4

Holy Households

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MELANIA AND THE LIBERATED WOMAN

The *Vita Melaniae Iunioris,* in the course of narrating a number of its protagonist's choice miracles, recounts Melania's healing of a woman literally caught in childbirth. In the process of a difficult labor, the infant had died in the mother's womb. Rather than relinquishing the dead child, however, the woman's body clung to the fetus, leaving the woman, in the words of the Greek *vita,* "neither able to live or die."[1] Once the news of the woman's plight reaches Melania, the saint is moved by sympathy and an apparent desire to seize a teachable moment. Upon leading her company of virgins to the woman's sickbed, Melania prays over her and places her belt upon the woman's stomach. The garment, a gift from a holy man and infused with his prayers, as Melania piously reminds her audience, works its wonders: at long last, the dead fetus is expelled, the woman liberated, and the attending crowds amazed.

The miraculous delivery, while evidently among the tokens of Melania's saintliness in the eyes of the *vita*'s author and translator, nevertheless strikes modern readers as oddly incomplete. Melania's intervention saves the life of the pregnant woman, yet there is no concomitant healing for the child in her womb. The *vita* does not depict Melania as offering prayers on the infant's behalf, and after the body's expulsion, the child's death is passed over amid the crowd's rejoicing over the mother's being freed of its body. Neither does Gerontius offer any apologies for the child's fate; for the *vita*'s original audience, the stillbirth evidently signaled neither a limitation of divine power nor callousness on Melania's part, as it may for contemporary readers. By its very incongruity—the disconnect between ancient and modern expectations of what may constitute a proper miracle in this context—the incident

allows readers a glimpse into late ancient thought about children, their lives and deaths, and perhaps even their place in the lives of "holy women" like the Melanias and their famous ascetic contemporaries.

On the one hand, the story thus attests to the harsh realities of late ancient Roman life expectancies. Although exact data are for obvious reasons inaccessible, conservative estimates suggest infant- and childhood-mortality rates of roughly one-third of all births, with many of the deaths occurring at birth or during the child's first few days of life.[2] Not only were these first moments of life precarious for the infants in question, mothers' lives, too, were in acute danger. Gregory of Nyssa memorably describes the approaching birth as follows: "Assume the moment of childbirth is at hand; it is not the birth of the child but the presence of death that is thought of, and the death of the mother anticipated. Often, the sad prophecy is fulfilled and before the birth is celebrated, before any of the anticipated goods are tasted, joy is exchanged for lamentation."[3] Gregory writes with both literary flair and ascetic bias—the aim of his treatise is, after all, to convince virgins that the way of life they have chosen for themselves is infinitely preferable to a life burdened by the cares of marriage and motherhood. Yet late ancient medical sources paint a similar picture. The majority of the fourth book of Soranus's *Gynaecology* is thus dedicated to difficulties in childbirth, including scenarios in which the fetus's extraction required the use of hooks or embryotomy.[4] Little wonder, then, that the Greek *Vita Melaniae,* likely the earliest version of the text, does not elaborate on the cause of the woman's predicament: death in childbirth was common for both mothers and infants, and required no special explanation, even if such deaths were no less grievous for that reason.[5]

The *vita*'s account of the nearly fatal pregnancy and its miraculous resolution nevertheless also suggests itself as a metaphor for the fraught experience of motherhood among late ancient ascetics. For Melania's patient, the struggle to rid herself of the child in her womb threatens her own life. Able to "neither live nor die" as long as the fetus remains within her, it is only through the intervention of the saints that the woman is able to relinquish the infant and draw back from the brink of death herself. Many women in late antiquity might face and perhaps survive such struggles on the physical plane. Ascetic writings suggest, however, that female renunciants confronted a similar battle between attachment to offspring and family, and the fullness of life in Christ on the spiritual level as well. Dedication to ascetic practice, including the sexual renunciation that it entailed, was thus one of the few ways by which late ancient women could escape the challenges of marriage and motherhood, and expand the palette of roles available to them in society.[6] Yet for women of Melania's class, renunciation frequently entailed compromises. As the *vita* acknowledges, Melania herself had given birth to two children prior to being able to persuade her husband to abandon marital relations in favor of a spiritual, that is to say: sexless, union.

Melania's example is both common and instructive: even situations in which the would-be ascetic's spouse was sympathetic to her project,[7] a token effort at procreation was frequently required. By comparison to her peers, moreover, Melania entered the longed-for monastic life quite early. Her saintly grandmother, the elder Melania, had given birth to three children before the death of her husband and two of her offspring created the opportunity for her to set sail for the Holy Land. Similarly, Paula, the elder Melania's rough contemporary and, like her, a convert to Christian asceticism, withdrew from Rome after her husband's death. Relinquishing hopes of remarriage, she left behind her own, still-young—and, if Jerome's account is to be trusted, pitifully weeping—children in the process.

In choosing asceticism, these women, late ancient sources claimed, had bravely and happily chosen against their offspring and families. Such antifamilial decisions, however, did not necessarily change the rhetorical characterization of ascetic women in Christian sources. Instead, female renunciation resulted in the rescripting of one of the most central aspects of Roman women's existence: motherhood. The loss, avoidance, or abandonment of biological offspring for these women needed not entail the rejection of the motherly role, late ancient writers argued. Instead, it was precisely such ascetics who could be better and truer mothers to large numbers of spiritual children than their more conventionally maternal counterparts. At times, this new construction of motherhood even allowed for a readoption of an ascetic's biological offspring—if, and only if, they were prepared to follow her along the path to renunciation. The following chapter explores the different configurations of motherhood—biological, spiritual, and, above all, rhetorically scripted—in the lives of the Melanias and their late ancient peers.

PHYSICAL MOTHERS AND BIOLOGICAL CHILDREN

Asceticism, late ancient Christians knew, might be a prescription against the death of the soul but did not ward against bodily death—indeed, at times severe renunciation even hastened death's arrival. Such had been the case for Blesilla, a young Roman widow who under Jerome's tutelage had embraced a harsh ascetic regime. The latter had, so her outraged contemporaries argued, claimed her life before she had reached the age of twenty. Blesilla's death was a public-relations disaster from the perspective of ascetic writers.[8] Jerome himself was forced to leave Rome in the its aftermath and took to exhorting from afar Blesilla's mother, Paula, to temper her mourning, lest public displays of her grief call Christianity, and particularly its more ascetic manifestations, further into question. To this end, Jerome conjured up for Paula's benefit the stolid bravery of various biblical mothers, before concluding with an example closer to Paula's own experience:[9]

> Why repeat old tales? Follow a contemporary model. The holy Melania, who is among Christians of our era of true nobility (May the Lord grant that you and I may partake with her in His day!), while her husband's body was still warm and yet unburied, lost two of her sons at the same time. What I tell you is incredible, but, as Christ is my witness, not untrue. Who would not have believed her then to appear in a frenzy, with disheveled hair, torn clothes, a pierced breast? She shed not a single teardrop! She stood motionless, and casting herself at Christ's feet, she smiled, as if she were holding him. "I am prepared," she said, "to serve you, Lord, for you have freed me from such a burden."

In later years, Jerome would grow to hate and malign the subject of his present exhortation: Melania the Elder, the namesake of her wonder-working granddaughter, and chief supporter of Jerome's former friend Rufinus. In the 380s C.E., however, Jerome could deploy her supposedly Stoic response in the face of overwhelming grief to illumine the posture appropriate to a Christian woman. The dead, after all, could be safely assumed to have entered a blissful afterlife, especially when the deceased was a young child or a practicing ascetic. By contrast, for the bereaved, God had created by their death an opportunity for a new, better life of superior spirituality. Released from her roles as wife to an ordinary (if highborn) man and mother to biological children, such a one could now embrace an existence as Christ's beloved and spiritual parent to many.

While Jerome's depiction of the elder Melania bears traces of his characteristic shrillness, other contemporaneous accounts nevertheless echo the underlying story. Both the *Lausiac History* and Paulinus of Nola's epistolary biography of her offer similar accounts of a saintly woman empowered to embrace a life of renunciation, following in Jesus' and Mary's footsteps, in the aftermath of her loved ones' deaths.[10] Neither text goes so far as Jerome in naming God as Melania's liberator; all alike, however, emphasize the redemptive quality of Melania's ascetic existence, a fate far superior to that of an ordinary wife and mother. "Through the loss of her human love," Paulinus argues, "[the elder Melania] conceived a love for God. She was made wretched to become blessed; she was afflicted to be healed."[11]

Nor was the elder Melania the only female ascetic whose biographers construed the death of a child as a show of divine favor. The *vita* of her granddaughter, the younger Melania, depicts a similar show of "grace from on high" in the form of a divinely severed bond between mother and biological offspring.[12] Just before giving birth to her second child, Melania thus tearfully "prayed to God that she might be freed from the world and spend the rest of her days in the solitary life, for this is what she had yearned for from the beginning."[13] Her prayers are answered promptly: upon returning from church, Melania goes into premature labor, giving birth to a child who lives just long enough to receive baptism. The infant's death prompts her husband's assent to live together in chastity thenceforth, the *vita* claims, with the death of their older child soon thereafter further uniting the couple in their decision to embrace asceticism.

These stories tell readers little about how late ancient women with ascetic aspirations actually felt about the deaths of their children. They do, however, provide a glimpse at the rhetorical culture that had sprung up around the ubiquitous tragedies of infant mortality and parental bereavement. Such accounts may have been read through the lens of ascetic excess or divine chastisement—and were no doubt read in this way by many contemporaries. By crafting rival narratives of liberation and empowerment, Gerontius, Jerome, and other champions of late ancient renunciation not only offered an apologia for ascetic practice but created role models for other elite women sympathetic to spiritual pursuits and afflicted by personal grief.

Jerome's exhortation to Paula to temper her mourning for her daughter thus evidently proved persuasive. Soon after Blesilla's death, Paula removed herself to Jerusalem, where she founded and oversaw a monastery for women alongside Jerome's. In the process, she left behind in Rome not only her deceased daughter but also several other children. To them, in Jerome's words, "she did not know herself to be a mother, that she might prove herself to be a handmaid of Christ."[14] Not all occasions of Roman women's relinquishing a child in favor of an ascetic vocation thus required the promptings of death and tragedy. Stories of youngsters thrust from their mothers' breasts and left weeping at the harbor may strike contemporary readers as the height of maternal irresponsibility; by late ancient standards, however, ascetic heroines of Paula's caliber acquitted themselves of their responsibilities in entirely socially appropriate ways, appointing guardians and providing financial support for children who had not yet reached the age of majority.

Paulinus of Nola, for example, likens the elder Melania, who similarly left behind her remaining child to pursue an ascetic vocation, to both the prophet Samuel and Samuel's mother, Anna (1 Samuel 1). By dedicating herself to divine service, Paulinus claims, Melania in her own person fulfilled the vow that Anna made on Samuel's behalf. Her "sacrifice" of her sole surviving son nevertheless qualifies her for Anna's position: while the young man, as Paulinus writes, "enjoys the riches and distinctions of the world," "once Melania had torn her one son from her breast and set him in Christ's bosom so that the Lord might nourish him, she bestowed no subsequent personal care on him, for she thought it a sin of distrust to give her own attention to one whom she had entrusted to Christ."[15] Melania's sacrifice lies in her trustful abandonment of her son to divine care. In Paulinus's words, "she loved the child by neglecting him and kept him by relinquishing him."[16]

Consistent throughout these narratives is the theme of the necessary separation between mothers and their biological children to facilitate full ascetic engagement. An ascetic woman might be "relieved" of her child by divine fiat or by her own strength of faith and character. To enter the life of renunciation, these narratives suggest, nevertheless required the severing of familial ties; only by removing themselves from the households that had determined their social loci thus far could a renunciant enter the household of God—or so late ancient Christian writers

claimed.[17] Yet even though consecrated virgins, holy widows, and chaste wives had to relinquish both their connection with existing offspring and their hopes for additional births, their status as mothers nevertheless remained intact—indeed, it could even greatly expand by virtue of their adoption of spiritual children.

SPIRITUAL MOTHERS AND SPIRITUAL CHILDREN

Melania the Younger's visit to Constantinople, by all accounts, could be considered a family reunion. Not only was the saint able to convert her ailing uncle, Volusianus, to the Christian faith; she also persuaded Theodosius II to permit his wife, the empress Eudocia, to travel to Jerusalem and worship at the "Holy Places." There, Melania arranged to meet Eudocia at Sidon, where the latter "fittingly received her with every honor, as Melania was a true spiritual mother [to her]."[18] When exhorted to continue in her good works, the empress informed Melania that she was fulfilling a "double vow to the Lord, to worship at the Holy Places and to see my mother, for I have wished to be worthy of Your Holiness while you still serve the Lord in the flesh."[19] Indeed, Gerontius depicts the filial tie between Melania and Eudocia as sufficiently firm that even the ascetic's other daughters become Eudocia's kin: the empress is thus said to regard the virgins of Melania's monastery "as if they were her own sisters."[20]

Spiritual motherhood to the Roman emperor's wife may seem like a tall order even for a highborn renunciant. Yet this was a role for which the younger Melania had arguably prepared her whole life. Upon the death of her own mother, Albina, Melania had gathered around herself virgins whose every need she promised to supply, just as long as the women agreed to keep away from men. Out of humility, Gerontius reports, Melania did not choose for herself the title of mother superior of the group, instead appointing another woman to this office. Her tireless activity behind the scenes, including extensive instruction and setting the liturgical schedule for the group, nevertheless must have placed Melania very firmly at the head of this *monasterium*.[21] Indeed, spiritual motherhood was a trope commonly invoked for female heads of monasteries. Both Jerome and Augustine designate the supervisors of monastic houses the mother (*mater*) of the virgins dwelling there.[22] At times such mother-daughter relationships between a monastic leader and her retinue were more than merely metaphorical. Gregory of Nyssa's account of his sister Macrina's death thus describes the women who had lived under her care as mourning her as their mother and nurse. These, Gregory writes, "were those whom she had taken up when they had been thrown along the roads in time of famine and tended and fostered and led by the hand to the holy and spotless life."[23] Somewhat ironically, then, Macrina's *monasterium* was populated in part by virgins whom she had rescued as infants from abandonment by their biological families.

By the same token, relations of spiritual mentorship, particularly in cases in which all parties involved were women, could be couched in maternal terms as well. Marcella, a member of the *gens Caeonia* and as such one of the wealthiest women in the Roman Empire, evidently sought to cultivate such relationships with like-minded women in her circle. Unlike Paula or the Melanias, Marcella remained in Rome after embarking upon the ascetic life as a young widow, wherein she cultivated the kind of household monasticism that straddled the spheres of elite Roman society and refined Christian asceticism. Marcella's failure to succumb to the allure of the desert as some of her contemporaries had done evidently frustrated Jerome. Writing ostensibly on behalf of Paula and her daughter Eustochium, both of whom he had first encountered as part of Marcella's circle, he exhorted Marcella to join their party: "You were the first to spark our tinder, the first to urge us to this [way of life], by teaching and example; like a hen you gathered us, your chicks, under your wing. And will you now permit us to fly with no mother near us?"[24] Marcella proved unresponsive to such pleas; even in Rome, however, she continued to cultivate a circle of spiritual daughters, that included, *inter alias,* Principia, another of Jerome's correspondents, who, he readily conceded, "had found a mother in [Marcella] and she a daughter in you."[25]

Discourses concerning spiritual mentorship as motherhood thrived on late ancient rhetoric about the role of the mother in the Christian household. In theory and in Roman law, even in late antiquity fathers continued to reign supreme over their households. In practice, however, both parents were owed *pietas*—filial devotion—in equal measure,[26] and mothers were expected to take an active—even *the* active—role in children's upbringing and education. The latter was certainly the case until at least the age of seven for the children of elite families, after which time male children were frequently educated outside the home, whereas girls remained under the auspices of their mothers until they married, typically less than a decade later.

One of the most fulsome exemplars of instructions on the topic of childrearing comes, somewhat ironically, from Jerome, champion extraordinaire of sexual renunciation, in his letter to Laeta, Paula's married daughter, concerning the upbringing and education of her child, a girl named after her saintly grandmother. The "little Paula" had been dedicated to the monastic life from an early age—no doubt the primary reason Jerome took an interest in her development.[27] In *Epistle* 107, he recommends a challenging educational program for the girl, alongside detailed instructions about the comportment that could be expected from a budding ascetic. Both parents had responsibilities vis-à-vis their offspring—Jerome notes, for example, that neither mother nor father was to teach her by example those kinds of behavior that they would not have her emulate. Laeta's role, however, predominates throughout the letter, both in her ability to control access to her daughter, for example by facilitating her instruction by experienced teachers

or removing her from the temptations of the familial table, and in her role as the younger Paula's chief instructor in spiritual matters.[28]

The program here set out by Jerome or, in even greater depth, by John Chrysostom for male children with no particular ascetic vocation among his community, combines classical and Christian sensibilities about education and parents' role therein. Parents and, in the case of daughters, particularly mothers molded the soft wax of a child's character lest it take on shameful or destructive form. For ascetics, however, the process of spiritual formation was not limited to childhood or youth. Virgins, widows, and their fellow renunciants required the sustained attentions of a household dedicated to their virtue and education. Women's monasteries provided such a setting, as did the kind of fellowships that ascetics from the elite strata of Roman society on occasion gathered around themselves. While abbots and bishops readily assumed the role of paterfamilias vis-à-vis their male charges, in women's communities spiritual mothers reigned at least qualifiedly supreme.[29] In these settings, at times even biological children could be reunited with their birth mothers—the filial bond between them now renewed and strengthened by their shared ascetic devotion.

SPIRITUAL MOTHERS AND BIOLOGICAL CHILDREN

Part of Jerome's instructions for the younger Paula's upbringing concerns the girl's relations with those among her family who had gone before her in choosing the ascetic life: "Let her learn at once also of her other grandmother and her aunt"—Jerome's companion Paula and her virginal daughter Eustochium—"and for what emperor, for what army she is being raised as a soldier."[30] Pledged from birth to a life of asceticism, little Paula was to know herself the product of a doubly noble lineage, a member of the elite by the standards of both Roman society and Christian monastic practice. If Laeta did not feel equal to implementing the demanding program that he had set out for her daughter amid the busy life of Roman high society, Jerome suggests, she ought to dispatch the girl to Jerusalem's monasteries, where her own relatives would rear her more ably than her own mother:[31]

> Hand the little one, whose every cry is a prayer to you, over to Eustochium. Hand her a companion in holiness, a future heir. . . . Let her sit in her grandmother's lap, and let her repeat to her granddaughter what she once before imparted to the daughter. She, who has been taught by long practice how to care for, preserve, and instruct virgins; in whose crown is daily woven the hundredfold reward of chastity.

Though Jerome no doubt would have rejoiced over any highborn girl dedicated to a life of permanent virginity, the kinship that tied the younger Paula to his great ascetic friends both sweetened the deal and heightened the stakes. As Rebecca Krawiec has noted, late ancient asceticism was seldom entirely antifamilial, and the

evidently tension-riddled discourse surrounding monastic and biological family ties rarely went so far as to affirm one to the exclusion of the other.[32] That even Jerome, perhaps the most uncompromising champion of sexual renunciation, should demonstrate an investment in ascetic genealogies forged not merely by shared faith and practice but by blood relation is therefore not surprising. Virgins in theory left their native households to join the larger family of God—allowing Jerome on another occasion to tactlessly promise to the mother of one such virgin status as mother-in-law to the divine. Yet where renunciants' familial pedigree gave cause for celebration, ascetic authors did not hesitate to dwell upon it.[33]

As a married woman, Laeta, as Jerome acknowledged, was not at liberty to leave her husband and her social obligations in pursuit of a life amid the physical remnants of Jesus's ministry in the company of her saintly relatives. By contrast, Laeta's daughter, the young Paula, could do so, and in the process could join an alternative but even nobler genealogy. Jerome sketches an ascetic family tree that excludes precisely those members of Paula's family—her son, Toxotius, and his wife, Laeta—who by Roman (and, no doubt, many Christians') standards conducted their lives in appropriate dedication to the familial ideal. By contrast, renunciants, virgins, monks, and widows, who by most standards represented procreative dead ends for their families, in these genealogies become the vital, fruit-bearing branches.

Late ancient sources attribute a similar (and arguably still more successful) attempt at reclaiming her biological family as her spiritual kin to Melania the Elder. Paulinus of Nola, writing to Sulpicius Severus, describes with no little irony the elder Melania's arrival in Italy. Sixty years old, worn out by the demands of the ascetic life and extravagant in her humility, she is met by her children and grandchildren.[34] The latter are dressed in silk, traveling in grand style, but sufficiently cowed by the long-absent matriarch's example to assent to accommodation in Paulinus's "hut" (*tugurium*), his humble *monasterium*.[35] By the time of her departure, the *Lausiac History* claims, both her daughter-in-law, Albina, and the younger Melania and Pinianus had come to embrace lives of asceticism, with the elder Melania "[leading] them out of Rome and [bringing] them into the holy and calm harbor of the [religious] life."[36] In this fashion, the younger Melania demonstrates the true family resemblance between herself and her grandmother: Palladius depicts her as pleading with her husband to "set my body free, that I may fulfill my desire toward God and become heir of the zeal of my grandmother, whose name I also bear."[37]

Yet the prayers and attentions of even the saintliest of women could not win all her children for the ascetic life and in the process repopulate her ascetic family tree with members of their native household. When Jerome thus at long last crafted an epitaph for Paula, he named her ancestors in considerable detail but deprived his departed friend of all but one of her children. Forgotten were Toxotius, father of Paula's namesake, Paulina, Rufina, and even the long-dead Blesilla. In death as

in life, Paula's only companion—and only true daughter—would be the virginal Eustochium, who had followed her mother to Bethlehem.[38]

CONCLUSION: MOTHERS BETWEEN TEXTS AND HOUSEHOLDS

Late antiquity provided few roles for even the highest-born of women and, similarly, few scripts by which to make sense of their existence and place in society. Christianity, particularly its most ascetic variants, held the potential to enhance such women's autonomy and to move them from the periphery of their own lives' stories closer to the center. These opportunities, however, came at considerable cost, not only in terms of material resources and physical pleasure but also by threatening to deprive female renunciants of some of the trenchant roles that they had played or could have been expected to play within their own households: those of wife and mother. Christian writers accordingly labored to rescript women's experiences of renunciation. A consecrated virgin might never marry a human husband but could know herself to be betrothed to Christ; similarly, a widow might never bear a child (or another child), but she could aspire to become spiritual mother to many.[39]

The *Vita Melaniae* reflects these concerns in crafting a new kind of maternal existence in the text's depiction of its protagonist. Throughout the narrative, Melania is portrayed as profoundly maternal. She shows, for example, a curious preoccupation with feeding and nurturing others, particularly the women under her care. As the de facto—if, out of humility, not de iure—head of a monastery, Melania thus provides for the physical as well as the spiritual needs of her virgin companions, sneaking additional food into the rooms of those women least able to withstand the rigors of ascetic fasting.[40] Her miracles, too, display her as a prototypically motherly and mothering figure. Melania thus heals two women whose lips have been sealed by demons, miraculously imparting food to them.[41] Similarly, the woman caught in childbirth with whom we began this essay is not released from Melania's care until the saint has fed her, nursing the woman back to health. Here Melania's actions both perfect the healing and bring into focus the contrast between the two kinds of motherhood involved: the one corporeal, painful, ultimately producing nothing but death; the other spiritual, joyful, and genuinely life-giving. By renouncing the former, the *vita* suggests, Melania has been set free to assume the latter role, in the process serving, nourishing, and reviving many.

Most Roman women no doubt never faced a choice between these different constructions of motherhood. Even among elite Christians of an ascetic bent—a small sample indeed—many saw no necessary contradiction between the life of the Roman household and the practice of the faith.[42] The latter could even be employed in the service of the former: as Ville Vuolante has argued, for example,

dedicating a child to the ascetic life could be an investment in estate planning for parents.[43] Still less can we assume that ascetics who *did* renounce traditional roles and their positions within elite households understood themselves to be reassuming these roles in a spiritualized guise. Narratives involving holy women casting away offspring and hopes of offspring in favor of spiritual lives and spiritual children are nevertheless sufficiently pervasive in late ancient literature to suggest that they had captured the attention of their contemporaries—even if the only group whose fascination with the trope is clearly apparent are those male ascetics who composed, translated, and copied these texts.

These writers, as a rule, were preoccupied less with ordinary households, women, and mothers than with their expediency as metaphors and their usefulness in theological debates. The prototypical mother for late ancient writers was thus either the church, whose spiritual nature could be deployed to good effect against the fleshliness of the synagogue,[44] or the Blessed Virgin Mary, the celebrated glory of mothers, whose virginity remained uncompromised even after Jesus's birth. Both entailed potential for empowering ascetics intent on transgressing the strictures of family life in the Roman Empire while simultaneously limiting the scope of such transgressions. Late ancient women, including those who, like the Melanias, became the subjects of literary attention, had to negotiate their existence between experience and metaphor, their roles both defined and circumscribed within a male framework of textuality.[45]

NOTES

1. Gerontius, *Vita Melaniae Iunioris* 61. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are taken from Elizabeth A. Clark, *The Life of Melania the Younger: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1984), here at 73. The Latin version of the *vita* is even more explicit concerning the woman's long-suffering: for three days already had she been near death, and that despite the best efforts of the obstetricians to free her from the child (Mariano Rampolla del Tindaro, *Santa Melania giuniore, senatrice romana: Documenti contemporanei e note* [Rome: Tipografia Vaticana, 1905], 34–35).

2. For a discussion of infant mortality rates in late antiquity and their impact upon popular life expectancy, see, e.g., Thomas Wiedemann, *Adults and Children in the Roman Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 12; Tim G. Parkin, *Demography and Roman Society* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 93; Geoffrey S. Nathan, *The Family in Late Antiquity: The Rise of Christianity and the Endurance of Tradition* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 139–40.

3. *De Virginitate* γ, in Werner Wilhelm Jaeger, John Peter Cavarnos, and Virginia Woods Callahan, eds., *Gregorii Nysseni Opera Ascetica,* (Leiden: Brill 1952), 261; trans. in *On Virginity,* in *St. Gregory: Ascetical Works,* trans. Virginia Wood Callahan (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press), 15–16.

4. Soranus, *Gynaecology* 4.3(19).9(61)–13(65), in *Soranus' Gynecology,* trans. Owsei Temkin (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 189–96. In Keith Bradley's assessment, ancient writings about the treatment of childhood ailments showed "evidence here of an intellectual effort to understand a medical condition, . . . but there is also evidence of the massive ignorance that characterized all

medical science before the modern era" ("The Roman Child in Sickness and Health," in *The Roman Family in the Empire: Rome, Italy, and Beyond,* ed. Michele George [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005], 70).

5. The Latin, by contrast, attributes the difficult birth to demonic influence: "Nec non et quemdam virum a daemone horribiliter correptum sanavit" (Rampolla, *Santa Melania,* 34). This characterization is in keeping with the Latin *vita*'s theological aims in this passage. For a discussion in greater depth, see E. A. Clark, *Life of Melania,* 147–48. Given the pervasiveness of threat to the life of mother and infant, late ancient parents and would-be parents frequently turned to spiritual remedies alongside more mundane medical means. The use of amulets—both Christian and not—designed to protect children is well documented in late antiquity, and children's health was evidently a prominent subject for prayer among parents of all religious affiliations. Marcus Aurelius, himself well acquainted with the grief of a child's death, acknowledges this practice in his *Meditations:* "Another prays: 'How I may not lose my little child', but you must pray: 'How I may not be afraid to lose him'" (*Meditations* 9.40.1; in Jan Hendrik Leopold, ed., *M. Antonius Imperator ad Se Ipsum* [Leipzig: Teubner, 1908], 120). No doubt only the most philosophically inclined joined him in such prayers. While the historical basis for much of the *Vita Melaniae Iunioris* is not free from suspicion, there is nevertheless nothing inherently improbable about a well-known local noblewoman, perhaps known to be sympathetic to "women's issues" and no doubt with a particular reputation for saintliness, being consulted to intervene in the case of a pregnancy that had proved beyond the midwives' and obstetricians' efforts.

6. Cf., e.g., Elizabeth A. Clark, "Ascetic Renunciation and Feminine Advancement: A Paradox of Late Ancient Christianity," *Anglican Theological Review* 63 (1981): 240–57.

7. Hagiographic literature surrounding women's renunciation frequently depicts such a move toward celibacy and chastity or, in the case of a virginal daughter's rejection of marriage, as originating from the woman herself rather than from a spouse or parent. Such womanly initiative does not necessarily reflect the historical record, however; rather, the valorization of women, even very young women, as initiators of the ascetic lifestyle was a rhetorical trope useful for shaming men or enhancing the female ascetic's standing. For a discussion of this trope with regard to elite women, see Michele Renee Salzman, "Aristocratic Women: Conductors of Christianity in the Fourth Century," *Helios* 16 (1989), 207–20; for the exploration of a similar theme with regard to intrafamilial conflict surrounding children's renunciation, see Ville Vuolanto, "Choosing Asceticism: Children and Parents, Vows and Conflicts," in *Children in Late Ancient Christianity,* ed. Cornelia B. Horn and Robert R. Phenix, Jr. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 255–91.

8. Jerome himself writes to both Paula (*Ep.* 39) and Marcella (*Ep.* 38) about his part in Blesilla's renunciation and death, his strongly avowed innocence for the latter, and the persecution he nevertheless experienced at the hands of the "mob" in conjunction with it. Cf. also Andrew Cain, *The Letters of Jerome: Asceticism, Biblical Exegesis, and the Construction of Authority in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 102–5.

9. *Ep.* 39.5 (CSEL 54: 305). Jerome's depiction here echoes descriptions of other famously heroic mothers from both the Roman and the Jewish traditions. Plutarch, for example, depicts Cornelia, the mother of the Gracchi, as speaking of her untimely deceased sons "without grief or tears" (ἀπενθὴς καὶ ἀδάκρυτος; Plutarch, *Lives: Tiberius Gracchus* 40.1.2, in Konrat Ziegler, ed., *Plutarchos: Tiberius und Gaius Gracchus* [Heidelberg: Winter, 1911], 51. Similarly, 4 Maccabees 14 and 15 depict the mother of the Maccabean martyrs as displaying calmness and fortitude even in the face of extreme grief, emboldened by "devout reason" (15.23).

10. The *Lausiac History* is the briefest of the three, noting merely that in the aftermath of Melania's husband's death, she journeyed to the Holy Land on a ship that carried other highborn women and children also (Palladius, *Lausiac History* 46.1;Cuthbert Butler, ed., *The Lausiac History of Palladius Together with Notes on Early Egyptian Monachism,* vol. 2 [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1904], 134). Paulinus of Nola's letter, the earliest of the three texts, goes into still greater depth and once

again increases Melania's woes as well as her emotional response thereto: at the time of the death of Melania's husband and sons, she had already suffered two prior miscarriages, leaving her one remaining child a mere bitter reminder to the grieving widow of the others that had gone before him (*Ep.* 29.8 [CSEL 29: 252–54]).

11. Ibid. (CSEL 29: 254). All translations, unless otherwise indicated, are from *The Letters of St. Paulinus of Nola,* vol. 2, *Letters 23–51,* trans. and annot. P. G. Walsh (Westminster, Md.: The Newman Press, 1967), 109. Paulinus's depiction of Melania similarly echoes contemporary expositions of the mother of the Maccabean martyrs. Augustine, for example, in a sermon on the Maccabean martyrs' feast day places the following reassurance in the character's mouth: "If you seem to desert me, then you are not deserting me. There I will have you, where I will not be afraid of ever losing you again" (*Sermo* 300.7 [ed. *PL* 38: 1380]).

12. Gerontius, *Vita Melaniae Iunioris* 6 (SC 90: 136–38; trans. E. A. Clark, 30).

13. Ibid. 5 (SC 90: 134–36; trans. E. A. Clark, 29).

14. *Ep.* 108.6 (CSEL 55: 33).

15. *Ep.* 29.9 (CSEL 29: 256; trans. Walsh, 110–11).

16. Ibid. Such a logic of "parental exchange" is already at work in late ancient martyr narratives and may have even originated there. As Susan Holman has recently noted ("Martyr-Saints and the Demon of Infant Mortality: Folk Healing in Early Christian Pediatric Medicine," in *Children and Family in Late Antiquity: Life, Death and Interaction,* ed. Christian Laes, Katariina Mustakallio, and Ville Vuolanto [Louvain: Peeters, 2015], 235–56), in the third-century *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas,* Perpetua's martyrdom purchases not only her own salvation but the health and well-being of three children. Her already deceased younger brother, and her son and daughter, both at vulnerable ages and, in the case of the former, still dependent upon her ability to nurse him, are thus restored—to physical survival, in the case of the children, and to spiritual health, in the case of the dead.

The elder Melania, of course, does not face physical martyrdom. Paulinus, however, strongly suggests that the sacrifice of her child and her maternal relationship with him constitutes a spiritual martyrdom—a neglectful love, by which Melania purchased, among other things, her son's spiritual and physical well-being. We are, of course, unable to discern whether Melania herself interpreted her relinquishment in these terms. Cornelia B. Horn has suggested nevertheless that martyr narratives involving children (and, presumably, other figures) were consciously crafted and deployed to allow ascetics of later centuries to interpret their own actions in light of their heroic predecessors' stories ("Raising Martyrs and Ascetics: A Diachronic Comparison of Educational Role-Models for Early Christian Children," in *Children in Late Ancient Christianity,* 293–316).

17. Such rhetoric of separation contrasts sharply with evidence for the existence of domestic monastic arrangements from this era, in which widows and virgins gathered around themselves like-minded relatives and friends. For a more in-depth discussion of the tensions between rhetorical construction and the historical record, see below, pp. 80–81.

18. Gerontius, *Vita Melaniae Iunioris* 58 (SC 90: 242; trans. E. A. Clark, 70).

19. Ibid. 58 (SC 90: 242–44; trans. E. A. Clark, 70–71).

20. Ibid. (SC 90: 244; trans. E. A. Clark, 71).

21. For a further discussion of Melania's depiction as mother in the *Vita Melaniae Iunioris,* see below, p. 80.

22. Cf. Jerome, *Ep.* 108.19 (CSEL 55: 332–34).

23. Gregory of Nyssa, *Vita Macrinae* 26.30 (SC 178: 232). For a more in-depth discussion of Christian ascetics' adoption of children, see, e.g., Judith Evans Grubbs, "Church, State, and Children: Christian and Imperial Attitudes toward Infant Exposure in Late Antiquity," in *The Power of Religion in Late* Antiquity, ed. Andrew Cain and Noel Lenski (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 119–31.

24. *Ep.* 46.1 (CSEL 54: 329).

25. *Ep.* 127.8 (CSEL 56.1: 151).

26. For a discussion of *pietas* and what it entailed, see Richard P. Saller, *Patriarchy, Property and Death in the Roman Family* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 110, 131.

27. Such dedications were not binding upon the child, as, for example, Ambrose's *Exhortation to Virginity* suggests, directed to four children whose parents had already vowed them to the religious life. Similarly, Gregory of Nazianzus claimed to have been promised to divine service prior to his own birth by his mother—a vow he fulfilled after a nearly fatal accident as a young adult (*Or.* 2.77; discussed in Vuolanto, "Choosing Asceticism," 56–57). Nor did the younger Paula's embrace of the ascetic life necessarily require her to leave her ancestral home, still less to join Jerome and her extended family in Jerusalem. For elite ascetics, whether virgins or widows, domestic forms of monasticism that never required a woman to leave her household were still a popular option at the turn of the fifth century. As such, asceticism could become and frequently was, in Vuolanto's apt expression, an "intergenerational effort" (Vuolanto, "Choosing Asceticism," passim). Jerome's pointed suggestions that Laeta might find the proper training of a Christian virgin to be impossible in her own home thus reflect his evident anxiety to move the girl to Jerusalem rather than an antiascetic environmental bias.

28. Geoffrey Nathan has argued on this basis that "motherhood . . . placed a great responsibility on a woman: she was in large part to blame for a son or daughter's spiritual and religious failings. In that sense, her importance far outweighed that of a father" (*The Family in Late Antiquity,* 151). A somewhat different picture emerges, however, if one consults texts addressing the formation of sons rather than, in the case of *Ep.* 107, that of a daughter. John Chrysostom's treatise *On Vainglory and the Right Way for Parents to Bring Up Their Children,* by contrast, focuses on the education of boys and devotes a concomitantly greater part of the text to the duties of fathers. For a discussion of the treatise, its contents, and its context in late ancient parenting, see Cornelia B. Horn and John W. Martens, *"Let the Little Children Come to Me": Childhood and Children in Early Christianity* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 149–59.

29. For a discussion of the bishop as paterfamilias in the Latin West during a slightly later period of late antiquity, see Kristina Sessa, *The Formation of Papal Authority in Late Antique Italy: Roman Bishops and the Domestic Sphere* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

30. *Ep.* 107.4 (CSEL 55: 296).

31. Ibid. 13 (CSEL 55: 304).

32. Rebecca Krawiec, "'From the Womb of the Church': Monastic Families," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 11.3 (2003), 283–307. See, however, Elizabeth A. Clark, "Antifamilial Tendencies in Ancient Christianity," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5.3 (1995): 356–80.

33. See, for example, Paulinus's lengthy introduction of Melania's ancestors—as well as his self-consciously biblical justification for the relevance of the latter (*Ep.* 29.7–8 [CSEL 29: 252–54]). Similarly, Gregory of Nazianzus's funerary oration for his friend Basil dwells not only upon the faith and virtue of the latter's ancestors but also on their noble rank (*Or.* 43.3–10).

34. Skeb surmises that the terms refer to Melania's spiritual progeny ("ihre geistliche Nachkommenschaft": Paulinus of Nola, *Epistulae,* 708 note 17). In context, however, the interpretation proffered by, e.g., Walsh, that the children in question are Albina and Publicola, with Melania the Younger, her husband, Pinianus, and perhaps Melania's unnamed brother as the requisite grandchildren makes better sense (*Letters of Paulinus of Nola,* vol. 2: 325).

35. *Ep.* 29.13 (CSEL 29: 260).

36. Palladius, *Lausiac History* 54.4 (ed. C. Butler, 148). The *Vita Melaniae Iunioris* presents a rather different picture—in that it surprisingly omits any reference to its subject's famous grandmother, even where Gerontius cites dialogue from the *Lausiac History* in which Palladius has the younger Melania name her grandmother as the impetus for her renunciation. Cf. Palladius, *Lausiac History* 61.2 (ed. C. Butler, 155). This curious omission on Gerontius's part is unlikely to be accidental but rather may reflect the perceived taint of heresy that attached to the elder Melania by virtue of her association with Evagrius and other so-called Origenists. Cf. E. A. Clark, *Life of Melania,* 148.

37. Palladius, *Lausiac History* 61.2 (ed. C. Butler, 155).

38. *Ep.* 108.34 (CSEL 55: 351).

39. Such negotiations were not limited to mothers, nor even to women. Mathew Kuefler has argued, for example, that one of ascetic authors' primary concerns was the rescripting of Roman notions of masculinity to include or even privilege monks and clergy, who lacked some of the most visible trappings of Roman manhood (*The Manly Eunuch: Masculinity, Gender Ambiguity, and Christian Ideology in Late Antiquity* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001]).

40. Cf. Gerontius, *Vita Melaniae Iunioris* 41 (SC 90: 204–6; trans. E. A. Clark, 54–55).

41. Ibid. 60 (SC 90: 246; trans. E. A. Clark, 72).

42. As Averil Cameron has observed, "the very urgency of [Jerome's] persuasion towards asceticism shows perhaps that it was not really very common" ("Virginity as Metaphor: Women and the Rhetoric of Early Christianity," in *History as Text: The Writing of Ancient History,* ed. Averil Cameron [London: Duckworth, 1989], 195).

43. Vuolanto, "Choosing Asceticism," 269–74.

44. Both Jerome and Augustine thus offer interpretations of the Judgment of Solomon (1 Kings 3:16–28), which cast the two mothers as the church and the synagogue, with the latter falsely attempting to lay claim to the former's true children. (Cf. Jerome, *Ep.* 74 [CSEL 55: 23–29]; Augustine, *Sermo* 10 [CCL 41: 152–59]).

45. I have borrowed this apt expression from Averil Cameron's perspicacious reflections on this subject nearly twenty-five years ago: "Virginity as Metaphor," 184.