A Captive Temptress: Classical Rhetoric in the Early Christian Tradition

The early Christian polemic against pagan thought has been a mainstay of scholarship on late antiquity. In this paper, I hope to shed light on a facet of this area that has remained largely unexamined. In the writings of the Augustinian tradition, female sexuality acts as a pervasive trope in the critique of Classical rhetoric. According to this line of thought, both pagan literature and unbridled female sensuality have a seductiveness that poses a threat to the core values of Christian doctrine and both must be divested of their "sexiness" to be appropriated to Christian ends. The platform of similarity on which the metaphor rests speaks to an important conceptual link in early Christian thought between pleasures of the flesh and pleasures of the intellect. I consider two instances of this pervasive trope in Jerome's letters. In the first instance, he makes an implicit parallel between his forays into Classical prose and erotic fantasies. In the second—and most striking—he compares pagan literature to a captive temptress in a bizarre extended metaphor.

In Jerome's 22nd letter, he draws an implicit comparison between the allurements of women and the seductiveness of Roman rhetoric. When he consigns himself to devotional isolation, he is nonetheless plagued by sexual fantasies that test his faith, to which he reacts by self-denial: "the fires of lust kept bubbling up before me when my flesh was as good as dead … I subdued my rebellious body with weeks of abstinence" (22.7). Later, he expresses a similar desire to peruse his pagan library, a desire to which he submits, though not without penance: "And so, miserable man that I was, I would fast only that I might afterwards read Cicero. After many nights spend in vigil … I would once more take up Plautus" (22.30). The similarity that underlies these two accounts implies an equation of "bevies of girls" with Ciceronian rhetoric, in

that both are seductive entities that draw Jerome from his devotional pursuits. Moreover, both are temptations that must be met with active penance: abstinence, fasting, and nights of vigil.

In Jerome's 70th letter, he compares pagan rhetoric to a barbarian woman. Once the woman is stripped of her seductive qualities, he claims, she might make a suitable wife: " … when a captive woman had had her head shaved, her eyebrows and all her hair cut off, and her nails pared, she might then be taken to wife" (70). This transformation of captive into Christian wife (and simultaneous process of desexualization) turns out to be a metaphor for Jerome's own appropriation of pagan eloquence to his scriptural writings:

> Is it surprising that I too, admiring the fairness of her form and the grace of her eloquence, desire to make that secular wisdom which is my captive and my handmaid, a matron of the true Israel? Or that shaving off and cutting away all in her that is dead whether this be idolatry, pleasure, error, or lust, I take her to myself clean and pure and beget by her servants for the Lord of Sabaoth? (70)

Pagan rhetoric may thus be "married" to Christian text, but only if it has been appropriated to the Christian cause ("held captive") and denuded of its appealing qualities. This union is rhetorically useful in communicating Christian doctrine, and thus—like the barbarian temptress—engenders servants of the Lord. These two examples demonstrate that pagan rhetoric was viewed in similar terms to female sexuality in early Christian thought, and circumscribed by similar moral strictures.

In order to contextualize this argument, I also invoke examples from other early Christian thinkers, such as Augustine and Origen. I briefly touch on historical gendering of rhetoric and consider precursors to this early Christian metaphor in Classical texts. For example, Cicero—

who is often the target of early Christian polemic against pagan rhetoric—characterized aspects of rhetoric as "modest" (*prudens*).

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