



Priscillianism and Women

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Abstract. Several names of women who were supporters of Priscillian are known, such as Euchrotia, Procula, Urbica, Hedibia, and Agape, but they are to us no more than shadowy figures. To proceed further than what prosopography has to offer, we must depend on ambiguous evidence: the accusation of magical practices and sexual promiscuity in the Council of Saragossa, the debated female authorship of two anonymous letters preserved in a single, possibly Gallic manuscript, and lastly the Life of Saint Helia, where the issue of virginity is prominent but whose links with Priscillianism are at best tenuous.
Keywords: Magic; Helia; Aristocracy; Buñuel; Virginity.

[esp] El priscilianismo y las mujeres

Resumen. Conocemos algunos nombres de mujeres que eran seguidoras de Prisciliano, como Eucrocia, Prócula, Urbica, Edibia o Ágape, pero carecemos casi de cualquier información sobre ellas. Para ir más allá de los datos prosopográficos tenemos que apoyarnos en una documentación ambigua: la acusación de magia y promiscuidad realizada en el concilio de Zaragoza, la discutida autoría femenina de dos cartas anónimas conservadas en un único manuscrito, originario tal vez de la Galia y, por último, la Vida de Santa Helia, en la que la cuestión de la virginidad es un tema principal, pero cuya conexión con el priscilianismo es incierta.
Palabras clave: magia; Helia; aristocracia; Buñuel; virginidad.

Summary. 1. Introduction. 2. Named Women. 3. Reading Women. 4. Writing Women. 5. Speaking Women. 6. Conclusions. 7. Bibliographical references.

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1. Introduction²

Priscillian of Avila makes a striking cameo appearance in Luis Buñuel's 1969 "The Milky Way", a time-traveling film that follows the journey of two twentieth-century French pilgrims en route to Santiago de Compostela. In crafting his portrait of the fourth-century Spanish heretic, Buñuel takes his cue from Marcelino Menéndez Pelayo's late nineteenth-century *Historia de los heterodoxos españoles*,³ "an extraordinary book full of historical facts and more interesting than a novel," as the filmmaker describes it in an interview.⁴ Buñuel's Priscillian is the Priscillian of the heresiological tradition, then (as much fiction as history, in fact). But where Menéndez Pelayo celebrates the spirit of Spanish orthodoxy that prevails despite the incursions of heresy, Buñuel is fascinated by "the nonconformities of the human spirit" that persist despite the zealousness with which even the most minor doctrinal deviation is pursued and punished.⁵ As Elizabeth Scarlett argues, Buñuel's Priscillian comes across as a "kindred spirit," implicitly aligned "with the surrealists of Buñuel's generation as well as with the hippies and flower children of the sixties".⁶ Indeed, it is not entirely clear to what time frame he belongs.

Buñuel's treatment of Priscillian is by no means idealizing, however; on the contrary, the film's tone is distinctly ironic. As Priscillian dons his bishop's miter and solemnly pronounces the imminent triumph of his doctrine to a congregation of sympathetic "brothers" gathered in the forest at night, the camera drifts to focus on a group of half-clothed women who are in the process of adorning themselves seductively. Filing forward, they join Priscillian and another male cleric in a gnostic litany delivered in Latin:

Priscillian: "Our soul is of divine essence".

Cleric: "Like the angels, it was created by God and placed beneath the sway of the stars".

Woman #1: "In punishment for sin, it was united to a body. This body is the work of the devil".

Woman #2: "Who exists from the beginning like God himself".

Priscillian: "God cannot have created matter so unworthy and debased as our body. The body is the prison of the soul".

Woman #3: "The soul, in order to free itself, must gradually become detached from it".

Woman #4: "The body must be humiliated, despised, unceasingly submitted to the pleasure of the flesh".

Cleric: "In order that the purified soul may return after death to the celestial abode".

Priscillian: "Swear never to betray this secret".

All: "We swear".

At this point, the congregants break up into pairs, embracing and kissing as they wander into the forest. At first it seems that Priscillian will abstain from this

² All dates are CE unless otherwise specified.

³ Menéndez Pelayo 1963, 133-141.

⁴ Pérez Turrent – De la Colina 1992, 192.

⁵ Pérez Turrent – De la Colina 1992, 192.

⁶ Scarlett 2014, 51.

“necessary submission” to the “pleasure of the flesh”, as he and two male clerics separate from the group, kneel, and celebrate the eucharist. Then Priscillian stands and gestures, and two beautiful young women join him. He exits the scene smiling, with an arm around each of them.

However idiosyncratic Buñuel’s depiction may be, his film highlights the power and persistence of a tradition that links heretics with women by representing heretics as seducers and hypocrites, while also suggesting that women are particularly drawn to such pernicious but charismatic figures. The film thus alerts us to one of the challenges involved in pursuing the topic of Priscillian and women, namely, the strong bias of our sources, which are for the most part either polemical or apologetic. Can we believe Priscillian’s detractors? Can we believe his own self-defense? Moreover, other potential evidence for Priscillianist women is difficult to identify with any certainty, since our assumptions about what might constitute a Priscillianist text or artifact largely depend on our interpretations of those same strongly biased sources. Indeed, it is debatable whether it is helpful to speak of “Priscillianism” at all, except as a heresiological category. Nonetheless, not only film-makers but also scholars continue to find themselves seduced by the portrait of a nefarious gnostic who dabbled in magic and took part in sexual rituals.

With these challenges in mind, I shall revisit the surviving evidence for the presence and activities of women among the followers of Priscillian, who was executed at Trier c. 385 on charges of Manichaeism and sorcery and subsequently condemned by some as a heretic while honored by others as a martyr. I shall begin with the most concrete evidence: the women whom our sources identify by name as followers of Priscillian, two of whom were killed as the result of their association with the Spanish teacher. Among other things, these cases raise questions about the popular association of women and magic, the role this may have played in these women’s violent deaths, and the extent to which charges of magic may have had some ground in reality. Next, I shall consider the evidence of the recorded judgments of the Council of Saragossa (c. 380), which reflect concerns about the behavior of women. Other sources make it clear that the council was also connected to the controversy surrounding Priscillian; thus the question arises as to whether we can assume that the council’s rulings regarding women’s behavior are directed against followers of Priscillian and have something to say about the role of women in Priscillian’s movement. From this point, the evidence becomes even more circumstantial, if still suggestive. Two letters that appear to be written by and to women may reflect a Priscillianist context, given that one of them references practices opposed at the Council of Saragossa. A little-known *Life* of a female saint, preserved exclusively in northern Spanish manuscripts and reflecting a context of embattled asceticism, also betrays affinities with Priscillian’s teachings. As this brief overview hopefully suggests, my purpose in this essay is not only to bring together some relatively well-known sources with some that are less well-known; it is also to draw attention to the limits of our evidence. Attending to those limits may deprive us of some old certainties while opening us to new possibilities.

2. Named Women

By starting with the named women associated with Priscillian, we begin our history *in medias res*. We also begin our account of a predominately Spanish movement in a place outside of Spain, trusting that this Gallic tale will shed light on the Spanish

one. Finally, we begin with the most concrete historical figures, only to have to acknowledge immediately that they come to us embedded in a suspect heresiological narrative, in the case of our main source, Sulpicius Severus's *Chronicle*. Fortunately, however, Sulpicius is not our only source: the women in question are members of the provincial aristocracy, and traces of their presence are still perceptible in other surviving writings of Bordeaux's cultural elite. To some extent, we may also check Sulpicius's account against surviving Priscillianist writings.

Priscillian and his allies were already under pressure in Spain c. 381 when they decided to travel to Rome to put their case before bishop Damasus. When they reached Aquitaine, Delphinus, the bishop of Bordeaux, refused to receive them. The prior year Delphinus had participated in the Saragossan council directed against Priscillian's circle; it thus seems that Priscillian's controversial reputation preceded him. Perhaps his influence did too, for the Spaniards found hospitality elsewhere in the Bordeaux region. As Sulpicius reports:

They stayed for a while on Euchrotia's estate, infecting not a few with their errors. From there they proceeded on their journey, with a very unseemly and shameful retinue, including wives and other women, among whom were Euchrotia and her daughter Procula, of whom there was talk among people that, pregnant by Priscillian's transgression, she induced an abortion with plants.⁷

We gather from this passage that Euchrotia was a woman of property and independence; no husband is mentioned. After hosting Priscillian on her estate, she and her daughter joined a group of supporters accompanying Priscillian to Italy; some of the women were the wives of men in the group, while others, like Euchrotia and Procula, were not accompanied by husbands. There were rumors that Procula became pregnant and aborted her pregnancy. Reporting those rumors without clearly endorsing them, Sulpicius does not hesitate to cast aspersions on the virtue of the group more generally. At the same time, he chooses not to divulge Euchrotia's family connections, though he must have been aware of them.

Fortunately, other sources allow us to identify Euchrotia as the widow of Attius Tiro Delphidius, a widely celebrated poet, orator, and lawyer best known to us from his poetic commemoration in Decimus Magnus Ausonius's *Professors of Bordeaux*.⁸ Delphidius came from a line of respected Bordelais teachers: his grandfather Phoebicius, an attendant at the temple of Belenus (Apollo) at Bayeux and also said to be of Druidic descent, was a grammarian, his father Attius Patera, a rhetorician;⁹ we know from Jerome that Patera taught at Rome, as well as Bordeaux.¹⁰ As Ausonius frames it, Delphidius would have been better off if he had followed his early gift for poetry, instead of being drawn into the political fray, where his fortune rose high in the time of a usurping emperor (unnamed but almost certainly Procopius, 365-66)¹¹ and plummeted subsequently.¹² Returning to Bordeaux in the late 360s, Delphidius took up a post as a teacher of rhetoric, but his heart was not in the work and he died

⁷ Sulp. Sev. *Chron.* 2.48.

⁸ Aus. *Comm.* 5; cf. Hier. *Chron.* 355; *Ep.* 120, pref.

⁹ Aus. *Comm.* 10.25-29 and 4.

¹⁰ Hier. *Ep.* 120, pref.

¹¹ Booth 1978, 236-239; Green 1978, 23.

¹² Aus. *Comm.* 5.19-32.

in middle age, perhaps in the late 370s.¹³ Thus, notes Ausonius succinctly, he was spared “the grief of a wayward daughter’s error and a wife’s punishment”.¹⁴

Sulpicius’s account clarifies not only the daughter’s “error” (either heresy or, more likely, her rumored pregnancy) but also the wife’s “punishment” (a state execution that took place in Trier c. 385, under the usurping emperor Magnus Maximus):

Priscillian was convicted of sorcery [*maleficium*], nor did he deny that he had studied obscene teachings, held nocturnal gatherings even of disgraceful women, and was accustomed to pray naked (...) Priscillian was condemned to death, and together with him Felicissimus and Armenius (...) Also Latronianus and Euchrotia were to be slain by sword.¹⁵

Sulpicius’s attitude toward this shocking event is complicated. On the one hand, he is sharply critical of the behavior of the bishops who pursued Priscillian and other ascetic Christians overzealously, as he saw it (attacking even his own teacher, Martin), to the point of becoming entangled in a secular trial.¹⁶ On the other hand, he depicts Priscillian as a treacherous heretic, deceptive and seductive. His carefully crafted narrative borrows both from Sallust’s negative portrait of Catiline and his supporter Sempronia¹⁷ and from heresiological texts that present heretics as particularly prone to prey on “little women”.¹⁸ “Women, desirous of new things, of unstable faith, and by nature curious about everything, flocked to him in masses”, Sulpicius reports.¹⁹

One other contemporary source mentions Euchrotia’s execution. Latinus Pacatus Drepanius, a Gallic rhetorician who probably also taught at Bordeaux, is less ambivalent than Sulpicius; his denunciation of the executions at Trier is thoroughgoing. In his 389 panegyric for the emperor Theodosius, who had defeated the usurper Magnus Maximus the prior year, Pacatus sharply criticizes Maximus’s sentencing of Euchrotia.²⁰

Do I speak of the deaths of men when I recall that he descended to spill the blood of women and raged in peace against the sex wars spare? But undoubtedly there were serious and odious reasons that the wife of a famous poet was seized with the criminal’s hook for punishment. For the widowed woman’s excessive piety and overly diligent worship of divinity was alleged and even proven!

Pacatus’s sarcasm is palpable; he clearly finds the opposition to Euchrotia’s piety groundless. Even more critical than Sulpicius of the bishops involved in the proceeding against Euchrotia and others, he subsequently insinuates that the victims were subjected to torture and goes on to suggest that greed motivated Maximus’s sentencing of these wealthy Christians.

¹³ Aus. *Comm.* 5.36, with Booth 1978, 239.

¹⁴ Aus. *Comm.* 5.37-38.

¹⁵ Sulp. *Sev. Chron.* 2.50-51.

¹⁶ Sulp. *Sev. Chron.* 2.50.

¹⁷ Fontaine 1975.

¹⁸ Cf. 2 Tim 3.6-7, with Burrus 1995, 134-138. Note that I am not attempting to provide comprehensive or up to date bibliographic references in this essay, which I have approached as an opportunity to revisit and reconsider my own thinking about women and Priscillianism, appearing in publications spanning more than twenty years.

¹⁹ Sulp. *Sev. Chron.* 2.46.

²⁰ Pacat. *Paneg.* 2.29.1-2.

The precise set of events and circumstances that led to the execution of Priscillian and his companions has been much discussed. For our purposes, the most pressing question is why Euchrotia was among those who were executed with him, the only woman and seemingly also the only non-Spaniard. There is much that we do not know. How old was Euchrotia at this point? Mother of an as yet unmarried daughter, she must have been significantly younger than her husband, who had reached middle age at his death less than a decade before. When did Euchrotia and her daughter become Christians, and how were they introduced to Priscillian? Delphidius's family seems to have been polytheist, but his death must have allowed his widow a great degree of independence, facilitating her interactions with the Spanish ascetic and his circle. Still, Bishop Delphinus's local opposition complicated matters, and Euchrotia's decision to accompany Priscillian to Italy, bringing her daughter with her, must have scandalized some, leading to rumors of sexual immorality and perhaps (given the outcome) even more damaging suspicions of sorcery. Did Euchrotia play a prominent role in the movement, to have been counted among those sentenced with execution? Or was she merely the most convenient female scapegoat, targeted by Priscillian's episcopal enemies and then caught up in a legal process in which Priscillian, perhaps under torture, confessed or at least "did not deny that he had studied obscene teachings, held nocturnal gatherings even of disgraceful women, and was accustomed to pray naked"?²¹ These are questions for which we have no conclusive answers.

We do know that at some point tensions ran high enough in Bordeaux that "a certain disciple of Priscillian by the name of Urbica was stoned to death by a mob on account of her obstinacy in impiety".²² This Urbica is possibly to be identified with Ausonius's *consocrus*, or son-in-law's mother, Pomponia Urbica.²³ Euchrotia was not the only well-born Bordelais woman to be martyred (as some Christians might have seen it) for her association with Priscillian, then. But once again we have more questions than answers. How large was the circle of Priscillian's local supporters, and were aristocratic women, especially aristocratic women without living husbands, in fact prominent among them, as Sulpicius insinuates? The polemical tone of his account, together with its strong framing by preexisting literary and heresiological narratives, undercuts his reliability without entirely discrediting his claims. How did others in these circles fare? Procula seems to have escaped execution, but what other fate awaited her?

And what finally are we to make of the Gallic widow Hedibia, who corresponded with Jerome c. 406, and whom Jerome identifies as the "descendent" (*stirps*) of Patera and Delphidius, her "ancestors" (*maiores*)?²⁴ Could Hedibia be Euchrotia's daughter, or even Procula's (which would admittedly make her a very young widow)? Is Jerome simply being tactful by remaining silent on the subject of her maternal ancestry? It is worth noting that he does take the opportunity in this letter to chastise those who "defend the heresy of Basilides and Mani and follow Spanish incantations and Egyptian portents",²⁵ perhaps an implicit warning to Hedibia, and one that is, like Sulpicius's narrative, strongly colored by its heresiological framing.²⁶

²¹ Sulp. *Sev. Chron.* 2.51; cf. Maximus, *Epistula ad Siricium papam* 4; Aug. *De natura boni* 47.

²² Prosp. *Chron.* 1187.

²³ Aus. *Par.* 30.

²⁴ Hier. *Ep.* 120, pref.

²⁵ Hier. *Ep.* 120.10.

²⁶ See Burrus 1995, 129-133, 138-140.

Euchrotia, Procula, Urbica, and Hedibia remain shadowy figures, and only the first three are directly identified as supporters of Priscillian. Yet our knowledge of these Gallic women is rich, in comparison with our knowledge of Spanish women associated with Priscillian. Indeed, we have only one name, Agape, and the evidence concerning her is both more meager and more problematic than is the case with the women of Bordeaux, given that it derives solely from the heresiological accounts of Sulpicius and Jerome, the latter apparently dependent on the former. According to Isidore of Seville, Ithacius of Ossonuba, one of Priscillian's most bitter opponents, was the author of a now-lost *Apology* in which he claimed that "a certain Marcus of Memphis, expert in the magic art, was the student of Mani and teacher of Priscillian".²⁷ Ithacius is likely the source for Sulpicius's similar report that Marcus of Memphis introduced "the heresy of the gnostics" into Spain. However, Sulpicius inserts another set of teachers between Marcus and Priscillian: "His students were a certain Agape, a not ignoble woman, and the rhetor Elpidius. Priscillian was instructed by them".²⁸ Sulpicius thus suggests that Priscillian's circles in Spain mirrored those in Gaul: aristocratic and well-educated women and men, from backgrounds that matched Priscillian's own. However, Agape drops out of Sulpicius's narrative immediately, and no further information about this figure is forthcoming. We certainly learn nothing useful from Jerome's derivative rant: "In Spain, Agape led Elpidius, the woman led the man, the blind led the blind, into a ditch; and she had as her successor Priscillian, most devoted student of a magus of Zoroaster, who from a magus became a bishop. A Gallic woman was connected with him".²⁹

We lack further names to lend specificity and credibility to Sulpicius's generalized depiction of the women who "flocked in masses" to Priscillian in Spain, as in Gaul.³⁰ However, it may be worth mentioning two Spanish Christians who represent the sort of woman whom their contemporaries could *suspect* of Priscillianist leanings (a "type", in other words). The first is Therasia, wife of Paulinus of Nola, a Spanish-born noblewoman who shared her husband's conversion to a life of asceticism. In a letter to Paulinus written in the early 390s when the couple was living in Spain, Ausonius compares Therasia to Tanaquil, an apparent allusion to the influence of Priscillian, hinting darkly that she is the cause of Paulinus's drift away from Ausonius and the life of learning and literature that the two men had shared in Bordeaux.³¹ The second such woman is Theodora, wife of Lucinius of Baetica, who shared her husband's attraction to a life of asceticism and biblical study. Writing c. 399 to console her on the death of Lucinius, Jerome mentions the teachings of a certain Marcus who entered Gaul and "seduced noblewomen with this error [i.e., gnosticism], promising certain mysteries in secret and winning them over with magic arts and the secret pleasure of the body". Jerome adds that Marcus subsequently crossed into Spain and there too "his goal was to approach the houses of the rich, and in them especially the women".³² Though his account is slightly confused (his Marcus being here identified

²⁷ Isid. *Vir.* 15.

²⁸ Sulp. Sev. *Chron.* 2.46.

²⁹ Hier. *Ep.* 133.4. For a more detailed discussion of this letter, see Ferreiro (1993, 309-322) as well as Burrus (1995, 138-140). The "Gallic woman" (*Galla*) may refer to Euchrotia, whom Jerome had mentioned by name in Hier. *Vir.* 122 as among those executed with Priscillian.

³⁰ Sulp. Sev. *Chron.* 2.46.

³¹ Trout 1999, 67-77.

³² Hier. *Ep.* 75.3.

with the one mentioned by the second century writer Irenaeus), Jerome is clearly referencing Priscillianism and warning Theodora that she is the kind of woman who might be sought out by such heretical teachers.³³

Prosopography thus yields a consistent portrait for the women associated with Priscillian: aristocratic, well-educated, and linked by shared social networks in Spain and Aquitaine. Of course, that is precisely the kind of women that prosopography *would* enable us to discover, but what is notable is that they are there to be discovered at all. We can surmise that these women and others like them were drawn to the life of asceticism and study that Priscillian both practiced and advocated in his own teachings and writings, and that they had the education and financial means to pursue such a life.

I am tempted to leave it at that. But what of the charges of heresy, magic, and sexual immorality linked to Priscillian and through him to these female figures? We are back to Buñuel and to the long heresiological tradition that undergirds his satirical portrayal of the Spanish ascetic. We are also back to questions that cannot be answered conclusively, it seems to me. It can easily be demonstrated that time-honored tradition characterized women as susceptible to seduction, both sexual and doctrinal, and hence associated them with both heresy and sorcery.³⁴ But the extent to which those cultural constructions aligned with reality will remain open to debate, even when we are dealing with very specific cases. This is true both because those accused of heresy and sorcery are assumed to be secretive and deceptive, and also because the categories of heresy and sorcery are so very fraught and unstable, outside the contexts of the heresiological treatises or legal codes that attempt to pin them in place.

In a study exploring “the curious relationship between magic, women, and heresy”, Todd Breyfogle approaches the Priscillianist controversy by asking “what appeared magical to the fourth-century Christian mind”.³⁵ He suggests that much that the Priscillianists thought and did would indeed have appeared “magical” to their contemporaries, including the strong roles played by women in their circles. “There is considerable evidence that women were thought to have possessed special or unusual powers”, he notes.³⁶ On the one hand, Breyfogle suggests that such appearances were largely deceiving: “the Priscillianist teachings and practices inclined to a mysticism which, to unsympathetic observers already hostile to asceticism, appeared both heretical and magical”.³⁷ On the other hand, he entertains the possibility that they might have been at least partly accurate, conceding that “whether the Priscillianists themselves crossed the line into magic is difficult to say”.³⁸

A case in point is Priscillian’s supposed possession of an amulet bearing the name of Christ inscribed in three languages, together with the words “King of kings and Lord of lords” and the image of a lion. Such an object is “illustrative of superstition common to pagans and Christians alike”, Breyfogle observes; it “is clearly designed to emphasize Christ’s supreme power in warding off hostile demonic and magical

³³ On Jerome’s *Ep.* 75, see also Burrus 1995, 130-131.

³⁴ On the association of women with heresy, see Burrus 1991, 229-248; Torres 2000; Marcos 2001; Knust 2006, 143-163. On the association of women with magic or sorcery, see, e.g., Stratton – Kalleres 2014.

³⁵ Breyfogle 1995, 435.

³⁶ Breyfogle 1995, 446.

³⁷ Breyfogle 1995, 453-454.

³⁸ Breyfogle 1995, 442.

forces”.³⁹ But the amulet also carries associations of both heresy and sexual immorality, he suggests. “For our purposes, it becomes symbolic of the intersection of Christianity (the proclamation of Christ as ‘King of kings’), magic (the amulet itself), heresy (the Gnostic lion), and women (the lion of lust)”.⁴⁰ The phrase “for our purposes” suggests that the amulet becomes “symbolic” for the scholar, but is it a symbol of an actual intersection of Christianity, magic, heresy, and women, or only of mistaken perceptions? There is genuine confusion here, I think, and it seems to derive at least in part from the categories themselves. A charge of heresy, magic, or even superstition is by definition “unsympathetic”, in the world of late antiquity. It may not be possible to neutralize those categories, to use them merely descriptively, if they are produced through a fundamental refusal of sympathy. Thus we need other ways to think about the epistemological and cosmological work that Priscillian’s amulet might have done.⁴¹ But there is another problem: it is not clear that this particular amulet ever existed at all, except in the mind of the modern scholars for whom it becomes one of the only concrete indications that Priscillian practiced magic, perhaps gnostic magic, perhaps even sexual magic.

Evidence for the amulet derives from a passage in Priscillian’s own *Apology*. The passage occurs in a context in which Priscillian is differentiating himself from those who worship demons, a practice he abhors. He himself worships only the one true god, he insists, and he proceeds to identify that god by citing a series of biblical passages.

But *our god Christ Jesus is the one* who said, “All that is under heaven is mine” (Job 41, 2) (...)

He is the one whose “name is written on the new white stone that no one has except the one who has received it” (Apoc 2, 17), if indeed we do not create a stumbling block for the schismatics, because we read the name “god” inscribed on the new stone. And in every letter, whether Hebrew or Latin or Greek, in all that is seen or said, he is “King of kings and Lord of lords” (Apoc 19, 16). And although the title of the cross is placed in those languages, nevertheless the divine testimony to god is written down in the prophets of god as well, in which Jeremiah wept by writing with the character of Hebrew letters in Lamentations, and David exulted in the Psalms “so that at the name Jesus every knee might bend, in heaven, on earth, and under the earth, and every tongue [or language] might confess him god” (Flp 2, 10-11).

He is the one about whom it is written, “The lion of the tribe of Judah has conquered” (Apoc 5, 5); but for us a lion is not god (...)

He is the one about whom it was written, “Let the deer of friendship and the fawn of grace converse with you” (Pr 5, 19); but for us a deer or a fawn is not god.⁴²

Here Priscillian’s biblical erudition is put in the service of a defense of his own theological orthodoxy. The scriptures are full of signs of god. To know the one true

³⁹ Breyfogle 1995, 448.

⁴⁰ Breyfogle 1995, 449.

⁴¹ The most persuasive framing of the “magical” aspect of Priscillian’s thought of which I am aware is Chin 2015. Note however that Chin makes no mention of the supposed amulet.

⁴² *Tract.* 1.410-427. Conti 2010, 56-59. Emphasis added. All citations of the Priscillianist tractates and *Pauline Canons* are from this edition.

god, one must be able to interpret the signs in the scriptures correctly. The core of the excerpted passage turns on a reading of a verse in the book of Revelation: “To everyone who conquers (...) I will give a white stone, and on the white stone a new name is written, which no one knows except the one who has received it”.⁴³ Priscillian positions himself as one who can read the name on the secretly inscribed stone. The name is the same as the one inscribed on Jesus’ cross, not secretly but publicly: “Pilate also wrote a title and put it on the cross (...). And it was written in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek”.⁴⁴ The allusion to John’s gospel brings home the point: the true god is Christ. At the same time, Priscillian replaces the Johannine inscription (“Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews”) with a title of cosmic scope and majesty drawn from Revelation (“King of kings and Lord of lords”).

Then I saw heaven opened, and there was a white horse, and the one who rides it is called faithful and true (...) and he has a name written that no one knows except he himself (...) And his name is called the Word of God (...) And on his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, “King of kings and Lord of lords”.⁴⁵

Sliding from the secretly inscribed stone in Revelation to the trilingual inscription published openly on the cross in John’s gospel and written on the robe and thigh of the rider in Revelation, Priscillian moves from an unknown name to one that he and his circle have received and are able to read. That inscription also repeats itself through the prophets and psalms, he asserts;⁴⁶ indeed, the inscribed name echoes “in all that is seen and said”, he claims.

Emphasis on inscription and on the power and omnipresence of the divine name is certainly consistent with the use of an amulet, but the text does not require or even invite such an interpretation, I would argue. Possible support for this position seems to me to be Priscillian’s suggestion that reading the name “god” into the text of Revelation 2, 17 may provide a “stumbling block for the schismatics”; that is, it may scandalize his opponents. Is this an admission that there is something controversial about his practice, involving an amulet or incantation? Perhaps, but it is at least as likely that it refers to Priscillian’s claim to superior exegetical knowledge and authority: he can read signs in the scriptures that remain hidden to others, not least his opponents. Support for the suggestion that the supposed amulet bore the image of a lion is even weaker than support for its inscriptions. The reference to the lion of Judah, while also drawn from Revelation, belongs to a separate and distinct unit of the passage, introduced in the same way as the other parallel units in the passage are: “He is the one”. Moreover, the lion is only one of many scriptural beasts and other figures that, as Priscillian emphasizes, are not gods but rather symbols of the one god Christ. If we imagine that Priscillian is here describing an amulet, at the very least it would have to include the figures of deer and fawn alongside that of the lion.

⁴³ Apoc 2, 17.

⁴⁴ Jn 19, 19-20.

⁴⁵ Apoc 19, 11-16; cf. Apoc 17, 14; 1 Tim 6, 13-15.

⁴⁶ Cf. Dt 10, 17; Ps 136[135], 3; Dan 2, 47. Priscillian’s reference to Jeremiah’s use of Hebrew letters in Lamentations suggests that he is aware that the Hebrew version consists of a series of acrostic poems, as Jerome notes in a letter to Paula, for example: “You have in the Lamentations of Jeremiah four ‘alphabets’” (Hier. *Ep.* 30.3).

The ambiguities surrounding this supposed amulet, so confidently identified as such by Henry Chadwick⁴⁷ and accepted as a fact by Breyfogle and others thereafter, are telling. As Diego Piay Augusto notes,

The question of whether Priscillian had an amulet or not is important from many points of view. In the first place, to affirm that Priscillian possessed an amulet would surely suggest a solid point of departure from which to derive all kinds of accusations regarding the carrying out of enchantments and spells, which would lead directly to the charge of magic. Moreover, amulets and talismans were very widespread among gnostics.⁴⁸

But what if there is no such “solid point of departure”?

I myself see no convincing evidence that Priscillian had an amulet; and if he did, this would not necessarily place him on a slippery slope toward heresy and sorcery, or even appearances thereof.⁴⁹ As the recent work of Theodore de Bruyn emphasizes, while the creation and use of amulets was sometimes controversial in Christian circles, it was also pervasive.⁵⁰ I see no convincing evidence that Priscillian or the women of his circle were practitioners of even “what appeared magical to the fourth-century mind”, that they were sexually promiscuous, or that they were dramatically out of step with the theological consensus of their day, in a context where any such consensus was in an active state of ongoing negotiation. I recognize that others interpret otherwise, and not only out of lack of sympathy (which is the perspective of traditional heresiology) but also out of different sympathies, such as Buñuel’s dark delight in “the nonconformities of the human spirit”⁵¹ or Breyfogle’s desire to uncover a different kind of history of magic. However, the problematic status and ambiguity of the evidence for Priscillianist women’s association with magic, heresy, or sexual immorality must, it seems to me, be acknowledged.⁵²

3. Reading Women

The eight judgments of the Council of Saragossa preserved in the seventh-century canonical collection known as the *Hispana* come to us lacking crucial information, including the year in which the council was convened, the reason it was convened, and the sees of the twelve attending bishops. Two of these, Delphinus of Bordeaux

⁴⁷ Chadwick 1976, 54-55.

⁴⁸ Piay 2011, 288. Piay’s confidence in the existence of the amulet, for which he offers “gnostic” parallels, is unwavering. His words even seem to imply that the amulet has been discovered: “But pride of place among the archaeological remains that we can associate with Priscillianism is undoubtedly held by the amulet that Priscillian mentions in the *Liber Apologeticus*” (Piay 2011, 286).

⁴⁹ Cf. the position of Sylvain Jean Gabriel Sanchez, who is open to the possibility that Priscillian had an amulet but finds in it nothing unusual or unorthodox (Sanchez 2009, 373-375).

⁵⁰ De Bruyn 2017.

⁵¹ Pérez Turrent – De la Colina 1992, 192.

⁵² Compare Kimberly Stratton’s discussion of how scholarship on women and magic has sometimes not only taken clearly biased ancient sources at face value (what she calls the “guilty as charged” approach) but also actively intensified those stereotypes (Stratton 2014). On the association of Priscillianist women with sexual immorality, Ferreiro (1998, 382-392) offers a helpfully cautionary reading.

and Phoebadius of Agen, can nonetheless be identified as Aquitanians and two others as Spaniards who would become Priscillian's most staunch opponents, Hydatius of Merida and Ithacius of Ossonuba. And while Priscillian is not mentioned at all in this document, other sources indicate that the council, which seems to have taken place c. 380, was indeed concerned with the controversy that had arisen regarding his teachings. Priscillian himself refers to "an episcopal gathering that took place at Saragossa" concerning which he is clearly on the defensive, insisting that none of his circle was present, nor were any of them accused, much less condemned, for any fault. "I know not what memorandum was given there by Hydatius, which laid out instruction as if for the life that should be led", he adds (*Tract.* 2.27-34). Sulpicius suggests that it was Hydatius's aggressive opposition to Priscillian and two Lusitanian bishops closely associated with him that resulted in the convening of the synod at Saragossa; his account thus matches Priscillian's, though he claims that Priscillian and his associates were indeed condemned in their absence (*Chron.* 2.47). The *Acts of the Council of Toledo* (400) likewise refers to judgment being made at Saragossa against certain persons. One way to resolve the contradiction is to assume that even if Priscillian was not condemned by name, some if not all of the council's judgments may have been directed against him and his circle. That is the approach that I shall follow here, while acknowledging the necessarily provisional nature of any conclusions we may draw.⁵³

For our purposes, the most important of the judgments is the first:

Let all women who are of the catholic church and faithful be separated from the reading and meetings of strange men, but let other [women] gather with those [women] who read in pursuit of either teaching or learning, because the apostle commands this (can. 1).

Just as Sulpicius would later express concern about the presence not only of men's wives but also of "strange women" in Priscillian's retinue (*Chron.* 2.48), so here the council disapproves of women reading and meeting with "strange men". In both cases anxiety is directed toward women mingling with men to whom they are bound by neither marital nor familial ties. In this case, the mingling (*coitus*) takes place around the activity of reading (*lectio*), presumably the reading of scripture and perhaps also apocrypha. Women are not to meet with men to read; rather, they should meet with other women, whether they take on the role of teacher or of learner. They should not engage in Bible study alongside men; they should not be taught by men; and above all, we may surmise, they should not teach men, as 1 Timothy 2, 12 explicitly forbids. Might we speculate that this is precisely what was happening in Priscillianist circles, though perhaps not only there?

Certainly the Priscillianist writings place a high value on biblical study, and the ascetic teacher is contemptuous of the ignorance of his opponents:

On one side, unlearned insanity presses, ignorant rage pushes, saying nothing else but whether or not the things you say are catholic: 'condemn what I do not know,

⁵³ See Burrus 1995, 25-46. Cf. Escribano 2002, who feels confident that accusations of Manichaeism and sorcery were already in the air at Saragossa.

condemn what I do not read, condemn what I do not examine because of my devotion to lazy idleness!’ On the other side, divine eloquence presses, saying, ‘Search the scriptures’ (Jn 5, 39).⁵⁴

Priscillian knows which side he stands on, and surely women like Euchrotia, Urbica, and Agape would have stood with him in valuing scriptural literacy and the authority of learning; they might also have claimed such authority for themselves. Although the Priscillianist writings have little to say directly about the status of women, Priscillian does affirm that “the spirit of God is in both males and females,” citing both Genesis 1, 27 (“God made the human according to god’s image and likeness, male and female”) and Galatians 3, 28 (“Because there is no male and female, but we are all one in Christ Jesus”). Priscillian’s *Pauline Canons* also asserts that those who believe in Christ “lack the diversity of sexes” (can. 55, referencing Gal 3, 28, among other passages).

The second and fourth judgments issued by the Council of Saragossa are also of interest here: although they do not single out women, they do evoke contexts that resonate not only with the private study groups that are the subject of the first judgment but also with the villa-based Christianity that we glimpse with Euchrotia and Procula. Both judgments deal with tensions over space and authority that arise in connection with seasonal practices. During the forty days before Easter, Christians “are not to be absent from the churches, nor to lurk in the hiding places of cells and mountains”; “they are not to meet on strange villas in order to hold meetings” (can. 2). Similarly, during the twenty-one days before Epiphany, “no one is permitted to be absent from the church, to hide in houses, to retire to a villa, to head for the mountains, or to walk with bare feet” (can. 4). These judgments appear to be directed against ascetic Christians who congregate in rural villas, evading the control of urban bishops; once again, the adjective “strange” likely indicates extra-familial, mixed-sex gatherings. “Keep the example and precept of the bishops”, the Council urges, countering such impulses (can. 2); “flock to the church!” (can. 4). But there must have been many who failed to heed that call. Archaeological studies suggest that Spain, even more than Euchrotia’s Aquitania, was dominated by a strong landed aristocracy. The center of gravity of late ancient Spanish Christianity was in its rich villa culture, not its cities, and the power wielded by the Spanish elite was, as Kimberly Bowes argues, “a power that trumped or simply ignored episcopal influence”.⁵⁵

Twenty years after the Council of Saragossa, the bishops gathered at the Council of Toledo (400) demonstrate continuing concern with the kind of privatized ascetic piety also opposed by the earlier council; the behavior of women in that context remains a source of particular anxiety. The Council of Toledo prohibits any “maiden of God” (*puella dei*) from engaging in familiar exchanges with a *confessor* (male ascetic) or “any layman of strange blood”, also explicitly forbidding such young women to enter the homes of *lectores* (literate men tasked with reading the scriptures aloud) who are not related to them by blood (can. 6). In addition, the bishops prohibit any *professa* (female ascetic) or widow from conducting prayer services in her home with a *confessor* or a slave, emphasizing that evening prayer “may not be read except in a church”, while immediately conceding that it may be read in a villa, so long as

⁵⁴ *Tract.* 3.146-150.

⁵⁵ Bowes 2005, 258.

a bishop, presbyter, or deacon is present (can. 9). Because the Council of Toledo explicitly condemns followers of Priscillian, it adds to the evidence linking private practices of biblical study and worship to Priscillian's circles. Both sets of judgments indicate anxiety about mixed-sex gatherings in particular. Might this not suggest that rumors of sexual promiscuity and sorcery that surface following the Council of Saragossa reflect no more than the fears provoked by such gatherings, as well as an impulse to curb and control the power of elite lay ascetic piety more broadly?

4. Writing Women

We have seen that the Council of Saragossa objects to a practice of ascetic withdrawal during the three weeks before Epiphany (can. 4). As it happens, an anonymous letter (*Quam libet sciam sacerdotali*) preserved in a single, possibly Gallic manuscript advocates just such a practice. For this reason, Germain Morin identified the letter, as well as another preserved in the same manuscript (*Nisi tanti seminis*), as likely Priscillianist, while acknowledging that there is nothing obviously unorthodox about either of these works.⁵⁶ Based on the texts themselves, we can say that the author of *Quam libet sciam sacerdotali* (hereafter Letter 2) is probably a woman and its addressee certainly is, while *Nisi tanti seminis* (hereafter Letter 1) is both addressed to, and authored by, a woman. Both letters also exhibit a remarkable level of literary sophistication and exegetical virtuosity. They thus offer us a precious glimpse of the kind of Christian literary culture that would have been available to women as well as men in the elite circles in which Priscillian and his followers moved.

Or so it would seem. In fact, the attribution of female authorship has been oddly fraught, and this demands at least a small detour in our argument. Morin himself claimed that the letters were written by women. Yet at the same time, he was struck by resonances with the writings of the rather shadowy figure of Bacharius, often suspected of Priscillianist affinities. "The style is from one end to the other that of Bacharius", Morin asserts, as confidently as he asserts female authorship. Confronted with seemingly contradictory evidence, he hedges. "It is true that our little correspondence is supposedly exchanged between women (*personnes du sexe*), but it is not only today that they have the luxury of male secretaries".⁵⁷ Just as Jerome served as scribe to Paula and Eustochium, so Bacharius might have done for ascetic women in his own circle: spreading his style over their texts from one end to the other, in the process. Is he more ghost writer than scribe, then, as Morin imagines it? This is not entirely clear, and Morin's highly speculative thesis has left most scholars unconvinced; Morin himself says that he "won't go so far as to assert the thing" as fact.⁵⁸ And as Roger Collins notes in the "Historical Introduction" to a recent critical edition of Bacharius's works,

The rather mechanistic practice of deducing common authorship by comparing textual passages of which Morin was a great exponent, is by no means reliable,

⁵⁶ Morin 1928, 304.

⁵⁷ Morin 1928, 307.

⁵⁸ Morin 1928, 307.

as the parallels are often too small, or insufficiently diagnostic, and they generally fail to take account of common sources and influence.⁵⁹

It might seem, then, that we are better off continuing to set the thesis of Bachiarian authorship aside.

However, the same volume that Collins introduces includes our two letters in Bacharius's corpus. Moreover, José Carlos Martín-Iglesias not only revives Morin's thesis but exceeds it, one might say, in his "Philological Introduction" to that volume. He does so, first, by making a case for a single author of both letters; second, by questioning the authorship of Letter 1, on the grounds that the author presents herself as a *young* virgin, whereas a young person could not possibly have authored a work reflecting "profound biblical knowledge and a capacity for highly elaborate and original exegesis"; third, by recalling the grammatical ambiguities that attend the gender of the equally exegetically skilled author of Letter 2; and fourth, by augmenting the list of Bachiarian parallels, so as to propose Bacharius not as the scribe for a female author or authors but simply as the author of both letters, while acknowledging that "reasonable doubt" may remain with respect to this claim.⁶⁰ Martín-Iglesias's arguments deserve serious consideration. For now, I merely want to point out how much work has gone into denying the female authorship of anonymous letters that give every appearance of having been written by women, in favor of attributing their writing to a man we know almost nothing about. We are left, moreover, with the question of why Bacharius would have adopted the fictive authorial persona of a woman, at least in the case of Letter 1, and whether his addressee was also fictional.

For present purposes, I am going to assume that reasonable doubt about Bachiarian authorship does indeed remain and that the letters are what they appear to be. That is, Letter 1 is written by an ascetic woman and addressed to another ascetic woman, and Letter 2 is probably written by a woman, possibly by a man, and addressed to a married woman. I am also going to assume that it is plausible that aristocratic women active in Spain (or possibly Aquitaine) c. 400, "in circles more or less related to Priscillianism" (as Martín-Iglesias describes the likely context of the letters),⁶¹ could have participated in a sophisticated exegetical culture and thus that the letters' sophistication does not render female authorship any less likely than male. Indeed, our discussion thus far suggests that it is extremely likely that the women in Priscillian's circles and others like them would have been actively engaged in the study and interpretation of the scriptures.

Letter 1 is striking not only for its exegetical virtuosity but also for its theorizing of the relationship between scripture, writing, and virginal fecundity. Both exegesis and theory unfold in the context of affectionate address to one who is repeatedly said to far exceed the author in her pursuit of true virginity. This rhetoric of humility carries undertones of friendly rivalry. In the opening passage the author complains playfully, "You embrace the entire body of the canon with the discourse of your

⁵⁹ Collins 2019, 25.

⁶⁰ Martín-Iglesias 2019, 155-156.

⁶¹ Martín-Iglesias 2019, 155.

letter, so that you leave me nothing to say!”⁶² She develops the conceit further, now shifting from the letter to its writer, who carries the whole Bible in the “clasp of [her] heart (*cordis*)”.⁶³ Her heart is in turn identified with the “ark of the covenant”, gilded inside and out, “in which the whole library of books is gathered”; there she “faithfully guards the words written with the finger of god”.⁶⁴ Formerly, this Bible of the heart was hidden from our author, but now, through her addressee’s writings, it has been revealed.

Now our author invokes another text: “That bride in the mystery of Christ, who sated the thirsting servant of Abraham with the liquid of the jug lowered from her shoulder, has indeed merited prophetic testimony”.⁶⁵ Identifying herself with Abraham’s servant, the letter writer places her addressee in Rebecca’s role: “you have sated us (...) from the jug of your heart (*pectoris*), that is, with treasure from an earthen vessel. I have surely drunk from what you have written”.⁶⁶ The passage recalls another famous woman at a well who gives water to Christ but also, and more importantly, receives “living water” from Christ (cf. Jn 4, 7-29). The layering of biblical tropes is both unexpected and effective: the addressee’s heart (*cor, pectus*) is at once a scriptural library (the very ark itself) and a jug or container of literary outpourings that themselves harbor an entire world of biblical texts, satisfying the deep thirst of their reader.

The author continues to slip from one scriptural metaphor to the next. Given ancient associations of jugs, it is an easy slide from the bride’s heart as a pouring jug to her heart as a fertile womb. Citing a scriptural passage commonly taken as a reference to Mary (“Behold, a virgin shall conceive in her womb and bear a son”; Is 7, 14), the letter writer declares: “You who are pregnant with the word (*verbo*) of god, you who bring forth his speech (*sermonem*), you give birth to the knowledge (*scientiam*) of god for us, in such a way that you are always replete and full”.⁶⁷ Some may not understand how a virgin can conceive and give birth, much less how she can remain perpetually pregnant, but our author has no trouble grasping it: a virgin is ever pregnant with the word and speech of god; she conceives and gives birth by writing. “Let them read your writings, because this is the incorruptible fecundity of virginal fruit”.⁶⁸ The letter writer is envious of such clear signs of fertility, which she herself lacks, she professes, at once modest and mournful. To be sure, she lives soberly and chastely. “But what use is that to me, if I do not have the word of God in my womb, that is, in my heart?” she asks.⁶⁹ It is *scientia*, or knowledge, that defines the true virgin. One who lacks it, who is a virgin in name only, “by no means crosses the threshold of the bridal canopy”.⁷⁰ Curiously, then, the fruits of virginal fecundity, writing and knowledge, seem to precede rather than follow the consummation of the bride’s marriage. Or perhaps they both precede *and* follow: time is no longer strictly

⁶² *Ep.* 1.5-7. Line references for both letters correspond to the critical edition of Martín-Iglesias 2019. For English translations of Letter 1, see Thiébaux 1987, 57-62, and Mathisen 2003, 160-164. For an English translation of Letter 2, see Burrus – Keefer 2000, 331-339.

⁶³ *Ep.* 1.7-8.

⁶⁴ *Ep.* 1.7-10; cf. Ex 25, 11 and 31, 18.

⁶⁵ *Ep.* 1.10-12; cf. Gen 24, 18.

⁶⁶ *Ep.* 1.14-16.

⁶⁷ *Ep.* 1.26-28.

⁶⁸ *Ep.* 1.30-31.

⁶⁹ *Ep.* 1.38-39.

⁷⁰ *Ep.* 1.41.

linear when an eternal bridegroom impinges. The bride of Christ is perpetually and, as it were, simultaneously, conceiving, pregnant, birthing; she is perpetually enjoying the embrace of her lover.

Continuing to proclaim her own inadequacy, the author represents herself next as one of the foolish virgins who lack oil for their lamps, her addressee as one of the wise virgins who possess oil in abundance.⁷¹ “I carry the lamp of my throat (*gutturis*)”, she declares, “being empty from the dryness (*ariditate*) of the wick, that is, filled with the lightness of inane words that the fat of knowledge does not touch”.⁷² Womb is now replaced by throat, and perhaps this too is an easy slide for an ancient writer: the vagina was frequently referred to as a neck or throat (*collum, cervix, guttur*) of the uterus, throat opening up onto *labia*, or lips. It is difficult to speak with a dry throat; it is also difficult to welcome the bridegroom with a dry “throat”. The throat needs to be oiled with *scientia*. But from whom should it be acquired? Our author asks her addressee, perhaps implicitly imploring her to share her own wealth, unlike the less generous virgins of the parable. Wine, which is “fragrant to virgins”,⁷³ may also do the trick of juicing up the bride, and once again, the addressee is well supplied. Christ is the vine, and she has made wine from his fruits. Indeed, like a jug, perhaps, she “overflows with the joy of spiritual knowledge, which enlivens the innermost parts (*interiora viscerum*) of [her] body with the juice of its sweetness and power”.⁷⁴ Here invocations of a feminine erotic body are difficult to miss, if also poetically encrypted (overflowing joy, inward vibrance, intoxicating juice). The biblical allusion that immediately follows should remove any lingering doubt: “Well do you emulate that Shunammite virgin, attendant and protector of David’s body!”⁷⁵ The reference is to Abishag, the young woman chosen for her great beauty to sleep with the elderly King David, caressing and warming him when he finds it difficult to get warm otherwise.⁷⁶

The closing returns to the themes of dryness and moisture. Our letter writer feels that she can scarcely eke out her lines, due to both the inexperience and the sorrow of her heart: she refers, enigmatically, to “maternal affliction”.⁷⁷ She implores her addressee a final time: “I beg that you will frequently spread a basket of dung (that is, the fecundity [*ubertatem*] of your words) on the dry roots of my understanding, so that when you visit me as usual you will discover some fruit of good work in me”.⁷⁸ Through the exchange of letters with the woman she calls “not sister but mistress (*domina*)”⁷⁹ the author will receive the outpourings of her sovereign lady’s overflowing heart: at once jug, library, and womb of her words’ conception. In so doing, she may find that her own parched throat is moistened with oil, that her inner parts are quickened with the juice of the vine, that the dry roots of her anguished heart have been fertilized, in short, that she herself is ready to enter the bridal chamber too. Indeed, perhaps she has already done so: the true bride is known by her fruit, and this biblically saturated letter is itself just such a fruit.

⁷¹ Cf. Mt 15, 1-13.

⁷² *Ep.* 1.41-43

⁷³ *Zec* 9, 17.

⁷⁴ *Ep.* 1.70-72.

⁷⁵ *Ep.* 1. 72-73.

⁷⁶ Cf. 1 Kg 1.1-4.

⁷⁷ *Ep.* 1.85.

⁷⁸ *Ep.* 1.87-90; cf. Luc 13, 8.

⁷⁹ *Ep.* 1.52.

Like Letter 1, Letter 2 displays exegetical virtuosity, an attraction to feminine figures of fecundity, and a troping of writing as offspring. It nests its recommendation of novel Advent observances within a framing narrative that supplies the author with the persona of a female ass (*asina*) and a rhetoric of humility. The letter writer opens by flattering her addressee, acknowledging that “only choice sacrifices of words are to be offered to a priestly family”;⁸⁰ however, the flock of her thoughts contains nothing suitable, she protests. She is like an ass who has given birth to her first son. The baby ass, an impure species unfit for sacrifice, must be redeemed with the offering of a sheep, according to the divine command of Exodus 12, 11 and 34, 19. Thus she will “redeem the brute expression of [her] foolish mind with the simplicity of Christian innocence”, as she puts it.⁸¹ Yet even that is not enough, for the utterance of a foolish beast is worth even less than the offspring of an impure animal, she fears; the fact that she speaks of heavenly things must be added to the ransom. Immediately she complicates matters further, however, going on to reverse the terms of exchange, on the authority of Leviticus 27, 8, according to which the wish or intention to redeem an offering may substitute, in the case of the poor, for the actual redemption. The author now begs that her addressee accept her plodding words (i.e., the offspring of the she-ass) instead of the sheep, and not drive them from the temple of her heart. Her offering will remain the offering of a she-ass (a baby ass, that is).

Here, through a bit of creative exegesis, letter writing has become an act of both birthing and offering; in the process, humility is undercut by assertiveness. Almost by sleight of hand, the maternal ass has become a model for “the life of learning”,⁸² and the author discovers an additional example of the ass’s work in the figure of Balaam’s famous talking *asina*, who is able to see the angel who stands in the road in front of her though her rider cannot. The angel appears three times; each time the ass has less room to maneuver: first she veers off the road, then she scrapes against the wall, and then she lies down. Each time Balaam beats her for her seemingly inexplicable behavior, until finally the ass is moved to speech, protesting her beatings.⁸³ Strikingly, our author focuses not on the ass’s speech but on her prayerful gesture: falling to her knees, the ass remembers the teachings of scripture as if they stood before her like the angel on the path. The author also makes much of the ass pressing Balaam’s foot against the wall, interpreting this to signify the destruction of “the desire to wander”.⁸⁴ She urges that the end of the year not be celebrated in the frenetic motion of pagan festivities (as exemplified in the Saturnalia and Kalends of January) but rather in withdrawal into the stillness of solitude. December, the tenth month, marks the final phase of Mary’s pregnancy: it is a time of preparation and anticipation best cultivated in ascetic retreat. As she puts it, “One who desires to give birth to Christ ought to choose a private and quiet place”.⁸⁵ Thus the figure of the ass whose words and thoughts are her firstborn offspring is overlaid by the figure of Mary who gives birth to the only-begotten divine word. At the same time, the author’s own humble identification with the ass gives way to her invitation to her addressee to join her in identifying with the mother of Christ. “We are to imitate the

⁸⁰ *Ep.* 2.2-3.

⁸¹ *Ep.* 2.5-7.

⁸² *Ep.* 2.27.

⁸³ Nu 22, 22-30.

⁸⁴ *Ep.* 2.46-47.

⁸⁵ *Ep.* 2.79-80.

groans of the holy Mary as she labors, so that just as within the concealed matrix of the womb, so within the private cell of the monastery, something may take shape in us that advances salvation, and in the tenth month a new work may appear from our fruits, at which the world may wonder”.⁸⁶ In apparent contrast with Letter 1, Letter 2 emphasizes that it is not only virgins who are allowed to give birth to Christ.⁸⁷

The figure of Mary is itself superseded by the image of the ark, enclosed and at rest amidst the teeming floods, which is in turn reconfigured as the temple of Solomon’s silent fabrication. Daniel’s three weeks of fasting and prayer at the end of the tenth month (December) locates the self-mastery of the “man of desires” in time, while the prophecy of Zechariah aligns the scripturally swaddled birth of the new age (Jesus) from the old (Joshua) with both the rebuilding of the destroyed temple and Ezra’s reinscription of the divine word. In all of this, the letter writer’s task is to persuade her addressee to take up an unfamiliar seasonal observance of solitude and quiet. The author turns in closing to reclaim the persona of the ass, invoking yet another scriptural donkey. She has offered a baby ass in place of a sheep, but even if her addressee will not accept it (even if it cannot be redeemed) she is not worried, she asserts. “For, because Christ was born according to the flesh, an ass was also needed to serve in the passion, since ‘god chooses what is the world’s foolishness’”.⁸⁸ Even foolish asses have their place, she suggests; perhaps there are no pure and impure species after all.

We have no way of knowing whether the authors of these letters would have identified themselves or been identified by others as followers of Priscillian. It seems likely, however, that they were located in an elite Christian milieu similar to that of Priscillian and his followers, where ascetic striving went hand in hand with the cultivation of exegetical expertise, and women and men walked the same path of perfection. Indeed, for these two letter-writers, both likely women, to read the scriptures was to be impregnated by the divine word, giving birth to texts that would transform others in turn. Asceticism and exegesis were one endeavor, then, converging in the feminine body of virginal fecundity most potently symbolized by Mary but available to all who sought it, even, perhaps, to Bachiarus, if these letters indeed reflect his own fantasy.

5. Speaking Women

There is one other text that we may add to our dossier, although its association with Priscillianism is even more tenuous than that of our two letters, namely, the *Life of Saint Helia*. This little-known work is preserved in only two manuscripts, both Spanish. The manuscript tradition, together with the stringent asceticism promoted by the Life led Zacarías García Villada to identify Helia as “one of those women who adhered to [Priscillian’s] sect”.⁸⁹ Helia is almost certainly a fictional heroine, and many aspects of

⁸⁶ *Ep.* 2.63-67.

⁸⁷ And also not only women, which may explain the use of the inclusive masculine plural in the line immediately following: “for if that incorrupt and holy Mary did not pour forth the hope of her salvation without groans and sighs, how do you think that we, whom [quos] the serpent’s counsels have deceived, must strive so that we may be capable of imitating some such thing?” (*Ep.* 2.67-70). For a careful discussion of this and two other masculine plural constructions that complicate (but do not decisively contradict) the theory of female authorship, see Martín-Iglesias 2019, 145-147.

⁸⁸ *Ep.* 2.217-19.

⁸⁹ García Villada 1923, 272.

the text that García Villada deemed heretical are in fact consistent with the positions of other contemporary ascetic teachers like Jerome (with whose works the author was apparently familiar). Nonetheless, there are resonances that are worth exploring: the text *might* have been produced in Priscillianist circles, even if it need not have been, and its focus on female speech, rather than writing, helpfully returns us to the oral context of the gatherings for biblical study glimpsed in the first judgment of the Council of Saragossa. Most of the text is in dialogue format and it is dominated by female speakers. Helia and her mother engage in a fierce debate regarding the relative merits of virginity and marriage; later, Helia also debates with a provincial judge who prosecutes her for filial disobedience. All of the speeches are heavily laced with biblical citations, and Helia's performances showcase her superior exegetical and rhetorical skills.

The importance of biblical study is emphasized from the start. Initially Helia "has neither the aid of divine reading (*lectionis divinae*) nor examples from anyone", yet providence swiftly provides her with both a teacher and readings:

In those same days it happened that a certain presbyter of our religion, coming from foreign lands, was staying nearby. And, according to common practice, this industrious servant of God began to give a reading regularly, as is customary, and to exercise his spiritual duties tirelessly (...) And while she listened attentively through a window to his reading, having become master of her own vow, she believed that this opportunity had been divinely granted her (...) She revealed the entire nature of her intention to the servant of God. And seeing a suitable prize for Christ, he (...) diligently prepared relevant readings.⁹⁰

Helia proves an apt student. The debates that dominate the text are conducted as contests of biblical citation and interpretation, a battle of readings, in other words. Helia's knowledge of the scriptures contrasts with her opponents' relative ignorance. Her mother confesses her own weakness near the end of their lengthy debate, compensating with aggression where she lacks learning:

Since I am insufficiently educated in the words of the *lectio divina* and cannot recount the narrative of the holy scripture, I will cite only one example, so that all the keenness of your rapid style may be weakened (...) "Children, obey your parents" (Eph 6, 1).⁹¹

To this Helia replies condescendingly:

Any aspect of the reading, when it is not recapitulated in its entirety, confounds and fogs the intellect. Since the sharpness of your mind is blunted, your incomplete argument augments the shadows of your depraved intelligence. For when the apostle said, "Children, obey your parents," he added, "in the Lord" (Eph 6, 1), which you have omitted.⁹²

⁹⁰ *Vita Heliae* 1.61-81. Line numbers refer to the edition of Burrus – Conti 2014.

⁹¹ *Vita Heliae* 2.190-194.

⁹² *Vita Heliae* 2.196-200.

Proceeding to explain the passage in context, Helia concludes her rejoinder with a citational flourish: “‘Those who said to their father and mother, ‘we did not know you,’ these have observed your commands’ (Dt 33, 9)”⁹³ She similarly accuses the judge of scriptural ignorance leading to lack of appreciation for virginity: “You hate ‘what you do not know; we love what we know’ (Jn 4, 22)”⁹⁴

The *Life of Helia* does not merely reflect a setting in which study of scripture is central to Christian practice and identity; it also depicts a young virgin studying with a man referred to as both a presbyter and a servant of God (*servus, famulus dei*) and depicted as a semi-itinerant biblical scholar and ascetic teacher.⁹⁵ Here the text recalls the lack of concern with sexual segregation apparently characteristic of Priscillian’s circles, as well as the tendency to value education and virtue more than clerical office or rank. Later the presbyter urges Helia to present herself to the local bishop in the hope that her own ascetic zeal might prevail, “if he were perhaps able, through a priestly intervention, to avert the obstinacy of the mother from the holy virgin”⁹⁶ In the end, however, the bishop is not a particularly forceful figure. Helia urges him on lustily: “Lift up your voice like a war-trumpet, in order that, through its priestly trumpeting (that is, through the fearsomeness of the pontiff) this wrongly persuaded city may tumble down, shaken from its foundations! (...) Can a pontifical mind not terrify womanly hordes?”⁹⁷ The bishop is moved to tears by this speech, as are some others in the audience. Yet anxiety about the mother’s reasonable desire to have heirs keeps him on the fence. “What was the divine priest to do between them? For he was overcome by the constancy of each: committed to her way of life, neither yielded”⁹⁸ His eventual address to the furious mother strikes a pacifying tone, yet his lengthy discourse in favor of virginity falls on deaf maternal ears. Evidently the aristocratic elite, mother and daughter alike, do as they please, regardless of episcopal persuasion.

Helia is, from start to finish, embattled. Her mother accuses the girl of following “the path of a new superstition”, issuing a pointed challenge: “You will either support marriage or you will condemn it”⁹⁹ To this Helia replies:

You demand of me that I either condemn marriage or celebrate it. And, following the Lord, who does not answer the one who questions him before introducing a suitable question of his own, “I will pose one question to you” (Mt 21, 24), and if you make the matter clearer to me, then I will be compelled to satisfy your questions fully. Is virginity to be professed or condemned?¹⁰⁰

Helia’s mother responds that Helia is trying “to avoid the contest of the debate”¹⁰¹ Yet Helia’s reframing of the question more exactly matches the terms of the debate, from her

⁹³ *Vita Heliae* 2.203-204.

⁹⁴ *Vita Heliae* 3.222-223.

⁹⁵ Presbyter: *Vita Heliae* 1.61, 2.251, 2.265. Servant of God: *Vita Heliae* 1.63, 1.74.

⁹⁶ *Vita Heliae* 2.252-253.

⁹⁷ *Vita Heliae* 2.283-284, 2.307-308.

⁹⁸ *Vita Heliae* 2.347-249.

⁹⁹ *Vita Heliae* 1.136.

¹⁰⁰ *Vita Heliae* 1.143-148.

¹⁰¹ *Vita Heliae* 1.151-152.

own perspective: she professes virginity; her mother condemns her choice. The mother answers that Christian laws uphold the celebrating of marriages and raising of children, whereas “the duties of virginity have nowhere been imposed entirely (1 Cor 7, 25)”.¹⁰² At this, Helia becomes agitated, claiming that her mother is trying to accuse her of heresy, “as if I were condemning marital alliances”.¹⁰³ There are many different members in the body of Christ, she affirms, as she parries the attack, though they are not all equal. She offers testimony to her own orthodoxy in formulaic terms: “I acknowledge and agree with the whole world, which judges that ‘an honorable marriage and an immaculate bed’ is the law of Christ (Heb 13, 4)”.¹⁰⁴ Yet she also demands that her mother acknowledge in turn the apostle Paul’s dictum that “one who does not give away a bride does better (1 Cor 7, 38)”.¹⁰⁵ This is not the only place in the *Vita* where Helia protests her respect for marriage without ceasing to praise virginity. “Do not think that I want to dissolve the marriages of others”, she scolds, during her debate with the judge. “Do not consider me to be free from wedlock. I have a spouse (...) in heaven”.¹⁰⁶

Would a Priscillianist setting make sense of the particular stridency of the resistance to marriage in this text, as García Villada suggests? Perhaps. While Priscillian himself does not tend to dwell on virginity as such, he assumes that sexual continence is required of those who reject the ways of the world, and his *Pauline Canons* include the assertion that the bodies of the saints should “remain as virgins according to the counsel of the apostle” (can. 33). The late fourth-century heresiologist Filastrius of Brescia (writing c. 384) gives evidence that the Spanish ascetics were known at a very early point in the controversy as “abstinents, (...) separating based on their convictions from the marriages of humans”.¹⁰⁷

Forced to defend herself, Helia is nonetheless able to celebrate the fecundity of virginity in poetic tones that match those of our letter writers:

But when summer finally comes, what the nobility could not have in winter, even the poor begin to have in abundance. And therefore the Lord said through the prophet: “Rise up, come, my friend, my beauty, my dove” (Sg 2, 13). For behold, “winter has passed,” summer comes, and “flowers are seen in the land” (Sg 2, 12). Not now a flower, but flowers. For when Christ was born of the virgin, he said: “Look, I am the flower of the meadow” (Sg 2, 1). And when from that flower very many were brought forth, it is said that “flowers are seen in the land.” If a field of yours pays back “a hundredfold fruit” (Mt 12, 8), will it not be more precious to you than one that returns thirtyfold? Behold, the land of my body, sowed by him of whom it is said, “He who sows is the son of man” (Mt 13, 37), bursts forth in fruit of hundredfold fecundity.¹⁰⁸

Might Procula, another teenage girl, have been drawn to a vision like Helia’s? While rumors of pregnancy and abortion circulated, perhaps it was the hundredfold fecundity of her virginal body that she herself celebrated.

¹⁰² *Vita Heliae* 1.155-156.

¹⁰³ *Vita Heliae* 1.169-170.

¹⁰⁴ *Vita Heliae* 1.202-203.

¹⁰⁵ *Vita Heliae* 1.205.

¹⁰⁶ *Vita Heliae* 3.98-101.

¹⁰⁷ *Diversarum hereseon liber* 84.1

¹⁰⁸ *Vita Heliae* 3.151-161.

6. Conclusions

Buñuel's humorous depiction of Priscillian and his female followers is a spoof of the heresiological imagination, inviting us to reflect on the strangeness of its lurid fantasies. It is also a celebration of "the nonconformities of the human spirit", as he puts it,¹⁰⁹ a phrasing echoed in the title of a 2009 monograph that dubs Priscillian "un chrétien non conformiste".¹¹⁰ Priscillian and those who shared his understanding of the Christian life were not only nonconformists in so far as they resisted forces of opposition that ultimately succeeded in labeling them heretics and magicians and cost some of them their very lives. They were also nonconformists in so far as they refused the "empty glory of the world", as they saw it, instead obeying the call to "search the scriptures" and pursue lives of quiet and simplicity wholly dedicated to the one true god, Christ.¹¹¹

Yet in many ways they also conformed to social convention. Some of them belonged to the landed aristocracy. They built chapels and mausolea on their villas and conducted prayer services and Bible studies without need for clerical mediation. They were linked by networks of friendship sustained by travel and letter-writing that facilitated the spread of their views. They were educated in grammar, literature, and rhetoric; they were proficient readers and writers, polished speakers, skilled in the arts of citation, interpretation, and persuasion. These elite Christians are the ones that are most accessible to us, yet still they elude our knowing. Did Christianization increase levels of literacy and cultural agency among elite women? Did it increase levels of literacy and cultural agency among the non-elite? How inclusive, in other words, was the life of study and prayer that seems to have flourished among late ancient Spanish and Gallic ascetics? How distinctively "Priscillianist" was it?

Once we cease taking our cues from the heresiologists, it becomes difficult to distinguish Priscillianist practices, texts, and artifacts from others (thus, to distinguish Priscillianist *women* from others) for the simple reason that Priscillianism as a category is bound to heresiology. We know that Euchrota, Procula, Urbica, and Agape were associated with Priscillian, and that Hedibia, Theresa, and Theodora were the kind of women who could be suspected of such association, apparently because they were well-educated and drawn to biblical study and ascetic life. But what of our letter writers? What of the author of the *Life of Helia*? We may need to be content with letting the category of "Priscillianist women" become blurry, an open cypher for certain "nonconformities of the human spirit" that flashed forth in late fourth- and early fifth-century Spain and Gaul, manifesting themselves in a bold reshaping of lifestyles and relational commitments and a creative flourishing of theological imagination that have left only the barest traces in the historical record.

¹⁰⁹ Pérez Turrent – De la Colina 1992, 192.

¹¹⁰ Sanchez 2009. In suggesting that Priscillian is not properly viewed as a "heretic" but as a "nonconformist", Sanchez restates fairly long-standing scholarly consensus.

¹¹¹ *Tract.* 1.26 and 3.150; cf. Jn 5, 39.

7. Bibliographical references

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