. Matrona's spiritual daughter Athanasia, for example, was at first denied blessed bread until she could prove her ascetic intentions.³⁸⁵

Matrona's active spiritual motherhood rescripts the role of the late Roman mother by applying the virtues of the *sophron* Christian mother, such as devotion to the upbringing and religious education of children, towards her ascetic family. While Melania the Younger's ascetic family included her former husband (now spiritual brother) Pinian and her mother Albina, both of whom practice asceticism with her until their deaths,³⁸⁶ Matrona's spiritual family is constructed entirely of disciples outside of her biological family. Instead of encouraging relatives and friends to join her in a religious life, Matrona's spiritual magnetism draws strangers to her side. After news of Matrona's demon fighting and miracle working spread to the people of Beirut, "many went out to her, both men and women, and especially noblewomen... to see her and receive her blessing" [πολλοὶ ἐξήρχοντο πρὸς αὐτήν, ἄνδρες τε καὶ γυναῖκες, καὶ μάλιστα τῶν ἐπισήμων γυναικῶν... θεάσασθαι αὐτήν καὶ εὐλογηθῆναι παρ' αὐτῆς].³⁸⁷ When a certain Sophrone [Sophrosyne in *Vat. gr.* 807] came to visit Matrona with her mother, the girl was unable to leave Matrona, immediately recognizing the holy woman as her new mother:

*[Sophrone] was moved to compunction, and could not bear to leave the blessed one or follow her mother, saying, "From now on, this holy woman is both mother and father to me."*³⁸⁸

καὶ κατανυγεῖσα, οὐκέτι ἠνέσχετο οὔτε τὴν μακαρίαν καταλείψαι οὔτε τῇ μητρὶ αὐτῆς ἀκολουθῆσαι, εἰποῦσα ὅτι, ἀπὸ τοῦ νῦν αὕτη μου ἡ ἀγία καὶ μήτηρ ἐστὶ καὶ πατήρ ·

Despite her mother's desperate pleas to first return home and bid farewell to her family, Sophrone refused to leave Matrona's side, declaring that the holy woman to be "both mother and father" to her. This same sentiment is echoed later on in the *vita* by Athanasia, who declared shortly after meeting Matrona that "*this holy woman is mother, father, and sister to me*", taking the place of Athanasia's family.³⁸⁹ Sophrone was Matrona's first follower to take up residence in alongside her "teacher" (*διδάσκαλος*),³⁹⁰ and her immediate and fervent attachment to Matrona is replicated by others in the text, as other young women of Beirut soon followed suit, including several from pagan families.³⁹¹ These daughters of pagans (*θυγατέρες ἐλλήνων*) describe

³⁸⁴ For food exchange signifying familial bonds in monastic communities, see Rebecca Krawiec, *Shenoute and the Women of the White Monastery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 21-26.

³⁸⁵ Athanasia's servants Bassianos' deacon Markellos, as she is deemed unworthy due to her extravagant lifestyle. *Life of Matrona*, 43.

³⁸⁶ Pinian was the head of the men's monastery adjoining Melanias, and her grief at his death was so great that she lived in isolation for four years afterwards, wearing herself out in "constant sorrow." *Life of Melania the Younger* 49, trans. Clark, 61.

³⁸⁷ *Life of Matrona* 19.

³⁸⁸ *Life of Matrona* 19.

³⁸⁹ *Life of Matrona* 38.

³⁹⁰ Matrona is referred to repeatedly as a *διδάσκαλος* (as is Matrona's own teacher Eugenia). This title was not uncommon among holy women. See Brown, *Body and Society*, 270.

³⁹¹ Matrona's tenure outside of Beirut was roughly between 450-457, and as Linda Jones Hall has shown, despite a Christian majority, lingering elements of Phoenician and Greco-Roman religion were still

Matrona as a holy mother and intreat her to lead them to Christ.³⁹² Matrona's reception of these young women is of particular interest, as she takes on the role not merely of an *ἁγία μήτηρ*, but that of a priest³⁹³ in educating and baptizing these novices.

Receiving them, the blessed one first quieted their bodily natures and then, once she had strengthened their spiritual reasoning and prepared them, over the course of many days, for the hope that lies in store for Christians, she perfected them through the rites of chrismation and baptism. And with the first one [Sophrone] she held these women and teaching them letters and poring over Scripture with them, especially the blessed David, she made them children of God.”³⁹⁴

Ἄς δεξαμένη ἡ μακαρία καὶ πρῶτον μὲν τὰ ἦθη αὐτῶν τὰ σωματικὰ ἐξομαλίσασα, ἔπειτα δὲ καὶ τοὺς τῆς ψυχῆς λογισμοὺς ἐπιρρώσασα καὶ πρὸς τὴν τοῖς χριστιανοῖς ἀποκειμένην ἐλπίδα εὐτρεπίσασα ἐπὶ πολλὰς ἡμέρας, ἐποίησεν τελειωθῆναι διὰ χρίματος καὶ βαπτίσματος μυστικοῦ· καὶ σὺν τῇ πρώτῃ εἶχε καὶ αὐτὰς γράμματα διδάσκουσα καὶ πᾶσαν γραφὴν ἐπιστένουσα καὶ μάλιστα τὴν τοῦ μακαρίου Δαυὶδ, ἐποίησεν αὐτὰς τέκνα Θεοῦ γενέσθαι.

Like a mother and priest, Matrona teaches the women “letters”, directing their catechism and knowledge of the psalter, and through baptism and chrismation, rebirths these novices into “children of God”. While it is likely these rites of baptism and chrismation would have been performed by a priest (Matrona's disciple Euche, for example, is baptized by a priest and deaconess upon Matrona's request³⁹⁵), the hagiographer nevertheless portrays Matrona's religious authority as being on-par with that of Bassianos and other members of the clergy.³⁹⁶ Linda Jones Hall illustrates how Matrona's actions in Beirut closely mirror those of other Late Antique holy men: she attracts monastic and lay disciples, counsels men and women, preaches, baptizes, fight demons, and performs in a manner highly reminiscent of two other important fifth century holy men from the same city, Rabulas and Severusas.³⁹⁷

As Matrona's disciples renounce their own families to become her spiritual daughters, the conversion of these young women is frequently met with strong objections on the part of their relatives. One such renunciant named Euche – depicted as a pagan priestess in the *Vita Altera*³⁹⁸– decided to neglect her *praxis* and distribute would-be sacrifices of grain and wine to the poor rather than the gods; fleeing to Matrona, Euche's angry relatives followed closely at her heels,

abundant through the mid-sixth century in literature and inscriptions. Zacharias of Mytilene's *Life of Severus* and the account of Rabulas Samosatensis from the Synaxarion of Constantinople (Feb. 19) point to on-going pagan practice and Christian conversion in the later fifth century. Jones Hall, *Roman Berytus*, 138-39 and 147-150, where she discusses Matrona's role converting pagan women; see also 161-185 for a discussion on Christian conversion and identity in the city in Late Antiquity.

³⁹² *Life of Matrona* 19

³⁹³ While Matrona's assumption of priestly activities will be described in further detail in the final chapter, this aspect to her character in the *vita* provides further evidence for the layering of roles a Late Antique holy woman could occupy.

³⁹⁴ *Life of Matrona* 19.

³⁹⁵ *Life of Matrona* 22.

³⁹⁶ This will be discussed in the final chapter on 136-38.

³⁹⁷ Jones Hall, *Roman Berytus*, 168.

³⁹⁸ *Vita Altera, Life of Matrona* 2.21.

hurling threats and promising to burn down Matrona’s temple and everyone inside if the girl did not surrender.³⁹⁹ When Euche refuses to return to her family, Matrona offers to burn down the temple herself, and Euche’s relatives retreat in disappointment.⁴⁰⁰ As the daughter of a prominent and practicing pagan family in the text, Euche’s conversion and baptism are a cause for celebration, as Matrona enlists the help of the local bishop to send a priest, a deacon, and a deaconess to baptize Euche in the presence of a great crowd of women.⁴⁰¹ While Euche’s baptism is the cause of their assembly, Matrona is the primary spectacle of the event:

*Nearly the <whole> city <including> all the freewomen, some in covered litters, others in sedan chairs, and yet others on foot, went out to her; and seeing her they acquired great profit and were filled with contrition and indeed received a spark of the knowledge of God. For who, upon seeing that honorable and holy person, her figure, her worn face and, in a word, her mortified body, was not moved to compunction and filled with all benefit, becoming a different person? Therefore, all were built up, and glorifying God for all the miracles wrought through her they returned to the city with great joy.*⁴⁰²

ἡ δὲ πόλις σχεδὸν καὶ πᾶσαι αἱ ἐλεύθεραι αἱ μὲν μετὰ βαστερνίων, αἱ δὲ μετὰ δίφρων, αἱ δὲ καὶ πεζεύουσαι ἐζήρχοντο πρὸς αὐτὴν καὶ ὀρῶντες αὐτὴν πολλὴν ὠφέλειαν ἐκτῶντο καὶ κατανύξεως πλήρης ἐγίνοντο καὶ ἐπιγνώσεως Θεοῦ σπινθήρα ὄντως ἐδέχοντο. Τίς γὰρ ὀρῶν τὸ τίμιον καὶ ἱεροπρεπὲς ἐκεῖνο σχῆμα καὶ κατατετηγμένην ὄψιν καὶ — ἵνα συνελὼν εἶπω — τὸ νενεκρωμένον αὐτῆς σῶμα οὐ κατενύγετο καὶ πάσης ὠφελείας ἐπληροῦτο καὶ ἄλλος ἐξ ἄλλου ἐγίνετο; ὅθεν πάντες οἰκοδομοῦμενοι καὶ δοξάζοντες τὸν Θεὸν ἐπὶ τοῖς γινομένοις δι’ αὐτῆς θαυμασίοις, ὑπέστρεφον ἐν τῇ πόλει μετὰ χαρᾶς μεγάλης.

For her viewers, simply gazing at Matrona’s body provided spiritual benefit and “knowledge of God”. Worn from asceticism, Matrona’s body was not solely a body transformed, but a body capable of transforming others, even at a glance. The spiritual attraction to Matrona’s transformed body makes it difficult for her lay disciples to part from her: Many who were meeting with her at that time could not endure leaving her, thinking it a loss, even for a short time, to be deprived of her venerable conversation.⁴⁰³ [*Πολλοὶ οὖν κατ’ ἐκεῖνον τὸν καιρὸν συντυγχάνοντες αὐτῇ ἐδυσχέραινον ἀναχωροῦντες αὐτῆς, ζημιανήγούμενοι τὸ κἂν πρὸς ὀλίγον στερηθῆναι τῆς αἰδεσίμου αὐτῆς συντυχίας*]. When Matrona decides to return to Constantinople and found a convent there with the blessing of Bassianos, these lay women who frequently visited Matrona for guidance and counsel were greatly distressed:

The freewomen, inasmuch as they loved her and did not want to part with her, were grieved and said, “O most God-loving Mistress, if this is to be, we do not know

³⁹⁹ Curiously, in both the *Vita Prima* and *Vita Altera*, Euche’s parents refer to the ascetic life as something mournful and devoid of joy, begging the girl to rejoin her family “who are joyous”. *Life of Matrona (Vita Prima)* 20; *Vita Altera, Life of Matrona* 2.22.

⁴⁰⁰ *Life of Matrona* 20-21.

⁴⁰¹ *Life of Matrona* 22.

⁴⁰² *Life of Matrona* 22.

⁴⁰³ *Life of Matrona* 23.

whether we ought to first lament the desolation of our souls or your good and helpful conversation. To whom shall we come then for consolation, or to which other mother shall we go to that we might be consoled, or to which teacher shall we run that we might be taught by her to scorn this temporary, vain life and not at all prefer it to the coming, everlasting life? Who hereafter, once we are bereft of you, will lighten the afflictions that weigh upon us? Who might lift up with a word as with a sponge those besieged by despondency, when you are not present? Who will speak with us concerning love for a husband, love for children, and godly housekeeping?

αἱ δὲ ἐλεύθεραι, ἅτε ἀγαπῶσαι αὐτήν καὶ δυσάποσπαστοῦσαι αὐτῆς, λυπηθεῖσαι λέγουσιν αὐτῇ· Ἡμεῖς μὲν, ὃ δέσποινα θεοφιλεστάτη, εἰ τοῦτο γένηται, τί πρότερον θρηνηῖσαι οὐκ οἶδαμεν, τὴν ἐρημίαν τῶν ψυχῶν ἡμῶν ἢ τὴν ἀγαθὴν σου καὶ ἐπωφελῆ συντυχίαν· πρὸς τίνα γὰρ τοῦ λοιποῦ ἐλευσόμεθα καὶ παραμυθίαν εὐρήσομεν ἢ πρὸς ποίαν ἄλλην μητέρα ἐξελευσόμεθα, ἵνα παραμυθηθῶμεν, ἢ πρὸς ποίαν διδάσκαλον δραμούμεθα, ἵνα ἐξ αὐτῆς διδαχθῶμεν τοῦ μὲν προσκαιροῦ καὶ ματαίου καταγελᾶν βίου, τῆς δὲ μελλούσης καὶ μενούσης ζωῆς μηδὲν προτιμᾶν; τίς ἡμᾶς σοῦ στερουμένας κουφίσει τοῦ λοιποῦ τῶν συνεχουσῶν ἡμᾶς θλίψεων; τίς καθάπερ σπόγγω λόγῳ τὰς πολιορκουμένας ὑπὸ ἀθυμίας, σοῦ μὴ οὔσης, διᾶραι δυνηθεῖν; τίς ἡμᾶς διαλέξεται περὶ φιλανδρίας, περὶ φιλοτεκνίας καὶ οἰκουρίας θεοφιλοῦς;⁴⁰⁴

This passage depicts Matrona's relationship to her disciples as not purely a monastic or spiritual one, but as a mother in a traditional sense, guiding her disciples towards asceticism and counseling them on their day to day lives as wives, mothers, and housekeepers. The freewomen's lament, "to which other mother shall we go?", highlights Matrona's more traditional maternal virtues such as her ability to console, lighten afflictions, teach, and counsel. While her disciples' reference to Matrona's domestic advice regarding "godly housekeeping" and loving one's husband and children seems a bit tongue-in-cheek considering Matrona's dismissal of these duties in her own life, this comment nevertheless underscores the extent to which Matrona's concern for her lay followers extended to all aspects of their lives. As the women grieve the loss of their mother, Matrona's anxiety at leaving them is readily apparent in the text as she instructs two deaconesses on their care:

"O spiritual mothers and sisters, I commit these souls to you and to God: be to them mothers in body and spirit, and for as long as you have them, take care for their salvation, so that you may present them on the day of judgment perfect, without offense, and pure to Christ, Who chose them." Having said these things, she kissed them as a loving mother and admonished them as a good teacher, and she drove them to leave with the deaconesses.⁴⁰⁵

Ἀδελφαὶ καὶ μητέρες πνευματικαί, ὑμῖν καὶ τῷ Θεῷ ταύτας ψυχὰς παρατίθημι· γίνεσθε αὐτῶν μητέρες σώματι καὶ πνεύματι καὶ ὅσον χρόνον ἔχετε αὐτάς, ἐπιμελεῖσθε τῆς σωτηρίας αὐτῶν, ἵνα τελείας καὶ ἀπροσκόπους καὶ καθαρὰς τῷ ἐκλεξαμένῳ Χριστῷ παραστήσητε ἐν ἡμέρᾳ κρίσεως. Ταῦτα εἶποῦσα καὶ καταφιλήσασα αὐτάς ὡς μήτηρ

⁴⁰⁴ *Life of Matrona* 26.

⁴⁰⁵ *Life of Matrona* 27.

φιλόστοργος καὶ νοθετήσασαὼς διδάσκαλος ἀγαθός, ἀπέλυσεν αὐτὰς σὺν ταῖς
διακονίσσαις ἀπελθεῖν.

Matrona's role was to be a mother in "body and spirit" to her community, and she instructs the deaconesses replacing her to likewise attend to these concerns. As Matrona bids farewell to her disciples in Beirut, she "kissed them as a loving mother" and hands them over to the deaconesses in a manner similar to her giving Theodote to Susanna. Juxtaposing these two moments of departure and abandonment, the text at once recognizes the grief of separation while also communicating its necessity for Matrona's spiritual growth and calling. By displacing her children and freeing herself of obligations towards them by providing new mothers, Matrona can become a mother anew in Constantinople, wherein she can acquire new spiritual children in her patrons, nuns, and the monks of Bassianos' adjoining monastery.

Lay Disciples and Patrons

The final third of the *vita* focuses on building up Matrona's convent and establishing her as a monastic founder in the imperial city. While Matrona's reputation as a holy woman preceded her, it is through her wealthy patrons and new disciples that Matrona's legacy is established. Upon her arrival in Constantinople, Matrona's first visitor of consequence was the empress Verina, the wife of Leo I. Their interaction plays out in the text in a manner commonly seen in Late Antique hagiography, wherein the holy person's counsel and intercessions are sought out by imperial patrons.⁴⁰⁶ In the *Life of Melania the Younger*, Melania establishes a similar relationship with the empress Eudoxia, wherein the empress refers to Melania as "my mother" and loathes parting from her.⁴⁰⁷ The *vita* of Matrona's contemporary Daniel the Stylite, who lived atop a column just outside Constantinople, depicts the Syrian ascetic frequently visited by Verina's husband Leo and subsequent emperors Zeno and Anastasios.⁴⁰⁸ Daniel functions as a miracle worker and oracle for the imperial family, warning them of trouble ahead and offering counsel.⁴⁰⁹ In exchange for his intercessions, emperors lavished gifts of great wealth and property on Daniel, some of which, his hagiographer tells, were displayed outside his column.⁴¹⁰ Unlike Daniel's experience, Matrona's relationship with Verina is not overtly transactional: Verina seeks Matrona out of curiosity, wanting to get her blessing and learn the details of her life, "since everyone, then, was flocking to her."⁴¹¹ Favorably impressed by Matrona's ascetic feats and "manliness of purpose," Verina asked for her intercessions on behalf of the emperor and their children, expecting "to be petitioned by [Matrona] for something."⁴¹² Instead of making a request, Matrona offers Verina blessed bread, an act which so surprises and impresses

⁴⁰⁶ Melania the Younger, for example, was visited by the empress Eudoxia in Jerusalem. Eudoxia refers to Melania as "my mother". Gerontius, *Life of Melania the Younger*, 58-59.

⁴⁰⁷ Gerontius, *Life of Melania the Younger*, 58-59.

⁴⁰⁸ *Life of Daniel* 35, 38, 42-44, 46, 48, 68-9.

⁴⁰⁹ *Life of Daniel* 21, 22, 31, 35, 68 76, 91; see Robin Lane Fox, "The Life of Daniel" in *Portraits: Biographical Representation in Greek and Latin Literature of the Roman Empire*, ed. M.J. Edwards and Simon Swain (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1997), 175-225.

⁴¹⁰ *Life of Daniel* 59, 60, 92, 94. Lane Fox, "Life of Daniel", 209, 224.

⁴¹¹ *Life of Matrona* 32. This notion of popularity, with the "whole city" coming to visit secluded ascetics is also seen in the *Life of Daniel* 44, 73, 75, 77-78, 80, 85, 100.

⁴¹² *Life of Matrona* 32.

Verina that the empress “derived extraordinary benefit by [Matrona] not asking for anything”.⁴¹³ Verina’s visit, however, seems to draw other aristocrats and members of the imperial family to Matrona’s door, and these patrons, such as Euphemia, the daughter of the emperor Marcian and wife of Anthimus/Anthemius (Augustus of the West from 467-472) and Antiochiane, the wife of the patrician Sphorakios (consul in 452)⁴¹⁴ offer gifts in exchange for healing and Matrona’s intercessions.⁴¹⁵ Through their endowments and property, as well as Athanasia’s fortune, Matrona is able to establish her long-standing convent in Constantinople; through her spiritual children, Matrona cements her status as holy mother both spiritually and materially.

Conclusion

By the fifth century, motherhood was being redefined in Christian writing and Roman law. If fourth century Christianity was preoccupied with “the virgin and the bride”⁴¹⁶, the fifth century shifted this focus from “virgin and bride” to “virgin and mother”. The Council of Ephesus (431) established the Virgin Mary as Theotokos, bringing a human mother to the forefront of Christian salvation as the “God-bearer” who embodied at once the paradoxical roles of virgin and mother; her veneration and promotion by imperial women further centered Mary at the heart of both Christian worship and imperial display, allowing Mary’s dual virginity and motherhood to take on new identities as “Queen of Heaven” and allowing empresses to style themselves as earthly counterparts to the holiest of mothers.⁴¹⁷ Further, Mary’s virginal maternity exemplified the paradoxical ways ascetic women could fashion themselves. In the words of John Chrysostom, a mother was no longer defined by birthing children but by “raising” them in the Church.⁴¹⁸ This sentiment helped define the emergence of spiritual motherhood in Late Antiquity. As the increased legal stature of mothers in late Roman law gave women more rights over their own children and property, granting them more power in determining the outcomes of family estates and their children’s futures, so too could spiritual mothers guide the lives (and property) of their disciples.

Fourth century model spiritual mothers such as Makrina, Gorgonia, or Augustus’ mother Monica were praised for acting as spiritual guides to their biological kin, remaining in their homes and serving the physical and spiritual needs of their families and communities. While some holy mothers such as Paula or Melania the Elder left behind their homes and children to pursue asceticism, they still remained intimately connected to their biological families, especially their children. The fifth century witnessed a shift in focus from holy women as intercessors on behalf of the *oikos* towards the rejection of traditional roles in favor of asceticism outside the home. This renunciation of family life by holy mothers in hagiography was closely associated with the deaths of children. In the case of Matrona of Perge and Melania the Younger, their biological children died early deaths, but these mothers maintained their maternal identity by nurturing spiritual children, establishing the salvation of their monastic communities, and, in Melania’s case, the salvation of her extended family. The biological mother therefore becomes

⁴¹³ *Life of Matrona* 32.

⁴¹⁴ Sphorakios famously constructed a church to the martyr Theodore, as the text reminds. *Life of Matrona* 33.

⁴¹⁵ *Life of Matrona* 33-36.

⁴¹⁶ Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride*.

⁴¹⁷ Pulcheria especially. See Angelova, *Sacred Founders*, 179-82.

⁴¹⁸ Chrysostom, *Homily on Maccabees*. trans. Mayer with Neil, 141-142.

the spiritual, substituting children for disciples. For Matrona, the relationships between mother and child, husband and wife are inferior to relationships with spiritual family. Religious friends, fellow monks/nuns, disciples, and above all, one's spiritual parent replace all kin, and Matrona's disciples follow her example and leave behind their own families to join her.

As notions of gender and masculinity were in flux, so too were the ways piety could be articulated within family groups and communities. Gregory of Nazianzus describes himself as both father and mother of his congregations, and at the same time praised his mother and sister as the primary sources of spiritual strength within their homes; in Gregory's estimation, his mother Nonna was "more than a man".⁴¹⁹ As Gregory shows, spiritual authority was best articulated through combining these essential attributes of mother and father, and this doubling of gender roles and responsibilities is articulated in the hagiographies of holy mothers. Melania the Younger and Matrona are showed feeding, clothing, educating, and ministering to their communities as mothers while also displaying masculine characteristics and participating in behaviors connoted male and reserved for male clergy (e.g. wearing male monastic clothing, preaching, miracle working, baptizing, tonsuring, etc.).⁴²⁰ However, as they abandon their families and adopt manly attributes, holy women paradoxically become *more* maternal. Children, whether spiritual or biological, could contribute to the sanctity of parents, and in the case of Late Antique holy mothers, were instrumental in defining their holiness. In the lives of Melania the Younger and Matrona of Perge, both biological and spiritual children play key roles in determining their sanctity, but it is the sacrifice of biological children that creates the foundations for spiritual motherhood. The abandonment and deaths of Theodote and Melania and Athanasia's children become the making of their mothers.

⁴¹⁹ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Carmina* 2.1.11.60, trans. Carolinne White in *Gregory of Nazianzus: Autobiographical Poems* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 15.

⁴²⁰ These manly behaviors and characterizations are discussed in detail in the final chapter.

Chapter 4

“Worthy of Abraham”: Maternal Abandonment and Child Mortality

If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.

(Luke 14:26, NKJV)

*I had to yield to the force of divine love and suffer this blow of division which was more painful than I can tell you, but which didn't prevent me from considering myself an infinity of times the cruelest of all mothers. I ask you to forgive me, my very dear son, for I am the cause of your having suffered much affliction.*⁴²¹

(Marie de l'Incarnation, *Lettre CIX*, c. 1647)

In 1631, Marie Guyart, a young French widow, left her son Claude in the care of relatives to join a cloistered Ursuline convent in Tours, later becoming St. Marie de l'Incarnation after establishing the first convent in New France (Quebec, Canada).⁴²² Claude, who was eleven years old at the time, pleaded for his mother's return, frequently wailing at the convent gates, writing poems of his affection for her, and sneaking behind the monastery walls to find any opportunity to see his mother or leave behind little reminders of his love.⁴²³ His condition was so pitiable that the sisters of the convent were moved to tears in their sympathy for the young boy; friends and neighbors sided with the child in condemning Marie for her lack of motherly affection – she had left him virtually penniless, with barely enough for a basic education and no prospect of a good career.⁴²⁴ Nevertheless, despite her apparent coolness, for thirty-one years Marie remained in regular correspondence with her son, and in their letters, abandonment was a frequent topic of discussion. Marie attempted to justify her abandonment of Claude as something required by God, and yet at the same time begged his forgiveness for her cruelty in leaving him.⁴²⁵ Claude's letters indicate that he was more than reluctant to forgive his mother and blamed all his problems and hardships on her abandonment. However, following Marie's death, Claude published her life and their letters, framing the event of abandonment as an act of ultimate sacrifice, comparing himself to Isaac and casting his mother as a model of Abraham, Jacob, and even Christ.⁴²⁶ In death,

⁴²¹ *Marie de l'Incarnation: Correspondance*, ed. Dom Guy-Marie Oury (Sablé-sur-Sarthe, France: Solesmes, 1971), 316, trans. in Mary Dunn, *The Cruellest of All Mothers: Marie de l'Incarnation, Motherhood, and Christian Tradition* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 1.

⁴²² Marie de l'Incarnation's canonization occurred rather late under Pope Francis on April 2, 2014, and her life has been a source of interest among Canadians, with numerous film and stage productions dedicated to her life and legacy.

⁴²³ Claude Martin, *La Vie de la Vénérable Mère Marie de l'Incarnation* (Sablé-sur-Sarthe, France : Solesmes, 1981), 186; Marie de l'Incarnation, “Lettres CLV and CCXLVII,” in Oury, *Correspondance*, 527 and 837. Dunn. 63-64.

⁴²⁴ Marie de l'Incarnation, *Relation de 1633*, in *Marie de l'Incarnation : Écrits spirituels et historiques*, (ed.) Dom Albert Jamet, vol 1 (Paris : Desclée-de Brouwer, 1929), 291 and “Lettre CCXLVII,” in Oury, *Correspondance*, 837.

⁴²⁵ Dunn, *The Cruellest of All Mothers*, 37.

⁴²⁶ Claude Martin, “Vie”, 170-171, discussed in Dunn, 40. While Claude edited the published letters between his mother and himself, many of Marie's original letters survive in the convents in Tours and Quebec, allowing scholars to access her voice unrevised.

Marie transformed under Claude's pen from "the cruelest of all mothers" into a paragon of saintly sacrifice, a mother who acquired salvation through the act of giving up what she held most precious: her only son.

Abandoning Children for Christ

The surviving correspondence between Marie and her son Claude and the lives and letters of other contemporary holy mothers provide a unique glimpse into the maternal motivations of child abandonment from the perspective of both mother and child.⁴²⁷ These late Western medieval sources, including *vitae*, autobiographies, and letters written by holy women themselves, reveal common themes pertaining to maternal abandonment and the pursuit of Christian spirituality that can also be seen in Late Antique hagiography,⁴²⁸ such as the renunciation of wealth, the incompatibility of biological motherhood with monasticism and the idea that living children are a major distraction and temptation to a spiritual life. While the life and letters of Marie de l'Incarnation are over a millennium removed from the hagiographies of Matrona of Perge and other Late Antique holy mothers, children play a common role as sources of anxiety and serve as sacrificial offerings in these texts. Maternal asceticism could have a profound economic impact on wealthy Christian families, both in Late Antiquity and in the late Medieval world, and no one in these stories was more fatefully impacted by the economy of salvation than the children standing between their mother and her vocation. Wealth and inheritance are at the heart of discussions on familial renunciations of elite ascetics,⁴²⁹ as all of the ascetic mothers discussed here were very wealthy.⁴³⁰ While the lives and letters of medieval

⁴²⁷ Major figures include Ivetta of Huy, Birgitta of Sweden, Elizabeth of Thuringia, St. Margaret of Cortona. Hugh of Floreffe, *The Life of Yvette of Huy*, trans. and intro. Jo Ann McNamara (Toronto: Peregrina, 1999), 53–62; Ceasarius von Heisterbach, *Vita Sancte Elyzabeth Lantgravie* in *Annalen des Historischen Vereins für den Niederrhein* 86, ed. Albert Huyskens (1908), 40 and 50. For a discussion of motherhood in Birgitta of Sweden's writings, see Claire Sahlin, *Birgitta of Sweden and the Voice of Prophecy* (Rochester, N.Y.: Boydell Press, 2001); *Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden*, 3 vols., trans. Senis Searby and intro Bridget Morris (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). Fra Giunta Bevegnati, *The Life and Miracles of Saint Margaret of Cortona (1247–1297)*, trans. and intro. Thomas Renna and ed. Shannon Larson (St. Bonaventure, N.Y.: Franciscan Institute, 2012). See general discussion in Dunn, *The Cruellest of All Mothers*, 100.

⁴²⁸ These common themes perhaps point to the influence of earlier hagiographic literature on the ways later medieval ascetics perceived their vocations and processed their own familial abandonment. Dunn, for example, discusses the influence of the passions of Perpetua and Felicitas, Agathonike, and Jerome's friend Paula on later medieval ascetic mothers. Dunn argues that these Late Antique texts represented maternity as "maximally powerful sources of temptation." Dunn, *The Cruellest of All Mothers*, 85–90. But even more likely, these common themes indicate that the separation and rejection of family among Christian ascetics was a painful, powerful, and transformative experience, something that was out of the norms of everyday life, regardless of whether it occurred in the fifth or fifteenth century.

⁴²⁹ Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of the Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350–550 AD* (2012) and *The Ransom of the Soul: Afterlife and Wealth in Early Western Christianity* (2015); Vuolanto, *Children and Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (2015); Susan Holman (ed.), *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society* (2008); Gerasimos Merianos and George Gotsis, *Managing Financial Resources in Late Antiquity: Greek Fathers' Views on Hoarding and Saving* (2017);

⁴³⁰ For the late Medieval examples, Marie de l'Incarnation's husband was a master silk worker and their home housed many servants and craftsmen who worked for her husband; Ivetta of Huy and Birgitta of Sweden were both wealthy elites, while Elizabeth of Thuringia was a Hungarian princess. Margaret of

holy mothers indicate that they often left their children without sufficient resources,⁴³¹ Late Roman inheritance laws protected children and their patrimony, making holy women like Melania the Elder and Paula ever connected to their living children through their finances, even if their children's inheritance was under another guardian.⁴³² Two thematic differences between the late Roman and medieval narratives, however, are the presence of husbands and child mortality. Husbands in the lives of Late Antique holy women were often still living (and objecting to their wives' departures), while the children of ascetic mothers often died once their mothers embarked on a religious life. In contrast, most late Medieval holy mothers who left behind children were widows;⁴³³ instead of dying, their children tended to linger on as reminders, tempters, and often lasting objectors to maternal abandonment. For Matrona, her disciple Athanasia, and Melania the Younger, obstinate husbands could be put aside, but living children hindered a mother's spiritual and financial agency.

As mentioned in previous chapters, it was highly unconventional for Roman matrons, even Christian ones, to leave behind their husbands and children to follow a religious life outside their homes. Marriage and motherhood tied one down "physically, economically, and socially."⁴³⁴ Separation from one's family and children for an aristocratic Roman matron was normally the result of exile and punishment for grave moral failing (usually adultery).⁴³⁵ From at least the third century, however, Christian literature began to valorize the separation of mother and child in martyrdom texts, wherein pious mothers would eagerly offer their lives (and sometimes their children's as well) for Christ.⁴³⁶ The *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* is among

Cortona was a little more unusual and was the mistress of an Italian lord; when he was murdered, Margaret returned to his family all of her lavish gifts, moved out of his castle, and devoted herself to a life of poverty in a convent as a Franciscan nun.

⁴³¹ Martin, "Vie", 170; Margaret of Cortona would starve herself and her son and give their food and money to the poor. Bevegnati, *Margaret of Cortona*, 55.

⁴³² See discussion on 97-99.

⁴³³ The notable exceptions to this are Adelheid of Rheinfelden and Rilindis of Bissegg who left their husband and infant children. Jeanne Ancelet-Hustache, ed., "Les 'Vitae Sororum' d'Unterlinden," *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen âge* 5 (1930), 394 and 460.

⁴³⁴ Caroline Schroeder, "Exemplary Women" in *Melania*, ed. Catherine M. Chin and Caroline T. Schroeder (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), 50-66, here 51; Elizabeth Clark, "Ascetic Renunciation and Feminine Advancement: A Paradox of Late Ancient Christianity". *Anglican Theological Review* 63 (1981), 240-57.

⁴³⁵ A famous Roman example was Augustus' exile of his daughter Julia for adultery. Under Augustan law, adultery was punishable by banishment: *Lex Iulia de Adulteriis Coercendis* (17 BC). Interestingly, under Justinian, this law was changed substantially. Adultery was punishable by banishment only for the lower classes; for the wealthy, half of their estate could be confiscated. Justinian, *Institutes* 4, 18, 2-3. Under Septimius Severus a woman who had an abortion without her husband's consent could be sentenced to exile or defrauding her husband of offspring. D. 47.11.4. Evans Grubbs, *Law and Family*, 96. In Byzantium, exile or death were punishments for abortion: 48.8.8; 48.19.39.

For sources on exile in Late Antiquity, especially religious exile, see *Mobility and Exile at the End of Antiquity*, ed. Dirk Rohmann, Jörg Ulrich, and Margarita Vallejo Givés (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2018); Julian Hillner, *Prison, Punishment and Penance in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) and "Imperial Women and Clerical Exile in Late Antiquity", *Studies in Late Antiquity* vol. 3 no. 3 (2019), 369-406.

⁴³⁶ The cults of martyred mothers and children were popular in Byzantine veneration. Two well-known examples include Sophia of Rome with her daughters Faith, Hope, and Charity (second century), and Julitta and her son Kyrikos (d.c. 304). Both of these martyred families were widely venerated, with

the most well-known literary examples of this maternal renunciation, wherein the young aristocratic Perpetua and her servant Felicitas are described as passionately seeking martyrdom while pregnant and nursing.⁴³⁷ When Perpetua is warned in the text that her infant son would surely die without her, she looks on unmoved as the baby is brought before her in court, remaining resolute in her desire for martyrdom.⁴³⁸ Pregnant Felicitas worries that she would not be martyred due to her pregnancy⁴³⁹, and with the help of her companions induces premature labor to deliver the child before their scheduled day in the arena. The text describes Felicitas as thankful for surviving the birth, so that she could willingly sacrifice her life, passing “from blood to blood, from the midwife to the gladiator.”⁴⁴⁰ Both young mothers die as martyrs, but the fates of their children are less certain. While Felicitas’ child survives its preterm birth and is placed in the care of a Christian woman, Perpetua’s son disappears from the text after her rejection of him, presumably to die, as her father predicts.⁴⁴¹ The *Passion of Perpetua* set a heroic, rhetorical precedent for mothers to choose Christ over their own children and family obligations. However unpopular such choices might have been in reality, this sentiment of rejecting, abandoning, and even killing children for Christ appears abundantly in monastic literature and iconography in Late Antique Egypt, as will be discussed shortly.

Canons of Gangra (340) Against Familial Renunciation

Familial renunciation gained popularity in the fourth and fifth centuries as patristic writers praised celibacy and encouraged chastity as the ultimate Christian virtues. Marriage and traditional family life were deemed largely incompatible with these ascetic ideals, which led to the development of various heterodox beliefs and practices that condemned marriage and childbearing. The Council of Gangra in 340/1 was called to address the supposed encratism of Eustathius, the bishop of Sebaste in Asia Minor, and his followers. In condemning Eustathius, the bishops at Gangra anathematized those who abandoned husbands and children for asceticism, as well as a variety of other practices and ideologies that ran counter to Roman cultural norms and threatened the socio-economic stability of Roman families.⁴⁴² Canons 14 and 15 from this

churches and shrines dedicated to them across the empire. In some instances of family martyrdom, such as St. Mamas and his parents, the child martyr became more famous than his parents. Other examples include Agathonike and her companions.

⁴³⁷ *Passion of Perpetua* 15. Scholarship on the *passio* is abundant, but key works pertaining to the influence of this text on Late Antique patristic writing, Burnett, “Mother-Child Bonding in the Greek and Latin Fathers of the Church”; L. Stephanie Cobb, *Dying to Be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr Texts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

⁴³⁸ *Passion of Perpetua* 5, 6.

⁴³⁹ Roman law forbade pregnant women from receiving capital punishment.

⁴⁴⁰ *Passion of Perpetua* 18.

⁴⁴¹ *Passion of Perpetua* 5.3. See discussions in Susan Holman, “Martyr-Saints and the Demon of Infant Mortality: Folk Healing in Early Christian Pediatric Medicine” in *Children and Family in Late Antiquity: Life, Death and Interaction*, eds. Christian Laes, Katariina Mustakallio, and Ville Vuolanto (Leuven: Peeters, 2015), 248-249 and Burnett, “Mother-Child Bonding”, 86-88.

⁴⁴² Among the most controversial of their supposed practices was the acceptance of runaway slaves as members in their community and that they allowed women to dress as men. The latter issue will be discussed in the following chapter on clothing. See Elm, *Virgins of God*, 106-111.

synod are of particular interest here, as they address the abandonment of husbands and children for asceticism:

Canon 14

Εἴ τις γυνή καταλιμπάνοι τὸν ἄνδρα, καὶ ἀναχωρεῖν ἐθέλοι, βδηλυττομένη τὸν γάμον, ἀνάθεμα ἔστω.

Si qua mulier a marito suo divertat, et secedere velit, nuptias abhorrens, anathema sit.

If any woman abandons her husband, and wishes to withdraw [from him], despising marriage, let her be an anathema.

Canon 15

Εἴ τις καταλιμπάνει τὰ ἑαυτοῦ τέκνα, καὶ μὴ [μηδὲ] τεκνοτροφεῖ, καὶ τὸ ὅσον ἑαυτῶ [ἐφ' ἑαυτῶ] πρὸς θεοσεβειαν τὴν προσήκουσαν ἀνάγοι [ἄγει], ἀλλὰ προφάσει τῆς ἀσκήσεως ἀμελοίη, ἀνάθεμα ἔστω.

Si quis filios suos deserat, et eos non alat, et quantum in se est ad pietatem et debitum Dei cultum non instituat: sed exercitationis praetextu, negligit, anathema sit.⁴⁴³

If anyone shall forsake/abandon his own children and not nurture them, nor, as much as is in him, bring them up in proper piety, but shall neglect them under the pretext of asceticism, let him be an anathema.

Canon 14 is one of several from this council directed towards women who left their marriages for religious lives. Canon 15 is generally directed at ascetic parents and condemns those who abandon their children “under the pretext of asceticism.” In doing so, this canon lays out the expectations for good Christian parents: to the best of their ability, parents ought to nurture their children and raise them in the Church. Fourth century patristic writers agreed that mothers were responsible not only for the general wellbeing of their children, but also their spiritual education, and Paul’s first letter to Timothy indicated that a mother’s salvation depended upon raising her children well.⁴⁴⁴ If a Christian mother rejected her children, the basis of her salvation, how then could she attain sanctity? Through the rescripting of motherhood in the fifth century, women could still maintain their maternity by raising spiritual children, but this was only possible if biological motherhood could be put aside. The paradox of the Christian mother abandoning her children and husband for her own salvation could only be rectified by making her a biological

Some controversy over the dating of the council found in Timothy Barnes, “The Date of the Council of Gangra”, *Journal of Theological Studies* 40 (1), 1989, 21-24 and Caner, *Wandering, Begging Monks*, 83-125.

⁴⁴³ Greek and Latin texts from Minge, PL, Vol 67, Col. 55 and 56 (Dionysius Exiguus).

⁴⁴⁴ Paul’s I Timothy 2:15 stated that women would be saved through childbearing, though the exegesis of several Church Fathers questioned such a literal interpretation of this passage. Clark, *Reading Renunciation*, 113-14, 140, 194, 353-54, 356-58.

mother no more – and in some instances, a woman no more, either, in the rhetoric of her renunciation.⁴⁴⁵ Spiritual motherhood required the transformation of body, person, and purpose.

In the *Life of Matrona of Perge*, when Matrona decides to abandon her marriage and family and pursue a religious life under a new male identity, her very first action in this transitional process from mother to monk is to give away her daughter. Matrona places Theodote in the care of her close friend Susanna, and the text is explicit in communicating the new relationships and roles of these women: Susanna becomes Theodote's mother, taking on Matrona's maternal responsibilities, while Matrona herself becomes "a man", "both in garb and purpose" by cutting her hair, wearing men's clothing, and changing her name.⁴⁴⁶ After spending three years as a eunuch monk in Bassianos' monastery, Matrona's biological sex is revealed, causing her much distress. Her anxiety centers around the loss of her vocation and fear of returning to her former life as a wife and mother. Before Matrona leaves the monastery, however, she learns that Theodote has suddenly died, and this news fills her with joy and relief, freeing her once and for all of concern for her child. While the hagiographer's positive portrayal of Theodote's abandonment and death for Matrona might appear callous, such attitudes towards children are expressed in other ascetic lives and are echoed by some of the most prominent Church Fathers. Melania the Younger, for example, passionately desiring an ascetic life and despising childbearing, fasted so strictly and prayed so intensely that she both miscarried and lost her other child in quick succession, thus freeing herself from marital duties and allowing her to pursue monasticism unencumbered.⁴⁴⁷ In the case of Matrona's disciple Athanasia, the text associates Athanasia's occupation with asceticism with the death of her child.⁴⁴⁸ The deaths of children are portrayed favorably in the texts, alleviating the ascetic mothers of their worldly responsibilities and allowing them to progress uninhibited on the path to holiness. Child mortality also served an economic purpose in these narratives: without a child to inherit her wealth, a mother was not obliged to keep her property within the family and could distribute it as she wished; further, a mother could even inherit from her deceased children.⁴⁴⁹

Inheritance Laws and Monastic Parents

As discussed in the previous chapter, late Roman law increased the rights of mothers over their own children and property, allowing mothers greater economic influence over their families

⁴⁴⁵ This subject will be explored more fully in the following chapter, but the origin of this idea that women must become men to be saved stems from the second century apocryphal texts, such as the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Acts of Thekla*. Davis, "Crossed Texts, Crossed Sex", 1-36; Castelli, "I will Make Mary Male", 29-49.

⁴⁴⁶ *Life of Matrona* 8.

⁴⁴⁷ Gerontius, *Life of Melania the Younger* 2.

⁴⁴⁸ Evelyn Patlagean explores the tensions of early Christian attitudes towards women through "transvestite" nuns in "La femme déguisée", 605-9. See also J. Anson, "The Female Transvestite in Early Monasticism: The Origin and Development of a Motif", *Viator* 5 (1974), 1-32, and Susan Ashbrook Harvey, "Women in Early Byzantine Hagiography: Reversing the Story" in *That Gentle Strength: Historical Perspectives on Women in Christianity*, ed. L. Coon, K. Haldane, and E. Sommer (Charlottesville, VA, 1990), 46-50.

⁴⁴⁹ Roman law prior to the fourth century dictated that property had to be passed through the paternal line. *Codex Theodosianus* 8.16.1, 3.2.1; Evans Grubbs, *Law and Family*, 118-119; Antti Arjava, "The Survival of Roman Family Law after the Barbarian Settlements" in *Law, Society and Authority*, (2001), 39.

and futures.⁴⁵⁰ If a widow remarried, her property from her first husband had to be handed over to her children for fear that a new husband could infringe on their patrimony.⁴⁵¹ However, with high child mortality rates throughout antiquity and the premodern world,⁴⁵² mothers often inherited *from* their own children. Constantine allowed mothers succession rights to deceased children's inheritance, even in cases where the children had reached maturity and had left their mothers out of the will.⁴⁵³ These laws stipulate that if a woman's children died, she would be able to maintain their property; if her husband was also deceased, she would inherit everything he had left to his children and could give it to anyone she chose, free to dispense with her husband's property away from his extended family line.⁴⁵⁴ As inheritance laws shifted throughout the fifth century, greater rights to family property fell to those who chose not to remarry following the death of their spouse, regardless of whether or not they had living children or other relatives to inherit, making it easier to move wealth outside of the family groups and towards charitable giving, monastic foundations, and Church building. Through such transactions, mothers and their deceased children could become heirs to one another: the mother who lost her children gained back her dowry, and if she used these funds to her spiritual benefit, she could secure a heavenly inheritance through a monetary one. Such mothers received a double inheritance from their children, securing treasure in heaven from "the greatest of all treasures."⁴⁵⁵

By the sixth century, special provisions were made to protect the financial interests of monasteries and the ascetics who dedicated family property to their communities. Under Justinian, parents who entered monasteries were required to reserve a quarter of their property for their children, but the remaining three quarters went to the monastery, ensuring that the ascetic owned no property themselves once they were tonsured.⁴⁵⁶ This type of bequeathal is

⁴⁵⁰ *Codex Theodosianus* 3.5.11 (380), 3.17.4 (390), 3.16.2 (421), 8.18.1 and 8.18.3 (334); Justinian, *Novels* 117.1 (542), *Institutes* 4.6.29; *Codex Justinianus* 5.12.30 (529) and 5.12.29-30; 5.13.1; 8.17.12.; Evans Grubbs, *Women and the Law*, 113-14, 231.

⁴⁵¹ *Codex Justinianus* 5.10.1, 6.56.4 and *Codex Theodosianus* 3.8.2.

⁴⁵² See footnote 14.

⁴⁵³ In these cases where a mother was left out of the will, proof had to be provided that the mother and child had been on good terms and that the mother had never harmed her child. *Codex Justinianus* 6.56.3 (315 or 318); *Codex Theodosianus* 5.1.1. Discussed in Evans Grubbs, *Law and Family* 116-117.

⁴⁵⁴ *Codex Theodosianus* 3.8.2.

⁴⁵⁵ Chrysostom referred to children as the "the greatest of all treasures" for a mother. Chrysostom, *On Marriage and Family Life*, tr. C.P. Roth and D. Anderson (Crestwood, NY, 1986), 96-97.

⁴⁵⁶ [issued 535] "We ordain further that a person intending to enter a monastery shall have license, before doing so, to dispose as he wishes of what is his. Once he has entered, his property will come with him in any case, even should he not expressly declare that he is bringing it in; he will no longer be the owner of it, in any way. In the case that he has children, should he actually have already given them any property, presenting it either by way of pre-nuptial gift or as a dowry, and be making that into the quarter share of his estate in intestacy, the children are to have no share in the rest of his property. If he gives them either nothing, or less than their quarter, then even after the person renouncing his property has become a candidate for the monastic community, the quarter-share is nevertheless still to be due to the children, either so as to bring it up to the full amount, if they have in fact already received something, or actually for the whole sum to be given them. Should he have a wife, and be now leaving her to enter the monastery, the dowry is to be secured to the wife, and so is her entitlement on his death as has been also enacted in another decree of ours. All that has been said on this with to monks is to hold good also for women who are entering a monastic community." Justinian, *Novels* 5.5, trans. Miller and Sarris, 93
And 5.9: "We have legislated that, by the very act of entering the monastery, such men and women are consecrating themselves, body and soul, and their estates; and <should they leave it, their estate remains>

exemplified by Matrona's disciple Athanasia, who hands over her vast wealth and property to Matrona and their monastery upon entering the community.⁴⁵⁷ The promise of spiritual rewards for pious giving was a popular topic among patristic writers praising the renunciation of wealth. Gregory of Nazianzus extols his sister Gorgonia for giving away so much of her personal wealth that "the only riches she left to her children were imitation of her example and emulation of her virtues."⁴⁵⁸ While legislation to protect children's' patrimony was robust in late Roman law,⁴⁵⁹ nevertheless, the idea that spiritual inheritance could hold immeasurable value was pervasive in patristic rhetoric and had a profound impact on some of Rome's wealthiest families.⁴⁶⁰ The virtues of pious parents could have eternal implications for both themselves and their children.

This chapter explores the impact of abandonment and child mortality on ascetic identity building in the *Life of Matrona of Perge* and contemporary hagiographies, revealing a paradoxical relationship between ascetic parent and biological child in early Christian literature. Christian mothers were expected to nurture and raise their children in the Church and at the same time were encouraged to reclaim their virginity as Brides of Christ by practicing continence and strict asceticism.⁴⁶¹ Despite a generally positive view of mothers and children in homilies, the letters of many Church Fathers and the function of children in hagiographic literature indicate a far murkier role of the child as a potential threat to parental salvation. Indeed, while some preached that children were a blessing from the ambo, others cited children in epistles as sources of distraction, anxiety, and an overall burden to the spiritual life.⁴⁶² Monastic texts such as the *Apophthegmata Patrum* even incorporate stories of child killing into their rhetoric of familial renunciation, describing ascetic fathers killing or abusing their biological children in order to secure a position in a prominent monastic community. While these latter accounts were intended to astonish readers with their displays of violence and implacable obedience,⁴⁶³ their portrayal of children as the ultimate sacrificial offering for parental asceticism and salvation were reflected more broadly in patristic discourses on child mortality, where bereaved parents could acquire spiritual benefit through the deaths of their children.⁴⁶⁴

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in the monastery, because they no longer have secure possession of it." Trans. Miller and Sarris, 535. See discussion in Avshalom Laniado, "The Early Byzantine State and the Christian Ideal of Voluntary Poverty" in *Charity and Giving in Monotheistic Religions*, eds. Miriam Frenkel and Yaacov Lev (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009), 15-43.

⁴⁵⁷ *Life of Matrona* 44-46. This is discussed in detail on pages 109-111 of this chapter.

⁴⁵⁸ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 8.12; Catholic University Press, 1953. Pg. 109.

⁴⁵⁹ Justinian, *Digest* 6.1.65.1, 31.88-89, 33.8.6.4,10,19.2,26, 34.4.31.3, 40.1.7; *Novels* 117.1; *Codex Justinianus* 3.29.2, 3.36.13,18, 6.60.4; *Codex Theodosianus* 8.18.3. Arjava, Women and Law, 101-3. See also Arjava, Paternal Power in Late Antiquity, *Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol. 88 (1998), 147-165.

⁴⁶⁰ Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of the Needle*, esp. 72-90, 389-395.

⁴⁶¹ See the discussion on Gorgonia as the model Christian wife, mother, and ascetic on 35-39.

⁴⁶² Jerome, *Letter* 54; Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity* 3.4-10, Chrysostom, *On Virginity* 52, 56-7 and *Letter to Theodore* 2.5, Paulinus of Nola, *Letter* 25.7. For scholarship questioning the good of children in Christianity, see Vuolanto, "Children and Asceticism: Strategies of Continuity", 2005; Evans Grubbs, "Late Roman Marriage and Family Relationships" in *A Companion to Late Antiquity*, ed. P. Rousseau (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 206-13.

⁴⁶³ Caroline Schroeder, *Children and Family*, 103, 107.

⁴⁶⁴ See Doefrler, *Jepthah's Daughter, Sarah's Son*, 86-88.

An abundance of sources both textual and material point to the great affection Late Antique parents had for their children and the great pains they took to protect children's health and property.⁴⁶⁵ While affection for one's children was a natural good and, according to Plutarch, the aim of all parents,⁴⁶⁶ Greco-Roman literature long immortalized parents who lost or sacrificed their children for a greater good, whether civic or religious, creating a precarious rhetorical position for children as the ultimate sacrificial offerings.⁴⁶⁷ For Late Antique Christians, the Maccabean mother provided a popular model for this type of motherhood and martyrdom.⁴⁶⁸

In the fourth century, homilists who were keen to define the qualities of good Christian parents and the proper way to raise children within the Church, often preached about the Maccabean mother⁴⁶⁹ as an example of ideal parental love, for she urged her seven sons to be

⁴⁶⁵ Evidence for affection for children often appears in funerary contexts: Byzantine funerary inscriptions denoting affection towards children, see G. Kiourtzian, *Recueil des inscriptions grecques chrétiennes des Cyclades: De la fin du IIIe au VIIe siècle après J.-C.*, Travaux et mémoires du Centre de recherche d'histoire et civilisation de Byzance. Monographies 12 (Paris 2000), 167, no. 97. For hagiographic examples of parents' concern for children's education and health, see A. Kiousopoulou, Χρόνος και ηλικίες στη Βυζαντινή κοινωνία: Η κλίμακα των ηλικιών από τα αγιολογικά κείμενα της μέσης εποχής (7ς - 11ς αι), *Ιστορικό αρχείο ελληνικής νεολαίας* 30 (Athens, 1997), 67-73. The papyrological evidence of affection and care for children is discussed in the following: April Pudsey, "Children in Late Roman Egypt: Family and Everyday Life in Monastic Contexts" in *Children and Family in Late Antiquity: Life, Death and Interaction*, ed. Christian Laes, Katariina Mustakallio, and Ville Vuolanto (Leuven: Peeters, 2015), especially 220-221; Pudsey, "Children in Roman Egypt" in *The Oxford Handbook of Childhood and Education in the Classical World*, eds. Evans-Grubbs, Parkin, and Bell (Oxford, 2013), 484-509. For a more general discussion on children in Byzantine material culture, see Brigitte Pitarakis, "The Material Culture of Childhood in Byzantium", in *Becoming Byzantine: Children and Childhood in Byzantium*, ed. Arietta Papaconstantinou and Alice-Mary Talbot (Dumbarton Oaks, 2009) 167- 251.

⁴⁶⁶ Plutarch, *On Affection for Offspring*, ed. and trans. Helmbold, in *Plutarch's Moralia*, vol. 6 342-343, and 348-349.

⁴⁶⁷ In a Roman context, Cornelia, the mother of the Gracchi was particularly celebrated. Plutarch, *Tiberius Gracchus* 1.4-5 and *Caius Gracchus* 19.2-3, in *Plutarch's Lives*, ed. and trans. Bernadotte Perrin (Loeb, vol. 10), 146-7 and 240-41. See also Suzanne Dixon, *Cornelia: Mother of the Gracchi* (London: Routledge, 2007).

⁴⁶⁸ The bibliography on the impact of the Maccabean martyrs on early Christian literature is immense. For a few select studies, see Jennifer Wright Knust, "Who Were the Maccabees? The Maccabean Martyrs and Performances on Christian Difference" in *Martyrdom: Canonisation, Contestation, and Afterlives*, ed. Ihab Saloul and Jan Willem van Henten (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 79-104 ; Ton Hilhorst, "Fourth Maccabees in Christian Martyrdom Texts", in *Ultima Aetas: Time, Tense and Transience in the Ancient World. Studies in Honour of Jan den Boeft*, ed. Caroline Kroon and Daan den Hengst (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 2000), 107-21; Gerard Rouwhorst, "The Emergence of the Cult of the Maccabean Martyrs in Late Antique Christianity" in *More than a Memory: The Discourse of Martyrdom and the Construction of Christian Identity in the History of Christianity*, ed. Johan Leemans and Annu Nuntia Lovaniensia (Leuven : Peeters, 2005), 81-96; Raphaëlle Ziadé, *Les martyrs Maccabées: de l'histoire juive au culte chrétien. Les homélies de Grégoire de Nazianze et de Jean Chrysostom*, Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 66-106; Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

⁴⁶⁹ The second and fourth books of Maccabees tell the story of the martyrdom of seven young brothers and their teacher Eleazar under the Seleucid king Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175-164 BC).

martyred rather than disobey Judaic law.⁴⁷⁰ The mother of the seven Maccabees looked on stoically while all of her sons were tortured and killed in front of her for refusing to eat pork.⁴⁷¹ 4 Maccabees celebrates her resolve by de-feminizing her virtues: “But devout reason, giving her heart a man’s courage in the very midst of her emotions, strengthened her to disregard her temporal love for her children.”⁴⁷² Like the later examples of the Christian martyrs Perpetua and Felicitas or even ascetic mothers Melania the Elder and Paula, the Maccabean mother was praised for being able to “disregard her temporal love for her children,” placing a devotion to God above family ties and nature itself. Ambrose, Gregory of Nazianzus, John Chrysostom, and Augustine repeated and popularized this narrative in their sermons, especially those given on the liturgical feast day of the Maccabean martyrs.⁴⁷³ One of Chrysostom’s homilies in particular objectifies the seven sons under their mother’s gaze, transforming their bodies torn apart by the gore of martyrdom into “corporeal capital”⁴⁷⁴ and treasures of heaven: “flowing blood” is woven into “crowns of righteousness”, pierced ribs are “eternal dwellings under construction”, flesh becoming the substance of eternal glory.⁴⁷⁵ Even the executioners are transformed into angels in

⁴⁷⁰ In brief, John Chrysostom, *On Vainglory and the Right Way for Parents to Bring Up their Children in Christianity and Pagan Culture in the Later Roman Empire*, trans. M.L.W. Laistner (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1951), *Homily 9 (Homilies on First Timothy)*, *Homily 21 (Homilies on Ephesians)*; Augustine, *Letter 262*, *Homily 10.4, De cura pro mortuis gerenda 7*; Jerome, *Letters 66, 107*; Paulinus of Nola, *Letter 13*; Paulinus of Pella, *Eucharisticus 2.219-44, 2.63-7*; Sidonius Apollinaris *Letter 5:16:5*; Aelius Donatus, *Commentary on Terence 594–5*. For a discussion on raising children, see Nathan, *Family in Late Antiquity*, 142-154. See also Burnett, “Mother-Child Bonding”.

⁴⁷¹ 4 Maccabees. The Maccabean mother’s stoicism has largely been regarded as “reason’s triumph” over weakness. See Robin Darling Young, “The ‘Woman with the Soul of Abraham’: Traditions about the Mother of the Maccabean Martyrs”, in *“Women Like This”: New Perspectives on Jewish Women in the Greco-Roman World*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991); on the dating of 4 Maccabees to the first century AD, see David de Silva, “4 Maccabees: Introduction and commentary on the Greek Text” in *Codex Sinaiticus, Septuagint Commentary Series* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), xiv-xvii;

⁴⁷² 4 Maccabees 15:23, trans. in the *Oxford Annotated Apocrypha. Revised Standard Version*, ed. Bruce Metzger (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 325.

⁴⁷³ Ambrose, *On Jacob and the Blessed Life*, delivered during Lent in 387 (English translation McHugh, Saint Ambrose: Seven Exegetical Works, 173-181); Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 15 “In Praise of the Maccabees”* (PG 35:912a-33a); Chrysostom, *Homilies 1 and 2 on the Maccabees* (PG 50:617-626), both delivered in Antioch; Augustine, *Homilies 300 and 301* (PL 38:1376-1385); Knust, “Who Were the Maccabees”, 80-81; Burnett, “Mother-Child Bonding”, 82; Ziadé, *Les martyrs Maccabées: Les homélies de Grégoire de Nazianze et de Jean Chrysostom*; Martha Vinson, “Gregory Nazianzen’s Homily 15 and the Genesis of the Christian Cult of the Maccabean Martyrs”, *Byzantion*, vol. 64, no. 1 (1994), 166-192; Chris L. de Wet, “Claiming Corporeal Capital: John Chrysostom’s Homilies on the Maccabean Martyrs”, *Journal of Early Christianity*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2012), 3-21 and “Old Age, Masculinity, and Martyrdom in Late Antiquity: John Chrysostom and the Maccabean Martyrs”, *Journal of Early Christianity*, vol.8, no. 1 (2018), 43-67; C. Brown Tkacz, “The Seven Maccabees, the Three Hebrews and a Newly Discovered Sermon of St. Augustine (Mayence 50)”, *Revue d’Etudes Augustiniennes et Patristiques*, 41, no. 1 (1995), 59-78.

⁴⁷⁴ The idea of the martyred body as “corporeal capital” is discussed in de Wet, “Claiming Corporeal Capital”, though he does not discuss the same passage of Chrysostom, focusing rather on the martyrdom of the seven sons as a double martyrdom for the mother.

⁴⁷⁵ Chrysostom, *Homily on Maccabees*, trans. Mayer and Neil, *Cult of the Saints*, 141-142 (PG 50:620-621).

the mother's eyes, escorting her sons to heaven!⁴⁷⁶ The suffering and dying of her sons confers on the mother martyrdom sevenfold, as she both endured watching their deaths and produced each martyr through her birth pains. Chrysostom, however, not only credits the mother for her courage in the face of her children's' deaths but also for the virtue of raising and loving her children. Chrysostom calls his congregation to take note:

*Let mothers hear these things, let them emulate the woman's courage, her love for her offspring. Let them raise their children this way. For giving birth is not the defining characteristic of a mother, for that is a matter of nature; instead, a mother's defining feature is raising her child, for that is a matter of choice.*⁴⁷⁷

Here Chrysostom identifies the defining characteristic of a mother as not merely giving birth but *raising* her children and highlights this as "a matter of choice". By "raising", Chrysostom was likely referring to all aspects of rearing a child, including the physical, educational, and spiritual aspects of upbringing, particularly as these responsibilities of motherhood were popular subjects of concern among patristic writers.

In Late Antiquity, children played a central role within the Roman family as guarantors of continuity: children replaced their parents after death, provided comfort to parents in their old age, and maintained family names, property, and status.⁴⁷⁸ "Happy are those who leave behind children to succeed them and take over their possessions. He has children, he is not dead." [*Ergo felices illi qui relinquunt filios in possession sua, quibus sui succedunt. Habuit filios, no est mortuus.*]⁴⁷⁹ Though Augustine's words may have been tinged with sarcasm, they nevertheless illustrate the prevailing cultural attitudes towards children as desired heirs, particularly within upper class Christian families. Capitalizing on the importance of children as successors, homilists were eager to direct this desire for biological progeny towards spiritual growth by emphasizing the importance of spiritual inheritance between parents and children. Parents, and mothers, in particular, were responsible for their children's religious education and were urged to regard their children as potential sources of sanctity for their families. Chrysostom compared parents to painters and sculptors of their child's soul and the child itself as a city in need of protection.⁴⁸⁰ In the fourth and fifth centuries, Church Fathers encouraged parents to dedicate their daughters to virginity and their sons to service in the Church and offered instruction for their religious upbringing.⁴⁸¹ By investing their children in an ascetic life, parents themselves

⁴⁷⁶ Chrysostom, *Homily on Maccabees*, trans. Mayer and Neil, 141

⁴⁷⁷ Chrysostom, *Homily on Maccabees*. trans. Mayer with Neil, 141-142.

⁴⁷⁸ Augustine, *Exposition on Psalm 70* 2.6; Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 2.23.139. Chrysostom, *Propter fornications* 3 (PG 51.213). For Roman continuity strategies, see summary in Vuolanto, *Children and Asceticism*, 28-40.

⁴⁷⁹ Augustine, *Exposition on Psalm 48* 1.14, text in Vuolanto, *Children and Asceticism*, 89.

⁴⁸⁰ Chrysostom, *On Vainglory and the Right Way for Parents to Bring up their Children*, ed. Malingrey, 106-110. For scholarship on Chrysostom's interest in children and their formation, see Leyerle, "Appealing to Children", 243-270; O'Roark, "Parenthood in Late Antiquity", 53-81; Guroian, "The Ecclesial Family: John Chrysostom on Parenthood and Children" in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Bunge (Grand Rapids, MI: 2001), 61-77.

⁴⁸¹ Jerome, *Letter* 66.3, on the only benefit of reproduction was producing virgins for the Church; *Letter* 107 to Laeta on how to raise her daughter Paula (granddaughter of Jerome's close friend Paula the Elder) as a consecrated virgin; *Letter* 128 to Gaudentius on how to raise his infant daughter Pacatula, who was dedicated to virginity; Basil of Caesarea's *Letter* 199, however, cautioned parents from forcing their

could expect spiritual returns.⁴⁸² Eusebius of Emesa ensured that a virgin daughter was a “good guardian at home” who would benefit everyone around her, including her parents, siblings, and even their neighbors.⁴⁸³

Children and Asceticism

From at least the fourth century, children featured prominently in many monastic communities, particularly those of Late Antique Egypt.⁴⁸⁴ Children could arrive at monasteries in a variety of ways, but in Late Antiquity and Byzantium, it was usually ties of kinship that brought them to monastic institutions. In some instances, parents and children or extended families entered religious communities together, establishing ascetic family legacies.⁴⁸⁵ Paulinus of Nola comments that ascetic novices often took their children with them, referring to his friends and acquaintances and who entered monasticism with their spouses and children, such as Apronianus and Avita (who were persuaded by Avita’s aunt Melania the Elder) and Eucherius and Galla.⁴⁸⁶ Such children were not necessarily destined to become ascetics themselves.⁴⁸⁷ Orphaned children, in particular, could be raised by an ascetic relative or under the care of a bishop who looked after their education, inheritance, and arranged their marriages.⁴⁸⁸

daughters towards a life of virginity against their will. Katz, “Educating Paula”, 115-27; Peterson, “The Education of Girls in Fourth-century Rome”, 29-37.

⁴⁸² Vuolanto, *Children and Asceticism*, 192-195, 200-201.

⁴⁸³ Eusebius of Emesa, Sermons 7.24. See also Jerome’s *Letter 107* to Laeta on how to raise little Paula as a consecrated virgin.

⁴⁸⁴ Caroline Schroeder, “Children in Early Egyptian Monasticism” in *Children in Late Ancient Christianity*, ed. Cornelia B. Horn and Robert R. Phenix (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 317-38 and *Children and Family in Late Antique Egyptian Monasticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Rebecca Krawiec, *Shenoute and the Women of the White Monastery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); *First Greek Life of Pachomius* 49, tr. Armand Veilleux, *The Life of Saint Pachomius and His Disciples, Pachomian Koinonia*, vol. 1 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1980).

⁴⁸⁵ Krawiec, *Shenoute and the Women*, 161-74.

⁴⁸⁶ Paulinus of Nola, Letters 39.1-2 (ed. de Hartel, 334-335), dated between 397 and 406, on the sons of Eucherius and Galla at the monastic community of Lérins. See also Palladius, *Lausiac History* 41.5 Paulinus of Nola, *Carmina* 21.66-71 and 21.313-329, ed. de Hartel, *Sancti Pontii Meropii Paulini Nolani opera 2. Carmina* (CSEL 30) (Vindobonae: Tempsky, 1894), 160 and 168-169, dated to 406), on the son and daughter of Apronianus and Avita at Nola; only the daughter remained an ascetic. Salvian entered a monastic life along with his wife Palladia and daughter Auspiciola when the girl was quite young: Salvian, *Letters* 4.6, 12, 16-18, ed. G. Lagarrigue, *Salvien de Marseille, Œuvres*, tome I, Sources chrétiennes 176, Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1971, 90, 94-98, dated to the 430s. Callinicus, *Life of Hypatius* 18.3, ed. G.J.M. Bartelink in *Callinicos: Vie d’Hypatios*, Sources chrétiennes 177, Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1971, 132, ca. 450; *Apophthegmata patrum*, Cario 2 (PG 65.71-440, here 25-d-251c, dated c. 500; *Life of Eupraxia* 2.7-12 (PL 73:623-42, here 627-629, fifth or sixth century. See discussion in Ville Vuolanto, “Choosing Asceticism: Children and Parents, Vows and Conflicts”

⁴⁸⁷ Vuolanto, “Choosing Asceticism”, 257.

⁴⁸⁸ Timothy Miller, *The Orphans of Byzantium: Childwelfare in the Christian Empire* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 152-157; Chrysi Kotsifou, “Papyrological Perspectives on Orphans in the World of Late Ancient Christianity”, in *Children in Late Ancient Christianity*, ed. Cornelia B. Horn and Robert R. Phenix (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck), 2009; Schroeder, “Children in Early Egyptian Monasticism”, esp. 325. For children coming to monasteries for education, see P. Mon. Epiph. 140, and Laes, “Kinship and Friendship”, 128-30

Augustine's letters reference his status as guardian over a young girl living in one of his monasteries; due to her age and reluctance, Augustine had to actively turn away her suitors who pursued her hand.⁴⁸⁹

However, many parents were reluctant for their children to enter a religious life. Chrysostom's mother Anthousa begged him not to devote himself to asceticism until after her death, citing all she had suffered in birthing him and raising him in her widowhood, providing for his education and protecting his inheritance.⁴⁹⁰ The fact that Chrysostom acquiesced perhaps reflects the depth of her maternal influence over him, as well as cultural expectations of reciprocity between parents and children in Late Antiquity.⁴⁹¹ Chrysostom's filial piety is reflected in the writings of many Church Fathers from Gregory of Nazianzus to Augustine, as the previous chapter discussed. In contemporary hagiography, however, holy women like Matrona, Melania the Younger, and their fourth century predecessors such as Olympias and Paula did not bend to the wishes or obligations of family, but rather forged their own way, establishing new identities and rescripting maternal roles in new spiritual families of their own design. For Matrona, the Melanias, and Paula, the separation from and loss of biological children stand at the center of their narratives of sanctification; as the women transition from matrons into female men of God and spiritual mothers, their children (and wealth) become the sacrificial offerings that ensures this transformation, corporeal collateral for maternal salvation.

Left Behind: Toxotius and Publicola

Jerome's *Letter 108* to the consecrated virgin Eustochium describes the life and virtues of her mother Paula, one of the foremost aristocratic widows of Rome who left behind children and kin to pursue a religious life in Palestine. With Eustochium at her side, Paula founded monasteries in Bethlehem and lived out her days in strict asceticism and poverty. Jerome lists out many of Paula's virtues, but he was particularly impressed by her familial renunciation and her immeasurable charity, two subjects that are frequently brought up in the letter, and often together. Jerome describes that after the passing of her husband and inspired by two visiting bishops, Paula's desire turned towards Christ: "*disregarding her house, her children, her servants, her property, and in a word everything connected with the world*" [*Non domus, non liberorum, non familiae, non possessionum, non alicujus rei, quae ad saeculum pertinent memor*]. Not unlike Matrona, Jerome's Paula relinquishes her traditional role as a Roman matron and practitioner of feminine *pudicita* (the Latin equivalent of *sophrosyne*) by leaving behind her

⁴⁸⁹ Augustine, *Letters 252-255* (CSEL 57, 348-349).

⁴⁹⁰ Chrysostom, *On the Priesthood* 1.5 (PG 48:621-692); Augustine cites a similar example with the mother of Laetus. Augustine, *Letters* 243.6-7, 10-12.

⁴⁹¹ This bond between mother and son is highlighted elsewhere in Late Antiquity, but particularly by Libanius, who likewise was raised by a widowed mother. Libanius' mother devoted herself to ensuring his education and forming his moral character. Like Anthousa, Libanius' mother maintained legal guardianship over her son. Libanius, *Oration* 1.4-5, 12, 17 and *To a Young Widow* 2. On the role of mothers as guardians, see Beaucamp, *Le statut de la femme à Byzance (4e- 7e siècle), II (Le pratiques sociales)* Paris 1992, 329-30, Beaucamp, *Le statut de la femme à Byzance (4e- 7e siècle), I (Le droit imperial)* (Paris 1990), 325-37 and Vuolanto 2002, 214-18 and "Construction of Elite Childhood and Youth in Fourth-Century Antioch", in *Children and Family in Late Antiquity: Life, Death and Interaction*, Ed. Christian Laes, Katariina Mustakallio, and Ville Vuolanto (Leuven: Peeters, 2015) 312; Nathan, *The Family in Late Antiquity*, 142.

house, children, servants, and property.⁴⁹² In this sequence of renunciation, *domus* comes first and is bookended with *possessionum*, Paula's home and property; children and servants are positioned in between as the product of Paula's home. Jerome captures the moment of Paula's departure from Rome in 385 in an iconic passage wherein the ascetic mother appears unmoved by the cries and entreaties of her young children Rufina and Toxotius⁴⁹³:

She went down to Portus accompanied by her brother, her relatives, and above all her own children eager by their demonstrations of affection to overcome their loving mother... On the shore the little Toxotius stretched forth his hands in entreaty, while Rufina, now grown up, with silent sobs besought her mother to wait till she should be married. But still Paula's eyes were dry as she turned them heavenwards; and she overcame her love for her children by her love for God. She knew herself no more as a mother, that she might approve herself a handmaid of Christ. Yet her heart was rent within her, and she wrestled with her grief, as though she were being forcibly separated from parts of herself. The greatness of the affection she had to overcome made all admire her victory the more. Among the cruel hardships which attend prisoners of war in the hands of their enemies, there is none severer than the separation of parents from their children. Though it is against the laws of nature, she endured this trial with unabated faith; nay more she sought it with a joyful heart: and overcoming her love for her children by her greater love of God.

Descendit ad portum, fratre, cognatis, affinibus, et quod his majus est, liberis prosequentibus, et clementissimam matrem pietate vincere cupientibus... Parvus Toxotius supplices manus tendebat in littore. Ruffina jam nubilis, ut suas exspectaret nuptias, tacens fletibus obsecrabat. Et tamen illa siccos tendebat ad coelum oculos, pietatem in filios, pietate in Deum superans. Nesciebat se matrem, ut Christi probaret ancillam. Torquebantur viscera, et quasi a suis membris distraheretur [Ms. distraherentur], cum dolore pugnabat: in eo cunctis admirabilior, quod magnam vinceret caritatem. Inter hostium manus et captivitatis duram necessitatem nihil crudelius est, quam parentes a liberis separari. Hoc contra jura naturae plena fides patiebatur, imo gaudens animus appetebat: et amorem filiorum majore in Deum amore contemnens.

Many scholars have discussed this passage, dwelling on the moving image of the crying children begging for their mother's return, and pointing to this passage as evidence of Jerome's negative view towards children.⁴⁹⁴ What is not often commented upon, however, is Jerome's eagerness in

⁴⁹² Paula is described as possessing *pudicitia* in 108.4, and Jerome discusses her traditional feminine virtues which include her seclusion, silence, modesty. Jerome, *Letter* 108.1-5.

⁴⁹³ Jerome, *Epitaphium Sanctae Paulae*. Cain's commentary suggests that since Paula's husband Toxotius died c. 381, little Toxotius was no younger than four and no older than ten or eleven (described in the text as *parvus*), while Rufina was a least twelve. Andrew Cain, *A Commentary on the Epitaphium Sanctae Paulae with an Introduction, Text, and Translation* (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 2013), 185.

⁴⁹⁴ Katz: "This approbation of a mother's desertion of her children, along with a lack of sympathy for the weeping child, is indicative of Jerome's overall attitude toward children as an impediment to the religious life." Phyllis B. Katz, "Educating Paula: A Proposed Curriculum for Raising a 4th-century Christian Infant" in *Constructions of Childhood in Ancient Greece and Italy*, ed. Ada Cohen and Jeremy B. Rutter

the letter to show how much Paula *loved* her children. Though Paula's eyes remain heavenward, "her heart was rent within her" and she "wrestled with her grief" as though her very body was being broken apart, an image shared in Matrona's separation from Theodote. Jerome uses this moment of great pain to highlight the strength of Paula's devotion to Christ and also to facilitate her transformation from matron and mother of children to "handmaid" of God: by loving God more than her children, Paula "knew herself no more as a mother." However, Paula does not so easily lose her maternal role or feelings. Though Jerome claims that Paula sought the separation "with a joyful heart",

*She was easily moved to sorrow and was crushed by the deaths of her family, especially her children. When one after another her husband and her daughters fell asleep, her life was always endangered. And when she signed her mouth and her breast, pressing with the sign of the cross she endeavored to soothe a mother's grief; her feelings overpowered her and her and her confident mind.*⁴⁹⁵

in luctu mitis erat, et suorum mortibus frangebatur, maxime liberorum. Nam et in viri et filiarum dormitione semper periclitata est. Et cum os stomachumque signaret, et matris dolorem crucis niteretur impressione lenire; superabatur affectu, et credulam mentem.

While Paula's husband, the elder Toxotius, and daughter Blesilla both died prior to her departure from Rome,⁴⁹⁶ Rufina died not long after Paula had settled in the Holy Land. Jerome's Paula may regard herself as "no more a mother", but she maintains her maternity and is heavily affected by a "mother's grief" and "maternal instincts" to such an extent that these "endangered her life" on more than one occasion.⁴⁹⁷ Maternity for holy mothers is not so easily put off, particularly for ascetics of aristocratic backgrounds.

Several scholars have highlighted that Melania the Elder, who abandoned her son Publicola to pursue a religious life in Palestine prior to Paula (and whom Jerome encouraged Paula to emulate), maintained an ongoing relationship with her biological family, and with her son in particular. Jerome provides a singular and extremely brief description of Melania's renunciation that is countered by other sources: he imagines Melania the Elder smiling and not shedding a tear after losing her husband and sons, joyfully bestowing her remaining possessions on her surviving son and sailing for the Holy Land.⁴⁹⁸ A closer look at Palladius' *Lausiaca Histories* and Paulinus of Nola's *Letter 29*, as Kevin Wilkinson has shown, provide a clear chronology and better understanding of Melania's foray into the ascetic life, a life that was

(), 120; Gillian Cloke, *This Female Man of God: Women and Spiritual Power in the Patristic Age, 350-450 AD* (London: Routledge, 1995), 21-22; Nicola Denzey, *The Bone Gatherers: The Lost Worlds of Early Christian Women* (Beacon Press, 2007), 187-88;

⁴⁹⁵ Jerome, *Letter* 108.21.

⁴⁹⁶ Following Blesilla's death, Jerome encouraged Paula not to give into excessive grief (*Letter* 39.6) and to "reject" her family and renounce her life (*Letter* 38.5). Paula's familial renunciation is discussed in Elizabeth Clark, *Reading Renunciation*, 106, 196.

⁴⁹⁷ Jerome, *Letter* 108.5, 21.

⁴⁹⁸ Jerome, *Letter* 39.5; Paulinus of Nola provides a different take in describing the loss of Melania's family: "So after accompanying her three dead in tearful procession, robbed of both husband and sons, she arrived in Rome with her one child who stimulated rather than allayed her tears", before reiterating her weeping. *Letter* 29.8, trans. P.G. Walsh (New York: Newman Press, 1967), 109.

delayed by a decade so that Melania could take care of Publicola's education and set up his career as a senator in Rome.⁴⁹⁹ Leaving Spain for Rome in 362 with her young son in tow, Melania spent nearly ten years establishing Publicola within the senatorial circles of the city, ensuring his education, entrusting him to a legal guardian, securing his career as a quaestor and praetor, and financing the praetorian games.⁵⁰⁰ When Melania did leave for the Holy Land, she left behind a teenage son who was already (or about to be) an urban praetor with a secure future in the Senate and an immense fortune, though not, as Jerome imagines with *all* of her property. Melania took most of her movable possessions with her to Egypt and Palestine to lavish upon monasteries, churches, charities, and building projects.⁵⁰¹ Moreover, when her own property ceased to be sufficient to support her monastic endeavors, Palladius asserts that "her family, her son, and her stewards provided the funds for this."⁵⁰² As Publicola reached maturity, he continued to materially support his mother's ascetic endeavors in Palestine and also named his daughter after her, Melania the Younger, who would eventually surpass her grandmother and namesake in spiritual renown and largess by distributing the entirety of her father's estate to the Church and poor.⁵⁰³

Protecting Ascetic Inheritance

Leaving behind young children to pursue one's own spiritual vocation was unusual by Roman social standards, but, as Maria Doerfler has pointed out, elite matrons such as Paula and Melania the Elder left behind their children in culturally appropriate ways: they provided guardians for their sons and protected their patrimony.⁵⁰⁴ However, the inheritance of ascetics' children was not always so well preserved, despite legislative protections. Augustine chastised

⁴⁹⁹ Kevin W. Wilkinson, "The Elder Melania's Missing Decade", *Journal of Late Antiquity* 5.1 (2012). Wilkinson's article establishes the reliability of Palladius as a source, discounting Nicole Moine's article "Melaniana", *Recherches Augustiniennes* 15 (1980), 1-79, Wilkinson has argued that Palladius knew Melania the Elder quite well and that his account of her life

⁵⁰⁰ As Wilkinson points out, the likely purpose of the ten-year time span was to raise money for the praetor's public games, the main responsibility for this "mostly ceremonial" position. Wilkinson notes the expense of these games, reporting that Symmachus spent 2000 pounds of gold on his son's praetorian games. Wilkinson, "Missing Decade", 181 n. 70.

⁵⁰¹ Palladius, *Lausiaca History* 46.2, 54.2, 10.2-4. For information on Publicola's political career vis-à-vis the Melania timeline, see Wilkinson, "Missing Decade", 179-180. See also A. Chastagnol, "Observations sur le conulat suffect et la préture du Bas-Empire," *RH* 219 (1958): 221-53, on how elite Roman youths in Late Antiquity began their political careers in a similar fashion, first as a quaestor and then a praetor.

⁵⁰² Palladius, *Lausiaca History* 54.2, trans. Butler, 146.

⁵⁰³ Palladius, *Lausiaca History* 46, 54.2, discussed in Christine Luckritz Marquis, "Namesake and Inheritance". In *Melania*: Ed. Catherine M. Chin and Caroline T. Schroeder. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), 36-37 39, 40. Marquis is particularly keen on highlight the significance of naming the younger Melania after her grandmother. Though it was an established Roman custom to name a grandchild after a grandparent, this was done in part to remind the grandchild of their family and their family's expectations for them.

⁵⁰⁴ Maria Doerfler, "Holy Households", 75; Cain assumes that Toxotius' guardian was his paternal uncle Iulius Festus Hymetius who also assumed *tutela* over Eustochium. Cain, *Epitaphium Sanctae Paulae*, 185. On the role of women as guardians of children, see Beaucamp, *Le statut de la femme à Byzance (4e-7e siècle)*, I (*Le droit imperial*) (Paris, 1990), 325-37 and *Le statut de la femme à Byzance (4e-7e siècle)*, II (*Le pratiques sociales*) (Paris, 1992), 329-30 ; Vuolanto, 2002, 214-18.

the over-zealous Ecdicia for giving away her son's inheritance to some passing monks.⁵⁰⁵ While Melania the Elder had the support of her family and their immeasurable wealth to draw upon in her charitable activities and building projects, Paula's charity was so extreme that she "robbed her children" [*spoliabat filios*] of their patrimony and incurred the ire of her relatives for doing so.⁵⁰⁶ When her relatives rebuked her, Paula claimed that she was leaving her children "a better inheritance in the mercy of Christ",⁵⁰⁷ and that Eustochium "rejoiced when her mother gave to the poor her little patrimony" [*et paternam et maternam substantiolam, a matre distribui pauperibus laetaretur*].⁵⁰⁸ Indeed, Jerome describes Paula as giving so freely that she took out loans to support her charity. When Jerome reproved her for this, he quotes her as saying "My prayer is that I may die a beggar not leaving a penny to my daughter and indebted to strangers for my winding sheet."⁵⁰⁹ [*hoc et habere voti, ut mendicans ipsa moreretur: ut unum nummum filiae non dimitteret, et in funere suo aliena sindone involveretur*]. While Toxotius' inheritance was most likely protected by his guardian, Paula had no qualms spending her virgin daughter's portion and even leaving her in debt. Jerome concludes,

Denique consecuta est quod optabat, et in grandi aere alieno filiam dereliquit, quod huc usque debens non suis viribus, sed Christi se confidit misericordia reddituram.

*She obtained her wish at last and died leaving her daughter overwhelmed with a mass of debt. This Eustochium still owes and indeed cannot hope to pay off by her own exertions; only the mercy of Christ can free her from it.*⁵¹⁰

While Paula's attitude towards Eustochium's financial fate seems cold-hearted, she was not alone in thinking that a virgin daughter did not need her inheritance. Wealthy Christian families of the fourth and fifth centuries often not give their ascetic, childless children a fair share (or any, in many instances) of the family patrimony.⁵¹¹ Though Church Fathers frequently complained about this practice, and it was eventually forbidden by law, it was apparently so widespread that even monastic parents would disinherit their ascetic children in favor of other children or even extended family living in the world.⁵¹² The wealthy widow Albina, who headed a monastic community in Rome and was the spiritual mother of Jerome, left her entire estate to her brother's children following her death, leaving nothing to her virgin daughter Marcella, their shared

⁵⁰⁵ Augustine, *Letter* 262.

⁵⁰⁶ Jerome, *Letter* 108.5.

⁵⁰⁷ Jerome, *Letter* 108.5.

⁵⁰⁸ Jerome, *Letter* 108.27.

⁵⁰⁹ Jerome, *Letter* 108.15.

⁵¹⁰ Jerome, *Letter* 108.17, trans. Fremantle, <<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3001108.htm>>.

⁵¹¹ Ville Vuolanto, "Choosing Asceticism: Children and Parents, Vows and Conflicts" in *Children in Late Ancient Christianity*, ed. Cornelia B. Horn and Robert R. Phenix (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 269-273; Antti Arjava, *Women and Law in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 46, 158-159; Gilliam Clark, *Women in Late Antiquity: Pagan and Christian Lifestyles* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 52-53; and Michel Verdon, "Virgins and Widows: European kinship and early Christianity", *Man* 23.3 (1988), 494-495.

⁵¹² Jerome, *Letters* 127.4, 130.6 (c. 413 or 414); Salvian, *To the Church Against Avarice* 3.4-5 (Sources Chretiennes 176), c. 435-439; Augustine, *Sermons* 355.3 (PL 39:1568-1574); Ambrose mentions parents who refused to give their virgin daughters their dowries as part of their inheritance. Ambrose, *On Virgins* 1.11.62-63, c. 377 and 1.7.32.

monastic community, or the poor.⁵¹³ Some parents even dedicated their daughters to virginity as a means to avoid paying their dowries and preventing property from being divided amongst too many heirs. Basil of Caesarea cautioned relatives from hoping to gain material advantage for themselves by handing daughters over to monasteries.⁵¹⁴ In 458, the Western Emperor Majorian made it illegal to consecrate a daughter to virginity under the age of 40; if a daughter was forced into such a vow, she had the ability to break it before the age of 40 and could not be disinherited for this reason.⁵¹⁵ As Vuolanto explains,

*The principal aim of the edict was safeguarding the financial interests of the parties involved. On the one hand, ascetism could not be used to save the part of the inheritance due to the girl in question; on the other hand, a person willing to marry could not be denied her share of the inheritance...The continuity of the family and the financial interests of the kin group were to be carefully guarded.*⁵¹⁶

Under Justinian it became illegal for parents to exclude monastic or priestly children from their inheritance or succession.⁵¹⁷ As Ville Vuolanto has pointed out, this practice of withholding inheritance or disinheriting ascetic children was (generally) not evidence of family conflicts over asceticism, but rather reflective of late Roman elite attitudes towards wealth as belonging to the family rather than to individuals.⁵¹⁸ The reasoning behind this denial of inheritance for ascetics was practical: familial wealth and property should be protected and passed on to the next generation, and late Roman laws worked to protect families' financial legacies from being broken apart by coercive (and corrosive) charity.⁵¹⁹

⁵¹³ Jerome, *Letter* 127.4, dated to 412.

⁵¹⁴ Basil of Caesarea, *Letters* 199.18. Leo the Great, Bishop of Rome in the mid-400s wrote that women could not be forced to take ascetic vows: *Letters* 167.15, (PL 54 :551-1218), c. 458 or 459. Leo the Great, Bishop of Rome in the mid-400s likewise wrote that women could not be forced to take ascetic vows. Basil, *Letters* 199.18; Leo the Great, *Letters* 167.15, (PL 54 :551-1218), c. 458 or 459. Texts discussed in Vuolanto, "Choosing Asceticism", 271-3; see also Joëlle Beaucamp, *La statut du la femme à Byzance* (4e-7e siècle), vol. II: Les pratiques sociales, 304.

⁵¹⁵ *Novels of Majorian* 6, esp. pr. 3 and 5, ed. T. Mommsen and P. Meyer, *Codex Theodosianus*, Vol. 2: *Leges novella ad Theodosianum pertinentes* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1954), 163-165. Discussed in Vuolanto, "Choosing Asceticism", 272 and *Children and Asceticism*, 136.

⁵¹⁶ Vuolanto, "Choosing Asceticism", 272-3.

⁵¹⁷ *Codex Justinianus* 1.3.54.5: *non liceat parentibus vel easdem personas quocumque modo abstrahere ve prpter hanc tantummodo causam quasi ingraturum a sua hereditate vel successione repellere*. Text in Vuolanto, *Children and Asceticism*, 133n10.

⁵¹⁸ Vuolanto, "Choosing Asceticism", 270 and *Children and Asceticism*, 133-34.

⁵¹⁹ Vuolanto, "Choosing Asceticism", 271.

Not all families, however displeased by their children's decision to become ascetics, sought to disinherit them. In Chrysostom's letter to the young monk Stagirius, the monk's father criticized his choice of a religious life as "shameful and unworthy of the brilliance of [his] ancestors"; nevertheless, Chrysostom points out that Stagirius' father did not disinherit him, citing that the "bonds of nature" were stronger than the father's displeasure. Chrysostom, *To Stagirius Tormented by a Demon* 2.3 (PG 47:423-494, here 452), tr. David G. Hunter, *A Comparison between a King and a Monk/Against the Opponents of the Monastic Life. Two Treatises by John Chrysostom* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1988), 97 fn. 11. Also discussed in Cornelia Horn, "Raising Martyrs and Ascetics: A Diachronic Comparison of Educational Role-Models for Early Christian Children" in *Children in Late Ancient Christianity*, ed. Cornelia B. Horn and Robert R. Phenix (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 301.

The edict of Valentinian I in 370 decreed that members of the clergy and others who called themselves “continents” (i.e. ascetics) were forbidden from visiting the homes of widows or female minors.⁵²⁰ Addressed to Damascus, bishop of Rome (366-84) and read aloud in churches, this edict claimed that under the pretext of religion, clergy were visiting “devout women” to receive gifts of legacies, to the detriment of the women’s families.⁵²¹ As Judith Evans Grubbs highlights, this law was not in opposition to Christian women becoming ascetics (Valentinian exempted widows and consecrated virgins from paying the head tax⁵²²), but rather reflects an attempt to quell the “meddling by some ecclesiastics into the financial affairs of wealthy Romans”. Valentinian’s edict indicates that aristocratic women choosing asceticism faced some family opposition, but these objections arose primarily from financial rather than religious objections.⁵²³

These instances of child abandonment by elite matrons such as Melania the Elder and Paula indicate that a woman could attain holiness by leaving behind her children for the right reasons. Though both women were reproved by their relatives for spending too much money on monks, the poor, and monastery building, the bulk of their estates were placed under guardians for their children.⁵²⁴ Leaving a child penniless, however, was unacceptable in Late Antique society. Augustine and even Jerome warned of excessive giving and the dangers of putting one’s children into debt from reckless liberality. Only after their heirs passed away could holy women dispense of their fortune without censure. In the *Life of Matrona of Perge*, the relationships between mother and child, husband and wife are subordinate to those fostered in a spiritual family. Religious friends, fellow monks/nuns, disciples, and above all, one’s spiritual parent replace all kin. As explored in the previous chapters, the primary tension in the *Life of Matrona* was wives and mothers rejecting their homes and traditional roles within the family, and the repercussions for this rejection resulted in the redistribution of wealth outside of the family and towards the Church and monastic foundations and the transformation of the holy woman herself from matron to manly ascetic and spiritual mother. This redistribution of wealth and spiritual transformation, however, were contingent on the deaths of biological children.

⁵²⁰ *Codex Theodosianus*, 16.2.20 (370 AD): *Ecclesiastici aut ex ecclesiasticis vel qui continentium se volunt nomine nuncupari, viduarum ac pupillarum domos non adeant, sed publicis exterminentur iudiciis, si posthac eos ad fines earum vel propinqui putaverint deferendos. Censemus etiam, ut memorati nihil de eius mulieris, cui se privatim sub praetextu religionis adiunxerint, liberalite quacumque vel extremo iudicio possint adipisci et omne in tantum inefficax sit, quod alicui horum ab his fuerit derelictum, ut nec per subiectam personam valeant aliquid vel donatione vel tetamento percipere.* On this edict, see Evans Grubbs, “Virgins and Widows”, 225-27.

⁵²¹ *Codex Theodosianus* 16.2.20; 16.2.22 (372 AD).

⁵²² *Codex Theodosianus* 13.10.3 (AD 368); 13.10.6 (AD 370).

⁵²³ Evans Grubbs, *Virgins and Widows*, 226. See also Hagith Sivan, “On Hymens and Holiness in Late Antiquity. Opposition to Aristocratic Female Asceticism at Rome”, *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 36 (1993), 89-91.

⁵²⁴ Nevertheless, at least in Melania the Elder’s case, the widow seems to have maintained substantial control. Regarding Paula, see Jerome, *Letter* 108.5; for Melania the Elder, see Paulinus of Nola, *Letter* 29.10; Jerome *Letter* 39.5; Palladius, *Lausiaca History* 46.1. Discussion in Vuolanto, *Children and Asceticism*, 136-137.

Child Sacrifice in the Life of Matrona

In Matrona's vita, her biological motherhood and the sacrifice of her daughter play prominent roles in establishing her sanctity. From the very start of the life, the reader is presented with the sacrifice of Theodote:

She was united to a man named Dometianos, and became a mother of a daughter by the name of Theodote; and indeed, as we shall show straightaway, abandoning everything, she gave her to God.

Καὶ συνάπτεται ἀνδρὶ ὀνόματι Δομετιανῶ, γίνεται δὲ καὶ μιᾶς παιδὸς μήτηρ, ὀνόματι Θεοδότης. Θεῶ γὰρ αὐτὴν δέδωκεν πάντα καταλιποῦσα, ὡς αὐτόθεν ἐπιδείζομεν.⁵²⁵

Even the name “Theodote” (literally “given to God”) presents the child as an oblation; her identity and function within the text is entirely within a sacrificial framework, and Matrona's concern for her child amplifies both Theodote's worth and the weight of this sacrifice. When Matrona and her family move to Constantinople, her desire for a religious life begins to take precedence over her family obligations. When Dometianos tries to hinder Matrona's nightly vigils and asceticism, she takes refuge with the pious widow Susanna, plotting her own escape with the future of her daughter in mind. Though Theodote is in the background of the vita's narrative action, she is nevertheless at the forefront of Matrona's plans and concerns:

She considered all concerning the child Theodote. Then the blessed Matrona spoke something worthy of Abraham and truly beyond nature itself: “Let there be nothing in common between me and my children/the contents of my womb/feelings/affections,” she said, “but let the honest Susanna take my child; and let the ascetic life sustain me.” The blessed Susanna took the child Theodote and filled the place/role of her mother.

ἐσκοπεῖτο πρὸ πάντων τὰ περὶ τῆς παιδὸς Θεοδότης. Ἡ δὲ μακαρία Ματρῶνα ἀβραμιαῖόν τι καὶ τῆς φύσεως αὐτῆς ἀνώτερον ὄντως φθεγξαμένη· Μηδὲν ἐμοὶ καὶ τοῖς ἐμοῖς σπλάγχνοις ἔστω κοινόν, ἔφη, ἀλλὰ Σωσάννα ἡ γνησία λαμβανέτω τὸ ἐμὸν παιδίον· ἐμὲ δὲ ἡ ἄσκησις τρεφέτω. Καὶ ταῦτα οὐ μέχρι ῥημάτων ἴστατο μόνον, ἀλλὰ καὶ αὐτοῖς τοῖς ἔργοις παρεδίδοτο. Ὅθεν λαβοῦσα ἡ μακαρία Σωσάννα τὸ παιδίον Θεοδότην, τὴντῆς μητρὸς τάξιν ἐπ' αὐτὸ ἐπλήρου.⁵²⁶

This short passage is highly significant, as it portrays the abruptness of Matrona's spiritual transformation from a pious mother into a monk. Just prior to this passage, Matrona is described as a *sophron* matron who longed to leave her husband and “vain life”, making this the first passage to give voice to Matrona's renunciation.⁵²⁷ Though descriptions and details are minimal, it is nevertheless clear that the hagiographer is eager to portray Matrona as a good, albeit absent,

⁵²⁵ *Life of Matrona* 2.

⁵²⁶ *Life of Matrona* 3.

⁵²⁷ *Life of Matrona* 3.

mother, who “considered all” concerning Theodote, indicating an awareness and concern her daughter’s welfare. When Matrona decides to separate from her child, the hagiographer characterizes this decision as extraordinary and “beyond” her nature or beyond what was natural for a mother. When Matrona gives the child up to be raised by Susanna, this moment of abandonment and exchange is described in visceral, sacrificial terms: acting in a way contrary to nature, in the manner “worthy of Abraham”, Matrona severs herself from her *σπλάγχνα*. While carrying the literal meaning of one’s inner organs, for women in particular, *σπλάγχνα* referred to the contents of the womb, including one’s children, and carried the meaning of one’s deepest affections. Theodote, as a part of Matrona’s own body, is therefore severed so that her mother can pursue an ascetic calling as a eunuch monk. The mention of Abraham refers to the binding and (near) sacrifice of his son Isaac in Genesis 22:2-8. Though Isaac is spared at the last moment and a ram is offered in his stead, Abraham’s willingness to kill his son out of obedience to God made him a model father figure in Judeo-Christian exegesis. Patristic writers in particular frequently used this story to explore the tension between love for God and love for one’s children, as well as the importance of safeguarding a child’s eternal soul ahead of caring for their earthly life, even to the point of killing them to ensure salvation.⁵²⁸ Chrysostom’s sermon on the adolescent saints Bernice and Prosdoke declares that the young sisters’ mother Domnina “fulfilled the role of Abraham” by drowning them, one after the other, to protect them from rape while they awaited martyrdom.⁵²⁹ Ambrose even declared Abraham a “better father” because he preserved his son for eternity by sacrificing him to God.⁵³⁰ Matrona’s sacrifice of Theodote is abandonment and not outright murder, but this act of maternal renunciation does result in Theodote’s death soon after, a fate that also meets the child of Matrona’s disciple Athanasia, and

⁵²⁸ For a comprehensive discussion of Church Father’s interpretation of the sacrifice of Isaac, see Clark, *Reading Renunciation*, 109-112.

⁵²⁹ Chrysostom, *On the Holy Martyrs Bernike, Prosdoke, and Domnina, Virgins* 6 (PG 50:629-40, here 639), tr. Elizabeth Clark, *Women in the Early Church*, 175. Eusebius of Emesa likewise spoke of Abraham in connection to the story of Domnina: *Homily* 6.29 in Buytaert I, 171-72.

Chrysostom interpreted Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac as a precursor to God’s sacrifice of his Son and the ultimate example of renunciation. Chrysostom, *Homily* 25 on Hebrews 2 (PG 63.174); he also notes, however, that Hannah, the mother of Samuel exceeded Abraham by offering her son to God before being asked [Homily 24 on Ephesians 3 (PG 62.173)]. Ambrose and Augustine saw Abraham’s sacrifice as the renunciation of family ties. Ambrose, *De excess fratris* 2.97; Augustine, *De bono coniugali* 20.24.

Families could also emulate this sacrifice by giving their children over to asceticism; a daughter could become “an offering for her mother, by whose daily sacrifice the divine power is appeased.” Ambrose, *De Virginibus* I.7.32; Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 15, *On the Maccabees* (PG 35:911-934). Gregory also compared his own mother to Abraham for dedicating (i.e. sacrificing) her son (Gregory) to an ascetic life prior to his birth. Gregory of Nazianzus, 5 (PG 37.1447); Doerfler, *Jephthah’s Daughter, Sarah’s Son*, 84-85. Interestingly, however, Basil of Caesarea notes that Abraham’s renunciation was not complete: though he was prepared to sacrifice his son, he was not willing to give up his wealth. Basil of Caesarea, *Sermon De renuntiatione saeculi* 1 (PG 31.628). Families could also emulate this sacrifice by giving their children over to asceticism; a daughter could become “an offering for her mother, by whose daily sacrifice the divine power is appeased.” Ambrose, *De Virginibus* I.7.32; Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 15, *On the Maccabees* (PG 35:911-934). Gregory also compared his own mother to Abraham for dedicating (i.e. sacrificing) her son (Gregory) to an ascetic life prior to his birth. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Letter* 5, PG 37.1447 (Paris: J.-P. Migne, 1844–65 Doerfler, *Jephthah’s Daughter, Sarah’s Son*, 84-85.

⁵³⁰ Ambrose, *On Abraham* 1.8.7.

other children of ascetics in contemporary hagiographic literature such as the popular *vita* of Andronikos and Athanasia and in several stories in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*.⁵³¹

Children in Monastic Literature and Culture

Ascetic literature from the fourth century onwards highlights the difficulties of raising a child within a monastic community. Abba Makarios the Great warned, “When you see young children, take up your sheepskins and go away,” for children embodied the temptations of the material world.⁵³² The sixth century *vita* of a certain Maria tells how the holy woman entered a men’s monastery in male clothing alongside her father. Following her father’s death, Maria, known as the young monk Marinos, was falsely accused of fathering a child. Not wanting to expose herself as a woman, Maria/Marinos acknowledged the child as her own, and took charge of caring for the infant, who cried constantly, soiled the monk’s clothes, and caused her great anxiety and distraction from prayer and asceticism.⁵³³

When parents or guardians and their children entered monastic communities together, their natural relationships often had to be severed in extreme ways to ensure that ascetic discipline would be maintained and to avoid nepotism: three year old Febronia of Nisibis (late third century) was only allowed food every two days by her abbess aunt;⁵³⁴ aristocratic nuns Theodora of Thessaloniki and her daughter Theopiste were not allowed to speak to one another for fifteen years after the mother was caught fussing over her daughter’s appearance and diet in front of their abbess (who was also a relative).⁵³⁵ The most extreme stories of parent and child separation, however, appear in the *Apophthegmata Patrum (AP)*, where fathers were charged with sacrificing their children “like Abraham” in order to join or maintain their position in the monastery. In these narratives from the Egyptian desert, children are presented as sacrificial objects to their fathers’ vocations:⁵³⁶ an aspiring monk is ordered by Abba Sisoës to throw his son into the Nile in order to join his monastic community; though the father is stopped just before drowning his son, the boy is nevertheless left behind while his father enters the

⁵³¹ The *Life of Andronikos and Athanasia* 5-6. This *vita* was part of the sixth century Daniel Cycle, stories about Abba Daniel of Sketis that were popular in Late Antiquity and were translated into a variety of languages. For dating the *Life of Andronikos and Athanasia*, see Anne Alwis, *Celibate Marriage*, 4. Stories in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* (Alphabetical) Sisoës 10 and (Anonymous) 162; for a similar story, see John Cassian, *Institutiones* 4.27.2-3. See also Caroline Schroeder, “Child Sacrifice in Egyptian Monastic culture: From Familial Renunciation to Jephthah’s Lost Daughter”, *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, vol. 20 no. 2, (Summer, 2012), 269-302, here 282.

⁵³² *Apophthegmata Patrum, Makarios the Great* 5, PG 65:264, tr. Ward, in *Sayings of Desert Fathers*, 128).

⁵³³ *Life of Maria/Marinos* 14-17, trans. Nicholas Conostas, in *Holy Women of Byzantium*, ed. Alice-Mary Talbot (Washington, D.C: Dumbarton Oaks, 1996).

⁵³⁴ Trans. in *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient*, ed and trans. Sebastian Brock and Susan Ashbrook Harvey,

⁵³⁵ *Life of Theodora of Thessaloniki* 25-30, trans. Alice-Mary Talbot in *Holy Women of Byzantium*, 159-238 (BHG 1737, 1739).

⁵³⁶ Caroline Schroeder, “Child Sacrifice in Egyptian Monastic culture: From Familial Renunciation to Jephthah’s Lost Daughter”, *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, vol. 20 no. 2, (Summer, 2012), 269-302, here 282.

monastery, remaining a sacrificial object through his father's rejection of him.⁵³⁷ Another story from the anonymous collection of the *AP* has a more violent outcome. After leaving behind his children to join a monastic community three years prior, a father desires to reunite with his children; the abba of his monastery allows the monk to bring his children to the monastery, but after learning that two of his children have died, the father brings his one remaining son to see the abbot. After kissing the boy, the abba asks the monk if he loves his son. After receiving an affirmative reply, the abba tells the monk to throw his son into an oven "so that it burns him", and the monk complies. The oven "immediately became like dew,"⁵³⁸ but as Caroline Schroeder has pointed out, the biblical connotations of dew suggest that the child still died, particularly as no further mention of him is made in the text.⁵³⁹ The sacrificing father, on the other hand, receives "glory like the patriarch Abraham" for his obedience to the *abba*. The death or rejection of the child constructs the "ascetic self" of the monastic parent.⁵⁴⁰

These stories of child sacrifice in the *AP* were reinforced in the visual program of two important Egyptian monasteries. The churches of St. Catherine's Monastery in Sinai and the Monastery of St. Antony at the Red Sea both contain iconography of the sacrifices of Abraham and Isaac and Jephthah and his daughter (Judges 11). In the churches of these monasteries, icons of sacrifice were displayed in prominent locations above the altar space, connecting the sacrifice of Isaac and Jephthah's daughter to God the Father's sacrifice of his own Son.⁵⁴¹ As the *AP* and paintings at these monasteries indicate, there existed a space, physical and imagined, visual and literary, in which ideas of child sacrifice could be expressed as part of the ascetic experience of familial renunciation. The renunciation of children – even onto death – was a rhetorical aspect of pursuing a spiritual life devoted to God. The undesirability of children within monastic communities was not simply because children were a distraction from the labors of asceticism. Children also posed a more sinister threat, particularly to monks, because they were potential

⁵³⁷ *Apophthegmata Patrum*, Sisoës 10, in *The Anonymous Sayings of the Desert Fathers: A Select Edition and Complete English Translation*, ed. and trans. J. Wortley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); for a similar story, see John Cassian, *Institutiones* 4.27.2-3.

⁵³⁸ *Apophthegmata Patrum Anonymus* 162 in Benedicta Ward (trans), *The Wisdom of the Desert Fathers: Apophthegmata Patrum from the Anonymous Series* (Fiaracres, UK: SLG Press & Convent of the Incarnation, 1975), 47.

⁵³⁹ Dew is associated with being assumed into heaven. Caroline Schroeder, "Child Sacrifice in Egyptian Monastic Culture", 281-82.

⁵⁴⁰ Maria Doerfler, *Jephthah's Daughter, Sarah's Son*, 18

⁵⁴¹ Extensive work has been done on this iconography and its literary associations, most significantly by Elizabeth Bolman. For a brief bibliography, see Elizabeth S. Bolman, ed., *Monastic Visions: Wall Paintings in the Monastery of St. Antony at the Red Sea* (American Research Center in Egypt; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002) and "Theodore, the 'Writer of Life,' and the Program of 1232/1233" in *Monastic Visions*, 62–76, esp. 66–70; and "Joining the Community of Saints: Monastic Paintings and Ascetic Practice in Early Christian Egypt" in *Shaping Community: The Art and Archaeology of Monasticism. Papers from a Symposium Held at the Frederick R. Weisman Museum, University of Minnesota, March 10-12*, ed. Sheila McNally (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2001); see Gertrud van Loon, "The Iconography of Jephthah: A Wall Painting in the Sanctuary of the Old Church of St. Anthony's Monastery near the Red Sea," in *Actes du IVe Congrès Copte, Louvain-la-Neuve, 5-10 Septembre 1988*, vol. 1, ed. M. Rassart-Debergh and J. Ries, Publications de l'Institut Orientaliste de Louvain 40 (Louvain-La-Neuve, Belgium: l'Institut Orientaliste de Louvain, 1992), 115–23 ; Caroline Shroeder, "Child Sacrifice in Egyptian Monastic Culture", 272-278.

sources of sexual temptation.⁵⁴² Numerous sources, from the *AP* and papyrological texts to Byzantine *typika* highlight this specific threat, though, as scholars have pointed out, the perceived danger is not out of concern for the children's welfare, but rather the threat to a monk's salvation.⁵⁴³ The separation from and ultimate death of children in these texts results in the establishment of the ascetic parent within a monastic community while facilitating a change in their external appearance and perceived identity.

Child Abandonment, Mortality, and Maternal Identity in the Life of Matrona

From the moment of separation from Theodote, Matrona's words, behavior, and appearance take on a manly character; her maternity and femininity are abruptly, and willingly, repressed. After learning in a dream that she should enter a men's monastery to best escape her husband Dometianos, Matrona eagerly cut her hair, dressed as a eunuch in men's clothing, and "completely transformed into a man and bore a man's name, Babylas"

(εἰς ἄνδρα μετασηματισθεῖσαν ὄλην καὶ ἄνδρὸς φέρουσαν ὄνομα Βαβυλᾶς).⁵⁴⁴ When Matrona's identity is revealed to Bassianos in a dream after three years in his monastery, her apology prominently features her husband, daughter, and her desire for a life apart from them: "I... had become the wife of a man and the mother of a child. But wishing to serve God rather than marriage and sin, I would depart to the all-night vigils of the holy martyrs." (Ἐγὼ... ἐγενόμην ἐνὸς ἀνδρὸς γυνὴ καὶ μιᾶς παιδὸς μήτηρ· δουλεύειν δὲ Θεῷ μᾶλλον ἢ γάμῳ καὶ ἁμαρτίᾳ.

⁵⁴² The place of children in monasteries was officially addressed until the Third Council of Constantinople (680/681), where the minimum age for a child to join a monastic community was set to ten years. However, most Church Fathers recommended later ages for deciding upon the monastic life. *Typika* from individual monasteries, however, made up their own age requirements for admittance, which for some communities was as late as thirty years old. For information on children in Byzantine monasteries, see Richard Greenfield, "Children in Byzantine Monasteries", in *Becoming Byzantine: Children and Childhood in Byzantium*, ed. Arietta Papaconstantinou and Alice-Mary Talbot (Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks and Harvard University Press, 2009) and Günter Prinzing, "Observations on the Legal Status of Children and the Stages of Childhood in Byzantium" in the same publication.

⁵⁴³ Abba Isaac of Nitria warned not to bring young boys to his monastery, since "four churches in Sketis are deserted because of boys". *Apophthegmata Patrum, Isaac Priest of the Cells* 5, PG 65:225, tr. Ward in *Sayings of Desert Fathers*, 100; John Marens, "'I Renounce the Sexual Abuse of Boys' Renegotiating the Boundaries of Sexual Behavior in Late Antiquity by Jews and Christians" in *Children and Family in Late Antiquity: Life, Death and Interaction*, ed. Christian Laes, Katariina Mustakallio, and Ville Vuolanto (Leuven: Peeters, 2015).

⁵⁴⁴ *Life of Matrona* 4. Mango and Featherstone, 22 n36 notes that St. Babylas was martyred in Nikomedeia under Diocletian (284-305) and is represented as a schoolmaster in his *passio*, which is edited by F. Halkin, *Inédits byzantins d'Ochrida*, Candie et Moscou (Brussels, 1963), 329-39. A closer look at Babylas' passion, however, reveals some interesting details: he was arrested for teaching his students about Christ, and some were martyred with him. At the moment of martyrdom, Babylas quotes Isaiah: "Behold, I and the children which God has given me". Matrona is also compared to Eleazar, the teacher of the Maccabees, "For like that valiant and holy martyr of Christ, the holy instructor of those meek and blessed youths, or like Eleazar [Macc 6:18-41], the teacher and companion of the seven youths in the Old Testament, so also did Matrona accomplish feats of endurance and asceticism in a frail body; she was honest toward God and solicitous toward those who sought salvation." *Life of Matrona* 4. Trans. Featherstone, 22-23.

Matrona is compared to male teachers instructing youths!

βουλομένη εἰς τὰς παννυχίδας τῶν ἁγίων μαρτύρων ἀπῆειν). After citing her husband’s abuse as her reason for choosing a men’s monastery, Matrona introduces the friends who helped her escape from Dometianos, abandon Theodote, and transition from matron to eunuch monk:

There was with this Eugenia a certain Susanna, and I commended my child to their keeping, inasmuch as they were pious and God-loving women with whom I had become acquainted at the all-night vigils. Upon hearing this, <the blessed Eugenia> thanked God, Who desires the salvation of all. Thereupon, we devised the plan that my child Theodote should be given over to the lady Susanna, and that I, dressed as and transformed into a man, should enter a men’s monastery; and we fulfilled in deed that which we had planned. For as soon as the child Theodote had been given over to the aforementioned Susanna, I put off my female attire forthwith and cut my hair; and, in a word, becoming a man both in garb and purpose.

Ἡ δὲ Εὐγενία αὐτῆ ἅμα καὶ Σωσάννη τινὶ προσην καὶ ἀφῆκα αὐταῖς τὸ παιδίον μου ὡς εὐλαβεῖς καὶ θεοφιλεῖς γυναῖκες γνώριμαί μου ἦσαν ἐκ τῶν παννυχίδων. Ἦτις ἀκούσασα ταῦτα ἠὲ χαρίστησε τῷ Θεῷ τῷ πάντας σωθῆναι βουλομένῳ. Τότε οὖν ἐσκεψάμεθα τὸ μὲν παιδίον Θεοδότην παραθέσθαι τῇ κυρίᾳ Σωσάννῃ, ἐμὲ δὲ μεταμφιασάμενην καὶ σχηματισθεῖσαν εἰς ἄνδρα εἰσελθεῖν εἰς μοναστήριον ἀνδρῶν καὶ ὅπερ ἐσκεψάμεθα, ἔργῳ ἐπληρώσαμεν· τὸ γὰρ παιδίον Θεοδότην παραθέμεναι τῇ μνημονευθείσῃ Σωσάννῃ, εὐθέως ἀποθεμένη τὴν γυναικείαν στολὴν καὶ τὴν κεφαλὴν ἀποκειραμένη καὶ — ἀπλῶς εἰπεῖν — ἀνὴρ γενομένη καὶ τῷ σχήματι καὶ τῇ προαιρέσει.⁵⁴⁵

The act of abandoning Theodote is immediately followed by a change not only from feminine to masculine attire, but of purpose and perception; in giving up Theodote, Matrona transitions from being “a wife of a man and mother of a child” to “a man, both in garb and purpose”. Matrona’s clothing, which will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter, serves as an outward indicator of her transition to monk and later spiritual mother.⁵⁴⁶ The hagiographer mentions several times that Matrona entered Bassianos’ monastery “as a man”, making clear that her gender was not disputed at the monastery and highlighting her ascetic feats through a filter of manliness.⁵⁴⁷ Though possessing a “frail body”, Matrona’s asceticism was so impressive that her fellow monks “marveled at her struggle” and “strove to imitate and gave heed to her way of life”.⁵⁴⁸ By giving Theodote to Susanna, Matrona (temporarily) relinquishes both her maternity and femininity; these aspects of her character are not recovered in the text until she reassumes a female identity as a spiritual mother in Syria. When Matrona’s identity as a woman is revealed to

⁵⁴⁵ *Life of Matrona* 8.

⁵⁴⁶ *Life of Matrona* 7 refers to the monks in Bassianos’ monastery as “God’s angels” and “men free of passions”.

⁵⁴⁷ One of Matrona’s fellow monks teases her for having both of her ears pierced like a girl, but Matrona reproves him and shares a false backstory of her life as a eunuch servant who was dressed as a girl. This story will be discussed in detail in the following chapter on clothing. *Life of Matrona* 4 and 5.

⁵⁴⁸ The text asserts that eunuchs are “frail by nature”. *Life of Matrona* 4.

Bassianos and two other monks in a dream,⁵⁴⁹ she laments bitterly her fate of leaving the monastery and returning to her former life:

“Woe is me, wretch that I am! For I am cast out as one unworthy. Woe is me, miserable one that I am! For it has been discovered what I am, and I am no longer counted a brother among the brethren; no longer am I thought to be a eunuch, nor to be addressed as Babylas, but am soon once again to be a woman and to be called Matrona.”

Οἷμοι τῇ ἀθλίᾳ, ὅτι ἀπορρίπτομαι ὡς ἀναξία· οἷμοι τῇ ταλαιπώρῳ, ὅτι ἐγνώσθη ὁ εἶμι, καὶ οὐκέτι ὡς ἀδελφὸς τοῖς ἀδελφοῖς διαλέγομαι, οὐκέτι ὡς εὐνοῦχος νοοῦμαι καὶ Βαβυλᾶς φωνοῦμαι, ἀλλὰ πάλιν γυνὴ ὀρῶμαι καὶ Ματρῶνα καλοῦμαι.⁵⁵⁰

Matrona’s lamentation focuses on her loss of identity as a monk and fear of returning to her husband and family. She grieves that she will “no longer counted a brother among brethren... nor to be addressed as Babylas” but “soon once again to be a woman and to be called Matrona”. Becoming “Matrona” again puts the ascetic in a vulnerable position, threatened by the loss of both her “garb and purpose” and resuming her responsibilities as a wife and mother. Moved by her apology, Bassianos offers Matrona the opportunity to choose her next steps: she could return to her family and former life as a wealthy matron or continue to pursue a monastic life as a nun on the run from her husband. Matrona readily replies that

She would choose the monastic life, for, she said, she had loved this life from the beginning, and on its account she had taken leave of her husband, her child, abundant wealth, indeed the entire world and everything in it; and she affirmed that to her very death she would not forsake it.

Τῆς δὲ εἰπούσης ὅτι ὁ μοναχικός, — τοῦτον γὰρ καιήγαπηκέναι ἐξαρχῆς ἔλεγεν καὶ δι’ αὐτὸν ἀνδρί, τέκνω, περιουσίᾳ ἰκανῇ ὄλω τε τῷ κόσμῳ καὶ τοῖς ἐν αὐτῷ ἀποτετάχθαι — καὶ ἕως θανάτου μὴ ἀποστήσεσθαι αὐτοῦ διαβεβαιουμένης.⁵⁵¹

Matrona’s response is the only hint in the text that she might have harbored desires for asceticism prior to marriage and motherhood, stating that she loved the ascetic life “from the beginning” and “on its account” she sacrificed her husband, daughter, and fortune. Blessing her and making assurances that God would fulfill her desire, Bassianos dismissed Matrona from his community, but not before promising not to neglect her.⁵⁵²

Just before Matrona departs from the men’s monastery, however, she learns that her daughter Theodote has died:

Before the blessed one [Matrona] departed from the monastery, God, Who fulfills the will of those who fear Him and assists in everything to the good of those who love Him, took her child Theodote unto Himself, lest she should add despair to

⁵⁴⁹ *Life of Matrona* 6.

⁵⁵⁰ *Life of Matrona* 7.

⁵⁵¹ *Life of Matrona* 9.

⁵⁵² *Life of Matrona* 9.

despair and might, out of concern for the child, somehow hinder the pursuit of her purpose. For this reason, finding that she had died, <the blessed one> felt joy rather than grief, because she was set free of concern/care for <the child>, and the child was also set free, as she departed before experiencing the evils of this life. As much as she grieved over her separation from the monastery, so much was she consoled in her rejection of the child: for this, too, was God's doing, to lighten in one part the distress she felt in another.

ἀλλὰ γὰρ ὁ ποιῶν Θεὸς τὸ θέλημα τῶν φοβουμένων αὐτὸν καὶ συνεργῶν πάντα εἰς ἀγαθὸν τοῖς ἀγαπῶσιν αὐτόν, πρὸ τοῦ ἐξελθεῖν τὴν μακαρίαν ἐκ τοῦ μοναστηρίου προσελάβετο τὸ παιδίον αὐτῆς Θεοδότην, ἵνα μὴ τῇ ἀθυμίᾳ αὐτῆς ἀθυμίαν προσθήσῃ καὶ τῇ ταύτης μερίμνῃ ἐκκόψῃ τι τῆς προθέσεως αὐτῆς· ὅθεν εὐροῦσα αὐτὴν τεθνηκυῖαν, χαρὰν μᾶλλον καὶ οὐ πένθος ἔσχεν, ὅτι καὶ αὐτὴ τῆς κατ' αὐτὴν φροντίδος ἀπηλλάγη κάκεινῃ πρὸ τοῦ τῶν κακῶν τοῦ βίου πειραθῆναι ἀπῆλθεν ἀπαλλαγείσα· καὶ ὅσον ἐθλίβετο διὰ τὸ χωρισθῆναι αὐτὴν τοῦ μοναστηρίου, τοσοῦτον παρεμυθεῖτο ἀποβαλοῦσα⁵⁵³ τὴν παῖδα. Θεοῦ γὰρ ἔργον καὶ τοῦτό ἐστιν τὸ ἐν ἐνὶ μέρει θλιβομένην αὐτὴν δι' ἄλλου ἐπικουφίζειν.⁵⁵⁴

This passage is one of the most illuminating in the vita, providing a glimpse into the hagiographer's understanding of Matrona's maternity, spirituality, and agency, as well as the role of children and divine intervention, all of which are echoed elsewhere in contemporary ascetic literature. From the start of the passage, it is clear that Theodote's death is regarded as a blessing, a "good" which God performs and Matrona herself desires: "God... fulfills the will of those who fear Him and assists in everything to the good of those who love Him." Matrona's "will" was laid out in the prior passage: she desired to continue living a monastic life and not return to her family. Her despair at leaving the monastery, therefore, is multivalent; she longs to be a "brother among the brethren,"⁵⁵⁵ she fears her husband's violence, and she worries that "she should add despair to despair" by leaving her monastic vocation "out of concern for the child." The hagiographer uses this moment of Matrona's unveiling as woman to signal a return of her maternal concern for her child and fear that the temptations of motherhood might hinder her monastic purpose. However, through divine intervention, the lives of both mother and daughter are "set free."

When Matrona learned that Theodote had died, she "felt joy rather than grief, because she was set free of concern for the child." The hagiographer assures the reader that Theodote's death was positive for the child herself, since she departed before experiencing the "evils of life," a sentiment expressed in the writings of Gregory of Nyssa on child mortality.⁵⁵⁶ Theodote's death

⁵⁵³ ἀποβάλλω is the verb used for the act of exposing a child, and translates generally to "throw off, cast off, reject, shed, expose (a child), despise, throw away, lose, drop, degrade". The Online Liddell-Scott-Jones-English Lexicon accessed through the TLG:< <http://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/ljsj/#eid=12597>>.

⁵⁵⁴ *Life of Matrona* 10.

⁵⁵⁵ *Life of Matrona* 7.

⁵⁵⁶ Producing the first treatise on the subject of childhood mortality, Gregory's aim was to suggest that the premature death of children was a divine preservation of later adult sin. Gregory of Nyssa, *Concerning Infants Who Have Died* in *Gregorii Nysseni Opera Dogmatica Minora* Part II (eds.) W.W. Jaeger, J.K. Downing and H. Hörner (Leiden, 1987), 67-9. See discussion in Doerfler, "The Sense of Ending", 154-155; Jean Daniélou, 'Le Traité "Sur les enfants morts prématurément" de Grégoire de Nysse', *VC* 20

serves to lighten Matrona's grief during her separation from Bassianos' community by ensuring that Matrona will not return to her former life; Theodote is presented as Matrona's only existing concern and impediment to continuing her life as a female ascetic. Matrona's loss of concern for her child following her death is somewhat reminiscent of Perpetua's attitude towards her infant son following his weaning: "I was relieved of any anxiety for my child and of any discomfort in my breasts."⁵⁵⁷ No longer concerned about his well-being and her own body's constant reminder of his absence, Perpetua can overcome her maternal anxiety and sever her relationship from her son, freeing her body and mind for martyrdom.

The hagiographer expresses Theodote's death as a divine mercy, performed by God to lighten Matrona's distress. The final sentence of the passage, however, orients Matrona's emotions and priorities. Her grief is not for her deceased daughter, but rather for her separation from Bassianos' monastery. Further, Matrona's relief at her daughter's death is something she is vigorously participating in: "so much was she consoled in her rejection of the child." The verb *ἀποβάλλω* is used to describe the throwing off of Matrona's daughter and her own maternity, and was the verb also used in antiquity to expose a child, highlighting the extent to which Matrona's rejection of Theodote could be conceived of through this framework of abandonment and exposure. Matrona, however, is the one seemingly abandoned at this point in the text, forced to leave her spiritual father and community of brothers, despite promises not to neglect her.⁵⁵⁸ The text makes clear that it is more painful to lose one's monastic community, one's father and brothers, than it is to lose or leave a dependent child, a sentiment repeated in the life when Matrona's own disciples separate from their families, especially Athanasia, whose child's death closely mirrors Theodote's.

When Athanasia first visits Matrona's convent in Constantinople, she is "pricked by divine longing" for the monastic life.⁵⁵⁹ Returning home, Athanasia begins preparations for her departure from the world by practicing asceticism, praying constantly, training her body, denouncing her sins, and looking for ways to separate from her husband. During this early period of ascetic zeal, Athanasia's young child dies:

But while the blessed Athanasia was busy with this most beautiful and good exercise and spiritual (soul-profit) training, her first and only begotten child died, but she did not lament greatly nor mourn excessively, as is the custom with women who love their children, but she wept for it a little, as much as to show that which was fitting to her appearance (to the nature within her), neither suffering nor acting in a manner unworthy of a man (effeminately).

ἀλλὰ γὰρ ἐν ταύτῃ τῇ καλλίῳ καὶ ἀγαθῇ μέλῃ καὶ ψυχωφελῇ γυμνασίᾳ οὐσίας τῆς μακαρίας Ἀθανασίας, τὸ μονογενὲς αὐτῆς καὶ πρωτότοκον παιδίον ἀποθνήσκει· καὶ μήτε θρηνήσασα πολὺ ἢ πενθήσασα ἀσέμνως, οἷα ἔθος γυναιξίν πάσχειν φιλοτέκνοισι, ἀλλ' ἐπιδακρύσασα μικρὸν καὶ ὅσον τὸ τῇ φύσει προσῆκον δειχθῆναι ἐν αὐτῇ, μήτε

(1966), 159-82; Marguerite Harl, 'La Croissance de l'âme selon le "De Infantibus" de Grégoire de Nysse', *VC* 34 (1980), 237-59.

⁵⁵⁷ *Passion of Perpetua* 7-8.

⁵⁵⁸ *Life of Matrona* 9: Bassianos encourages Matrona before her departure, saying "We will not neglect you." [οὐ γὰρ περιοψόμεθά σε].

⁵⁵⁹ *Life of Matrona* 38.

If the death of Theodote is met with a striking maternal reaction of joy rather than grief, the death of Athanasia's child is met with a calculated display of stoicism. While Athanasia is occupied with "this most beautiful and good exercise" of asceticism, her child dies. Despite being her "first and only begotten child", a phrase highlighting the child's valuable place within the family,⁵⁶¹ the hagiographer claims that Athanasia did not show the customary display of grief for "women who love their children"; rather, she "wept for it a little" just enough "to show that which was fitting to her appearance" as a mother.⁵⁶² The hagiographer's association of the death with Athanasia's sudden adoption of asceticism is all too convenient and might even suggest neglect towards the child by a mother too "busy" with ascetic practice. Like Matrona, Athanasia experiences no grief from her child's death, displaying instead an appropriate amount of emotion without suffering or "acting in a manner unworthy of a man." After one visit to Matrona's convent, Athanasia is already transformed, and her roles as a wife and mother dissipate in the wake of her religious calling and the death of her child; she transitions from being a young matron with family obligations to an independent, wealthy woman. Freed of husband and child, Athanasia is able to become a child anew under the guidance of her spiritual mother Matrona; Athanasia's fortune becomes the foundation of Matrona's monastic legacy in Constantinople, as spiritual daughter makes spiritual mother the beneficiary and heir to her property.

Hagiographers understood the importance of inheritance for their Christian audience. The transfer of inheritance from spiritual child to spiritual parent is a particularly striking inversion of Roman cultural expectations. One has children, even spiritual children, to continue one's legacy after death, ensuring the continuation of memory, family line, position, and property. Matrona's *vita* credits her sanctity as stemming from raising up virtuous spiritual children, stating that her "flock" was proof of her holiness.⁵⁶³ In the case of Matrona and Athanasia, it is not simply Athanasia's role as a spiritual daughter that perpetuates Matrona's legacy, but rather her wealth, making Matrona both mother and heir to her spiritual daughter. Here the family economy becomes intricately woven within the divine economy of Athanasia's salvation and Matrona's sanctity; the inheritance of the spiritual daughter confers sanctity and lasting memory to her spiritual mother. This relationship is stated explicitly in the *vita* itself: the hagiographer declares

⁵⁶⁰ *Life of Matrona* 41.

⁵⁶¹ Interestingly, the phrase *μονογενὲς(ῆς) καὶ πρωτότοκον* appears only in Eusebius of Caesarea, *Demonstratio evanēlica* 5.3.1 to refer to Christ as the first and only begotten Son of the Father. Elsewhere, only one of these terms is used (and often accompanied by *παιδίον*) to describe an only child. The significance and great value of only children has long been expressed in ancient literature, from Biblical miracle stories to Greco-Roman novels. Maria Doerfler notes the significance of this epithet "only-begotten" in Syriac as referring simultaneously to a child's singleness and its specialness as an offering to God, particularly in the writings of Aphrahat and Ephrem in the fourth century and Jacob of Serugh. Doerfler, *Jephthah's Daughter*, 277-277, n.52.

⁵⁶² Athanasia's reaction is similar to that of *Mary the Younger* (d. ca. 903), who, upon the death of her first-born son "almost conquered nature and, weeping just enough to show that she was a mother gave thanks to the guardian of our souls". Mary displayed the patience of Job for "in this manner she bore what happened with patience and thanksgiving. And if she could accept with such courage the death of her only son, what other grief would she not bear with ease and equanimity?" *Life of Saint Mary the Younger* 4, trans. Angeliki E. Laiou in Talbot (1996), 258-9.

⁵⁶³ *Life of Matrona* 1, 48.

that the only reason for mentioning Athanasia at all was to highlight the spiritual power of Matrona's prayers: whatever the abbess required, be it property, food, or coin, materialized "in abundance."⁵⁶⁴ Though Matrona abandoned her own wealth, she acquired wealth anew through Athanasia, and through this wealth secured the future of her monastic community and personal legacy.⁵⁶⁵

Though Matrona and Athanasia's reactions to the deaths of their children in the *Life of Matrona* might appear surprising to a contemporary reader, the joy expressed at being freed from the burden of parenthood is a common trope in ascetic literature, wherein parents and spouses express relief at the deaths of family members, thus allowing them to be freed of all concerns apart from their own salvation. The undesirability of children is particularly striking in the *Life of Melania the Younger* who is described as passionately desiring an ascetic life and despising childbearing as a young matron.

Wealth and Child Mortality in the Life of Melania the Younger

After being forcibly married to her husband Pinian at a young age, Melania the Younger begs her husband to live in celibacy, offering him all of her possessions in exchange for her chastity.⁵⁶⁶ Pinian agrees to live in continence with her, but only after the couple have produced two children to inherit their possessions.⁵⁶⁷ Reluctantly agreeing to his terms, Melania gives birth to a daughter, but following the birth, Melania "frequently asked [Pinian] to keep bodily chastity", however, "he would not agree, saying that he wanted to have another child."⁵⁶⁸ Deeply unhappy, Melania "kept trying to flee and to leave him all her possessions", but a holy man advised her to wait for a time, indicating that she might save her husband if she could be patient.⁵⁶⁹ While pregnant with her second child, Melania's longing for continence seems within reach, until tragedy strikes:

Later on, when the prayers of the saint had taken effect and she was about to give birth to her second child, the feast of Saint Lawrence arrived. Without taking any rest and having spent the whole night kneeling in her chapel, keeping vigil, at dawn the next day she rose early and went with her mother to the church of the martyr. With many tears she prayed to God that she might be freed from the world and spend the rest of her days in the solitary life, for this is what she had yearned for from the beginning. And when she returned from the martyr's shrine, she commenced a difficult labor and gave birth prematurely to a child. It was a boy, and after he was baptized, he departed for the Lord.⁵⁷⁰

Ὅτε δὲ λοιπὸν αἱ εὐχαὶ τῆς ἀγίας συνήργησαν καὶ γέγονεν πρὸς τὸ τίκτειν τὸ δευτέρου παιδίον, ἔφθασεν ἡ μνήμη τοῦ ἀγίου Λαυρεντίου· καὶ μηδὲ ὅλως ἑαυτὴν ἀναπαύσασα, ἀλλὰ πᾶσαν τὴν νύκτα ἐν ἀγρυπνίᾳ καὶ γονυκλισίαις καταναλώσασα

⁵⁶⁴ *Life of Matrona* 47.

⁵⁶⁵ *Life of Matrona* 47-48.

⁵⁶⁶ See discussion of this topic in previous chapter, [add page numbers].

⁵⁶⁷ *Life of Melania the Younger* 1, trans. Clark, 28.

⁵⁶⁸ *Life of Melania the Younger* 3, trans. Clark, 29.

⁵⁶⁹ Gerontius, *Life of Melania the Younger* 4, trans. Clark, 29

⁵⁷⁰ Gerontius, *Life of Melania the Younger* 5, trans. Clark, 29.

ἐν τῷ ἑαυτῆς εὐκτηρίῳ, ὀρθρίζει τῇ ἐπαύριον μετὰ τῆς ἰδίας μητρὸς καὶ ἀπελθοῦσα ἐν τῷ μαρτυρίῳ μετὰ πολλῶν δακρύων τῷ Θεῷ προσήζατο, ὅπως ἐλευθερωθεῖσα τοῦ κόσμου ἐν τῷ μονήρει βιώ τὸν ἐπίλοιπον τῆς ζωῆς αὐτῆς χρόνον διατελέσῃ· τοῦτο γὰρ ἐξ ἀρχῆς ἐπεπόθησεν. Καὶ ἐπανελθοῦσα ἐκ τοῦ μαρτυρίου σφοδρῶς ἐδυστόκησεν καὶ τίκτεται ἄωρον τὸ παιδίον· ἄρσεν δὲ ἦν· καὶ βαπτισθὲν ἀπῆλθεν πρὸς τὸν Κύριον.

Like Athanasia, Melania's worldly life begins to unravel following a visit to the shrine of St. Lawrence on his feast.⁵⁷¹ Pregnant with her second child, and with her desired life of continence within reach, Melania prayed so fervently "that she might be freed from the world" and lead a "solitary life", that she induced premature labor, giving birth to a boy who lived only long enough for baptism. With her second child now deceased, however, Melania fell into despair and was herself on the brink of death:

*After this, when her blessed husband saw that she was exceedingly troubled and was giving up on life, he lost courage and was himself endangered. Running to the altar, he cried aloud with tears to the Lord for her life. And while he was sitting next to the altar, the saint declared to him: "If you want me to continue living, give your word before God that we will spend the rest of our lives in chastity, and then you will see the power of Christ." And since he was very fearful that he might never see her again alive in the flesh, he promised this joyfully. Because of grace from on high and the young man's promise, she was cheered; she got better and completely regained her health. She took the occasion of her child's death to renounce all her silken clothing.*⁵⁷²

Τὴν δὲ λοιπὸν χαλεπῶς ἐνοχλουμένην καὶ πρὸς τὸ ζῆν ἀπαγορεύσασαν θεασάμενος ὁ μακάριος αὐτῆς σύμβιος, ὀλιγοψυχήσας καὶ αὐτὸς ἐκινδύνευσεν· καὶ δραμῶν πρὸς τὸ θυσιαστήριον μετὰ δακρύων ἐβόα πρὸς Κύριον περὶ τῆς ζωῆς αὐτῆς. Ἡ δὲ ἅγια ταῦτα αὐτῷ ἐδήλωσεν καθεζομένην παρὰ τὸ θυσιαστήριον· «Εἰ βούλει με, φησὶν, ἔτι ζῆν, δὸς λόγον ἐνώπιον τοῦ Θεοῦ, ὅτι τὸ λοιπὸν τοῦ βίου ἡμῶν ἐν ἀγνείᾳ διάγωμεν, καὶ ὅψει τὴν δύναμιν τοῦ Χριστοῦ.» Ὁ δὲ σφόδρα δεδουκῶς, μήπως οὐκέτι αὐτὴν ἐν σαρκὶ ζῶσαν θεάσῃται, χαίρων ὑπέσχετο· καὶ τοῦτο μὲν ἐκ τῆς ἄνωθεν χάριτος, τοῦτο δὲ ἐκ τῆς ἐπαγγελίας τοῦ νέου εὐφρανθεῖσα κομψότερον ἔσχεν καὶ εἰς τέλος ὑγιάνασα, προφάσει τοῦ κοιμηθέντος αὐτῆς παιδίου ἀπέθετο πᾶσαν στολὴν ὀλοσήρικον.

The infant's death has a profound impact on the young parents: Melania was "giving up on life" and her husband "was himself endangered." While one would assume that their pain was caused by the loss of the child, the hagiographer's portrayal of Melania's emotions and speech indicates that her grief and despair were not perhaps from the loss of the child itself, but rather that her desired life of continence was slipping away, and that she would have to produce another child. Melania, however, is not prepared to undergo another pregnancy, and threatens her own death if Pinian does not agree to live in chastity with her. Fearful of her worsening condition, Pinian vows to comply, and Melania immediately recovers her health. Shortly after this promise of chastity is secured, however, their daughter also dies, leaving them childless and without an heir to their fortune. The hagiographer makes no mention of the emotional impact this death might

⁵⁷¹ Melania the Younger visited the original church of St. Lawrence in Rome, while Athanasia visited his shrine in Constantinople. *Life of Matrona* 38.

⁵⁷² Gerontius, *Life of Melania the Younger* 6, trans. Clark, 30.

have had on Melania and Pinian, focusing instead on the family drama that ensues following their decision to cease procreating. Their parents refused to accept their vow of chastity, and Melania's father Publicola even threatened to disinherit them and give their possessions to other children.⁵⁷³ As Publicola was on good terms with his own ascetic mother, Melania the Elder, his threat was likely not against the couple's ascetic resolution, but rather out of concern to maintain wealth and continue their family line.⁵⁷⁴ In the *Life*, Melania and Pinian were so unhappy that they "refused to eat" until their parents consented to their ascetic vocation.⁵⁷⁵ Publicola finally relented on his deathbed, begging Melania's forgiveness and reinstating her patrimony.⁵⁷⁶

As Elizabeth Clark points out, Melania's "most spectacular renunciations" were her wealth and property.⁵⁷⁷ What is not mentioned in scholarship on Melania the Younger is the connection between her children's deaths and the distribution of her wealth; she could not have parted with the entirety of her property if her children had lived, as they would have inherited the majority of her estate. In the fourth century, wealthy families frequently would not give their ascetic, childless children a fair share (or any, in many instances) of the family patrimony.⁵⁷⁸ Church Fathers complained about this practice, which was apparently so widespread that even monastic parents would disinherit their own children living in asceticism in favor of other children or extended family living in the world.⁵⁷⁹ As Vuolanto notes, however, this practice of disinheriting ascetic children was (generally) not evidence of family conflicts over asceticism, but rather reflective of late Roman elite attitudes towards wealth as belonging to the family rather than to individuals, and the importance of economic continuity strategies. The logic behind this denial of inheritance was practical: familial wealth should be protected and passed on to the next generation.⁵⁸⁰

Chaste Marriage and Child Mortality in Hagiography

While no emotional display is warranted following the death of Melania's daughter in the *Life of Melania the Younger*, the holy woman bitterly grieves deaths of her mother and husband. When Melania's mother Albina died and was buried on the Mount of Olives, "Melania

⁵⁷³ As Elizabeth Clark notes, this is the first and only mention of Melania's possible siblings in the Greek *vita*, though Palladius reports in the *Lausiaca History* that Melania the Younger's father Valerius Publicola had two children. According to Palladius, Melania the Elder (Melania the Younger's grandmother) "taught the younger son of Publicola and led him to Sicily", though no further details are mentioned regarding a possible brother. Palladius, *Lausiaca History* 54. For a discussion regarding differences in the Greek and Syriac texts of these passages in the *Lausiaca History*, see Clark, "Commentary", 90-91.

⁵⁷⁴ The hagiographer notes that their senatorial relatives were scheming for their goods and "their numerous and great possessions". *Life of Melania the Younger* 12, trans. Clark, 36-37. Vuolanto, *Children and Asceticism*, 135.

⁵⁷⁵ Gerontius, *Life of Melania the Younger* 6-7, 12.

⁵⁷⁶ Gerontius, *Life of Melania the Younger* 7, 12.

⁵⁷⁷ Elizabeth Clark, "Commentary", 95.

⁵⁷⁸ Ville Vuolanto, "Choosing Asceticism," 269-273; Arjava, *Women and Law*, 46, 158-159; Gilliam Clark, *Women in Late Antiquity*, 52-53; and Michel Verdon, "Virgins and Widows", 494-495.

⁵⁷⁹ Jerome, *Letters* 127.4, 130.6 (c. 413 or 414); Salvian, *To the Church Against Avarice* 3.4-5 (Sources Chretiennes 176), c. 435-439; Augustine, *Sermons* 355.3 (PL 39:1568-1574); Ambrose mentions parents who refused to give their virgin daughters their dowries as part of their inheritance. Ambrose, *On Virgins* 1.11.62-63, c. 377 and 1.7.32

⁵⁸⁰ Vuolanto, "Choosing Asceticism", 270-271 and *Children and Asceticism*, 133-34.

straightaway remained there in the dark cell, no longer wishing to live in the city [Jerusalem]. She spent that year in great grief, ascetic discipline and fasting”, and after that built a woman’s monastery in that place.⁵⁸¹ Pinian’s death, however, caused far greater grief: after his passing,

*Melania remained in the Aposteleion that she had constructed a short time before and in which she had also deposited the remains of the blessed man. She remained here for about four years, very much wearing herself out in fasting, vigils, and constant sorrow.*⁵⁸²

As with her grief over her mother’s passing, Melania’s sorrow over Pinian’s death bears spiritual fruit. After four years of mourning and “aroused by divine zeal,” she builds a men’s monastery so that she could see “the divine service being offered without interruption in the church and the bones of my mother and my master find rest through their chanting.”⁵⁸³ By enshrining the bones of her husband and mother in monasteries built for their commemoration, Melania reveals the depth of her relationship to these individuals as her true family, both in a spiritual and natural sense.

Despite living in continence, Melania and Pinian remained together for most of their lives. According to Gerontius, their bond became stronger because their chaste marriage, and this phenomenon is recorded elsewhere in the hagiographies of celibate married saints in Late Antiquity and Byzantium. Anne Alwis’ work on celibate marriage highlights how these hagiographies illustrate that the renunciation of spouses was not necessary to practice asceticism, and that the emotional bonds of marriage could be maintained, celebrated, and even bring about mutual salvation, provided the couple upheld their vow and abstained from marital relations.⁵⁸⁴ Chaste marriage, particularly where the couple took a vow of continence after having children and entered monastic communities together, was a well-established practice by the latter half of the fifth century in the East and West.⁵⁸⁵ Sozomen notes how the ascetic Ajax and his wife entered the monastic life with two of their sons, while the third was married off.⁵⁸⁶ Several friends in Paulinus of Nola’s circle including Apronianus and Avita (persuaded by Avita’s aunt Melania the Elder after having two children), Eucherius and Galla (retired to islands of Lérins with two minor sons), and Salvian and Palladia with their daughter Auspiciola were notable examples.⁵⁸⁷ As Ville Vuolanto points out, “even the most Christianized families with a positive view of asceticism tried to ensure their own and their families’ succession through biological children and grandchildren.”⁵⁸⁸ Losing a child, therefore, after such a vow was particularly painful. Shortly after committing themselves to a chaste marriage, Paulinus of Nola and his wife Therasia lost their only child in infancy; Paulinus bitterly grieved that they were “unworthy to

⁵⁸¹ Gerontius, *Life of Melania the Younger* 41, trans. Clark, 54-55.

⁵⁸² *Life of Melania the Younger* 49, trans. Clark, 61.

⁵⁸³ *Life of Melania the Younger* 49, trans. Clark, 62.

⁵⁸⁴ Anne Alwis, *Celibate Marriages in Late Antique and Byzantine Hagiography: The Lives of Saints Julian and Basilissa, Andronikos and Athanasia, and Galaktion and Episteme* (London; New York: Continuum, 2011).

⁵⁸⁵ Basil of Caesarea, *Longer Rules* 12; Ambrose, *On Virgins*, 22; Augustine, *On the Sermon on the Mount* 1.15.42; *Letters* 31.6; 200.3; 220.12; *Anonymous Homily On Virginity* 116-118; Vitricius of Rouen, *The Praise of Saints* 3. Vuolanto, *Children and Asceticism*, 189-92;

⁵⁸⁶ Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History* 7.28; Rufinus, *History of the Monks of Egypt* 14.13.

⁵⁸⁷ See footnote 80.

⁵⁸⁸ Vuolanto, *Children and Asceticism*, 192.

rejoice in posterity”.⁵⁸⁹ The sixth century *Life of Andronikos and Athanasia*, a wealthy Alexandrian couple, particularly emphasizes this loss; shortly after the couple agrees to live in continence, their two adolescent children die from fever.⁵⁹⁰ Athanasia’s moving lament over their bodies is met with stoic resolution on the part of Andronikos, though these sensibilities are reversed when the two give away their wealth to the poor and enter desert monastic communities. Athanasia’s grief over her children transforms her into a manly ascetic, and she lives as a male monk alongside Andronikos; in a twist of events, Andronikos does not recognize his former wife Athanasia, and as she ascends to new ascetic heights, she becomes Andronikos’ spiritual brother and exemplar.⁵⁹¹

Conclusion

Despite his near inability to forgive his own mother, Claude Guyart, who later became a Franciscan friar, advised at least one widow to leave behind her children to answer a divine call to monasticism, even though she desperately did not want to leave them. This widow, Madame Guyon, became a vocal advocate of the “spirituality of abandonment” in seventeenth-century France.⁵⁹² When first pressed by Claude to renounce her family, the well-to-do Madam Guyon suggested that she donate a large sum of money to found an institution or convent instead of leaving her children and joining such a community herself. Madame Guyon’s autobiography details the pain she felt on leaving her children and highlights in particular her anxiety on taking all her money with her to the religious life, leaving her children with nothing. When her spiritual father made this financial demand of her, Madame Guyon questioned, “What else could God require of me, but to take due care of them in their education?”, hoping at least to leave her children with money enough to secure their futures. The response of her spiritual advisor was to “make a free sacrifice of everything” to God, leaving nothing at all for her children.⁵⁹³

In the divine economy, children could be both inheritors of their parents’ spiritual legacy and their parents’ inheritance itself, functioning as guarantors and intercessors of their family’s salvation as martyrs, clergy, dedicated virgins, or even as sacrificial offerings in the wake of parental asceticism.

As Caroline Schroeder has shown, child sacrifice motifs in Late Antique Egyptian iconography and literature do more than illustrate familial renunciation; they reinforce priestly authority and monastic family legacies by appearing at moments of ritual transition and transformation.⁵⁹⁴ Iconography representing Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac and Jephthah’s killing

⁵⁸⁹ Paulinus of Nola, *Carmina*, 31.603-4 and *Letters* 27.3; Augustine, *Letters* 31.5-6. Cited in Vuolanto, *Children and Asceticism*, 190.

⁵⁹⁰ The *Life* was part of the sixth century Daniel Cycle, stories about Abba Daniel of Sketis that were popular throughout Byzantium and translated into a variety of languages. For dating the *Life of Andronikos and Athanasia*, see Alwis, *Celibate Marriages*, 4.

⁵⁹¹ For the events described here, see the *Life of Andronikos and Athanasia* 4-12, trans. Alwis, *Celibate Marriages*.

⁵⁹² Dunn, *The Cruellest of All Mothers*, 123.

⁵⁹³ Madam Guyon, *Autobiography of Madame Guyon* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1960), 197, 200-201, 203. Discussed in Dunn, 123.

⁵⁹⁴ Caroline Schroeder, “Child Sacrifice in Egyptian Monastic Culture: From Familial Renunciation to Jephthah’s Lost Daughter” *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, vol. 20, no. 2 (Summer, 2012), 269-302

his daughter in altar spaces in churches at St. Catherine's and St. Antony's monasteries function in a variety of ways for their viewers.⁵⁹⁵ For the priests in the altar, these images amplify their authority, alluding to their role in the consecration of the Eucharist and connecting them with the patriarchs represented as prefigurments of the sacrifice and partakers in the body of Christ. For the monks in the nave, these images would have inspired mimetic viewing, per Elizabeth Bolman's analysis, encouraging the monastic viewer to identify with the sacrificing patriarchs and the children as offerings.⁵⁹⁶ Stories of abandonment and child killing in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* position children as the ultimate sacrificial offerings and their rejection and deaths function as moments of transition and initiation for their parent or killer. The literary deaths of the children in the *AP* function in a manner similar to the iconography of St. Catherine's and St. Antony's. As Schroeder explains,

These textual and visual acts of sacrificial child killings are a socially and culturally generative process that allows celibate men to regenerate their own social group, one not dependent on biological reproduction but nonetheless one in which fathers beget sons who carry on a social and cultural legacy.⁵⁹⁷

Dead children did far more than free their ascetic parents to pursue monastic vocations; their deaths, even in a rhetorical sense, laid the foundations for monastic community building. In the lives of Matrona of Perge and other elite holy mothers, the separation from and deaths of children played significant roles impacting the financial, social, and religious futures of their families and allowed for the establishment of new, monastic legacies in their absence. Further, by connecting Matrona's sacrifice specifically with Abraham's, the hagiographer established the basis for her spiritual authority on a male, priestly model. Matrona was not simply an ascetic mother who rejected her child for Christ; she dressed as a monk and, as the next chapter explores, she *lived* as a holy man by wandering the desert, working miracles, counseling disciples, and tonsuring them at the altar. In the *vita*, changes in Matrona's appearance are closely associated with her separation from Theodote, as shifts in dress reflect new "purpose", action, and authority. "Worthy of Abraham" takes on new, priestly meaning as Matrona transitions from sacrificing mother to eunuch monk to spiritual mother dressed in the male monastic schema, wielding spiritual authority.

and *Children and Family in Late Antique Egyptian Monasticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 84-111.

⁵⁹⁵ The icons at St. Catherine's date to the seventh century, while those at St. Antony's date to the thirteenth-century.

⁵⁹⁶ For the connection between Egyptian monastic viewing of iconography, particularly within the Monastery of St. Antony, see Elizabeth Bolman's "Theodore, 'The Writer of Life' and the Program of 1232/1233" in *Monastic Visions: Wall Paintings in the Monastery of St. Antony at the Red Sea*, ed. Elizabeth Bolman and Patrick Godeau (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002) and "Joining the Community of Saints: Monastic Painting and Ascetic Practice in Early Christian Egypt" in *Shaping Community: The Art and Archaeology of Monasticism. Papers from a Symposium Held at the Frederick R. Weisman Museum, University of Minnesota, March 10-12*, ed. Sheila McNally (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2001), 46, 44.

⁵⁹⁷ Caroline Schroeder, *Children and Family*, 111.

Chapter 5

“A Man in Garb and Purpose”: Clothing, Gender, and Asceticism in the Lives of Holy Women

*Vain trifles as they seem, clothes have, they say, more important offices than merely to keep us warm. They change our view of the world and the world's view of us... thus, there is much to support the view that it is clothes that wear us and not we them; we may make them take the mould of arm or breast, but they mould our hearts, our brains, our tongues to their liking.*⁵⁹⁸

(Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*, 1928)

In Virginia Woolf's 1928 novel *Orlando: A Biography*, the title hero starts out life as a male British aristocrat in the seventeenth century. Sent to Constantinople as an ambassador, Orlando wakes up one morning to find himself transformed into a woman; exchanging male clothing for “those Turkish coats and trousers which can be worn indifferently by either sex”, Orlando adopts women's clothing for the journey back to England. Later on in the novel, despite having a female body, Orlando takes on different gender roles and identities by dressing a female body in both men's and women's clothing.⁵⁹⁹ Woolf declares that clothes “wear us and not we them... they mould our hearts, our brains, our tongues to their liking”, describing the role of dress in gender performativity.⁶⁰⁰ Clothing, however, communicates far more than gender, and in the Late Antiquity, was a fundamental to differentiating identity. In Ramsay MacMullen's seminal article on clothing and ornament in the writing of Ammianus Marcellinus, he describes how appearance in the late Roman world communicated status and occupation:

*An emperor should look like an emperor and should be identifiable by his shoes alone or by the hem of his mantle; a soldier should distinguish himself visibly from his officers, and they from their commander-in-chief; chamberlains should not dress like lawyers nor lawyers like consuls, nor consuls like monks and bishops. From each person might be expected, instead, a declaration of what he did in the world.*⁶⁰¹

In Late Antiquity, dress was one of the primary ways to communicate one's identity to the outside world. Wealth, status, education, family background, career, and even religious beliefs or practices could be readily identifiable by dress. As ever-evolving mediums of display, clothing and fashion could communicate more than the status of the wearer. As physical and social

⁵⁹⁸ Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography* (1928), 179. This passage was brought to my attention in Ingvild Saelid Gilhus' introduction to *Clothing and Monasticism in Ancient Christian Egypt: New Perspective on Religious Garments* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 12.

⁵⁹⁹ Woolf, *Orlando*, 139.

⁶⁰⁰ Woolf, *Orlando*, 179. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990).

⁶⁰¹ Ramsay MacMullen, “Some Pictures in Ammianus Marcellinus”, *The Art Bulletin* vol. 46, no. 4 (Dec., 1964), 435-56, here 448. However, while the clothes of bishops, monks, and emperors stood apart, men's fashion in the later Roman Empire increasingly blurred the boundary between “civil and military and Roman and non-Roman”, as “barbarian” dress came into vogue in both military and civic contexts. Mary Harlow, “Clothes make the Man” in *Objects in Context, Objects in Use: Material Spatiality in Late Antiquity*, ed. Ellen Swift, Luke Lavan, and Toon Putzeys (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 66.

boundaries between Roman and “barbarian” were increasingly blurred in the later Empire, so too were the ways in which elite civic and military officials represented themselves. Mary Harlow has shown how the third and fourth centuries played a significant role in eliding distinctions in dress for elite Roman men through the adoption of “barbarian military fashions” by civic officials. As military officers of Vandal and Gothic ancestry rose in the imperial ranks to become members of the new elite, they maintained their uniforms and regalia in public office.⁶⁰² By the fifth century, Harlow explains, “Military status was social status and the uniform of the high-ranking soldier (chlamys, tunic, belt, and leggings) could be interchangeable with that of the civilian official.”⁶⁰³ The toga, the signature garment of the Roman ruling class, was gradually replaced by tunics and trousers (*bracae*), even for the emperor himself, as portraits of Justinian show.⁶⁰⁴ Shifts in elite representation reflected not only demographic changes across the Empire’s ruling class but deeper changes in the ways authority could be communicated - and threatened - through clothing. The idea that “you were what you wore” was not lost on Late Antique commentators, lawmakers, and patristic writers, who worried that the authority inherent in particular types of dress could be exploited or diminished when displayed on the wrong bodies.⁶⁰⁵ Laws from the later fourth and fifth centuries forbade those outside of the imperial family from wearing gold-embroidered garments and clothes dyed purple in order to maintain class distinctions and privileges.⁶⁰⁶ Just as dress could communicate or accentuate one’s role in society, it could likewise obscure or alter identity, and this was particularly concerning for monastic dress, as its very purpose was to transform the wearer.⁶⁰⁷

Clothing Makes the Monk: Monastic Dress in Late Antiquity

In the stories of the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, clothing quite literally makes the monk.⁶⁰⁸ Donning the monastic habit was a powerful act that both obscured and transformed one’s prior identity, an outward indicator of renunciation and inner change. Handed down from spiritual parent to child at the moment of tonsure, these garments were imbued with the grace of the bestower, and each item was thought to represent specific ascetic virtues, as articulated by

⁶⁰² See articles in J.H.W.G. Leibeschuetz, *Decline and Change in Late Antiquity: Religion, Barbarians and their Historiography* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).

⁶⁰³ Harlow, “Clothes maketh the man”, 67. Visual evidence for this can be found in the diptychs of Stilicho and Probanus.

⁶⁰⁴ For example, Justinian’s portrait in San Vitale, Ravenna. Harlow, “Clothes maketh the man”, 44-69, especially 63-69.

⁶⁰⁵ Quote from Mary Harlow, “The Impossible Art of Dressing to Please: Jerome and the Rhetoric of Dress” in *Objects in Context, Objects in Use: Material Spatiality in Late Antiquity*, ed. Luke Lavan, Ellen Swift, and Toon Putzeys (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 536. For example, Claudian, *Against Eutropius*.

⁶⁰⁶ The *Codex Justinianus* preserves laws from Valentinian and Theodosius II regulating dress for elites and prohibiting those outside the imperial family from wearing (or even making) clothes woven with gold or dyed with the imperial purple. 11 8.1-2, 4.

⁶⁰⁷ Justinian’s Novels forbade actors and prostitutes from wearing the monastic habit or mocking monks on the stage “or in any inappropriate manner.” *Novels* 123.41, trans. Miller and Serris, 826.

⁶⁰⁸ *Apophthegmata Patrum*, Abba Theodore of Pherme 2 (PG 65:188), trans. Ward, 69; Abba John the Cenobite 1 (PG 65:220) trans. Ward, 96; Epiphanius, Bishop of Cyprus 4 (PG 65:164), Poemon 11 and 182 (PG 65:324-25 and 367); Serapion 4 (PG: 65:416-17). Discussed in Rebecca Krawiec, “Garments of Salvation”: Representations of Monastic Clothing in Late antiquity, *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 17.1 (2009), 127 n.6.

Evagrius of Pontus and John Cassian.⁶⁰⁹ Though monastic clothing differed across time, space, gender, and class in Late Antiquity, the garments of renunciation were typically characterized by the roughness of their material and the lack of adornment or vibrant colors. While a variety of monastic garments existed, common pieces of ascetic dress included a dark tunic (*σιτάριον*; sometimes referred to as *ίμάτιον* or *λεβήτονος*, if sleeveless), mantle/cloak (*ίμάτιον* or *μηλωτή*, if made of sheepskin), belt (*ζώνη*), and hood (*κουκούλλιον*), a uniform appropriated by Christian ascetics from ancient philosophers, as Tertullian asserts in his treatise *On the Pallium*.⁶¹⁰ More austere renunciants could also wear hair-shirts (*τρίχινα*), a signature clothing item of desert hermits such as Antony the Great that was adopted by several aristocratic ascetic women including Matrona and Melania the Younger.⁶¹¹

The work of Thelma Thomas and Rebecca Krawiec shows just how varied and dynamic monastic garments were, as not merely communicators of spiritual power but miracle-working conductors of a holy person's grace which played a salvific role both for the ascetic and the object of his intercessions.⁶¹² As Ingvild Saelid Gilhus explains regarding monastic dress, "Clothes are seen as mediators between their wearers and the world, and sometimes as actors, because of their potential to restrain as well as enable those who wore them."⁶¹³ A holy person's virtues could be woven into the fabric of their attire. When Paulinus of Nola gifted Melania the Elder's wool tunic to his friend Sulpicius Severus, Paulinus made sure to wear it first, in order to "snatch a prior blessing from the garment."⁶¹⁴ The clothing of a holy man, like his body, was highly prized, and a gift of clothing from spiritual parent to disciple was a dynamic exchange, as the authority and power of a holy man were tightly wound within the threads of his garments, offering spiritual and physical benefits to the wearer.⁶¹⁵ Monastic clothing was referred to as "the

⁶⁰⁹ Evagrius of Pontus, *Praktikos*, Prologue 6-7, 46-7, 52-3. The symbolism of the habit in the Prologue not expressed in earlier monastic literature. See discussion in Robert E. Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 92-93. John Cassian, *Institutes* 1. Krawiec, "Garments of Salvation", 139; Thomas, "Mimetic Devotion and Dress", 60-

⁶¹⁰ Clothing of monks appropriated from the simple yet distinct dress of ascetic philosophers in antiquity like those worn by Cynics and Stoics. As Thelma Thomas summarizes: "Philosopher's dress might comprise a single, simple tunic and/or mantle indicative of lack of interest and participation in worldly society and an elective display of poverty, yet point to a rich life of the mind and spirit. Monastic adaptation of the philosophers' scheme accorded with a common understanding of Christian monasticism as a philosophical way of life." Thomas, "Mimetic Devotion and Dress," 48. See also the discussion in Lynda L. Coon, *Sacred Fictions: Holy Women and Hagiography in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 58-59. For sources on the clothing and images of philosophers in Late Antiquity, see R.R.R. Smith, "Late Roman Philosopher Portraits from Aphrodisias", *Journal of Roman Studies* 80 (1990), 127-155; Paul Zanker, *The Mask of Socrates: The Image of the Intellectual in Antiquity*, trans/ Alan Shapiro (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Sarah E. Bassett, "The Late Antique Image of Menander", *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 48 (2008), 201-225; Kristi Upson-Saia, *Early Christian Dress: Gender, Virtue, and Authority* (New York; London: Routledge, 2011), 70.

⁶¹¹ Athanasios of Alexandria, *Life of Antony* 47, 91. On the significance of Matrona and Melania the Younger wearing a hair-shirt, see the discussion on 131 of this chapter.

⁶¹² Thomas, "Mimetic Devotion and Dress" and *Dressing Souls* (forthcoming); Krawiec, "Garments of Salvation".

⁶¹³ Saelid Gilhus, *Clothes and Monasticism*, 14.

⁶¹⁴ Paulinus of Nola, Letter 29.5, trans. Walsh, 105.

⁶¹⁵ Paulinus of Nola, Letter 29.5; Athanasios, *Life of Antony* 92. Gerontius, *Life of Melania the Younger* 61.

garments of salvation” (*ἰμάτια σωτηρίου*), handed down with the laying on of hands and enveloping the wearer with spiritual armor.⁶¹⁶ The act of taking off the habit could have perilous consequences for careless monks and nuns, akin to risking both their lives and salvation, as stories in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* make clear. In one example from the *Systematic Collection*, a monk heading to Scete removed his habit to bathe in the Nile and was eaten by a crocodile; when a passing abba reprimanded the crocodile for eating the monk, the animal replied with a human voice that he had eaten a worldly man (*kosmikos*) and, nodding towards the monastic habit on the bank, said “the monk is there.”⁶¹⁷ This story encapsulates the extent to which monastic clothing fashioned identity in Late Antique society; by removing his habit, the monk ceased to *be* a monk.

Clothing the Female Monastic Body: Fashioning Identity

The idea that clothing could craft identity and shape behavior from the inside out was pervasive in Late Antique hagiographies of holy women who dressed - and often lived - as men.⁶¹⁸ This popular hagiographic type included at least a dozen ascetic women such as Matrona of Perge and more well-known examples like Thekla, the disciple of the Paul, as well as popular narratives of Maria/Marinos and Pelagia of Antioch.⁶¹⁹ In these vitae, holy women adopt the clothing and identity of men, becoming, in the words of Matrona’s hagiographer, “a man in garb and purpose”.⁶²⁰ However, many other holy women, such as Melania the Younger, also wore male monastic clothing without necessarily intending to obscure their sex or alter their gender.⁶²¹

⁶¹⁶ Quote from Gerontius describing the monastic clothing of Melania the Younger, *Life of Melania the Younger* 11.

⁶¹⁷ *Apophthegmata Patrum Systematic Collection* 18.53, trans. John Wortley, *The Book of the Elders: Sayings of the Desert Fathers, The Systematic Collection* (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian and Liturgical Press, 2012), 350.

⁶¹⁸ While the term “transvestite” has been long used in scholarship to describe female saints disguised in men’s clothing, I refrain from using this word for its pejorative connotations. Roland Betancourt has recently suggested using “transgender” as an appropriate substitute, as this term encompasses a wide range of practices and identities including cross-dressing. Betancourt cites David Valentine’s definition in *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 1-65. See discussion on terms in Roland Betancourt, *Byzantine Intersectionality: Sexuality, Gender, and Race in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 89-91.

⁶¹⁹ The *Life of Maria/Marinos* was among the most popular stories in Byzantine hagiography, with translations appearing in Latin, Syriac, Coptic, Ethiopic, Armenian, Arabic, and later medieval German and French. Her veneration extended across the medieval world. See Maximos (formerly Nicholas) Constas’ introduction to his translation of the *Life of Maria/Marinos* in *Holy Women of Byzantium*, ed. Alice-Mary Talbot (Washington, D.C: Dumbarton Oaks, 1996). Constas translation from M. Richard’s text, “La Vie Ancienne de Sainte Marie surnommee Marinos” in *Corona Gratiarum. Miscellanea patristica, historica et liturgica Eligio Dekkers O.S.B. XII Lustra complenti oblata* I (Bruges, 1975), 83-94 ; other edition of the text in BHG 1163. *Life of Pelagia*, trans. Sebastian Brock and Susan Ashbrook Harvey in *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, trans. J.K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

⁶²⁰ *Life of Matrona* 8.

⁶²¹ The hagiographic trope of the saintly woman dressed as a man was immensely popular in Christian literature both in Late Antiquity and Byzantium, particularly as many of their vita survive in both their original hagiographies and metaphrastic versions found in the Synaxarion of Constantinople and in the Menologion of Basil II.

Ascetic women donned male clothing for different reasons, such as escaping family obligations and unwanted husbands, gaining entrance into stricter male monastic communities, or simply wearing the clothing of renunciation that was handed down to them by their spiritual guides.⁶²² Regardless of the intentions behind adopting male clothing, in hagiography, changes in female ascetic dress often parallel shifts in spiritual progress, creating new identities and expressions of spiritual authority for the holy women in question. As Judith Herrin explains,

*Apparel, far more than physique, identified a person. The monastic disguise adopted by women who were able to pass as eunuchs permitted them to simulate a holiness reserved by male ecclesiastical authorities to men only.*⁶²³

By dressing in the male monastic schema, female men of God become *like* men, live like men, and acquire the spiritual authority to engage in priestly roles usually reserved for men.⁶²⁴ The *Life of Matrona of Perge* in particular highlights this shift in identity through Matrona's close relationship with her spiritual father Bassianos and her mirroring of the activities and clothing of other famous holy men. Beginning in the fourth century, however, there were serious ecclesiastical objectors to ascetic women adopting male clothing.

The bishops who gathered at a local synod in Gangra in 340/41 to condemn Eustathius of Sebaste were particularly concerned by the ways women and slaves could use ascetic practices and clothing to espouse new identities separate from their families and masters. The introductory letter to the synod's canons as well as canons 13 and 17 address the issues of women dressing and shaving their heads like men:

*We have discovered... that, on account of the sin of commonality in dress they adopt strange garments; ... that slaves run away from their masters and, on the basis of said strange garments, hold their masters in contempt; and that in violation of custom, women assume masculine garments in place of feminine ones, and think themselves thereby justified. Many even shave their heads under the pretext of piety.*⁶²⁵

⁶²² See the recent discussion in Roland Betancourt, *Byzantine Intersectionality*, 100.

⁶²³ Judith Herrin, *Unrivalled Influence: Women and Empire in Byzantium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 179.

⁶²⁴ See Mathew Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch: Masculinity, Gender Ambiguity and Christian Ideology in Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 23; Hannah Hunt, "Transvestite Women Saints: Performing Asceticism in Late Antiquity", in RIHA Journal Special Issue: *From living to Visual Images. Paradigms of Corporeal Iconicity in Late Antiquity*, September 30, 2019, 10.

⁶²⁵ Introduction to the Canons of Gangra, trans. Insley, "Dressing Up the Past", 72, adapted from Elm, *Virgins of God*, 108. Greek text in Mansi, *Sacrorum conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio* 2 (Florence and Venice, 1757-1798), 1095-1122.

Canon 13: If any woman, under pretense of asceticism, shall change her apparel and, instead of a woman's accustomed clothing, shall put on that of a man, let her be anathema [*Εἴ τις γυνή διὰ νομιζομένη ἄσκησιν μεταβάλλοιτο ἀμφιάσμα, καὶ ἀντὶ τοῦ εἰωθότος γυναικείου ἀμφιάσματος, ἀνδρείων [ἀνδρῶν] ἀνάλαβοι [ἀναλαμβάνοι], ἀνάθεμα ἔστω / Si qua mulier, propter eam quae existimatur pietatis exercitationem, vestem mutet, et pro solita veste muliebri, virilem sumat, anathema sit.*]

Canon 17: If any woman from pretended asceticism shall cut off her hair, which God gave her as the reminder of her subjection, thus annulling as it were the ordinance of subjection, let her be anathema [*Εἴ τις γυναικῶν διὰ νομιζομένην ἄσκησιν [θεοσεβείαν] ἀποκείροιτο τὰς κόμας, ἃς ἔδωκεν ὁ Θεὸς εἰς ὑπόμνησιν τῆς ὑποταγῆς, ὡς ἀναλύουσα [παραλύουσα] πρόσταγμα τῆς ὑποταγῆς, ἀνάθεμα ἔστω / Si qua*

Εὐρίσκοντο... ξένα ἀμφιάσματα ἐπὶ καταπτώσει τῆς κοινότητος τῶν ἀμφιασμάτων συναγοντε... καὶ δοῦλοι δεσποτῶν ἀναχωροῦντες, καὶ διὰ τοῦ ξένου ἀμφιάσματος καταφρόνησιν κατὰ τῶν δεσποτῶν ποιούμενοι. καὶ γυναῖκες παρὰ τὸ σύνηθες ἀντὶ ἀμφιασμάτων γυναικείων ἀνδρικὰ ἀμφιάσματα ἀναλαμβάνουσαι, καὶ ἐκ τούτων οἰόμεναι δικαιοῦσθαι. Πολλὰ δὲ καὶ ἀποκείρονται προφάσει θεοσεβαίας τὴν φύσιν τῆς κόμης τῆς γυναικείας.

As the product of a regional council addressing the supposed encratism of Eustathius of Sebaste in Neocaesarea, Asia Minor, these canons did not have a widespread or lasting impact on the clothing choices of female renunciants. While the canons object to women dressing in *ἀνδρικὰ ἀμφιάσματα* and cutting off their hair, patristic and hagiographic literature reveal that holy women quite often wore some male garments, especially if they visited or resided in monastic communities in the Egyptian desert.⁶²⁶ Shaved heads were unacceptable for Roman women, and Theodosius even banned such women from entering churches, threatening bishops with expulsion if they did not enforce this rule,⁶²⁷ however, wearing men's clothing was not punishable for women under late Roman law.⁶²⁸ The canons of Gangra speak to mid-fourth century fears regarding the threat radical Christian asceticism posed to Roman society and episcopal authority through the rejection of social norms, roles, and hierarchies. To the bishops at Gangra, appearance played a prominent role in advertising and empowering the renunciation of Eustathius' followers and stripping authority from traditional power structures within home, Church, and state. If one was what one wore, then with the right apparel, a matron could cast off her husband and become a shorn man of God and a slave could become a free man. Clothing and appearance held real, persuasive power. While female ascetic dress continued to be regulated by bishops (with varying success) in the Western Empire through the seventh century, hierarchs in the East appear to have been more tolerant of monastic women adopting a variety of habits, indicating that there were acceptable ways for women to wear men's attire.⁶²⁹

The issues at stake for the synod at Gangra and in ascetic discourse on monastic garments were not simply the renunciation of wealth and status but the anxiety that clothing could obscure these important distinctions, muddling key social differences between men and women and slave and free. While class and gender distinctions and roles were upheld throughout Late Antiquity,

mulier, propter eam quae existimatur pietatis exercitationem, comam tondeat, quam Deus ei dedit in memoriam subjectionis, ut quae subjectionis praeceptum dissolvat, anathema sit.]

⁶²⁶ Palladius describes the Pachomius' female monastic community living "the same manner of life" in all respects as its affiliated men's monastery, except that the women did not wear the goat or sheep-skin cloak (*μηλωτή*) common to monks. Gerontius presents Melania the Younger wearing a mosaic of ascetic garments handed down to her from holy men. Palladius, *Lausiac History* 32-33; Gerontius, *Life of Melania the Younger* 69-70.

⁶²⁷ Bishops who allowed women with shaved heads to enter churches were threatened with expulsion. *Codex Theodosianus* 16.27.1.

⁶²⁸ As dress among the upper classes changed dramatically from the fourth to sixth centuries, some garments were interchangeable between the sexes, as Justinian's *Digest* makes clear. The passage of discussing clothing puts it in the context of inheritance, tying clothing to family property. *Digest* 34.3.23.2.

⁶²⁹ The Western Empire produced a variety of canons regulating female religious dress from the fifth through seventh centuries: Canon 19, Council of Agde (506), CC 148.202; Canon 38, Council of Epaon in Burgundy (517), CCL 148(A).34; "Liber Pontificalis I.239; canons 36 and 37; Council of Auxerre (561-605), CC 148(a), 269. See discussion in Coon, *Sacred Fictions*, 38.

the hagiographies of elite ascetics explore the ways more extreme ascetic ideals *could* impact aristocratic families. Popular vitae of holy fools such as Symeon or Alexios the Man of God depict noblemen living as beggars, fleeing their family obligations and disguising their true identities behind feigned madness, rags, and nakedness.⁶³⁰ In these lives, changes in dress reflect their rejection of wealth and family, but they also present the problematic loss of personal identity, as noblemen transform themselves into despised strangers as a form of *xeniteia*.⁶³¹ While patristic rhetoric praised holy men and women for forsaking their fortunes and families, maintaining (or in the case of Alexios the Man of God, recovering) their identities was essential to the construction of their sanctity. A noble lineage was a primary attribute of Late Antique saints,⁶³² and thus the loss or obstruction of one's true identity at once complicated and enlived this process of sanctification. The majority of holy women in hagiography who adopted male monastic clothing, however, were not trying to conceal their original identities as noblewomen, but rather assumed clothing appropriate to their ascetic activities, environment, and companions. Further, as the lives of elite holy women show, adopting alternative forms of ascetic dress did not usually result in a loss of one's identity or status, even if these were sometimes confused. When Melania the Elder was arrested in Palestine for lavishing wealth on holy men while dressed as a "young slave," Palladius describes her indignation towards the local magistrate: immediately revealing her lineage and rank, she warned him not to "despise the cheapness" of her clothing or dare to touch her possessions, as she could exalt herself if she liked.⁶³³

By the sixth century, two traditions emerged in Christian literature of holy women who wore men's clothing: the transgender saint who becomes male through asceticism like Maria/Marinos or Hilaria/Hilarion and does not reacquire a female identity⁶³⁴ and the aristocratic

⁶³⁰ For the *Life of Symeon the Fool* by Leontius of Neopolis, see Derek Krueger, *Symeon the Holy Fool: Leontius' Life and the Late Antique City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) and Sergey Ivanov, *Holy Fools in Byzantium and Beyond*, trans. Simon Franklin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). The Life of Alexios the Man of God survives in a Syriac original text and later Greek vitae, *Analecta Bollandiana*, XIX, 241 (1900); Louis Duchesne, "Les legendes chretiennes de l'Aventin; Notes sur la topographie de Rome au moyen-age VII" in *Melanges X*, 234 (1890); *La legende Syriaque de S. Alexis, l'Homme de Dieu*, ed. Arthur Amiaud (Paris, 1899). See also Robert Doran, *Stewards of the Poor: The Man of God, Rabbula, and Hiba in Fifth-Century Edessa* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Press, 2006).

⁶³¹ The ascetic virtue of *xeniteia* (alienation) takes on a variety of forms, as Daniel Caner explores in *Wandering, Begging Monks*, 24-30, 36, 46, 48, 243. See also John McGuckin, "Aliens and Citizens of Elsewhere: Xeniteia in East Christian Monastic Literature" and Janet Rutherford, "Byzantine Asceticism – a Stranger to the Church?" in *Strangers to Themselves: The Byzantine Outsider. Papers From the Thirty-Second Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, University of Sussex, Brighton, March 1998*, ed. Dion C. Smythe (London and New York: Routledge, 2016). Basil of Caesarea, *Longer Rules* 5.

⁶³² The hagiographies of all major Late Antique saints from Thekla and Perpetua to Antony and Symeon the Holy Fool emphasize their wealth and nobility as a crucial aspect of their sanctity; renouncing wealth and status were considered ultimate sacrifices in the late Roman world and thus appear as prerequisite steps towards sanctity.

⁶³³ Palladius, *Lausiaca History* 46.

⁶³⁴ The lives of Maria/Marinos and Hilaria/Hilarion both date to the sixth century. *Life of Hilaria/Hilarion*, ed. and trans. James Drescher, "Hilaria" in *Three Coptic Legends* (Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 1947). Roland Betancourt argues that these two saints specifically reflect transgender identities, as they are regarded as "male" by their companions and hagiographers. Betancourt even compares them to Matrona, highlighting the differences between their perceived identities in the *vitae*. Betancourt, *Byzantine Intersectionality*, 91-96.

mother who adopts male monastic garments as part of her renunciation. In the latter case, it is not the maleness of the garments that is usually emphasized so much as the baseness of the clothing itself and lack of adornment. Matrona of Perge, however, plays into both of these paradigms, progressing from elite matron and mother to the eunuch monk Babylas before reclaiming her name and cultivating a new identity as a monastic founder with male and female characteristics in Constantinople. The separation from and death of her daughter Theodote feature prominently as catalysts for these shifts from matron to monk to abbess, and changes in clothing mark out these transitions, vesting Matrona with the authority to live out/in these identities as spiritual mother and holy man. Both her elite status as a matron and ascetic credentials contribute to her spiritual authority, and by wearing Bassianos' habit, Matrona's body signals to her community and disciples this hybridity of holy mother and priest.

As Rebecca Krawiec has shown, monastic clothing was not considered a static marker of identity, even for individual ascetics.⁶³⁵ Rather, clothing often functions in these texts as "material memories" that invite "continuous interpretation and change" for the holy man or woman who wears them.⁶³⁶ In the *Life of Matrona of Perge*, the holy woman's evolving dress signifies her spiritual progression, occupation, and relationships. Matrona is dressed for the ascetic occasion: as a reluctant wife, she refuses to bathe or wear her fine clothes or jewelry; after abandoning her husband and daughter, she dresses as a eunuch and lives as a monk wearing a monastic habit; when she leaves Bassianos' monastery, she wanders the desert in a hair shirt like St. Antony, and continues to wear her hair shirt while living as an anchorite exorcising demons in a temple outside Beirut; upon her return to Constantinople, Matrona exchanges her desert ascetic wardrobe for a return to the male monastic schema she wore in Bassianos' monastery; in this final costume she receives imperial patrons and builds up a lasting monastic legacy by bestowing this same schema on her nuns at their tonsure. In the vita, Matrona can appropriately wear these varying ascetic garments because she engages in behaviors associated with these types of dress in the lives of prominent holy men. Moreover, she can model the spiritual authority of holy men because she has *lived* as one; her activities and authority are closely modeled on those of her spiritual father Bassianos and famous desert ascetics such as Antony the Great and others from the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, while also harkening back to Abraham through her sacrifice of Theodote.

This chapter examines the ways ascetic dress communicates identity and bestows spiritual authority in the *Life of Matrona* and in contemporary hagiographic literature. Considerable scholarly interest has been devoted to the subject of holy women living as men⁶³⁷ and on male monastic clothing,⁶³⁸ but less attention has been given to the role of ascetic dress

⁶³⁵ Krawiec, "Garments of Salvation," 125-150.

⁶³⁶ Gilhus, *Clothes and Monasticism*, 18 and chapter 5; Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 269.

⁶³⁷ See Patlagean, "L'histoire de la femme déguisée en moine et l'évolution de la sainteté féminine à Byzance", *Studi Medievali* (s. 3) 17 (2) (1976), 597-623; Castelli, "I will Make Mary Male", 29-49; Stephen J. Davis, "Crossed Texts, Crossed Sex: Intertextuality and Gender in Early Christian Legends of Holy Women Disguised as Men", *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 10 (2002), 1-36; Hunt, "Transvestite Women Saints"; Insley, "Dressing up the Past", 55-82; John Anson, *The Female Transvestite in Early Monasticism*, 25-27.

⁶³⁸ Scholarship on monastic dress, particularly in Late Antique Egypt, has been a subject of continuous study since the 1930s, with an abundance of research published in the past few decades. For an overview of sources on monastic dress, both textual and material, see the following: Philip Oppenheim, *Das*

among holy women in contemporary scholarship.⁶³⁹ While patristic writers expressed concern and offered much opinion on how consecrated virgins and widows should adorn themselves with virtues and modesty, “barely exposing one eye”, per Jerome’s recommendation to Demetrias,⁶⁴⁰ Church Fathers and hagiographers alike made spectacles of holy women’s clothing and bodies, highlighting their garments and features as outward indicators of their holiness. In hagiography, female ascetic dress often incorporates garments from the male monastic schema as holy women take on manly virtues and the angelic life.⁶⁴¹ For Matrona, her disciple Athanasia, Melania the Younger, and others, their clothing plays a significant role in communicating spiritual status, and changes in wardrobe closely parallel specific stages in their journeys from matrons to ascetics and holy mothers. The “garments of salvation” of these women are closely tied to their familial renunciation, weaving the rejection of wealth, marriage, and the loss of children and biological motherhood into their dress, and signaling new roles and identities. For Matrona and Melania, the loss of children allows for their transition into manly ascetics; they become at once holy fathers and mothers with priestly authority over their communities and disciples. While dressing entirely in men’s clothing and adopting a male identity were problematic in late Roman society, Matrona’s hagiography justifies her actions through divine sanction. Further, Melania the Younger and Matrona’s monastic habits tie them to new legacies beyond family status or gender, generating new, angelic spiritual identities and authority for themselves and their disciples. As Matrona bestows male monastic garments on the bodies of her nuns, this schema becomes a recognizable characteristic of her monastery, at once communicating and generating a lasting community identity in Constantinople.

Mönchskleid im christlichen Altertum, Römische Quartalschrift für christliche Altertumskunde und für Kirchengeschichte, 28 (Freiburg in Breisgau: Herder, 1931) and *Symbolik und religiöse Wertung des Mönchskleides im christlichen Altertum*, Theologie des Christlichen Osten II (Muster: Aschendorff, 1932); René-Georges Coquin, “À propos des vêtements des moines égyptiens”, *Bulletin de la Société d’Archéologie Copte* 31 (1992), 2-23; Paraskevė Kalamara “Le système vestimentaire à Byzance du IV jusqu’à la fin du XI^e siècle,” 2 volumes (Doctoral thesis, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 1995); Stephen Davis, “Fashioning a Divine Body: Coptic Christology and Ritualized Dress”, *Harvard Theological Review* 98 (2005), 335-62; Sofia Tovar, “The Terminology of Egyptian Monastic Garments” in *Material Culture and Well-Being in Byzantium (400-1453)*, eds. M. Grünbart, et. al (Vienna: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaftern, 2007), 219-224; Rebecca Krawiec, ““Garments of Salvation””, 125-150; Maria Chiara Giorda, “Does the Cowl Make the Monk? A Monastic Accessory during the First Centuries of Egyptian Monasticism” in *Dress Accessories of the 1st Millenium AD from Egypt Proceedings of the 6th Conference of the Research Group “Textiles of the Nile Valley”, Antwerp, 2-3 October 2009*, ed. Antine De Moor and Cäcilia Fluck (Tielt: Lanoo, 2011), 182-187; Thomas, “Mimetic Devotion and Dress”, 37-79 ; Ingvild Saelid Gilhus, *Clothing and Monasticism*.

⁶³⁹ With the exception of Mary Harlow, most studies on women’s clothing and *cultus* (adornment) are less interested in the clothing of renunciation. Mary Harlow, “The Impossible Art of Dressing to Please”.

⁶⁴⁰ Jerome, Letter 130.18 (PL 22.1122). See also Jerome, *Letters* 22, 128; Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*.

⁶⁴¹ On angels as ideal models for monastics, see Karl Suso Frank, *Angelikos bios: begriffsanalytische und begriffsgeschichtliche Untersuchung zum "engelgleichen Leben" im frühen Mönchtum* (Müster: Aschendorff, 1964). Elizabeth Bolman explores the personification of angelic virtues in monastic portraiture in “Mimesis, Metamorphosis and Representation in Coptic Monastic Cells”, *Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists* 35 (1998), 65-77.

What (Not) to Wear: Patristic Sources on Female Ascetic Dress

In a letter to Sulpicius Severus, Paulinus of Nola describes Melania the Elder's return to the West after nearly twenty-five years in Egypt and Jerusalem. Paulinus sets the scene at Nola, where Melania's silk-clad relatives throng to see at touch their beloved matriarch, juxtaposing the holy woman's dirty rags with the splendid adornment of her relations:

*They longed to have their woolen garments, so valuable with their golden embroidery, trodden down beneath her feet or worn away with the rubbing of her rags. For they thought that they were cleansed from the pollution of their riches if they succeeded in gathering some of the dirt from her tawdry clothing or her feet.*⁶⁴²

Renouncing fine clothes was a public step for a pious Christian noblewoman embarking on a religious life which announced her transition from layperson to continent ascetic. Praising the aristocratic Roman virgin Asella for putting aside her finery and adopting "dark clothes", Jerome declared that "by her very dress, she condemned the world".⁶⁴³ For the wealthiest Christian women, forsaking fine clothing alone was almost enough to secure salvation, provided the renunciant did not maintain other luxurious possessions, Jerome warns, such as manuscripts decked out in gold letters and jewels, parchments dyed purple, and bands of eunuch attendants.⁶⁴⁴ In their admiration of ascetic women, patristic writers often describe the absence of adornments and luxuries in more detail than the clothing of renunciation itself. Jerome, who wrote extensively on appearance, prescribed and praised consecrated virgins and widows such as Marcella, Paula the Elder and Younger, Eustochium, Demetrias, and Asella for dressing in demure, dark clothing and putting aside their shimmering garments of silk and brocade, fine linen and wool embroidered with gold, flashing pearls and glittering gems of all varieties.⁶⁴⁵ The "jeweled style" which permeated all aspects of Late Antique art, literature, and style was not lost in discussions of renunciation but rather contributed to new Christian constructions of piety through the rhetoric of abstinence.⁶⁴⁶ In praising Demetrias' abandonment of her fiancé the night before her wedding, Jerome dwells at great length on all the bridal finery left untouched by the runaway bride: "precious necklaces, costly pearls and glowing gems were returned to their cases", "costly earrings, glistening pearls from the Red Sea", "bright green emeralds", "flashing onyxes", "liquid sapphires, stones which set fire to the desires of matrons and make them mad".⁶⁴⁷ Giving up such luxuries and status symbols was a mark of sincere asceticism, and yet the virtues of holy men and women are described in the material terms of their renunciation.⁶⁴⁸

⁶⁴² Paulinus of Nola, *Letter* 29.12. The context of this letter to Sulpicius Severus is regarding his *Life of Martin of Tours*, wherein St. Martin is depicted in tattered clothes. Paulinus attempts to "one-up" his friend by making Melania's appearance even more ascetic, something Paulinus himself acknowledges (CSEL 29: 251-52); Discussed in Luckritz Marquis, "Namesakes and Inheritance", 34-35.

⁶⁴³ Jerome, *Letter* 24.2.

⁶⁴⁴ Jerome, *Letter* 22.32.

⁶⁴⁵ See Harlow's "The Impossible Art of Dressing to Please"; Jerome, *Letters* 22, 24, 45, 107, 130.

⁶⁴⁶ Michael Roberts, *The Jeweled Style: Poetry and Poetics in Late Antiquity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989); Harlow, "The Impossible Art of Dressing to Please"; Nikki Rollason, *Gifts of Clothing in Late Antique Literature* (New York; London: Routledge, 2016).

⁶⁴⁷ Jerome, *Letter* 130.5,7. Trans. Harlow, "The Impossible Art of Dressing to Please".

⁶⁴⁸ The kingdom of heaven itself is compared to a pearl in Matthew 13:45.

As an ascetic matron, Gorgonia dressed herself with great simplicity, shunning the latest fashions in hair style and never adorned herself with jewelry or cosmetics.⁶⁴⁹ Her garments are described as “bright with virtue alone”, indicating the tempered nature of her clothing.⁶⁵⁰ Makrina, as a consecrated virgin and spiritual mother, is depicted weaning her mother Emmelia and spiritual daughter Vestiana of their fine clothing and adornments while she dressed in dark clothes. At the time of her death, Makrina’s body “was resplendent, even in the dark robe” as if “rays actually seemed to shine forth from her beauty”.⁶⁵¹ A noble birth is enriched by asceticism; exchanging bright garments for coarse dark clothes results in a shining, angelic body.⁶⁵² By leaving behind luxuries and symbols of aristocratic birth, such holy women only increased their status and nobility, transforming their bodies and drab clothes into shining ornaments of salvation, adding to their family legacies through their asceticism, adorning themselves with the garments of virtue.⁶⁵³

As mentioned earlier in the chapter, by adopting ascetic clothing, elite women typically did not lose their identity or status but rather accentuated it, as their renunciation added greater renown to their families. Through their asceticism Makrina, Paula, Gorgonia, and the Melanias only made their families more illustrious in patristic rhetoric, even surpassing their celebrated male relatives through their spiritual nobility. Paulinus claims that Melania’s relatives “took pride more in her holy poverty than in their own conspicuous wealth” and that Melania’s asceticism was a nobler legacy for their family than the consulships of their forefathers.⁶⁵⁴ Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa similarly describe the asceticism of their sisters Gorgonia and Makrina as contributing not only to collective family value but increasing their own personal standing as bishops and holy men.⁶⁵⁵

However, Augustine and Jerome warn that one could go too far. Dress served as an outward indicator of the depth of one’s spiritual intentions, but it had to be chosen carefully. Ecdicia, an elite matron with a living husband embarrassed him with her showy display of ascetic garments, presenting herself as a widow or continent while he was unprepared or unwilling to follow in her renunciation. Per Augustine’s reproof, Ecdicia’s display shamed both herself and her husband and led to her spouse’s sin.⁶⁵⁶ Jerome likewise chides an anonymous elite ascetic who dressed in rags but went about with a showy band of eunuchs distributing coins

⁶⁴⁹ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 8.3, 10

⁶⁵⁰ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 8.14.

⁶⁵¹ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Makrina* 970B-C, 988C, 992C-D. Ed. Robert Pearse for <http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/gregory_macrina_1_life.htm>. See also, Virginia Burrus, “Macrina’s Tattoo”, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 33.3 (Fall 2003), 403-417.

⁶⁵² Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Makrina* 972A, 992C-D; Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 8.13.

⁶⁵³ Melania the Younger “rose to the heavens with joy, having clothed herself in virtues as a garment”. Gerontius, *Life of Melania the Younger* 70, trans. Clark, 82. Idea of covering oneself with virtues as a garment comes from Colossians 3:12-15; also Isaiah 64:10, Revelation 19:8.

⁶⁵⁴ Paulinus of Nola, *Letter* 29.6-8, trans. P.G. Walsh in *The Letters of St. Paulinus of Nola*, vol. II (London: Newman Press, 1967) 115.

⁶⁵⁵ Susanna Elm, “Gregory’s women: Creating a philosopher’s family” in *Gregory of Nazianzus Images and Reflections*, ed. Jostein Børtnes and Tomas Hägg (Museum Tusulanum Press, University of Copenhagen, 2006), 190-191; Nathan Howard, “Preserving Family Honour: Gregory of Nyssa’s Life of Macrina as Theological Polemic” in *Approaches to the Byzantine Family*, ed. Leslie Brubaker and Shaun Tougher (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2013), 91-105.

⁶⁵⁶ Augustine, *Letter* 262.

to the poor.⁶⁵⁷ The spectacle of tattered ascetic clothing, therefore, had to fit the right body in the right moment in order for it to be praiseworthy. In Jerome's *Letter 22* to Eustochium (384 AD), he writes at length about what not to wear and gives examples of ascetic women who made a spectacle of their renunciation by disfiguring their bodies with fasting and squalor and dressing to the extreme:

*They cover their faces, all but one eye, which they keep free to see with. Their dress is somber, their girdles are of sackcloth, their hands and feet are dirty... others change their garb and assume the mien of men, being ashamed of being what they were born to be – women. They cut off their hair and are not ashamed to look like eunuchs. Some clothe themselves in goat's hair, and, putting on hoods, they think to become children again by making themselves look like so many owls.*⁶⁵⁸

While Jerome's aim was to caution Eustochium to be more moderate in her attire, so as not to appear "too devout nor too humble",⁶⁵⁹ his comments tie into larger fourth-century concerns over the appearance of religious women and the elision of gender and social distinctions through dress. Ascetic women cutting their hair and dressing as eunuchs was a real concern for some fourth century Christians, as highlighted in the canons from the Council of Gangra. However, wearing some (or all) of a male monastic costume could be acceptable if one's prior identity was still recognizable in these garments.

Ascetic Clothing and Spiritual Transformation in the Lives of Melania the Younger and Matrona

In hagiography, this shift towards ascetic clothing is often a dramatic moment. Prior to her children's deaths and complete renunciation, Melania the Younger wore a "course tunic" (*ἰμάτιον χονδρὸν*) beneath her silk and linen in order to hide her asceticism.⁶⁶⁰ After the deaths of her children, however, Melania renounced silk and fine clothing, and instead took on "garments of salvation" (*ἰμάτια σωτηρίου*).⁶⁶¹ As Melania and her husband Pinian embark on an ascetic life, she gradually adopts clothing that outwardly displays her inner intentions, including a veil (*μοφόριον*), hood (*κουκούλλιον*), belt (*ζώνη*), and hair-shirt (*τρίχινα*). Melania's changes in dress reflect changes in her spiritual authority and outward identity, to the point that when she and Pinian visit the monks of Tabennisi and Nitria outside Alexandria, the monks regard Melania "as if she were a man", since "she had been detached from the female nature and had acquired a masculine disposition, or rather, a heavenly one."⁶⁶² However, this newfound manliness is not to

⁶⁵⁷ Jerome, *Letter 22.32*.

⁶⁵⁸ Jerome, *Letter 22* Translated by W.H. Fremantle, G. Lewis and W.G. Martley in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, Vol. 6, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1893.) Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight. <<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3001107.htm>>

⁶⁵⁹ Jerome, *Letter 22.27*. Jerome's advice is inconsistent, however. Just one year later in a letter to Asella, he praised Paula's dirty clothes and tear stained (*Letter 45.3*). Several decades later in his letters to Laeta and Demetrias, however, Jerome recommends some of the more extreme ascetic clothes he once criticized, such as advising Demetrias to only expose one eye when going out of her house. Jerome, *Letters 107 and 130*.

⁶⁶⁰ Gerontius, *Life of Melania the Younger 4*.

⁶⁶¹ Gerontius, *Life of Melania the Younger 11*.

⁶⁶² Gerontius, *Life of Melania the Younger 4, 31, 62, 69* (on clothing); quote from 39, trans. Clark, 54.

imply a shift in personal identity, but rather in the construction of her spiritual authority; by detaching herself “from the female nature”, she acquired a “heavenly” disposition, but her maternity is not repealed but “rescripted.”⁶⁶³ after the establishment (or perhaps, refurbishment) of her family convent in Jerusalem, Melania serves the women of her community as a mother, feeding, clothing, and nursing the sick.⁶⁶⁴ By the time of her death, Melania’s clothing was a mosaic of male monastic dress handed down to her from holy men: “the tunic of a certain saint, the veil of another servant of God, another garment without sleeves,” a miracle-working belt from a holy man, and “a hood made from the hair of another saint.”⁶⁶⁵ Melania’s hagiographer Gerontius asserts that she was worthy to be buried in the garments of holy men, since she herself had acquired their same virtues through living an ascetic life.⁶⁶⁶ Further, Melania used these garments to work miracles. When a young woman was dying after laboring for days to expel a stillborn baby, Melania placed the belt of a holy man on the woman’s stomach, and she was successfully delivered of the child. The implication in the text is that the miracle is Melania’s: the belt is imbued with her grace, as well that of the holy man which she acquired through wearing his garment.⁶⁶⁷

In the *Life of Matrona*, changes in dress reflect the spiritual progression of the saint and her disciple Athanasia. From the start of the vita, Matrona is presented as a *sophron* matron who avoids cosmetics and adornments, rebuffs her husband, refuses to bathe, and humbles her body with fasting,⁶⁶⁸ mirroring aspects of Gorgonia and Melania the Younger in her *sophrosyne* and desire for continence.⁶⁶⁹ While her clothing as a matron is not described, the vita gives two contradictory portraits of Matrona prior to her life as a monk: the narrative voice indicates that while Matrona spent her evenings in churches at all-night vigils, her husband Dometianos suspected her of being a courtesan, which would perhaps indicate that she had not forsaken all of her worldly accoutrements.⁶⁷⁰ When Matrona relays the events of her renunciation to Bassianos, however, she makes clear that her husband was well aware of her inner religious desires and defends her decision to enroll as a eunuch monk in his monastery to better escape Dometianos’ notice.⁶⁷¹ Regardless of its quality, Matrona’s matronly clothing is put aside following her separation from Theodote.

As mentioned in the previous chapters, from the time she abandons Theodote, Matrona’s words, behavior, and appearance take on manly characteristics. As Matrona relinquishes her biological motherhood, she takes on a new identity by cutting off her hair and donning men’s clothing. The abruptness of this transition is voiced in the text by Matrona herself:

For as soon as the child Theodote had been given over to the aforementioned Susanna, I put off my female attire forthwith and cut my hair; and, in a word, becoming a man both in garb and purpose.

τὸ γὰρ παιδίον Θεοδότην παραθέμεναι τῇ μνημονευθείσῃ Σωσάννῃ, εὐθέως ἀποθεμένη

⁶⁶³ Maria Doerfler, “Holy Households”, 73.

⁶⁶⁴ Gerontius, *Life of Melania the Younger* 41.

⁶⁶⁵ Gerontius, *Life of Melania the Younger* 69, trans. Clark, 81-82.

⁶⁶⁶ Gerontius, *Life of Melania the Younger* 69, trans. Clark, 82.

⁶⁶⁷ Gerontius, *Life of Melania the Younger* 61.

⁶⁶⁸ *Life of Matrona* 2.

⁶⁶⁹ See discussion in chapter 2.

⁶⁷⁰ *Life of Matrona* 2.

⁶⁷¹ *Life of Matrona* 8.

τὴν γυναικεῖαν στολὴν καὶ τὴν κεφαλὴν ἀποκειραμένη καὶ — ἀπλῶς εἶπεῖν — ἀνὴρ
γενομένη καὶ τῷ σχήματι καὶ τῇ προαιρέσει.⁶⁷²

As the hagiographer expresses, the act of cutting her hair and putting on male clothing allows Matrona to be “completely transformed into a man” [εἰς ἄνδρα μετασχηματισθεῖσαν ὄλην], implying a change in both her inner and outer person.⁶⁷³ Few details are given regarding Matrona’s clothing as a eunuch monk, apart from her wearing a cloak (*παλλίον*), the traditional garb of philosophers and ascetics.⁶⁷⁴ Regarded as the eunuch Babyllas, Matrona outdoes Bassianos’ monks in her manly asceticism, surpassing them in fasting, temperance, obedience, physical labor, and in prayer and “abounding love”, leaving the men to marvel and imitate her, just as she later imitates Bassianos.⁶⁷⁵ Nevertheless, when Matrona is teased by a fellow monk Barnabas for having both of her ears pierced like a “girl”, “she was brought to a state of no ordinary anxiety and trouble from this, diverting her mind towards many and differing thoughts” [εἰς ἀγῶνα δὲ καὶ τάραχον οὐ τὸν τυχόντα ἐκ τούτου καθίστατο, εἰς πολλὰς καὶ διαφοροὺς ἐννοίας τὴν διάνοιαν ἀπάγουσα] and remembered the words of her spiritual mother Eugenia, “‘It is a difficult thing’, she said, ‘impossible even, for a woman to be settled/appointed in a male monastery or, having settled, to escape notice.’” [Δυσχερὲς γὰρ πρᾶγμα, ἔλεγεν ἐκείνη, καὶ ἀδύνατον, γυναῖκα ἐν ἀνδρικῷ μοναστηρίῳ ἀποτάξασθαι ἢ ἀποταξαμένην λαθεῖν].⁶⁷⁶ Despite becoming “a man in garb and purpose”, Matrona is not a man in body. Matrona’s latent femaleness causes her great anxiety, and her fears comes to a head when her sex is revealed to Bassianos in a dream. Summoning her, Bassianos immediately questions her modesty and accuses her of tempting his monks: “Tell me, sister what prompted you to dare such a thing against us and to bring such a great temptation escaping notice all the while?” [Εἰπέ, ἀδελφή, τί τὸ παρασκευάσαν σε τηλικούτον καθ’ ἡμῶν τολμῆσαι πρᾶγμα καὶ πειρασμὸν ἐπαγαγεῖν ἐπὶ τοσοῦτον λανθάνουσαν χράνον]⁶⁷⁷ Matrona accepts his reproach and immediately covers her head with her cloak, declaring that she did not come to bring temptation but to escape the world. While Bassianos acknowledges that Matrona’s female body had escaped notice up to this point, he chides her for daring to approach the divine mysteries with an unveiled head and offering the kiss of peace to his monks during the Liturgy.⁶⁷⁸ Here Matrona defends herself by stating that during the divine mysteries she would cover her head halfway with her *pallium* feigning a headache; as for the kiss of peace, she did not refrain from kissing her fellow brethren because she saw them not as men but as angels free from passions.⁶⁷⁹ Matrona’s care to cover her

⁶⁷² *Life of Matrona* 8.

⁶⁷³ *Life of Matrona* 4. See footnote 552.

⁶⁷⁴ *Life of Matrona* 7. From the Latin *pallium*, this word was especially used to denote the monastic habit. Lampe, 999.

⁶⁷⁵ *Life of Matrona* 4.

⁶⁷⁶ *Life of Matrona* 5.

⁶⁷⁷ *Life of Matrona* 7.

⁶⁷⁸ The kiss of peace occurs at ritual moments in the Liturgy, though at different times depending on the Liturgy celebrated and is referenced in the apostolic epistles and in patristic writing. As the *Vita Matronae* indicates, the kiss of peace was shared on the lips between the monks at the monastery, making a woman’s lips particularly objectionable as a source of temptation.

⁶⁷⁹ Ἡ δὲ πρὸς ταῦτα εἶπεν· Ἐν μὲν τῷ καιρῷ τῶν θείων μυστηρίων ἔσυρον τὸ παλλίον μου ἕως ἡμίσεως τῆς κεφαλῆς μου, ἀσθένειαν αἰτιωμένη τῆς κεφαλῆς. Τὸ δὲ σύμβολον τῆς εἰρήνης καὶ τῆς ἀγάπης τὴν σφραγίδα

head during the divine mysteries indicates that her hagiographer did not see her as a man but as a woman. Her feminine identity was not completely subsumed into her male monastic persona.⁶⁸⁰

Despite marveling at her response and expressing support for her monastic vocation, Bassianos nevertheless instructs Matrona to cover her head as a woman with a piece of cloth and to leave his community immediately.⁶⁸¹

Matrona is escorted back to the home of Susanna, the foster mother of her daughter Theodote, but before leaving the monastery, Matrona learns that her daughter has died. As discussed previously, this news alleviates Matrona's grief at parting from Bassianos' community and her life as Babylas. While Matrona mourns the loss of her identity as a monk, "no longer counted a brother among the brethren," nor addressed by a man's name, but "again to be a woman and to be called Matrona," Theodote's death frees her from reuniting with her daughter and resuming her maternal responsibilities towards the child.⁶⁸² Matrona is spared from abandoning her vocation and returning to her former life as a wife and mother. Further, Theodote's death marks a new transition in Matrona's ascetic life. While Matrona's separation from Theodote facilitated the holy woman's transition to a eunuch monk, Theodote's death allows Matrona to progress from monk to spiritual mother, reclaiming her feminine identity and transforming her motherhood. Leaving Susanna's home for the Holy Land, Matrona's persona changes from monk to spiritual mother in the Syrian landscape; her appearance in the text shifts as she progresses through different stages of desert asceticism, taking on the clothing, attributes, practices, and authority of desert holy men in the process.

As a solitary ascetic on the move in Syria, the text describes Matrona carrying a staff and wearing a hair-shirt (*τρίχινον* / *τὸ φόρεμα τρίχινον*), signature items of the desert monastic costume.⁶⁸³ While the staff was a "necessary monastic possession" in the Pachomian rule and appears frequently in Late Antique monastic portraits,⁶⁸⁴ Matrona's hair-shirt ties her to a range of famous ascetics from John the Baptist and Antony the Great to Melania the Younger.⁶⁸⁵ Matrona's hair-shirt becomes an identifying attribute of her wardrobe, and her admirers describe her thus to Dometianos: "her statue was tall and proportional, her hair-shirt, her white complexion, and her countenance bright and joyful." [*ἡ μὲν ἡλικία αὐτῆς ὑψηλὴ ἐστὶν καὶ ἀναλόγως κειμένη, τὸ δὲ φόρεμα τρίχινον, τὸ δὲ χρῶμα λευκόν, τὸ δὲ πρόσωπον ἰλαρὸν καὶ τερπνόν* v.] and also as "the woman of noble statue who wears garments of hair" [*τὴν εὐήλικον γυναῖκα... τὴν τὰ τρίχινά φοροῦσαν*].⁶⁸⁶ Despite recognizing these descriptions to match his former wife,

οὐκ ἔφευγον· οὐ γὰρ ἀνθρωπίνῳ στόματι, ἀλλ' ἀγγέλους Θεοῦ καὶ ἀπαθέσιν ἀνθρώποις οἰόμεν προσάγειν ἔμμαντήν. *Life of Matrona* 7.

⁶⁸⁰ *Life of Matrona* 7.

⁶⁸¹ *Life of Matrona* 9.

⁶⁸² *Life of Matrona* 7.

⁶⁸³ *Life of Matrona* 13, 14.

⁶⁸⁴ Thomas, "Mimetic Devotion and Dress", 39 n.7. Further, Evagrius of Pontus in his *Praktikos* elaborates that the meaning of the staff by quoting Proverbs 3:18: it is "a tree of life to those who lay hold of it and a strong support for those who lean upon it as upon the Lord". Evagrius of Pontus, *Prologue of Praktikos*, trans. and discussion by Robert Sinkweicz in Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 95 (trans), discussion on 92-93.

⁶⁸⁵ Athanasios of Alexandria describes Antony's hair-shirt in *Life of Antony* 47, 91. On Antony's monastic clothing, see David Brakke, *Athanasius and Asceticism* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1998), 246-7.

⁶⁸⁶ *Life of Matrona* 14

when Dometianos comes face to face with Matriona in Jerusalem, he is unable to recognize her. Matriona's body, like her garments, is transformed beyond recognition.

Matriona ultimately evades Dometianos by settling as a semi-anchorite in a demon-filled temple outside Beirut and engaging in behavior characteristic of desert holy men. Inhabiting temples or spaces filled with demons was a common trope of holy men in hagiography, where the ascetic experiences daily assaults from demons who shriek, shapeshift and attack the bodies of ascetics.⁶⁸⁷ In the temple Matriona's nightly battles with demons mirror those of famous holy men such as St. Antony and Daniel the Stylite, as the spirits attempt to drive her out through incessant shrieking.⁶⁸⁸ Unsuccessful in frightening her away, a demon disguised as a beautiful noblewoman visits Matriona during the day and attempts to persuade her with threats to her vanity and chastity. Demons disguised as woman appear in the *Life of Antony* and in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* as dangerous forces of *porneia* for both novice and senior monks, however, the purpose of this disguise in the *Life of Matriona* is to appeal to Matriona's already forsaken femininity and elite social standing.⁶⁸⁹ Bidding her to depart from such an unsuitable "dwelling of idols and demons", the devil cites Matriona's youth and beauty as vulnerable to attack from "any of those men who often come here", threatening her with rape, starvation, and the loss of her beauty if she remains in such a desolate place.⁶⁹⁰ Recognizing the woman to be the Tempter (*πειράζων*), Matriona dismisses the demon's concerns, showing that God provided a miraculous supply of water and greens to sustain her in the desert. When the demon returns a few days later in the same guise, entreating Matriona to come to Beirut, abandon the harsh environment of her desert dwelling, and to remember the comforts of her former life, it plays on her youth, nobility, and vanity:⁶⁹¹

*I have consideration for you, my lady, and really have sympathy for your youth, and I am anxious and concerned lest such great beauty and such comeliness should wither and die in the sorrow of this place.*⁶⁹²

Φείδομαί σου, δέσποινά μου, ὄντως καὶ συμπάσχω τῇ νεότητί σου καὶ μεριμνῶ καὶ φροντίζω, μήπως τὸ τοιοῦτον κάλλος καὶ ἡ τοιαύτη εὐπρέπεια μαρανθεῖσα ὑπὸ τῆς τοῦ τόπου σκυθρωπότητος ἀπόληται

⁶⁸⁷ *Anonymous Sayings of the Desert Fathers* N.176/5.28 (BHG 1440h), text and trans. in Wortley, 123; In the *Life of Theodore of Sykeon* 8, the demons appear as wolves and wild beasts, and he inhabits a demon-filled place in 16; Theodore's spiritual son Arsinos likewise settles in a demon-filled village 48; Zacharias of Mytilene, *Life of Severus* 31-32, trans. Lena Ambjörn (New Jersey: Gorgias Press, 2008).

⁶⁸⁸ While numerous stories in the vitae of Antony and Daniel the Stylite involve demon fighting, there are several instances which particularly similar to Matriona's, and those are cited here: *Life of Matriona* 15; Athanasios of Alexandria, *Life of Antony*, 5, 8-9, 13 (demons shrieking); *Life of Daniel the Stylite* 14-15 (demons shrieking).

⁶⁸⁹ Demons disguised as women appear frequently in the lives of male ascetics. Athanasios, *Life of Antony* 5-6; *Anonymous Sayings of the Desert Fathers* N.171/5.25, N.454 (cf. 5.52), N.729 (Abba Apollo) Wortley, 293.

⁶⁹⁰ *Life of Matriona* 17.

⁶⁹¹ This visit is reminiscent of Antony's first encounters with the devil in Athanasios' *Life of Antony*, wherein the demon tries to sway Antony with reminders of his wealth, family, comforts, and pleasures. Athanasios, *Life of Antony* 5.

⁶⁹² *Life of Matriona* 17.

Unbothered, Matrona “put the woman to shame and chased her off” by explaining, “I do not desire beauty of the body but of the soul, and if I wither my comeliness on the outside, I renew that within.” [οὐ τὸ κάλλος τοῦ σώματος ἐμοὶ περισπούδαστον ἀλλὰ τὸ τῆς ψυχῆς, καὶ εἰ τὴν ἔξωθεν εὐπρέπειαν μαραιῖνω, τὴν ἔσωθεν ἀνακαινίζω.]⁶⁹³ While the devil seeks to tempt Matrona’s vanity by describing her as young and attractive, at once flattering and threatening the loss of her beauty, social status, and dignity, this choice in temptation seems absurd, as Matrona gave up care towards her feminine appearance while she was still living in the world some five or more years prior. While ineffective, these interactions with demons make up part of the holy man narrative of Matrona’s vita, establishing her credentials as a Syrian holy man, connecting her to a long tradition of desert ascetic heroes, and rewarding her victory over temptation with divine visitation and spiritual disciples. When the demon returns a third time as “an old woman, common and ugly, with fiery eyes”, promising to “bring the most dreadful things” upon Matrona in her old age and to turn the city of Beirut against her, the opposite occurs.⁶⁹⁴ After conquering the demon, crowds of admirers from Beirut come to visit the woman who routed the temple’s demons:

*Afterwards there was talk of her in Beirut, and many went out to her, both men and women, and especially noblewomen, for in a few days report of her had spread everywhere. All told of how her angelic life and shining purity prevailed over the demons in the temple, removing them and putting them to flight.*⁶⁹⁵

Ὅμως ἐξ ἐκείνου ἀκουστὸν ἐγένετο τὰ περὶ αὐτῆς ἐν τῇ Βηρυτῶ καὶ πολλοὶ ἐξήρχοντο πρὸς αὐτήν, ἄνδρες τε καὶ γυναῖκες, καὶ μάλιστα τῶν ἐπισήμων γυναικῶν· διέδραμεν γὰρ ἐν ὀλίγαις ἡμέραις ἡ περὶ αὐτῆς φήμη πανταχοῦ. Καὶ πάντες ἔλεγον ὅτι τοὺς ἐν τῶ ναῶ δαίμονας ἡ πολιτεία αὐτῆς ἡ ἀγγελικὴ καὶ ἡ ἀγνεῖα ἡ λαμπρὰ μετανάστας καὶ φυγάδας κατέστησεν·

Further, Matrona’s success over the demons renders her worthy of divine visitation, wherein three angelic, incorporeal beings (*ἀσώματοι*) gather around her during prayer and curiously intreat her to intercede on their behalf.⁶⁹⁶ This visitation, however brief, marks a transition in the text as Matrona moves from solo anchorite to abbess with sisters under her care.

Matrona undergoes her final and perhaps most significant wardrobe change when she leaves Beirut and returns to Constantinople to establish her convent. Prior to her departure for the imperial city, she has a dream wherein three men - Alexander, Antiochos, and Constantine - vie for her hand in marriage. Refusing them all, Matrona declares that she is committed to God, for on “His account I have renounced my lawful husband [Dometianos].”⁶⁹⁷ Drawing lots, Constantine wins Matrona’s hand, and when she awakens from her dream, she interprets the three men to represent the cities of Alexandria, Antioch, and Constantinople. While this story secures Matrona’s return to Constantinople, it also highlights Matrona’s desirability; even in a

⁶⁹³ *Life of Matrona* 17.

⁶⁹⁴ *Life of Matrona* 18. The “most dreadful thing” is likely a subtle reference to Matrona’s challenges regarding the Henotikon.

⁶⁹⁵ *Life of Matrona* 19.

⁶⁹⁶ *Life of Matrona* 18.

⁶⁹⁷ *Life of Matrona* 25.

metaphorical sense, she is pursued and desired. Despite putting off her body, Matrona is sought after with great zeal by her former husband and spiritual children.

Arriving in Constantinople with her spiritual daughters Sophrone and the married “freewomen” who escorted her from Beirut, Matrona sends word straightaway to Bassianos’ deacon Markellos, telling him of her spiritual trials and travels in Syria. When Markellos informs Bassianos of her return, he refers to her as “the Lord Babylas, the eunuch” who “had come from the East and had brought with him a brother.” [ὁ κύριος Βαβυλᾶς ὁ εὐνοῦχος παραγέγονεν ἀπὸ τῆς ἀνατολῆς ἔχων μεθ’ ἑαυτοῦ καὶ ἓνα ἀδελφόν].⁶⁹⁸ Bassianos, however, is grieved by this news (perhaps fearing a return to her guise as a eunuch) and questions her motives for returning to Constantinople. Upon hearing of her trials and meeting Sophrone, however, he was greatly moved and blessed her to found a convent in the imperial city beside his own. As Bassianos bestows the blessing on Matrona, a “divine force” [θεία ἐνεργεία] puts the abbot “in ecstasy” [ἐν ἐκστάσει], and compelling him to act in a manner that was beyond “human understanding”, he presents Matrona with male monastic girdles and cloaks for herself and her nuns. The hagiographer emphasizes the masculine character of these garments to highlight their novelty and significance for Matrona and her community:

[Bassianos] did not give her wool belts/girdles and veils, such as women are accustomed to use, but wide/large, dark/black leather men’s girdles and white men’s cloaks.

οὐκ ἔρεᾶ δὲ ζωνάρια καὶ μαφόρια, οἷσπερ εἰώθασι γυναῖκες κεχρηῆσθαι, αὐτῇ δέδωκεν, ἀλλὰ Ζωνάρια λώρινα πλατέα ἀνδρικὰ μαῦρα καὶ παλλία ἀνδρικὰ λευκά.⁶⁹⁹

Matrona, for her part, is described as “amazed by the strangeness and miraculous character” of Bassianos’ gift.⁷⁰⁰ In monastic literature, the white cloaks of desert ascetics represented their assimilation to the heavenly ranks of angels, as a description of Apa Apollo’s monks illustrates in the fifth-century *Historia Monachorum*: “One could see them looking like a real army of angels, draw up in perfect order, robed in white.”⁷⁰¹ Wall paintings at the monastery of Apa Apollo in Bawit connect this description to the iconography on the monastery walls, depicting monks and angels dressed alike in white [Fig. 8-9].⁷⁰² Robed in the white cloaks of male desert ascetics, Matrona and her sisters would have been highly conspicuous among the nuns of Constantinople, and the novelty of their dress is emphasized by the astonishment of both Matrona and her spiritual daughter Athanasia. When Athanasia and her sister visit Matrona’s convent for the first time, they marveled “at the strange and different nature of her clothes...

⁶⁹⁸ *Life of Matrona* 29

⁶⁹⁹ *Life of Matrona* 51.

⁷⁰⁰ *Life of Matrona* 30.

⁷⁰¹ *Historia Monachorum* 8, trans. Norman Russell in *The Lives of the Desert Fathers: The Historia Monachorum in Aegyptio* (Kalamazoo and Oxford: Cistercian Press, 1981), 19.

⁷⁰² Thomas, “Mimetic Devotion and Dress”, 62-3 and “The Honorific Mantle as Furnishing for the Household Memory Theater in Late Antiquity: A Case Study from the Monastery of Apa Apollo at Bawit” in *Catalogue of the Textiles in the Dumbarton Oaks Byzantine Collection*, ed. Gudrun Bühl and Elizabeth Dospěl Williams (Washington, DC, 2019), <https://www.doaks.org/resources/textiles/essays/thomas>.

edified by her holy words and the strange clothing worn by the sisters”

[*θαυμάσασαι τὸ ξένον καὶ ἐνηλλαγμένον τοῦ στολισμοῦ... ὠκοδομήθησαν ἐκ τῶν ἀγίων αὐτῆς λόγων καὶ τοῦ περικειμένου ταῖς ἀδελφαῖς ξένου σχήματος*]. The text articulates that it was Matrona’s holy words *and* appearance that led to Athanasia’s sudden wounding by divine love, with word and clothing coming together to form her conversion to asceticism. Indeed, the moment Matrona receives this *ξένον καὶ ἐνηλλαγμένον* (changed, different, crossed, perverted) clothing, Bassianos also “ordained her overseer of souls”, giving her “authority for the laying of hands”, and charges her to “save the souls” of those who join her community.⁷⁰³ This gift of clothing and ordination transitions Matrona into the role of Bassianos’ female counterpart with the authority to tensure her disciples.⁷⁰⁴ The hagiographer explicitly lays out Matrona’s spiritual authority vis-à-vis Bassianos’ and shows the role of clothing in communicating monastic relationships:

*Just as the most holy Bassianos, after a long time and with much examination laid his hand on those he received, so too the blessed Matrona did not permit to bestow the habit on a woman unless she had taken time bearing witness to her resolution of coming forward <as a nun>. And again just as the most holy elder did before the holy altar, when the mysteries are laid out and suitable things are read, and the psalms prescribed, with much admonition and instruction, and taking on the holy habit and the crucifixion of the Lord, signifying and promising through the schema to govern the will through denial and they were first tonsured by him, and then girdled and finally robed in the pallium by him, so too did the blessed Matrona perform again these rites before the holy altar, receiving those who had come to her, and she gave them over to those responsible for caring for them, as they bore witness to before in their community. And thus so to speak, she plainly did everything the same way as her abbot.*⁷⁰⁵

καὶ ὡσπερ ὁ ὁσιώτατος Βασσιανὸς μετὰ πολὺν χρόνον καὶ μετὰ πολλῆς τῆς δοκιμασίας ἐπετίθει χεῖρα οἷς ἐπετίθει, οὕτως καὶ ἡ μακαρία Ματρῶνα, εἰ μὴ τὸν χρόνον ἐδέξατο μαρτυροῦντα τὴν προαίρεσιν τῆς προσελθούσης, οὐ κατεδέχετο αὐτῇ δοῦναι σχῆμα· καὶ ὡσπερ πάλιν ὁ ἀγιώτατος γέρων πρὸ τοῦ ἀγίου θυσιαστηρίου, τῶν μυστηρίων προκειμένων καὶ ἀναγνωσμάτων προσφόρων γινομένων καὶ ψαλμωδίας ἐπιτελουμένης, μετὰ πολλῆς νοουθεσίας καὶ κατηχήσεως λαμβανόντων τὸ ἅγιον σχῆμα καὶ τὴν σταύρωσιν τοῦ Κυρίου παραδηλούντων καὶ ὁμολογούντων διὰ τοῦ σχήματος τὴν τῶν οἰκείων θελημάτων ἄρνησιν καὶ πρῶτον μὲν κουρευομένων παρ’ αὐτοῦ, ἔπειτα δὲ καὶ περιζωννυμένων καὶ τὸ παλλίον τελευταῖον περιβαλλομένων ὑπ’ αὐτοῦ, οὕτως καὶ ἡ μακαρία Ματρῶνα ἐποίει πρὸ τοῦ ἀγίου θυσιαστηρίου δεχομένη τὰς προσερχομένας καὶ ταῖς ὀφειλούσας φροντίζειν αὐτῶν μεταδιδούσα ταύτας, πρὸ τοῦ ἀγίου θυσιαστηρίου πάλιν ἐτελείου τὰς αὐτάς, τῶν ὑποδεξαμένων μαρτυρουσῶν τῇ πολιτεία αὐτῶν πρότερον, καὶ ἀπλῶς εἰπεῖν πάντα καθ’ ὁμοίότητα τοῦ ἡγουμένου αὐτῆς ἐποίει.

This passage establishes Matrona as Bassianos’ monastic female counterpart and allows her to act with the same authority and in the same manner as the holy man himself: just as Bassianos

⁷⁰³ *Life of Matrona* 29-30, 51.

⁷⁰⁴ *Life of Matrona* 30.

⁷⁰⁵ *Life of Matrona* 51.

tonsures and places the habit upon his monks, so too does Matrona initiate her nuns “before the holy altar” though the laying on of hands and bestowing the male monastic habit.⁷⁰⁶

Matrona functions here like a female representative of Bassianos, imitating him in “everything”, as the vita asserts. This priestly role, however, is not new for Matrona. The vita describes Matrona serving in a clerical capacity during her time in Syria, preaching, catechizing, baptizing, and working miracles. In one instance, following the discovery of the head of John the Baptist in Emesa,⁷⁰⁷ Matrona joins the crowds of faithful being anointed by the clergy with fragrant oil exuding from the relic. Approaching the relic, those around her clamor for Matrona to anoint them directly with the oil, bypassing the priests and bishop who are also distributing the oil. When a blind man approaches, he asks Matrona specifically to anoint his eyes, and “straightaway the eyes of the blind man were opened”. While the oil came from the head of John the Baptist, the text attributes the miracle to Matrona:

This miracle proved <Matrona's> greatness at that time. For all were eager to see her, trampling on each other and standing on their tiptoes. Nor was she less marveled at after these things by all. For everyone was saying, 'She is the one who lived for a while as a monk with men, escaping notice: and through this she is magnified and received the grace of healing from Christ.

Τοῦτο τὸ θαῦμα μεγάλην μὲν αὐτὴν κατ' ἐκείνην τὴν ὥραν ἔδειξεν. Πάντες γὰρ ἀλλήλοις ἐπεμβαίνοντες καὶ ἐπ' ἄκρων ὀνύχων ἰστάμενοι ἰδέσθαι αὐτὴν ἔσπευδον. Οὐκ ἔλαττον δὲ καὶ μετὰ ταῦτα παρὰ πάντων ἐθαυμάζετο. Πάντες γὰρ ἔλεγον· Αὕτη ἐστὶν ἢ μετὰ ἀνδρῶν μονάσσα καὶ λαθοῦσα ἐπὶ χρόνον· καὶ διὰ τοῦτο χάριν λαβοῦσα ἰαμάτων παρὰ τοῦ Χριστοῦ μεγαλύνεται.⁷⁰⁸

Matrona's reputation from Syria carries over to Constantinople, where she is referred to as a “wonder-worker” by Euphemia (the wife of Anthemius, Augustus in the West from 467-472 and the daughter of the emperor Marcian) and becomes well known for healing the sick. In one miracle account, Euphemia brings her ailing friend Antiochiane to Matrona for healing.⁷⁰⁹ Despite spending a fortune on doctors, Antiochiane's condition was deteriorating; after speaking with Matrona and gaining spiritual benefit from her words, Antiochiane boldly placed the holy woman's hand on her body and feels immediate relief of her symptoms. As in the case of Athanasia, it is Matrona's words *and* body that effect change and make her new spiritual daughter loath to part with her. Bidding Euphemia to go home, Antiochiane declares, “I shall

⁷⁰⁶ Sarah Insley asserts that this passage presents Bassianos and Matrona as “co-directors of a joint community” wherein the “equality” of their communities is symbolized by their common dress in male monastic clothing. While Bassianos and Matrona are certainly represented as a sort of spiritual team, the text nevertheless asserts Bassianos' superiority with superlative epithets that are not shared by Matrona and by repeatedly indicating that Matrona's founding of her convent (and her salvation) were made possible through him. Sarah Insley, “Dressing Up the Past”, 74, 76.

⁷⁰⁷ The discovery of the head of John the Baptist in Emesa occurred in February 452/3. Cyril Mango notes that its inclusion in *the Life of Matrona* complicates the narrative timeline of the vita, as Matrona would still be living in Constantinople until at least the 458. Mango, “Introduction”, 16.

⁷⁰⁸ *Life of Matrona* 12.

⁷⁰⁹ *Life of Matrona* 33-34. Antiochiane was the wife of Sphorakios, consul in Constantinople around 452 who, the vita reminds, constructed a church to the martyr Theodore.

remain with my physician (*ἰατρός*) until my complete recovery.”⁷¹⁰ In exchange for her healing, Antiochiane offers Matrona the pick of her estates; after choosing an estate in Severiana beside the monastery of Bassianos, Antiochiane improves the property before granting Matrona “full ownership” by having the deed transferred to her name.⁷¹¹ Matrona’s miracle working closely associates her with activities normally practiced by men, functioning as a priest and physician to those who seek her out for healing.

Conclusion

Recent studies on masculinity in Late Antiquity have observed a flexibility in manly virtues and their application in the later Roman world.⁷¹² Just as visible distinctions between Roman and barbarian were increasingly blurred by fashionable dress in the later fourth and fifth centuries, so were the constructs of gender adaptable to one’s profession, wealth, asceticism, and their display.⁷¹³ Well-dressed imperial eunuchs such as Eutropius or Narses could become generals, bishops, or consuls, taking on roles once deemed unsuitable, if not impossible, for men of their status.⁷¹⁴ In this culture of materiality and display,⁷¹⁵ women could become popular saints by renouncing family and living as eunuch monks.⁷¹⁶ To repeat the earlier quote from Judith Herrin, “Apparel, far more than physique, identified a person. The monastic disguise adopted by women who were able to pass as eunuchs permitted them to simulate a holiness reserved by male ecclesiastical authorities.”⁷¹⁷ An elite abbess in men’s clothing could move more easily between circles of influence, be they audiences with empresses, bishops, or holy men. Clothing *made* the man. This changeability of roles is seen in the figures of ascetic mothers who take on masculine attire and attributes while still maintaining their maternity.

The clothing of renunciation shifts with various ascetic identities, as Rachel Krawiec argues, communicating “alienation from the world, angelic status, widowhood, bride of Christ, and, above all, an inner person who may, or may not, be discernible by outer appearance”.⁷¹⁸

⁷¹⁰ *Life of Matrona* 34.

⁷¹¹ *Life of Matrona* 35-36.

⁷¹² Roland Betancourt, *Byzantine Intersectionality*; Susanna Elm, *New Men for a New Rome: Masculinity, Ethnicity, Fashion, Display and the Later Roman Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press), forthcoming. See also Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch*.

⁷¹³ Harlow, “Clothes Maketh the Man”; Susanna Elm, “What the Bishop Wore to the Synod: John Chrysostom, Origenism, and the Politics of Fashion at Constantinople,” in *Adamantius* 19 (2013), 156-159.

⁷¹⁴ As Claudian’s invective shows, Eutropius as consul was not well received among the Western elite, and the consular robes only served to emphasize the eunuch’s body as unfit for office. Claudian, *Against Eutropius*. See Susanna Elm, “An Icon of Ugliness – Eutropius the Eunuch” in *RIHA Journal Special Issue: From Living to Visual Images. Paradigms of Corporeal Iconicity in Late Antiquity* (2019).

⁷¹⁵ Patricia Cox Miller, *Corporeal Imagination: Signifying the Holy in Late Antique Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 3-4, 18.

⁷¹⁶ Vitae on these so-called “transvestite female saints” were quite popular in Late Antiquity, with at least eleven written from the fifth to the seventh centuries. Stephen J. Davis, “Crossed Texts, Crossed Sex,” 2-3; Hunt, “Transvestite Women Saints.”

⁷¹⁷ Judith Herrin, *Unrivalled Influence*, 179. See also Brock and Harvey, *Holy Women*, 297.

⁷¹⁸ Krawiec, “Garments of Salvation”, 125-150, quote from 149-150. Thelma Thomas also notes the “great variation in dress” mentioned in the lives of the desert fathers. Thomas, “Mimetic Devotion and Dress”, 38 n.3.

Even the absence of clothing altogether on a transformed ascetic body could denote holiness, as the *Life of Mary of Egypt* attests: escaping to the desert to live as a hermit after a life of sin, Mary's clothing wears away, leaving her "clothed in nakedness".⁷¹⁹ For holy mothers like Matrona or Melania the Younger, donning male monastic clothing was remarkable, but it was not a "heterodox" practice so much as a pious performance of virtues and priestly authority woven within the cloth itself. Changes in dress signify one's spiritual progression and, in the case of Matrona, are appropriate to her function and activity. She is dressed for the ascetic occasion, wandering the desert in a hair shirt and living as an anchorite exorcising demons in a temple like Antony or receiving imperial guests garbed in the male monastic schema like Daniel the Stylite. Such garments closely connect her with holy men and sanction her actions, but shifts in identity rely not merely on holy cloth, but also on permanent changes within the family. As Matrona's varying ascetic costume parallels her transition from matron to eunuch monk to abbess, the vita makes clear that these changes occur following the separation and death of her daughter. Athanasia, Melania the Younger, and Athanasia of Alexandria are likewise able to transition away from their roles as matrons and mothers towards new, manly ascetic identities through the passing of their children.

In varying monastic dress, figures like Makrina, Matrona, and Melania the Younger could be all-things to their spiritual families: mother, father, sister, brother, teacher, and healer, allowing them to transition outside the realm of exclusively female identities and move on to a higher depiction, often described as "angelic" by their hagiographers.⁷²⁰ Like the Late Antique holy man,⁷²¹ the bodies of holy women were immediately recognizable to the outside viewer, cloaked in a monastic schema or other distinct garb, communicating their special status as renunciants imbued with spiritual power. Becoming "both mother and father" to their disciples reflected the totality of the holy mother's role as "all things" to her community and the primary authority over her flock; vested in the male monastic schema, Matrona's very body displayed the inherent fungibility of Late Antique ascetic identities, where Christian holiness encompassed virtues connotated both male and female.

In *Orlando*, Virginia Woolf explores the idea that space is centrally important to creating identity. Woolf's overt Orientalizing of Constantinople characterizes it as a place where the impossible can happen, where transformation is made possible by the "duel otherness of race and

⁷¹⁹ *Life of Mary of Egypt* (BHG 1723-24) 16. For a discussion of Mary's nakedness, see Krawiec, "Garments of Salvation", 141-143, 150. See also, Patricia Cox Miller, "Is There a Harlot in the Text? Hagiography and the Grotesque" in *The Cultural Turn in Late Ancient Studies: Gender, Asceticism, and Historiography*, ed. Dale B. Martin and Patricia Cox Miller (Raleigh, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 87-102 and Virginia Burrus, *The Sex Lives of Saints: An Erotics of Ancient Hagiography* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 250-51.

⁷²⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Macrina* 970C, 972A, 982D; *Life of Matrona* 38; Gerontius, *Life of Melania the Younger* 39. Frank, *Angelikos bios*. Bolman, "Mimesis, Metamorphosis and Representation", 65-77.

⁷²¹ On the bodies of holy men as communicators of their spiritual power, see James A. Francis, "Living Icons: Tracing a Motif in Verbal and Visual Representation from the Second to Fourth Centuries C.E.", *The American Journal of Philology* v. 124, no. 4 (Winter 2003), 575-600. See also Peter Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity", *The Journal of Roman Studies*, vol. 61, 1971; Garth Fowden, "The Pagan Holy Man in Late Antique Society", *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, vol. 102, 1982.

space”, a space within which a man can become a woman, or a woman a man.⁷²² While Late Antique Constantinople cannot be compared with Woolf’s fictional seventeenth century Ottoman city, nevertheless, the idea that Constantinople straddled the boundary of East and West, where people across the known world from different ethnic backgrounds, languages, and religions, came together is ubiquitous across time periods, both real and imagined. Constantinople was a city in which a noblewoman could leave her husband and child, disguise herself as a eunuch and compete in asceticism with men on the field of virtue. The imperial city in the fifth and sixth centuries was a place teeming with religious and political activity, where monks from across the empire would gather to pray and protest, beg alms, court patrons, and fight for a say in defining Christian orthodoxy.⁷²³

While Constantinople forms the backdrop for Matrona’s transformation, the real catalyst in her transition from a “woman called Matrona” to “man in garb and purpose” and finally an “angelic being” was the abandonment and death of Theodote. While the severing of Matrona’s maternal relationship with her daughter has been explored in previous chapters, illustrating how Theodote’s abandonment and death freed Matrona to pursue her monastic vocation, the role of clothing in the vita and in other hagiographical texts of ascetic mothers reveals a connection between the loss of children and the taking on of a manly monastic persona, perhaps as a real, as well as rhetorical, coping mechanism for the painful realities of child life expectancy.

⁷²² For a discussion on racism in Woolf’s construction of Ottoman Constantinople and its role as the backdrop for Orlando’s sex change, see Urmila Seshagiri, *Race and the Modernist Imagination* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 180-182, quote from 182.

⁷²³ Daniel Caner, *Wandering Begging Monks: Spiritual Authority and the Promotion of Monasticism in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Peter Hatlie, *The Monks and Monasteries of Constantinople, c. 350-850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

Conclusion

καὶ πᾶς ὃς ἀφῆκεν οἰκίαν ἢ ἀδελφοὺς ἢ ἀδελφὰς ἢ πατέρα ἢ μητέρα ἢ γυναῖκα ἢ τέκνα ἢ ἀγροὺς ἕνεκεν τοῦ ὀνόματός μου, ἑκατονταπλασίονα λήψεται καὶ ζωὴν αἰώνιον κληρονομήσει.

And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life.

Matthew 19:29

Christian asceticism in the fifth century made a significant impact on some of the late Empire's most prominent families. Detailed hagiographies and letters between churchmen and aristocratic ascetics describe how vast fortunes accumulated over generations by senatorial elites could be dispersed within a single generation on charities, monastic foundations, Church building, and ecclesiastical endowments. Parting with great wealth, however, required fundamental changes within nuclear families to account for such an upheaval of the inheritance economy and familial continuity. The privileging of virginity and chastity as the ideal Christian way of life shifted the priorities of some elite families towards establishing ascetic legacies ahead of biological ones. While children were a blessing from God, they were no longer necessary to continue family lines; securing salvation became the priority.⁷²⁴ While Chrysostom regarded children as “the greatest of treasures”,⁷²⁵ in a sermon on marriage, he argued that “if you desire children, you can get much better children now, a nobler childbirth and better help in your old age, if you give birth by spiritual labor.”⁷²⁶ The anxiety that sexual relations (even sanctioned within marriage) *could* prevent salvation was pervasive in fourth and fifth century Christian writing. While more extreme heterodox beliefs condemning marriage were never popular or widely practiced,⁷²⁷ the threat radical encratism posed for late Roman society was worrisome enough that the emperor Theodosius threatened with death anyone who called themselves an Encratite.⁷²⁸ In direct opposition to encratic ideals, however, stood Jovinian, a popular critic of asceticism who declared that there was no fundamental difference in the eyes of God between the consecrated virgin, the married woman, and even the re-married widow. In Jovinian's estimation, each could receive the same reward in heaven if they lived good, Christian lives. His

⁷²⁴ For scholarship questioning the good of children in Christianity, see Vuolanto, “Children and Asceticism: Strategies of Continuity”, 2005; Evans Grubbs, “Late Roman Marriage and Family Relationships” in *A Companion to Late Antiquity*, ed. P. Rousseau (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 206–13 and *Children and Asceticism*, 89-92.

⁷²⁵ Chrysostom, *On Marriage and Family Life*, tr. C.P. Roth and D. Anderson (Crestwood, NY, 1986), 96-97.

⁷²⁶ Though Chrysostom was not speaking of spiritual discipleship, the lives of ascetic mothers make clear that this type of maternity contributed hugely to their sanctity. Chrysostom, *On Marriage and Family Life*, tr. C.P. Roth and D. Anderson, 85-86. Origen expressed a similar sentiment in his Homily 39 on Luke 3-4.

⁷²⁷ Despite the rigorous ecclesiastical action against encratite heresies in the fourth century, it appears these heterodoxies were never very popular and had little impact on birth rates among Christian families, according to Evelyne Patlagean's study of Christian family inscriptions in Asia Minor (c. 250-550) (1978), 180-84.

⁷²⁸ *Codex Theodosianus* 16.5.

preaching on the spiritual equality between marriage and celibacy gained considerable attention in Rome, even convincing some consecrated virgins to abandon their vows and marry.⁷²⁹

Jovinian was condemned a heretic in 393 by Ambrose of Milan and Siricius, the bishop of Rome, but the amount of invective hurled at him by his contemporaries (Jerome especially), indicates just how threatening Jovinian's ideas were to the developing orthodox opinion of chastity's superiority.⁷³⁰

By favoring virginity, the traditional role of the *sophron* matron and mother was seemingly marginalized, as it was now "better" to not marry and live in chastity.⁷³¹ However, with the rise in veneration of the Virgin Mary in the later fourth century, the paradoxical role of the virginal mother provided a new ideal. Sainly wives and mothers with living husbands were encouraged to make vows of continence along with their spouses after producing heirs, becoming at once mothers and continent Brides of Christ; virginity became a state of mind, as well as of the body.

Chastity's supremacy in the fifth century is reinforced in hagiography, which often paints asceticism and continence as prerequisites for salvation, particularly for married female saints. To not outright condemn marriage, these texts walk a fine line, often underscoring the dissolving of married life and the spiritual transformation of their subjects with justifications or divine signs. For holy mothers, like the Melanias or Athanasia of Alexandria, it is the loss or separation from biological children that prompts their transition from matrons to ascetics. Justification for leaving their family roles is further reinforced by the gender bending of these characters in their vitae; asceticism does not cause them to lose maternal virtue and identity, but rather allows them to add on additional manly attributes and behaviors, enabling them to occupy contradictory spaces and roles as both holy men *and* holy mothers. While husbands (and biological children) are often cast in these hagiographies as unwelcome distractions to the ascetic life, the virtues of the good wife and mother are still maintained and exhibited by these ascetic women. Indeed, it is *because* of these virtues that such holy women appear to be successful in their vocations as spiritual mothers and female men of God.

The sixth century *Life of Matrona of Perge* captures the shifting ideals of fifth century Christian motherhood by presenting a holy woman who embodies the Greco-Roman ideals of *sophrosyne* while also rejecting the fundamental roles associated with this virtue. Desiring continence and escaping her husband's abuse, Matrona abandons her home, husband and daughter, dresses as a eunuch, and enters a men's monastery before later establishing an identity as a spiritual mother and monastic founder in Constantinople. For Matrona's hagiographer, her renunciation of wealth and family are central aspects of her holiness and notoriety, but it is her role as a spiritual mother *and* father that secures her sainthood. In order to achieve this spiritual identity, Matrona first sacrifices her daughter Theodote, proving herself "worthy of Abraham" and therefore worthy of a manly ascetic identity. In the hagiography, Theodote's abandonment and death frame Matrona's internal and external transformation from matron to eunuch monk to spiritual mother with priestly authority, allowing her to progress through each stage of her ascetic development. While Theodote's death frees Matrona of maternal obligations, it is the death of another young child that secures Matrona's monastic legacy – the child of her disciple

⁷²⁹ Augustine, *Retractions* 2.22.

⁷³⁰ Jerome, *Against Jovinian*; Siricius of Rome, *Letter* 7.5; Ambrose, *Letter* 42; See Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity: The Jovinianist Controversy* (Oxford, 2007).

⁷³¹ I Corinthians 7.

Athanasia. The death of Athanasia's child frees up her fortune from familial claims, allowing Athanasia to gift the entirety of her estate to her spiritual mother Matrona.

Christ's promise in Matthew 19:29, that "everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life" closely links family with property, highlighting the integral relationship between physical home and household. In exchange for renouncing "houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands", Christ ensures spiritual returns "a hundredfold" and salvation itself. For Matrona, these spiritual returns come in the form of faithful disciples and wealthy patrons who sponsor her convent and secure her lasting legacy as the founder of one of Constantinople's most prominent and long-lasting convents. The *Vita Matronae* makes clear the direct association between renunciation and spiritual reward, particularly in regard to Matrona's abandonment of her daughter. The *Life of Matrona* of Perge, the *Life of Melania the Younger*, and contemporary hagiographies of ascetic mothers reveal a paradoxical idealization of Christian motherhood dependent on the renunciation of wealth, marriage, and biological children in favor of spiritual relationships.

This dissertation has merely scratches the surface on Matrona of Perge. Little to no work has been done on her Byzantine hymnography, a subject that I will be exploring in an article with translations, or on her iconography. While no known images of Matrona survive from the sixth century, Matrona rather curiously appears in iconographic synaxaria in churches across the Balkans in the later Byzantine period. Prominent examples include the Menologion Frescos of the narthex of the Dečani Monastery in Kosovo (1348-1350) (fig. 10), the church of the Holy Forty Martyrs in Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria (1230), Cozia Monastery in Călimănești, Romania (1390/91) and Patriarchate of Peć, Kosovo (1561).

Abbreviations

BHG	<i>Bibliotheca Hagiographica Graeca</i>
BHO	<i>Bibliotheca Hagiographica Orientalis</i>
CSCO	Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium
CSEL	Corpus Christianorum Series Latina
PG	Patrologia Graeca
PL	Patrologia Latina
PO	Patrologia Orientalis
SC	Sources Chr�tiennes

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