

The Gender of Grace: Impotence, Servitude, and Manliness in the Fifth-Century West

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To talk about grace properly is to adduce the dependence of the slave on his master, or the way the footman clings inseparably to his patron or lord. ... Just as it is unfitting for a helmsman's rower to fail him, or a bishop's attendant, or a commander's soldier, so it is fitting that grace and its foster child, obedience, should be linked inseparably together through servitude.

(Faustus of Riez, *De gratia*, prologue, pp. 3-4)

[T]he pusillanimous youth preferred the penance of the monastic to the dangers of a military life; ... whole legions were buried in these religious sanctuaries; and the same cause, which relieved the distress of individuals, impaired the strength and fortitude of the empire.

(Edward Gibbon, *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, III, pp. 62-4)

Modern images of ancient man and the process by which he became 'medieval' still owe much to Gibbon. In his *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, the great historian left readers in no doubt that Roman manliness had been fatally compromised by the rise of ascetic Christianity. Christian superstition had sapped the civic spirit of the empire, argued Gibbon, and of this superstition, there was no more deadly version than the monastic life. The modern historian of gender may be tempted to agree, given that the late Roman period

witnesses the consolidation of a polarised vision of manhood and masculine authority: on the one hand, that of the married Christian layman, sexually and financially active, prepared to use violence if need be; on the other, that of the ascetic, a celibate man who has foresworn all personal possessions and the bearing of arms. It is not hard to see here the lineaments of the medieval world, with its *bellatores* and *oratores*, a division of labour unknown to the ancient Romans.¹

It has often been assumed that Roman men (and the barbarian warriors who came to occupy the western empire, and subsequently to convert to Christianity) must have had their propensity to violence stemmed by the Gospel's injunction to turn the other cheek.² But the story is more complicated: if we turn to the writings of 'those who prayed', we see that for a figure such as Faustus, bishop of Riez (c. 408 - c. 490), it was precisely the language of ancient social relations which served as a template, rather than an antithesis, for describing the Christian's relations with God. It is the austere power of the *patronus*, with its implicit threat of violence, which best serves to delineate the Deity's ultimately benevolent, yet awesome and inescapable authority, while the cowering uncertainty of the *servus* embodies the Christian's existential condition. Where social relations were concerned, the Christianisation of language did not imply a whole-hearted departure from the ancient paradigm of masculinity.

Where sexual relations were concerned, the continuity among Roman, late Roman, and early medieval visions of masculinity is more elusive, but equally significant. Approaches to late antiquity from Gibbon to Foucault have held in common an assumption that asceticism was at the centre of the changing construction of masculinity, or the changing subjectivity of men. It is this widespread assumption that the present essay seeks to challenge. Read in light of the language of male power and dependence at the end of antiquity, central ascetic writers such as Faustus, it will be argued, are noticeable not for any escalation of the sexual discourse of masculine identity, but rather for their increasing emphasis on social (rather than sexual) relations as the crucial discursive element - a stress especially pronounced in the writings of Augustine of Hippo. This reading sits uneasily with a widely held view of the role played by Augustine in the development of the western idea of (male) sexuality, a view put forward most influentially by Michel Foucault.³

Such a critique, however, emerges precisely from a post-Foucauldian vein of work on masculinity in the Roman world, work

which shifted attention away from repression and towards the representation of sexual desire. While the Victorians imagined ancient men as unrepentant libertines, whose prodigious sexual energies were then condemned and repressed by the monastic movement,⁴ for Foucault and his school 'repression was only a subordinate mechanism in a more fundamental historical development: the creation of that thing we call sexuality as the centre of the Western idea of the self'.⁵ In the pages of Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, the male elite 'subjects of Rome' emerge – in contrast to Gibbon's reading – as a group highly concerned to regulate their violent rage and their sexual passion. The contrast presumed between pagan licentiousness and Christian puritanism largely disappears. Already in ancient Greece, argues Foucault, the crucial association was forged between sexuality and male subjectivity. (Although Foucault's title implies a discussion of female sexuality, this is not a promise on which his work delivers.) On this view, ancient man saw his identity as a man to reside in his capacity to avoid being ruled by the passions. The degree of excess or moderation in his sexual behaviour told him and his peers the truth about who he really was. In this culture of self-control, a man at the mercy of his lust risked, literally, losing his very claim to be male.⁶

The volatility of gender was directly linked to the instability of biological sex.⁷ Ancient physiology was predicated on the understanding that the human body, like all matter in the cosmos, was composed of a delicate mixture of the four elements: earth, water, air, and fire. This elemental balance was easily upset: merely through eating, a person could alter their physical makeup with immediate consequences for their health and character. It was the task of doctors to monitor and to correct for excess, bearing in mind that different people had slightly different constitutions. A person's sex, in this scheme of things, was a function of their elemental makeup: the male body was understood to have a higher proportion of air and fire than the female, which was wetter and colder. Notoriously, the conclusion was drawn that men were better balanced than women, less prone to engulfment in labile passions. By the same token, however, no man could rest complacent. If he had too much sex, if he spent too much semen, he risked degeneration to the point where he became indistinguishable from a menstruating woman. Gender, then even more than now, was regarded as a provisional marker of social identity – always under contest, always in need of affirmation.

Intersecting with this biological paradigm was a keen sense of the self as a product of social theatre. Ancient and late ancient writers showed an interest in the representation and competitive self-fashioning of the public man which has been the subject of vivid interest across the last two decades of the twentieth century. Ancient masculinity therefore was constituted across a matrix of malleable social and biological elements. Self-control was its hallmark; this meant that not only austerity but also moderation was prized. Perceived virtue was the prerequisite to power, yet on this model even self-control ceased to seem virtuous if it was practised in a spirit of excess.⁸ If the discourse of ancient masculinity was agonistic, its terms favoured the *status quo*. While the competition was, for those involved, a very high-stakes game of reputations won and lost, its overall function was conservative and reassuring: the audience knew that the skills showcased by each of the players were a mark of elite cultural hegemony. At one extreme stood the man whose power over others was justified by his control of himself; at the other, the man without control, the so-called *kinaedros*, who had surrendered all attempt to remain master of his passions to the point where he was ready to be penetrated by other men simply in order to satisfy his lust.⁹ This was the world-view shared by philosophers and statesmen. It was, on the face of it, a moral universe in which there was not much to be gained by standing on pillars or other feats of ascetic heroism: the more radical ascetics, however, would prove that there was.

This reading of the parameters of ancient masculinity has led to a changed perception of gender and sexuality in the writings of the Church Fathers. Ascetic masculinity can no longer be understood, in Gibbon's terms, as 'fanaticism' degenerating into 'hypocrisy'. The shrill asceticism of a man like Jerome now appears as an attempt to participate in, while altering the rules of, the ancient game of masculinity. Jerome took to extreme lengths the public performance of sexual austerity, and managed to persuade at least some of his audience that this was not dangerous extremism, but in fact a more trustworthy course than that of the married man. Whether a majority of his audience was convinced is a point for debate, but what is certain is that the late fourth century inaugurates a period when men went to extraordinary lengths in discussing sexual purity.¹⁰

Ascetics did not necessarily agree with one another. It is now possible to see the constellation of ascetic writers at the turn of the fourth to fifth century as characterised not by unity of vision but rather as themselves engaged in a risky game of competitive self-fashioning,

each attempting to constitute and win currency for his own new language of masculine self-control. Jerome was only one of many who thought that self-control should no longer, in itself, be understood as something to be practised in moderation. While the quasi-pornographic and distinctly hallucinatory qualities of his letter 22 *To Eustochium* have brought it as wide an audience as anything produced by this school of thought, its most cogent expositor is not Jerome, but his younger contemporary John Cassian. Cassian's *Conferences*, for example, take the problem of a man's nocturnal emissions as the occasion for developing a fine science of the fully controlled body, where the ideal of balance has given way to a vision of desire eradicated, of the body finally freed from its power.¹¹

Augustine, by contrast, was uncomfortable with the ascetic movement's more exaggerated claims. At the level of the individual, he believed the ascetic claim to purity to be illusory. Indeed, his suspicion of any discourse which lionised the achievements of one class of individuals at the expense of another has been shown by Robert Markus to be at the core of his approach to Christian community.¹² We will see below that his keen sense of irony left him particularly ill-suited to the kind of ascetic triumphalism espoused by Jerome and, in a modified form, by Cassian. Augustine was certainly an ascetic and a proponent of asceticism, but it was an asceticism which was suspicious of the exaltation of the individual. What was important to Augustine about asceticism was its ability, when understood correctly, to foster the communion of hearts.

The repercussions of Augustine's debate with Pelagius on grace and free will for the study of gender are much contested. In the work of writers like Elaine Pagels and Kim Power, Augustine appears as the man who gave definitive form to Christian fear of sex and of women.¹³ Emerging as victor over Pelagius, Augustine is seen by Pagels in particular to have brought an end to the ancient tradition of moral freedom, and to have inaugurated a dark medieval authoritarianism, emphasising human helplessness before God and the powers that be.¹⁴ Power, by contrast, offers an independent but complementary psychosexual reading of 'woman's symbolic status as dangerous desire'¹⁵ in Augustine's thought. It can be argued that neither approach takes fully into account the work of Markus, with its insight into the social basis of Augustine's repudiation of ideologies of human perfectibility: the result of Markus's work is to indicate that Augustine was in fact attacking the very positions he is so often presumed to have espoused.

If he was not prepared to stake all on a performance of sexual and moral purity, this was because it threatened to open up a rift between radical ascetics and the less fiercely committed Christian majority. Our view of Augustine's authoritarianism thus needs to be balanced against a recognition of his commitment to an ideal of community where the relationship between the religious specialist and the non-specialist would not be poisoned by quarrelling over status.

Augustine's contribution to the late Roman discussion of civic masculinity has yet accurately to be differentiated from that of his interlocutors – we will see below, for example, that Foucault went so far as to conflate the views of Augustine with the very different position of Cassian. Precision is of fundamental importance here. It is widely and erroneously assumed that Augustine regarded sexual desire as fundamentally excessive and dangerous. But this was not how Augustine himself posed the problem of masculinity. In a context where ancient writers had for millennia discussed male desire in terms of controlling excess, Augustine set out to explain, in his discussion of grace and free will in Book Fourteen of the *City of God*, that the real problem lay not in the force of desire, but rather in its unpredictability. Lust was not everywhere: it required mobilisation, and, when summoned, it might not appear, without any explanation for its absence. The most profound challenge for men was not to bridle their lust, but to face the humiliation of impotence. More emphatically even than the involuntary erection, sexual failure spoke to the true condition of humanity after the Fall.

Most ancient authors who opined on the subject of impotence regarded it as an embarrassment, to be sure, but as a relatively minor medical condition for which there were a number of tried and tested remedies. Unlike the problem of excess, impotence was certainly not a problem of ethical or philosophical dimensions. Augustine, however, departed from conventional wisdom by introducing impotence into the philosophical discourse of excess and self-control.¹⁶ Augustine pointed out that men were at the mercy not only of the force but also of the hollowness of their desires. 'Sometimes, the [sexual] impulse is an unwanted intruder', he admits but, he continued:

Sometimes, it abandons the eager lover, and desire cools off in the body while it is at boiling heat in the mind. Thus strangely does lust refuse to be a servant not only to the will to procreate, but even also to the lust for lascivious indulgence; and although on the whole it is totally opposed to the mind's control, it is quite often divided against itself. It arouses the mind, but does not follow its own lead by arousing the body.¹⁷

This was not a temporary embarrassment. As Augustine saw it, impotence pointed to the fundamental and humiliating inability of the mind to control the body, a rift deep in the psyche itself between will and desire, or even within desire itself. Male subordination to lust did not only, or primarily, involve passion-crazed transgression: it connoted an unbearable fear of failure.

The genital organs have become as it were the private property of lust, which has brought them so completely under its sway that they have no power of movement if this passion fails ... It is this that arouses shame; it is this that makes us shun the eyes of beholders in embarrassment. A man would be less put out by a crowd of spectators watching him visiting his anger unjustly upon another man than by one person observing him when he is having lawful intercourse with his wife.¹⁸

All of this was a sign that the original perfection of Paradise had been lost, and that humans suffered under dire punishment.

Although many commentators would have it otherwise, Augustine was adamant that the body and its desires were not to blame for the expulsion from Paradise. The original sin had nothing to do with sex: it was the sin of pride. When Adam and Eve took the apple, it was not because they were gluttons; nor was it a series of sexual seductions – the serpent of Eve, Eve of Adam. The problem was that they thought they live independently of God who had created them. Sex in Paradise, Augustine believed, would have been unimaginably exquisite. Humans would have known no frustration or interruption of desire: men would have been spared the embarrassment of impotence, women the pain of the breaking of the hymen (and later, the pains of labour). The body was a site of punishment: it was not the cause of the problem.¹⁹

Sex was, however, where men came face to face with Original Sin – that is to say, with the disjunction of the human will, that fact that outside of Paradise even desire could only be, irredeemably, ‘divided against itself’. To the degree that he acknowledged sex as a central site for the human experience of this dislocation, Augustine was attempting to situate his theory of the will in terms of the ancient discourse which had linked masculine authority to sexual morality. But Augustine was not, after his ascetic conversion, himself deeply interested in sex. What did interest him, what his mind returned to again and again, was the problem of human weakness. When he watched babies (most likely, his own son, born before he had reached the age of twenty), he saw their vulnerability to their own needs and desires, their powerlessness to control, or even to understand, the

currents of volition pulsing through them. This profound human helplessness was visible in sex, but only because its signs were everywhere.

Unlike many of his ascetic contemporaries, Augustine viewed the ancient discourse of self-control through a lens of irony. Some lines below the passage on Adam and Eve cited above, Augustine turned his critique of ascetic triumphalism into parody. The only humans who seemed to be capable of exerting serene control over themselves, to have never to experience the dissonance of mind and body – or, worse, the dissonance internal to mind – were circus artists, ‘freaks’ who did tricks in the town squares:

Some can swallow an incredible number of various articles and then with a slight contraction of the diaphragm, can produce, as if out of a bag, any article they please, in perfect condition. There are others who imitate the cries of birds and beasts and the voices of any other people, reproducing them so accurately as to be quite indistinguishable from the originals, unless they are seen. A number of people produce at will such musical sounds from their behind (without any stink) that they seem to be singing in that region.²⁰

The scatological *chutzpah* of this argument has gone largely unremarked. In his survey of ancient attitudes towards the body, Augustine parades a solemn regiment of world philosophers – Cicero, the Platonists, the Cynics, the gymnosophists of India – only to bring before his readers the street performers of provincial North Africa. He reasons, with impeccable tabloid logic, ‘I know from my own experience of a man who used to sweat whenever he chose; and it is a well-known fact that some people can weep at will and shed floods of tears’ – but not so with the flow of semen.²¹ Book Fourteen of the *City of God* may be ‘a story of human bondage’;²² it is also a lowbrow satire of ancient phallogocentric pretensions.

It is tempting to imagine that Augustine’s critique of the ancient paradigm of masculinity could be summarised thus: if so earnest a competition for moral authority could be won by the self-promotionalism of radical ascetics – monks no better than charlatans bent on short-circuiting the system to their own advantage by a calculated claim of eradicating what others had merely held in check – surely such a system for establishing the *bona fides* of an elite male leadership was at worst fundamentally flawed, and at best a matter for black humour? By satirising the ancient discourse of sexual self-control, Augustine collapsed the polarity defining ancient manhood, and so removed the conventional basis for claims to moral authority. No man could claim with any security that he was morally entitled to rule another; no man

could know whether he numbered among the saved or the damned. Augustine's point was that the ancient 'hard man' who thought he was dominant was mistaken. Conversely, the soft man, the *kinaedros*, was not merely the archetypal figure of masculine powerlessness: he was everyman.

Augustine's debate on grace, free will, and predestination with Pelagius and his followers was to influence and be influenced by his thinking about masculinity. For Augustine, the Pelagian vision of human responsibility untrammelled by the disjunction of the will was untenable, since it depended on an inherited language for calculating human *virtus* which radical ascetics had now shown to be untenable. (The very word *virtus* – connoting both virtue and manliness – reflects the intrinsic link that had long been assumed to obtain between the two.) Augustine's views, which hardened rather than softened as he continued the polemic well into his seventies, caused a degree of consternation around the Mediterranean, even among those who were not inclined to sympathise with Pelagius. We can track their reception in southern Gaul in particular. According to one of Augustine's disciples, there was a group of ascetics in Marseilles who balked at Augustine's late views on grace and predestination. The leader of these 'new Pelagians' (known somewhat misleadingly since the seventeenth century as 'semi-Pelagians') was John Cassian, whose view of asceticism was very different from that of Augustine.²³ It was Cassian above all who made clear that the ancient language of male authority could be turned to the advantage of the ascetic speaker.²⁴

After years of travel in the deserts of Egypt and Syria, Cassian had settled in Provence to offer ascetic instruction to local enthusiasts. Over a decade or so, he had articulated a view of ascetic masculinity that extended, rather than broke with, the traditional moral discourse. His goal was to find a middle way. We find little of the stridency of Jerome about ascetic purity – far more on the difficulty of the ascetic art. On the other hand, its goals remain within reach. Cassian did not follow Augustine into a consideration of male impotence. He endorsed the traditional premise that the problem of sexual desire was one of excess and its regulation. In dealing, for example, with the question of nocturnal emission and its reduction, Cassian invoked for reference the standard procedures adopted by ancient athletes looking to maximise their sporting performance by minimising the loss of vital fluid.²⁵ Christian ascetics, Cassian effectively suggested, combined the physical rigour of athletics with the moral stringency of

philosophy. They were at the pinnacle of what ethical manhood could achieve.

By the death of Augustine in 430, literate Christian men were left in something of a dilemma. The reconciliation of the views of Augustine and Cassian was a difficult task, all too easily reduced to polemic, as shown by the flurry of prose and verse argument and counter-argument in the early 430s. The subsequent decades saw no real consensus emerge: in addition to the complexity of the issues, the times themselves were hardly conducive to leisured reflection. In 451, Pope Leo the Great met Attila the Hun in an instantly iconic encounter: this was a season for authority in action, not for Augustine's fine sarcasm about impotence, or Cassian's careful monitoring of nocturnal emissions.

In the search for moral authority, Augustine's was a name to conjure with, so long as one could steer clear of the emasculating content of what he had said. This balancing act is what we find in the writings of Faustus of Riez.²⁶ After nearly thirty years as abbot of Lérins, Faustus had moved *c.* 462 to take up the see of Riez. A decade later, Faustus was recognised by his episcopal colleagues in the Gallic church as their pre-eminent spokesman, and it was he who was delegated to handle the delicate matter, in the early 470s, of the priest Lucidus, whose intemperate predestinarian views resulted in a formal recantation at the synod of Arles in 473. Afterwards, Faustus undertook to compose a treatise expounding the full logic of the synodal position: the result was the two books *De gratia*.

Faustus couched his argument as a refutation of two extremes – Pelagianism on the one hand, and, on the other, the error of Lucidus. Faustus was at pains to make clear that 'predestinarianism' was based on a misreading of Augustine. Although Faustus has generally been understood as Cassian's successor in taking up the legacy of Pelagius, it was to Augustine that Faustus appealed in articulating his own, centrist position, by name and through tacit citation.²⁷ At the same time, however, his treatise advanced positions that were far from the letter or the spirit of what Augustine had written. He was unrestrained in his affirmation that human beings were powerless to choose the good without the support of divine grace – but he drew a distinction (alien to Augustine) between divine foreknowledge and predestination. Even as he quoted Augustine on the punishment of Adam and Eve, Faustus offered a view of the capacities of the fallen human will that was some way from Augustine's sense of the helplessness of the post-lapsarian condition.²⁸

Crucial is the distinction between Faustus and Augustine when it comes to their engagement with the ancient discourse of masculine authority and power. Where Augustine had exposed the vanity of competitive display, Faustus saw meaningful reciprocity: this allowed him to annex the ancient discourse for theological use. The dominant metaphor of *De gratia* is that of the *patronus* and his man. In their relationship, the *gratia* extended by the master requires an active response from the recipient, namely a labour of obedience. The *gratia* involved here is the 'first grace' of creation: the created being can hardly refuse the duty of obedience, but having, in the garden of Eden, done just this, humans on earth are now constrained by still stronger duty. What Faustus insists upon is the dynamic of reciprocity at work even in relations of abject dependence. Weak and infirm as he is,

The slave extends the hand of faith by which he may be drawn to the master who assists and calls ... So these two are joined together: the power of one who draws in (*adtrahit*), and the disposition of the one who obeys.²⁹

Even in the post-lapsarian condition, then, Faustus attempts to find grounds for mutuality in social relations. This language of the civic sphere is assimilated to his language of male spiritual authority:

What is it to draw in (*adtrahere*) but to preach? To excite with the consolations of the Scriptures, to deter with rebukes, to set forth what must be desired, to draw attention to what must be feared, to threaten judgement and to promise a reward.

The connection envisaged here between society and the holy was no mere metaphor. Relations between masters and slaves, bishops and their attendants were not simply an echo of the relation between God and humanity: rather, they served as instruments through which that relation was embodied. It was precisely God's *gratia* which a bishop was to dispense in his preaching.

It can hardly fail to strike the modern reader that the gender of grace, here as elsewhere, was overwhelmingly male. Yet it is important to observe the way in which the body, sexuality, and semen have been dropped from the discussion. Faustus drew his metaphors from the scene of politics, warfare, the ecclesiastical hierarchy – anywhere but the bedroom in which Augustine had so mischievously lingered. This, more than any single argument, is what signals Faustus's determination to reassert traditional norms of civic masculinity, but to side-step the sexual code on which it had traditionally been based. The subversion of this code by Augustine could not be reversed.

Thus the message of the tradition of civic masculinity was Christianised at the same time as its essential social conservatism was reasserted. Faustus turned a blind eye to Augustine's irony: the language of *De gratia* locates religious community squarely within the frame of a traditional idea of civic masculinity. The rise of asceticism had not, for Faustus, irredeemably ruptured the model of male ethical conduct inherited from the ancients. Rather, he saw the valour of the soldier and the subservience of a priestly acolyte as equally relevant parallels for human obligation to God. Seen as a form of 'male bonding', the relationship between humans and the Godhead was to be defeated neither by differentials of status, nor by the troubling implications of changing sexual *mores*. This analysis of salvation served not to sunder men from the world, nor the medieval from the classical epoch, but rather to uphold and extend an ancient model of manhood based on reciprocity.

To understand Augustine and Faustus along the lines indicated above is to open the way for a re-evaluation of the accounts of the end of antiquity posed by both Gibbon and Foucault. While it would fall far beyond the scope of an essay such as this to offer substantial proposals, it may be worth initiating a discussion here about the shape such a re-evaluation might take. To begin with, as might have been suspected, one cannot accept categorically Gibbon's proposal that the net effect of asceticism was to emasculate Roman men. On this point, the ascetic movement was characterised by diversity rather than unity; we have seen a full spectrum of opinions in play, from Jerome's triumphalism to Augustine's irony to Faustus's desire to side-step the sexual discourse altogether. Though less well documented and certainly less well studied, the married laity must equally have numbered among its members proponents of a variety of strategies for resolving the tensions created by radical asceticism. At the very least, however, we can imagine that the ascetic Faustus's willingness to avoid the issue of sexual deportment as an ethical marker was welcome to that element of the married laity who were moving toward a model of masculinity pieced together from elements of classical philosophy, the Hebrew Bible, and the ethos of the warlord.

Where Foucault and his heirs are concerned, the salient issue to emerge from the above is Augustine's supposed role in the sexualisation of human identity. Two points bear emphasis. The first is that, within the diversity of ascetic readings of the discourse of masculinity, Augustine stood precisely at the opposite end of the spectrum from

those who took sexual behaviour in earnest as the summary of a man's moral standing. Foucault's reading of Book Fourteen of the *City of God* apprehended Augustine's main point as being about erection, rather than impotence:

The famous gesture of Adam covering his genitals with a fig leaf is, according to Augustine, due not to the simple fact that Adam was ashamed of their presence but to the fact that his sexual organs were moving by themselves without his consent. Sex in erection is the image of man revolted against God.³⁰

It is Foucault's easy equation here between 'moving by themselves without his consent' and 'sex in erection' which we have sought to undo.³¹ Our second, and connected, point is that Foucault was wrong to suggest that Augustine can be read as characteristic of 'the ascetic and monastic literature of the fourth and fifth centuries':³² in that highly contested milieu, Augustine's was a minority position. This holds true equally for the subsequent intellectual history of the Church: his was a name to contend with but his vision was never dominant.³³ To conflate Augustine with the ascetic triumphalism he critiqued is to misunderstand him. The lively and ongoing debate among ascetics ensured that no single voice emerged to speak for moral masculinity in the late Roman west.

Much remains to be done if the implications of systematic attention to masculinity for the study of the fifth century are to be realised concretely and fully. In plotting a course for future work, we might return attention to the scholarship of an earlier generation. Some four decades ago, scholars in the newly forming field of late antiquity, eager to move away from Gibbon's narrative of decline and fall, began to ask afresh how ascetic theory might have jostled against the harsh social realities of the end of an empire. Specifically, in 1960 J. N. L. Myres, an authority on Roman Britain, offered to account for British support for Pelagius in terms of a connection between religious and political dissent. Struck by the fact that early fifth-century Britain was in revolt against Rome, and that it was also seen to be a hotbed for followers of Pelagius, Myres suggested that *gratia*, the key term in the Pelagian controversy, did not only connote God's saving power. In the later Roman empire, it meant 'not so much "grace" as "favour", and not so much "favour" as "favouritism"'. Pelagius, in other words, had protested against the association of God with political corruption, and his followers in Roman Britain had actually led a revolt against what they perceived to be the corrupt regime of

the empire itself. 'Behind the whole Pelagian movement lay a simple, rather pathetic, claim to elementary social justice', argued Myres.³⁴

Myres's critics have not been few, and his thesis is now rarely discussed.³⁵ But the time may be ripe to reopen his inquiry into *gratia* and its social meanings. As we have seen, *gratia* was wider in its connotations than political corruption, but, equally significantly, recent work on 'corruption' itself indicates that it was a far from simple target for the social philosopher. In a face-to-face society such as the Roman empire, governed by an impossibly thin administrative staff, it served a more complex function than Myres's analysis would allow. Put simply, corruption and *gratia* were – in tandem – what allowed imperial autocracy and imperial bureaucracy to coexist.³⁶ On this model, it would have been eminently reasonable for a Faustus – or indeed for an Augustine or a Pelagius – to see *gratia* as the vehicle through which a language of moral authority, and moral responsibility, should be contested.

Far from fatally compromising the ancient tradition of civic masculinity, as Gibbon argued, the rise of ascetic Christianity led to its reconstitution and renewal in a form which would prove enduring through the instability of a devolving empire. Like asceticism itself, Augustine's challenge had posed a real threat to the social conservatism of ancient definitions of masculinity. But by disengaging sexual self-control from the exercise of *gratia*, writers such as Faustus were able to re-establish the language of male authority in terms perhaps even more public and even more firmly based in male social relationships than the language inherited from antiquity. If a man could no longer be judged by his ability to resist the lure of women, what remained was how he would relate to other men. Of course, the moral language of self-control and resistance to womanly influence was never entirely to lose its currency among the laity in the early middle ages, as a case such as the divorce of Lothar II makes all too clear.³⁷ But the negotiation of ascetic claims to this aspect of the male code was peculiarly suited as a vehicle for the problem of how the new ascetic class would relate to the secular men of authority. The division of the male polity into these two complementary classes of men – the *oratores* and the *bellatores* – may still, as Gibbon suggested, turn out to have been the defining factor at stake in the end of an age.

Notes

1. For a recent discussion of 'men who fought' and 'men who prayed', see J. L. Nelson, 'Monks, Secular Men and Masculinity', *Masculinity in Medieval Europe*, ed. D. M. Hadley (Longman, London and New York, 1999), pp. 121–42.
2. P. Wormald, 'Bede, "Beowulf" and the Conversion of the Anglo-Saxon Aristocracy', in *Bede and Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. R. T. Farrell (British Archaeological Reports, British Series 46, Oxford, 1978), pp. 32–95.
3. See below nn. 30, 31.
4. See P. R. L. Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (Columbia University Press, New York, 1988), on William Lecky, pp. xvi–xvii.
5. Danny Praet, in 'Hagiography and Biography as Prescriptive Sources for Late Antique Sexual Morals', *Litterae Hagiologicae*, 5 (1999), pp. 2–13, at p. 3.
6. M. Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, trans. R. Hurley (Pantheon Books, New York, 1985), and *The Use of Pleasures*, trans. R. Hurley (Pantheon Books, New York, 1985).
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10. On Jerome and his critics, see Cooper, *Virgin and Bride*, pp. 92–115.
11. C. Leyser, 'Masculinity in Flux: Nocturnal Emission and the Limits of Celibacy in the Early Middle Ages', in Hadley, *Masculinity*, pp. 103–20.
12. Crucial here is Robert Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of Saint Augustine* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1970); Markus's reading is made more accessible in his *The End of Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990), esp. ch. 4, 'Augustine: A Defence of Christian Mediocrity', pp. 45–62. See also Brown, *Body and Society*, ch. 19, pp. 387–427.
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17. Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* XIV.16, ed. L. Verheijen, *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina* (2 vols, Brepols, Turnhout, 1955), vol. 2, p. 439; *St Augustine, City of God*, trans. H. Bettenson (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1972), p. 577. All subsequent page references refer to this edition and this translation.
18. Augustine, *Civ. Dei* XIV. 19, p. 442, trans. p. 581.
19. Augustine, *Civ. Dei* XIV. 26, pp. 449–50.
20. Augustine, *Civ. Dei* XIV. 24, p. 447, trans. p. 588.
21. 'Far more incredible is the case of Restitutus of Calama ...' continues the passage in mock sensationalism: Augustine, *Civ. Dei* XIV. 24, p. 447, trans. p. 588.
22. Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent*, p. 105.
23. For an introduction, see C. Leyser, 'Semi-Pelagianism', in *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. A. Fitzgerald (Eerdmanns, Grand Rapids, MI, 1999), pp. 761–6.
24. C. Leyser, 'Lectio divina, oratio pura: Rhetoric and the techniques of asceticism in the *Confessiones* of John Cassian', in *Modelli di santità e modelli di comportamento*, ed. G. Barone et al. (Rosenberg and Sellier, Turin, 1994), 79–105.
25. The most reliable guide is C. Stewart, *Cassian the Monk* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1998), pp. 62–84; see also the debate between D. Brakke, 'The Problematicization of Nocturnal Emissions in Early Christian Syria, Egypt and Gaul', *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 3 (1995), pp. 419–60, and Leyser, 'Masculinity in Flux'.
26. On Faustus, see in particular T. A. Smith, 'De Gratia': Faustus of Riez's Treatise on Grace and its Place in the History of Theology (University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, 1990).
27. See Smith, 'De Gratia', pp. 126–40.
28. *De gratia* I.1–2, *Patrologia Latina* 58, 785–9, citing, for example, Augustine's *De nuptiis et concupiscentia*, 1.6.7.
29. *De gratia* I.17, *PL* 58, 810. The following citation is the continuation of the passage.
30. M. Foucault, 'Sexuality and Solitude', in *Religion and Culture by Michel Foucault*, ed. J. R. Carrette (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1999), pp. 182–7 at p. 186.
31. Foucault's repeated use of the word 'technique' with regard to Augustine (p. 186 as n. 30) and his invocation of Cassian without preamble in his conclusion (p. 187), lend substance to the suspicion that Foucault has assimilated Augustine to Cassian.
32. Foucault, 'Sexuality and Solitude', p. 187.
33. In the fifth and sixth centuries, Augustine was a figure of controversy and not without a readership, but his writings were often condemned and his thought not necessarily a predominant influence even on those who invoked his authority: see C. Leyser, *Authority and Asceticism from Augustine to Gregory the Great* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000).
34. J. N. L. Myres, 'Pelagius and the End of Roman Rule in Britain', *Journal of Roman Studies*, 50 (1960), pp. 21–36, esp. pp. 24–5.
35. See W. Liebeschuetz, 'Did the Pelagian Movement have Social Aims?', *Historia*, 12 (1963), pp. 227–41; P. R. L. Brown, 'Pelagius and his Supporters: Aims and Environment', *Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s., 21 (1968), pp. 93–114; repr. in his *Religion and Society in the Age of Saint Augustine* (Faber and Faber, London, 1972), pp. 183–207.
36. See C. M. Kelly, 'Later Roman Bureaucracy: Going through the Files', in *Literacy and Power in the Ancient World*, ed. K. Bowman and G. D. Woolf (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994), pp. 161–76; the same author's 'Emperors, Government, and Bureaucracy', in *The Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. 13, *The Late Empire, A.D. 337–425*, ed. A. Cameron and P. Garnsey (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998), pp. 138–83; and J. D. Harries, *Law and Empire in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999), esp. pp. 153–71.
37. S. Airlie, 'Private Bodies and the Body Politic in the Divorce Case of Lothar II', *Past & Present*, 161 (1998), pp. 3–38.