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Jerome and Women

Antti Arjava

Women are no longer a forgotten chapter in the history of the Early Church. The first Christian heroines are at least as popular in modern research as the Church Fathers, who are made to pay for their past chauvinist statements. Few of them have escaped the revaluation – not even Jerome.

If one wants to show that someone is a misogynist, it is not difficult to present a suitable collection of his sayings and writings, especially if he was writing around 400 A.D. and was as productive as Jerome. But what is more surprising is that some have conjectured that no positive statements about women have ever been found in the works of the Church Fathers.¹ There is additionally a terminological problem: what is a misogynist? From the modern perspective, most of human history, religion and literature is misogynous – in which case the word itself is of little avail. It might be more accurate to apply the term *misogynous* only to such persons and works that deviate from the mainstream of their society.

What I propose to do in this article is to look at Jerome's production as a whole in order to assess whether his contemporaries would have had reason to view him as a misogynist. Whether they actually posed themselves this question or not, is irrelevant from my point of view.

¹ Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex*, New York 1975, 23.

Jerome's attitudes to women have been the object of some earlier studies.² Despite their obvious merits, these works have merely touched upon parts of the available evidence. Thus, their results, too, present only a partial picture.

In his relationship with women Jerome was unlike all the other Church Fathers. Tertullian had a wife and Augustine a concubine and an influential mother, but no one had a circle of so many female friends as Jerome. That is why his views are of some interest even for those who are not attracted to the study of his theological thought.

In his student days in Rome Jerome lived a fast life. As he later indirectly admitted, that included intimate relationships with women, though whether with prostitutes and slaves or with a respectable concubine, we do not know.³ However, this is a matter of only secondary importance, as nothing indicates that the experiences of his youth in any significant way affected Jerome's later views on sexuality and women.

Before Jerome came back to Rome in 382 he had spent several years in the east as an ascetic studying Christian and

² G.J. Campbell, *St. Jerome's Attitude towards Marriage and Women*, *Amer. Eccl. Rev.* 143 (1960) 310-320, 384-394; D. Wiesen, *St. Jerome as a Satirist*, (*Cornell Stud. Class. Philol.* 34), Ithaca N.Y. 1964; M. Turcan, *Saint Jérôme et les femmes*, BAGB 1968, 259-72; Elizabeth A. Clark, *Jerome, Chrysostom and Friends, Essays and Translations* (*Studies in Women and Religion*, vol. 2), New York 1979; Jane J.S. Barr, *St. Jerome's attitude to women as an influence on the Vulgate Old Testament, Ou testamentiese werkgem. in Suid-Afrika* 20+21 (1978-79) 1-20 (a shorter version in *Studia Patristica* 17 [1982] 268-73). Of these, Turcan's is the most balanced view. Clark's discussion is also useful, but she concentrates on Jerome's actual friendships.

³ *Epist.* 3,1; 7,4; 22,7 and 47,20. He could even have indulged in some unlawful affair, cf. *Aug. conf.* 2,3,7 CChr 27,20.

In Jerome's letters I refer to the text in *Saint Jérôme, Lettres I-VIII, Texte établi et traduit par J. Labourt, Coll. Budé, Paris 1949-63*. In references to Migne's *Patrologia Latina*, the column numbering is that of the 1883 (vol. 23) and 1884 (vol. 26) editions.

classical literature, as well as Greek and Hebrew. He was respectfully received and employed in the secreteriat of Pope Damasus. At the same time there gathered around him a circle of aristocratic women led by two rich widows, Marcella and Paula. These two women, who of Jerome's acquaintances we know best, were highly intelligent and well versed in both Biblical languages and in theological learning. Consequently, they were able to discuss the most difficult exegetical questions with him.⁴ Modern observers have called Paula his dearest friend, probably with some reason.⁵ We have no grounds for believing that the relationship ever went beyond the limits of platonic friendship. If there were sexual overtones, they probably remained concealed even to the persons themselves.⁶

Jerome was a ferocious proponent of asceticism and a sharp-tongued satirist who inevitably made himself enemies among the secularised Christians of Rome. In the papal election of 384 he was passed over and evidently lost some of his influence. He gave up politics and went again to the east with Paula. With her money an ascetic community was established in Bethlehem. There Jerome spent the rest of his life absorbed in his literary work and in doctrinal disputes.

It is not uncommon for scholars to claim that they are discussing Jerome's attitude to women when they are actually speaking about his attitude to marriage and virginity.⁷ These are

⁴ Cf. J.N.D. Kelly, *Jerome, His Life, Writings and Controversies*, London 1975, 91-103.

⁵ Wiesen, *op.cit.* 142; Kelly, *op.cit.* 97 and 278; Barr, *op.cit.* 4. Cf. e.g. Paula's obituary, *epist.* 108, and *vir. ill.* 135.

⁶ Cf. Kelly, *op.cit.* 91. As Turcan, *op.cit.* 261-262, remarks, we should not be deceived by the picture of an old monk crouching over his books. Both Jerome and Paula were under forty at that time and many of the other women considerably younger. For serious difficulties in determining Jerome's age, see Kelly, *op.cit.* 337-39.

⁷ This applies e.g. to the above-mentioned articles of Jane Barr.

two related but by no means identical questions. Modern readers have perhaps projected the themes of some contemporary or later philosophizing into Jerome's writings. Many of his fellow Christians (and others), notably Augustine, pondered upon the nature of woman – i.e. her natural inferiority – and saw virginity and the renunciation of her sex as her only refuge. In such logic the attitudes to women and the attitudes to virginity were closely linked, but such thinking was not typical of Jerome.⁸

For him ascetism was a principle that was not determined by sex. In a few somewhat inconsistent passages he stresses the special benefits of virginity to women.⁹ Moreover, most of the letters propagating virginity were addressed to women, and consequently they received the majority of exhortations. But the examples offered were often male, and Jerome gave repeated reminders that his advice applied to men as well.¹⁰ In fact, he remarked that in the Old Testament virginity was confined to males.¹¹

Virginity was Jerome's foremost obsession and an end in itself. If necessary, he was prepared to use any arguments to support it, irrespective of their logic. According to one of his main justifications asceticism made room for prayer and spiritual studies – for both sexes. In his vast production the connection between virginity and female inferiority is found only in the most isolated passages, cited above, so much so that they are virtually nonexistent.

Thus, Jerome's attitudes to virginity and his attitudes to women should not be confused. But it does not follow that he considered the sexes to be similar. For him a woman was *vas*

⁸ Cf. Clark, *op.cit.* 48-59, who appears to have a different opinion.

⁹ Epist. 22,21; 65,1; 71,3; virg. Mar. 20 PL 23,214 and especially in Eph. 3,5,28-29 PL 26,567.

¹⁰ E.g. epist. 128,3.

¹¹ Epist. 22,21.

infirmius, sexus fragilis.¹² He was following age-old traditions, for *infirmitas sexus* and *levitas animi* were ancient concepts, which could be found even in Roman law.¹³ The prevalent belief in the feminine character appears in some other expressions, too, and he quotes from Vergil at least twice: "*Varium et mutabile semper femina*."¹⁴

In his exegeses Jerome agreed readily with the apostles about hierarchy within the family: the husband had to be considered "the head of the wife",¹⁵ But it should be clear that there was nothing peculiarly Christian in this idea. One could cite Plutarch as a particularly good pagan parallel.¹⁶ The patriarchal structure of the family was a fact that hardly anyone questioned in antiquity – except for Jerome himself, as we shall see later.

Naturally, there were also issues that were typical only of the Church, the right to teach theological matters, for example. Again Jerome's views were perfectly in line with those of the majority of his contemporaries. It was, of course, disgraceful to hear women teach men – but they could teach each other.¹⁷ And if women were allowed an influence in choosing clerics it would be

¹² E.g. epist. 65,1; 128,3; in eccles. 2,8 CChr 72,266; in Mich. 2,7,5/7 CChr 76,511; in Soph. prol. CChr 76A,655.

¹³ Gaius inst. 1,144; Ulp. reg. 11,1; Marcian. dig. 49,14,18pr; Cod. Iust. 5,35,1 etc. *Fragilitas* was used from the 5th century onwards, Cod. Theod. 2,16,3 int; 3,5,3 int; 4,14,1,2; Cod. Iust. 5,3,20,1; 9,17,12. *Vas infirmius*, the weaker vessel, is found in 1 Petr. 3:7.

¹⁴ In eccles. 7,28/30 CChr 72,312; in Mich. 2,7,5/7 CChr 76,511 (= Aen. 4,569-70). Other examples are *muliebre iurgium*, in Gal. 3,5,19-21 PL 26,444 and *dissolutio feminarum* (as opposed to *virilis duritia*), in Is. 2,3,16 CChr 73,55.

¹⁵ In Mich. 2,7,5/7 CChr 76,511; the same principle with some personal weighting in the argumentation, in Tit. 2,3-5 PL 26,617.

¹⁶ E.g. Coniug. praec. 11 and 33.

¹⁷ Epist. 53,7; 65,1; adv. Pelag, 1,25 PL 23,542; in Tit. 2,3-5 PL 26,616; cf. Stat. eccl. ant. (c. A.D. 475) c.37/41/100 CChr 148,172/173/184. In some god-forsaken place in Gaul women had been ordained priests, but it was a shocking exception, Conc. Nemaus. (A.D. 394/6) c.2 CChr 148,50.

frankly stupid, or as Jerome says, a case of "pearls before swine".¹⁸ His position was consistent, but not his practical behaviour.

One of Jerome's favourite biblical citations was 2 Tim. 3:7, which singled out those particularly vulnerable to heretical teaching:

...mulierculas oneratas peccatis, quae ducuntur variis desideriiis: semper discentes, et numquam ad scientiam veritatis pervenientes.

He used this passage, sometimes combined with Eph. 4:14, at least ten times, mostly to attack rival teachers and sects.¹⁹ Thus, it was an essential and perhaps an effective part of his invective against them. Such an image of ignorant female Christians certainly had some equivalent in real life, even more so in the minds of his audience.²⁰ Some of these writings were addressed to women, which makes us suspect that he did not think all his sisters in Christ were of the same kind.

A few passages might lead us to an opposite conclusion. When Solomon in his Ecclesiastes informed the readers that woman is the cause of all evil, Jerome rather automatically agreed:

¹⁸ In Is. 2,3,12 CChr 73,52 and in Is. 16,58,10 CChr 73A,670. On similar themes in John Chrysostom's writings, see Clark, op.cit. 10 with references.

¹⁹ E.g. epist. 130,17; 133,4; c. Vigil. 3 PL 23,356; in Is. 16,57,6 CChr 73A,646.

²⁰ Ignorant male Christians are not a recognizable group in Jerome's writings, at least not as identified by sex. However, there is no doubt that in his opinion most of his contemporaries were totally ignorant in theology and in Biblical studies – and one is tempted to agree.

*Non putemus temere hanc Solomonem de genere mulierum protulisse sententiam; quod expertus est, loquitur.*²¹

In the next chapter he states: *Facilior ad casum est mulier.*²² And in a letter (130,17) to a woman (!):

Sed si quidem in viris periculosa est (vita solitaria)... quanto magis in feminis, quarum mutabilis fluctuansque sententia, si suo arbitrio relinquatur, cito ad deteriora delabitur!

The first statement is perhaps the only one in Jerome's works that can be called truly misogynous. The two last-mentioned passages could quite conveniently be placed under his conception of *vas infirmius*.

In his Biblical exegeses Jerome was naturally tied to the main text. If the Scripture contained a statement hostile towards women, he could not reject it out of hand. The best he could do was to circumvent it through an allegorical explanation, though usually in the form "*alii dicunt ...*". His commentary to Ecclesiastes offers some particularly clear examples of this.²³ In that kind of interpretation the feminine stands for matter and body, while the masculine denotes soul. The comparison was hardly flattering from a woman's point of view and its appositeness should be questioned, although it was typical of Late Ancient philosophy. Jerome, however, gave it in cases where the literal interpretation would have been even less favourable to women.

²¹ In eccles. 7,26,27 CChr 72,311.

²² In eccles. 7,28/30 CChr 72,312.

²³ In eccles. 2,8 CChr 72,266; 7,26,27 and 7,28/30 CChr 72,311/313; see also in Is. 2,3,16 CChr 73,55 and in Eph. 3,5,33 PL 26,570.

In his letters Jerome was allowed a degree of latitude and could aim his thrusts where he thought them appropriate. And anything that promoted asceticism was appropriate. He had to convince his prospective virgins of the blessings of their chosen state. The vexations of a married woman had to be emphasized,²⁴ and sisters who had chosen worldly goods had to be painted black. Jerome eagerly described what he saw as the luxury, self-indulgence and ambition of the noble Roman matrons.²⁵ Again, his view evidently to a certain degree corresponded to reality. Nevertheless, the passages were not intended, and should not be treated, as an attack against women but as a part of his grand strategy: the defence of the ascetic life.

This is how we should also understand the most famous "misogynous" passages of Jerome in his tract against Jovian. Jovian was a monk who had publicly defended several theses that were to Jerome the purest heresy and blasphemy. Not the least among them was the claim that marriage was no less sacred than sexual continence.

Jerome attacked him fiercely drawing on all the imaginable disadvantages of marriage, and this time he wanted expressly to convince a male audience. Leaning on Solomon's Proverbs Jerome assured his readers that a quarrelsome wife was one of man's worst plagues and even an amiable one only exhausted the husband with her love.²⁶ When proceeding to Graeco-Roman history, drama and mythology he found irrefutable arguments in favour of virginity, as well as catastrophes caused by women. He continued by quoting at length Theophrastus' treatise on marriage, of which the original text has not been preserved. Here all the wives' faults were listed, from adultery to endless

²⁴ Epist. 22,2; 49,18; virg. Mar. 20 PL 23,214.

²⁵ E.g. epist. 38,3-4; 45,4-5; 107,4-5; 125,3; 130,18.

²⁶ Adv. Iovin. 1,28 PL 23,260-62.

complaining and quarreling. As a finishing touch, the venerable Church Father even qualified Epicurus as an authority.²⁷

Jerome's aims in this attack are quite clear, as in many instances are the models for his arguments. Apart from those he explicitly names, quotations from e.g. Seneca, Plutarch and Porphyrius have been detected. There is no agreement whether Juvenal is used or not, even though many arguments would fit the tone of his sixth satire. Of Christian antifeminists, Tertullian is represented.²⁸

Jerome was well aware of the satirical nature of his style. Once he described the behaviour of a wealthy lady and declared that he did not mention her name, lest the readers should think he was writing a satire.²⁹ He was even more explicit in his polemic tract on Mary's virginity. After having once again caricatured a wife's life in a long passage, he admitted in the end: *Rhetoricati sumus et in morem declamatorum paululum lusimus*.³⁰ But he did not let this awareness restrain his bitter tongue.³¹

So far we have treated mainly those passages of Jerome's works which have earned him ill fame as a misogynist – somewhat unjustly, as I have tried to stress. I will next turn to another, more philogynous, feature of his writings. Hitherto it has attracted much scantier notice among the scholars studying Jerome's attitudes towards women.

It is quite revealing that Jerome was frequently accused of discussing theological matters with women and of excessively extolling their merits. As always, he defended himself firmly. These passages show us another Jerome:

²⁷ Adv. Iovin. 1,41-48 PL 23,282-93.

²⁸ Kelly, op.cit. 12, 108 and 184; Wiesen, op.cit. 8-10, 14 and 152-158.

²⁹ Epist. 22,32.

³⁰ Virg. Mar. 22 PL 23,216; cf. also epist. 49,18.

³¹ Jerome's own view of his satire is discussed by Wiesen, op.cit. 247-64.

*Rideat forsitan infidelis lector, me in muliercularum laudibus inmorari, qui, si recordetur sanctas feminas, comites Domini Salvatoris ... se potius superbiae, quam nos condemnabit ineptiarum, qui virtutes non sexu sed animo iudicamus.*³²

*(Non considerantes) ... in servitute Christi nequaquam differentiam sexuum valere, sed mentium.*³³

This time he adduced examples of revered women in the past. His list included not only heroines from the Jewish and Christian traditions, but also pagan figures like Aspasia, Sappho, Themista, Cornelia and Porcia.³⁴

Thus, in his defence Jerome pleaded mainly the spiritual equality of the sexes. But he could not help making a sarcastic remark that if men were interested in the Scripture, he would not have to talk to women.³⁵ Though hardly a compliment from the latter's point of view, this was clearly a taunt thrown at his male critics rather than his female friends and as such very typical of Jerome.

We might suspect that Jerome again only reacted to an attack and that his egalitarian views did not spring from a deep conviction but from an acute need to defend himself. Obviously this was not the case. He made similar statements on occasions where no similar need existed:

*Neque enim fieri potest, ut in spiritalibus donis sit sexus ulla diversitas, cum in Christo Iesu non sit vir et mulier.*³⁶

³² Epist. 127, 5.

³³ In Is. 12 prol. CChr 73A, 465-66.

³⁴ In Soph. prol. CChr 76A, 655.

³⁵ Epist. 65, 1.

³⁶ In Is. 15, 56, 6. 7 CChr 73A, 634.

*Non tamen arbitrandum sit, quod uxor, quae corporis vasculum habet infirmum, statim et anima infirmior sit.*³⁷

Such views were extremely rare in antiquity. In one passage Jerome was even led to express thoughts that are, as far as I know, unique in Latin literature. He was expounding Paul's letter to the Ephesians, in which the Apostle, after having ordered wives to be subjugated to their husbands, wound up with a sentence that in Latin translation runs (Eph. 5:33): *Uxor autem timeat virum suum*. Jerome was surprised at the word *timere*, because of its common meaning 'to fear'. He found it quite unsuitable and, having considered the possibility of an allegorical explanation, concluded that its proper sense here was 'to revere'. However, it was his arguments that were particularly notable:

*cum frequenter multo meliores maritis inveniuntur uxores et eis imperent, et domum regnent, et educent liberos, et familiae teneant disciplinam: illis luxuriantibus et per scorta currentibus. Hae viros suos utrum regnare debeant an timere, lectoris arbitrio derelinquo.*³⁸

There is no doubt that Jerome highly valued his female friends, and he unhesitatingly extolled their intelligence in their obituaries.³⁹ He mentioned especially their speed of learning and their shrewd questions. In Marcella's obituary Jerome informs us of the rather surprising fact that after his departure from Rome

³⁷ In Tit. 2,3-5 PL 26,615.

³⁸ In Eph. 3,5,33 PL 26,570. The same themes but not the same conclusions are found in Joh. Chrys. hom. quales duc. s. uxores 4 PG 51,230-31.

³⁹ Blaesilla, epist. 39,1; Paula, epist. 108,26; Marcella, epist. 127,7.

she was frequently used as an authority in Biblical questions. But she exhibited proper behaviour and tried to perform her expected role:

sic interrogata respondebat, ut etiam sua, non sua diceret, sed vel mea, vel cuius libet alterius, ut et in ipso quod docebat, se discipulam fateretur. Sciebat enim dictum ab Apostolo: "Docere autem mulieri non permitto"; ne virili sexui, et interdum sacerdotibus, de obscuris et ambiguis sciscitantibus, facere videretur iniuriam.⁴⁰

This paradox illustrates Jerome's ambivalent position well. He bravely defended the spiritual equality of women but found more than enough examples of their disastrous influence. He adopted Paul's views on patriarchal hierarchy inside the family and Church but admired the strong and intelligent Roman ladies who could enlighten priests. What did he really think?

It would be a serious mistake to treat Jerome's writings as a logical whole. What other merits he may have claimed, consistency was not one of them. He was never an original philosophical thinker and did not even strive for a coherent picture of the world around him. That is why we have to resolve his attitude to women into its component parts. It also explains why so many different interpretations are possible.

First, it is beyond dispute that Jerome had absorbed the old pattern of thought – common to both the Jewish and the Greco-Roman world where he was born – according to which women were a weaker variety of the human race, without citizenship and without equal rights, with lesser talents and with graver faults. This view was accepted in his secular and ecclesiastical

⁴⁰ Epist. 127,7.

surroundings and was as natural an inheritance to him as to anyone else.

Second, he had overriding aims like asceticism, which he was eager to propagate in Roman society at any cost. He used his sharp pen wherever he saw a weak spot in his adversaries and heaped ridicule on them with a most unchristian zeal. In the heat of the fight he satirized both men and women without regard to logic or to any contrary opinions which he voiced in a calmer mood.

Finally, he had a close personal relationship with several intelligent women. Their intellectual equality with men was a practical fact, which was reflected in Jerome's theoretical writing, as well.⁴¹ It is no wonder that these different elements produced very inconsistent attitudes towards women in his works. He did not need to notice it himself. For him there was no "feminine question" which would have led him to consider this part of his production as a unity. The same applied to his contemporaries.

But it was precisely the third, more positive aspect of his attitudes, which separated him from the common opinion of his time – and of a long time before and after him. Was he an exception by pure chance? In a way, probably, yes. However, I have argued that his sympathetic disposition was based on personal relationships, which enabled him to see the mental capacities of women when they were not restricted. And I think we have here the clue to our question.

A married woman in classical Antiquity, as in all times, was in the shadow of her husband. While running his household, she could hardly lead an independent life or devote herself to serious literary study. It was only in the late fourth century that a new custom penetrated the Roman nobility. Then some women,

⁴¹ Cf. Clark's conclusion, *op.cit.* 78-9, though she is less concerned with Jerome's writings than with his practical behaviour.

virgins and young widows, remained unmarried and, motivated by their new creed, redirected their energy to learning and spiritual questions. Thus, an unsociable monk, cut off from male friends, found the circle of Roman ladies in a highly exceptional situation. Without sexual intentions, he was able to form a spiritual bond with them and to see them as only a few males could.

But there was no room for intellectual women in the world of men. Jerome himself propagated a change. Ascetic communities in the cities were transferred to monasteries, and learned virgins were shut behind the walls. This was the case for most of the Middle Ages.

In spite of his wealthy friends and his extensive correspondence, Jerome was never a leader of masses. His attitudes to women are a curiosity, not an illustration of the general tendencies of his time.⁴² However, besides his personal feelings his letters offer much useful information about contemporary Roman family and women. Combined with other evidence, such as Late Ancient legislation, they shed some light on the realities of life in the late 4th and early 5th centuries. The results of this separate survey will, I hope, appear later in a more comprehensive work.

⁴² From this viewpoint both Turcan's concluding statements, *op.cit.* 272, and Clark's optimism, *op.cit.* 79, appear somewhat exaggerated.