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A Militant Bride: Gender-Loaded Metaphors in Jerome's Writings to Ascetic Men and Women

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Abstract: This article examines Jerome's use of bridal and military imagery in his writings to male and female ascetics. The metaphor of the "bride" and the "soldier" had been used in earlier Christianity to describe the Christian identity of the baptized person, and in the writings of Jerome and other fourth-century ascetic writers, these motifs came to be increasingly employed in discourses on the ascetic life. While previous scholarship has claimed that Jerome mainly used the image of the bride in descriptions of and advise to ascetic women, and military imagery in writings to and about men, the article argues that his employment of these imageries was more complex. It is shown that while the bridal metaphor signals femininity and passivity, and the soldier metaphor manliness and activity, Jerome's employment of them does not depend first and foremost on the gender of the ascetic. Rather, both images are used to support certain aspects of his theology – mainly his ideas about the postlapsarian, fleshly condition and the human possibility of transcendence – as well as his ascetic ideology, by marking the ascetics as superior to non-ascetics through their unique relationship with Christ.

Keywords: Jerome of Stridon, asceticism, gender, masculinity, femininity, metaphors, bride, soldier, flesh

1 Introduction

Jerome is an often-recurring name in scholarship on women in early Christianity, and a study about Jerome can hardly escape mentioning his many female patrons and friends. Scholars have brought attention to how he integrated with female ascetics, offering them spiritual and exegetical guidance as well as receiving support from them.[1] A significant part of this research has been occupied with Jerome's rhetorical employment of women in promoting his ascetic ideology as well as in the construction of orthodoxy and heresy;[2] that is, how he used women to "think with."[3] This approach is in line with a scholarly focus on how women in early Christian texts functioned as tools for male theological and ideological agendas.[4]

1 Clark, *Jerome, Chrysostom, and Friends*; Haines-Eitzen, *The Gendered Palimpsest*, 23–52; Laurence, *Jérôme et le Nouveau Modèle Féminin*; Georgieva, "Domina, Filia, Conserva, Germana;" Georgieva, "The Letters of Jerome, Augustine, and Pelagius;" Moretti, "Jerome's Epistolary Portraits of Holy Women;" Cain, "Polemic, Patronage;" Letsch-Brunner, *Marcella*; Graves, "Marcella."

2 Cain, *Letters of Jerome*, 68–98; Cain, "Rethinking Jerome's Portraits of Holy Women;" Hunter, "The Virgin, the Bride, and the Church," 290–5; Burrus, "The Heretical Woman;" Pålsson, "The Orthodox Woman;" Jacobs, "Writing Demetrias."

3 This term is used by Brown, *The Body and Society*, 153, with reference to Humphreys, *The Family, Women, and Death*, 33; and Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, 61–2.

4 Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride*; Burrus, "Word and Flesh."

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In the present article, I will focus neither on Jerome's relationships with real women nor his rhetorical use of women. I will examine how Jerome, in his letters, used female and male metaphors in representing ascetic men and women. The two metaphors which I will focus on are *the bride* and *the soldier*, that is, one signalling femininity and one signalling masculinity. The study will not be limited to texts in which these precise words are used, but will include writings which employ bridal and military imagery. Examining the use of such metaphors in texts written to both men and women, I ask the question of whether Jerome used each metaphor exclusively in representing one gender, or whether both metaphors could be used in descriptions and instructions of men and women alike.

The use of metaphors is highly informative if we want to understand a writer's ideological agenda – in this case, Jerome's ideas about how men and women should be *as* ascetics. The metaphors of *bride* and *soldier* do not only signal femininity and masculinity, but also more precisely passivity and activity. In Roman antiquity, morality was connected to manliness: Virtue (*virtus*) was directly associated with the word *vir*, and to be virtuous was to be manly.[5] This meant that to *not* be a man, but a woman, implied a lack of virtues: "moral depravity was as 'natural' to women as moral goodness was to men."[6] When it came to sexuality, manliness was defined by control of the passions, but also by being the active, dominating part in sexual relationships, while femininity was associated with a lack of self-control as well as passivity.[7] Studies on gender in early Christian texts have shown how Christian writers were clearly influenced by, but also reinterpreted, Graeco-Roman ideas about masculinity and femininity. The Christian ascetic discourse included descriptions of women turning into males as a result of their ascetic lives,[8] at the same time as the male monk embodied characteristics traditionally associated with unmanliness. Scholars have argued that early Christian authors both used and reappropriated traditional images in making ideological and theological points.[9]

Jerome wrote for an aristocratic audience, who were well acquainted with and formed by traditional values. In examining his use of these metaphors, it is essential to notice in which literary contexts they are used, particularly, in relation to whom the ascetic may take on the role of either the bride or the soldier. When did it serve Jerome to enhance the ascetic's passivity, and when was it more appropriate to emphasize the active side? Was this a division between men and women, or did other circumstances determine which metaphors were used, and how?

Before moving on to the analysis, I will discuss the place of gender in Jerome's ascetic theology, in order to provide a framework for understanding his use of bridal and military imagery.

2 Jerome on Asceticism and Gender

Jerome's often repeated claim that humans will be resurrected as men and women has sometimes led scholars to the conclusion that he sought to defend the existence of a gender hierarchy in heaven, in opposition to an Origenist idea of transcendence.[10] However, as will become clear, the idea of a possibility for ascetic men and women to transcend their sexual condition was an essential part in Jerome's theology. The implications of this transcendence were more obvious for women than for men, in the sense that it implied an escape from the subordination which was otherwise ascribed to them, naturally and socially. Jerome held that through asceticism, a woman could regain a condition of full humanity, as Eve had before the Fall.[11] This idea was expressed already in the work *Against Helvidius* (383) in which Jerome, discussing the impossibility of combining married

5 McDonnell, *Roman Manliness*, 2–3.

6 Kuefler, *Manly Eunuch*, 20; cf. 19–21.

7 Ibid., 21, 87–96; Foucault, *Use of Pleasure*, 46–7; 220–2; Karras, "Active/Passive, Acts/Passions."

8 Concerning the idea of ascetic women turning male, e.g. Castelli, "'I Will Make Mary Male'."

9 Burrus, *Begotten, Not Made*; Kuefler, *Manly Eunuch*; Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk*, 182–212.

10 Brown, *Body and Society*, 379–84; Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body*, 86–91.

11 Concerning early Christian ideas about asceticism and the regaining of Paradise, see Shaw, *Burden of the Flesh*, 161–219; about fasting and female ascetics: 220–53.

life with the service of God, argued that the virgin is not affected by the punishment that was given to women after the Fall (cf. Gen 3.16).

> Womanly things failed in Sarah (Gen 18.11); afterwards, it was said to Abraham: "In everything that Sarah tells you, listen to her voice" (Gen 21.12). The person who does not suffer the anxiety and pain of child-bearing, and in whom the function of monthly bleeding has ceased, is freed from the curse of God.[12]

Thus, the virgin, who physically is a woman but who does not use her natural functions, escapes the curse of womanhood. The same theory returns in *Letter* 22 to Eustochium (384): "I refuse to subject you to the sentence by which condemnation has come to the human being: 'In pain and sorrow you shall bring forth children, woman' – to which you may answer: 'That law does not apply to me'."[13] This has significant consequences for the ascetic woman's possibilities. According to Jerome, she acquires a more advanced understanding, and thus, an authority in spiritual matters. In his *Commentary on Galatians*, Jerome describes Marcella's role as a reader of the Scriptures and of exegesis in the following way: "[…] she rises above her sex, forgets what is human, and crosses the Red Sea of this world to the drumbeats of the divine books."[14] Studying and understanding the Scriptures is directly associated with renunciation of the sexual functions. The idea of asceticism as a pre-requisite for reaching a deeper understanding of the Bible is clearly expressed in *Against Jovinian* (393), where Jerome writes, referring to 1 Corinthians 3.1,[15] that the one who is in an "animal state" (*qui animalis est*), that is, the non-ascetic Christian, cannot understand the things that belong to the Spirit.[16]

It was precisely in *Against Jovinian* that Jerome primarily developed his theory of asceticism, which is essential for his understanding of gender. In this work, Jerome lingers extensively on the theme of fleshly existence making perfection impossible, and expresses that fallen humanity is above all *sexed* humanity. Jerome held that living according to humanity's *true* nature, that is, according to humanity as first created, was achieved by imitation of Christ, and an essential aspect of this imitation was virginity.[17] The ascetics were seen by Jerome as the realization of God's intentions with humankind. Arguing that Adam and Eve were virgins in Paradise, Jerome writes: "The bond of marriage is not found in the image of the Creator. When difference of sex is removed, and we put off the old man and put on the new, we are born again as a virgin in Christ, who was born of a virgin and is born again through virginity."[18]

There is good reason to believe that Jerome's anthropological teaching was deeply influenced by Origen of Alexandria, especially when it comes to the way in which he maximizes the difference between before and after the Fall, and sees the unique status of the virgin as achieved through imitation of the paradisical, asexual life. Origen made clear, perhaps above all in his *Commentary on Romans*, that the post-lapsarian state was the state of the *flesh*, of defilement – a defilement directly connected to sexuality, and with which every human being is born. As he writes in the fifth book of the commentary, in Rufinus' translation, it was after the sin that Adam and Eve began their sexual life: "Therefore our body is a body of sin, because it is not written that Adam knew his wife Eve, and became the father of Cain, until after the sin."[19] However, Origen's Pauline exegesis, as found in the *Commentary on Romans*, did not only concern the inherent impurity of fleshly existence; it also dealt with the way by which a human being may transcend his/her fleshly condition, and become spiritual

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12 *Adv. Helv*. 22 (PL 23, 204): *Defecerunt, inquit Scriptura, Sarae muliebra: post quod dicitur ad Abraham: Omnia quaecumque dicit tibi Sara, audi vocem ejus. Quae non est in partus anxietatibus et dolore; quae deficientibus menstrui cruoris officiis, mulier esse desiit, a dei maledictione fit libera*[…] (The translations are my own unless stated otherwise).

13 *Ep*. 22,18 (CSEL 54, 167): *Nolo illi subiacere sententiae, quae in hominem est lata damnatum: in doloribus anxietatibus paries, mulier – lex ista non mea est*.

14 *Comm.Gal*., praef. (CCSL 77A, 5): *… superare sexum, obliuisci hominis et diuinorum uoluminum tympano concrepante rubrum huius saeculi pelagus transfretare*.

15 "[…] I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh […]."

16 *Adv. Iovin*. 1,37 (PL 23, 263).

17 Hunt, *Jerome of Stridon*, 203–28; Pålsson, *Negotiating Heresy*, 75–107.

18 *Adv. Iovin*. 1,16 (PL 23, 235): *Imago Creatoris non habet copulam nuptiarum. Ubi diversitas sexus aufertur, et veteri homine exuimur, et induimur novo, ibi in Christum renascimur virginem, qui et natus ex virgine, et renatus per virginem est*.

19 Origen, *Comm. in Rom*. V 9,12 (SC 539, 496): *Corpus ergo peccati est corpus nostrum quia nec Adam scribitur cognouisse Euam uxorem suam et genuisse Cain nisi post peccatum*.

rather than fleshly, by turning from the flesh to the spirit.[20] This is a transformation that takes place through imitation of Christ, the image of the heavenly, rather than Adam, the image of the earthly.[21]

Origen held that human beings could become like the angels already on earth. Through chastity, it is possible not only to return to Paradise but also to anticipate eternal life. The spiritual circumcision belongs to those who begin to be like the angels while still on earth, who have castrated themselves for the sake of the Kingdom.[22] Origen saw the virgin as someone being free from serving a spouse, serving the Lord instead. The married woman is under the curse which came after the Fall, dominated by a husband – the virgin, on the other hand, is free from this because of her purity.[23]

Origen' influence on Jerome, especially through his Pauline exegesis, is supported by the fact that Jerome wrote commentaries on four Pauline epistles in 386, and made clear, in his prefaces to the *Commentary on Ephesians* and the *Commentary on Galatians*, that Origen was his principal source. His indebtedness to Origen in these commentaries is well established.[24] This influence did not least concern ideas about the human ability to transcend earthy conditions and particularly gender identities. In his *Commentary on Ephesians*, commenting on Ephesians 5.28–29, Jerome writes, concerning the woman who devotes herself to Christ rather than to the world, that: "she will cease to be a woman and will be called man." He continues:

> […] souls also cherish their bodies so that this corruptible may put on incorruption and, suspended on the lightness of wings, may be lifted more easily into the air. Therefore, let us husbands cherish our wives and let our souls cherish our bodies so that wives may be brought into the rank of men and bodies into the rank of souls. And may there be no diversity of the sexes at all, but as there is no man and woman among the angels, so also let us, who will be like angels, even now begin to be that which has been promised us in the heavens.[25]

Not even in the context of the Origenist controversy, when Jerome had to defend his use of Origen and became involved in anti-Origenist polemics himself, did he clearly distance himself from Origen's theology of transcendence. In defence against Rufinus' critique concerning his dependence on Origen in the *Ephesians* commentary,[26] Jerome held that although human beings will retain their sexed bodies in the resurrection, sexed bodies may be angelic bodies – which is precisely what the bodies of ascetics begin to be already on earth.[27] In *Letter* 75, to the widow Theodora, criticizing the "Origenist" idea of a spiritual resurrection, Jerome still claimed that as a result of her continence, Theodora was a brother of her husband rather than a wife, "for a continent tie does not have the difference of sex which belongs to marriage."[28] Likewise, in one of his later letters, the virgin Demetrias is told to act against her nature (*contra naturam*), or even beyond it (*ultra*) so that she, while in the body, will live without it (*in corpore uiuere sine corpore*), that is, live "the angelic life" (*angelorum … conuersatio*).[29]

While Jerome has sometimes been described as holding, precisely in contrast to Origen, a very static idea of the human being, and not least the *sexed* human being, there is evidence that he shared with Origen an idea

20 *Comm. Rom.* I 21,5.

21 *Comm. Rom.* V 1,13.

22 *Comm. Rom.* II 13.

23 *Fragm 1 Cor* 39.

24 Heine, *The Commentaries of Origen and Jerome*; Scheck, *St. Jerome's Commentaries*.

25 *Comm. in Eph.* III 5,29 (PL 26, 534): *Animae quoque fovent corpora sua, ut corruptivum hoc induat incorruptionem, et alarum levitate suspensum, in aerem facilius elevetur. Foveamus igitur et viri uxores, et animae nostra corpora, ut et uxores in viros, et corpora redigantur in animas. Et nequaquam sit sexuum ulla diversitas: sed quomodo apud angelos non est vir et mulier: ita et nos, qui similes angelis futuri sumus, jam nunc incipiamus esse quod nobis in coelestibus repromissum est*. (Transl. Heine, *The Commentaries of Origen and Jerome*, 238).

26 In the apology that he wrote against Jerome, Rufinus brought attention to Jerome's dependence on Origen in the *Commentary on Ephesians*, not least with regard to the idea that there will be no sexual difference in the world to come. For a discussion of Jerome's way of using Origen's Ephesians commentary, and how he explains this use in *Against Rufinus*, see Cain, *Jerome's Commentaries*, 177–82; 188–94.

27 *Contra Rufinum* I 29.

28 *Ep.* 75,2 (CSEL 55, 31):*… in terra quoque sororem te habere coeperat, immo fratrem, quia casta coniunctio sexum non habet nuptialem.*

29 *Ep.* 130,10 (CSEL 56/1, 191).

of human beings' possibilities to transcend their earthly conditions. The question to which we now turn is whether this fundamental anthropological conviction is supported and confirmed by Jerome's use of the metaphors of the bride and the soldier, or whether his use of bridal and military imagery rather reveal a lingering perception of a hierarchy of the sexes.

3 The Bride

The image of the Bride, drawn from the Song of Songs, had since long been used by Christian authors, mainly in two ways: For describing the church, and for describing the individual Christian.[30] In fourth-century ascetic literature, the bride would increasingly refer to the female ascetic, and specifically the virgin.[31] According to Teresa M. Shaw, although women are sometimes described, in early Christian ascetic literature, as going against their nature and becoming manly, they are still "fundamentally female" precisely in being brides of Christ.[32]

Jerome was certainly no exception to this development. As argued by Karl Shuve, he was indebted to Origen's understanding of the bride, as it had been expressed in his commentary on the Song of Songs as well as in two homilies which were translated by Jerome in the early 380s.[33] Analysing the use of the bride metaphor in Jerome's *Letter* 22, to Eustochium, Shuve argues that while Jerome agrees with Origen in interpreting the bride allegorically as the Christian being united with Christ, there is a difference in emphasis: While Origen made the bride an allegory of the soul, Jerome rather applied the image to the whole virgin, soul *and* body, using a more physical and erotic language in comparison to Origen's spiritualization of the bride. "Jerome," Shuve writes, "is operating within a monastic theory of the passions, which places considerably more weight on the problem of the body, and in particular the sexed body."[34]

When Jerome discusses the conversion to virginity in *Letters* 22, 54, and 65, all written to female ascetics, describing the women's transformation into brides of Christ, he uses bridal imagery from Psalm 45.10–11: "Hear, O daughter, consider and incline your ear; forget your people and your father's house, and the king will desire your beauty."[35] In *Letter* 54, this is combined with the words from Song of Songs 4.7: "You are altogether beautiful, my love; there is no flaw in you."[36] Jerome writes that the human soul should, like Abraham, leave the land of the Chaldeans, interpreted as the demons.[37] It is essential, Jerome asserts, that the bride forgets what she has left behind: her people and her father's house (*populi et domum patris tui*). The father whom she leaves behind is the devil.[38] Bridal imagery is not the only one used in these texts; Jerome also sees this transformation in terms of being born again as a daughter of God.[39]

The union with the Bridegroom is central to the transformation which is to take place. The bride is not understood to be pure at the beginning of their relationship – Christ marries "an Ethiopian woman" (*Aethiopissam duxit uxorem*, cf. Num 12.1),[40] blackened by fleshly sin – but is rather described as being made pure by the Bridegroom.

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30 Shuve, *Song of Songs*. Concerning the use of the Song in the context of Christian baptism, see Jensen, *Baptismal Imagery*, 196–200.

31 Shaw, *Burden of the Flesh*, 248–52.

32 Ibid., 248.

33 Shuve, *Song of Songs*, 182–7.

34 Ibid., 187.

35 *Ep*. 22,1; *ep*. 54,3; *ep*. 65,16. While *Letters* 22 and 65 are written to virgins (Eustochium and Principia), *Letter* 54 is written to a widow (Furia).

36 *Ep*. 54,3.

37 For Jerome's interpretation of Chaldea/the Chaldeans, see *ep*. 65,16 and *ep*. 108,31.

38 *Ep*. 22,1 (CSEL 54, 144–145); 65,16 (CSEL 54, 638): *nemo dubitat patrem nostrum… fuisse diabolum, de quo saluator ait: uos de diabolo patre nati estis*.

39 *Ep*. 22,1 (CSEL 54, 145): *renascor in Christo*; cf. *ep*. 54,3; *ep*. 65,16.

40 *Ep*. 22,1 (CSEL 54, 145).

> Being generated first by such a parent [the devil], we are black, and after the penitence, although still not reaching the height of virtue, we say: *I am black and beautiful, daughter of Jerusalem* (cf. Cant. 1.5).
>
> Once you wish to hear the wisdom of the true Solomon and come to him, he will reveal everything that he knows to you, and the king will lead you into his chamber. Through a miraculous change of your colour, this word will aptly apply to you: Who is this, who rises up whitened? [41]

The closest that Jerome comes to describing an actual wedding between the ascetic and Christ is when he writes about the virgin Demetrias' consecration in *Letter* 130. As he did not observe this occasion himself, we cannot know what actually took place, but the description tells us something about Jerome's own understanding of the transition. It is described how the bishop puts the bridal veil over her head, reciting "I want to present you all as a chaste virgin to Christ (2 Cor 11.2)." The bride then says: "the king has brought me into his chambers," (Cant 1.4), and a choir made up of her companions replies: "the king's daughter is all glorious within (Ps 45.13)."[42]

We have seen that Jerome understood the ascetic life as one of transformation from a condition determined by the fleshly nature to a spiritual, angelic life. What does the bridal metaphor reveal about Jerome's ideas about the (lack of) agency in this transformation? We may first conclude that this is a motif that signals passivity on the part of the ascetic. Although the ascetic leaves her homeland and father behind and seeks the Bridegroom, the actual transformation from flesh to spirit is itself effected by the Bridegroom. *He* will reveal knowledge to the ascetic and *lead her* into His chamber; *He* will change the ascetic's colour and *make her* white. The Bridegroom thus plays an active part in transforming the ascetic by giving of Himself to her. The erotic language itself strengthens the metaphor's function of emphasizing the passivity of the bride in relation to the Bridegroom, as when Jerome writes to Eustochium: "May the secrecy of your chamber always guard you; may the Bridegroom always play with you inside."[43]

A degree of activity may be seen on the part of the bride to the extent that she has to prepare herself for the Bridegroom. Still, these preparations mainly take the form of different kinds of abstinence. By avoiding things which would have resulted in physical lust, like seeing persons of the opposite sex, eating too much, and drinking wine, the bride should prepare herself by emptying herself, in such a way as to arouse desire for her Bridegroom instead, and make herself able to receive him. In *Letter* 22, Jerome advises Eustochium to never go to sleep when she is full, and to fall asleep while reading the Scriptures – this nutrition will prepare her for the Spouse in a similar way that eating ordinary food makes sexual arousal possible.[44] As Shuve has remarked, it is "openness – penetrability – that incites Jerome's imagination."[45]

Also, the advice about withdrawal and seclusion, and warnings about going outside, like the bride in the Song actively seeking her beloved (Cant 5.6–8), point to an ideal of passivity on the part of the Bride: "I do not want you to search for the Bridegroom in the streets."[46] She will not only fail to find Him, but she will be wounded and stripped and will say with the bride in the Song: "Making their rounds in the city the sentinels

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41 *Ep*. 22,1 (CSEL 54, 145): *tali primum parente generati nigri sumus et post paenitentiam necdum culmine uirtutis ascenso dicimus: nigra sum et speciosa filia Hierusalem. … statim ut uolueris sapientiam ueri audire Salomonis et ad eum ueneris, confitebitur tibi cuncta, quae nouit, et inducet te rex in cubiculum suum et mirum in modum colore mutato sermo tibi ille conueniet: quae est ista, quae ascendit dealbata?*

42 *Ep*. 130,2. Cf. the discussion in Shuve, *Song of Songs*, 198–9.

43 *Ep*. 22,25 (CSEL 54, 178): *Semper te cubiculi tui secreta custodiant, semper tecum sponsus ludat intrinsecus*. Miller, "The Blazing Body," argues that in *Letter* 22, Jerome rewrites the female body with erotic images from the Scriptures, textualizing the female body, thus moving the focus from the real, dangerous female body to a metaphorical body. In this rewriting of the female body, sexuality is, Miller argues, paradoxically both avoided and inscribed.

44 *Ep*. 22,17. Shaw remarks that in Christian ascetic literature, fasting and neglect of the body has the function of making the bride desirable to Christ, much like caring for the body makes it pleasing to an earthly husband: *Burden of the Flesh*, 249–50. Concerning the relation between reading and eating, see Haines-Eitzen, *Gendered Palimpsest*, 39–52.

45 Shuve, *Song of Songs*, 190.

46 *Ep*. 22,25 (179): *nolo te sponsum quaerere per plateas*.

found me; they beat me, they wounded me, they took away my mantle" (Cant 5.7).[47] Jerome describes Jesus as a jealous husband who does not want His bride to be seen by others.[48] The virgin should be enclosed, waiting for her Bridegroom to come to her.

The importance of purifying oneself in order to receive what is holy points to similarities between the image of the Bride and the image of the temple, and in *Letter* 22, bridal and temple imageries are combined:

> As Jesus entered the temple, He threw out everything that did not belong to the temple. God is jealous and does not want the Father's house to be turned into a den of thieves. Besides, where money is counted, where there are cages with doves and simplicity has no place, where the virgin's chest burns with care for worldly troubles, the veil in the temple is teared down, and the Spouse rises angered and says: Your house is left to you desolate.[49]

Considering the femaleness, and especially the passivity, which the image of the bride signals, we may ask whether this was an image used by Jerome to describe female asceticism in particular. Mathew Kuefler, in his study of masculine ideals in early Christianity, has noted that the bride metaphor certainly was applied to Christian men, but argues that a difference can be seen in how the metaphor was used with regards to men and women, respectively. For men, this was an image that, although it marked a state of submission, still had the effect of increasing their authority in relation to other Christians. When it was used in describing women, however, the guardedness and seclusion of the bride was emphasized,[50] that is, the image served to *lessen* power rather than increasing it. Shuve has likewise claimed that: "Socially speaking, the nuptial metaphor does not simply secure Eustochium's standing as the wife of a great man, but it reminds her that she is a woman under authority."[51]

While the texts studied so far seem to confirm such arguments, I hope to demonstrate that Jerome's use of bridal imagery is more complex. One text in which Jerome uses the bride metaphor in describing a man is his *Letter* 66, to the senator Pammachius. Analysing this letter, Shuve describes a move "from sexual to parental language."[52] First, Pammachius, in contrast to Eustochium, is advised to actively go out and seek Christ, rather than remaining in his chamber: "[…] if He escapes from your hands while you are asleep for a short time, do not immediately get worried. Go out into the streets and entreat the daughters of Jerusalem, and you will find Him resting at noon […]."[53] Thus finding his beloved, Pammachius is advised to offer Christ his breast to suck from. Here, Christ is a child whom Pammachius is supposed to raise. Shuve notes that this difference may be due to the danger of ascribing penetrability to a male aristocrat.[54]

This parental imagery, which Shuve claims replaces the nuptial imagery found in writings to females, is actually found in strikingly similar terms precisely in *Letter* 22. Eustochium is described as being the mother of Christ, giving birth to Him. She will go "to the prophetess," conceive and give birth to a son – Jerome here refers to how the son of Isaiah was conceived (cf. Isa 8).[55] The description of Christ being the child of the ascetic is very similar in the writings to Pammachius and Eustochium: In both letters, it is related to how the child grows into adulthood and how he plunders and conquers the enemies, still with reference to Isaiah 8,

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47 *Ep*. 22,25–26; *ep*. 107,7. For different ideas about agency in achieving a union with the divine, I refer to Valantasis, *Making of the Self*, 60–79. Valantasis argues that the Eastern ascetic tradition, in theorizing about mystical union, leaves more room for agency on the part of the human, precisely in ascetic performance, while the Western tradition tends to stress the ascetic's passivity.

48 *Ep*. 22,25 (CSEL 54, 180): *zelotypus est Iesus, non uult ab aliis uideri faciem tuam.*

49 *Ep*. 22,24 (CSEL 54, 177): *Iesus ingressus templum omnia, quae templi non erant, proiecit. deus enim zelotes est et non uult domum patris fieri speluncam latronum. alioquin, ubi aera numerantur, ubi sunt caueae columbarum et simplicitas enecatur, ubi in pectore uirginali saecularium negotiorum cura aestuat, statim uelum templi scinditur; sponsus consurgit iratus et dicit: relinquetur uobis domus uestra deserta.*

50 Kuefler, *Manly Eunuch*, 236–7.

51 Shuve, *Song of Songs*, 188.

52 Ibid., 197.

53 *Ep*. 66,10 (CSEL 54, 660): *et si pauxillulum dormitanti elapsus fuerit e manibus, noli protinus desperare. egredere in plateas, adiura filias Hierusalem, repperies eum cubantem in meridie* […].

54 Shuve, *Song of Songs*, 197–8.

55 *Ep*. 22,38 (CSEL 54, 204):… *cum accesseris ad prophetissam et conceperis in utero et pepereris filium* […].

signifying the spiritual development of the ascetic.[56] To Pammachius, Jerome describes how Jesus "spoils the enemies within you, and plunders, when he is mature, Damascus and defeats the king of Assyria."[57] Thus, both texts contain images of the ascetic as a bride as well as a parent. Besides, a certain passivity is found also in the parental imagery, since Christ is described as being the one fighting the ascetic's inner foes, that is, the passions. This apparently applies to a young girl as well as a senator well-trained in the practice of asceticism.

Another text in which Jerome writes of an ascetic man as a bride is *Letter* 125, to the young monk Rusticus. Like female virgins, Rusticus is instructed to keep himself "unstained of any impurity" (*nulla sorde conmacules*) so that he "may go to Christ's altar like a virgin going out of the chamber" (*ut ad altare Christi quasi de thalamo uirgo procedas*).[58] The references to Abraham leaving his country and people, seen in letters to female virgins, reappear in this text,[59] as does the idea of the ascetic being born again.[60] Also, a great concern for purity is seen in the letter, which bears similarities to warnings directed to female virgins about meeting unknown persons, especially of the opposite sex.[61] Rusticus is specifically instructed to guard his *pudicitia* against threats,[62] that is, the virtue of modesty typically ascribed to women.[63] Jerome hopes to present him "without spot and wrinkle as a chaste virgin," "holy in mind as well as body" so that he will not be "shut out by the Spouse because, lacking the oil of good works, his lamp has gone out."[64] Here, as in *Letter* 22, we find a combination of bridal and temple imagery.

Concluding that young Rusticus is advised to guard his purity in order to be prepared for the Bridegroom, we may ask if the relatively more active role ascribed to Pammachius should be explained by the fact that he is a male, or whether the difference is rather one between younger, inexperienced and older, well-trained ascetics. However, there is also reason to believe that according to Jerome, all ascetics find themselves in a female position. Stating, in *Letter* 22, that the human soul has a need to direct love towards something, and that desire can only be extinguished if replaced by another desire, he refers to Paul:

> Mortify, says the apostle, your members on the earth. Therefore he could himself say with confidence: It is not I who live, but Christ who lives in me (cf. Gal 2.20). He who mortified his members … is not afraid to say: I become like a bottle in the frost (cf. Ps 119.83): Whatever was moist in me has been dried up […][65]

Paul, Jerome's main influence in his understanding of the flesh,[66] and such an important model for celibates to imitate,[67] is here presented as the example whom the virgin bride should follow in emptying herself in order to receive something else, thus making her spiritual transformation possible. At the same time, Paul is the principal source in Jerome's writings about the weakness of the flesh, which is seen as a common reality to all human beings. The figure of Paul combines, for Jerome, the ascetic strife for transformation *and* the impossibility of definitely escaping the fleshly condition while being in the earthly body. Not only in ascetic

56 *Ep*. 22,38; *ep*. 66,10.
57 *Ep*. 66,10 (CSEL 54, 661): … *in te hostes spoliat, mature praedatur Damascum et regem uincit Assyrium*.
58 *Ep*. 125,17 (CSEL 56/1, 136–137).
59 *Ep*. 125,20.
60 *Ep*. 125,20 (CSEL 56/1, 140): *renatum in Christo*.
61 *Ep*. 125,6; 125,7.
62 *Ep*. 125,2.
63 McDonnell, *Roman Manliness*, 161. van't Westeinde, *Roman Nobilitas*, 122–4, notes the uniqueness in Jerome's use of the term *pudicitia* in writing to Rusticus, a male ascetic.
64 *Ep*. 125,20 (CSEL 56/1, 140–141): … *ut renatum in Christo sine ruga et macula quasi pudicam uirginem exhibeam sanctamque tam mente quam corpore, ne solo nomine glorietur et absque oleo bonorum operum extincta lampade excludatur ab sponso*.
65 *Ep*. 22,17 (CSEL 54, 166): *mortificate, ait apostolus, membra uestra super terram. unde et ipse confidenter aiebat: uiuo autem iam non ego, uiuit autem in me Christus. qui mortificauit membra sua … non timet dicere: factus sum tamquam uter in pruina; quidquid enim in me fuit umoris, excoctum est* […].
66 Brown, *Body and Society*, 376: "In his [Jerome's] exegesis of the Apostle, he contributed more heavily than did any other contemporary Latin writer to the definitive sexualization of Paul's notion of *the flesh*." This is seen not least in writings from the Pelagian controversy, in which Jerome used Paul to argue that human beings have no possibility to be completely free from bodily passion: e.g. *ep*. 130,9 and *ep*. 133,8 with references to Rom 7.18–19 and Rom 7.24.
67 E.g. *Adv. Iovin*. 1,8.

writings but also in polemics against Jovinian and the Pelagians, Jerome returned to a call to ascetic humility and a reminder of the limitations of free will in spiritual transformation.[68] In relation to Christ, the ascetic will never be an equal, but in a submissive state of dependence. Kuefler's description is helpful:

> The Christian god, as the personification of moral perfection, also represented ultimate masculine authority, according to the gendered standards of *virtus*. The relationship of all human beings to that divine and manly perfection was already, therefore, from a subordinate position, a feminine position in the eyes of contemporaries.[69]

In Jerome's view, all ascetics find themselves in a fleshly – a *female* – condition. As Shuve writes: "Female flesh, which is sinful flesh, is also archetypal flesh. … Inscribed in the deceptive, seductive bodies of women is, perhaps paradoxically, a clear sign of the libidinous disorder that afflicts all of humanity."[70] While it is through union with Christ that the ascetic may transcend his/her fleshly and sexed condition, this is necessarily a state marked by liminality – the ascetic is still in the flesh, still not completely transformed. In relation to the heavenly Bridegroom, all ascetics take on the role of the female. This is seen in how Jerome in *Letter* 22 describes himself, when struggling with temptations, as a penitent woman (cf. Lk 7.37–50): "Totally helpless I threw myself at the feet of Jesus, watered them with my tears and wiped them with my hair, and my rebellious flesh was conquered by weeks of fasting."[71] Here, Jerome depicts himself "in feminine terms and to enact a feminine persona before a masculine God."[72]

According to Kuefler, although the ascetic's relationship with God was marked by femininity and submission, it was this relationship that, paradoxically, put a person in a position of power in relation to other human beings[73] (although, as discussed above, he argues that this was the case of ascetic men, not women). Being a bride of Christ implied a unique relationship with the divine which brought with it spiritual authority. Richard Valantasis has likewise argued that the idea of sacred marriage had the function of marking an individual as something totally different from other human beings:

> The metaphor and its attendant implications for personal and intimate relationship with the divine constitute a removal from the realm of the ordinary and socially known and an entrance into a new subjectivity now solely connected with the divine. On the scale of human identities and status, those married to God or united to God in a fixed state of union no longer resemble the majority of believers. The nuptial chamber is only for the elite, the perfect, the fully developed ascetic.[74]

Does this association with authority only apply to male brides? Something that speaks against such a conclusion is the fact that one of the most hierarchical elaborations on bridal imagery is found in *Letter* 65, to Principia. Jerome explains Psalm 45 in this letter, and connects the words in Ps 45.14–15, about the bride, her virgins, and companions entering the palace of the king, with the words in the Song of Songs about "sixty queens and eighty concubines, and maidens without number" (Cant 6.8):

> I think that these virgins, who follow the church and are placed in the highest rank, are you and all those who preserve in virginity of body and mind. Those who are close, and friends, are the widows and the continent in marriage, who all with joy and exultation are led into the temple and into the chamber of the king: Into the temple as priests of God, and into the chamber as spouses of the King and Spouse.[75]

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68 E.g. *Adv. Iovin.* 2,2–3; *ep.* 133,1–2, 6, 8.

69 Kuefler, *Manly Eunuch*, 139–40. Kuefler states that he builds on an argument in Connolly, *Augustinian Imperative*, 58.

70 Shuve, *Song of Songs*, 190; cf. Miller, "Blazing Body," 30: "in [*Letter* 22], Jerome's erotics of asceticism is applicable to men as well as to women […]."

71 *Ep.* 22,7 (CSEL 54, 153): *itaque omne auxilio destitutus ad Iesu iacebam pedes, rigabam lacrimis, crine tergebam et repugnantem carnem ebdomadarum inedia subiugabam*. Shuve, *Song of Songs*, 190; cf. Miller, "Blazing Body," 32–3.

72 Kuefler, *Manly Eunuch*, 139.

73 Ibid., 137–51.

74 Valantasis, *Making of the Self*, 62.

75 *Ep.* 65,20 (CSEL 54, 643): *ego puto de istis uirginibus, quae secuntur ecclesiam et in primo ponuntur gradu, et te esse et omnes, qui in uirginitate corporis et animae perseuerant, proximas autem et amicas uiduas esse et in matrimonio continentes, quae omnes cum laetitia et exultatione ducuntur in templum et in thalamum regis: in templum quasi sacerdotes dei, et in thalamum quasi sponsae regis et sponsi.* Jerome sometimes called all celibate women brides, and sometimes, he used this term more narrowly to refer only to virgins: Shuve, *Song of Songs*, 193–6.

As Shuve remarks, in this text, all celibates, whether virgins, married, or widows, are included among the brides and priests. The great difference is between the celibates and the non-celibates.[76] Neither is there any reason to presume that this reflects an idea of ascetic women's superiority over non-ascetic *women*, rather than non-ascetic *men*. As seen in the above discussion of Jerome's views on gender in relation to his theory of asceticism, the essential difference is the one between ascetics and non-ascetics, not between men and women. When it comes to his struggle against Jovinian, it actually seems that it was a critique against precisely *female* ascetic superiority that was at the foundation of the debate.[77] Thus, the superiority of ascetics in relation to non-ascetics, as described in this work, certainly pertains to ascetic women and men alike.

To conclude this part, although the metaphor of the bride is more common in texts to and about female ascetics, there are important similarities in Jerome's use of the image in writings about ascetics of both sexes. These similarities must be understood from the anthropological and eschatological framework of his ascetic theology: The fleshly condition is universal, and in this regard, all ascetics are in a female position. They are the passive partner of a Bridegroom who will transform them. This female position, however, also makes them superior to other Christians.

4 The Soldier

Like the figure of the bride, the metaphor of the soldier came to be used by early Christians to depict a person's transformation into a Christian, not least in the context of baptism.[78] While the bride was a metaphor found in the Jewish–Christian tradition, the soldier metaphor belonged to Graeco-Roman culture. Kuefler notes that "military metaphors formed an essential element of traditional Roman masculinity,"[79] and claims that there certainly was a discrepancy between Roman ideas of manliness and the Christian ideal of *patientia*. However, in the Christian reinterpretation of manly ideals, *patientia* did not only signify passivity, but also the typically military attributes of steadfastness and courage, and was associated with triumph. This can be seen in writings about Christians martyrs:[80] "Among the Latin writers of late antiquity … the phrase 'soldier of Christ' was turned into the heart of a sophisticated (and complicated) defence of Christian manliness."[81] The martyrs, as soldiers of Christ (*milites Christi*), appear to passively suffer and die, and still, they conquer and triumph.

This rhetoric was translated into a battle against inner passions[82] through an "interiorization of the military image,"[83] which was seen not least in ascetic literature: Resistance against sexual temptation was understood as heroic and manly.[84] David Brakke points out that "the monk imagined himself as an *agonistes*, a 'fighter,' 'contender,' or 'combatant' – a masculine figure."[85] This reinterpretation of manliness constitutes a certain contrast to Michel Foucault's idea, expressed in his *History of Sexuality*, of a development from a pre-Christian to a Christian context: Graeco-Roman ideals of self-control and empowerment of the self, through which elite men were thought to rise above others (avoiding excess as well as passivity in sexual matters), gave way, Foucault argued, to a Christian emphasis on purification – something that he understood as a change from a masculine and active to a feminine and passive ideal.[86]

76 Shuve, *Song of Songs*, 196.

77 Jovinian's first proposition, as described by Jerome, focused on female asceticism: Virgins and widows are compared to married women; *Adv. Iovin.* 1,3. See the discussion in Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy*, 31–3.

78 Jensen, *Baptismal Imagery*, 65–8.

79 Kuefler, *Manly Eunuch*, 37. See ibid. 37–55; 105–24, about Christian views on militarism and manhood.

80 Kuefler, *Manly Eunuch*, 110–7.

81 Ibid., 112.

82 Ibid., 117–24.

83 Ibid., 118.

84 Ibid., 170–8; Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk*.

85 Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk*, 182.

86 Foucault, *Use of Pleasure*, 85–9. See the discussion and partial critique in Clark, "Foucault, the Fathers, and Sex."

The metaphor of the soldier may be seen as an opposite of the bride metaphor. It signals masculinity and not least activity, an essential aspect of manliness in this historical context. This metaphor became important in Jerome's explanation of the ascetic life in terms of struggle. In his anti-Pelagian polemics, Jerome fiercely attacked the idea of *apatheia*, claiming that for the Christian, and more precisely, the ascetic, the struggle does not end until death.[87] Jerome's ascetic is per definition someone engaged in warfare, and therefore, an active individual. Thus, like many other Christian authors, he retained, but reinterpreted, the manly ideal of activity and the military imagery in particular. What we must ask is whether this was the case only for male ascetics or if – like the image of the bride – a clearly gender-loaded metaphor could be used by Jerome in descriptions of both male and female ascetics.

First, something should be said about the enemy. In difference to other monastic literature of the time, Jerome did not understand the ascetic struggle mainly as a struggle against outer forces, that is, the devil and the demons, but against one's own humanity. Although fleshly humanity could be associated with the devil, as we saw for example in *Letter* 22, Jerome typically interpreted the foes as internal threats. What is to be overcome is the passion. He writes to Furia: "It is therefore a task of great virtue and restless diligence to overcome what you are born as in the flesh, and not live according to the flesh; to every day fight with yourself and to watch the enclosed enemy with the hundred eyes of Argus, as the fables relate."[88]

In his polemics against Jovinian, who had drawn significantly from the Old Testament in arguing that celibates and married people are equal members of the church, Jerome makes references to passages which indicate that celibacy is required, for example, in going to battle: "The one who has taken a wife and planted a vineyard, that is, fathered children, is forbidden to go to war, because someone who serves his wife cannot serve in the Lord's army (cf. Deut 20)."[89] He explains that what matters in the Christian fight (*praelium*) against the devil is not ecclesiastical degrees but performance in battle,[90] meaning that the ascetics will receive a higher reward. Being married prevents a person from serving the Lord as a good soldier, always being ready to follow commands without distraction.[91] In writing to Rusticus, Jerome speaks of "the school of monasteries" (*ludus monasteriorum*) which produces fearless soldiers, and he sees this as a prerequisite for handling a solitary life.[92] Interestingly, he compares this training to the "extraordinary fairytales" about struggles with demons – obviously referring to writings about the desert monks – made up by "foolish persons" in order to impress simple people and generate income.[93]

Kuefler states that in ancient Christian literature, only Christian men are called "soldiers of Christ," never women, and argues that Paulinus of Nola is unique in that he "comes close to doing so" concerning Melania the Elder (she is depicted as "fighting," *militans*).[94] However, even if we do not have examples of Jerome calling a female ascetic a *miles*, military metaphors are found in multiple places in his writings to and about women. In order to detect this complexity, let us begin with examining two letters to male ascetics. In *Letter* 52, to Nepotian (a man with military experience), Jerome describes what a soldier of Christ (*Christi miles*)[95] should be like: He should withstand the passions and be led by virtues – prudence (*prudentia*), justice (*iustitia*), temperance (*temperantia*) and courage (*fortitudo*). These virtues are likened to a four-horse team that will carry the monastic, as well as precious stones by which he is decorated and protected, as the stones are "turned

87 See e.g. *ep*. 133,3; 133,5; *Dial. Pelag*. 3,1.

88 *Ep*. 54,9 (CSEL 54, 475): *grandis ergo uirtutis est et sollicitae diligentiae superare, quod natus sis in carne, non carnaliter uiuere, tecum pugnare cottidie et inclusum hostem Argi, ut fabulae ferunt, centum oculis obseruare*. Cf. *Ep*. 22,6.

89 *Adv. Iovin*. 1,20 (PL 23, 238): *Qui uxorem duxerit, et qui plantaverit vineam velut propagines filiorum, prohibetur ad bella procedere. Non enim potest Domini servire militia servus uxoris.*

90 *Adv. Iovin*. 1,35.

91 *Adv. Iovin.* 1,13 (PL 23, 231): *… quasi strenuus, et armatus miles statim impleat quod praeceptum est, et hoc faciat sine ulla distentione.*

92 *Ep*. 125,9 (CSEL 56/1, 128).

93 *Ep*. 125,9 (CSEL 56/1, 128–129): *… qui nesciunt secundum quosdam ineptos homines daemonum obpugnantium contra se portenta confingere, ut apud inperitos et uulgi homines miraculum sui faciant et exinde sectentur lucra*. See also *ep*. 14,2, to Heliodorus, who was a former soldier.

94 Kuefler, *Manly Eunuch*, 114.

95 *Ep*. 52,13 (CSEL 54, 436).

into shields."[96] This discussion of virtue – itself associated with manliness – in combination with military terms would seem to belong to an exclusively male discourse. However, *Letter* 66 gives us reason to think that women are included as well. The same four virtues that we have seen in *Letter* 52 (prudence, justice, temperance, and courage) appear in the letter to Pammachius; however, it is said that Pammachius possesses them *together with* Eustochium, Paula, and Paulina (that is, his sister-in-law, his mother-in-law, and his deceased wife). Each of the four ascetics possesses all four virtues, Jerome claims, but he still holds that each of them is characterized by one of the virtues (*emineatis in singulis*). It may be noted that Eustochium is the one associated with the virtue of courage, which would appear to be the most manly of these.[97] In Roman society, *pudicitia* (chastity) was generally seen as the main female virtue, but here we find women associated with typically manly virtues – at the same time, the male ascetic Rusticus, as we have seen, was characterized by precisely *pudicitia*.[98]

The fact that female ascetics are not excluded from military imagery becomes even clearer when we examine some of Jerome's writings to women. *Letter* 22, written to the young Eustochium and full of bridal imagery, also contains military metaphors. Eustochium is told that she must not have anything in her former life which holds her back, "because no soldier goes to battle with his wife."[99] Part of this battle takes place by defence against the inner passions. Jerome speaks of this, in letters to female ascetics, as seizing the "shield of faith" (*scutum fidei*; Eph 6.16) in order to protect themselves against "the fiery arrows of the devil" (*ignatia diaboli sagittae*).[100] In *Letter* 130, Jerome relates how Demetrias, resolving to convert to the ascetic life, told herself to "seize the shield of faith, the breastplate of righteousness, the helmet of salvation, and go to battle."[101] Fasting is spoken of as an armour to be put on (*ieiuniorum arma*).[102]

The celibate woman should not only defend herself, but also attack the enemy: Jerome interprets the words about "dashing your little ones against the rock" (Ps 137.9) in terms of the ascetic dashing passionate thoughts, as soon as they arise in the mind, against the Rock which is Christ.[103] We cannot expect to be crowned without having fought, Jerome explains, and asks the virgin: "Is it not better to do battle for a short time, to carry poles for bulwark, arms, and food supplies, to grow weary under breastwork, and afterwards rejoice over the victory, than to be a slave forever, just for an hour's impatience?"[104] Quoting Paul (Eph 6.12), Jerome describes how the ascetic is surrounded by enemies, and it is not until the flesh is "dissolved" (*dissoluta*) that the ascetic does not need to fear anymore.[105] As long as we are in the flesh, there can be no certain victory, Jerome assures the young ascetic, reminding her that: "The Saviour did not come to bring peace to earth, but a sword."[106] Commenting on Psalm 45.3 ("Gird your sword on your thigh, O mighty one, in your glory and majesty") in his *Letter* 65 to Principia, Jerome speaks of virginity as conquering the flesh:

> I think that you do best to understand this place as referring to you being girded with the military sword of Christ. However, that you may know that virginity always has the sword of chastity, by which it cuts the works of the flesh and triumphs over pleasures, even pagan error invented virgin goddesses who were armed.[107]

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96 *Ep*. 52,13 (CSEL 54, 437): *habeto prudentiam, iustitiam, temperantiam, fortitudinem. his plagis caeli includere, haec de quadriga uelut aurigam Christi ad metam concitum ferat. nihil hoc monili pretiosius, nihil hac gemmarum uarietate distinctius. ex omni parte decoraris, cingeris atque protegeris; et ornamento tibi sunt et tutamini: gemmae uertuntur in scuta.*

97 *Ep*. 66,3 (CSEL 54, 649–650).

98 Cf. above, n. 63.

99 *Ep*. 22,21 (CSEL 54, 173): *nemo enim miles cum uxore pergit ad proelium.*

100 *Ep*. 22,17 (CSEL 54, 165); *ep*. 54,7 (CSEL 54, 473): *ardentes diaboli sagittae ieiuniorum et uigiliarum frigore restinguendae sunt*; *ep*. 130,5 (CSEL 56/1, 180): *adsume scutum fidei*; *ep*. 130,10 (CSEL 56/1, 190): *ignita diaboli iacula.*

101 *Ep*. 130,5 (CSEL 56/1, 180): *adsume scutum fidei, loricam iustitiae, galeam salutis, procede ad proelium.*

102 *Ep*. 130,10 (CSEL 56/1, 189).

103 *Ep*. 22,6; *ep*. 130,8.

104 *Ep*. 22,39 (CSEL 54, 206–207): *nonne melius est breui tempore dimicare, ferre uallum, arma, cibaria, lassescere sub lorica et postea gaudere uictorem, quam inpatientia unius horae seruire perpetuo?*

105 *Ep*. 22,3.

106 *Ep*. 22,4 (CSEL 54, 148): *non uenit saluator pacem mittere super terram, sed gladium.*

107 *Ep*. 65,10 (CSEL 54, 627): *istum arbitror locum te optime intellegere et accinctam Christi gladio militare. ut autem scias semper uirginitatem gladium habere pudicitiae, per quem truncat opera carnis et superat uoluptates, gentilis quoque error deas uirgines finxit armatas.*

Becoming an ascetic does not only mean to be the bride of Christ, but it also means to be enrolled in the Lord's army. To Demetrias, Jerome explains that although she is a consecrated virgin, she will profit from his advice, much like soldiers will be ignited by the words of their general (*imperator*).[108] Demetrias is called a "recruit young soldier of Christ" (*Christi tiruncula*) and is told that "we must always stand as in war footing and on the battle line, ready to fight."[109] In *Letter* 107, little Paula (Toxotius' and Laeta's daughter, granddaughter of Paula the Elder) is said to be enrolled in an army (*exercitus*), under a general (*imperator*),[110] and she is spoken of as a young recruit (*cui exercitu tiruncula nutriatur*).

In *Letter* 54 to Furia, Jerome clearly combines bridal and military imagery as he sets Judith as an example for the widow to imitate. Judith fasted and wore sombre clothes, but not, Jerome asserts, mainly because she grieved her husband, but because she awaited her Bridegroom. He immediately continues:

> I see her armed with a sword in her hand, a blood-stained soldier. I recognize the head of Holofernes which she has carried back from the midst of the enemies. A woman defeats men and chastity cuts lust.[111]

Judith, a model for female ascetics, is called "soldier" (*dextera*), and both Demetrias and little Paula are called recruits (*tiruncula*). This is not too different from how Nepotian was told not to think of himself a soldier (*miles*) while still a recruit (*tiro*).[112] He and the consecrated virgins seem to find themselves at a similar stage, that of being enrolled in the army but still not having obtained the dignity of a soldier.

We thus find military metaphors of shields and arms, of defence and attack, of joining an army and obeying a general, in writings to both men and women. While cultivating virtues, and having the virtue of self-control, was thought to be typical of men and distinguishing them from women, the virtues that Jerome ascribed to, and expected from, female and male ascetics appear to have been very similar. On the one hand, the ancient Roman idea of a virtuous man is accepted; on the other hand, it becomes an ideal not specifically for men, but for *male and female ascetics*. Being a soldier, for Jerome, means above all to guard oneself against the enemies and not let oneself be distracted by what belongs to the world, in order to dedicate oneself wholly to the general's wishes and commands.

The idea of the ascetic life as a struggle and the ascetic as a soldier may also be part of the explanation for Jerome's eschatological conviction that the human body will remain intact in heaven.[113] Even if his critique against an "Origenist" idea of the resurrection influenced his eschatological teaching, the idea of heavenly flesh should not only be seen as an effect of such polemics, but rather as an integral part of his ascetic theology at large: The resurrected body of the ascetic parallels the earthly body in having a sex without using the functions of it; in being human and angelic at the same time. There is a crucial difference, of course, between the ascetic on earth and the ascetic in heaven: On earth, the struggle is ongoing with an uncertain outcome; in heaven, triumph is obtained.[114] We may conceive of the heavenly flesh as an eternal mark of triumph: That which has been overcome, the flesh and the sex, will forever be a sign of ascetic victory.

There is reason to suggest that for Jerome, women, because of being naturally more fleshly, and thus weaker, also were the fiercest fighters. Having described his own struggles in the desert in his youth, he remarks that if a man exhausted by fasting could experience such temptations, how much more vulnerable

108 *Ep*. 130,2 (CSEL 56/1, 177).

109 *Ep*. 130,8 (CSEL 56/1, 187): *quasi in procinctu et in acie stamus semper ad pugnam.*

110 *Ep*. 107,4 (CSEL 55, 296).

111 *Ep*. 54,16 (CSEL 54, 484): *uideo armatam gladio manum, cruentam dexteram, recognosco caput Holofernae de mediis hostibus reportatum. uincit uiros femina et castitas truncat libidinem.*

112 *Ep*. 125,8 (CSEL 56/1, 127).

113 Shaw has made the point that Jerome's resistance against the *apatheia* ideal may be part of the reason why he does not, as was common in ascetic literature, tend to speak of women as "becoming male," and also may explain his resistance to the idea that gender difference will disappear in the resurrection: "For Jerome, female asceticism is not so much a matter of blotting out or denying female nature as it is the renunciation of the 'natural' female functions of sexuality and procreation." Shaw, *Burden of the Flesh*, 239.

114 Cf. *ep*. 22,3.

must the reality be for a young girl who is used to experience pleasures.[115] In *Letter* 66, he remarks to Pammachius that the senator is overrun by his female associates, since they belong to the weaker sex.[116] What women accomplish is seen as more astonishing. Such statements are, of course, misogynist in the sense that they reflect the predominant idea of women as being naturally weaker. However, it also points to the idea that women embody the liminal, imperfect, and combatant reality of all ascetics. If struggle defines the ascetic and, like the sacred marriage, sets the ascetic apart from other Christians by his/her service of Christ, and if this struggle is most perfectly seen in ascetic women, it also means that according to Jerome, female ascetics are in a position of spiritual power and authority in relation to non-ascetic Christians.

5 Conclusion

I have argued that Jerome used the seemingly opposite metaphors of the bride and the soldier to describe male as well as female ascetics. His use of bridal and military imagery, I have shown, certainly had the function of enhancing passivity and activity respectively, but these different emphases did not correspond to the two sexes as much as to other aspects of Jerome's theology and ascetic ideology. Thus, I contend that Jerome's use of these metaphors does not contradict, but rather confirm, that he held anthropological views about the human possibility to transcend sexual difference, which were deeply indebted to the theology of Origen of Alexandria.

The images of the bride and the soldier helped Jerome to make certain theological points: The bride metaphor, signalling passivity, was useful in claiming that the ascetic, still being in the flesh, was utterly dependent on the transforming grace of the Bridegroom. In relation to Christ, the ascetic – as a bride – is always submissive and in need of a superior to act upon him/her. Although the term "bride" is more often used in Jerome's writings to women, bridal imagery is found also in descriptions of and advise to male ascetics. Men and women alike must keep themselves pure and prepare themselves for the Bridegroom by practicing abstinence, emptying themselves in order to be able to receive Him.

In relation to Christ, men as well as women are brides, but in relation to the passions, they are fierce soldiers. Military images of courageous fighters appear, just like the bridal imagery, in writings to men and women alike. Jerome's use of these images does not appear to be as dependent on sexual difference as on the age and experience of the ascetic. He tends to see younger, inexperienced ascetics as more endangered, which may explain why the young Rusticus is presented in feminine terms which are absent in descriptions of the older Pammachius. However, regardless of sex as well as age, all ascetics find themselves in a liminal position – transformed into angelic beings but still fleshly. Again, in this sense, they all find themselves in the female position of imperfection, being dependent on a male agent to awaken their true humanity.

While I argue that Jerome's use of bridal and military imagery did not imply an idea of hierarchy between the sexes, this does not mean that his employment of the metaphors did not display hierarchical thinking. Above all, both metaphors had the function of marking the ascetics as something totally different and clearly separated from non-celibates. They both signalled a unique position which the ascetics gained through their relationship with Christ and their excellence in the Christian battle.

As with all theologians, Jerome developed his ideas in a specific context: He wrote extensively to and about ascetic women – women who also belonged to the Roman nobility. I argue that Origen's anthropology, marked by ideas about transcendence and dynamism, suited Jerome perfectly in this sense. It helped him to justify female spiritual authority, which would not only have appealed to his patrons, but would have been important for his own reputation. If his disciples were, to a large extent, women, and the skills of the disciples were supposed to mirror the excellence of the teacher, it would have been in his interest to ascribe to women characteristics traditionally ascribed to men, in order to enhance their authority. Jerome seems to have viewed himself and his female associates in a similar way: An elite of militant brides, fighting but not yet victorious.

115 *Ep.* 22,8.
116 *Ep.* 66,13.

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