

Virgin Motherhood: A Case Study from the Life of St. Agatha

Brooke Nelson

Ph.D., Claremont Graduate University

Abstract: This article will focus on a popular early Christian martyr tale with a maternalized virgin martyr—the *Life of Agatha*—in order to show how the idea of a perfect Christian mother who is sacred in body and soul, fertile in spirit and virginal in body was constructed through narrative. By comparing the tale to contemporary literary discussions of ideal and un-ideal mothers, this article concludes that the *Life of Agatha* uses the power of rhetoric to develop a striking rubric for ideal motherhood and mothering in early Christianity.

Keywords: early Christianity, mothers, women, martyr, hagiography

I. Introduction

In the *Life of St. Agatha*, the virgin martyr refuses to compromise her chastity or her Christian faith and is sent to a brothel by her thwarted, would-be lover. Regular readers of hagiography, especially virgin hagiographies of the Decian persecution, may find nothing altogether unusual about this sequence of events. After all, virgin martyrs in texts dating after the second century were regularly sentenced to brothels, and the sado-erotic undertones of martyr torture have been well discussed. Thus, a person would be forgiven if he or she, on first glance, lumped Agatha's tale together with the other well-known virgin tales of the period that also feature both brothels and sexualized torture of chaste heroines, such as the tales of Agnes, Lucy, Christina, and Katherine. In the case of Agatha, however, subtle changes to these standard motifs demonstrate a deliberate uniting of virgin and

maternal rhetoric in a clear attempt to have Agatha function as an example of how a virgin martyr could also be a mother.

The language of motherhood and maternity saturates the tale to a degree that is not seen in other virgin martyr tales and, for this reason, deserves closer scrutiny. For example, the brothel that Agatha is sent to is run by a mother and her daughters, and much of Agatha's torture scene consists of her creating a contrast between her mortal, virginal body and the spiritual, maternal breasts of her soul. In these key scenes, images of mothers and mothering are injected in locations that are not standard fare for virgin martyr tales of the period, and thus show a conscious layering of maternal language into this narrative. In addition, there is a long history of worship practices directed towards St. Agatha that uses the language of mother and child to describe the virgin saint's relationship to her petitioners. The inherent challenge facing the text is how it can establish Agatha, a young girl who has never conceived or bore children, as a maternal figure. The endeavor of transforming a Christian virgin into a Christian mother found its precedent in the tradition of the writings of Ambrose of Milan and Gregory of Nyssa's treatments of the virgin mother motif. Ambrose of Milan, for example, exhorted the women of his acquaintance in *Concerning Virginité* to practice "holy virginité." Gregory of Nyssa said in *On Virginité* that the best mother is "the virgin mother who by operation of the Spirit conceives the deathless children." These ideas, however, ran the danger of only living in treatises if not translated into narrative.¹ The major task of this article is to show, using the hagiography of Agatha as a case study, how these patristic teachings about virgin motherhood gave flesh to rhetorical models that taught ordinary Christian women to mother without maternity.

¹ Ambrose of Milan, *Concerning Virginité*, 1: 35; Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginité*, 13.

In order to show how the *Life of Agatha* provides a narrative construction of the virgin mother trope, this article will address several questions raised by the source material itself. The textual transmission of the *Life of Agatha* is not as clear as one would want for this type of investigative project. Chronologically, the text is included in the *Acta Sanctorum* and claims to record events that took place during the reign of Emperor Decius (250-253 CE).² It appears in the *Martyrologium Hieronymianum*, the oldest of the Latin martyrologies, as well as in the calendar of the church of Carthage, the Gelasian and the Gregorian *Sacramentaries*, and the *Synaxarion* of the Greek Church.³ The *Martyrologium Hieronymianum* currently provides the terminus ante quem for Agatha's written record, but this does little to narrow down the exact date of the story because it only shows that the tale had social traction by the mid-fifth century. In some of the original commentaries on the text, such as the one by Hippolyte Delehaye, the *Life of Agatha* was marked as a mid-fifth century tale on this basis alone.⁴ His dating is often relied on in more contemporary treatments, which is problematic as Delehaye's dating of the narrative originated from a very text-based approach to martyr tales that relied only on written sources to calculate dates.

Opening up the source base to non-written sources challenges this often cited mid-fifth century dating for the tale. For example, one historian of Malta has recently concluded that there was a vibrant cult around Agatha quite early on in Malta where, according to tradition, she lived briefly before her eventual persecution. By the fourth century, a

² "Agatha", *Acta Sactorum*, IV (February), 1. The translations from Latin are the author's own unless otherwise indicated, although Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda Aurea*, trans. William Caxton (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1931) was consulted.

³ Magdalena Elizabeth Carrasco, "An Early Illustrated Manuscript of the Passion of Agatha (Paris, Bibl. Nat., MS lat 5594)", *Gesta*, 24:1 (1985), 19-32, esp. 20.

⁴ Hippolyte Delehaye, *Commentarius perpetuus in Martyrologium Hieronymianum ad recensioem H. Quenti in Acta Sanctorum XXIV* November 11, 2 (Brussels: 1931).

catacomb was named in her honor on the island and was possibly enlarged to allow for greater crowds, which points to a vibrant religious following.⁵ Likewise, a historical survey of the Roman canon shows that Agatha's feast day was formally observed from the middle of the fourth century, even if no written records of her tale survive that predate the *Martyrologium Hieronymianum*.⁶ More convincing evidence for a fourth century date of the tale lies in the congruencies of ideas between the *Life of Agatha* and fourth century patristic thinkers. Ambrose of Milan, a fourth century Christian writer, records a tale very similar to Agatha's in *Concerning Virginity*, in which a virgin martyr who rejects the sexual advances of her tormentor is sentenced to a brothel before being tortured for her faith.⁷ Typically, this story is understood to be the tale of St. Agnes, but the virgin sent to the brothel is not named. The similarity of narrative elements with fourth-century virgin martyr stories, as well as a history of cultic worship dating to the fourth century, leads some scholars to confidently conclude that Agatha's story was well known in ancient Christianity.⁸

For all this discussion of the *Life of Agatha* in modern commentaries, very little has been said about the way that the text represents the maternal subject. Most of the conversation surrounding the tale that is not specifically concerned with dating the story has focused either on its representation of virginity as a soteriological paradigm for early Christians, or has used the tale as a supporting plank for an argument about the erotic

⁵ A.A. Caruana, *Ancient Pagan Tombs and Christian Cemeteries in the Islands of Malta Explored and Surveyed* (Malta: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1989), 18.

⁶ Milton Walsh, *In Memory of Me: A Meditation on the Roman Canon* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), 191.

⁷ Ambrose of Milan, *Concerning Virginity*, 2:22-33 in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, transl. H. de Romestin, E. de Romestin, and H.T.F. Duckworth, Vol 10 (Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing, 1896)

⁸ Magdalena Elizabeth Carrasco, "An Early Illustrated Manuscript of the Passion of Agatha (Paris, Bibl. Nat., MS lat 5594)", *Gesta*, 24:1 (1985), 19-32, esp. 20.

undertones of torture in early Christian texts.⁹ While there is certainly some benefit to mining the *Life of Agatha* for what it reveals about notions of virgin martyrdom or the erotic torture of virgin martyrs, such a singular focus on virginity rhetoric runs the danger of reading past the very striking maternal nuances of the text. Such readings do not, for example, note how the ideal of a chaste mother in the text is lifted up through contrast with the sexualized mother. Nor do such readings fully address how the narrative connects to a larger discussion in early Christian circles about how the best mother was coming to be understood as having a role entirely without physical components. Close reading the *Life of St. Agatha* will show how the text constructs virgin motherhood as a Christian ideal, as well as open a conversation about the broader implications of the use of these maternalized martyr themes in the tale.

II. Aphrodisia: A Cautionary Tale

The framework establishing the ideal Christian virgin mother for Agatha's followers is a rubric of behavior built through the narrative contrast between Aphrodisia's sordid maternal brothel and Agatha's stalwart chaste fertility. The contrast established between the two women does quite a bit of cultural work that has not, as of yet, been fully explored. For example, the juxtaposition of a highly sexual mother versus a virgin mother prompts a conversation about the female martyr's sexualization. First, consider how clearly and completely Aphrodisia is coded in the text as a minor villain with an overtly sexual nature.

⁹ For a discussion of virginity as a soteriological paradigm see Hanne Blank, *Virgin: The Untouched History* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2007), 158-160 ; Kathleen Coyne Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 56-58. For a discussion of the erotic undertones of virginity in this tale see Martha Easton, "Saint Agatha and the Sanctification of Sexual Violence", *Studies in Iconography*, 16 (1994), 83-118 ; Paul Szarmach, *Writing Women Saints in Anglo-Saxon England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 263.

She is the keeper of the brothel that Agatha is sentenced to, the enforcer of her sentence, and the agent in charge of her seduction. As the madam of a brothel, she plays a clearly defined role in the virgin-in-the-brothel trope that uses the power of well recognized narrative patterns to characterize her as a threat. Daniel Boyarin has explored the elements of this trope as part of his larger argument on the ways martyrdom was claimed as part of the identity-making process for Christianity in *Dying for God*, and he ultimately concludes that one of the major elements of this rhetorical motif is a hyper sexualized figure who is an immediate threat to the martyr's virginity.¹⁰ This conclusion is clearly supported through the bulk of stories that feature this theme in early Christianity. In Prudentius' treatment of the *Life of Agnes*, for example, a gang of Roman men "rush to check out this new slave of their wanton sport" and are a palpable sexual threat to the martyr as they pay for prostitution services with the sentenced virgin.¹¹ Similarly, Ambrose provides a vivid description of how lascivious men besiege the Christian virgin Agnes in the brothel, as the "door is shut within, the hawks cry without; some are contending who shall first attack the prey."¹² The language in both of these treatments is vivid, disturbing, and sexualized, as the virgin becomes the hapless hunted, and her predators are rendered dangerous because of their uncontrollable sexual desires. Finally, the aggressiveness of hyper sexualized figures in typical virgin brothel scenes is crystalized in the *Life of Lucy of Syracuse* when her persecutor amasses together the most sexually aggressive Roman males and orders them to "defoul her, and labour her so much till she be dead," a sentence of death by rape.¹³ All of

¹⁰ Boyarin, *Dying for God* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 84.

¹¹ "...omnis iuuentus inruet et nouum ludibriorum mancipium petet." Prudentius, "The Passion of Agnes" in *Peristephanon Liber*.

¹² Ambrose of Milan, *Concerning Virginity*, 2: 4, 27.

¹³ "Invitate ad eam omnem populum, et tamdiu illudatur, donec mortua nuntietur.", "Agatha", *Acta Sactorum*, IV (February).

these hyper sexualized figures play a vital rhetorical role in the standard virgin brothel scene of Christian hagiography because they seem to pit the strength of the martyr's virginity against a physically stronger male aggressor, playing into the idea that faith provides strength to the martyr. When the martyr inverts the dynamic and resists the loss of sexual virtue, the reader is to understand that such a dramatic upheaval represents the martyr's unique spiritual nature and the spiritual power she gains through chastity.

When turning to the brothel scene in the *Life of Agatha*, however, it becomes clear that the text is quite a bit different from the standard virgin brothel scene. Consider, for example, just how much the *Life of Agatha* departs from the expected literary pattern of Christian virgin brothel scenes by including a maternal figure in the brothel as opposed to the hyper sexualized male figures that typically pose the sexual threat in the virgin-in-the-brothel trope. In the *Life of Agatha*, the heroine is not under direct threat from a sexualized male aggressor when sentenced to the brothel. Rather, she is handed over to the care of a woman "named Aphrodisia, which had nine daughters, over foul, like unto the mother" for thirty days.¹⁴ While the mother-madam is certainly construed negatively by the author, she is a far distance away from the lecherous hordes that throw themselves against the doors of Agnes's brothel and the sexually aggressive "ribands" who physically drag Lucy towards her fate, because the mother-madam Aphrodisia does not embody the threat of physical domination. In Agatha's case, her brothel is a feminine sphere, from which the physical threat of male assault is removed through the introduction of a mother-madam figure.

At this point, it is also worth remembering that Agatha is not sent to the brothel in order to forcibly become an object of male lust, as is the case with Agnes, Lucy, and

¹⁴ "...nomine Aphrodisiae et novem filiabus ejus ejusdem turpitudinis, ut per XXX dies", "Agatha", *Acta Sactorum*, IV (February).

Ambrose's virgin from Antioch. She is sent to the brothel in order that Aphrodisia and her daughters may convince her to willingly embrace a life of pleasure with the pagan provost of Catania. The author of the tale records that the provost hopes that time in the brothel will "induce Agatha to do his will" by teaching her to reciprocate his "lecherous sight."¹⁵ In short, he intends to seduce her spirit and have her eagerly come to him as a sexual partner rather than physically forcing himself on the young beauty. In terms of Agatha's broader characterization as a virgin martyr and ultimately a virgin mother, placing her in a brothel to test her willpower shows that she will partially prove her status as a martyr through a mental trial. This is an important distinction because by changing the function of the brothel, the narrator of the *Life of Agatha* is opening a conversation about the agency of the virgin martyr and her ability to resist temptation. Ultimately, it suggests that the challenges Agatha faces in the brothel to mentally resist sexuality are as much a part of her identity as a martyr as her ability to withstand the physical torture that would come later in the narrative.

Neither the presence of a prominent female figure in the brothel scene nor the role of the brothel in the tale would seem to align the *Life of Agatha* with the standard presentation and use of the brothel in early Christian martyr literature. The reader is left to ponder what, exactly, the reframing of the brothel from punishment to inducement is meant to convey to the reader and why, exactly, a mother and her prostitute daughters are added to the tale. Perhaps the key to answering these questions is a matter of shifting perspectives and looking for literary parallels to the *Life of Agatha* in late Roman treatments of the virgin in the brothel idea, rather than in Christian treatments of the

¹⁵ "suaderent et quomodo ejus animum immutarent", "Agatha", *Acta Sactorum*, IV (February).

theme. The feminized brothel scene in the *Life of Agatha*, I argue, bears a striking resemblance to the widely popular *Dialogues of the Courtesans* by Lucian, and the depictions of the most sordid brothel scenes in Juvenal's *Satires* in which various mother-daughter prostitute pairs ply their trade. It is then possible to conclude that both authors were well known to the Christian Romans of the Decian persecution that provides the backdrop to Agatha's tale, as well as the third and fourth century imperial Christian world that provides the background to the earliest known written versions of the tale. Lucian's text is Greek, but Roman sources show that his fame and acceptance in the Roman West was well established early in his second century career. Juvenal's text was more clearly Roman in origin, and he uses his idea of what constitutes Rome to spear the prostitutes of his day, arguing that they represent all that is base about Rome because they both corrupt the otherwise noble youth of Rome and bring up their daughters in their sordid trade.

In late Roman sources that link conversations about sexual ideals and maternal ideals, such as Juvenal's *Satires* and Lucian's *Dialogues of the Courtesans*, the very worst prostitutes are mothers who raise their daughters up to be sex workers. Juvenal, for example, stresses the maternal nature of a prostitute when he wants to establish her depraved nature. The worst Roman women, according to Juvenal, were retired prostitutes who taught their daughters to sell their bodies for economic reasons.¹⁶ Likewise, Lucian's *Dialogues of the Courtesans* records multiple imagined conversations between mothers and their daughters in which mothers encourage their children to take up prostitution.¹⁷ These conversations are quite explicit that the mother-madam is leveraging her biological

¹⁶ Juvenal, *Satires*, 6: 239-240.

¹⁷ See discussion in Anise K. Strong, "Working Girls: Mother-Daughter Bonds among Ancient Prostitutes" in *Mothering and Motherhood in Ancient Greece and Rome*, ed. Lauren Petersen and Patricia Salzman-Mitchell (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), 121-140, esp. 125-129.

maternity and the inherent power it gives her over her daughter to force her daughter to become a prostitute. Consider the conversation between Croybyle and her daughter Corinna in Lucian's *Dialogues of the Courtesans* as representative of the broader theme. In this conversation, Croybyle tells her daughter, "We have only your favor with men to depend on for a living." Croybyle's plea to her daughter to take up prostitution is based on the idea that her life as a mother was characterized by constant sacrifice. To pay her back for these years, Croyble argues that her daughter owes Croybyle a debt for her upbringing. "I thought you were now big enough to support your tired mother," states Croybyle, thus establishing Corinna's inevitable fall into prostitution as an act of sexuality arranged by her mother.¹⁸

Throughout such conversations in the *Dialogues of the Courtesans*, the mothers and daughters tend to fall into established literary patterns that serve to denounce the mothers as the villains of the tales on the basis of the fact that they are sexually active. In perhaps the only sustained academic treatment of the theme of mother-daughter prostitution in the ancient world, Anise Strong argues that the mother-madam and her daughters in Lucian's work and the contemporary works of the late Roman world establish the literary construct of the mother-madam as a "hostile, witch-like lenae (madams)" and the daughters as "naïve victims of their mothers' greed and nagging."¹⁹ Lucian and Juvenal's work can be marshaled to the cause of supporting Strong's characterization of the depraved mother-madam as a well-known literary device, but historical evidence also suggests that the practice had real world roots. An Egyptian papyrus from Hermoupolis tells the case of a mother who sold

¹⁸ "...ἄλλη μὲν γὰρ ἡμῖν ἀποστροφή τοῦ βίου οὐκ ἔστιν, ὃ θύγατερ...", "Dialogues of the Courtesans" in *Lucian Volume VII*, Loeb Classical Library, trans. M.D. MacLeod (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961), 355-468, esp. "Croybyle and Corinna" 387-394.

¹⁹ Anise K. Strong, "Working Girls", 125.

her daughter to a pimp in order to have economic support.²⁰ It is thus immediately apparent that the text is patterned off of the rhetorical forms of Romans works, such as Juvenal's *Satires* and Lucian's *Dialogues of the Courtesans* that characterize a woman as a mother-madam in order to represent her as a negative character whose overly sexualized nature makes her the recognizable enemy of good virtuous women everywhere.

This reading of Aphrodisia as the villainous and sexualized foil to virginal virtue in the *Life of Agatha* must be complicated by the broader conversation going on in the Christian world at the time about the "correct" form of maternity. Contemporary to the writing of the *Life of Agatha*, patristic thinkers were arguing that biological maternity was no longer a feminine ideal because reproduction inevitably involved sexuality.

Among the most vocal opponents of physical maternity were Gregory of Nyssa and Ambrose of Milan, who both asserted that biological childbearing reflected a sexuality unsuitable for Christian women. For a childbearing wife, according to Ambrose of Milan, "the more she bears the more she endures" because "she marries and weeps." Her act of giving birth is dangerous, painful, and sinister because "the daughters of this age are conceived and conceive," a fruitless cycle of sexual reproduction.²¹ Gregory of Nyssa echoes the theme, arguing that childbirth was a moment of great suffering for a woman. He writes, "Assume that the moment of childbirth is at hand; it is not the birth of the child, but the presence of death that is thought of and the death of the mother is anticipated."²² According to this anti-physical line of thought, such suffering in childbirth was the lot of women, who, like Eve, gave into temptation and were "condemned to the punishment of

²⁰ "Berlin Papyrus 1024.6-8, exc. G" in Mary Lefkowitz and Maureen Fant, eds., *Women's Life in Greece and Rome*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1992), 125.

²¹ Ambrose of Milan, *Concerning Virginity*, 2:26

²² Gregory Nyssa, *On Virginity*, 3.5.

the pains of childbirth for the sin which she committed.”²³ The natural conclusion was that physical childbirth should be avoided by virtuous Christian women because it was the result of female sexual activity and, ultimately, a physical sign of their un-virginal nature. This article suggests that the inclusion of the mother-madam in the *Life of Agatha* serves as a plank in this broader platform and does so by building from the power of the sexualized mother in Roman literature in order to construct the rhetorical argument that all mothers who have physical children are no better than prostitutes because they indulge in sexual union.

Far better were the fertile virgins explored in Gregory of Nyssa and Ambrose of Milan’s treatises by building from the narrative paradigm of Agatha, who, by avoiding coitus, avoided physical childbirth. Virgin mothers gave birth to spiritual children in an act of faithful devotion that requires no base sexuality. The best virgin mother, according to Gregory of Nyssa “begets immortal children through the Spirit” despite the fact that “she is called barren.”²⁴ The lived world, rooted in biology and reproduction, simply could not truly understand the virgin mother’s idyllic state. For Ambrose of Milan, on the other hand, the “virgin mother” was destined to receive the accolade, “Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bear.”²⁵ These “virgin mothers” who knew nothing of the burden and pain of childbearing, were the epitome of a feminine “pious soul, which esteems all its children, which is rich in successors, barren of all bereavements, which knows no death,

²³ Gregory Nyssa, *On Virginity*, 12.4.

²⁴ Gregory Nyssa, *On Virginity*, 13.3.

²⁵ Luke 23:29 and Ambrose of Milan, *Concerning Virginity*, 1.26.

but has many heirs,” and were the models of womanhood that Ambrose advocated for female believers.²⁶

Clearly, then, the sole biological mother in the *Life of Agatha* — already associated with blatant sexuality and moral depravity through her characterization and the way she fulfills a common literary trope — does not fit any of the ideas in early Christianity about how an ideal Christian mother should appear or show virtue. Rather, she is a clear example of how not to behave as a Christian mother because she is sexual and vulgar. She is a literary foil to Agatha who emerges through the text as an exemplar of both mental martyrdom through her ability to withstand sexual persuasion, and virtuous maternal chastity through the narrative contrast to the sexualized mother.

III. Agatha: Virgin Mother and Role Model

For all that Aphrodisia does to help delineate the ideal virtues of the perfect Christian mother, her character does not speak directly to how a virgin mother should go about mothering. What role should a virgin mother play in the lives of her children? How was she expected to act? How should she mother children she bore only through faith? For an answer to these questions this analysis must turn to how Agatha becomes a virgin mother in the tale and the example she sets for future Christian women about how a non-biological mother should bear and rear Christian children. After all, the goal of the *Life of Agatha* is not only to criticize physical sexualized maternity, but also to lift up Agatha as the model of the ideal “virgin mother” whose Christian maternity is unsullied by the physical realities of biological mothering. In doing so, the text faces many challenges, including the

²⁶ Ambrose of Milan, *Concerning Virginity*, 1.30.

need to establish Agatha as a “virgin mother” — a task that was accomplished through the description of the torture of Agatha’s breasts—and the need to stress that Agatha’s maternity is the ideal form of Christian maternity because it is unsexual, unphysical, and un-biological. By addressing these topics, the text is able to develop the idea that Agatha is an embodiment of all that is best about Christian mothers, an aspirational model given flesh in the narrative in a virgin female form.

What can be seen in the *Life of Agatha* is an attempt to give narrative flesh to the model of the virgin mother, especially in the dramatic breast torture scene that establishes that Agatha has maternal breasts, and thus a maternal self, and that Quintianus acts inappropriately and inhumanly towards the maternal form. Consider how Agatha, after her breasts are cut off, exclaims:

Over felon and cruel tyrant, hast thou no shame to cut off that in a woman which thou didst suck in thy mother, and whereof thou wert nourished? But I have my breasts whole in my soul, of which I nourish all my wits, which I have ordained to serve our Lord Jesus Christ, since the beginning of my youth.²⁷

This conversation about how a son acts towards his mother’s breasts develops an uneasy mother-child relationship between Agatha and her torturer. The idea that Agatha could have breasts “whole in her soul” points to the idea that more than physical forms are at work in the scene.

The first aim of the passage, that of drafting Agatha as a mother and the torturer as a wayward child, is a rhetorical feat accomplished through literary allusion. The breast torture scene in the *Life of Agatha* mimics many of the core rhetorical features of Hecuba’s

²⁷ “...impie crudelis et dire tyranne, non es confuses amputare in femina, quod ipse in matre suxisti? Ego habeo mamillas integras in anima mea, ex quibus nutria omnes sensus meos, quas ab infantia domino consecravi...” , “Agatha”, *Acta Sactorum*, IV (February).

plea to Hector in the *Iliad* to withdraw from the battle in which he would eventually die at the hands of Achilles. In this iconic scene, Hecuba loosens her robe and bears her breast to her city and her son, saying,

Hector, my child! Look – have some respect for this!
Pity your mother too, if I ever gave you the breast
To soothe your troubles, remember it now, dear boy.²⁸

The initial similarities between the two scenes are quite striking. In both scenes a mother figure's breast is exposed in order to cause the child to rethink his actions, and the nude maternal breast serves the narrative function of emphasizing a mother's relationship to her child. The larger impact of what this allusion may bring to this reading of Agatha as a mother figure, however, relies on how the reader understands the act of exposure that lies at the heart of both the Christian torture scene and the Homeric battlefield scene.

Some scholars maintain that the exposure of the maternal breast in the original Homeric scene and its subsequent adaptations is ultimately rooted in an appeal for pity. In this interpretation, the act of baring the breast in the text is a moment of pathos and extreme maternal generosity in which the mother figure risks shame through public nudity in order to beg for her child to have respect for her sorrow.²⁹ Ultimately, these scholars conclude that Roman rhetorical scenes that highlight a nude maternal breast characterize the Roman rhetorical subject as a woman with an incredible sense of maternal sacrifice and duty. Applying this conclusion to the *Life of Agatha* would lead the reader to the idea that

²⁸ “Ἑκτορ τέκνον ἐμὸν τάδε τ’ αἶδεο καί μ’ ἐλέησον / αὐτήν, εἴ ποτέ τοι λαθικηδέα μαζὸν ἐπέσχον: τῶν μνησαί φίλε τέκνον”, *Iliad* 22. 82-84, translation from Robert Fagles, trans., *Homer: The Iliad* (New York: Penguin, 1998).

²⁹ Dennis MacDonald, “The Breasts of Hecuba and Those of the Daughters of Jerusalem Luke’s Transvaluation of a Famous Iliadic Scene” in *Ancient Fiction: The Matrix of Early Christian and Jewish Narrative*, eds. Jo-Ann Brant, Charles Hedrick, Chris Shea (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 239-254, esp. 245.; see also Dennis MacDonald, *The Gospels and Homer: Imitations of Greek Epic in Mark and Luke-Acts* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 83-84 and Maureen Alden, *Homer Beside Himself: Para-Narratives in the Iliad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 190.

the baring of Agatha's breasts could also be part of an attempt to characterize the virgin martyr as a woman with extreme generosity of her maternal spirit. The breast here is representative of maternity as a whole, and functions as a rhetorical stand in, or synecdoche, for all of the laudable sacrificial qualities ascribed to mothers in the ancient world. The violent actions that the torturer takes by cutting off the exposed breast are rendered vividly inhumane against this backdrop because he is grotesquely mutilating a female body part that functions as a synecdoche for parental sacrifice.

Having thus followed this line of argument and parsed how it can enhance this understanding of how the scene develops Agatha as a mother figure in the text, I must also address a prevalent alternative reading of Hecuba's exposed breast that draws attention to the potential for sexual misunderstandings generated by the nude body. Larissa Bonfante and Patricia Salzman-Mitchell, for example, have explored how the display of the maternal breast in late Roman literature built from and exploited taboos around the mother, especially those taboos having to do with sexual urges.³⁰ In the Homeric text, the nude maternal breast is revealed to an adult male audience, raising questions about whether the female maternal body should be read as a sexual or motherly object because Hector is no longer an infant. Elsewhere, Nicole Loraux has argued that there is no way to make a distinction between a motherly and a sexual way of exposing the maternal breast in the literature of the time period, a point echoed by Salzman-Mitchell when she concludes that Hecuba's scene in the *Iliad* conveys "ambiguous, and possibly sexual, overtones."³¹

³⁰ Larissa Bonfante, "Nursing Mothers in Classical Art" in Ann Olga Koloski-Ostrow and Claire L. Lyons, eds., *Naked Truths: Women, Sexuality, and Gender in Classical Art and Archaeology* (London: Routledge, 1997), 174-196 ; Patricia Salzman-Mitchell, "Breast-feeding Mothers in Greek and Latin Literature" in *Mothering and Motherhood in Ancient Greece and Rome*, ed. Lauren Petersen and Patricia Salzman-Mitchell (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), 141-164.

³¹ Nicole Loraux, "Matrem nudam: Quelques versions grecques", *L'Écrit du Temps*, 11 (1986) 90-102, esp.100;

The argument put forth by Salzman-Mitchell, Bonfante, and Loraux offers intriguing possibilities for understanding Agatha's breasts, especially when it is remembered that the exposure of her maternal breasts seems to sit uneasily in the narrative against the text's backdrop of lust and thwarted passion. There is a real danger, however, in reading Agatha's scene as one of just sexual titillation because the language used by Agatha referencing suckling and nourishing sharply reminds the reader that the nude body of Agatha is to be considered only in maternal terms. Roman literature includes many scenes in which the exposed maternal breast is understood entirely in nurturing terms, even when the object is an adult male, such as in the depiction of *Caritas Romana*, in which a daughter nurses her elderly imprisoned father.³² Perhaps it is best to apply Salzman-Mitchell and Loraux's paradigm loosely to these and Agatha's scenes by following her claim that agentive action is the deciding factor that could cause the display of the nude maternal breast to become inappropriately sexualized. It is not just the presence of the nude maternal body in literature that sexualizes the scene, but rather the inappropriate reaction of others to the nudity that creates an uneasy connection between the sexual and the maternal.

Whether the exposure of the maternal breast is construed as an act of pathos or an act of erotic scopophilia, the reaction of the torturer to that breast is characterized as repulsive. In Agatha's own statement to her torturer, he has "drawn and cut off" her maternal breast, characterizing him as deviant, both if the breast is understood as symbol of altruistic sacrifice and if the breast is a sexual organ that has been violently exposed against the will of Agatha.³³ The suggestion is put forth rhetorically that Agatha's breasts

Salzman-Mitchell, "Breast-feeding Mothers in Greek and Latin Literature", 145.

³² Valerius Maximus, *De Factis Dicitisque Memorabilibus*, IX, 5.4.7.

³³ "Agatha", *Acta Sactorum*, IV (February).

should be treated with the same respect and honor given to the breasts of one's own mother—Agatha and the reader's mother elide together to the extent that Agatha is represented as a maternal being and becomes a paradigmatic model of how the ideal Christian mother should comport herself. As a part of this process, the reader becomes complicit with the narrator's condemnation of Quintianus and is forced to come to the conclusion that his actions are fundamentally incompatible with the Christian ideal of virgin motherhood that is being constructed through the tale.

Finally, the martyr tale's ultimate point that a virgin martyr can articulate the virtues of ideal motherhood is further underscored through the second part of Agatha's speech, in which she states:

But I have my breasts whole in my soul, of which I nourish all my wits, which I have ordained to serve our Lord Jesus Christ, since the beginning of my youth.³⁴

The suggestion here that Agatha has an alternative set of nourishing breasts that exist on a spiritual level provides the final and most clear statement valorizing Agatha as an example of virgin motherhood. With this framework in mind, it is possible to see three different ways that the cultural work of Agatha as a mother is being accomplished. First, the narrator makes the suggestion through Agatha's rebuttal that every woman has two bodies: one tied to the physical plane, liable to become an object of lust, and one tied to the soul that is associated purely with the rhetoric of nourishment. Second, the text establishes that the soul form of a woman, or her spiritualized nature, is a superior and maternal form. The physical maternal body runs the risk of being sexualized based on the circumstances and audience. The spiritual maternal body, one that is dedicated to Christ, is couched in purely

³⁴ "...Ego habeo mamillas integras in anima mea, ex quibus nutria omnes sensus meos, quas ab infantia domino consecravi..." , "Agatha", *Acta Sactorum*, IV (February).

nurturing motherly terms. Agatha argues that the breasts she has whole in her soul, for example, “nourish all my wits” – they provide sustenance to her, they feed her spiritual nature, and they provide her with the strength she needs. These are maternal breasts that she has in her perfect soul that are – to suggest a phrase – spiritually lactating and embodying a maternal nature that allows her to grow in faith. The third thing to note is that Agatha’s maternalized spiritual form is dedicated to religious service. She has given it over and “ordained it” to serve the Christian God. Ultimately, the idea emerges that Agatha uses her spiritual maternal body in service of the Lord and that this offering greatly pleases the Christian God. The soul based on a spiritualized form of motherhood is thus favored by the Deity and marshaled into service of the Christian God as a paragon of aspirational femininity.

Thus, the expectation for Agatha and all Christian women following her example is that they will find a way to practice mothering without biological motherhood. This paradigm hinges on the fact that they will give birth to children by bringing them to a life of faith. The notion of motherhood is abstracted to such a degree in this text that birth becomes the act of painfully bringing a new life of faith to a follower, and mothering becomes the action of leading these children through example of sustained faith in the face of adversity. The childbearing and childrearing traditionally associated with sexual reproduction are assumed into the paradigm of spiritual mothering so that a virgin spiritual mother can perform the same basic tasks as a sexual mother without giving up her biological virginity. In Agatha’s story, the prototypical form of this pattern of mothering is found in the relationship forged between Agatha as the mother and her observers as her devout, inspired children who are birthed into faith as result of her example. Consider how,

for instance, the text stresses that her death led to direct conversions “wherof the Jews and Saracens began to sing and worship the sepluchre of the tomb of Agatha” or the fact that the readers of her tale should pray to the saint for her grace.³⁵ These populations are established as her children in the text because she nurtures and raises them, exhorts and teaches them, all as the ideal mother should.

IV. Conclusions

In sum, the *Life of Agatha* stresses how she and her devout female followers of the early Christian era were expected to exemplify the emerging ideal of virgin motherhood. The women who fell under this category were represented as earning the praise typically ascribed to mothers and exemplifying a bevy of maternal virtues, all without ever giving birth biologically. In this particular text, the characterizations of Agatha and her fellow narrative figures develop a paradigm for Christian womanhood that emphasizes that sexualized maternity does not fit the early Christian vision of the perfect mother. Agatha is a stark contrast to Aphrodisia, the madam of a brothel and a biological mother. Aphrodisia is thoroughly denounced in the tale for being overly attached to her sexual nature, and the narrative builds on contemporary literary patterns to suggest to the reader that any woman who reproduced biologically had a strong affinity to this prostitute madam. Agatha, as the martyr heroine, shows herself able to resist the powerful lure of sexuality in order to advocate virginity through her passion. She is able to maintain her virginity despite both the promise of pleasure and the threat of pain, a difficult mental trial that establishes her as a martyr. What emerges is the conclusion that a Christian mother should be everything that Aphrodisia is not, and all that Agatha is: virginal, maternal, and imbued with martyr-virtue.

³⁵ “Agatha”, *Acta Sactorum*, IV (February).

After it establishes benchmarks for the appearances and virtues of the perfect Christian virgin mother through the contrast between Agatha and Aphrodisia, the narrative begins the complicated work of establishing Agatha as a virgin mother. It does so by suggesting that she has a maternal soul, complete with a set of spiritually nourishing breasts, which has found favor with the Christian God. It also stresses her ability to inspire others to convert to Christianity or to become more devout in their faith, suggesting that potential converts would function as children to her spiritual mothering. The moral for the early Christian reader is that they too can please the Divine by inculcating a sense of spiritual motherhood within their souls and maintaining perfect virginal chastity of their bodies. This investigation is thus able to conclude that this case study provides an invaluable glimpse into how virgin motherhood was conceptualized for early Christian women and why exactly women would be told to imitate the example of Agatha.

Bibliography

Alden, Maureen. *Homer Beside Himself: Para-Narratives in the Iliad*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Ambrose of Milan, "Concerning Virginity" in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, transl. H. de Romestin, E. de Romestin, and H.T.F. Duckworth, Vol 10. Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing, 1896.

Ambrose of Milan, *Letter LXIII To the Church of Vercellae* in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, transl. H. de Romestin, E. de Romestin, and H.T.F. Duckworth, Vol 10. Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing, 1896.

"Berlin Papyrus 1024.6-8, exc. G" in Mary Lefkowitz and Maureen Fant, eds., *Women's Life in Greece and Rome*, 2nd ed. Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1992.

Blank, Hanne. *Virgin: The Untouched History*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2007.

Bonfante, Larissa. "Nursing Mothers in Classical Art" in Ann Olga Koloski-Ostrow and Claire L. Lyons, eds., *Naked Truths: Women, Sexuality, and Gender in Classical Art and Archaeology*. London: Routledge, 1997. 174-196.

Bonner, Stanley. *Education in Ancient Rome: From the Elder Cato to the Younger Pliny*. New York: Routledge, 2012.

Boyarin, Daniel. *Dying for God*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999.

Carrasco, Magdalena Elizabeth. "An Early Illustrated Manuscript of the Passion of Agatha (Paris, Bibl. Nat., MS lat 5594)", *Gesta*, 24:1 (1985), 19-32.

Caruana, A.A. *Ancient Pagan Tombs and Christian Cemeteries in the Islands of Malta Explored and Surveyed*. Malta: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1989.

Cicero, "de Sua Domo" in *The Orations of Marcus Tullius Cicero*, trans. C.D.Yonge. London: George Bell & Sons, 1891. 144-145.

Delehaye, Hippolyte. "Agatha" in *Commentarius perpetuus in Martyrologium Hieronymianum ad recensionem H. Quenti* in *Acta Sanctorum XXIV*. Brussels: 1931.

"Dialogues of the Courtesans" in *Lucian Volume VII*, Loeb Classical Library, trans. M.D. MacLeod. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961. 355-468,

Easton, Martha. "Saint Agatha and the Sanctification of Sexual Violence", *Studies in Iconography*, 16 (1994), 83-118.

Fagles, Robert. trans., *Homer: The Iliad*. New York: Penguin, 1998.

Gregory Nyssa, "On Virginity" in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. Vol. 5. Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing, 1893.

Kelly, Kathleen Coyne. *Performing Virginitiy and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages*. New York: Routledge, 2002.

Loroux, Nicole. "Matrem nudam: Quelques versions greques", *L'Ecrit du Temps*, 11 (1986) 90- 102.

MacDonald, Dennis. *Does the New Testament Imitate Homer? Four Case Studies from the Acts of the Apostles*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003.

— "The Breasts of Hecuba and Those of the Daughters of Jerusalem Luke's Transvaluation of a Famous Iliadic Scene" in *Ancient Fiction: The Matrix of Early Christian and Jewish Narrative*, eds. Jo-Ann Brant, Charles Hedrick, Chris Shea. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005. 239-254.

— *The Gospels and Homer: Imitations of Greek Epic in Mark and Luke-Acts*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014.

Prudentius, "The Passion of Agnes" in *Peristephanon Liber*.

Salzman-Mitchell, Patricia. "Breast-feeding Mothers in Greek and Latin Literature" in *Mothering and Motherhood in Ancient Greece and Rome*, ed. Lauren Petersen and Patricia Salzman-Mitchell. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012. 141-164.

Strong, Anise K. "Working Girls: Mother-Daughter Bonds among Ancient Prostitutes" in *Mothering and Motherhood in Ancient Greece and Rome*, ed. Lauren Petersen and Patricia Salzman-Mitchell. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012. 121-140.

Szarmach, Paul. *Writing Women Saints in Anglo-Saxon England*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013.

Valerius Maximus, *De Factis Dicitisque Memorabilibus*, IX, 5.4.7.

Voragine, Jacobus de. *Legenda Aurea*, trans. William Caxton. London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1931.

Walsh, Milton. *In Memory of Me: A Meditation on the Roman Canon*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011.