De Amicitia: Towards an Understanding of Spiritual Marriage and Female Religious Authority in Fourth-Century Antioch

Tom Cramer
University of Washington, Seattle

John Chrysostom (347-407 CE), one of the most respected theologians of the late fourth-century, composed more works on asceticism and marital relations than any other Greek patriarch.[1] He earned the sobriquet "golden mouth" for his eloquent prose and fiery preaching, and would later rise to a position of preeminence through his appointment as the Archbishop of Constantinople in 398. Two of his most remarkable treatises concern his condemnation of mixed-sex ascetic relationships.[2] The first, *Adversus eos qui apud se habent subintroductas virgins,* is directed towards the reasons men should not cohabitate with women and the second, *Quod regulares feminae viris cohabitare non debeant,* addresses why women should not do the same with men. These works are generally considered to be among the finest examples of Chrysostom's eloquence and oratory skill.[3] The goal of this paper is to closely analyze Chrysostom's arguments against syneisaktism, or spiritual marriage, in order to discover his own views on gender, as well as the views of the men and women engaged in spiritual marriages. Chrysostom is usually quite clear in his arguments and, as the rationale behind his thought is of a traditional nature, they have been well documented by historians. The challenge is to rediscover the other side of the debate. The motivations and reasoning of the men and women who drew such harsh attacks from the faction that eventually was seen as orthodox are generally unavailable. Yet it is easy to miss the fact that these issues were debated. The story that is told

[1] Sally Shore and Elizabeth A. Clark, *John Chysostom: On Virginity, Against Remarriage* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1983), vii.
[2] Clark, "John Chrysostom and the Subintroductae," *Church History* 47, no. 2 (1977): 171-185.
[3] Clark, "John Chrysostom and the Subintroductae," 172.

should thus not be one of a triumphant orthodoxy stamping out heresy, but rather one of conflict and negotiation that recognizes both sides of the debate.

The practice of ascetic monks and nuns sharing house, home, and sometimes bed, has had a long and predictably scandalous reputation in the history of early Christianity. The evidence suggests that this custom dates back to the first-century and may be referred to by the apostle Paul in his letter to the Corinthians.[4] In addition to this biblical reference, plenty of other evidence for the existence of chaste cohabitation exists for the early Christian church.[5] One of the first pieces of evidence that seems to directly advocate the practice of spiritual marriage is that of the *Similitudes of Hermas* in the late second-century CE.[6] In this text, the female companions of Hermas assure him that he need not be concerned about sexual temptation since they will live and sleep together as brother and sister, not as husband and wife. Syneisaktism, in the *Similitudes of Hermas,* is thereby linked to the idea that spiritual achievement can enable one to overcome social restrictions and is emblematic of the liberating elements of Christian theology. By embracing the power of the spirit to transform the body, ascetics could make the claim that the social restrictions surrounding gender relations no longer applied. The free association between men and women who had surpassed temptation should be no more problematic than any other asexual relationship. The repeated condemnation of spiritual marriage by successive councils well into the early middle ages suggests both that it was widely practiced as well as opposed. In the fourth-century, at least six councils spoke out against the practice.[7] It is not surprising, then, that Chrysostom, as one of the greatest orators of this era and a staunch

---

[4] I Cor 7:36-38.
[5] For a thorough discussion of the early Christian evidence of spiritual marriage see Elliott, Dyan. *Spiritual Marriage: Sexual Abstinence in Medieval Wedlock* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 43; and Clark, "John Chrysostom and the Subintroductae," 171-185. The following description is drawn largely from these two works.
[6] Clark, "John Chrysostom and the Subintroductae," 172.
[7] Clark, "John Chrysostom and the Subintroductae," 173.

defender of orthodoxy, rose to condemn it. Chrysostom's attack on chaste marriage is a continuation of the institutional opposition to mixed-sex religious association, not just the opinion of one individual.

Scholars have tended to emphasize the limitations placed upon female authority in Roman society.[8] There is much merit to be found in these assumptions, and the institutions of family and society were often clearly dominated by males. The striking figure of the *pater familias* who possessed the power of life and death over his entire household still resonates with modern audiences and holds a great deal of explanatory power. However, gender relations were much more nuanced than simple readings of the legal precepts might first suggest. This simplistic view of Roman life can be tempered by examples of the power women were able to wield within Roman society. The ability of women to control vast wealth, their vital role in the early Christian church, and even their ability to exercise limited political power all stand as exceptions to the overriding control of men. However, by placing patriarchal systems at the center of our understanding of gender relations, we are likely to miss key elements of the situation by classifying them as mere exceptions to an undifferentiated orthodoxy. Nowhere is this more evident than in regards to ecclesiastical affairs. While the process of viewing the past as a long struggle of orthodox against heterodox belief and practice may serve the interests of the church, it is not beneficial for the understanding of the time period.

The case of syneisaktism in the fourth-century is an example of how this process worked. John Chrysostom's treatises on syneisaktism provide us with half of the debate on the matter of social positions and order. To understand the other half we are at an immense disadvantage because we only know of this position through orthodox attacks. Yet, in this case, a credible argument can be made for the use of Chrysostom's writings to understand his opponents'

[8] e.g. Dixon, Suzanne, *The Roman Family* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992)

position. This is due in large part to the fact that Chrysostom's two works were delivered as sermons at Antioch sometime between 368-371.[9] The public presentation of these arguments in a Roman administrative center ensured that his opinions would not go unnoticed locally and may well have had a much wider audience. Therefore, Chrysostom could not have strayed too far from the actual practice and arguments of his opponents. To do so would have immediately cost him the credibility that he needed to be an effective polemicist. He did, of course, make every effort to frame the syneisaktic position in an unfavorable light, producing a straw man, which he could then dismantle. However, through careful reading and an understanding of the basis for Chrysostom's misgivings, we can unearth some fragments of this debate and take initial steps towards reconstituting his opponents' case.

Chrysostom's arguments against syneisaktic practices are based upon his social conservatism. He wanted to retain the traditional gender order, the internal religious hierarchy, and the distinctions drawn between Christians and pagans. As will be shown below, each of these points is clearly illustrated in his two treatises. However, merely to deal with the intellectual history apart from the physical and social context does a disservice to the evidence. To understand the background for Chrysostom's call for social stability requires a brief description of the city and political environment in which it was made.

In the fourth-century, Antioch was regarded as one of the greatest cities in the Roman Empire. Astride the commercial routes between Asia and the Mediterranean, the city had both strategic and economic value as it controlled the main access point from regions to the south and the busy traffic from the upper Euphrates.[10] The social makeup of the city was highly diverse.

---

[9] J.N.D. Kelly, *Golden Mouth: A Story of John Chrysostom - Ascetic, Preacher, Bishop.* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1995), 42.
[10] Glanville Downey, *A History of Antioch in Syria: From Seleucus to the Arab Conquest* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 16.

There were strong communities of both pagans and Jews, but by and large it was a Christian city. However, the makeup of the city was that of the *polis* of antiquity. The ancient civic devotion which served as the basis of the *polis* was complicated by the active presence of Christians and Jews within the city.[11] The Christians in particular, by attempting to rework the social bonds of the city along ecclesiastical lines, posed a challenge to the reigning order.[12] By the middle of the fourth-century, the makeup of the city itself was in crisis. Not only was there conflict between Christians and pagans and Jews, but internal division wracked the Christians as well.

The most notable division in Antioch's Christian community was the running battle between the Arian and Nicaean factions through much of the fourth-century. Despite the pressure exerted on Arians as a result of the council of Nicaea's ruling in 325 that defined God the Father and Christ as having the same 'essence,' the Arian community was still influential. In Antioch, these divisions were represented in the internal politics of the Antiochene church. In 331, Arian supporters were able to get the Nicean bishop of the city, Eustathios, banished in favor of a bishop of their own faction. These tensions would resurface repeatedly over the course of the fourth-century, with Antioch having three competing bishops at one point in 361.[13] It was into this context of religious competition that Chrysostom was born around the year 349.[14]Chrysostom was the son of an aristocratic Christian family and obtained the high-level classical education expected of his station, but later rebelled and began a life-long pursuit of sacred studies.[15]This decision marked the beginning of a spiritual progression for Chrysostom that was characterized by increasingly ascetic behavior. He first attempted to set up a spiritual

[11] Peter Brown, *Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 313.
[12] Brown, *Body and Society*, 309-321.
[13] Kelly, *Golden Mouth*, 11-12.
[14] Kelly, *Golden Mouth*, 296-298.
[15] Kelly, *Golden Mouth*, 16.

household with his companion Basil, but this project was frustrated by his mother's entreaties that her son should not abandon her. Chrysostom's desire for a spiritual household, while not fulfilled, was by no means unique and was part of the same trend that gave rise to syneisaktism. After his own brief flirtation with urban household asceticism, he accepted Meletios as a spiritual advisor and mentor. In Meletios' service he also began to study ascetic practice under Carterios and Diodore, Meletios' deputy. This was apparently not so much a monastery as a group of highly committed young Christians who accepted the teachings of a master while remaining in the world.[16] This arrangement was altered in 371 when Meletios was forced into exile from Antioch by the Emperor Valens' decree expelling all bishops whom Julian had allowed to return. With Meletios exiled, Chrysostom removed himself from the city and into the wilderness in order to intensify his ascetical lifestyle.The next six years of Chrysostom's life were spent in rigorous self-denial and sacrifice. For the first four of these years Chrysostom lived in a community of monks who maintained a network of hermitages in which the majority of work was performed communally, but meditation and prayer was undertaken by individual monks. After four years of this type of semi-communal living, Chrysostom further radicalized his behavior by adopting a solitary ascetic discipline, evidenced by his move to a cave high on the mountain. Unfortunately, Chrysostom ruined his health in his desire for spiritual progress. According to his biographer Palladios, he denied himself sleep and never laid down day or night. Further, extensive fasts and the bitter cold weakened his body. After two years of self-mortification Chrysostom was forced to come down from the mountain in order to save his life.[17] Coinciding with Chrysostom's return to Antioch was Meletios' return from exile following the death of Valens at the battle of Adrianople in 378. Chrysostom quickly resumed his position in

[16] Kelly, *Golden Mouth*, 17,18.
[17] Kelly, *Golden Mouth*, 24-35.

Meletios' service and was appointed to the diaconate three years later.[18] The primary role of the deacon was in pastoral work and it was at this time that Chrysostom composed his works on marriage, virginity, and the family.

The concepts of virginity and marriage were intimately linked for Chrysostom. Through various treatises he repeatedly dealt with the distinctions between marriage and sexual renunciation. For Chrysostom, virginity was based in a physical removal from marriage. The physicality of marriage is contrasted to the spirituality of virginity. A virgin is defined through removal from physical association with men. However, to understand Chrysostom's thought on virginity and marriage a brief outline of the canonical texts upon which he drew will be necessary.

Chrysostom's primary influence was the apostle Paul. The main principle of Paul's thought concerning virginity in 1 Corinthians was based upon a distinction between the body and the spirit through the affirmation or rejection of the institution of marriage. Although he regarded virginity as valuable, it was not compatible with the institution of marriage. Framed in this manner, marriage is inherently linked to the sex act while virginity is the absence of marriage. The Pauline doctrine concerning this tension reaffirmed the gospel concept of marriage while stressing the benefits of celibacy. Paul begins his section on virginity and marriage by stating that though it would be best if everyone were able to hold to chastity as he did, not everyone was given the strength to do so.[19] He sees virginity as one of many possible gifts from God. If one did not have this gift it would be foolish to try and take on a celibate life. For those who were married, to abandon sexual contact was dangerous and would lead to sin, as one's inherent lust

[18] Kelly, *Golden Mouth*, 38.
[19] 1 Cor. 7.7 "I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has a particular gift from God, one having one kind and another a different kind."

would not be satisfied.[20] While reiterating the prohibition on divorce, [21] Paul still expresses that virginity is preferable as long as it is not socially disruptive.[22] This essentially conservative message may have been a "rearguard action" against the response his previous radical egalitarian teachings in the letter to the Galatians generated,[23] in which he proclaimed, "there is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; there is neither male nor female."[24] While this may have been advisable as a means to recruit members to a new religious faction, later in his career these egalitarian measures served to undercut the very households that were the basis for Paul's support. The message from Paul in 1 Corinthians is thus an explicit attempt to maintain the current social structure based upon a stable household. Virginity, while clearly not for all, is still a holier state than marriage.[25] By focusing the dialogue in this manner, these passages structured the discussion on virginity as a removal from the problematic nature of marriage, while equating marriage with sex.

---

[20] 1 Cor 7.8-11 "To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain single as I do. But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion. To the married I give charge, not I but the Lord, that the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, let her remain single or else be reconciled to her husband) -- and that the husband should not divorce his wife."

[21] 1 Cor. 7.10-11.

[22] 1 Cor 7 25-40. "Now concerning virgins, I have no command of the Lord, but I give my opinion as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. I think that, in view of the impending crisis, it is well for you to remain as you are. Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But if you marry, you do not sin, and if a virgin marries, she does not sin. Yet those who marry will experience distress in this life, and I would spare you that. I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away. I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided. And the unmarried woman and the virgin are anxious about the affairs of the Lord, so that they may be holy in body and spirit; but the married woman is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please her husband. I say this for your own benefit, not to put any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and unhindered devotion to the Lord."

[23] Brown, Peter. *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 53-57.

[24] Gal. 3.28

[25] 1 Cor. 7.7

Chrysostom's constructions of virginity and marriage paralleled Pauline thought. Along with *Genesis,* the epistles of Paul constitute a large portion of Chrysostom's work.[26] Yet, while his views regarding the linking of marriage and virginity were indebted to Paul, Chrysostom's own interpretation was substantially different. Paul was primarily concerned with the spiritual nature of virginity. The practice of virginity was desirable but could not be mandated due to its nature as a divine gift. If a virgin found that she did not have this particular gift, there was no shame in marriage.[27] Paul was, as we have seen, very concerned about maintaining social order; however, these concerns were secondary to spiritual issues.

As a member of a large and established ecclesiastical structure, Chrysostom could not view social arrangements in such a blithe manner. For him, virginity and marriage were fixed social conditions that must be maintained. In his sermon, *De non iterando coniugio*, Chrysostom argues that widows and virgins must remain in their stations or risk worse punishments than those who were mere adulterers, "for breaking a promise is much worse than not promising at all."[28] Virginity and chastity are not conditions that emanate from divine favor; rather, they come from free choice and contract. Chrysostom asserts that remarriage is a breach of contract with God that arises "not from one's nature but from one's deliberate choice."[29] By placing the status of widows and virgins in this context he is making a clear statement about their social status.

Chrysostom's view of virginity as a free choice was a matter of necessity in the religious environment of fourth-century Antioch. In order to differentiate his support for virginity from pagans and other Christians who had been declared heretical, he needed to hold marriage up as a

---

[26] e.g. *Homiliae in Epist. As Colossios. PG* 62.299-392; *Homiliae in Epist. I ad Corinthios*. *PG* 61.11-382; *Homiliae in Epist. I ad Timotheum. PG* 62.501-600.
[27] Matt. 19:12
[28] *De non iterando coniugio* 3.11
[29] *De non iterando coniugio* 3.15

positive station.[30] He does this by stressing the traditional view of Greek philosophy that no conduct may be seen as worthy of praise that is not undertaken by free choice.[31] "Just as no one would praise eunuchs for virginity because they do not marry," no one should praise those who do not freely choose virginity.[32] While he upholds the view that marriage is a blessed condition sanctioned by God, it is an institution that has as many problems as benefits.

According to Chrysostom, marriage originated as a direct result of the fall from Eden. Before the Fall, there was no need for marriage as there was no hint of sexual desire and Adam and Eve lived in a pure virginal state. "Desire for sexual intercourse, conception, labor, childbirth and every form of corruption had been banished from their souls. As a clear river shooting forth from a pure source, so were they in that place adorned by virginity."[33] Marriage only developed after the Fall, then, as a way to minimize lust. It had its value, but Chrysostom argued that it was time to put away these 'childish' ways and to embrace perfect virtue.[34] Marriage arose at the same time as all the other worldly institutions and all have the same effect:

> Why did marriage not appear before the treachery? Why was there no intercourse in paradise? Why not the pains of childbirth before the curse? Because at that time these things were superfluous. The necessity arose later because of our weakness, as did cities, crafts, the wearing of clothes, and all our other numerous needs. Death introduced them in its wake.[35]

Chrysostom links sexuality to the most fundamental elements of Late Antique society. As the family was the essential building block of society, to challenge the conception of marriage was to challenge society. Thus, when he advocates virginity, he is calling for radical social change as well.

---

[30] John explicitly mentions the teachings of Marcion, Valentinus, and Mani as examples of heretical teachings that condemn marriage. *De Virginitate* 3.
[31] *De Virginitate* 1.2
[32] *De Virginitate* 8.5.1
[33] *De Virginitate* 14.3.6
[34] *De Virginitate* 15-17
[35] *De Virginitate* 15.2

According to Chrysostom, the only benefits of marriage were procreation and a salve for lust; however, neither is particularly compelling in Chrysostom's estimation. Procreation is unnecessary since "the earth and sea and all the world has been inhabited."[36] While "marriage is of much use to those who are still now caught up in their passions," it is a relic of a bygone age.[37] The emphasis here is on the revolutionary aspects of Christianity. Just as children eventually reach adulthood, Chrysostom sees Christian society as finally reaching the point where it can abandon marriage. This is not merely a reformation of sexual relations, but rather a reconstruction of society as a whole.

The large numbers of virgins and ascetics that Chrysostom saw around him were evidence that this change was taking place. His view of society was essentially a dualistic one. The previous worldly construction of society was being replaced by a spiritual one. Formulating virginity in this way removed virgins' bodies from the traditional cycle of replenishing the population of the city.[38] Virginity represents the triumph of Christianity over paganism and the emergence from a religious 'childhood.'

> There will no longer be marriage or birth pains, sexual pleasure or intercourse, an abundance of money or the management of possessions, food or clothing, agriculture or seamanship, crafts or construction, cities or homes, but some other system and way of life. All of these will cease to exist in a little while.[39]

The characteristics of virginity that Chrysostom describes are predictably based upon social conduct rather than inner spirituality. The physical aspects of virginity had little or no meaning without the moral character that should be present to equal mere physical integrity.[40] The need for proper spiritual conduct is also matched by the need for social behavior. This aspect is by no

---

[36] *De Virginitate* 19.1.5
[37] *De Virginitate* 19.2.1
[38] Brown, *Body and Society*, 5-16.
[39] *De Virginitate* 73.4.9
[40] *De Virginitate* 5.2

means unique to Chrysostom and is derived from similar statements made by Paul.[41] However, Chrysostom places more emphasis on the point. "If you take away 'decorum and devotion,' you cut out the very heart of virginity," he writes. "But when you possess it along with perfect conduct, you have the roots and foundation for goodness."[42] Proper social behavior was critical for Chrysostom's understanding of what it meant to be a Christian. Antioch in Chrysostom's time consisted of many rival groups that frequently interacted and were in constant competition with each other. Chrysostom's public arguments for Christianity's preeminence rested largely upon the social conduct of its most holy members. The appearance of improper conduct was equal to an actual lack of spirituality. It was within this context that Chrysostom also criticized the cohabitation of virgins.

To begin his treatise directed against men cohabitating with virgins, Chrysostom sets out the framework under which men and women can have personal contact. The two states are defined as marriage and prostitution. He needed to defend marriage as legitimate to uphold his orthodox position in light of his forthcoming enthusiastic praise of marriage. He reasons quite humbly that marriage is valid since it is "of ancient origin and God was its legislator." Continuing along the same lines, prostitution is seen as newer and inspired by demons. Still newer, with the clear association with prostitution, is a third practice, which was syneisaktism.[43]

This progression clearly indicates that Chrysostom perceived the personal association between men and women as inherently based upon sexual relations. He is willing to excuse the

---

[41] 1 Cor. 7.32-35 " I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided. And the unmarried woman and the virgin are anxious about the affairs of the Lord, so that they may be holy in body and spirit; but the married woman is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please her husband. I say this for your own benefit, not to put any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and unhindered devotion to the Lord."

[42] *De Virginitate* 80.2.1

[43] *C. eos qui subintroductas habent virgins* 1.1 Unless otherwise noted all translations are the work of Elizabeth A Clark, "Instruction and Refutation Directed Against those Men Cohabitating with Virgins" in *Jerome Chrysostom, and Friends: Essays and Translations* (Toronto: Edwin Mellen Press, 1979), 164.

problems associated with marriage because God ordained marriage as a method of procreation and reducing licentious desire; however, prostitution and syneisaktism have no such endorsement. Chrysostom does not explicitly accuse those practicing syneisaktism of engaging in sexual activity, but his constant sarcasm leaves little doubt of his thoughts. However, he does argue that there must be a certain amount of enjoyment for the men and women living together. He postulates that the men involved in syneisaktism "would not enjoy such a despicable reputation nor would there be so many scandals, if a violent and tyrannical pleasure were not found in their cohabitation."[44] What possible motivation can there be for men choosing to live with women other than desire, Chrysostom muses. With this as the basis for his understanding of syneisaktism, Chrysostom can dismiss the "excuses" provided by his opposition.

The rationales presented by Chrysostom for syneisaktism are quite practical in nature. Chrysostom has his opponents' claim that cohabitation is meant to protect the virgin and her property and for the two ascetic individuals to share household duties. The proponents of syneisaktism are quoted as saying:

> [t]he virgin is unprotected, without a husband or in-laws; often she does not have even a father or a brother. She needs someone to lend her a hand, to comfort her solitude, to come to her defense in all occasions, and to establish her in a haven of considerable security.[45]

Chrysostom, of course, does not accept this proposition and declares that syneisaktism has nothing to do with either charity or legal protection, but rather is based upon pleasure. He disregards the notion that cohabitation can be seen as an act of charity where men help poor, disadvantaged women. He argues that if charity was the true goal, the sick and the impoverished abounding in Antioch are in much greater need. Furthermore, there are many elderly women who seem to be in greater distress than the young "nubile and pretty" girls who are the usual

[44] *C. eos* 1.2.9
[45] *C. eos* 6.1.5

choice for cohabitation.[46] Chrysostom concludes that clearly charity cannot be the true goal of men who pick young and healthy women over the aged and infirm.

Chrysostom sets up his straw man particularly well and the listener would have had little choice but to agree with the logic of his construction. Yet his audience would presumably have been aware of the legal background upon which the argument for the protection of young women was based. While all Romans who were no longer under their father's power were theoretically independent, children and adult women were required to have a legal guardian.[47] The rationale for this was that children needed to have a guardian because of their inexperience while women needed protection because of the weakness of their gender. Ulpian stated that "it was the wish of the old lawyers that women, even those of full age, should be in guardianship as being scatterbrained."[48] The *tutela mulierum* was not originally designed to help women who were ignorant of legal affairs. Rather, it was created in response to the concern that women would alienate property that should rightfully be passed down through the family. In order to regulate the control of family property, *res mancipi*, the closest agnatic relative was appointed to be the guardian of a woman upon the father's death in the republic. The woman theoretically needed the approval of the guardian to effect any action that might harm the *res mancipi*.[49]

By the third-century, however, this function was largely ceremonial for adult women. The guardian could not compel the woman to do anything and could be forced to give his consent in court.[50] The concept that women were intrinsically unsuited to manage their own affairs was being challenged in principle. In his second-century *Insitutiones*, Gaius had written

---

[46] *C. eos* 7.7.2
[47] Antti Arjava, *Women and Law in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 112
[48] *Institutiones* I. 144. *The Institutes of Gaius*, trans. W.M. Gordon and O.F. Robinson (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1988).
[49] Arjava, *Women and Law in Late Antiquity*, 112-113
[50] Arjava, *Women and Law in Late Antiquity*, 113

against the argument that women were "scatterbrained" and "frequently subject to deception," concluding that such ideas were "specious rather than true." He goes on to write:

> women of full age deal with their own affairs for themselves, and while in certain instances the guardian interposes his authorization for form's sake, he is often compelled by the praetor to give authorization, even against his will. Regardless, the Augustan law that freed women from guardianship once they had given birth to three children would seem to indicate that most women were not under the system of *tutela*.[51]

The only point in the system of *tutela mulieris* that seems to have applied was in relation to young women. In the third-century, the age of majority for Roman girls was twelve, and very few girls of that age would have been capable of running their own affairs. In this sense, the *tutela* made sense as a safeguard for these women and allowed their estates to be managed without interference.[52]

Within this context, Chrysostom's assault on the protection of young virgins is no longer self-evident. The choice of men to cohabit with young, nubile virgins certainly reverberates with implied sexual tension, but the relationship described is well within the Roman tradition of protecting young women in this manner and need not imply any type of physical relationship. Young female virgins would certainly have as much need for legal advice and protection until they reached maturity as a male child of the same age. Chrysostom's rejoinder to seek old women and the poor does not make sense in the context of *tutela.* If the young women do not have family with which to live, as Chrysostom clearly admits is possible, then sharing a household with their *tutela* is not really so strange.

While Chrysostom would have preferred to keep virgins under the care of the church, there seems to be a separate faction that tried to incorporate traditional Roman methods to care

---

[51] *Institutiones* I. 190

[52] Arjava, *Women and Law in Late Antiquity*, 115. By the late fourth-century, this was officially replaced by the position of *curator minoris* but the essential purpose was much the same.

for and protect the young. In his own way, however, Chrysostom was acting in a very conservative manner as well. He wished to preserve a situation marked by a strong sense of differentiation from secular pagan culture. As seen in the above discussion of virginity, he saw the place of Christianity as a radical reformation of society. Taking his cue from Paul's call for a focus upon the spiritual world instead of the physical one, Chrysostom saw the large number of virgins in Antioch as a sign of the coming of a Christian age.[53] Peter Brown has characterized the development of Antioch as a wholly Christian city as "the poignant, tragically unrealized wish of his life."[54] The relationship between pagan and Christian culture was the same as the relationship between the world and the spirit. Chrysostom believed that as the age of Christianity drew near, as was evidenced through virgins, the worldly characteristics of the traditional society were being set aside.[55]

Chrysostom wished to maintain the revolutionary status of Christianity. His objections to the system of *tutela mulieris* must then be understood within this framework. He argued that this practice had no benefit for anyone when it was applied to the cohabitation of virgins. Not only were both individuals involved corrupted by the arrangement, but the institutional Church suffered great harm as well. Chrysostom's arguments focus on the way that the practical elements of cohabitation affect their spiritual and worldly affairs. He spends a great deal of time showing how the perceived benefits of living together do not actually exist and, even if they did, would cause great harm to the cohabitants or others.

Chrysostom argued that men involved in syneisaktic relationships were harmed by their immersion in secular matters. Their error did not simply arise from their association with money and its administration. Rather, it was based upon the breaking of social bonds. "It is not so

[53] 1 Cor. 7
[54] Brown, *The Body and Society*, 306.
[55] *De Virginitate* 73.

shameful for married people to attend to the management of these domestic matters," he writes, "as it is for you, you who pretend to have turned away from present realities but slip back in under another disguise."[56] Just as virgins and widows were obliged to remain in the Christian camp having made their commitment to reject the world, so too was the ascetic male. For Chrysostom, the essence of religious asceticism was based upon the removal of worldly attachments. A position that somehow compromised this dichotomous relationship was antithetical to ascetical practice. Repeatedly citing the biblical passage, "you cannot serve God and mammon,"[57] Chrysostom reinforces the distinction between the secular and the nascent Christian society.

If the management of a virgins' wealth harmed men, women were equally afflicted by its accumulation. Chrysostom argued that whatever protection men offered for the possessions of the virgin led to their corruption through association with material wealth. Yet he goes far beyond the charge that syneisaktic virgins did not live in absolute poverty. Chrysostom worries about the loss of control that success in business might bring:

> What if she insists on engaging in other activities . . . such as lending money at interest? What if next she summoned us to make a contract and did not convince us to do so; when she failed to persuade us and seized upon other persons would we be blamed? What then? If she established certain other low-class disreputable taverns and since we did not wish to join the enterprise she found it necessary to seek others…[58]

The issue of purity seems to be intimately linked to the issue of social control over the virgin. It would seem here that Chrysostom was worried about the freedom from supervision that the current form of *tutela mulierum* allowed. He also suggests - without much objectivity - that an

---

[56] *C. Eos* 6.3.1
[57] Matthew 6:24
[58] *C. eos.* 7.1

institution might better handle the property of the virgins rather than a single individual.[59] In sum, Chrysostom viewed the wealth and freedom possessed by affluent virgins as antithetical to Christian practice.

Similarly, he argues that providing for virgins in extreme poverty is no more beneficial to the virgins' souls. Yet, in this case, his objections are less about wealth than scandal. Helping the poor is a constructive act, but not when it is done in such a way as to bring disrepute upon those that one seeks to help.

> What sort of alms are these, when the glory of God is outraged, when complaints, shame scoffing, and abuse are heaped on the woman you have pitied and on so many others who are the victims of scandal because of her?[60]

The scandal to which he refers seems to be regarding the suspicion of sexual impropriety. However, Chrysostom's focus does not linger overlong upon the plight that such doubt might cause to the individual. Rather, he seems much more concerned with the difficulty that the practice poses to the church as a whole.

At first glance, the exact nature of the scandalous behavior that Chrysostom saw in syneisaktic practice is obvious. If we are willing to assume that sexual renunciation is the defining factor of ascetic practice, cohabitation with the opposite sex is clearly shocking behavior. However, this is a vastly oversimplified view of the situation. This base level of suspect sexual purity did exist and formed a large part of Chrysostom's impeachment of the practice. Yet there is clearly something more going on in his writings. Chrysostom goes to great pains to make the point that even if cohabitation did not harm those who participated in it, they were responsible for the moral injury that it caused others. On the simplest of levels, the damage to which he refers would have risen from the indignations of those in the congregation with

[59] *C. eos.* 7.2.2
[60] *C. eos.* 7.3.7

overactive imaginations. Yet Chrysostom's extensive and scathing treatment of the subject in one of the most important imperial centers, combined with the sustained conciliar attack, indicates that he perceived a much greater threat.

The nature of this threat becomes apparent when one considers of what precisely the men and women are being accused here. If it is assumed that they are having sexual relations outside of marriage then the charge is simple fornication. Indeed, this is insinuated at various times throughout the text. But what harm is there if, as Chrysostom is willing to concede, there is no sexual transgression or temptation in the spiritual marriage?[61] His answer is that the sin is worse when it affects the Christian community as a whole as it destroys the appearance of superior morality that the community had carefully cultivated.

> When a virgin learns to discuss things frankly with a man, to sit by him, to look at him, to laugh in his presence, to disgrace herself in many other ways, and does not think this is dreadful, the veil of virginity is destroyed. . . . [and] they are despised by everyone.[62]

In other words, if the central concept of virginity is corrupted through rumor and innuendo, then the position of the Christian church is jeopardized. Chrysostom argues that this is done in three different ways, none of which pertains directly to the individual morality of the men and women in the spiritual marriage.

First of all, he establishes at length the principle that those who provide the occasion for scandalous rumors are just as guilty as those who spread them.[63] The interesting point here is that Chrysostom does not seem concerned as much by the sensibilities of his own congregation, but rather of his opponents'.[64] This changes the focus of the subsequent dialogue from the individual care of souls to that of institutional and social competition with non-Christians and

---

[61] *C. eos* 3.1.2
[62] *Quod regulares* 11.2-3
[63] *C. eos* Ch 3 and 4 and *Quod regulares feminae viris cohabitare non debeant* 4.5
[64] *C. eos* 3.1.4

possibly even the members of the ultra-Nicene group that was still present in Antioch. Judging by Chrysostom's language and concern for the delegitimization of Christian virginity, it is apparent that his opponents in question are most likely the non-Christians of Antioch.

This is not to say that his own parish did not also concern Chrysostom. His apprehension was apparently not so much for their souls as for the acceptance of his argument, as it seems that syneisaktism had significant support within his church. Chrysostom publicly worried about attracting widespread antagonism for his remarks:

> If some become angry at me for saying these things, I will ask them to forgive me and not be irritated. For I have not chosen to bring such enmity upon myself willingly or naively; I am not so miserable and contemptible as to wish to insult everyone heedlessly.[65]

Perhaps it is because of this extensive support for cohabitation that Chrysostom is so willing to assume that there is no personal blame to be found in the arrangement.[66] The main focus of his argument rests upon the status of the Christian church in the eyes of unbelievers.

Chrysostom uses a utilitarian argument to justify his condemnation of spiritual marriage on the grounds that others are scandalized by it. Since there are other ways in which a man could "prove his piety . . . without scandalizing souls, then he ought not to spend his time on the kind of projects in which the disadvantage is greater than the benefit."[67] The disadvantage here is again the loss of a favorable reputation among pagans. "For if men living irreproachably can scarcely convert the careless, are we not in all ways responsible for their ruin if we provide them with the opportunity for their behavior?"[68] The negative effects of syneisaktism considered by Chrysostom are significant in their outward looking nature. The proper understanding of his

---

[65] *C. eos* 1.3
[66] e.g. *C. eos* 8.1 and *Quod regulares* 5.2
[67] *C. eos.* 8.1.3
[68] *C. eos* 8.2.3

argument must then be focused not upon Christian doctrine, but rather on the social relationship of a Christian to his community.

The group that most clearly represented this division was the monks who lived in the countryside surrounding Antioch. They were separated from society both physically and by their spiritual rigor. The heroic feats of asceticism performed by these individuals were a source of prestige for Christian society and signified its favor with the divine.[69] The power of an ascetic individual sprang from his separation. Syneisaktism threatened this distinction by claiming to have superceded the feats of the desert monks within the comfortable confines of Antioch. Worse still, syneisaktists claimed to have done so by socially integrating themselves with women.

The danger of sexual sins was the singular most difficult worldly attachment that a monk must overcome.[70] For Syrian monasticism, "sexuality was not an aspect of the person that could be ignored by those who had given up marriage."[71] Only strict codes of sexual avoidance and the most stringent practice of self-torture could hope to tame the stirrings of lust within the body. Chrysostom chides the men in spiritual marriages for excessive pride in claiming to have conquered desire through comfortable cohabitation where all the extreme feats of asceticism practiced by prophets, apostles and monks had failed.

If one is attempting to avoid lust, then a logical step would seem to be to avoid members of the opposite sex. Chrysostom's biblical examples draw on stories that exemplify this notion. He begins by noting that the prophet Job took no notice of virgins lest it cause him to sin against his wife.[72] Chrysostom extrapolates from this that Job

---

[69] Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971): 80-101.
[70] Brown, *The Body and Society*, 248-9.
[71] Brown, *The Body and Society*, 268.
[72] Job 31.1, *C. eos* 4.5

would have denounced cohabitation since even gazing upon women was a sin. Similarly, Chrysostom cites Paul's dialogue regarding the rebellious nature of the flesh, his constant self-mortifications,[73] and Jesus' command to not "even look into the eyes of a woman"[74] to support his claim that even the most holy of men could not totally overcome physical urges. However, he mischaracterizes this gospel passage in a manner that was unlikely to have been accidental. Jesus did not in fact forbid looking at maidens; rather, he forbade looking at them with lust. This distinction does not help Chrysostom's argument and is manipulated so that it would appear as if it supports his case.

The monks were the true heirs to the ascetical tradition of Job and Paul. Chrysostom knew this group and its behavior quite well, as he was a monk for several years and perhaps still considered himself akin to these men.

> [M]any who cover their entire bodies with iron chains and are clad in sack cloth, who have climbed the peaks of mountains and live in constant fasting accompanied by vigils and sleeplessness, who demonstrate great hardiness in every way, forbid all women to enter their chambers and cells and in this way discipline themselves --- these men, we are told, scarcely prevail over the frenzy of desire.[75]

If these men who performed a continuous war with their 'rebellious' flesh were scarcely able to conquer sexual urges, then how, Chrysostom argues, could one accept that men who live and associate with women might do so?[76]

The extraordinary claims made by syneisaktic couples challenged the fundamental assumption upon which the standard form of monasticism was based. If the proper response to sexual temptation rested in the physical removal from any contact with the opposite sex, then there is no room for the spiritual marriage in the Christian social context. Accepting spiritual

---

[73] I Cor. 9.27
[74] *C. eos* 5.3.3 paraphrasing Matt 5.28
[75] *C. eos* 5.3
[76] *C. eos* 5.4

marriage would undercut the special position of spiritual authority that the extreme ascetics had created for themselves.[77] The indignation that Chrysostom shows for the claims of spiritual marriage is founded upon the practice's potentially revolutionary impact upon the fundamental assumptions of Syrian monasticism.

For the most part, Chrysostom dealt directly with the impact that syneisaktism had upon the institutional church and monasticism. However, perhaps the most fundamental social issue that spiritual marriage raised was the relationship between men and women. Although Chrysostom did not clearly and concretely address the challenge, the underlying basis for contact and relationships between men and women is the real crux of the argument.

The evidence for this contention lies within Chrysostom's text. While he devotes a large portion of his work to attacks upon the supposed practical benefits that are claimed by syneisaktism's supporters, there are also a number of arguments that seem to challenge the theoretical basis for understanding gender. He is clearly addressing the issue when argues that the only reason men associate with women is because of desire, that contact between the sexes will lead to inappropriate gender roles, and that there can be no equality in relationships between men and women. Taken as a whole, these contentions are all designed to contradict the idea that friendship between the sexes was possible.

The topic of friendship was a popular one in classical philosophy and was well represented among the most famous thinkers.[78] Classical philosophers believed that friendship was based upon a "similarity of natures, interests, and pursuits, and in its truest form, an equality of persons."[79] Cicero sums up the general principle that "friendship takes its beginning from our

---

[77] Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," 80-101.
[78] c.f. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 8-9; Cicero, *De amicitia*; Plato, *Lysis*.
[79] Clark, "Friendship between the Sexes: Classical Theory and Christian Practice" in *Jerome, Chrysostom, and Friends Essays and Translations*, v. 2. (New York: Edgar Mellen Press, 1979), 35.

very nature" rather than from need.[80] Chrysostom's excellent classical education would have undoubtedly put him into contact with these principles, if not Cicero's specific text. In this light, Chrysostom's argument that syneisaktic men and women only live together because of a "violent and tyrannical pleasure" takes on greater meaning than a simple accusation of licentious behavior. It also has the direct effect of ruling out the possibility of friendship between them. Pleasure is a need and any relationship based upon this cannot be regarded as friendship.

> What man, if he were free from the compulsion to have a woman, would choose to put up with the delicacy, wantonness, and all the other faults of the sex? Thus even from the beginning God endowed women with this strength, knowing that she would be totally despicable unless she were provided with this power, that no man would choose to live with her if he were innocent of desire.[81]

As women's natures were clearly so different, the only plausible reason Chrysostom can find for men associating with women is for sexual purposes. This principle becomes clear in his dialogue with syneisaktic women, when he rhetorically inquires what legitimate reason they could have for their association with men: "The matron will answer 'marriage,' and the prostitute, 'sensuality,' but you, the virgin, what pretext will you set before us which is plausible and wears a fair face?"[82] Clearly, Chrysostom does not see 'friendship' as a particularly plausible answer to his query. Chrysostom is on firm ground with his audience here, as the likelihood of such a relationship occurring was seen as quite rare in both practice and theory.[83]

Chrysostom further argues that if such a strange situation as friendship between men and women was allowed, then by necessity each gender must lose its distinctiveness in order to find common ground: men would become women, and women men. If men had these relationships

---

[80] *De amicitia* 8.27
[81] *C. eos* 5.6
[82] *Quod regulares* 4.4
[83] Clark, "Friendship between the Sexes," 35-6

they would be indelibly imprinted with the habits of women; an idea completely antithetical to the masculine virtues displayed by the Syrian monks.

> Christ wants us to be stalwart soldiers and athletes. He has not furnished us with spiritual weapons so that we take upon ourselves the service of girls worth only three obols, that we turn our attention to matters which concern wool and weaving and other such tasks, . . . that we spend all day having our souls stamped with the women's habits and speech.[84]

Instead, he calls for men to take their rightful place as monks, to go to war against the powers of evil, and to cast down the devil. Continuing with his analogy of spiritual warfare, Chrysostom imagines syneisaktic monks as deserters who hide in the company of women just as the battle is the hottest, and whose only fitting punishment is a swift death.[85] Hardly his harshest criticism, Chrysostom concludes by saying that women "render [monks] softer, more hot-headed, shameful, mindless, irascible, insolent, importunate, ignoble, crude, servile, niggardly, reckless, nonsensical, and, to sum it up, take all their corrupting feminine customs and stamp them on the souls of these men."[86]

Even more threatening for Chrysostom was the idea that nuns might become aggressive and domineering. The dislocation of the relative status of men and women seemed to Chrysostom to be an intrinsic effect of spiritual marriage. "It is a great disgrace when the upper assumes the position of the lower so that the head is below and the body is above," he writes.[87] Chrysostom cautions men that by sharing a household and its duties with women, they are becoming slaves of women. Monks are portrayed as losing their very independence, forced into obeying all the trifling requests that a woman might order.[88] Chrysostom employs the threat of active and domineering nuns to shock his audience. At various points in his treatises he shifts

---

[84] *C. eos* 10.7
[85] *C. eos* 11.1
[86] *C. eos* 11.2
[87] *Quod regulares* 7.7
[88] *C. eos* 11.2

from rebuking men for harboring nubile young women to recoiling at horror at the sight of nuns "overpowering men."[89] "If cohabitation is shameful," he concludes, "it is doubtless much more so when the man living with the woman is enslaved."[90]

Chrysostom's arguments against those "who stir up trouble everywhere in the established order" were undoubtedly effective.[91] Yet they only make sense if we are to presume that there was an argument either being made or implied that men and women could share friendship. Chrysostom's arguments specifically address the issues and implications that would arise from such a proposition. Furthermore, he calls on the monks and nuns at various points to give up their friendship with women even though he denies such a relationship is possible.[92] These relationships, Chrysostom concludes, are best left to the next life. "There will be no hindrance in the next world to prevent man and woman from being together, for every evil suspicion is removed and all . . . can maintain the way of life of those angels and intellectual powers."[93] Clearly, Chrysostom was aware that syneisaktism implied friendship between the sexes and was attempting to counteract its influence.

Syneisaktism was a widespread and influential form of religious piety, one which took seriously the ideas in the Christian canon that allowed for greater social freedom than traditional society condoned. Lines of inquiry dependent on reading through another text using rhetorical analysis are fraught with difficulties and are, by their very nature, prone to imprecise conclusions. This study is no exception. However, to follow the viewpoint of Chrysostom and other critics of syneisaktic practices too closely would lead to a distorted version of Late Antique

[89] *Quod regulares* 7.6
[90] *Quiod regulares* 7.7
[91] *Quod regulares* 5.5
[92] e.g. *C. eos* 11.2
[93] *C. eos* 13.4

society. The fourth-century was a period of varied Christian practice and belief and our narratives should attempt to reflect this balance.