

Revealed for Her Pleasure: Ontological Permanence of Female Ecstasy in Christian Erotic Metaphysics

Eleanor Vannan – Greek and Roman Studies Department

Supervised by Dr. Gregory Rowe

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Introduction

Research on Christian sexual ethics has traditionally linked its rise to increased sexual repression. Scholars like Rousselle (1988) and Harper (2013) note that Christian ideals of virginity and chastity were prefigured in ancient Greece and Rome. Similarly, scholars like Finke (1993) have examined the erotic experience of female mystic saints in the medieval period, like Marguerite Porete in the 12th century, Margery Kempe in the 15th century, and Teresa of Ávila in the 16th century and the experience of transverberation – where one's being is physically overcome by the penetrating energy of divine love. The use of eroticized language in expressing women's spiritual experiences laid the foundation for the rise of affective spirituality in the medieval period and provides insight into medieval ontologies of womanhood in which embodied emotionality is an essential part of what it is to be a woman. Despite this, the origins of such erotic language among female mystic saints remain unexplored. This research examines eroticized expressions of women's physical pleasure in Latin love elegy, ancient Greek novels, and early Christian literature through the lens of genre transmission and argues that medieval women's erotic spirituality is rooted in a consistent understanding of how women experienced pleasure even as the source of that pleasure shifted from a mortal lover in the classical world to the figure of Jesus Christ in the medieval period.

Eroticism

This research focuses on eroticism, a concept explored by Bataille (1986), Hunt (1991), and Lorde (1984). It considers eroticism an enthusiastic affirmation of life's pleasures, psychologically akin to the joys of reproduction. Eroticism uses language symbolically to express various forms of pleasure, implying a creative and communicative power. The erotic differentiates from the pornographic, with the former being a true expression of pleasure and the latter an objectifying performance. Thus, this study regards eroticism as symbolic imagery rooted in sexual pleasure and desire, also serving as a metaphor to convey unfamiliar experiences.

Latin Love Elegy

Latin love elegy, which dates from the late 1st century BCE to the early 1st century CE, is a genre in opposition to epic poetry. Whereas epic poetry is narratively vast in depicting heroic actions and monumental events, love elegy focuses more on describing the agony and ecstasy of intimate relationships.

Catullus and Ovid's works bookend the Latin love elegy genre, exploring women's erotic desires and pleasures. Their poems, especially *Catullus 3* and *83* and Ovid's *Ars Amatoria 2* and *Heroides 17*, use fiery imagery to symbolize the intertwining of women's emotions and physical states. Additionally, violent imagery and metaphors of death for orgasm in *Catullus 3* further connect sexual desire with physical bodies.

Fiery imagery in Latin love elegy often symbolizes women's hidden passions and the risk of exposing them, paralleling the genre's frequent theme of illicit love affairs. This secrecy underscores women's unfulfilled sexual aspirations, as exemplified in Ovid's *Heroides 17*, where Helen is torn between societal expectations and her desires. Additionally, these elegies include themes of erotic pedagogy, where an experienced lover guides a younger one in understanding desire, a role sometimes filled by older women with younger men, as seen in Ovid's *Ars Amatoria 2*.

Recently, I have noticed when you lustfully look at me with reckless eyes,
the urgent light of which I can barely endure,
and when you sigh, sometimes taking the cup next to me,
drinking from the same side where I drank.
O how often by those fingers...
how often I have noticed the covert signals given
by your eyebrows that almost dare to speak!
Many times, I feared that my husband might notice,
and I blushed at the inadequately concealed secrets.

Ov. Her. 17.75-84 (trans. mine)

Ancient Greek Novels

Ancient Greek novels, dating from the 1st to the 3rd centuries CE, show continuity and evolution in portraying women's erotic pleasure. In works like Chariton's *Chaereas and Callirhoe* and Achilles Tatius's *Leucippe and Clitophon*, we find fiery imagery linking women's emotions to their bodies and violence, illustrating the perils of succumbing to sexual desire. These novels also feature older women educating young men in erotic knowledge, depict female orgasms, and explore the conflict between desire and social norms.

The novel invention in the ancient Greek novels shifts from depicting extramarital affairs towards monogamous true love pairings. Along with this comes a focus on female virginity. Abduction by pirates is a standard narrative device in this genre. As seen in *Leucippe and Clitophon*, Leucippe's ability to maintain her virginity serves as proof of the veracity of her love for Clitophon. Thus, the eroticism of sexual fidelity is a crucial innovation in this genre.

Whom he cannot rape he kills. Arm yourself, then; take up the whips
against me, the rack, the fire, the sword. Let Sosthenes, your counselor, join the campaign too. I am
unarmed, alone, a woman. My one weapon is my freedom, which cannot be shredded by lashes,
dismembered by sharp blades, or burned away by fire. It is the one thing I shall never part with. If you try
to set it on fire, you will not find the fire hot enough.

Leucippe and Clitophon (trans. Reardon, 2008)

Early Christian literature

Early Christian literature, though distinct from Latin love elegy and ancient Greek novels, incorporates elements of pre-Christian literary traditions, particularly in the apocryphal acts. These acts, part of the New Testament Apocrypha, detail the journeys of the eleven apostles and St. Paul. Before the establishment of the Christian canon and theological orthodoxy by ecumenical councils, there was no uniform stance on accepting these apocryphal texts across different Christian denominations. Neither the *Acts of Xanthippe, Polyxena, and Rebecca* nor the *Acta Andreae* were included in the canonical acts. However, they provide insight into how early Christians maintained and transformed elements of literary eroticism.

Like earlier genres, the apocryphal acts use fiery imagery to symbolize the overwhelming power of desire, while light signifies the revelation of hidden knowledge. Yet, the longing and trepidation these metaphors evoke are directed not toward a human lover but toward God's divine love, reflecting a sense of unworthiness. For instance, in the *Acts of Xanthippe, Polyxena, and Rebecca*, Xanthippe yearns not for Paul's sexual teachings but his spiritual guidance in God's love.

Similarly, the *Acta Andreae* revisits themes of illicit desire and fidelity. St. Andrew and Maximilla yearn to be close to each other, and Andrew demands that Maximilla refuse her husband's sexual advances. While Andrew demands Maximilla's sexual fidelity, the affair between the two remains unconsummated; instead, their union is spiritual as they find pleasure together by sharing God's love. Indeed, Andrew's willingness to die if Maximilla is faithful to him as proof of his passion mirrors Leucippe in the ancient Greek novels.

Conclusion

Scholarship on early Christianity often presents a dichotomy, suggesting either a stark break from Roman pagan practices or minimal change. However, examining depictions of female eroticism in Christian texts reveals a more nuanced picture. While Latin love elegy and Greek novels present established patterns of expressing women's desire, Christian apocryphal literature demonstrates a similar evolution of these expressions. Contrary to a focus on sexual repression, early Christian writings continue the use of erotic symbols and metaphors. The apocryphal acts, for example, maintain portrayals of women's overpowering desire yet redirect this longing towards the divine. Christianity thus emerges as neither strictly repressive nor inert but as a force that adapts and transforms pre-existing erotic narratives. Further, this study shows the presence of eroticism in the Christian literary corpus before the rise of female mystics in the medieval period.



Bibliography

