

ADVICE TO A SISTER: AVITUS ON CHASTITY (*DE CONSOLATORIA CASTITATIS LAUDE*)

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As a poet, Avitus of Vienne is best known for his biblical epic, De spiritalis historiae gestis, but he also wrote a poem of exhortation addressed to his sister, Fuscina, a dedicated virgin. That poem is given the title De virginitate in the influential MGH edition, following one group of manuscripts, but in a second group it is entitled De consolatoria castitatis laude, a title attested in a dedicatory letter Avitus wrote for the poem and adopted by its most recent editor. The title is problematic, however. Why castitas rather than virginitas, and how is the poem consolatory since it refers to no grief experienced by its addressee? The paper addresses these questions by exploring the language of chastity and consolation. It also analyzes the model of womanly virtue that the poet holds up for his sister: one that, through the biblical and saintly examples of Deborah, Susanna, and Eugenia, proposes a kind of heroism, embodied in mental resolve, strength of character, and the maintenance of moral integrity. In more than one passage Avitus contrasts womanly resolve with male irresolution and weakness. Virtus, despite its etymological associations, lies with the women. By comparison, references to males or the manly (viri, virilis) tend to take on ironic or subversive connotations in such contexts.

Alcimus Ecdicius Avitus, bishop of Vienne from about 490 to 518, is best known as a staunch defender of Christian orthodoxy, especially in his exchanges with the Burgundian king Gundobad, an Arian. A large number of his letters survive, including correspondence with Gundobad, as well as fragments of other prose works, written in a difficult, somewhat knotted, style that can present challenges to the reader.¹ In addition, however, Avitus was a gifted poet, whose poems, specifically the *Spiritual History* (*De spiritalis historiae gestis*, hereafter *SHG*), his five-book Old Testament biblical epic, enjoyed canonical status in the Middle Ages.² Composed in the Virgilian-inflected idiom typical of late Latin poetry, the work is more immediately accessible than Avitus's prose and retains an appeal for the modern reader.

The vast majority of the manuscripts of Avitus's poetry include, in addition to the five books of the biblical epic, a further poem, which they number

¹ For a valuable detailed study of Avitus's prose style, see *Avitus of Vienne, Letters and Selected Prose*, trans. Danuta Shanzer and Ian Wood (Liverpool, 2002), 70–85.

² See Reinhart Herzog, *Die Biblepik der lateinischen Spätantike: Formgeschichte einer erbaulichen Gattung* (Munich, 1975), xix–xxiii; and *Avit de Vienne, Histoire spirituelle*, ed. and trans. Nicole Hecquet-Noti, SC 444 and 492, 2 vols. (Paris, 1999–2005), 1:86–92.

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consecutively with those books as book six of Avitus's poetic corpus. Despite this numbering the poem is clearly a separate work, differing in subject matter and equipped with a separate dedicatory letter, to Bishop Apollinaris of Valence, Avitus's brother, as was the five-book *SHG*. The poem is addressed to Avitus's younger sister, Fuscina, who had been dedicated to virginity at her birth and, according to the text, took her vows at the age of ten.³ The poem has a number of unusual features, but has not been much studied.⁴ It will be the subject of the present paper.

THE TITLE

In the first fully critical edition of Avitus's works, that of Rudolph Peiper in the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* (1883), this poem receives the title *De virginitate*, following the Gallican family of manuscripts.⁵ This title suggests an affiliation with the longstanding tradition in patristic prose of treatises on Christian virginity, but the choice of verse for his poem already sets it apart from earlier writings on virginity. Avitus's would be the first verse treatment of the subject, to be followed in the later sixth century (about 570) by Venantius Fortunatus, with a poem on the same subject probably composed on the occasion of the nun Agnes becoming abbess of the convent of the Holy Cross in Poitiers, with which he was closely associated.⁶ The choice of verse perhaps owes something to the

³ For the practice of child oblation at or before birth, see Mayke de Jong, *In Samuel's Image: Child Oblation in the Early Medieval West* (Leiden, 1996), 20–22. Avitus evokes the canonical biblical exemplar for this practice, comparing Fuscina's situation to that of Samuel (*De consolatoria castitatis laude*, lines 59–62).

⁴ Apart from textual studies taking in the whole of Avitus's poetic corpus, I know of only two articles that predate Hecquet-Noti's edition of the poem: Angelo Roncoroni, "Note al *De virginitate* di Avito di Vienne," *Athenaeum* 51 (1973): 122–34, primarily studying the relation of the poem to earlier patristic works on virginity; and Peter Flury, "Juvenecus und Alcimus Avitus," *Philologus* 132 (1988): 286–96, comparing Avitus's treatment of three Gospel episodes—the women at the tomb, parable of the talents, and the wise and foolish virgins — with the same episodes in Juvenecus. Nicole Hecquet-Noti's introduction to her edition, *Avit de Vienne, Éloge consolatoire de la chasteté (Sur la virginité)*, SC 546 (Paris, 2011), 9–93, provides the most helpful approach to the poem. There is also a later paper by Hecquet-Noti, "Vertus de la moniale, vertus royales: Bible et réception du *De virginitate* d'Avit de Vienne," in *Poésie et Bible aux IV^e–VI^e s.: Actes de la session scientifique de l'Assemblée générale de l'Association 'Textes pour l'Histoire de l'Antiquité Tardive'*, Paris, École des Chartes 8 octobre 2016, ed. Michele Cutino, *Revue des Études tardo-antiques*, Supplément 4 (2017), 135–46.

⁵ *Alcimi Aviti opera quae supersunt*, ed. Rudolph Peiper, MGH, *Auctores antiquissimi* 6.2 (Berlin, 1883), 274–94. Isidore slightly adapts this title for the poem in his *De viris illustribus* 36, naming it *De laude virginitatis* (PL 83, col. 1101A).

⁶ *Carmen* 8.3, ed. Marc Reydellet, in *Venance Fortunat, Poèmes*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1994–2004), 3:129–46.

personal and occasional nature of the work. The work takes the form of an address to his sister, Fuscina, rather than more generalized instruction in the proper conduct of the Christian virgin. She is addressed continually throughout the poem.⁷ It may be, too, that Avitus welcomed the special pleasure that verse could give an educated reader.⁸ In the body of the poem, he records that Fuscina was knowledgeable in “all the sacred songs our poets have composed” (“si quid sacrum nostri cecinere poetae,” line 409) and in the prefatory lines that begin his poem he invites his sister to “find diversion in [his] labored verse and by studying it relax [her] mind” (“tunc licet excusso libeat tibi ludere versu / atque fatigatam meditando absolvere mentem,” lines 9–10). The second of the two families that make up the tradition of Avitus’s poetry, however, gives a different title, *De consolatoria castitatis laude* (hereafter *Cons.*). This is the name Avitus himself gives to the poem in his dedicatory letter. As Nicole Hecquet-Noti points out, just as the title for Avitus’s biblical epic, *De spiritualis historiae gestis*, derives from a letter of the poet, in that case to a different Apollinaris, son of Sidonius Apollinaris, so the dedicatory letter to the second work, addressed to his brother, should in the same way be the authoritative source for its title.⁹

Here the problems start. As Jacques Fontaine observes in his survey of the Christian Latin poetry of late antiquity, the title is “scarcely translatable” (*peu traduisible*): literally, “Concerning the consolatory praise of chastity”—but what does that mean?¹⁰ What is “consolatory praise”—who is consoled and for what—and why chastity rather than virginity? Is it just a synonym or is there further significance?

CHASTITY

Hecquet-Noti addresses the second of these questions in passing.¹¹ She suggests that Avitus chose *castitas* rather than *virginitas* to conform to the status of the three major female models, beside the virgin Mary, that the poet cites for his sister: Deborah, Eugenia, and Susanna. Of these three Deborah and Susanna were not virgins, but rather wives (Judg. 4:4 and Dan. 13:2). Hecquet-Noti’s

⁷ By comparison, Ambrose’s *De virginibus* is also dedicated to a sister, Marcellina, who was a Christian virgin, but she is only addressed occasionally and is far from a constant presence in the poem. The work is edited and translated by Franco Gori, *Sant’ Ambrogio, opere morali: Verginità e vedovanza*, 2 vols. (Milan, 1989) 1:99–241.

⁸ So, for instance, Sedulius, in his letter to Macedonius, attributes his decision to write a Gospel poem in verse, the *Carmen paschale*, to the special appeal of poetry and the pleasure it gave readers, speaking of *poeticae deliciae* and *carminum voluptates*. See Sedulius, *Paschale Carmen*, ed. Johann Huemer, in *Sedulii Opera Omnia*, CSEL 10 (Vienna, 1885), 5.

⁹ Hecquet-Noti, *Avit de Vienne, Éloge*, 49. It is interesting that in her later article, “Vertus de la moniale,” she reverts to the more manageable *De virginitate*.

¹⁰ Jacques Fontaine, *Naissance de la poésie dans l’occident chrétien: Esquisse d’une histoire de la poésie latine chrétienne du IIIe au VIe siècle* (Paris, 1981), 273.

¹¹ Hecquet-Noti, *Avit de Vienne, Éloge*, 49.

argument, though not made explicit, presumably relies on the fact that patristic authors regularly speak of a “marital chastity” (*castitas coniugalis*) that celebrates exemplary conjugal fidelity without excluding sexual activity between the partners.¹² The very choice of such women for a letter to a dedicated virgin suggests that Avitus is not primarily concerned with presenting Fuscina with models of sexual continence. Even Eugenia, the Roman martyr, though presumably a virgin, is never so described by Avitus. She is a *mulier* (line 505), who, when she dresses as a man to become abbot of a monastery, “conceals her motherhood, taking on the role of a father” (“cum . . . fieret abbas / atque patrem complens celaret tegmine matrem,” lines 506–507).¹³ Only at the last, after successfully refuting the charges leveled against her, it is said that she “always preserved safely her vow to be chaste” (“semper tuta fuit casti custodia voti,” line 528).

In one passage in the poem Avitus does give some indication of what is at stake in preferring *castitas* to *virginitas* in the title:

Sic et virginitas sacro devota pudori
 indiget adiunctis virtutibus et, nisi mentem
 intactam servans casto cum corpore iungat,
 concumbit vitiis nec castam dicere carnem
 iure potest, animus quam sic corrumpit adulter.
 Ira, furor, maeror, livor, discordia, luxus,¹⁴
 lingua duplex, constricta manus, laxata voluntas
 moechantur cum corde hominis, tum semine turpi
 fetus mortis alunt. En quo perducitur omnis,
 nomine virgineo quae se dum iactitat, intus
 criminibus gravidam nescit turgescere mentem (lines 430–40).¹⁵

In this passage, Avitus concerns himself with a virginity that exists in name only. It is presented as an interpretation of the biblical story of the barren fig-tree that is the subject of the preceding lines, a tree that produced only leaves and no fruit

¹² For this sense of *castitas*, see ThLL 3:540.80–541.39; and Kate Cooper, *The Fall of the Roman Household* (Cambridge, 2007), 170.

¹³ Motherhood here suggests a certain maturity and status; it does not necessarily mean that she had had children.

¹⁴ The asyndetic list of violent emotions recalls a similar passage in the *SHG* (2.31–32), which in turn echoes a line-ending from Juvenal (1.85).

¹⁵ “In the same way virginity too, when it has taken a vow of sacred modesty, needs to maintain the accompanying virtues and, unless it preserves a pure mind along with a chaste body, succumbs to vice and cannot rightly call the flesh chaste that adultery of the mind has so corrupted. Anger and passion, grief, envy, discord, and luxury, a deceitful tongue, a tight fist, a dissolute will, all commit adultery with the human heart, and from a vile insemination nurture death as their offspring. See what the end is for all who exalt themselves with the name of a virgin, but are unaware that within their mind is swollen, pregnant with sin.”

and was condemned by Jesus to dry up and wither away (Matt. 21:18–19; and Mark 11:13–14 and 20–21). The false virgin is like that tree, making a show of her virgin status, but failing to match words with actions (“adgravat hoc etiam, ni dictum facta sequantur,” line 429).¹⁶ The consequences of such a deficiency become clear in the immediately following biblical parable in the *Cons.* of the wise and foolish virgins (lines 441–502; based on Matt. 25:1–13), where the foolish virgins correspond to Avitus’s virgins in name only.

Central to the distinction Avitus is making is the opposition between mind and body. A person may be physically chaste, that is, a virgin, but lack mental chastity. If such is the case, he argues, it is not possible even to speak of physical chastity, because the flesh is corrupted by the sinful soul (lines 430–34). To reinforce his argument, Avitus consistently applies language literally used for sexual relations and pregnancy to the mental chastity that in his argument is indispensable for true virginity. The virgin should preserve “an unsullied mind” (“mentem intactam,” lines 431–32; *intacta* is regularly used of virginity); her mind should not engage in adultery (“animus . . . adulter,” line 434) or have indecent relations (“moechantur,” line 437) with vice, for in so doing it suffers a degrading insemination and produces death as its offspring (“semine turpi / fetus mortis alunt,” lines 437–38). The final lines of the passage sum up Avitus’s warning to the woman who is a virgin in name only, employing the same metaphorical language: it is as though her mind becomes bloated like the body of a pregnant woman — she is impregnated, though, by sins (“criminibus gravidam . . . turgescere mentem,” line 440).

The sustained metaphor, by applying the language of literal pregnancy to spiritual values, dramatizes the case Avitus is making, that true virginity is a quality of mental as well as bodily integrity. This passage may help to explain why he employs the word *castitas* rather than *virginitas* in his title. His subject is the moral uprightness and strength of character that are required of virtuous Christians in general, and as such are indispensable too for the Christian virgin, qualities summed up in the word *castitas*. This broader sense of *castitas* persists throughout antiquity alongside the common narrowing of its meaning specifically to sexual continence.¹⁷

¹⁶ Compare the lesson Avitus draws from the parable of the fig tree (lines 425–27), that one should “not declare oneself Christ’s servant in words alone, when the name is counterfeit and not put into practice in life” (“nomine conficto vivens operatio desit,” line 427).

¹⁷ The *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae* and the *Oxford Latin Dictionary* both begin their articles with this more inclusive sense of the word. In his *Controversiae* 1.2.13, the Elder Seneca recalls the rhetorician Porcius Latro bringing up just this question, of the meaning of *castitas*, “whether chastity should relate only to virginity or to abstinence from all shameful and degrading things” (“utrum castitas tantum ad virginitatem referatur an ad omnium turpium et obscenarum rerum abstinentiam”).

CONSOLATION

The second problematic element in Avitus's title is the adjective *consolatoria*, "consolatory." It is not immediately clear who is being consoled or why. Typically, the addressee of a consolation has suffered some cause for distress that the speaker or writer is attempting to assuage. In the rhetorical set speech, the *consolatio*, the cause of the distress is normally the death of a loved one and there are certain standard arguments that the consoler will deploy.¹⁸ Avitus's poem, however, does not follow that model. It begins with a proem addressed to Fuscina and employing the standard *topos* of Christian Latin poetry in which the truth of Christian poetry is contrasted with the falsehood of its pagan predecessors (lines 1–18). Avitus then launches into the elements of a conventional speech of praise, describing his sister's birth and early life, culminating with the vows she took at age ten, when he has her mother addressing her and enumerating as examples for her daughter female members of the family who have taken the same vows. In so doing he incorporates the topic of ancestry that is an expected element when praising an individual. But at that point the poet pulls himself up short: "This modest page has not assumed the task of praising you. In the fullness of time, when your life comes to a victorious end, then your praise will be better sung" (lines 111–13). It is then, he anticipates, that she will receive her full reward (line 114).¹⁹ Avitus goes on: "But at this time it is right for those concerned to counsel you with words of caution, to share and discuss with you their anxieties, and to aid your endeavors with words of exhortation" (lines 115–17).²⁰ These lines, in fact, describe quite accurately the tone of the rest of the poem. It is largely paraenetic in nature, devoted more to "words of exhortation" ("hortantia dicta") than to words of celebration, leading the poet at one point to seek pardon for his hortatory tone, attributing it to his love for the addressee ("tu modo da veniam, qui te exhortatur, amori," line 141).

It is true, as Hecquet-Noti points out, that *consolatio* and *exhortatio* are closely related; Augustine, in particular, frequently associates them.²¹ Effective consolation seeks to rally the spirits of the grieving party, both by argument and exhortation. The *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae* provides a useful way of understanding

¹⁸ The fullest catalog of these arguments in Christian literature is Peter von Moos, *Consolatio: Studien zur mittellateinischen Trostliteratur über den Tod und zum Problem der christlichen Trauer*, 4 vols. (Munich, 1971–72).

¹⁹ "Non haec parva tuam suscepit pagina laudem. / Exitus impleto veniet cum tempore victor, / laus melius canitur, cum iam clamante triumpho / consummata tuis reddentur praemia factis."

²⁰ "Nunc decet attonitos caute te voce monere, / sollicitas tecum partiri ac volvere curas / atque iuvare tuos hortantia dicta labores."

²¹ Hecquet-Noti, *Avit de Vienne, Éloge* (n. 4 above), 50; and ThLL 5:1444.17–23, s.v. *exhortatorius*.

consolation. It glosses the verb *consolari* as *animum confirmare* and the noun *consolatio* as *levatio doloris*.²² Combining the two we arrive at the role of the *consolatio* as providing *animi confirmatio adversus dolorem*, “reinforcement for the mind in the face of grief.” What makes the *Cons.* anomalous as a work of consolation is that no grief or distress is attributed to its recipient Fuscina. On the other hand, *confirmatio animi*, “reinforcement of the mind,” is an accurate characterization of the majority of the poem. A letter from the fifth or sixth century, falsely attributed to Sulpicius Severus and addressed to one Claudia, shows some similarity to this Avitan usage.²³ The writer, a male ascetic writing to his “sister,” probably here his spiritual sister, speaks of the mutual consolation they give each other. The letter itself embodies such consolation, which takes the form of an exhortation to stay true to her profession.²⁴ In this case too no specific cause of grief is mentioned. Instead, the writer exhorts his addressee to remain true to her chosen life.

Most of the exemplary figures and biblical episodes narrated by Avitus serve in some way or other to bolster the resolution of his sister. The life Fuscina has chosen requires “intense labor” (“attento . . . labore,” line 285); lassitude and idleness (“torpida . . . otia,” line 287; “somno . . . inerti,” line 289) are inconsistent with a life of virtue.²⁵ The parable of the talents dramatizes this moral in the fate of the idle servant (“segnem,” line 324; “serve piger,” line 325; and “inerti,” line 334), who buries his talent rather than putting it to productive use. So later the foolish virgins find themselves caught short without sufficient oil in their lamps because “laziness dulled their foolish wits” (“stolidum lentavit inertia sensum,” line 448).

The virgin is to shake off *inertia* and vigorously engage with the devil and his serpentine wiles (lines 370–78) in the manner of *Pudicitia* combating *Libido* in Prudentius’s *Psychomachia* (lines 40–108), a figure Avitus admiringly dubs “virginity under arms” (“virginitas armata,” line 374). The biblical figure of Deborah, as victorious leader of the Israelite army, provides a model for such energetic *fortitudo* of the kind needed for the trials that the chaste woman will be subject to from the devil. Complementing this, the stories of Eugenia, who refutes a false accusation of unchastity, and of Susanna, who resists the harassment and blackmail of two elders who are seeking to force her to grant them sexual favors, both illustrate the qualities of character and resolution required

²² ThLL 4:479.35, s.v. *consolor*; and 4:476.27, s.v. *consolatio*.

²³ The letter receives the title *Epistula Sancti Severi presbyteri ad Claudiam sororem suam de ultimo iudicio* in the sole surviving manuscript. See the edition of Karl Halm, CSEL 1 (Vienna, 1866), 219–23. For this work, see Cooper, *The Fall of the Roman Household* (n. 12 above), 136–41. I am grateful to Professor Cooper for drawing my attention to this text.

²⁴ *Epistula ad Claudiam*, ed. Halm, 219.12 and 219.22–220.1.

²⁵ Avitus regularly contrasts the need for *labor* with the dangers of *otia* and *pigritia* (see too lines 117, 132–33, and 160).

for the struggle: “constancy of mind has raised girls, weak though they may be in body, from time to time to heaven” (“*fragiles nam carne puellas / protulit interdum caelo constantia mentis,*” lines 501–502); such is the case with Eugenia and Susanna. The experience of Joseph in Egypt, briefly summarized between the narratives of the two women, illustrates the rewards to be expected from such mental resolve. He advances from prison to a kingdom, winning there “the rewards for his steadfastness of heart” (“*praemia servati cordis,*” line 548). Joseph’s elevation prefigures the glory the faithful virgin can expect to receive in heaven.²⁶

At this point the temptation is strong to speculate about the circumstances that evoked such counsel from Avitus, in particular whether there was something in Fuscina’s situation that prompted her brother’s “words of exhortation.” Both Shanzer and Wood and also Hecquet-Noti raise the possibility that she was impatient with her life as a dedicated virgin and was eager for the status of a married woman.²⁷ But with the possible exception of the passage on the perils of childbirth there is little in the poem to suggest that Fuscina is attracted to married life. Indeed, at least two of the exemplary figures in the poem are married women, a choice hardly designed to deter from marriage. There are, though, a number of passages that can be read as expressions of concern about Fuscina’s situation. The poet speaks of his anxieties (“*sollicitas . . . curas,*” line 116) and the treacherous nature of the life she has chosen (“*lubrica . . . vita,*” line 119), for “the present world brings nothing that is not uncertain and no secure peace is granted for perishable flesh” (“*nil non incertum praesentia saecula ducunt / nec secure datur requies in carne caduca,*” lines 122–23). He also emphasizes the danger “if the desire for the struggle for holiness slackens and idle relaxation undermines a customary commitment” (“*nam studium sancti laxet si forte laboris / pigraque consuetas dissolvant otia curas, / labitur in praeceptis damnosae gloria vitae,*” lines 132–34), for, he says, any pause in the struggle must lead to backsliding: “Virtue cannot remain stationary: whoever does not acquire it by moving forward, loses it by regressing” (“*stare nequit meritum: si non acquirit eundo, / amittit rediens,*” lines 135–36). These passages all come in a section explicitly identified as exhortation to his sister (line 141). The theme recurs again at the end of the poem, where he again addresses his sister directly: “So, my sister, when the world flares up with its own concerns, never fail to maintain the role

²⁶ Avitus had previously anticipated similar posthumous *praemia* for Fuscina on line 114. He exaggerates Joseph’s final status in Egypt, speaking of him “exchang[ing] exile for a kingdom, slavery for becoming a prince” (“*exilium regno commutet, principe servum,*” line 547).

²⁷ Shanzer and Wood, *Avitus* (n. 1 above), 262–63; and Hecquet-Noti, *Avit de Vienne, Éloge* (n. 4 above), 56. Hecquet-Noti, 67–69, raises the possibility that a specific historical event prompted backsliding on Fuscina’s part, citing a passage from a twelfth-century life of Fuscina, but finally dismisses the theory in the absence of support in the text of the poem.

you have chosen” (“sic, germana, suis dum flagrant saecula curis, / electam servare tibi non desine partem,” lines 646–47).

These passages might suggest that Fuscina was in danger of succumbing to some form of worldly pursuit, inconsistent with Avitus’s understanding of the requirements of her calling. When he speaks of the danger of regressing (lines 135–36), the language is consistent with a concern about Fuscina’s slackening commitment to her chosen life. Taken together with his characterization of a virginity that exists in name only, perhaps Fuscina’s backsliding, if such there was, involved not a disposition to abandon the status of a virgin, but a failure to conform to the manner of life expected of someone in her orders and a susceptibility to some form of worldly temptation. Again, there is a parallel with the *Epistula ad Claudiam*. The addressee of that letter is specifically counselled against backsliding. She is urged “not to return to what she has put behind her, not to desire what she has scorned, and not to look back once she has put her hand to the plow” (“ne transcurta repetas, ne contempta desideres, ne manum aratro inserens retrorsum conversa respicias”); she must “continue the fight every day against flesh and the world” (“adversus carnem et saeculum cotidie dimicare”).²⁸ In Fuscina’s case Avitus’s language can be taken to suggest some kind of equivalent disquiet about his sister’s manner of life — it is possible that the disquiet was intensified by the investment her family had in her sanctity as a Christian virgin — but beyond that it is difficult to go.²⁹

WOMANLY VIRTUS

Despite possibly voicing reservations about Fuscina’s situation in a number of passages, the poet equally expresses admiration for her and for women in general. In particular, he praises his sister’s learning, which he claims surpasses his own. The poem includes an enumeration of the books of the Bible (lines 379–405), all of which, Fuscina “has imbibed with thirsty spirit” (“cuncta . . . animo sitiente bibisti,” line 408). In addition she has mastered “all the sacred poetry of our

²⁸ *Epistula ad Claudiam* ed. Halm, 219.22–220.2 and 220.13–14. The image of putting the hand to the plow is from Luke 9:62. The addressee of the *Ad Claudiam* is distinguished from Fuscina in that there is no evidence she was a consecrated virgin.

²⁹ A number of the family’s female members had pursued an ascetic life (lines 83–101), while its menfolk came to occupy high positions in the church (lines 651–61). The status and prestige of the family might potentially be compromised by any slackening in Fuscina’s devotion. It is striking that in the dedicatory letter to Apollinaris, printed in modern editions before the poem, Avitus chooses to emphasize these two passages on the religious history of the family to the exclusion of the exhortation to chastity and resolution of mind that constitutes the vast majority of the poem, describing the book as “treating intimately of our common kinsfolk and the virgins of our immediate family” (“de religione parentum communium vel de virginibus nostrae familiae familiaris disputantem”).

poets” (“si quid sacrum nostri cecinere poetae,” line 409), for which “with her singing she wins special favor” (“tuo commendas carmina cantu,” line 411).

Avitus’s comparative evaluation of men and women takes off from a passage in Matthew’s Gospel: “whoever does the will of my father is my brother, sister, and mother” (“quicumque enim fecerit voluntatem patris mei, ... ipse meus frater, et soror, et mater est,” Matthew 12:50). Avitus paraphrases this passage quite closely: “if anyone, Christ says, fulfills in proper form the law, that person will be brother, mother, and sister to me” (“si quis, ait, ‘nostram compleverit ordine legem, / hic mihi semper erit frater, materque, sororque,” lines 219–20). He goes on to interpret the passage in terms of the divine image that resides within all humans, irrespective of their sex: “Do you see how the heavenly image (“caelestis imago”) that persons receive and hold fast in their minds lacks distinction of sex” (“sexu careat,” lines 221–22).³⁰ In this respect, men and women hold equal status. Avitus follows up this passage with the biblical story of the women at the tomb, but he introduces it not as a demonstration of equality, but as an occasion when Christ actually preferred to honor women over men (“femineum maribus . . . praeponit honorem,” line 224).³¹

Avitus’s account of this episode, which occupies fifty-seven lines, goes out of its way to emphasize that the women are made of sterner stuff than everyone else: following the natural and meteorological phenomena that accompany Christ’s death the mass of people were unable to endure such portents and took to their heels (lines 229–30); among the sound and confusion of the accompanying earthquake all fled, except for the women who, though fearful, held their ground (lines 240–41). The thematic significance of the exceptional courage of women in this passage then finds definitive formulation in the words that the angel who appears before them speaks to them: “Surpass with your female sex the courage of men, do not tremble, bravest of hearts, at this strange commotion” (lines 257–58).³² This is Avitus’s amplification of Matthew’s “nolite timere vos” (Matt. 28:5). The account culminates with Christ’s instructions to the women to carry the message that he is risen to the disciples (lines 275–76). In doing so, in the poet’s words, “they became teachers of those teachers and the disciples, who received from the mouth of women their first instruction in a message destined to be broadcast throughout the world, came to recognize that it is one’s mind that bestows preeminence rather than one’s sex” (lines 279–81).³³ Once

³⁰ “Adspicis ut sexu careat caelestis imago, / interior sortitus homo quem mente retentat.”

³¹ The full text is “Praebuit exemplum surgens a morte redemptor, / femineum maribus cum sic praeponit honorem” (lines 223–24). The episode serves as a divinely sanctioned *exemplum* for those who would be inclined to dismiss the moral and spiritual equality of women.

³² “Femineo sexu mentes transite viriles / nec trepidate novo, fortissima corda, tumultu.”

³³ “Doctoresque docent et quae spargenda per orbem / primum femineis instructi discere verbis / agnoscent animum potius quam vincere sexum.”

more Avitus's message is emphatic: preeminence depends on mental not physical qualities and women are just as capable of excelling as men. Moreover, this capacity is not dependent on whether they are virgins or not. The women at the tomb are described as *matres* (line 241), of mature age and status.³⁴

The same emphasis on the bravery of women and their capacity to outdo men shines through Avitus's account of the biblical figure Deborah. She marches at the front of the Israelite army, to the admiration of the men ("mirantes . . . viros," line 345), leading them by her example and urging them on with her words.³⁵ The victory is represented as a triumph of a woman over men:

Dissolvitur omnis
hostilis virtus et, qua se femina monstat,
palantes dant terga viri (lines 349–51).³⁶

In the introduction to the episode (lines 338–40) Avitus urges Fuscina to show the same moral qualities and, though a woman, wage war, but in her case not a literal war, but one that is waged by the power of the mind ("quod mens peragit," line 340).³⁷

The emphasis on strength of mind and inner qualities of character, as opposed to external physical characteristics, is a recurrent theme in the poem.³⁸ In a passage already discussed, which introduces the stories of Eugenia and Susanna, Avitus celebrates the resolution of mind ("constantia mentis," line 502) that can raise women to heaven despite their physical frailty ("fragiles . . . carne," line 501). To achieve that glorious reward in heaven women are to practice piety, endurance, and virtue. The last quality, however, receives the telling qualification, "virtue of the mind, that is" ("suppetat ergo tibi pietas, patientia, virtus, / sed virtus animi," lines 500–501), presumably to distinguish it from the sense of valor and martial excellence, marked as male from the etymology of the word *virtus*.

There are good reasons to suppose that Avitus is fully conscious of the word's etymological association with the male. He has a propensity for setting the word *vir* or its cognates in contexts that bring into question the conventional notion of

³⁴ Ambrose in his *De virginitate* 3.14 wrongly represents the women as virgins: "Considerate quia virgines prae apostolis resurrectionem Domini videre meruerunt" ed. Gori, *Sant' Ambrogio, opere morali* (n. 7 above), 2:22.

³⁵ "Et mulier sumpto praecederet agmina signo / mirantes hortata viros, quos ipsa ducatu / exemplo verboque monens accendit in hostem" (lines 344–45).

³⁶ "The courage of the enemy vanished entirely and wherever that woman made an appearance, men turned tail in disarray."

³⁷ Ergo age, succinctis ad proelia lumbis / armata cum mente veni nec femina bellum / formides, quod mens peragit" (lines 338–40)

³⁸ See, in addition, lines 222, 281, 364–65, 431–32, and 526–27.

manliness. Faced by a woman (*femina*), that is, Deborah, the *virtus* of the enemy (“*hostilis virtus*”) gives way and the *vir*i turn tail and flee (“*palantes dat terga viri*,” line 351).³⁹ *Virtus* in this case lies with the woman. Earlier her own men had been struck with admiration at their woman (*mulier*) leader (“*mirantes . . . viros*,” line 345). Otherwise, the word *vir* is used sparingly: twice of a husband (lines 161 and 168), once in a passage asserting the common *virtus* of men and women, against its etymology (line 283), and once at the trial of Eugenia where her deluded accusers apply the word to her, though she is in fact a woman disguised as a man (line 518).

Unsurprisingly, *virilitas* too undergoes some subversion. The adjective *virilis* occurs three times in the poem. On the first occasion the angel is urging the women at the tomb to surpass the courage (or lack thereof) showed by the men (“*mentes . . . viriles*,” line 257). In so doing, they will demonstrate the mental fortitude the men in the episode conspicuously lack. The second passage follows after the catalog of the books of the Bible and other religious texts that have formed Fuscina’s reading. The poet urges her to “apply what she has read with a manly zeal to the pursuit of virtue” (“*ad virtutis opus studio converte virili*,” line 414). Normally *studium virile* would imply the eager pursuit of some activity characteristically male. Study of books is an odd manifestation of *virilitas*. In this case, a woman is urged to pursue *virtus*. Once more Avitus has an eye for the etymology of the word, which may contribute to the choice of the adjective *virili*.⁴⁰ The final case is in the story of Eugenia, where, disguised as a man, she is accused of “being inflamed with crazed love for a girl and burning with masculine emotion” (“*motuque ardere virili*,” line 515).⁴¹ Once more *virilitas* comes into question. Passionate love for a girl is identified as a typical male emotion. The phrase can be read either as coming from the accusers or being a gloss from the poet. Either way there is a further level of irony in that they are attributing stereotypical male behavior to a person who is actually a woman. Revelation of her true sex secures a triumph for female chastity over her discomfited accusers and over public opinion that had up to that point been united against her (lines 521–23). Avitus even goes so far as to hail her as a hero (“*heros*,” line 527), a designation typically reserved for men, for her preservation of inner integrity.⁴²

This asymmetry in the treatment of men and women somewhat surprisingly crops up too in his biblical epic, the *SHG*. In the Genesis account of the expulsion

³⁹ As an anonymous reader pointed out to me, the wording is somewhat reminiscent of *Aeneid* 11.734 (*femina palantis agit*), describing the actions of another female warrior, Camilla (see too *Aeneid* 12.738), though without the same emphasis in the wording on the reversal of roles for male and female.

⁴⁰ So too the play on words “*ad virtutis opus studio converte virili*.”

⁴¹ “*Insano qui fingat amore puellae / accendi Eugeniam motuque ardere virili*.”

⁴² “*Interiore tamen servato permanet heros*.”

from Paradise, God cross-examines both Adam and Eve about their reasons for disobeying his command. Adam answers “the woman you gave me as a partner gave to me from the tree,” Eve “the serpent deceived me” (Gen. 3:12–13). There is a certain symmetry in their answers, both attributing their fall to a second agent. In the *SHG*, though, the two speeches are treated quite differently. Adam is given a ten-line response in direct speech. Its tone is set by the pair of lines that introduces it:

Erigitur sensu tumidisque accensa querellis
fertur in insanas laxata superbia voces (*SHG* 3.96–97).⁴³

The first two lines of the speech paraphrase quite closely the Genesis text, but Adam’s sense of grievance (*querelae*) emerges clearly from what follows: he made the mistake, he says, of trusting Eve, but it was God who taught him to trust her. His life would have been better if he had never had a wife or entered into a compact with a corrupt mate (3.103–107, I paraphrase).⁴⁴ Eve’s response by comparison is in indirect speech. The emphasis is on her remorse. She is “grieving” (“maerentem,” 3.109) and after God has addressed her is “ashamed, her cheeks flushed with a mortified blush” (“illa pudens tristisque genas suffusa rubore,” 3.113). The contrast could not be more pronounced. God’s charge against Eve, corresponding to “why did you do this” in Genesis 3:13, emphasizes her persuasion of Adam: “you cast manly reason (or alternatively “your husband’s judgment”) down from its lofty seat” (“sublimi sensum iecisti ex arce virilem,” 3.112). The reference to “manly reason” (“sensus virilis”), in the context, is striking. Adam’s previous speech, with its scarcely concealed complaint against God, demonstrates just how far “manly reason” has fallen.

One final passage in the *Cons.* deserves attention here. It concerns a commonplace in the prose treatises on virginity, the hardships of marriage and, in particular, the perils of childbirth. Although the church fathers regularly bring up this argument, they do not typically go into any detail.⁴⁵ The fullest treatment is that of Ambrose in his *De virginibus* (1.6.25):

⁴³ “He gave himself airs and inflamed by an inflated sense of injustice, his arrogance was given full rein in flights of unrestrained language.”

⁴⁴ “Credulus ipse fui, sed credere tu docuisti / conubium donans et dulcia vincula nectens. / Atque utinam felix, quae quondam sola vigebat, / caelebs vita foret talis nec coniugis unquam / foedera sensisset comiti non subdita pravae.”

⁴⁵ In addition to the Ambrose passage cited below, see Cyprian, *De habitu virginum* 22, ed. Wilhelm Hartel, in *S. Thasci Caecili Cypriani opera omnia*, CSEL 3.1 (Vienna, 1868), 202.25–203.30; Jerome, *Adversus Helvidium* 20, PL 23, col. 204C; Jerome, *Ep.* 22.2 and 22.22, ed. Isidore Hilberg, in *Eusebii Hieronymi epistulae*, CSEL 54, 3 vols. (Vienna, 1910–18), 1:145.15–146.10 and 1:174.9–175.6; and Augustine, *De sancta virginitate* 16, ed. Joseph

A noble woman may glory in her offspring, but the more children she has, the more she suffers. Let her list the gratifications she receives from her children, provided she lists the hardships. She marries and she laments. What kind of a marriage is it that brings tears? She conceives and grows heavy. Childbearing certainly brings a burden before it bears any fruit. She gives birth and is laid up. How sweet can the pledge be that begins with danger and ends in danger? Destined to bring pain before any pleasure, it is bought with perils and its possession is not in one's power."⁴⁶

The discussion, nevertheless, remains at a high level of generality and is somewhat impersonal. Avitus's treatment of the subject, however, is unusually detailed and specific. He enumerates the three possible tragic outcomes of pregnancy: the child will die (lines 180–81), both child and mother will die (lines 182–83), or just the mother will die (lines 184–86). He adds to these a further possibility: that the child will die after the parents have begun to bring it up (lines 186–89). This evokes a note missing from the prose treatises, a certain empathy for the loss involved. A child that was their "sole hope" ("unica . . . spes," line 188) has perished, taking with it the joy they had anticipated and the wishes they had cherished (lines 188–89).⁴⁷ The passage on childbirth is introduced by a broader statement of the inequality of the partners in a marriage: the wife is described as a "captive of the marriage bed" ("captiva tori," line 170), who though she has the title of "yoke-mate" ("coniugis," line 171) of her spouse and sharer of his fortune ("consors," line 171), must alone bear the yoke and experience no equality of fortune ("sortem" — "sola iugo premitur non aequam ducere sortem," line 172). He goes on to describe the unequal burdens imposed on men and women, specifically in producing children, writing "What had been the father's seed becomes a weight on the mother, inflicting on her cruel pains as the stomach distends" ("semina quae patris fuerant, haec pondera matri / infligunt duros utero turgente dolores," lines 175–76). In itself this could perhaps be read just as a straightforward account of pregnancy, reflecting the sentence passed on Eve in Genesis 3:16 and deterring the addressee from marriage by emphasizing the attendant hardships. But the antithesis between *semina* and

Zycha, in *Sancti Aureli Augustini, De fide et symbolo, De fide et operibus, et al.*, CSEL 41 (Vienna, 1900), 248.23–249.21.

⁴⁶ "Iacet licet fecundo se mulier nobilis partu, quo plures generavit, plus laborat. Numeret solacia filiorum, sed numeret pariter et molestias. Nubit et plorat. Qualia sunt vota quae flentur? Concipit et gravescit. Prius utique impedimentum fecunditas incipit adferre quam fructum. Parturit et aegrotat. Quam dulce pignus quod a periculo incipit et in periculis desinit. Prius dolori futurum quam voluptati, periculis emitur nec pro arbitrio possidetur."

⁴⁷ "Quid forte levatum / nutritumque diu rapitur si funere pignus, / unica quod crebro spes respicit, et perit omne / quod sibi conceptis spondebant gaudia votis?" Ausonius (*Parentalia* 20.1) uses the phrase *matris spes unica* in a poem on the premature death of a young nephew.

pondera is especially pointed, suggesting a troubling inequality between the partners' roles in begetting a child. The following sentence, then, reinforces this impression: "For when in the travail of childbirth her womb sheds its charge, only one pays in extreme peril to her body for what two have come together to do" ("Nam cum luctato solvuntur viscera partu, / una luit tanto carnis discrimine pendens, / quod coiere duo," lines 177–79). While the note of empathy for the dangers of childbirth was to find fuller echoes later in the sixth century in the *De virginitate* of Venantius Fortunatus (8.3.325–70) and in the same poet's epitaph for Vilithuta (4.26.45–68), Avitus's apparent concern here about the disparate burdens borne by men and women in producing children strikes an unexpected and, as far as I know, unparalleled note.

In conclusion, despite including some of the familiar commonplaces from treatises on Christian virginity, the poem is not a typical treatise on that subject, but, as indicated by the title Avitus gives it in the dedicatory letter to his brother, concerns rather what he terms chastity, a broader and more encompassing moral requirement than simple sexual continence and one that requires significant strength of character and commitment on a woman's part.⁴⁸ Avitus's position in this poem is best summarized in two lines that follow directly after his account of the women at the tomb:

Communis virtus igitur, commune periculum
matribus atque viris, nulla est distantia cordis (lines 282–83).⁴⁹

The passage shows all the consistent features of Avitus's evaluation of the two sexes. *Virtus*, the etymologically male word, is equally attributable to both sexes, *matres* and *vir*i. Both face dangers, suggesting that both must on occasion summon up mental courage and resolve. And the equality between them derives from their inner equivalence of heart. At times, indeed, the poet even goes beyond this assertion of equality. In more than one passage the text shows a pointed disparity between the courage and steadfastness of women and the failure of men in the same situations to display those same qualities, underlined by the play on the noun *vir* and its cognates.

The poem represents itself as a personal address to Fuscina. It contains two broad messages for her: one is a warning, to avoid the debilitating effects of idleness and backsliding in the struggle for virtue; but the other is an inspiring one, celebrating the potential of women to achieve a kind of heroism through their

⁴⁸ Commonplaces include the avoidance of fine dress and jewelry (lines 35–43), the hardships of marriage and childbirth (lines 163–97), and the heavenly reward the virgin will receive as bride of Christ (lines 621–45).

⁴⁹ "Virtue, therefore, is common to both women and men, and peril likewise; there is no difference in their hearts."

strength of character and vigorous maintenance of moral integrity. If, and here I speculate again, Fuscina was fretting under the limitations on the freedom of action and expression imposed on her by her chosen calling, then Avitus's poem supplies countervailing narratives of womanly excellence in accordance with which his sister can configure her own struggle for moral integrity. In that respect it truly is a "consolatory praise of chastity."

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