

“Nor are you touched by the emotion that overcame Eve”:
Sexual Desire and Female Sexual Renunciation in the Works of Bishop
Avitus of Vienne



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Abstract

Alcimus Ecdicius Avitus lived at the turn of the sixth-century AD. He was bishop of Vienne, a see located in the Burgundian Kingdom. His surviving works, including a letter collection, two poems (*De spiritalis historiae gestis* and *de consolatoria castitatis laude*) and several homiletic fragments, have been previously noted by scholars for their political and theological content. My thesis provides a new perspective on Avitus: I argue that the theme of sexuality features prominently throughout his works. To demonstrate my argument, I reconstruct the beliefs Avitus held about two particular aspects about of sexuality, sexual desire and female sexual renunciation, by drawing upon his various texts. I suggest that in his writings Avitus consistently depicts sexual desire as a destructive, contaminating force, which he believed capable of tainting the act of sex, the institution of marriage, and the process of reproduction. I then propose that Avitus believed the contaminating effects of sexual desire can be minimised through a commitment to sexual renunciation. According to Avitus, female renunciants in particular are entitled to significant worldly and heavenly benefits as a reward for resisting the temptations of sexual desire and exhibiting great willpower. Throughout the thesis I show that Avitus' beliefs about both sexual desire and female sexual renunciation recall the theologies of his forebears, Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine. Given the wide circulation of these men's works in late-antique Gaul, it is likely that they could have influenced Avitus' own writings about sexuality. Although Avitus' works do not survive in the volume Ambrose's, Jerome's or Augustine's do, I contend that they are nonetheless significant and worthy of recognition for the information about sexuality they contain. I hope to show that the pervading themes of sexual desire and female sexual renunciation render Avitus' letters, poetry and, to a lesser extent, his sermons, unique and significant sources for the place of sexuality in post-Roman, pre-Merovingian Gaul.

Declaration

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

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Introduction

Late antiquity saw a proliferation of writings on sexuality¹ by men such as Gregory of Nyssa, Ambrose of Milan, Jerome of Stridon, John Chrysostom, Augustine of Hippo, Caesarius of Arles and Venantius Fortunatus.² This study seeks to number Bishop Avitus of Vienne among these better-known authors by demonstrating that the theme of sexuality features in his surviving works too. I argue that two aspects of sexuality are particularly pervasive: sexual desire and female sexual renunciation. In the text that follows, I draw upon Avitus' surviving letters, poetry and, to a lesser extent, his sermons, to reconstruct the beliefs he might have held about sexual desire and female sexual renunciation. I suggest that Avitus was greatly troubled by the sensation of sexual desire because he recognised it as the most disastrous consequence of original sin, and he hypothesised that it contaminated the once-pure phenomena of sex, marriage and reproduction. I then propose that Avitus believed the contaminating effects of sexual desire could be minimised by maintaining a steadfast commitment to sexual renunciation. According to Avitus, renunciants, especially female renunciants, can enjoy both worldly and heavenly benefits as a reward for their commitment. Recognising the prominence of sexuality in Avitus' works and understanding the beliefs Avitus held about sexual desire and female sexual renunciation is a crucial step towards determining how elite men in a pivotal, often-neglected period of late-antique Gaul conceived of sexuality.³

¹ By the study of late-antique 'sexuality', I refer to the study of all phenomena relating to the physical act of sex according to modern or ancient thought, such as lust, reproduction, genitalia, fertility and even marriage: Hemmings (2014: 268). Pioneering studies by authors such as Michel Foucault (1978-1986) and Peter Brown (1988) have demonstrated the extricability between marriage and sex in early-Christian thought. I classify 'writings' about sexuality as discussions surviving in textual form that in some way incorporate any of the above phenomena.

² For examples, see Gregory of Nyssa, *De virginitate*, *Vita Macrinae*; Ambrose, *De institutione virginis et sanctae Mariae virginitate perpetua ad Eusebium*, *De viduis*, *De virginibus*, *De paradiso*; Jer. *Adv. Iovinian*, *Ep.* 22, 108, 130; John Chrysostom, *Adversus eos qui apud se habent subintroductas virgines*, *De virginitate*; August. *De bono coniugali*, *De nuptiis et concupiscentia*, *De sancta virginitate*; Caesarius of Arles, *Serm.* 42, 43, 44, 47, 189; Venantius Fortunatus, *Carm.* 4.26, 8.1, 8.3, *Vita Radegundis*. Any abbreviations used in this thesis are formatted according to the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (fourth edition, 2012).

³ Shanzer and Wood (2002: 58-59). The area of Gaul during Avitus time was fragmented. In references throughout this thesis to 'Gaul', I describe the geographical area considered that comprised the province of Gaul during the Roman imperial period.

Background

Little is known about Avitus' life outside of the evidence provided by Avitus himself.⁴ He was born sometime during the mid-fifth century to a noble couple Hesychius and Audentia.⁵ Hesychius preceded his son as bishop of Vienne and probably served the Emperor Eparchius Avitus (455-456),⁶ and Audentia may have been the sister of Sidonius Apollinaris, and therefore related to Emperor Avitus.⁷ Avitus of Vienne was brother to three siblings, including Apollinaris, bishop of Valence, and Fuscina, an ascetic.⁸ As part of a family with an aristocratic background and a high standing in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, Avitus would have received a better education than most of his peers, in both Christian and 'pagan' texts.⁹ We know Avitus had ascended to the bishopric in Vienne, one of the most powerful sees in Southern Gaul, by the mid 490s.¹⁰ It seems he held the episcopacy until his death, the precise date of which is unknown. The latest source attesting to his existence is the Acts of the Council of Epaone in 517, though his 11th century hagiography dates his death to some point during the reign of Anastasius, who died in 518.¹¹

During Avitus' time, Vienne was part of the Burgundian Kingdom.¹² He witnessed many significant events in Burgundian history, including the raids in Northern Italy by King Gundobad and the King's son Sigismund's conversion from Arianism to Catholicism and later ascension to the kingship.¹³ Avitus' letters suggest that throughout his time as bishop, he shared

⁴ For references to Avitus by his contemporaries and near-contemporaries, see Ennodius, *Vita Epifani* 173; Venantius Fortunatus, *Vita Sancti Martini* 1.14-25; Nodes (1982: 195); Pollmann (2017: 70).

⁵ For Audentia, see *CCL* 19; *PLRE* Audentia 1; Hummer (2018: 166). For Hesychius, see Ado of Vienne, *Chron.* 103; *Vita Aviti* 1; *PLRE* Hesychius 11; Shanzer and Wood (2002: 4).

⁶ Hydatius, *Chron.* 179; Mathisen (1981: 100). If this is the case, *PLRE* Hesychius 10 and 11 may be merged.

⁷ Mathisen (1981: 100, 103); Shanzer and Wood (2002: 5). Avitus states in *Ep.* 51 (MGH AA 80.13-14) that he is related to Sidonius, but he does not specify exactly how.

⁸ Hecquet-Noti (2011: 25). Apollinaris is the addressee of *Ep.* 14, 27, 61, 72, 87, 88, and the author of *Ep.* 13 and 71, while Fuscina is the addressee of *CCL*, and possibly the subject of *Ep.* 13 and 14. According to her hagiography, authored around the 12th century, Fuscina lived in a monastery founded by her father: *Vita Fuscinae* 6. The unnamed sibling may be identified as Aspidia, who Avitus mentions was a nun like Fuscina but died at a young age: *CCL* 87-89; Mathisen (1982: 367); Wood (2001b: 423); Hecquet-Noti (2011: 45).

⁹ On the 'pagan' references in Avitus' works, especially in his poetry, see Goelzer (1909); Capponi (1967: 151-164); Arweiler (1999).

¹⁰ This is arrived at based on Avitus' involvement in the ransoming of Italian captives, an event recorded by Ennodius (*Vita Epifani* 173) dating to this time: Shanzer and Wood (2002: 7).

¹¹ *Vita Aviti* 6; Shanzer and Wood (2002: 10). It is also worth noting that the Acts of the Council of Lyons in 519 do not record Avitus' presence.

¹² Vienne held the position of metropolitan see of the Burgundian Kingdom before 499/500: Shanzer and Wood (2002: 7-8); McCarthy (2016: 357). For more on the Burgundians, see Goffart (1980: 127-161); Wood (1990: 53-69), (2004: 367-380); Shanzer (1998b: 225-258).

¹³ Ennodius, *Vita Epifani* 173; Marius of Avenches, *Chron.* 500.

a close relationship with Gundobad and Sigismund.¹⁴ Avitus wrote to Gundobad especially on many doctrinal issues, writings which, combined with his incorporation of Augustinian doctrine throughout the *SHG* and his apparently dominant presence at the Council of Epaone in 517, suggest that Avitus had an impressive grasp of contemporary theological discussions.¹⁵ In 534, after Avitus' death, the Burgundian Kingdom was annexed by the Merovingians.¹⁶

Rationale

The late-fifth and early-sixth centuries were formative years for Gaul, during which the fragmented ex-province grappled with its new identity as a land independent from, yet still very much connected to, Rome.¹⁷ This was a period that saw many aristocratic families in Gaul, who had previously improved their social standing through senatorial positions, find prestige in the ecclesiastical hierarchy instead.¹⁸ Avitus' works, alongside those of Ruricius of Limoges and Ennodius of Pavia, are invaluable for reconstructing elite, episcopal life in Gaul in this unique generation following that of more 'Romanised' bishops like Faustus of Riez and Sidonius.¹⁹

In late-antique Gaul, as in all societies and communities past and present, sexuality played an important role.²⁰ Sexuality drove reproduction, created and divided families and communities, was seen to categorise humans as male or female, and could be a source of reverence or shame.²¹ Seminal works by Michel Foucault and Peter Brown have demonstrated that sexuality was especially central to those early-Christian societies most eager to renounce it.²² In these societies, across the East and the West, sexuality was a crucial determinant that featured as a subject of much controversy among the leading Churchmen of the day: it was the transmitter of original sin, it governed one's level of piety, and it included or excluded one from holding ecclesiastical roles. As a collection of communities that lauded asceticism, a principal tenet of

¹⁴ Shanzer and Wood (2002: 11). For Avitus' letters to Gundobad, see *Ep.* 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 22, 30, 44; For those to and on behalf of Sigismund, see *Ep.* 23, 29, 31, 32, 45, 46a, 47, 49, 76, 77, 78, 79, 91, 92, 93, 94. For more on Avitus' relationship with the Burgundian monarchy, see Shanzer and Wood (2002: 13-23).

¹⁵ Note that Avitus did make minor errors in his theological writings, such as when he confused the doctrines of Nestorius and Eutyches in a letter to Gundobad: *Ep.* 2 (MGH AA 16.24-29). However, these can largely be explained by issues in communication: Shanzer and Wood (2002: 91-92).

¹⁶ Wood (1998: 213), (2013: 81).

¹⁷ For more, see Wood (1998).

¹⁸ Shanzer and Wood (2002: 6).

¹⁹ Shanzer and Wood (2002: 5-6).

²⁰ Garton (2004: 1); Hemmings (2014: 268).

²¹ Brown (1988: 5-32).

²² Foucault (1988), (2018); Brown (1988).

which was the renunciation of sex, and by extension, marriage and reproduction, sexuality was fundamental to the ecclesiastical life of late-antique Gaul.²³

Avitus' works endure as some of the most detailed to come from the unique post-Roman, pre-Merovingian period of Gallic history. Though writings about sexuality survive from the more 'Romanised' era in Gaul, such as those by John Cassian and Faustus of Riez,²⁴ and in the early Merovingian period, as exemplified by the works of Gregory of Tours and Fortunatus,²⁵ less evidence comes from the intervening years. The only other roughly-contemporary Gallic author to express an interest in sexuality to such a degree was Caesarius of Arles, who was born sometime after Avitus.²⁶ The bishop of Arles hailed from the monastery at Lèrins,²⁷ and has two monastic *regulae* and at least 238 sermons surviving,²⁸ which numerous scholarly analyses have rightly observed are valuable for what they can tell us about sexuality in late-antique Gaul and the West.²⁹ Some aspects of Caesarius' texts indicate that he and Avitus shared some similar ideas about sexuality, particularly sexual renunciation. Yet Avitus is a unique source for this period. His surviving works address different aspects of sexuality in more detail, such as the origins and nature of sex and sexual desire, and are of a different literary genre to Caesarius' surviving works.³⁰ He is also the only Gallic author of his time before Fortunatus to versify his beliefs about virginity in poetry.³¹ Further, Avitus had a less monastic background than Caesarius and fifth-century authors Cassian and Faustus, that distinguishes the perspective he provides on sexuality and asceticism as unique for his time.³²

²³ One particularly tangible source of evidence for this are the Acts of the Gallic Church Councils. For example, see the Acts of the Church Councils that dealt with the issue of clerical celibacy: Arles (§16), Arles (§2), Macon (§3), Orleans (§17), Tours (§13): Hunter (2015: 135).

²⁴ John Cassian, *De institutis coenobiorum* (esp. 6.7), *Conlationes*; Faustus of Riez, *De gratia* (esp. 1.2): Lynch (1986: 272-274); Cooper and Leyser (2000: 545). See also Sulpicius Severus, *Vita Martini*; Prosper of Aquitaine, *Epistula ad Demetriadem de vera humilitate*; Salvian, *Ad ecclesiam* 2.8-10; Claudianus Mamertus, *De statu animae*.

²⁵ Venantius Fortunatus, *Carm.* 4.26, 8.3, *Vita Radegundis*; Gregory of Tours, *Liber in gloria confessorum* (esp. 77); *Hist.* (esp. 1.44, 4.36), *Vita patrum* (esp. 19): Brennan (1985: 315-316); Shanzer (2002: 401-403); Hecquet-Noti (2011: 80).

²⁶ Shea (1997: 1); McCarthy (2016: 357).

²⁷ Klingshirn (1994: 24). For more on Lèrins, see Leyser (1999: 188-213); Dunn (2000: 82-84).

²⁸ Beck and Klingshirn (2003: 848-849).

²⁹ For example, *Regula ad virgines* 18-19 tells us that Caesarius recommended nuns study holy texts for two hours every day: Klingshirn 2004: 121. The enforcement of this rule is corroborated by the fact that Baudonivia, a nun at the Holy Cross Monastery in Poitiers, founded by Radegund, authored a hagiography of Radegund by her own hand. For work on his sermons (esp. *Serm.* 47, 55) see Bailey (2007: 23-43).

³⁰ Shanzer and Wood (2002: 59).

³¹ See, for example, Venantius Fortunatus *Carm.* 8.3. Sid. Apoll. (*Carm.* 9, 10, 14, 15) and Ennodius (*Ep.* 334-335, 336) composed poetry, but these were usually *epithalamia* praising marriage: Kennell (2000: 71-72); Bartlett (2001: 207-208).

³² Brennan (1985: 311).

By drawing attention to Avitus' interest in sexuality through a discussion of his beliefs about sexual desire and female sexual renunciation, this thesis reveals the potential for Avitus' works to be unique sources for late-antique sexuality.

Methodology

I have chosen to use Avitus' works as evidence for what they can tell us about how Avitus *understood* certain aspects of sexuality, rather than for how sexuality was *experienced* by Avitus or his literary subjects. This approach necessitates my interpretation of the writings of Avitus as 'discourses' – texts that are the product of certain socio-economic conditions and are imbued with particular agendas. Avitus' particular focus on females in his discussions of sexuality further necessitates such an approach. As scholars such as Elizabeth Clark and Kate Cooper have shown, females were usually inserted into narratives to qualify or describe male actions;³³ they were a good tool for male authors like Avitus to "think with".³⁴ Consequently, though I do not discount the possibility that male, rhetorical discussions of female sexuality have the potential to be somewhat representative of late-antique female 'realities', I acknowledge that the use of primary source material in this way is complex and perhaps ambitious for a Master's thesis, especially one focused on works as previously little-studied as those of Avitus.³⁵ My thesis' approach is symptomatic of the "cultural turn", a methodological movement in late-antique historiography emphasising the problematic nature of primary texts and the resulting need for their critical analysis.³⁶

Primary sources

In my research for this thesis, I have considered all surviving texts authored by Avitus, including his letter collection, two poems and fragmented sermons. I have accessed the original Latin text through Rudolf Peiper's nineteenth-century compilation of all Avitus' known and complete works,³⁷ and sourced the English translations of the letter collection and some

³³ Cooper (1992: 151); Clark (1998a: 1-31), (1998b: 413-430).

³⁴ Brown (1988: 153), quoting Lévi-Strauss (1974: 89).

³⁵ Wilkinson (2015: 12). For some examples of works that have effectively grappled with the task of uncovering 'real' late-antique women, see Burrus (1994); Krawiec (2002); Wilkinson (2015). On the problematic nature of late-antique, male-authored source material, see Cooper (1992: 150-164); Clark (1994a: 155-184); (1998a: 1-31), (1998b: 413-430); Brakke (2005: 25-39). The potential for Avitus' works to disclose information about 'real' late-antique females would be a fruitful topic to explore in future study.

³⁶ Martin (2005: 9-11).

³⁷ These were published in the *MGH* by Peiper (1893). Peiper's edition was compiled based on the Lyons manuscript and several fragments. We know another manuscript, now lost, existed in the 17th century and formed the basis of an edition of Avitus' works by Jacques Sirmond: McCarthy (2016: 358). For more on the history of the manuscripts of Avitus' works, see Shanzer and Wood (2002: 28-72).

sermons from Danuta Shanzer and Ian Wood's 2002 publication and the poetry from George Shea's 1997 commentary and translation.³⁸ Given the range of the surviving source material, as part of my interpretation I consider how the literary conventions associated with the individual genres of Avitus' various discourses may have governed his incorporation of sexual context.

Letters

Approximately 90 letters authored by Avitus survive as part of a collection that most scholars contend to have been compiled after Avitus' death.³⁹ For the majority of letters the dates cannot be confirmed.⁴⁰ I have found that at least twelve in the collection reference sexuality, most of which pertain to *female* sexuality.⁴¹ Among these twelve letters include lengthy treatises on certain theological topics addressed to King Gundobad;⁴² an additional letter to Gundobad consoling him on the death of his virginal daughter;⁴³ three other letters addressed to Bishop Victorius of Grenoble, a fellow Burgundian Bishop, in response to his questions about canon law;⁴⁴ and a letter addressed to the Burgundian Count Ansemundus, in which Avitus explicitly voices his disapproval regarding the rape of a nun by a layman.⁴⁵ The most relevant letters to my thesis are those discussing sexual misdemeanours.⁴⁶

The ambiguous nature of the epistolary genre causes many methodological challenges for historians. To ensure I use my source material appropriately I adopt the approach advocated in the 2015 work *Collecting Early Christian Letters*.⁴⁷ Bronwen Neil proposes that each late-antique letter should be considered according to its individual context. The student of letters must take into account the epistolary conventions of the time, collation practices, survival rates and biases, and the intended audience.⁴⁸ For example, this methodology can be applied to Avitus' letter of consolation to Gundobad on the premature death of his daughter, in which

³⁸ Shea (1997); Shanzer and Wood (2002). Avitus' sermon fragments have not been translated into English.

³⁹ Shanzer and Wood (2002: 63); McCarthy (2016: 357). The letter collection as collated by Shanzer and Wood (2002), based largely on the compilation by Peiper (1883), contains 98 letters in total (including Avitus' two dedicatory letters to his poems), but 8 of these include letters addressed to, rather than from, Avitus.

⁴⁰ McCarthy (2016: 358-359).

⁴¹ *Ep.* 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 18, 30, 46, 50, 55. Note that this list is by no means exhaustive.

⁴² *Ep.* 1-4, 6.

⁴³ *Ep.* 5.

⁴⁴ *Ep.* 7, 17-18.

⁴⁵ *Ep.* 55.

⁴⁶ See *Ep.* 17-18, 55. Peiper (1883: 48-49) tentatively dates these letters to around the time of the Council of Epaone in 517, because the question of incestuous marriage under discussion is reflected in canon 30 of the council.

⁴⁷ Neil and Allen (2015).

⁴⁸ See Neil (2015: 3-17).

Avitus invokes the daughter's virginity as the main source of consolation. Avitus' appeal to virginity appears to have been a commonplace technique of consolation to royalty at this time – Remigius of Rheims made a similar reference in his letter consoling Clovis on the death of his virginal sister.⁴⁹ This leads me to question if Avitus' reference to Gundobad's daughter's virginity as a means of consolation should be interpreted as an adherence on Avitus' part to epistolary convention, rather than a genuine indication of the extent to which he lauded virginity.

Poetry

Avitus' two poems, *De spiritalis historiae gestis* (*SHG*) and *De consolatoria castitatis laude* (*CCL*), are the most referenced sources in this thesis.⁵⁰ The five-book epic *SHG* is useful for what it can disclose about Avitus' attitude towards sexual desire, while the much-shorter *CCL* gives insight into Avitus' perception of sexual renunciation.⁵¹ The poems can only be dated tentatively: the *SHG* was probably published around 507,⁵² and the *CCL* sometime after this date.⁵³ Though I acknowledge the merits of Mondin's argument that the *CCL* could be considered 'book six' of the *SHG*,⁵⁴ I agree with Nodes and Hecquet-Noti that the poem was composed entirely separately from the *Spiritual History* and should accordingly be treated as its own 'book'.⁵⁵

The *SHG* versifies significant events in Genesis and Exodus. This thesis primarily draws upon the first three books in the *SHG*, which recount the creation of the world and the fall of Adam

⁴⁹ *Epistolae Austrasicae* 1; Shanzer and Wood (2002: 208).

⁵⁰ Note that the title of the *CCL*, which literally translates into "verses about the praise of chastity intended to console" was retrospectively assigned to the poem by modern scholars and is taken from a description of the poem given by Avitus in its dedicatory letter to Apollinaris: Hecquet-Noti (2011: 48-49). Scholars who recognise *De consolatoria castitatis laude* as the poem's title include Wood (1993: 33), (1994: 24), (2001b: 423); Shanzer and Wood (2002: 262-263); Hecquet-Noti (2011). See also White (2000: 149); Hummer (2018: 167). However there are a small number of authors who refer to the poem as *De Virginitate* based on Peiper's (1883: 274) collation. See Roncoroni (1973: 122); Shea (1997); Mondin (2017: 674).

⁵¹ Avitus expresses anxiety over the length of the *CCL* in its dedicatory letter: Hecquet-Noti (2011: 58-62). Note too that including the dedicatory letter, the *CCL* has 666 lines in total. Mondin (2017: 691) claims this number is coincidental, while Shea (1997: 67) comments that it is fitting for the final line of *CCL* to have eschatological connotations because it is the last of precisely 666 lines, 666 being a significant number in Rev. 13:18.

⁵² Roncoroni (1973: 328) believed *Ep.* 51 definitively dates the *SHG* to 507, while Shanzer and Wood (2002: 259, 262) suggest that it had to have been published earlier, in 506.

⁵³ Shea (1997: 55); Shanzer and Wood (2002: 259-262). Fuscina, if she can be identified as the subject of *Ep.* 13-14, died some years before Avitus and his brother Apollinaris, although she was the youngest sibling. Since the *CCL* was published while Fuscina was still alive, it could not have been published much later than 507, considering Avitus died around 517/518. For more, see Hecquet-Noti (2011: 65-66).

⁵⁴ Mondin (2017: 674-695).

⁵⁵ Nodes (1981: 192-199); Hecquet-Noti (2011: 48).

and Eve, because they most prominently feature the topic of sexual desire.⁵⁶ The *CCL* is a poem reassuring Fuscina, Avitus' sister, on her decision to commit to virginity and an excellent source for my thesis because it repeatedly exalts the act of sexual renunciation; as such, Hecquet-Noti describes the poem as a consolatory, panegyric, and parennetic text.⁵⁷

The potential for poetry to convey historical 'truths' has long been recognised.⁵⁸ Early-Christian Latin poets, like their non-Christian classical predecessors, used poetry to express their thoughts on contemporary matters.⁵⁹ I thus interpret the depictions of sexuality in Avitus' poems to be accurate expressions of his own beliefs: I assume that the *SHG*, a self-professed versification of 'history', is reflective of how Avitus believed the events of Genesis actually occurred; and that the *CCL*, a poem which could arguably be better classified as a versified tract or letter, is the voice of Avitus himself.⁶⁰ My assumption is vindicated in part by the consistency with which Avitus maintains his views about sexuality in his poetry and throughout his epistolary and sermonic works. However, in adopting this approach I also consider that there is a limit to the extent that Avitus' poetry can be taken as an accurate reflection of the beliefs the author held. As such, when using the *SHG* and the *CCL* as sources, I allow for potential factors that could have influenced certain poetic references, such as the poem's intended audience, typical poetic conventions and Christian dogma. For instance, when interpreting the *CCL*, I acknowledge that Avitus' denigration of the institution of marriage may not have been a complete or honest expression of his own beliefs, but an exaggeration resulting from his aim to effectively convince Fuscina of the merits of virginity. There are many late-antique authors who appear to have struggled to praise virginity without denigrating marriage in the process.⁶¹

Sermons

A very small amount of sermonic material by Avitus survives. Though parts of approximately thirty sermons endure in original manuscript form, which was produced probably very shortly

⁵⁶ Book four narrates the story of Noah's Ark, and book five the exile of the Hebrews from Egypt.

⁵⁷ Hecquet-Noti (2011: 50-51).

⁵⁸ Swearingen (2007: 149-151). This goes back to Arist. *Poetics* 3.1451b.

⁵⁹ Roberts (1989: 6). For example, Sedulius' poem based on the gospels was influenced by Arian and Sabellian heresies of his own day; Arator's *Historia Apostolica* narrating the *Acts* professed his support for papal primacy: Trout (2005: 558-559). Nodes (1984: 185-195) conjectures that Avitus' overall goal in the *SHG* was to maintain "a wholly Augustinian position" against the contemporary 'Semipelagianism' controversy.

⁶⁰ For more on using poetry as a source of history and the problem of assuming that texts in the first person are autobiographical, see Stock (1996); Swearingen (2007: 145-161).

⁶¹ Otten (1998: 389-390).

after Avitus' death in the sixth century, they are highly fragmented.⁶² Sermons six and seven dedicated to the feast of Rogations are the only two to survive in full, while merely the titles of sermons 31-34 are recorded.⁶³ Wood surmises that because all these sermons are occasional pieces, they were probably not part of the homiliary we know Avitus compiled himself during his lifetime.⁶⁴ I have identified that sermons seven and nine deal with sexuality in the most detail.⁶⁵ It is regrettable that more of Avitus' sermons do not survive. Sermons are extremely useful sources for their projection to an often diverse audience – though of course problems posed by the editing process and the pedagogical motivations of the preacher must always be considered.⁶⁶ The sermon's unique audience base gave preachers the opportunity to communicate more inclusive ideas about topics like sexuality, rendering these sources invaluable to scholars of late-antiquity.⁶⁷

Structure

In chapter one I explore the scholarship that has been conducted on Avitus' writings and the scholarship that has been conducted on late-antique sexuality. I discuss the works that have been essential to my own research and to the field more generally and demonstrate that many previous studies have overlooked Avitus' writings as potential sources of evidence for late-antique sexuality. Chapter two contextualises the prominence of the theme of sexuality throughout Avitus' works by looking at how sexuality pervaded the writings of Avitus' forebears, the 'Church Fathers' Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine.⁶⁸ I briefly summarise their ideas and suggest that they could have influenced Avitus' own discussions of sexuality. Chapters three and four comprise the core of my argument. They establish sexual desire and female sexual renunciation as two prevalent themes throughout Avitus' works. In the first part of chapter three, using the *SHG*, I address how Avitus imagined sexual desire was originally introduced to humankind and in the second section, drawing upon the *SHG* in addition to the

⁶² Wood (2013: 82-83). Discovered in 1865, the manuscripts are now preserved in the *Bibliothèque nationale de France*, as items 8913 and 8914.

⁶³ *Serm.* 6-7; 31-34: Shanzer and Wood (2002: 377).

⁶⁴ Wood (2013: 83-85). Avitus attests to the existence of his homiliary in the dedicatory letter to the *SHG*.

⁶⁵ *Serm.* 7; 9.

⁶⁶ Mayer (2008: 571-579); Diesenberger (2013: 6-17). That being said, Cunningham and Allen (1998: 19) warn against universalising the diversity of congregations and emphasise the importance of situating each sermonic audience in their context.

⁶⁷ For example, sermons have proved hugely useful in studies reconstructing the attitudes towards sexuality of bishops like Augustine and Caesarius of Arles. See Hunter (2002: 39-60); Klingshirn (2004); Bailey (2007: 23-43); Milco (2015: 276-295).

⁶⁸ I use the term 'Church Fathers' here to describe influential early-Christian authors, such as the late fourth-century theologians Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine. I acknowledge that the term, an 18-19th century invention, is problematic, and I do not intend it to imply that these three thinkers were uniform in their ideas.

CCL and some letters, I identify how Avitus supposed sexual desire manifested throughout human history and during his own time. I argue Avitus imagined sexual desire ‘contaminated’ the act of sex, and the associated processes of marriage and reproduction.⁶⁹ Chapter four concerns Avitus’ interest in the renunciation of the act of sex and the (often) accompanying renunciation of marriage and reproduction. Based primarily on the *CCL* and some letters, I conjecture that Avitus believed in the potential for sexual renunciants to exhibit the willpower sufficient to resist the temptation for sex and therefore minimise the degree to which they are affected by sexual desire’s destructive effects. The nature of the source material on this topic means that Avitus’ discussions about sexual renunciation primarily pertain to females. Throughout both chapters I demonstrate that many of his ideas are consistent across his works, and align with those of his predecessors, Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine.

Limitations

One limiting factor in analysing the role of sexuality in Avitus’ writings is that many of his works cannot be definitively dated. This inhibits the accurate contextualisation of Avitus’ texts and the tracking of developments in Avitus’ beliefs, which we can imagine surely occurred throughout his decades-long career as bishop of Vienne. Avitus is also a limiting source because though his writings about sexuality that do survive are rich with information, these writings do not survive in the same volume as those of the earlier Church Fathers. This limits the extent to which his works can be compared with those of other late-antique authors – Avitus’ perspective on sexuality appears comparatively narrow and limited in comparison.⁷⁰ Another limitation is that very little secondary scholarship has been conducted on Avitus. This thesis is, to my knowledge, the first study dedicated to investigating the theme of sexuality throughout Avitus’ works.⁷¹ The paucity of existing research on Avitus’ works makes it difficult for a Master’s level project to offer anything beyond preliminary, introductory observations on Avitus’ ideas and potential influences. Finally, this thesis is limited in that it does not have the scope to dwell on other aspects of sexuality that Avitus elaborates on throughout his works apart from sexual desire and female sexual renunciation. Although these are the most prominent aspects of sexuality discussed throughout Avitus’ corpora, especially his letters and poetry, there are other potential subjects worthy of consideration, such as the

⁶⁹ This belief was largely based on Avitus’ reading of Gen. 3:16.

⁷⁰ For instance, whereas the texts of Ambrose and Augustine consider the sexual renunciation of many types of women, such as virgins, widows and those who lived celibately in ‘spiritual marriages’, the material of Avitus that survives mostly deals with virginal sexual renunciants.

⁷¹ I demonstrate this in more detail in chapter one’s literature review.

role of family sanctity in the *CCL*'s discussion of sexual renunciation, and the repeated references to the term *semen* (seed) in both Avitus' letters and poetry.⁷²

Conclusion

Despite the above limitations, however, I believe the findings of this thesis are significant to the study of late-antique sexuality in Gaul. I argue that Avitus' writings, like those of his better-known rough-contemporaries, feature prominently the topics of sexual desire and female sexual renunciation. As one of the only writers about sexuality whose works survive from this crucial time period of Gallic history, in which previously divorced 'secular', aristocratic powers and Christian powers merged against the background of the rising force of the ascetic movement, Avitus is a unique source of information for how a pivotal aspect of late-antique life, sexuality, was understood by episcopal elites.

⁷² *SHG* 1.7, 1.26, 2.277, 4.642; *CCL* 402, 437; *Ep.* 2.12 (MGH AA 19.5), 26 (MGH AA 57.11), 46 (MGH AA 76.10). Note that this list of references is not exhaustive.

1. “One had to speak of sex”: *Status quaestionis*⁷³

1.1 Introduction

In this brief chapter, I consider the state of scholarship on both the works of Avitus and on the topic of sexuality in late antiquity. I demonstrate that Avitus has featured as the subject of numerous historical analyses, though few have observed the pervading theme of sexuality throughout his works. I find that while this thesis is one of the only studies to consider the role of sexuality in Avitus’ works, the discourses about sexuality produced by many other early-Christian, late-antique men have been the source of much scholarly analysis for decades.

1.2 The works of Avitus

Scholarship on Avitus can be divided according to the genres of his works. His letters have been most thoroughly treated in Shanzer and Wood’s detailed commentary accompanying their 2002 translation of the collection.⁷⁴ Other important works on Avitus’ letters include Luce Pietri’s and Uta Heil’s respective studies analysing the political references in Avitus’ letter collection and a book chapter by Brendan McCarthy considering the socio-cultural evidence the letters provide.⁷⁵ A small number of Avitus’ most famous letters, including one congratulating Clovis on his conversion to Christianity, have been cited in numerous studies looking at late-antique Gallic history.⁷⁶

Avitus’ poetry, the *SHG* and the *CCL*, have received significantly more attention in modern scholarship.⁷⁷ Shea’s commentary accompanying his translation of both poems is undoubtedly informative, though his analysis is at times inaccurate.⁷⁸ Nicole Hecquet-Noti provides a more comprehensive analysis of Avitus’ two poems across three separate volumes as part of the *Sources Chrétiennes* series.⁷⁹ Of Avitus’ two poems, his biblical epic the *SHG* is far more widely known. Its theological motivations have provoked much discussion, most recently in Daniel Nodds’ article contending that Avitus composed the *SHG* for the purpose of defending

⁷³ Foucault (1978: 24).

⁷⁴ Shanzer and Wood (2002). The most comprehensive commentary on Avitus’ letter collection before Shanzer and Wood’s is a highly critical assessment by Max Burckhardt (1938).

⁷⁵ Pietri (2009: 311-331); Heil (2011); McCarthy (2016: 357-368).

⁷⁶ Mathisen (1979), (1981: 95-109), (1982: 364-386); Bernard (1996: 47-51); Shanzer (1998a: 29-57); Mathisen and Shanzer (2001); Bailey (2016).

⁷⁷ Shanzer and Wood (2002: xix) suggest this is due to his poetry’s more accessible Latin style.

⁷⁸ For example, Shea confuses Apollinaris of Valence, Avitus’ brother (*PLRE* 2, Apollinaris 5), with Sidonius Apollinaris, the poet (*PLRE* 2, Apollinaris 6), and erroneously believes “Machabaea”, a biblical figure in the second book of Maccabees, to be a relative of Avitus: 2 Macc. 7: Shanzer (1999: 404-405).

⁷⁹ Hecquet-Noti (1999); (2005); (2011).

his own Augustinian position against the ‘Semipelagianist’ controversy,⁸⁰ and Wood’s 2001 book chapter taking up this idea and arguing that Avitus’ versification of Genesis in the *SHG* heavily relies on Augustine’s works.⁸¹ The *SHG* has also been cited for its similarities with earlier poetry and other late-antique Latin epics.⁸² The *CCL*, meanwhile, has rarely been scrutinised in its own right. The small number of exceptions include Angelo Roncoroni’s 1973 article asserting that *SHG* and *CCL* were published separately,⁸³ a 2017 response to Roncoroni by Luca Mondin arguing that the poems were originally published as part of the same edition,⁸⁴ and the aforementioned commentaries and translations by Shea and Hecquet-Noti.⁸⁵ The *CCL* has also been referenced in passing in studies on the late-antique family and female education by Wood, Carolinne White, Mary Thurlkill and Hans Hummer.⁸⁶

As only a few of Avitus’ sermons survive in full, little work concerning these texts has been conducted.⁸⁷ In 2013 Wood authored a book chapter on the potential for the fragmentary sermon collection to shed light on the social and political life of late-antique Gaul.⁸⁸ In addition, a small number of works translating one or two of the sermons provide accompanying commentary,⁸⁹ and sermons six and twenty-five have been referred to in the scholarship of Gallic liturgical history.⁹⁰ Studies by Lisa Bailey on the topic of preaching in late-antique Gaul also reference several of Avitus’ sermons.⁹¹

There has been no modern scholarship solely dedicated to investigating the theme of sexuality in the works of Avitus. The most attention this topic has received is in Shea’s and Hecquet-

⁸⁰ Gamber (1889); Capponi (1967: 151-164); Nodes (1982), (1984: 185-195). ‘Semipelagianism’ is a somewhat inaccurate term. For more on its history, see Leyser (2003: 761-765). This controversy was an offshoot of the earlier ‘Pelagianist’ dispute between the followers of the British monk Pelagian (however, as Brown (1970: 56-72) has shown, ‘Pelagianism’ was advanced by many theologians, not just Pelagius) who believed that asceticism was a way of life capable of securing salvation, and Augustine, who, although an advocate for asceticism, was suspicious of the praise bestowed on ascetic individuals, fearing that it had the potential to deemphasise God’s role in helping humans achieve salvation.

⁸¹ Wood (2001a: 263-277).

⁸² See Goelzer (1909); Costanza (1968); Roberts (1983: 79-80), (1985), (1989); Nodes (1993); Arweiler (1999); Pollmann (2017). See also the unpublished PhD dissertation by Dion (2011).

⁸³ Roncoroni (1973: 122-134).

⁸⁴ Mondin (2017: 674-695).

⁸⁵ Shea (1997); Hecquet-Noti (2011).

⁸⁶ Wood (1994), (2001b: 416-436); White (2000); Thurlkill (2007); Hummer (2018). See also the unpublished PhD dissertations (Kellsey 1999); MacDonald (2000).

⁸⁷ *Serm.* 6-7.

⁸⁸ Wood (2013: 81-97).

⁸⁹ Borrel (1883: 46-55); Perrat and Audin (1957); Shanzer and Wood (2002: 377-389).

⁹⁰ For occasional references to *Serm.* 25, see Rosenwein (2000: 37-56); Helvétius (2015). For *Serm.* 6, see Favrod (1992: 67-81). For both, see Hen and Meens (2004: 214-218).

⁹¹ Bailey (2007: 23-43); (2010); (2016).

Noti's commentaries written on the *SHG* and the *CCL*. Shea remarks only briefly on sexuality in the *SHG* when he identifies it as a theme Avitus dwelled on in book three, and Hecquet-Noti does not discuss the role of sexuality in the *SHG*.⁹² The theme of sexuality in the *CCL* has been more widely discussed. Shea claims that the poem suggests Avitus saw sexuality as the ultimate representation of "physicality", and thus the primary obstacle to living morally.⁹³ He argues Avitus wrote the *CCL* to ensure Fuscina did not enter the wicked realm of physicality.⁹⁴ Hecquet-Noti's situates the *CCL* within the broader context of writings on virginity in late antiquity and speculates on the sources Avitus may have drawn upon. Hecquet-Noti also considers in detail the reasons for the poem's composition and its possible sub-genre (she identifies it as both a *consolatio* and a *laus*).⁹⁵ Apart from the studies by Shea and Hecquet-Noti, the only other instances in which the topic of sexuality in Avitus' works have been considered come from passing comments in broader studies on late-antique history. Analyses by Wood, White and Hummer note the *CCL*'s discussion of "family piety", that is, the embracing of asceticism (and by extension, sexual renunciation) by entire families, and two studies on early-medieval women reference Avitus' advice to Fuscina in the *CCL* to spurn physical procreation in favour of spiritual procreation.⁹⁶

Though no detailed studies focusing on sexuality in Avitus' works have been conducted, there are various investigations dealing with the role sexuality played in late-antique Gallic society. For example, the topics of asceticism, monasticism and other expressions of piety in Gaul have been analysed in numerous studies,⁹⁷ as have more specialised subjects including ecclesiastical structure and clerical celibacy in the late-antique West,⁹⁸ and gender in Merovingian society and texts.⁹⁹ With a small number of exceptions, barely any of these studies have considered Avitus' writings as evidence for how sexuality was understood in Gaul. However, the information they provide about Avitus' Gallic context and the views on sexuality of his contemporaries make them highly valuable to my research.

⁹² Shea (1997: 28, 31).

⁹³ Shea (1997: 6, 58-61, 68).

⁹⁴ Shea (1997: 58-61).

⁹⁵ Hecquet-Noti (2011: 50-51).

⁹⁶ Wood (1994: 24), (2001b: 423-424); White (2000: 150); Hummer (2018: 153-154, 166-179).

⁹⁷ Klingshirn (1994); Bartlett (2001: 201-216); Goodrich (2007); Bailey (2016).

⁹⁸ Brennan (1985: 311-323); Halfond (2010: 99-158); Hunter (2015: 96-139).

⁹⁹ Wemple (1981); Brennan (1996: 73-97); Bailey (2007: 23-43); Dailey (2015).

1.3 Sexuality in late antiquity

My thesis is rooted in a long historiographical tradition advocating a discourse-focused approach to the study of late-antique sexuality. Historians of late antiquity began to turn in more detail to the subject of sexuality in the 1970s and 1980s.¹⁰⁰ A major source of influence on scholarship was Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, a work employing a methodology that considers writings about sex as 'discourses'.¹⁰¹ The *History of Sexuality* emphasises the importance of focusing on the discourses themselves, rather than the historical 'facts' these discourses can reveal, because discourses, particularly the repressive early-Christian discourses about sex, were enormously impactful on their contemporary environments and can therefore be revealing of the culture in which they were produced.¹⁰² Peter Brown, a colleague of Foucault's, adopts a similar methodology in his significant 1988 study interrogating the discourses on sexuality of nearly 20 early-Christian theologians.¹⁰³ The studies of Foucault and Brown, and in addition to those of other major scholars of the late twentieth century such as Paul Veyne, Elizabeth Clark and Aline Rousselle, demonstrate an adherence to what has been termed the "cultural turn" in late-antique studies, a movement which saw scholars approach sources according to methodologies previously exclusive to the field of anthropology and other social sciences.¹⁰⁴ Many of the seminal studies produced in the late twentieth century continue to be accurate resources.

The subject of sexuality is inextricably linked with gender, as Thomas Laqueur has so famously demonstrated.¹⁰⁵ The turn towards the study of gender in late antiquity, pioneered by scholars such as Veyne, Rosemary Radford Ruether and Clark,¹⁰⁶ was part of a wider move among historians at this time to reject the practice of 'institutional' or 'political' history in favour of 'social' history – that is, the study of the experiences of historical people.¹⁰⁷ In the 1990s, the field was heavily influenced by the prevailing gender theories being proposed by scholars like

¹⁰⁰ Veyne (1978: 35-63); Ruether (1979: 71-98); Clark (1981: 240-257); Rousselle (1988); Cooper (2005: 10-11). This coincided with multiple historical events, including the rise of post-modernism, an increased communication between academic disciplines, second- and third-wave feminist movements, and the sexual revolution.

¹⁰¹ Cameron (1986: 266). Volume one, *The Will to Knowledge*, was published in 1976, and volumes two and three, *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self* in 1984. The English translations of these volumes were published in 1978, 1985 and 1986 respectively. An unfinished volume four, *Confessions of the Flesh*, exploring in more detail early-Christian discourses on sexuality, was published in 2018.

¹⁰² Cameron (1986: 266-267); Wilkinson (2015: 8, 13).

¹⁰³ Brown (1988); Wilkinson (2015: 9).

¹⁰⁴ Veyne (1978: 35-63); Clark (1981: 240-257), (1983), (1986), (1989: 25-46); Rousselle (1988). For more on the "cultural turn", see the various contributions in Martin and Miller (2005).

¹⁰⁵ Laqueur (1992: 22).

¹⁰⁶ Veyne (1978: 35-63); Ruether (1979: 71-98); Clark (1981: 240-257), (1983), (1986), (1989: 25-46).

¹⁰⁷ Cameron (1986: 269); Martin (2005: 4); Wilkinson (2015: 12).

Judith Butler,¹⁰⁸ whose famous thesis that gender is performative resonated with the definitions of asceticism formulated by Patricia Cox Miller and Richard Valantasis in 1994 and 1995 respectively.¹⁰⁹

Women's studies emerged as a field of historical inquiry during the 1990s and early 2000s, during which time the number of analyses on late-antique females increased.¹¹⁰ Clark began to urge scholars of late-antique gender and sexuality to leave aside any attempts to understand the 'experiences' or 'realities' of late-antique females, and instead resign themselves to the fact that

“we cannot with certainty claim to hear the voices of “real” women in early Christian texts, so appropriated they have been by male authors.”¹¹¹

Clark expresses this outlook in her other works of the 1990s.¹¹² Kate Cooper adopted this approach in her 1992 article and later works too.¹¹³ The influential studies of Clark and Cooper continue to be highly relevant to the field of late-antique sexuality and gender.

Over the last decade or so, the field of late-antique sexuality has been impacted by the increasingly prominent discussions about sexuality that have taken place in both popular and academic culture, fuelled by a growth in awareness about gender inequality, rights for LGBTI+ persons, and other contemporary movements unhelpfully categorised under the broad umbrella of “identity politics”. For instance, Susanna Drake incorporates theories of intersectionality in her 2013 book looking at how sexuality was used in slandering Jewish peoples in late antiquity and Taylor Petrey addresses modern debates about the definition of gender and sex in his 2015 exploration of how early-Christians imagined their bodies at the resurrection.¹¹⁴ Another topic that scholars of this decade have developed is the construction of femininity in late antiquity: Kristi Upson-Saia's 2011 work looks at the role early-Christian males played in constructing femininity by enforcing modest dress among women, while Kate Wilkinson tackles a similar

¹⁰⁸ Butler (1990). See also Laqueur (1992) and the slightly earlier work of Scott (1986: 1053-1075).

¹⁰⁹ Miller (1994: 137-153); Valantasis (1995: 775-821).

¹¹⁰ McNamara, Halborg and Whatley (1992); Clark (1994a: 155-184), (1999), (2011); Clark (1994b); Elm (1994); Schulenburg (1998); Burrus (2000), (2004); Kuefler (2001); Halsall (2004: 17-40); Martin and Miller (2005).

¹¹¹ Clark (1998a: 31).

¹¹² Clark (1994a: 155-184); (1998b: 413-430); (1999).

¹¹³ Cooper (1992: 150-164), (1996); Cooper and Leyser (2000: 536-551).

¹¹⁴ Drake (2013); Petrey (2015).

idea in her 2015 study arguing that late-antique women had a degree of agency in determining the construction of “feminine modesty”.¹¹⁵ In fact, there has been a significant growth recently in the number of comparative studies on sexuality between classical and late antiquity. Examples include Ville Vuolanto’s 2016 work on the place of the family amidst the rise of ideas about piety and individual asceticism, Sissel Undheim’s 2017 volume demonstrating that the notion of *virginitas* grew from an earlier classical tradition, and a 2019 volume edited by Sabine Huebner and Christian Laes looking at celibacy and singleness during Republic, Imperial and Late-Antique Roman society.¹¹⁶ Though these aforementioned studies do not reference Avitus, many have proved invaluable resources for my own research because of the discourse-focused methodologies they employ and the contextual information about the place of sexuality in late-antique culture they provide.

1.4 Conclusion

This thesis continues the work that scholars of late-antique sexuality have been conducting for decades. It recognises Avitus as a commentator of sexuality and situates him among a long line of previously-studied theologians of sex, including Ambrose, Jerom and Augustine. My consideration of source material as evidence for how Avitus *conceived* of sexuality, rather than how he or his literary protagonists *experienced* it, is based on a methodology representative of the “cultural turn” in late-antique historiography of the 1980s and 1990s.

¹¹⁵ Upson-Saia (2011); Wilkinson (2015). Also in this category is Kyle Harper’s 2016 work tracing the development of the construction of ideas about sexuality and shame from early to late antiquity.

¹¹⁶ Vuolanto (2016); Undheim (2017); Huebner and Laes (2019).

2. “It was a frequent practice to read writers whose artistry was of a similar kind”: Sexuality in the writings of Avitus’ forebears Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine¹¹⁷

2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to contextualise the prominence of the theme of sexuality throughout Avitus’ works. I do so by demonstrating that discussions of sexuality are abundant in the writings of Avitus’ forebears, the Church Fathers Ambrose of Milan, Jerome of Stridon and Augustine of Hippo.¹¹⁸ I firstly show that the prominence of asceticism and sexuality in fourth- and fifth-century culture is reflected in the scholarly output of Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine. Then, I demonstrate that the surviving writings of the three men in question deal with the specific aspects of sexuality I have identified Avitus’ works do: sexual desire and female sexual renunciation. Finally, I touch on the possibility that Avitus could have derived his interest in sexual desire and female sexual renunciation by reading the writings of Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine directly, given their wide circulation in late-antique Gaul.

2.2 Sexuality in the works of Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine

Sexuality was a common subject of discussion in Avitus’ time because of the pivotal role it played in many Christian communities in the fifth and sixth centuries. It was when Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine were writing, in the late-fourth and early-fifth centuries, that sexuality became the subject of much discussion. The rising interest in sexuality coincided with the rise of asceticism. While in the earlier centuries of Christianity the act of martyrdom was seen to be the ultimate expression of holiness, when this act was no longer a viable option, the most faithful found an alternative in asceticism,¹¹⁹ a movement that involved the renunciation of the worldly aspects of one’s lifestyle for the purpose of spiritual transformation.¹²⁰ The renunciation of one such worldly aspect, sex, constituted a primary tenet of asceticism. Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine all embraced the ascetic lifestyle in adulthood and vowed celibacy.¹²¹

¹¹⁷ Sid. Apoll. *Ep.* 2.9.4.

¹¹⁸ According to Conte (1999: 678), these men stand out as “three great fathers who in different ways have shaped the entire history of Western Christianity”.

¹¹⁹ Clark (1982: 45); Tilley (1991: 471-475); Endsjo (2008: 126); Brakke (2009: 23-27).

¹²⁰ Clark (1999: 14-17); Valantasis (1995: 797). For more on the origins and growth of Christian asceticism, see Wimbush and Valantasis (2002).

¹²¹ Hunter (2000: 283-284).

Writings about asceticism proliferated during the fourth and fifth centuries, and Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine contributed valuably to this tradition.¹²² Although these men produced works on a very wide variety of topics concerning asceticism, their texts often referred to sex in some way. Ambrose's earliest writings on asceticism include two treatises on virginity and one on widowhood.¹²³ The earliest of these three writings, *De virginibus*, focuses on defending and justifying virginity through numerous references to the virginity of Mary.¹²⁴ Ambrose authored *De institutione virginis* about twenty years later, in the 390s. Its invocation of a quasi-literal interpretation of Genesis to emphasise the perpetual virginity of Mary demonstrates Ambrose's steadfast support for asceticism and virginity in his later life, amidst the Jovinian controversy.¹²⁵ Ambrose expounds on a more allegorical interpretation of Genesis in his earlier *De paradiso* and the *Hexameron*.¹²⁶

Jerome's writings about sexuality include a treatise against Jovinian and several letters, many of which were authored to or about aristocratic, female sexual renunciants from Rome such as Marcella, Melania the Elder, Paula, Eustochium and Demetrias.¹²⁷ *Adversus Iovinianum* is both a defence of asceticism and virginity against the heretical statements of Jovinian, and a tirade against marriage.¹²⁸ Jerome responded to Jovinian's argument that Genesis suggests the necessity of marriage and reproduction for salvation by contending that Adam and Eve's virginity before original sin clearly indicates the superiority of the virginal state and the consequent inferiority of marriage, sex and reproduction.¹²⁹ Also informative are Jerome's letters, especially those to the virgins Eustochium and Demetrias, which urge the women to maintain their commitment to sexual renunciation by comparing the advantages of the virginal lifestyle with the disadvantages of the married one.¹³⁰

¹²² For other writings about asceticism from this time not including those of Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine, see Athanasius, *Vita Antonii*; Macarius *Homiliae quinquaginta*; Evagrius Ponticus, *Praktikos*; John Cassian, *Institutes*; *Apophthegmata Patrum*.

¹²³ Ambrose, *De institutione virginis et sanctae Mariae virginitate perpetua ad Eusebium*; *De viduis*; *De virginibus*.

¹²⁴ Hunter (2000: 285).

¹²⁵ Clark (1986: 356-358). For more on the Jovinian controversy see Hunter (1987: 45-65), (2007).

¹²⁶ Clark (1986: 355-357).

¹²⁷ Clark (1988: 15); Dunn (2007a: 670). For Melania the Elder, see *Ep.* 29; for Marcella, see *Ep.* 23-29, 32, 34, 37-38, 40-44, 46, 48, 59, 97, 127; for Paula, see *Ep.* 30, 32-33, 38-39, 44-47, 54, 60, 66, 77, 107-108, 127; for Eustochium, see *Ep.* 22, 31-32, 38-39, 45-46, 48, 52, 54, 66, 107-108, 123, 127; for Demetrias, see *Ep.* 130.

¹²⁸ Elliot (2013: 25).

¹²⁹ Clark (1986: 360-361). However, overall, Jerome tended not to expound on Genesis to the extent Ambrose and Augustine did.

¹³⁰ Jer. *Ep.* 22, 130.

Some years after its composition, Augustine responded to Jerome's *Adversus Iovinianum* with *De bono coniugali* and *De sancta virginitate*, treatises which attempt to argue for the goodness of asceticism and virginity without denigrating marriage.¹³¹ A later work, *De nuptiis et concupiscentia*, written with the intention of refuting Julian's assertions that Augustine's ideas were Manichean in nature, claims that the institution of marriage is essentially good, despite the associations of sex and reproduction with original sin.¹³² Discussions of sexuality also abound in Augustine's writings concerning Genesis.¹³³ His interpretation of Genesis informed many of his ideas about the nature of sex and sexual desire, which can be traced throughout many works from the late 380s to his death.¹³⁴ For example, the *De Genesi ad litteram* identifies sexual desire as, according to Brown, "an exceptionally sharply delineated symptom of Adam's fall",¹³⁵ and *De civitate dei* proposes that prelapsarian Adam and Eve would have engaged in a serene kind of sexual intercourse had they not sinned.¹³⁶ Also useful sources are Augustine's various letters to women, such as those to and about the ascetic women of the *gens Anicii Proba*, Juliana and Demetrias.¹³⁷

2.3 Sexual desire and female sexual renunciation in the works of Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine

Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine, like Avitus, also address the topics of sexual desire and female sexual renunciation in their writings. I briefly summarise their basic ideas and find that, broadly speaking, Augustine tended to be more concerned with sexual desire, while Ambrose and Jerome wrote about sexual renunciation in greater detail. I additionally demonstrate that, like Avitus, the three men in question consider the sex-related processes of marriage and reproduction in their discussions about sexuality.

2.3.1 Sex and sexual desire

Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine all discuss their beliefs about the introduction of sex and sexual desire by tracing it back to the Genesis story of Adam and Eve. Ambrose and Jerome agreed that sex and sexual desire could not have existed in prelapsarian Paradise because they

¹³¹ Clark (1986: 362, 367); Brown (1988: 402); Otten (1998: 395). See also *De bono viduitatis*, which was addressed to Juliana, an aristocratic Roman widow: Dunn (2006a: 247).

¹³² Hunter (2005: 124).

¹³³ These writings include *De Genesi contra Manichaeos*, *De Genesi litteram imperfectus liber*, *De Genesi ad litteram libri duodecim*, *De civ. D.* 11-16: Neil (2006: 144).

¹³⁴ Neil (2006: 144).

¹³⁵ Brown (1988: 406).

¹³⁶ Greenblatt (2017: 116-117).

¹³⁷ See August. *Ep.* 130, 131, 150, 188: Wilkinson (2015: 18). For more, see Dunn (2006a: 247-256); McWilliam (2007: 189-202).

were only introduced after the first humans committed sin.¹³⁸ They similarly agreed that marriage and reproduction could not have existed in prelapsarian Paradise.¹³⁹ Augustine, who interpreted Genesis in a more literal way, believed that Adam and Eve, had they not sinned, could have performed “unimaginably exquisite” sex that would have been carried out in complete accordance with human will.¹⁴⁰ He also imagined that marriage and reproduction could have existed before original sin.¹⁴¹ In his later works, Augustine even goes so far so as to contend that Adam and Eve felt sexual desire before the Fall, albeit in a form more attune to the human will than its postlapsarian manifestation.¹⁴² However, like most Christians at this time, neither Ambrose, Jerome or Augustine believed sexual desire was the cause of original sin; rather, as Augustine makes clear, original sin was caused by *iactantia* (pride).¹⁴³

Augustine’s writings about sexual desire are far more detailed than those of Ambrose or Jerome. Augustine was not necessarily troubled by sexual desire because it led to sex, or because it was impure or even forceful, but because it was an unpredictable and unruly sensation and a reminder to humans of “the twisted human will” that resulted from the Fall.¹⁴⁴ Ambrose and Jerome, as ascetic men who had – like Augustine – vowed celibacy, were similarly troubled by sexual desire, but for a different reason. Unlike Augustine, their misgivings about sexual desire were tied up with their beliefs about the act of sex itself. To Ambrose and Jerome, sex was the most devastating product of original sin.¹⁴⁵ It represented worldliness, a devastating obstacle between human carnality and divine spirituality.¹⁴⁶ Thus, though Ambrose and Jerome differed to Augustine on some points about the origins and nature

¹³⁸ Ambrose, *De institutione virginis et sanctae Mariae virginitate perpetua ad Eusebium* 5.36; Jer. *Adv. Iovinian.* 1.29, *Ep.* 22.19; Schafer (2019: 18-19). For more examples of men who shared this view, see Tert. *De virginibus velandis* 5; Gregory of Nyssa, *De virginitate* 7.31, 12.4; John Chrysostom, *De virginitate* 73.4, *Homiliae in Genesim* 18.4; Gregory of Tours, *Hist.* 1.2; Clark (1986: 357, 378); Brown (1988: 294-295); Clark (1994b: 236); Clark (1999: 120); Shanzer (2002: 396); Dunn (2005: 19); Hunter (2007: 167); de Wet (2014: 243); Schafer (2019: 13).

¹³⁹ Ambrose, *Exhortatio virginitatis* 6.36; Jer. *Ep.* 22.1.4; Hunter (1989: 290); Clark (1999: 120).

¹⁴⁰ August. *De civ. D.* 14.23; *De Genesi ad litteram* 9.9; *De Genesi adversus Manicheos* 1.19.30; *De nuptiis et concupiscentia* 1.5.6, 1.7; Clark (1986: 371); Cooper and Leyser (2000: 542).

¹⁴¹ August. *De nuptiis et concupiscentia* 1.1.1.

¹⁴² Lamberigts (2005: 184-185).

¹⁴³ Ambrose, *Ep.* 63.14, *De bono mortis*; August. *De civ. D.* 14.13, *De Genesi ad litteram* 11.5, *De nuptiis et concupiscentia* 1.6.7. For other examples, see Gregory of Nyssa, *De hominis opificio* 22.4-5; John Chrysostom, *De virginitate* 14.3, 5, 6, *Homiliae in Genesim* 15.4, 18.4, 20.1; Brown (1988: 295); Hecquet-Noti (2011: 21); Finn and Dupont (2019: 197).

¹⁴⁴ See chapter 14 of August. *De civ. D.*; Brown (1988: 404). A seminal piece by Cooper and Leyser (2000: 536-551) agrees with Brown’s argument.

¹⁴⁵ Ambrose, *Ep.* 57, 63.13-14; Jer. *Adv. Iovinian.* 1.8, 1.16, *Ep.* 22.6, 79.10, 121.8, 130.10; Salisbury (1986: 281); Brown (1988: 362); Clark (1989: 29-30); Schulenberg (1998: 129); Schafer (2019: 19).

¹⁴⁶ Ambrose, *De virginibus* 1.9; Jer. *Adv. Iovinian.* 1.6, *Ep.* 79.9; Miller (1993: 29).

of sex and sexual desire, all three men were nevertheless troubled by these human experiences, which they each saw as in some way connected with sin. Sexual desire features as a subject of significance in many of their writings, just as it does in the surviving letters, poetry and sermons of Avitus.

2.3.2 Sexual renunciation

Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine all agreed that sexual renunciation is a most praiseworthy commitment for Christians. As such, the three men address the topic extensively throughout their works. Like Avitus, these men tended to write about specifically *female* sexual renunciation, particularly female virginity. This is not unusual: many cultures throughout history were preoccupied with female sexuality, believing that female bodies, as possessors of both a hymen and a womb, were uniquely capable of physically indicating a woman's sexual state.¹⁴⁷ In the words of Laqueur, "it is *always* woman's sexuality that is being constituted".¹⁴⁸ Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine presumably concerned themselves with the topic of female sexual renunciation because they observed the increasing number of females during the fourth century who adopted asceticism and vowed celibacy.¹⁴⁹ As the letters mentioned in the previous section suggest, the Church Fathers were personally acquainted with some of these women.

The appeal of asceticism and sexual renunciation to females is certainly understandable. Sexual renunciation was seen to endow the female adherent with significant prestige otherwise inaccessible to her in a patriarchal society and a Church that excluded females from positions of authority.¹⁵⁰ Whereas females had traditionally been seen as both inherently weak but with a capacity for significant evil (a paradox encapsulated by the figure of Eve),¹⁵¹ the act of sexual renunciation, in addition to other acts of asceticism, enabled late-antique females to harness a new, more spiritual, kind of power.¹⁵² The power of renunciants is partly attributable to the fact

¹⁴⁷ Brakke (2005: 27); Rosenberg (2018: 13-14, 90-118, 182-206).

¹⁴⁸ Laqueur (1992: 22).

¹⁴⁹ Note that most detailed accounts of female asceticism from this time refer to females from privileged backgrounds: Mistry (2015: 71); Vuolanto (2019: 276). Indeed, wealth enabled the ascetic female to practice acts of generous almsgiving and Church patronage. Melania the Younger is a famous example: Dunn (2014a: 110-111). For other examples, see Clark (1986: 175-228); Cooper (2007: 165-189).

¹⁵⁰ For more on female leadership (or lack thereof) in the early Christian Church, see Madigan and Osiek (2005); Kateusz (2019).

¹⁵¹ This paradoxical perception of women also existed in Ancient Rome. For example, see Hor. *Epod.* 8; Liv. 34.2.10, 34.3.2; Juv. 6; Gal. *De usu partium* 14.6-7.

¹⁵² Cooper (2013: 530).

that their virginal or celibate state was perceived to imitate that of Mary, the bearer of salvation and the antithesis of Eve.¹⁵³

Though sexual renunciation can be embraced by widows or even married persons, during late antiquity virgins were thought to be the purest of renunciants.¹⁵⁴ Female virgins were believed to especially pious, as demonstrated by the popular ‘bride of Christ’ *topos* that circulated in many late-antique writings on sexuality.¹⁵⁵ According to this *topos*, famously employed by Ambrose and Jerome, the sacrifice sexual renunciants make in forgoing sex and marriage render them spiritually worthy to enter into some kind of mystical union with Christ.¹⁵⁶ Clark points out that the employment of this *topos* “reinserted Christian ascetics within a familiar domestic economy”.¹⁵⁷ Augustine diverged from Ambrose and Jerome, and used the *topos* to refer to the Church, rather than celibate females.¹⁵⁸

Ambrose and Jerome saw a clearer distinction between sexual activity and sexual renunciation than did Augustine. For the former two, put simply, sex symbolised impurity and sexual renunciation symbolised purity.¹⁵⁹ Ambrose and Jerome believed sexual renunciation allowed adherents to reclaim the conditions of prelapsarian human existence in which humans enjoyed a closer relationship with God.¹⁶⁰ They attributed to sexual renunciation the power to control the frenzied sensations of sexual desire, an inevitable force which Jerome conceded even the most pious of humans would never overcome.¹⁶¹ For Jerome, a female who chooses to renounce sex and wage war against the sexual desires of her own body “will cease to be called

¹⁵³ Dunn (2007a: 699).

¹⁵⁴ Dunn (2007a: 670). Virginité had been associated with the divine for many years before the advent of Christianity. For example, in Greece, there were the Leucippides, the female, virginal servants of Apollo’s sisters and the divine temples; in Rome, there were the Vestal Virgins, priestesses assigned the grave responsibility of guarding the sacred fire of Vesta, the goddess who connected earthly Rome with its pantheon: Blank (2008: 127-129). For more, see Undheim (2017: 383-409).

¹⁵⁵ Cooper (2013: 530) identifies that the title derives from the notion that the Church is the bride of Christ, as described by Paul in his letters 2 Cor. 11:2-3; Eph. 5:22-23. The *Song of Songs* also seems to have been influential on the development of the *topos*.

¹⁵⁶ Ambrose, *De virginibus* 1.5.20-23, 1.6.31, 1.7.37, 1.9.52, 1.12.65; Jer. *Ep.* 22.1-2, 5, 16, 24-26, 28-29, 38. For Eastern examples, see Tert. *De virginibus velandis* 16.4; Gregory of Nyssa, *Vita Macrinae* 22; Brennan (1996: 80); Dunn (2004: 116), (2005: 14).

¹⁵⁷ Clark (2009: 2).

¹⁵⁸ August. *De bono viduitatis* 10.13; *De Civ. D.* 17.16; *Enarratio in ps.* 45 23-25; Hunter (2000: 296-303); Ruether (2007: 60).

¹⁵⁹ Salisbury (1986: 286-288).

¹⁶⁰ Clark (1989: 30-31).

¹⁶¹ Jer. *Dialogus adversus Pelagianos* 2.24; *Ep.* 22.6, 22.40, 79.10, 130.13.

a woman and will be called a man”.¹⁶² His letter to Eustochium compares the trials faced by the virgin with those of holy men such as Abraham, Solomon and even Christ himself.¹⁶³ Ambrose and Augustine tended not to describe renunciants in such virile terms.¹⁶⁴

Augustine attempted to soften the overwhelming superiority of sexual renunciation and virginity preached by Jerome and Ambrose by acknowledging that, although a celibate lifestyle was preferable, it was not the only means of achieving salvation. Celibacy was, like marriage, a gift of grace given to humans by God.¹⁶⁵ Augustine saw sexual desire as obstructive, but he did not attribute sexual renunciation with the extensive redeeming qualities imparted to it by Ambrose and Jerome.¹⁶⁶ Augustine was concerned with deemphasising the role of celibacy in the ascetic lifestyle and highlighting the importance for ascetic men and women to ensure they practiced piety in other aspects of their lives too, such as through the act of almsgiving,¹⁶⁷ an act Ambrose and Jerome also emphasised was important for sexual renunciants to engage in.¹⁶⁸

2.3.3 Sex-related processes of marriage and reproduction

Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine supported their arguments about sexual desire and female sexual renunciation by appealing to the sex-related processes of marriage and reproduction. Further on in this thesis I show that Avitus too discussed these topics. The three men in question agreed that a lifestyle of asceticism and sexual renunciation is preferable to one of marriage, primarily because the latter involves sex, and potentially, reproduction and childbirth. Preferability was ranked according to the heavenly rewards Christians could hope to yield. Ambrose and Jerome both subscribed to the common idea that, based on a reading of Mt. 13:8, virgins reap “one hundred-fold” for their commitment to sexual renunciation, widows “sixty-fold” and married persons “thirty-fold”.¹⁶⁹ Augustine, though it seems he too believed in some

¹⁶² Jer. *Commentarius in epistolam ad Ephesios* 3.5. For other examples of female ascetics transgressing their sex, see *Gospel of Thomas* 114; Gregory of Nyssa, *Vita Macrinae* 1: Clark (1998a: 29); Elmer and Mayer (2014: 5). Many examples of courageous, strong, ‘manly’ females exist can also be found in late-antique references to martyrs. For example, see *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* 10.7; Basil of Caesarea, *Homilia in martyrem Julittam* (PG 31.237-262); Jer. *Ep.* 22.39.

¹⁶³ Jer. *Ep.* 22.39.

¹⁶⁴ Elliot (2013: 26).

¹⁶⁵ August. *De bono coniugali* 2, 24, 35; *De sancta virginitate* 21, 32, 41-47.

¹⁶⁶ Harrison (2000: 189).

¹⁶⁷ August. *Ep.* 125.2, 126.7. For more examples, see Dunn (2006a: 247-256).

¹⁶⁸ Ambrose, *De excessu fratris sui Satyri* 2.13, *De viduis* 9.53-58; Jer. *Ep.* 66.5, 108.2-6, 26, 31, 127.14, 130.7; Vuolanto (2016: 52-53).

¹⁶⁹ Ambrose, *De viduis* 4.23, *De virginibus* 1.11.60; Jer. *Adv. Iovinian.* 1.3, *Ep.* 22.15, 48.2. The idea of a ‘heavenly hierarchy’ stretches back to the earliest Christian centuries. For example, see Cyprian, *De mortuis* 76.7.2; Dunn (2006b: 218).

kind of ‘heavenly hierarchy’ warned against such a simplistic quantification.¹⁷⁰ He stressed that although the married person would not achieve “perfect” bliss in heaven, he or she still had the opportunity to enter the kingdom of heaven and receive its rewards.¹⁷¹

Jerome was the most extreme critic of marriage and reproduction. One of his techniques for praising the virtue of the ascetic, celibate lifestyle was by denigrating the married lifestyle. Thus, in works such as *Adversus Iovinianum* and in his letter to Eustochium, he compares the disadvantages of marriage with the advantages of celibate singleness. Jerome argued that it was not just the act of sex that rendered marriage an undesirable institution for ‘serious’ Christians, but the obligations of spousal bondage and the physically and emotionally painful process of childbirth too.¹⁷² For example, in his tract against Jovinian, he claims that the “yoke” of wedlock distracts one from prayer and can inhibit them from responding fully to God’s call.¹⁷³ Ambrose also laments marriage in his works praising virginity, because he observed that wives suffer as “slaves” to their husbands.¹⁷⁴

Despite their acknowledgment that the reproductive process, including the ordeal of childbirth, is necessary to ensure the continuation of the human race, Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine believed these painful experiences to be significant disadvantages of a married lifestyle, especially for women.¹⁷⁵ In reference to a mother in his *De virginibus*, Ambrose writes: “let her count up the comforts of her children, but let her likewise count up the troubles”.¹⁷⁶ These “troubles”, according to Ambrose and Jerome, can involve the physical pain of pregnancy and labour, the death of a child, or the death of the mother herself.¹⁷⁷ Even Augustine, who considered progeny as one of the three goods of marriage, perceived the trauma of procreation, pregnancy and childbirth to be a poignant reminder of original sin.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁰ August. *De sancta virginitate* 46.

¹⁷¹ August. *De bono viduitatis* 8, *De sancta virginitate* 13, 22-27, *Ep.* 3.1, *Serm.* 354.9; Bailey (2010: 115); Vuolanto (2016: 46-47).

¹⁷² These disadvantages were seen to be reflected in God’s punishment to Eve in Genesis 3:16.

¹⁷³ Jer. *Adv. Iovinian.* 1.7, 1.11; *Ep.* 22.6, 22.22. In *Adv. Iovinian.* Jerome refers to 1 Cor. 7:39 (“A wife is bound for so long time as her husband lives...”) three times in the first book.

¹⁷⁴ *De virginibus* 1.6.27; Hunter (2007: 226). Eastern Church Fathers shared this view too. For examples, see Gregory of Nyssa, *De virginitate* 3; John Chrysostom, *De virginitate* 14.5-6.

¹⁷⁵ Ambrose, *De virginibus* 1.6.24-31, 1.7.34; Jer. *Adversus Helvidium* 20, 22; Vuolanto (2016: 181).

¹⁷⁶ Ambrose, *De virginibus* 1.6.25.

¹⁷⁷ Ambrose, *De virginibus* 1.6.25-26, 30; Jer. *Adv. Iovinian* 1.7, 1.12, *Ep.* 22.13, 22.18, 22.21.

¹⁷⁸ August. *De bono conjugali* 17.19, *De nuptiis et concupiscentia* 1.25; Vuolanto (2016: 90).

However, overall, Augustine made a greater attempt than Ambrose and Jerome to take a more balanced approach to the topic of marriage versus sexual renunciation.¹⁷⁹ His belief that both marriage and sex could have existed in prelapsarian Paradise allowed him to emphasise that marriage was an institution that involved more than just sex. According to Brown, Augustine believed that the binding friendship between husband and wife was “an expression of the primal and enduring nature of men and women...created by God for concord”.¹⁸⁰ Ambrose and to some extent, Jerome, amidst their praises of virginity, also acknowledged the potential for marriage to be praiseworthy. Jerome saw sex and marriage as natural (though he notes that this does not justify their goodness),¹⁸¹ and even conceded that an honourable marriage “has its place”.¹⁸² Ambrose was more respectful of marriage, despite believing it inferior to celibate singleness.¹⁸³ In *De virginibus* he stresses that he does not intend to denigrate marriage, and goes so far as to “encourage” it, pointing to Old Testament figures Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel as examples of pious married women.¹⁸⁴ In his much later work, *De institutione virginis*, he admits “it is not good for man to be alone”.¹⁸⁵

Despite their disagreements on certain points, Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine all address the same two aspects of sexuality that I argue Avitus does in his works: sexual desire and female sexual renunciation. Further, also like Avitus, these thinkers incorporate into their discourses discussions about the merits of sexual renunciation in relation to marriage and reproduction. Overall, Ambrose and Jerome dedicated more of their work to the topic of female sexual renunciation, perhaps because they both regarded it so highly, while Augustine was more preoccupied with the topic of sexual desire.

2.4 The writings of Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine in Gaul

Avitus evidently shared an interest with Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine in sexuality. Though it is difficult to confirm Avitus’ exact sources, it is possible that the reason why sexual desire and female sexual renunciation feature as such prominent themes throughout his works is because he was directly influenced by the writings of Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine. Indeed, as subsequent chapters reveal, Avitus agreed with many of the men’s ideas about these topics.

¹⁷⁹ Clark (1989: 29)

¹⁸⁰ *De bono conjugali* 7.7; 16.18: Brown (1988: 403).

¹⁸¹ Jer. *Adv. Iovinian* 1.8; *Ep.* 130.10.

¹⁸² Jer. *Ep.* 22.2.

¹⁸³ Elliot (2011: 45).

¹⁸⁴ Ambrose, *De virginibus* 1.6.24, 7.34.

¹⁸⁵ Clark (1986: 356).

Further, it is likely that at least some of these patristic Latin texts would have been required reading as part of Avitus' education.¹⁸⁶ In what remains of this chapter, I present evidence attesting to the likelihood that Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine's discussions about sexuality circulated in Gaul during the time of Avitus and that they could have been drawn upon by elite, episcopal authors like himself.

Ambrose lived during the fourth century and enjoyed a special relationship with Gaul during his lifetime, having been born in Trier to a father who was Praetorian Prefect of Gaul.¹⁸⁷ After Ambrose's death his writings continued to be circulated throughout late-antique Gaul and the West.¹⁸⁸ Roncoroni has argued that Avitus directly drew upon Ambrose's *De virginibus* when composing the *CCL*.¹⁸⁹ Shanzer and Wood supported this observation by drawing a connection between Avitus' family and the martyrs Gervasius and Protasius, saints heavily associated with Ambrose to whom Avitus' father Hesychius may have dedicated a monastery.¹⁹⁰ Indeed, Ambrose's other works, such as those concerning Church controversies, were referenced by Gallic authors Claudianus Mamertus and Fortunatus, and in the Acts of the Council of Turin.¹⁹¹

The writings of Jerome, who was born slightly after Ambrose, were similarly influential in Gaul, which has been identified as home to Jerome's biggest following outside of Italy.¹⁹² He was referenced by Prosper of Aquitaine and Gennadius, continuers of his *Chronicon* and *De viris illustribus* respectively,¹⁹³ and the Eusebius Gallicanus preachers and Gregory of Tours.¹⁹⁴ Further, Gregory's reference to Melania and Fortunatus' reference to Marcella and Eustochium indicate that Jerome's writings about female sexuality were also known among the Gallic

¹⁸⁶ As a man of noble birth belonging to an ecclesiastically-superior family, we can imagine Avitus received the best education available: Shanzer and Wood (2002: 7). He would have been taught grammar and rhetoric through both 'pagan' and Christian texts: Browning (2001: 874-875); Shanzer and Wood (2002: 7, 58-59, 66-67). However, it is likely that, like most educated Gallic men of his time, Avitus did not know Greek: Hecquet-Noti (1999: 28), (2011: 11, 24); Browning (2001: 866).

¹⁸⁷ Mathisen (1989: 11).

¹⁸⁸ Mathisen (1989: 5-26).

¹⁸⁹ Roncoroni (1973: 122-134).

¹⁹⁰ Shanzer and Wood (2002: 12). Ambrose uncovered the remains of these martyrs based on a dream that revealed to him their location: *Ep.* 22; Moreira (2000: 87-88). The Monastery of Saints Gervasius and Protasius was the same that Fuscina entered: *Vita Fuscinae* 6. Note that Hesychius' founding of this monastery is contested: see no. 2 in Shanzer and Wood (2002: 12) for more.

¹⁹¹ Claudianus Mamertus, *De statu animae* 2.9; Venantius Fortunatus *Serm.* 9; *Carm.* 5.1.6-7, 5.3.39; Acts of the Council of Turin (§6); Mathisen (1989: 237). It is important to note, however, that Fortunatus was educated in Ravenna and so many not have necessarily read Ambrose in Gaul.

¹⁹² Rebenich (1992: 208); Mathisen (2013: 192).

¹⁹³ Prosper of Aquitaine, *Chron.* 420; Gennadius *Ep.* 1, 17, 33, 36, 63.

¹⁹⁴ Gregory of Tours, *Hist.* 1.34, 37. For citations in the Eusebius Gallicanus sermons, see Glorie (1971: 1045-1083).

elite.¹⁹⁵ Mathisen has established in a recent article that although Jerome may not have been referenced by Gallic authors as frequently as Ambrose, the fact that many of his works survive in late-antique and early-medieval manuscripts from Gaul attest to his wide reception there during the fifth and sixth centuries.¹⁹⁶

However, it is Augustine, born around the same time as Jerome, who stands out as one of the most influential theologians in late-antique Gaul.¹⁹⁷ His ideas were the subject of extensive discussion among Gallic elites. Though the writings of John Cassian and Faustus of Riez, and the Acts of some Church Councils, suggest that Augustine had his critics in Gaul,¹⁹⁸ there are also surviving works of many enthusiastic supporters of Augustine, such as Prosper, Caesarius, and, significantly, Avitus himself.¹⁹⁹ The influence of Augustine and his theology on Avitus' writings has been highlighted in many studies;²⁰⁰ Augustine has even been described as "Avitus' chief inspiration".²⁰¹ For example, Wood has shown that Avitus' *SHG* relies heavily on *De Genesi ad litteram*, and on some occasions, mimics passages from Augustine nearly *verbatim*.²⁰² Yet, though modern scholarship identifies Augustine as the principal source Avitus drew upon, it is not inconceivable that Avitus would have been influenced by other, similarly well-known patristic authors in Gaul, such as Ambrose and Jerome. After all, as is shown in chapter four, many of Avitus' ideas about sexuality, especially sexual renunciation, align more with Ambrose and Jerome than with Augustine.

2.5 Conclusion

Looking at the role of sexuality in the writings of Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine provides context for why this theme features prominently in Avitus' own writings. Sexuality seems to have become a subject of much interest in late antiquity, probably due in part to the rise of the ascetic movement. Like his theological forebears, Avitus felt compelled to comment. He shared

¹⁹⁵ Gregory of Tours, *Hist.* 1.40; Venantius Fortunatus, *Carm.* 8.1. For Jerome's references to Melania, see *Ep.* 29; to Marcella, see *Ep.* 23-29, 32, 34, 37-38, 40-44, 46, 48, 59, 97, 127; to Eustochium, see *Ep.* 22, 31-32, 38-39, 45-46, 48, 52, 54, 66, 107-108, 123, 127.

¹⁹⁶ Mathisen (2013: 191-208).

¹⁹⁷ Mathisen (1989: 130).

¹⁹⁸ John Cassian, *Conlationes*; Faustus of Riez, *De Gratia*. See, for instance, the Acts of the Council of Arles in 475, which accepted Augustine's teaching on humankind's innate sinfulness but rejected his ideas about predestination.

¹⁹⁹ Wheaton (2018: 167).

²⁰⁰ Nodes (1982), (1985: 185-195); Wood (2001a: 263-277); Shanzer and Wood (2002); Pollmann (2017); Wheaton (2018).

²⁰¹ Shanzer and Wood (2002: 12).

²⁰² For instance, compare *SHG* 2.272-276 with August. *De Genesi ad litteram* 11.32.42; Wood (2001a: 266-267).

an interest with these three men in the specific topics of sexual desire and female sexual renunciation. It would not be unreasonable to surmise that, due to the wide circulation of the Latin writings of Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine in late-antique Gaul, combined with the fact that Avitus shared many of the same ideas about sexual and female sexual renunciation as these men (as subsequent chapters show), their patristic texts influenced Avitus' discussions of sexuality. Even if Avitus did not access the texts of these Church Fathers himself, given their wide circulation throughout Gaul during his lifetime, he would have come across the ideas of these men indirectly, through other Latin writings on the topic of sexuality.²⁰³

²⁰³ Hecquet-Noti (2011: 11).

3. “A disgusting urge tries to prove your bodies foul”: Sexual Desire in the Works of Avitus²⁰⁴

3.1 Introduction

This chapter establishes one of two aspects of sexuality that pervades Avitus’ works: sexual desire. By reconstructing the specific beliefs Avitus held about the origins and nature of sexual desire, I demonstrate that the topic features prominently throughout his poetry, letters and, to a lesser extent, his sermons. I firstly argue that the *SHG* suggests Avitus believed sexual desire was an outcome of the original sin committed by Adam and Eve. He supposed sexual desire tainted sex, rendering the once-chaste act “disgusting”, and diminishing Eve’s experience of the related processes of marriage and reproduction.²⁰⁵ I then show that Avitus’ other works, including the *CCL*, some letters, and a sermon, indicate his belief that the destructive effects of sexual desire in Paradise can still be felt in his own day. In these texts Avitus makes various references to the dangers of sexual desire and the tainted state of sex, marriage and reproduction as they existed in late-fifth, early-sixth-century Gaul. I find that many of Avitus’ beliefs about sexual desire mirrors those of his patristic predecessors Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine.

3.2 Sex, marriage and reproduction in Paradise

Avitus believed the introduction of sexual desire dramatically transformed the act of sex, the institution of marriage, and the process of reproduction. The first three books of the *SHG*, which versify the first three chapters of Genesis, elaborate on the prelapsarian manifestation of these phenomena. As Genesis does not comment explicitly on whether prelapsarian Adam and Eve could have engaged in sex, Avitus follows his forebears in speculating at length on the topic. In book one, *De mundi initio*, he demonstrates his adherence to the ideas of Augustine by suggesting that Adam and Eve would have had sex in Paradise if had they not sinned.²⁰⁶ This suggestion is implied by his comment that Adam and Eve had the potential to use their genitalia before original sin, but that it was only after original sin that this use became shameful.²⁰⁷ Avitus imagines that the purpose of genitalia and prelapsarian sex was to generate “happy seed”, in order to produce children.²⁰⁸ It seems human reproduction was the only kind that

²⁰⁴ *SHG* 3.89.

²⁰⁵ For a definition of ‘tainted’ in this context, see section 3.3.2.

²⁰⁶ August. *De civ. D.* 14.23; *De Genesi ad litteram* 9.9; *De Genesi adversus Manicheos* 1.19.30; *De nuptiis et concupiscentia* 1.5.6, 1.7: Clark (1986: 371); Cooper and Leyser (2000: 542).

²⁰⁷ *SHG* 2.23-24.

²⁰⁸ *SHG* 1.173.

Avitus believed involved sex: he states that the rest of creation, including Adam and Eve themselves, were generated by God's will alone.²⁰⁹

In the *SHG* Avitus states that marriage also existed in prelapsarian Paradise.²¹⁰ On numerous occasions he refers to the two as "husband" and "wife".²¹¹ This echoes Augustine's interpretation of Genesis, and contrasts that of Ambrose and Jerome.²¹² As soon as Avitus recounts the creation of Eve, he has God bind her to Adam, pronouncing "let another not separate what God has joined and united".²¹³ However, Avitus makes clear that marriage in Paradise was not the same worldly institution as it was in his own day.²¹⁴ Without the existence of sexual desire and mortality, the marriage of prelapsarian Adam and Eve was an "eternal contract" bound by God's word alone, not tied up with any financial concerns because "the world itself was their dowry".²¹⁵ God's first words to the married couple, "live in harmonious devotion to one another and fill the world", and the subsequent discussion about Adam and Eve's progeny, implies that Avitus saw the purpose of their marriage to be reproduction.²¹⁶

In the *SHG*, Avitus uses adjectives such as "chaste", "modest" and "inviolable" to describe the sexuality of prelapsarian Adam and Eve.²¹⁷ For example, he states that the two participate in an "inviolable" form of marriage, a union heralded by "an angel's song...in honour of their chaste modesty".²¹⁸ In another example, Avitus describes the "chaste kisses" they share.²¹⁹ Avitus' use of these terms to describe sexuality contrasts significantly with how he depicts sex, marriage and reproduction after original sin. As is demonstrated further on in this chapter, later on in the same work, the *SHG*, Avitus laments extensively about the perils involved in sex, marriage and reproduction. He describes postlapsarian sex as a "disgusting union",²²⁰ involving "indecent impulses" and a "disgusting urge".²²¹ In another poem, the *CCL*, terms like "chaste",

²⁰⁹ *SHG* 1.27.

²¹⁰ Genesis does not specify whether Adam and Eve were married in Paradise. It simply notes that they were "united": 2:24.

²¹¹ For examples, see *SHG* 2.22, 3.98, 3.110.

²¹² Ambrose, *Exhortatio virginitatis* 6.36; Jer. *Ep.* 22.1.4; August. *De nuptiis et concupiscentia* 1.1.1: Clark (1999: 120).

²¹³ *SHG* 1.183-184. This looks forward to Mt. 19:6; Mk. 10:9.

²¹⁴ McBryne (2017: 144).

²¹⁵ *SHG* 1.188; 191-192.

²¹⁶ *SHG* 1.172; Gen. 1:28.

²¹⁷ *SHG* 1.181; 1.189-190; 2.237.

²¹⁸ *SHG* 1.181; 1.189-190.

²¹⁹ *SHG* 2.237.

²²⁰ *SHG* 2.30.

²²¹ *SHG* 2.272; 3.89.

“modest” and “inviolable” no longer describe sex, marriage and reproduction (and those who engage in it), but are instead used to depict abstainers from sex who *eschew* a life of marriage and reproduction.²²² I suggest that the reason sex and its related phenomena acquire negative connotations later in the *SHG* and in his other works is because of the introduction of sexual desire.

3.3 Sexual desire in Paradise

The topic of sexual desire features heavily throughout books two and three of the *SHG*, in which Avitus describes how it was introduced to humankind after both Adam and Eve bit the forbidden fruit.²²³ He expounds in long passages mere lines from Genesis concerning the nakedness of Adam and Eve and the shame they felt after the fall.²²⁴ I argue that Avitus believed sexual desire rendered the act of sex and its related phenomena ‘contaminated’.

3.3.1 The origins of sexual desire

Avitus makes it clear that he believed sexual did not exist in prelapsarian Paradise. In fact, books one and two indicate that according to Avitus, no desire of any kind existed before original sin. There was no need to experience desire, because the Garden of Eden was “a world filled with every perfection”.²²⁵ Avitus recounts that plants did not need water to grow,²²⁶ flowers were not withered by the sun,²²⁷ and any fruit picked from a tree automatically regenerated itself.²²⁸ Although unlimited flora and fauna existed for the pleasure of humans,²²⁹ Avitus comments that Adam and Eve:

“took their meals and sought food in a random way because no hunger compelled them and no empty stomach urged them to fill bodies weary with nourishment”.²³⁰

He later returns to the absence of hunger in book two of the *SHG* when Eve informs Satan that “God did not, as you think, urge hunger upon us”.²³¹ Avitus notes there was also no desire for

²²² *SHG* 1.181, 1.189-190, 2.237; *CCL* 204, 364, 367, 573-574.

²²³ McBryne (2017: 152) suggests that Avitus’ narration of Eve’s internal battle with herself while biting the apple hints at the first stirrings of sexual desire, the “sexual awakening” that she is to experience after the fall.

²²⁴ Gen. 2:25; 3:7, 10-11, 21.

²²⁵ *SHG* 1.53.

²²⁶ *SHG* 1.225-226.

²²⁷ *SHG* 1.233.

²²⁸ *SHG* 1.229-230; 2.8-9.

²²⁹ *SHG* 1.133-135; 1.304-309.

²³⁰ *SHG* 2.17-18.

²³¹ *SHG* 2.170.

sleep or even clothing in Paradise. Adam and Eve only slept for the purpose of enjoyment,²³² and had no need for clothes because they maintained a constantly pleasant body temperature.²³³ In short, according to Avitus, no kind of desire, sexual or non-sexual, was felt by humans in prelapsarian Paradise because they were completely fulfilled by what their maker had created for them.

Though original sin was caused by a desire, Avitus clarifies that this desire was non-sexual, and that it was introduced to them by Satan, when he spoke into Eve's "weaker ear" and "kindled her desire" to possess knowledge of good and evil.²³⁴ Augustine also emphasised that Satan was the instigator of this non-sexual desire in Adam and Eve.²³⁵ Book two of the *SHG* indicates Avitus' belief that sexual desire was one of the many disastrous consequences of original sin.²³⁶ Expounding Genesis 3:7, Avitus recounts that after both Adam and Eve had taken a bite of the apple, the very first thing they observed upon opening their eyes was the sexual desire of their genitalia, which Avitus describes as "indecent impulses".²³⁷ He elaborates:

"Their shame, at once distinguished or perhaps new born – for I am not sure how to put it – beheld for the first time their naked limbs. Their minds, conscious of their own sin, blushed, and the law of the flesh, which was now imposed on their members, struggled within them."²³⁸

Ian Wood has identified that this passage is very similar to Augustine's discussion in *De Genesi ad litteram* of Adam and Eve's initial recognition of their own nakedness, which made physically evident the sexual desire now imbued in their genitalia and caused them great

²³² *SHG* 2.10-11.

²³³ *SHG* 2.20.

²³⁴ *SHG* 2.225; Nodes (1984: 186). As Nodes has perceptively observed, Avitus wanted to demonstrate that Adam and Eve did not develop feelings of desire of their own accord but were overcome by the will of Satan. Avitus highlights the overwhelmingly evil capabilities of Satan for the purpose of making clear the helplessness of humankind in comparison. By assigning Satan such power, Avitus could emphasise the necessity for humans to rely on God, and thus demonstrate his own theological position against 'Semipelagianism', one of the many ecclesiastical controversies that existed in Gaul at the time of Avitus. For more, see Nodes (1984: 185-195).

²³⁵ For example, see *SHG* 2.225. The ascription of Satan with overwhelming power served one of Avitus' agendas in the *SHG* to emphasise the helplessness of the humankind and the necessity for humans to rely on God: Nodes (1984: 186).

²³⁶ *SHG* 2.22; 268.

²³⁷ *SHG* 2.272.

²³⁸ *SHG* 2.272-276.

shame.²³⁹ Like Augustine, Avitus was preoccupied with the topic of the newfound sexual desire felt by Adam and Eve, and returns to it further on in the poem.²⁴⁰

3.3.2 Sexual desire and the contamination of sex

I argue that Avitus imagined sexual desire contaminated the act of sex. In this context ‘contaminated’ and its synonym ‘tainted’ refer to a state in which a phenomenon, such as sex or marriage, has become morally impure or polluted by an external source. As stated above, though book one of the *SHG* implies that prelapsarian sex would have been a blameless act, in book two, after original sin, Avitus describes sex as the joining of “passionate sexes together in a disgusting union”.²⁴¹ Avitus does not explicitly state why he believed sex suddenly became “disgusting”. To supplement our knowledge, we can consult Augustine of Hippo, whose many late-fourth-, early-fifth-century writings about sex and sexual desire survive.²⁴² It is likely that Avitus was influenced by the ideas of Augustine on this matter; the respective studies of Nodes and Wood have demonstrated that Augustine’s theology significantly influenced Avitus’ ideas about original sin, grace and baptism as versified in the *SHG*.²⁴³

Like Avitus, in *De civitate Dei* Augustine depicts the first humans as “incorrupt” despite engaging in sex.²⁴⁴ This is because he imagined that prelapsarian sex would have been a harmonious and unfrenzied act initiated by the “command of the will”, a will that aligned with God’s.²⁴⁵ Augustine was troubled by sex as it existed after original sin because it was no longer an act that resulted from this divine will, but from what Peter Brown has termed “the twisted human will”.²⁴⁶ For Augustine, the unpredictable, unruly sensations of sexual desire are symptomatic of “the twisted human will” and that represent *discordiosum malum*, “discordant evil”.²⁴⁷

Broaching Augustine’s perspective can give us some insight into why Avitus considered sex to be “a disgusting union” after the fall. Though Augustine and Avitus diverge slightly in their

²³⁹ Compare *SHG* 2.272-276 with August. *De Genesi ad litteram* 11.32.42; Wood (2001a: 266-267).

²⁴⁰ *SHG* 3.4-89

²⁴¹ *SHG* 2.29-30.

²⁴² For example, see August. *De bono conjugali*; *De bono viduitatis*; *De civ. D.* 14; *De nuptiis et concupiscentia*; *De sancta virginitate*.

²⁴³ Nodes (1981), (1984: 185-195); Wood (2001a: 263-277).

²⁴⁴ August. *De civ. D.* 14.26.

²⁴⁵ August. *De civ. D.* 14.26; Brown (1988: 402); Harrison (2000: 176).

²⁴⁶ Brown (1988: 404).

²⁴⁷ August. *Contra Julianum* 4.84.49; *De civ. D.* 14.15.

beliefs about the existence of sexual desire in prelapsarian Paradise – in his later life Augustine believed that prelapsarian humans could feel sexual desire, but that it “coincided perfectly with the conscious will”,²⁴⁸ while Avitus did not believe any desire, sexual or non-sexual, existed in prelapsarian Paradise – both authors seem to have been nevertheless troubled by sexual desire as it is experienced by postlapsarian humans.

Like Augustine, Avitus believed Adam and Eve would have had complete control over their bodies in prelapsarian Paradise:

“The holy beginnings of human life kept the thoughts and feelings of those first creatures under control”.²⁴⁹

We can take the above statement to mean that if Avitus did believe sex could have existed in prelapsarian Paradise, he believed it would have been performed according to the human will. Also like Augustine, Avitus viewed postlapsarian sex as very different to its prelapsarian manifestation. He saw it as an act initiated independently of the human will, by “a disgusting urge [that] tries to prove your bodies foul”.²⁵⁰ These quotations suggest that Avitus was troubled by postlapsarian sex because he too recognised that it is no longer the result of the conscious will as God originally intended, but of the uncontrollable, frenzied emotions symptomatic of the “twisted human will” introduced after the first human transgression.²⁵¹ This can explain why Avitus describes sex as “chaste”, “modest” and “inviolable” at the beginning of the *SHG*, but “disgusting” towards the end of the *SHG* and in other works.²⁵² He believed that after original sin and the introduction of sexual desire, sex had become contaminated.

3.3.3 Sexual desire and the contamination of marriage and reproduction

According to Avitus, the introduction of sexual desire further contaminated the human experience of marriage and reproduction. This epiphenomenal effect is reflective of Avitus’ belief that sex, marriage and reproduction are mutually inclusive, a common notion held by most late-antique Christians at this time.²⁵³ When sex became a product of desire, and therefore

²⁴⁸ August. *Contra duas epistolas Pelagianorum* 1.10, 1.31, 1.35; *Contra Julianum* 1.68.5: Brown (1988: 402-403); Clark (1989: 34); Harrison (2000: 175).

²⁴⁹ *SHG* 2.35-36.

²⁵⁰ *SHG* 3.89.

²⁵¹ Brown (1988: 404).

²⁵² *SHG* 1.181, 1.189-190, 2.29-30, 2.237; *CCL* 168-169.

²⁵³ Foucault (1988); Brown (1988).

tainted, the institution in which sex is (theoretically) practiced, marriage, and a potential consequence of sex, reproduction and the resulting experiences of childbirth and parenthood, also became tainted. The newfound tainted nature of these phenomena is evidenced by the punishments God delivered to Eve.²⁵⁴

Marriage is described in the *SHG* as a “venerable law” in which Adam and Eve participated in prelapsarian Paradise.²⁵⁵ Yet further on in the same poem, after Avitus narrates original sin, he depicts marriage as a tainted, “depraved” institution.²⁵⁶ That Avitus believed marriage was epiphenomenally contaminated due to its association with the act of sex is evidenced by his clarification that Eve was condemned by God to be subjugated primarily in a sexual sense. Avitus has God pronounce to Eve:

“You will endure the domination of your husband in bed and fear your lord, whom I had given you as a mate. In subjection you will obey his commands and with bent head accustom yourself to his male pleasures.”²⁵⁷

According to Avitus, it is specifically “in bed” (i.e. in sex) where Eve was condemned to be dominated by Adam and his “male pleasures”.²⁵⁸ He expresses this idea again in the *CCL* when he recounts that Eve “served in a disgusting marriage-bed, as she endured wedlock”,²⁵⁹ The tainted nature of “the marriage bed” is a theme that also appears twice in a letter Avitus wrote to the Count Ansemundus on the rape of a nun.²⁶⁰ However, beyond the above quotation, Avitus never elaborates in the *SHG*, nor in his other works, on how exactly he imagined that a woman was subjugated to her husband in sexual intercourse on the marriage-bed. Avitus’ view that the tainted nature of sex caused the marital institution’s contamination is further demonstrated by his belief that a marriage not involving sex, known among scholars today as “spiritual marriages”, are praiseworthy and far preferable to conventional marriages.²⁶¹

²⁵⁴ *SHG* 3.137-152; Gen. 3:16.

²⁵⁵ *SHG* 1.180.

²⁵⁶ *SHG* 3.107.

²⁵⁷ *SHG* 3.140-141.

²⁵⁸ *SHG* 3.140; McBryne (2017: 144).

²⁵⁹ *CCL* 168-169.

²⁶⁰ *Ep.* 55 (MGH AA 84.7-8, 10).

²⁶¹ See Elliot (1995). Avitus makes two such references: *CCL* 22-23; *Ep.* 6 (MGH AA 34.20-21). The notion of spiritual marriages was a subject of much controversy, especially in the late-fourth century. For example, in *De bono coniugali* Augustine saw the potential for a chaste marriage to be beneficial, while John Chrysostom’s *Adversus eos qui apud se habent subintroductas virgines* demonstrates his deep contempt for the practice. For references to spiritual relationships in late-antique Gaul, both favourable and unfavourable, see Gregory of

Avitus writes that the introduction of sexual desire after the Fall that contaminated the act of sex also contaminated the reproductive process. It rendered what was once Adam and Eve's "happy seed", "tainted seed".²⁶² The procreative seed produced in sexual intercourse is no longer "happy" because it is the product of "a disgusting union", and carries within it the devastation of original sin.²⁶³ The idea that *concupiscentia* transmits original sin through the production of *semen* is very Augustinian.²⁶⁴ Avitus depicts a potential result of this seed, childbirth, as similarly contaminated, as evidenced by Eve's newly diminished experience of childbirth imposed upon her by God in Genesis 3:16:

"When your womb conceives and feels the growing life within it, you will testify to its burden with groans, and your uneasy belly will carry closed within you its growing load".²⁶⁵

But the pattern of contamination does not end with childbirth. Perils await the woman in motherhood too: Avitus notes that it is common for the child to die and the mother to weep for her "meaningless suffering".²⁶⁶

The original Genesis account and Avitus' extended versification makes clear that it was Eve's, rather than Adam's, experience of the sex-related processes of marriage and reproduction that was specifically diminished upon the introduction of original sin. Avitus implies that this is because Eve, at the coaxing of Satan, led her husband astray and helped initiate original sin, and by extension, sexual desire.²⁶⁷ As punishment for her initiatory role, God specifically ordered her to directly suffer the consequences of sexual desire: she must be subjugated to her husband in the marriage-bed and feel the pain of sexual reproduction and childbirth. It was common for late-antique theologians to justify Eve's punishment in Gen. 3:16 by claiming that

Tours, *Liber in gloria confessorum* 31, 41, 75, 108; *Ep.* from Licinius, Melanius, and Eustochium in Bailey (2012: 32-34).

²⁶² *SHG* 1.173; 2.277.

²⁶³ *SHG* 2.29-30; Rist (2014: 374).

²⁶⁴ August. *Contra Julianum* 4.4.34-4.8.44; *De nuptii et concupiscentia* 1.24.27; Rist (2014: 319).

²⁶⁵ *SHG* 3.143-144; Gen. 3:16.

²⁶⁶ *SHG* 3.152.

²⁶⁷ *SHG* 2.235-260.

she was the instigator of original sin.²⁶⁸ The claims made by Tertullian in *De cultu feminarum* is perhaps the most famous example of this tendency.²⁶⁹

Prelapsarian sex, along with marriage and reproduction, are depicted by Avitus as chaste, harmonious and painless in the *SHG*. After original sin, according to the *SHG* and Avitus' other works, these phenomena suddenly take on a more contaminated nature: sex becomes "a disgusting union", marriage is "depraved", and reproduction produces "tainted seed".²⁷⁰ I argue that the reason why Avitus believed this contamination occurred is because of the introduction of sexual desire.²⁷¹

3.4 Sexual desire after Paradise

Avitus believed the disastrous effects sexual desire had on sex and the associated processes of marriage and reproduction in the time of Adam and Eve extended into his own time. This belief indicates Avitus' subscription to the Augustinian doctrine of original sin.²⁷² In this section I demonstrate that the *SHG* is not the only text of Avitus' dealing with the topic of sexual desire: it is also addressed in the *CCL*, his letter collection and his sermons.

The prominence of sexual desire in the *CCL*, for example, a text dedicated to convincing his sister of the superiority of sexual renunciation, is not surprising. The poem emphasises to Fuscina the potential destructive and dangerous effects of sexual desire and sex. Such an approach was common at this time: many late-antique authors like Avitus embellished the 'badness' of sex and sexual desire for the purpose of emphasising the 'goodness' of sexual renunciation and virginity.²⁷³ One perpetrator we have already come across is Jerome.²⁷⁴ Though there are minimal examples of Avitus' references to sexual desire in his highly fragmented sermon collection, the presence of the theme of sexual desire in texts of this genre is also unsurprising. Bailey has shown that many of the sermons preached by Avitus'

²⁶⁸ See Ephrem, *Commentary on Genesis* 2.17.1, 2.20.2-3; Ambrose, *Hexameron* 11.50, 12.56, 13.62; August. *Contra Julianum* 6.25.

²⁶⁹ Tert. *De cultu feminarum* 1.1.

²⁷⁰ *SHG* 2.30; 3.107; 2.277.

²⁷¹ Brown (1988: 404).

²⁷² Nodes (1984: 186); Pollmann (2017: 67). For examples throughout his works in which Avitus makes an explicit connection between human sin and its derivation from Adam and Eve, see *SHG* 2.314-315, 2.400-407, 4.148-150; *Ep.* 7 (MGH AA 37.26-27). Note that the doctrine of original sin was not formally recognised in Gaul until the Council of Orange in 529.

²⁷³ Salisbury (1992: 28).

²⁷⁴ For examples, see Jer. *Adv. Iovinian.*; *Ep.* 22.

contemporary, Caesarius, focused on warning their audience of the dangers of sex and sexual desire.²⁷⁵ Lust was a widely-acknowledged vice in Gaul, as attested to especially in the writings of Cassian.²⁷⁶

3.4.1 Sexual desire and the contamination of sex

Just as Avitus believed that sexual desire contaminated the act of sex in Paradise, he also professed that it contaminated every act of sex since. His troubled attitude towards sex parallels the attitude we saw in chapter two Ambrose and Jerome expressed.²⁷⁷ Avitus writes of the “polluted” nature of sex in a letter to the Bishop of Grenoble on the topic of using old Arian churches as Catholic churches. Avitus analogises Arianism to a female “harlot” and Catholicism to a virginal bride of Christ. He claims that a harlot is so contaminated that if anyone is “joined to her body they are polluted”.²⁷⁸ While an analogy clearly employed to signify the poisonous state of the Arian Church, the pollution Avitus ascribes this hypothetical, adulterous woman nevertheless indicates the degree to which he believed adulterous sex was tainted.

Avitus’ fears about sexual desire and its potential to lead to sexual crimes and misdemeanours are further illustrated in his letters and poetry. For example, Avitus discusses the destructive dangers of sexual desire in a letter to the Burgundian count Ansemundus, in which he condemns an unnamed aristocratic man for sexually assaulting a nun.²⁷⁹ Avitus considered the crime to be one of fornication, which he describes as “damnable above all things...the human spirit can conceive of no greater wrong than this”.²⁸⁰ This is followed by Avitus’ embellished claim that leaving aside the fact that the man raped, defiled and impregnated the nun, he “sinned in the first degree” simply by lusting after her.²⁸¹ Avitus imagines that even a man “gazing lewdly” at a virgin can affect her commitment to chastity.²⁸² Such statements, although probably exaggerated for the purpose of amplifying the gravity of the crime perpetrated, at least demonstrate the passion with which Avitus blamed the sensation of sexual desire for

²⁷⁵ Bailey (2016: 23-43).

²⁷⁶ John Cassian, *De institutis coenobiorum* 6.

²⁷⁷ Ambrose, *De virginibus* 1.9; Jer. *Adv. Iovinian* 1.6, *Ep.* 79.9; Salisbury (1986: 281); Clark (1989: 29-30); Miller (1993: 29); Schulenberg (1998: 129).

²⁷⁸ *Ep.* 7 (MGH AA 37.20-21).

²⁷⁹ *Ep.* 55.

²⁸⁰ *Ep.* 55 (MGH AA 84.8-9).

²⁸¹ *Ep.* 55 (MGH AA 84.6).

²⁸² *Ep.* 55 (MGH AA 84.10-11).

causing sexual misconduct, and how readily he expressed his condemnation of sexual desire not just in poetry, but in letters to laymen, too.

Avitus also highlights the role sexual desire plays in causing sexual crimes in the *CCL*, through three clear examples.²⁸³ He firstly refers to the ordeal of the famous early Christian martyr Eugenia who, disguised as a monk, encounters the advances of a woman afire with a “mad, girlish love” roused in her by Satan.²⁸⁴ Having resisted the woman’s advances, Eugenia remains “ignorant of guilt”.²⁸⁵ The second is Joseph, who is seduced by Potiphar’s wife and is falsely charged with adultery, but maintains his innocence throughout the ordeal and is eventually rewarded.²⁸⁶

But the example Avitus dwells on most is that of Susanna, the famous biblical woman from the book of Daniel.²⁸⁷ He describes in detail the sexual desire of the two men who attempt to seduce her:

“The fire that burned basely in their hearts brought their two minds together in a common furnace of crime...[they] declared in turn the common desire that burned in both their hearts”.²⁸⁸

Avitus describes the sexual desire of the men as immensely powerful, so much so that even Susanna’s pleas and tears can not overcome the “obscene flames”.²⁸⁹ Avitus’ metaphorical description of sexual desire as fire recalls the description of the adulterous man in the letter to Ansemundus who was “afire with desire”.²⁹⁰ This is a metaphor that was widely employed by late-antique authors.²⁹¹ Although Avitus acknowledges Susanna is never actually defiled because of her brave choice to be falsely condemned for adultery rather than have her chastity

²⁸³ *CCL* 503-534 (Eugenia); 534-548 (Joseph); 549-620 (Susanna).

²⁸⁴ *CCL* 514; Hecquet-Noti (2011: 32-34).

²⁸⁵ *CCL* 531.

²⁸⁶ *CCL* 536.

²⁸⁷ *CCL* 549-620; Hecquet-Noti (2011: 35).

²⁸⁸ *CCL* 554-559.

²⁸⁹ *CCL* 570.

²⁹⁰ *Ep.* 55 (MGH AA 84.7).

²⁹¹ For examples, see Ambrose, *Ep.* 2.8, 2.11, 37.10, 63.26, 67.8; Jer. *Ep.* 22.6-8; Brown (1988: 17-20); Miller (1993: 24-28).

violated, the mere lust of the men is nevertheless described as an “evil deed” itself.²⁹² Like Eugenia and Joseph, Susanna is rewarded for resisting the sexual desires of these men.²⁹³

Yet Avitus imagined that sexual desire contaminated even ‘legitimate’ sex performed between a husband and wife. Referring to the importance of abiding by the commitment of marriage, Avitus states that the incontinence of a married couple, though not sinful in itself, is risky. In a letter he claims that sexually active people are more vulnerable to the temptations of Satan than non-sexually active people, because Satan can “make them forget their vows” and engage in illegitimate sex.²⁹⁴ In a sermon dedicated to Rogations, referring to Amos 3:12, Avitus preaches that *concupiscentia* can lead humans into the “mouth” of Satan.²⁹⁵ Another example can be found in the *CCL* when, employing the same adjective *obscenus* (“disgusting”) to describe sex as used in the *SHG*, Avitus recounts that the fallen Eve, though married to Adam, “served in a disgusting [marriage] bed”.²⁹⁶ He imagines the captivity Eve endured in marriage and the horrors of her experience in childbirth.²⁹⁷

Avitus’ disgust towards legitimate sex is further communicated in a letter discussing the case of possible incest, in which a man married the sister of his deceased wife.²⁹⁸ Avitus harshly judges the man and woman involved. Although the two had been lawfully married for thirty years by the time the matter was brought to his attention, Avitus describes the husband as “adulterous” for engaging in “illicit sexual relations”.²⁹⁹ Throughout the letter Avitus continues to condemn the man for his “considerable love of the flesh”.³⁰⁰ However, most telling is Avitus’ statement that sexual desire is not an appropriate feeling for an older man:

“It is quite right that after many years he should at the very least check his criminal sexual appetites, since, at the approach of old age, he ought to have reined in his legitimate ones too.”³⁰¹

²⁹² *CCL* 563.

²⁹³ *CCL* 148.

²⁹⁴ *Ep.* 4 (MGH AA 31.6-7).

²⁹⁵ *Serm.* 7 (MGH AA 115.20).

²⁹⁶ *CCL* 169.

²⁹⁷ *CCL* 166-169.

²⁹⁸ *Ep.* 18.

²⁹⁹ *Ep.* 18 (MGH AA 49.29). Such a harsh judgement would not have been unusual at the time, however. According to Shanzer and Wood (2002: 286), it was customary for such marriages to be considered incestuous by Christians at this time (see *Cod. Theod.* 3.12.2).

³⁰⁰ *Ep.* 18 (MGH AA 49.31).

³⁰¹ *Ep.* 18 (MGH AA 50.2-3).

We can assume that Avitus believed the old man's "sexual appetites" to be "criminal" because he recognised there was little to no possibility for reproduction to result from the performance of sex in his old age.³⁰² Avitus' belief echoes that of Ambrose and Jerome, who were also firm on the point that sex should only be performed for the purposes of reproduction.³⁰³

3.4.2 Sexual desire and the contamination of marriage and reproduction

Avitus also believed that the processes of marriage and reproduction, and the resulting experience of childbirth, which had been contaminated by original sin and the introduction of sexual desire, continued to be tainted in his own day. Avitus expresses this view most explicitly in the *CCL*, when he describes marriage and reproduction as "ways of the tainted world".³⁰⁴ Avitus' discussion of these "ways" mostly pertains to female experiences. This is because, like many other authors of his time, Avitus connected the contamination of marriage and reproduction, and the resultingly diminished experience of married mothers, to God's punishment to Eve condemning her to subjugation in marriage and pain in childbirth in Genesis 3:16.³⁰⁵ For example, in the *CCL* he writes:

"Nor are you touched by the emotion that overcame Eve, the mother of both offspring and death that day she bore a dead child and with it a guilt that lived on afterwards. She was subject to a man and doomed to suffer a master in her chamber. She served in a disgusting bed, as she endured wedlock."³⁰⁶

This passage is inserted into a longer tirade warning his sister Fuscina about "the bonds of marriage".³⁰⁷

The primary way in which Avitus believed the institution of marriage to be tainted was through the subjugation he believed wives suffered at the hands of their husbands. The subordination of wives to their husbands was indeed a part of reality in late-antique Gallic culture, as it was in most parts of Europe at the time, and as it had been for centuries.³⁰⁸ In the aristocratic circles

³⁰² *Ep.* 18 (MGH AA 50.14-15).

³⁰³ Ambrose, *Expositio in Evangelium Secundum Lucam* 1.43-45; Jer. *Adv. Iovinian.* 1.20.

³⁰⁴ *CCL* 157.

³⁰⁵ Clark (1984: 168); Pagels (1989: 133).

³⁰⁶ *CCL* 166-169.

³⁰⁷ *CCL* 156.

³⁰⁸ Hecquet-Noti (2011: 17).

occupied by Avitus, marriage was a basic tool used to forge strategic alliances between families – the typical woman was expected to move from a place of subordination to her father to a place of subordination to her husband.³⁰⁹

Thus, Avitus described the lot of a married woman as an unequal one she must endure alone and without support.³¹⁰ In the *CCL* he likens a married woman to a captive, who “bears the empty name of wife and in a hollow charade is called a consort and an equal”.³¹¹ He communicates this same idea in a highly fragmented letter to Arigius, an aristocrat, on the topic of a ceremony dedicating a new Church.³¹² He analogises an occurrence (the details of which are now lost), probably something to do with the ceremony,³¹³ to the burdensome obligation of a bride “who had to be joined in whatever way to such a husband, as she was promised”.³¹⁴ Avitus’ observation that the bride is subjugated to her husband “in whatever way” implies his belief that wives are often *sexually* subjugated to their husbands. This aligns with Avitus’ emphasis in the *SHG* on the subjugation of Eve in “the marriage bed”. Chapter two revealed that Ambrose and Jerome also drew upon the subjugation involved in the marital institution in their works advocating sexual renunciation: Ambrose described wives as slaves and Jerome often referred to the “yoke” of wedlock.³¹⁵ Unlike Avitus, these men referred to the burden of marriage in relation to both men and women.

Avitus additionally believed childbirth, as the result of sex and reproduction, maintained its tainted state since it was contaminated by the introduction of sexual desire in Paradise. As evidence for this Avitus draws upon the two main punishments for Eve outlined in the *SHG*: the pain women suffer in childbirth and the high chance that their children will die.³¹⁶ These scenarios were of course painful realities for late-antique women, as they have been for all women throughout history.³¹⁷ Although Parkin observes that scholars have historically tended to exaggerate the mortality rate for mothers in childbirth in the ancient world, the rates were

³⁰⁹ Vuolanto (2019: 278).

³¹⁰ Hecquet-Noti (2011: 17).

³¹¹ *CCL* 170-171.

³¹² *Ep.* 50.

³¹³ Shanzer and Wood (2002: 326) provide some possibilities as to Avitus’ meaning.

³¹⁴ *Ep.* 50 (MGH AA 78.27-28).

³¹⁵ Ambrose, *De virginibus* 1.6.27; Jer. *Adv. Iovinian.* 1.7, 1.11; *Ep.* 22.6, 22.22; Hunter (2007: 226).

³¹⁶ *SHG* 3.137-152.

³¹⁷ Cooper (2013: 530).

still significantly high.³¹⁸ Infant mortality rates were much more common: Parkin estimates that in the time of the Roman empire about 45% of children died before reaching the age of five.³¹⁹

In the *CCL*, immediately after Avitus discusses the perils of married life for women, he discusses in more detail the dangers of childbirth. Avitus describes how the swelling of the baby in the womb “inflicts terrible pain on the mother”.³²⁰ He goes on to imagine many possible disastrous scenarios involving the death of the infant or the mother herself. Just as Eve “bore a dead child”, Avitus cites that “it often happens that as she [a woman] groans she gives birth to dead children”.³²¹ Avitus notes that is also common for either both the mother and the infant to die, or for the mother alone to die.³²² Avitus imagines that the latter case becomes more tragic if the offspring dies in childhood rather than infancy.³²³ However, the most disastrous consequence of childbirth, in Avitus’ opinion, is the possibility that the child can die before baptism, and thereby receive “that harsh sentence to hell”.³²⁴ In this instance Avitus identifies the child as “the son of damnation”.³²⁵

Avitus also briefly alludes to the suffering of women who have lost their children in book five of the *SHG*. He cites two instances of children perishing: firstly, when God strikes down the Egyptian children, and secondly, when the Egyptians plan their revenge on the Israelites for this act. In both instances Avitus only notes the reactions of the mothers, not the fathers, to the death of their children. When the bodies of male Egyptians youths littered the streets, Avitus observes that it was only the mothers who “ran weeping to their dead bodies”.³²⁶ Similarly, the Egyptians’ revenge speech after the flight of the Hebrews makes a special reference to the agony of the mothers of dead children. As he does in the *CCL*, Avitus imagines a scenario in which both mother and child die:

³¹⁸ Parkin (1992: 103-105), (2013: 46). Parkin conjectures that for every 1000 live births in ancient Rome approximately 10-15 involved the death of a mother.

³¹⁹ Parkin (2013: 47).

³²⁰ *CCL* 175-176.

³²¹ *CCL* 182.

³²² *CCL* 183-185.

³²³ *CCL* 186-189.

³²⁴ *CCL* 192.

³²⁵ *CCL* 193.

³²⁶ *SHG* 5.292.

“Let each see her own child fall before her eyes and then, offering her neck, pray to meet death herself.”³²⁷

Ambrose and Jerome similarly represent the tainted nature of reproduction by warning against the resulting pains of labour and the potential for mothers and infants to die in the process of childbirth.³²⁸

Avitus further believed reproduction to be contaminated because it increases the population of humans born in sin. “Tainted seed”, produced in sexual intercourse and fuelled by sexual desire, generates offspring who are stained with original sin.³²⁹ Avitus writes of the contamination of human seed throughout both his letters and his poetry. It is their tainted seed that cause humans “to learn the future through unlawful arts” and caused Eutyches to preach heresy.³³⁰ Because human seed contains within it original sin, and therefore the inevitability of mortality, Avitus even refers to it on several occasions as the “seed of death”.³³¹ Avitus’ lamentation of the reproduction of offspring from this tainted seed recalls Augustine’s contention that concupiscence drives original sin because it produces procreative seed.³³²

Avitus’ preoccupation with the dangers of sexual desire and the tainted nature of sex, marriage and reproduction in his own time and throughout human history, as indicated throughout many of his work, mirrors his preoccupation with these same experiences immediately before and after the fall of Adam and Eve, as shown in the *SHG*. Avitus believed that the devastating effects of original sin, such as the introduction of sexual desire, had universal effects. His writings attribute sexual desire with the contamination of sex, marriage and reproduction not just for Adam and Eve, but for all of humankind too.

3.5 Conclusion

The above examples demonstrated that one particular aspect of sexuality, sexual desire, features prominently across Avitus’ surviving works, including the *SHG*, the *CCL*, some letters and a sermon. The *SHG* betrays Avitus’ interest in the origins of sexual desire; the *CCL* emphasises its role in causing the tainted nature of sex, marriage and reproduction; and several

³²⁷ *SHG* 5.489-490.

³²⁸ Jer. *Adv. Iovinian* 1.7, 1.12, *Ep.* 22.13, 22.18, 22.21; Ambrose, *De virginibus* 1.6.25-26, 30.

³²⁹ *SHG* 2.277.

³³⁰ *SHG* 2.278-279. For more references to heresy as something derived from tainted seed, see *Ep.* 26 (MGH AA 57.11); 46 (MGH AA 76.10).

³³¹ E.g. *SHG* 1.8, 5.289; *CCL* 437.

³³² August. *Contra Julianum* 4.4.34-4.8.44; *De nuptii et concupiscentia* 1.24.27; Rist (2014: 319).

letters and a sermon discuss the dangers of sexual desire in both a literal and metaphorical context. By drawing upon this wide range of texts, I argued that Avitus was troubled by sexual desire because of its frenzied and uncontrollable nature, and because he believed that it contaminated the once “chaste”, “modest” and “inviolable” act of sex and the related phenomena of marriage and reproduction.³³³ Avitus’ belief in the unruly nature of sexual desire is quite an Augustinian idea, while his preoccupation with the tainted nature of sex, marriage and reproduction parallels more the attitudes of Ambrose and Jerome.

³³³ *SHG* 1.181, 1.189-190, 2.237.

4. “Who is so barbaric as not to envy the happiness of this virgin?”: Female Sexual Renunciation in the Works of Avitus³³⁴

4.1 Introduction

The second aspect of sexuality I have identified as a pervading theme throughout Avitus’ works is sexual renunciation, a primary tenet of asceticism. Sexual renunciants in this case can refer to those in a state of virginity, who have never had sex, or those in a state of chastity, who, though not virgins, have committed to celibacy.³³⁵ In this chapter, I present the many instances in which Avitus refers to sexual renunciation by reconstructing the specific beliefs he held about the topic. I demonstrate that Avitus believed by renouncing sex, and the related processes of marriage and reproduction, one can minimise the effects of sexual desire, an inevitable sensation he considered among the gravest consequences of the first human transgression.³³⁶ I firstly address why Avitus believed sexual renunciants, specifically female renunciants, can curtail the destructive consequences of sexual desire, and by extension, original sin. I then identify which effects of sexual desire Avitus contended renunciants can minimise (namely, the contamination of sex, marriage and reproduction) and the spiritual benefits he imagined renunciants can reap from this minimisation. I conclude by showing that Avitus subscribed to the popular idea advanced by the Church Fathers Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine that virgins enjoy more divine favour than their marriage-bound counterparts.

Avitus gives the most attention to sexual renunciation in the *CCL*, because it is a poem designed to convince its addressee, Avitus’ sister Fuscina, to maintain her virginal lifestyle. Avitus also treats the topic in numerous letters, including one consoling King Gundobad on the death of his virginal daughter, and one regarding the case of a nun who was raped. While the *SHG* briefly refers to the topic of virginity through its references to the Virgin Mary and the metaphor of the virgin bride of Christ as the Church, references that also feature in Avitus’ letters and sermons, it otherwise does not directly address sexual renunciation.³³⁷ Rather, the *SHG* provides an example of the fate that female sexual renunciants can avoid by resisting sexual desire – namely, Eve’s painful experience in marriage, reproduction and childbirth.

³³⁴ *Ep.* 5 (MGH AA 33.8).

³³⁵ Note that on one occasion (*CCL* 574) Avitus uses *casta* to describe married woman who are faithful to their husbands. Dailey (2015: 54) has demonstrated that Gregory of Tours (*Vita Patrum* 7.1) also used *casta* in this way.

³³⁶ This belief of Avitus’ is detailed well in *Serm.* 7 (MGH AA 114-115).

³³⁷ *SHG* 1.160-169; *Ep.* 7 (MGH AA 37.14-16), 50 (MGH AA 78.27-28); *Serm.* 2 (MGH AA 105.13-22).

To understand Avitus' belief in the potential for sexual renunciants to minimise the effects of sexual desire and original sin, it is instructive to briefly consider his theological position on the possibility for humans to attain grace. As Nodes has suggested, Avitus adhered to the Augustinian doctrine preaching that humankind are helpless because they bear the long lasting stain of original sin, and consequently must rely on the grace of God to achieve salvation, made possible through Christ.³³⁸ Before Christ's sacrifice on the cross, Avitus believed that humankind was denied access to heaven. In book three of the *SHG* he likens Adam to the rich man in the Parable recorded in the Gospel of Luke: both are 'dead' through sin, and have no means of attaining salvation.³³⁹ However, for the remainder of the *SHG*, and throughout his other works, Avitus emphasises that human nature are no longer doomed as Adam was because salvation is now possible. This is encapsulated by Avitus' comment in a letter that "for as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive".³⁴⁰

According to the beliefs of Augustine and Avitus, it is Christ who initiates the process of reconciliation through salvation, while the human sinner assumes a predominantly passive role.³⁴¹ One way in which humans are given the means to achieve salvation is through baptism,³⁴² a sacrament that Nodes and Wood have demonstrated was central to Avitus' theological position.³⁴³ I suggest Avitus' works imply that, like Augustine, he saw sexual renunciation as "another type of holiness"; another path to salvation that God gifts to humans.³⁴⁴ For Avitus, sexual renunciation, which "can almost imitate martyrdom", can render the renunciant "perfect in immortal longevity".³⁴⁵ I argue that just as Avitus believed sexual renunciation is a gift from God that can allow one to achieve salvation, so he believed it is a gift that can enable one to curtail one of the most destructive obstacles to achieving salvation: sexual desire. Avitus' belief that God's grace plays a significant role in humankind's battle with sexual desire is illustrated by his sermon dedicated to day one of the Rogations, in which

³³⁸ Nodes (1984: 185, 193-194). For more on Augustine's complex theology of grace and salvation, see Cooper and Leyser (2000: 536-551); Wetzel (2012: 339-352).

³³⁹ Lk. 16:19-31; Nodes (1984: 189).

³⁴⁰ *Ep.* 1.4. This letter, *Contra Arrianos*, does not appear as part of Avitus' letters collection in MGH AA. It can be found in Shanzer and Wood (2002: 167).

³⁴¹ Nodes (1984: 190, 192).

³⁴² Avitus describes baptism as a gift prepared by Christ in *SHG* 4.653.

³⁴³ Nodes (1981: 109), (1984: 194); Wood (2001a: 263-277). Baptism is figuratively represented in the *SHG* by the flood that cleansed sinners during the time of Noah, and the waters of the Red Sea that drowned the Egyptians during the time of Moses.

³⁴⁴ August. *De bono coniugali* 2, 24, 35; *De sancta virginitate* 21, 32, 41-47.

³⁴⁵ *Ep.* 6 (MGH AA 34.32, 35.5).

he describes how, even if a human is led by sexual desire into the “mouth” of Satan, the compassion of God can retrieve them from the brink of sin.³⁴⁶

4.2 Why *female* sexual renunciation?

The reason this study is limited to investigating how Avitus conceived of specifically *female* sexual renunciation is due to the nature of the surviving source material. The sources that we have on this topic predominantly concern females only. It is likely, however, that even if more of Avitus’ writings about sexuality did survive, females would still feature more than males. As shown in chapter two, men have long concerned themselves with the business of the sexuality of females.

We can imagine, then, when females in Gaul increasingly began to embrace asceticism and sexual renunciation, men like Avitus felt compelled to comment. Indeed, a number of Gallic females appear to have vowed celibacy during the time of Fuscina, some of whom include the ‘abbess’ Severiana, probably the daughter of Sidonius Apollinaris, and Yole, who established a monastery at La Balme.³⁴⁷ In the sixth century, the first rule for nuns, published by Caesarius for use by his sister Caesaria, was adopted by monasteries in Aries, Poitiers, Metz and Laon.³⁴⁸ From this time onwards, our sources attest to the existence of many monastic noblewomen in Gaul, such as Monegund, Radegund, Chlothild, Basina, Theudechild, Gertrude, Austreberta, and Aldegonde.³⁴⁹

That the majority of examples of Gallic ascetic females we know of appear to have been *noble* can be explained by the fact that a close relationship between asceticism and the Gallic nobility existed at this time.³⁵⁰ In fact, Bartlett has shown that the Gallic nobility were more inclined

³⁴⁶ *Serm.* 7 (MGH AA 115.18-23). Avitus is referring here to Am. 3:12.

³⁴⁷ CCL 85-86; Sid. Apoll. *Ep.* 2.12.2; *Vita patrum Jurensium* 1.19; Gregory of Tours, *Vita patrum* 1.1. CCL 85-89.

³⁴⁸ Caesarius of Arles, *Regula ad virgines*: Coon (1997: 121-122); Amt (2013: 183).

³⁴⁹ Gregory of Tours, *Vita patrum* 19 (Monegund); Gregory of Tours, *Hist.* 3.6-7, 6.34, 7.36, 9.39, 40, Venantius Fortunatus, *Vita Radegundis*, Baudonivia, *De vita sancti Radegundis* (Radegund); Gregory of Tours, *Hist.* 9.39-43 (Chlothild and Basina); Gregory of Tours, *Hist.* 4.26 (Theudechild); *Vita sanctae Geretrudis* (Gertrude); *De sancta Austreberta* (Austreberta); *Vita Aldegundis* (Aldegonde). For more, see Dailey (2015).

³⁵⁰ Hecquet-Noti (2011: 19); Vuolanto (2016: 151). This tradition of the noble, female ascetic has its roots in the late-fourth, early-fifth century, as exemplified by the example of Roman aristocratic women Marcella, Melania the Elder and Paula, and later, Eustochium, Melania the Younger and Demetrias: Vuolanto (2019: 276). Indeed, wealth enabled the ascetic female to practice acts of generous almsgiving and Church patronage. Melania the Younger is a famous example: Dunn (2014a: 110-111). For other examples, see Clark (1986: 175-228); Osiek (2005: 347-370); Cooper (2007: 165-189).

towards asceticism and monasticism than their Italian counterparts.³⁵¹ With the imperial court no longer present in Gaul, those from aristocratic families like the *Avitii* had to seek other positions of power for themselves, which they found in the ecclesiastical hierarchy.³⁵² For noble females, who were excluded from the clergy and liturgical practices, this often meant joining a monastery and embracing asceticism.³⁵³ While females did not have access to the same opportunities as males in the Church, they could still gather some prestige for themselves through embracing asceticism and sexual renunciation: as Bailey has pointed out, since the Gallic church hierarchy depended on lifestyle, rather than formal ordination, asceticism allowed one “to claim a status akin or sometimes even superior to clergy”.³⁵⁴ The female renunciant could find a point of comparison between herself and the more authoritative religious man through a shared spirit of renunciation.³⁵⁵ In the patriarchal culture of late-antique Gaul, in which power was inextricably linked with the Church, it is unsurprising that Avitus, and later bishops such as Gregory and Fortunatus, felt compelled to comment.

4.3 The renunciation of sex

Avitus knew that sex will never be the “chaste”, “modest” and “inviolable” act it was in prelapsarian Paradise, because sexual desire exists and is an inevitable, devastating reality for all of humankind.³⁵⁶ To return to a state of perfect chastity, he believed sex must be renounced completely. For this to be achieved, the aspiring renunciant must demonstrate a sense of willpower against temptation that Adam and Eve did not in the Garden of Eden: Fuscina is pointedly reminded that she is not to be overcome “by the emotion that overcame Eve”.³⁵⁷

³⁵¹ Bartlett (2001: 201-216). For more, see Salzman (2001: 359-385); Dunn (2014b: 293-313).

³⁵² Shanzer and Wood (2002: 6).

³⁵³ Bailey (2016: 27). Many Church Councils discussed the involvement of women in ecclesiastical matters. For example, Canon 26 of the Council of Epaone, over which Avitus himself presided, prohibited deaconesses from being consecrated.

³⁵⁴ Bailey (2016: 22, 32). Evidence for this, for example, comes from law codes: e.g. *Cod. Theod.* 5.3. However, Bailey (2016: 22) also notes that this was not always the case, and that asceticism could be a risky, complex and ambiguous lifestyle. For more on the topic of female sexual renunciants and power, see Clark’s classic article ‘Ascetic Renunciation and Feminine Advancement: A Paradox of Late Ancient Christianity’, reprinted in Clark (1986: 175-208).

³⁵⁵ Bailey (2016: 43).

³⁵⁶ *SHG* 1.181; 1.189-190; 2.237.

³⁵⁷ *CCL* 166. The connection between female sexual renunciation and Eve finds its focus in the notion of the Virgin Mary as the “New Eve”. Not only did Mary’s obedience and resistance against temptation directly contradict the behaviour of Eve, but Mary, as the bearer of Christ the saviour, was seen to be the source that provided salvation from the death that Eve, through her sin, brought into the world. Sexual renunciants, or more specifically, virgins, were perceived to be imitators of Mary, the quintessential virgin: Cooper (2007: 106-108). For examples of Mary as the ‘new Eve’ in early-Christian texts, see Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 3.22.4; Tert. *De virginibus velandis* 5, *De carne Christi* 17; Jer. *Ep.* 22.21; Dunn (2007b: 478). Augustine deviated from this idea, tending to depict Mary as representative of the Church, rather than the new Eve: Vuolanto (2016: 76). Avitus never refers to Mary as the new Eve.

However, as articulated by Augustine, the struggle facing sexual renunciants is greater than the struggle faced by prelapsarian Adam and Eve, because renunciants now have to contend with the “twisted human will”, an outcome of original sin.³⁵⁸ The “twisted human will” is most poignantly represented by the frenzied, wayward sexual desires of the human body.

However, in spite of the odds stacked up against them, Avitus believed humans are capable of resisting sexual desire and maintaining their commitment to celibacy. All they have to do is demonstrate enough willpower to overcome the “twisted human will”. This belief is communicated in the *CCL* through anecdotes involving the triumph of willpower over sexual desire. For instance, Avitus presents the examples of Old Testament figures Joseph and Susanna. Though not sexual renunciants, Avitus describes how these praiseworthy persons “learned the rewards of a steadfast heart” when they exhibited willpower in the face of sexual desire.³⁵⁹ Joseph resisted the temptations of Potiphar’s wife and Susanna “overcame the improper advances of two old men and their conspiracy of passion”.³⁶⁰

Avitus demonstrates his confidence in the willpower of sexual renunciants in the most detail when he imagines their resistance against sexual desire in a militaristic context. In a long passage in the *CCL*, Avitus depicts Fuscina, a “maiden of God”, in battle against the sexual desires of her own body.³⁶¹ Instead of traditional armour, Avitus imagines Fuscina is “embellished here by modesty, there by faith”, with “justice” as her cloak, “the Word” as her sword, and “precious modesty” as her girdle.³⁶² To enhance his depiction, Avitus cites Prudentius’ *Psychomachia*, a poem which also portrays a battle between the personifications of virginity and sexual desire:

“Virginity came forward, armed and powerful in the fullness of her might. Foul desire pursued her and vainly challenged her to fight”.³⁶³

³⁵⁸ Brown (1988: 404).

³⁵⁹ *CCL* 548.

³⁶⁰ *CCL* 550-551; 603-620. In this section, Avitus also narrates the example of Eugenia (503-533) the virgin who disguised herself as a monk. However, in his narration of the example, sexual desire does not factor as a temptation for Eugenia to resist.

³⁶¹ *CCL* 363.

³⁶² *CCL* 364.

³⁶³ *CCL* 373-375; Prudent. *Psychomachia* 40-108.

He concludes the passage by inserting Fuscina into the Prudentius narrative, writing: “I hope the jealous snake will find you such a warrior when you are challenged”.³⁶⁴ This appeal recalls those we have seen in chapter two Jerome makes in his letters to Eustochium and Demetrias.³⁶⁵ Avitus’ militaristic depiction of the sexual renunciant’s battle to maintain willpower in the face of temptation attests to his belief in the immensely dangerous nature of sexual desire. Yet the victory of Joseph, Susanna, and the personified virginity in the above examples also indicates Avitus’ belief in the potential for humans to succeed in committing to sexual renunciation. By exhibiting willpower strong enough to overcome the “twisted human will”, renunciants can resist the temptations of sexual desire, not engage in the act of sex, and reclaim the state of chastity once experienced by prelapsarian Adam and Eve.

4.4 The renunciation of marriage and reproduction

Avitus believed other disastrous effects of sexual desire, such as the contamination of marriage and reproduction, can be avoided by sexual renunciation. Believing marriage and reproduction to have existed in Paradise as morally good practices, Avitus surmised that the introduction of sexual desire after original sin contaminated these sexual epiphenomena. Avitus interpreted the two punishments to Eve recorded in Genesis 3:16, subjugation to her husband and pain in childbirth, to be evidence of this contamination. However, Avitus argued that because female sexual renunciants do not succumb to desire like Eve did, and do not engage in the act of sex, they do not have to suffer the punishments in marriage and reproduction Eve was dealt. Avitus elaborates on these particular benefits of sexual renunciation in great detail throughout many of his works. The idea that a female sexual renunciant can avoid the fate of Eve was a common one and taken up especially by Ambrose and Jerome.³⁶⁶

Avitus observed that Eve’s subjugation to Adam was an unfortunate dynamic reflected in the marital institution of his own time. Avitus saw the married woman as a “captive” to her husband; she is “forced to endure an unequal lot”.³⁶⁷ By remaining unmarried, the sexual renunciant is not subject to such a fate.³⁶⁸ Avitus’ recognises this in the *CCL* when he describes

³⁶⁴ *CCL* 374-375.

³⁶⁵ *Jer. Ep.* 22.3, 5, 39; 130.5, 8, 13. However, note that towards the end of his life, Jerome expressed more anxiety about the sensation of sexual desire, and did not believe it could ever be truly overcome: *Dialogus adversus Pelagianos* 2.24.

³⁶⁶ Ambrose, *De viduis* 13.81; *Jer. Ep.* 22.18-19, 130.8. See also Cyprian, *De habitu virginum* 22; John Chrysostom, *Adversus eos qui apud se habent subintroductas virgines* 11: Clark (1999: 107-108).

³⁶⁷ *CCL* 170-172.

³⁶⁸ Cooper (2013: 530).

Fuscina as a woman “bent to bear a yoke but not to accept the bonds of marriage”.³⁶⁹ Although Fuscina is burdened by the yoke of desire, sexual and non-sexual, this fate is not so disastrous as the captivity and bondage that await her if she succumbs to the desire for partnership and gets married. Avitus appears particularly preoccupied with Fuscina’s avoidance of *sexual* domination by her husband: he praises Fuscina for spurning “the marriage bed” of “the tainted world”,³⁷⁰ a reference to the marriage bed upon which we saw in chapter three Eve was forced to endure sexual domination by her husband Adam.³⁷¹

But Avitus notes in his poetry and letters that the sexual renunciant is not without some kind of intimate partner. When praising Fuscina for rejecting the tainted marriage bed, Avitus describes how she gains “Christ as a spouse”.³⁷² Fuscina can harbour for him “a holy love” untainted by the lust that typically accompanies marital love.³⁷³ Avitus here employs the same bride of Christ *topos* Ambrose and Jerome did.³⁷⁴ At the beginning of the *CCL* Avitus narrates that Fuscina’s transformation into a bride of Christ coincided with her formal commitment to chastity at aged ten, around the age when the family of an aristocratic girl would typically start arranging her future.³⁷⁵ Avitus addresses Fuscina: “you are enrolled as consort, are wedded to a mighty King”,³⁷⁶ and continues the metaphor by detailing how Christ adorns Fuscina with grace in the same way a bride is adorned with jewels on her wedding day.³⁷⁷ He again refers to the bride of Christ *topos* when retelling the Parable of the Ten Virgins, in which he imagines the five wise maidens as the brides, and the groom for whom they are prepared as Christ.³⁷⁸ The *topos* is repeated in a letter to Ansemundus, when he describes the nun who was raped as “a consecrated bride of Christ”.³⁷⁹ Although it is impossible to grasp the extent to which Avitus genuinely believed in the possibility for virgins to be intangibly married to Christ, his employment of this *topos* at the very least indicates the divine favour he thought renunciants were entitled to, perhaps because he was conscious of the effort required to maintain chastity in the midst of worldly desires.

³⁶⁹ *CCL* 156.

³⁷⁰ *CCL* 157.

³⁷¹ *SHG* 3.140-141.

³⁷² *CCL* 158.

³⁷³ *CCL* 158.

³⁷⁴ Ambrose, *De virginibus* 1.5.20-23, 1.6.31, 1.7.37, 1.9.52, 1.12.65; Jer. *Ep.* 22.1-2, 5, 16, 24-26, 28-29, 38.

³⁷⁵ Hecquet-Noti (2011: 23); Vuolanto (2015: 99).

³⁷⁶ *CCL* 66.

³⁷⁷ Avitus specifically compares the wickedness of worldly adornments with the goodness of heavenly adornments in the previous stanza, quoting Isaiah Is. 51:6-9.

³⁷⁸ *CCL* 442-502.

³⁷⁹ *Ep.* 55 (MGH AA 84.9-10).

Another effect of sexual desire that Avitus believed female sexual renunciants can avoid is the emotional and physical pain involved in reproduction and its consequences, childbirth and motherhood. Avitus observes throughout his works that the tainted nature of sex can result in perilous circumstances in childbirth, including intense pain in labour, the death of a child in infancy or childhood, or the death of a mother herself.³⁸⁰ Avitus connects these disastrous scenarios back to the contamination of reproduction after original sin and God's punishment to Eve recorded in Genesis 3:16. But Avitus reminds Fuscina in the *CCL* she does not have to suffer these consequences if she maintains her resistance against sexual desire and does not participate in sex.³⁸¹ Anticipating Fuscina's sorrow at missing the opportunity to produce children of her own, Avitus consoles her: "you will not weep when deprived of the pledges of your fecund life".³⁸² This is because as a sexual renunciant Fuscina has the potential "to produce the kind of offspring that no sad misfortune can ever take away."³⁸³ We can see here that in the same way Avitus deemed the renunciant who eschews marriage a bride of Christ, he assigned the renunciant who does not produce children with the ability to instead give birth to longer-lasting, more fruitful, 'spiritual' offspring.³⁸⁴ Avitus writes that rather than producing *semen* tainted with the original sin of Adam and Eve, sexual renunciants cultivate a kind of "well-nourished seed" that "yields fruit a hundredfold".³⁸⁵ Like the bride of Christ *topos*, the assignment of renunciants with spiritual offspring was a common means by which male authors such as Ambrose, Jerome, and to a lesser extent, Augustine, marketed sexual renunciation.³⁸⁶ Due to their capability to become bearers of spiritual offspring, Avitus attributes sexual renunciants, particularly virgins, with the "twin crown": that is, the crown of both virgin and mother.³⁸⁷ In the *CCL*, Avitus urges Fuscina, a virgin, to bear divine offspring by a non-traditional means of reproduction, just like how Mary, the quintessential virgin, bore the divine Christ the saviour without contamination by "human seed".³⁸⁸ He writes to Fuscina that because she "follows Mary", she too can "conceive Christ" by bearing spiritual offspring.³⁸⁹

³⁸⁰ See section 3.4.2.

³⁸¹ *CCL* 165-169.

³⁸² *CCL* 163.

³⁸³ *CCL* 162.

³⁸⁴ Hecquet-Noti (2011: 14).

³⁸⁵ *Ep.* 6 (MGH AA 34.6-7).

³⁸⁶ Ambrose, *De virginibus* 1.6.30-31; Jer. *Adv. Iovinian* 1.3, *Ep.* 22.19; August. *De bono coniugali* 17, 19, *De nuptiis et concupiscentia* 1.14; *Ep.* 243.9; Vuolanto (2016: 85-87).

³⁸⁷ *CCL* 203. The notion of a "twin crown" can be traced back to the birth of Christ from Mary's virginal womb. Avitus expresses his reverence for Mary and the virgin birth, and his adoption of the title of Mary *Theotokos* ('God bearer') at several points throughout his works. See *Ep.* 2.3, 6; *SHG* 4.203-205, 4.643-644, 4.458-461; *CCL* 201-203.

³⁸⁸ *SHG* 4.459.

³⁸⁹ *CCL* 201, 217; Hecquet-Noti (2011: 14). A similar idea can be found in Jer. *Ep.* 22.38.

He specifies in the following line that by spiritual offspring, he means “the holy blossoms of good works”.³⁹⁰ While Avitus never specifies exactly what such “good works” should involve, he dedicates much of the *CCL* to highlighting why they are essential for the sexual renunciant.³⁹¹ Augustine is notable for similarly emphasising the importance for sexual renunciants to be fruitful and exhibit piety in non-sexual ways.³⁹² In the *CCL*, Avitus mainly communicates his belief in the necessity for renunciants to be fruitful and perform good works through scriptural parables, including the Parables of the Fig Tree and the Ten Virgins.³⁹³ The fig tree is rejected by Christ because its “canopy of delicate leaves” was “barren of blossoms”.³⁹⁴ Based on his brief relation of this parable, Avitus concludes that “virginity, which is dedicated to holy modesty, needs other virtues to accompany it”.³⁹⁵ In a more straightforward example, the Parable of the Ten Virgins, Avitus recounts how only the five virgins who have prepared their lamps with oil are accepted into the chamber of their bridegroom. He interprets the oiling of the lamps to signify the performance of good works and identifies the bridegroom as ‘Christ’.³⁹⁶ When the time comes to meet the groom, which Avitus interprets as Christ’s second coming,³⁹⁷ the lazy, unprepared virgins are “left behind and excluded” because they have not performed good works sufficient to gain them entry into heaven.³⁹⁸ Like the lazy servant and barren fig tree, the lazy virgins are denied an encounter with Christ because they failed to perform any other good works beyond their vow of virginity. The Parable of the Ten Virgins was a narrative often invoked by authors writing on the topic of sexual renunciation.³⁹⁹

Just as Avitus highlights the importance for sexual renunciants to perform good works, in a letter to Gundobad popularly known as *De subitanea paenitentia* he emphasises that faith is

³⁹⁰ *CCL* 218; Shea (1997: 63).

³⁹¹ The second half of the *CCL*, from line 290, is dedicated to communicating this point, as is *Ep.* 4.

³⁹² August. *Ep.* 125.2, 126.7. For more examples, see Dunn (2006a: 247-256).

³⁹³ Mt. 21:18-19, Mk. 11:12-25 (Figtree); Mt. 25:1-13 (Ten Virgins). A third parable Avitus mentions in the *CCL* which is of relevance here is the Parable of the Bags of Gold (Mt. 25:14-30; Lk. 19:12-27), in which a lazy servant, who is given a certain sum of *minae* by his master, does not bother to multiply the sum. We can interpret the lazy servant as the sexual renunciant who fails to perform good works and the chastisement by God as the renunciant’s rejection from heaven.

³⁹⁴ *CCL* 418; 421.

³⁹⁵ *CCL* 431-432.

³⁹⁶ *CCL* 497; 441.

³⁹⁷ *CCL* 452-455.

³⁹⁸ *CCL* 491.

³⁹⁹ Ambrose, *De institutione virginis et sanctae Mariae virginitate perpetua ad Eusebium* 17.110; Jer. *Ep.* 7.6, 130.11, *Commentaria in Evangelium Matthaei* 282; August. *Serm.* 43; Clark (1999: 201). Hecquet-Noti (2011: 12-13) has surmised that Avitus was specifically reliant on Augustine’s sermons when he invoked the depiction of the Parable of the Ten Virgins to emphasise the importance for virgins to perform good works.

also essential. He describes sexual renunciation without faith as “sham chastity”.⁴⁰⁰ As punishment, renunciants of this type “undergo great damnation”.⁴⁰¹ At the conclusion of the letter, Avitus reconciles his views on the importance for sexual renunciants to both perform good works and maintain faith by stating: “Thus it is clear that devotion, which the faithful should not neglect, ought to be joined to good works”.⁴⁰²

As noted above, despite dedicating much of the *CCL* to emphasising why Fuscina should perform good works, Avitus does not make clear exactly *what* good works she should perform. Perhaps he had in mind the act of almsgiving, a popular expression of fecundity for noble, female sexual renunciants, that was proscribed by Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine and practiced by women such as Melania the Younger and Juliana.⁴⁰³ While he never specifies this, Avitus does suggest that Fuscina should become inspired to perform good works by reading holy texts:

“Use the good sense your education has given you and with a manly zeal turn what you know or what you have merely skimmed in your reading into a work of virtue.”⁴⁰⁴

He goes on to implore her to remember “whatever holy message the divine scriptures teach with eloquence and insight”,⁴⁰⁵ and proceeds to recount all the writings collected in the bible that she should read, books by males and females from both the Old and New Testament.⁴⁰⁶ Avitus’ emphasis on the necessity for female sexual renunciants to cultivate their learning echoes that of Jerome, who famously lauded Paula’s ability to chant the psalms in perfect Hebrew and Marcella’s mental agility.⁴⁰⁷ Indeed, Brown identifies this as a kind of trend among

⁴⁰⁰ *Ep.* 4 (MGH AA 31.2-3).

⁴⁰¹ *Ep.* 4 (MGH AA 31.3).

⁴⁰² *Ep.* 4 (MGH AA 31.27-28).

⁴⁰³ For Melania, see August. *Ep.* 125.2, 126.7; Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* 61.3; Gerontius, *Vita Sanctae Melaniae Junioris* 9; Dunn (2014a: 93-115). For Juliana, see August. *De bono viduitatis* 21.26; Dunn (2006a: 252). For more examples of sexual renunciants being fruitful in almsgiving, see Ambrose, *De viduis* 9.53-58, *De excessu fratris sui Satyri* 2.13; Jer. *Ep.* 66.5, 108.2-6, 26, 31, 127.14, 130.7; Vuolanto (2016: 52-53).

⁴⁰⁴ *CCL* 412-414.

⁴⁰⁵ *CCL* 379-380.

⁴⁰⁶ *CCL* 379-416. For more on this ‘reading list’ for Fuscina, see Hecquet Noti (2011: 84-88).

⁴⁰⁷ Jer. *Ep.* 108.27; 127.7. For other examples, in both the East and the West, see Gregory of Nyssa, *Vita Macrinae* 3; Jer. *Ep.* 22.17, 108.26; Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* 55.3; Brown (1988: 369); Dunn (2007a: 671); Cooper (2013: 535-539). However, Clark (1998a: 1-31), and more recently, Doerfler (2018: 28-56), have warned that we must be sceptical of the exact details about the intellectual capabilities of early-Christian women given by these male authors - the characterisation of women as ‘wise’ was a common literary trope in the ancient world.

aristocratic, female sexual renunciants, for whom “virginal fertility implied a high level of actual creativity in the mind”.⁴⁰⁸

Avitus’ belief in the potential for sexual renunciants to bear spiritual offspring accords with his depiction of the renunciant as the bride of a heavenly spouse. These are the rewards sexual renunciants receive because of their steadfast resistance against sexual desire. By not giving in to sex, renunciants can avoid its contaminating effects as manifested in the institution of marriage and the process of reproduction and childbirth. Like many authors of his time, Avitus traced the female’s diminished experience in marriage, reproduction and childbirth back to Eve, who was punished because she succumbed to the desire to be like God.

4.5 The ‘manliness’ of female sexual renunciants

The *SHG* establishes Avitus’ adherence to the widespread belief in antiquity that women were inferior to men.⁴⁰⁹ He contrasts Adam’s “steadfast mind” with Eve’s “weaker ear”,⁴¹⁰ a defect Avitus cites made Eve “open to seduction” and “perversely gullible”,⁴¹¹ and rendered her the perfect target for Satan.⁴¹² Given Avitus’ belief in the inherent weakness of females even before the first human sin, it is interesting that in the *CCL* he states:

“Virtue and danger are common to both men and women. There is no difference in our hearts. Each is capable of willing what is right if grace is present. To attain this, however, the lives of either sex must sweat and never rest from the struggle.”⁴¹³

This passage expresses a strikingly different belief about the equality between men and women to what is stated in the *SHG*. Such incongruity is not necessarily surprising when we consider that the *SHG* and *CCL* were two poems composed for very different purposes: it would have been in Avitus’ interest to encourage his sister to commit to virginity by appealing to the strength of her sex. But the two sentiments are nonetheless reconcilable. They suggest that although Avitus conjectured women are by default inferior to men in a physical, and perhaps intellectual, sense, he believed they nonetheless have the potential to cultivate spiritual qualities

⁴⁰⁸ Brown (1988: 369-370); Hecquet-Noti (2011: 23-24).

⁴⁰⁹ This was believed to be confirmed by medical theory at the time, which purported that women were just faulty versions of men: Galen, *De usu partium* 14.6-7.

⁴¹⁰ *SHG* 2.140; 2.144.

⁴¹¹ *SHG* 2.166.

⁴¹² *SHG* 2.213.

⁴¹³ *CCL* 282-285.

equal to men. In the *CCL*, Avitus indicates that the kind of women he believed worthy of such an honourable title are female sexual renunciants.

Avitus thought sexual renunciants were worthy of this honour because, by resisting sexual desire and maintaining a commitment to celibacy, they demonstrate exceptional intellect and bravery, two qualities ubiquitously recognised during Avitus' time as 'masculine'.⁴¹⁴ As discussed above, in the *CCL* Avitus insists that because Fuscina rejects reproduction and childbirth, she can be otherwise fruitful by cultivating her intellect, an activity more commonly practiced by men at this time.⁴¹⁵ He consequently encourages Fuscina to approach her studies "with a manly zeal".⁴¹⁶ Other examples in the *CCL* and in a letter attest to Avitus' belief that even women who are not sexual renunciants, but who exhibit great wisdom, can be likened to, or described as, men.⁴¹⁷

Other 'masculine' traits Avitus attributes to female sexual renunciants throughout his works are the virtues of strength and courage. As shown above, in the *CCL* Avitus likens the struggle for steadfastness and resistance against sexual desire to a battle.⁴¹⁸ The association between these characteristics and masculinity is encapsulated by the Latin word *virtus*, which is literally derived from the word *vir*, man.⁴¹⁹ Fuscina must therefore approach her fight against sexual desire in the same way a soldier might approach war, "with limbs girt for a brave fight".⁴²⁰ Avitus urges his sister not to feel "self-doubt" because of her sex, but to remember that as a woman she is capable of exhibiting great bravery. He encourages Fuscina by citing examples of famous women who waged war such as the virgin Eugenia who, "although a woman", performed "brave deeds" when she resisted the sexual desire of a nun,⁴²¹ and Deborah, a woman from the book of Judges who "exhorted the astonished men" and led the Israelites to victory.⁴²² Avitus' words to Fuscina echo those of Jerome, who noted that any woman waging war against the sexual desires of her own body "will cease to be called a woman and will be

⁴¹⁴ Cooper and Leyser (2000: 539); Bailey (2007: 36).

⁴¹⁵ McNamara (1993: 222-223); Elm (1994: 268).

⁴¹⁶ *CCL* 414.

⁴¹⁷ See *CCL* 257-258; *Ep.* 3 (MGH AA 23.31).

⁴¹⁸ Hecquet-Noti (2011: 13).

⁴¹⁹ Cooper and Leyser (2000: 544); de Wet (2014: 228). Elm (1994: 137-183) notes the problematic history of translating the term *virtus*.

⁴²⁰ *CCL* 338.

⁴²¹ *CCL* 505.

⁴²² *CCL* 345; Hecquet-Noti (2011: 31-32).

called a man”.⁴²³ Avitus’ belief in the potential for Fuscina and other female sexual renunciants to exhibit masculine characteristics is indicative of the high regard he held for sexual renunciation. We can imagine that, given the strict patriarchal culture in late-antique, early-Christian societies, the likening of females to males would have been considered highly complimentary.⁴²⁴

4.6 Heavenly rewards for sexual renunciants

Throughout his works, Avitus continually refers to the heavenly rewards that await sexual renunciants, specifically, virginal women. These are the underlying messages of the New Testament stories he relates in the *CCL*: the men who prepare treasure for their master are rewarded when it is time to meet him again;⁴²⁵ the five virgins who fill their lamps with oil are greeted into the chamber of heaven by Christ their bridegroom;⁴²⁶ and Mary is praised by Jesus for preparing the food “that merits eternal nourishment” while Martha, “caught up in the world’s work”, is reprimanded.⁴²⁷ The same message is communicated in the examples of Joseph and Susanna, who resist the sexual advances of their adversaries by choosing to look forward to the heavenly rewards in store for them.⁴²⁸

While Avitus did not believe salvation is guaranteed for all sexual renunciants – faith and good works are also crucial factors – he surmised that their chaste commitment does put them at a significant advantage. This is because, I argue, he believed that maintaining a commitment to sexual renunciant allows one to minimise the degree to which they are impacted by the sinful effects of sexual desire. Through immense willpower, renunciants not only distinguish themselves among their fellow Christians, but they also enjoy a state of chastity, not unlike the one Adam and Eve experienced when they lived closer to God, in prelapsarian Paradise. Further, sexual renunciants who are virginal can claim a likeness to Mary, the quintessential virgin, who was immaculately conceived and so born without original sin.⁴²⁹

⁴²³ Jer. *Commentarius in Epistolam ad Ephesios* 3.5. For other examples of female ascetics transgressing their sex, see section 2.3.2.

⁴²⁴ Clark (1998b: 413-417); Miller (2005: 87-88).

⁴²⁵ *CCL* 333-337.

⁴²⁶ *CCL* 489-502.

⁴²⁷ *CCL* 636-645.

⁴²⁸ *CCL* 542-548; 572-578.

⁴²⁹ Hecquet-Noti (2011: 28).

Avitus imagines that the heavenly rewards reserved for sexual renunciants are so great that he appeals to them as a source of consolation on numerous occasions. In a sympathy letter to Gundobad on the death of his young daughter, Avitus' main point of consolation is his certainty that because Gundobad's daughter died a virgin, she will receive magnificent heavenly rewards. Avitus imagines the princess as so immensely happy because she has moved from her earthly father, Gundobad, to her heavenly Father, God.⁴³⁰ Employing a common consolatory technique, Avitus asks "who is so barbaric as not to envy the happiness of this virgin?"⁴³¹

Avitus cites the heavenly rewards reserved for virgins as a source of consolation in the *CCL* too. Avitus promises Fuscina that if she exhibits "an unswerving resolve" in her commitment to chastity,⁴³² performs good works, and maintains her faith in God, she will receive "victory's first prize" – that is, the most prestigious of heavenly rewards.⁴³³ Because she has renounced sex, glory awaits Fuscina in the next life, where she has "holy seats" reserved.⁴³⁴ Avitus describes her reception in heaven, in which amidst "cries of triumph" and an "angelic choir" she will be "joined in victory and joy" with the "virgin company" of the pious men and women who have gone before her.⁴³⁵

Additionally in the *CCL* Avitus relates that the latter woman, Aspidia, who may have been the fourth of his and Fuscina's siblings,⁴³⁶ died suddenly at young age, after making a vow of sexual renunciation.⁴³⁷ Similarly to the letter of consolation to Gundobad, Avitus does not dwell on the grief caused by Aspidia's sudden death, but instead reassures his addressee that "such a departure is never sudden for those who are always prepared".⁴³⁸ Here Avitus implies that although she died suddenly, Aspidia's commitment to sexual renunciation was enough to secure a prosperous life after death. Soon after citing this example, Avitus also refers to the mother of the Maccabean martyrs who actually rejoiced when her seven sons were murdered

⁴³⁰ *Ep.* 5 (MGH 33.8-13).

⁴³¹ *Ep.* 5 (MGH 33.8). It is interesting that Avitus does not repeat this same technique of consolation in *Ep.* 14 to his brother, when consoling him for forgetting to commemorate the death of their sister, who Shanzer and Wood (2002: 244) suggest can be identified as Fuscina. Perhaps this is because Avitus is more interested in demonstrating the innocence of his brother in this letter rather than the innocence of their sister.

⁴³² *CCL* 502-503.

⁴³³ *CCL* 378.

⁴³⁴ *CCL* 654.

⁴³⁵ *CCL* 630; 662-666.

⁴³⁶ Mathisen (1982: 367).

⁴³⁷ Aspidia made her vow at a similar age to Fuscina. She was 12, while Fuscina was 10: *CCL* 136.

⁴³⁸ *CCL* 91.

for their faith.⁴³⁹ Although these martyrs were not sexual renunciants, Avitus' inclusion of the anecdote indicates his conviction that the most faithful of believers can delight in death, because they can be confident knowing the heavenly rewards that await them. He makes a brief comparison of the rewards in store for martyrs with those for virgins in a sermon dedicated to day three of the feast of Rogations too.⁴⁴⁰

Perhaps the most significant feature of Avitus' portrayal of the heavenly rewards awaiting virgins is his belief that these rewards are of a greater magnitude than those that await non-virgins. We have seen that the existence of this heavenly 'hierarchy' was much discussed among late-antique authors before the time of Avitus: Ambrose and Jerome often quantified it based on a reading of Mt. 13:8, and Augustine, though he did not necessarily refer to these same quantities, made clear his belief sexual renunciants would receive greater heavenly rewards than their counterparts.⁴⁴¹

While throughout his works Avitus acknowledges that it is possible for married people to access heaven, he consistently argues that sexual renunciants stand a greater chance of entry and that they will enjoy a suitably grand reception when they do. Avitus articulates this belief explicitly in the *CCL* after praising Susanna, a married woman who chose to die rather than fulfil the sexual desires of her admirers. Avitus compares Susanna to unmarried, virginal women:

“For if the universal judgement of mankind afford so much praise to the girl who is wed in accordance with the laws of this world, who guards her marriage bed and knows only one mate, just imagine how great a reward is ordained for a virgin's merits in that place whither Christ will summon us from here.”⁴⁴²

Avitus makes a similar comparison in the aforementioned letter of consolation to Gundobad, when he reminds him that “there would have been greater cause for grief” if his daughter “had

⁴³⁹ *CCL* 104-108; 2 *Macc.* 7:20-29; Hecquet-Noti (2011: 22). Shea's translation of *On Virginity* incorrectly identifies this biblical woman as 'Machabaea': Shea (1997: 136); Shanzer (1999: 405).

⁴⁴⁰ *Serm.* 9 (MGH AA 120.13-26).

⁴⁴¹ August. *De bono viduitatis* 8, *De sancta virginitate* 13, 22-27, *Ep.* 3.1, *Serm.* 354.9; Bailey (2010: 115); Vuolanto (2016: 46-47).

⁴⁴² *CCL* 623-627; Hecquet-Noti (2011: 35).

ended her life just after marriage,”⁴⁴³ and in his sermon on Rogations, in which he states that it is far better to allow a virgin to remain unmarried than to marry her.⁴⁴⁴

At the end of the *CCL*, when describing the heavenly reception awaiting Fuscina, Avitus is so certain that Fuscina will be granted heavenly rewards superior to those of himself and his brother Apollinaris, Bishop of Valence, that he begs her to “lift up those humble brothers” (Avitus and Apollinaris) and ensure neither of them are missing when it comes time to enter heaven.⁴⁴⁵ Although it is evident that this plea is a highly rhetorical expression of authorial self-deprecation typical of ancient poets, the sentiment is nonetheless powerful. It comprises one of many instances in which Avitus deems Fuscina’s renunciation of sex and commitment to chastity worthy enough to entitle her to significant heavenly rewards. Fuscina was not the only sexual renunciant whose salvation Avitus was certain of – he imagined that the virgins Aspidia and Gundobad’s daughter were similarly worthy.

4.7 Conclusion

This chapter demonstrated that the topic of sexual renunciation features prominently in the works of Avitus, especially in the *CCL*. I argued that he believed sexual renunciation could allow adherents to minimise the degree to which they are affected by the destructive powers of sexual desire. In chapter two I suggested that Avitus was disgusted by sexual desire for the same reason Augustine was: it is symptomatic of the “twisted human will”. Sexual desire contaminated sex by rendering it an act no longer performed in accordance with the conscious human will, which, in turn, epiphenomenally tainted the institution of marriage and the process of reproduction, as evidenced by God’s punishment to Eve in Gen. 3:16. However, Avitus expresses the belief that sexual renunciants do not have to suffer these consequences of sexual desire. Renouncing sex allows them to reclaim the state of chastity once enjoyed by prelapsarian humans. By eschewing sex, female renunciants can avoid suffering the punishments God distributed to Eve, including domination by her husband and immense pain in childbirth. In fact, Avitus dedicates much of the *CCL* and a few letters to highlighting the array of benefits chaste and virginal women can enjoy because of their commitment to

⁴⁴³ *Ep.* 5 (MGH AA 33.5-6). It is implied that one of the reasons for why the princess’ death as a married woman would have been a cause for greater grief is because her married state would not have allowed her to receive the greater heavenly rewards reserved exclusively for virgins. This recalls Cyprian’s comment in *De mortalitate* (15) that it is better for virgins to have died in the plague than to have lived and be forced into brothels: Dunn (2006b: 217).

⁴⁴⁴ Here Avitus is referencing 1 Cor. 7:38; *Serm.* 7 (MGH AA 116.21-24).

⁴⁴⁵ *CCL* 660.

renunciation. The sexual renunciant can look forward to a valiant reception in heaven, where she will be rewarded for the hardship she endured while resisting the temptations of desire on earth.

Conclusion

Though Avitus has featured as the subject of numerous pieces of scholarship in recent decades, few of these studies have recognised the extent to which the theme of sexuality pervades his many surviving works. My thesis sought to fill the current gap in literature by demonstrating that sexuality features prominently throughout Avitus letters, poetry and, to a lesser extent, his sermons. It was common for authors of Avitus' time to concern themselves with matters of sexuality, as indicated in chapter two by the writings of Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine. It is possible that Avitus could have derived his interest in this subject matter from reading the Latin writings of these three thinkers, which we know to have been in wide circulation during Avitus' time. In fact, many of Avitus' ideas about sexuality mirror those of Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine. Put simply, Avitus' theories regarding the origins of sexual desire and its nature echo betray an Augustinian influence, while the passionate praises Avitus sung of sexual renunciation align more with the sentiments expressed by Ambrose and Jerome.

I argued throughout this thesis that sexual desire and female sexual renunciation are particularly pervasive themes in Avitus' surviving texts. I demonstrated this by drawing upon Avitus' various texts to reconstruct his specific beliefs about sexual desire and female sexual renunciation. In chapter three I asserted that the *SHG* suggests Avitus saw sexual desire as the most destructive consequence of original sin because its unruly and "disgusting" nature directly contradicts God's intentions for humans to live in perpetual harmony and satisfaction. Based on the views expressed in both his letters and poetry, I argued that Avitus believed sexual desire contaminated the once-chaste act of sex by rendering it the product not of the conscious human will as originally intended by God, but of wayward and sinful desires. Avitus thought sexual desire contaminated the processes related to sex – marriage and reproduction – not just for Adam and Eve, but for all humankind.

In chapter four I suggested that Avitus believed the destructive, inevitable sensation of sexual desire can be minimised by a commitment to sexual renunciation. The surviving source material, particularly the *CCL*, indicates that Avitus had an interest in discussing specifically *female* sexual renunciation. By not giving in to the temptations of sexual desire, women do not have to suffer its contaminating effects: namely, domination by a husband and pain in childbirth. Not can could female sexual renunciants avoid these evils, but they could become brides of Christ who bear spiritual offspring by exhibiting intellectual fecundity and performing good works. Further, Avitus thought that by demonstrating steadfastness and not succumbing

to the temptation for sex, female renunciants can be attributed with characteristically ‘masculine’ traits and be rewarded with a life of eternal bliss in heaven.

Throughout chapters three and four I related many of Avitus’ ideas back to those of the Church Fathers, Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine. Though Avitus’ writings may not survive in the volume that the works of these earlier men do, what does survive contains unique and valuable discussions about sexuality, particularly sexual desire and female sexual renunciation. It is essential that the prevalence of these topics throughout Avitus’ writings are recognised. Sexuality played a pivotal role in Gallic society during the late-fifth- and early-sixth centuries, especially in the elite, ecclesiastical circles in which Avitus moved, due in part to the rise of ascetic and monastic movements. As the introduction has shown, of the numerous surviving writings about sexuality that come from Gaul, most were produced in the early- to mid-fifth century, and a smaller, though still substantial, number in the mid- to late-sixth century.⁴⁴⁶ Alongside those of Caesarius, Avitus’ writings about sexuality are some of the most detailed to survive from the late-fifth, early-sixth century. They have the potential to shed much light on elite, episcopal attitudes to sexuality during this unique post-Roman, pre-Merovingian period in Gaul.

To recognise the significance of sexuality in the writings of Avitus is to number him among the eminent array of better-known early-Christian writers of sexuality, such as Gregory of Nyssa, Ambrose, Jerome, John Chrysostom, Augustine, Caesarius and Fortunatus.⁴⁴⁷ It is my hope that by reconstructing Avitus’ beliefs about sexual desire and female sexual renunciation, this thesis has demonstrated that Bishop Avitus of Vienne is a unique voice of late-antique sexuality, and worthy of greater consideration than he has hitherto been afforded.

⁴⁴⁶ For instance, the work of Cassian and Faustus come from the early-fifth century, and that of Gregory of Tours and Fortunatus from the mid-late sixth.

⁴⁴⁷ See footnote 2.

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