

# Writing Demetrias: Ascetic Logic in Ancient Christianity

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## I. ANCIENT HISTORY, MALE AUTHORS, AND WOMEN ASCETICS: INTRODUCING DEMETRIAS

In his influential discussion of early Christian ascetic renunciation, Peter Brown announced that “Christian men used women ‘to think with’ in order to verbalize their own nagging concern with the stance that the Church should take with the world.”<sup>1</sup> Brown’s statement encapsulates the particular difficulties facing students of the history of women in the early Christian period. The most basic difficulty is that we possess very few texts *by* women from this period until well into the Middle Ages. We can point to the diary of the third-century martyr Perpetua, the complex and recondite Vergilian and Homeric *centos* (“stitch-verses”) of the aristocrat Proba and the empress Eudocia, and perhaps one or two other arguable examples.<sup>2</sup> With a dearth of

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CSEL = Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum latinorum

*ep(p)*. = epistula, epistulae

NPNF = Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers series

PL = Patrologia Latina, ed. J. P. Migne

SC = Sources chrétiennes

1. Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 153, a concept he derives from Claude Lévi-Strauss (see his n. 57).
2. Perpetua’s diary is embedded in the *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, text and translation in Herbert Musurillo, ed., *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), 106–31 and also Jacqueline Amat, ed., *Passion de Perpetuë et de Félicité*, SC 417 (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1996); on the authenticity of the first-person account, see Amat, *Passion de Perpetuë*, 67–78. The *centos*, poems composed of recycled half-verses of Vergil and Homer, respectively, are found in Elizabeth A. Clark and Diane F. Hatch, *The Golden Bough, the Oaken Cross: The Virgilian Cento of Faltonia Betitia Proba*, American Academy of Religion Texts and Translations 5 (Chico: Scholars, 1981) and Mark D. Usher, *Homeroecen-*

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women's own voices, can historians be expected to reconstruct women's lives? This paucity of "first-person" texts is coupled with a more serious theoretical difficulty facing historians of all periods whose main "evidence" consists of literary and rhetorically informed texts. Scholars are much less confident today in our ability to peel back layers of male rhetoric and find the "real" woman concealed underneath.<sup>3</sup> Brown's comment underscores this rhetorical skepticism by asking whether these texts are even "about" women at all. Others following Brown's lead have understood texts that are ostensibly to or about women as concerned primarily with issues of male authority and identity.<sup>4</sup> In Brown's words, women were good "to think with," but the subject of that "thought" was inevitably male. Despite these technical and theoretical difficulties, however, I do not think we are witnessing the final and absolute erasure of women from ancient Christian history.

In a simplistic (but not necessarily naïve) sense, historians of ancient Christianity of even the most skeptical stripe still acknowledge various degrees of separation from our "vanished ladies."<sup>5</sup> Different types and examples of sources allow us to verify, on some level, the probable existence of certain ancient Christian women, while we leave others obscured within legend. For instance, both the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* and the *Life of Melania the Younger* are highly literary productions, influenced by "romantic" genres of literature and capable of flights of fancy.<sup>6</sup> Yet, while Thecla's "reality" in the first century has been and remains a mystery, few would question that Melania the Younger did

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tones *Eudociae Augustae* (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1999), with discussion in Mark Usher, *Homeric Stitchings: The Homeric Centos of the Empress Eudocia* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998). Scholars have also tried to ascribe otherwise anonymous bodies of ancient Christian texts to women: see, for example, Stevan Davies, *The Revolt of the Widows: The Social World of the Apocryphal Acts* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980).

3. On male texts "to" and "about" women, see Teresa M. Shaw, "Askesis and the Appearance of Holiness," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6 (1998): 485–99; and eadem, *The Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 222: "Our sources do not permit us to see through the dark glass of male representation to women's own self-presentation or self-understanding."
4. See Kate Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).
5. I borrow this felicitous phrase from Elizabeth A. Clark, "The Lady Vanishes: Dilemmas of a Feminist Historian After the 'Linguistic Turn,'" *Church History* 67 (1998): 1–31 (which, of course, she has in turn borrowed from the 1938 Alfred Hitchcock film), an article that has spurred much of the thinking of my study of Demetrias. See also eadem, "Holy Women, Holy Words: Early Christian Women, Social History, and the 'Linguistic Turn,'" *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6 (1998): 413–30.
6. *Acta Pauli et Theclae* found in R. A. Lipsius and M. Bonnet, eds., *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha* (Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1959), 1: 253–72; *Vita Melaniae Iunioris* found in D. Gorce, ed., *Vie de Sainte Mélanie*, SC 90 (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1962).

live and act in the fifth century. Furthermore, we retain certain possibilities of verisimilitude embedded within the most rhetorically constructed of texts: in the heady transcontinental drama of the *Life of Melania the Younger*, we are treated to social and economic details which, if not verifiable in fact, bore for their readers at least the *likelihood* of veracity.<sup>7</sup> We can, therefore, allow ourselves to imagine that women in fact *existed* who were *believed* to have acted in the fashion narrated by male authors.

To abandon altogether women's history in early Christianity is, therefore, premature. We may regret the seeming loss of the female renunciant herself, speaking in her own voice, an acting subject rather than acted-upon object, but critical approaches to male-authored texts can nonetheless provide ways of understanding ancient ideologies of gender and power as conceived in the nexus of Christian renunciation.<sup>8</sup> The schism between "rhetoric" and "reality" that has daunted historiography in recent decades has, perhaps, drawn lines too sharply between textuality and materiality, between literary production and social history. Gabrielle Spiegel, a historian of the Middle Ages, has proposed one strategy for transcending this "text-context conundrum."<sup>9</sup> She reminds other historians that "texts represent situated uses of language . . . as *lived events*."<sup>10</sup> That is, to claim that a text is *literary* or rhetorically laden is not to say that it is a fantastic fiction, entirely divorced from the thoughts, ideas, and practices of its producers and consumers: "All texts occupy determined social spaces, both as products of the social world of authors and as textual agents at work in that world, with which they entertain often complex and contestatory relations. In that sense, texts both mirror *and* generate social realities, are constituted by *and* constitute the social and discursive formations which they may sustain, resist, contest, or seek to transform, depending on the case at hand."<sup>11</sup> Spiegel calls this "the text's social logic, its site within a highly particularized and local social environment."<sup>12</sup>

7. On Roland Barthes's "reality effect" (*l'effet du réel*) in relation to early Christian literature, see Clark, "Lady Vanishes," 19–20, and Catherine M. Chin, "Abgar, Constantine, and Unreality in Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*," paper delivered at the 1998 North American Patristics Society annual meeting. A. H. M. Jones's classic *The Later Roman Empire, 284–602: A Social, Economic, and Administrative Survey*, 2 vols. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1964) relies not infrequently on the *Vita Melaniae* for economic details (see, for example, 2:767–823 on "land use").

8. See Clark, "Lady Vanishes," 30–31.

9. Gabrielle M. Spiegel, "History, Historicism, and the Social Logic of the Text in the Middle Ages," *Speculum* 65 (1990): 75. For reference to this article I am indebted to Clark, "Lady Vanishes," 13–14 and 24–31.

10. Spiegel, "History," 77 (emphasis added).

11. Spiegel, "History," 77 (emphasis in original).

12. Spiegel, "History," 79.

The understanding that texts *produce* social realities among their authors and readers adds a significant nuance to Peter Brown's image of Christian men "thinking with" women. This is no abstract intellectual process, confined to the remote recesses of the ancient male mind. Men did not write in one world, while women lived in another. By attending to the particularity of a cultural product, its "social logic," we can perhaps bridge the gap between "text" and "context" and produce social history from within the murky depths of poststructuralist discourse.

This attention to social logic bears most fruit, for the historian of ancient Christian women, in the context of the ascetic movements of late antiquity. Here women were not only the constant subject of male writing, they were also the most visible social *products* of that writing. Women emerging from the "social logic" of texts on virginity and monasticism came to be the shining emblems of a new Christian truth in the fourth and fifth centuries.<sup>13</sup> As Peter Brown himself notes, "Dedicated women came to be thought of as harboring a deposit of values that were prized, by their male spokesmen, as peculiarly precious to the Christian community."<sup>14</sup> We might call this relation between male discourse and female ascetic practice "ascetic logic," a way not of recovering individual women and their own particular lives, but rather of delineating the space in which women could "logically" operate in the early Christian world. In this essay, I shall take the example of the fifth-century ascetic aristocrat Demetrias in order to suggest how even the most "male" of texts can be analyzed to recover the "logic" of early Christian female asceticism.

Demetrias first appears as an aristocratic Roman teenager in exile in North Africa with her mother and grandmother following the sack of Rome in 410. In a span of three years (ca. 414–17) Demetrias received letters from three of the most prominent Christian figures of the fifth century.<sup>15</sup> The ecclesiastical writers and theorists Pelagius, Jerome, and Augustine all found in the noble virgin Demetrias a congenial object

13. See Shaw, *Burden of the Flesh*, 253: "Some embodied women and men were intent on training, creating, and displaying the future body in the present flesh" (emphasis in original).

14. Brown, *Body and Society*, 263.

15. The epistles (in roughly chronological order) are Augustine, *ep.* 150 (*ad Iulianam et Probam*) (CSEL 44:380–82); Pelagius, *Epistula ad Demetriadem* (PL 30:15C–45A); Jerome, *ep.* 130 (CSEL 56:175–201); and Augustine, *ep.* 188 (*ad Iulianam*) (CSEL 57:119–30). The social connections of Augustine and Jerome were institutionally well established by this point; on Pelagius's connections, see Peter Brown, "The Patrons of Pelagius: The Roman Aristocracy Between East and West," *Journal of Theological Studies*, 21 (1970): 56–72. (Also found in *Religion and Society in the Age of Saint Augustine* [London: Faber, 1977], 208–26).

“to think with.” Indeed, their respective epistles to the young woman are most often plumbed as sources of theological or social-historical insight about the male authors.<sup>16</sup> Quite often the figure of Demetrias has been viewed by historical theologians as one more player (albeit a silent one) in the ongoing Pelagian controversy of the early fifth century, which was at this point just gaining momentum. Augustine produced his first anti-Pelagian tracts on nature, grace, and original sin at this time, and Pelagius himself faced his first episcopal inquiry at the Synod of Diospolis in 415. Augustine and Jerome were, in the years following the composition of these letters, notable allies in their condemnation of Pelagius and “Pelagianism,” and the fact that it is these three authors who address young Demetrias makes the context of theological controversy the most “natural” from which to interpret the letters.

Yet since we do not imagine that these three men conspired among themselves to contrive the useful fiction of a fabulously wealthy fourteen year-old embracing the life of Christian virginity and since other sources provide some corroboration, I suggest our starting point should not be the theological currents of incipient Augustinianism, but rather, Demetrias herself. That is, we should first accept the existence of Demetrias.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, we should then acknowledge the “reality” of the situation framing the letters to Demetrias.<sup>18</sup> Namely, that the daughter of one of the most noble (and wealthy) families of the Western empire has renounced sex and marriage, been consecrated as a virgin, and received the advice of the more famous names in Christian asceticism of her day. Our starting point is not the theological history of Augustine’s fight with Pelagius and his followers, but rather, Demetrias herself.

I am *not* suggesting that it is possible to triangulate the letters of Pelagius, Jerome, and Augustine in order to recover the “real” Demetrias. Such recovery is precisely the sort of task made next to impossible by our present historiographic context. I do propose, however, that we attend to the “social logic” of these letters in such a way as to

16. This is especially clear in the only work comparing all three authors: M. Gonsette, “Les directeurs spirituels de Démétriaque: Épisode de la lutte anti-pélagienne,” *Nouvelle revue théologique* 60 (1933): 783–801. Given the paucity of (verifiable) sources from Pelagius, his epistle to Demetrias has been valuable in the reconstruction of “early Pelagianism”: see A. Soullignac, “Pélage et pélagianisme,” *Dictionnaire de spiritualité, ascétique et mystique* 12.1 (1986): 2889–942, esp. 2895–98.

17. See A. H. M. Jones et al., eds., *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire* [PLRE], 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971–80), 2:351–52.

18. I refer to the “letters to Demetrias,” although Augustine’s letters are, in fact, addressed to Demetrias’s mother Juliana. This particularity will be discussed below.

understand *how* Demetrias might be allowed to emerge from the ascetic wrangling of these three men. If we cannot find Demetrias, we can at least theorize "Demetrias." I shall first ask how the particular "asceticisms" of Pelagius, Jerome, and Augustine respond to and attempt to transform Demetrias's inescapable social position (as noble, as female, as wealthy). I shall demonstrate that, in fact, questions of status come to predominate over the more obvious issues of gender, signaling some of the central concerns surrounding Demetrias's particular "ascetic logic." Next, I shall address how these three men construct Demetrias's virginal devotion as a function of both theory (theology) and praxis (asceticism).<sup>19</sup> Is Demetrias's asceticism in these letters something that is ultimately a theoretical conception, configured by theological doctrine, or a series of practices (fasting, abstinence, prayer)? Is the relation between theory and practice, as laid out in these prescriptive letters, particularly gendered? Is it the job of her male advisors to theorize, while she simply "acts"?<sup>20</sup> I shall conclude by examining sources about Demetrias from later in her life in order to fill out the ascetic logic in which she could operate. These later sources (a treatise on humility and a dedicatory inscription from the city of Rome) suggest that the ascetic logic of the illustrious virgin Demetrias could be construed not simply as one of passive instruction, but a "logic" in which Demetrias herself might be imagined to "think back" to her male authors. I do not, through this exercise, propose to unveil to modern eyes the "real Demetrias"; I do hope to show, nonetheless, the value in recovering the "ascetic logic" that she and the men who wrote to her were constrained to observe. From within this ascetic logic we find not necessarily Demetrias herself, but ways in which Demetrias could have potentially conceived of her own privileged existence as a "virgin of Christ."

## II. "THAT VIRGIN OF CHRIST WHO IS BOTH NOBLE AND RICH": NOBILITAS AND THE ANICIAN VIRGIN

The primary function of epistolary communication in antiquity was to establish, confirm, or transform relations between the writer and

19. A debate that had swirled through Christian circles since the 380s, imported by Jerome into all the major conflicts of his colorful ecclesiastical career: see, for instance, Elizabeth A. Clark, *The Origenist Controversy: The Cultural Construction of an Early Christian Debate* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 98–99, 129–32.

20. See the survey of *de virginitate* literature in Shaw, "Askesis," (esp. 487–92): "The texts establish or perpetuate the contours of ideal behavior and offer up the everyday tastes and manners by which the virgin's identity and ἦθος (character and demeanor) is asserted" (491).

recipient of the letter.<sup>21</sup> In the wide-ranging yet increasingly fragmentary context of late ancient Christianity, letters were used to articulate not only relationships between individuals but also the communal boundaries of the church itself.<sup>22</sup> The relations suggested by the form and content of an ancient letter were often asymmetrical: the client writing in praise of a patron, the philosopher writing for the education of a pupil, the emperor writing to a provincial governor. The negotiation of such delicate boundaries of propriety, hierarchy, and alliance take on a special significance in our letters to Demetrias. While all three authors mention her noble birth (and wealth) more than once,<sup>23</sup> they are wary on two different fronts. First, none of the three wishes to be accused of flattery (*adulatio*), which would be an abuse and perversion of the relationship established in their letters.<sup>24</sup> In addition, all three claim that they wish to avoid privileging her “worldly” rank over the rank she has acquired through her virginal consecration. Their strategies for articulating Demetrias’s virginal status in relation to her aristocratic status not only reveal certain (at times differing) Christian assumptions about “nobility,” but also project Demetrias into various power relations both within her own family and with respect to her (male) ecclesiastical “advisors.”

Pelagius may have been only slightly exaggerating when he declared to Demetrias that “this glory of your public profession by busy rumor has become common knowledge to all.”<sup>25</sup> The *gens Anicia* was one of the most prominent families of the empire, for its extraordinary wealth, its political prestige, and possibly for its tradition of public

21. On ancient epistolary theory and practice, see Stanley K. Stowers, *Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity*, Library of Early Christianity 5 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), esp. 27–31; Klaus Thraede, *Grundzüge griechisch-römischer Brieftopik*, Zetemata 40 (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1970).
22. Stowers, *Letter Writing*, 41–47; Thraede, *Brieftopik*, 109–24. This ecclesiological function of the Christian letter can be seen, of course, in the earliest extant “Christian” literature, the letters of Paul.
23. Pelagius, *Ep. ad Demetriadem* 1, 11, 14, 22, 30 (PL 30:15A–16C, 26C–D, 28C–29B, 36C–D, 43D–44A); Jerome, *ep.* 130.1.1, 3–4, 7.1–2 (CSEL 56:175–76, 177–79, 182–83); Augustine, *ep.* 188 does not make mention of the family’s status (except very obliquely), but see *ep.* 150 (CSEL 44:380–81), written to Juliana and Proba in 413 on the occasion of Demetrias’s consecration as a virgin.
24. Pelagius, *Ep. ad Demetriadem* 21 (PL 30:35B–C), on the dangers of flattery (implicitly acquitting himself of such conduct); Jerome, *ep.* 130.1.1, 7.10 (CSEL 56:176, 185), excusing his own rather grandiloquent praise and dissociating it from flattery; Augustine, *ep.* 188.2.6 (CSEL 57:124).
25. Pelagius, *Ep. ad Demetriadem* 14 (PL 30:29B). On the date and provenance of Pelagius’s letter (probably late 413 or 414, from Palestine), see Soulignac, “Pélage,” 2895–96 and G. Bardy, “Démétride,” *Dictionnaire de spiritualité, ascétique et mystique* 3 (1957): 133–37. On the “fame” of an aristocratic woman choosing the ascetic life, see *Vita Melaniae Iunioris* 12–13 (SC 90:148–54), where the renunciation of Melania and her husband Pinian draws the swift (and approving) attention of the Empress Serena.

Christian piety.<sup>26</sup> Pelagius acknowledges this worldly importance at the very opening of his letter to Demetrias, at the same time suggesting its deeper significance for the *virgo Anicia*: "It is Demetrias to whom I must write, virgin of Christ, noble virgin, wealthy virgin, and, *what is greater than these*, she who tramples on nobility and riches."<sup>27</sup> Pelagius weaves together here several threads that are worth untangling, since they determine how he will accommodate Demetrias's virginal status to her worldly status and how he will relate himself to the noble virgin. We must first note the subtle suggestion of coercion. Pelagius "must" write to Demetrias (*scribendum est*), a point he emphasizes soon after: "We write indeed because her holy mother requests—rather, *commands* this from us in a letter sent across the sea, pressing with the remarkable desire of her soul."<sup>28</sup> This epistolary relationship has been inaugurated in a distinctly asymmetrical fashion. Pelagius's humble and unflattering advice responds to the "command" of a Roman aristocrat. We should further note the double significance of Demetrias's "nobility" and "riches." Not only do they mark her worldly status as an Anician heiress, they redouble the importance of her ascetic renunciation. She would not be able in so praiseworthy a fashion to spurn her wealth and status had she not possessed them in the first place. In this inverted fashion, secular riches and rank *do*, in fact, allocate higher status to the Christian virgin.

Throughout the letter, Demetrias's "greater nobility,"<sup>29</sup> her ascetic vocation, is articulated through idioms of aristocratic status. Just as her family is endowed with nobility and wealth "in the physical sense" (*corporalis*), so she will amass "spiritual riches" (*spiritualis divitias*) to her family's credit.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, her ascetic *honor* is on par with the political *honores* accumulated by her male relatives and ancestors. It is even superior to these male *honores*, since as consuls they were merely "sent foreign beasts and unknown animals whose gore with that of men bloodied the arena," while to the noble virgin of God "chosen maidens are sent . . . as most prized offerings."<sup>31</sup> Metaphors of "rank"

26. See Hagith Sivan, "Anician Women, the Cento of Proba, and Aristocratic Conversion in the Fourth Century," *Vigiliae Christianae* 47 (1993): 140–57. See PLRE 1:113 (stemma 7), for the various political accomplishments of the Anician men.

27. Pelagius, *Ep. ad Demetriadem* 1 (PL 30:15C), emphasis added.

28. Pelagius, *Ep. ad Demetriadem* 1 (PL 30:16B). On the rhetorical trope of "command" in epistolary prefaces, see Tore Janson, *Latin Prose Prefaces: Studies in Literary Conventions*. Studia Latina Stockholmiensia 13 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1964), 118, 145.

29. Pelagius, *Ep. ad Demetriadem* 22 (PL 30:36C): *animi virtute nobilior*.

30. Pelagius, *Ep. ad Demetriadem* 11 (PL 30:26C–D).

31. Pelagius, *Ep. ad Demetriadem* 14 (PL 30:29A–B). PLRE lists eight consular men on the Anician side from 260–431 (1:1133) and six on the Petronian side from 314–406 (1:1144, stemma 24), and see John Matthews, *Western Aristocracies and Imperial Court, A.D. 364–425* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965), 15–16 and 196–97. Pelagius also contrasts the

and “honor” characterize her ascetic endeavor, made more palpable (as in the letter’s opening) by the material reality of Anician wealth and status.<sup>32</sup> Her ascetic calling is both analogous yet superior to the well-established secular merits of her family line. Demetrias’s mother and grandmother, Juliana and Proba, “having shaped” Demetrias “for honest morals from the onset of [her] youth,” now “desire to be surpassed” by her.<sup>33</sup> Like a male child who has passed his father on the *cursus honorum*, the classical Roman ladder of magisterial offices, Demetrias transcends the glory of her female ancestors while adding to it.

Pelagius’s treatment of Demetrias’s *nobilitas* in his construction of her asceticism, however, becomes still more complex. The language of “honor and riches” is distinctly problematized at the end of the letter by the invocation of the recent disaster that has brought Demetrias and her family to African shores—Alaric’s sack of Rome in 410: “Recently it happened, and you yourself heard it: to the sound of the shrill trumpet and the tumult of the Goths, Rome, mistress of the world, groaned, pressed by sad fear. Where was the order of nobility then? Where were the fixed, distinct grades of their hierarchy? Everything was thrown into confusion and disorder by fear. . . . The slave and noble became one.”<sup>34</sup> By linking the worldly fear of the Goths with the Christian fear of judgment at the end of time,<sup>35</sup> Pelagius insinuates the present lack of “fixed and distinct grades of hierarchy” into his ascetic Christian order. His use of aristocratic language takes on a new, destabilized meaning for the Anician virgin. The idiom of worldly status is not borrowed by Pelagius in a vaguely complimentary and ingenuous fashion. It is entirely appropriated, translated into a new “social logic” in which “rank and honor” are forever transformed into a vision of

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applause of the “common people” given to Demetrias’s consular relatives and the joy and rejoicing of angels that await Demetrias in heaven.

32. Pelagius, *Ep. ad Demetriadem* 19, 22, 25 (PL 30:33A–B, 36D, 39B), using the terms *dignitas* and *honor*.
33. Pelagius, *Ep. ad Demetriadem* 14 (PL 30:28C–D). Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 340, 351, calls Proba Demetrias’s “great-aunt,” but Jerome refers to her specifically as Demetrias’s *avia*: for example, *ep.* 130.20 (CSEL 56:201).
34. Pelagius, *Ep. ad Demetriadem* 30 (PL 30:44A–B). None of the male authors seems aware of the rumor (perhaps circulated much later: it first appears in the sixth-century historian Procopius of Caesarea) that Anicia Faltonia Proba herself was responsible for opening the Roman gates to Alaric’s Goths: see Matthews, *Western Aristocracies*, 300 and n. 1.
35. Pelagius, *Ep. ad Demetriadem* 30 (PL 30:44B–45A). Possibly the “shrill trumpets” of the Goths are also intended to invoke the “trumpet of God” in 1 Thess. 4:16.

Christian elitism.<sup>36</sup> This reconfiguration of Demetrias's nobility also allows Pelagius to transmute his own relation to the Anician women. Although "commanded" by Juliana to give some words of advice on the occasion of her daughter's consecration, his position as competent and experienced advisor in ascetic matters acquires a new sheen of authority.<sup>37</sup> If "slave and noble became one" in the wake of Rome's disaster, it is Demetrias's newfound status as Christian virgin that has restored her family to prominence. Pelagius himself, therefore, participates in an important way in this "greater nobility," as its architect and guarantor.

Like Pelagius, Jerome also acknowledges that Demetrias's family possesses the "authority to command" (*iubendo auctoritas*). He is, however, less subtle than Pelagius in immediately subordinating this "command" to his own status as ascetic expert: "Indeed it is nothing new or peculiar they press me for (*a me flagitant*); my expertise (*ingenium*) is often worn away with matters of this sort."<sup>38</sup> Although Proba and Juliana have the "authority to command," Jerome frames their request for advice in less hierarchical terms: they "press" for the fruit of his "expertise" (or even "genius"). Whether Proba or Juliana would have so viewed this exchange of letters must remain unknown, although it is possible to imagine that, by this time, aristocratic women writing to Jerome for advice had come to expect a certain grizzled hauteur, which they may even have found amusing.<sup>39</sup> Also like Pela-

36. Peter Brown, "Pelagius and His Supporters: Aims and Environments," *Journal of Theological Studies* 19 (1968): 93–114 (also found in *Religion and Society*, 183–207), draws attention to this "striving for an aristocratic *élite*" by Pelagius.

37. It is directly after acknowledging Juliana's "force" and "command" that Pelagius casually mentions his own "usual" routine in giving "moral instruction": *Ep. ad Demetriadem* 2 (PL 30:16B–C).

38. Jerome, *ep.* 130.1.2 (CSEL 56:176). The same terms (*iubere*, *petere*, and *flagitare*) appear in Pelagius's letter, but their use and effect, I would argue, is quite different. On Jerome's ascetic resumé, the English translator of Pelagius's *Epistle to Demetrias* comments aptly: "Rhetoric apart, this letter of Jerome's is an unexceptionable but quite unremarkable piece of moral instruction, which an old hand like its writer would be able to turn out on demand every day of the week, and I would rate it no higher than a beta plus" (B. R. Rees, *The Letters of Pelagius and his Followers* [Woodbridge: Boydell, 1991], 32).

39. By 414 (the date of the letter: see F. Cavallera, *Saint Jérôme: Sa vie et son oeuvre* [Louvain: Spicilegium Sacrum Lovaniense, 1922], 2:54) Jerome had established a reputation in eastern and western aristocratic circles. See Stefan Rebenich, *Hieronymus und sein Kreis: Prosopographische und sozialgeschichtliche Untersuchungen*. *Historia Einzelschriften* 72 (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1992), 21–31, 282–92. For prosopographical analysis of *ep.* 130, see Christa Kumreich, *Hieronymus und die christlichen Feminae clarissimae*, Habelts Dissertationsdrucke, Reihe alte Geschichte, 36 (Bonn: Dr. Rudolf Habelt, 1993), 176–88. Walter Dunphy, "Saint Jerome and the Gens Anicia (*Ep.* 130 to Demetrias)," *Studia Patristica* 18.4 (1990): 139–45, on the contrary, finds Jerome in this letter "very much ill-at-ease" in addressing the Anician aristocratic women (140). I find this to be a fairly insupportable observation.

gius, Jerome has occasion to mention the illustrious deeds of Demetrias's ancestors and her fabulous wealth<sup>40</sup> and to establish rhetorical connections between the *nobilitas* of the Anicians and that of Demetrias's ascetic vocation: "A virgin by her virginity was to make a noble family more noble." The suggestion follows that Demetrias's secular nobility ennobles the ascetic calling of all Christian virgins.<sup>41</sup> Demetrias's consecration is further given epic scope as the culmination of an aristocratic family's storm-tossed tribulations. Proba is nothing less than a new Aeneas, "who from the sea's depth saw her native land in smoke and committed her own safety and that of her family to a fragile boat, and came upon Africa's fiercer shores."<sup>42</sup> If Proba is a new Aeneas, then Demetrias is perhaps a new Silvius. In his voyage to the underworld in the *Aeneid*, Aeneas had been granted a vision of his unborn son, the scion of a noble house destined to transfer that nobility to new shores and a new context. Like Jerome's transformation of Anician "command" into Christian "request," this epic dramatization of Proba's family also relativizes and contains the young virgin's "real-world" *nobilitas*, subordinating it (and her) to Jerome's forthcoming brand of ascetic merit. Like Silvius, the virgin Demetrias has yet to be truly "born."

The very structure of Jerome's letter makes plain this relativization and subordination. The first section discusses and praises Proba, whose story brings the Anician line from Roman splendor to African misery to the verge of Christian virtue.<sup>43</sup> He then turns to address "the virgin, the noble virgin, noble no less by holiness than by birth, of whom it is true that as high as she has risen, so much more dangerous is her fall."<sup>44</sup> This curious line refers to the difficulties to be faced by the noble young woman embarking on a life of Christian renunciation, and this next section of the letter in fact gives advice to Demetrias as

40. Jerome, *ep.* 130.1.1, 3–4, 6.5–7, 7.2, 14.1 (CSEL 56:175–76, 181–83, 193).

41. Jerome, *ep.* 130.6.1–2 (CSEL 56:181).

42. Jerome, *ep.* 130.7.7 (CSEL 56:184). Could this link between Proba and Aeneas, followed soon after by a citation of Vergil (CSEL 56:185, citing *Aeneid* 3.435), be a tacit apology for Jerome's sneering at the Vergilian *cento* produced by Proba's grandmother (see *ep.* 53.7.3–4 [CSEL 54:453–54])? See discussion of Jerome and Proba's *cento* in Clark and Hatch, *Golden Bough*, 104–6; Sivan, "Anician Women," 142, 153. D. Shanzer, "The Anonymous *Carmen contra paganos* and the Date and Identity of the Centonist Proba," *Revue des études augustiniennes* 32 (1986): 232–48 and, more recently, "The Date and Identity of the Centonist Proba," *Recherches augustiniennes* 27 (1994): 75–96, argue that it is Demetrias's grandmother, this Anicia Faltonia Proba, who authored the *cento*, making the Proba-as-Aeneas parallel even more noteworthy and the entire exchange between Jerome and the Anician women somewhat more delicate. Kumreich, *Hieronymus*, 76–82, discusses the *cento* as part of Demetrias's strong Anician Christian heritage, but does not mention the possible connection to Jerome. See also Dunphy, "St. Jerome," 142–44.

43. Jerome, *ep.* 130.1–7 (CSEL 56:176–86).

44. Jerome, *ep.* 130.7.11 (CSEL 56:185).

"the wealthy virgin and noble virgin."<sup>45</sup> The remaining third of the letter makes clear the transformation that Jerome rhetorically imposes on Demetrias's *nobilitas*: "Now I shall speak to the virgin only, that is, only those things within you but not external to your self shall I consider."<sup>46</sup> This powerful phrase detaches Demetrias from her "circumstances," that is, her "honor and rank." The levels of her identity (lady, heiress, virgin) have been stratified and stripped away, revealing that the new center of her "self" is not the Anician name or fortune, but the vow to God that has made her a consecrated virgin.<sup>47</sup>

This reconfiguration of Demetrias's identity leaves her in a somewhat tenuous position; like the phantom of Silvius, one of the "illustrious souls who is about to venture into our great name,"<sup>48</sup> Demetrias holds great promise but also great danger. Jerome can recommend two bulwarks against this "dangerous fall" that threatens one set so high. The first, naturally, is his own wise and experienced counsel. Others, he concedes, have written treatises on the blessed state of virginity: "The holy life (*hagia vita*)<sup>49</sup> has been praised in words and speech by as many Latins as Greeks, and all other nations, especially in the churches." Jerome, however, is the sage advisor of *dedicated* virgins: "It is for us to guard what has already been chosen."<sup>50</sup> Since the ascetic path is so fraught with peril, Jerome counsels Demetrias "to pay heed to your betters"; this is especially true for women, "whose changeable and fluid minds, if left to their own wills, quickly sink into weaker things."<sup>51</sup> That Jerome should transmit this counsel by letter reiterates to Demetrias on which side of their correspondence ultimate authority resides. At the beginning of the letter, he even makes a lightly veiled comparison between himself and the apostle Paul, "writing as a stranger to a stranger" (*ignoti ad ignotam*), like Paul to the Colossians.<sup>52</sup>

The other defense against the virgin's terrible fall is her own family, her mother and grandmother. Early on Jerome configures himself and

45. Jerome, *ep.* 130.7.12–14.8 (CSEL 56:185–95), cited at *ep.* 130.14.8 (CSEL 56:195).

46. Jerome, *ep.* 130.15.1 (CSEL 56:195).

47. The same suggestion is made with slightly more finesse by Pelagius when he begins addressing Demetrias simply as *virgo*: *Ep. ad Demetriadem* 5, 9, 16 (PL 30:20D, 24D, 30A).

48. Vergil, *Aeneid* 6.758.

49. This odd combination of Greek and Latin terms is no doubt meant to demonstrate Jerome's mastery of both languages and literatures, similar to his display of Hebrew knowledge as a form of ascribing Christian authority to himself: see below, at n. 106.

50. Jerome, *ep.* 130.19.5–6 (CSEL 56:200). Jerome's own ascetic expertise is a favorite theme of his: he is the "learned sailor after many shipwrecks" (*ep.* 125.2.3 [CSEL 56:120]). He also mentions to Demetrias here his notorious letter to Eustochium (*ep.* 22) and notes with some smugness that his "book remains," while its erstwhile critics have "passed away" (*liber manet, homines praeterierunt*).

51. Jerome, *ep.* 130.17.3, 1 (CSEL 56:198).

52. Jerome, *ep.* 130.2.1 (CSEL 56:176).

these two elder women as the spiritual progenitors of Demetrias's noble new station: "The grandmother and the mother have planted, but it is I who will water and the Lord who will give growth."<sup>53</sup> Like a good bride, Demetrias is advised to "imitate your spouse: be subject to your grandmother and mother."<sup>54</sup> In practical terms, since she has taken a vow of virginity instead of a husband, her mother and grandmother must now care for the more material concerns of the Anician fortune.<sup>55</sup> In spiritual terms, she is to look to Proba and Juliana as models of a pious and transformed Christian nobility: "Let *these* jewels [that is, scripture and wisdom] hang on your breast and in your ears. Let your tongue know nothing but Christ, let it make no sound that is not holy, and let it repeat in its sweetness that of your grandmother and mother, whose form of virtue is to be imitated."<sup>56</sup> In a manner similar to Pelagius, Jerome has seized upon the inevitable fact of Demetrias's noble birth and transformed this "mark," through epic language and flowery rhetoric, into something both valuable and fragile. In doing so, he has gone further than Pelagius to reinscribe Demetrias in a relationship of inferiority both to her ascetic master and to her family guardians.<sup>57</sup>

Augustine's correspondence with the Anician women moves in quite a different direction from either Pelagius's or Jerome's, in that he halfheartedly acknowledges the social status of the Anician clan while deferring the absolute "nobility" of Demetrias's ascetic calling. It is most significant, first of all, that Augustine never writes directly to Demetrias. His congratulatory letter of 413 is addressed to Proba and Juliana, while the more substantive letter of 416/17 is addressed to Juliana alone. One reasonable explanation for this is that he has already established epistolary lines of communication with Proba and Juliana. To Proba he has written, upon her request, a small treatise on prayer and another small letter of encouragement.<sup>58</sup> He has dedicated

53. Jerome, *ep.* 130.2.4 (CSEL 56:177), referring to 1 Cor. 3:6.

54. Jerome, *ep.* 130.12.1 (CSEL 56:192). The CSEL editor and NPNF translator suggest that this sentence refers to Luke 2:51, with the result that Demetrias, like the young Jesus, will also soon "increase in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor" (Luke 2:52).

55. Jerome, *ep.* 130.14.6 (CSEL 56:194).

56. Jerome, *ep.* 130.20 (CSEL 56:201).

57. In some ways, Jerome's taming of Demetrias's aristocratic merit follows more socially conservative lines. According to Christine Steininger, *Die ideale christliche Frau, virgo-vidua-nupta: Eine Studie zum Bild der idealen christlichen Frau bei Hieronymus und Pelagius* (St. Otillien: EOS Verlag, 1997), 195–202, Jerome's "ideal Christian woman," even a dedicated virgin, is modeled on the Roman *matrona*, while Pelagians tend to construct their female subjects in more universally elite terms.

58. Augustine, *ep.* 130–131 (CSEL 44:40–79).

a treatise on widows to Juliana.<sup>59</sup> He received, apparently, a “souvenir” of Demetrias’s veiling ceremony in 413 from Demetrias’s mother, and he wrote a letter of praise and thanks to them.<sup>60</sup> But it is also true that, as far as the letters indicate, Augustine was not *asked* (or, as Pelagius phrased it, “commanded”) to write a letter of advice to Demetrias.<sup>61</sup> His 413 letter of thanks is rather superficial, acknowledging the greatness of the Anician family and the “higher choice” now made by Demetrias.<sup>62</sup> But whereas such language was prefatory for Pelagius and Jerome, no words of counsel follow in Augustine’s brief missive. It is only some years later, after Pelagius’s own letter to Demetrias has somehow reached Augustine, that he writes in concern—and still he writes to *Juliana*, not to Demetrias, even though the latter has now received direct address from two of the greatest ascetic minds of the West. The effect is subtle, but tangible: Augustine does not construe Demetrias as the governing principle of her own ascetic life, and the worried letter to Juliana reinforces the inability and lack of authority in the daughter by instead focusing on the mother.<sup>63</sup>

Although his congratulatory letter of a few years prior was rich in the language of *nobilitas* and wealth (both figurative and literal), Anician status is conspicuously absent from this second letter. Part of Augustine’s letter addresses remarks (now otherwise lost) from Juliana, apparently responding to earlier warnings from Augustine about heretical influences (presumably Pelagians or Pelagius himself). We can barely make out Juliana’s aristocratic confidence beneath the muffled tones of Augustine’s prose: “You go further and say, ‘But Your Priesthood knows that I and my little household (*domunculam*) are far removed from persons of this sort; all of our family follows the

59. Augustine, *De bono viduatis*, written ca. 414, between Demetrias’s consecration and Augustine’s reading of Pelagius’s letter to her (between *ep.* 150 and *ep.* 188). *Ep.* 150 was clearly written soon after Demetrias’s consecration, in 413; on the date of *ep.* 188 (417), see Rees, *Letters of Pelagius*, 31–33.

60. Augustine, *ep.* 150 (CSEL 44:382). According to *ep.* 188.1.1, at some point in the midst of this correspondence, Augustine met the Anician women in person: *vos per litteras primum, deinde etiam praesentia corporali* (CSEL 57:119).

61. Dunphy, “St. Jerome,” suggests that Augustine directed the Anician women to write to Jerome for ascetic advice, creating an anti-Pelagian bloc of ascetic advisors. There is no evidence for such an assertion, although by the 410s Jerome and Augustine had become somewhat amicable correspondents.

62. Augustine, *ep.* 150 (CSEL 44:381). It is by now familiar language: Demetrias is “noble by birth, more noble by sanctity.”

63. It is also worth noting that *ep.* 188 is from both Augustine and Alypius, supporter of Augustine and bishop of Thagaste, emphasizing the institutional grounding of Augustine’s rhetoric: this is an epistle of ecclesiastical import, not merely a letter of ascetic counsel. This coheres with Augustine’s attempts to transform Demetrias’s ascetic calling into one more chapter in his theological controversy with Pelagius and his followers.

Catholic faith so closely that we have never deviated into any heresy, nor has any one ever lapsed into any sect: I speak not only of those which can hardly be excused, but even of those whose errors seem small. . . . We consider your house as no small church of Christ."<sup>64</sup> Augustine concedes only that Juliana's house is indeed "not small" (*non parvam*; we could imagine that Juliana herself might use the word *magnam*), but this is as close as he will come to acknowledging the secular and religious reputation of the *Anicii*.<sup>65</sup> The trait ascribed to the family in general and to Demetrias in particular is vulnerability. The consecrated virgin, it seems, is highly suggestible—Augustine insinuates that his "ministry" among the Anicians some years prior "bore fruit" without even his knowledge.<sup>66</sup> Similarly, the mere reading of Pelagius's dangerous letter will cause Demetrias to lose that ministerial fruit: "so go ahead and let the virgin of Christ read that from which she will believe that her virginal sanctity and all her spiritual riches belong to her only from herself, and thus . . . let her learn to be ungrateful to God!"<sup>67</sup> Demetrias has all but lost personal agency in her own ascetic life—which, of course, is entirely the point of this dire theological warning. Demetrias's "spiritual riches" are not *of* her; in making this point, Augustine ignores also her "worldly" riches, her worldly status, all possibility of Demetrias standing up and independently acting. He does not even address her directly.

Juliana, although addressed by Augustine, is not in much better shape. Jerome and Pelagius had both negotiated Demetrias's status within the family in such a way as to acknowledge the superiority of her calling, yet retain the *nobilitas* of Proba and Juliana. Augustine's language leaves no one in a clearly superior position: "Your daughter surpasses you, joyously and willingly, by age (*natu*) after you, by deed (*actu*) before you, in birth (*genere*) from you, in rank (*honore*) before you, following in age (*aetate*), preceding in holiness (*sanctitate*). In her, indeed, you begin to be what you could not be in yourself. She has not married carnally, and thus not only herself but you has she enriched spiritually. Although you are less than she is, you are compensated by the fact that you married in order to give birth to her."<sup>68</sup> The merit is Demetrias's, but it accrues to Juliana's credit. Carnal marriage is inferior to holy virginity, but Demetrias's virginity "enriches" her widowed mother, too. Augustine assures Juliana that the sanctity of

64. Augustine, *ep.* 188.1.3 (CSEL 57:121).

65. Augustine, *ep.* 188.1.1 (CSEL 57:120) does refer to Demetrias as *fideli et nobili virgine*, but here it is as the object of *nostra* . . . *exhortatio*.

66. Augustine, *ep.* 188.1.1 (CSEL 57:120); like Jerome, he cites 1 Cor. 3:6 here.

67. Augustine, *ep.* 188.2.4 (CSEL 57:122).

68. Augustine, *ep.* 188.2.6 (CSEL 57:124).

her daughter "is both yours and not of you."<sup>69</sup> To whom, then, does this sanctity, this Christian *nobilitas*, belong? The answer seems to be "God," and the suggestion is that this is not really *nobilitas* at all; it is praiseworthy, it is holy, but most of all this life chosen by Demetrias (or, rather, implanted by Augustine and brought to fruition by God) is perilous.<sup>70</sup> That Demetrias and her mother are in such mortal danger at once strips them of secular and religious *nobilitas* in a manner not found in Pelagius's or Jerome's letters, while at the same time insinuating a different and less genial brand of authority for Augustine himself. The rhetorical differences between a letter of advice and a letter of warning establish new and charged networks of authority and allegiance.<sup>71</sup> For Augustine, the "rich and noble virgin" carefully praised by Jerome and Pelagius is transformed into the "saintly virgin, groaning, thumping her breast humbly, and perhaps even weeping," at the constant onslaught of disgraceful heretics.<sup>72</sup>

Pelagius embraced Demetrias's nobility, only to transform it into something both "greater" and wholly Christian; Jerome acknowledged her nobility, only to subordinate it to his expertise and her own youth and fragility; Augustine deliberately deflated her nobility, casting Demetrias and her entire family as constantly and thoroughly vulnerable to the attacks of the devil (through heretics). In all three authors, it is notable that the aristocratic merit of young Demetrias takes center stage in the figurative language of their respective "ascetic logics." Students of early Christian asceticism might expect to find the language of *gender* predominating here, but Demetrias's nobility instead seems to predominate. It is surely not the case that these three men were not interested in the issues of sex and gender in the early church. Yet we have our first indication here of the utility of approaching these texts through their "highly particularized and local social environment" (to use Spiegel's phrase). Demetrias's "highly particularized" ascetic calling, in the textual constructions of all three men, poses immediate problems of hierarchy and status, and not of sex and gender. Demetrias, heiress and descendant of consuls, must be configured first and foremost in such a way as to place her incontestable nobility in a relation with the ecclesiastical hierarchy into which she

69. Augustine, *ep.* 188.2.6 (CSEL 57:124).

70. That theological danger predominates over ascetic merit is made clear in *ep.* 188.3.10 (CSEL 57:128): "May that book be altogether out of mind, we do not mean just yours or that of the holy virgin your daughter, but even in the last of your male or female servants."

71. On various types of "letters of exhortation," including "letters of advice" and "letters of admonition," see Stowers, *Letter Writing*, 91–152.

72. Augustine, *ep.* 188.3.9 (CSEL 57:127).

has now entered. Pelagius, Jerome, and Augustine are *not* aristocrats, and the “ascetic logic” they construct for Demetrias must, first of all, accommodate her worldly status to their Christian expertise.

### III. “KNOWING IS PRIOR TO DOING”: THEORY AND PRAXIS IN ASCETIC INSTRUCTION

The aristocratic reputation of Demetrias’s family drives these three Christian writers to construct an “ascetic logic” of power both within the Anician household and between the composers and recipients of the respective letters. Demetrias’s privileged position has been used to adjudicate aristocratic and ecclesiastical authority between episcopal, monastic, and secular institutions. Similarly, her official consecration as a “virgin of Christ” is manipulated by our three male writers to establish what constitutes the value and essence of the ascetic life for this particular Christian woman.<sup>73</sup> The letters of Jerome and Pelagius are framed as self-conscious ascetic guidebooks, treatises on “moral instruction,” especially crafted for the noble young virgin.<sup>74</sup> For all three authors, Demetrias functions as an emblem of ascetic theory and praxis, demonstrating how doctrinal orthodoxy and ascetic orthopraxy are meant to “fit” and interrelate. In an ecclesiastical context in which women have more access to religious power through praxis (asceticism) than through participation in doctrinal theology (theory), such interrelation becomes crucial to our understanding of Demetrias’s ascetic logic.

For Pelagius, knowledge (derived mainly from scripture) and proper action constitute the means for restoring and preserving the essential sanctity of human nature.<sup>75</sup> This essential sanctity is assured by the

73. All three writers apply various titles to Demetrias, perhaps reflecting the increasing institutionalization of female ascetic offices in the Christian hierarchy. Pelagius addresses her simply as “virgin” (*virgo*) (*Ep. ad Demetriadem* 5, 9, 16 [PL 30:20D, 24D, 30A]; see also 1, 2, 9, 19 [PL 30:16B, 16D, 24A, 33D]) and also as “virgin of Christ” (*virgo Christi*) (*Ep. ad Demetriadem* 1 [PL 30:15C]). To Jerome she is a “virgin of Christ” (*virgo Christi*) (*ep.* 130.1.1, 6.5, 7.8 [CSEL 56:175, 182, 184]) and “virgin of God” (*virgo Dei*) (*ep.* 130.4.4, 5 [CSEL 56:179, 180]); he also refers to “holy virgins” (*sanctae virgines*) (*ep.* 130.19.3 [CSEL 56:199]). Augustine refers to her as “consecrated virgin” (*sanctimonia virginalis*) (*ep.* 150 [CSEL 44:380], *ep.* 188.1.1 [CSEL 57:120]), “virgin of Christ” (*virgo Christi*) (*ep.* 188.2.5, 3.14 [CSEL 57:128, 130]), “holy virgin” (*sancta virgo*) (*ep.* 188.3.9 [CSEL 57:127]), and “sacred virgin” (*sacra virgo*) (*ep.* 188.3.10 [CSEL 57:128]). On titles and institutionalization, see Susanna Elm, “*Virgins of God*”: *The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 137–51.

74. See for example Pelagius, *Ep. ad Demetriadem* 2 (PL 30:16C), *de institutione morum*; Jerome, *ep.* 130.19.3 (CSEL 56:200), *instructionem virginis*.

75. The famous image of a “file” use to abrade evil “habit” is central to the behavioral imagery of the letter: Pelagius, *Ep. ad Demetriadem* 8, 13 (PL 30:23A–24A, 27D–28C). The critical reevaluation of this theology, focusing on its traditional roots, is Torgny Bohlin, *Die Theologie des Pelagius und ihre Genesis* (Uppsala: A. B. Lundequistka Bökhandeln,

total goodness of God the Creator.<sup>76</sup> This idea of the “natural sanctity of the mind”<sup>77</sup> has predominated in scholarship on Pelagius’s *Epistle to Demetrias*, due, no doubt, to its centrality in Augustine’s later theological rebuttal.<sup>78</sup> The grounding of God’s goodness and natural ability, however, allows Pelagius through his “moral instruction” to interweave doctrinal orthodoxy and ascetic practice in mutually reinforcing ways. The recognition of human ability is tightly linked to ascetic activity: “Let these first fundamentals of the holy and spiritual life be established: let the virgin recognize her own strengths, which she will be able to exercise well only when she has learned that she has them.”<sup>79</sup> The “virgin’s strengths” and her “exercise” of these strengths (asceticism) are virtually inseparable in this statement.

Throughout his instruction, Pelagius maintains an equal emphasis on theory and praxis. He acknowledges that he must prioritize the order of her instruction: “Even as it is greater to do the Lord’s will than to know it, so knowing is prior to doing; the latter precedes by merit, the former in order of time.”<sup>80</sup> Although this seems to subordinate doctrine (“knowing it”) to ascetic practice (“doing it”), Pelagius does not allow for this simple reading. He continues, “The beginning of obedience is wanting to know what is commanded, and to have learned what you are to do is a part of your obedience.”<sup>81</sup> “Knowing” is, in fact, an integral and ongoing part of “doing.” The first section of the letter contains an increasingly narrow body of examples for Demetrias to follow: first laudable figures from human history and then more applicable examples from biblical history.<sup>82</sup> The pinnacle of these biblical exemplars is Job, a particularly apt model for Demetrias.<sup>83</sup> Pelagius emphasizes that Job “proved” his knowledge of God’s will “not in words only but also in deeds.”<sup>84</sup> Through this integration of theory and praxis in realized apostolic perfection, Job “revealed by

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1957), esp. 15–45. See also Robert F. Evans, *Pelagius: Inquiries and Reappraisals* (New York: Seabury, 1968), esp. 90–121.

76. Pelagius, *Ep. ad Demetriadem* 2 (PL 30:17A).

77. Pelagius, *Ep. ad Demetriadem* 4 (PL 30:19B): *in animis nostris naturalis quaedam . . . sanctitas*.

78. See, for example, Soullignac, “Pélage,” 2926–27.

79. Pelagius, *Ep. ad Demetriadem* 2 (PL 30:16D).

80. Pelagius, *Ep. ad Demetriadem* 9 (PL 30:24A–B).

81. Pelagius, *Ep. ad Demetriadem* 9 (PL 30:24B).

82. Pelagius, *Ep. ad Demetriadem* 3–6 (PL 30:18A–22B). Again, perhaps too much emphasis has been placed on the inclusion of pre-Christian figures of righteousness, in the attempt to pin down Pelagius’s over-inclusive “naturalism”: see the laments of Goussier, “Directeurs spirituels,” 787, 790–791: “Toujours dame nature!” (791)

83. Due to his “renunciation” of wealth and station: Pelagius, *Ep. ad Demetriadem* 6 (PL 30:21B–D).

84. Pelagius, *Ep. ad Demetriadem* 6 (PL 30:22A): *non verbis tantum, sed ipsius quoque rebus probavit*.

public display of himself (*in medium proferens ex se*) what all of us can do and taught how great is that treasure the soul which we possess, although *without use*, and, because we do not wish to *display it*, believe that we do not possess it."<sup>85</sup> It is by "displaying" the will of God (through ascetic practice) that Demetrias can confirm to herself and others her doctrinally correct belief in divine and human nature; likewise, this correct belief will bolster and facilitate her ascetic practices.

Much of the rest of the letter reiterates this unified attention to theory and praxis.<sup>86</sup> Some specific details of physical renunciation are offered, such as abstinence and fasting,<sup>87</sup> as well as more general virtues that are intimately linked to action: disdain of wealth leads to "works of mercy,"<sup>88</sup> love of God leads to a private regimen of prayer,<sup>89</sup> and, in sum, "whatever is holier and more perfect, whatever can better commend you to God and make you greater in heaven, this always pursue, this always embrace."<sup>90</sup> "Pursuing and embracing," knowing and doing, are most coherently bound in Pelagius's advice concerning scripture. *Lectio divina* enacts both "words and deeds" for the young virgin, announcing the truth about God while laying down precepts that are to be rigorously followed.<sup>91</sup> Like Pelagius's own letter to Demetrias, the "sacred scriptures" have been sent "by God himself and are to be cherished as his own commandments."<sup>92</sup> Together with regular prayer, reading of scripture constitutes one of the two central pillars of the ascetic's "spiritual progress" (*spiritualis profectus*): "The best use of the divine text is if you hold it up to yourself like a mirror. . . . Now, therefore, let the order of celestial history instruct you; now a holy song of David delight; now the wisdom of Solomon inform; now the rebukes of the prophets arouse to fear of the Lord; now evangelic and apostolic perfection join you (*coniungat*) with Christ in a life of complete sanctity."<sup>93</sup> "Complete sanctity," according

85. Pelagius, *Ep. ad Demetriadem* 6 (PL 30:22A–B), emphasis added. On female asceticism as "display" see Shaw, "Askesis."

86. Soullignac, "Pélage," 2932, asserts that chapters 10–27 "énoncent successivement le programme de perfection qui convient à la vierge consacrée," but this is perhaps too rigid a division of the letter's contents.

87. Pelagius, *Ep. ad Demetriadem* 18 and 21 (PL 30:32A–33A, 35D–36B).

88. Pelagius, *Ep. ad Demetriadem* 22 (PL 30:36B–D); but note that it is specifically Demetrias's *fasting* that will lead to her *miseriordiae opera*, since it will allow her mother and grandmother to give her food and money to the poor. The merit accrues to Demetrias (and her entire family), but it is no longer her place to practice *public* munificence.

89. Pelagius, *Ep. ad Demetriadem* 23 (PL 30:37A–C).

90. Pelagius, *Ep. ad Demetriadem* 24 (PL 30:38B).

91. Pelagius, *Ep. ad Demetriadem* 9 (PL 30:24B).

92. Pelagius, *Ep. ad Demetriadem* 16 (PL 30:30C).

93. Pelagius, *Ep. ad Demetriadem* 23 (PL 30:37C–D).

to Pelagius, therefore comprises a complete integration and interpenetration of theory and praxis: “knowing and doing” the will of God at the same time. This integrated ascetic life furthermore reinforces his image of an elite church, of *evangelica et apostolica perfectio*, and coheres with the “ascetic logic” of Demetrias’s translated *nobilitas*.

Pelagius’s vision of the integration of ascetic theory and praxis leaves Demetrias in a fairly strong ascetic position. Although she might complain that “it’s hard work,”<sup>94</sup> the constant knowledge of God’s beneficence and her own reward provide adequate refreshment: “No labor ought to seem hard, no time long, for which eternal glory is acquired.”<sup>95</sup> Jerome’s concluding remarks are quite similar: “Love the holy scriptures, and wisdom will love you. ‘Love her [Wisdom], and she will keep you safe. Honor her, and she will embrace you.’”<sup>96</sup> Her road will be difficult, Jerome warns her, even more so because she is renouncing a life of ease.<sup>97</sup> Many of Jerome’s specific remarks on the ascetic life echo those of Pelagius’s: the recollection of biblical exemplars,<sup>98</sup> the importance of abstinence and fasting as well as moderation in these behaviors,<sup>99</sup> warnings about anger,<sup>100</sup> the significance of regular prayer.<sup>101</sup> One receives the impression that a virgin “trained” by Jerome would not look so different from a virgin “trained” by Pelagius.<sup>102</sup> Jerome’s view of the female ascetic life, however, veers away from Pelagius’s in ways that cohere with their respective “ascetic logics” as outlined above. Pelagius’s transformed *nobilitas* finds realization in Demetrias’s empowered integration of doctrine and practice;

94. Pelagius, *Ep. ad Demetriadem* 28 (PL 30:42D): *Dicas fortisan: grandis labor est.*

95. Pelagius, *Ep. ad Demetriadem* 30 (PL 30:45A).

96. Jerome, *ep.* 130.20 (CSEL 56:201), citing Prov. 4:6, 8.

97. Jerome, *ep.* 130.15.4–5 (CSEL 56:196).

98. Jerome, *ep.* 130.4.2–3, 7.4–6 (CSEL 56:178–79, 183–84); compare Pelagius, *Ep. ad Demetriadem* 4–6 (PL 30:19A–22B). Gonsette, “Directeurs spirituels,” 794–95, feels that Pelagius is “cribbing” Jerome’s letter due to the similarities between them, but this is due more to Gonsette’s mistrust and loathing of Pelagius. On the contrary, Georges de Plinval, *Pélagie: Ses écrits, sa vie, et sa réforme* (Lausanne: Libraire Payot, 1943), 246, produces more plausible arguments that Jerome has already read Pelagius’s letter. In any case, I find their similarities evidence for a commonly held basic “ascetic logic” applicable to Demetrias.

99. Jerome, *ep.* 130.10–11 (CSEL 56:189–91); compare Pelagius, *Ep. ad Demetriadem* 18, 21 (PL 30:32A–33A, 35D–36B).

100. Jerome, *ep.* 130.13.2 (CSEL 56:193); compare Pelagius, *Ep. ad Demetriadem* 20 (PL 30:35B).

101. Jerome, *ep.* 130.15.1 (CSEL 56:195); compare Pelagius, *Ep. ad Demetriadem* 23 (PL 30:37A–C).

102. Likewise, it is unclear that a male ascetic would “look” particularly different from a female ascetic in this regard, as several readers of this essay have pointed out to me. Nonetheless, the significance of such treatises *de virginitate* for women’s history in early Christianity lies precisely in the fact that female asceticism seems especially designed for public “display”: see above, nn. 13, 14, and 20.

Jerome's slightly hobbled version of this same *nobilitas* leaves his Demetrias more vulnerable and in need of constant guidance.<sup>103</sup>

To take a specific example: both Pelagius and Jerome value highly the practice of *lectio divina*, the regular and regimented reading of scriptures. Yet for Pelagius, scripture was a missive "sent" directly to Demetrias (as to all "noble" Christians) by God. Jerome, after instructing Demetrias to "occupy" her mind "with the reading of scripture" (*sacrae lectionis*),<sup>104</sup> goes on himself to "pluck some small flowers from the most beautiful field of the holy scriptures," so that he might himself pick and choose those passages that will best direct her virginal life.<sup>105</sup> Jerome, of course, has established a particular claim to scriptural expertise through translations and commentaries, and he subtly deploys this expertise as he mediates the ascetic scriptures for Demetrias.<sup>106</sup> Thus, whereas Pelagius had put forth certain virtues and then given the particular practice that would follow from them, Jerome turns his scriptural "flowers" into terms of the virgin's compact with God.<sup>107</sup> It is from David that she should learn to put on the "holy armor" of fasting, and from Job that she should learn to sap the "strength" in her "loins."<sup>108</sup> The psalmist teaches her the dangers of anger, and the sad tale of Ananias and Sapphira instructs her on the perils of her great fortune.<sup>109</sup> By himself choosing and interpreting the ascetic passages of scripture that are to act as Demetrias's rules of behavior, Jerome lays much less emphasis on how Demetrias herself can integrate doctrinal theology with ascetic practice.<sup>110</sup> Demetrias does not precede "doing" with "knowing" in quite the same way. Here "knowing" is reduced to an act out of Demetrias's hands; rather, she is the fragile recipient of nurturing wisdom from a beneficent superior.

103. Unlike Jerome, Pelagius indicates that in a short time Demetrias will become mistress of her own conduct: *Ep. ad Demetriadem* 13 (PL 30:27D–28C).

104. Jerome, *ep.* 130.7.12 (CSEL 56:185).

105. Jerome, *ep.* 130.9.1 (CSEL 56:188).

106. Jerome, *ep.* 130.7.4 (CSEL 56:183), on a "better Hebrew" rendering of a passage from Job. Steinger, *Ideale christliche Frau*, 195, remarks that scriptural expertise provided Jerome his first *entrée* into aristocratic ascetic circles in Rome in the 380s.

107. On the Bible as the virgin's "treaty" (*foedus*), see Jerome, *ep.* 130.7.14 (CSEL 56:186).

108. Jerome, *ep.* 130.10.1, 4 (CSEL 56:189, 90).

109. Jerome, *ep.* 130.13.2, 14.5 (CSEL 56:193, 194).

110. It is also possible that Jerome's more protective attitude towards the ascetic uses of scripture responds directly to Pelagius. One particular section of Pelagius's letter to Demetrias suggests the use of scriptural passages against "evil thoughts" (*cogitationes*) (*Ep. ad Demetriadem* 19 [PL 30:40C–41C]). If Jerome knew of this ascetic practice, he may have (perhaps correctly) associated it with the theory of *logismoi* of Evagrius Ponticus, very recently revealed to Jerome as the archfiend of Egyptian Origenism (see Clark, *Origenist Controversy*, 79–81, 222–23). On Origenist influence on Pelagius (via Rufinus's translation of Origen's *Commentary on Romans*), see Bohlin, *Theologie*, 77–103 and Evans, *Pelagius*, 6–25.

Where “theory” (that is, theological doctrine) does enter Jerome’s instruction book, it is a danger on par with the “venomous” chatter of married women.<sup>111</sup> He arrives at “that which is quite noteworthy” at the end of his epistle, which turns out to be a recitation of the events of the Origenist controversy of some years past. The most significant part of Jerome’s dire warning is his reticence actually to engage Demetrias in theological discussion: “This impious and wicked doctrine was located some time ago (*olim*) in Egypt and eastern parts, but now, concealed as if in vipers’ pits, it is found in many places, and pollutes the purity of those places, and it creeps like a hereditary disease in short time, so that it may reach even more—which, I am sure, if you should hear of it, you would not accept it. Indeed, you have mistresses who belong to God (*apud Deum*), whose faith is the standard of doctrine. You understand what I have said—‘for God *will give* you understanding in all things’ [Ps. 83:7]—nor right away should you press for a refutation against this cruelest heresy and those even more vile. . . . The present work is to instruct a virgin, not refute heretics.”<sup>112</sup> By refusing to give substance to his warnings of heretical “vipers” (the Origenists and now, presumably, Pelagians), Jerome shifts all theoretical responsibility away from Demetrias: it rests with her “mistresses” (*magistras*, Proba and Juliana); it rests with God (*apud Deum*); it rests (of course) with Jerome himself. The implication is that perhaps one day Demetrias may be able to deal with the heretical dangers herself,<sup>113</sup> but for now she must follow the precepts laid forth by God (and Jerome) and guard her virginity zealously. Like her erstwhile nobility, the safeguards of doctrinal faith are now, it seems, beyond the control of Demetrias. It is for those who planted and nourished the ascetic desire in her—her mother and grandmother, God, and Jerome—to ensure her doctrinal purity while she obeys the precepts. They will “know” for her while she is occupied with “doing.”

If Jerome breaks apart the theory of asceticism from its practice, leaving only the latter within the control of Demetrias, Augustine removes both altogether from Demetrias’s slender grasp. His first letter to Juliana and Proba, thanking them for the “souvenir” (*apophoreta*) of Demetrias’s consecration and sending his congratulations,

111. See Jerome, *ep.* 130.18.1 (CSEL 56:198).

112. Jerome, *ep.* 130.16.5–6 (CSEL 56:197), emphasis added.

113. Although Jerome soon after sneers at “presumptuous women” of whom “the apostle says that they ‘are carried about with every wind of doctrine’ [Eph. 4:14], ‘ever learning and never able to come to knowledge of the truth’ [2 Tim. 3:7]” (*ep.* 130.17.3 [CSEL 56:198]). Note also that he represents Paula, when confronted by a dastardly Origenist, immediately rushing for Jerome’s aid: “Necessity fell upon *me* to stand up against the most evil viper and deadly beast” (*ep.* 108.23.4 [CSEL 55:340]).

deals in only the vaguest terms with the ascetic life that looms ahead of Demetrias.<sup>114</sup> His second letter, responding with vigor and alarm to a copy of Pelagius's instructional epistle, is predominantly concerned with the *theory* of the ascetic life (and, indeed, all Christian existence), relegating its actual practice to a few passing mentions. We might remark that it is precisely theology that is the point of contention between Augustine and Pelagius, and therefore it is only natural that he should so focus his words of warning. I suggest, however, that this begs the question of the relation between ancient ascetic theory and practice. Augustine himself naturalizes the concern with theology over practice, and centuries of entrenched Augustinian *Dogmengeschichte* deter us from asking *why* Demetrias's asceticism should suddenly become a question of doctrinal orthodoxy alone. As the letters of Pelagius and Jerome suggest, it would be equally reasonable for Augustine to address Demetrias's ascetic practices and to criticize Pelagius's construction of her virginal life.<sup>115</sup> That he does not do so is our first indication of how the ascetic life of this woman is being redirected by the bishop of Hippo Regius.

The tight integration of theory and praxis I outlined in Pelagius's epistle is Augustine's primary reason for writing to Juliana: "Clearly it is no small error of those who think that we have of our own selves whatever justice, continence, piety, and chastity there is in us, because God has established us so that he gives us no further help beyond a revelation of knowledge, which makes us do, with love, what we know through learning we ought to do."<sup>116</sup> This intermingling of virtues and practices—*iustitia*, *continentia*, *pietas*, *castitas*—illustrates well Pelagius's interrelation of "knowing" and "doing," founded in the goodness of God and reading of his Scriptures. Augustine finds this to be an inadequate recognition of God's *gratia*. Demetrias must be wary of those "who define nature and doctrine as the only form of grace and help from God so that we may live justly and correctly."<sup>117</sup> This might be a plausible reading of Jerome's epistle—divine instruction (mediated by Jerome) allows Demetrias to choose to fulfill her

114. We might even imagine that Augustine's somewhat hollow praises in *ep.* 150 encouraged Juliana to look elsewhere (to Pelagius and Jerome) for specific ascetic counsel. A letter similar to Augustine, *ep.* 150, came to Juliana from Pope Innocent (*ep.* 15 [PL 20:518]); it may not have escaped Juliana's notice that bishops, in this case, did not seem to offer the most useful *ascetic* advice for her daughter.

115. See Brown, *Augustine*, 345: "For Augustine, Pelagianism was always a body of ideas, of *disputationes*, 'arguments.'" See also Bohlin, *Theologie*, 5: "Seit dem Ende des 16. Jahrhunderts ist eine dogmengeschichtliche Pelagius-Untersuchung nach der anderen erscheinen."

116. Augustine, *ep.* 188.1.3 (CSEL 57:121).

117. Augustine, *ep.* 188.1.3 (CSEL 57:121).

duties through appropriate ascetic practice. It does, however, sell Pelagius's vision somewhat short. While leaving a good deal of the theoretical and practical "work" of asceticism in Demetrias's hands, God the Creator and author of Scripture (God's own "letter" sent for the virgin's instruction) remains fundamental to the ascetic life outlined for Demetrias. What Augustine views as the true affront to the Godhead is, rather, Pelagius's confidence that Demetrias will succeed in her endeavor.<sup>118</sup> In short, Pelagius has discussed the "doing" of asceticism as if Demetrias had some control over this aspect. By this point in Augustine's theological development, however, his view that good deeds are "in her but not of her" is too deeply entrenched.<sup>119</sup> He insists that "unless his own will is helped by God's grace, there can be no good will in a person."<sup>120</sup> Of course, Augustine admits, chastity, continence, and good works are all to be praised as desirable practices, but the book of Wisdom indicates their true source: "Certainly that one knew how great a good continence is when he said, 'And since I knew that no one can be continent unless God grants it' [Wisd. of Sol. 8:21]."<sup>121</sup> This allows Augustine irretrievably to take both "knowing" and "doing" out of Demetrias's control: "God helps us not only in this, that we might know what should be done (*ut sciamus quid agendum sit*), but also so that we do by loving what we already know from learning. So, therefore, no one can be either learned or continent unless God gives it."<sup>122</sup> Again, Pelagius's emphasis has been oversimplified. Both "knowing" and "doing" had been, in his view, a constant gift of God, a gift actively appropriated and reciprocated by Demetrias. For Augustine, even appropriation and reciprocity are out of Demetrias's hands. It is not in her power to achieve knowledge, and it is not in her power to achieve action.

All that Augustine seems to allow for Demetrias in her ascetic life is the rejection of heresy on the advice of her more informed guardians. A fragile assent to theological orthodoxy is her only "ascetic" recourse: "Our opinion, however, of the training and Christian humility of the saintly virgin in which she was nourished and brought up makes us think that when she read these words [of Pelagius], if indeed she did

118. Augustine, *ep.* 188.3.11 (CSEL 57:128), suggests that denying God credit for doing good, despite what Juliana may have thought, constitutes blasphemy against God (and therefore the Trinity).

119. Augustine, *ep.* 188.2.7 (CSEL 57:125): *in illa non etiam ex illa*. See Brown, *Augustine*, 345–64.

120. Augustine, *ep.* 188.2.7 (CSEL 57:125).

121. Augustine, *ep.* 188.2.8 (CSEL 57:126).

122. Augustine, *ep.* 188.2.8 (CSEL 57:126), artfully rearranging Wisd. of Sol. 8:21.

read them, she groaned and humbly thumped her breast . . . and faithfully prayed to God" that her faith would remain "untouched" by heresy.<sup>123</sup> In a sense, Demetrias the "consecrated virgin" finishes in Augustine's view as remarkably similar to any Christian in danger of valuing her own will over God's. Just as his particular "ascetic logic" had essentially wiped clean her *nobilitas*, so his overall emphasis on "theory" at the expense of "praxis" (with both ultimately beyond Demetrias's grasp) brings this "noble virgin" into a state of Christian humility in which she is more or less undifferentiated. She is part of another "Christian household," in the same peril as her "male and female servants."<sup>124</sup> She is firmly unnobled. By transforming ascetic "works" into a shadow of doctrinal theory and subordinating both to God's inscrutable will, Augustine has reduced Demetrias's ascetic calling to yet another perilous situation in which the good Christian risks denying God's grace.

#### IV. "A RIPE AND LEARNED SOUL": *NOBILITAS HUMILIS* AND THE ASCETIC CHRISTIAN WOMAN

As I indicated at the outset, I do not believe that "the real Demetrias" has emerged from these epistolary constructions.<sup>125</sup> I have suggested, however, that "Demetrias" provided for all three men a fruitful and socially specific site of religious contestation. Consequently, I have read these letters as "engaged in contests, contests constituted in and through language, but also by events and interests within the broader discursive and social field."<sup>126</sup> Christian "social logic" has been inscribed by means of "ascetic logic," as Demetrias's *nobilitas* and her ascetic vocation are reshaped and reconfigured by Pelagius, Jerome, and Augustine to fit their own visions of Christian subjectivity and salvation. At the same time, I have tried to demonstrate the very specificity of these "ascetic logics," conformed to the ineluctable fact of Demetrias's elevated social station.

We assume that all three men wanted Demetrias to heed their advice, to view the world as they viewed it, and to become the sort of Christian virgin who would broadcast their respective religious mes-

123. Augustine, *ep.* 188.3.11 (CSEL 57:128), an interesting "theologization" of the *integritas* that usually denotes physical virginity.

124. Augustine, *ep.* 188.3.11 (CSEL 57:128).

125. Despite the plaintive cry of Gonsette, "Directeurs spirituels," at the end of his study: "une question se pose naturellement sur nos lèvres: qu'advint-il de la jeune Démétride?" (800)

126. Clark, "Lady Vanishes," 31.

sages to the rest of the world.<sup>127</sup> As a means of concluding, I would like to take later evidence for Demetrias's ascetic life in order to flesh out the "ascetic logic" made available and practicable for Demetrias. Through these sources, we find once again ascetic theory and praxis coming into play in the context of the *nobilitas* of the Anician virgin.

One of the main sources for Demetrias in her later life is a letter from the mid-fifth century that has come down to us without specific attribution, but is likely the work of Pope Leo I or Prosper of Aquitaine.<sup>128</sup> The letter, conventionally subtitled *On True Humility*, is addressed to a mature Demetrias. Drawing on the botanical images of Jerome and Augustine, the author remarks that "the tender seed has received robust strength, and the tree of your manner of life has brought forth fruits worthy of its generosity."<sup>129</sup> It is difficult to deduce from the context of *De vera humilitate* what shape Demetrias's "manner of life" (*propositum*) has taken. We do possess an inscription and an entry in the *Liber pontificalis* telling us that "Demetrias virgo" endowed a church to St. Stephen in Rome under Leo.<sup>130</sup> This is our first indication that some of the advice given at the outset of her ascetic career might not have appealed to Demetrias and of the extent to which she might herself moderate and temper the ascetic advice given her. Jerome had specifically instructed her that "others may build churches" with ostentatious decoration, but it is for Demetrias to "clothe Christ in the poor, visit him in the sick, feed him in the hungry, shelter him in the homeless."<sup>131</sup> This might even be construed as a

127. Pelagius, *Ep. ad Demetriadem* 14 (PL 30:29B), tells Demetrias: "Think of it: on you are turned the faces and eyes of everyone, and the whole world has taken seats for the spectacle of your life."

128. The English translator argues for ascription to Prosper, based primarily on linguistic parallels: M. K. C. Krabbe, *Epistula ad Demetriadem de vera humilitate: A Critical Text and Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Catholic University of America, Patristic Studies 97 (Washington: Catholic University Press, 1965), 47–52. Whether by Leo or Prosper, we can safely say the letter dates to the 440s and is the work of an pro-Augustinian Catholic male of some authority. For the sake of convenience I shall refer to the author as [Prosper].

129. [Prosper], *De vera humilitate* 1.49–51 (Krabbe, *Epistula*, 142), pushing the image of 1 Cor. 3:6–7. References are to chapter and line numbers of Krabbe's critical text. Translations modified from Krabbe.

130. For the text of the inscription, see Krabbe, *Epistula*, 103 n. 54 (including variants). Demetrias is referred to as "Amnia," another *nomen* of the *Anicii* and *Probi* (for example, Amnius Anicius Iulianus, consul in 322). *Liber pontificalis* 47.1 refers to her as *Demetria ancilla Dei*. Text in J. Forchielli and A.M. Strickler, eds., *Liber pontificalis*, 3 vols., *Studia Gratiana* 21–23 (Rome: Libreria Atheneo, 1978), 2:107. Translation in R. Davis, *The Book of Pontiffs*, *Translated Texts for Historians*, Latin Series, 5 (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1989), 37.

131. Jerome, *ep.* 130.14.7–8 (CSEL 56:194–95). On female Christian patronage in this period, the increasing commonality of which adds a more urgent tone to Jerome's "advice," see Elizabeth A. Clark, "Patrons, Not Priests: Gender and Power in Late Ancient Christian-

significant point at which Demetrias “thought back” to her male advisors: anonymous works of charity, as suggested by Jerome for this “lady of rank,” would unacceptably blot out Demetrias’s Anician noble status. That she has instead chosen to Christianize traditional forms of public munificence, through the construction of a church, is perhaps an indication of how Demetrias herself, in response to Jerome and the others, construed her ascetic and Anician *nobilitas*.<sup>132</sup> Even so, this act does remain within the bounds of an “ascetic logic” articulated by men primarily around the problem of the young virgin’s aristocratic status and great wealth.

The framework of *De vera humilitate* gives further nuance to these particular “ascetic logics.” It seems that Demetrias has assumed some of the *auctoritas* that characterized Juliana and Proba, in that she has similarly “commissioned” from the author this epistle of ascetic counsel: “In this, holy virgin Demetrias, you have abased the honor of your rank (*dignationem tuae dignitatis*) to the point that you insist (*exigas*) that your progress be aided by my pen.”<sup>133</sup> A strong sense of asymmetry marks this later letter, suggesting that Demetrias has fashioned an identity of great *dignitas* and *auctoritas* in Rome, carrying on, perhaps, a tradition of authoritative Anician *feminae clarissimae*. The pronounced theme of this letter, and its self-conscious connection to its famous precursors, call further attention to Demetrias’s inescapable status: “Even after the most polished compositions of excellent masters, what utility will you find in this speech which you have deigned to assign to me? Except, perhaps, since both by their teachings and your own zeal your holy life progresses to higher degrees of virtues, I might warn you to beware of pride (*elatio*), and commend to you by faithful suggestions sincerity of humility, so that in all the deeds (*in omnibus actionibus*) in which you find good conscience you never dare to be complacent.”<sup>134</sup> This neatly summarizes the letter’s concern: the *vera humilitas* of the noble Christian virgin, which stands opposed to the cardinal sin, pride (*superbia* or, as here, *elatio*).<sup>135</sup> Not only are the rich and noble especially prone to the sin of pride, but also the successful ascetic lies vulnerable to the Devil’s envy: “The more

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ity,” *Gender and History* 2 (1990): 253–73. Leslie Brubaker, “Memories of Helena: Patterns in Female Imperial Matronage in the Fourth and Fifth Centuries,” in Liz James, ed., *Women, Men and Eunuch: Gender in Byzantium* (London: Routledge, 1997), 52–75, even suggests that such public munificence became a particularly female expression of Christian *imperium/basileia*.

132. See Matthews, *Western Aristocracies*, 21–23 and 363–69; Clark, “Patrons, Not Priests,” 258–61, 263–64.

133. [Prosper], *De vera humilitate* 1.4–6 (Krabbe, *Epistula*, 138).

134. [Prosper], *De vera humilitate* 1.53–61 (Krabbe, *Epistula*, 142).

135. [Prosper], *De vera humilitate* 8–9 (Krabbe, *Epistula*, 164–68).

illustrious were their merits, the more apt he found them for his snares."<sup>136</sup> The ultimate perversion of ascetic success is the denial of God's grace, leading into all the perceived pitfalls of Pelagianism that have become commonplace by the mid-fifth century.<sup>137</sup> The respectful sincerity of the author's warnings implicitly acknowledges both Demetrias's noble status and her ascetic "success." This last epistolary Demetrias is both supremely noble and humble, a glorified ascetic who is so advanced that she can ascribe all of her many successes to God's grace. This concept of *humility* accords a new brand of ascetic agency to Demetrias, one that had been stripped away by Augustine's overwhelming concern to protect God's authority: "It now remains, most consecrated virgin of God, to scrutinize the secret recesses of your pure heart with chaste and sober judgment. With the sting of pride wholly blunted, you will seek within yourself and count how many and how great are the gifts bestowed upon you by your bridegroom."<sup>138</sup> The author of this letter has managed to retrieve for Demetrias a measure of integration of her pious orthodox theology and her laudable ascetic practice. We might wonder if, perhaps, this had been the very request made by the *sacratissima Dei virgo*: a way to reconcile her exceptional ascetic *nobilitas* to the homologizing rhetoric of Augustinian grace.<sup>139</sup> Aside from such speculation, we can still note the central theme of Demetrias's "ascetic logic," the integration of her Christian and secular *nobilitas*. The distinction between Demetrias and "any Christian soul" has now reappeared with vigor: "How much more should the dignity of your person be armed with the protection of this virtue, to whom, concerning the most opulent gifts of God's grace, such manifold opportunity has been heaped on her for glorying."<sup>140</sup> Ironically, the author of the letter allows Demetrias to retain the

136. [Prosper], *De vera humilitate* 10.31–33 (Krabbe, *Epistula*, 170).

137. These include: denial of original sin, the assertion that Adam sinned alone, denigration of infant baptism, and the possibility of being without sin ([Prosper], *De vera humilitate* 10.47–70 [Krabbe, *Epistula*, 172–74]).

138. [Prosper], *De vera humilitate* 22.1–7 (Krabbe, *Epistula*, 204). A reader for this journal commented on the many commonplaces of a treatise "On humility" such as this, questioning my ability to derive any "Demetrias-specific" information from it apart from incidentals. While I do not deny that much of this treatise reads like common platitudes, these platitudes are now embedded in a "particularized and local social environment" and must thus be read in light of Demetrias's "ascetic logic." See Shaw, "Askesis," 486–87.

139. Despite the quite confident statement of Gonsette, "Directeurs spirituels," 801: "Mais il suffit à nous faire croire que l'autorité de Jérôme, d'Innocent, de l'anonyme [that is, [Prosper]], et surtout d'Augustin l'empêchèrent de suivre la pédagogie naturaliste et anti-chrétienne du stoïcisme pélagien et que, parmi les fidèles de Rome, sa mémoire est à bon droit restée longtemps en vénération."

140. [Prosper], *De vera humilitate* 18.1–8 (Krabbe, *Epistula*, 196), emphasis added.

significance of her noble status in an inverted fashion that ultimately recalls Pelagius's rhetoric.

Once we concede that Demetrias's "real" story is to a great extent lost to us, we find that we can still learn a great deal from our epistolary Demetriades. Just as the fragile, fictitious body of the martyr Agnes could bear all the freight of the gendered discourse of orthodoxy,<sup>141</sup> so too the noble name and reputation of the Anician virgin Demetrias could be used to explore the reciprocal influences of aristocratic and ascetic discourses. The fact that Pelagius, Jerome, and Augustine all appropriate and temper her noble status and then employ this transformed *nobilitas* to describe the interrelation of doctrinal theory and ascetic practice, illumines the potential space hovering around the question mark of Demetrias's virginal vocation. As Peter Brown suggested, issues of worldly and Christian status are "thought out" through epistolary dialogue with Demetrias, and we have found that the discourse of class and status occupies more of this "thought" in the particular "ascetic logic" of Demetrias than does the usually overcharged discourse of gender.<sup>142</sup>

Although, as Gabrielle Spiegel highlighted, the analysis of "social logic" serves the salutary role of reintegrating the textual and the social, there remains missing one of the key ingredients that students of women's history often seek (and hope) to find in their study: resistance to the social control of dominant discourse. While my analysis of these letters to (and about) Demetrias describes for us the plausible and ideological space in which the young, aristocratic virgin could be expected to operate, they do not tell us whether she did so or whether she was very happy about it.<sup>143</sup> We can make some guesses that do not strike against the grain of the ascetic logic outlined above. The gap between Augustine's near erasure of Demetrias's nobility and ascetic practice and its delicate restoration in the letter *De vera humilitate* (strongly informed by Augustinian theology), might suggest that,

141. As outlined by Virginia Burrus, "Reading Agnes: The Rhetoric of Gender in Ambrose and Prudentius," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 3 (1995): 25–46.

142. Of course, all three authors attend to Demetrias's gender. Apart from Pelagius's rather optimistic statement that "an equal trophy (*palma*) for virginity is promised to both sexes" and that "it is possible even for women to triumph in this war" (*Ep. ad Demetriadem* 9, 25 [PL 30:25A, 40A]), the men are much more concerned to treat Demetrias's membership in the *gens Anicia*.

143. On the problem of male social control and female resistance in early Christianity, see Virginia Burrus, "Word and Flesh: The Bodies and Sexuality of Ascetic Women in Christian Antiquity," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 10 (1994): 27–51. These letters to Demetrias do not give the sort of textual evidence that Burrus would find useful in this respect: for her "resistant" texts, Burrus relies on documents she feels can be traced more directly to a woman's own "voice," the "gynocentric" folk-tale of Thecla and the anonymous Spanish letter to Marcella (Burrus, "Word and Flesh," 45–50).

between her adolescence and her establishment back in Rome, Demetrias did in fact “think back” to her male advisers. This letter, written to the “ripe and learned” aristocratic virgin,<sup>144</sup> takes great pains to provide a theological and practical idiom through which our *virgo Anicia* can display both her aristocratic *and* ascetic *nobilitas*. It just might be that by exploring the twists and turns of late ancient “ascetic logic” in these texts that “think with” women, we can yet discover “traces” of women exercising imperial brands of Christian authority.<sup>145</sup>

144. The author remarks that Demetrias’s soul is “ripe and learned” (*maturo et erudito animo*) (*De vera humilitate* 1.8 [Krabbe, *Epistula*, 138]).

145. Clark, “Lady Vanishes,” 31: “[S]he leaves her traces, through whose exploration, as they are imbedded in a larger social-linguistic framework, she lives on.”