

From Shame to Sin: Fictional Prostitutes and Greek Fiction
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In antiquity, prostitution was not only an important social institution, it was a vital symbol of sexuality. The prostitute was defined in opposition to the wife. One was promiscuous, unfree, dishonored, and incapable of legitimate reproduction; the other was chaste, free, honorable, and her sexuality was reserved for procreation. This symbolic system gave the prostitute (whether *porne* or *hetaera*) a prominent role in Greek fiction, both comedy or romance. These fictions, it is well known, manipulate the protocols of sexual honor for dramatic effect. In the novel, for instance, an honorable girl is imminently in danger of losing her virginity but narrowly rescued and reserved for the marriage which consummates the erotic plot.

It has not been recognized that fictional representations of prostitutes in Christian literature are consciously in dialogue with these earlier novels and deliberately subvert the protocols of honor and shame which drive the pre-Christian narratives. The rise of the holy harlot in Christian fiction is traditionally discussed as a purely Christian phenomenon. Indeed, the scholarship on Christian prostitution has focused on questions like sexuality and literary production (monastic, high literary, popular), without recognizing the ancient roots of the fictional prostitute. My presentation, part of a larger project on the transformation of prostitution amidst Christian triumph, attempts to demonstrate the ways in which Christian literature is consciously manipulating the social codes of the Greek romance. It is even possible to trace an evolution. Early Christian writers (such as Palladius, who preserves an early tradition) first adapt the plot of the girl who is narrowly saved from prostitution yet with God as the agent of her salvation. Later, more radical plots develop (*Life of Mary of Egypt*) in which the girl loses her virginity but is saved by a repentance that fundamentally overrides the code of honor and shame. The shift from sin to shame implies a whole new relationship between the prostitute and society.